

To cite text:

Munkholt Christensen, Maria (2021), "Meditatio mortis. Meditating on Death, Philosophy and Gender in Late Antique Hagiography", *Philosophy and Society* 32 (2): 177–193.

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MEDITATIO MORTIS MEDITATING ON DEATH, PHILOSOPHY AND GENDER IN LATE ANTIQUE HAGIORAPHY

ABSTRACT

According to Socrates, as he is described in Plato's *Phaedo*, the definition of a true philosopher is a wise man who is continuously practicing dying and being dead. Already in this life, the philosopher tries to free his soul from the body in order to acquire true knowledge as the soul is progressively becoming detached from the body. Centuries after it was written, Plato's *Phaedo* continued to play a role for some early Christian authors, and this article focuses on three instances where Christian women mirror Socrates and/or his definition of philosophy. We find these instances in hagiographical literature from the fourth and fifth centuries at different locations in the Roman Empire – in the Lives of Macrina, Marcella and Syncletica. These texts are all to varying degrees impacted by Platonic philosophy and by the ideal of the male philosopher Socrates. As women mastering philosophy, they widened common cultural expectations for women, revealing how Christian authors in certain contexts ascribed authority to female figures.

KEYWORDS

Macrina, Marcella, Syncletica, Socrates, Plato, philosophy, gender, emotions, Gregory of Nyssa, Jerome

Introduction

Sources from early Christianity are often unflattering in their assessment of women's capacities of keeping their emotions under control and engage in rational thinking. One example of a negative assessment of the female sex can be found in Augustine's *De Genesi ad litteram* from around 400, where Augustin writes:

[...] woman was given [to man], woman who was of small intelligence and who possibly henceforth lived more in accordance with the senses of flesh than in accordance with the mental capacities. Is this why the apostle Paul does not attribute the image of God to her?¹

1 Augustin 1894, *De Genesi ad litteram*: 11.42: [...] *mulier addita est, quae parui intellectus esset et adhuc fortasse secundum sensum carnis, non secundum spiritum mentis uiueret, et hoc est, quod ei apostolus non tribuit imaginem dei?*

Augustine's quote leaves the reader with the idea that women have a small intellect and are dominated by their bodies (flesh) rather than by their mental capacities (*secundum spiritum mentis*). However, there was always more than one approach to the topic of women and their abilities in Christian discourse, and although it would be an exaggeration to say that there were liberating tendencies for women in early Christianity, some (male) authors did in fact attempt to describe how according to Christian and philosophical theories the soul is not defined by the bodily sex, and how virtue is accessible to men and women alike.² Gregory of Nazianzus expresses this vision in his *Oration 8* about his sister Gorgonia where he exclaims: "O nature of woman overcoming that of man in the common struggle for salvation, and demonstrating that the distinction between male and female is one of body not of soul!"³ These quotations by Augustin and Gregory of Nazianzus show how differently the topic of women's constitution was understood in Late Antique Christianity. However, they share the common understanding of the body as a negative element which ideally should be overcome by the reason of the spirit/soul. According to an antique understanding, it is a difficult task for both men and women to master their flesh and body, but for women, according to antique concepts, it is an even harder thing to do, because the womanly body was generally understood as a particular obstacle to the mind.⁴

In fourth-century hagiographical literature, women were occasionally praised – not only for their virtuous and chaste life – but also as Socratic figures with superior intellectual skills. In the following we shall look at three such cases, where holy women are related to Platonic philosophy. The three women under consideration are Macrina, Gregory of Nyssa's sister, Marcella, Jerome's friend, and the so-called *amma* (mother) Syncletica whose hagiographer is anonymous (Munkholt Christensen; Gemeinhardt 2019). In most cases, ancient women must be identified like this, by mentioning of the male authors who wrote about them. In the literary process, the women of the past lost their authentic *female* character as they were defined by men's words, and male theologians shaped their memory according to their male outlook and their theological ideals.⁵ However, the fact that the female figures are, so to say, buried beneath male perspectives in historical texts like these, does not make the texts any less informative as historical sources, but it calls for critical interpretations and careful consideration about the agendas that may have driven male authors when promoting women. Arthur Urbano has pointed out

2 The Cappadocian father Gregor of Nazianzus expresses the idea that neither the soul nor life after resurrection is defined by gender (see Harrison 1990). In the works of Jerome one finds very different attitudes to women (see Novembri 2010).

3 Gregory of Nazianzus 1856-1866, *Oratio*: 8.14: Ὡ γυναικεία φύσις τὴν ἀνδρείαν νικήσασα διὰ τὸν κοινὸν ἀγῶνα τῆς σωτηρίας, καὶ σώματος διαφορὰν οὐ ψυχῆς τὸ θῆλυ καὶ τὸ ἄρρεν ἐλέγξασα!

4 See below how holy women are presented as transcending their bodily sex.

5 On the methodological difficulties in dealing with texts about women from Antiquity, see e.g. Burrus 2001; Clark 1994; Clark 1998; Clark 2004; Cobb 2009; Matthews 2001.

that stories about women “were told through the paradigms and categories of a male-dominated philosophical field” (Urbano 2013: 247). In fact, male authors promoted praiseworthy women explicitly as *men*, by emphasising male virtues exhibited by such women and directly describing them as male. For example, Syncretica’s deeds are called ἀνδραγαθημάτων which literally means ‘manly deeds’,⁶ while Macrina helps her mother to be ‘brave’ (ἀνδρεία; this word is derived from the word *man* (άνήρ)).⁷ The semantic field related to the word ‘bravery/manliness’ (ἀνδρεία, *virtus*) could in itself be the main focus of an investigation regarding gender in the mentioned sources. In the same way ‘impassibility’ (ἀπάθεια) and ‘nature/bodily form/sex’ (φύσις) are key concepts in the sources and could be investigated further, because bravery, impassibility and manliness regularly belong together in antique literature, whereas women must transcend their own nature to be thought of as virtuous (see e.g. Smith 2001). However, the approach of this article is a bit different. Here the focus is the reception in Christian hagiography of one particular Socratic saying, i.e. the true philosopher is continuously practicing dying. This saying is embedded in narrations about holy women, and thereby these women are related to Socrates and to his ability to pay little attention to the body and thereby reach the truth. I set out to show how this Socratic ideal of transcending the the body is intertextually applied in Christian hagiography and thereby imply a subtle gender bending and even gender transcendence in literary *Lives* of Christian women.

When it comes to the theme of this article, i.e. the combination of the ideal of Socrates and Platonic philosophy, on the one hand, and Christian women in Late Antiquity, on the other hand, there have been initial explorations. Especially the literary moulding of Macrina has been dealt with quite extensively in secondary literature (Maraval 1971; Meissner: 1992; Williams 1993; Muehlberger 2012; also Apostolopoulos: 1986). On the contrary, the Roman Marcella has not yet received much attention in her role as a disciple of Plato and the apostles,⁸ and the indirect link between Socrates and the Alexandrian Syncretica has not yet been presented thoroughly. We shall encounter these three women and their links to Platonic philosophy below. However, before we arrive at the Christian sources, the first two paragraphs will define, firstly, how gender and emotions are presented in Plato’s *Phaedo* and, secondly, the expectations to a philosopher that Socrates (re)presents in that text.

Emotions and Gender in Plato’s *Phaedo*

Plato’s *Phaedo*, also known as *On the Soul*, from the 5th century BC is the account of Socrates’ last conversation with his friends – a dialogue centred on the immortality of the soul. In *Phaedo*, the conversation is recounted by one of the involved, Phaedo himself, who also describes the context of the dialogue. The

6 Pseudo-Athanasius 2002, *Vita Syncreticae*: 15.

7 Gregory of Nyssa 1971, *Vita Macrinae*: 10.

8 Jerome 1912, *Epistula 127*: 6.

conversation took place on the day before Socrates' execution in the prison in Athens where Socrates was incarcerated. Towards the end of the text, Socrates swallows the poisonous hemlock, and then he takes his last breath with the famous words: "Crito, we owe Asclepius a cock."⁹ For this article, two themes in *Phaedo* are of particular interest: Firstly, the text gives us an idea about how women are stereotypically dealt with in antique philosophical literature,¹⁰ and secondly, in the text we learn how Socrates defines philosophy.

From the beginning of the dialogue, the reader encounters a group of men and only one woman, Socrates' wife Xanthippe. She is visiting Socrates with their child, when his male friends enter the room where he is held. *Phaedo* describes the situation:

So we went in and found Socrates who had just been unfettered and Xanthippe – well, you know her – sitting beside him with his young son. Now when Xanthippe saw us, she cried out and said the kind of things that women usually do, such as: 'Socrates, this is the very last time your friends will be speaking with you, and you with them'. And Socrates looked at Crito and said: 'Crito, get someone to take her home'.¹¹

Xanthippe is obviously presented as a disturbing element for the philosophical conversation that is about to take place, and she has to leave. Her womanly voice must leave the room, before the men can begin their discussion. The text expresses an expectation towards women in general which Xanthippe immediately fulfils, as she cries out and says "the kind of things that women usually do" (οἷα δὴ εἰώθασιν αἱ γυναῖκες). In this case, we are given one example of Xanthippe's "womanly" utterances: that is her sentimental statement that this will be the last conversation between Socrates and his friends. As she is taken away, she is "shouting and wailing".¹² Socrates, on the contrary, remains calm. According to *Phaedo*, Socrates even seemed happy, "so fearlessly and nobly was he meeting his end".¹³ With the reactions of Socrates and Xanthippe, we thus encounter the most radical responses to Socrates' coming passing. However, the scheme of 'male = calm' versus 'female = emotional outburst' is not generalized, as also Socrates' male friends struggle to bear the situation.

9 The full-length quotation from Plato's *Phaedo* 118a (Plato 2017): ὦ Κρίτων, ἔφη, τῷ Ἀσκληπιῷ ὀφείλομεν ἀλεκτρυόνα· ἀλλὰ ἀπόδοτε καὶ μὴ ἀμελήσητε.

10 We do encounter women in antique philosophy, but only few. Hypatia and Sosipatra stand out. See Hartmann 2018, 1361: „Dennoch blieben die wenigen Philosophinnen auch in der Spätantike ein Randphänomen“.

11 Plato 2017, *Phaedo*: 60a: εἰσιόντες οὖν καταλαμβάνομεν τὸν μὲν Σωκράτη ἄρτι λελυμένον, τὴν δὲ Ξανθίπην – γιγνώσκεις γάρ – ἔχουσαν τε τὸ παιδίον αὐτοῦ καὶ παρακαθημένην. ὡς οὖν εἶδεν ἡμᾶς ἡ Ξανθίπην, ἀνηφήμησέ τε καὶ τοιαῦτ' ἄττα εἶπεν, οἷα δὴ εἰώθασιν αἱ γυναῖκες, ὅτι “ὦ Σώκρατες, ὕστατον δὴ σε προσερούσι νῦν οἱ ἐπιτήδειοι καὶ σὺ τούτους”. καὶ ὁ Σωκράτης βλέψας εἰς τὸν Κρίωνα, “ὦ Κρίτων”, ἔφη, “ἀπαγέτω τις αὐτὴν οἴκαδε”.

12 Plato (2017), *Phaedo*: 60a–60b: βοῶσάν τε καὶ κοπτομένην.

13 Plato (2017), *Phaedo*: 58e: εὐδαίμων γάρ μοι ἀνὴρ ἐφαίνετο, ὃ Ἐχέκρατες, καὶ τοῦ τρόπου καὶ τῶν λόγων, ὡς ἀδεῶς καὶ γενναίως ἐτελεύτα [...].

Phaedo had a “strange sort of feeling and a curious mixture made up of pleasure and pain in equal measure”,¹⁴ and “everyone present was affected pretty much in this way, laughing one moment and crying the next [...]”.¹⁵ In effect, only Socrates himself is in control of his emotions, whereas the people around him are more or less under the influence of their sorrow.

As Xanthippe has left the scene, the philosophical conversation begins. It is conducted among men, and the “philosopher” who is idealized in the dialogue is always spoken about as male (explicitly in e.g. 95c: φιλόσοφος ἀνὴρ). Towards the end of the text, Socrates again meets with his children and with women of the family, before he sends them away one last time and meets with his male friends for his execution.¹⁶ It is fair to say, that there is one “room” established in the text for Socrates’ relation with women and children, and another “room” in which the philosophical conversation and, finally, the execution by forced suicide takes place.

As Socrates receives the poison that will kill him, his companions give into their emotions and cry. However, this becomes too much for Socrates, and he reprimands them, saying:

What are you doing, you strange people? This was the main reason I sent the women away so they wouldn’t disrupt things in such a way. For I’ve heard it said one should die in silence. Do calm down and pull yourselves together.¹⁷

This chastisement makes the men ashamed, and they get their tears under control. However, once again it is clear that Socrates had expectations to the women: that they would be emotional and disturb the peace, and he cannot accept this behaviour from his male companions.

‘The True Philosopher’ in Plato’s *Phaedo*

The preceding description sets the scene for the conversation between Socrates and his friends. At the beginning of the dialogue, the topic is ‘the true philosopher’, whom Socrates defines as someone pursuing death and dying. Two succinct formulations attributed to Socrates are: “Other people are likely not to be aware that those who pursue philosophy aright study nothing but dying and being dead”.¹⁸ And: “In reality therefore, [...] those who are true

14 Plato 2017, *Phaedo*: 59a: ἀτεχνῶς ἀποτόν τί μοι πάθος παρῆν καί τις αἰήτης κρᾶσις ἀπό τε τῆς ἡδονῆς συγκεκριμένη ὁμοῦ καὶ ἀπὸ τῆς λύπης.

15 Plato 2017, *Phaedo*: 59a: πάντες οἱ παρόντες σχεδόν τι οὕτω διεκειμέθα, τοτὲ μὲν γελῶντες, ἐνίοτε δὲ δακρύνοντες.

16 Plato 2017, *Phaedo*: 116b.

17 Plato 2017, *Phaedo*: 117d-e: Ἐκεῖνος δέ, Οἶα, ἔφη, ποιεῖτε, ὃ θαυμάσιοι. ἐγὼ μέντοι οὐχ ἤκιστα τούτου ἔνεκα τὰς γυναῖκας ἀπέπεμψα, ἵνα μὴ τοιαῦτα πλημμελοῖεν· ἐκαὶ γὰρ ἀκήκοα ὅτι ἐν εὐφημίᾳ χρῆ τελευτᾶν. ἀλλ’ ἡσυχίαν τε ἄγετε καὶ καρτερεῖτε.

18 Plato 2017, *Phaedo*: 63e: κινδυνεύουσι γὰρ ὅσοι τυγχάνουσιν ὀρθῶς ἀπτόμενοι φιλοσοφίας λεληθῆναι τοὺς ἄλλους ὅτι οὐδὲν ἄλλο αὐτοὶ ἐπιτηδεύουσιν ἢ ἀποθνήσκειν τε καὶ τεθάναι.

philosophers are practicing dying and for them of all people death is the least thing to be feared.”¹⁹

Here we come across a philosophical method in the Socratic repertoire: “practicing dying” (ἀποθνήσκειν μελετῶσι). However, it is clear from the context that this does not entail that the true philosopher is fascinated by death as such. Rather, the true philosopher longs for his soul to be free from the weight of the body and bodily desires, so that he will be able to think purely without biases induced by his physical existence. In order to be a philosopher, one must abandon one’s bodily existence. This can, of course, only be accomplished to a certain degree in life, by trying to disregard bodily pleasures, and only in death – when the soul is free – can this process be completed.

“So it is this that’s given the name death: the freeing and separation of the soul from the body?”, asks Simmias.²⁰ Socrates affirms it: “Yes, and the ones who always desire most to set it free, as we say, and the only ones, are the true philosophers, and just this is the proper practice of the philosophers: the freeing and separation of soul from body, or isn’t it?”²¹ Socrates is about to die in a bodily absolute sense, but his ideal for every philosopher is to practice death throughout life – a metaphor for the ability to think and transcend bodily demands (Marques 2018: 136).

Long after Socrates’ death and Plato’s writings, this particular Socratic definition of philosophy remained in circulation, also in the Latin speaking world. In his *Disputationes*, Cicero mentioned Socrates’ passing, and he cited Socrates’ words about how a truly wise man approaches death. Cicero writes:

our true wise man (*vir sapiens*) will joyfully pass forthwith from the darkness here into the light beyond. [...] For the whole life of the philosopher, as the same wise man says, is a preparation for death.²²

The Socratic maxim thus transferred into the Latin speaking world: *Tota enim philosophorum vita, ut ait idem, commentatio mortis est.*²³ The Latin word *commentatio* as the Greek μελετάω contains the aspects of practise and study. With these words it is expressed that life should ideally be defined by its endpoint, death, and the brighter existence beyond. Christian authors as well adopted the Socratic maxim, and it seems to have spread even without its

19 Plato 2017, *Phaedo*: 67e: Τῷ ὄντι ἄρα, ἔφη, ὃ Σιμμία, οἱ ὀρθῶς φιλοσοφοῦντες ἀποθνήσκειν μελετῶσι, καὶ τὸ τεθνᾶναι ἥκιστα αὐτοῖς ἀνθρώπων φοβερὸν.

20 Plato 2017, *Phaedo*: 67d: Οὐκοῦν τοῦτο γε θάνατος ὀνομάζεται, | λύσις καὶ χωρισμὸς ψυχῆς ἀπὸ σώματος;

21 Plato, *Phaido*: 67d: Λύειν δέ γε αὐτήν, ὡς φαμεν, προθυμοῦνται ἀεὶ μάλιστα καὶ μόνοι οἱ φιλοσοφοῦντες ὀρθῶς, καὶ τὸ μελέτημα αὐτὸ τοῦτο ἐστὶν τῶν φιλοσόφων, λύσις καὶ χωρισμὸς ψυχῆς ἀπὸ σώματος· ἢ οὐ;

22 Cicero 1927, *Tusculanae Disputationes*: 74: *vir sapiens laetus ex his tenebris in lucem illam excesserit, nec tamen illa vincla carceris ruperit—leges enim vetant—, sed tamquam a magistratu aut ab aliqua potestate legitima, sic a deo evocatus atque emissus exierit. Tota enim philosophorum vita, ut ait idem, commentatio mortis est.*

23 In Hilberg’s edition of Jerome’s *Epistula 127*, the phrase is not rendered with *commentatio*, but with *meditatio*. See below, note 41.

attribution to Socrates.²⁴ As we shall see below, some Christian authors even related it – or, at least, the Socratic attitude – to Christian women and thus by borrowing a classic ideal, underlined the wisdom and endurance of Christians.

Macrina and Her Final Philosophical Discussion

A first instance of a Christian woman who must be interpreted in the light (or shadow?) of Socrates is Gregory of Nyssa's older sister Macrina. A substantial body of research has already established the literary connection, between, on the one hand, the presentation of Macrina in the Christian writings *On the Soul and the Resurrection* and *Life of Macrina* and, on the other hand, the presentation of Socrates in *Phaedo* and Diotima in *Symposium*.²⁵ There is an unmistakable link between Macrina and Socrates, almost, one might say, bordering on a literary cliché.²⁶ However, Gregory does not let Macrina quote Socrates directly, but in his presentation, she virtually *is* Socrates. She and her Christian teachings on the soul both evoke, correct and replace Socrates. According to the logic of Gregory, it does not play a role that Macrina is a woman, because she has transcended her human nature altogether.²⁷ By expressing such an assumption, we can sense the conflation of Christian theology and Neoplatonic philosophy that characterizes Gregory. It also comes to the fore in his descriptions of Macrina and her mother. In one instance he writes about them that they were “not weighed down by the burden of the body; instead their life was sublime and uplifted”.²⁸

In the above-mentioned writings about Macrina that date to the late fourth century, Macrina is, as Socrates was a millennium before, lying on her death bed (or rather, as a true ascetic, “not on a bed or cover but on the ground itself”²⁹). Although seriously ill, Macrina remains brave and looks forward to the better life ahead.³⁰ According to Gregory, even on her death bed she was still able to speak clearly and logically about the soul and its resurrection, and she continued to make “greater progress in the philosophical life”.³¹ Gregory explicitly states that Macrina “entered upon a philosophical discussion regarding the soul”³², and it is certainly no coincidence, that Gregory refers to their conversation as a *philosophical* discussion, as he has already mentioned several

24 On the reception of ‘Meditation on death’ in the Christian tradition, e.g. in Clement of Alexandria, Gregory of Nazianzus, Evagrius, Maximus Confessor, see: Guillaumont 1971: 620–21. Cf. Hadot 1995: 138–39.

25 See above Smith 2001.

26 Cf. J. Mossay who is quoted in Maraval 1971: 229, note 4: “l’image des derniers moments de Socrate, popularisée par Platon, pourrait être à l’origine d’un cliché.”

27 Gregory of Nyssa, *Vita Macrinae* 1.

28 Gregory of Nyssa, *Vita Macrinae* 11: (ed. Maraval): οὐκ ἐβαροῦντο τῷ ἐφορκίῳ τοῦ σώματος, ἀλλ’ ἀνωφερῆς τε καὶ μετέωρος ἦν αὐτῶν ἡ ζωὴ.

29 Gregory of Nyssa 1971, *Vita Macrinae*: 16: δὲ οὐκ ἐπὶ κλίνης τινὸς ἢ στρωμνῆς, ἀλλ’ ἐπὶ τοῦ ἐδάφους

30 Gregory of Nyssa 1971, *Vita Macrinae*: 19.

31 Gregory of Nyssa 1971, *Vita Macrinae*: 17: τῆς ὑψηλοτέρας φιλοσοφίας.

32 Gregory of Nyssa 1971, *Vita Macrinae*: 18: περὶ τε τῆς ψυχῆς ἡμῖν φιλοσοφοῦσα.

times in her *Life* how Macrina perfected philosophy.³³ On Macrina's final day, as if she was inspired by the Holy Spirit, she explained the nature of man, revealed the workings of the divine plan and things to do with the future life.³⁴

The resemblance with the Socratic tradition does not end here, also the idea of the calm philosopher who can lift up his friends as he is facing death nobly is incorporated into *the Life of Macrina*. Although sick and feverish, Macrina's contemplation of higher things kept her unaffected by the terrible illness.³⁵ She had trained herself to be unaffected by hardships, which is a topic throughout her *Life*. Now on her death bed, it is she who consoles the people around her. Firstly, Macrina's words have a huge effect on Gregory, who experienced the situation in quite a Platonic way, as he notes: "my soul seemed almost to be freed from my human nature".³⁶ But with the prospect of her death coming closer, everyone saddens. Even the male bishop, Gregory, gives into sadness, as to do the women living in Macrina's ascetic community. Macrina remains calm, she is after all a Socratic character.³⁷ Her final prayer alludes to Platonic concepts with a strict distinction between body and soul, but integrated into a Christian frame: "Grant that I may come into your presence when I shed my body and that my soul, holy and without blemish, will be received into your hands like incense before your face."³⁸

Even though we do not encounter the exact Socratic maxim that a true philosopher is practicing death in *Vita Macrinae*, the anthropology and soteriology expressed by Gregory and reflected in Macrina is similar to the Platonic worldview in *Phaedo*. In both cases the ascetic training of the mind is crucial, in order to make the mind able to rule the body as well as to suppress spontaneous emotional reactions. Freeing the soul from the burden of the body is a crucial part of the *philosophic* life, and this training foreshadows the kind of life that awaits after death. Macrina is already acting as a Socratic philosopher in life, she has first transcended her female nature and then altogether her human nature.

Marcella and Plato's Saying

Jerome, who has gone down into church history as Doctor of the Church, lived in the fourth to fifth century Roman society. For our purpose he is interesting, because he wrote to and about women, and also because he continuously

33 E.g. Gregory of Nyssa 1971, *Vita Macrinae*: 5.

34 Gregory of Nyssa 1971, *Vita Macrinae*: 17. For the conversation in its entirety, see Gregory of Nyssa 2014, *De anima et resurrectione*.

35 Gregory of Nyssa 1971, *Vita Macrinae*: 18.

36 Gregory of Nyssa 1971, *Vita Macrinae*: 17: ὥστε μοι τὴν ψυχὴν ἕξω μικροῦ δεῖν τῆς ἀνθρωπίνης φύσεως εἶναι δοκεῖν [...].

37 Meissner 1992: 38: „Macrina wird also in der Lebensbeschreibung zum Vorbild für die christliche Haltung angesichts des Todes stilisiert.“

38 Gregory of Nyssa 2017, *Vita Macrinae*: 24: καὶ εὐρεθῶ ἐνώπιόν σου ἐν τῇ ἀπεκδύσει τοῦ σώματός μου μὴ ἔχουσα σπῖλον ἢ ῥυτίδα ἐν τῇ μορφῇ τῆς ψυχῆς μου, ἀλλ' ἄμωμος καὶ ἀκηλίδωτος προσδεχθεῖν ἢ ψυχῇ μου ἐν ταῖς χερσὶ σου ὡς θυμίαμα ἐνώπιόν σου.

struggled with his classical education and the question of whether or not his education was useful to him as a Christian.

Jerome's connections with Christian women were not unproblematic, and he seems himself ambivalent, sometimes critical of women, while at other times he lauds his female friends. For financial and other reasons, he was acquainted with many women in the Roman elite, who supported his work and wanted to learn languages and exegesis from him. Marcella was one of these women, who had vivid interaction with Jerome. Their correspondence has, however, only been preserved in Jerome's letters and prologues addressed to her, and therefore we can only ever come to know the *hieronymized* Marcella. After her death, Jerome wrote his *Letter 127* about her, written in 412. It is a biographical writing, written in a way so that it lauds both Marcella and Jerome himself (Cain 2009: 68–98). In this letter about Marcella, Jerome paused in one instance to give a justification for his choice of subject: little women (note the diminutive form: *muliercularum*). Jerome wrote:

The sceptical reader may perhaps laugh at me for wasting so much time in praise of little women. But if he remembers those holy women, the companions of our Lord and Saviour, who took care of him using their own possessions, and the three women called Mary who stood before the cross, and especially Mary known as Magdalene, who [...] was deemed worthy to be the first to see Christ after his resurrection, even before the disciples did, he will see that he is guilty of arrogance rather than I of foolishness. I judge a person's virtue by his or her character rather than by gender.³⁹

Here Jerome defends himself towards an anonymous, but probably real critic that seems to have argued that women are not worthy to be presented as protagonists in literature. In this case, Jerome uses the argument that virtue and character/soul is not defined by gender – to think otherwise is an expression of silliness. In other words, the inner person is not defined by his or her sex, and both men and women can attain virtues. At this point in the text, Jerome has praised Marcella for living an ascetic life in Rome and for her Bible studies. Jerome equals her with “the perfect man” (*perfecto uiro*) from Psalm

39 Jerome 1912, *Epistula 127: 6*: *Rideat forsitan infidelis lector me in muliercularum laudibus inmorari: qui si recordetur sanctas feminas, comites domini salvatoris, quae ministrabant ei de sua substantia, et tres Marias stantes ante erucem Mariamque proprie Magdalenen, [...] prima ante apostolos Christum uidere meruit resurgentem, se potius superbiae quam nos condemnabit ineptiarum, qui uirtutes non sexu sed animo iudicamus*. White translates *muliercularum* with “mere women”, which I changed to “little women”. Also in chapter 3, Jerome promotes a kind of equality between men and women. See Jerome, *Epistula 27.3* (ed. Hilberg; tr: White): “I am not drawing a distinction between holy women as some people foolishly do with regard to holy men and church leaders, but I do draw the conclusion that those who make equal efforts should have an equal reward.” (*non facio ullam inter sanctas feminas differentiam, quod nonnulli inter sanctos uiros et ecclesiarum principes stulte facere consuerunt, sed illo tendit adsertio, ut, quarum unus labor, unum et praemium sit*).

1, whose delight is in the law of the Lord.⁴⁰ After having established her as a biblical scholar, Jerome goes on to underline her knowledge of Platonic philosophy as well, which is evident when he writes:

So Marcella lived in this way for many years and found herself old before she had time to remember that she had once been young. She thought highly of Plato's saying that philosophy was a preparation for death.⁴¹

According to Jerome, Marcella lauded (*laudans*) the Platonic saying (*Platonicum*) that philosophy is training for death (*philosophiam meditationem mortis esse*). We are not told that Marcella *is* a philosopher, but that she apparently knew philosophy and was able to estimate its value. The thought that a woman could philosophize is not altogether foreign to Jerome. In the preface to his *Commentary on the Prophet Zephaniah*, Book 1 (which is addressed to two women), he mentions pagan women, among them Themista who "philosophizes among the wisest men of Greece."⁴² Marcella is not a philosopher in Jerome's view, and she also does not let the philosophical statement speak for itself, she immediately Christianises it. Jerome describes how, for Marcella, the Socratic maxim is combined with biblical verses that express the same, namely:

That is why our apostle also says: 'Every day I die through your salvation' (*I Corinthians* 15,31), and the Lord according to the ancient copies says: 'Unless a person takes up his cross every day and follows me, he cannot be my disciple' (*Luke* 14,27). Long ago the Holy Spirit spoke through the prophet saying: 'For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are counted as sheep for the slaughter' (*Psalms* 44,22 (cf. *Romans* 8,36)), and from many generations later we have the saying: 'Remember always the day of death and you will never sin' (*Ecclesiasticus* 7,40) [...].⁴³

These immediate links that are established between the Platonic saying and biblical Scriptures seem to legitimize both sources, and the reader can

40 Jerome 1912b, *Epistula 127*: 4 (148,9–10 H.).

41 Jerome 1910, *Epistula 27*: 6: *Annis igitur plurimis sic suam transegit aetatem, ut ante se uetulam cerneret, quam adulescentulam fuisse meminisset, laudans illud Platonicum, qui philosophiam meditationem mortis esse dixisset.*

42 Jerome 1969-1970, *Commentary on the Prophet Zephaniah*: Book 1, Preface: "I shall come to the pagan women, so they may see that it is customary among the philosophers of the world to look to the differences of souls, not bodies. Plato introduces Aspasia into a disputation. Sappho is a writer, along with Pindar and Alcaeus. Themista philosophizes among the wisest men of Greece." (*Ad gentiles feminas ueniam, ut et apud saeculi philosophos uideant animorum differentias quaeri solere non corporum. Plato inducit Aspasiam disputantem, Sappho cum Pindaro scribitur et Alcaeo; Themista inter sapientissimos Graeciae philosophatur.*)

43 Jerome 1912, *Epistula 127*: 6: *unde et noster apostolus: 'Cotidie morior per vestram salutem,' et dominus iuxta antiqua exemplaria: Nisi quis tulerit crucem suam cotidie et secutus fuerit me, non potest meus esse discipulus, multoque ante per prophetam spiritus sanctus: Propter te mortificamur tota die, aestimati sumus ut oves occisionis et post multas aetates illa sententia: Memento semper diem mortis [...].*

infer that the Platonic wisdom is only rightly understood when interpreted according to biblical insight. However, Jerome's Marcella is presented as having an extra set of references that guide her interpretation of Plato's words, also "the most eloquent advice from the satirist: 'Live without forgetting death, for time flies and what I am now saying is already a thing of the past (Persius V 153)'"⁴⁴ In these few lines, Marcella is presented as well-versed in both Christian and philosophical literature, and additionally in satire, which means that she is well-educated across a wide range of genres. Her entire education, biblical and classic, led her to live a life directed at death: "Marcella lived in such a way that she never forgot that she would soon die. She dressed in a way that reminded her of the tomb and offered herself as a living sacrifice, reasonable and pleasing to God".⁴⁵

Marcella's life came to an end under dramatic circumstances shortly after the sacking of Rome in 410, where the Visigoths under Alaric plundered the city. Jerome explains that the bloody conquerors burst into Marcella's house, and she confronted the intruders without betraying any fear.⁴⁶ When she was beaten with sticks and whips, she felt no pain, but some time after the harsh events, she died. On her deathbed, she was able to calm and comfort the bystander in a way that is reminiscent of both Socrates and Macrina: "smiling despite [Principia's] tears, for she knew that she had lived a good life and that rewards awaited her".⁴⁷ Interestingly enough, the grief that is mentioned in *Letter 127* is not Marcella's, but primarily Jerome's own "incredible powerful grief" (*tristitiae incredibilis*) over the loss of his friend.⁴⁸

Letter 127 is not the only existing example that Jerome refers to Plato and *Phaedo* 64a. In fact, there is a telling parallel in Jerome's *Letter 60*, which is written to Heliodorus, Bishop of Altinum, and consists of consolation because Heliodorus' has lost his nephew Nepotianus. Here Jerome writes:

Plato thinks that a wise man's whole life ought to be a meditation of death; and philosophers praise the sentiment and extol it to the skies. But much more full of power are the words of the apostle: 'I die daily through your glory'. For to have an ideal is one thing, to realize it another. It is one thing to live so as to die, another to die so as to live.⁴⁹

44 Jerome 1912, *Epistula 127*: 6: *et numquam peccabis, disertissimique praeceptum satirici: uiue memor leti, fugit hora, hoc, quod loquor, inde est.*

45 Jerome 1912, *Epistula 127*: 6: [...] *aetatem duxit et vixit, ut semper se crederet esse morituram. Sic induta est vestibus, ut meminisset sepulchri, offerens hostiam rationabilem, uiuam, placentem Deo.*

46 Jerome 1912, *Epistula 127*: 13.

47 Jerome 1912, *Epistula 127*: 14: *dum inter lacrimas tuas illa rideret conscientia vitae bonae et praemiis futurorum.*

48 Jerome, *Epistula 127*: 1.

49 Jerome 1910, *Epistula 60*: 14: *Platonis sententia est omnem sapienti uitam meditationem esse mortis. laudant hoc philosophi et in caelum ferunt, sed multo fortius apostolus: cotidie, inquit, morior per uestram gloriam aliud est conari, aliud agere; aliud uiuere moriturum, aliud mori uiucturum.*

In this case, in contrast to *Letter 127*, Jerome is not trying to use a knowledge of philosophy to demonstrate education, as he seemed to be doing in the case of Marcella. In this instance, he instead uses the reference to Plato to compare Platonic views to the insights of Christianity. He now promotes the Christian message as more powerful than the wisdom found in pagan philosophy which he, however, does not present fairly in this place. Socrates, as we saw in the opening paragraphs, expected a transformation in this life by someone claiming to be a philosopher, this would free the immortal soul, and therefore it is not fair of Jerome to claim that the Platonic saying refers only to an idea and not to its realization. In any case, the Christian soteriology is presented here as clearly exceeding the Pagan understanding, since for Christians the point is not to die in life, but to live in death. For the Christian bishop, Jerome goes on, the deceased are absent, but not dead (*quasi absens, non quasi mortuus*).

Syncretica and Her Divine Symposium

The last of our three examples of ‘Socratic’ women is the desert mother Syncretica, an eremite from the desert outside Alexandria. She is known to us because of her *Vita* from the fifth century and for her occurrences in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*. Her *vita* consists of a few biographical information that frame a long speech by Syncretica. She delivers the speech to a group of people that has sought her out with a question concerning their salvation. Unlike in the text about Marcella, Syncretica’s connection to the Platonic tradition is described in an indirect way. David Brakke has shown that certain topics in Syncretica’s speech indicate to the educated reader that the gathering around her is an event like the Platonic Symposium (Brakke 2009: 188–190). Once in the *Vita* it is also said explicitly: it was “a divine symposium (θεῖον συμπόσιον) for those present. For they were made merry from the chalices of wisdom”.⁵⁰ Syncretica is obviously the authority in the text, she serves wisdom (σοφία) to the people around her.

Regarding our topic, we must look at a part of Syncretica’s speech where she describes ascetic virtues and says:

The cross is the trophy of victory for us. For our profession is nothing but renunciation of life, the rehearsal of death. Therefore just as the dead do not operate in the body, so neither do we.⁵¹

Particularly noteworthy is the definition of the ascetic profession: the ‘practice of death’ (μελέτη θανάτου). We find here the exact same idea and vocabulary as we saw in Plato’s *Phaedo*. The underlying logic also seems to be similar to the idea in *Phaedo*: that the body represents a stumbling block for the real

50 Ps.-Athanasius 2002, *Vita Syncreticae*: 30: ἦν μὲν οὖν θεῖον συμπόσιον τῶν παρουσῶν· ἐκ γὰρ τῶν τῆς σοφίας κρατήρων εὐφραίνοντο·

51 Ps.-Athanasius 2002, *Vita Syncreticae*: 76: σταυρός ἐστὶν ἡμῖν τὸ τρόπαιον τῆς νίκης· τὸ γὰρ ἐπάγγελμα ἡμῶν οὐδὲν ἄλλο ἐστὶν ἢ ἀποταγή βίου καὶ μελέτη θανάτου· ὥσπερ οὖν οἱ νεκροὶ οὐκ ἐνεργοῦσι τῷ σώματι, οὕτω καὶ ἡμεῖς·

spiritual life, and that it is important to control the body. In the *Life of Syncletica*, the spirit, mind and soul are presented as being in opposition to the body:

For the apostle says, ‘The world is crucified to me, and I to the world’. We live in the spirit. We demonstrate virtue through it; we are merciful in accordance with the mind; for ‘blessed are the merciful’ in soul.⁵²

It is worth mentioning in this context, that the anonymous author of the *Life of Syncletica* might not have had *Phaedo* in mind when writing this, he(?) could rely on a text by a Christian ascetic author, Evagrius Ponticus’ *Praktikos*, which definitely was known to the author of the *Life*. Evagrius knows and uses the same Platonic vocabulary to describe that the ascetic withdrawal from the world is “meditation on death”:

Separating body from soul belongs solely to the one who joined them together; but separating soul from body belongs also to one who longs for virtue. Our fathers call anachoresis a meditation on death (ἀναχώρησιν μελέτην θανάτου) and a flight from the body.⁵³

Now we cannot know if Plato’s writings were actively read and received in the Alexandrian communities that produced the *Life of Syncletica*. It is probably also not as important as to state that the particular Socratic formulation from *Phaedo* as well as the Platonic logic behind it, was received and integrated into the Christian ascetic culture, where both men and women were struggling to remove themselves from their bodily needs and as such acted like philosophers training for death in a Platonic sense. The art of mastering one’s body was performed by practising fasting and other kinds of renunciation, but also by attempting to control unwanted emotions such as sadness or anger.

At the end of the *Life of Syncletica*, her bodily deterioration is described in great detail and presented as blows by the devil. However, even in this physically miserable state, Syncletica continued to demonstrate “her own virility (ἀνδρεία)”.⁵⁴ The devil mistakenly looked down on her as a woman defined by “the weakness of her body”⁵⁵, “for he did not know of her virile (ἀνδρεῖον) mind.”⁵⁶ The description of Syncletica’s sickness and death show the reader that Syncletica’s teaching, including her rehearsal for death, has proven valid (Krueger 2004: 141–158). Whereas her body is deteriorating, her “greatness of soul”⁵⁷ is intact.

52 Ps.-Athanasius 2002, *Vita Syncleticae*: 76: ὁ Ἀπόστολος ὡς Ἐμοὶ κόσμος ἐσταύρωται, κἀγὼ τῷ κόσμῳ· τῇ ψυχῇ ζῶμεν· αὐτῇ τὰς ἀρετὰς ἐπιδείζομεν· κατὰ διάνοιαν ἐλεήσωμεν· Μακάριοι γὰρ οἱ ἐλεήμονες τῇ ψυχῇ·

53 Evagrius Ponticus 1971, *Praktikos*: 52: νβ’ Σῶμα μὲν χωρίσαι ψυχῆς, μόνου ἐστὶ τοῦ συνδήσαντος· ψυχὴν δὲ ἀπὸ σώματος, καὶ τοῦ ἐφιεμένου τῆς ἀρετῆς. Τὴν γὰρ ἀναχώρησιν μελέτην θανάτου καὶ φυγὴν τοῦ σώματος οἱ Πατέρες ἡμῶν ὀνομάζουσιν.

54 Ps.-Athanasius 2002, *Vita Syncleticae*: 111: τὴν οἰκείαν ἀνδρείαν.

55 Ps.-Athanasius 2002, *Vita Syncleticae*: 112: [...] τῇ τοῦ σώματος ἀσθενείᾳ· γυναικα ὀρῶν κατεφρόνει·

56 Ps.-Athanasius 2002, *Vita Syncleticae*: 112: ἡγνῶει γὰρ αὐτῆς τὸ ἀνδρεῖον φρόνημα.

57 Ps.-Athanasius 2002, *Vita Syncleticae*: 111: μεγαλοψυχίαν.

Conclusion

This article took the Socratic definition of a true philosopher as its point of departure, i.e. the true philosopher practices death already in this life, which means that *he* works on setting *his* soul free. Socrates himself incarnates this ideal in *Phaedo* and shows no fear in the face of death. This Socratic ideal was taken over by early Christian authors who combined it in refined ways with their Christian faith in eternal life. In certain Christian contexts, also women could, at least in literature, be active in the otherwise almost exclusively male domain: philosophy. However, the Christian authors presented a new kind of philosophy: a blend of, on the one hand, classic Platonism with its body-soul-dichotomy and longing for transcendence, and, on the other hand, the particularly Christian message of taking up one's cross.

Socrates appears, like the idealized Christian women mentioned in this article, as a literary figure. We cannot really know him or them, but we can estimate from the way they are described what was going on in the world that produced such descriptions. Here it seems to me, that we can make two conclusions about the Christian communities of the fourth and fifth century that produced and read the *Lives* of Macrina, Marcella and Syncletica: in those communities there were ambivalent stances both to philosophy and to women as thinking agents.

Ambivalence I: What is the stance on Platonic philosophy? In the *Life of Macrina*, Gregory of Nyssa is working on replacing ancient classics with the biblical Scriptures and Christian examples, Macrina has the role of Socrates. Some Platonic features find their way into the description of Macrina, but on the surface of the text, she represents something far better, i.e. the perfected philosophy of Christian asceticism. Marcella, on the other hand, does not replace Socrates, she is well-educated and able to integrate Platonic and further literary wisdom into her superior biblical world-view. Finally, the Platonic heritage is inserted into the *Life of Syncletica*, without it being pointed out directly. In this case Christian asceticism has absorbed parts of Platonic thinking and made it its own. In the three texts, we are dealing with three different strategies of integrating classical and Christian philosophy. The Platonic heritage is used actively, but for the Christian authors it cannot stand alone.

Ambivalence II: What is the understanding of female abilities? We encounter women in the *Lives* of Macrina, Marcella and Syncletica, but they are literarily styled. The moulding of their images is very obvious when Socrates is evoked, but also when the women are described as passionless and fearless on the brink of death. What unites Macrina, Marcella and Syncletica is that their attitude towards death transcends common expectations towards their gender. They do not cry out and say "the kind of things that women usually do". Instead they present well-reasoned attitude that reflects the Late Antique ideal of both pagan philosophy and Christianity. The female figures prove the theory that it is possible to free the soul from the body, because they are freeing their own soul from a life defined by their female sex. The female body, like

any body, is inferior to the mind, and it is no ordinary achievement to overcome one's bodily inclinations. In fact, from a Christian perspective it takes something extraordinary, a level of holiness, to transcend one's bodily existence. The ideal presented in the texts is out of this world.

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Marija Munkholt Kristensen

Meditatio mortis

Meditacije o smrti, filozofiji i rodu u kasnoantičkoj hagiografiji

Apstrakt:

Prema Sokratu, opisanog u Platonovom *Fedonu*, definicija pravog filozofa je mudar čovek koji kontinuirano vežba umiranje i smrt. Već u ovom životu filozof pokušava da oslobodi svoju dušu od tela, kako bi stekao istinsko znanje kako se duša progresivno odvaja od tela. Vekovima nakon što je napisan, Platonov *Fedon* nije prestao da igra značajnu ulogu za neke ranohrišćanske autore, a ovaj članak se fokusira na tri slučaja u kojima hrišćanske žene oponašalje Sokrata i / ili njegovu definiciju filozofije. Ove slučajeve nalazimo u hagiografskoj literaturi iz četvrtog i petog veka na različitim lokacijama u Rimskom carstvu - u žitjima Makrine, Markele i Sinkletike. Sve ove žene su, na manje ili više direktne načine i prema različitim strategijama u vezi sa uticajem paganske filozofije na hrišćanstvo, pod uticajem platonске filozofije i muškog filozofa Sokrata. Kao žene koje se usavršavaju u filozofiji, one šire zajednička kulturna očekivanja ostalim ženama i otkrivaju kako su hrišćanski autori u određenim kontekstima pripisivali autoritet ženskim figurama.

Ključne reči: Makrina, Marcella, Sinkletika, Sokrat, Platon, filozofija, rod, emocije, Grigorije Niski, Jeronim