

Gender and unruly titles in the booklists of the Gelasian Decree

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Abstract

This essay offers a new perspective on the booklists of the Gelasian Decree (*Decretum Gelasianum*) from the sixth century. In this document's apocryphal booklist, there are several titles featuring female or feminine names that exhibit a certain unruliness. Whether known only by title or by many titles, these entries pose the question of why female figures and texts not usually associated with heresy are constructed under this rubric in the Gelasian Decree. By untangling the lists from the academic discourse on canon and rather understanding them in the context of the document as a whole, the essay offers a fresh reading of the relations between gender, apocryphal books, and church hierarchy. Through an analysis of the occurrences of female/feminine names and signifiers throughout the text, it is found that while male figures are associated with God, the church hierarchy, and canonical and legitimate literature, the categories of apocrypha and heresy are feminized. It is argued that the “unruly” book titles in the Gelasian Decree ultimately resist the organizing efforts of its author.

Keywords

apocrypha, booklists, books known only by title, canonicity, *Decretum Gelasianum*, Gelasian Decree, gender

Introduction

In the sixth-century document *Decretum Gelasianum* (hereby referred to as the Gelasian Decree) there is a list of apocryphal books “to be avoided by catholics” (5.1).¹ Several

1. In this article, I quote the Latin version found in The Latin Library: <http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/decretum.html>. I use the English translation by Roger Pearse, found at The Tertullian Project: https://www.tertullian.org/decretum_eng.htm. There is also an English translation of the apocryphal list (chapter 5), in Wilhelm Schneemelcher, Edgard Hennecke, and R. McL Wilson, eds., *New Testament Apocrypha: Gospels and Related Writings*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1991), 38–40.

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female names figure on this list, in a document predominantly exhibiting male names connected to church hierarchy and sanctioned authorship. Some of the list entries are books known only by title, and some of the names are associated with heresy, such as Maximilla and Priscilla, the Montanist prophetesses. But others are names associated with books that were widely read and commonly accepted as orthodox in early Christianity, such as Thecla and Mary, the mother of Jesus. Why is there such an abundance of female names in the Gelasian Decree's apocryphal list? And what is the connection between gender, unruly book titles, and heresy? In this article I study these booklist entries as part of the literary context in which they occur, the Gelasian Decree.² Pursuing the theoretical shift proposed by the Books Known Only by Title Project, I ask what kind of rhetorical and conceptual work these titles do within the lists and within the overarching literary unit of the Decree.³

Although the Gelasian Decree is well known in scholarship, few have studied the text in its own right. In 1912, the German theologian and text critic, Ernst von Dobschütz, published a critical edition.⁴ Since then, hardly any scholarly works have been devoted to the Gelasian Decree.⁵ It is, nevertheless, frequently referred to in studies on the canonization process of the Bible as well as studies on early Christian apocryphal literature. Such references are primarily to the text's lists of either canonical or apocryphal books.⁶ The lists are drawn upon as a source without an agenda, a pin on the map, tracing the development of the Christian canon. This instrumental use of canon lists, which disregards their literary context, has been critiqued by C. Rebecca Rine. She argues that the various canon lists do not comprise a standard subgenre that can be read independently of their literary context.⁷ Even if the various lists have the same linguistic form, Rine posits, they may not share the same linguistic function. Many of these so-called canon

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2. This article was written during my stay as a fellow in the Books Known Only by Title research project at the Center for Advanced Studies, Norwegian Academy of Sciences. My thanks go to Marianne Bjelland Kartzow, and Liv Ingeborg Lied for inviting me to participate in the project.
 3. See the introduction to this volume by Liv Ingeborg Lied, Marianne Bjelland Kartzow, and Esther Brownsmith.
 4. Ernst von Dobschütz, *Das Decretum Gelasianum de libris recipiendis et non recipiendis*, Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1912).
 5. The only recent works are a handful of short articles in encyclopedias. Mario Maritano, "Decretum Gelasianum," in *Brill Encyclopedia of Early Christianity Online* (Leiden: Brill, 2020); Ursula Reutter, "Decretum Gelasianum," in *Religion Past and Present* (Leiden: Brill, 2011); Ken A. Grant, "Gelasian Decree," in *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception* (ed. Hans-Josef Klauck; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014). See also Justin Taylor, "The Early Papacy at Work: Gelasius I (492–6)," *JRH* 8 (1974–75).
 6. Thomas O'Loughlin, "Inventing the Apocrypha: The Role of Early Latin Canon Lists," *ITQ* 74, no. 1 (2009): 53–74; Schneemelcher, Hennecke, and Wilson, *New Testament Apocrypha: Gospels and Related Writings* (1991); John K. Elliott, ed., *The Apocryphal New Testament. A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), xxiii–xxiv.
 7. C. Rebecca Rine, "Canon Lists Are Not Just Lists," *JBL* 139, no. 4 (2020): 809–31. See also Liv Ingeborg Lied, "The Unruly Books of Abdisho of Nisibis: Book Lists, Canon Discourse

lists were not primarily written as an argument in a “canon debate,” and should rather be read within their literary context.⁸

Similarly, Liv Ingeborg Lied, Marianne Bjelland Kartzow, and Esther Brownsmith argue in the introduction to this special issue that the name-dropping of book titles in booklists and literary works is interesting in its own right. What functions do such title-dropping serve? What kind of literary imagination is going on? They suggest that “books known only by title” sometimes serve a wish “to catalogue, know and control the larger literary tradition.”⁹ In the following, I explore what kinds of functions the female titles in the Gelasian Decree’s booklists serve, and what kind of effort lies behind them. Drawing on theoretical insights from intersectionality and feminist studies, I analyze how gender functions in the text, and how it relates to other vectors of power.¹⁰ In particular, I explore the connections between female gender and heresy that come to the fore in the unruly titles of the apocryphal booklist in the Gelasian Decree.¹¹

I borrow the label “unruly” from Liv Ingeborg Lied, who has used it to theorize how modern scholars have found certain booklist items unruly because they did not fit their own categories or scholarly agendas, which were focused on a discourse of canon.¹² This is certainly true for the Gelasian Decree as well. However, I suggest that the unruliness of the Decree’s list entries goes even further, not only haunting modern scholars grappling with the lists, but also tripping up the author in the process of constructing these lists. I read this document in the context of a fifth- to sixth-century discourse on imagined libraries and contested literature, which intersected with papal authority and orthodoxy. It is not an “innocent” document from which information about various books and book titles can simply be extracted. As one voice in this discourse, the Decree constructs a gendered church hierarchy where women and their ascribed books are relegated to the margins and connected with the categories of apocrypha and heresy.

Recently, scholars have turned their critical lens toward the history of research, asking about the frameworks and ethics of the scholars who established our academic fields.¹³

and the Quest for Lost Writings,” in *Synopses and Lists: Textual Practices in the Pre-Modern World* (ed. Teresa Bernheimer and Ronny Vollandt; London: Open Book Publishers, 2022).

8. Rine, “Canon Lists Are Not Just Lists,” 830.

9. See introduction to this volume.

10. Joan Wallach Scott argues that gender is a constitutive element of social relationships and a primary way of signifying relationships of power. Joan W. Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” *AHR* 91, no. 5 (1986): 1067. For intersectional approaches to early Christian studies, see e.g., Anna Rebecca Solevåg, *Negotiating the Disabled Body. Representations of Disability in Early Christian Texts* (ed. David G. Horrell, Early Christianity and Its Literature; Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2018); Marianne Bjelland Kartzow, *Destabilizing the Margins: An Intersectional Approach to Early Christian Memory* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012); Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “Introduction: Exploring the Intersections of Race, Gender, Status, and Ethnicity in Early Christian Studies,” in *Prejudice and Christian Beginnings: Investigating Race, Gender, and Ethnicity in Early Christian Studies* (ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Laura Salah Nasrallah; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 1–23.

11. Lied, “The Unruly Books of Abdisho of Nisibis.”

12. Lied, “The Unruly Books of Abdisho of Nisibis.”

13. See e.g., Blossom Stefaniw, “Feminist Historiography and Uses of the Past,” *SLA* 4, no. 3 (2020): 260–283; Ekaputra Tupamahu, “The Stubborn Invisibility of Whiteness in Biblical Scholarship: The Politics of Scripture,” *Political Theology Network*, Nov. 12 2020.

The various historical quests for ancient literature and their subsequent categorization into pseudepigrapha, apocrypha, and so on, were not objective but predicated upon a contextual agenda and assumptions that to a large extent were male and Eurocentric.¹⁴ Ernst von Dobschütz (1870–1934) may serve as an example of how historiography has been enmeshed in the institutional patriarchy and white supremacy of our profession. Von Dobschütz was a member of the German National People's Party (*Deutschnationale Volkspartei*, DNVP) from 1919 to its dissolution in 1933. The DNVP was a national-conservative political party with antisemitic elements that advocated for a restoration of monarchy, a repeal of the dictated peace treaty of Versailles and reacquisition of all lost territories and colonies.¹⁵ Von Dobschütz was also a member of the Society of Biblical Literature, the same academic association that I belong to. Although drawing on von Dobschütz's scholarship, I acknowledge this tension between dependency and critique in the history of research.

The gendered hierarchy of the Gelasian Decree

The Gelasian Decree is attributed to Pope Gelasius I (492–496) but is assumed to be a pseudonymous literary production of the first half of the sixth century. Von Dobschütz' edition is based on the eighty-six manuscripts known to him, located in various libraries across Europe.¹⁶ The earliest complete manuscript we have is the mid-eighth-century *Ragyndrudis Codex*.¹⁷ Von Dobschütz divides the manuscripts into two main recensions, one longer and one shorter. The longer recension attributes the first part (Chapters 1–2) to Pope Damasus and the second part (Chapters 3–5) to Pope Gelasius I. The shorter recension starts with the second part. Mario Maritano suggests that the two parts were put together and edited by a cleric at the end of the fifth or beginning of the sixth century CE, and that this cleric added the author attributions and perhaps also some of the names and titles in the apocryphal booklist by relying on memory.¹⁸ Whether it is, then, a pseudonymous work falsely attributed to these two popes at a later time, or a forgery making one (for the shorter recension) or two (for the longer) false authorial claims seems hard to ascertain.¹⁹ In the renaissance, a renewed interest in apocryphal writings spurred scholarly attention to the booklists of the Decree.²⁰ Since then, the Gelasian Decree has,

14. See e.g., Annette Yoshiko Reed, "The Modern Invention of 'Old Testament Pseudepigrapha,'" *JTS* 60, no. 2 (2009): 403–36; Reed, "The Afterlives of New Testament Apocrypha," *JBL* 134, no. 2 (2015): 401–25.

15. "German National People's Party." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, January 2, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/German-National-Peoples-Party>.

16. Maritano, "Decretum Gelasianum.,"; Dobschütz, *Decretum Gelasianum*, 14–15.

17. Günther Haseloff, *Der Einband Des Ragyndrudis-Codex in Fulda: Codex Bonifatianus 2* (Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1978).

18. Maritano, "Decretum Gelasianum."

19. Cf. Ehrman's distinction between forgeries proper and the wider category of pseudonymous works. Bart D. Ehrman, "Apocryphal Forgeries: The Logic of Literary Deceit," in *Fakes, Forgeries, and Fictions: Writing Ancient and Modern Christian Apocrypha* (ed. Tony Burke; Eugene, Or: Cascade Books, 2017).

20. Irena Backus, "Renaissance Attitudes to New Testament Apocryphal Writings: Jacques Lefèvre D'étaples and His Epigones," *RQ* 51, no. 4 (1998): 1169–98.

as already noted, mainly played a role as referent in scholarly discussions on the biblical canonization process and the creation of the category of apocrypha.

The long recension of *The Gelasian Decree* consists of five chapters. Chapter 1 lists names and attributes for Christ and the Holy Spirit; Chapter 2 is a canon list, giving the names and order of the books of the Old and New Testaments; Chapter 3 lists and describes the three seats of the Roman Catholic church: Rome, Alexandria, and Antioch; Chapter 4 lists the «books received»; and Chapter 5 lists the «books not received» by the Roman Catholic church. It should be noted that the three booklists are presented quite differently. The canonical books are specified according to name, group (Old Testament or New Testament), and subgroup (prophets, histories, gospels, etc.) and appear in the canonical order accepted at that time. It is also specified whether each title contains one or several books. The two other booklists are not so neatly organized, as I will elaborate below.

Each of the five chapters of the Gelasian Decree seems to represent one important tier in a hierarchically conceived universe that starts with the godhead (chapter 1) and has the biblical canon following right below (chapter 2). Next follows the church (with its own internal hierarchical organization, chapter 3), followed by the books, which are read by the faithful (chapter 4). The final chapter is dedicated to the heretical books which also represent the borders of the true church (chapter 5). The three booklists in the document are thus listed in descending order, and play a role in the configuration of the ecclesial hierarchy which shapes the entire document. While the two first booklists—the canon list and the list of “books received,”—fall within the parameters of the Christian universe, the final list—the “books not received”—falls outside the borders of the church. This final booklist, it is made clear, is just a sample of all the writings which have been “compiled or been recognized by heretics and schismatics” (5.1). The Gelasian Decree ends with a list of heretical authors (not books) who are all damned. Thus, the document starts figuratively in heaven, with descriptions of God, and ends in hell, with the condemnation of heretical authors “and the followers of its authors to be damned in the inextricable shackles of anathema forever” (5.1).

The Gelasian Decree thus constructs a distinct hierarchy of authorities and writings. This hierarchy is clearly gendered through the references to both male and female names of historical persons and in book titles. It should be noted that gender is distributed unevenly across the document. The first four chapters describe an almost entirely male church universe. Only two female figures are mentioned in these chapters. The first is “the virgin” (1.1), referring of course to Mary, the mother of Christ. The second is a figurative woman, “the universal catholic church” (*catholicae diffusae ecclesiae*, 3.1). The feminine figure of the church also holds the epithet “bride of Christ” (*unus thalamus Christi*, 3.1). It is in the apocryphal section, Chapter 5, which deals with books and figures that are defined as outside the borders of the church, that an abundance of female names appears. I now turn to look at this gendered hierarchy and the distribution of male and female names in the document.

A few good women

Not surprisingly, Chapter 1, which lists the names and attributes of God, is distinctly male. The only female is the Virgin Mary, mentioned in the fourth listed name for Christ,

“the man, who was born of a virgin” (*homo, qui natus ex virgine*, 1.2). This female figure is not herself on the list proper, she is incidental to it. Note that the name of the virgin is not mentioned, only the sexual status of the mother of Christ is mentioned in this designation. Several of the attributes given to God are related to male social roles and protocols of masculinity, such as *dominus, filius, pastor, magister*, and *sponsus*. In Chapter 2, the biblical canon is similarly androcentric, with the exception of the three Old Testament books with female titles, namely, Ruth, Esther, and Judith. The books of both Esther and Judith have interesting trajectories of reception, and their inclusion into the canon was not universally accepted. However, at the time of the compilation of the Gelasian Decree, these books were commonly considered canonical in the Latin West.²¹

Chapter 3 is quite short and primarily concerned with constructing the male gendered hierarchy of the church, starting with the founders Peter, Paul, and Mark. It sets the stage for the booklist of “books received” in Chapter 4, which starts with the synods and church fathers. These male figures are thus constructed as the legitimate heirs and transmitters of the traditions flowing from God through the biblical canon and the church’s founders. The only female, or, rather, *feminine* ascription in Chapter 3 is the church itself, which is referred to as “the single bride of Christ” (*unus thalamus Christi sit*, 3.1). Although *thalamus*, referring to bed chamber or marriage, is grammatically male,²² it serves as a reference to the foundational metaphor of Christ as the bridegroom and the church as his bride.²³ Christ is called *sponsus* at the beginning of the document (1.2), so this matrix is already established at the outset. The choice of *thalamus*, referring to the room or chamber, rather than the more common term *sponsa*, seems to pacify and objectify the feminine gendered church. Through this choice of metaphor, the church is constructed as receptacle and bounded space. This space needs to be kept pure, as we can gather from a second reference to the church, where the *ecclesia* is referred to as “having no spot or wrinkle or any other defect” (*non habens maculam nec rugam nec aliquid eiusmodi*, 3.3). This is a reference to Eph 5:27, the primary biblical passage for the construction of the Bride of Christ metaphor.²⁴ The imagery of the church as a bridal chamber that needs to remain undefiled and sanctified, thus supports the notion of purging books that may pollute the church. Through the imagery of the bridal chamber, doctrinal purity is associated with virginity. The flip side of this imagery is the biblical trope of the promiscuous woman who goes whoring after other gods, represented by such

21. Edmon L. Gallagher and John D. Meade, *The Biblical Canon Lists from Early Christianity: Texts and Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 270–75.

22. “Inner room, bedchamber, marriage-bed, wedlock,” s.v. *Thalamus*, Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1879).

23. See e.g., Line Cecilie Engh, ed. *The Symbolism of Marriage in Early Christianity and the Latin Middle Ages: Images, Impact, Cognition*, Knowledge Communities (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019).

24. Eph 5:27: “so as to present the church to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind—yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish.” (NRSV). See Anna Rebecca Solevåg, “Marriage Symbolism and Social Reality in the New Testament: Husbands and Wives, Christ and the Church,” in *The Symbolism of Marriage in Early Christianity and the Latin Middle Ages. Images, Impact, Cognition* (ed. Line Cecilie Engh; Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), 91–111.

biblical figures as Jezebel and the whore of Babylon.²⁵ The metaphor of the church as the virginal bridegroom of Christ thus draws on a wider set of associations that connect female sexuality with other types of allegiances. Whereas virginity aligns with doctrinal fidelity; sexual promiscuity, and prostitution is associated with heresy.

In summary, Chapters 1 through 3 present us with a male, triune God and numerous illustrious men. We also meet a few symbolic female figures that represent “good women:” the Virgin Mary, the canonical figures Ruth, Esther, and Judith, and the feminine representation of the church as the chaste and passive bride of Christ. This gendered world becomes more complex in Chapters 4 and 5 when the document turns to list “books received” and “books not received.”

The list of books received: a dubious category

In Chapter 4, the author starts the overview of accepted books by claiming that the church “does not prohibit the reception of these writings” (*non prohibet scripturas*, 4.1). This section is much more peripatetic in its listing of writings than the canon list, intermingling references to books with references to synods and writers in a prose style rather than as a proper list. As I will argue in the following, there are slippages in the categories that the text constructs. Some of the items listed turn out to be unruly, and ultimately the category of “books received” disintegrates.

In this chapter, there is just one female name, Julitta. The name appears in the title of the Martyrdom of Cyricus and Julitta, which is mentioned because the text is of dubious character.²⁶ In fact, it is also listed as apocryphal in the following chapter. Martyrdom narratives seem to pose a particular challenge for the author of the Gelasian Decree. The deeds of the holy martyrs are glorious, the decree confirms, but there is a problem with some of the martyrdom texts:

According to old custom by the greatest caution they are not read in the holy Roman church (*in sancta Romana ecclesia non leguntur*), because the names of those who wrote are not properly known and separate from unbelievers and idiots or [the accounts] are thought less attached to the order of events than they should have been; for instance the [accounts of] Cyricus and Julitta (*sicut cuiusdam Cyrici et Iulittae*), like Georgius and the sufferings of others like these

25. See e.g., Gail Corrington Streete, *The Strange Woman. Power and Sex in the Bible* (Louisville, K.Y.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997). This concept can also be found in Greco-Roman literature, see Shelley P. Haley, “Be Not Afraid of the Dark: Critical Race Theory and Classical Studies,” in *Prejudice and Christian Beginnings. Investigating Race, Gender and Ethnicity in Early Christian Studies* (ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Laura Salah Nasrallah; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2009).

26. The Greek original is lost, but versions survive in several languages, including Latin, Armenian, Syriac, and Arabic. The text recounts the martyrdom of Julitta, a noblewoman from Iconium, and of her son Cyriacus, a small child. It is set in Tarsus, where the mother and child were allegedly martyred in 304 CE. “Cyricus and Julitta,” David Hugh Farmer, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). In Latin, it was also preserved in the Golden Legend. Patricia Healy Wasyliw, *Martyrdom, Murder, and Magic: Child Saints and Their Cults in Medieval Europe* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2008), 45.

which appear to have been composed by heretics. On account of this, as it was said, so that no pretext for casual mockery can arise, they are not read in the holy Roman church (*in sancta Romana ecclesia non leguntur*). However, we venerate together with the aforesaid church all the martyrs and their glorious sufferings, which are well known to God and men, with every devotion (*omni devotione veneramur*). (3.4)

It is surprising that in this section on received and accepted books, we suddenly come across a subgroup of texts that are “not read” (*non leguntur*). Is it all the martyrdom stories that are not read, or only the two mentioned? In the above passage, the writer introduces several reasons for restricting the reading of martyrdom texts. First, uncertain authorship is noted as a problem. Second, the historicity of the events related is questioned. Finally, a charge of heresy is introduced in order to exclude the texts. By these standards, the author concludes that martyrdom stories are not read, although the martyrs are nonetheless venerated. What does it mean when it is claimed that these texts “are not read in the holy Roman church”? Does the author claim that the texts are not read at all, or that they are not read during church services? If the author is at all true to his own categorization, we may assume that he is trying here to make a distinction about which books can be read in the context of worship. Some of the texts already mentioned in this chapter, such as the writings of the church fathers, as well as papal letters and decrees, we know were read in church. However, so were martyrdom narratives at various points in early Christianity. There are several sermons by Augustine given on the day of the feast of Perpetua and Felicitas, and we may assume that the martyrdom narrative was read to the congregation before Augustine held the sermon.²⁷

The two martyrdom stories that are explicitly named in Chapter 4, the Passion of Cyricus and Julitta and the Passion of Georgius, also appear in the apocryphal booklist in the following chapter. These are the only two martyrdom stories in the apocryphal list. Thus, it seems like the author uses its most dubious representatives to throw the whole group of martyrdom writings in a bad light. This slippage between the two booklists, and the author’s struggle to argue for why accepted books should still not be read, shows that some of the books in this author’s imagined library are quite unruly.

There are further slippages between works listed in Chapters 4 and 5. In Chapter 4, the following is said concerning Eusebius:

Likewise, the chronicle of Eusebius of Caesarea and the books of his church history (*chronica Eusebii Caesariensis atque eiusden historiae ecclesiasticae libros*), however much he fell flat in the first book of his narration and [although he also] afterwards wrote one book in praise and to excuse Origen the schismatic, however on account of his narration of remarkable things, which are useful for instruction, we do not say to anyone that it must be refused (*usque quaque non dicimus renuendos*). (4.4)

27. Augustine’s sermons 280–282. Margaret Cotter-Lynch, *Saint Perpetua across the Middle Ages: Mother, Gladiator, Saint* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Thomas J. Heffernan, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

Although the passage concludes that “we do not say to anyone that it must be refused,” Eusebius *is* refuted in the following chapter, where his history is listed as apocryphal, although under a slightly different name.²⁸

There are two more groups of works in this section that the Decree is hesitant about. One of them is “certain writings on the finding of the cross and the head of John the Baptist,” the other is the writings of Origen. About the first group it is said that “some of them are read by catholics” (*nonnulli eas catholici legunt*). Note that “in church” is absent here, so this seems to be yet another subcategory. Finally, concerning Origen’s works, those accepted by Jerome can be read, but “the rest with their author must be refused” (*autem cum auctore suo dicimus renuendo*, 3.4).

As noted, the Gelasian Decree is hierarchically organized, and even within the category of “books received” there seems to be a downward motion. The most acclaimed texts, which are the texts of the eleven sanctified church fathers, are mentioned first. Texts that are barely tolerated, such as the named martyrdom stories and Origen’s as well as Eusebius’s works, are mentioned later in the chapter. However, the chapter does not follow this descending scheme strictly. Between examples of spurious writings toward the end of the list are mentioned some works that seem unproblematic, such as the lives of the desert fathers and the paschal work of Sedulius.

Throughout the Gelasian Decree a confusing array of terms are used in order to categorize and sort books. Although the main distinctive pair is “received and not received” (*recipiendis et non recipiendis*, 3.1), the text also refers to books that are read and not read by Catholics; books that should be avoided, books that are prohibited and books that are not, books that are refused, books that must be both kept and received, and so on. The category of “books received” thus disintegrates, as the author unsuccessfully tries to control these unruly books. Not only is there a variation from completely orthodox to dubious within the list, but there is also a blurring between “books received” and “books not received.”

Women and unruly titles in the Apocryphal list

The final booklist in the Gelasian Decree, the list of “books not received,” resumes a more proper list format. Chapter 5 provides a list of individual works or collection of works, each designated with the epithet “apocryphal.” These writings should be “not merely rejected but eliminated” (*non solum repudiata . . . eliminata atque*, 5.1). Interestingly, many of the titles on this list are quite vague. Although title variation is not unusual in manuscript cultures dependent on transmission by scribes, the way of referencing items in this list stands out as deliberately off-hand. For example, the Acts of Andrew and the Shepherd of Hermas are referred to as “the Acts in the name of the apostle Andrew” (*Actus nomine Andreae apostoli*) and “the book which is called by the name of the Shepherd” (*Liber qui appellatur Pastoris*). Both these books had fairly established titles in Latin and were commonly referred to as *Acta Andreae* and *Hermae*

28. “The History of Eusebius Pamphili” (*Historia Eusebii Pamphili*). The author may have thought that these were different writers or different works.

Pastor.²⁹ Von Dobschütz posits that the author was not familiar with many of the books he lists as apocryphal, hence the vague titles. He assumes that the author simply draws on other works where these writings are mentioned.³⁰ In the following, I argue that a more conscious blurring is at work here. The unruliness in the titles of the apocryphal lists comes to the fore in the entries with female names.

Six of the sixty works that are listed as apocryphal have female names or feminine designations in the titles. These are:

- “The Passion of Cyricus and Julitta” (*Passio Cyrici et Iulitta*)
- “The book of the daughters of Adam Leptogenseos” (*Liber de filiabus Adae Leptogenseos*)
- “The works of Montanus, Priscilla, and Maximilla” (*opuscula Montani, Priscillae et Maximillae*)
- “The book of the nativity of the saviour and of Mary or the midwife” (*Liber qui appellatur salvatoris et de Maria vel obstretice*)
- “The book which is called the Acts of Thecla and Paul” (*Liber qui appellatur Actus Theclae et Pauli*)
- “The book which is called the Assumption of holy Mary” (*Liber qui appellatur Transitus sanctae Mariae*)

All these titles exhibit a certain unruliness. The Passion of Cyricus and Julitta is, as mentioned above, listed both as an accepted book in Chapter 4 and as apocryphal in this chapter. This martyrdom seems to resist categorization—an unruly book indeed.

Two of the items are books known only by title: “The book of the daughters of Adam Leptogenseos” and “the works of Montanus, Priscilla, and Maximilla.” “The book of the daughters of Adam Leptogenseos” may never have existed as an extant book. As noted in the introduction to this special issue, various manuscripts of the Gelasian Decree give varying titles for this work, suggesting limited familiarity.³¹ The works of Montanus, Priscilla, and Maximilla, which are not extant anymore, were not well known in the context of the sixth-century Latin West.³² Their names, however, were well known as the leaders of the infamous Montanist heresy, and thus the entry evokes an aura of heresy. Montanus is also mentioned in the final anathema list that ends the Gelasian Decree. He is condemned together with «his obscene followers» (*obscenissimis secquacibus*). Whether this is a reference to Montanists in general or refers to the two female leaders, Maximilla and Priscilla, the term obscene carries with it the same connection between heresy and licentious sexuality mentioned above.

29. Jean-Marc Prieur, *Acta Andreae*, vol. 5/6, Corpus Christianorum. Series Apocryphorum (Turnhout: Brepols, 1989), 36–37; Carolyn Osiek, *Shepherd of Hermas: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999), 2.

30. Dobschütz, *Decretum Gelasianum*, 334; F.C. Burkitt, “The Decretum Gelasianum,” *JTS* 14 (1913): 469–471.

31. See the introduction to this issue.

32. Christine Trevett, *Montanism. Gender, Authority and the New Prophecy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

The final three items, “The book of the nativity of the saviour and of Mary or the midwife,” “The book which is called the Acts of Thecla and Paul,” and “The book which is called the Assumption of holy Mary,” all have very unusual titles. As already noted for the apocryphal list in general, the wording of these titles differs from what we find in other late ancient references and in the manuscript tradition. “The book of the nativity of the saviour and of Mary or the midwife,” is a title that does not appear anywhere else in early Christian literature. Stories about Mary, mother of Jesus, starting from her own miraculous birth, childhood, and upbringing, up to and including the birth of Christ, originated in the second century in Greek.³³ One of the earliest attestations for these narrative clusters is a text found in Papyrus Bodmer 5, titled “Nativity of Mary. Revelation of James” (Γενεσις Μαρίας. Αποκαλυψις Ιακωβ).³⁴ In modern scholarship, this text has often been called *Protevangeliium Iacobi*, or the *Proto-gospel of James*. Its Latin adaptation, called the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew*, is probably later than The Gelasian Decree.³⁵ The mention of a midwife (*obstretix*) in the title is not attested anywhere else. By putting *obstretix* in the title, the Gelasian Decree underscores the centrality of a midwife in the narrative (or two midwives in some variants). The midwife serves as prime witness to Mary’s perpetual virginity (as evidenced through a genital inspection) and thus the divinity of Jesus.³⁶

The reference to “the Acts of Thecla and Paul” is noteworthy because it is the only known instance of a reference to the Thecla stories in which Thecla is mentioned before Paul. Ancient references to this work generally refer to it as the Acts of Paul. The canon list in Codex Claromontanus includes *Actus Pauli* as part of the New Testament canon.³⁷ Tertullian and Eusebius, who both regard the work as dubious, also refer only to Paul in the title.³⁸ Jerome, however, mentions Thecla after Paul, calling the work “*periodous Pauli et Theclae*.”³⁹

Finally, “The book which is called the Assumption of holy Mary” refers to the corpus of writings on Mary’s miraculous transfer in body and soul to Paradise at her death.⁴⁰ This extremely diverse tradition, which emerged into mainstream Christian discourse around the end of the fifth century, has a prehistory that is hard to trace.⁴¹ It is thus impossible to know exactly which of the texts within this tradition that this title is referring to.

A common trait with these entries containing female names and feminine designations is that gender is more forefronted than in many other ancient manuscripts or booklists

33. Zlatko Pleše and Bart D. Ehrman, *The Apocryphal Gospels: Texts and Translations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 31.

34. Stephen J. Shoemaker, *Mary in Early Christian Faith and Devotion* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2016), 47.

35. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, 86; Pleše and Ehrman, *The Apocryphal Gospels: Texts and Translations*, 75.

36. *The Apocryphal Gospels: Texts and Translations*, 76.

37. Gallagher and Meade, *The Biblical Canon Lists from Early Christianity: Texts and Analysis*, 184–86.

38. Tertullian, *Ad bapt.* 17, Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 3.3.5.

39. Jerome, *De vir.* Ill. 7.

40. Shoemaker, *Mary in Early Christian Faith and Devotion*, 100–65.

41. Stephen J. Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions of the Virgin Mary’s Dormition and Assumption* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 76–77.

referring to the same books. In the Gelasian Decree, Thecla's name is placed first, and Mary's name is not accompanied by James's, as in other manuscripts. I therefore suggest that the choice of titles is deliberate, and that female names and feminine work titles (midwife) are forefronted in order to further taint the works. This aligns with the emphasis the entire document puts on the gendered hierarchy of the church. One of the ways the Gelasian Decree constructs the category of apocryphal is through feminization.

What is it that is invoked by a feminine reference in a title? Several of the titles suggest family connections, such as the *daughters* of Adam, or the *motherhood* of Julitta as well as Mary. Some of the other women on the list, however, have other connotations. Thecla, Priscilla, and Maximilla suggest female leadership and connection to a male teacher. I also find it highly interesting that midwife, *obstetrix*, is mentioned in one of the titles. Here we have a female professional title, perhaps invoking a particular source of female knowledge and authority.

Only one of the entries, "The works of Montanus, Priscilla, and Maximilla," explicitly refers to female authorship. This is the only reference in the entire Gelasian Decree to female authorship. I suggest that there is also a case of concealed female authorship in the apocryphal booklist. There are two references to so-called centos, "the Cento on Christ put together in Virgilian verse" and "the Cento stitched together from verses of Virgil." Both these references are probably allusions to the most well-known Christian cento, namely, the *Cento Vergilianibus de laudibus*, written by the noblewoman Faltonia Betitia Proba (c. 320–370).⁴² The poem circulated widely in both the eastern and the western Roman Empire.⁴³ Again, we have an example of an unruly title, this time the same work referred to by two titles. It is quite likely that this was a work known to the author of the Gelasian Decree, so why does the author blur the title? I posit that it is a conscious effort to conceal and obscure these female authored works.

Apart from Priscilla and Maximilla, the women who appear in the titles of *Decretum's* apocryphal work were not associated with heresy. Rather, they were biblical figures (Mary and the daughters of Adam) and revered martyrs and saints (Thecla and Julitta). These books are not listed as apocryphal in other late ancient booklists. As noted, the Acts of Paul is even listed as canonical in Codex Claromontanus.⁴⁴ So what are these women doing here, in or behind the unruly titles of apocryphal works branded as heretical? I argue that they support the gendered hierarchy constructed throughout the Gelasian Decree. The appearance of female figures, as well as the more or less convoluted references to female authorship on the apocryphal list, constructs female gender as

42. For works on Proba's Cento, see e.g., R.P.H. Green, "Proba's Cento: Its Date, Purpose, and Reception," *TCQ* 45, no. 2 (1995): 551–63; Karl Olav Sandnes, *The Gospel "According to Homer and Virgil": Cento and Canon*, vol. 138, Supplements to Novum Testamentum (Leiden: Brill, 2011) i–xii; Sigrid Schottenius Cullhed, *Proba the Prophet: The Christian Virgilian Cento of Faltonia Betitia Proba*, vol. 378, Mnemosyne Supplements (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

43. Susan Ashbrook Harvey, "Women and Words: Texts by and about Women," in *The Cambridge History of Early Christian Literature* (ed. Frances Young, Lewis Ayres, and Andrew Louth; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

44. Gallagher and Meade, *The Biblical Canon Lists from Early Christianity: Texts and Analysis*, 184–86.

on the margins. Their presence is defined as outside the hierarchical order of the church. Notions of female authorship and female authority, even female martyrdom, are thus associated with heresy and apocrypha, whereas male authorship is associated with the sanctioned power structure of the church.

Conclusion: not so innocent booklists

I have argued that the Gelasian Decree can be read as an effort to suppress and regulate an imagined library that was becoming too prolific and out of control. The first four chapters show a clear effort to hierarchically organize the world, although not always successful, through listing and categorizing books and persons. The effort in Chapter 5 is more devious. Here the author also attempts to confuse and encourage forgetting. He blurs the names of the books he lists, conceals female authorship, and leaves the list intentionally incomplete. As such, this messy, chaotic, incomplete list mirrors the anathema world to which it belongs. The apocryphal books should not be copied or read; in fact, they should be destroyed (5.1). The Gelasian Decree ultimately seeks to eliminate the unruly category that it fails to control.

How did it succeed in its efforts? On one hand, the Decree was successful in that it was widely transmitted, and its false papal authorial claim accepted. As a papal decree it became influential in discourses on canonicity as well as on heresy. Moreover, the Gelasian Decree gained renewed success in early modern scholarship when it became a valued source for research on the creation of the Christian canon. The authority of the Decree is taken at face value by these scholars, who read the text strictly as part of a canonization process rather than more broadly as an effort to gain control by one party within the Church.

On the other hand, it should be noted that there were limits to its power. The Gelasian Decree shows us what a certain writer (representing a faction within the church) thought that people should and should not read. It does not tell us what people in fact read nor what they refrained from reading. Many of the texts on the apocryphal list continued to be copied, translated, reworked, and read. The Martyrdom of Cyricus and Julitta, which the Decree brands as dubious, was incorporated into the Golden Legend, and veneration of the toddler saint and his mother became widespread throughout the Latin West in the early Middle Ages.⁴⁵ The popularity in medieval times of the various Thecla stories as well as Proba's cento also shows that the Gelasian Decree did not stop the circulation of the works it considered apocryphal. Thecla and Proba are connected to scribal culture and book production in a number medieval of manuscripts.⁴⁶ In Anglo-Saxon Britain, apocryphal stories about Mary were widely read, and their content used in sermons.⁴⁷ In one of these popular medieval tales, the role of the midwife is expanded even further.

45. Wasyliw, *Martyrdom, Murder, and Magic: Child Saints and Their Cults in Medieval Europe*, 45.

46. Maud Burnett McInerney, *Eloquent Virgins from Thecla to Joan of Arc* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

47. Brandon Hawk, *Preaching Apocrypha in Anglo-Saxon England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018).

Not only does this female figure testify to the core theological tenet of Mary's perpetual virginity, but she also serves as the only witness to the birth of Christ.⁴⁸

I argue that gender signifies relationships of power in the Gelasian Decree. The hierarchical composition of the document is key to understand how gender functions as part of the text's rhetoric. The document tries to organize the entire universe and the books imagined within it. It associates male gender with godly attributes, canon, ecclesial hierarchy, and order. Female gender is relegated to the margins and connected to the categories of apocrypha and heresy. It is marked as dangerous through associations with sexual deviancy. The Gelasian Decree manifests an effort to bring unruly books, and gender out of place, under ecclesial control. Blurring the titles in the apocryphal books is one strategy. Many of these blurred titles are simultaneously feminized by forefronting female names and feminine designations. However, the Gelasian Decree's effort to control unruly books does not quite succeed. In the document itself, the categories that are constructed ultimately unravel, and in the course of history, many of the books it tried to prohibit were transmitted and read. Others were preserved through the Gelasian Decree itself, as books known only by title. And as such, we continue to explore their unruliness.

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48. The centrality of the midwife is particularly strong in a late recension of the Latin infancy gospels called the J composition. In one variant, the Arundel Form, the midwife scene is expanded, and the birth of Christ is only narrated through the voice of a midwife. Pleše and Ehrman, *The Apocryphal Gospels: Texts and Translations*, 115.