THE SEDUCTION OF WEAK MEN:
TERTULLIAN’S RHETORICAL CONSTRUCTION OF
GENDER AND ANCIENT CHRISTIAN “HERESY”

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Although the markers that describe the Christian community are numerous and include many ethical and visual descriptions, the early Christian writers paid vigilant attention to the assent to knowledge. In this essay I argue that, when Tertullian (c. 160–220 C.E.) separates the “self” from “others” in order to establish Christian identity, he thereby articulates and sanctions forms of thinking and believing. In other words, what one thinks or believes, including how one arrives at a position, are important markers of what it means to be Christian. Tertullian and other second-century C.E. North African intellectuals display a clear debt to the philosophic discourse of the later Roman Republic. A trajectory traced from Cicero’s De natura deorum through Minucius Felix’s Octavius to Tertullian illustrates the Christian preoccupation with assent to true knowledge. In the prologue to De natura deorum Cicero argues that it is more prudent for the academy to withhold assent to things uncertain ( . . . a rebus incertis adsensionem cohibuisse . . . ; Nat. d. 1.2) then to rectify inscientia with the acquisition of false or dubious knowledge. Consequently, Tertullian’s contemporary Minucius Felix, in referencing this passage, asserts that the question of the gods demands a choice. The Octavius narrates a disputatio between a Christian (Octavius) and a Stoic non-Christian character (Caecilius). Interestingly, the charge against Caecilius, the non-Christian persona, is that he lacks knowledge and that he suspends judgment on some other aspects of knowledge, which is a position

considered virtuous in *De natura deorum*. Octavius employs the metaphor of a forked road that illustrates the basis of his response to Caecilius. He describes Caecilius as a man at an intersection where one road branches into several others. Not only does he not know the right road, he refuses to take any altogether (*Oct.* 16). The *Octavius* provides a pertinent example of the way a person’s disposition to knowledge becomes a marker of Christian identity. In other words, Christian rhetoric maps a requirement of choice or assent in the place of the virtuous suspension of judgment in traditional philosophical rhetoric. This kind of narrative provides the background to my reference to legitimate forms of thought and belief.²

Also interesting in this regard is the reversal of the Roman binary of *religio* and *superstitio*. Traditional Roman *religio* demanded local compliance with cultic activities but shunned too much enquiry into the *raison d’être* for those activities.³ For the religious person, scrupulousness (doing and passing over) is essential (especially according to civic customs), while giving too much consideration to the reason and rationale of particular beliefs amounts to superstition. Christianity by contrast requires commitment and consideration of its *raison d’être* and, in order to exact this consideration, it inverts the meaning of *superstitio* so that it now refers to activity that is not given enough considered reason. As an example of this Christian discursive emphasis, in this essay I argue that Tertullian and other early Christian writers deploy the symbol of the heretical woman as an example of unscrupulous and unsanctioned thought and belief.

In what follows, I discuss more specifically the intersection of discourses of legitimate thinking and believing with gender in Tertullian, arguing that Tertullian focuses his own conception of legitimate thinking and thinker-types through the representation of other thinkers, so that they function as negative discursive actors for the development

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