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# **ICONIC WOMEN:**

## **Martyrdom and the Female Body in Early Christianity**

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2005/06

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**ABSTRACT**

Martyrdom is an inherently corporeal experience often involving horrific torture and directed towards the annihilation of the human body. Our earliest Christian martyrdom narratives, dating from the mid-second century C.E., focus on the bodies of the martyrs and the physicality of persecution. This focus became increasingly more intense from the second century onwards, as is evidenced by the martyr panegyrics of the fourth century. These homilies simultaneously convey horror through clinical descriptions of the persecuted body, and beauty through poetic and romanticised accounts of the tortured body. The present study pursues this preoccupation with the martyred body in the mid-second to late-fourth centuries. Exploring the theological ideas surrounding the martyred body, this study centres on the interpretation of martyrdom as a holy performance enacted beneath the eyes of God. Martyrdom is discussed in relation to early Christian understandings of revelation, ancient notions of body language, and modern theories of performance and communication. Revealing the presence and power of God through their bodies, the martyrs were seen and depicted as teachers, preachers, exemplars, and icons, both in times of persecution and times of peace.

This understanding of martyrdom is particularly important for the study of women in early Christianity. While women were excluded from assuming roles as teachers and preachers in the Church, they actively preached the Christian faith through their bodies. By performing martyrdom, Christian women became preachers of the gospel, philosophers of virtue, teachers of faith, and icons of Christ.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to thank the Arts and Humanities Research Council for the generous financial assistance that has made this study possible. I would also like to thank those members of staff in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Durham who kindly gave up their time to help me make the most of mine. I would especially like to thank Professor John Barclay for his support, Doctor Mathew Guest for his helpful discussion and guidance, and Professor Andrew Louth and Doctor Augustine Casiday for their comments and suggestions on the subject of female martyrdom. Most importantly, I am extremely grateful to my research supervisor, Doctor Carol Harrison, who first introduced me to the study of early Christianity five years ago and has since continually supported and encouraged my research in this area. Her openness for discussion, constructive criticism, and dedication to this study has been invaluable to me.

**ABBREVIATIONS****❖ Journals and Volumes of Texts**

<i>ACW</i>	<i>Ancient Christian writers</i>
<i>AJP</i>	<i>American Journal of Philology</i>
<i>ANCL</i>	<i>Ante-Nicene Christian Library</i>
<i>ANF</i>	<i>A Select Library of Ante-Nicene Christian Fathers</i>
<i>Aug.</i>	<i>Augustinianum</i>
<i>AugSt.</i>	<i>Augustinian Studies</i>
<i>Byz.</i>	<i>Byzantion</i>
<i>CH</i>	<i>Church History</i>
<i>FC</i>	<i>Fathers of the Church</i>
<i>HTR</i>	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
<i>JAAR</i>	<i>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JECS</i>	<i>Journal of Early Christian Studies</i>
<i>JEH</i>	<i>Journal of Ecclesiastical History</i>
<i>JRS</i>	<i>Journal of Roman Studies</i>
<i>LCC</i>	<i>Library of Christian Classics</i>
<i>LCL</i>	<i>Loeb Classical Library</i>
<i>MFC</i>	<i>Messages of the Fathers of the Church</i>
<i>NPNF</i>	<i>A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers</i>
<i>NT</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
<i>SP</i>	<i>Studia Patristica</i>
<i>ST</i>	<i>Studia Theologica</i>
<i>VC</i>	<i>Vigiliae Christianae</i>
<i>WSA</i>	<i>The Works of Saint Augustine</i>

**❖ Treatises, Martyr Narratives, and Homilies**

<i>Ad.Marty.:</i>	<i>To the Martyrs</i>
<i>Ad.Scap.:</i>	<i>To Scapula</i>
<i>De usu.:</i>	<i>On the Usefulness of the Parts of the Body</i>
<i>De unit.:</i>	<i>On the Unity of the Catholic Church</i>
<i>Ecc.Hist.:</i>	<i>Ecclesiastical History</i>
<i>En.Ps.:</i>	<i>Expositions of the Psalms</i>
<i>Ep.Diog.:</i>	<i>Epistle to Diognetus</i>
<i>Exhort.Mart.:</i>	<i>Exhortation to Martyrdom</i>
<i>Flight.:</i>	<i>Flight in Time of Persecution</i>
<i>GenAn.:</i>	<i>On the Generation of Animals</i>
<i>Hom.Babylas.:</i>	<i>A Homily on the Martyr Babylas</i>
<i>Hom.Barlaam.:</i>	<i>On Saint Barlaam</i>
<i>Hom.Bernike.:</i>	<i>On Saints Bernike, Prosdoke, and Domnina</i>

<i>Hom.Drosis.:</i>	<i>On Saint Drosis</i>
<i>Hom.Gordius.:</i>	<i>A Homily on the Martyr Gordius</i>
<i>Hom.Ignatius.:</i>	<i>On the Holy Martyr Ignatius</i>
<i>Hom.Julian.:</i>	<i>A Homily on Julian the Martyr</i>
<i>Hom.Pelagia.:</i>	<i>A Homily on Pelagia, Virgin and Martyr</i>
<i>Hom.Theodore.:</i>	<i>A Homily on Theodore the Recruit</i>
<i>Inst.Or.:</i>	<i>Institutes of Oratory</i>
<i>M.Agap.:</i>	<i>The Martyrdom of Saints Agapê, Irenê, and Chionê at Saloniki</i>
<i>M.Carp.:</i>	<i>The Martyrdom of Saints Carpus, Papyrus, and Agathonicê</i>
<i>M.Crisp.:</i>	<i>The Martyrdom of Crispina</i>
<i>M.Justin.:</i>	<i>The Acts of Justin and Companions</i>
<i>M.Lyons.:</i>	<i>The Letter of the Churches of Lyons and Vienne</i>
<i>M.Marian.:</i>	<i>The Martyrdom of Marian and James</i>
<i>M.Mont.:</i>	<i>The Martyrdom of Saints Montanus and Lucius</i>
<i>M.Perp.:</i>	<i>The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas</i>
<i>M.Poly.:</i>	<i>The Martyrdom of Polycarp</i>
<i>M.Pot.:</i>	<i>The Martyrdom of Potamiaena and Basilides</i>
<i>M.Scill.:</i>	<i>The Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs</i>
<i>Physio.:</i>	<i>Physiognomics</i>

### ❖ A Note on References

Throughout this study, footnotes to primary texts are followed by parentheses containing the translator's name, the date of the translation, and page numbers to aid location of the texts. In the case of volumes, such as the libraries of the Ante-Nicene Fathers and the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, the series abbreviation, volume number, and page numbers are given. Texts in the Musurillo volume are identified by page number and refer to Herbert Musurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, vol. 2, Oxford Early Christian Texts (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000).

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## INTRODUCTION: Martyrdom, the Body, and Women

Early Christian martyrdom narratives centre on the bodies of the martyrs and the physicality of persecution. The texts linger on descriptions of instruments of torture, the spectacle of the tortured body, and the treatment of the martyr's corpse.<sup>1</sup> With the intensification of the cult of the saints in the mid-fourth century, this lingering gaze on the bodies of the martyrs became even more intense. As Elizabeth Castelli affirms, 'the more distant the events being narrated, the more gruesome and detailed the accounts and the more blood-saturated the representations seem to become'.<sup>2</sup> This was, as Peter Brown describes, 'a world awash with blood'.<sup>3</sup> The fourth century martyr homilies of men such as Basil of Caesarea and John Chrysostom, and the lyrical poems of Prudentius, describe martyrdom in vivid and visceral detail.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the cult of the saints promoted the collection, division, and translation of martyrs' corpses, that is, their blood, bones, and ashes. Even material items that had been in contact with a martyr's corpse were held in great esteem and were believed to have great spiritual power – dust scraped from a grave, oil that had trickled over bones, or fabric that had been lowered into a tomb.<sup>5</sup>

This focus on the martyred body and the inherent corporeality of martyrdom is evident in the only extant work of Victricius of Rouen, his sermon

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<sup>1</sup> For example, *M.Poly.*, 2 (Musurillo, 3); *M.Lyons.* (Musurillo, 75); *M.Perp.*, 19-21 (Musurillo, 127-31); *M.Pot.* (Musurillo, 133); *M.Marian.*, 5, 12 (Musurillo, 201, 211); *The Letter of Phileas* (Musurillo, 320-25)

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth A. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making, Gender, Theory, and Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004) 121

<sup>3</sup> Peter Brown, 'Enjoying the Saints in Late Antiquity', *Early Medieval Europe*, 9:1 (2000) 1-24, at 7

<sup>4</sup> For example, Gregory of Nyssa, *Homily 1b on the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste* (Leemans [2003] 105); Basil, *A Homily on the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste*, 5 (Allen [2003] 71-72); Prudentius, *Crowns of Martyrdom* (LCL 398: 99-153); Chrysostom, *On the Holy Martyrs*, 4 (Mayer [2006] 221); idem, *Hom.Julian.*, 3 (Mayer [2003] 133); Augustine, *Serm. 277A.1* (WSA III/8: 47)

<sup>5</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Hom.Theodore.* (Leemans [2003] 85); Chrysostom, *Homily After the Remains of Martyrs*, 469 (Mayer & Allen [2000] 87-88); idem, *A Homily on Martyrs*, 664 (Mayer & Allen [2000] 96)



*Praising the Saints*, delivered in 396 C.E.<sup>6</sup> Positively inculcating the image of the tortured body upon the minds of his Christian audience, Victricius encourages his audience to linger upon the memory of the martyred body:

Let there be no day, dearest brothers, when we do not linger over these stories. This martyr was not afraid under torture...this one greedily drank in the flames; this one was cut to pieces...this one, eager for death, provoked a lion to anger against her; this one, while her child went hungry, offered full breasts to the wild beasts.<sup>7</sup>

The deliberate and sustained gaze on the martyred body that Victricius so desired is also related by Paulinus of Nola. In a poem on Saint Felix, who was venerated as a martyr, Paulinus describes how the audience of the Christian faithful were possessed with devotion and struggled with one another to see the saint's remains. In this poem, dated to c.400 C.E., Paulinus relates that 'a single glimpse was not enough; they delighted in lingering on, and implanting their eyes, and where possible their kisses, on the laid-out corpse'.<sup>8</sup> While non-Christians like Julian the Apostate believed that the human corpse polluted the vision of those who beheld it – 'staining the eyesight of all' – the Christians at Felix's shrine had an intense desire not only to see the martyr's body, but also to seize it with their eyes and to dwell upon the corpse with a lingering gaze.<sup>9</sup>

This concentration on the martyred body has been observed by Boniface Ramsey, who remarks that 'the narratives are marked by what one might call an unblinking look at the martyrs' suffering, totally unabashed by any of the horrid details'.<sup>10</sup> Ramsey's important observation might easily be overlooked by a contemporary readership desensitised by what Gillian Clark has referred to as 'compassion fatigue', which 'makes it easy to forget what has in fact been done

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<sup>6</sup> Translated in Gillian Clark, 'Victricius of Rouen: Praising the Saints', *J ECS*, 7:3 (1999) 365-399

<sup>7</sup> *Praising the Saints*, 12 (G. Clark [1999] 398-99)

<sup>8</sup> *Poem 18* (Walsh [1975] 118)

<sup>9</sup> For Julian the Apostate see Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (London: SCM Press, 1981) 7

<sup>10</sup> Boniface Ramsey, *Beginning to Read the Fathers* (London: SCM Press, 1993) 130

by humans to humans'.<sup>11</sup> And yet, as Clark maintains, martyrdom narratives urge us to engage with those texts and to ask, 'why do Christian texts insist on the detail of pain and insult, and what are we to think about the people who wrote and read them?'<sup>12</sup>

This question has, on occasion, been answered rather negatively, as the thin line between corporeity and carnality has exposed early Christian interpretations of martyrdom, and especially female martyrdom, to the accusation of eroticising the suffering body with a curious and morbid attraction, rather than conveying the sense of awe and admiration that one might expect to accompany the veneration of the martyrs.<sup>13</sup> For example, one scholar has protested against these descriptions of torture and suffering, declaring that 'the vast majority of the later Passions are *tasteless affairs* and historically worthless, and some of them are *rather disgusting*'.<sup>14</sup> However, recent scholarship of early Christian martyrdom has drawn attention back towards these "horrid details" and "tasteless affairs". Rather than passing moral judgement on the texts and their audiences, scholars now seem to agree that 'the question is, why these 'excesses' were to the taste of late antique Christians, and, furthermore, how can they be understood'.<sup>15</sup>

This turn towards the martyred body and the physicality of persecution may be located in what Patricia Cox Miller has defined as 'a material turn' in late

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<sup>11</sup> Gillian Clark, 'Bodies and Blood: Late Antique Debate on Martyrdom, Virginitly and Resurrection', in Dominic Montserrat (ed.), *Changing Bodies, Changing Meanings: Studies on the Human Body in Antiquity* (London; New York: Routledge, 1998) 99-115, at 103; cf. Gillian Clark, *Christianity and Roman Society*, Key Themes in Ancient History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 38-39; For the trivialisation of torture in the English language see Joyce E. Salisbury, *The Blood of Martyrs: Unintended Consequences of Ancient Violence* (London; New York, Routledge, 2004) 115

<sup>12</sup> G. Clark (2004) 43

<sup>13</sup> See Virginia Burrus, 'Word and Flesh. The Bodies and Sexuality of Ascetic Women in Christian Antiquity', *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 10 (1994) 27-51; Kate Cooper, 'The Voice of the Victim: Gender, Representation and Early Christian Martyrdom', *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester*, 80:1 (1998) 147-57, at 154-56; G. Clark (1998b) 103-04

<sup>14</sup> G.E.M. De Ste Croix quoted in Lucy Grig, 'Torture and Truth in Late Antique Martyrology', *Early Medieval Europe*, 2:4 (2002) 321-336, at 321, emphasis added

<sup>15</sup> Grig (2002) 322

antique studies, which acknowledges ‘a shift in the late ancient religious sensibility regarding the signifying potential of the material world, a shift that reconfigured the relation between materiality and meaning in a positive direction’.<sup>16</sup> With this movement towards the body, scholars contend that the description of early Christian authors and audiences as sadistic, masochistic, or pathological is the result of anachronism and unfair simplification.<sup>17</sup> Rather, the martyred body is seen positively within a context in which material objects were perceived to be endowed with referential value and signifying and revelatory qualities.

The notion of material objects as referential mediums – or icons of spiritual truths – draws attention to the association between the corporeality of the martyred body and the incorporeality of the truth that it expressed. While the ‘grisly physical ordeal of torture’ was indeed an act directed towards the annihilation of the human body, the specifically physical, bodily, tangible dimensions of suffering were believed to reveal spiritual truth.<sup>18</sup> Seen with the eyes of faith, the martyrs were icons that pointed towards a greater truth through the corporeity of their bodies. This spiritual mode of perception served as the underlying motivation for the lingering gaze upon the martyred body in the mid-second to late-fourth centuries. Far from being an insignificant skin to be shed on the way to salvation, the martyred body itself was believed to have substantial importance. Consequently, in the opinion of those contemporary to the early Christian martyrs, to close one’s eyes to the tortured body is to become blind to the meaning of martyrdom.

It is this depiction of the martyred body as an icon of faith and a communicator of truth that I will endeavour to pursue. This study is structured into three chapters that can be roughly divided into three interlocking areas of enquiry: martyrdom, the body, and women. Individually, these areas are

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<sup>16</sup> Patricia Cox Miller, ‘Visceral Seeing: The Holy Body in Late Ancient Christianity’, *J ECS*, 12:4 (2004) 391-411, at 392

<sup>17</sup> Judith Perkins, *The Suffering Self: Pain and Narrative Representation in the Early Christian Era* (London; New York: Routledge, 1995) 173; Grig (2002) 322; G. Clark (1998b) 105-06

<sup>18</sup> Patricia Cox Miller, ‘“The Little Blue Flower is Red”: Relics and the Poetizing of the Body’, *J ECS*, 8:2 (2000) 215; cf. Grig (2002) 328

extremely convoluted and each one comes with its own complex of contexts, ambivalences, histories, and intricacies. While this study has attempted to avoid generalisation, the imposed limits nevertheless restrict it to being an initial probing of ideas that will lay the foundations for further research. Despite this, the study employs a relatively broad scope to enable the most relevant texts to be considered, incorporating Greek and Latin writers from the mid-second century C.E. to the end of the fourth century C.E.

The range of texts represented in this study reflect a rapidly changing world that renders the designations “the early Church” and “early Christianity” inadequate.<sup>19</sup> In this timeframe we encounter a nascent Church attempting to define its existence in a hostile environment, an infant Church trying to make sense of localised and sporadic persecutions, a growing Church addressing ecclesiastical concerns in the midst of general and systematic persecution, and a blossoming Church determined to reconcile its persecuted past with its comparatively peaceful present. While all of these phases are encountered in this study, particular attention is given to the memory of martyrdom and the post-event interpretation of persecution in the late-fourth century, as this period is of marked importance for the discussion of female martyrdom which is found in the third chapter of this thesis.

The first chapter, *We, with the Crown Eternal in our Eye*, presents the concept of participation in the mystical body of Christ as the defining feature of Christian identity, serving as a motivation and encouragement towards martyrdom in times of persecution. This chapter explores the theological ideas surrounding the bodies of the martyrs, which were consistently and persistently perceived as positive objects despite the sense of apprehension with which the human body was often perceived in this era. Following the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ, salvation was considered to have become visible, palpable and

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<sup>19</sup> While this thesis has employed these terms whenever necessary, the reader is reminded of the insufficiency of the terms to convey the heterogeneity of Christianity at different periods and places within this timeframe

embodied.<sup>20</sup> And, as Tertullian said, the body is the axis of salvation.<sup>21</sup> By focusing on the torn flesh and cracked limbs of the martyr's body, martyrdom narratives and homilies affirm that Christian faith is embodied faith and that it is precisely this mystery of embodiment that enables the martyr to conform to Christ.<sup>22</sup>

The second chapter, *Power and Performance*, uses ancient and modern ideas of non-verbal communication, body language, and performance as a theoretical basis for viewing the martyred body as it is presented by prominent Church fathers like Cyprian, Augustine, Chrysostom, and the Cappadocian fathers. Locating the persecution of Christians within the Greco-Roman context of a "spectator society" and a religious climate of "visual piety", this chapter explores the relationship between the fourth century focus on the martyred body, the interpretation of martyrdom as performance, and body language. Often recorded with the overt intention of instructing and edifying the Christian faithful, martyrdom narratives and homilies portray the martyr silently "preaching" a *sermo corporis*, a sermon of the body. The martyred body, standing at centre stage of a cosmic drama, is seen to communicate Christ's power and presence in the world, testify to the existence of a future life, and provide an example of perfect discipleship in *imitatio Christi*. In this way the martyrs are seen, remembered, and depicted as teachers of virtue and preachers of Christ who instruct future generations of Christians through the performance of martyrdom.

The final chapter, *Iconic Women*, looks at the importance of body-centric interpretations of martyrdom for early Christian women. Contemporary scholarship on women in the patristic era often emphasises the ambivalence with which women were perceived: simultaneously exalted for their ascetic feats but excluded from ecclesiastical authority; praised as brides of Christ but chastised as daughters of Eve; symbols of virginal orthodoxy but personifications of heterodox

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<sup>20</sup> Kallistos Ware, 'My Helper and My Enemy: the Body in Greek Christianity', in Sarah Coakley (ed.), *Religion and the Body*, Cambridge Studies in Religious Traditions, vol. 8 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 90-110, at 92

<sup>21</sup> *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, 8.2 (ANF 3: 551)

<sup>22</sup> M.T. Prokes, *Toward a Theology of the Body* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996) 25

perversity.<sup>23</sup> However, martyrdom provided a specific context in which women could attain spiritual and physical equality with men. Like the martyrdom of men, female martyrdom is depicted as a performance through which the body is seen to preach. Consequently, while Christian women were excluded from teaching in the ecclesiastical sphere, they silently preached a *sermo corporis* to the Christian community through martyrdom. This chapter explores how martyrdom enabled Christian women to be seen and depicted as preachers, teachers, exemplars, and icons by summarising ancient medical and legal attitudes towards the female body, reviewing contemporary scholarship on Christian women in the patristic era, looking at various female martyrs, and presenting case studies of two specific martyrs in their respective fourth century contexts.

While enquiry into martyrdom and the female body is not given exclusive attention until the third chapter of this study, the title of the work, *Iconic Women: Martyrdom and the Female Body in Early Christianity*, is not intended to be misleading or inaccurate. The first two chapters of the study are fundamental for establishing the interpretative framework of martyrdom and the conceptual framework of the communicative body, both being factors upon which this discussion of female martyrdom rests. Only when martyrdom is seen as an inherently corporeal experience through which the martyred body physically preaches can the significance of female martyrdom be fully appreciated.

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<sup>23</sup> For example, Elizabeth A. Clark, *Women in the Early Church*, Messages of the Church Fathers, vol.13 (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1983) 15-25; Patricia Cox Miller, *Women in Early Christianity: Translations from Greek Texts* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005) 1-14

## CHAPTER 1: We, with the Crown Eternal in our Eye

The history of martyrdom is complex and a tidy chronological study is not easily possible. Different time periods, geographical locations, ecclesiastical figures, theological controversies, and social contexts promise to tangle any such enterprise.<sup>24</sup> The present chapter picks out threads from that tangle to follow the interpretation of martyrdom as the embodied expression of Christian identity and faith. This approach is not intended to be comprehensive or exhaustive, but rather suggestive, demonstrating that the notion of identification with Christ motivated Christians towards martyrdom and lent the martyred body great theological significance.

### ❖ **The Mystical Body**

In order to understand how early Christian communities perceived the bodies of the martyrs one must first look to Paul, whose understanding of Christian identity shaped the ways in which martyrdom was interpreted in the first four centuries of Christianity. Central to Paul's theology was the concept of participation in the mystical body of Christ.<sup>25</sup> Paul believed that at the moment of baptism the individual Christian is grafted onto the body of Christ, forming a union between Christ and believer.<sup>26</sup> As a member of Christ's body, the individual is assumed 'in Christ', 'with Christ', and 'through Christ'.<sup>27</sup> This union has been described as a locative movement; 'Christ...[is] conceived as a "location" into which the convert is "inserted" and within which believers find themselves'.<sup>28</sup> On account of this union, the body of the individual Christian is subsumed within the mystical body of Christ, qualifying individual existence in relation to participation in a greater corporeity. As Paul said, 'I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no

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<sup>24</sup> The reader is directed to W.H.C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church: A Study of a Conflict from the Maccabees to Donatus* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1965) for a more chronological study of martyrdom

<sup>25</sup> John D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, Michigan; Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans, 1998) 399

<sup>26</sup> 1 Cor. 12:12-13; cf. 1 Cor. 6:15, 10:17; 12:27; Gal. 3:27-28

<sup>27</sup> See further Dunn (1998) 396

<sup>28</sup> Dunn (1998) 409



longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me'.<sup>29</sup> This is an intimate fellowship evoking a sense of belonging that served as the context and inspiration for ethical conduct in everyday life; 'if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's'.<sup>30</sup> The individual Christian body is a slave, a temple, and a sacrifice to be offered to God in spiritual worship.<sup>31</sup>

In his exploration of Christian identity in Paul's letter to Philemon, Norman R. Petersen has observed that Paul frequently describes social relations in symbolic language, such as the metaphorical slave-master relationship and the terminology of kinship.<sup>32</sup> These metaphorical relationships form 'symbol systems', which represent the way that Paul perceived the world.<sup>33</sup> Petersen notes that while believers and non-believers existed in a 'social universe', Paul's symbol systems reflect the belief that Christians also partook in a 'symbolic universe', a transcendent reality in which God and Christ were located.<sup>34</sup> Although Petersen's terms 'social universe' and 'symbolic universe' may appear to be anachronistic, they provide a valuable insight into how early Christians, such as Paul, understood and defined themselves in relation to the world.

The enduring influence of Paul's definition of Christian identity as a simultaneous participation in the body of the Church on earth and the body of Christ in heaven is evident throughout the second and third centuries. Early Christian communities defined themselves as a people set apart from the world in which they lived. While they lived *in* the world they were not *of* the world.<sup>35</sup> They were resident aliens and holy pilgrims temporarily residing in a hostile land. The *Epistle to Diognetus* expresses this belief:

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<sup>29</sup> Gal. 2:20; cf. Dunn (1998) 392, 397

<sup>30</sup> Rom. 14:8; cf. Dunn (1998) 411

<sup>31</sup> 1 Cor. 6:19

<sup>32</sup> *Rediscovering Paul: Philemon and the Sociology of Paul's Narrative World* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985) esp. 25, 206-215, 240-257

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.* 17

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.* 27-28

<sup>35</sup> *Ep. Diog.*, 6.3 (LCL 25: 143); cf. Cyprian, *Ep.*, 5.5 (ANCL 8: 26); Cyprian, *On the Mortality*, 26 (ANCL 8: 467-68); Tertullian, *Ad Marty.*, 2 (ANF 3: 693-94)

[T]hey show forth the character of their own citizenship in a marvellous and admittedly paradoxical way... They live in their respective countries, but only as resident aliens; they participate in all things as citizens, and they endure all things as foreigners.<sup>36</sup>

This sense of worldly separation is linked to the concept of belonging to an alternative, heavenly citizenship as a result of baptism into the body of Christ. This is understood as a simultaneous existence in two spatially distinct realms, ‘they live on earth but participate in the life of heaven’.<sup>37</sup> The celestial citizenship of Christians was appealed to in times of persecution in order to strengthen Christian confessors and martyrs by qualifying their fleeting presence in the world with a true existence in heaven.<sup>38</sup> At the beginning of the third century Tertullian encouraged a group of imprisoned confessors awaiting martyrdom by appealing to their spiritual citizenship, ‘it is of no consequence where you are in the world – you who are not of it’.<sup>39</sup>

This understanding of citizenship in an alternative community defined Christian identity. This is evident in the words *Christianus sum*, the statement of faith and identity that often forms the climactic moment of martyrdom narratives; a statement Daniel Boyarin terms ‘the declaration of the essence of self’.<sup>40</sup> When asked to state their names, the town from which they came, or whether they were a slave or free, some of the martyrs are reported to have simply declared “I am a Christian”, refusing to identify themselves by anything except Christ.<sup>41</sup> External features such as ethnicity, language, dialect, and apparel did not distinguish those who were defined by Christ alone.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>36</sup> *Ep. Diog.*, 5.4-5 (LCL 25: 139, 141)

<sup>37</sup> *Ep. Diog.*, 5.9 (LCL 25: 141); cf. Cyprian, *On the Mortality*, 3, 25 (ANCL 8: 455, 468); Origen, *Exhort. Mart.*, 39 (Greer [1979] 70)

<sup>38</sup> *Ep. Diog.*, 10.6-8, (LCL 25: 153-55); *M. Poly.*, 2.3, 11 (Musurillo, 5, 11)

<sup>39</sup> *Ad. Marty.*, 2 (ANF 3: 694)

<sup>40</sup> Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism*, Figurae: Reading Medieval Culture (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1999) 95

<sup>41</sup> Most powerful is Sanctus’s repeated declaration in *M. Lyons*. (Musurillo, 69); cf. *M. Justin.*, 4 (Musurillo, 45-47); *M. Scill.* (Musurillo, 89)

<sup>42</sup> *Ep. Diog.*, 5.1-17 (LCL 25: 139-41); For a later reflection (373 C.E.) of this see Basil, *A Homily on the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste*, 2 (Allen [2003] 68-69)

In his apology for Christianity, composed in the mid-second century, Justin Martyr aims to reduce pagan hostility and suspicion by explaining that Christians have faith in a *future* kingdom of God and *not* a human kingdom established in opposition to the state. In this process, he links the understanding of an alternative citizenship with motivation towards martyrdom:

And when you hear that we look for a kingdom, you uncritically suppose that we speak of a human one; whereas we speak of that with God, as appears also from the confession of their faith made by those who are charged with being Christians, although they know that death is the penalty meted out to him who so confesses. For if we looked for a human kingdom, we would deny it, that we might not be slain; and we would try to escape detection, that we might obtain the things we look for.<sup>43</sup>

Justin distinguishes the empire of the world from an alternative empire by spatial and temporal distinction: while human kingdoms exist in the world, the heavenly kingdom exists with God; while human kingdoms exist in the present, the kingdom of God is anticipated. Furthermore, Justin explains, the prospect of an already realised citizenship in the future kingdom of God serves as a motivation for Christians to accept death in witness to Christ.

Associated with the concept of an alternative kingdom is the acknowledgement of the ultimate authority of Christ, 'the emperor of kings and of all nations'.<sup>44</sup> While Christians rendered obedience to the emperor on account of his God-given authority, persecution forced Christians to make a decision between allegiance to the world and allegiance to the heavens.<sup>45</sup> The authority of the emperor was uncompromisingly placed against that of God. In this situation, Christians expressed a belief in a hierarchy of authority that allowed them to choose allegiance to God without denying the authority of the emperor. In c.212 C.E. Tertullian wrote a letter to Scapula, Proconsul of North Africa, defending and explaining Christian beliefs:

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<sup>43</sup> *Apology*, 1.11 (*ACW* 56: 29)

<sup>44</sup> *M.Scill.* (Musurillo, 87); cf. Cyprian, *On the Mortality*, 26 (*ANCL* 8: 468); for Christ ruling on an 'eternal throne' in his 'heavenly kingdom' see *M.Poly.*, 9, 21-22 (Musurillo, 9, 19); *Ep.Diog.*, 7.4 (*LCL* 25: 145)

<sup>45</sup> Tertullian, *Apology*, 30-39 (*ANF* 3: 42-44)

To the emperor, therefore, we render such reverential homage as is lawful for us and good for him; regarding him as the human being next to God who from God has received all his power, and is less than God alone.<sup>46</sup>

In the same letter Tertullian declares, ‘We have no master but God. *He is before you...those whom you regard as masters are only men, and one day they themselves must die*’.<sup>47</sup> These statements refer to the distinction between the transient and the eternal, creation and Creator, in order to assert an order of authority. The emperor, on account of his humanity and his existence as a part of creation, is ultimately subjected to the authority of God.<sup>48</sup> As the North African martyr Donata affirmed, ‘Pay honour to Caesar as Caesar; but it is God we fear’.<sup>49</sup>

The inversion of this cosmic order of authority amounted to idolatry, as Christians were exhorted to ‘never bow down to the creatures when the Creator is present’.<sup>50</sup> The association between denial of Christ and idolatry is particularly prominent in Origen’s *Exhortation to Martyrdom*, written c.235 C.E:

[J]ust as he who joins himself to a prostitute becomes one body with her...so the one who confesses some god, especially in the time when faith is being tried and tested, is mingled and united with the god he confesses.<sup>51</sup>

Forming a bodily union by fornicating with the gods, the idolater defiles the communal body of the Church.<sup>52</sup> This notion of idolatry as contamination is also present in Cyprian’s treatise *On the Lapsed*, written in direct response to those who had lapsed in faith during the first general and systematic persecution of Christianity by Decius in 250 C.E. Cyprian refers to the lapsed as ‘the wound of our body’, which, if closed over and ignored, will become infected.<sup>53</sup> Cyprian

<sup>46</sup> Tertullian, *Ad.Scap.*, 2 (*ANF* 3: 105-06); Tertullian, *On Idolatry*, 15 (*ANF* 3: 70-71); for the subjection of all earthly authority to God see Ignatius, *Letter to the Smyrneans*, 6.1 (*LCL* 24: 301)

<sup>47</sup> *Ad.Scap.*, 5 (*ANF* 3: 108), emphasis in original

<sup>48</sup> Tertullian, *Apology*, 33 (*ANF* 3: 43)

<sup>49</sup> *M.Scill.* (Musurillo, 89)

<sup>50</sup> Origen, *Exhort.Mart.*, 7 (Greer [1979] 46); cf. *M.Crisp.*, 1 (Musurillo, 305); *M.Carpus.*, 2 (Musurillo, 29); *M.Agap.*, 5 (Musurillo, 289)

<sup>51</sup> *Exhort.Mart.*, 10 (Greer [1979] 47); cf. Tertullian, *On Idolatry*, 1 (*ANF* 3: 61)

<sup>52</sup> Origen, *Exhort.Mart.*, 10 (Greer [1979] 47)

<sup>53</sup> *De Lapsis*, 4, 14 (*ACL* 8 : 354, 361)

advises, 'the wound must be opened, and cut, and healed by the stronger remedy of cutting out the corrupting parts'.<sup>54</sup> In such a way the idolater was expelled from the body of the Church until the wound had been healed with 'the true medicine derived from atonement'.<sup>55</sup>

Not only did idolatry alienate the individual from the body of the Church, but also from the body of Christ, as the union with demons polluted and defiled the body of Christ by introducing a foreign body. Cyprian warned that 'reeking with the fatal contact' the idolaters 'intrude on the body of the Lord'.<sup>56</sup> Having chosen union with demons over union with Christ, Christians may have avoided the torture of martyrdom; however, they experienced an even more awful spiritual death. Like bowels torn out of a body and thrown to one side, those who offered sacrifice were alienated from the body of Christ and the salvation that lay therein.<sup>57</sup> As Origen said of those who had offered sacrifice, 'denied by his own denial, which like a sword cuts him off from the One he denies, he suffers amputation by being separated from the One he denies'.<sup>58</sup> Sacrifice to the gods broke the baptismal promise of 'the entire citizenship of the Gospel, which says, 'If any one would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me''.<sup>59</sup> While the martyrs followed Christ to their death, exclaiming 'let my body be mangled, let my limbs be pulled apart',<sup>60</sup> those Christians who offered sacrifice polluted Christ's body, ripping it apart limb from limb.

Paul's development of Christian identity defined in relation to the mystical body of Christ was also influential in the mid- to late-fourth century, a period of relative peace and stability. For example, the simultaneous participation in a social reality (or social body) and a spiritual reality (or spiritual body) is conveyed

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<sup>54</sup> *ibid.*, 14 (361)

<sup>55</sup> *ibid.*, 14-15, 35 (361-62, 374-376)

<sup>56</sup> *ibid.*, 15 (362); cf. Origen, *Exhort. Mart.*, 11 (Greer [1979] 48)

<sup>57</sup> *De Lapsis*, 4, 24-26 (*ANCL* 8: 353, 367-69); Cyprian, *De unit.*, 23 (*ANCL* 8: 396)

<sup>58</sup> *Exhort. Mart.*, 10 (Greer [1979] 47-48)

<sup>59</sup> *ibid.*, 12 (49)

<sup>60</sup> Basil, *Hom. Gordius.*, 5 (Allen [2003] 63); Chrysostom, *On Ephesians Homily 11*, 225B, 225D (Mayer & Allen [2000] 70-71)

in the fourth century *Apostolic Constitutions*, which describes baptism as initiation into the body of Christ:

Look down from heaven and sanctify this water and give it grace and power, that so he that is baptized, according to the command of thy Christ, may be crucified with him, and may die with him, and may be buried with him, and may rise with him to the adoption which is in him.<sup>61</sup>

This primary initiation into the body of Christ was continued through the accompanying sacrament of the Eucharist, by which Christ entered and pervaded the individual body, uniting it with himself. Through baptism and the Eucharist, the body of the individual Christian was assimilated into the mystical body of Christ. Cyril of Jerusalem expresses this in his *Catechetical Mysteries*, delivered in c.347-8 C.E.:

In the figure of wine his blood is given to you, so that by partaking of the body and blood of Christ you may be one body and blood with him.<sup>62</sup>

This notion of participation in Christ provides the exegetical key of Augustine's expositions of the Psalms during the late-fourth to early-fifth centuries. For Augustine, Christ is to be found in the individual and the individual is to be found in Christ, because 'when we consider the flesh, there we find Christ, and in Christ we find both him and ourselves'.<sup>63</sup> Developing the idea of a bodily union between Christ the head and the Church as the body,<sup>64</sup> Augustine understands the relationship between Christ and Christians as a locative union, uniting heaven and earth:

Though many, we are one, for Christ is one, and Christ's members are one with Christ, one in Christ. The head of all these members is in heaven. The body is toiling on earth, but it is not separated from its head, for the head looks down from heaven and cares for his body.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> *The Apostolic Constitutions*, III.17, cited in Everett Ferguson, 'Baptismal Motifs in the Ancient Church', in Ferguson et al. (eds.), *Conversion, Catechumenate, and Baptism in the Early Church*, Studies in Early Christianity, vol. 11 (New York: Garland Publishing, 1993) 283

<sup>62</sup> *Catechetical Mysteries*, 4.3, cited in Ramsey (1993) 83

<sup>63</sup> *En.Ps.*, 142.3 (*WSA* III/20: 347)

<sup>64</sup> *ibid.*, 345-46

<sup>65</sup> *En.Ps.*, 123.1 (*WSA* III/20: 43)

For Augustine, union with Christ is inseparably linked with the incarnation, redemption and ascension. Christ came down from heaven, became united with mankind, ascended back to heaven, and is calling his body to follow after him. While the head looks down to earth, the members of the body look upwards and fix their gaze upon Christ.<sup>66</sup> Locked in a mutual gaze, the head calls the body to follow. This understanding of mystical union conveys a cosmic motion, or magnetism, towards Christ, ‘we cling inseparably to him of whom we are members; our head is in heaven, and he is drawing his members after him’.<sup>67</sup> Although the head and the body are located in different places, their unity results in a simultaneous participation in heaven and earth. Christ in heaven continues to suffer through his body on earth,<sup>68</sup> while the body on earth is united in a heavenly existence with Christ, because ‘he is still down here, and we are already up there’.<sup>69</sup>

This concept of participation in the body of Christ is also seen in Victricius of Rouen’s *Praising the Saints*, c. 396 C.E. This sermon is a unique development of the theology of relics which propounds that relics are consubstantial with God; that ‘they are entirely with the Savior in his entirety’.<sup>70</sup> In his desire to develop this belief and to affirm the unity of the godhead and the Church, Victricius appeals to the idea of bodily unity: the Church is a body dispersed in space and time but united in faith;<sup>71</sup> members of the Church body are joined in the mutual possession of relics, which are themselves bodies that are divided, yet whole and unified;<sup>72</sup> this Church body is united to Christ the head through adoption at baptism;<sup>73</sup> while all Christians have been adopted into the body of Christ at baptism, the martyrs and saints earn complete concord with

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<sup>66</sup> *En.Ps.*, 122.6 (*WSA* III/20: 36); This mutual gaze precedes the face-to-face vision of the illuminated eyes when the Christian reaches heaven. See Augustine, *En.Ps.*, 123.2 (*WSA* III/20: 44)

<sup>67</sup> *En.Ps.*, 127.4 (*WSA* III/20: 101)

<sup>68</sup> *En.Ps.*, 142.3 (*WSA* III/20: 346)

<sup>69</sup> *En.Ps.*, 122.1 (*WSA* III/20: 30)

<sup>70</sup> *Praising the Saints*, 7 (G. Clark [1999] 386)

<sup>71</sup> *ibid.*, 7 (385-86)

<sup>72</sup> *ibid.*, 9 (389-90)

<sup>73</sup> *ibid.*, 7 (385-86)

Christ's body through their perfect confession of faith and conformity to Christ's death in *imitatio Christi*.<sup>74</sup> Drawing together these ideas of unity with, and conformity to, Christ, within the context of the reception of translated relics and the commemoration of the saints and martyrs, Victricius refers to the Pauline metaphor of Christian identity:

Just as the head of the body died for the members, so the members die for the head, so that just as the head lives, the members may be made alive with the head.<sup>75</sup>

Participation in Christ was a powerful and enduring belief which informed the earliest understandings of Christian identity, promoted unity among disparate Church communities, and stimulated ethical behaviour in everyday life. Moreover, in times of persecution, this idea was combined with a sense of dying and rising with Christ, and served as a motivation towards martyrdom and a deterrent to sacrificing to idols. Even in the late-fourth century, the depiction of the Church as the body of Christ remained central to the memory of martyrdom, as it conveyed the essence of Christian identity, inspiring mystical devotion to Christ, and encouraging Christians to be united as one body with the martyrs.

### ❖ **Dying in Christ**

Persecution brought corporate identity to the forefront of the Christian mind. Witness to Christ was seen as the physical expression of membership in the body of Christ, whereas denial of Christ was the expression of alienation from Christ and the Christian community through participation in the body of demons. It was within this framework of corporate identity that a distinctively Christian attitude towards death developed. The Christian community was perceived as partaking in a 'strange new cult', and was despised for 'walking readily and joyfully to their death'.<sup>76</sup> While Galen stated that '[t]heir contempt of death is patent to us every

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<sup>74</sup> *ibid.*, 6, 7, 8, 9 (382, 386, 388, 391)

<sup>75</sup> *ibid.*, 12 (398)

<sup>76</sup> *M.Lyons*. (Musurillo, 83)



day',<sup>77</sup> Tertullian related that contempt of death was a negative charge brought against the Christians:

The rest of your charge of obstinacy against us you sum up in this indictment, that we boldly refuse neither your swords, nor your crosses, nor your wild beasts, nor fire, nor tortures, such is our contempt of death.<sup>78</sup>

The writings of the Church fathers from the second to fourth centuries present martyrdom as the 'the perfect work of love', a holy, religious, and special kind of death.<sup>79</sup> By imitating and conforming to Christ's death, martyrdom enabled Christians to participate in Christ's resurrection. The martyrs are said to have believed that 'they are put to death and made alive', that martyrdom was the 'gate of death', and 'the beginning of the true life'.<sup>80</sup> With this faith, confessors locked in prisons hungered for the death they had so nearly tasted through torture.<sup>81</sup>

This welcoming of death is evident in the romanticised fourth century descriptions of confessors joyfully processing into the arena as though heading towards a wedding feast, proclaiming 'let us die that we may live'.<sup>82</sup> The martyrs who entered the arena were depicted not approaching death but being delivered to angels,<sup>83</sup> 'skipping and rejoicing and dancing as if they were in a sacred pageant or playing around in a green meadow'.<sup>84</sup> This attitude towards death inverted

<sup>77</sup> Galen quoted in Brown, 'Bodies and Minds: Sexuality and Renunciation in Early Christianity', in D.M Halperin, & J.J. Winkler, (eds.) *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990) 477

<sup>78</sup> *Ad Nationes*, 1.18 (ANF 3: 126); cf. *Ep. Diog.*, 1 (LCL 25: 131); Ignatius, *Letter to the Ephesians*, 18.1 (LCL 24: 237); Ignatius, *Letter to the Smyrneans*, 3.3 (LCL 24: 299); Cyprian, *On the Mortality*, 16 (ANCL 8: 462)

<sup>79</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies*, 4.4 (ANF 12: 146); Origen, *Exhort. Mart.*, 29 (Greer [1979] 61); Chrysostom, *On Saint Romanus*, 3 (Mayer [2006] 230)

<sup>80</sup> Quotes from *Ep. Diog.*, 5.12 (LCL 25: 141) and Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies*, 4.7 (ANF 12, 159); cf. Ignatius, *Letter to the Romans*, 4.3 (LCL 24: 275); Basil, *Hom. Gordius.*, 8 (Allen [2003] 66)

<sup>81</sup> For Christians "hungering" for death see Tertullian, *Scorpiace*, 1 (ANF 3: 634)

<sup>82</sup> Basil, *A Homily on the Forty Martyrs*, 6 (Allen [2003] 73); cf. *M. Lyons*. (Musurillo, 79)

<sup>83</sup> Basil, *Hom. Gordius.*, 8 (Allen [2003] 66)

<sup>84</sup> Chrysostom, *On Saint Romanus.*, 7 (Mayer [2006] 232)

traditional values through a qualification of the current life on earth by a future life in heaven. As Augustine said, ‘in the holy martyrs love of life was conquered by love of life; in loving life they thought nothing of life’.<sup>85</sup>

Martyrs were remembered as individuals who had been graced with the opportunity of participating in the suffering of Christ. Basil asked his congregation, ‘what greater suffering can a slave have {than to} suffer what his Master did?’<sup>86</sup> Victricius of Rouen questioned, ‘What else is a martyr, beloved ones, but an imitator of Christ?’<sup>87</sup> And Paulinus of Nola affirmed that the martyrs were held in such high esteem precisely because their suffering was similar to that of Christ.<sup>88</sup> Martyrdom was seen and remembered as the highest, most unsurpassable example of *imitatio Christi*.<sup>89</sup> The martyr did not only participate in Christ’s suffering and conform to Christ’s death, but also shared in Christ’s resurrection into eternal life. Christ’s victory had removed the sting of death, and the martyrs were believed to reign victorious over death by their supreme conformation to Christ. Athanasius explains:

[B]efore men believe Christ, they see in death an object of terror, and play the coward before him. But when they are gone over to Christ’s faith and teaching, their contempt for death is so great that they even eagerly rush upon it, and become witnesses for the Resurrection.<sup>90</sup>

The fact that martyrdom enabled Christians to participate in Christ through conformity to his death resulted in the interpretation of martyrdom as a witness to Christ’s Passion and a performance that pointed back towards the gospel. Rowan Williams presents this understanding of martyrdom, describing martyrdom as ‘a lived exposition, of taking Christ seriously as the one through whom the definition

<sup>85</sup> *Serm.* 335A.2 (*WSA* III/8: 212)

<sup>86</sup> *A Homily on the Forty Martyrs*, 6 (Allen [2003] 72); cf. Chrysostom, *On the Holy Martyrs*, 5 (Mayer [2006] 223)

<sup>87</sup> *Praising the Saints*, 6 (G. Clark [1999] 382)

<sup>88</sup> *Poem* 26 (*ACW* 40: 261)

<sup>89</sup> Clement, *Miscellanies*, 4.8 (*ANCL* 8: 169); *M.Poly.*, 19 (Musurillo, 17); Tertullian, *Flight.*, 12.7 (*FC* 40: 302); Origen, *Exhort.Mart.*, 41 (Greer [1979] 72)

<sup>90</sup> *On the Incarnation of the Word*, 27 (*NPNF* 4: 51); cf. Tertullian, *Flight.*, 12.2-3 (*FC* 40: 299-300); Tertullian, *Ad.Marty.*, 3 (*ANF* 3: 694); Tertullian, *Ad Nationes*, 1.19 (*ANF* 3: 127)

of God's people has changed'.<sup>91</sup> Just as Christ had 'preached the gospel in the body',<sup>92</sup> the martyrs also preached the gospel with their bodies. The actions of the martyrs were seen as lived expositions of the gospel, as acts of perfect discipleship that bore witness to Christ's victory, and as testimony to the presence and power of God.<sup>93</sup>

### ❖ Holy Vessels of Power

In her discussion of ascetic men and women of the late-fourth to seventh centuries, Patricia Cox Miller observes that ascetic bodies were seen as loci of spiritual power that was expressed to others through the corporeity of their bodies.<sup>94</sup> To support her point she cites Peter Brown:

Often seeming to be tragically absent, Christ needed to be "represented" on earth, and it was as "Christ-bearers", as those who imitated him and consequently carried his power within them, that holy persons – alive or in their tomb – gave human density to the urge to find a joining of heaven and earth.<sup>95</sup>

The same can be said of the martyrs, who were often described as 'Christ-bearers' because Christ dwelt within their bodies, strengthening them in their endurance of torture.<sup>96</sup> This perception of the human body as a sacred shrine filled with the presence of God is present as early as Paul:

[T]his extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed;

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<sup>91</sup> Rowan Williams, *Why Study the Past? The Quest for the Historical Church*, Sarum Theological Lectures (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2005) 53

<sup>92</sup> Clement, *Miscellanies*, 4.8 (ANCL 8: 169)

<sup>93</sup> *Ep. Diog.*, 7.9 (LCL 25: 147); Clement, *Miscellanies*, 4.4 (ANCL 12: 145); Cyprian, *On the Mortality*, 14 (ANCL 8: 460)

<sup>94</sup> Miller (2004)

<sup>95</sup> Peter Brown, 'Arbiters of Ambiguity: A Role of the Late Antique Holy Man', *Cassiodorus*, 2 (1996) 140, cited in Miller (2004) 406

<sup>96</sup> For example, the introductions of Ignatius's *Letters* (LCL 24); *M. Lyons*. (Musurillo, 69, 75); *M. Perp.*, 15 (Musurillo, 123-25); Cyprian, *Ep.*, 8 (ANCL 8: 34-36); Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word*, 29 (NPNF 4: 52); Asterius, *A Homily on Stephen the First Martyr*, 9.1 (Dehandschutter [2003] 182)

always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh.<sup>97</sup>

This ideology was intensified with martyrdom. The notion of the body of the martyr as a holy vessel and sacred shrine formed a *topos* of martyrdom narratives and homilies.<sup>98</sup> Their holy bodies acted as 'materializations of an invisible world',<sup>99</sup> blurring the boundaries between transcendence and immanence by joining heaven and earth. For Ignatius, the belief that the power of Christ resided within the bodies of the martyrs meant that they were at the centre of the divine presence, for 'to be near the sword is to be near God, to be in the presence of the wild beasts is to be in the presence of God'.<sup>100</sup> This divine presence transformed the martyr's body into a seat of 'holy and terrifying power', a manifestation of the greater cosmic reality to which the martyr belonged.<sup>101</sup> The martyr was a 'holy and Christ-bearing shrine',<sup>102</sup> filled with 'the power of God', and revealing Christ by providing visual 'proofs of his coming'.<sup>103</sup> Moreover, this indwelling presence of Christ reinforced the endurance of the martyrs, as the suffering passed over to Christ. In the late-fourth century, Paulinus of Nola affirmed:

[O]n the many different crosses of the blessed martyrs he [Christ] was often killed... [Christ] knows how to bear the weakness that we cannot and know not how to endure without him. He, I say, now also carries

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<sup>97</sup> 2 Cor. 4:7-11

<sup>98</sup> For example, Ignatius, *Letter to the Ephesians*, 9.2, 15.3 (LCL 24: 229, 235); *M.Lyons*. (Musurillo, 69, 75); *M.Perp.*, (Musurillo, 123-25); Cyprian, *Ep.*, 8 (ANCL 8: 34-36); Chrysostom, *Hom.Pelagia.*, 1 (Mayer [2003] 151-52); Augustine, *Serm.* 330.1 (WSA III/9: 185); Asterius, *A Homily on Stephen the First Martyr*, 5.1 (Dehandschutter [2003] 179)

<sup>99</sup> Miller (2004) 411

<sup>100</sup> *Letter to the Smyrneans*, 4.2 (LCL 24: 299)

<sup>101</sup> Williams (2005) 36, 39

<sup>102</sup> Chrysostom, *Hom.Julian.*, 3 (Mayer [2003] 133)

<sup>103</sup> *Ep.Diog.*, 7.9 (LCL 25: 147); cf. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word*, 28 (NPNF 4: 51); *M.Perp.*, 5, 9 (Musurillo, 113, 117); Cyprian, *Ep.*, 15.4 (ANCL 8: 54)

about the world for us and in us, that he may destroy it by bearing it, and may perfect strength in weakness.<sup>104</sup>

As vessels of divine power and presence, the martyrs were believed to transcend their location in the world to take part in a greater cosmic reality.<sup>105</sup> The earliest martyrdom narratives and treatises describe the martyrs as ‘no longer men but angels’, walking on earth but participating in the life of heaven.<sup>106</sup> This is especially seen in those of Cyprian’s letters addressed to a group of confessors awaiting martyrdom in prison, c.250 C.E. Cyprian writes to them, ‘although you are still placed in the flesh, it is the life not of the present world, but of the future, that you now live’,<sup>107</sup> and, ‘already breathing only celestial things, and meditating only divine things, you ascend to loftier heights’.<sup>108</sup>

The notion of simultaneous participation in heaven and earth was believed to enable the martyr to withstand torture, which is presented as having an almost analgesic effect. In the last quarter of the fourth century, Gregory of Nyssa preached a homily in commemoration of the martyr Theodore, assuring his congregation that Christ had dwelt within Theodore’s body so that while ‘they tore most of his flesh in pieces, he was singing psalms as if somebody else was undergoing the torture’.<sup>109</sup> Similarly, in a homily delivered in Constantinople, John Chrysostom explained that the martyrs’ unexpectedly joyful response to torture was the result of ‘a certain divine power seated in their souls, stimulating and nerving and equipping them to laugh at all the tortures’, for ‘Christ is both alive and is active in the martyrs’ souls’.<sup>110</sup> Furthermore, not only was Christ present within the martyr, helping them to endure torture, but the martyr was also believed to be present with Christ in heaven. This is evident in a homily of John Chrysostom that was preached in Antioch in commemoration of the female martyr

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<sup>104</sup> *Ep.*, 38.3, cited in Ramsey (1993) 85-86

<sup>105</sup> Ignatius, *Letter to the Smyrneans*, 4.2 (LCL 24: 301)

<sup>106</sup> *M.Poly.*, 2.2 (Musurillo, 5); cf. *Ep.Diog.*, 5.9, 10.7 (LCL 25: 141, 153-55); Origen, *Exhort.Mart.*, 44 (Greer [1979] 74); Cyprian, *On the Mortality*, 2 (ANCL 8: 454)

<sup>107</sup> *Ep.*, 15.3 (ANCL 8: 54)

<sup>108</sup> *ibid.*, 15.1 (52)

<sup>109</sup> *Hom.Theodore.*, 69.30 (Leemans [2003] 89)

<sup>110</sup> *On all the Martyrs*, 8 (Mayer [2006] 246); *idem*, *Hom.Drosis.*, 5 (Mayer [2006] 196)

Drosis. Chrysostom explains to his audience, ‘since she’d been redeployed in heaven and had transferred her soul there, she laughed at all her tortures and thought that the fire wasn’t fire, but dew’.<sup>111</sup>

The martyr’s simultaneous participation in the life of the world and the life of heaven also led to the description of the martyr’s body as an open channel of communication with the divine realm, as the martyr engaged in ‘an experience of unmediated communion with Christ’.<sup>112</sup> The martyr was close to God, because God’s ears were open to the prayers of the martyrs and his ‘unsleeping eye’ was attentively fixed on them.<sup>113</sup> This privileged relationship with God is seen in martyrdom narratives of the second to fourth centuries. These texts portray the martyrs freely conversing with Christ, prophesying, and receiving visions and voices from heaven.<sup>114</sup> This belief in God’s favour towards the martyrs is also illustrated in one of John Chrysostom’s homilies on the martyr Julian, delivered in Antioch in c.396-7 C.E:

[T]he martyr’s voice leapt forth from that holy tongue and leapt up into heaven. It passed the sky of heaven. Angels saw it and gave it room; archangels [saw it] and got out of the way. The cherubim and the other powers guided it on its way above and didn’t step away until they’d escorted it to the royal throne itself.<sup>115</sup>

The heavenly significance of Julian’s martyrdom is also conveyed by Chrysostom’s description of Julian’s body radiating a bright and holy light, his wounds shining ‘brighter than the stars fixed in heaven’.<sup>116</sup> The light that radiated from the martyr’s wounds reflected that of Christ’s cross, which had ‘chased away the darkness from every corner, and introduced a light brighter to us than

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<sup>111</sup> *Hom. Drosis.*, 8 (Mayer [2006] 200)

<sup>112</sup> M. Therese Lysaught, ‘Witnessing Christ in their Bodies: Martyrs and Ascetics as Doxological Disciples’, *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics*, 20 (2000) 239-262, at 246

<sup>113</sup> Chrysostom, *Hom. Pelagia.*, 2 (Mayer [2003] 156)

<sup>114</sup> *M. Poly.*, 2, 5, 9, 12, 16 (Musurillo, 3, 7, 9, 13, 15); *M. Perp.*, 4, 7, 8, 10 (Musurillo, 111-13, 115-119); *M. Marian.*, (Musurillo, 195-213); *M. Mont.*, 5, 7, 8, 11 (Musurillo, 217-219, 221, 223-25)

<sup>115</sup> *Hom. Julian.*, 3 (Mayer [2003] 134)

<sup>116</sup> *ibid.*, 2 (132)

the rays of the sun',<sup>117</sup> blinding demons and causing them to withdraw as though they had been punched in the eyes.<sup>118</sup>

For Chrysostom, the light that emanated from the martyrs' bodies was 'a major proof of Christ's power' and 'a herald of God's glory'.<sup>119</sup> This theme of transfiguration indicated by radiant light was not unique to Chrysostom, but was a common motif for interpreting martyrdom that was employed by Clement of Alexandria, Cyprian, and Basil, to name a few.<sup>120</sup> The martyrs' bodies, participating in the celestial citizenship of the kingdom of heaven, were believed to be illuminated with the divine presence and to reflect that heavenly light in their imitation of Christ. This belief in the martyrs' victory over demons and the Devil, conveyed through the divine light radiating from the body, was part of a more general interpretation of martyrdom as a cosmic conflict in which good trampled evil, life crushed death, and light illuminated the dark corners of the world.

During the Decian persecution of the mid-third century Cyprian described martyrdom as 'the heavenly contest – the contest of God, the spiritual contest, the battle of Christ'.<sup>121</sup> Martyrs were 'soldiers of Christ', and 'an army established in the heavenly camp', who battled with the enemy to 'gain the crown of contest' and received glory 'in the heavenly kingdoms'.<sup>122</sup> The cosmic interpretation of persecution endowed martyrdom with great significance, as it removed the individual Christian from the context of the world and placed them on the cosmic battlefield, armed in defence of Christ. The portrayal of martyrdom – as a 'war against the principalities of darkness, and against death'<sup>123</sup> – mapped the suffering

<sup>117</sup> *Hom. Babylas.*, 3 (Mayer [2003] 143); Chrysostom, *Hom. Julian.*, 3 (Mayer [2006] 133); Cyprian, *De unit.*, 3-5, 22, 27 (*ANCL* 8: 379-81, 395, 398)

<sup>118</sup> *Hom. Julian.*, 2 (Mayer [2003] 133); cf. Chrysostom, *Homily After the Remains of Martyrs*, 469, 470 (Mayer & Allen [2000] 87-88)

<sup>119</sup> *Hom. Julian.*, 2 (Mayer [2003] 132)

<sup>120</sup> For example, *M. Perp.*, 18 (Musurillo, 127); Cyprian, *Ep.*, 15.2 (*ANCL* 8: 52); Clement, *Miscellanies*, 4.17, 4.18, 6.13 (*ANCL* 12: 188, 193, 365); Basil, *Hom. Gordius.*, 4 (Allen [2003] 62); Gregory, *Homily Ib on the Forty Martyrs*, 148.6 (Leemans [2003] 100); Paulinus of Nola, *Poem* 15 (*ACW* 40: 90)

<sup>121</sup> Cyprian, *Ep.*, 8 (*ANCL* 8: 34)

<sup>122</sup> *ibid.*, *Ep.*, 8, 15, 24 (33-37, 51-54, 68-70)

<sup>123</sup> Clement, *Miscellanies*, 4.7 (*ANCL* 12: 161)

of the individual on the grand scale of the cosmos. The martyrs were believed to be ‘fighting under the eyes of a present Lord’.<sup>124</sup>

This depiction of martyrdom as a cosmic conflict endured in the post-event interpretations of martyrdom in the late-fourth century. Gregory of Nyssa affirmed that, ‘in the hands of the good soldier the confession of Christ becomes a sling: the Enemy falls on the ground and is decapitated’.<sup>125</sup> And Basil avowed that the victorious witness of the martyrs permeated the cosmos; the ‘angels applauded when they heard it, the Devil with the demons was traumatised by it, while the Lord registered it in heaven’.<sup>126</sup>

The cosmic interpretation of martyrdom referred to the martyr’s death as *imitatio Christi*. Christ’s own victory was understood in cosmic terms, as is evident in the following words of Irenaeus:

[I]n his invisible form [Christ] pervades us universally in the whole world, and encompasses both its length and breadth and height and depth...the Son of God was also crucified in these, imprinted in the form of a cross in the universe.<sup>127</sup>

According to Irenaeus, the victory of Christ permeated the universe with cosmic repercussions. This dimension of Christ’s death and resurrection lent martyrdom its cosmic significance. As Ramsey observes, Christ’s passion was not limited to a single historic moment, rather, ‘all suffering in whatever age was drawn up into Christ’s suffering and made his own in mysterious fashion’.<sup>128</sup> Christ’s victory had triumphed over and renewed the whole of creation and this victory was recapitulated by the martyrs. This belief is illustrated by Basil’s *Homily on the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste*, preached in Caesarea in 373 C.E.<sup>129</sup> The forty Christian soldiers had been condemned to death by standing naked in the icy winter night and, once they had frozen to death, their bodies were burnt and their ashes swept into a river. In this way, Basil claims, the martyrs triumphed over each of the four

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<sup>124</sup> Cyprian, *Ep.*, 8 (*ANCL* 8: 36)

<sup>125</sup> *Homily Ib on the Forty Martyrs*, 148.6 (Leemans [2003] 101)

<sup>126</sup> Basil, *A Homily on the Forty Martyrs*, 3 (Allen [2003] 70)

<sup>127</sup> Irenaeus, *Demonstratio*, 34, cited in Ramsey (1993) 84

<sup>128</sup> Ramsey (1993) 85

<sup>129</sup> (Allen [2003] 68-76)



elements, 'the suffering of the blessed ones went completely through all creation. They suffered on earth, they remained steadfast in the air, they were delivered over to the fire; the water received them'.<sup>130</sup> This victory was understood in terms of sanctification. Gregory of Nyssa, preaching on the same martyrs a few years after Basil, assured that the martyrs 'sanctified the fire' by becoming its fuel, and 'carried over their blessing to the water' in the burnt ashes of their bodies.<sup>131</sup> By passing through the four elements, the group martyrdom resounded throughout the whole of creation, renewing and sanctifying the cosmos.

### ❖ The Seed of the Martyrs

The significance of the martyred body as a channel of divine power and a witness bearing testimony to Christ remained even after a martyr had died. The perception of the corpses of martyrs as positive objects worthy of veneration is evident as early as the mid-second century. In c.145 C.E. the martyr Polycarp's bones were described by the Christian community as being 'dearer to us than precious stones and finer than gold'.<sup>132</sup> Polycarp's persecutors recognised the high admiration of the martyr's relics within the Christian community and guarded his corpse as a direct result:

[They] prevented us even from taking up the poor body, though so many were eager to do so and to have a share in his holy flesh. Hence he [the Devil] got Nicetas, Herod's father and Alce's brother, to petition the governor not to give up his body. 'Otherwise', he said, 'they might abandon the Crucified and begin to worship this man'.<sup>133</sup>

The fact that Polycarp's persecutors were afraid that the Christians would abandon Christ and begin to worship Polycarp is implicit of the public expression of devotion towards martyr relics at this early stage in Christian history. Polycarp's persecutors were very much aware of the Christians' zeal in collecting

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<sup>130</sup> *ibid.*, 8 (74)

<sup>131</sup> Gregory, *Homily on the Forty Martyrs* (Allen [2003] 106)

<sup>132</sup> *M.Poly.*, 18 (Musurillo, 17)

<sup>133</sup> *ibid.*, 17 (15)

the martyr's body for veneration and it was precisely this that provoked a centurion to burn the corpse.<sup>134</sup>

A similar occasion prompted the same reaction some twenty-five years later, c.170 C.E, in Lyons.<sup>135</sup> Here, the strangled, charred and decapitated bodies of the martyrs were exposed to the open air and dogs, whilst continually watched with a military guard.<sup>136</sup> The bodies were then burnt and swept into the river Rhone.<sup>137</sup> This account displays parallels with the treatment of Polycarp's remains. The martyrs' corpses were violated and then placed under constant guard 'so that not a single relic of their bodies might be left on earth'.<sup>138</sup> In both cases, the corpses of the martyrs were violated, destroyed, and disposed of, preventing Christian onlookers from burying or preserving the remains. However, unlike the account of Polycarp's martyrdom, the destruction of the martyrs' bodies in Lyons was not construed as a preventative measure to thwart Christians from the idolatrous abandonment of Christ in favour of the martyr. Rather, the intent to destroy the corpses was a public display of defiance against the Christian God and an attack on the Christian belief in the bodily resurrection of the martyrs:

[T]hey did this as though they could overcome God and deprive the martyrs of their restoration, in order, as they themselves said, 'that they might have no hope in the resurrection in which they put their trust'.<sup>139</sup>

At Lyons, the reduction of the corpses through a process of exposure, incineration, and dispersion in water was motivated by a defiance of Christian beliefs and attitudes towards death, as is evident in the response of the Christians observing the violations, who were aggrieved that they could not bury the martyrs' bodies.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> *ibid.*, 17-18 (15-17)

<sup>135</sup> See also *M. Justin.*, 6 (Musurillo, 53), 'Some of the faithful secretly took their bodies and buried them in a suitable place'

<sup>136</sup> *M. Lyons.* (Musurillo, 81)

<sup>137</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>138</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>139</sup> *ibid.*, 81-83

<sup>140</sup> *ibid.*, 81

Thirty years after the persecution at Lyons, a group of Christians were apprehended, tried, and persecuted in Carthage.<sup>141</sup> Among them was a man named Saturus, who, following numerous tortures, was sentenced to the beasts and was finally attacked by a leopard. With his dying words, Saturus asked a believing prison guard to remove the ring from his finger; Saturus dipped the ring into the blood of his wounds, and handed it back to the soldier as a memento – a relic – of his continued physical presence within the faithful community.<sup>142</sup> This action suggests that at this stage, more than a century before the flourishing of the cult of the saints in the mid-fourth century, the bodies of the martyrs and the objects associated with them were retained and revered as physical reminders of the martyrs' continued presence within the Christian community.

As Tertullian famously said, the blood of the martyrs laid down seed that blossomed in the Christian Church.<sup>143</sup> The martyrs were 'heavenly flowers' stained purple with their own blood.<sup>144</sup> As they were cut down, new seeds were sprinkled over the fertile soil of faith, blossoming to bear the fruit of eternal life.<sup>145</sup> It was around these 'spiritual meadows' that the Christian community swarmed.<sup>146</sup> Like bees darting from flower to flower, Christians went from one tomb to another,<sup>147</sup> becoming drunk on the blood of the martyrs.<sup>148</sup>

While commemoration of the martyrs was practiced at an early stage in Christian history, the imperial favour of Constantine enabled Christians to express their devotion to the cult of the martyrs publicly. Retaining a link with its

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<sup>141</sup> *M.Perp.* (Musurillo, 107-131)

<sup>142</sup> *M.Perp.*, 21 (Musurillo, 131)

<sup>143</sup> *Apology*, 50 (*ANF* 3: 55)

<sup>144</sup> Cyprian, *Ep.*, 8 (*ANCL* 8: 37)

<sup>145</sup> Gregory, *Hom.Theodore.*, 70.29 (Leemans [2003] 91); Gregory, *Homily Ib on the Forty Martyrs*, 146.9 (Leemans [2003] 100); Chrysostom, *Hom.Julian.*, 4 (Mayer [2003] 136-37); Augustine, *Serm.* 335E.2 (*WSA* III/9: 234-35)

<sup>146</sup> Chrysostom, *Hom.Ignatius.*, 2 (Mayer [2006] 103-04); Basil, *Hom.Gordius.*, 1 (Allen [2003] 57-58)

<sup>147</sup> For *martyria* as spiritual meadows see Chrysostom, *A Homily on the Holy Martyrs*, 2 (Mayer [2003] 121); for Christians as darting bees see Chrysostom, *On Eleazar and the Seven Boys*, 16 (Mayer [2006] 133); Basil, *Hom.Gordius.*, 1 (Allen [2003] 57-58)

<sup>148</sup> Tertullian, *Scorpiace*, 12 (*ANF* 3: 646); cf. the hymn of Rabbula of Edessa, cited in Ramsey (1993) 127-28

persecuted past, the fourth century Church kept the memory of martyrdom alive through the ardent commemoration of the martyrs.<sup>149</sup> The increasingly open and popular expression of devotion to the martyrs is evident in the fourth century panegyrics that were preached in commemoration of the martyr's *dies natalis*, the annual celebration of the day of their martyrdom or heavenly birthday. These homilies illustrate the intensity of devotion to the cult of the martyrs during times of peace; a spirit that is glimpsed in the introduction to one of John Chrysostom's martyr homilies:

What can I say? What shall I speak? I'm jumping with excitement and aflame with a frenzy that is better than common sense. I'm flying and dancing and floating on air and, for the rest, drunk under the influence of this spiritual pleasure.<sup>150</sup>

These festivals were extraordinary occasions that drew larger and more socially diverse crowds than usual.<sup>151</sup> Basil described the Christian community exiting and emptying the city *en masse*, 'pouring forth just now out of the city, as if from beehives'.<sup>152</sup> Similarly, Gregory joked that he would need 'a voice that sounds like a trumpet' to preach to the huge crowd, which he compared to a sea of swelling waves.<sup>153</sup> While both Basil and Gregory were indeed employing hyperbole, their words still indicate the expansion of the audience of the Christian faithful on such occasions.

One of the reasons for this popular devotion to relics was the belief in the continued function of the martyr's body as a vessel of divine power that blurred

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<sup>149</sup> R.A. Markus, 'How on Earth Could Places Become Holy? Origins of the Christian Idea of Holy Places', *J ECS* 2:3 (1994) 257-71; idem, *The End of Ancient Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) esp. 90-95, 99

<sup>150</sup> *Homily Delivered after the Remains of Martyrs* (Mayer & Allen [2000] 86)

<sup>151</sup> Wendy Mayer and Pauline Allen, *John Chrysostom, The Early Church Fathers* (London; New York, Routledge, 2000) 38; Wendy Mayer, 'Female Participation and the Late Fourth-Century Preacher's Audience', *Aug.*, 39 (1999) 139-147, esp. 141-42

<sup>152</sup> *Hom. Gordius*, 1 (Allen [2003] 58); cf. Gregory of Nyssa, *Hom. Theodore*, 61,4 (Leemans [2003] 83-84); Chrysostom, *Homily After the Remains of Martyrs*, 470 (Mayer & Allen [2000] 89)

<sup>153</sup> *Homily Ia on the Forty Martyrs*, 145,5 (Leemans [2003] 98)

the boundaries between heaven and earth.<sup>154</sup> The relics of the martyrs were simultaneously material and spiritual objects that had the power to mediate between the material and spiritual realms.<sup>155</sup> Present on earth, but in close proximity to God, relics had a declaratory capacity. Chrysostom develops this idea in a homily on the martyr Julian:

Indeed, just as the heavens proclaim the glory of God (cf. Ps 18:2) without uttering a sound – rather, they pass the viewer on to wonder of the creator through the splendour of the sight; so too did that martyr proclaim God’s glory then, since he too was a heaven.<sup>156</sup>

For Chrysostom, the bodies of the martyrs continue to bear witness to God even after death; ‘I won’t just guarantee this from what happened a long time ago, but also from what still happens even now’.<sup>157</sup>

The idea of the martyred body continuing to proclaim God after death is also found in Ambrose who, like Chrysostom, refers to martyrs’ bodies as “heavens”. In a letter detailing his discovery of the bodies of the Milanese martyrs Protasius and Gervasius, Ambrose exclaims, ‘Look at the holy relics at my right hand and at my left, see men of heavenly conversation, behold the trophies of a heavenly mind. These are the heavens which declare the glory of God’.<sup>158</sup>

This declaratory quality of martyr relics results from the belief that the martyrs were simultaneously present on earth and seated beside God as citizens of heaven. The martyrs – ‘whose souls were in heaven, their bodies in the earth’ – served as channels of grace between heaven and earth.<sup>159</sup> As Peter Brown has shown, the shrines and relics of martyrs, seen as loci that united the transcendent and the mundane, were physical reminders of the martyr’s simultaneous

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<sup>154</sup> John of Damascus refers to relics as “vessels of divine power” in *C. Imag.*, 3.34, cited in Georgia Frank, *The Memory of the Eyes: Pilgrims to Living Saints in Christian Late Antiquity*, Transformation of Classical Heritage, vol. 30 (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, (2000) 120

<sup>155</sup> Miller (2000) 214-15

<sup>156</sup> *Hom. Julian*, 2 (Mayer [2003] 132)

<sup>157</sup> *ibid.*, 2 (133)

<sup>158</sup> *Letter 22.4 (NPNF 10: 437)*

<sup>159</sup> *ibid.*, 22.7 (437); Miller (2000) 214-15

*praesentia* in heaven and on earth.<sup>160</sup> This breaking of boundaries was made visible through the miraculous and curative power of relics. As Paulinus of Nola said of Saint Felix, ‘the dwellers of heaven enjoy the mind of Felix, while we benefit from his body’.<sup>161</sup> It was precisely this simultaneous participation in heaven and earth that endowed the martyrs’ corpses with divine power. Paulinus asks:

You observe the tomb which conceals our martyr’s holy bones...To human eyes, to our bodily sight, there is no living person here...Why, then, does such great awe encompass this threshold?...What power constrains evil spirits?<sup>162</sup>

Similarly, John Chrysostom appeals to a spiritual mode of perception to encourage his audience to view relics as spiritual objects:

Please don’t mention the dust, nor think about the ash, nor the bones that have been consumed by time, but open wide the eyes of faith and see God’s power that accompanies them.<sup>163</sup>

Just as the bodies of the martyrs had performed awe-inspiring acts in the arena, so too did their relics continue to perform miraculous deeds through the indwelling power of God; they healed the sick, returned stolen goods, and exorcised demons.<sup>164</sup> For Paulinus, as for many other Christians, ‘the divinely implanted grace in the saint’s limbs could not die and be buried with the flesh’.<sup>165</sup> Chrysostom develops this understanding of indwelling grace to present relics as eternal and superabundant springs of spiritual grace that are continually drained but never emptied:

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<sup>160</sup> Brown (1981)

<sup>161</sup> *Poem 18* (ACW 40: 118)

<sup>162</sup> *ibid.*, 117

<sup>163</sup> *Homily 1 on the Holy Maccabees*, 1 (Mayer [2006] 137)

<sup>164</sup> For example, Augustine, *City of God*, 22.8-9 (Walsh & Honan [1954] 431-51); Ambrose, *Letter 22.9* (NPNF 10: 438); Chrysostom, *On all the Martyrs*, 10 (Mayer [2006] 248); Paulinus of Nola, *Poem 18* (ACW 40: 119-21); Victricius, *Praising the Saints*, 2 (G. Clark [1999] 378)

<sup>165</sup> *Poem 18* (ACW 40: 119)

[T]he grace of the Spirit that accompanies these bones and dwells with the saints both extends towards others who follow it with faith and flows from mind into body, and from body into clothing, and from clothing into shoes, and from shoes into a person's shadow.<sup>166</sup>

For Chrysostom, the relics of the martyrs radiate grace just as their living bodies had done so; the relics of the martyrs send away demons, just as their living bodies had fought them off by radiating divine light.<sup>167</sup> As Ambrose had affirmed, 'we with opened eyes behold the glory of the Lord, which is passed in the passion of the martyrs, and present in their working',<sup>168</sup> so Chrysostom saw the glory of God working through relics:

Indeed, don't look at the fact that the martyr's body lies before you naked and bereft of animating energy. Rather consider this, that a second power, greater than the soul itself, infuses it – the grace of the Holy Spirit, which, through the miracles it performs, confesses to all about the resurrection.<sup>169</sup>

The miracles effected by the relics of the martyrs were "visible words" that continued the martyr's confession by proclaiming the power of God and the gospel of Christ, 'so that you, the unbeliever, might learn that for martyrs death is not death, but the beginning of a better life and an introduction to a more spiritual society, and a change from a worse to a better situation'.<sup>170</sup>

Like Chrysostom, Augustine also drew attention to the "silent words" of the dead martyrs, preached by relics. In a homily on Protasius and Gervasius he claimed that the martyrs 'have asserted Christ's cause more effectively when dead than when they were alive. They assert it today, they preach him today; their tongues are silent, their deeds echo around the world'.<sup>171</sup> What are these "silent

<sup>166</sup> *Homily After the Remains of Martyrs*, 469 (Mayer & Allen [2000] 87-88); cf. Chrysostom, *On Saint Eustathius*, 4 (Mayer [2006] 54)

<sup>167</sup> *Homily After the Remains of Martyrs*, 470 (Mayer & Allen [2000] 88)

<sup>168</sup> *Letter 22.11 (NPNF 10: 438)*

<sup>169</sup> *Hom. Babylas.*, 2 (Mayer [2003] 143); Gregory of Nyssa, *Hom. Theodore.*, 62.25 (Leemans [2003] 85)

<sup>170</sup> Chrysostom, *Hom. Babylas.*, 2 (Mayer [2003] 142-43); Augustine, *City of God*, 22.9 (Walsh & Honan [1954] 450-51)

<sup>171</sup> *Serm. 286.3 (WSA III/8: 102)*

words” that the dead martyrs preached? The martyrs’ corpses preached the truth of the resurrection:

What, after all, is God doing, when he performs miracles in connection with the bodies of the departed saints, but bearing witness to the truth that what dies does not perish.<sup>172</sup>

The simultaneous role of the martyr, at once a ‘friend of God’ in heaven and an ‘invisible companion’ present among Christian communities, enabled the martyrs and their relics to be seen as intermediaries and intercessors.<sup>173</sup> On account of ‘so much power and friendship with God’, the martyrs were believed to possess ‘much boldness of speech, not just when they were alive, but also now that they are dead’.<sup>174</sup> Thus Gregory of Nyssa described how Theodore was appealed to as a living intercessor, ‘as if he was intact and appearing, they address to the martyr a plea that he would intercede on their behalf, in a way as if they were asking God’s bodyguard for a favour’.<sup>175</sup>

Retaining their living identification as “soldiers of Christ”, martyrs’ corpses became ‘holy protectors’ and ‘spiritual *patroni*’, serving as custodians who guarded and protected the Christian community.<sup>176</sup> So Gregory implored Theodore; ‘as a soldier, fight for us, as a martyr, use your freedom of speech on behalf of your fellow-servants’.<sup>177</sup> The relics of the martyrs were often perceived at a localised level as intermediaries and intercessors associated with a local Christian community. For example, Agnes, the first female saint to be commemorated in Rome, was appealed to as the patron and protector of that city, who was said to guard Rome like a heavenly custodian.<sup>178</sup> Similarly, the martyr

<sup>172</sup> *Serm.* 275.3 (*WSA* III/8: 28)

<sup>173</sup> Brown (1981) 5-6; for the martyr as an ‘invisible friend’ see Gregory of Nyssa, *Hom. Theodore*. (Leemans [2003] 90)

<sup>174</sup> Chrysostom, *Hom. Bernike.*, 24 (Mayer [2006] 175-76)

<sup>175</sup> *Hom. Theodore*. (Leemans [2003] 85)

<sup>176</sup> Brown (1981) 50, 55; for protectors and guardians see Victricius of Rouen, *Praising the Saints*, 6 (G. Clark [1999] 384); for patrons, travel companions, and guides see Paulinus of Nola, *Poems* 12 and 13 (*ACW* 40: 73-76)

<sup>177</sup> *Hom. Theodore*. (Leemans [2003] 90)

<sup>178</sup> Prudentius, *Crowns of Martyrdom*, 14.1-3 (*LCL* 398: 339); cf. Grig (2004) 79-80



Phocas was a local saint of Sinope and a patron saint of sailors;<sup>179</sup> Augustine's sermons have an emphasis on North African martyrs such as Cyprian and Perpetua and Felicitas;<sup>180</sup> Paulinus of Nola's *Poems* praise the protection and patronage of Felix;<sup>181</sup> Chrysostom depicts Julian watching over his brothers and sisters in Antioch;<sup>182</sup> the martyr Gordius is described by Basil as a native and home-grown fruit, and a child born from the city's womb.<sup>183</sup> The concept of a community as the ancestors of a local martyr is summarised by Gregory of Nyssa, 'After all, the fatherland of a martyr is the region where he suffered, where his citizens, yes, his brothers and relatives, buried him and are keeping him and bringing him honour'.<sup>184</sup>

This notion of community identity, patronage, and intimate familial relationship extended beyond locality as the separation and translation of relics enabled an individual martyr to be present as an ancestor and a powerful friend at many different places at any one time.<sup>185</sup> Paulinus observes:

[T]he Lord did not content Himself with allowing the martyrs to bring radiance with their names or assistance only to their own regions. He multiplied the memorials of the saints from these tombs, and in His pity conferred the same martyrs in many regions.<sup>186</sup>

The bones and ashes of the martyrs were scattered throughout the world like 'life-giving seeds'.<sup>187</sup> Divided yet undiminished, reduced yet complete, the translation

<sup>179</sup> Asterius, *A Homily on Phocas*, 5.1, 11.1 (Dehandschutter [2003] 169, 172)

<sup>180</sup> For a collection of many sermons on Cyprian see John E. Rotelle (ed.), trans. Edmund Hill, *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, III/9 (NY: New City Press, 1994); for Perpetua and Felicitas see *Serm.* 280-282 (*WSA* III/8: 72-82)

<sup>181</sup> See especially *Poem* 19 (*ACW* 40: 131)

<sup>182</sup> *Hom. Julian.*, 4 (Mayer [2003] 138)

<sup>183</sup> *Hom. Gordius.*, 2 (Allen [2003] 60); for familial and agricultural imagery in Basil and other fourth century panegyrics see Lisa D. Maugans Driver, 'The Cult of the Martyrs in Asterius of Amaseia's Vision of the Christian City', *CH*, 74:2 (2005) 136-254, at 246-47

<sup>184</sup> *Hom. Theodore.* (Leemans [2003] 90)

<sup>185</sup> Brown (1981) 89

<sup>186</sup> *Poem* 19 (*ACW* 40: 141-42)

<sup>187</sup> *ibid.* (143)

of relics enabled the power of the martyrs to be distributed among many.<sup>188</sup> Described as ‘surplus of supply’,<sup>189</sup> the translation of relics multiplied Christian *loca sancta*, allowing the veneration of local martyrs to extend further to produce new feelings of sacred ancestry and history within communities – such as Constantinople – that lacked their own local martyrs and martyr traditions.<sup>190</sup> While the translation of corporeal relics was the subject of ecclesiastical controversy and legal prohibition,<sup>191</sup> it was a practice accepted and advanced by many Christians, most notably Ambrose of Milan’s famous translation of the relics of Protasius and Gervasius.<sup>192</sup> Forging links between the donating and receiving communities, and intensifying relations by creating a network of mutual relic possession – ‘a symbolic web of patronage’ – the translation of martyr relics strengthened the Church body by uniting its disparate members through the bodies of the martyrs.<sup>193</sup>

Whether housed in a shrine outside the city walls or buried beneath an altar in an urban basilica, the martyr maintained a physical presence within the Christian community so that, even after death, the body of the martyr retained spiritual significance as an object of the Christian gaze. Chrysostom summarises this in a homily on a group of Egyptian martyrs:

My point is that no longer the soul alone, but even the body itself shared in more abundant grace, and not only didn’t throw away what it possessed after it was cut into pieces and often chopped up but also even took on a more abundant and substantial importance.<sup>194</sup>

<sup>188</sup> Victricius, *Praising the Saints*, 9 (G. Clark [1999] 390-91); Chrysostom, *A Homily on the Holy Martyrs*, 2 (Mayer [2003] 121), Paulinus of Nola, *Ep.*, 31 (ACW 36: 132-33)

<sup>189</sup> Chrysostom, *An Encomium on Egyptian Martyrs*, 1 (Mayer [2006] 210)

<sup>190</sup> Paulinus of Nola, *Poem 19* (ACW 40: 142); cf. Wendy Mayer, *St John Chrysostom: The Cult of the Saints*, St Vladimir’s Seminary Press Popular Patristics Series (Crestwood; New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2006) 21-23

<sup>191</sup> Gillian Clark, ‘Translating Relics: Victricius of Rouen and Fourth-century Debate’, *Early Medieval Europe*, 10 (2001) 161-176; David G. Hunter, ‘Vigilantius of Calagurris and Victricius of Rouen: Ascetics, Relics, and Clerics in Late Roman Gaul’, *JECs*, 7:3 (1999) 401-430, esp. 419-29

<sup>192</sup> G. Clark (2001) 168-71

<sup>193</sup> Hunter (1999) 421; cf. G. Clark (2001) 168

<sup>194</sup> *An Encomium on Egyptian Martyrs*, 2 (Mayer [2006] 213)

This is not only the case for the division and translation of martyr relics, but also for the martyred body, whether alive or dead. The body of the martyr was endowed with spiritual significance and filled with divine power and grace that lent it great importance.

By reading the martyrdom narratives without taking the significance of the body into full consideration, one can neither fully appreciate nor explain the centrality of martyrdom in the early Church. The body described the mystical relationship with Christ; it was the medium through which conformity to Christ's death could be realised; it was a Christ-bearing shrine filled with divine power; it blurred the boundaries between heaven and earth, making God's power manifest to the world. Even the dead body retained its importance, as the martyr remained present in relics; a presence attested to by the miracles that they performed. It is to the martyred body that I will now turn.

## CHAPTER 2: Power and Performance

The early Church fathers looked upon the bodies of the martyrs with awe because it was in those weak, mutilated, and disfigured bodies that Christ was made manifest. Transformed through torture, the bodies of the martyrs became Christ-bearing shrines and conduits of divine power that radiated and communicated the immediate presence of God in the world. This chapter focuses on the ways in which the martyrs were believed to communicate with the Christian community through their bodies. While working primarily from the theological foundation of patristic texts, contemporary concepts of performance and body language provide an additional perspective for viewing the significance of patristic interpretations of martyrdom as a theatrical performance staged before a Christian community, and a divine drama enacted beneath the eyes of a celestial community.

### ❖ **The Linguistic Body**

Modern scholarship on the body in the Greco-Roman world draws attention to the theatricality of everyday life and the ubiquity of occasions for performance in that spectator society.<sup>195</sup> Even mundane actions were performed with an assumed audience, as the body was to be seen, actions to be observed. This element of theatricality was especially prominent in the ancient pseudo-science of physiognomy. This practice of reading external appearance to reveal inner character was based on the notion of the correlation and harmony between body

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<sup>195</sup> For example, Erik Gunderson, *Staging Masculinity: The Rhetoric of Performance in the Roman World*, *The Body in Theory: Histories of Cultural Materialism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000); Maud W. Gleason, *Making Men: Sophists and Self-Presentation in Ancient Rome* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); eadem, 'The Semiotics of Gender: Physiognomy and Self-fashioning in the Second Century C.E.', in Halperin et al. (eds.) *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990) 389-415; Gregory S. Aldrete, *Gestures and Acclamations in Ancient Rome*, *Ancient Society and History* (Baltimore; London: John Hopkins University Press, 1999); Anthony Corbeill, *Nature Embodied: Gesture in Ancient Rome* (Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004)

and soul; that ‘the body is a sort of outline of the soul’.<sup>196</sup> In the Greco-Roman world, physical appearance and the act of visual decipherment became fundamental to social communication because, as Maud Gleason observes, this was ‘a world in which the scrutiny of one’s fellow man was not an idle pastime but an essential survival skill’.<sup>197</sup>

A particular preoccupation of physiognomy was the analysis of the male body with regards to gender affirmation or deviance. M. Antonius Polemo, a second century physiognomist and sophist, stated:

[I]n the masculine there is something feminine to be found, and in the feminine something masculine, but the name “masculine” or “feminine” is assigned according to which of the two prevails.<sup>198</sup>

According to this belief in the fluidity of gender, embodied actions were to be read as signs and physiognomy provided a tool for translating those signs.<sup>199</sup> The determination of masculinity required a continual display of virility, an active and outward performance of the prevalence of manliness.<sup>200</sup> For example, the everyday act of walking was an important factor in the construction of gender identity.<sup>201</sup> A manly gait did not betray softness but an erect posture, with firm limbs and joints.<sup>202</sup> Men strived to be the opposite of women, who have ‘soft limbs, and slackened joints, thin sinews, weak voice, a hesitant gait with frequent short steps, and limp limbs that glide slowly along’.<sup>203</sup> While women took frequent short steps, the length of the slow male stride indicated trustworthiness,

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<sup>196</sup> Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, 1.79-91, cited in Dale B. Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (Michigan: Yale University Press, 1995) 18; Ps.-Aristotle, *Physio.*, I.805a, II.806a, IV.808b (*LCL* 307: 85, 93, 105-06)

<sup>197</sup> Gleason (1990) 389

<sup>198</sup> Polemo, *Physiognomy*, 2,1.192F-94F, in Gleason (1990) 390-92

<sup>199</sup> Gleason (1990) 390, 402

<sup>200</sup> Gleason (1995) xxii, 159

<sup>201</sup> Ps.-Aristotle, *Physio.*, VI.813a (*LCL* 307: 131); Gleason (1990) 393

<sup>202</sup> Ps.-Aristotle, *Physio.*, III.807b (*LCL* 307: 101); cf. Polemo’s attack on Favorinus in his *Physiognomy*, in Gleason (1995) 7

<sup>203</sup> Ps.-Aristotle, *Physio.*, III.807a (*LCL* 307: 99); Polemo, *Physiognomy*, 2,1.192-92F, in Gleason (1990) 392

sincerity and success.<sup>204</sup> Masculinity was, as Gleason comments, ‘a language that anatomical males were taught to speak with their bodies’.<sup>205</sup>

Gait was also a powerful indicator of moral character. Ambrose of Milan had once refused to ordain a priest on account of his arrogant gait and another on account of his unseemly gesticulation.<sup>206</sup> As neither of the two men remained loyal to the “orthodox” faith, the inference is that the carriage of the body is communicative of the state of the soul.<sup>207</sup> Gait could also indicate social status, according to the belief that ‘freedom of character follows freedom in the appearance of the body’.<sup>208</sup> A rhythmic, strong gait signified station and confidence in front of superiors, whereas miscarriage of the shoulders suggested servility, receptivity and sexual passivity.<sup>209</sup>

In his analysis of ancient oratory, Erik Gunderson works on the founding premise that ‘the motions of the body and the modulations of the voice serve as their own sort of language, a *sermo corporis*’.<sup>210</sup> Similarly, Maud Gleason affirms that ‘the body, by the way it is used in one’s deportment, may quite literally speak’.<sup>211</sup> This ‘linguistic body’ conveyed meaning through body language, as the body was closely scrutinised as a public object, especially in the context of Roman oratory.<sup>212</sup> This observation of the body was so scrupulous that every part was analysed in order to draw conclusions about gender, and social and

<sup>204</sup> Polemo, *Physiognomics*, 2,1.192-94F, 61,1.276F in Gleason (1990) 392, 395

<sup>205</sup> Gleason (1995) 70

<sup>206</sup> Ivor J. Davidson, ‘Staging the Church? Theology as Theatre’, *JECS*, 8:3 (2000) 413-51, esp. 438; Gleason (1990) 393

<sup>207</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus*, 3.3, in Gillian Clark, ‘The Old Adam: The Fathers and the Unmaking of Masculinity’ in L. Foxhall & J. Salmon (eds.), *Thinking Men: Masculinity and its Self-Representation in the Classical Tradition*, Leicester-Nottingham Studies in Ancient Society, vol. 7 (London; New York: Routledge, 1998) 170-82, at 173

<sup>208</sup> Ps.-Aristotle, *Physio.*, VI.811a (*LCL* 307: 119)

<sup>209</sup> Gleason (1990) 395; for the body as indicator of social status see Ps.-Aristotle, *Physio.*, VI.811a, VI.812b (*LCL* 307: 121, 131); Polemo, *Physiognomics*, 2,1.192-94F, in Gleason (1990) 392; Quintilian, *Inst.Or.*, XI.III.83 (*LCL* 127: 289)

<sup>210</sup> Gunderson (2000) 67

<sup>211</sup> Gleason (1995) xxix

<sup>212</sup> Gunderson (2000) 70

moral character: the eyes,<sup>213</sup> the neck,<sup>214</sup> the head,<sup>215</sup> the hands and the feet.<sup>216</sup> As Cicero had declared, the body could talk through action and gesture.<sup>217</sup> Commenting on this, Quintilian observes, ‘Cicero in one passage speaks of action as being a *form of speech*, and in another as being a *kind of physical eloquence*’.<sup>218</sup> Quintilian accepts this belief, stating that parts of the body, and particularly the hands, ‘may almost be said to speak’.<sup>219</sup> As a result of this, immeasurable trust was placed on the significance of embodied action as a distinct physical language and the power of visual perception to read, decode, and translate that language.<sup>220</sup> One scholar has recently remarked on this concept, perceiving body language in the everyday life of ancient Rome:

It has become a cliché to say that the body “speaks”... [yet] the gestural language displayed on the streets and in the houses of Rome can in fact be shown to belong to a self-consistent language, and to one no less complicated and subject to explanation than the spoken language of Latin.<sup>221</sup>

The communicative potential of the human body was considered to be so great that the body was physically transformed and coerced in an ancient form of eugenics in order to control the messages that it embodied and emitted. Sexual intercourse was approached in a certain frame of mind so as to avoid imposing

<sup>213</sup> Ps.-Aristotle, *Physio.*, III.807a, III.808a, VI.811b, VI.813a (LCL 307: 99, 103, 123, 131); Quintilian, *Inst.Or.*, XI.III.72, XI.III.76-79 (LCL 127: 283-85); Cicero, *De Oratore*, III.lviii.221-222 (LCL 349: 177-79)

<sup>214</sup> Ps.-Aristotle, *Physio.*, III.807a, III.807b (LCL 307: 99, 101); Quintilian, *Inst.Or.*, XI.III.83 (LCL 127: 289)

<sup>215</sup> Ps.-Aristotle, *Physio.*, III.808a (LCL 307: 103); Quintilian, *Inst.Or.*, XI.III.69 (LCL 127: 281)

<sup>216</sup> Ps.-Aristotle, *Physio.*, III.808a (LCL 307: 103); Quintilian, *Inst.Or.*, XI.III.85, XI.III.92-106, XI.III.114, XI.III.124 (LCL 127: 289, 293-301, 309); For the male-right, female-left association see Galen, *De usu.*, 14.6 (May [1996] 636); Gunderson (2000) 78-80; Gleason (1990) 391

<sup>217</sup> Cicero, *De Oratore*, III.lix.222 (LCL 349: 179)

<sup>218</sup> Quintilian, *Inst.Or.*, XI.III.1 (LCL 127: 243)

<sup>219</sup> *ibid.*, XI.III.85 (289)

<sup>220</sup> Frank (2000) 149

<sup>221</sup> Corbeill (2004) 2; cf. Aldrete (1999) 6

negative characteristics on the embryo at the moment of conception;<sup>222</sup> babies were tightly bound to form straight backs, tall growth, small wrists and elbows, while female babies were bound tightly across the chest and more loosely at the hips to produce a body shape appealing to future husbands;<sup>223</sup> right hands were unbound first to produce a right-handed child;<sup>224</sup> arms and legs were stretched and pulled to encourage length, strength and straight growth;<sup>225</sup> heads and noses were routinely pressed to dictate future appearance;<sup>226</sup> boys had their genitals manipulated and massaged, as that part of their anatomy would be on public exhibition at the baths and the gymnasium.<sup>227</sup> This rigorous regimen continued through adolescence and adulthood, as men adopted the roles of both surgeon and patient, metaphorically “operating” on their own bodies in order to reconstruct and transform their identity to conform with the ideals of society.

The above discussion of body language and bodily manipulation has many aspects that are paralleled with, and can be illuminated by, recent sociological and anthropological scholarship.<sup>228</sup> While physiognomy and performance have been influential subjects in the study of early Christianity,<sup>229</sup> of particular significance

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<sup>222</sup> Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Man, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988) 20; Aline Rouselle, trans. Felicia Pheasant, *Porneia: On Desire and the Body in Antiquity* (New York: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1988) 48

<sup>223</sup> Soranus, *Gynecology*, 2.14[83]-2.15[84] (Temkin [1991] 84-87); cf. Ps.-Aristotle, *Physio.*, V.809b (LCL 307: 111)

<sup>224</sup> Soranus, *Gynecology*, 2.42[111] (Temkin [1991] 114-15)

<sup>225</sup> *ibid.*, 2.32[101] (105)

<sup>226</sup> *ibid.*, 2.33[102-03] (106-7)

<sup>227</sup> *ibid.*, 2.34[103] (107-08); Rouselle (1988) 52-53; Gleason (1990) 402-03; Martin (1995) 26-27

<sup>228</sup> For an overview of recent scholarship relevant to this study see Bryan S. Turner, ‘The Body in Western Society: Social Theory and its Perspectives’, and Talal Asad, ‘Remarks on the Anthropology of the Body’, both respectively in Coakley (1997) 15-41, 42-52

<sup>229</sup> For example, Michael Penn, ‘Performing Family: Ritual Kissing and the Construction of Early Christian Kinship’, *J ECS*, 10:2 (2002) 151-74; *idem*, ‘Ritual Kissing, Heresy and the Emergence of Early Christian Orthodoxy’, *J EH*, 54:4 (2003) 625-640; Teresa M. Shaw, ‘*Askesis* and the Appearance of Holiness’, *J ECS*, 6:3 (1998) 485-499; Patricia Cox Miller, ‘Desert Asceticism and ‘The Body from Nowhere’’, *J ECS* 2:2 (1994) 137-153; Frank (2000) 134-170



for this study is the broader understanding of the body as a system of signs, a communicator of meaning, and a bearer of social values.

In her influential book, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology*, Mary Douglas presents the view that the physical body is inseparably linked with the social body.<sup>230</sup> As a microcosm of society, the physical body is both restrained by society and is expressive of social values.<sup>231</sup> Therefore, the body is a medium of communication that transmits social values and conveys information about social structures.<sup>232</sup> Douglas claims that the communicative quality of the body is particularly made manifest in the symbol systems that comprise ritual activity, understanding ritual as a form of communication encoded through systems of symbols.<sup>233</sup> Consequently, Douglas suggests that the degree of control over physical aspects – such as grooming, feeding, sexual intercourse, and hairstyle – provides an indication of the social ideals and constraints that a particular society imposes upon its members, and also the extent to which a certain member might respond with compliance or resistance.<sup>234</sup>

Mary Douglas's research is seminal, but it does stand within different trends of scholarship that focus on the body as a communicative medium. From Charles Darwin's publication of *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* in 1872 through the field of enquiry of "kinesics" in the 1950s, the study of non-verbal communication in the 1960s and the profound influence of Foucault in the 1970s, the expressive and communicative potential of the human body has been a prominent aspect of academic research and popular non-scholarly interest.<sup>235</sup> These developments, combined with the current popularity of the

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<sup>230</sup> Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (London: Barrie & Rockliff, 1973) 101

<sup>231</sup> *ibid.*, 93, 42, 44, 101

<sup>232</sup> *ibid.*, 42, 44

<sup>233</sup> *ibid.*, 39, 41-42, 44

<sup>234</sup> *ibid.*, 16, 93, 102

<sup>235</sup> B. Turner (1997) 17, 42, 44; Jonathan Miller, 'Communication without Words', in D. H. Mellor (ed.), *Ways of Communicating* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990) 113-124; Michael Argyle, 'Non-verbal Communication in Human Social Interaction', in R. A. Hinde (ed.) *Non-Verbal Communication* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972) 243-269; For popular literature see Allan Pease, *Body Language: How to Read Others'*

body as a subject across various disciplines of the social sciences and the humanities, has drawn attention to the ways in which everyday actions, gestures, and performances can be interpreted as forms of communication; that ‘all our actions or deeds speak louder than words, and that everything we do...is open to interpretation and therefore counts as a communication’.<sup>236</sup>

This concept of action as communication is not dissimilar to the ancient assumption employed and manipulated by the physiognomist and the orator, as summarised by Cicero, ‘by action the body talks’ (*est enim actio quasi sermo corporis*).<sup>237</sup> Indeed, these strands of scholarship articulate a basic assumption of late antiquity; that the human body has the power to communicate social values and ideals through symbolic and embodied action. Recent attention to the human body as a bearer of social values and a communicator of meaning urges us to explore how martyrs were seen as paradigmatic figures that embodied, performed, and communicated Christian ideals and beliefs. It can also help us to understand why, in the fourth century, the Church fathers chose to remember martyrdom as a specifically graphic, visual, and corporeal experience focused on the body of the martyr.

#### ❖ A Christian Sign Language

In her discussion of early Christian pilgrimage, Georgia Frank observes the importance of physiognomic principles for the development of a “visual piety”, that is, a climate of religious devotion that held the sense of sight in high esteem. She explains, ‘Just as the physiognomist pierced the surfaces of external appearances to gain insight into the deepest recesses of the soul, so the eye of faith looked through signs to perceive another, more genuine reality’.<sup>238</sup> Frank understands “the eye of faith” as a mode of vision whereby everyday reality and

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*Thoughts by their Gestures, Overcoming Common Problems* (London: Sheldon Press, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. 1997); Warren Lamb & Elizabeth Watson, *Body Code: The Meaning in Movement* (London; Boston: Routledge; Kegan Paul, 1979)

<sup>236</sup> J. Miller (1990) 117

<sup>237</sup> *De Oratore*, III.lix.222 (LCL 349: 179)

<sup>238</sup> Frank (2000) 167

physical objects were perceived with an incisive gaze that pierced through the crude reality of the corporeal in order to discover hidden truth.<sup>239</sup>

This understanding of physical objects as symbols of a higher reality is also observed by Mary Douglas in her discussion of the Eucharist as a Christian ritual that condenses and communicates a wide range of symbolic meaning through the physical object of the host:

The condensation of symbols in the Eucharist is staggering in its range and depth. The white circle of bread encompasses symbolically the cosmos, the whole history of the Church and more...It unites the body of each worshipper to the body of the faithful.<sup>240</sup>

This concept of objects and rituals as communicative of spiritual truth has recently been applied to the period of the earliest Christian communities by Gerd Theissen. Referring to the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist, Theissen states that these 'symbolic actions' comprise a 'ritual sign language' that preserves, renews, and transforms Christian identity. The sacraments 'communicate salvation' and form a '*verbum visibile*', a visible word, that physically communicates the fundamental beliefs of Christianity.<sup>241</sup> Theissen asserts that this sign language was not restricted to the sacraments, but extended to every part of the human body, which communicated through a somatic sign language:

[I]t would be wrong to limit the new ritual sign language to these two rites. Rather, alongside them we find many other non-verbal gestures and actions which have ritual character. Through this sign language important parts of the body take on a semantic quality.<sup>242</sup>

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<sup>239</sup> Frank, 'Taste and See: The Eucharist and the Eyes of Faith in the Fourth Century', *CH*, 70:4 (2001) 619-643

<sup>240</sup> Douglas (1973) 69, 29; for the concept of objects acquiring iconic status by embodying faith and word see Simon Coleman, 'Words as Things: Language, Aesthetics and the Objectification of Protestant Evangelicalism', *Journal of Material Culture*, 1:1 (1996) 107-128

<sup>241</sup> Gerd Theissen, *The Religion of the Earliest Churches: Creating a Symbolic World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999) 121, 135

<sup>242</sup> *ibid.*, 123

The communicative quality of ritual is also evident in other forms of embodied action that employed physical gestures to communicate meaning; for example, the laying on of hands, the washing of feet, the anointing of the head, and the ritual kiss of peace.<sup>243</sup> Here Theissen articulates the earliest Christian communities' attitudes towards the sacraments that later became central assumptions in the Church fathers' understanding of symbolic action in the liturgy of the sacramental mysteries.<sup>244</sup> However, by focusing specifically on the role of the body in this ritual sign language, Theissen draws attention to the power of the body to communicate and transform community identity and belief through embodied action.

In a similar way, Theissen's latter example, the ritual kiss of peace, has been explored by Michael Penn, who reads the ritual kiss alongside "performance theory" in order to highlight the potential of the body to construct community identity, reaffirm group membership, and demarcate boundaries through embodied action.<sup>245</sup> While the theme of fictive kinship was a metaphor drawn from scripture, Penn demonstrates that the performance of the kiss of peace enabled the individual to exist in the lived experience of that metaphor and to 'perform family' through the body.<sup>246</sup> Penn's study is significant in that it stresses the dynamism of performance. Embodied action does not merely express an idea, but constructs, lives, and realises it:

As a metaphor, the very term *performance* changes our vocabulary and shifts our analytic attention. Audience, script, participation, framing – all become central concerns. Performance also stresses dynamism instead of simple expression. Cultural performances do not just reflect an abstract hidden cultural system (they are not simply texts that describe), they also create, reproduce, or challenge that system.<sup>247</sup>

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<sup>243</sup> *ibid.*, 123-24

<sup>244</sup> For bodily movement and orientation in early Christian baptism see Hugh M. Riley, *Christian Initiation*, Studies in Christian Antiquity, 17 (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University Press of America; Consortium Press, 1974); cf. Frank (2001) 619-43

<sup>245</sup> Penn (2002); *idem* (2003)

<sup>246</sup> Penn (2002) 153

<sup>247</sup> *ibid.*

Penn's primary intention of perceiving the ritual kiss of peace as a performance is to reveal and explore the dynamic quality of human action. As Catherine Bell affirms in her discussion of performance in ritual studies, the real value of the 'performance approach' is that it reveals the dynamism of human interaction, wherein social ideals become embodied and experienced through action.<sup>248</sup> Through performance, social values and ideals do not remain static, but are generated, modified and transformed.<sup>249</sup>

Penn's approach to the study of the early Christian ritual kiss of peace is influenced by concepts of performance developed in ritual studies, gender theory, and performance studies.<sup>250</sup> These fields of research perceive a wide variety of human activity as sharing the same basic qualities of performance; ritual, theatre, dance, music, sports, play, social drama, and forms of popular entertainment.<sup>251</sup> This definition has been taken even further with the claim that the presentation of the self in everyday life is a type of performance and that 'the basic stuff of social life is performance'.<sup>252</sup>

By perceiving martyrdom as a type of performance, it is revealed as a dynamic process that evolves and changes with interpretation and context, resulting in the communication, transformation and reformation of Christian identity and ideals.

### ❖ The Body Inscribed

To talk of the martyred body as a communicative medium or of martyrdom as performance does not distort early Christian attitudes towards martyrdom. Rather, it is a way of speaking about martyrdom that corresponds to the early Christian worldview in which life was perceived as being saturated with Christ's presence;

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<sup>248</sup> Bell (1997) 73

<sup>249</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>250</sup> *ibid.*; cf. Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) 72-76, 159-164; Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (London; New York: Routledge, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2003)

<sup>251</sup> Schechner (2003) 296

<sup>252</sup> Victor Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1988) 81

a presence that made itself known through divine revelation. From the moment of the Incarnation, the invisible had become visible and, as a result of this, Christianity placed an emphasis on revelation and the sense of sight. This is evident in the figural quality of Christian discourse,<sup>253</sup> the symbolic interpretation of Scripture,<sup>254</sup> the development of Christian art,<sup>255</sup> the veneration of relics,<sup>256</sup> pilgrimage to view holy sites and witness holy men and women,<sup>257</sup> and the contemplation of icons from the fifth century onwards.<sup>258</sup> Each of these visually intense phenomena serve as a manifestation of a trend of visual piety that stretched from Eucharist to relic to pilgrimage to icon, all of which were visual experiences focused on the observation of an object that served as a conduit of the divine presence. It is within this climate of visual piety that martyrdom should be located, as it was the most intense form of visual experience that embodied and enacted the spiritual ideals of early Christianity.

Martyrdom presented the Christian community with a specifically visual performance in which the martyred body was transformed into a vessel of divine power, physically baring and revealing the divine presence before the eyes of the Christian audience. Central to the performance of martyrdom was the body of the Christian martyr. Christianity had acknowledged the symbolic quality of the body from a very early stage, as is evident from the early Christian art in the funereal context of the catacombs, which often depicted the human body in the symbolic forms of the shepherd and the *orant*. Drawing attention to the artistic symbol

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<sup>253</sup> Averil Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of the Empire*, Sather Classical Lectures, vol. 55 (Berkeley; Los Angeles; Oxford: University of California Press, 1991) esp. 57

<sup>254</sup> Joseph W. Trigg, *Biblical Interpretation*, Messages of the Fathers of the Church, vol. 9 (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1988); cf. Frank (2000) 102, 104

<sup>255</sup> Robin Margaret Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art* (London: Routledge, 2000) esp. 181

<sup>256</sup> Brown (1981)

<sup>257</sup> See Peter Brown, 'The Saint as Exemplar in Late Antiquity', *Representations*, 2 (1983) 1-25; Cynthia Hahn, 'Seeing and Believing: The Construction of Sanctity in Early-Medieval Saints' Shrines', *Speculum*, 72 (1997) 1079; Frank (2000) 104

<sup>258</sup> The Sixth Session of the Seventh Ecumenical Council of Nicaea, 787, 256D-257B (Sahas [1986] 88-89)

system of early Christian art, and particularly to the ubiquity of these two images, Robin Margaret Jensen comments that ‘these simple, usually single images seem less complex but are in many ways more difficult to interpret. They invite viewers to apply their own meanings and values, making precise interpretation impossible’.<sup>259</sup> If early Christian sensibilities had been accustomed to interpreting figurative depictions of human bodies within theological and funereal contexts, is it not reasonable to suggest that the bodies of martyrs could have acquired similar referential qualities as later generations of Christians remembered, depicted and interpreted martyrdom?

Considering that martyrdom was a phenomenon focusing specifically on the body, it is surprising that the concept of “the linguistic body” has not been so influential in modern theological scholarship of martyrdom.<sup>260</sup> Through the performance of martyrdom, the body served as a medium of communication that was particularly appropriate to the message that it transmitted: how Christians should live as members of Christ’s body.

Before turning to the interpretation of martyrdom as performance it would be useful to say a few words about the body as the medium and message of martyrdom. Prudentius’s poetic description of the martyrdom of Eulalia in his *Crowns of Martyrdom* provides an example of how the martyred body was a linguistic body, proclaiming Christ through martyrdom.<sup>261</sup> Some preliminary observations from Michel Foucault will enable appreciation of the significance of Eulalia’s body as the medium and message of her martyrdom.<sup>262</sup>

Recent studies of criminal punishment staged as public executions have drawn attention to the centrality of the human body as the site of punishment, affirming that public torture and capital punishment is essentially a performance

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<sup>259</sup> Jensen (2000) 32

<sup>260</sup> A move in this direction is found in a concluding remark of Perkins (1995) 172: martyred bodies were ‘texts for their neighbours to read as proofs for the reality of another world’; cf. Brent D. Shaw, ‘Body/Power/Identity: Passions of the Martyrs’, *JECS*, 4:3 (1996) 278; Saphinaz-Amal Naguib, ‘The Martyr as Witness. Coptic and Copto-Arabic Hagiographies as Mediators of Religious Memory’, *Numen*, 41:3 (1994) 223-54

<sup>261</sup> Prudentius, *Crowns of Martyrdom*, 3 (*LCL* 398: 143-157)

<sup>262</sup> I would like to thank Mathew Guest for bringing to my attention the significance of Michel Foucault for the study of early Christian martyrdom

in which the authority of the state is acted out and inscribed upon the criminal's body.<sup>263</sup> Most influential of these is Michel Foucault's analysis of the historical shift in penal practice that resulted in the decline of the public spectacle of capital punishment and the rise of the more discrete and less physical corrective of imprisonment. In his book, *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault demonstrates that until the early nineteenth century the human body was the major locus for the physical torture of criminals by capital punishment.<sup>264</sup> Foucault states that the main objective of torture was that 'it must mark the victim: it is intended, either by the scar it leaves on the body, or by the spectacle that accompanies it, to brand the victim with infamy'.<sup>265</sup> Elsewhere he says of the criminal, 'in him, on him, the sentence had to be legible for all'.<sup>266</sup> This concept of the criminal body as the focus of torture and locus of sentence had a specifically communicative function. The public implementation of penalties:

[M]ade the guilty man the herald of his own condemnation. He was given the task, in a sense, of proclaiming it and thus attesting to the truth of what he had been charged with...the condemned man published his crime and the justice that had been meted out to him by bearing them physically on his body.<sup>267</sup>

By carrying placards inscribed with the criminal sentence and displaying physical marks of torture, the condemned body became a text "publishing" the crime, and a preacher "proclaiming" the crime. Ultimately, the act of torture is a confessional performance that reveals, visualises, and affirms the truth of the sentence; 'The function of the public torture and execution was to reveal the truth...A successful

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<sup>263</sup> Elizabeth A. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making*, Gender, Theory and Religion (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004) 40; cf. David Potter, 'Martyrdom as Spectacle', in Ruth Scodel, *Theater and Society in the Classical World* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993) 53-88; Shaw (1996) 300-312

<sup>264</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1991) 7

<sup>265</sup> *ibid.*, 34

<sup>266</sup> *ibid.*, 43

<sup>267</sup> *ibid.*



public execution justified justice, in that it published the truth of the crime on the very body of the man to be executed'.<sup>268</sup>

Although Foucault spoke specifically of the demise of public execution in relation to the birth of the modern prison system, this same concept of bodily inscription is helpful for understanding martyrdom within the context of Roman spectacle entertainment and public execution. The body of the criminal, stripped of identity and placed within the liminal zone of the arena, became a blank canvas upon which political ideology was acted and inscribed in a theatrical display of imperial authority.<sup>269</sup> Although inscriptions upon boards were sometimes carried about to visually display the sentence of the condemned,<sup>270</sup> the physical act of torture was also a form of inscription that was written upon, and carried around by, the body. An example of this is Prudentius's hymn for Eulalia, a young girl who was martyred during the persecution of Diocletian in c.304 C.E. In the following extract Eulalia looks at the incisions that are being scored onto her body and joyfully reads the marks as letters that proclaim the name of Christ:

In a moment two executioners are tearing her slim breast, the claw striking her two girlish sides and cutting to the bone, while Eulalia counts the marks. "See, Lord," she says, "thy name is being written on me. How I love to read these letters, for they record thy victories, O Christ, and the very scarlet of the blood that is drawn speaks the holy name."<sup>271</sup>

In this highly poetic and romanticised account of torture, Eulalia's spoken confession of Christ is continued by a declaration of witness through her body. Eulalia's body is written upon and it speaks, as her flesh is inscribed with Christ's victory over death and her blood declares Christ's name.<sup>272</sup> Through the performance of martyrdom Eulalia's body is branded with a spiritual script that communicates her membership and participation in Christ's cosmic victory. Eulalia's body becomes both the medium and the message of martyrdom. Her

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<sup>268</sup> *ibid.*, 44

<sup>269</sup> Castelli (2004) 108; Potter (1993) 53, 65

<sup>270</sup> For example, Attalus in *M. Lyons*. (Musurillo, 75)

<sup>271</sup> Prudentius, *Crowns of Martyrdom*, 3.130-140 (*LCL* 398: 151)

<sup>272</sup> For the martyred body as inscribed and legible see Jill Ross, 'Dynamic Writing and Martyrs' Bodies in Prudentius' *Peristephanon*', *JECS*, 3 (1995) 325-355; Miller (2000) 223-26

body bears Christ's name, and her death conveys the implications of true discipleship inspired by love of Christ.

Prudentius's description of Eulalia's death provides an insight into how martyrdom was interpreted in the early Church. Eulalia's martyred body was the focus of an extraordinary transformation in which spiritual faith was communicated as though it were physically scored onto the body, rendering the invisible visible. The joyful acceptance of physical torture, expressed by Eulalia's delight, inverted the power system so that the imperial authority and criminal sentence that were intended to be inscribed upon her body were "overwritten" by a spiritual script that declared Christ. This spiritual script, this faith in Christ, motivated and guided Christian men and women to confess Christ; whether through martyrdom in times of persecution, or ethical action in times of peace.

### ❖ Public Spectacles

Roman *spectacula* incorporated a variety of public events such as theatrical performances of tragedies and comedies, public dances, ceremonies, re-enactments of pagan legends, military triumphs, gladiatorial and athletic contests, chariot races, and performances given by mimes, jugglers, acrobats, and dancers.<sup>273</sup> Events were staged as entertainment and spectators were attracted to the exotic, the erotic, and the violent that was put on show.<sup>274</sup> Some performances were enacted in public, drawing audiences to spaces specifically created for the staging of spectacles (such as the circus, the stadium, the theatre, and the amphitheatre), while others were performed through the streets of Rome.<sup>275</sup>

Recent scholarship has drawn attention to the various levels at which Roman spectacle entertainment functioned: as political devices manipulated by

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<sup>273</sup> M. Kueffler, *The Manly Eunuch: Masculinity, Gender Ambiguity, and Christian Ideology in Late Antiquity*, Chicago Series on Sexuality, History, and Society (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001) 210; Castelli (2004) 107

<sup>274</sup> D.G. Kyle, *Spectacles of Death in Ancient Rome* (London; New York: Routledge, 2001) 3

<sup>275</sup> Castelli (2004) 107

emperors to gain the support of the masses;<sup>276</sup> as symbolic demonstrations of political power;<sup>277</sup> as confirmation of social order;<sup>278</sup> as staged sacrificial appeasements of the gods;<sup>279</sup> as deterrents of aberrant behaviour and deviance from social norms.<sup>280</sup> The dramatic events of the arena, Castelli summarises, ‘sought to produce a legible and intelligible narrative that entertained as it inculcated social, political, ethical, and religious values’.<sup>281</sup>

Along these lines of spectacle as entertainment, Kate Coleman draws attention to the elements of theatricality involved in ‘fatal charades’, that is, events that combined the public execution of the condemned with the ritual enactment of mythological role-play.<sup>282</sup> Through these spectacles, the expectations of the audience were shaped in anticipation of set plots, which were performed with a high degree of realism incorporating elaborate props and costumes, ritual and framing.<sup>283</sup> Coleman takes a quote from Tertullian’s *Apology* as her main source and starting point:

But you really are still more religious in the amphitheatre, where over human blood, over the polluting stain of capital punishment, your gods dance, supplying plots and themes for criminals – unless it is that criminals often adopt the roles of your deities. We have seen at one time or another Attis, that god from Pessinus, being castrated, and a man who was being burnt alive had taken on the role of Hercules.<sup>284</sup>

Christian martyrdom is located in this complex of spectacle entertainment and performance.<sup>285</sup> Aesthetic elements of the theatricality of martyrdom are evident as early as the Neronian persecution of Christians following the great fire

<sup>276</sup> Alison Futrell, *Blood in the Arena: The Spectacle of Roman Power* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997) 31

<sup>277</sup> Potter (1993) 65; Futrell (1997) 45

<sup>278</sup> Potter (1993) 53; Futrell (1997) 49, 47, 209-10

<sup>279</sup> Kyle (2001) 7-10, 35-43; Rouselle (1988) 116; Futrell (1997) 7, 205-10; Castelli (2004) 108

<sup>280</sup> Kyle (2001) 53; Futrell (1997) 31, 47

<sup>281</sup> Castelli (2004) 119

<sup>282</sup> K. M. Coleman, ‘Fatal Charades: Roman Executions Staged as Mythological Enactments’, *JRS*, 80 (1990) 44-73; Potter (1993) 66-67

<sup>283</sup> Potter (1993) 53; *M.Perp.*, 18 (Musurillo, 127); Clement of Rome, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 6 (Staniforth [1987] 25)

<sup>284</sup> Tertullian, *Apology* 15.4-5, in Coleman (1990) 60

<sup>285</sup> Castelli (2004) 106

of Rome in 64 C.E. Tacitus records that Nero arrested and convicted a group of Christians in order to eradicate rumours of his own involvement in the fire. The group were mockingly subjected to horrific and graphic torments that were staged as public entertainment in Nero's gardens, while the emperor drove about in a chariot, dressed as a charioteer. Some Christians were sewn into the skins of animals and were torn to pieces by dogs, some were nailed to crosses, and others were doused with flammable liquids and set on fire to serve as torches to illuminate the night.<sup>286</sup> These forms of punishment were spectacular, and the condemnation to live cremation reflected the original accusation of arson, lending a distinct quality of theatricality to the event.<sup>287</sup>

Although spectacular entertainments of death were mostly taken for granted by Roman society as part of everyday life, the Church fathers exposed the spectacles with polemical condemnation.<sup>288</sup> The second century apologists Athenagoras and Theophilus condemned Roman spectacles, on the understanding that vision implicates the spectator, turning the spectator into an accomplice. Athenagoras explains, 'We, deeming that to see a man put to death is much the same as killing him, have abjured such spectacles',<sup>289</sup> and Theophilus affirms, 'we are forbidden even to witness gladiatorial shows lest we should become participants and accomplices in murder'.<sup>290</sup>

This notion of spectatorship as implication is the underlying principle for the condemnation of the Roman games in the fourth century. Augustine describes Roman spectacle entertainment as a 'consuming addiction' that eats away at the soul of the spectator.<sup>291</sup> Spectatorship could easily turn into habit, as is illustrated by an event that Augustine records in his *Confessions*. Augustine describes how his friend, Alypius, was drawn into the gladiatorial games:

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<sup>286</sup> Tacitus, *Annals*, xv.44.2-8 (Stevenson [1999] 2)

<sup>287</sup> For punishment reflecting accusation see Kyle (2001) 54; Potter (1993) 67

<sup>288</sup> For example, Tertullian, *Spectacles* (FC 40: 47-107); Chrysostom, *Against the Games and Theatres* (Mayer & Allen [2000] 119-125)

<sup>289</sup> Athenagoras, *Legatio pro Christianis*, 35.1, in Castelli (2004) 112

<sup>290</sup> Theophilus, *Ad Autolyicum*, 3.15, in Castelli (2004) 112

<sup>291</sup> Augustine, *Serm.* 313A.3 (*WSA* III/9: 92)

[A]n incident in the fight drew such a great roar from the crowd, and this thrilled him so deeply that he could not contain his curiosity ... So he opened his eyes, and his soul was stabbed with a wound more deadly than any which the gladiator, whom he was so anxious to see, had received in his body.<sup>292</sup>

The climax of this passage is the opening of Alypius's eyes because it was at that moment that his soul became exposed to the penetrating wound received from the vision upon which he gazed. Even after viewing the games, Alypius's soul remained a slave in bondage to the vision with which it had connected, and 'he carried away with him a diseased mind'.<sup>293</sup> Influenced by this incident, Augustine condemned the games and theatres, drawing attention to the moral effect that objects of vision have upon their spectators. In a sermon delivered in 401 C.E., Augustine warns, 'I would be very surprised if some of the disreputability of the person you're crazy about didn't brush off on you'.<sup>294</sup>

Augustine was not alone in his denunciation of Roman spectacle entertainment or in his emphasis on the effect that it has upon the audience.<sup>295</sup> In 399 C.E. Chrysostom also cautioned his congregation on how spectatorship at the games and the theatre brings about bondage of the soul, 'you observe your own soul being swept away, a prisoner to passions'.<sup>296</sup> Chrysostom declared that, if a man cannot even look at a woman without his heart inflaming with desire, then nobody will be strong enough to return from the games or the theatre without a similar ignition of desire.<sup>297</sup> For Chrysostom, as for Augustine, to attend and watch the spectacles is to take in the object of vision and carry it about in the mind, polluting the body and soul with its presence, even long after the vision had been observed.<sup>298</sup> The mental penetration of these images defiles the individual, who becomes afflicted with 'leprosy of the soul' and a mind bubbling with ulcers

<sup>292</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, 6.8 (Pine-Coffin [1961] 122)

<sup>293</sup> *ibid.*, 6.8 (123)

<sup>294</sup> Augustine, *Serm.* 313A.3 (*WSA* III/9: 92)

<sup>295</sup> For an earlier North African example see Tertullian, *Spectacles*, 8.10, 13.5, 15.1-8, 17 (*FC* 40: 69-70, 81-84, 86-89); cf. Markus (1990) 102, 107-123

<sup>296</sup> Chrysostom, *Against the Games and Theatres*, 265 (Mayer & Allen [2000] 120)

<sup>297</sup> *ibid.*, 266 (121)

<sup>298</sup> *ibid.*, 266, 267 (121-22)

and wounds.<sup>299</sup> Chrysostom considers this disease to be so extreme that he refuses to teach or administer the sacraments to anyone in such a state, as their presence would infect the Christian flock.<sup>300</sup> Consequently, Chrysostom fervently threatens that those who attend the games and the theatre – like those who had earlier offered sacrifice in denial of Christ – would be chopped off from the body of Christ.<sup>301</sup> These would receive the most severe punishment; ‘if you continue on the same course, I will make the knife sharper, and the cut deeper, and I will not stop until I have scattered to the winds the theatre of the devil, and made pure the assembly of the Church’.<sup>302</sup>

Yet it was precisely this understanding of the power of vision and the connection made between spectacle and spectator that was positively emphasised by the Church fathers in their memory of martyrdom. The Christian spectacle of martyrdom enabled spectators to identify with, and carry around, the faith and love of Christ embodied in the image of the martyr. Remembering martyrdom during times of peace, the fathers developed a way of appropriating the Roman spectacles by immortalising martyrdom as a sacred performance of cosmic significance.<sup>303</sup> This simultaneous rejection of Roman spectacle and praise of Christian spectacle formed the paradoxical rhetoric of the ‘Christian counterspectacle’ of martyrdom.<sup>304</sup>

Just as Roman spectacle entertainment presented the audience with a physical competition that evoked emotion, so the counterspectacle of martyrdom offered a spiritualised version to the Christian congregation. Augustine describes this notion of counterspectacle in a sermon preached in Carthage on Cyprian’s birthday:

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<sup>299</sup> *ibid.*, 268 (124)

<sup>300</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>301</sup> *ibid.* 269 (124); Chrysostom, *On Ephesians Homily 11*, 225B, 225D (Mayer & Allen [2000] 70-71); cf. Origen, *Exhort. Mart.*, 10 (Greer [1979] 47-48); Tertullian, *Flight.*, 10.2 (FC 40: 296); Cyprian, *De Lapsis*, 4, 14, 15, 24-26, 35 (ANCL 8: 353, 361-62, 367-69, 374-376)

<sup>302</sup> Chrysostom, *On the Theatre*, 1.8.3, quoted in Retzleff (2003) 202; cf. Chrysostom, *Against the Games and Theatres*, 267 (Mayer & Allen [2000] 123)

<sup>303</sup> Castelli (2004) 35-36; Kyle (2001) 243

<sup>304</sup> Castelli (2004) 106

What evils vulgar, shameless curiosity is the cause of, the lust of the eyes, the avid craving for frivolous shows and spectacles, the madness of the stadiums, the fighting of contests for no reward!...change your consuming addiction to shows and spectacles; the Church is offering your mind more honest and venerable spectacles. Just now the passion of the blessed Cyprian was being read. We were listening with our ears, observing it all with our minds; we could see him competing, somehow or other we felt afraid for him in his deadly peril, but we were hoping God would help him.<sup>305</sup>

This polemical attack on the Roman spectacles that were drawing in members of Augustine's congregation provides an insightful perspective on martyrdom as spectacle. The reading of Cyprian's *passio* during the mass is described not only in aural terms, but also with visual metaphor. The reading of the *passio* forms a mental picture of the event in the listeners' minds, evoking feelings associated with spectatorship. By reading – and listening to – the *passio*, martyrdom was re-created as a visual spectacle before the eyes of Augustine's congregation: 'When the gospel was read, our eyes were presented with a cruel spectacle'.<sup>306</sup>

Augustine affirmed the central importance of visualising the martyr's *passio*. Failure to form a mental image of the martyrdom event implies mental distraction or spiritual failure, whereas right listening evokes a mental image that is pleasing to the soul; 'That is why you people gaze on with pleasure when the accounts of such things are read in Church. After all, if you didn't form some sort of picture of what happened, it would mean you weren't listening at all'.<sup>307</sup>

Elizabeth Castelli affirms that 'the memory of martyrdom...is a matter that privileges vision, but the vision is conjured through words and resides on a spiritual plane'.<sup>308</sup> Augustine effectively urges his congregation to re-create the martyrdom as a spiritual spectacle within the mind, transforming the acoustic into the visual; the spoken words into mental images. By listening to the *passio* in this active and engaged way, the martyrdom event could be imprinted upon the mind like an image impressed upon a wax tablet, thus creating an even more vivid and

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<sup>305</sup> Augustine, *Serm.* 313A.3 (*WSA* III/9: 92)

<sup>306</sup> *Serm.* 307.1 (*WSA* III/9: 47)

<sup>307</sup> *Serm.* 51.2 (*WSA* III/3: 20)

<sup>308</sup> Castelli (2004) 105

powerful memory of martyrdom that could be “kept before the eyes” at all times.<sup>309</sup>

Augustine develops the idea of forming a mental image of martyrdom as a performance in the mind by distinguishing between two different modes of vision that affect the ways in which martyrdom is perceived and received:

The materially-minded look on, and think how wretched and unfortunate those martyrs are, thrown to wild beasts, beheaded, burned with fire, and they are filled with detestation and horror. Others, however, look on, as do the holy angels also, and don’t fix their attention on the mangling of bodies, but instead marvel at the completeness of faith.<sup>310</sup>

By placing Christian and pagan spectators of persecution in antithetical opposition, Augustine demonstrates how the faithful should look upon the persecuted body.<sup>311</sup> While pagan spectators focus their fleshly eyes on the mangled and bloodied bodies, the Christian eyes of faith look both *at* the martyred body and *beyond* it, seeing a further truth that is hidden from fleshly eyes.<sup>312</sup> As Augustine explains:

They [the original, hostile spectators of the martyrdom event] saw with the eyes of the flesh that wherewith they might assuage the lust of their hearts; we with the eyes of our heart see that which was hidden from them that they might not see it...we with the strong gaze of faith do behold them crowned.<sup>313</sup>

The martyred body is here represented as having a symbolic quality with referential value. It is only with the strong gaze of faith, an angelic mode of vision, that Christian spectators can recognise the iconic nature of the martyred body and perceive the heavenly truth that is revealed through its suffering. When martyrdom is perceived with this mode of vision, physical torture is no longer seen to be vulgar and shameless, but a pure performance and a holy revelation, ‘A

<sup>309</sup> For this model of memory see Mary J. Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) esp. 21-23

<sup>310</sup> Augustine, *Serm.* 51.2 (*WSA* III/3: 20); cf. Castelli (2004) 105

<sup>311</sup> Grig (2004) esp. 45

<sup>312</sup> Castelli (2004) 105

<sup>313</sup> Augustine, *Serm.* 280 (*WSA* III/8: 50)



splendid spectacle offered to the eyes of the mind is a spirit whole and unbroken while the body is torn to pieces'.<sup>314</sup> The spectacle of martyrdom, claimed as the rightful possession of the Church, is medicine for the soul. While Roman spectacles infect and corrupt the mind with disease, Christian spectacles of martyrdom heal the minds of Christians on account of the virtue of the martyrs:

[D]o you want to know, in a word, what the difference is between our shows and spectacles and those of the theatres? We, to the extent that we are of sound and healthy mind, would love to imitate the martyrs whose contests we are watching...Decent spectator, when you are watching a show in the theatre, you're off your head if you have the audacity to imitate the performer you love.<sup>315</sup>

By directing their vision towards the spectacle of martyrdom, Christians developed a bond with the martyrs, as the martyr was taken into the mind, lay present in every thought, and ignited a pure and holy passion to imitate the martyr's words and actions.<sup>316</sup> For this reason Christians were encouraged to redirect their vision towards the 'simple spiritual theatre' of martyrdom,<sup>317</sup> which presented the audience with righteous actors performing 'a strange and terrifying spectacle'.<sup>318</sup>

The reading of the martyr's passion effectively collapsed time, re-creating the spectacle of death within the mind of the Christian individual, and making the martyr immediately present to the observing congregation.<sup>319</sup> By commemorating the martyrs at *martyria*, the performance of martyrdom was dislocated from being a historical event performed at a given moment in time, and relocated as a performance that transcends time and place as it is re-enacted in the minds of individual Christians. Chrysostom preached to his congregation at Antioch on one such occasion:

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<sup>314</sup> Augustine, *Serm.* 51.2 (*WSA* III/3: 20)

<sup>315</sup> Augustine, *Serm.* 313A.3 (*WSA* III/9: 92)

<sup>316</sup> Augustine, *Serm.* 328.8 (*WSA* III/9: 180)

<sup>317</sup> Chrysostom, *Against the Games and Theatres*, 264 (Mayer & Allen [2000] 119)

<sup>318</sup> Chrysostom, *A Homily on Martyrs*, 664-65 (Mayer & Allen [2000] 97)

<sup>319</sup> Brown (1981) 81-82

You have come to see people lacerated, covered in blood, decorated with a row of wounds; people who have shed the present life and are clinging to life in the future...you've come to view courage of soul, and strength of mind, and a new and wonderful trophy, and an unusual fight, and wounds and battles, and an all-round contest involving a human being.<sup>320</sup>

Chrysostom's congregation had gathered at the *martyrium* in the physical presence of the martyrs' relics, but they did not see lifeless bones and cold sarcophagi, they were encouraged to visualise the martyrs as living people fighting for God.

In a similar way Gregory of Nyssa describes martyrdom as an enduring performance that is not bound by time or place. In a homily delivered in 376/8 C.E. Gregory described the martyrdom of the forty soldiers at Sebaste as though it were a verbal recreation of the martyrdom performance:

[L]et us then narrate everything about the martyrs step by step, in a way that brings their contest under your eyes on this very stage.<sup>321</sup>

In this way, the martyr's tomb becomes a stage upon which the performance of martyrdom is recreated scene by scene for the audience to view in cinematic fashion.<sup>322</sup> The depiction of martyrdom as a performance in the theatre of the *martyrium* conjures the presence of the martyrs and enables immediate access to the performance of their deaths for future generations of Christians. This is evident in one of Augustine's homilies preached in commemoration of the martyr Cyprian and delivered at "the table of Cyprian", a construction built on the site where Cyprian had been martyred:

How many of the persecutors, who saw the blessed Cyprian shed his blood, saw him kneel down, offer his neck to the sword, saw it *here*, watched it *here*, exulted *here* at such a spectacle, *here, here* heaped abuse upon him as he died; how many of them, which I have no doubt about, later came to believe!<sup>323</sup>

<sup>320</sup> *ibid.* (96-97)

<sup>321</sup> Gregory, *Homily 1b on the Forty Martyrs*, 145.5 (Leemans [2003] 98)

<sup>322</sup> Driver (2005) 249

<sup>323</sup> Augustine, *Serm.* 313B.4 (*WSA* III/9: 99), emphasis added; cf. Brown (1981) 86; For the localisation of holiness see Markus (1994) 257-271

Augustine's emphasis on the physical location of the *martyrium* as the stage upon which the martyrdom took place, combined with the repeated use of the word *hic* (suggesting Augustine's use of emphatic points and gestures to indicate place) serves as a performance in itself, forcefully conveying a sense of intimacy and continued presence that would have been associated with the martyr as a local *patronus*. Augustine draws a spatial link to emphasise that the Christian community commemorates Cyprian's life and death upon the very stage of the martyrdom event.<sup>324</sup>

This homily, delivered following the reading of Cyprian's *passio*, not only collapsed time to evoke a sense of the tangibility and immediacy of the holy presence, but also relocated the arena of the performance of martyrdom within the mind of the Christian individual. Through his words and gestures, Augustine encouraged his audience to visualise the martyrdom as though it were taking place, creating a virtual 'theatre of the mind' in which Cyprian stood at centre stage.<sup>325</sup> By attentively listening to the words of the *passio* and forming a mental image of the performance of martyrdom, the spectator becomes a participant, entering into the drama as an eyewitness of the martyrdom event.<sup>326</sup>

### ❖ Celestial Dramas

The discussion of martyrdom as performance is not intended to impose any element of fiction, superficiality, or insincerity. The Christian counterspectacle of martyrdom was never simply an empty form of rhetoric intended to promote the Christian Church as an exciting equivalent of the emotions experienced at Roman spectacle entertainments.<sup>327</sup> Rather, the interpretation of martyrdom as performance exposes the faith that provoked Christians to confess Christ: a faith expressed in the interpretation of martyrdom as a celestial drama.

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<sup>324</sup> Markus (1994) 271

<sup>325</sup> This term has been taken from Miller (2000) 217

<sup>326</sup> Frank (2000) 106-07

<sup>327</sup> Although, see Alexandra Retzleff, 'John Chrysostom's Sex Aquarium: Aquatic Metaphors for Theatre in *Homily 7 on Matthew*', *JECS*, 11:2 (2003) 195; cf. Driver (2005) 236-254

It has been noted previously in this study that martyrdom was interpreted as extending beyond the realm of social experience. The divine gave martyrdom its meaning, as the martyr was inspired by love, transformed into a Christ-bearing shrine, served as a conduit of divine power, and fought as a soldier of Christ in a cosmic battle between good and evil. The suffering of persecution was part of a divine drama in which the Devil was the protagonist, tempting the Christian individual beneath the watchful eyes of God. This performance only had value and meaning insofar as there was belief in God's 'unsleeping eye that is present everywhere and sees everything'.<sup>328</sup> It was this divine spectatorship that Minucius Felix referred to in his *Octavius*, 'How beautiful is the spectacle to God when a Christian does battle with pain',<sup>329</sup> and which led Gregory of Nyssa to appeal to Psalm 115:6, 'in the eyes of the Lord the death of His saints is precious'.<sup>330</sup> It was also with this belief in mind that Origen depicts martyrdom as a celestial performance in which Christian athletes compete against the devil beneath the eyes of a heavenly audience:

A great theatre is filled with spectators to watch your contests and your summons to martyrdom, just as if we were to speak of a great crowd gathered to watch the contests of athletes supposed to be champions...the whole world and all the angels of the right and the left...either the angels in heaven will cheer us on...or, may it not happen, the powers from below, which rejoice in evil, will cheer.<sup>331</sup>

Even when Christians suffered death in prison rather than under the public eye, that death was still considered to be martyrdom and was also described with elements of the spectacular, as the confession had taken place beneath the eyes of God. In the midst of the Decian persecutions of the mid-third century, Cyprian advised his congregation:

You should pay special care and solicitude also to the bodies of all those who, without being tortured, nevertheless die in prison, departing this life in glory...A man who, under the eyes of God, has offered himself to

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<sup>328</sup> Chrysostom, *Hom. Pelagia.*, 2 (Mayer [2003] 156); cf. idem, *Homily on Saints Juveninus and Maximinus*, 80 (Mayer [2006] 98); cf. Leyerle (1993) 171

<sup>329</sup> *Octavius*, 37.1, cited in Castelli (2004) 120

<sup>330</sup> *Hom. Theodore.* (Leemans [2003] 85)

<sup>331</sup> *Exhort. Mart.*, 18 (Greer [1979] 53-54)

torture and to death, has in fact suffered whatever he was willing to suffer.<sup>332</sup>

While Origen and Cyprian interpreted martyrdom as a cosmic battle during persecutions of the mid-third century, the fourth century homilies of the Cappadocian fathers display a similar interpretation during times of relative peace. In 373 C.E. Basil referred to martyrdom as ‘that great and competitive spectacle, which was wondrous both for angels and all creation, painful for the Devil, and terrifying for demons’.<sup>333</sup> Likewise, in 376/8 C.E. Gregory of Nyssa described martyrdom as a performance that is ‘beautiful to the angels, beautiful to the powers above the world but hateful to the demons and those who clung to the demons’ interests’.<sup>334</sup> For Gregory, martyrdom is ‘a wrestling-match between the Devil and men’, observed by the angels in heaven, who cheered on the martyrs and applauded their victories.<sup>335</sup>

This concept of martyrdom as a performance before God lent martyrdom a higher level of meaning associated with future judgement. Christ is a divine judge, observing the spectacle of martyrdom and recording the results of the athletic battles with a view to future judgement. Those who confess Christ would be confessed *by* Christ at the final judgement.<sup>336</sup> This belief transfers the locus of authority and the direction of action away from the earthly judge of the battle and towards the heavenly judge of souls.

The belief in God’s watchful eye also lent martyrdom a sense of sacredness, as the martyr was honoured with the grace of martyrdom and the attention of the divine: ‘it is a great sublimity before the face of the Lord, and under the gaze of Christ, to contemn without a shudder the torments inflicted by human power’.<sup>337</sup> Martyrdom is a drama organised by God, a performance enacted beneath the eyes of God, and an offering directed towards the eyes of

<sup>332</sup> *Ep.*, 12.1.2-3 in Castelli (2004) 40

<sup>333</sup> *Hom. Gordius.*, 6 (Allen [2003] 64)

<sup>334</sup> *Homily Ib on the Forty Martyrs*, 148.6 (Leemans [2003] 101)

<sup>335</sup> *ibid.*, 149.22 (102)

<sup>336</sup> For example, Tertullian, *On Idolatry*, 13 (*ANF* 3, 69); Augustine, *Serm.* 306B.7 (*WSA* III/9: 34); Augustine, *En.Ps.*, 141.4 (*WSA* III/20: 329-30); Basil, *Hom. Gordius.*, 7 (Allen [2003] 65-66)

<sup>337</sup> Ps.-Cyprian, *On the Glory of Martyrdom*, 12 (*ANF* 5: 582)

God. As Origen exhorts, 'Let us, then, glorify God, exalting Him by our own death, since the martyr will glorify God by His own death'.<sup>338</sup>

For Origen and Cyprian, Basil and Gregory, martyrdom is interpreted on an earthly level as a theatrical performance, but it also has a higher level of signification that is expressed as a celestial drama. In this cosmic framework of evil/good, present/future, earth/heaven, death/life, the tortured body functions as a living icon, directing the eye beyond itself and towards a greater truth. When the eyes of faith focus upon the physical destruction of the tortured body, they see a holy performance that expresses the martyr's love for God and God's love for humankind.

#### ❖ Preaching by Performance

In his book, *City of God*, Augustine describes the martyrs preaching the gospel through their bodies in continuation of the missionary activity of the apostles:

[T]he gospel was preached throughout the whole world, not only by those who had seen and heard Christ both before His passion and after His resurrection, but also after their death, by their successors, in the midst of terrible persecutions and many tortures and the deaths of the martyrs. And God bore witness by signs and manifestations and diverse acts of power and by gifts of the Holy Spirit, so that the peoples of the Gentiles, believing in Him Who was crucified for their redemption, might venerate with Christian love the blood of the martyrs which they shed in their devilish fury.<sup>339</sup>

The depiction of the Christian martyrs preaching Christ through their bodies is repeatedly asserted in fourth century interpretations of martyrdom as performance. This chapter has discussed how the Church fathers described the martyred body as a figure at the centre stage of a theatrical performance. This element of the spectacular transformed the martyred body into a medium for the communication of the Christian message. The final sections of this chapter will explore how the performance of martyrdom was perceived to have a didactic and edificatory

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<sup>338</sup> *Exhort. Mart.*, 50 (Greer [1979] 79)

<sup>339</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, 18.50 (Dyson [1998] 897-98)

function, as the martyr communicated the Christian message with a form of bodily preaching, proclaiming a *sermo corporis*.

In her discussion of the figural and performative quality of early Christian discourse, Averil Cameron establishes a context that is valuable for understanding the environment in which Christian martyrdom took place:

Roman imperial culture, especially in the cities of the Greek East, in the second century, a crucial time for the incipient Christian faith, had become in political terms a spectator culture...Showing, performance, and affirmation became as important as argument.<sup>340</sup>

It was within this context of demonstration as alternative to verbal argument that early Christian martyrdom was located. Based on the revelation of truth, Christian discourse was deeply embedded in this idea of “showing” rather than “telling”. This is evident in the extensive use of figurative language – metaphor, visions, parables, and miracles – linking the verbal and the visual to express and reveal truths that often could not be expressed by words alone.<sup>341</sup> The Christian dependence on revelation as a source of truth resulted in an emphasis on signs and symbols rather than simply the rational argument that dominated philosophy.<sup>342</sup> Cameron continues:

Accounts of martyrdom lent themselves perfectly to this mode; the martyr and his death become at once the enactment and the symbol of Christian perfection...death is given a meaning and made a part of the whole mystery of Christian dispensation, in which things are no longer as they seem on the surface.<sup>343</sup>

According to this understanding, martyrdom is a mystery that reveals truth at various levels through the symbolic quality of visual performance. The martyred body is seen within a complex of revelation and symbolism, and the performance of martyrdom is understood as the embodiment and revelation of the Christian faith.

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<sup>340</sup> Cameron (1991) 78-79

<sup>341</sup> *ibid.*, 57

<sup>342</sup> *ibid.*, 48

<sup>343</sup> *ibid.*, 51

That the performance of martyrdom was interpreted as having a higher referential value is evident in *The Martyrdom of Ss. Perpetua and Felicitas*. Framed by an anonymous editor, the martyrdom event is presented as a testimony to God's grace and continued involvement in the world.<sup>344</sup> The editor of the text asserts that the preservation of the account has the additional benefit of teaching the Christian community, who are urged, 'read these new deeds of heroism...For these new manifestations of virtue will bear witness to one and the same Spirit who still operates'.<sup>345</sup> This illustrates that, at the beginning of the third century, martyrdom narratives were already being understood and interpreted as revealing hidden truths, instructing the faithful, and communicating the presence of the holy through the martyred body.

Fifty years after the martyrdom of Perpetua, also in Carthage, Cyprian's mid-third century epistles to the confessors portray martyrdom as a holy and illuminating type of death.<sup>346</sup> Cyprian places martyrdom within a tradition of *mimesis*, as the martyr provides an example for the confessor to imitate, who, in turn, provides an example for other Christians during persecution:

I not only beseech but exhort the rest of you, that you all should follow that martyr now most blessed, and the other partners of that engagement...and that you may confirm, by the provocation of your example, the steadfastness of others who stand also.<sup>347</sup>

Cyprian's use of martyrdom as an instrument for instruction that urges imitation is acknowledged in a letter sent in reply from the confessors.<sup>348</sup> In this letter the confessors refer to Cyprian's description of the martyrs in visual terms. The words of Cyprian's letter are said to have verbally painted an image of the martyrs upon which the confessors were able to contemplate and find encouragement for their own ordeals:

[W]e have received great joy, great comfort, great refreshment, especially in that you have described, with glorious and deserved praises, the

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<sup>344</sup> *M.Perp.*, 1 (Musurillo, 107)

<sup>345</sup> *ibid.*, 21 (131)

<sup>346</sup> *Ep.*, 6.3, 8, 10.1, 15.4 (*ANCL* 8: 24, 33, 41, 54)

<sup>347</sup> *Ep.*, 8 (*ANCL* 8: 36)

<sup>348</sup> *Ep.*, 25 (*ANCL* 8: 70-76)



glorious, I will not say, deaths, but immortalities of martyrs...from your letter, we saw those glorious triumphs of the martyrs; and with our eyes in some sort have followed them as they went to heaven, and have contemplated them seated among angels, and the powers and dominions of heaven...It is this, then, which also raises our spirit day by day, and inflames us to the following of the track of such dignity.<sup>349</sup>

This interpretation of martyrdom as a form of edification towards imitation rose to even greater prominence in the martyr panegyrics of the fourth century, following the peace of the Church granted by Constantine with the Edict of Milan in 313 C.E. One of the most acute examples of this is found in John Chrysostom's interpretation of martyrdom in his homilies on the martyrs. In one particular homily delivered in Antioch in the last decade of the fourth century, Chrysostom declares:

[E]ven when silent, martyrs are louder in volume than we when we speak, when time after time many have preached to many others on the topic of virtue, they have achieved nothing; yet others, though silent, have achieved major successes through the splendour of their life. Consequently the martyrs have effected this to a greater degree, uttering voice not with their tongue, but with their deeds – a voice far superior to that which comes from the mouth. Through it they preach to humankind's whole nature.<sup>350</sup>

Here Chrysostom presents the view that people who lead virtuous lives effectively preach Christian virtue through their actions rather than their words, showing rather than telling. Of such people, Chrysostom claims, the martyrs achieve this to the greatest degree, as they preach the ideal Christian lifestyle through the performance of martyrdom. Chrysostom juxtaposes the faith of the martyr with the verbosity of philosophical reasoning. Just as Chrysostom had used theatrical metaphors to oppose the theatre, here he applies rhetorical flourish to oppose rhetoric. Using rhetorical eloquence to oppose the rhetoric of philosophy, Chrysostom depicts the martyrs as supreme philosophers: the martyrs' silent examples are much more effective in encouraging virtue than the verbal arguments of philosophers. The martyrs do not only speak, but they 'preach', thus conveying connotations of proclamation, sermonising, and moral

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<sup>349</sup> *ibid.* (72)

<sup>350</sup> *A Homily on the Holy Martyrs*, 1 (Mayer [2003] 119)

instruction. Furthermore, the martyr's actions constitute a nonverbal form of instruction that is uninhibited by the barriers that affect verbal communication; for example, different languages, varying dialects, and educational background. This visual, kinesic form of communication enables the martyrs to speak to 'humankind's whole nature', that is, not only those who have had the privilege of a classical education. Elaborating on how martyrdom can be seen as a form of ethical instruction, Chrysostom explains:

If I say that torture is associated with nothing burdensome, I'm not convincing when I say it. After all, there's nothing more irksome in offering philosophy like this in theory. But, when the martyrs give voice through their actions, no one can contradict them.<sup>351</sup>

He continues to illustrate this through a simile drawn from everyday life:

Indeed it's the same as occurs inside the public baths, when the pool of hot water is bubbling away, and no one is confident about getting in. For as long as people sitting on the edge encourage each other with words, they rather convince no one. Yet when just one of them either sticks in a hand, or lowers a foot and then confidently dips in their entire body, in silence it is they who persuade those sitting up above to venture into the pool rather than the people who had a lot to say. It's the same way too with the martyrs. After all, in this case the fire lies in front of them instead of the pool of water [...] when one of the martyrs lowers down not just a foot or a hand, but dips in their entire body, through their action they provide a proof more powerful than any counsel or advice, and banish the fear of those surrounding them.<sup>352</sup>

Distinguishing between philosophical theory and exemplary action, Chrysostom argues that verbal attempts to encourage action are futile, and that exemplary action is more effective in convincing others to perform certain acts or to adopt certain behaviour. In order to encourage others to perform extreme actions such as martyrdom demands a greater and more powerful form of preaching. By actually doing what is required, the martyrs prove that such actions are possible, banishing all fear, and encouraging imitation. The martyr's body is the instrument by which the lesson is silently communicated; the martyr's body speaks, preaches, instructs, utters words, and gives proof more powerful than

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<sup>351</sup> *ibid.*, 2 (119)

<sup>352</sup> *ibid.* (119-20)

argument. Consequently, one is presented with a homily within a homily. While preaching on the martyrs, Chrysostom's words bring about a visual image of the martyrs preaching a *sermo corporis* through the performance of martyrdom.

Chrysostom was not alone in his depiction of the martyrs as ethical teachers and moral instructors. One of his contemporaries, Asterius of Amasea, also affirmed that 'the commemoration of the saints is good and useful, especially for those who strive for what is noble'.<sup>353</sup> Asterius presents Christianity as the true philosophy, and the martyrs as philosophers. Rather than employing verbal instruction, the martyrs' actions constitute an effective and persuasive language of the body, instructing with the rhetoric of performance. The encomia of the martyrs, therefore, are not simply concerned with commemoration, but they also impart practical advice and moral instruction. Asterius develops this idea in a homily on the martyr Phocas, delivered in Amasea c.400 C.E:

Those who long for virtue and true religion are not only taught by words but also have in front of them, as visible lessons, the deeds of people who lived in a just way [...] Theoretical education is a lesser and weaker teacher than real action; in the measure that sight is said to be more accurate than hearing, action can prevail over the word [...] So we as disciples of the martyrs take the deeds of these valiant people as our confession and learn to preserve the true religion even in extreme danger; and therefore we keep our eyes on their holy shrines as inscribed monuments showing us precisely their struggle of martyrdom.<sup>354</sup>

Asterius locates the martyrs within a tradition in which exemplary lives of holy figures provide "visible lessons", teaching not by word but by deed. Like Chrysostom, Asterius maintains that visual demonstration is a more effective form of edification than verbal instruction. Asterius describes the commemorative festivals of the martyrs as "public schools", in which the martyrs are teachers, and the audience of students learn to imitate them:

Festival assemblies are brought together [as] public schools for our souls, in order that while we honour the martyrs we may learn to imitate the steadfast nature of the martyrs on behalf of the faith.<sup>355</sup>

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<sup>353</sup> *Homily on Phocas*, 1.1 (Dehandschutter [2003] 168)

<sup>354</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>355</sup> *Against Covetousness*, 1.2, cited in Driver (2005) 241

Asterius not only depicts the martyrs as teachers of virtue, but also encourages his audience to consider themselves to be disciples of the martyrs, imitating the martyrs' confession of Christ in their everyday lives and, if circumstance demands, in times of extreme danger. Asterius also draws attention to the didactic quality of the holy shrines and monuments housing the martyr's relics, which he described as physical representations of the martyrs' struggles and, therefore, sources of valuable ethical lessons.<sup>356</sup> Martyrs' deeds are remembered in the mind, and the monumental shrines and relics are kept "before the eyes" as constant reminders of the martyrs' struggles and an inspiration towards emulation.

These examples taken from Chrysostom and Asterius are indicative of what Cameron describes as the 'essentially figural character' of Christian discourse.<sup>357</sup> This quality is evident in the popular use of language drawn from the visual arts in the description of martyrdom as ethical teaching. An example of this is found in Basil's *Homily on the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste*, preached in 373 C.E. In this homily Basil employs artistic language in order to visualise the scene of martyrdom. Using words to paint the scene, Basil refers to the visual arts to exhort his audience towards imitation of the martyrs:

The facts which the historical account presents by being listened to, the painting silently portrays by imitation. In this very way let us too remind those present of the men's virtue, and as it were by bringing their deeds to their gaze, let us motivate them to imitate those who are nobler and closer to them with respect their course of life.<sup>358</sup>

A similar technique is apparent in Gregory of Nyssa's *Homily on Theodore the Recruit*, delivered at Theodore's shrine in the village of Euchaïta, the centre of his cult. In this homily Gregory provides a detailed description of Theodore's shrine, which may be understood either as a literal description of the building, or, alternatively, as an *ecphrasis*. In either case, Gregory's words paint

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<sup>356</sup> Cf. Chrysostom, *On Saints Juventinus and Maximinus*, 10 (Mayer [1996] 99); idem, *Hom. Babylas*, 9 (Mayer [2003] 147)

<sup>357</sup> Cameron (1991) 23

<sup>358</sup> *Homily on Forty Martyrs*, 2 (Allen [2003] 68-69)

a picture, describing the sublime decoration of the shrine to appeal to the senses of his audience and lift their eyes towards God:

The painter coloured the blooms of his art, having depicted on an image the martyr's brave deeds, his opposition, his continuous pain...the insults, the blazing furnace that was the athlete's most blessed end, the representation of the human form of Christ...he portrayed, as if in a book that uttered speech, in great detail the martyr's contest and at the same time he also adorned the Church as a beautiful meadow. For even though it remains silent, painting can speak on the wall and be of the greatest profit.<sup>359</sup>

These visual representations of martyrdom as artistic images, which are silent communications and revelations of the divine, provide valuable insight into fourth century interpretations of martyrdom and its significance. By describing the events of martyrdom in the language of the visual arts, the words of the homilies verbally depict the performance of martyrdom as though it were a visual image present and unfolding before the eyes of the listening audience. This technique of representation encourages the audience to actively participate in the sermon – they are to listen attentively to the words and create an image of the performance within their minds. By encouraging the audience to engage with the martyrdom events, the homilist incites his listeners to respond to the martyrs by constructing his words into an icon of the mind. Then, just as the painted icon arouses the emotions, reveals the divine presence, inspires imitation, and directs the soul towards God, so too would the performance of martyrdom.

Asterius of Amasea's *Ecphrasis on the Holy Martyr Euphemia* is an example of how fourth century Christian audiences were encouraged to visualise martyrdom as an icon of the mind.<sup>360</sup> Euphemia was a popular female martyr whose relics were laid in a *martyrium* in Chalcedon by the end of the fourth century C.E. Asterius introduces his text by relating that a few days earlier he had gone for a walk, entered a Church, and stumbled across a painting of Euphemia's martyrdom, which the remainder of the text purports to describe. In this text Asterius employs *ecphrasis*, a rhetorical technique whereby vivid description

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<sup>359</sup> *Hom. Theodore*, 62,25 (Leemans [2003] 85)

<sup>360</sup> (Dehandschutter [2003] 174-76), hereafter *Ecphrasis*.

depicts a chosen image, verbally painting that image before the eyes of an audience.<sup>361</sup> By employing this technique, Asterius encourages his readers to form a visual image of Euphemia's martyrdom with "the mind's eye", guiding his audience through the events of the martyrdom as though in cinematic progression:

The virgin stands...She is led to the ruler...She inclines her head...[the executioner] cuts out her teeth...The prison follows...the holy virgin sits...she is praying...the painter lit a tremendous fire...He put her in the middle with her hands stretched towards heaven...she moves towards the bodiless, blessed life.<sup>362</sup>

By describing the martyrdom in this visual, sequential, and progressive manner, Asterius effectively transforms his readers into spectators.<sup>363</sup> Blurring the boundaries between past and present, between spectator and spectacle, Asterius invites his audience to step into the scene, inhabit the narrative, and become eye-witness spectators of the performance of martyrdom.<sup>364</sup> This immediate vision and participation in the event creates an intense sensory experience to evoke an emotional response of awe, delight, love, pity, sympathy, and wonder.<sup>365</sup> The emotional intensity of this experience is conveyed by Asterius, who describes how he was overcome with emotion when he reflected upon Euphemia's body, 'I weep from now on – I am too shocked to speak'.<sup>366</sup> By describing his own sensory link with the image, Asterius encourages his audience to train their ears and their eyes, to read between the lines of the words, and to "see" the deeper meaning conveyed in the "image". Asterius acts as a model exemplifying right reaction to the image. The audience is urged to contemplate the image, to imitate Asterius's emotional and embodied response, and to imitate the martyr by reflecting her droplets of blood with the droplets of their own observing tears. Visualising and internalising the event incites the audience towards active engagement with the martyr and moves them towards responsive action. This transforms the audience into actors,

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<sup>361</sup> Miller (2000) 220

<sup>362</sup> Asterius, *Ekphrasis*., 2-4 (Dehandschutter [2003] 175-76)

<sup>363</sup> James and Webb, cited in Castelli (2004) 129-30: '*ekphrasis* should bring about sight through sound...it should turn its listeners into spectators'

<sup>364</sup> Miller (2000) 221; for collapse of time see Castelli (2004) 130

<sup>365</sup> Miller (2000) 222

<sup>366</sup> Asterius, *Ekphrasis*., 4 (Dehandschutter [2003] 176)

as the performance of martyrdom is contemplated, imitated, and reproduced in everyday life.

### ❖ From Audience to Actor

The suffering endured by the martyrs was only meaningful insofar as it was interpreted by a Christian audience, which endowed the persecution of Christians with theological significance. It was through a process of retelling, interpretation, and ‘meaning-making activity’ that Christians were “constructed” as martyrs and martyrdom became central to the development of Christian identity and ethics in the early Church.<sup>367</sup> The presentation of martyrdom as a public spectacle, a cosmic drama, and a holy performance was a popular method of visually conveying the deeper meaning of martyrdom throughout the generations. By a process of recalling and commemorating martyrdom, a visual image became imprinted upon the Christian memory, collapsing time and bringing the historical moment of martyrdom into the present. This process of internalising the performance of martyrdom within the mind enabled Christians to feel the immediate presence of the martyr, to identify with the martyr and to participate in their sufferings. This was a *dynamic* process. By internalising, identifying with, and imitating the martyr, the individual Christian’s behaviour and beliefs were transformed, as they reproduced the performance of martyrdom through their own bodies and within their own social and religious contexts. Actively appropriating their cultural heritage of suffering and persecution, the Christian audience was transformed into actors, as they entered onto the stage of the cosmic drama, re-enacting the performance of martyrdom in times of peace.

While the rise of the cult of the saints physically transformed the topography of the Roman Empire by establishing a network of holy places,<sup>368</sup> the internalisation of the memory of the martyrs transformed individual Christians into fleshly tombs, living *loca sancta*, enshrining the martyr in the body and the

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<sup>367</sup> Castelli (2004) 34; cf. Grig (2004); Elizabeth A. Castelli, ‘The Ambivalent Legacy of Violence and Victimhood: Using Early Christian Martyrs to Think With’, *Spiritus*, 6:1 (2006) 1-24

<sup>368</sup> Markus (1994)

soul. As Chrysostom explained, ‘each of you who are present is that saint’s tomb, a tomb that has life and soul. For, if I were to open up the conscience of each of you who are present, I would find this saint dwelling inside your mind’.<sup>369</sup> The martyr was held in the mind, and the memory touched the emotions.

Martyrdom was an intense sensory sermon that engaged the whole body in spiritual inebriation. The memory of martyrdom delighted the senses of hearing, sight and touch. The meaning of martyrdom was only truly heard when the words of the *passio* or the homily were grasped by the hands of the mind, consumed and ingested by the eyes, and transferred into the soul, inflaming the emotions and inspiring imitation. The commemoration of the martyrs also aroused the senses of taste and smell, whether evoked in the imagery of martyr panegyrics, or conveyed through the physical presence and veneration of relics.<sup>370</sup> Christians were encouraged to approach the martyrs’ bodies through their own bodies – to form a somatic memory and an embodied response – using their eyes, ears, noses, mouths, and hands in sensory encounter. In the late-fourth century, the memory of martyrdom provoked bodily engagement in the multi-sensory experience of commemoration. Paulinus described how Christians at Nola delighted in planting their eyes and their kisses on Saint Felix’s body;<sup>371</sup> Augustine said of the martyr Vincent, ‘we would have loved to embrace and kiss, if it had been possible, those ravaged limbs’;<sup>372</sup> Chrysostom encouraged his audience to ‘embrace the coffin, nail yourself to the chest...Take holy oil and anoint your whole body – your tongue, your lips, your neck, your eyes’;<sup>373</sup> and Gregory of Nyssa famously declared:

[A]s if it is the same body, still alive and flourishing, those beholding it embrace it with the eyes, the mouth, the ears. And when they have

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<sup>369</sup> *On Saint Eustathius*, 3 (Mayer [2006] 54)

<sup>370</sup> Chrysostom, *Hom. Babylas.*, 10 (Mayer [2003] 147); idem, *Hom. Julian.* (Mayer [2003] 131-32); Paulinus of Nola, *Poem 27* (*ACW* 40: 285); Augustine, *Serm.* 273.5, 313C.2, 313G.3 (*WSA* III/8: 19, 102, 124)

<sup>371</sup> *Poem 18* (*ACW* 40: 118)

<sup>372</sup> *Serm.* 277A.1 (*WSA* III/8: 47)

<sup>373</sup> *A Homily on Martyrs*, 664 (Mayer & Allen [2000] 96)



approached it with all the senses, they pour tears out over it from piety and emotion.<sup>374</sup>

This internalisation of the martyr – present within the mind and experienced through the senses – encouraged the transformation of the Christian individual. As Susan Ashbrook Harvey comments in her study of saintly scent in the life of Simeon Stylites, ‘By stressing this encounter as a sensory one, hagiographers instructed the faithful as to how they, as the faithful, should live in, know, and experience their own bodies, as compliment to but distinct from the bodily existence of the saint’.<sup>375</sup>

With Neoplatonic undertones,<sup>376</sup> the martyr not only provided an external example of virtue, but also served as an interiorised model to which individual Christians were encouraged to turn in an attempt to fashion and transform themselves according to the image of the martyr. John Chrysostom, urging his congregation to take the martyrs as spiritual models, affirmed that ‘to honour a martyr is to imitate a martyr’.<sup>377</sup> For Chrysostom, the memory of the martyrs is a mental ‘painting’ that forms ‘a constant instruction in virtue’.<sup>378</sup> He develops this concept in a homily on the martyr Barlaam:

[L]et’s all store the martyrs away in our minds, with the roasting pans, with the cauldrons, with the other tortures. And, just as painters wipe clean a painting that has often become dimmer with smoke and soot and time, so too you, beloved, use the memory of the holy martyrs. When worldly concerns attack and are about to dim your mind, wipe it clean through the memory of the martyrs.<sup>379</sup>

Chrysostom’s depiction of the memory of martyrdom as a painting within the mind reflects an understanding of memory that was popular in late antiquity.

<sup>374</sup> *Hom. Theodore*. (Leemans [2003] 85)

<sup>375</sup> Susan Ashbrook Harvey, ‘Olfactory Knowing: Signs of Smell in the *vitae* of Simeon Stylites’, in G.J. Reinink & A.C. Klugkist, *After Bardaisan: Studies on Continuity and Change in Syriac Christianity in Honour of Professor Han J.W. Drijvers*, *Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta*, vol. 89 (Leuven: Peeters, 1999) 23-34, at 24

<sup>376</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads*, 1:1-9 (LCL 440: 259)

<sup>377</sup> *A Homily on Martyrs*, 663 (Mayer & Allen [2000] 94)

<sup>378</sup> *Hom. Barlaam.*, 12 (Mayer [2006] 188)

<sup>379</sup> Chrysostom, *Hom. Barlaam.*, 12 (Mayer [2006] 188)

The memory is like an image drawn or impressed upon the mind as if on a tablet of wax.<sup>380</sup> Here, the significance of martyrdom is communicated through the remembrance and recollection of “things”, that is, the martyred body, methods of persecution, and instruments of torture, which are painted on the mind. The recollection of these vivid, dramatic, and evocative images is emotionally charged. The audience engages with the image, admitting the martyrs to their emotions, and allowing the recollection of the memory to shape their own self-understanding and moral judgement. For Chrysostom, commemoration of the martyrs is necessary because it restores the painting to its original splendour, preventing the memory from becoming blurred or erased by time. Moreover, commemoration of the martyrs is *useful*, constituting a form of practical ethical training and moral instruction. Chrysostom recommends that his congregation ‘use the memory of the martyrs’. While in this extract Chrysostom does not define exactly *how* the memory of the martyrs should be “used”, the inference is that Christians must imitate the martyrs, accepting them as models and mentors. This suggestion is supported by Chrysostom’s concluding remarks of the sermon, ‘Let us imitate these saints...and, by walking the same road as them, we shall attain the same crowns as them’.<sup>381</sup>

The notion of imitation as the proper veneration of the martyrs was popular in the fourth century. Augustine associated the imitation of the martyrs with *imitatio Christi* by developing a metaphor of the martyrs treading a path between heaven and earth.<sup>382</sup> Augustine explained that while Christ had originally laid that path, Christians of “too little faith” had been discouraged from walking along it, as they believed that the Son of God was too difficult a model to follow; that ‘He, even if he’s flesh, is still the Word as well as flesh’.<sup>383</sup> It was for this reason that the martyrs left an example of virtue:

<sup>380</sup> See quotes from Plato, *Theaetetus*, 191D-E, and Cicero, *Partitiones Oratoriae*, 26, in Carruthers (1990) 21, 19, respectively

<sup>381</sup> Chrysostom, *Hom. Barlaam.*, 12 (Mayer [2006] 188-89)

<sup>382</sup> *Serm.* 326.1 (*WSA* III/9: 170); cf. *Serm.* 306B (*WSA* III/9: 28-35); *Serm.* 328.1 (*WSA* III/9: 176)

<sup>383</sup> *Serm.* 325.1 (*WSA* III/9: 167-68)

So therefore, it was to deny our weakness and our lack of faith all such excuses that the martyrs were built for us as a paved road... They made it with their blood, with their confession of faith.<sup>384</sup>

Augustine believed that because of the example of the martyrs, Christians no longer had any excuse except to strive for virtue. He asks, 'How can the way still be rough, when it has been smoothed by the feet of so many walking along it?'<sup>385</sup> Augustine asserts that the sole purpose of martyr festivals is to instruct the Christian community towards imitation of the martyrs, and, through this, to glorify God.<sup>386</sup> Basil, likewise, employs the metaphor of the martyrs as guides along the road of life, whose examples urge others towards imitation of their virtue by producing 'a light for those who are being kept safe with regard to the road of life'.<sup>387</sup>

Underlying the belief that martyrdom could serve a didactic purpose in the Church was the continued identification of the Christian individual as living in a hostile environment and experiencing persecution. Even in times of peace, the Christian life was described in terms of antagonism and adversity. Augustine proclaimed, 'here we have a combat on our hands; this life is an amphitheatre for God, who has a ringside seat. Here is a fight, here a conflict with all the vices, and supremely with the prince of vices'.<sup>388</sup>

Disassociated from death, martyrdom remained present in the Church after persecution as it was perpetuated through asceticism, "the long martyrdom".<sup>389</sup> With the spread of asceticism and the consequent focus on the ascetic body, fourth century understandings of martyrdom reinterpreted the external tortures *applied to* the body alongside the inner turmoil experienced *within* the body that renounced riches, alcohol, food, and sexual relations. For Augustine, a man whose understanding of the world was seen through the lenses of the Fall, the continued conflict experienced by Christians was found *within* the individual. The Christian

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<sup>384</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>385</sup> *Serm.* 306.10 (*WSA* III/9: 23-24)

<sup>386</sup> *Serm.* 325.1 (*WSA* III/9: 167); for the didactic quality of relics see Chrysostom, *Hom. Julian.*, 4 (Mayer [2003] 135-36)

<sup>387</sup> *Hom. Gordius.*, 1 (Allen [2003] 58); cf. Cyprian, *Ep.*, 6.3 (*ANCL* 8: 24)

<sup>388</sup> Augustine, *Serm.* 335K.3 (*WSA* III/9: 256)

<sup>389</sup> G. Clark (1998b) 99

no longer fought in the arena because the battle now took place in the arena of the individual person:

It wasn't, however, against the man persecuting them that they wrestled, but against the devil laying traps for them, and – if you want the whole truth – against their own weakness. It's within oneself, when all is said and done, that the great contest takes place, where the theatre of conscience is located, and where, moreover, the chief spectator is the inspector of conscience.<sup>390</sup>

This relocation of the arena of persecution to within the body of the Christian individual is also expressed by Chrysostom. At the end of the fourth century Chrysostom depicted his present time as a period of persecution in order to create a link between the past and the present, and to exalt the martyrs as exemplars:

The martyrs had their ribs crushed. They saw executioners standing around. Do this to your conscience too. Seat your reason as a judge on the throne of your impartial mind, lead all the sins you've committed into the public eye...punish the inappropriate desires from which your sins arose, let them be crushed with considerable force.<sup>391</sup>

Chrysostom asserted, 'while it isn't a time of persecution, it is a time of martyrdom... You don't see burning coals in front of you, but you do see desire's flame kindled'.<sup>392</sup> He affirmed that martyrdom was present at all times, 'For it is not the hanging on a cross only that makes a martyr'.<sup>393</sup> With this in mind Chrysostom interpreted the deaths of the martyrs as though they were texts requiring allegorical exegesis in order to extract the significance for the context of the present Church community. The commemoration of the martyrs was not simply pious veneration. The memory of martyrdom served practical and didactic functions to instruct Christians on how to live here and now.<sup>394</sup> Many fourth century martyr homilies were *hagiobiographical*, that is, they presented the martyr as an *imitator Christi* in order to instruct and edify the Christian

<sup>390</sup> *Serm.* 306E.2 (*WSA* III/11: 275)

<sup>391</sup> *On the Holy Martyrs*, 3 (Mayer [2003] 122)

<sup>392</sup> *Hom. Barlaam.*, 2 (Mayer [2006] 180)

<sup>393</sup> *Homily 1 on Second Corinthians*, 6 (*NPNF* 12: 275)

<sup>394</sup> Mayer (2006) 25-26

community.<sup>395</sup> For example, in a homily in praise of the martyr Pelagia, Chrysostom depicts her death as though it were a text requiring interpretation. Having related the events of Pelagia's martyrdom, Chrysostom interprets the event on a moral level, elucidating a general lesson to encourage his audience to imitate her martyrdom with a disciplined lifestyle:

Let's copy her in so far as we can. She despised life; let us despise luxury, let us ridicule lavish expenditure, let us step away from drunkenness, let us flee from gluttony... retain a precise memory of both these comments and the rest of what I've said...demonstrate them all through what you do.<sup>396</sup>

Martyr homilies, such as this one, provided a context in which the memory of martyrdom could be consciously cultivated for the purpose of moral instruction. The homily could compliment and elaborate upon passion narratives by revealing the different levels of meaning, glossing over less important details, and drawing attention to the lessons to be learnt. Consequently, the edificatory value of martyrdom could have real relevance to many different communities with varying concerns throughout distant periods in time.

By viewing the present time as a time of persecution and by imitating the martyrs in their own lives, ordinary Christians could transform themselves into martyrs. As Basil said, 'Bless the martyred sincerely, so that you become a martyr by choice, and end up being worthy of the same rewards as theirs, without persecution, without fire, without blows'.<sup>397</sup> With this move from audience to actor, from spectator to martyr, the individual Christian life could be transformed. The image of the martyr that had been taken into the mind was to become visibly manifest in every action, shining through the body. 'The person returning from viewing martyrs should be recognisable to all', said Chrysostom, 'through their gaze, their appearance, their gait, their compunction, their composed thoughts'.<sup>398</sup> The person who venerated and imitated the martyrs should be 'breathing fire,

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<sup>395</sup> Johan Leemans, 'At that Time the Group around Maximian was Enjoying Imperial Power': An Interpolation in Gregory of Nyssa's Homily in Praise of Theodore', *JTS*, 57:1 (2006) 158-63, at 159-60

<sup>396</sup> *Hom. Pelagia.*, 3 (Mayer [2003] 155)

<sup>397</sup> *Homily on the Forty Martyrs*, 1 (Allen [2003] 68)

<sup>398</sup> *A Homily on Martyrs*, 665 (Mayer & Allen [2000] 97)

restrained, contrite, sober, vigilant – announcing the spiritual life within through the movements of their body'.<sup>399</sup> By internalising, contemplating, and imitating the martyrs, Christians could enter onto the stage of the divine drama and transform their own bodies into living icons that declared and performed Christ.

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<sup>399</sup> *ibid.*

### CHAPTER 3: Iconic Women

The previous two chapters of this study have explored the patristic reading of the martyred body as a locus of divine power that embodied discipleship and proclaimed Christ through the performance of martyrdom. By focusing on the communicative potential of the body and the constructive power of performance, martyrs have been revealed as teachers and preachers of Christ. Does this early Christian interpretation of martyrdom include female martyrdom? As women were prominent among the Christian martyrs, one might assume that female martyrdom *was* understood within this same framework of interpretation. Yet, how could the body of a female martyr have been perceived as a preacher or a teacher when the scriptural authority of 1 Timothy 2:12 was appealed to in order to overtly exclude women from assuming authoritative roles as teachers and preachers within the Church?<sup>400</sup> In this chapter I demonstrate that female martyrdom *should* be located within the same framework of martyrdom established in the first two chapters of this study. Despite restrictions within the ecclesiastical sphere, martyrdom provided women with a specific context in which they could be depicted as teachers and preachers who communicated Christ through their bodies.

Furthermore, I suggest that while female martyrdom was understood in a similar way to male martyrdom (i.e. as a holy performance that revealed the power of Christ and preached the Christian faith) it also differed from male martyrdom.<sup>401</sup> This claim will be corroborated by examples of female martyrs who were described differently simply because they were women and their bodies

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<sup>400</sup> For example, Chrysostom, *Discourse 4 on Genesis 1*, and Origen, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians*, frag. 74, both in Miller (2005) 30, 36; Chrysostom, *Homily 9 on 1 Timothy* (NPNF 13: 435-37)

<sup>401</sup> This suggestion has been made before, but with different emphasis. For example, Virginia Burrus has drawn attention to the erotic elements of female martyrdom, 'Reading Agnes: The Rhetoric of Gender in Ambrose and Prudentius', *J ECS*, 3 (1995) 25-46; Margaret Miles has observed that involuntary nudity was a prominent feature in the martyrdom of women, *Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989) esp. 54-63; Mary Lefkowitz has drawn attention to the gender complexes associated with female martyrdom narratives, 'The Motivations for Perpetua's Martyrdom', *JAAR*, 44:3 (1976) 417-421

were female. The differences in perception of the body of the female martyr, influenced by traditional gender stereotypes, are central to understanding the theological significance of the martyrdom of women.

The first section of this chapter provides a survey of ancient stereotypes that depicted women as being weaker than, and inferior to, men. I then introduce the current state of academic debate on this subject, particularly focusing on the strand of scholarship that classes patristic attitudes towards women as misogynistic, restrictive, and subjugatory. I assess that predominant view in the light of this present study, and suggest an alternative way of viewing patristic attitudes towards female martyrs. While the Church fathers did indeed think in terms of traditional gender stereotypes, this should not be interpreted as patristic misogyny, but rather it should be viewed within the context of the theological significance of martyrdom. By inheriting traditional concepts from classical medical theories of the weak female body, the Church fathers recognised female martyrdom as a dramatic transformation of the body from weakness to strength, from human frailty to divine power. Through this transformation, the female martyr was changed into an icon, as her body forcefully revealed the power and presence of Christ and directed the viewer's gaze towards God.

This chapter concludes with two separate studies of individual female martyrs in specific contexts of fourth century Christianity: John Chrysostom's praise of the mother of the Maccabean martyrs, and Augustine's homilies on Vibia Perpetua. By way of illustration, this final section draws upon concepts discussed throughout this study in order to support the contention that female martyrs were perceived and depicted as teachers of the gospel, preachers of the faith, philosophers of virtue, and icons of Christ.

### ❖ **Imperfect Men**

Christianity emerged from an environment in which gender stereotypes were inextricably woven into the fabric of society and, as a result of this, the early Church inherited traditional attitudes regarding women. While baptism provided



spiritual unity and equality between all people,<sup>402</sup> the unchangeable nature of the female body remained a danger to men.<sup>403</sup> The female body was a sexual threat and provocation to men,<sup>404</sup> a vulnerable locus for demonic attack,<sup>405</sup> and a potential cause of social shame.<sup>406</sup> For these reasons women were subjected to gender hierarchies at home and in the Church,<sup>407</sup> and they required protection and manipulation to be moulded into modest, gentle and temperate wives.<sup>408</sup> And yet, despite this, Christianity challenged and even inverted some traditional gender stereotypes. Women held positions of authority in the earliest house-Churches,<sup>409</sup> female martyrs were praised and commemorated for their public expressions of faith and endurance,<sup>410</sup> asceticism gave women a greater level of autonomy with which they could dedicate their lives to the devotion of Christ,<sup>411</sup> women served as deaconesses in female ascetic communities and were ordained in the eastern part of the empire,<sup>412</sup> and, on some occasions, Christian men even described themselves in female roles in their mystical devotion to Christ.<sup>413</sup> As this brief summary reveals, the Church fathers' attitudes towards women were diverse and varied, ambivalent and often dependent on context.<sup>414</sup>

In order to understand how female martyrs were perceived in relation to this complex of attitudes, it is necessary to put aside modern understandings of the

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<sup>402</sup> Gal. 3:27-28

<sup>403</sup> Brown (1988) 81

<sup>404</sup> *ibid.*, 153

<sup>405</sup> Tertullian, *On the Veiling of Virgins*, 7 (ANL 18: 166); Tertullian, *On the Apparel of Women*, 1.i-xiii (FC 40: 117-140)

<sup>406</sup> 1 Timothy 5:13-14; Margaret MacDonald, *Early Christian Women and Pagan Opinion: The Power of the Hysterical Woman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Martin (1995) 233

<sup>407</sup> 1 Cor 11:3; 1 Cor 14:34-36; Ephesians 5:22; Titus 2:4-5; Chrysostom, *Homily 20 on Ephesians* (NPNF 13: 143-152); Martin (1995) 232-33

<sup>408</sup> Chrysostom, *Homily 20 on Ephesians* (NPNF 13: 150)

<sup>409</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (London: SCM Press, 1983) 160-99

<sup>410</sup> For example, Chrysostom, *Hom. Pelagia*. (Mayer [2003] 149-157); M. Lyons. (Musurillo, 75, 81); Augustine, *Serm. 280-82*, (WSA III/8, 72-82)

<sup>411</sup> For example, Egeria's travel diary (Gingrass [1970] 49-128)

<sup>412</sup> *Didascalia apostolorum*, 3.1-11; 4.5-8 (Miller [2005] 51-61)

<sup>413</sup> For example, Augustine, *En.Ps.*, 122.5 (WSA III/20: 33-34); G. Clark (1998a) 180

<sup>414</sup> E.A. Clark (1983) 15-25

human body and consider how the body of the female martyr would have been seen through the eyes of its contemporary spectators. A select survey of classical medical theory provides insight into the assumptions and stereotypes associated with male attitudes towards women in late antiquity; attitudes that would have influenced the thoughts and beliefs of the Church fathers. The preserved works of Aristotle, the Hippocratic corpus, Galen, and Soranus, present a very different picture to our contemporary understandings of the body.<sup>415</sup> Acknowledging this, and especially in relation to Greek philosophical reflections on the body, Andrew Louth states that ‘one is often given to doubt whether the understanding of the bodily in this society has any real continuity with any of the ways in which we relate to the body’.<sup>416</sup> By understanding how the female body was believed to be different to the male body, one can begin to comprehend how female martyrdom took on additional qualities that were not so pronounced in interpretations of male martyrdom.

Classical medical theory was based on the primary perception of the human body as being constituted from the tempering of the four elements that pervade the cosmos: earth, air, fire, and water.<sup>417</sup> These elements were required in equilibrium to form a stable condition of good health, as elemental disproportion resulted in an imbalanced temperament.<sup>418</sup> The art of medicine was concerned with realigning troublesome disproportion of the bodily temperament, the *dyscrasia*, in order to attain the ideal balance of the constitutions of the body, the *eucrasia*.<sup>419</sup>

The elemental constitution of the body not only governed health but it was also a significant factor during procreation, as the fiery element was one factor

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<sup>415</sup> I am aware of the distinctions and nuances between different medical theories and philosophies so I have attempted to avoid over-generalisation. However, the limits of this study do not allow for a detailed comparison of the differences

<sup>416</sup> Andrew Louth, ‘The Body in Western Catholic Christianity’, in Coakley (1997) 111-130, at 111

<sup>417</sup> Plato, *Timaeus*, 64C, 82A, 86A (LCL 234: 163, 219, 233); Nemesius of Emesa, *On the Nature of Man*, 15 (Telfer [1955] 272)

<sup>418</sup> Hippocrates, *Nature of Man*, 4 (LCL 150: 11-13); Hippocrates, *On Affections*, 1, in Martin (1995) 146; Galen, *Hygiene*, 6, in Martin (1995) 148; Ps.-Aristotle, *Physio.*, 812a (LCL 307: 127)

<sup>419</sup> Nemesius, *On the Nature of Man*, 4 (Telfer [1955] 272)

contributing to the determination of biological sex. It was believed that the female uterus was constructed from two chambers – a hot left cavity and a cool right cavity – and that biological sex was influenced by which part of the uterus the seed became embedded.<sup>420</sup> As summarised by the Hippocratic aphorism, *male embryos on the right, female embryos on the left*,<sup>421</sup> an embryo conceived in the right cavity of the uterus was believed to retain more heat during gestation and so would be more likely to mature into a male child, as opposed to the cooler left cavity, which would more often produce female embryos on account of its heat deficit.<sup>422</sup> It was also considered that a man's right testicle received blood that had been purified by the kidneys and so was hotter and more concentrated than the blood provided to the left testicle.<sup>423</sup> For this reason, seed from the right testicle, by virtue of its fiery concentration of purified blood, was thought to be stronger and so more likely to produce a male child.<sup>424</sup>

As a result of the heat required to produce male children, certain characteristics were formed that were associated with either sex. These distinctions were already evident at the embryonic stage. The male embryo was thought to take thirty days to coagulate, the female embryo forty-two;<sup>425</sup> the male embryo was thought to move at three months, the female embryo at four.<sup>426</sup> Thus the male embryo was believed to mature at a greater rate than the female embryo, which experienced a stunted growth in the womb. This belief in the delayed development of the female embryo points towards the basic assumption of ancient

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<sup>420</sup> Galen refers to the uterus in the plural, *uteri*, in *De usu.*, 14.1n2, 14.6 (May [1968] 620-21, 636); Gleason (1990) 390-91

<sup>421</sup> Hippocrates, *Aphorisms*, 48 (Chadwick & Mann [1983] 225)

<sup>422</sup> Aristotle, *GenAn.*, IV.i.765a (*LCL* 366: 381); Galen, *De usu.*, 14.7 quoted in R. Flemming, *Medicine and the Making of Roman Women: Gender, Nature and Authority from Celsus to Galen* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 310; for sex difference originating in the womb see Aristotle, *GenAn.*, 764a1 cited in Guthrie (1965) 218

<sup>423</sup> Aristotle, *GenAn.*, IV.i.765a-b (*LCL* 366: 383-85)

<sup>424</sup> Aristotle, *GenAn.*, 765a (*LCL* 366: 383); E. S. McCartney, 'Sex Determination and Sex Control in Antiquity' in *The American Journal of Philology*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (1922) 63; Rouselle (1988) 48

<sup>425</sup> Hippocrates, *The Nature of the Child*, 18 (Lonie [1983] 331)

<sup>426</sup> Hippocrates, *On Generation*, 18.1, cited in Martin (1995) 32; cf. Aristotle, *GenAn.*, IV.vi.775a (*LCL* 366: 459)

gender attitudes, that ‘the female is less perfect than the male’.<sup>427</sup> Female imperfection was sometimes explained by the comparative heat deficiency of the female race.<sup>428</sup> Because heat was considered to be the optimum state, women were believed to be inferior, imperfect, and deformed men.<sup>429</sup>

For Aristotle, female imperfection was further evidenced by the secondary role of women in reproduction. Aristotle defined woman as ‘an infertile male’, who ‘lacks the power to concoct semen’.<sup>430</sup> Other physicians differed from Aristotle by claiming that women did produce seed, but that female contribution to procreation was less than that of the male, because female seed was ‘scantier, colder, and wetter’.<sup>431</sup> However, whether women were believed to produce seed or not, the female role in reproduction was always secondary to the male role; reproduction was a masculine prerogative.<sup>432</sup>

From the embryonic stage men were believed to retain a solid, strong and robust physique,<sup>433</sup> whereas women displayed a phlegmatic nature and a lack of composure as a consequence of heat deficit - either from a cold uterus or from cold or weak seed.<sup>434</sup> The female body betrayed a damp deformity comparable to

<sup>427</sup> Galen, *De usu.*, 14.6 (May [1996] 628)

<sup>428</sup> Galen, *De usu.*, 14.6 (May [1996] 628-630); cf. Aristotle, *GenAn.*, IV.i.765b (LCL 366: 387); Hippocrates, *Regimen*, I.xxxiv (LCL 150: 281); Gleason (1990) 392

<sup>429</sup> Galen, *De usu.*, 14.6, (May [1996] 628, 630); Aristotle, *GenAn.*, II.iii.737a, IV.vi.775a (LCL 366: 175, 459-61); Ps.-Aristotle, *Physio.* VI.814a (LCL 307: 137)

<sup>430</sup> *GenAn.*, I.xx.728a (LCL 366: 103); Harlow (1998) 158

<sup>431</sup> Galen, *De usu.*, 14.6 (May [1996] 631); Hippocrates, *Regimen*, I.xxviii (LCL 150: 267-69); Hippocrates, *The Seed*, 4-7 (Lonie [1983] 319-321); Soranus, *Gynecology*, I.12 (Temkin [1956] 12); Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, VII.158-9 (Hunt [1976] 72)

<sup>432</sup> Aristotle, *GenAn.*, I.xix.727b, I.xx.729a, II.i.731b, IV.i.765b (LCL 366: 101, 109, 129-33, 385-87); Hippocrates, *Regimen*, I.xxviii (LCL 150: 267-69); Galen, *De usu.*, 14.6 (May [1996] 632-33); Soranus, *Gynecology*, I.12 (Temkin [1956] 12)

<sup>433</sup> Flemming (2000) 310; for the male-form, female-matter equations see Aristotle, *GenAn.*, I.xx.729a (LCL 366: 109)

<sup>434</sup> For men as well-formed, well-jointed and sinewy and women as poorly-jointed, weak, and fleshy see Ps.-Aristotle, *Physio.* V.809b, VI.810a (LCL 307: 111, 115); Hippocrates, *Glands*, 16 (LCL, 482: 125); for female seed being “without tension” see Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, VII.158-9 (Hunt [1976] 72)

that of young children, whose bodily boundaries leaked with incontinence, crying, dribbling, and dripping noses.<sup>435</sup> The Hippocratic Corpus described female flesh as being intrinsically different to that of men; it was spongy and absorbent, soaking up fluids like the woolly fleece of a sheep.<sup>436</sup> The porous flesh soaked up blood from the stomach, retaining and accumulating fluids that would otherwise be excreted from the body.<sup>437</sup> This fluid retention made it necessary for the female body to be opened at menarche and to continue releasing fluids by regular menstruation.<sup>438</sup> However, due to the sedentary lifestyles led by women within the *domus*, the female body could never release all the retained fluids.<sup>439</sup>

Women were advised not to engage in strenuous exercise, which would dry out their bodies and stop menstruation, causing them to become ‘mannish’, and preventing the reproductive functions for which their bodies existed.<sup>440</sup> Therefore, while wetness was a deformity resulting from female imperfection, it was also a necessary condition required for reproduction.<sup>441</sup> This is illustrated by the belief that lack of sexual intercourse would dry out the uterus, displacing it,

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<sup>435</sup> Rouselle (1988) 59

<sup>436</sup> Hippocrates, *Glands*, 16 (LCL 482: 125)

<sup>437</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>438</sup> M. Harlow, ‘In the Name of the Father: Procreation, Paternity and Patriarchy’, in Foxhall & Salmon (1998) 155-169, at 157; A.E. Hanson, ‘The Medical Writers’ Woman’, in D.M. Halperin, J.J. Winkler, F.I. Zeitlin (eds.), *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990) 309-337, at 317

<sup>439</sup> Aristotle, *GenAn.*, IV.vi.775a (LCL 366: 461); Hippocrates, *Glands*, 16 (LCL 482: 125); Soranus, *Gynecology*, I.vi.27 (Temkin [1956] 23); Hippocrates, *Regimen*, I.xxxiv (LCL 150: 281); Flemming (2000) 312

<sup>440</sup> Soranus, *Gynecology*, I.vi.29 (Temkin [1956] 26); Soranus advised women not to take too strenuous exercise due to the possibility that menstruation might cease, see L. Dean-Jones ‘The Cultural Construct of the Female Body in Classical Greek Science’, in M. Golden & P. Toohey (eds.) *Sex and Difference in Ancient Greece and Rome*, Edinburgh Readings on the Ancient World (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003) 183-201, at 190; Helen King, *Hippocrates’ Woman: Reading the Body in Ancient Greece* (London: Routledge, 1998) 10

<sup>441</sup> Hanson (1990) 318, 320-21. This ‘drying out’ is stated in Hippocratic medical theory, whereas Soranus claims the opposite, noting that young girls prevent menstruation through excessive dancing and singing and, therefore, risk bodily ailments by retaining surplus fluids

and sending it wandering around the body in search of moisture.<sup>442</sup> In order to rectify the position of the displaced uterus a physician was required to coax the uterus into place through “odour therapy”; the use of foul-smelling and pleasant odours to repel and attract the uterus back into its proper position.<sup>443</sup> The theory of the wandering womb also presents the female body as deviant and beyond autonomous self-control, and the prescription of odour therapy points towards the belief that women were unable to control their own bodies and required male intervention to impose order and regulation. By controlling the womb, as a man would take control of a slave, the physician’s action is indicative of the power-submission relationship of male and female in the Greco-Roman Empire.<sup>444</sup>

The reproductive functions of the female body were a particular concern in a society that relied upon women for the propagation and perpetuation of the state.<sup>445</sup> Once a decision of marriage had been made, a midwife would examine the future bride and inspect her body for external signs that would serve as indicators of fertility, such as whether the woman had reached puberty and whether she had broad, childbearing hips.<sup>446</sup> The complexion of the face was examined; freckled or roughly spotted skin implied a tendency to produce female children, whilst blushed or dark skin meant that the woman was too desirous and that she would destroy the fertile seed.<sup>447</sup> A dispassionate state of neither joy nor sadness was desirable, whereas an unhappy or fearful disposition indicated

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<sup>442</sup> This view is developed from Plato, *Timaeus*, 91A-D (LCL 234: 249-51); Soranus, *Gynecology*, III.iv.26 (Temkin [1956] 149-54); Hippocrates, *Places in Man*, 47 (LCL 482: 95-97)

<sup>443</sup> This view is evident in the Hippocratic corpus but not in Aristotle, Galen or Soranus, whose knowledge of the womb through animal dissection had informed them of the fixed position of the uterus. See Soranus, *Gynecology*, III.iv.29 (Temkin [1956] 152-53) for the Hippocratic recommendation of “fumigation”; Hippocrates, *Places in Man*, 47 (LCL 482: 97-101); Hanson (1990) 319-21; King (1998) 36-37

<sup>444</sup> King (1998) 25-26

<sup>445</sup> M. I. Finley, ‘The Silent Women of Rome’, in Laura McClure (ed.), *Sexuality and Gender in the Classical World* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002) 147-56, esp. 151-53; Rouselle (1988) 47

<sup>446</sup> Hippocrates, *Prorrhetic*, II.24 (LCL 482: 271); Soranus, *Gynecology*, 1.34, 1.45 (Temkin [1956] 32, 44); King (1998) 31

<sup>447</sup> Soranus, *Gynecology*, I.35 (Temkin [1956] 33)

sterility.<sup>448</sup> Further indications of sterility included small eyes, a disproportionate head, a projected jaw, and a large or rounded forehead.<sup>449</sup> In this way the female body was “read” as external signs indicated whether the soul’s temperament and the body’s physiological structure were conducive to conception.

Medical aphorisms such as ‘if they become pregnant, they become healthy’,<sup>450</sup> supported and perpetuated the reproductive social role of women by presenting pregnancy as an essential condition for female health. Yet, from Soranus onwards (second century C.E.), medical theory started to distinguish medical health from social values. For example, Soranus did not believe that reproduction was the only way for women to achieve peak health. Instead, he believed that sexual moderation and even chastity would not cause ill effects upon female health, asserting that permanent virginity does not harm health but rather enables women to act in “manly” ways.<sup>451</sup> However, even Soranus considered this female “manliness” in a somewhat ambivalent way, as he advised women who did not menstruate to restrict their active lifestyles and forsake manly activities so that ‘their bodies may become more feminine’.<sup>452</sup>

While Soranus’s attitude towards the female body might imply that women had the opportunity to become more autonomous and unrestricted by their reproductive duties, women were also believed to be restrained by psychological weakness. The physical wetness of the female body was seen alongside an intellectual framework summarised in the statement: ‘dryness leads to understanding in the soul, wetness to mindlessness’.<sup>453</sup> This association between dryness and intelligence, wetness and mindlessness, was affirmed by Heraklitos, who maintained that ‘a dry soul is wisest and best’, and Diogenes of Apollonia,

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<sup>448</sup> Soranus, *Gynecology*, 1.34-35 (Temkin [1956] 32-33); Rouselle (1988) 21, 40

<sup>449</sup> For disproportion as indicative of a negative character see Ps.-Aristotle, *Physio*. VI.814A (LCL 307: 135-37); Rouselle (1988) 21

<sup>450</sup> Hippocrates, *On Unmarried Girls*, cited in McLure (2002) 99

<sup>451</sup> *Gynecology*, 1.30-32 (Temkin [1956] 27-30); Hanson (1990) 331

<sup>452</sup> *Gynecology*, III.9 (Temkin [1956] 134-35); Hanson (1990) 33; Soranus did recognise that the female body had been created for the natural purpose of procreation and that women who do not menstruate are “mannish and sterile”, *Gynecology*, I.32, VI.29 (Temkin [1956] 26, 30)

<sup>453</sup> Galen, *The Soul’s Dependence on the Body*, 4 (Singer [1997] 156-57)

who pronounced that ‘moisture hinders intelligence’.<sup>454</sup> While men retained a condition of dry stability congenial to rational thought on account of their hot and dry nature,<sup>455</sup> the female mind was ‘senseless’, ‘grossly stupid’, and unreasonable.<sup>456</sup> This physiological explanation of the psychological inferiority of women reasserted the dominance of male rationality over female irrationality. This is evident in Philo’s gender hierarchy:

[T]he rational which belongs to mind and reason and is of the masculine gender, the irrational, the province of sense, is of the feminine. Mind belongs to a genus wholly superior to sense as man is to woman.<sup>457</sup>

The concept of the weakness of the female mind was also present in legal contexts. In 63 B.C.E. Cicero claimed that women should be put under the power of a male *tutor* due to their weakness of judgement in legal and economic matters.<sup>458</sup> This influential claim led to the establishment of *tutela mulierum perpetua*, where a woman was placed under the protective authority of a male *tutor* who oversaw and monitored her economic activities.<sup>459</sup> The *tutela mulierum* was, in part, based on the premise that the female mind was weak and incompetent. Although the *tutela mulierum* had been in steady decline from the time of Cicero through to third and fourth centuries C.E.,<sup>460</sup> the concept of the weakness of women had become conventional wisdom and was later embodied in written law.<sup>461</sup>

As Dixon claims, ‘The ‘protective’ conception of *tutela* gave rise incidentally to the doctrine of *infirmetas sexus muliebris* which took on a life of its

<sup>454</sup> Cited in Carson, ‘Putting Her in Her Place: Woman, Dirt, and Desire’, in D.M. Halperin, J.J. Winkler, F.I. Zeitlin (eds.), *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990) 135-169, at 137-38

<sup>455</sup> Hippocrates, *Regimen*, I.35 (LCL 150: 281)

<sup>456</sup> *ibid.*, I.35 (287)

<sup>457</sup> *Laws*, I.xxxvii, cited in Jantzen (1995) 43

<sup>458</sup> Suzanne Dixon, ‘Infirmetas Sexus: Womanly Weakness in Roman Law’, *Tijdschrift voor Rechtsgeschiedenis*, 343 (1984) 343-371

<sup>459</sup> *ibid.*, 343

<sup>460</sup> *ibid.*; Gillian Clark, *Women in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993)

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<sup>461</sup> For example, *Codex Justinanus*, 8.17(18).12, in G. Clark (1993) 58



own after the disappearance of *tutela mulierum perpetua*'.<sup>462</sup> Ironically, while the tutelage of women was in steady decline, the idea of the weakness of the female sex was gaining popularity as a common stereotype and legal concept. The notion of female intellectual weakness was such common knowledge that it could be referred to without further explanation, implying that the idea was so widely accepted that it formed a type of "shorthand" stereotype of the female sex.<sup>463</sup> Certain words, such as *infirmitas*, *levitas*, and *imbecillitas* were used to evoke a larger and more generalised conception of "woman". These terms formed a hotchpotch from which single terms could be plucked to convey general assumptions of the female sex, allowing for the merging and transition of the concept of weakness that was applied to the bodies and the minds of women in stereotypical fashion.<sup>464</sup>

The fact that *infirmitas sexus* was seen as referring directly to the female mind and not to the female body is observed by Chris Jones, 'The Roman belief in *infirmitas sexus* sprang not from any opinion on their [women's] physical state, but rather from the idea that they had inferior critical faculties'.<sup>465</sup> However, when seen alongside the medical theories of the Hippocratic Corpus, Galen, and Soranus, one finds that the notion of *infirmitas sexus* ran parallel to the physician's understanding of the inferior and weak female body. Consequently, the stereotypical portrayal of the physically and mentally weak woman is seen to be present in legal and medical circles; circles that would inevitably have been reflected in the educated mind and would have influenced general opinion by its transformation into popular stereotype and assumptions.

The environment from which Christianity emerged was dominated by the medical, philosophical, and legal concepts of women as physically and psychologically weak. Although the legal concept of *tutela mulierum perpetua* was steadily fading out during the rise of Christianity, the intellectual weakness of women and the requirement for male protection and control continued to be expressed in the concept of *infirmitas sexus*. The impact of such beliefs for

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<sup>462</sup> Dixon (1984) 356

<sup>463</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>464</sup> *ibid.*, 357

<sup>465</sup> Jones (1993) 25

Christianity are evident in the household codes of the New Testament, which restrict roles of female authority and affirm the traditional, secular institution of marriage and childbirth. This presents a potential problem to the thesis that female martyrs could be held up as ethical exemplars and moral instructors. How could physically weak, intellectually inferior humans be seen as teachers and preachers?

However, this apparent problem is, in fact, not a problem at all, but rather it is a solution. It is precisely this understanding of the weak female body that lent female martyrdom such great significance. Before turning to explore exactly how this is the case, it is important to place my own research within the context of those trends of contemporary scholarship on women in early Christianity which present the Church fathers' inheritance of traditional gender stereotypes as endorsing misogyny, subjugation, and constraint. It is against these views that I will assert that traditional stereotypes were employed not to contain and constrain women, but to praise women for their ability to reveal Christ in their bodies.

### ❖ **The Devil's Gateway**

Much contemporary scholarship on women in early Christianity focuses on the Church fathers' inheritance of traditional concepts of femininity and gender. In this section I introduce a trend of scholarship that focuses on the patristic exegesis of the Genesis creation narrative. This trend claims that the Church fathers identified all women with the figure of Eve as part of a conscious strategy to contain and control the threat of women. I then discuss the current interest in the patristic description of female martyrs and ascetics with masculine terms, for example, as displaying "manly courage" or "virile strength". This view implies that salvation is a masculine prerogative and that women have to "become male" in order to attain salvation.

Both of these areas of scholarship have direct implications for the understanding of female martyrdom in early Christianity: if all women were associated with the credulity, transgression, and punishment of Eve then how could they have served as exemplars of faith? If women had to "become male" to

attain salvation then how can one talk of exemplary *female* martyrs? However, I propose that both of these areas of scholarship are based upon evidence which does not necessarily point towards the conclusions that are drawn. Consequently I will demonstrate that the martyrdom of women was of great theological significance in early Christianity, despite the challenges of contrary opinion in modern scholarship.

One prominent trend of recent scholarship on women in early Christianity focuses on the Genesis creation narrative, based on the observation that,

The canonical Hebrew Scriptures never so much as repeated, much less developed, the one story exploited by later Christians to restrict women's activities; the tale of Eve and the serpent in the Garden of Eden.<sup>466</sup>

This trend depicts patristic exegesis of the Genesis creation narrative as 'a tragic distortion' of the original Christian movement, which had 'arguably offered one of the most radically egalitarian stances known in the ancient world, and sought the renunciation of every form of domination, whether based on sex, race, or social class'.<sup>467</sup> This view portrays the patristic era as the imposition of patriarchal 'oppression' that consciously reversed an earlier egalitarian 'charter of freedom and equality' in order to enforce a scheme of female subjugation and submission 'permeated with misogyny'.<sup>468</sup>

Within this trend Elizabeth A. Clark claims that patristic interpretations of the Genesis narrative are indicative of the Church fathers' ideological agenda of 'rationalizing women's secondary status'.<sup>469</sup> For Clark, the Church fathers intended to assert female subordination to male authority by identifying all women with Eve and creating a 'strategy of containment' to restrict female

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<sup>466</sup> Elizabeth A. Clark, *Ascetic Piety and Women's Faith: Essays on Late Ancient Christianity*, Studies in Women and Religion, vol. 20 (Lewiston; Lampeter; Queenston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1986) 30

<sup>467</sup> Quote from Grace M. Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*, Cambridge Studies in Ideology and Religion, vol. 8 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 48; cf. Schüssler Fiorenza, (1983) esp. 289, 303-04

<sup>468</sup> Jantzen (1995) 48-49, 56

<sup>469</sup> E. A. Clark (1986) 30

authority.<sup>470</sup> Clark claims that in appealing to the creation narrative, the fathers were ‘universalizing’ women to provide a justification for female subordination by presenting the secondary status of women as a natural and eternal state.<sup>471</sup> Clark provides an example from Tertullian to support her theory of the ‘universalising’ of women through appeal to Eve:

*You are the Devil’s gateway; you are the unsealer of that tree; you are the first foresaker of that divine law...you so lightly crushed the image of God, the man Adam...because of your punishment, that is, death, even the Son of God had to die.*<sup>472</sup>

In a similar way, other Church Fathers used the technique of incorporating all women into Eve as they argued against female ecclesiastical authority and teaching.<sup>473</sup> As daughters of Eve, women inherited their mother’s traits; they were psychologically disadvantaged, credulous and easily deceived, and so were unfit to teach, preach, or enter the priesthood.<sup>474</sup>

However, the description of a patristic strategy of containment may be criticised as it results from approaching the texts with a preconceived agenda which aims to portray Christianity as a movement from egalitarianism to institutionalisation, and to characterise the patristic era as the misogynistic suppression of a previous state of gender equality.<sup>475</sup> This basic assumption is derived from a romanticised and blinkered reading of Paul’s epistles combined with a disregard of many patristic texts.<sup>476</sup> Additionally, Clark’s appeal to

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<sup>470</sup> E. A. Clark, ‘Ideology, History, and the Construction of “Woman” in Late Ancient Christianity’, *JECS*, 2:2 (1994) 155-184

<sup>471</sup> *ibid.*, 160-62, 167-68

<sup>472</sup> Tertullian, *On the Apparel of Women*, 1.i, cited in E. A. Clark (1994) 169

<sup>473</sup> E. A. Clark (1994) 168; *eadem* (1986) 31

<sup>474</sup> Chrysostom, *On the Priesthood* in E. A. Clark (1986) 32; Tertullian, *On the Veiling of Virgins*, 9 (*ANF* 3: 168); Jantzen (1995) 47; Chrysostom, *On 1 Timothy*, 9 (*NPNF* 13: 435)

<sup>475</sup> See Carol Meyers’s critical overview of the feminist approach to the study of the Genesis account in *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) 24-46; cf. Schüssler Fiorenza (1983); Jantzen (1995) 48-49, 56; Martin (1995) 231

<sup>476</sup> To give one example, Gregory Nazianzen’s claim that Eve was not the sole guilty culprit in the fall, ‘the woman sinned, and so did Adam. The serpent

Tertullian in support of her argument is somewhat misleading, as Tertullian was one of the most famously vociferous and impetuous in his attitudes towards women. In truth, even Tertullian, the painter of Eve's most bleak portrait, praised his female contemporaries for the virtue, courage and endurance that they expressed in witness to Christ.<sup>477</sup>

Additionally, while the fathers did express a preoccupation with using the figure of Eve "to think with" in order to understand the social position and roles of Christian women, to describe this process as ideological agenda, conscious subjugation, or deliberate patriarchalisation is to anachronistically superimpose modern feminist concepts of power, oppression and emancipation onto an ancient society that was radically different from our contemporary western standards.<sup>478</sup> In describing the fathers' association of women with Eve as 'the self-conscious affirmation of traditional norms' through a formulated agenda with an 'androcentric bias', serving as a 'strategy of containment',<sup>479</sup> there is a danger of judging the ancient texts from contemporary standards and this danger risks overlooking the theological context and significance of the texts. It is perhaps this point that Peter Brown has in mind when he describes the term 'using women "to think with"', as implying 'considerably more than the creation and manipulation of stereotypes'.<sup>480</sup>

The perception of the Church fathers' attitudes towards women as misogynistic has direct implications for the study of female martyrdom. Clark affirms that,

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deceived them both: the one was not found to be weaker and the other stronger', *Oration* 37.7, cited in G. Clark (1998a) 172

<sup>477</sup> Tertullian, *Ad Martyr.*, 4 (*ANF* 3: 695); *To His Wife*, I.4 (*ACW* 13: 14-15); cf. *On the Flesh of Christ* for the concept of Mary recapitulating Eve, 'so that what had been reduced to ruin by this sex, might by the selfsame sex be recovered to salvation', 17 (*ANF* 3: 536). Such positive attitudes towards women need to be taken into account when talking of misogyny or degradation of the female sex; Kari Elisabeth Børreson, 'Gender and Exegesis in the Latin Fathers', *Aug*, 40 (2000) 65-76, for the idea of "patristic feminism" in Clement and Augustine, who, on account of their significance and influence in early Christianity, should not be overlooked in this discussion

<sup>478</sup> Meyers (1988) 26

<sup>479</sup> E. A. Clark (1994) 170

<sup>480</sup> Brown (1988) 153 n.57

the “weakness” characteristic of the female sex serves to highlight the exemplary labors a few “token” women were able to perform...[but] even when the intent is to compliment, the praise is delivered via the denigration of women-in-general.<sup>481</sup>

This statement refers to the language that the fathers used to describe female martyrs and ascetics who displayed “manly strength”, “virile endurance”, and “valour above their sex”.<sup>482</sup> Clark asserts that, by employing such language, the fathers emasculated women and thereby discredited them when praise was due.<sup>483</sup> This view is also advocated by Jantzen, who claims that ‘the term ‘male’, again, was an honorific one, serving both to describe and to valorise actual men in contrast with actual women’.<sup>484</sup> For Jantzen, as for Clark, ‘the implicit message was that ‘woman’ is derogatory while ‘man’ is valorised’.<sup>485</sup>

Here Jantzen and Clark voice the concerns of a subject of interest in current scholarship on women in late antiquity; the conviction that women could only be virtuous if they first “became male”. This trope of becoming male is found in Jewish and Gnostic texts, as well as those from “orthodox” Christian circles.<sup>486</sup> Examples of this trope include the mother of the Maccabean martyrs who ‘aroused her female way of reasoning with male courage’;<sup>487</sup> Philo declared that ‘progress is indeed nothing else than the giving up of the female gender by changing into the male’;<sup>488</sup> the Gnostic *Gospel of Thomas* pronounced that ‘every

<sup>481</sup> E. A. Clark (1994) 166-67

<sup>482</sup> A few examples of this include Cyprian, *De Lapsis*, 2 (*ANCL* 8: 352); Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of St Macrina*, 1 (Miller [2005] 193); Augustine, *Serm.* 280.1 (*WSA* III/8: 72); Jerome, *Ep.*, 1.3, 1.4 (*NPNF* 6: 1-2); Paulinus of Nola, *Ep.*, 29.6, cited in Cloke (1995) 214

<sup>483</sup> E. A. Clark (1994) 167

<sup>484</sup> Jantzen (1995) 54

<sup>485</sup> *ibid.*, 58

<sup>486</sup> Miles (1989) 56

<sup>487</sup> 2 Maccabees 7:21, in Jan Willem van Henten and Friedrich Avemarie, *Martyrdom and Noble Death: Selected Texts from Graeco-Roman, Jewish, and Christian Antiquity* (London; New York: Routledge, 2002) 68; cf. Stephen D. Moore and Janice Capel Anderson, ‘Taking it Like a Man: Masculinity in 4 Maccabees’, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 117/2 (1998) 249-273

<sup>488</sup> Philo, *Quaestiones et Solutiones in Exodum*, I.8, cited in Elizabeth Castelli, “‘I Will Make Mary Male’: Pieties of the Body and Gender Transformation of Christian Women in Late Antiquity”, in Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub, *Body*

woman who makes herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven';<sup>489</sup> Domnina and her two daughters Bernike and Prosdoke were said to have displayed male minds in female bodies;<sup>490</sup> Perpetua had a vision in which she became a man;<sup>491</sup> Blandina's body was said to have been transformed through torture into the body of Christ.<sup>492</sup>

As Margaret Miles remarks, 'The metaphor most frequently used for women who undertook to live an uncompromisingly Christian faith was that they had "become male"'.<sup>493</sup> The implication of this metaphor, described by Kari Børreson as 'androcentric monism', is that women could only attain salvation by rising above their sex and assuming the specifically masculine *imago dei* in which Adam had been created.<sup>494</sup> In this context masculinity was linked with the Christian ideal. Consequently, the reasoning goes, while female martyrs were praised for exhibiting manly strength or virile endurance, what appears to have been praise for women did, in fact, underpin the traditional male-female hierarchy:

"Becoming male" marks for these thinkers the transcendence of gendered differences, but it does so only by reinscribing the traditional gender hierarchies of male over female, masculine over feminine.<sup>495</sup>

It is from this standpoint that scholars such as Clark and Jantzen have concluded that even when the Church fathers seemed to praise female martyrs, they actually affirmed the subordinate and inferior status of all women. This perspective is in danger of underestimating the significance of female martyrdom in early Christianity, as it interprets patristic praise of women as little more than a form of misogyny in disguise. Female martyrdom has sometimes been referred to as an exceptional context in early Christianity in which Christian women could

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*Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity* (New York; London: Routledge, 1991) 32

<sup>489</sup> *Gospel of Thomas*, 114, cited in Castelli (1991) 30

<sup>490</sup> Chrysostom, *Hom. Bernike.*, 11 (Mayer [2006] 166)

<sup>491</sup> *M. Perp.*, 10 (Musurillo, 119)

<sup>492</sup> *M. Lyons.* (Musurillo, 75)

<sup>493</sup> Miles (1991) 55

<sup>494</sup> Børreson (2000) 66; cf. Miles (1991) 56; Castelli (1991) 34

<sup>495</sup> Castelli (1991) 33

publicly attain equality with men through the freedom of self-expression, spiritual leadership, and the physical endurance of torture.<sup>496</sup> If one is to accept the conclusion of Clark and Jantzen, then the extraordinary significance of female martyrdom is devalued, and martyrdom is not seen as a context for spiritual equality, but rather as a situation that was manipulated to reinforce traditional gender hierarchies with the intention of reducing the significance of women in early Christianity.

However, the work of scholars like Rachel Moriarty has drawn attention to the complexities behind the metaphor of becoming male. Exploring the masculine metaphor that associated manliness with courage in the martyrdom accounts of Polycarp, the martyrs of Lyons, and Perpetua, Moriarty observes that ‘Early Christians do not come out well in current debate on gender, and idioms which identify courage with manliness seem to confirm the worst about them’.<sup>497</sup> However, while the martyrdom accounts may appear to support traditional gender hierarchies, Moriarty draws attention to the more subtle details that are easily overlooked. For example, she maintains that ‘manliness does not come automatically to those of the male sex’.<sup>498</sup> While courage was associated with manliness, men could easily fall short of that ideal, whereas women could surpass men in courage. Additionally, while women martyrs such as Blandina and Perpetua were depicted as crossing gender boundaries by changing into men, male martyrs could also be described in female and gynaecological terms.<sup>499</sup> For Moriarty, these facts demonstrate that the relationship between gender and virtue was not straightforward, but was the subject of active debate in classical antiquity and extending through to the second and third centuries of Christianity.<sup>500</sup>

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<sup>496</sup> For example, Stuart G. Hall, ‘Women Among the Early Martyrs’, in Diana Wood (ed.), *Martyrs and Martyrologies*, Studies in Church History, vol. 30 (Oxford; Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1993) 1-21; Rachel Moriarty, ‘Playing the Man – the Courage of Christian Martyrs, Translated and Transposed’, in R. N. Swanson (ed.), *Gender and Christian Religion*, Studies in Church History vol. 34 (Suffolk; Rochester, NY: The Boydell Press, 1998) 1-11, esp. 1-2

<sup>497</sup> Moriarty (1998) 1

<sup>498</sup> *ibid.*, 5

<sup>499</sup> *ibid.*, 8

<sup>500</sup> *ibid.*, 4



Furthermore, Moriarty observes that this debate is still ongoing today with the present focus on an inclusive language of gender. This context, she asserts, influences modern translations of martyrdom narratives, and consequently has the ability to slant perceptions of martyrdom in early Christianity. Moriarty uses the example of Perpetua to demonstrate how ancient concepts can be skewed by modern translations.<sup>501</sup> Perpetua's words *facta sum masculus* could be translated simply as "I became male", or, as many translations read, "I was made a man".<sup>502</sup> The first translation is based on the metaphorical association between masculinity and strength and is indicative of a transformation from weakness to strength. However, the second translation, perhaps informed by the modern phenomenon of sex-change,<sup>503</sup> is a heavily loaded translation that communicates the more drastic and body-focused sex transformation from female to male.<sup>504</sup>

The Church fathers must be seen within their particular context in which courage, endurance, and strength were qualities associated with masculinity. When seen in this context, their praise of female martyrs displaying manly courage or virile strength is not so surprising because the intellectual environment of which they were a part affirmed that courage was manly and strength was virile. By extension of the masculine metaphor, female martyrs who displayed both courage and strength were described as being manly and virile.

Drawing attention to the social and theological contexts of the Church fathers' attitudes, Mary Prokes has urged that patristic perceptions of the female body must be seen as 'part of their struggle, from within the limitations of their own historical moment, to understand and explicate what had been given through Revelation in Jesus Christ'.<sup>505</sup> If the Church fathers' use of a gendered vocabulary of virtue was conceived as conventional within their own contexts, and this vocabulary was not intended to vilify female martyrs but to praise them, then the theological significance of female martyrdom becomes visible.

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<sup>501</sup> *ibid.*, 9

<sup>502</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>503</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>504</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>505</sup> Prokes (1996) 12-13

When understood less as derogation and more as convention, the Church fathers' employment of masculine terms for the praise of female martyrs draws attention to the strength and the power of the women. As has been demonstrated in the previous chapters of this study, the martyred body was perceived as a locus of divine power and a physical revelation of the indwelling presence of Christ that fortified the martyr from within. If these points are put together – the assumed weakness of the female body, the perception of the martyred body as a locus of divine presence and power, and the praise of the strength of female martyrs – it starts to become clear that the Church fathers' use of “the masculine metaphor” served a theological purpose. The transformation of the weak female body into a strong and powerful witness forcefully attested to the indwelling presence and power of Christ.

#### ❖ Physical Infirmary, Spiritual Strength

The martyred body was a weak vessel that relied on the indwelling presence of Christ to fortify the body and strengthen the will in order to endure persecution. As Augustine declares:

The holy martyrs, you see, did not rely on themselves, but asked for relief from Christ. That's why they were also victorious...The martyrs say, *Unless the Lord were among us*, unless he had helped us, unless he had strengthened our hearts with faith, unless he had endowed us with patience, unless he had provided us with power as we fought, *they would perhaps have swallowed us alive* [Psalm 124:3].<sup>506</sup>

Augustine believed that every martyr was dependent on the strength of the indwelling Christ, ‘he was in them, and it was through him that they overcame’.<sup>507</sup> This indwelling presence of Christ was common to both male and female martyrs: ‘The strength, the fortitude, of Christ's martyrs, men and women alike, is Christ’.<sup>508</sup> Yet, as has been discussed, the early Church inherited the belief that women were weaker than men and so required external support and guidance.

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<sup>506</sup> *Serm.* 335F.2 (*WSA* III/9: 240), emphasis in original

<sup>507</sup> *Serm.* 335J.1 (*WSA* III/9: 252)

<sup>508</sup> *Serm.* 299E.1 (*WSA* III/8: 263)

However distasteful the concept of “the weaker sex” may be to a modern readership, it is precisely this assumed weakness that gives female martyrdom its significance. On account of its greater weakness, the body of the female martyr, transformed through torture, provides an even more forceful revelation of the fortifying presence of Christ:

If men alone, you see, stood out as being brave and strong in suffering, their courage would be attributed to their being the stronger sex. The reason the weaker sex too has been able to suffer bravely, is that God was able (sic.) make it possible in people of all sorts. Accordingly, be they men, be they women, in their tribulations they all ought to say, *The Lord is my strength* (Ps 118:14).<sup>509</sup>

For Augustine, if all the martyrs had been male then the strength and endurance of those martyrs would have been explained by the characteristic strength of the male sex. However, the fact that women were also present among the martyrs, and the fact that those women endured the same tortures as men, is understood as a revelation of Christ’s fortifying presence in the martyred body. Consequently, what may appear to be the affirmation of the traditional categorisation of “the stronger sex” and “the weaker sex” is, in fact, an example of how these categorisations were central to the expression of the theological significance of female martyrdom.

Because the female martyrs had to overcome the additional obstacle of physical weakness, they had a greater need to cling to Christ. As a result of this, female martyrs received even more praise because their endurance displayed the strength of their union with Christ. Augustine affirms this view:

A more splendid crown, I mean, is owed to those of the weaker sex...when their feminine frailty has not been undone under such enormous pressure. They had done well to cling to one man, to whom the one Church is presented as a chaste virgin. They had done well, I say, to cling to that man, from whom they had drawn the strength to withstand the devil.<sup>510</sup>

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<sup>509</sup> *Serm.* 299E.1 (*WSA* III/8: 263), emphasis in original

<sup>510</sup> *Serm.* 281.1 (*WSA* III/8: 78)

This distinctive feature of female martyrdom was not unique to Augustine. Chrysostom also acknowledged the theological significance of the female body as a powerful medium for revealing Christ. For Chrysostom, the physical weakness of the female body made women martyrs even more worthy of commemoration:

[W]hile I love and embrace them all, [I do so] especially when it happens to be women who are competing. For the weaker the vessel (cf. 1 Pet 3.7), the greater the grace, the more brilliant the trophy, the more famous the victory.<sup>511</sup>

This distinction between male and female martyrdom has recently been observed by Chris Jones, who notes that the bodies of female martyrs had the additional factor of being able to shock and surprise their audiences by overcoming the physical weakness of their sex, 'Although it was obviously the case that women were expected to be, and indeed were, treated in like manner to their male counterparts [during persecutions], this could not suppress a feeling of surprise'.<sup>512</sup> For Jones, this element of surprise was elicited as a result of the female martyr's contradiction of the strong male / weak female stereotype through the endurance of torture, 'It was not the fact that women were tortured and died so painfully that caused surprise, but the fact that they could show themselves the equals of men in their endurance'.<sup>513</sup>

While Jones's remarks are primarily focused on the reaction of surprise that arose within non-Christian audiences, and the power of unexpected endurance to shame pagan persecutors, a similar sense of surprise is also evident in early Christian reflections on martyrdom. In fact, this element of surprise was even more pronounced within Christian circles, as it was interpreted theologically as a proof of Christ's victory over death. One example of this is found in Chrysostom's homily on the female martyrs Domnina, Bernike, and Prosdoke. Here Chrysostom's surprise at the strength of the women is offered up in praise of God, 'Praise God! A woman braved death...The very vessel that is weak and

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<sup>511</sup> Chrysostom, *Hom. Drosis.*, 7 (Mayer [2006] 198)

<sup>512</sup> Jones (1993) 23-34, at 33

<sup>513</sup> *ibid.*, 34

fragile became an unassailable weapon. Women are challenging death. Who wouldn't be amazed?'<sup>514</sup>

Although some Church fathers believed that sexual difference lay in the body and not in the soul,<sup>515</sup> and affirmed that 'we judge moral excellences not by people's sex, but by their quality of spirit',<sup>516</sup> the significance of female martyrdom can only be fully recognised once ancient assumptions of the female sex and the female body have been taken into consideration. Once the concept of women as the weaker sex has been acknowledged, female martyrdom can be seen as a dramatic transformation that enabled women to overcome 'the weakness of their gender', in a lived exegesis of the baptismal statement of spiritual equality in Galatians 3:28.<sup>517</sup> Chrysostom's homily on Ignatius makes this point clear:

Many people from both this and that [gender] were heralded and crowned, so that you might learn in practice that "in Christ Jesus there is no male, no female" (Gal 3.28), that neither gender nor physical weakness nor age nor anything else of the sort could impede those running the race of piety.<sup>518</sup>

The martyrdom of women was understood as a dramatic transformation that was often described as a transcendence of the female sex. Sometimes this transcendence was understood as a process of "becoming male",<sup>519</sup> and at other times it was described more ambiguously as the exhibition of virtues or qualities that were not usually associated with femininity. A typical example of the second understanding is found in Cyprian's Epistles:

Blessed too are the women who are there with you as partners in your glorious confession...by displaying *valour above their sex*, by their steadfastness, they have set an example to the rest of womankind as well.<sup>520</sup>

<sup>514</sup> *Hom. Bernike.*, 1 (Mayer [2006] 158)

<sup>515</sup> Clement, *Miscellanies*, 4.8 (*ANCL* 12 : 165-67); G. Clark (1998a) 172

<sup>516</sup> Jerome, *Ep.*, 127.5 in E. A. Clark (1986) 27

<sup>517</sup> Chrysostom, *Hom. Ignatius.*, 1 (Mayer [2006] 103)

<sup>518</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>519</sup> The most powerful example being *M. Perp.*, 10 (Musurillo, 119)

<sup>520</sup> *Ep.*, 3.1, cited in Jones (1993) 23, emphasis added



This transformation enabled female martyrs to transcend the traditional association between physical weakness and femininity not only to elicit a sense of surprise, but also to provide an example for imitation.<sup>521</sup> While Cyprian wrote in the midst of surrounding persecutions, this association of physical weakness, spiritual strength, an element of surprise, and an encouragement towards imitation, remained powerful within the Church in times of relative peace. Towards the end of the fourth century, c.377 C.E., Ambrose of Milan composed a treatise, *Concerning Virgins*, in which he referred to the martyrdom of Agnes. Although now considered to be legendary, Agnes's death was popular in the early Church. One of the earliest martyrs venerated in Rome, she was also the most frequently depicted martyr after Peter and Paul.<sup>522</sup> Agnes was remembered not only for her death, but also for the fact that her death was a double martyrdom that preserved her chastity. It was this association between martyrdom and virginity that prompted Ambrose's discussion of the female martyr in his treatise on virgins.

Playing on the weakness of both Agnes's sex and her age, Ambrose claims that her martyrdom was even more glorious because of the astonishment that was elicited from the courage of such a young girl.<sup>523</sup> Ambrose declares, 'Girls of that age, in fact, can not endure even the stern faces of their parents, and when they are pricked by a pin they are likely to weep as if they had been inflicted with wounds'.<sup>524</sup> However, Agnes had courageously and fearlessly submitted her body to the soldier's sword.<sup>525</sup> The courage of that girl, who was so young that there were no iron bands wide enough to contain her wrists, led Ambrose to exclaim, 'let men marvel, let children not despair, let the married be amazed, let the unmarried imitate'.<sup>526</sup>

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<sup>521</sup> For women rising beyond the limits of their sex and providing an example for imitation, see *M. Lyons*. (Musurillo, 75); Palladius, *The Lausiaca History*, 41 (*ACW* 34: 117-19); Ambrose, *On Virgins*, I.2.5-9 (Ramsey [1997] 74-76); Augustine, *Serm.* 280.1, 281.1 (*WSA* III/8: 72, 78)

<sup>522</sup> Grig (2004) 79-85

<sup>523</sup> *On Virgins*, I.2.7-8 (Ramsey [1997] 75)

<sup>524</sup> *ibid.*, I.2.7 (75)

<sup>525</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>526</sup> *ibid.*, I.2.5 (74)

From Cyprian to Ambrose to Augustine, the fact that female martyrs had to overcome the frailty of their sex meant that their achievement was greater and their crown more glorious. By overcoming their physical weakness female martyrs left an example of faith that even men would find difficult to imitate; ‘for what thing might there be more glorious than these women, whom men may wonder at sooner than they may imitate?’<sup>527</sup> Yet, the transformation of the female martyr from weakness to strength not only provided a worthy example for future imitation, but also proof of God’s power working in the world, and proof of Christ’s continued presence in the community of the faithful. As Augustine had claimed, ‘where the battle is harder, the greater help is needed’.<sup>528</sup> This help came in the form of Christ, who had ‘transposed the weak members of his body into himself’.<sup>529</sup> The female martyrs, physically weaker than their male counterparts, and therefore requiring greater help from Christ, attested to the presence of the power of Christ through the transformation of their bodies.

The special relationship between the female martyr and Christ was often communicated in intimate terms. The body of the female martyr was filled with Christ, touched by Christ, held by Christ. This closeness was sometimes described in terms of spiritual marriage, as the female martyr was presented as a bride whose death was a climactic moment of intimate embrace with Christ. This is evident in Augustine’s description of the martyr Crispina. In speaking of Crispina’s death, Augustine alludes to the Song of Solomon 2:6 in order to present her as a bride of Christ:

O that his left hand were under my head,  
and that his right hand embraced me!

Evoking the sensual imagery of the Song of Solomon, Augustine described how Crispina’s physical weakness was fortified by her heavenly bridegroom, who supported her head with his left hand and embraced her with his right hand:

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<sup>527</sup> Augustine, *Serm.* 280.1 (*WSA* III/8: 72)

<sup>528</sup> *Serm.* 313A.1 (*WSA* III/9: 90)

<sup>529</sup> *Serm.* 31.3 (*WSA* III/2: 132)

Had the persecutor power to do anything, even against so delicate a woman? She was of the weaker sex, perhaps enfeebled by riches and quite frail in body in consequence of the life to which she had been accustomed. But what did all this signify, compared with the bridegroom whose left hand was beneath her head, whose right hand was embracing her?<sup>530</sup>

For Augustine the right hand of God was a metaphor for salvation, especially in the context of martyrdom. In his exposition of Psalm 137, Augustine links this concept with Crispina's death:

*[Y]our right hand saved me*, for there is one kind of salvation pertinent to the right hand and a different kind to the left. Temporal salvation, the well-being of the body, is the work of the left hand, but eternal salvation in the company of the angels belongs to the right...Think again about Crispina: she was slain, but did that mean God had abandoned her? By no means. He [the Lord] did not save her with his left hand, to be sure, but he did save her with his right.<sup>531</sup>

And yet, for Augustine, this embrace was more than an indication of Crispina's salvation through martyrdom. Augustine believed that Crispina, a member of the weaker sex, who had been weakened even further by a life of luxury, was fortified by the embracing presence of Christ. Looking back to the account of Crispina's martyrdom, one finds this message preserved and presented as Crispina's own words, 'My God', she says, 'he is at my side, helping me, strengthening his handmaid in all things so that she will not commit sacrilege'.<sup>532</sup> Playing on the weakness of the female sex, Augustine intensifies this concept of Christ's strengthening presence to such an extent that he asks, 'Was the enemy ever likely to overthrow one so fortified?'<sup>533</sup> Thus Crispina's martyrdom is depicted as a dramatic transformation from complete weakness to unconquerable power, and is interpreted as a proof of Christ's presence and power working within, and through, her body.

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<sup>530</sup> *En. Ps.*, 120.13 (*WSA* III/19: 524)

<sup>531</sup> *En. Ps.*, 137.14 (*WSA* III/20: 253)

<sup>532</sup> *M. Crisp.*, 3 (Musurillo, 307)

<sup>533</sup> *En. Ps.*, 120.13 (*WSA* III/19: 524)



Similarly intimate terms of closeness and embrace are found in Chrysostom's descriptions of female martyrs. In a homily on the martyr Drosis he explains:

For truly she had a weak body, and her gender was vulnerable to injury and her age was rather immature, but grace came and hid the weakness of all these elements, when it discovered that her enthusiasm was noble and her faith unwavering and her soul prepared for dangers.<sup>534</sup>

Chrysostom depicts Drosis as physically weak on account of her sex, and yet displaying strong faith. Drawing a distinction between physical weakness and spiritual strength, Chrysostom claims that grace concealed Drosis's physical weakness so that her body could become as strong as her faith. Of particular interest is the imagery that Chrysostom uses to describe this strengthening process. Alongside the metaphorical image of grace as a garment that clothed Drosis's weakness, Chrysostom also describes Drosis as being strengthened and supported by the hand of Christ; 'Christ himself held the martyr's holy head in his invisible hand and baptized her in the fire as if in water'.<sup>535</sup> Just as Augustine had described Crispina's martyrdom, so Chrysostom described the martyrdom of Drosis: Christ is present at the moment of the martyr's death, strengthening, supporting, and embracing her.

Chrysostom also depicted the martyrdom of Pelagia in similar terms of intimate contact and presence. Although on her own in a house surrounded by soldiers ready to take her to trial, Chrysostom assured his congregation that Pelagia was not really on her own because she had Christ by her side:

[S]he did everything with confidence, as if some friends and acquaintances were at her side. And rightly so! For she was not alone inside, but had Jesus as an adviser. He was by her side, he touched her heart, he cheered her soul, he alone cast out her fear.<sup>536</sup>

The belief in Christ's presence is also central to Chrysostom's homily on Domnina and her daughters Bernike and Prosdoke. These three women fled from

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<sup>534</sup> *Hom. Drosis.*, 7 (Mayer [2006] 199)

<sup>535</sup> *ibid.*, 10 (201)

<sup>536</sup> *Hom. Pelagia.* (Mayer [2003] 152)

Antioch to Edessa during the Diocletian persecutions in 302 C.E. and were remembered as martyrs as they took their own lives by drowning in order to avoid being raped by passing soldiers.<sup>537</sup> Describing how the women had fled for Edessa, Chrysostom declares, ‘Truly they were women who had Christ dwelling there with them...where the women weren’t just gathered, but also fleeing because of his name, how didn’t they attract his help all the more?’<sup>538</sup> While this statement presents an image of Christ dwelling *among* the women rather than *within* the women, Chrysostom also claims that the virginity of the two daughters was preserved in spite of their vulnerability because ‘they had the angels’ Master dwelling in their souls’.<sup>539</sup> The presence of Christ is again asserted at the moment of their martyrdom. As the three women entered into the river so that Domnina could drown her two daughters before taking her own life, Chrysostom saw ‘Christ in the midst of them’.<sup>540</sup>

One of the most vivid examples of how the body of the female martyr revealed the indwelling presence and power of Christ is found in the record of the martyrdom of Christians at Lyons and Vienne. Amongst those martyred was the slave girl Blandina, ‘through whom Christ proved that the things that men think cheap, ugly and contemptuous are deemed worthy of glory before God’.<sup>541</sup> Blandina’s death was recorded as a revelation of the divine power through the female body. Blandina’s mistress was concerned that she would not be able to confess Christ, ‘because of her bodily weakness’.<sup>542</sup> However, in contrast, Blandina was strengthened, for ‘tiny, weak, and insignificant as she was...she had put on Christ’.<sup>543</sup> This clothing amounted to a transformation from fragility to strength:

Blandina was filled with such power that even those who were taking turns to torture her in every way from dawn to dusk were weary and

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<sup>537</sup> Mayer (2006) 155

<sup>538</sup> *Hom. Bernike.*, 15 (Mayer [2006] 169)

<sup>539</sup> *ibid.* 14 (168)

<sup>540</sup> *ibid.* 19 (172)

<sup>541</sup> *M. Lyons.* (Musurillo, 67)

<sup>542</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>543</sup> *ibid.*, 75

exhausted...they were surprised that she was still breathing, for her entire body was broken and torn.<sup>544</sup>

Through torture, Blandina, a weak slave girl, was transformed into a powerful figure whose endurance elicited a sense of shock so that her persecutors 'themselves admitted that they were beaten'.<sup>545</sup> This record of astonishing endurance was preserved because it was believed to convey a theological message, as can be seen in the following extract:

Blandina was hung on a post and exposed as bait for the wild animals that were let loose on her. She seemed to hang there in the form of a cross, and by her fervent prayer she aroused intense enthusiasm in those who were undergoing their ordeal, for in their torment with their physical eyes they saw in the person of their sister him who was crucified for them.<sup>546</sup>

Blandina's ability to endure numerous tortures was attributed to Christ's presence within her body. W.H.C. Frend has said of Blandina, 'Her reward is her opportunity of complete imitation of Christ and identification with His own perfect martyrdom'.<sup>547</sup> Through her confession of Christ and her act of perfect discipleship, Blandina's body was conformed to Christ to such an extent that those who looked upon her body saw the crucified body of Christ. This is a remarkable example of how the body of the female martyr was perceived as an icon. Blandina's body, distorted and mutilated by repeated tortures, guides the eye towards Christ and proclaims eternal life.

All of these examples – Crispina, Drosis, Pelagia, Bernike, Prosdoke, Domnina, and Blandina – are linked together by the concept of Christ's presence within the female body, described in intimate terms of touch and embrace, and signifying the strengthening and fortifying power of God. This focus on interiority, contact, and union conveys the sense of Christ's presence within the body of the martyr. Christ is not external, above, or distant, but rather he enters the martyr, he is present in her body, and he is felt and experienced within her.

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<sup>544</sup> *ibid.*, 67

<sup>545</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>546</sup> *ibid.*, 75

<sup>547</sup> W.H.C. Frend, 'Blandina and Perpetua: Two Early Christian Heroines', in *Town and Country in the Early Christian Centuries* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1980) 174

This representation of female martyrs illustrates the ways in which the bodies of the female martyrs were seen to be iconic. When Augustine imagined the body of Crispina, he saw Christ's hands holding and embracing her; when Chrysostom imagined the body of Pelagia he saw Christ within her, touching her heart; when people remembered Blandina, they saw the body of Christ. Just like an icon, the physical body of the female martyr revealed the presence of Christ, proclaimed the divine power, and pointed towards deeper spiritual truths.<sup>548</sup>

What this shows is that, contrary to the trend of contemporary scholarship discussed previously in this chapter, the early Christian depiction of female martyrdom was more than the reaffirmation of traditional gender stereotypes. Rather, the weakness of the female body and the metaphor of the intimate relationship between Christ and martyr were factors that contributed towards the communication of a more significant depiction of the female martyr as an icon of Christ. Once this is acknowledged, the performance of martyrdom, seen here as a dramatic transformation from weakness to strength, reveals the female martyr preaching the Christian message through her body. The female martyr proclaims the presence of Christ, the power of God, and the cosmic victory of eternal life over death.

The iconic body of the female martyr was also perceived as a physical symbol of a new era in salvation history. The martyred body was an icon that pointed forwards towards a future eternal life and also stretched back into the sacred past. The transformation of the female martyr was not seen in isolation but was understood on a deeper level, as the image of the strong woman courageously leaping towards death was perceived as a cosmic reversal in which the Devil was overpowered by women. This reversal was interpreted as a visual proof of the power and presence of Christ.<sup>549</sup> As Chrysostom declared in a homily on the martyrs Bernike, Prosdoke, and Domnina:

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<sup>548</sup> For the representation of people as living icons see James A. Francis, 'Living Icons: Tracing a Motif in Verbal and Visual Representations From the Second to Fourth Centuries C.E.', *AJP*, 124 (2003) 575-600

<sup>549</sup> Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word*, 27, 28, 29 (NPNF 4: 50-51)

[P]reviously nothing was stronger than it [Death] and nothing weaker than us. But now nothing is weaker than it and nothing stronger than us. Do you see how outstanding the reversal is? How God made the strong weak and rendered the weak strong, demonstrating his power to us in both instances?<sup>550</sup>

The notion of female transformation as part of salvation history had an ironic element, as the femininity of the female martyr was linked to the femininity of Eve. This association emphasised that while a woman had been used by the Devil to bring death into the world, women were now overpowering the Devil to attain eternal life. Thus Athanasius said of the Devil, ‘so weak has he become, that even women who were formerly deceived by him, now mock at him as dead and paralyzed’.<sup>551</sup> Chrysostom also introduced this element of ironic reversal and cosmic recapitulation in a homily on Drosis:

A woman braved death; a woman who brought death into our life – the Devil’s own ancient weapon – defeated the Devil’s power...For, tell me, what greater sign of that resurrection do you seek, when you see that so great a reversal of reality has taken place? Women are challenging death, something which before this time was frightening and terrifying even to holy men.<sup>552</sup>

Later in the same homily, this reversal is succinctly conveyed with the words, ‘The first [woman] sinned and died; this one died, so that she wouldn’t sin’.<sup>553</sup>

The association of the female martyrs with Eve is also expressed by Augustine:

Old men have been crowned, young men crowned, teenagers have been crowned, boys crowned, men have been crowned, women crowned. And among women every age has been crowned. Nor did the female sex say, “I am unequal, because of my sex, to subduing the devil.” It concentrated rather on overthrowing the enemy by whom it had been overthrown, and outfighting by faith the one by whom it had allowed itself to be seduced.<sup>554</sup>

<sup>550</sup> *Hom. Bernike.*, 2 (Mayer [2006] 159)

<sup>551</sup> *On the Incarnation of the Word*, 27 (NPNF 4: 51)

<sup>552</sup> *Hom. Bernike.*, 1 (Mayer [2006] 158-59)

<sup>553</sup> *Hom. Drosis.*, 7 (Mayer [2006] 199)

<sup>554</sup> *Serm.* 305A.2 (WSA III/8: 325)

Earlier in this chapter I introduced the trend of contemporary scholarship that views patristic attitudes towards women as misogynistic on account of their incorporation of all women into the figure of Eve. However, as we have just seen, in the context of martyrdom, Christian women were associated with Eve in order to create a juxtaposition to highlight the differences between them and to present the female martyr recapitulating Eve through cosmic reversal. While Eve had transgressed God's command, been deceived by the Devil, and given birth to death, the female martyr believed in Christ, overpowered the Devil, and was born into eternal life. This association was intended to distinguish the female martyr from Eve and to convey the existence of a new era in salvation history. In fact, rather than being incorporated into Eve, the female martyr was more closely associated with Mary. As John Chrysostom elaborates:

Even women now poke fun at death and girls mock passing away and quite young, unmarried virgins skip into the very stings of Hades and suffer no ill effects. All of these blessings we experience because of Christ, born of a virgin.<sup>555</sup>

[E]ven through those whom the enemy controlled is he captured now. At least, recently the Devil killed Adam because of a virgin; after this through a virgin Christ conquered the Devil, and the sword that had been sharpened by him against us cut off the serpent's head.<sup>556</sup>

In this context of comparison with Eve and Mary, the female martyrs may have suffered the weakness of Eve, but they also shared the grace of Mary: while Mary had carried Christ in her womb, the female martyrs carried Christ in their bodies.

When men like Augustine claimed that the female martyrs were 'women being true to Christ, not like women, but forgetful of their sex', we should not disregard these comments as 'The hoary old chauvinist assumption that women are not naturally brave, like men', as does the footnote to this quote.<sup>557</sup> This judgement fails to grasp the central point. Rather, statements like that of

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<sup>555</sup> Chrysostom, *Hom. Pelagia.*, 1 (Mayer [2003] 149-50)

<sup>556</sup> Chrysostom, *Hom. Drosis.*, 7 (Mayer [2006] 198-99); for the more general association between women and Mary through which women are honoured, see Augustine, *Serm.* 159B.10 (*WSA* III/11: 156)

<sup>557</sup> Augustine, *Serm.* 299D.7 (*WSA* III/8: 261, 262n.13)

Augustine should be read in the context of an inherited gendered vocabulary of virtue *and* within the context of a deep-felt faith that informed early Christian understandings of martyrdom. Only then can the theological significance of such words be recognised and the importance of female martyrdom be acknowledged.

❖ **Female Martyr, Holy *Mater***

The books of Second and Fourth Maccabees record the persecution of the Jews under Antiochus Epiphanes in the second century B.C.E.<sup>558</sup> Both books detail Antiochus' attempt to enforce the abandonment of ancestral religions and the adoption of Hellenistic culture, recording that he ordered Jewish burnt offerings in the Temple to cease, copies of the Law to be destroyed, circumcision and Sabbath observation to be forbidden, and Jews to consume the flesh of pigs that had been offered in sacrifice.<sup>559</sup> Fourth Maccabees is a conflation and elaboration of the earlier 2 Maccabees 6:18-31 and 7:1-42, making central an incident in which Eleazar (an elderly priest), an anonymous widow, and her seven sons were tortured and killed for refusing to eat pork that had been sacrificed to idols at the monthly celebration of the king's birthday.<sup>560</sup> This event, spanning fourteen chapters of the book, is provided as a stoical illustration of the superiority of reason over the emotions and as a lesson for edification towards the imitation of Eleazar, the mother, and her seven sons.

After introductory remarks, Fourth Maccabees describes the trial, torture and death of Eleazar, which is provided as a proof of the sovereignty of reason, an example for imitation, and an expiatory sacrifice for the Jewish people (5:4-6:30). The book then relates the trial of the seven brothers, each of whom is individually ordered to eat the meat and, following his refusal, is horrifically tortured and

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<sup>558</sup> 2 Maccabees 6:18-31 and 2 Maccabees 7:1-42 (van Henten & Avemarie [2002] 64-70); *Fourth Maccabees* (Hadas [1953] 145-243)

<sup>559</sup> 2 Maccabees 6:1-11, in John R. Bartlett, *The First and Second Books of the Maccabees*, The Cambridge Bible Commentary Series (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1973); 4 Maccabees 4:22-26

<sup>560</sup> For a review of the debate over the date of composition of Fourth Maccabees see Shaw (1996) 276n18; Moore & Anderson (1998) 251n4

killed (8:1-12:19). The two primary motivations for their actions are given as the observance of the Law and the anticipation of posthumous reward.<sup>561</sup>

Although the mother of the seven brothers is hardly mentioned, the reader is reminded of her continual and observing presence when the author relates that she encouraged her sons towards firmness of faith with private exhortation and encouragement (12:7; 16:12-24). After the death of her seventh son, the mother takes centre stage and becomes the subject of a lengthy and climactic panegyric in celebration of her constancy, courage, and strength (14:11-17:6). Towards the end of this praise, the author returns to the event to refer to the mother's death quite incidentally, "Certain of the guards declared that when she too was about to be seized and put to death, she flung herself into the fire, so that no one might touch her body" (17:1). Despite the fact that her death is passed over with relative brevity and detachment, Fourth Maccabees is notable for the prominence given to the figure of the mother.<sup>562</sup> Her role in the narrative is central, as her encouragement of her sons towards death is provided as the supreme example of the sovereignty of reason over emotion, in this case, the emotions associated with maternal affection and the bond of love developed from childbirth; 'count it not a marvellous thing that reason prevailed over tortures in the case of those men, when the mind of even a woman despised torments even more manifold' (14:11).

The Maccabean mother is said to have suffered even greater torture than her sons, as she watched and encouraged them to die for the Law. Watching the torture and death of each of her sons, the mother was set aflame with maternal affection and the suffering of each of the seven sons was transposed onto the mother, who is described as having suffered seven deaths (15:22). This suffering is made more acute by the vivid description of her sons' tortures (15:14-20), and by the almost scientific deviation into the power of maternal affection in the animal kingdom (14:14-19). By encouraging her sons towards their deaths, the

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<sup>561</sup> For the concept of posthumous reward and divine judgement see 4 Maccabees 9:8-9; 10:31; 13:17, 16:3, 25; 18:23; cf. Boyarin (1999) 95

<sup>562</sup> Robin D. Young 'The "Woman with the Soul of Abraham": Traditions about the Mother of the Maccabean Martyrs', in A. Levine (ed.), *"Women Like This": New Perspectives on Jewish Women in the Greco-Roman World*, Society of Biblical Literature (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholar's Press, 1991) 67-81, at 74-75



mother is presented as having mastered maternal affection – here the strongest of the passions – and is depicted as the highest example of Stoic *andreia*. The irony of this has recently been observed in a study of gender in Fourth Maccabees, which admits that ‘the prime exemplar of masculinity in 4 Maccabees is a woman’.<sup>563</sup> Fourth Maccabees is an example of how the complex of gender in the ancient world could be used to convey or emphasise a particular point. It was precisely on account of her femininity – her weak mind, her weak body, her maternal bond of love – that the Maccabean mother provided such a powerful witness to the ability of reason to rule over the emotions.

Throughout Fourth Maccabees the mother is depicted in relation to her gender; as a woman she was created by the rib from Adam’s side (18:7); as a young girl she remained chaste within her father’s house (18:7); when she was married she lived faithfully with her husband (18:9); she had experienced the pangs of childbirth (15:7); she was tortured by maternal affection while watching her sons die before her (16:3; 17:7). And yet, on account of her strength and constancy she is said to have displayed the soul of Abraham (14:20), revealed ‘manly courage’ (15:23), given an example of athletic determination (17:11-16), and exhibited virile endurance (15:29-30; 17:2-4).

It is precisely this link between femininity-weakness and masculinity-strength that enabled the Maccabean mother to be held as an example that was even more powerful than Eleazar’s eloquent final words or the horrific tortures endured by her seven sons. For despite, or indeed, on account of, the weakness associated with femininity, old age, and the maternal bond of love, the Maccabean mother provided an unparalleled example, ‘If, then, a woman - elderly at that, and the mother of seven sons - endured seeing her children tortured to death, it must be acknowledged that religious reason is sovereign over the emotions’ (16:1).

Fourth Maccabees was influential in the Church in the second half of the fourth century as the central figures became appropriated as Christian proto-martyrs, the so-called “Maccabean martyrs”.<sup>564</sup> This is attested in the fourth

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<sup>563</sup> Moore & Anderson (1998) 252

<sup>564</sup> For the Maccabees included in a mid-fourth century Syriac martyrology see Frend (1965) 21, and Margaret Schatkin, ‘The Maccabean Martyrs’, *VC*, 28

century works that have been preserved today, among the most important being Gregory Nazianzen's *Oration 15* preached at Nazianzus in 362,<sup>565</sup> Augustine's *Sermons* 300, 301, 301A given in North Africa towards the end of the fourth century,<sup>566</sup> and three of Chrysostom's homilies on the Maccabees preached in Antioch and Constantinople, also towards the end of the fourth century.<sup>567</sup>

Despite the tension that arose from the resistance to accept these Jewish figures as Christian martyrs,<sup>568</sup> the existence of a cult of the Maccabean martyrs is evidenced by the Church of the Maccabees in Antioch,<sup>569</sup> is suggested by Chrysostom's claim that 'the whole countryside poured into the city when the festival of the Maccabees was under celebration',<sup>570</sup> and is attested to by the centralisation of the cult in Antioch, where the relics of the Maccabean martyrs were held.

Due to the limits of this study I will be focusing mainly on the homilies of John Chrysostom (c. 349-407 C.E.). The reason for this focus is primarily based on the fact that Chrysostom lived in Antioch – the centre of the cult – between 349 and 397.<sup>571</sup> It was at this location that there existed a prominent and vibrant Jewish community that was not only made visible by its two synagogues in

(1974) 97-113, at 104; for the cult becoming established in the mid-fourth century during the reign of Julian the Apostate see Martha Vinson, 'Gregory Nazianzen's Homily 15 and the Genesis of the Christian Cult of the Maccabean Martyrs', *Byzantion*, 64 (1994) 166-92. While the cult proper may be dated to this period, an earlier acceptance of the Maccabean martyrs in earlier periods of persecution is evident in Cyprian, *Exhortation to Martyrdom, Addressed to Fortunatus* (ANF V: 496-507), and Origen, *Exhort. Mart.* (Greer [1979] 41-79)

<sup>565</sup> (FC 107: 72-84). For the significance of this oration for the development of the cult of the Maccabean martyrs see Vinson (1994) 166-92

<sup>566</sup> (Hill [1994] 276-281, 282-89, 290-99)

<sup>567</sup> *On Eleazar and the Seven Boys* (Mayer [2006] 121-34), hereafter *Eleazar.*; idem, *Homily 1 on the Maccabees* (Mayer [2006] 137-45), hereafter *Maccabees.1.*; idem, *Homily 2 on the Maccabees* (Mayer [2006] 148-53), hereafter *Maccabees.2.*

<sup>568</sup> This is evident in Nazianzus in 362 C.E., Gregory Nazianzen, *Oration 15.1* (FC 107: 71); in Constantinople c.398-9 C.E., Chrysostom, *Eleazar.*, 4-15 (Mayer [2006] 123-33); and in North Africa, Augustine, *Serm.* 300.1-6 (WSA III/8: 276-279), date uncertain

<sup>569</sup> Augustine, *Serm.* 300.6 (WSA III/8: 279); Leemans et al. (2003) 116

<sup>570</sup> *On the Holy Martyrs*, 1 (Mayer [2003] 118)

<sup>571</sup> Mayer and Allen (2000) 12

Antioch's Jewish quarter and in Daphne, but also boasted of a shrine in Daphne that is believed to have housed the relics of the Maccabees.<sup>572</sup> This shrine – the Cave of Matrona – was a popular site that served as the locus of the Jewish cult, was frequented by those hoping to be healed from illnesses, and even attracted Christians.<sup>573</sup>

Until the reign of Theodosius in 379 C.E. the Jewish and Christian cults of these martyrs co-existed in Antioch.<sup>574</sup> The tensions that arose from the close proximity of Christians and Jews are evident, as Chrysostom preached against those Christians who would enthusiastically join in with the Jewish celebrations, particularly admonishing against visiting the Cave of Matrona.<sup>575</sup> A desire for Christian differentiation from the Jewish cult is suggested by the building of the specifically Christian “Church of the Maccabees”,<sup>576</sup> and the modification of the Christian calendar to move the feast day of the Maccabean martyrs from December, which was linked with the Jewish festival of Hanukkah, to 1<sup>st</sup> August.<sup>577</sup>

While Antioch provides an interesting location to situate this discussion of Chrysostom and the Maccabean mother, so too does Constantinople. Although this city did not have the same geographical links with the Maccabean martyrs as did Antioch, Constantinople appears to have had a shrine dedicated to the Maccabees and also a Church of the Maccabees situated in the suburb of Sykae.<sup>578</sup> While this might appear to suggest that the cult in Constantinople was strong,

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<sup>572</sup> For the view that the Christian cult of the Maccabees quickly appropriated the relics of the martyrs see Schatkin (1974) 104. This view is opposed by Vinson (1994) 185n58, who argues that the evidence for this argument may equally point towards the opposite, i.e. that the Christian cult at Antioch was not in possession of the relics. This latter view, claiming that the relics were held at the Jewish ‘Cave of Matrona’ in the nearby suburb of Daphne, is supported by Mayer and Allen (2000) 13

<sup>573</sup> Mayer and Allen (2000) 12; for the Cave of Matrona attracting Christians see Chrysostom, *Against the Jews Oration 1*, 852, 855 (Mayer and Allen [2000] 160, 166)

<sup>574</sup> Vinson (1994) 188

<sup>575</sup> *Against the Jews Oration 1*, 852 (Mayer and Allen [2000] 160)

<sup>576</sup> Mayer and Allen (2004) 18

<sup>577</sup> Mayer (2006) 136

<sup>578</sup> *ibid.*, 119

Chrysostom encountered resistance to the cult, as certain Christians refused to commemorate the Maccabees as Christian martyrs, claiming that the Maccabees had died for the Law and not for Christ.<sup>579</sup> Thus, the significance of Chrysostom for this discussion is appropriate because of his location at Antioch and also because of the tensions that he encountered between Christianity and Judaism in both Antioch and Constantinople.

Intent on justifying the status of the mother and her sons as “Christians before Christ”, Chrysostom depicted the martyrdom of the Maccabees in the same framework of imagery that he used to understand and describe other Christian martyrs: the martyrdom was a spectacular performance enacted before a hostile crowd, the mother, and God;<sup>580</sup> the martyrs were lights that shone brighter than the stars;<sup>581</sup> they revealed the power of God through their bodies,<sup>582</sup> and they were exemplars encouraging imitation.<sup>583</sup> Furthermore, Chrysostom overtly associated the martyrs’ deaths with Christ, asserting, ‘their bodies are precious, since they received blows for their very own Master’s sake, since they bear identifying marks because of Christ’.<sup>584</sup> For Chrysostom, the Maccabean martyrs were firmly located within the genealogy of the suffering Church and its sacred history.

Chrysostom’s praise of the Maccabean martyrs places an exceptional emphasis on the mother, who is presented as the central character of the martyrdom performance. This is evident in Chrysostom’s homily *On the Holy Maccabees and their Mother*, which is almost entirely dedicated to the mother.<sup>585</sup>

<sup>579</sup> *Eleazar.*, 4 (Mayer [2006] 123)

<sup>580</sup> *Maccabees.2*, 2 (Mayer [2006] 149); this is more pronounced in Augustine, *Serm.* 300.1, 6; 301.1 (*WSA* III/8: 276, 279-80, 282); The depiction of the Maccabean martyrs as part of the North African interpretation of martyrdom as spectacle has been acknowledged by Grig (2004) 42; see also Gregory Nazianzen, *Oration* 15.7, 9 (*FC* 107: 78, 80); Origen, *Exhort. Mart.*, 23 (Greer [1979] 57)

<sup>581</sup> *Maccabees.1*, 1 (Mayer [2006] 137); cf. 4 Maccabees 17:5

<sup>582</sup> *Maccabees.1*, 3 (Mayer [2006] 138)

<sup>583</sup> *ibid.*, 11 (142, 145); *idem*, *Eleazar.*, 16 (Mayer [2006] 133-34); *idem*, *Maccabees.2*, 6 (Mayer [2006] 153); see also Gregory Nazianzen, *Oration* 15.3, 9, 12 (*FC* 107: 73, 82, 84); Augustine, *Serm.* 300.6 (*WSA* III/8: 279); Origen, *Exhort. Mart.*, 22-27 (Greer [1979] 55-59)

<sup>584</sup> *Maccabees.1*, 1 (Mayer [2006] 137-38); Gregory Nazianzen, *Oration* 15.1 (*FC* 107: 72)

<sup>585</sup> (Mayer [2006] 137-46)

In this homily Chrysostom depicts Eleazar, the mother, and the seven sons as a group of spiritual athletes united in physical weakness; either by youth or old age, they were ‘a useless age group’.<sup>586</sup> From this group, Chrysostom identifies the mother as the weakest member. On account of her female frailty and the emotions associated with motherhood she was ‘the weaker among them – the wife, the old woman, the mother of seven children’.<sup>587</sup>

While the author of Fourth Maccabees had given the mother a prominent position as a paradigm of the sovereignty of reason over the emotions, Chrysostom elevated the woman as an example of how the female body could express theological truth and reveal Christ. The body of the mother, weakened by her sex and her advanced age, more forcefully revealed the strength of Christ’s indwelling power than did the body of a healthy and strong man:

[W]henver you see a woman, who is shaky, elderly, who requires a walking-stick, entering a contest and destroying a tyrant’s rage, defeating incorporeal powers, conquering the Devil with ease, smashing his strength with considerable force, marvel at the president of the games’ grace, be astonished at Christ’s power.<sup>588</sup>

As indicated in the above words, women, such as the mother of the Maccabees, were considered to be weak on account of their sex and advanced age, both of which formed obstacles that made the path of martyrdom rough.<sup>589</sup> In addition to these obstacles was maternal affection. Chrysostom claims that the Devil further softened the mother’s resolve and weakened her will by forcing her to watch her sons being tortured in horrific ways, so that the Devil ‘might then easily attack her in her weakened condition’.<sup>590</sup> The pain of this maternal affection was so great that Chrysostom equated it with a living martyrdom, ‘she endured the pain

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<sup>586</sup> *Maccabees.1*, 2 (Mayer [2006] 138)

<sup>587</sup> *ibid.* 5 (139)

<sup>588</sup> *ibid.* 3 (138)

<sup>589</sup> *ibid.* 5 (139); Cyprian, *Exhort.Mart.*, 11 (*ANF* 5: 504)

<sup>590</sup> *Maccabees.1*, 3 (Mayer [2006] 140)

more severely with each and every one of them, and was slain with each and every one of them'.<sup>591</sup>

The spiritual strength of the woman weakened by sex, age, and maternal affection evoked astonishment and wonder:

For even if she was a philosopher, she was still a mother...Even if she was zealous, she also shared a woman's nature. Even if she seethed with the zeal of piety, she was also restrained by the bond of child-birth...even if a person were made of stone, even if her stomach were made of steel, wouldn't she have been utterly churned up, wouldn't she have experienced something of the kind both a woman and mother were likely to feel?<sup>592</sup>

Chrysostom explains that the reason why the mother could endure such tortures was because of the power of Christ. Chrysostom imagines Christ saying, 'I'm not the kind of president of the games to entrust everything to the ability of the competitors. Instead, I stand by and assist and extend a hand to my athletes, and the bulk of their successes occur as a result of my patronage'.<sup>593</sup> Fortified with divine power and supported by the hand of Christ, the weak body of the elderly mother displayed 'the ineffable power of the one who set up the contest'.<sup>594</sup>

Not only was the mother an example of a Christian before Christ, but she was also a pre-Christian proof of the New Testament Scriptures.<sup>595</sup> Origen had previously declared that the Maccabean mother proved that 'The Lord is my strength and my song' and 'I can do all things in Him who strengthens me, Christ Jesus our Lord'.<sup>596</sup> In a similar vein, Chrysostom demonstrated that the mother was an illustration that 'his [Christ's] power is perfected in weakness'.<sup>597</sup> By this

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<sup>591</sup> *ibid.*, 5, 9 (140, 143); *idem*, *Maccabees.2*, 4 (Mayer [2006] 151); Augustine, *Serm.* 300.6, 301.1 (*WSA* III/8: 279, 282); Cyprian, *Exhort.Mart.*, 11 (*ANF* 5: 503-05); Origen, *Exhort.Mart.*, 27 (Greer [1979] 59)

<sup>592</sup> *Maccabees.1*, 5 (Mayer [2006] 140-41)

<sup>593</sup> *ibid.*, 2 (138)

<sup>594</sup> *ibid.*, 4 (139)

<sup>595</sup> Jean LaPorte, *The Role of Women in Early Christianity*, *Studies in Women and Religion*, vol.7 (New York; Toronto: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1982) 10

<sup>596</sup> Origen, *Exhort.Mart.*, 27 (Greer [1979] 59), citing Ps. 118:14, and Phil. 4:13, and 1 Tim. 1:12

<sup>597</sup> *Maccabees.1*, 4 (Mayer [2006] 139), citing 2 Cor. 12:9

Chrysostom not only affirmed that the mother was truly a *Christian* martyr fortified by Christ and dying for Christ, but also that her life and death were proofs and illustrations of the Christian Scriptures.

In my previous discussion of martyrdom as a form of preaching I referred to Chrysostom's depiction of the martyrs teaching silently through their bodies, 'uttering voice not with their tongue, but with their deeds'.<sup>598</sup> The Maccabean mother is a clear example of this. She was a Christian exemplar because in her endurance of torture and her death she exhorted the community with her actions, 'leaving behind for us substantial comfort and counsel; *advice through her actions* that we should brave every trouble with a healthy soul and lofty mind'.<sup>599</sup> Chrysostom depicts her as a teacher, a preacher, and a philosopher, whose example edified the whole of humankind. Her endurance left a pattern that is imitated by martyrs;<sup>600</sup> women are to learn from her patience and courage;<sup>601</sup> the young are to take the mother as a teacher and the old to take her as a virtuous companion of like age;<sup>602</sup> she is an example of the ideal Christian mother to be emulated in the Christian household.<sup>603</sup>

Naturally the Maccabean mother provided a paradigmatic example of a virtuous Christian woman for the female members of the Churches in Antioch and Constantinople.<sup>604</sup> However, precisely because of her femininity, the Maccabean mother was not only an example for the edification of every woman in the Antiochene and Constantinopolitan Churches, but also for the men of those communities. If this woman, weakened by femininity, motherhood, and age, had achieved such virtue and faith, then so could men. Men were advised to inscribe her contests upon their hearts as a perpetual counsel and an example for

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<sup>598</sup> *A Homily on the Holy Martyrs* (Mayer [2003] 119)

<sup>599</sup> *Maccabees.1*, 10 (Mayer [2006] 144), emphasis added

<sup>600</sup> *ibid.* 11 (145); Augustine, *Serm.* 300.6 (*WSA* III/8: 279)

<sup>601</sup> Augustine, *Serm.* 300.6 (*WSA* III/8: 279)

<sup>602</sup> *Eleazar.*, 16 (Mayer [2006] 133-34)

<sup>603</sup> *Maccabees.1*, 8 (Mayer [2006] 142); *idem*, *Maccabees.2*, 6 (Mayer [2006] 152); Gregory Nazianzen, *Oration* 15.9 (*FC* 107: 82); Basil, *Letter* 6 (*LCL* 190: 41-42)

<sup>604</sup> For female presence in Chrysostom's audience see W. Mayer, 'Female Participation and the Late Fourth-Century Preacher's Audience', *Aug*, 39 (1999) 139-47

imitation,<sup>605</sup> and fathers were advised to take her as a figure to be imitated.<sup>606</sup> The example of the Maccabean mother also extended beyond the family unit, as men and women living in virginity and practising asceticism were encouraged to take her as a philosopher and a teacher to instruct them in a life of Christian virtue.<sup>607</sup> The Maccabean mother left behind an example that spoke both to ascetic and married Christians:

[L]et us all pray together, both those who inhabit the cities, and those who spend their lives in the deserts, and those who practice virginity and those who shine in holy marriage, and those who disdain everything associated with the present and crucify their body, that through invoking the same bold speech as her we can be considered worthy of the same race as her.<sup>608</sup>

The fact that the Maccabean mother was a martyr even before Christ meant that she not only provided a valuable and accessible example of faith, but that no Christian had any excuse for failing to imitate her example:

For what man, what woman, what old person, what young person who is afraid of dangers brought against them because of Christ will now attain pardon or will have a defense, when a woman, and an old one at that, and a mother of so many children, and one who competed before the coming of grace when the gates of Death were still closed, when sin was not yet extinguished, nor death defeated, can be seen enduring with such great enthusiasm and courage so many tortures because of God?<sup>609</sup>

With this statement Chrysostom simultaneously shames those who were weak in faith and love while encouraging them towards virtue with the positive example of the Maccabean mother.<sup>610</sup> As Margaret Miles has observed, ‘Male interpreters used accounts of women who “became male” to shame men into similar behaviour: if the “weaker sex” can act so heroically, the reasoning went, men

<sup>605</sup> *Maccabees.1*, 11 (Mayer [2006] 145)

<sup>606</sup> *Maccabees.2*, 6 (Mayer [2006] 152)

<sup>607</sup> *ibid.*, 6 (152-53)

<sup>608</sup> *ibid.*, 6 (153)

<sup>609</sup> *Maccabees.1*, 10 (Mayer [2006] 145); Gregory Nazianzen, *Oration* 15.1, 2, 11 (*FC* 107: 72, 83)

<sup>610</sup> For the rhetoric of shaming men with the figure of the woman see Elizabeth A. Clark, ‘Sex, Shame, and Rhetoric. En-Gendering Early Christian Ethics’, *JAAR*, 59:2 (1992) 221-245



should be ashamed not to do likewise'.<sup>611</sup> Here Chrysostom employs a rhetorical device to shame the male community, who are considered to be weaker than the woman they refuse to venerate as a martyr. Consequently, the female martyr spoke to men and women alike: women were encouraged that the weakness of their sex was no longer an obstacle, and men were encouraged that if members of "the weaker sex" are able to achieve such exemplary virtue then so too are men.

Furthermore, the example of the Maccabean mother surpassed that of other female martyrs because her example was not only accessible but also universal. The Maccabean mother was not only a woman, but she was elderly, a mother, and she lived before Christ's victory over death. While some Christians had expressed concern or resistance over accepting the Maccabean mother as a Christian martyr, Chrysostom claims that she is not only a Christian martyr, but she is a brilliant and shining proof of the power of Christ and an unsurpassable example of faith for the edification of all humankind. In fact, Chrysostom claims, she is 'even more brilliant' than the other martyrs, as she overcame the additional obstacle of conquering the Devil even before the triumphant victory of Christ had cleared the way for the path of martyrdom that had as yet remained untrodden.<sup>612</sup>

In his discussion of the martyred body as a site of political resistance, Brent D. Shaw observes that persecution enabled Christian martyrs, such as the Maccabees, 'to speak through their bodies'.<sup>613</sup> This is evident in the example of the Maccabean mother. Chrysostom perceived the mother's weak body as a locus of divine power that revealed and proclaimed Christ. As a Christian proto-martyr, she was a teacher of faith, a preacher of Christ, and an instructor of virtue. Embodying the gospel and displaying strength despite weakness, the Maccabean mother spoke with her body, producing a *sermo corporis* for the instruction, inspiration, and encouragement of the Christian community. The Maccabean mother, singled out by Chrysostom, Augustine, and Gregory Nazianzen, continued to "speak" to the Christian community and urge them towards virtue. In a sermon preached in the mid-fifth century in memory of the Maccabean

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<sup>611</sup> Miles (1989) 207n.19

<sup>612</sup> *Eleazar.*, 5 (Mayer [2006] 124)

<sup>613</sup> Shaw (1996) 278

martyrs, Pope Leo referred to the popular enthusiasm and devotion of the Christian community for the Maccabean mother:

No, you could not have failed to understand the instruction which you received in so great a series of events when, with your exultant and clamorous affection you gave honor [sic] to the glorious mother of the seven martyrs, who suffered indeed with each single son but was crowned in all of them.<sup>614</sup>

With this special reference to the mother of the Maccabees, Leo, like Chrysostom, urged the Christian community to take the mother as a moral instructor and to learn from her example, for ‘Things that have been heard become tiresome if they are not taken up to be imitated’.<sup>615</sup>

#### ❖ Perpetua: Preaching by Performance

The noblewoman, young mother, and female martyr Vibia Perpetua was seen and depicted in a similar light to the Maccabean mother. Captured, tried, tortured, and killed among a group of North African Christians in 202/3 C.E. during the Severan persecution, Perpetua and her legacy were preserved by her own hand in the *Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis*.<sup>616</sup> This account – the earliest extant text attributed to a woman – is a composite text that pivots around Perpetua’s prison diary. Perpetua’s account of her imprisonment, her four hostile encounters with her father, and her visions while in prison are introduced and concluded by an editor, who also relates the events of the arena, climaxing with the martyrdom of Perpetua. Through his preface and epilogue, the editor of the text uses *inclusio* to invite his readers to interpret the martyrdom as a proof of the continued working of the divine power through the person of the Holy Spirit, and

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<sup>614</sup> Pope Leo, *Serm.* 84b.1 (*FC* 93: 362-63)

<sup>615</sup> *ibid.*, 2 (363)

<sup>616</sup> References throughout this case study are to *The Martyrdom of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas* (Musurillo, 107-131), hereafter *M.Perp.*

as a contemporary example standing within a tradition of ancient figures of virtue for the spiritual and moral edification of the Christian community.<sup>617</sup>

Providing direct access into the thought-world of an early Christian woman, *The Martyrdom of Ss. Perpetua and Felicitas* is an important text that has been at the centre of theological discussions. Most prominent of these is the argument about whether Perpetua and/or the editor of her Passion were members of a proto-Montanist circle.<sup>618</sup> However, as Maureen Tilley has recently demonstrated, the evidence for this argument – the emphasis on the Holy Spirit, the centrality of visions, the (debated) theory of Tertullian as redactor, and the prominence of women – may have been characteristics of Montanism, but they were not distinctively Montanist characteristics, and were, in fact, also prominent features of “orthodox” Christianity of that period.<sup>619</sup> With no definitive evidence suggesting otherwise, this study assumes that the Passion is the description of a “mainstream” martyrdom.

While the text is now widely known, a brief summary will provide a basis for the following discussion. The editor records the capture of a group of catechumens in Carthage, among whom were two young women; the well born Perpetua and the slave girl Felicitas. Remarkably, apart from the title, the editor of the Passion does not develop a strong link between Perpetua and Felicitas, and Perpetua does not once mention Felicitas in her diary, despite the fact that they were fellow catechumens, both recent mothers, and the only female prisoners recorded to be among the small group awaiting martyrdom.<sup>620</sup> After a brief

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<sup>617</sup> Shaw (1993) 30-31; for discussion of the latter point see Rachel Moriarty, ‘The Claims of the Past: Attitudes to Antiquity in the Introduction to *Passio Perpetuae*’, *Studia Patristica*, 31 (1997) 307-313

<sup>618</sup> For example, Frederick C. Klawiter, ‘The Role of Martyrdom and Persecution in Developing the Priestly Authority of Women in Early Christianity: A Case Study of Montanism’, *CH*, 49 (1980) 251-61; Kenneth B. Steinhauser, ‘Augustine’s Reading of the *Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae at Felicitatis*’, *SP*, 33 (1997) 244-49; Maureen A. Tilley, ‘The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity’, in Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (ed.), *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Commentary*, vol. 2 (London: SCM Press, 1995) 829-57

<sup>619</sup> Tilley (1995) 833-36; cf. Lisa M. Sullivan, “‘I Responded, ‘I Will Not...’”: Christianity as Catalyst for Resistance in the *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis*’, *Semeia*, 79 (1997) 63-74, at 65n.3

<sup>620</sup> Shaw (1993) 25

introduction, the editor informs the reader that the following account was written by Perpetua's own hand. Introducing the extract from her prison diary, and drawing attention to the extraordinary fact of female authorship, he states, 'from this point on the entire account of her ordeal is her own, according to her own ideas and in the way she herself wrote it down'.<sup>621</sup>

The first words of Perpetua's diary describe an encounter between Perpetua and her father, who did not share her Christian faith. In response to his attempts to persuade her to renounce Christ, Perpetua provides a powerful insight into her own understanding of Christian identity:

'Father,' said I, 'do you see this vase here, for example, or water-pot or whatever?'  
'Yes, I do', said he.  
And I told him: 'Could it be called by any other name than what it is?'  
And he said: 'No.'  
'Well, so too I cannot be called anything other than what I am, a Christian.'<sup>622</sup>

This dialogue forms a lens for viewing the motivations and beliefs that underlie the unfolding events of Perpetua's Passion. By defining herself in relation to Christ, Perpetua's life was transformed into a journey, a pilgrimage, in the footsteps of Christ. While public torture and execution functioned to strip away the identity of the victim and present them as a social outcast, Perpetua's words encourage the reader of the Passion to view her death as an act motivated by, and declaratory of, her identification with, and participation in, Christ.<sup>623</sup> This exchange, the first of four hostile encounters, infuriated Perpetua's father, who departed, 'vanquished along with his diabolical arguments'.<sup>624</sup>

Within a few days Perpetua and her fellow Christians were baptised in prison.<sup>625</sup> Perpetua highlights this moment as the point at which the Holy Spirit filled and fortified her body, 'I was inspired by the Spirit not to ask for any other

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<sup>621</sup> *M.Perp.*, 2 (109)

<sup>622</sup> *ibid.*, 3 (109)

<sup>623</sup> For this complex of torture, power, and identity see Cooper (1998) 150-154

<sup>624</sup> *M.Perp.*, 3 (109)

<sup>625</sup> *ibid.*

favour after the water but simply the perseverance of the flesh'.<sup>626</sup> While awaiting martyrdom Perpetua received four visions that she interpreted as prophecies.<sup>627</sup> The first of those visions was of Perpetua's ascent upon a golden ladder beneath which a large dragon crouched.<sup>628</sup> At the top of the ladder Perpetua meets a large man with white hair, who is milking sheep and offers Perpetua a mouthful of the curds.<sup>629</sup> Perpetua interprets this dream as an indication of her future Passion, 'I at once told this to my brother, and we realized that we would have to suffer, and that from now on we would no longer have any hope in this life'.<sup>630</sup> Perpetua's second and third visions were of her brother Dinocrates, who had died of cancer, and required Perpetua's intercession on his behalf.<sup>631</sup> These visions had a later effect on the early Christian debate on purgatory.<sup>632</sup>

Perpetua's fourth vision, occurring on the day before her martyrdom, has been most significant in recent discussions of gender in early Christianity. In this dream a deacon called Pomponius takes Perpetua by the hand and leads her to the amphitheatre, guiding her to the centre of the arena under the watchful eyes of an immense audience.<sup>633</sup> There Perpetua stands in confusion as an Egyptian man approaches her. Her clothes are removed, and oil is applied to her body by a group of handsome young men. At this moment, Perpetua recalls, 'My clothes were stripped off, and suddenly I was a man' (*facta sum masculus*).<sup>634</sup> Then a man of great stature comes forward to announce the contest between Perpetua and the Egyptian. Perpetua engages in battle, striking the Egyptian man's face with her feet, rising in the air and pushing him to the ground, grasping his head in her hands, and stamping upon his head. Perpetua's victory is then celebrated as she receives a green branch with golden apples as a prize. After this vivid vision Perpetua concludes her diary with a different type of challenge; the challenge for

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<sup>626</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>627</sup> Patricia Cox Miller, 'Dreams in Patristic Literature: Divine Sense or Pagan Nonsense?', *SP*, 18:2 (1989) 185-89

<sup>628</sup> *M.Perp.*, 4 (111-13)

<sup>629</sup> *ibid.* (113)

<sup>630</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>631</sup> *ibid.*, 7-8 (115-17)

<sup>632</sup> Tilley (1995) 842

<sup>633</sup> *M.Perp.*, 10 (117-19)

<sup>634</sup> *ibid.* (119)

others to preserve her memory after her death, 'So much for what I did up until the eve of the contest. About what happened at the contest itself, let him write of it who will'.<sup>635</sup>

Perpetua's diary is followed by a vision attributed to the hand of Saturus, the catechist of the group.<sup>636</sup> However, Brent D. Shaw has recently cast doubt upon the authenticity of Saturus's authorship of the vision.<sup>637</sup> After this vision, the editor of the text speaks of Felicitas, who, we are told, was eight months pregnant when apprehended. Felicitas had been afraid that she would not join the group in martyrdom, because pregnant women were prohibited from public execution.<sup>638</sup> Yet, through the prayers of her fellow confessors and the grace of God, Felicitas goes into labour one month prematurely and gives birth to a daughter. Seeing the pain and suffering of the childbirth, a prison guard jeeringly asks Felicitas how she could think that she will be able to endure the pain of torture if she can hardly bear the pain of childbirth. Felicitas's reply reflects the belief in the indwelling and fortifying power of Christ:

'What I am suffering now', she replied, 'I suffer by myself. But then another will be inside me who will suffer for me, just as I shall be suffering for him'.<sup>639</sup>

The editor of the account then relates the events that took place on the day of the martyrdom, placing the bodies of the martyrs at the centre of the execution. The group proceed joyfully as if towards an assembly; Perpetua assumes the step and gait of a bride of Christ; the women, refusing to be dressed in the costumes of Ceres, are brought out naked; Perpetua sings psalms; the men utter threats against the crowds; their bodies speak with a physical sign language, 'You have condemned us, but God will condemn you'.<sup>640</sup>

Perpetua's martyrdom is singled out from amongst the group of the condemned as the final death and the climax of the narrative. Drawing attention

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<sup>635</sup> *ibid.*, 10 (119)

<sup>636</sup> *ibid.*, 11-13 (119-23)

<sup>637</sup> Shaw (1993) 32

<sup>638</sup> *M. Perp.*, 15 (123); Jones (1993) 26

<sup>639</sup> *ibid.* (123)

<sup>640</sup> *ibid.*, 18 (127)

to Perpetua's strength, the editor relates that, after been thrown about by a fierce cow, she was taken with the group to have her throat cut:

Perpetua, however, had yet to taste more pain. She screamed as she was struck on the bone; then she took the trembling hand of the young gladiator and guided it to her throat. It was as though so great a woman, feared as she was by the unclean spirit, could not be dispatched unless she herself were willing.<sup>641</sup>

*The Martyrdom of Ss. Perpetua and Felicitas* is a narrative of power. On one occasion, when in prison, Perpetua tried to reassure her father, attempting to comfort him with the words, 'It will all happen in the prisoner's dock as God wills; for you may be sure that we are not left to ourselves but are all in his power'.<sup>642</sup> On another occasion Perpetua related that Pudens, a prison guard, 'began to show us great honour, realizing that we possessed some great power within us'.<sup>643</sup> Similarly, Felicitas's assertion that Christ will suffer in, and for, her is another reference to the power of God. The editor of the Passion also draws upon this theme, inviting the reader to see the Passion as an illustration of the divine power: the operation of the Holy Spirit, the omnipotence of God, the indwelling power of Christ. Harnessing the power of the martyrs, the editor presents them as authoritative figures for edification and emulation. In addition to this, recent scholarship has interpreted Perpetua's experiences as one woman's protest against traditional social and gender restraints,<sup>644</sup> and has drawn attention to the male interpretation and usurpation of Perpetua's narrative of female power.<sup>645</sup>

*The Martyrdom of Ss. Perpetua and Felicitas* is also a powerful narrative. In the context of martyrdom, texts had the power to construct, preserve, and

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<sup>641</sup> *ibid.*, 21 (131)

<sup>642</sup> *ibid.*, 5 (113)

<sup>643</sup> *ibid.*, 9 (117)

<sup>644</sup> Mary R. Lefkowitz, 'The Motivations for Perpetua's Martyrdom', *JAAR*, 44:3 (1976) 417-421; Sullivan (1997) 63-74; Rosemary Rader, 'The Martyrdom of Perpetua: A Protest Account of Third-Century Christianity', in Patricia Wilson-Kastner et al. *A Lost Tradition. Women Writers of the Early Church*, (Lanham; NY; London: University Press of America, 1981) 1-32; Castelli (2004) 35

<sup>645</sup> Shaw (1993) 21, 32-33, 45; Miles (1989) 61-62

perpetuate memory.<sup>646</sup> This is even more so in the case of Perpetua, where the text had been written by the martyr's own hand. As Brent D. Shaw states, 'The startling and incandescent words penned by this young woman facing death produce an account that derives its power from the simplicity and directness of its communication'.<sup>647</sup> It is this simplicity and directness that enabled the words to "speak" to future generations of Christians. Perpetua herself had expressed the hope that an eyewitness would take an interest in her diary and complete it with a record of her death. Unlike modern diaries, Perpetua's diary was not secret, personal, and reflective. Rather, it was written with the knowledge and intention that one day it would enjoy a wider readership that would find a deeper meaning in her record. As Joyce Salisbury has observed:

Probably, the martyrs who were urging the recollection of their deeds imagined that the example they were setting was to encourage their companions to be strong in the face of expected persecutions.<sup>648</sup>

However, the power of Perpetua's diary continued to have importance and meaning even after times of persecution. When a text was accompanied by relics, the memory of the martyr became even more powerful and often led to the development of a martyr cult.<sup>649</sup> These two constituents – text and relics – were physical reminders and memorials that contributed towards the preservation of Perpetua's memory and ensured that her martyrdom would continue to have value in the Christian community.<sup>650</sup> The *passio* was read annually as part of the liturgy in the commemoration festivals held in North Africa.<sup>651</sup> The text was mimicked in later North African martyr *acta*.<sup>652</sup> The relics of Perpetua and Felicitas were housed in the Basilica Maiorum in Carthage.<sup>653</sup> Perpetua and Felicitas enjoyed

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<sup>646</sup> Salisbury (2004) 2-5; Castelli (2004) esp. 69-103

<sup>647</sup> Shaw (1993) 22

<sup>648</sup> Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion: The Death and Memory of a Young Roman Woman* (London; New York: Routledge, 1997) 166

<sup>649</sup> *ibid.*, 166-70

<sup>650</sup> *ibid.*, 170

<sup>651</sup> Shaw (1993) 33

<sup>652</sup> Shaw (1993) 16; Rader (1981) 2

<sup>653</sup> Shaw (1993) 42



popular commemoration from Africa in the West to Syria in the East.<sup>654</sup> The *passio* and the relics had the power to preserve the memory of the past and to inform the present mind by reinterpretation throughout the following generations.

The power of Perpetua's memory to inform the later Christian community is illustrated by Augustine's three existing sermons preached on the occasions of the feast day of Perpetua and Felicitas at the turn of the fifth century. These sermons reflect the key themes of the interpretation of martyrdom that were common in early Christianity and that have already been encountered in the previous chapters of this study. The rest of this chapter discusses some of the ways in which Augustine perceived and presented Perpetua and Felicitas: as key figures in a spectacular drama, as vessels of divine power, and as teachers who preach to the Christian community through the performance of martyrdom.

As with many of his other sermons preached in commemoration of the martyrs, Augustine drew attention to the link between the sense of hearing and the sense of sight to present the martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas as a spectacular drama. For Augustine, the reading of the Passion amounted to the staging of a visual performance:

We heard of the encouragement they received in divine revelations, and of their triumph in their sufferings, as it was all being read; and all those things, recounted in such glowing words, we perceived with our ears, and actually saw with our minds.<sup>655</sup>

Augustine used this concept of Passion as performance in order to present the commemoration of the female martyrs as a new and holy performance that reversed the historical event of suffering and torture. While the historical spectacle had been staged in the amphitheatre and cheered on by the audience, that spectacle had been preserved and renewed within the Church, re-enacted every year, and attended to with great and pious zeal:

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<sup>654</sup> See Salisbury (1997) 170 for the calendar of the Church of Rome by 313 C.E.; see also Augustine, *Serm.* 280.1 (*WSA* III/8: 72), the martyrs' feast day was "a celebration of such universal devotion"

<sup>655</sup> *Serm.* 280.1 (*WSA* III/8: 72)

Nor at that time was the theater of cruelty filled with as great a throng of people to see them killed, as the one that now at this time fills the Church of family piety to do them honor. Every year loving-kindness watches in a religious service what ungodliness committed on one day in an act of sacrilege. They [the hostile spectators of the martyrdom] too watched, but with a vastly different intention and attitude...[we], on the other hand, both deplore what was done by the godless, and venerate what was suffered by the godly.<sup>656</sup>

While the spectacle had originally been staged by ‘the ungodly’ as ‘an act of sacrilege’ in ‘the theatre of cruelty’, the commemoration of the martyrs now provided a holy spectacle for the veneration of the saints, ‘What could be more lovely than this spectacle? What more gallant than this contest? What more glorious than this victory?’<sup>657</sup>

Augustine makes the distinction between ungodly spectacle and holy performance by focusing on the intention of the audience and their mode of vision, ‘They saw with the eyes of flesh sights with which to glut the monstrous inhumanity of their hearts; we behold with the eyes of the heart sights which they were not permitted to see’.<sup>658</sup> This distinction reflects Augustine’s belief in the different modes of vision brought about by the eyes of faith and the eyes of the flesh. However, this interpretation of the martyrdom of Perpetua also reveals another belief; the iconic nature of the martyrdom performance. Perpetua’s Passion was considered to be holy because ‘we behold with the eyes of the heart *sights which they were not permitted to see*’. For Augustine, when ‘the ungodly’ looked upon the bodies of the martyrs they only saw part of the performance, the fleshly part. However, when the Church looked upon the performance, they saw the whole performance, sights that the eyes of faith alone were permitted to see, spiritual sights. Consequently one might speak of Augustine’s understanding of the performance of martyrdom as iconic; those with the eyes of faith looked upon the performance and were guided to more holy and spiritual sights. Thus

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<sup>656</sup> *ibid.*, 2 (73)

<sup>657</sup> *ibid.*, 1 (72)

<sup>658</sup> *ibid.*, 2 (73)

Augustine could say, 'They, lacking the light of faith, thought the martyrs liquidated; we, with the clear sight of faith, perceive them crowned'.<sup>659</sup>

Augustine's interpretation of martyrdom as a holy performance provides an insight into how he understood the role of the female martyrs. The martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas is a spectacular performance that reveals spiritual truths, and the two female martyrs are its main characters. It is these two women, standing at the centre of the heavenly drama, who display those spiritual truths. Their bodies reveal their relationship with Christ, and their lives are models for the spiritual edification of the Christian community.

Augustine's description of Perpetua and Felicitas was inextricably linked with issues of gender in the ancient world. While Augustine's praise of the female martyrs draws attention to their femininity and the traditional notion of *infirmitas sexus*, it should be remembered that his views must be located within his own cultural milieu. The assumed and widely accepted belief in female physical infirmity is a prominent theme and theological signifier in Augustine's sermons on Felicitas and Perpetua. As with the previous discussion of John Chrysostom's sermons on the Maccabean mother, Augustine claimed that the two female martyrs not only demonstrated the perfect Christian act of love, but they did so despite the burdens of female weakness, matrimonial bond, and maternal affection:

As regards the women themselves, whose names these are, as we heard when their *Passion* was read, as we know from what we have committed to memory, these two of such strength of character and merit were not only women, they were wives as well. And one of them was a mother, so that to the weakness of her sex might be added feelings less capable of endurance.<sup>660</sup>

With these additional, specifically female, obstacles in mind, Augustine believed that 'it was a greater miracle for women in their weakness to overcome the ancient enemy'.<sup>661</sup> Due to the greater battle, the women received a greater reward, 'A more splendid crown, I mean, is owed to the weaker sex, because a manly spirit

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<sup>659</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>660</sup> *Serm.* 282.2 (*WSA* III/8: 81)

<sup>661</sup> *ibid.*, 3 (82)

has clearly done much more in women, when their feminine frailty has not been undone under such enormous pressure'.<sup>662</sup>

For Augustine, this female strength was to be explained theologically. Perpetua and Felicitas were strong because they were 'holding onto the name of Christ'.<sup>663</sup> Where Christ had embraced Crispina, touched Pelagia's heart, and supported Drosis's head, here Perpetua and Felicitas clung on to Christ and were fortified with his strength; 'They had done well to cling to one man, to whom the one Church is presented as a chaste virgin. They had done well, I say, to cling to that man, from whom they had drawn the strength to withstand the devil'.<sup>664</sup>

Yet Augustine did not only describe Christ's relationship with Perpetua and Felicitas in terms of touch, embrace, and support. *The Martyrdom of Ss. Perpetua and Felicitas* is a text concerned with transformation. Through the indwelling power of Christ, Felicitas is transformed from a woman suffering in labour to a woman strongly determined to endure torture, and, in her fourth vision, Perpetua is transformed from being a model Roman matron to a victorious athletic man. Alongside this focus on transformation, the Passion reflects a powerful spirituality of *imitatio Christi*, of discipleship and self-sacrifice.<sup>665</sup> Augustine's sermons, given following the public reading of the Passion, echo this focus on transformation towards Christ. For Augustine, Perpetua and Felicitas's movement from weakness to strength is indicative of a transformation towards conformity to Christ, participation in his power, and assumption into his body. The close identification between Christ and the female martyrs is described as an athletic race run in the name of Christ, through which the martyrs are transformed and

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<sup>662</sup> *Serm.* 281.1 (*WSA* III/8: 78)

<sup>663</sup> *Serm.* 280.2 (*WSA* III/8: 72)

<sup>664</sup> *Serm.* 281.1 (*WSA* III/8: 78)

<sup>665</sup> While the Passion is not as explicit in its notion of *imitatio Christi* as, for example, the martyrdom of Blandina in Lyons, Alvyn Pettersen's study of the *Passio Perpetuae* details the ways in which the martyrs are identified with Christ, 'Perpetua - Prisoner of Conscience', *VC*, 41 (1987) 139-153; for *imitatio Christi* in Perpetua's dreams see Thomas J. Heffernan, 'The Passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas and the *imitatio Christi*', in idem, *Sacred Biography: Saints and their Biographers in the Middle Ages* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) 185-230

they transcend their sex to become “neither male nor female”. The praise of the women:

[R]esounds supremely to the praise of him in whom they believed, and in whose name they ran the race together with faithful zeal, so that according to their inner self they are found to be neither male nor female; so that even as regards the femininity of the body, the sex of the flesh is concealed by the virtue of the mind, and one is reluctant to think about a condition in their members that never showed their deeds.<sup>666</sup>

This is an allusion to Galatians 3:28, ‘There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ’. This extract, an early baptismal formula, is immediately preceded by the statement, ‘As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ’ (3:27). For Augustine, the two recently baptised women had been clothed with Christ and reborn into his body.<sup>667</sup> Their transformation through baptism and martyrdom had left them “neither male nor female”. Furthermore, as an unspoken allusion to the same passage, Perpetua was freeborn, Felicitas a slave, but they both attained the same reward.

Augustine’s reference to Galatians 3 and its purpose in portraying the martyrdom as a dramatic transformation is also a reflection of his interpretation of Perpetua’s fourth vision, in which she became a man. Augustine believed that Perpetua and Felicitas could only conquer death in so far as they had Christ within them, ‘It is the one who lived in them that conquered in them, in order that, as they lived not for themselves but for him, they might not die even when they were dead’.<sup>668</sup> For Augustine, this notion of identification with, and participation in, Christ is the meaning behind Perpetua’s changing into a man; Perpetua’s transformation was actually a move towards Christ. This is suggested in Augustine’s following words:

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<sup>666</sup> *Serm.* 280.1 (*WSA* III/8: 72)

<sup>667</sup> For the relationship between Perpetua’s baptism and martyrdom see Peter Cramer, *Baptism and Change in the Early Middle Ages, c.200-c.1150*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought, 4<sup>th</sup> Series (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 73-86

<sup>668</sup> *Serm.* 280.4 (*WSA* III/8: 74)

The devout mind, though, is delighted to behold such a spectacle as the blessed Perpetua tells us was revealed to her about herself; how she was turned into a man, and took on the devil. By that contest, to be sure, she too was hastening *to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ* (Eph 4:13).<sup>669</sup>

Augustine perceived Perpetua's transformation as a movement towards 'mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ'. This allusion to Ephesians 4:13 may be illuminated by a reading of Augustine's *Sermon 341, On the Three Ways of Understanding Christ in Scripture*. In this sermon Augustine refers to the same New Testament passage in a discussion of how scripture reveals Christ as the head of the Church, and Christians as his members.<sup>670</sup> While sermon 341 is to be dated later than the sermons on Perpetua,<sup>671</sup> it does indicate that Augustine understood Ephesians 4:13 to relate to the movement towards the incorporation of the individual Christian member into the body of Christ.<sup>672</sup> When this is seen within the context of Augustine's sermon on Perpetua, it is revealed that Augustine understood Perpetua's "becoming male" theologically, as a transformation towards Christ through *imitatio Christi*, as "becoming Christ".<sup>673</sup> For Augustine, the transformation of Perpetua's body was a physical manifestation of her identification with Christ and incorporation into his body. In her vision Perpetua's body physically proclaimed her relationship with Christ and revealed the divine power that enabled her to endure torture for Christ.

While the editor of the *Passion* drew attention to the didactic value of the account, presenting Perpetua and Felicitas as two contemporary examples for the spiritual edification of the Christian community, Augustine also perceived the female martyrs as model disciples and used their example as a tool for the

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<sup>669</sup> *Serm.* 281.2 (*WSA* III/8: 78)

<sup>670</sup> *Serm.* 341.1 (*WSA* III/10: 19)

<sup>671</sup> (*WSA* III/8: 19); at 28n.1 the sermon is dated to 419 C.E.

<sup>672</sup> cf. *Serm.* 216.7, preached in 391 C.E. to the *competentes*, in which Augustine referred to Ephesians 4:13 as a maturing, or growing towards, Christ (*WSA* III/6: 171)

<sup>673</sup> For a study of the theological interpretation of Perpetua's transformation, see Gertrude Gillette, 'Augustine and the Significance of Perpetua's Words: "And I was a Man"', *AugSt*, 32:1 (2001) 115-125

instruction of his congregation. By presenting the martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas as a specifically *visual* performance that is *seen* as well as heard, Augustine encouraged his audience to take the image of the martyrs into their minds. Furthermore, he overtly presented the martyrs as exemplars and models to be imitated, 'By the example, you see, of their glorious struggle they encourage us to imitate them; and likewise by their names they bear witness to the indivisible gift we are going to receive'.<sup>674</sup>

Augustine's congregation were encouraged to imitate the martyrs who imitated Christ. In a homily on honouring and disregarding parents, Augustine presented Perpetua and Felicitas as role models for the edification of Christian women:

How many women have won the martyr's crown, and not been overcome by their menfolk cajoling them in no manly fashion! How did Perpetua become perpetually blessed...? What made Felicity fit for such infinite felicity, but her not being terrified by momentary infelicity? So then, for women too to avoid being seduced in this matter by the cajolery of their men, let them fix their minds on Perpetua, fix them on Felicity and so take hold of perpetual felicity.<sup>675</sup>

Maureen A. Tilley has recently commented upon the accessibility of the two female martyrs, whose different circumstances enabled their example to speak to all women:

Perpetua and Felicity were complementary role models. Through their bodies these two women in their own parts of the story provided alternative models for the women of their audience. Slave or free, pregnant, nursing, or having weaned a child, respectably married or not, women in the audience could identify with one of these women martyrs.<sup>676</sup>

In addition to this, Augustine believed that the example of the female martyrs was so great that it was not only a holy example for women, but also for men. It was, in fact, easier for men to wonder at the two women than to imitate

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<sup>674</sup> *Serm.* 282.1 (*WSA* III/8: 81)

<sup>675</sup> *Serm.* 159A.11 (*WSA* III/11: 142)

<sup>676</sup> Tilley (1995) 849; cf. Rader (1981) 10, for Perpetua as a symbol for 'the "every person" of the early Christian Church in North Africa'

them, 'What, after all, could be more glorious than these women, whom men can more easily admire than imitate?'<sup>677</sup> In this way, Perpetua and Felicitas were presented as teachers, instructing the Christian community through their example of perfect discipleship. Held as a picture in the mind, the female example was at once accessible and tangible, and yet it was also awesome, wonderful and difficult to imitate.

Needless to say, this was not the historical Perpetua herself speaking to the Christian community, nor was it the Perpetua of the editor of the *Passion*, rather it was Augustine's Perpetua: the female martyr textually transmitted through the *passio* and seen through the eyes of the African bishop.<sup>678</sup> In fact, a recent observation by Peter Dronke may seem to imply that Augustine's use of Perpetua and Felicitas as edificatory role models created a tension with the original text of Perpetua's diary. Dronke claims that the diary, 'records her thoughts in an informal, graphic way, which is moving partly because she is not striving to be literary. There are no rhetorical flourishes, no attempts at didacticism or edification'.<sup>679</sup> While it is clear that the power of the narrative comes through the 'intimate and unselfconscious quality of Perpetua's utterance',<sup>680</sup> this does not mean that Perpetua herself had not intended her account to have edificatory and didactic value. Perpetua's diary records her self-formation according to her new identity in Christ; a journey towards the alignment of identity and ethics, culminating in martyrdom.<sup>681</sup> By recording her experience in writing, Perpetua left a written record that served as a model of Christian discipleship, linking participation in Christ with life lived in the world. The very fact that Perpetua committed her experiences to writing suggests that she was aware of the instructive value of her example for a future audience.

Indeed, Perpetua's example, committed to writing, was perpetuated throughout the generations. As one scholar has remarked, the *Passion of Ss. Perpetua and Felicitas* was 'the primal document in the development of the

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<sup>677</sup> *Serm.* 280.1 (*WSA* III/8: 72)

<sup>678</sup> Tilley (1995) 833

<sup>679</sup> Peter Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages*, cited in Shaw (1993) 19

<sup>680</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>681</sup> Castelli (2004) 86



conventions which were to shape female sacred biography for a millennium'.<sup>682</sup> While Perpetua could not have anticipated that she would be remembered as one of the most famous female martyrs throughout the next eighteen hundred years, she nevertheless looked beyond her own personal experience and saw herself as providing valuable instruction for the Christian community that she left behind – a fact that is reflected in her writing activity, in the editor's framing of her diary as an example for spiritual edification, and in Augustine's sermons presenting Perpetua as a role model for imitation and emulation.

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<sup>682</sup> Heffernan (1988) 186

### CONCLUSION: Looking at the Martyred Body

This thesis has proposed a link between the early Christian fascination with the martyred body, the interpretation of martyrdom as performance, and the notion of body language. This combination of factors has revealed the body of the martyr as the central focus of martyrdom narratives. By virtue of its very corporeity, temporality, and weakness, the martyred body was seen as an icon that revealed spiritual truths. It communicated Christ's power and presence, proclaimed the resurrection, embodied the ideal of discipleship, and taught Christian values. On account of this, ordinary men and women were remembered as extraordinary figures whose holy examples lived on after their deaths, informing future generations of Christians in their everyday lives.<sup>683</sup>

This observation is particularly insightful for the study of female martyrdom. While women were excluded from many authoritative roles in the ecclesiastical hierarchy, female martyrs, living the ideal as *imitatores Christi*, became exemplars for imitation within the Christian community. Female martyrs were exalted as teachers and preachers who instructed the Christian community by example. While bishops taught their congregations with verbal treatises and homilies, female martyrs preached silently through their bodies. This is perhaps surprising and unexpected, as the human body, and particularly the female body, was viewed with a certain anxiety and trepidation in the patristic era. Yet, one finds that martyrdom narratives and homilies perceived the martyred body as a positive object of spiritual significance. Furthermore, in these narratives and homilies the *female* body was often glorified because the *specifically female* nature of the bodies of women lent their martyrdoms powerful theological value. Femininity conveyed theological messages and revealed spiritual truths as the women martyrs communicated the power and presence of Christ through their bodies.

It is imperative that the full significance of this is taken seriously in the study of early Christianity. As modern scholarship typifies patristic attitudes

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<sup>683</sup> Robin Darling Young, 'Martyrdom as Exaltation', in Virginia Burrus (ed.) *Late Ancient Christianity, A People's History of Christianity*, vol. 2 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005) 70-92, at 80

towards women with the word “ambivalence”, it is important that martyrdom is acknowledged as one factor that contributed towards that ambivalent attitude by presenting a remarkably positive view of women. The number of narratives and homilies that detail female martyrdom challenge us to ask: how can we talk meaningfully about martyrdom without acknowledging women? And how can we discuss the lives and roles of early Christian women without considering female martyrs? If these positive evaluations of early Christian women are overlooked, disregarded, or omitted from scholarship, then patristic attitudes towards women are distorted and are defined not by ambivalence, but rather by the more negative descriptions of misogyny, constraint, and subjugation. If this were the case then the significance of female martyrdom would be lost and the impact of Christian women upon the development of the early Church would be drastically reduced. If, on the other hand, female martyrdom is taken seriously, then one finds that women had a significant role to play in the formation, communication, and development of Christian beliefs and ideals.

This study has endeavoured to provide a preliminary and tentative look at the interpretation of martyrdom, and particularly *female* martyrdom, as a dynamic performance through which the martyr preaches the Christian faith. However, further research clearly needs to be done in this area. While this thesis has adopted a thematic approach, this could be complemented by a more chronological method of study that would explore how interpretations of martyrdom developed and changed throughout different periods, places, and contexts in early Christianity. Recent scholarship of early Christian martyrdom draws our attention to the ways in which martyrs were “produced” and “constructed” by an ongoing process of commemoration, representation, and interpretation.<sup>684</sup> These studies affirm that the designation “martyr” is not an ontological category, but a heavily loaded title resulting from the ongoing process of interpretation that takes place within a particular community after the event of death.<sup>685</sup> By outlining the progression of interpretations of martyrdom at different points in Christian history, we may begin to understand the interlocking factors

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<sup>684</sup> Castelli (2006); eadem (2004); Grig (2004); Salisbury (2004)

<sup>685</sup> Castelli (2006) 1

that resulted in the construction and depiction of martyrs as teachers and preachers of Christ. For example, one could trace the attention given to the description of torture and the suffering body that gained popularity from the mid-second to late-fourth centuries. Although the suffering body is described in graphic detail in some of our earliest martyrdom narratives, this focus clearly became increasingly central from the mid-fourth century onwards. A more chronologically-focused study could follow this progressive concentration on the martyred body, explore the reasons for its growth, and compare it with other related ideas that were developing at the same time, such as the poeticizing and romanticising of the martyred body, and the increasingly popular portrayal of the analgesic effects of torture and the impassivity of the martyr's soul.

With this process of interpretation and reinterpretation throughout the second to fourth centuries the martyrs increasingly came to be seen less as historical figures and more as spiritual models. Although the Church fathers did not deny the historicity of the martyrs, historical details of their lives almost always assumed a secondary position to the spiritual truths and lessons communicated through the martyr's death. In many late-fourth century martyr homilies, the figure of the martyr and the occasion of the martyr's death were treated simply as catalysts for the discussion of other less related but more urgent matters, such as the chastisement of Christians who exhibited inappropriate behaviour by visiting brothels, getting drunk in public houses, indulging in the immoderate and gluttonous consumption of food, taking part in Jewish festival celebrations, or attending the Roman games. In these cases, bishops and priests employed the memory of the martyrs to instruct their Christian audiences towards ethical behaviour in everyday life, to preach sermons of polemical warning, and to bolster the boundaries of the Christian community by affirming the distinctiveness and superiority of Christianity against competing beliefs and allegiances.

Commemorated throughout various time periods, in distant locations, and for diverse social and religious reasons, the martyrs became abstracted as figures who transcended time and place to speak directly to the particular needs of certain communities at specific moments in time. This abstraction shifted the focus away from the specific details of the martyr and the martyr's death, and towards the

rather more general and typified depiction of the martyr as a powerful character who instructed ordinary Christians in their everyday lives, who encouraged others with an example of unsurpassable discipleship, whose distance in time was counteracted with graphic and evocative descriptions of martyrdom, whose body was perceived on a more beautiful and holy plane of meaning, and whose untouched soul and joyful countenance pointed towards spiritual truths. Further research into this process of constructing martyrs during the second to fourth centuries would allow us to discover exactly how Christian martyrs could increasingly be portrayed as ethical teachers and moral instructors whose exemplary deaths continued to have meaning in a rapidly changing world.

Apart from focusing on the chronological progression of interpretations of martyrdom in early Christianity, it would also be interesting to investigate further our contemporary anthropological and sociological concepts of body language and non-verbal communication and to explore the value that these theories might have for understanding patristic interpretations of the martyred body. It would also be particularly interesting to assess the enduring effects of the performance of female martyrdom. Female martyrs continued to address the devotional needs of future generations of women as they had established patterns for the continued expression of faith throughout Christian history. Contributing to the transformation of Christian piety, female martyrs encouraged spirituality, aided individual devotion, and informed the lives of future generations of Christian women. The martyrs became models of piety that spoke directly to women's religious needs and desires, and guided women in their expression of Christian faith in everyday life: mothers, wives, sisters, daughters, virgins, and ascetics.

From the second to the fourth centuries, the early Church fixed its eyes on the martyred body with a lingering gaze. This thesis has attempted to follow that line of vision in order to discover the significance of the martyred body. However, this is but a brief glance, and, as Paulinus said, a single glimpse is not enough.<sup>686</sup> If we want to discover what captured the imagination and impressed the memory of the early Church, we must continue to look closer, look harder, and let our eyes rest on the bodies of the martyrs.

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<sup>686</sup> *Poem 18* (Walsh [1975] 118)

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