

Kate Cooper: *Queens of a Fallen World. The Lost Women of Augustine's Confessions*. New York: Basic Books 2023. IX, 290 p., 5 ill., 4 maps. \$ 30.00. ISBN: 978-1-5416-4601-8.

For almost three decades, Kate Cooper's scholarship has drawn attention to the role of Christian women as agents of religious change in the waning years of the Roman Empire. In a series of well-researched and elegantly written studies, she has examined how Christian authors inverted ancient ideologies about the social value of marriage to promote female asceticism and how conversion to Christianity transformed the gender dynamics of Roman households.¹ These inquiries about the changing expectations placed upon late Roman woman paved the way for her 2013 study "Band of Angels", a recovery project centered on the lives of ancient Christian women rather than the ideals that male authors shaped about them.² The tissue of evidence for this kind of inquiry is very thin, but with imagination and creative inference Cooper admirably and honestly confronted the dearth of sources to reconstruct lost stories from textual fragments. Her most recent book, reviewed here, follows the same formula with a narrower scope. While "Band of Angels" provided a portrait gallery of Christian women who lived between the first and fifth centuries, "Queens of a Fallen World" focuses on the lives of four women who each played a significant role in the life of Augustine of Hippo (354–430), the North African bishop and exegete. The result is a poignant and often moving inquiry that adds new dimensions not only to our understanding of female agency in Late Antiquity, but also to our appreciation of the role played by women and their stories in the life of the most influential Latin theologian in the western Christian tradition.

"Queens of a Fallen World" comprises three parts, each containing multiple chapters. As Cooper notes early on, "Augustine was a man who noticed women" (p. 4) and for this reason, they often appear as "characters in his narrative" (p. 5). Part One ("Four Women", pp. 15–98) reconstructs what we know directly and can infer indirectly about four women of different social backgrounds whose lives intersected with each other, however briefly,

1 See, for example, K. Cooper: *The Virgin and the Bride. Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity*. Cambridge, MA/London 1996; and eadem: *The Fall of the Roman Household*. Cambridge/New York 2007.

2 K. Cooper: *Band of Angels. The Forgotten World of Early Christian Women*. New York 2013.

through their association with Augustine. Chapter 1 (“Justina”, pp. 17–34) introduces readers to Empress Justina (c. 340–c. 388), the mother of Emperor Valentinian II, who ruled the western half of the Roman Empire from his early childhood until his untimely death in 392. Little is known about Justina’s life beyond the hostile portrait of her by Ambrose’s biographer, who depicted the empress as the bishop’s heretical adversary in Milan. A relative of Emperor Constantine and thus a “valuable political pawn” (p. 22), Justina first married the usurper Magnentius, who committed suicide in 353 before consummating the union, and then Emperor Valentinian I, who died on campaign in 375. Cooper reconstructs the “alarming eventful life” (p. 31) of the empress, which was characterized by intrigue at the imperial court in Milan and frequent travel to the Rhine and Danube frontiers. Her precarious political fortune often found her fraught with anxiety about the fate of her husband and the safety of her children, especially Valentinian II.

Chapter 2 (“Tacita”, pp. 35–57) presents a much more obscure figure, a nameless ten-year old girl to whom Augustine was briefly engaged during his time in Milan between 383 and 386. Cooper dubs her Tacita, “the silent one” (p. 35). Augustine barely knew her and as a result neither can we, but this does not prevent Cooper from ruminating on what this girl’s life may have been like and what kind of hopes she may have fostered. What follows is an evocative portrait of the childhood of an aristocratic girl assembled from material culture like dolls, from the trappings and expectations of wedding rituals, and from the potential dangers to new brides from their husbands, as revealed by details from murder trials and pious Christian romances. While Augustine was undoubtedly attracted to Tacita’s dowery, which must have been sizeable enough to attract his interest, Cooper also considers the “updraft of social mobility” (p. 54) as a key motivation for Tacita’s parents to promise their daughter in marriage at such a young age. While the entire chapter is an exercise in imaginative reconstruction, Cooper’s probing questions about Tacita’s feelings, including the myriad of ways that she may have responded when Augustine suddenly broke off the engagement, conjures this nameless girl in vivid hues.

Chapter 3 (“Monnica”, pp. 59–79) treats one of the most well-known women of Late Antiquity, Augustine’s mother Monnica. Cooper characterizes her as “a storyteller whose tales run like a bright thread through her son’s writings” (p. 59). Much of this chapter reconstructs the experiences of Monnica’s childhood and the early years of her marriage through the stories that she

shared with Augustine, which he in turn preserved in his *Confessions*. Cooper finds that many of her tales involved Monnica's interaction with her family's slaves and repeatedly drew out the lesson that "a person's status in the world has no bearing on the value of what the person says or does" (p. 66). Her marriage to Augustine's father Patricius was fraught from the outset, as malicious handmaids stirred up trouble against her and kindled the wrath of her widowed mother-in-law, whose affections Monnica labored to win over. The tempering of her husband's wrath was also a full-time occupation for Monnica, which in turn provided a model of comportment for her female friends.

The subject of Chapter 4 ("Una", pp. 81–98) remains a cipher. The woman who was Augustine's sole companion for two decades (conf. 4.2.2: *sed unam tamen, ei quoque servans tori fidem*) and the mother of his son Adeodatus remains nameless in the *Confessions*. While acknowledging "the daunting thinness of the trace she left in the world" (p. 82), Cooper nonetheless strives to restore Una's social and economic circumstances as Augustine's beloved concubine. It is unknown if Una was a slave or a freedwoman, but she provided Augustine with a stable low-status long-term liaison before he made a professional reputation for himself and could compete for an elite marriage that would benefit his social standing. In the absence of details specific to Una's life, Cooper devotes the chapter to a useful discussion of the expectations of Roman marriage, the hazards of concubinage, and the sexual exploitation of slaves, all of which cast light on the fate of Una, "a woman with very few options" (p. 89).

With these portraits in place, the second section of the book ("Things Fall Apart", pp. 101–210) turns the reader's attention to Augustine's residency in Milan, where the four women's lives intersected in the mid-380s. Chapter 5 ("A Son of Africa", pp. 101–123) sets the stage. Drawing primarily from Augustine's *Confessions*, this chapter reconstructs his childhood in Hippo Regius, his studies in Carthage, his dalliance with Manichaeism, and his abrupt move to Italy to take up a coveted teaching position. Chapter 6 ("The Empress and the Bishop", pp. 125–155) sketches out the heightened sense of danger and anxiety that pervaded the imperial court in Milan in the 380s, when the looming threat of civil war suggested that God had withdrawn his favor from the Christian elect. It was in this charged environment that Emperor Gratian removed the altar of the goddess Victory from the Senate House, which prompted Quintus Aurelius Symmachus's famous plea for religious toleration. In Milan, the battle of wills between Ambrose and the

imperial family for control of the city's churches occupied everyone's attention. The bishop achieved the moral high ground with the unfounded claim that "[t]he things that are God's [...] were not subject to the power of the emperor" (p. 145). Later authors supportive of Ambrose's cause vilified Empress Justina as a heretic for her loyalty to an age-old imperial principle that the bishop successfully overturned.

Chapter 7 ("The Heiress", pp. 157–178) explores the development of Augustine's thinking about marriage and money, while he was in the orbit of the bishop of Milan. The rhetorical prowess of Ambrose's preaching had an impact not only on Augustine, but also on Monnica, who was won over to the Nicene cause and became an ardent disciple of the bishop. While there was no legal impediment preventing Augustine from marrying his concubine Una, who had accompanied him to Italy, it was in Milan that he made the decision to end their relationship in order to secure an engagement to an aristocratic bride ("Tacita") who would uplift him both socially and financially. Leaving Augustine and Adeodatus behind, Una returned to North Africa and disappeared from the historical record. Chapter 8 ("Remedy for a Broken Heart", pp. 179–199) explores how the emotional fallout of Augustine's dismissal of his concubine led to the renunciation of his marriage proposal to Tacita and his withdrawal from public life. Cooper characterizes his philosophical dialogue *The Happy Life*, written at Cassiacum in the late 380s, as a meditation on Una's absence. Human loss was inevitable, Augustine argued, so it was better to fix one's longing onto the permanence of God. As Cooper argues, "[h]is way of handling the reality of human loss was to try to reinvent human relationships in a new dimension, safely beyond the reach of death and time" (p. 196). It is worth ruminating with Cooper why Augustine did not seize the opportunity afforded by his resignation from his teaching position to join Una in North Africa. Chapter 9 ("A Long Way Home", pp. 201–210) begins with Augustine's baptism in Milan in the spring of 387 and then follows his journey back home to Africa that summer. En route, Monnica fell ill in the port-town of Ostia, where she died in August. Plumbing Book 9 of the *Confessions*, Cooper examines Augustine's reflection on his mother's life and the lessons that she imparted to him. Her "uncanny ability to smooth things over when others fell out" (p. 209) stood out as an exemplary characteristic to a son whose future vocation as a bishop presented innumerable occasions for mediation and reconciliation.

Part 3 (“The Aftermath”, pp. 213–233) comprises a single chapter and an epilogue. Chapter 10 (“Trouble in Paradise”, pp. 213–233) argues that Monica’s lessons and Augustine’s emotional history with Una and Tacita informed his theology of Christian marriage, which he expressed most fully in his treatise *On the Good of Marriage*. Composed shortly after he became bishop in 395, this work broke with Roman legal precedents by arguing that men and women should be held to the same standard with respect to the bond of marital trust (*fides*). Augustine even went so far as to argue that a marital ethos could develop between a couple who shared a bed yet had no intention of marrying. This was perhaps a retroactive validation of his relationship with Una. Cooper sums up her findings in this chapter as follows: “Augustine’s sense that the male and female sexual partners ought to be held to the same standards – and that the female partner might experience needs and motivations different from those of the male – was a departure” (p. 233). The epilogue of the book (pp. 235–242) entertains some counterfactual threads about what Augustine’s life might have entailed had he stayed with Una or married Tacita.

The main takeaway from the book, however, is Cooper’s insight that a handful of women played an important role in teaching Augustine about love and loss, even long after they had died or disappeared from his life. As a preacher and an author, he returned repeatedly to the lessons that they had imparted to him through the stories they told to him and the emotional experiences that they shared with him. In the crowded field of studies about North Africa’s most famous bishop, “Queens of a Fallen World” stands out as an innovative and thought-provoking study of the influence of the women whose affection and wisdom directly shaped Augustine’s thinking and thus indirectly plotted the course of medieval thinkers who took their cues from his writings.

Scott G. Bruce, Fordham University, New York
Professor of History
sbruce3@fordham.edu

www.plekos.de

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