



# Apocalyptic Women in the Silos Beatus: The Woman and the Whore

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## Feminine Agency and Oppositions

The Silos Beatus, MS Additional 11695 in the British Library, is an illuminated manuscript containing Beatus's *Commentaries on the Apocalypse*. Women depicted in the Silos Beatus are visually similar in ways that elide their roles within the substance of the text. Artists have instead used their relationship to antagonistic figures to represent the women's roles within the story.

Both the Woman Clothed in the Sun and the Great Whore display agency within the text, but to different ends: the Woman confronts the Dragon, but the Whore rides the Beast and stands on equal footing with the kings. The artists of these images incorporate features of agency found only in the *Commentaries*, beyond the literal text of the Apocalypse.

Silos Beatus, folio 183v, The Great Whore on the Seven Headed Beast



"Uidi mulierem sedentem super bestiam..." I saw the Woman seated on top of the Beast.

## The Whore of Babylon

The Great Whore inverts notions of gender in her image by riding the Beast and offering the chalice to the kings. Beatus writes, "Her work is of iniquity, in the population which she works... and it is known that the kings of the earth are believed to fornicate with her. The kings of the earth who do not rule their bodies but are delighted to bask in their desire; and this woman lures not only bad men but also good men; she has the golden cup in her hand, which falsely models sanctity."

According to the Apocalyptic text, the Whore is a fornicator, but Beatus goes further in saying that she is a threat to sanctity itself. The artist demonstrates this by according her more agency than she is given in the text, and placing her in positions of power within images depicting her.



Silos Beatus, folio 182v, The Whore of Babylon and Kings of the World

Silos Beatus, folios 147v-148r, Woman Clothed in the Sun and the Dragon



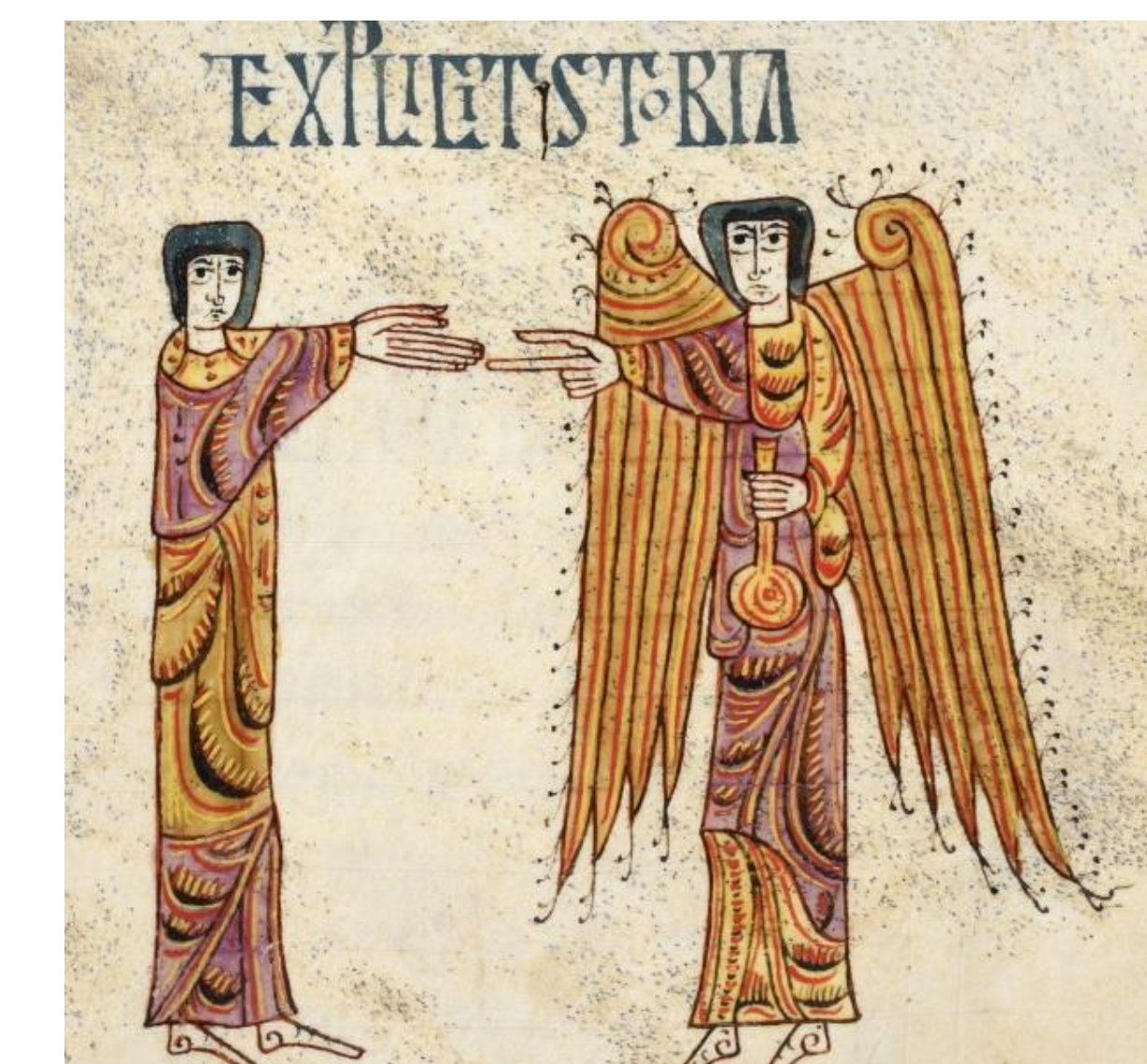
## The Woman Clothed in the Sun

In the substance of the Apocalypse, the Woman Clothed in the Sun is menaced by the Dragon. The Dragon pursues her for birthing the masculine child, or another form of Christ, and chases her into the wilderness. Once there, a serpent, represented here by one of the heads of the Dragon, pours forth a river from his mouth to try and sweep the Woman away. In the top left of the image, the Woman confronts the Dragon, rather than flee, gesturing towards him. In the bottom left, the Woman confronts the serpent head.

Beatus writes, "We say that the two wings are the two testaments." If her two wings are the testaments, this would accord her authority that is absent from the Apocalypse, but present in the image. Beatus states, "We say that the Serpent is the devil. The river just as the water are the persecutors of the church." The image increases the Woman's apparent agency, here depicting her standing above and untouched by this river of persecutors. Although her evasion is described in the Apocalypse, for the illuminator to place her in visual opposition reiterates Beatus's words that the Woman defends the church against its persecutors and the devil/Serpent with her two testaments.

## Conclusions

The artists of the Silos Beatus transcend the literal text of the Apocalypse, incorporating Beatus's *Commentaries* in order to demonstrate the agency of the female figures. Beatus is clear with his intentions in constructing the Commentaries, and he may have had a hand in the original composition of the images. The way the images use his words in the case of the Woman and the Whore would support this. Textually, the Woman is valorized and the Whore is denigrated; visually, while the Whore is not precisely valorized, she is depicted as beautiful, and her beauty is intended to terrify. The extra-textual features in all the images discussed here, such as the Whore's confrontational posture and the Woman's visual rebukes to the monsters who threaten her suggest an under-appreciated perception in early medieval Spain of female agency, positive and negative, displayed in these powerful figures.



Silos Beatus, folio 182r, Explicit Storia

## Selected Literature Cited

- Gryson, Roger, and Marie-Claire De Bièvre. *Beati Liebanensis Tractatus De Apocalipsin*. V. 107-B. Turnhout: Brepols, 2012.
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- Williams, John. *The Illustrated Beatus: A Corpus of the Illustrations of the Commentaries on the Apocalypse: Introduction*. London: Harvey Miller Publishers, 1994.