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# 2010 NAPS Presidential Address

## “Fleeing the Uxorious Kingdom”: Augustine’s Queer Theology of Marriage

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VIRGINIA BURRUS

Might attending to the *texture of bodies* in Augustine’s theology of marriage open up new interpretive possibilities? Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Patricia Cox Miller give theoretical cues, Danuta Shanzer philological ones, for a dialogical reading of *On the Good of Marriage* and *Confessions* that seeks to defamiliarize, complicate, and broaden—in several senses, to *queer*—traditional interpretations of Augustinian marital theology. Shame and vulnerability, fear and desire, pain and pleasure, are all surfaced, as Augustine depicts marital figures that are shot through with ambivalence—open and torn, cut and bleeding, both cleaving to one another and ripped apart. Ultimately, he attempts to turn desires that won’t quite align as they should toward textual pleasures. If Christ attends, caresses, and enflames through “the mesh of flesh” (*Confessions* 13.15.18 [CCL 27:252]), as he puts it, Augustine reaches back toward both flesh and divinity through the mesh of text. Seduction may thereby be drawn toward the border where time touches eternity—where a libidinous love evokes the reciprocal gift of fidelity without demanding it, exceeds itself in fecundity without commodifying its own productivity, and, finally, embracing all by grasping at nothing, touches on a joy that knows no end. *Fides—proles—sacramentum*. At such a barely imaginable limit-point, marriage has become so expansive—an ever-exceeding love set into the very weave of the cosmos—that he need no longer resist its lure.

In his *City of God*, Augustine narrates the healing of one Innocent of Carthage, who suffers from “numerous and complicated” rectal fistulae. Augustine claims to have seen the miracle with his own eyes (*oculis aspeximus nostris*), yet we swiftly learn that the particular fistula that requires divine intervention “lay so hidden that the doctors could not touch it” (*ita latuerat ut eum non tangerent*). Having already experienced the pain of the surgery that cured his other internal sores, Innocent is terrified of any

further encounter with the knife. A parade of doctors persuades him of its necessity, nonetheless. On the eve of what is to be his second surgery, Innocent prays with uncanny intensity. Augustine is among those gathered with him and returning to support him the next day. As he reports, “the terrifying knives were brought forth.” Then “the knots of the bandages were untied, the place was laid bare, the doctor inspected it and, armed and intent, searched for the abscess to be lanced.” Augustine specifies that the surgeon “examined with his eyes and felt with his fingers” (*scrutatur oculis digitisque contrectat*). What he finds is not an abscess to be penetrated but the surface of “a very firm scar” (*firmissimam cicatricem*). That which was hidden from touch is now, through its miraculous healing, both seen and felt (*City of God* 22.8 [CCL 48:816–18]). Despite initial and final evocations of vision, Augustine’s story ultimately focuses our attention on cutting and pain, on fear and the desire for healing, on the gaping interiority of flesh and a “very firm” scar explored with surprised fingers. On *touching and feeling*, in other words.

Admittedly, the groping of Innocent’s ravaged backside may seem a *gratuitously* queer point of entry into Augustine’s theology of marriage, to which I shall presently turn. I begin there, nonetheless, in order to evoke what Patricia Cox Miller has taught us to think of as *visceral seeing*, which she describes as “corporeal responses to word-pictures of the body, responses that implicate the reader in such a way that the boundary between text and reader begins to weaken.”<sup>1</sup> I take this to be akin to what critical theorist Eve Sedgwick has called a “textural” mode of perception:

To perceive texture is never only to ask or know What is it like? nor even just How does *it* impinge on *me*? Textural perception always explores two other questions as well: How did it get that way? and What could I do with it? . . . I haven’t perceived a texture until I’ve instantaneously hypothesized whether the object I’m perceiving was sedimented, extruded, laminated, granulated, polished, distressed, felted, or fluffed up. Similarly, to perceive texture is to know or hypothesize whether a thing will be easy or hard, safe or dangerous to grasp, to stack, to fold, to shred, to climb on, to stretch, to slide, to soak.<sup>2</sup>

1. Patricia Cox Miller, “Visceral Seeing: The Holy Body in Late Ancient Christianity,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 12 (2004): 396. See also Patricia Cox Miller, *The Corporeal Imagination: Signifying the Holy in Late Ancient Christianity*, Divinations: Rereading Late Ancient Religion (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 11–14.

2. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 13–14.

Textural perception for Sedgwick, like visceral seeing for Miller, traverses the sensory imagination, though it tends to be registered most powerfully on the borders between touch and sight. It also complicates the binary of subject and object: to touch is, after all, also always to be touched in return. Finally, it evokes the “particular intimacy [that] seems to subsist between textures and emotions.”<sup>3</sup>

Innocent’s scar intrigues me partly because it appears both to invite and to resist the kind of narrative hypothesizing and imaginative interactivity that Sedgwick describes as inherent to textural perception (“How did it get that way? and What could I do with it?”). The physician’s discovery retroactively elicits Augustine’s tale, bestowing temporal as well as spatial depth on the scar and the fistula that once occupied its place. However, the very firmness of the scar’s miraculous closure may also effect a cover-up—producing not an articulate roughness but a hyper-smoothness reluctant to yield any depth, possibly even signifying “the willed erasure of its history.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, despite Augustine’s lengthy narration of Innocent’s malady, his treatments, and his fears, it finally becomes unimaginable how this particular wound was transformed into a scar; one can only marvel and praise God that it is so.<sup>5</sup> Eternity thus seems to impinge not to enfold but to obliterate the vicissitudes of time. And if, as Augustine subsequently suggests, scars are no more than a martyr’s fashion accessory in the resurrection, seen but neither touched nor felt, does that mean that heaven lacks texture?<sup>6</sup> Perhaps. Then again, Sedgwick also reminds us that, “[h]owever high the gloss, there is no such thing as textural lack.”<sup>7</sup> Smoothness is also

3. Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 17.

4. Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 15.

5. Of course, such a rupturing of causality (or, in the terms of Aristotle’s *Poetics*, of probability and necessity) is typical, even constitutive, of miracle stories; moreover, tales involving doctors arriving to perform surgery and instead witnessing a miracle would likely have been familiar to Augustine’s audience (see Krueger’s discussion of one such story in the *Miracles of Thecla*, in *Writing and Holiness: The Practice of Authorship in the Early Christian East*, Divinations: Rereading Late Ancient Religion [Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004], 85–86). Yet “an Augustinian poetics of time and narrative,” as M. B. Pranger has shown with respect to *Confessions*, cashes in on this ruptured narrativity to quite powerful and novel effect (M. B. Pranger, “Time and Narrative in Augustine’s *Confessions*,” *Journal of Religion* 81 [2001]: 390).

6. I am extrapolating from Augustine’s discussion of the likelihood and desirability that the scars of the wounds of the martyrs will be preserved in the resurrection as marks of beauty, together with his almost exclusive focus on the visual in his culminating fantasy of resurrected life (*City of God* 22.19, 30).

7. Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 15.

a texture, in other words. What can we do with such a glossy mark? We can, at the very least, look—and *remember*.<sup>8</sup>

In partial contrast to the scarred Innocent, the figures in the passages to which I will turn are still bleeding, sticky, and porous. Chained, tied, glued, and wrapped tightly in the filaments of Scripture, they can and will be ripped apart and torn to pieces, nonetheless. Philip Lyndon Reynolds has suggested that Augustine's treatment of marriage "is largely negative. For while it is apparent what this relationship is not (since Augustine's depiction of libido is vivid), he gives the reader little sense of what it is. He sketched it out but did not know how to colour it in."<sup>9</sup> Without disputing Reynolds's assertion on its own grounds, I want to see whether it might be possible to let some color seep back into the picture—or, put otherwise, to rediscover the *texture of bodies* in Augustine's theology of marriage. As in the story of Innocent, materiality and emotion here exhibit their "particular intimacy."<sup>10</sup> Augustine's marital subjects are not only textured by histories of adhesion and tearing, bondage and loosening. They are also buffeted by pains and pleasures, fears and desires, and—above all—by the shame that attends and amplifies these other affects.<sup>11</sup> Marriage is "good," in Augustine's view, not only because it contains and controls shame—in this it is destined to fail—but rather more promisingly because it renders shame productive. This, among other things, makes his theology of marriage distinctly queer.

In what sense *queer*? Here again, I take my cue from Sedgwick. For Sedgwick (or, more specifically, for the Sedgwick of *Touching Feeling*),

8. As Georgia Frank puts it in her discussion of another story of miraculous healing, the "scar becomes the site of a *locational memory*" ("Macrina's Scar: Homeric Allusion and Heroic Identity in Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Macrina*," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 8 [2000]: 528).

9. Philip Lyndon Reynolds, *Marriage in the Western Church: The Christianization of Marriage During the Patristic and Early Medieval Periods* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994), 258.

10. Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 17.

11. When shame binds with another affect, it often seems, paradoxically, not only to inhibit but also (in the same stroke) to intensify that affect. I discuss this in theoretical terms, with reference to affect psychology, and also more textually in relation to Augustine's *Confessions* in *Saving Shame: Martyrs, Saints, and Other Abject Subjects*, *Divinations: Rereading Late Ancient Religion* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 1–4, 110–25. Silvan Tomkins's thought is here particularly significant; for an introduction, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank, "Shame in the Cybernetic Fold: Reading Silvan Tomkins," in *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader*, ed. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 1–28.

queerness does not stand in a strongly privileged relation to the homoerotic, though it may frequently converge with it. It does, in her view, have erotic affinities with the “realm [of affect and texture] that is not shaped by lack nor by commonsensical dualities of subject versus object or of means versus ends.”<sup>12</sup> It also crucially marks an *identity*, and one that is tightly linked to the affect of shame. “Queer,” Sedgwick notes, “might usefully be thought of as referring . . . to . . . those whose sense of identity is for some reason tuned most durably to the note of shame.”<sup>13</sup> That marriage is, for Augustine, durably tuned to the note of shame is difficult to deny, as we shall see. From this perspective, and strangely enough, “married” thus emerges within a Christian theological context, not as a normative but as a *stigmatized* identity<sup>14</sup>—an image that turns us again to those sticky, porous bodies. How did they get that way? And what can we do with them?

The treatise *On the Good of Marriage* (401) offers one of Augustine’s most richly complex articulations of a theology of marriage.<sup>15</sup> After a brief discussion of that work, I will turn to his *Confessions* (397–401), where accounts of two unnamed loves (one male, the other female) are each haunted by the figures of the Scriptures’ first couple—figures associated quite explicitly with the marital ideal in *On the Good of Marriage*. If these relationships—one described as “friendship,” the other as a “pact of libidinous love”—both fail to be marriages, marriage itself is presented in surprisingly ambivalent terms in the *Confessions*. Ultimately, Augustine attempts to turn desires that won’t quite align as they should toward textual pleasures, while at the same time his reading draws him to scriptural figures even more primal than the first couple—scriptural figures that seem to orient desire toward a radically promiscuous all-love. Where does this

12. Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 21.

13. Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 63.

14. Compare Mark D. Jordan’s suggestion that virginity is normative, marriage queer, from the perspective of early Christian sexual ethics (as I might paraphrase the point): “we must recognize already that Christian marriage was justified against claims of virginity (rather than apart from them). It is not clear how far Christian marriage is an alternative ideal and how far it is a derivative ideal” (*The Ethics of Sex*, *New Dimensions to Religious Ethics* [Oxford: Blackwell, 2002], 71).

15. Augustine’s theory of marriage can be plotted developmentally in such a way as to position *On the Good of Marriage* as a transitional text, poised between an understanding of marriage as spiritual union and an understanding of marriage as established for the sake of procreation and as a remedy for lust, between figural and literal readings of Scripture, and between more and less asceticizing perspectives; see, e.g., Reynolds, *Marriage in the Western Church*, 252–54. As should become clear, my strategy is to embrace the complexity, even the inconsistency, of the text.

leave *marriage*? Perhaps simultaneously more doomed, more alluring, and queerer than ever.

### ON THE GOOD OF MARRIAGE

As David Hunter has emphasized, the opening lines of Augustine's treatise *On the Good of Marriage* place "the union of husband and wife, and their production of children, . . . squarely into a social framework."<sup>16</sup>

Because every single individual is a part of the human race (*humanum genus*) and human nature is something social and has a great and natural good as well—namely, the power of friendship—God desired to form all humans out of one, so that they might be held in their sociality not only by likeness of race (*genus*), but also by bond (*vinculum*) of kinship (*cognatio*). Therefore the first natural tie (*copula*) of human society is husband and wife. Nor did God create these each singly, and join them together as alien by birth, but rather created the one out of the other, also setting a sign of the power of the union (*coniunctio*) in the side whence she was drawn and formed. For they are joined one to another side by side, who walk together, and look together whither they walk. Then follows the connection (*connexio*) of sociality in children, which is the one worthy fruit, not of the union of male and female, but of a shared bed (*concupitus*). For it were possible that there should exist in either sex, even without such commingling, a certain friendly and siblinglike union (*coniunctio*) of the one ruling, the other obeying. (Augustine, *On the Good of Marriage* 1 [CCEL 41:187–88])

We should note that Augustine's claim that "the first natural tie of human society is husband and wife" is scarcely without precedent. Cicero, for example, asserts in similar words that "the first society is in that union"—i.e. the marital.<sup>17</sup> However, the exegetical context of Augustine's argument presses the thought in new directions. For Cicero and most of the prior tradition, marriage as a social tie arises directly from the natural desire to procreate, whereas for Augustine, the causal relation is reversed: procreation arises directly from the natural sociality of humans.<sup>18</sup> Even more strikingly, the biblical text allows Augustine to fuse disparate models

16. David G. Hunter, "Augustinian Pessimism? A New Look at Augustine's Teaching on Sex, Marriage, and Celibacy," *Augustinian Studies* 25 (1994): 160.

17. Cicero, *De officiis* 1.54 (ed. M. Winterbottom [Oxford: Clarendon, 1994], 22).

18. *Contra Bernadette J. Brooten*, "Nature, Law, and Custom in Augustine's *On the Good of Marriage*," in *Walk in the Ways of Wisdom: Essays in Honor of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza*, ed. Shelly Matthews, Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, and Melanie Johnson-DeBaufre (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003), 186.

and degrees of relationality that a thinker like Cicero is very careful to distinguish.

As we have just heard, Augustine derives human sociality, and thus marriage, simultaneously from *genus* (race), *amicitia* (friendship), and *cognatio* (kinship). *Cognatio*—literally, “shared birth”—indicates descent from a common ancestor, typically biological descent, as opposed to adoptive, and explicitly inclusive of maternal lines, as the contrasting agnatic, or patrilineal, kinship system is not. Intriguingly, Augustine’s exegesis seems to suggest both matrilineage *and* patrilineage, for the *shared birth* to which he points us is from a male. Here as elsewhere, Augustine shifts away from the biblical language of “taking one of his ribs” (*tulit unam de costis eius*) and replaces it with the language of “drawing from his side” (*in latere, unde illa detracta . . . est*).<sup>19</sup> It may not be too much to suggest that, in so doing, he layers the gospel representation of Jesus’ pierced and fondled “side” (*latus eius*: John 19.34, 20.25, 20.27) onto the figure of Adam. The christological resonance adds to the imagery of birthing, in which God plays midwife, the near-violent intimacy of the connection between the first two humans: is God also a swordsman? Yet the relationships are more complicated still. If Adam is the ancestral mother from whose opened, wounded side the entire race descends, he is also joined to the woman “by sides” (*lateribus*), language that suggests less parent and child than brother and sister, a collateral or “sideways” relationship, underlined by the subsequent description of the union as not only “friendly” but also “siblinglike” (*germana*); to cleave to another’s side can have erotic connotations as well. *This*—the pierced, birthing, conjoining *side*—“signifies the power of *coniunctio*,” Augustine pronounces. The term *coniunctio*, or union, repeated three times in the opening passage, also finds echoes in other words of joining (*cognatio*, *connexio*, *concupitus*, *commixtio*, and even *copula*) in an audial texturing of language.

Despite the insinuated slippages and reversals of gendered and generational hierarches and the incestuous layerings of relationships, Augustinian marriage of course remains recognizably a union of male and female—and that is one of the queerest things about it, one might say. Queer, first, because he has thereby very closely aligned the relationship of a man and

19. Danuta Shanzer, “*Avulsa a latere meo*: Augustine’s Spare Rib: *Confessions* 6.15.25,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 92 (2002): 159–60: “While Genesis does not use the word *latus*, but *costa*, Augustine, commenting on the passage in *De Genesi ad litteram* and elsewhere, repeatedly and invariably uses *latus*.” Shanzer cites the *Literal Commentary on Genesis* 9.16.30, 9.17.31, 9.18.34, and 10.1.1 as well as *City of God* 22.17.



a woman with “the power of friendship,” although it was commonly assumed that friendship was *naturally* a relationship between two like *men*—a sentiment explicitly articulated at least as early as Aristotle, and only occasionally interrupted by the utopian fantasies and countercultural experiments of philosophers and ascetics. Indeed, in his *Literal Commentary on Genesis* (401–415), Augustine wrestles directly with the tension produced by his own near-conflation of marriage and friendship: only the need for procreation can account for the sex of man’s original friend, he proposes, since “for companionship and conversation, how much more suitable it is for two friends (*amici*) to dwell equally than for a man and a woman” (*Literal Commentary on Genesis* 9.5.9 [CSEL 28.1:273]).

Queer, second, because Augustine links marriage very strongly with erotic intimacy and excitement. Again, this is not an unprecedented move, but it is one that rubs against the grain of a widespread cultural assumption that a free man’s sexual relations would not be confined to, and might only lightly overlap with, his marital bed. Procreation once again functions apologetically for Augustine as a justification for his odd proposal (*On the Good of Marriage* 3). Yet here too, as in the case of marital friendship, it fails to provide a full or satisfying explanation. In the end, it is not *proles* (children) so much as *fides* (faithfulness) that accommodates sexual desire and pleasure, as Augustine goes on to argue that the conjugal bond of faithfulness is established for the protection of the mutual vulnerability incurred in the exposure of desires that are, on his terms, by definition both shameful and overweening. “And this is why they are wed, so that such lust, having been confined to a legitimate bond (*vinculum*), would not float free, deformed and disconnected.” Attracting language of unbreakable chains, ties, and fetters, marriage is here configured as a practice of sexual bondage premised on mutuality, prickling with the thrill of transgression while also promising at least relative safety. Augustine continues: “If married persons perform immodest, shameful, or degrading acts with each other, it is the sin of the persons, not the fault of marriage” (*On the Good of Marriage* 5 [CSEL 41:194]). However much he condemns the seemingly almost inevitable sin, he still finds hope in the mutual entrustment of shame and insists that spouses are obligated to strive to meet each other’s desires, while acknowledging that those desires will never be precisely calibrated and never completely pure. Anchoring his argument in Rom 1.26–27, Augustine does explicitly condemn non-vaginal intercourse within marriage later in this work, along with failure to abstain from sexual relations on certain holidays set aside for prayer (*On the Good of Marriage* 11–12). However, the appeal to “natural use” rings somewhat false in the broader context of his argument: his position

on the shamefulfulness of *all* desire makes it extremely difficult for him to put a limit on what might be pardonable within marriage.<sup>20</sup>

*Concubitus* is thus the site of tremendous ambivalence for Augustine, crowded with potentially conflicting fears and longings. It is the scene of mutual bondage and submission, of the entrusting of both shame and shamelessness at the nearly unbearable threshold of intimacy, and of the acknowledgement of a deep human desire to be both held tight and cut loose, connected and freed at once. It is also crucially the place where lovers may discover a capacity for transformation of, within, or beyond the sexual. For Augustine, the best kind of marriage in this lapsed (and already overpopulated) world would be chaste marriage—but only if both partners truly desired it. That is to say, the best kind of marriage would not be characterized by procreative intercourse but by something as queer, and very nearly unimaginable, as the sex lives of ascetic saints. This is a possibility glimpsed, intriguingly, from the retrospective vantage point of aging, as he imagines marital bodies whose “members languish, almost corpse-like” but are nonetheless yoked to one another as powerfully as ever (*On the Good of Marriage* 3 [CSEL 41:191]). Yet at the same time that Augustine here seems to render procreation incidental at best to the marital union, he also understands children to be a natural extension of a couple’s sociality and insists that all sexual intercourse be open to procreative possibility, on the additional grounds that material creation is good and participation in cosmic creativity also therefore good. The arguments from *fides* and from *proles* are thus in significant tension; yet together they steer toward both an intensification and an expansiveness of love that ultimately burst the bounds (if not the bonds) of marriage. As John Cavadini has suggested, this capacity of marriage to exceed itself is the source of its sacramentality, in Augustine’s understanding: spousal love “is itself transformed or taken up into the higher love that is the bond between all Christians in the church,” as he puts it.<sup>21</sup> I might add that for Augustine “higher” is identical to “broader,” while also proposing that his eschatologically inflected theory of marital love should be thought of in relation not only to his ecclesiology but also to his cosmology and aesthetics.

At this point, we may want stop to take account of the status of my initial suggestion that Augustine’s theology of marriage is a queer one. In what sense have the marital bodies encountered in *On the Good of Marriage*

20. For a sterner critique of Augustine’s censoriousness, see Brooten, “Nature, Law, and Custom.”

21. John C. Cavadini, “The Sacramentality of Marriage in the Fathers,” *Pro Ecclesia* 17 (2008): 456.

supported it? Surely the biblically entrenched heteronormativity of Augustinian marriage presents one of the greatest challenges to such a claim, if a queer desire is understood not to privilege any particular gender, or indeed kind, of object—if it is understood to break down the very duality of subject and object. Yet the heteronormativity of his theology turns out to be precarious at best. He justifies the privileging of the union of one male and one female only by simultaneously privileging sexual practices that are open to the expansion of human sociality through procreation. Yet he also asserts that the best form of marriage would be mutual chastity and thus non-procreative. He expresses bemusement at the exclusion of male-male intimacy from the most primal bond of friendship. And he invests great imaginative effort in not merely sketching but sometimes also painting vividly textured word-pictures of a relationship that stretches friendship into a visceral realm of physical kinship and sexual intimacy that is as thrilling as it is treacherous—a union marked by the sign of vulnerability opened in the side of an ambiguously gendered first human.

We do well not to reduce Augustine's argument to its most simplistic consistencies—even when he does. His somewhat formulaic, and much cited, position is that there are three main goods of marriage—*fides, proles, sacramentum* (the latter usually interpreted in terms of indissolubility). Yet these three categories are criss-crossed by complex theories of desire, sociality, materiality, and temporality. He has brought all of those theoretical concerns together in a reading of Genesis 2 via the mediation of a christological figuration deriving (I am suggesting) from John 19 and 20, where Jesus' side is depicted as being pierced by the soldier's lance and then touched by the hand of the disciple Thomas. He has not created any of this *ex nihilo*, but the cumulative theory of marriage is nonetheless strikingly innovative. It is also drastically overburdened and therefore unstable, as many others before me have noted—less a single theory than a complex of interlocking theories. Mark Jordan puts it particularly well: “Augustine's purpose is really a set of purposes, and the purposes pull at one another.”<sup>22</sup> The volatility of divergent and intersecting desires, the sought-after mutuality of friendship, the necessary breaking-open of dyads to others, and the elusiveness and allure of “presence”—none of these facets of relationality can be detached from the others, and yet no single formula (certainly not the ones conventionally associated with marriage, then or now) can address them all, simultaneously, in every case. By proposing such an ambitious and unwieldy concept of marriage, Augustine has virtually guaranteed its impossibility.

22. Jordan, *Ethics of Sex*, 110.

## CONFESSIONS

In Book 6 of his *Confessions* (397–401), a work that he finishes around the same time that he writes *On the Good of Marriage*, Augustine’s skepticism with regard to marital convention has already surfaced quite clearly. There, describing himself as having been in his youth “no lover of marriage,” he asserts that the addiction to sexual pleasure nonetheless led him toward the “uxorious kingdom”—toward taking a wife, that is.<sup>23</sup>

. . . *quia non amator coniugii sed libidinis servus eram, procuravi aliam, non utique coniugem, quo tamquam sustentaretur et perduceretur, vel integer vel auctior, morbus animae meae satellitio perdurantis consuetudinis in regnum uxorium.*

. . . because I was no lover of marriage but a slave of desire, I procured another, by no means a wife, so that, as it were, the disease of my soul might be sustained and conducted under the guard of lasting habit to the uxorious kingdom—intact or even augmented. (*Confessions* 6.15.25 [CCL 27:90])

This odd statement is typically smoothed over by translators who take it to mean not that Augustine’s continuing indulgence of sexual habit *leads him* into marriage, but rather that it *carries his lust* into marriage (or at least threatens to do so). Such a rendering, though not without support from the syntax, fails to do justice to the governing metaphor of the passage, which likens the diseased soul to one being conducted against his will to the seat of royal power by an armed escort.<sup>24</sup> This metaphor seems to depict not a marriage lamentably tainted by unrestrained lust but rather the state of one being *constrained to marry* by the force of an overweening desire transformed into relentless habit. As Augustine will subsequently adumbrate his predicament: “the perversion of the will gives rise to desire; and when desire enslaves, habit arises; and when habit is not resisted, necessity arises” (*Confessions* 8.5.10 [CCL 27:119]). It so happens that he is ultimately able, through the grace of God, to resist habit and turn aside from the uxorious kingdom. Yet any reader of the *Confessions* also knows that resistance, for Augustine, is much less a singular, closed event than an ongoing, open-ended performance, and habit ever carries the trace of desire. Augustine is always suspended in the moment of resisting marriage, we might say; and if so, he is also always being lured by it. It

23. Shanzer, “*Avulsa a latere meo*,” 161, points out that this phrase “evokes comic misogynistic quips about the dominion of the *uxor dotata*.”

24. Shanzer, “*Avulsa a latere meo*,” 161, suggests a translation of “minions” or “henchmen” to capture the “deeply pejorative” connotations of *satellitium*.

is this play of resistance and allure that I want to explore in three parts, which I have labeled respectively “she,” “he,” and “they.”

### *She*

In Book 4 of *Confessions*, Augustine allows us a peek under his covers: “In those years I had someone (*unam*), not recognized by that union that is called lawful, but one whom a restless desire (*ardor*), lacking prudence, had tracked down, to whose bed I was nonetheless also faithful” (*Confessions* 4.2.2 [CCL 27:40–41]). The woman in Augustine’s bed is not only nameless but lacking any nominal designation. Interpreters are quick to fill the gap, dubbing her his “mistress,” “concubine,” “common-law wife,” or “partner,” and indeed it is impossible to duplicate in English the teasing elusiveness of his Latin. He does not call her mistress or concubine, any more than he calls her wife; rather, he manages not to call her *anything*.<sup>25</sup> Their bond, as he represents it, is unnameable, deriving not from law but from a burning desire. Readers often miss the degree of ambivalence sustained in Augustine’s brief account of this relationship—that is, they often miss how positively he seems to position it.

The faith of a shared bed to which Augustine lays claim was more than marriage required of a man, and it is possible to detect a sarcastic note in his reference to the “union that is called lawful (*quod legitimum vocatur*).”<sup>26</sup> Nonetheless, Augustine is obviously also critical of his own all-too-ardent love. He continues: “In her I could prove by my own example what the difference is between the constraint of a marital agreement that is contracted for the sake of descendents (*foederatum esset generandi gratia*) and the pact of libidinous love (*pactum libidinosi amoris*), where an offspring may be born even against our wish, although once born it compels one to love it” (*Confessions* 4.2.2 [CCL 27:41]).<sup>27</sup> If desire is excessive with

25. Shanzer, “*Avulsa a latere meo*,” *passim*, argues persuasively that Augustine’s linguistic reticence—in particular, his avoidance in this text of the generally neutral term *concubina*—reflects an attempt to blur the distinction (already ambiguous “on the ground”) between concubine and wife, so as to present their relationship as a virtual marriage.

26. Shanzer, “*Avulsa a latere meo*,” 175, reads it as a “bitter expression” that “problematized marriage.”

27. The depiction of marriage as a legal contract pertaining primarily to the production of heirs arises from a quite concrete social context. As David G. Hunter notes, Augustine refers on “more than a dozen occasions” to the signing of *tabulae matrimoniales*, or marriage contracts, which identified “the intent to marry and the contents of the dowry” as well as “the purpose of the marriage,” namely, “for the sake producing children” (“Augustine and the Making of Marriage in Roman North Africa,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 11 [2003]: 74–75).

respect to the law, which provides for the generation of heirs, fecundity also exceeds desire: one need not plan families to have them; one need not want children to love them. This Augustine proves “in her.”

The woman is mentioned briefly only once more in *Confessions*, in a passage in Book 6 that leads into the reference to the “uxorious kingdom.” Now a bit older, and also farther from home, Augustine finds himself tempted by “the union that is called lawful”: he becomes engaged to a girl from a socially well-positioned family (*Confessions* 6.13.23). “In the meantime my sins were multiplying,” he writes, “for the one with whom I was accustomed to share a bed was torn from my side (*a latere meo*), on the grounds that she was a hindrance to the marriage, and my heart, where she cleaved (*adhaerebat*), was cut and wounded and it was drawing (*trahebat*) blood” (*Confessions* 6.15.25 [CCL 27:90]). This image is not only strikingly *textural* but also allusively *intertextual*, as Danuta Shanzer has shown.<sup>28</sup> The “one” is torn from his side like the woman from the first man, in a violent replay of Genesis 2.21–22—“he took one of his ribs”—an act that Augustine recasts in *On the Good of Marriage* and elsewhere as *drawing* Eve from Adam’s *side*, as we have seen. The tearing is also a perverse reversal of Genesis 2.24: “therefore, a man leaves his father and mother and cleaves (*adhaerebit*) to his wife, and they become one flesh.”<sup>29</sup> As Shanzer frames the implications of the exegetical convergence of *Confessions* with *On the Good of Marriage*, “If Adam and Eve were married in Eden, then so, in a sense, was she married to Augustine.”<sup>30</sup> In a lost paradise, the constraints of marriage are strangely entangled with the excesses of desire, it would seem.

Moreover, *she* keeps the faith of their pact (via divine triangulation), as Augustine goes on to relate. “And she returned to Africa, vowing to you [i.e. God] not to know another man, leaving with me my natural son whom I had from her.” Augustine is unable to imitate her chastity, however. “Not a lover of marriage but a slave to desire,” he is more faithful to the bed than to the woman, and since his fiancée is still too young to wed, he must find an other (*aliam*) to fill the empty space. Still, his heart aches not for an other but for the one: “Nor was that wound of mine made

28. Shanzer, “*Avulsa a latere meo*,” 157–62.

29. As Shanzer points out, though Augustine’s citation of Genesis 2.24 in the *Literal Commentary* 9.1 reads, *et conglutinabitur ad uxorem suam et erunt duo in carne una*, this citation is exceptional: “Almost everywhere that Augustine discusses the passage, he cites the text as in the Vulgate of Genesis,” e.g., *et adhaerebit uxori suae et erunt duo in carne una* (Shanzer, “*Avulsa a latere meo*,” 160).

30. Shanzer, “*Avulsa a latere meo*,” 176.

by the prior amputation cured, but after the sharpest burning and pain it festered, and it continued to hurt, as if the pain had become duller but more hopeless” (*Confessions* 6.15.25 [CCL 27:90]). God closes the flesh around Adam’s excised rib, but Augustine’s cut (simultaneously of “side” and of “heart”) will not heal: he here again overwrites the biblical text incisively, insisting on the pain and loss foretold in every union.

Both the woman’s self-willed chastity and his unwilling promiscuity, her austere virtue and his multiplying sins, thus mimic and parody *fides*, after the fall. Still, Augustine can remember what it was like to join to another in a *pactum libidinosi amoris*. It is this memory that continues to seduce him, drawing him along the well-worn path of sexual habit “toward the uxorious kingdom” (*Confessions* 6.15.25 [CCL 27:90]). However, a marriage designed primarily for the propagation of heirs is no more than a mockery, it would seem, its degraded promise correlating with a once full-bodied desire that has become no more than an addict’s empty craving.

### *He*

In the *Confessions*, Augustine brags frequently about the diversity and multiplicity of his desires. We should not, then, expect them to be confined to women. In fact, with the exception of his mother, his *Confessions* has much more to say about his relationships with men. Some of his intimate circle of male companions are called by name, but the one for whom he expresses the most intense passion remains as nameless as the woman with whom he lives for so many years—nameless but not without designation, for Augustine refers to him confidently as “my friend.”

Augustine introduces this friendship in Book 4, soon after first mentioning the woman. The contrast between the two accounts is notable. His reference to *her* is constrained and concise, pared back to the bone. His description of his feelings about his *friend*, however, is verbose and performatively passionate. A relationship that lasted less than a year before death cut it short leaves much still to be felt and expressed, it seems: it takes up most of the book. Augustine and his friend grew up in the same town, were of the same age, knew each other from childhood, yet their intimacy was not kindled until he returned from Carthage to teach rhetoric in Thagaste. Even then, he professes, theirs was not a “true friendship,” for that could only be the result of a divine “gluing” that would secure “those cleaving to one another by means of the love diffused through our hearts by the holy spirit.” The blessings of paradisaical *caritas* are apparently denied this couple because of their Manichaean beliefs, then. Nonetheless, “the fervor of similar studies” swiftly ripened a relationship that was, as he puts it, “sweet to us.” Indeed, it was a delight to him “above all delights

of this my life" (*Confessions* 4.4.7 [CCL 27:43]). Yet it was extinguished almost as quickly as it was ignited, as a fever that had seemingly abated returned to rob his friend of life.

Augustine skillfully describes the symptoms of his grief but he cannot make sense of its intensity. "I became a great question to myself," he observes. "Only weeping was sweet to me," he recalls, "and it succeeded my friend in the affections of my soul" (*Confessions* 4.4.9 [CCL 27:44]). He marvels at the tenacity with which he cleaves to his own mourning. "How is it that sweet fruit is plucked from the bitterness of life—to lament and to weep and to sigh and to complain?" (*Confessions* 4.5.10 [CCL 27:44]). Unable to answer his own question, he contents himself with confessing his condition: "I was miserable, and every soul bound by the friendship of mortal things is miserable; it is torn to pieces when it loses them, and then feels a misery with which it is already miserable even before it loses them." If "the friendship of mortal things" inevitably entails loss, grief is sweet in the face of loss because it appears to be the one thing that cannot be lost. Prolonging his mourning, he tries to halt the march of time. Tears are a frozen mirror in which he preserves the image of his friend. Citing (and exceeding) Horace (*Odes* 1.3.5–8), he can imagine them as two halves of one soul, virtually indistinguishable: "and therefore life horrified me, because I did not want to live as a half" (*Confessions* 4.6.11 [CCL 27:45–46]). His soul is now "cut and bleeding" (*Confessions* 4.7.12 [CCL 27:46]).<sup>31</sup>

Ultimately, he attempts to replace his friend with others, renewing his pretense that *they* will live forever. "Having loved one who would die as if he would not die," he finds himself prolonging the "great fiction and long lie" (*ingens fabula et longum mendacium*): friends might die, "but the fiction did not die." The fiction of immortality lives on because Augustine cannot bear to relinquish the pleasures of friendship: "to speak and to laugh with one another, to yield to each other willingly; to read pleasant books together, to joke and to be serious together; sometimes to disagree without rancor, as one would with oneself, with the rare discord seasoning the more usual accord; to teach or to learn things from one another, to long impatiently for those who are absent, to welcome those who arrive

31. Shanzer, "*Avulsa a latere meo*," 158, notes the parallel with the account of his parting with the woman, which leaves the place of cleaving in his heart "cut and wounded and trailing blood" (6.15.25), but she also emphasizes differences: the wound left by his friend's death was "treated neutrally and eventually healed," unlike the one left by the woman's departure. I want here to consider similarities in the accounts, including shared resonances with the biblical text.



with joy . . .”; such acts and gestures “set our hearts aflame like kindling and make one out of many.” “This is what is loved in friends,” he concludes (*Confessions* 4.8.13–4.9.14 [CCL 27:46–47]).

The point is not, then, that God denies the bliss of true love to doctrinal deviants. It is not even that Augustine’s swiftness to replace his friend (as he later tries to replace the woman) suggests a failure to know and love the other as other. Rather, Augustine does not know how to love the immortal creator as such, and he is therefore equally incapable of loving *any* mortal creature, whether man, woman, or pear.<sup>32</sup> Paradoxically, the pleasures and joys of sociality may seduce him into denying the very transience that lends them their sweetness, by obscuring the seductions of the eternal God in which they rest. A grasping attachment may mimic eternal love in its zeal never to accept loss of a desired object, but a “true friendship,” accepts the mutability, difference, and multiplicity of flesh—and also its ultimate elusiveness. (No one, or thing, is ours to possess, any more than God is.) The erotic failure, which is also a theological failure, is confirmed both by his grief and by the cessation of his grief.<sup>33</sup>

Is there, then, nothing but failure secreted in the love of this special friend, cloaked in its “great fiction and long lie”? What, if anything, might Augustine be hiding in this particular corner of his prayer closet? The anachronistic question of his sexual orientation has for the most part produced disappointingly uninteresting answers. “The evidence that Augustine engaged in same-sex sexual activity is missing or underwhelming,” as Alan Soble notes.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, Augustine’s unselfconscious passion for the friendship of men, together with his tendency to asceticize such relationships, seems unremarkable in its late ancient setting.

However, certain features of his account do grant his love for his unnamed friend a particular gendered inflection, as well as particular erotic excitement. At the very beginning of his narrative he has offered a

32. As Gerald W. Schlabach puts it, “The fable was not the Manichaeism that his friends may have shared, but the pretense of human society itself” (“Friendship as Adultery: Social Reality and Sexual Metaphor in Augustine’s Doctrine of Original Sin,” *Augustinian Studies* 23 [1992]: 125–47).

33. This is, at least, a theological failure from the perspective of hindsight. Here, as elsewhere in the *Confessions*, one may detect a delicate layering of past and present, Manichaean and Catholic, perspectives, as Jason David BeDuhn shows (*Augustine’s Manichaean Dilemma, 1: Conversion and Apostasy, 373–388 C.E.*, *Divinations: Rereading Late Ancient Religion* [Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010], 92–96).

34. Alan G. Soble, “Correcting Some Misconceptions about St. Augustine’s Sex Life,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 11 (2002): 568.

scripturally larded definition of divinely ordained friendship: “it is not true friendship, unless you bind (*agglutinas*) those cleaving (*haerentes*) to one another with the love that is poured in our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who is given to us” (*Confessions* 4.4.7 [CCL 27:43]). The first half of this line echoes the language of binding or cleaving found in Genesis 2.24, “and he will *cleave* to his wife”—*adhaerebit* in the Vulgate, *conglutinabitur* in the Septuagint-based Latin translation also known and cited by Augustine (*Literal Commentary* 9.1.1). Splitting the biblical text by doubling the translations, as it were, he is able to read his friendship both with and against the union of Adam and Eve: he and his friend do *cleave* to one another; however, they are not divinely *bound* in the *caritas* that suffuses the hearts of those who have been granted the Holy Spirit. The impediment of shared heresy distracts from another possible problem, namely, sexual in/difference. For here again, Augustine’s attraction to the notion of a primal sociality deriving from the bond between Adam and Eve draws him to a marital ideal that is in tension with experiences described elsewhere. As we have seen, his *On the Good of Marriage* opens by identifying “the power of friendship” as “the great and natural good” of humanity, exemplified in “the first natural tie (*copula*)” of human society—i.e. “husband and wife” (*On the Good of Marriage* 1.1 [CSEL 41:187]). As we have also seen, in the *Literal Commentary on Genesis* (401–415), he notes, “how much more suitable it is for two *amici* to dwell equally than for a man and a woman” (*Literal Commentary* 9.5.9 [CSEL 28.1:273]). Augustine’s evolving exegesis of Genesis 2 as the charter document for both human sociality and heteroerotic marriage ensures that male-male bonding, however frequently described and indeed paradigmatic for his broader understanding of friendship, is pushed off the map of theological articulation.

It may thereby be rendered all the more shamefully seductive—a hunch that seems confirmed by the appearance, at the end of his account of his grief for his friend, of the figure of Christ—somewhat unusual in the *Confessions*, and here presented explicitly as a *spouse*. “He calls us to return from here to him,” exults Augustine, “in that secret place from which he came forth to us, in that first virginal womb where the human creature was wed to him, mortal flesh, that it might not always be mortal; and from there, as if he were a bridegroom coming forth from his chamber, he exulted as a giant to run his course.” These images are not novel (see Psalm 18.6/19.5) but they are strikingly presented, as the virgin’s womb is equated with the psalmist’s bridal chamber, where the human is wed to Christ. A marvelously gigantic groom, this cosmic Christ comes forth so as to draw us back in, and he draws us in by withdrawing just as he has

come, ascending just as he has descended, always leaving a teasing trace. “And he pulled back from our eyes that we might return to our own hearts and find him; for he withdrew, and behold he is still here” (*Confessions* 4.12.19 [CCL 27.50]). Here, finally, in the convergence of withdrawal and interiority, absence and presence, the boundary between the subject and object of desire begins to dissolve.

### *They*

The Augustine of *Confessions* is not merely fleeing marriage to save himself for a divine Bridegroom, like so many other ascetics of his day. The beloved lover in whose arms we finally leave him is not a *he* or a *she* but a multiplicity—a *they*. To be sure, he first encounters this multiplicity in the guise of a singular female figure. “And behold, what I saw was something neither open to the proud nor bared to children, but humble in approach, exalted in ascent, and veiled in mysteries.” He is not able to appreciate her right away: “my sharp wit did not penetrate her interior,” he avers (*Confessions* 3.5.9 [CCL 27:31]). Instead, “I came across that bold woman, lacking prudence, . . . and she seduced me” (*Confessions* 3.6.11 [CCL 27:33]).<sup>35</sup> Yet by Book 11, the veiled mysteries of *scripturae* (for such is the identity of our mystery woman), previously disdained, have begun to draw him powerfully indeed. “Let the secrets of your words be opened to me when I knock,” he begs his God (*Confessions* 11.2.4 [CCL 27:196]). That opening leaves him dizzy, as the surface of the text seems to give way to an abyss of meaning: “Behold the depth of your words, the surface of which is, see, before us, enticing the little ones: but behold the depth, my God, behold the depth!” (*Confessions* 12.14.17 [CCL 27:224]). The multiplication of signification is visibly evident in the play of letters on the page: “from these words can be understood things that vary and yet are all true” (*Confessions* 12.18.27 [CCL 27:229]). No one should imagine himself to be in sole possession of the Scriptures’ multifaceted and promiscuously disseminated revelations, for “all lovers of truth” share them in common (*Confessions* 12.25.34 [CCL 27:235]). They suit their style to their readers, moreover. For fledgling exegetes, they are a laplike nest (*Confessions* 12.27.37 [CCL 27:237]). For others, the lap reveals “a dark thicket” in which hidden fruits are fleetingly glimpsed and joyfully pursued

35. Danuta Shanzer, “Latent Narrative Patterns, Allegorical Choices, and Literary Unity in Augustine’s *Confessions*,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 46 (1992): 47: “For the figure of Scripture (C. 3.5.9) is in fact Sapientia herself.” Shanzer traces the figure of Scripture in Augustine’s *Confessions* from her first “unrecognized epiphany” in Book 3 to her angelic reading in Book 13.

(*Confessions* 12.28.38 [CCL 27:237]). The Scriptures—*scripturae*—are a multiplicity, then, not unlike the former sensual pleasures that he names playfully his “old girlfriends” (*antiquae amicae*), who seduce him with “this and that” (*Confessions* 8.11.26 [CCL 27:129]).

Will the *scripturae* prove sufficiently versatile to match the “this and that” of Augustine’s queerly polymorphous desire? Perhaps they will. If his sexual orientation is a textual one, this is because the text is so capacious: the attempt to plumb the mysteries of heaven and earth, *caelum et terra*, contained in its first slim verse occupies him for much of the last three books of *Confessions*. There, in the ever-deepening moment of his reading, he *almost* begins to overcome the distensions of time that stretch desire so tautly in the earlier books—the hauntings of belatedness, the subtle misalignments of longing. If Christ attends, caresses, and enflames through “the mesh of flesh” (*Confessions* 13.15,18 [CCL 27:252]), as he puts it, Augustine reaches back toward both flesh and divinity through the mesh of text. His wager seems to be that seduction may thereby be drawn toward the border where time touches eternity—where a libidinous love evokes the reciprocal gift of fidelity without demanding it, exceeds itself in fecundity without commodifying its own productivity, and, finally, embracing all by grasping at nothing, touches on a joy that knows no end. *Fides—proles—sacramentum*. At such a barely imaginable limit-point, marriage has become so expansive—an ever-exceeding love set into the very weave of the cosmos—that he need no longer resist its lure.

## CONCLUSION

At the outset of this paper, I wondered whether Innocent’s scar, described by Augustine in the final book of his *City of God*, offered too much closure—imposing a firmness or smoothness that robbed the surface of the body of richer, deeper textures, thereby also pointing ahead to a possibly radical attenuation of the sensory range allowed to resurrected flesh. The marital, or quasi-marital, bodies inscribed in two earlier texts have proved similarly vulnerable, yet they have refused to scar, from Adam’s opened side, given as the “sign” of the ambivalent openness of humans one to another, to Augustine’s torn side, his cut and bleeding heart, his soul at once cleaving and ripped to pieces by grief. If they have refused to scar, these bodies have also ceased hemorrhaging—paradoxically, by becoming not less but more porous, not less but more interconnected. I am suggesting that Augustinian marriage is impossible and that this is its greatest lure. It succeeds, if it succeeds at all, only by exceeding and thus

undoing the always already conflicted privileging of the procreative union of a man and a woman as the necessary starting or end point of a love without beginning or end.

I am now reminded that Innocent's fistulae—those unexpected folds, passages, and openings of flesh—are said to have been “numerous and complex” (*City of God* 22.8 [CCL 48:816–18]). His scars must, then, also be multiple and intricate, an articulate bodily mapping of a history of touch and feeling—a deep surface of text/ure that still opens up to draw readers in.

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