



CHAPTER 8

Modes of Silencing the Past

The pendulum of cultural change always swings—perhaps not as far as where it started, but never still. Cultural change takes place under competing forces. Its graph is not a straight line. It is a series of waves. No pope, emperor, theologian, or church council is ever so influential as to immediately change deeply embedded gender roles.

Pope Gelasius himself died after only four years. And by no means did all subsequent popes appear to agree with him. The pendulum swung. A hundred and fifty years later, Pope John IV commissioned the mosaic in San Venantius chapel in the Lateran Baptistery, where *Maria archiepiscopopa* stands arms-raised above the altar, wearing the episcopal pallium. John IV was from Zadar, the same city where today the archeological museum holds the reliquary box that portrays an arms-raised woman titled MARIA paired with a shepherd titled PASTOR, and a day's sail from the Euphrasiana Basilica, where the apse mosaics portray both Mary and Elizabeth wearing the episcopal pallium. Two hundred years after John IV, Pope Paschal twice commemorated his mother as *Theodora episcopa* in Santa Prassede. Paschal also commissioned the apse mosaic in Santa Maria in Domnica, which portrays Mary holding the Eucharistic cloth above the altar.

The transformation of gender roles in Christianity was slow, a series of undulations over time and geographical areas. Not only popes, but also communities and churches opposed the cultural change. For example,

the churches of Cerula and Bitalia publicized their support for the ordination of women bishops. The mere fact that Gelasius complained provides historical evidence, not only that some women were Eucharistic officiants, but also, of the conflict.

MODES OF SILENCING THE PAST

Over many centuries, the redaction of markers of female authority, from both art and early Christian narratives, slowly continued. This effort has been largely successful in silencing some of the oldest memories of biblical and apostolic women who held central ritual and community leadership roles. The silencing extends to memories of the women named in the canonical gospels. What do we really know, for example, about the apostle Junia? Or Prisca? Or Mary Magdalene? Or Martha?

Christoph Marksches estimates that 85% of the early Christian texts *that we know about* from the first two centuries did not survive.¹ Who knows how many more were lost that we do not know about because the silencing of them was complete and no mention of them has survived? Consider, for example, the *Gospel of Mary*. The scribal silence around the *Gospel of Mary* was so thorough that until 1896, when the first fragment was purchased in Egypt, no one had any clue that a gospel by this name had ever existed. Yet since 1896, fragments of two more manuscripts of the *Gospel of Mary* have been discovered, one Coptic and another Greek.² Three fragments in two languages suggest that at one time the *Gospel of Mary* was widely read. Yet the ancient silence around this gospel was profound. Not a word. Not a whisper. Crickets.

Harriet I. Flower says with respect to Roman political culture: “Choosing what to remember must entail also the choice of what to forget, what to pass over in silence, and what to obscure.”³ In the fourth century, Athanasius came up with the first list of books in a canon, and in the same letter that he listed these, he instructed that the other books be rejected *and silence be maintained about them*—“Let us command ourselves not to proclaim anything in them nor to speak anything in them.”⁴ Book burning decrees, such as the Gelasian Decree, chose what was to be silenced, and the list of books to be burned was long. In the case of some books, such decrees likely influenced scribes to redact their sacred texts. If these scribes, or their masters, wanted to keep at least a skeleton of the story that traditionally had been read in church in order to preserve the memory of a beloved heroine such as Mary or Thecla or

Mariamne—whose narratives the Gelasian Decree anathematized⁵—they had to choose what in her story to silence.

Most scribes were silent about their silencing. The Gelasian Decree, however, survived. Cyril of Jerusalem recounted burning the Gospel of the Hebrews. Some Dormition homilists—John of Thessalonica and pseudo-Melito—tried to defend their censorship of the longer narrative, and thereby left a record of their shortening. Nonetheless, the vast majority of scribes were silent about what they had done—but by comparing multiple manuscripts of a text we can identify some of what they excised. Most texts, as Markschies calculates, did not survive since 85% of the texts we know about did not. We can only suppose, from our sample of one, the *Gospel of Mary*, that the level of silencing that took place with respect to other gospels that featured important women—Junia, Chloe, Nympha, Apphia, Lydia, Phoebe, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, Mary the mother of Mark, Rufus’s mother, Nereus’s sister, Prisca, Priscilla, Maximilla, Quintilla, Philip’s prophetess daughters—was equally profound.

These scribes’ silence about their silencing followed the various cultural practices of erasing memory, from the formal *damnatio memoriae* of the Roman Senate, to the Jewish and Christian tradition of *anathema*. As Flower says, these types of sanctions “are deliberately designed strategies that aim to change the picture of the past, whether through erasure or redefinition, or both.”⁶ Charles W. Hedrick Jr. explains why the Roman silence about their silencing was so important: “It is integral to the process of forgetting that it pretend not to be a repression at all, that it dissimulate itself.”⁷

The scribal activity associated with the redaction of the markers of female religious authority functioned as a form of *damnatio memoriae*, but instead of obliterating a single powerful political foe or family from the written record, it attempted to erase the memory of powerful historical women who had exercised religious authority. Perhaps as time passed some scribes came to consider these early women leaders as enemies; in any case, scribes’ selective pruning of markers of female liturgical authority indicates that *female* liturgical authority, not male, was their concern. Did scribes redact memories of men? Without doubt, yes, as the Gelasian Decree’s list of anathematized books demonstrates, books about men and written by men were also condemned when the men or their books were later called “heretical”—including, remarkably, even the “Works of Tertullian,” after he himself proved the awesome spiritual power of New

Prophecy prophetesses by joining them.⁸ Yet relative to narratives about women with religious authority, more long narratives about male apostles have survived. The same silencing appears to be the case for the writings authored by men versus those by women. For example, despite all their books condemned to the fires in the Gelasian Decree, large numbers of books by Tertullian and Clement of Alexandria have nonetheless survived, yet not one page has survived of the many books written by the New Prophecy prophetesses Priscilla and Maximilla.⁹

BREAKING THE BOX OF OUR FALSE IMAGINATION OF THE PAST

The scribal custom of silently excising depictions of female authority, while leaving male authority intact, cannot be attributed to serendipity. Given what was redacted—Mary’s liturgical authority, the title of “apostle” for Thecla, Marianne, Irene, and Nino—this mode of domination reimagined the Christian past with an exclusively all-male apostolate. The scribes, including modern translators, who changed the apostle Junia’s name to the masculine *Junius* in Paul’s letter to the Romans—“a sex-change by translation”¹⁰—performed the same type of silencing with the same type of motive, that is, the motive of defending the false proposition that only men had been apostles, because that false proposition supported the claim that only men had the right to leadership roles in the church.¹¹

In ways both subtle and heavy-handed, scribes—ancient, medieval, and modern—buttressed, and continue to buttress, the myth of an all-male clergy. Shoemaker’s *Life of the Virgin* is by no means the only modern English edition of an important text that did not footnote redactions of the markers of female religious authority that were in the original text. A prominent case in point is Douglas M. Parrott’s translation of *The Sophia of Jesus Christ* in Nag Hammadi Codex III, which was published in the widely relied upon *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* edited by James M. Robinson. Without any explanation or footnote, Parrott translated the Coptic word for “disciples”—from the Greek loan word $\mu\alpha\theta\eta\tau\acute{\eta}\varsigma$ —as “disciples” when in the masculine, but as “women” when in the feminine. Thus Parrott’s translation reads: “After he rose from the dead, his twelve *disciples* and seven *women* continued to be his followers.”¹² The correct translation of the Coptic is: “After he rose from the dead, his twelve male *disciples* and seven female *disciples* continued to be his followers.” Without explanation or footnote, Parrott did not translate

the word literally and thereby obscured the original meaning to all but Coptic scholars. Imagine how often this has been done over the centuries if scholars are still doing it, and seemingly without consequence.

Perhaps some modern scholars' lack of imagination about ancient gender roles led them to innocently redact or translate a text so that it better matched what they believed *must* have been the original. Or, perhaps they did so acceding to the demands of their dissertation supervisor, or editor, or publisher. Or, perhaps, they deliberately redacted the text in order to support a desired status quo in their church's gender politics. The result is the same: the continuing cultivation of a myth.

Unlike the doubt that can be entertained regarding the naïve motives of some scholars, a rather clear-cut example of deliberate institutional self-interest would appear to be the Vatican excavation report with its two incorrect drawings of the ancient ciborium as square. Contriving how to successfully censor the ivory image of the woman at the altar inside Old Saint Peter's Basilica—inside the heart of the Vatican's symbolic power—probably consumed most of the ten years that the Vatican excavators took to write their report. One can only imagine how much they began to sweat when they realized that their own excavations had proven that the ivory scene was in Old Saint Peter's. Not surprisingly, their report passes over in silence the fact that previous art experts identified a woman at the altar in the ivory scene.¹³ This case is particularly annoying to me because it consumed literally months of my time as I tried to reconcile my own imagination of the truthfulness of Vatican specialists—yes, I assumed they were honest—against what I was actually seeing on the ivory scene that everyone agreed depicted the liturgy in Old Saint Peter's sanctuary.

This is how the Vatican excavators used my own imagination against me. Their final report sandwiched the photo of the ivory scene between two drawings that they purported were reconstructions of Old Saint Peter's ciborium, both of which drew the ciborium as a square. The first drawing was a floor plan of the supposed excavations, and it illustrated a square ciborium. Later when I more carefully studied the floor plan, I realized that the lines demarking the square ciborium were dotted, signaling that this area actually had *not* been excavated—but the dots were faint and easy to overlook. The next page was a photo of the ivory with its scene of the liturgy in Old Saint Peter's sanctuary—yet when I turned the page and saw the photo, I was still visualizing the dotted lines of the hypothetical square ciborium from the previous page. The following

page had yet another drawing of the reconstruction, this time a full-page three-dimensional drawing of a square ciborium—presented as real, no longer hypothetical—and it reinforced my imagination of a square ciborium. Whenever I looked at the photo of the ivory, I flipped back and forth between it and the two drawings. I could see that the ciborium on the ivory was *not* a square—but I imagined it *was* a square because that was what the Vatican drawings showed. This tactic of sandwiching the photo of the ivory between two drawings of a “reconstructed” square ciborium confounded me for months. I tried to imagine why such a talented ivory sculptor had been unable to execute basic artistic perspective and represent a square. The ciborium didn’t look square, but it was square. I blamed the artist. When I think back now I realize how absurd it was that I could not see the truth in front of me—my imagination had been skillfully manipulated. Over several months, I repeatedly pulled out the two drawings of the square ciborium, then looked at the ivory scene, with the effect that the two drawings continued to exert control over my imagination!

It was only when I *finally* translated the excavators’ Italian beneath the photo of the ivory that the mystery suddenly solved itself. The Italian said the ciborium on the ivory had the very same function and similar form as the famous monument over Christ’s tomb inside the Church of the Anastasis in Jerusalem—“*ha esattamente la medesima funzione e forma simile al monumento eretto da Costantino nella Anastasis sulla tomba del Salvatore.*”¹⁴ I knew that the famous monument over Christ’s tomb had *not* been square. It had fit inside the Rotunda, and was round shaped, quite likely hexagonal. Suddenly, I saw that the ivory sculptor’s artistic perspective was perfect. The ivory ciborium was not sculpted as a square. It was sculpted as a trapezoid, a half-hexagon. The Vatican excavators had hidden a woman at the altar in plain sight—and for months my own imagination of the fictional square ciborium prevented me from seeing the obvious.

Censorship appears to have been intense in some periods during the first millennium. For example, according to Paul Bradshaw almost no liturgical manuscripts have survived from the first seven centuries, neither Christian nor Jewish.¹⁵ We would expect the liturgy in at least some of these manuscripts to have paralleled the liturgy seen on the ivory, but almost no liturgical manuscripts have survived. In the eighth century, however, large numbers of liturgical manuscripts suddenly filled the void, all looking the same, or, as F. L. Cross says, they have “a specious

similarity. They are written in similar scripts and on similar writing materials ... their intent was *not* to make an accurate reproduction of an existing model.”¹⁶ It may have been during this same period that art depicting both men and women at the altar was destroyed. In any case, the only such art to survive was by then buried underground—the ivory box under the altar of the church near Pola and the sarcophagus front inside a hypogeum near the Theodosian walls in Istanbul.

Censorship is seldom complete. Draw together all the perceived outliers in the data. What pattern do they create? In the current study, the outliers, both literary and iconographic, speak of Mary and her son paired in liturgical authority. They speak of women apostles and women leaders in the assembly, including women overseers or bishops—they speak of men and women together at the offering table. Whether today they are called pastors, priests, presbyters, presidents, ministers, deacons, bishops, or archbishops, the pattern reveals men and women presiding at the offering together, male and female standing in for God, *elohim*, the divine image, both male and female, in accordance with Genesis 1:27 and Galatians 3:28.

The Therapeutae in Judea had a gender parallel liturgy. Quite likely, given Bernadette J. Brooten’s epigraphs of gender parallel synagogue titles, this liturgy continued to be performed around the Mediterranean in some synagogues. At the same time, it was performed in army churches in Palestine, as witnessed by the Megiddo army church. In Gaul and Asia Minor, Jesus communities followed the same liturgical pattern, which was painted in the catacombs of the city of Rome, where, aboveground, two hundred years later, women and men flanked the altar in Old Saint Peter’s Basilica. In Constantinople, this liturgy was modeled in the second Hagia Sophia, and, as portrayed in the San Vitale mosaics, it continued to be modeled in the next Hagia Sophia, which still stands.

Further suggesting the importance of women in the liturgy during the early Christian era, women, and only women, were depicted in the liturgical procession to the altar table at the most holy site in Christendom, the Anastasis Church built over Jesus’s empty sepulcher in Jerusalem. By comparison, through the end of Theodora and Justinian’s reign in 565, to my knowledge, no art has survived that depicts a Christian man without a woman at an altar table in any church.¹⁷ Instead, iconographic and textual evidence supports the claim that from the beginning of the Christian era, women—both alone and with men—stood at the table and

officiated the blessing, the agape, the offering, the Eucharist, the sacrifice, the Body and Blood, whatever their community called it.

These women church leaders formed a continuous line from the first recorded church mothers, the leaders of the New Testament house assemblies, almost all of which were attributed to women—the houses of Chloe, Nympha, Apphia, Priscilla, Lydia, and Mary the mother of Mark. These women church leaders also followed in the footsteps of Phoebe, Prisca, Mary, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, Julia, Euodia, Syntyche, Dorcas, Damarias, Rufus’s mother, Nereus’s sister, the apostle named Junia, and other women apostles. Their Jewish foremothers were their models: Mary the mother of Jesus, Elizabeth the mother of John the Baptist, Mary Magdalene, Mary of Bethany, Anna the prophet, Martha, Joanna, Susanna, Salome, and many more women leaders in Judea, Israel, and the diaspora.

The overarching goal of this study was to demonstrate how our false imagination of the past impedes our interpretation of ancient artifacts that depicted Christian women as ministerial and Eucharistic leaders. The past is political. Therein lies its power. Therein lies why it has been censored. When such evidence exists, no church can exclude women from its leadership and remain true to its origins.

* * *

“Be submissive like the Virgin.” What a horrible lie to tell a girl. How many times has it been told to how many little girls? How many little boys have heard the same aberrant teaching about how a girl should behave?

Would my friend’s submission to a violent man have happened if her priest had taught the girls about the early Christian Mary? Would the abuse have happened if she had grown up seeing both a woman and a man celebrating the Eucharist? It was for little girls that I did this research.

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