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A Male Colonization of a Female Visionary Body: The "Montanist" Prophetess in Tertullian's *On the Soul* 9,4

1 Introduction

In *On the Soul* 9,4[1] Tertullian introduces a detailed account of a prophetic ecstasy experienced by an anonymous female member of his *ecclesia.* The woman declares to have received the gifts of revelation experienced "in the spirit" during church services on Sunday. In this regard, she extensively describes how she is able to converse with angels and sometimes even with the Lord. Moreover, she unequivocally asserts that she is able to see and hear "secrets." She can also discern the hearts and receive instructions to heal those who expressed the will to be healed.

Tertullian then reports that the visions described by the woman are influenced by the reading of Scriptures performed in the church assembly, by the songs that were sung, and eventually also by both the sermons and the prayers recited by the church members. The proof of the strict connection between the religious experience of ecstasy and the influence exerted on it by all the abovementioned liturgical rituals is the occurrence of the following episode reported by Tertullian himself: the woman—addressed in the entire account as *soror*—falls into ecstasy while the members of the *ecclesia* are addressing a sermon on the soul. At the end of the ritual, and only after the people taking part in the religious assembly are dismissed, the prophetess is able to report what she saw in her visions. Tertullian also specifies that her visions are transcribed very carefully in order that their content may be probed (*nam et diligentissime digeruntur, ut etiam probentur*).

The foundational works on Montanism, starting from De Labriolle's monograph[2] to the massive investigation of the "New Prophecy" by William Tabbernee[3] (only to mention some of the most important ones), affirm with enough cer-

1 For the Latin text, here I follow Claudio Moreschini and Pietro Podolak, eds., *Q.S.F. Tertulliani Opera Dogmatica. De Anima – De Carnis Resurrectione – Adversus Praxean. Tertulliano, Opere dottrinali. L'anima – La resurrezione della carne – Contro Prassea* (Roma: Città nuova, 2010), esp. 76–77. For the English translation, see Ronald E. Heine, *The Montanist Oracles and Testimonia* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1989), esp. 71.

2 See Pierre De Labriolle, *La crise montaniste* (Paris: E. Leroux, 1913).

3 See William Tabbernee, *Fake Prophecy and Polluted Sacraments: Ecclesiastical and Imperial Reactions to Montanism* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2007).

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tainty that the anonymous prophetess was a member of Tertullian's Montanist group within the Carthaginian *ecclesia.* Tabbernee's assessment is explicit in this regard:

> From Tertullian's statement, a number of things are clear. (1) There were second- (or later-) generation Montanist prophetesses in Carthage whose prophecies Tertullian and, presumably, the other adherents of the New Prophecy at Carthage considered to be genuine, though contemporary, mouth-pieces of the Paraclete. (2) The reality of contemporary prophecy was guaranteed by "God's witness" and by apostolic testimony to the continuation of *charismata* in the church into the post-apostolic future. (3) The context of (at least) this particular prophetess' prophesying was during the regular "catholic" Sunday worship service [...]. (4) The manner of prophesying, while described as "by ecstasy in the Spirit" [...] seems remarkably passive. (5) The content of the type of prophesying familiar to Tertullian (at least in this instance) was stimulated by the liturgy: the readings from scriptures, the singing of psalms, the homilies or "sermons." (6) The genuineness of the early third-century expression of the New Prophecy in Carthage was "tested" by those authorized to do so.[4]

Maria Dell'Isola, in her recent monograph on Montanism,[5] seems to lean toward an analogous thesis. In fact, she underlines that the doctrine of the soul, as it is described in Tertullian's *On the Soul*, shows a remarkable resemblance to other overtly Montanist teachings.[6] However, Dell'Isola states, Montanism emerges in the heresiological sources as a rhetorical construction aiming at discrediting religious opponents or competitors. This conceptual premise, therefore, makes it difficult to shed light on the historical identity of the Montanist movement.

I would like to avoid a discussion of the "real" identity of the prophetess in *On the Soul* 9,4 based on typical categories ("heresy" vs. "orthodoxy") that are taken over from ancient Christian apologetics. In fact, any attempt to determine the identity of the woman – in terms of belonging or not to a group – relies entirely upon specific classifications which are based on the apologetic intent of some ancient Christian authors whose major goal was to discredit religious opponents. These categories, in many cases, cannot fully represent the socio-historical complexity characterizing both events and actors in the ancient world(s).

In order to attempt to recover the abovementioned socio-historical complexity, I will try to focus on the use of psychotropic practices within the religious experience of ecstasy. I contend that the episode of the ecstatic prophetess in *On the Soul* 9,4 is a highly representative case study in this regard. Religious practices attested in the Roman Imperial world offer unequivocal examples of the use

4 Tabbernee, *Fake Prophecy,* 136.

5 Maria Dell'Isola, *L'ultima profezia: La crisi montanista nel cristianesimo antico* (Trapani: Il pozzo di Giacobbe, 2020).

6 See especially Dell'Isola, *L'ultima profezia*, 94 – 96.

of psychotropic practices as means to alter the physiological mechanisms of the body.[7] Clear evidence of the connections between psychotropic (i. e. ritual) "inputs" and visionary "outputs" (i. e. first-person narrative of the otherworld) is indeed the episode of the "Montanist" *soror* as it is reported in Tertullian's *On the Soul* 9,4. In this specific passage of Tertullian's treatise on the soul, an unnamed but well-described woman—labelled *soror*—claims to have direct access to a different, "higher" reality. After undergoing a psychotropic experience (that becomes a claim of direct access to the "other world"), the woman then triggers a writing process which is however exclusively managed by the male members of the group gathered for the service in the *ecclesia.* Thus, a group of men aim at providing the audience with a written "platform" recording a psychotropic experience. The record then serves as a basis for further interpretation and activation of other processes of inner chemical mutations. This is unequivocal evidence of a re-appropriation of psychotropic factors by male members of the group to colonize a specifically female religious experience by adapting it to a new horizon of meaning/action.

Within the boundaries of the abovementioned twofold dynamics, are we able to separate the specifically female psychotropic experience from its male written record as reported by Tertullian in his *On the Soul?* Is it possible to describe different models of psychotropic experiences despite the gendered discourses which they are subject to? Is it possible to reconstruct a specifically female model of vi-

7 On psychotropy and ancient "religious" practices, see Daniel L. Smail, *On Deep History and the Brain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); Daniel L. Smail, "Psychotropy and the Patterns of Power in Human History," in *Environment, Culture, and the Brain: New Explorations in Neurohistory,* ed. Edmund Russell (Munich: RCC Perspectives, 2012): 43 – 48; see also Andrew Shryock, Daniel L. Smail and Timothy Earle, eds., *Deep History: The Architecture of Past and Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011) and Luther H. Martin, *Deep History, Secular Theory: Historical and Scientific Studies of Religion* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 240 – 71. According to Smail, the human cultural practices that alter or affect brain-body chemistry emerge as psychotropic practices. Whereas "moods, emotions, and predispositions inherited from the ancestral past [...] form a [panhuman] structural backdrop for many things we do and have done," (Smail, *On Deep History*, 176) human emotional effects are never universals but rather contextual to a given culture and/or society, as well as to single individuals. For instance, if fear is a human universal, on the other hand, the stimuli that elicit fear can be local instead: "Such contingent stimuli are interesting to the historian for how they violate, manipulate, or modulate panhuman proclivities. Such practices as sports, education, novel reading, pornography, recreational sex, gossip, military training, or religious rituals all reinforce or inhibit synapses and receptors and stimulate, beyond baseline levels, the production or reuptake of various neurochemicals" (Smail, *On Deep History*, 163). For the study of Second Temple Jewish and proto-Christian apocalyptic and/or visionary texts in light of Smail's approach to psychotropy, see Luca Arcari, *Vedere Dio: Le apocalissi giudaiche e protocristiane (IV sec. a.C.-II sec. d.C.)* (Roma: Carocci, 2020), esp. 42 – 59.

sionary experience by referring to written records and texts dominated by exclusively male perceptions and intents? I will try to offer a plausible answer to these questions below.

2 Tertullian and the Anonymous *Soror* as "Freelance Religious Experts"

In the passage from Tabbernee's monograph on Montanism quoted above, it is clear that some of the features listed by Tabbernee himself reveal the influence of a traditional heresiological approach. In fact, by saying that the "context of (at least) this particular [i. e. Montanist] prophetess' prophesying was during the regular 'catholic' Sunday worship service," Tabbernee assumes that the woman here prophesying belongs to a separate group within the Carthaginian *ecclesia.* By referring to her as a "Montanist prophetess," he underlines that she represents the "heretical otherness." Moreover, by stating that "The manner of prophesying, while described as 'by ecstasy in the Spirit' [...] seems remarkably passive,"[8] Tabbernee seems to mirror the same distinction between true and false ecstasy so frequently addressed by the heresiological sources including accounts refuting the Montanist prophecy.

In the present investigation I will try to avoid relying on the heresiological patterns that traditionally define Montanist religious experience. On the contrary, I will refer to the analytical category of the "freelance expertise in the Roman Empire" which has been introduced and brilliantly investigated by Heidi Wendt.[9] Wendt describes freelance experts as: a) entrepreneurial, in that they competed in offering innovative and specialized religious services; b) independent, since their authority did not typically depend on inherited status or formal affiliation with civic cults; c) self-interested, since they sought personal benefit through their activities. Paul, Josephus, Marcion, Alexander of Abonoteichus, astrologers, dream interpreters, Syrian exorcists, Egyptian magi: despite their diverse backgrounds, all these actors may be grouped together within the same etic category of the "freelance religious experts" introduced by Heidi Wendt. Wendt also ties the expert's growing clout to the social changes that Rome underwent during

8 Tabbernee, *Fake Prophecy,* 136.

9 See Heidi Wendt, *At the Temple Gates: The Religion of Freelance Experts in the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). On religious "experts" and "providers" in the Roman Empire, see also Jörg Rüpke, *Pantheon: A New History of Roman Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), esp. 296 – 326.

the transition from the republic era to the imperial times. These changes included the erosion of the aristocrats' religious authority, the emperors' reliance on religious experts, the manumission of slaves who then, as freedmen, sought prestige through religious activity, and eventually also the spread of a more cosmopolitan and mobile populace that started showing a growing interest and preference for foreign religions. Within this theoretical framework, Wendt further explores the notion of "ethnic coding" among freelancers. Thus, for instance, she demonstrates that the ethnonyms Egyptian and Judean (i. e. Jewish) were associated with two different manifestations of religious expertise respectively. Against this broader background, Wendt describes the rivalries among Christian groups in the second century CE as a competition among different religious experts seeking to distinguish themselves from others within the competitive religious panorama of the Roman Imperial period.

Among these religious freelancers there were also some "writer-intellectuals," a small but influential subset of experts who proffered novel readings of authoritative texts and composed texts of their own. Plutarch was one of these "writer-intellectuals," as were also both Paul and Tertullian. Despite their respective specificities, the texts composed by the religious freelancers provide the fullest first-hand evidence of the comprehensive religious "program" developed and supported by this new category of "writer-intellectuals." In addition, despite the individuality of the different personalities, the working activity of all these freelancers was characterized by a series of shared features, including *inter alia:* a) a self-presentation in the text as the authoritative *persona loquens*; b) the use of creative and technical exegesis of previous traditions and of certain philosophical tropes; c) the promotion of life-changing rituals; d) the resistance to hardships; and e) the punishment of rivals. This implies a normalization of apparent exceptionalities conducted through a process of standardization and contextualization of these intellectuals within the shared elements defining the contemporary religious landscape.

Ancient texts also attest the participation of women in the abovementioned activities carried out by the freelance experts. However, the sources tend more toward revealing the intellectual and religious agenda of the authors than providing actual and detailed information on the religious activities performed by women. This dichotomy turns into specific agencies lived and experienced by women but perceived and portrayed by men, thus leading to both a textual/literary construction of gender and a consequent gendered colonization of women's freelance expertise. In the Roman Imperial period, such a contrast clearly emerges especially in the traditionalist reactions against the role of women in the freelance expertise which was favored by the new social classes and activities emerged from a more dynamic, creative, and enterprising knowledge-based society. In fact, a female re-

ligious freelance expertise spread very quickly in the Roman Imperial period and began to diversify along with the imperial geographical and cultural expansion.[10]

According to Tertullian's report on the anonymous *soror*, women's participation in the liturgical rites as freelance experts seems to have played an important role. However, this evidence appears inconsistent with the sentences reported by the author of a fourth-century text, *The Dialogue of a Montanist with an Orthodox.*[11] Here the alleged orthodox writer states that they "do not repudiate prophecies of women" but, at the same time, "do not permit them to speak in churches nor to have authority over men."[12] These unequivocal statements attest that the status of women in Tertullian's time and circles was very different from that experienced by women themselves within the cultural milieu reflected by *The Dialogue.* Tertullian's account shows that female freelance expertise was positively received by his *ecclesia.* This attests that women were held in high regard in terms of religious agency, differently from what was generally attested in other historical, cultural, and religious contexts. In this regard, suffice it to know that Paul the apostle was highly critical of women in 1Cor 14:34–35 and 1Tim 2:12. To the same extent, Aelius Aristides accused the Pythia of not being able to remember what she prophesied in ecstasy (see *Defence of Oratory*, 34–35).

The anonymous *soror* in Tertullian's treatise on the soul had a prophetic "gift," and for this reason, she was able to speak for the interests of the religious community of which she was part. This was a widespread phenomenon quite familiar to early Christ followers rooted in the Jewish tradition and well-integrated in the Graeco-Roman cultural environment. Moreover, the freelance expertise of the anonymous *soror* is connected to the notion of an alleged divine-human communication, a religious process in which the woman acts as the mouthpiece of God. Her speaking authority was founded on the prophetic gift: this allowed her (and the audience) to perceive that she received divine messages directly from the oth-

10 On this, see also Luca Arcari, *"Una donna avvolta nel sole" (Apoc 12,1): Le raffigurazioni femminili nell'Apocalisse di Giovanni alla luce della letteratura apocalittica giudaica* (Padova: EMP, 2008), 262–76.

11 See Anna Maria Berruto Martone, ed., *Dialogo tra un montanista e un ortodosso* (Bologna: Dehoniane, 1999). On this *Dialogue*, see also Tabbernee, *Fake Prophecy*, 294–95 and 389–93. On the anti-montanist reactions, see also Enrico Norelli, "Parole di profeti, parole sui profeti: La costruzione del montanismo nei frammenti dell'Anonimo antimontanista (Eusebio di Cesarea, *Storia ecclesiastica* 5,16–17)," in *Carisma profetico: Fattore di innovazione religiosa*, ed. Giovanni Filoramo (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2003): 107–32.

12 English translation by Heine, *The Montanist Oracles*, 124–26.

erworld during the rite.[13] Therefore, she acted in a non-ordinary state of consciousness, thus having and showing on her body the marks of such an extraordinary contact with the otherworld (*per ecstasin in spiritu patitur*). In conclusion, she was able to display her prophetic expertise through her own body.

3 The "Holy" Scriptures and the *Soror*'s Visionary Account (According to Tertullian's Report)

Another relevant detail which emerges from Tertullian's description of the female ecstasy deals with what we might call the actual "trigger point" of the religious experience lived by the anonymous *soror*. As already mentioned here, the Scriptures read in the assembly, or the songs which were sung, as well as both the sermons and the prayers recited during the liturgical rite appear as the essential starting points for the elicitation of the woman's religious experience of contact with the otherworld. As I have argued in my recently published monograph,[14] religious experiences like the one described by Tertullian in his *On the Soul* are activated by specific psychotropic inputs, namely mechanisms aiming at altering perceptions, emotions, moods, and behaviour experienced by the individual. By focusing specifically on the case reported by Tertullian, a series of relevant details emerge in this regard. In fact, listening to Scriptures and Psalms which are recited or sung can produce oxytocin and serotonin. To the same extent, the experience of such practices seems to increase the levels of pain-killing endorphins and enkephalins to the point of perceiving a mild state of euphoria, which in turn is perceived (and/or culturally constructed) as a physical and mental state quite similar to a first-person experience of contact with the otherworld. Moreover, the anonymous *soror*, at least at a first level (*quas in ecclesia inter dominica sollemnia per ecstasin in spiritu patitur*), seems to be able to share with the other members of the group the report of the visions she had during her extraordinary religious experience.

Maria Dell'Isola has countered the hypothesis that the frequent references to Scriptures in the transmitted list of Montanist oracles might be interpreted as the marks of an intentional charismatic exegesis practiced by the Montanist prophets

13 Tertullian clearly emphasizes this issue in *An.* 9,4: *Est hodie soror apud nos revelationum charismata sortita, quas in ecclesia inter dominica sollemnia per ecstasin in spiritu patitur* (text in Moreschini and Podolak, eds., *Q.S.F. Tertulliani*, 76).

14 See Arcari, *Vedere Dio.*

and prophetesses.[15] She states that the Montanist oracles, in the form in which they have come down to us, were probably uttered during an ecstatic experience and practice. Therefore, both the contents of the oracles and the scriptural allusions shaping their transmitted message then recorded in writing texts must be attributed to and interpreted according to the specific religious experience in which the oracles themselves seem to occur. This is a persuasive argument, especially when considering, at least in some cases, the oracular form of the Montanist texts which have come down to us. The scene of the female visionary experience portrayed by Tertullian seems to reflect exactly these dynamics. In fact, Tertullian writes that at the end of the Sunday celebration, and only after the assembly has retired, as usual (*quo usu*) the prophetess can report the visions that she saw, and which were elicited by the Scriptures and prayers and songs which were read and recited and sung in the *ecclesia.* At this point, Tertullian adds, the *soror*'s visions are transcribed (*digeruntur*) very carefully so that they may also be tested (*probentur*).[16]

The Latin *digero* is a very intriguing technical term. It refers not only to the act of describing (as we read in Ronald Heine's translation of this passage[17]), but also and especially to the practice of dividing, organizing, or even regulating. It also alludes to "writing down" and "explaining in detail," as attested in Vergil's *Aeneid.*[18] In light of this, I contend that by using this specific verb, Tertullian refers not only to the act of transcribing – together with other members of the group (presumably all males!) – the visions that the *soror* claims to have seen, but also to the act of reframing the contents of her report. In conclusion, men here seem to practice an actual intentional exegesis of the woman's account. This is eventually confirmed by the other verb employed by Tertullian in the narrative: *probo.* The Latin verb *probo*, which means "to test," represents here a kind of *sphragis* within the overarching framework of the interpretative and/or "testing" process. The fact that the

15 See especially Dell'Isola, *L'ultima profezia*, 79–114. On the Montanist oracles and Scriptures, see also Enrico Norelli, "Le statut des textes chrétiens de l'oralité à l'écriture et leur rapport avec l'institution au II^{e} siècle," in *Recueils normatifs et canons dans l'Antiquité: Perspectives nouvelles sur la formation des canons juif et chrétien dans leur context culturel. Actes du colloque organisé dans le cadre du programme plurifacultaire "La Bible à la croisée des savoirs" de l'Université de Genève, 11–12 avril 2002*, ed. Enrico Norelli (Lausanne: Zèbre, 2004): 147–94, esp. 147–48. On "charismatic exegesis" see David E. Aune, "Charismatic Exegesis in Early Judaism and Early Christianity," in *The Pseudepigrapha and Early Biblical Interpretation*, eds. James H. Charlesworth and Craig A. Evans (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993): 126–50.

16 See Moreschini and Podolak, eds., *Q.S.F. Tertulliani*, 76.

17 Heine, *The Montanist Oracles*, 72.

18 For example, see *Aen.* 2:182, with reference to the omens of Calchas the seer.

active protagonists of this process are only men is not of secondary importance in terms of religious agency and gender identity.

4 How Does Tertullian "Colonize" the Prophetess' Experience?

Tertullian's description of the anonymous *soror* stands as a kind of authoritative *sphragis* enclosed between two philosophical digressions on the nature and body of the soul. By referring to the soul, Tertullian states that it has a body, and as such it possesses also the qualities commonly defining a body like, for instance, form and limitation. Moreover, similarly to the body and according to the ancient traditional philosophical ideas, also the soul is defined by the three dimensions of length, width, and height. Here Tertullian is obviously referring to (and refuting) Plato, who said—Tertullian specifies—that the notion of the corporeality of the soul is nonsense. Plato says, by assuming that the soul has a body we tend to run the risk of denying the soul's immortality.[19] For all that has a figure, according to the Greek philosopher, is compound and composed of various parts. On the contrary, the soul is immortal, and being immortal, it is therefore indissoluble. Consequently, being indissoluble, the soul is also figureless. On the other hand, if the soul had a figure, it would have a composite structure. Tertullian, like also the other members of his group—Tertullian himself states—has a completely different opinion on the corporeality of the soul. According to him, the marks of corporeality are imprinted on the soul. Tertullian then adds that both he and all the other members of the group acknowledge spiritual charismata (or gifts), which are still valid and effective even after the ministry of John the Baptist. After such a polemical-philosophical digression, Tertullian starts describing the visionary experience of the anonymous *soror* to confirm his assessments about the corporeality of the soul.

19 Here the main reference is probably to *Phaed.* 84 c-107 b. On Platonic arguments on the immortality of the soul, see Giovanni Casertano, "Dal logo al mito al logo: la struttura del Fedone," in *La struttura del dialogo platonico*, ed. Giovanni Casertano (Napoli: Loffredo, 2000): 86–107; Dorothea Frede, "The Final Proof of the Immortality of the Soul in Plato's *Phaedo* 102a-107a," *Phronesis* 23 (1978): 27–41; Hans B. Gottschalk, "Soul as Harmonia," *Phronesis* 16 (1971): 179–98; Nicolas Lindner, *The Evidence of Immortality in Plato's "Phaidon"* (Munich: GRIN Verlag, 2008); Lidia Palumbo, "Pensare l'anima nello spazio iconico dei dialoghi di Platone," *Chôra* 9–10 (2011–2012): 13–31; Gregory Vlastos, "Reasons and Causes in the *Phaedo*," in Gregory Vlastos, *Plato: A Collection of Critical Essays, Vol. I: Metaphysics and Epistemology* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1971): 132–66; David Wiggins, "Teleology and the Good in Plato's *Phaedo*," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 4 (1986): 1–8.

Another relevant aspect emerging from Tertullian's introductory polemical-philosophical digression is the potential connection between the notion of the corporeality of the soul and the Stoic doctrine of the πνεῦμα.[20] Tertullian describes the soul as having a kind of *sui generis* body. This interpretation appears to be influenced by (or it simply reflects) the Stoic theory which conceives the spirit as an actual body. It is not by chance then that Tertullian uses a very similar image in *Against Praxeas* 7,8: *spiritus enim corpus sui generis in sua effigie.*[21] Such an intellectual game is further combined with a syllogism attributed to Plato (*sed animam immortalem, igitur indissolubilem, qua immortalem, et ineffigiatam, qua indissolubilem, ceterum compositiciam et structilem, si effigiatam, tamquam alio eam modo effigians intellectualibus formis, pulchram iustitia et disciplinis philosophiae, deformem uero contrariis artibus*)[22] resulting from the combination of two Platonic passages: *Phaed.* 78 c 1–2 and *Phaedr.* 247 c. Tertullian had probably found this in an early source. To the same extent, also the notion of the weight of the soul, mentioned in *On the Soul* 8,3 and here previously discussed, was most likely taken from the work of the Greek physician Soranus of Ephesus.[23]

After describing the anonymous *soror*'s religious experience, Tertullian concludes that the prophetic gift received by the woman is clear evidence of the fact that the soul is equipped with an actual corporeal shape. In Tertullian's account, the prophetess explicitly declares that she saw in a vision a soul with a bodily shape. More importantly, she also boldly stresses that the vision of the soul was not a void and empty illusion. On the contrary, the soul in the vision was so vivid and concrete that it was even possible to grasp it with both hands. Moreover, it was a soft and transparent image, of an ethereal colour and defined by a shape unequivocally resembling that of a human being in every respect.[24] Such a vivid description echoes a typical visionary account where the psychotropic experience

20 See Anthony A. Long, "Soul and Body in Stoicism," *Phronesis* 27/1 (1982): 34–57. See also Aiste Celkyte, "The Soul and Personal Identity in Early Stoicism: Two Theories?," *Apeiron* 53/4 (2020): 463–86. On πνεῦμα in Stocism, see Jackie Pigeaud, *La maladie de l'ame: Étude sur la relation de l'âme et du corps dans la tradition médico-philosophique antique* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1981), esp. 267; Ian Hensley, "The Physics of Pneuma in Early Stoicism," in *The Concept of Pneuma after Aristotle*, eds. Sean Coughlin, David Leith and Orly Lewis (Berlin: Topoi, 2020): 171–202.

21 Moreschini and Podolak, eds., *Q.S.F. Tertulliani*, 472.

22 Moreschini and Podolak, eds., *Q.S.F. Tertulliani*, 74–76.

23 See Moreschini and Podolak, eds., *Q.S.F. Tertulliani*, 73–74.

24 See *An.* 9,4: *'inter cetera', inquit, 'ostensa est mihi anima corporaliter, et spiritus uidebatur, sed non inanis et uacuae qualitatis, immo quae etiam teneri repromitteret, tenera et lucida et aerii coloris, et forma per omnia humana. Hoc uisio'. Et deus testis et apostolus charismatum in ecclesia futurorum idoneus sponsor; tunc et si res ipsa de singulis persuaserit, credas.* See Moreschini and Podolak, eds., *Q.S.F. Tertulliani*, 76.

lying and acting behind the text is made accessible to the audience. A clear example of this process, for instance, is described in 1 Enoch 14:1, where the image of the "tongue of flesh" unequivocally reflects a direct experience of contact with the otherworld characterized by vivid and almost tangible perceptions of the objects seen in a vision. Further evidence of this is offered by the Second Temple Jewish apocalyptic texts, where the souls of the dead are always represented as material images. This evidence seems to justify then the literary tendency to make the idea of the immortality of the soul subject to a descriptive process of "materialization" and/or "revisualization."[25]

Considering all this, it is easy to conclude that Tertullian colonizes the anonymous *soror*'s visionary account. In fact, he includes and contextualizes the account of an "actual" visionary experience—in which the description of a first-person contact with the otherworld reflects previous authoritative visionary reports—within the boundaries of a philosophical debate on the immortality of the soul. Within these religious dynamics two different freelance activities and individuals emerge. On the one hand, there is the anonymous *soror*, a visionary resembling other well-known examples of prophetic agents, like those introduced and described by Dio Cassius in his *Roman History* (e. g., see *Hist. Rom.* 55,31,2 – 3; 59,9,3; 79,4,1 – 5; 79,31,1 – 2), Hermas[26] and others.[27] On the other hand there is Tertullian, a teacher and urban intellectual who is engaged in a continuous process of demarcation of boundaries between competing groups.[28]

5 Concluding Remarks

Many scholars have already noted that most of the seers in the ancient and late antique Mediterranean world were mainly men. More importantly, these seers were introduced and described in the sources as well-trained prophetic agents equipped with technical skills and knowledge. On the contrary, a prophetic ecstasy characterized by altered states of consciousness, including dreams and frenzy—

25 In the sense of visual culture. See in this regard William J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994). On the descriptive processes of materialization in Jewish apocalyptic texts, see Jan N. Bremmer, "Descents to Hell and Ascents to Heaven in Apocalyptic Literature," in *The Oxford Handbook of Apocalyptic Literature*, ed. John J. Collins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014): 340 – 57.

26 On the prophetic agents in the *Shepherd of Hermas*, see Jannes Reiling, *Hermas and Christian Prophecy. A Study of the Eleventh Mandate* (Leiden: Brill, 1973).

27 See Rüpke, *Pantheon*, 310 – 13.

28 Rüpke, *Pantheon*, 365 – 69.

and as such not subject to a specific and professional training—was generally embodied by women.[29] However, I contend that such a polarization is not so effective in reference to a complex, multifaceted and "cluttered" world like the third century Roman Empire. In any case, as Craig Keener has rightly pointed out, in both Graeco-Roman and Jewish environments women were normally less educated than men, especially in terms of public activities like writing.[30] Within this overarching tendency, even the women who were privileged enough to receive an advanced education, like the aristocrats, received nonetheless a lower level of technical training. This was probably the main reason behind the perception of the anonymous *soror* in Tertullian's *On the Soul* as a visionary agent not so well-trained, so much that her visions had to be interpreted by other participants in the liturgical rite.

In describing the visionary experience of the anonymous *soror*, Tertullian draws a line of continuity between the prophetess' speaking activity and the male members' writing skills. This line of continuity, however, inevitably also hides a deep separation between two different forms of discourse. The woman prophesies by practicing a highly ritualized, bodily, and performative speech. In this regard, Tertullian clearly states: *Forte nescio quid de anima disserueramus, cum ea soror in spiritu esset.*[31] Such a female ecstatic experience emerges as a visible/audible extra-ordinary status, so much so that it needs further assistance to be recorded and interpreted. By practicing this interpretive activity, the male members of the group aim at disconnecting the female visible religious experience from both the prophetic ritual and her expertise, in order to make the record of her visions accessible in a written form to anyone with sufficient education. This dynamic clearly attests that a female prophetic activity and revelation needs a male exegesis in order to be recovered and correctly interpreted. This can be clearly defined as a process of male "colonization" of a female body and speech.

Moreover, such a one directional performative movement which leads the female religious experience toward a male interpretation reflects the dichotomy between presence/existence and representation. The interpretive technique practiced by the male members of the group shows that visions—experienced by the woman but deemed as not culturally decipherable—can only be made manifest by a pro-

29 For instance, see Martti Nissinen, "What is Prophecy? An Ancient Near Eastern Perspective," in *Inspired Speech: Prophecy in the Ancient Near East. Essays in Honor of Herbert B. Huffmon*, eds. John Kaltner and Louis Stulman (London: T & T Clark, 2004): 17–37.

30 See Craig S. Keener, "Women's Education and Public Speech in Antiquity," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 50/4 (2007): 747–59.

31 Moreschini and Podolak, eds., *Q.S.F. Tertulliani*, 76.

cess of *mise en discours* (i. e. by being written down). This is perceived and conceived as a "normalizing" process aimed at providing sense, coherence, and order to the ritual female activity. Within this context, the authorized male interpreters and writers are power-holders, as was the case with the Jewish prophetic and apocalyptic writers of both ancient and Second Temple Period. They made visible divine realms and modelled both temporal and spatial divine dimensions on specific human realities. However, such writers were not always in a position of power. In some cases, they even represented a counterweight to the religious power-holders.[32]

To conclude, Tertullian's account in *On the Soul* 9,4 shows a clear case of "colonization" of a female experience of contact with the otherworld. By collecting, ordering, and interpreting the visions recounted by the prophetess, the male members of the Carthaginian *ecclesia* conclude a process of communicative reframing. This allows well-trained freelance experts equipped with technical writing skills to include the female revelatory account within the interpretive boundaries of a theological and philosophical discourse. A similar dynamic is reflected in another third century Christian text, the *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas*. Here Perpetua, the protagonist of the story, claims to have received and experienced a series of visions of the otherworld. Even if a specific version of the *Martyrdom* is considered as one of the oldest texts written by an early Christian woman,[33] there is sufficient evidence to demonstrate that this literary work, as a "living text," was presumably re-narrated and re-written several times. It was also re-framed in and for various contexts. In such a process of re-invention and re-proposition, the influence and activity of male freelance writing experts certainly played a pivotal role.[34]

32 On such a cultural dynamic, see the book by Anthony Keddie, *Revelations of Ideology: Apocalyptic Class Politics in Early Roman Palestine* (Leiden: Brill, 2018). See also Arcari, *Vedere Dio*, esp. 324–70.

33 See further discussion in Vincent Hunink, "Did Perpetua Write Her Prison Account?," *Listy filologické/Folia philologica* 133/1–2 (2010): 147–55.

34 See Heidi Vierow, "Feminine and Masculine Voices in the 'Passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas'," *Latomus* 58/3 (1999): 600–19.