The Holy Abject: The Narrative Arc of Female Christian Martyrdom and Its Implications for Subjecthood in the Roman Empire

Gillian Murdock Gardner

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarship.claremont.edu/scripps_theses

Part of the History of Gender Commons, and the History of Religion Commons

Recommended Citation

This Open Access Senior Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Scripps Student Scholarship at Scholarship @ Claremont. It has been accepted for inclusion in Scripps Senior Theses by an authorized administrator of Scholarship @ Claremont. For more information, please contact scholarship@claremont.edu.
THE HOLY ABJECT:
THE NARRATIVE ARC OF FEMALE CHRISTIAN MARTYRDOM AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR SUBJECTHOOD IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE

by

GILLIAN R. MURDOCK GARDNER

SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

PROFESSOR AISENBERG

PROFESSOR JOHNSON

APRIL 25TH, 2024
For my grandmother, Maureen, who introduced me to religion.

For my mother, Heather, who taught me to be critical of it.

And for my sister, Ella, without whom I could not write about it.
Of religious history, Peter Brown writes that “it is both our privilege and our accursed lot to work the flinty soil of a long-extinct and deeply reticent world. We shall be dealing with Christianity whose back is firmly turned toward us, untroubled by our most urgent, and legitimate questions.”¹ The Christian faith is representative of an ongoing struggle between society and the ineffable, a tool with which we attempt to answer the question of who we are and what we could be. This dissonance is innate to the survival of the faith, and must therefore be embraced rather than resisted. A hallmark of the early Christianity Brown refers to, the figure of the Christian martyr has become stilted over the past two millennia, servicing a constrained view of early Christianity which centers devotion and miracles of faith. This ultimately flattens the function of martyrdom, blotting out the radical restructuring of Ante-Nicene society that is implicit in the bodily transformation and transcendence that the act facilitates. The seemingly opaque nature of early Christian martyrdom makes it ripe for theoretical intervention, as critical theory aims to challenge aspects of being which are enigmatic or otherwise taken as intrinsic. A theoretical approach to hardened religious history will be most effective in deconstructing familiar narratives that have solidified in the dominant culture, making this intervention—in essence—a liberatory practice. The work of turning Christianity to face us, unabashedly, may never be complete. However, it is my belief that through the lens of modern critical theory—incorporating the relevant works of Judith Butler, Lee Edelman, Julia Kristeva, and Simone de Beauvoir—we can recontextualize martyrdom of the Ante-Nicene period, catching glimpses of early Christianity’s countenance in veiled reflections of ourselves.

Christians of the Roman Empire were endlessly preoccupied with how the physical, mutable, and transient body was—or was not—related to one’s notion of the self. Below the surface of this captivation, a deep anxiety of identity churned. I hope to analyze the manner in

which persecution disrupted the once intertwined notions of body and identity by examining the ways in which the early Christian sōma methodically fluctuated within the narrative arc of feminine martyrs’ hagiography. I posit that the martyr’s body is hyperfeminized, transformed, and eventually eclipsed in a simultaneous process of unbecoming in the corporeal realm and becoming in a divine register. The martyr’s augmented femininity signals her ability to endure as far as womens’ abject position in the Empire allows, while her bodily transformation conveys a transgression of the ontological pairings of active masculinity and passive femininity that govern Roman social order. Finally, the martyr’s death communicates an imperial attempt to reestablish the infringed-upon binaries, but the early Christians’ unique eschatological conception of resurrection ultimately allows for the transgressive identity to survive. This process culminates in the body being ungendered in secularity while a gender of sanctity—paradoxically generated through a systematic undoing—emerges in religiosity.

In this study of gender’s fluidity and eventual dissolution in sociopolitical and religious contexts, we must establish a clear understanding of gender, gendered difference, and gender ambiguity. Queer theorist Judith Butler challenges previously held notions that biological sex and enacted gender are a combined entity, with the former giving shape to the latter. Butler is most famous for their theory of gender performativity, which posits that “gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts.”

However, while these enactments contribute towards an exterior identity, gender is far more than a set of movements which operatively denote. An individual can become illegible to society if the gendered being does not fit into the ostensible male/female and masculine/feminine binary.

While not all societies are dimorphic or binary, Butler’s theory is effective in approaching the Roman Empire, whose body politic not only favored binarism but was structurally dependent upon it. Butler writes that individuals who “appear to be persons but who fail to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined” are therefore incoherent and do not accomplish a performance of gender which is incentivised and compelled by social sanction. This incoherence—and Roman society’s reaction to it—will be the focus of my intervention. The body and gender have a complex relationship in the Roman Empire. While this relationship will be further explicated in the coming analysis, Butler's notion of gender as a “stylized repetition of acts” will be especially pertinent in relation to early Christian hagiography. The “repetition” exhibited by the feminine martyrs is largely displayed through common tropes, as their expressions of gender change with the narrative, but the panoptic narrative arc and the expressions of gender within it are firmly reiterated across individuals. This ultimately results in the literary construction of a gender of sanctity—one which produces incoherence. Akin to “the body that becomes its gender,” the sanctified body of hagiographic tradition undergoes a similar process of identity formation, becoming illegible yet distinct through a series of acts which are repeated, revised, and consolidated over time. It is worth noting that although I argue the initially feminine martyr’s gender undergoes significant change throughout the narrative arc, I will be using the same pronouns consistently employed by the source text to refer to the martyrs: she/her/hers.

I - The Active Woman, Ante Martyrium

To understand how semiotics of the body were disrupted through martyrdom, we must first understand how the body structured Roman life. I foreground my hagiographic analysis with

a précis of expectations regarding activity and passivity, the position of women within the Empire, and the ways in which an active woman posed a threat in the imperial imagination. In his 1990 seminal work, *Making Sex*, Thomas Laqueur posits that throughout Western history and until the nineteenth century, women have been regarded as “imperfect” men. The scientific and cultural basis for this notion was particularly solidified in the Ancient and Late Antique Mediterranean world. Laqueur cites Galen’s (d. ca. 216 C.E.) publication, *The Usefulness of the Parts of the Body*, in which women are understood as “men in whom a lack of vital heat—of perfection—had resulted in the retention, inside, of structures that in the male are visible without.”

This development in structural understandings of the sōma mapped women’s anatomy as fundamentally similar to men’s but ultimately inferior and unfinished.

Culturally, the boundaries between what we now might identify as men and women appear equally porous, as categorizations of ‘male’ and ‘female’ hinged greatly upon actions rather than bodily essentialism. Laqueur expands on his theory of the one-sex body in ancient cultures through their weighing of physiognomic indicators of masculinity and femininity. He quotes Polemo’s *Physiognomonika*—“from your subject’s glance, movement, and voice, and then, from among these signs, compare with one another with one another until you determine to your satisfaction which of the two sexes prevails.” Laqueur clarifies that by “two sexes” Polemo is not referring to inherent, opposite genders, but rather the two poles that bookend the many shadings of one sex. Gender and sexuality were intertwined and similarly expressed through behavior, with the rudimentary categories being “active” and “passive.” As the Roman sexual schema was undoubtedly phallocentric, “active” is associated with maleness and masculinity.

---


while its counterpart—the “passive”—is elementally female.\(^7\) The common categorization for individuals would thus be the normal/active male (\textit{vir}) and the normal/passive female (\textit{femina/puella}). In his article, “The Teratogenic Grid”, which explores the implications of these categorizations, Holt Parker identifies the antitypes of these models as “the passive/abnormal man (\textit{cinaedus}) and the active/abnormal woman (\textit{virago/tribas/moecha})\(^8\). Of these contrasting types and the individuals who become monstrous in their boundary crossing and anomalous acts, Parker writes, “a woman cannot be properly active at all…female sexual activity, then, by definition, is abnormal, almost an oxymoron. The [active] woman is a monster.”\(^9\) Laqueur similarly discusses the role of the active woman, explicating that while the passive female does not threaten social order, it was the \textit{tribas} who is “condemned” and the victim of a “wicked imagination.”\(^10\) The actions of an active woman are not unnatural because they infringe upon an ostensibly natural heterosexuality, but rather because moving away from passivity presents a reversal of power and prestige that was culturally unacceptable. Therefore, the binary which is disrupted through martyrdom is not necessarily an essentialist view of sex, but rather the concomitant pairings of passive/female and active/male.

Despite being a bastardization of masculinity, the Roman \textit{virago, tribas, or moecha} reveals the mobility of gender identity on the one body, multi-gendered model. While women could not move towards the perfect body or the immaculate disposition that was deemed ‘male/man’ with any legitimacy, men could very likely slip into imperfect versions of themselves if their masculinity was not fervently maintained. Rhiannon Graybill identifies this phenomenon in her reading of Exodus, indicating that the negotiability of gender was not a newfound


\(^8\) \textit{Ibid}, pp. 48

\(^9\) \textit{Ibid}, pp. 50.

\(^10\) Laqueur, pp. 53.
development during the early years of Christianity. Instead, malleable gender expression constituted an evolving tradition with deep roots in the religions that preceded it, spanning not only the early years of the Empire, but building upon conceptions of gender in the late Republic. Graybill writes, “masculinity is not the necessary and inevitable consequence of a male-sexed body…masculinity is a matter of degree.”\(^{11}\) The titular performance of masculinity is recognized by Graybill as ‘hegemonic masculinity,” which describes a “culturally specific and culturally valued form of masculine performance.”\(^{12}\) Hegemonic masculinity is particularly pertinent to the formation and perpetuation of Roman social order in that it constitutes a pattern of practice that allows men’s dominance over women to not only continue, but to be widely accepted as a ‘natural’ consequence of women’s inferiority.\(^{13}\) Principally, hegemonic masculinity resists feminization.\(^{14}\) The perfect male subject of the Roman Empire commanded the adjectives “rational, physically and politically strong, spiritual, superior, active, dry, and penetrative”\(^ {15}\) while women embodied the antonyms. Diana Swancutt indicates that these negative attributes of the female/women pole of the one-body model meant that women were not only weak but “inherently dangerous to family and state.”\(^ {16}\) Swancutt goes on to quote Anne Carson’s 1990 publication “Putting Her in Her Place,” stating “[women] are, as psychological entities, unstable compounds of deceit and desire, prone to leakage…the female body, the female psyche, the female social life, and the female moral life…are mutable, and subject to defilement all the


\(^{12}\) Ibid, 520.


\(^{14}\) Graybill, 522.


\(^{16}\) Ibid, 54.
time. The woman of the Ancient and Late Antique world is thus not only inferior, but a vulnerability for the Empire, inviting social pollution through her deficiencies.

The peripheral position of women is made explicit in Titus Livius’s *Ab Urbe Condita*—a series of books which encompass Rome’s history from its legendary beginnings to Livy’s own time period during the Principate, under the reign of emperor Augustus. Livy’s cast of women are undoubtedly enmeshed in the development and actualization of the Empire, but they remain symbolic of a darker and more dangerous part of the ‘self’ that cannot be expelled from the cultural consciousness and therefore must be dealt with or otherwise atoned for. The narrative of Tanaquil and Tullia warns against women meddling in public affairs, transcending the passivity associated with wifely and motherly duties by taking on an active role in the public sphere.

Tarquinius Priscus was the fifth king of Rome and the first king of the Etruscan dynasty. His reign began with his wife Tanaquil encouraging him to leave their city of Tarquinii to seek recognition for his honor and ability in Rome. He succeeds in taking the throne but is ultimately assassinated by two shepherds who drive an ax through his head. In the wake of the slaying, Tanaquil communicates with the public while covertly organizing for Servius Tullius to succeed Tarquinius—“the throne is yours Servius…if you are a man”—solidifying her role as a kingmaker and thus usurping the electoral function of the Roman assembly twice over. Tanaquil assigning the condition of manliness almost constitutes a challenge, suggesting that she has assumed the masculine role and Servius, the submissive feminine. Though Livy seemingly reserves judgment in reporting this tale, his description of Tullia, the younger of Servius’s

---

18 Augustus’s rule spanned over forty years, from 31 B.C.E. to 14 C.E.
daughters, does not receive the same impartiality. Tullia develops an affection towards her sister’s husband, Tarquin, after being “bitterly humiliated by her husband Arruns.” To Tarquin, she attests that “‘you and I’…‘would have been better single than bound in a marriage…where each of us is forced by a cowardly partner to fritter our lives away in hopeless inactivity.’” Livy tells us that “to Tullia the thought of Tanaquil’s success was torture. She was determined to emulate it.” Whether Livy intended it to or not, this line foreshadows a failed advisory role and an inauspicious kingship. Tullia influences Tarquin to murder her husband, her sister, and the king in order to seize power. Though Tarquin’s reign is not an admirable one—“without hope of his subjects’ affection, he could rule only by fear”—Livy’s retelling of the series of events oozes with schadenfreude as Tarquin’s sovereignty marks the end of the monarchy in Rome. Tanaquil and Tullia’s appropriation of masculine activity not only results in the death of their family and allies but the decline of an entire governmental system.

In contrast to Tanaquil and Tullia’s scramble for influence, Livy’s depictions of the Sabine women create an *exempla* for Roman women to emulate. After the fathers of Sabine refused Romulus alliance with their daughters, the families were lured to Rome under the guise of a religious festival in honor of Neptune. Amid festivities, the young women were snatched and distributed amongst the Romans—“all the able bodied men burst through the crowd and seized the young women. Most of the girls were the prize of whoever got hold of them first.” Instead of resisting capture, the Sabine women settle down with their new husbands. Livy says, “[the Roman men] spoke honeyed words and vowed that it was passionate love that prompted

---

21 *Ibid*, 1.46.
22 *Ibid*, 1.47.
23 *Ibid*, 1.47.
24 *Ibid*, 1.47.
their offense…the women in course of time lost their resentment.” 26 The narrative ends with the now-Roman women acting as a bridge between their Sabine relatives and their Roman husbands. Although all the women in Ab Urbe Condita presumably possess biologically female bodies—opening them up to associations of irrationality, fragility, and dishonor—the Sabine women are able to be integrated into the Roman body politic because they have embraced their status as penetrated, docile, and passive; they do not challenge the social order of the burgeoning Republic. Serving the course of history through reproduction and companionship secures the futurity promised in teleological progress, thus fitting the narrative of imperial masculinity.

For a deeper understanding of why the active/unpenetrated woman disrupts reproductive futurity and the ordering of an imperial society, I look to Lee Edelman’s 2004 article, “The Future is Kid Stuff.” 27 Although Edelman is using a Lacanian framework to identify the threat of queerness in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century United States, the theory Edelman utilizes aptly displays the anxieties surrounding the maintenance of birth and heterosexual coupling in prominent empires. Edelman recognizes the Imaginary as representing the Ego and the self, and the Symbolic as representing language, law, and norms that reflexively govern the Imaginary. These signifiers become fundamentally disturbed by the fleeting presence of the Real or the Id 28 that Edelman aligns with an essential queerness that aggregates beneath the actualization of identity which occurs in the realm of the Imaginary. Edelman writes, “the signifier only bestows a sort of promissory identity, one with which we can never succeed in fully coinciding because we, as subjects of the signifier, can only be signifiers ourselves, can only ever aspire to catch up to whatever it is we might signify by closing the gap that divides us

26 Ibid, 1.9.
and, paradoxically makes us subjects *through that act of division alone.*"\(^{29}\) The figure of the Queer cannot be fully actualized in the Self as a subject because it is precisely the rejection of the Queer and the Real that that creates identity. In the Roman Empire, the Queer—or the active/unpenetrated woman—is repressed for disturbing the “natural” order, and can therefore never be integrated into the hegemonic body politic that *relies* upon domination of the passive female. Edelman marks this formation of identity as quintessential to the civics of a collective polity. Therefore, the non-reproductive Queer poses a threat to the perpetuation and success of said polity. This figure of the Queer can be borrowed for the purposes of understanding the perceived peril of a society plagued by active women—women who reject penetration and reproductive futurity. The active woman ultimately represents the jouissance that bubbles up from the Real to trouble the Imaginary and the Symbolic, disturbing social order, and is consequentially rejected from effected subjecthood.

The notions of imperialism and ultimately the health of Roman civilization that Livy stresses are tied up within the one-sex model. Laqueur writes that the one-sex model can be understood as “an exercise in *preserving the Father,* he who stands not only for order but for the very existence of civilization itself…being male…is the ascendancy of mind over the senses, of order over disorder, legitimacy over illegitimacy”\(^{30}\) In contrast, women stood for the threat of corruption to the larger body politic, while *active* women imperiled the social stratum in its entirety. Despite these negative associations, women could not completely embody the cultural Other as they were necessary for reproducing the polity. This unique position allows women of this period to be aligned with the social abject. Julia Kristeva identified and developed the notion of the abject in critical theory with her book, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection,*


\(^{30}\) Laqueur, pp. 58-59, emphasis mine.
published in 1980. Like Edelman’s figure of the Queer, the abject disturbs social order and reason, existing somewhere in the borderlands between what one defines as a part of oneself—the subject—and what exists independently of oneself—the object.\(^{31}\) Due to the Roman Empire’s strong sense of ‘self’ and ‘other,’ the body politic becomes a collective subject, foreigners and slaves occupy the role of the object, and women dwell in the liminal space between the two, constituting a rejected part of the ‘self’ that is the Roman Imperial identity.

Joseph Marchal explicates the precarity of culturally ambiguous bodies within the Roman Empire in his 2019 book, *Appalling Bodies: Queer Figures Before and After Paul’s Letters.* Chapter three addresses the status of eunuchs in the Empire, noting that eunuchs and their bodily illegibility made them synonymous with foreignness, as exports of the larger slave trade, and hailing from “the East.”\(^{32}\) Due to the vast nature of the Empire, naturalization of the subject depended upon exclusion of the effeminate rather than a construction of internal identities. Marchal writes that these exoticised eunuchs were the ultimate “scare-figure”—feminine, barbaric, and “Oriental.”\(^{33}\) Despite their association with lands outside the Empire, eunuchs were “incredibly proximate to [elite Romans], either as the eastern outsiders among them or as striking representations of how parts of their imperial margins have been brought into the very heart of their empire.”\(^{34}\) While eunuchs do not pose a threat to reproductive futurity and social hierarchy in the same ways as the active female, Marchal’s discussion of eunuchs undermines the kyriarchal identity in a similar manner, as they create tension by merely existing within an empire that structures itself around the legibility and domination of the active/masculine over the


\(^{33}\) *Ibid*, 87.

\(^{34}\) *Ibid*, 89.
passive/feminine. The eunuch holds no reproductive value and can therefore be fully relegated to the foreign Other, but the active/unpenetrated woman maintains the potential for assimilation to civic and familial frameworks, positioning her in the borderlands between Abject and Other.

In essence, the one-sex model creates a hierarchy of relational modes of being. Having outlined the ways in which women of the Roman Empire inhabited a fringe position within the centralized subjecthood and culture due to their perceived deficiencies, I posit that the emergence of Christianity during the Ante-Nicene period and the subsequent persecution of Christ’s followers troubled women’s role as the social abject. While the chaste Christian woman inherently attracts associations of activity due to her rejection of penetration and domestic/imperial structures, her martyrdom and larger hagiography refues promissory assimilation to the Empire and denies the potential to survive as the social abject, suggesting that liberation lies in transcending engendered and bodily constraints.

Before moving forward while using the one-sex model as a foundation and backdrop for analyzing the gender dynamics at play in holy martyrdom, it is important to note the pitfalls in Thomas Laqueur’s thesis. Laqueur has been accused of being “incurably Eurocentric,” for his tendency to project modern distinctions between gender and sex onto societies and cultures without these conceptions. Helen King, a historian of early science, complicated Laqueur’s characterization of the pre-Renaissance period by noting that models of the human body often stressed difference with as much gusto as they found commonality. While many critiques of Laqueur are certainly valid—particularly in regards to his anachronistic overemphasis of genital anatomy and its role in creating the one-sex model—Laqueur successfully destabilizes dominant notions of bodily sex in ways that are crucial for understanding strata of power in the

---

36 Ibid.
Ante-Nicene period. Given that the semiotics of the body are undoubtedly relational to expectations of activity and passivity, Laqueur’s one-sex model is particularly useful in displaying how a body in flux manifests in an easily troubled social setting when said social setting is organized around both symbolic and physical penetrative positionality. Once these dynamics are made explicit and their reliance on bodies for social order is understood, the real work of queering these structures through the very bodies that uphold them can begin.

The emergence of Christianity and the martyrdom of Christ’s followers allowed for the monstrous to become the divine as the already peripheral Christian woman is first involuntarily removed from humanity due to her abnormal impenetrability and then, of her own volition and as an act of defiance, removes herself from the flesh. The systemized narrative structure of female martyrdom and the dissemination of women’s hagiography not only queered the role of the body under the Empire, but provided radical routes to citizenship and subjecthood that would have proved otherwise impossible. I argue that the standard hagiography of Christian women’s life and persecution follows a narrative arc in three distinct installments: the hyper-expression of the feminine, the transformation of the body and its legibility, and the transcendence of the body and gender in its entirety. The commonalities between these saints’ lives first underscore their status in the Empire, maintaining that the corporeal body is penetrable and porous, and that receiving acts of violence is effeminizing. The desire for persecution and trial in the public arena then troubles expectations of activity and passivity, and worldly death ultimately delivers Christian women from their position of the social abject as they forego their flesh and therefore their rejected status within the Self, becoming illegible to the imperial imagination, and issuing a divine subjecthood as promised in the Gospels through resurrection in Heaven.
II - The Narrative Arc of Feminine Martyrology

In the introduction of her 1997 book, *Sacred Fictions: Holy Women and Hagiography in Late Antiquity*, Lynda Coon writes, “in short, all saints’ lives are rhetorical, didactic, and constructed. They are sacred fictions, not factual accounts of human achievements.”37 Coon approaches martyrrology and hagiography with detachment, but her implicit point is pertinent—what is fiction without function? Although forms of sanctity changed as Christianity was accepted into the dominant culture, the focus of my argument will stay with the original Christ Model—or the *imitatio Christi*—that was enacted in the early years of Christian persecution in the Roman arena. Early hagiographic *imitatio Christi* hoisted the passion of Christ to titular importance, centering the act of martyrdom over Christlike attributes or behaviors. Of the Christ Model, Coon writes that “the literary recreation of Christ’s brief tenure on earth inverted ancient social norms for the purpose of segregating the Son of God from ordinary patterns of human existence.”38 However, “ordinary patterns of human existence” are not without their gendered differences. The feminine *imitatio Christi* deviates from the passion of the Christ in that the female martyr must not only atone for the sins of her humanity, but must undo her femininity as a prerequisite to salvation. The female martyr thus enacts a chiasmus of the fall.

To demonstrate the narrative structure of womens’ martyrdom and analyze the implications of its distinct acts in Roman Imperial society, I will utilize the hagiography of Febronias of Nisibis. Febronias’s life is particularly helpful in understanding tropes associated with the virgin martyrs because, although she is reputed to be a martyr under the emperor Diocletian (284-305 C.E.), her hagiography and martyrrology was written much later, likely in the late sixth

or early seventh century. The account of Febronia’s life includes blaring anachronistic details. Most notably that a thriving convent of nuns would exist during the reign of Diocletian, whose rule occurred prior to the popularization of cenobitic monasticism that Christian ascetics gravitated towards after religious persecution ceased. However, the late nature of this *vita* provides an invaluable advantage; its author was no doubt raised Christian, and drafted Febronia’s martyrdom by drawing upon and ultimately synthesizing better known *vitae* such as those of Saint Thecla, Saints Perpetua and Felicitas, Saint Agnes, Saint Agatha, and Saint Lucy. As a result, Febronia presents as an amalgamation of earlier tropes, reflecting what aspects of the female martyr’s narrative remained salient to both late Antique and early Medieval Christian readers.

II.1 The Hyper Feminized Martyr

Contrary to hagiographic tradition, Febronia’s *vita* begins without her presence. The narrative is effectuated by the anti-Christian machinations of emperor Diocletian, who will only grant a young man’s ascendancy to political office if he visits ‘the Orient’ and exterminates blossoming Christian values in the region. The young man, Lysimachos, brings with him his uncle Selenos, who has been given guardianship over Lysimachos in the wake of his father’s death. Also with them is Lysimachos’s cousin, Primus, who is appointed commander of the legion Diocletian has parceled out for the impending invasion. The mission transpires to be a test of Lysimachos’s allegiance to the Pagan state, as the boy is known to have had a Christian mother who, before her death, implored him to be “a friend to Christ.”

A sympathetic Primus hears this, halts the arrest of Christians in the eastern territories they have already encroached

---

upon, and sends word to monasteries further on their route, warning them to “take refuge and escape from the clutches of the cruel Selenos.”

One of these monasteries is home to Febronia, who is a niece of the convent’s deaconess and a strict ascetic. Her “learning, beauty, humility, and gentleness” attracts a pagan widow, Hieria, to study under Febronia and the two become close companions. When news of Selenos—who has temporarily usurped Diocletian as antagonist—and his crusade arrives, the monks, clergy, and other practicing Christians flee Nisibis. However, the deaconess Bryene decides that the sisters of the convent must stay due to an illness that has befallen Febronia. The sisters disobey and flee from the premises, leaving Bryene and Febronia to be seized by the soldiers upon their arrival. They are subsequently taken to trial.

The exposition of this hagiography contains one key element of the archetypal Virgin Martyr’s narrative, while the rest lies within the trial itself. When the reader meets Febronia, we learn that she “was of extremely handsome appearance: her face and features were so beautiful that the eye could never be sated by gazing upon her.” Febronia’s hagiographer adds that her beauty was something of a nuisance—so much so that it required compensatory commentary. Febronia takes food “once every other day, whereas all the other sisters would eat each evening.” In the monastic tradition, this practice of nutritional abstinence would augment Febronia’s spirituality, but enhancing her feminine features and portraying her as an object of desire additionally works to magnify the female martyr’s degree of separation from normative social structures, while simultaneously underscoring the—often freeborn and upper

42 Ibid, 154.
43 Ibid, 155.
44 The relationship between Febronia and Hieria is suspected to have queer undertones, which would further complicate Febronia as a ‘queer’ figure who troubles not only social and cosmic hierarchy but also normative Roman sexualities.
45 S. Brock and S. Harvey, 155.
46 Ibid, 155.
class—womens’ capability to survive comfortably if they had conformed to imperial, civic, and familial frameworks. As the Sabine women have shown us, penetrability affords a relative degree of safety. Penetration is a status one asserts and an advantage from which one benefits, or, conversely, an acceptance of a situation from which one is “allowed to benefit.” As Primus’s legion serves as the embodiment of imperial ideology, the relationality between state power and beneficial beauty—and metonymically, penetrability—is revealed as Thomais and Bryene tell Febronia, “if we are arrested by the soldiers, the tyrants will quickly put us two to death as we are both old women; but they will grab you, seeing that you are young and beautiful.” Additionally, the stress placed upon Febronia’s beauty signaled to the Roman reader not only that she was eligible as a bride, but that she possessed innate moral superiority. Even if she were not freeborn, the associations between beauty, virtue, and goodness as developed by Cicero and Seneca would have aligned her with the spirit of romanitas, reifying her capacity for citizenship in the Empire. This potential to survive as the social abject is what creates stakes in the life of a Saint.

One can not ignore the role of class and status in hagiographic epistolary—many martyrs existed within an elite cultural sphere before dedicating their lives to Christ, embodying the

---

47 Exceptions to this identity exist, of course. Blandia and Felicitas are two popular early Christian martyrs who were enslaved prior to their trial. It is also worth noting that when on trial, Febronia identifies herself as a slave (of Christ) even though her vita has made explicit that she comes from high birth. The stock character of the slave in early Christian martyrdoms is often a figurative embodiment of Paul’s notion that God’s wisdom appears as a folly to the world. See Anders Klostergaard Petersen’s excerpt on Blandia as a literary device in “Gender Bending in Early Jewish and Christian Martyr Texts”. Febronia may also be imitating Thecla, who similarly identifies herself as a slave of Christ and whose city is under Roman occupation. Of this intersection between foreigner and enslaved, Elizabeth Castelli writes “both figures, the foreigner and the slave, are quintessential outsiders to civic identity, having no claim to the legal status accorded citizens and free persons, being in essence ἀτόποι, physically and socially perennially out of place”. For more, see Elizabeth A. Castelli, Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).
49 S. Brock and S. Harvey, 159.
50 See De Natura Deorum and De Officiis.
intersection between nobility, beauty, and virtue that composed the idyllic Roman *puella*. Noting this trope is nothing new. In his 1926 Little Blue Book, “Legends of Saints and Martyrs,” Joseph McCabe sardonically remarks on the overused stereotypes, writing of Saint Agnes, “Agnes was the very beautiful daughter of rich and noble Romans (the usual beginning of the fairy tale).”

This parenthetical eye-rolling continues with Saint Agatha, who “was (of course) a very beautiful Sicilian maid” and even extends to Thecla, the proto-martyr who “was ‘a very beautiful and very learned’ (of course) pagan lady.” McCabe accurately identifies the trope but refuses to engage with its crucial function in the narrative. Although these distinctions were trite and banal a century ago, their raison d’être is to make the reader conscious of the cultural transgression that has taken place. Possessing beauty and perceived status but rejecting a masculine partner—and by extension rejecting penetration—is ultimately symbolic of antagonism towards the Family and, more broadly, the Empire which is modeled upon the Family’s paternalistic constitution—there is no *Pater Patriae* without the *mater*.

After Primus, Lysimachos, and Selenos’s arrival in Nisibis, Primus is stunned to find the convent nearly empty. He reports back to his companions, but what he considers newsworthy is not the lack of Christians, but the fairness of one Christian who remains. Primus tells Lysimachos,

> I am filled with wonder when I tell you what I saw in that convent: I beheld a young woman the like of whom I have never set eyes upon; no, I have never seen such beauty and shapeliness in any other woman…my mind was stunned…she would have made a suitable wife for you, my lord

---

52 *Ibid*, 57.
54 S. Brock and S. Harvey, 161.
Febronia has resolved throughout her vita that she will remain chaste, making Primus’s suggestion of domesticity deeply ironic—Febronia’s refusal of this proposal is implicit. However, the implication conveyed by her looks is operatively twofold. In Christian and Judaic contexts, Febronia’s hyperfemininity and potential for sexual objectification solidifies her—and other Roman women like her—as a daughter of Eve. Once aligned with Eve, the chiasmus of the fall and a reversal of the book of Genesis is catalyzed by refusing civic partnership and childbirth—the pain of which is Eve’s punishment for the original sin. Therefore, the beautiful martyr’s denial of domesticity not only holds significance in the Imperial register, but marks her as the threshold for the salvific process. While Febronia’s refusal interrupts reproductive futurity and the success of the State as Edelman defines it, Febronia’s positionality as a nun inside a convent could be further read as a secondary act of teleological disruption, moving her towards alternative homosocial collectivity. However, as stated above, the account of Febronia’s monasticism is anachronistic and most likely reflects the lived experience of her hagiographer rather than Febronia herself. While homosocial collectivity would enhance the alignment between the female martyrs and Edelman’s “The Future is Kid Stuff,” it is not a wholly realized and distinct plot point in the standardized martyrology I am arguing for in this essay. Nevertheless, “successful” heterosexual coupling is upended in both iterations of the hagiography, whether the Saint is enacting imitatio Christi or retreating into cloistered communities. Febronia’s reemergence into public society forcibly moves the narrative away from the homosocial utopia of monastic life and notions of nonhierarchical mutuality as Selenos proclaims that she will be held for trial in the public tribunal. The next day, soldiers arrive at

55 The Holy Bible. Genesis 3:16. NRSV
57 S. Brock and S. Harvey, 150.
Febronia’s convent, secure a heavy iron collar around her neck, and drag her out to be judged in the arena.

Febronia’s final denial of domesticity and, by metonymic implication, the ideological paradigm of penetrator/penetrated and its relationality to statecraft, the perceived health of the body politic, and the “success” of the nation, comes when Selenos realizes her “meek disposition and beautiful looks.”58 The secular rewards of beauty in the Empire become strikingly concrete as Selenos offers to spare her life if she will accept Lysimachos’s hand in marriage. Febronia rebukes Selenos, proclaiming “my Bridegroom is immortal, incorruptible, and unchangeable. I shall enjoy him in eternal life…do not waste your time, sir.”59 With this, Febronia seals her fate.

II.II Transforming the Body

To begin Febronia’s trial, soldiers are ordered to tear off her robes and bind her with rags, letting her stand undressed, “an object of shame in front of everyone.”60 This act does not faze Febronia, and, frustrated by her lack of embarrassment, Selenos retorts “I know well that you are proud of your shapely features…you do not think it is a shame or a disgrace to stand there with your body naked; you even imagine it adds to your splendor.”61 Febronia’s lack of shame when unclothed likely alludes to Christian notions of clothing as the garments of mortification given to Adam and Eve following their transgression. The virgin Febronia has no need for such garments,

58 Ibid, 164.
59 Ibid, 165. This reference to Christ as a bridegroom is not a sublimation of earthly heterosexual coupling, as Christ’s gender and humanity has always been ambiguous. The word ‘enjoy’ may point towards a sexual relationship, but some scholars have read Febronia’s relationship with Christ as a queer co-identity. See Luis Josué Salés, “Queerly Christified Bodies: Women Martyrs, Christification, and the Compulsory Masculinisation Thesis,” Journal of Early Christian History 10:3 (2020), 83-109. While later Christian mysticism evokes Christ as a vessel of ecstasy, there is little sexual charge between the female martyr and her confessor in the Christ-model of martyrdom.
60 S. Brock and S. Harvey, 165.
61 Ibid, 166.
as she has lived a life of chastity and obedience. 62 She is not embarrassed of her naked body, no more than Eve was ashamed of her nudity prior to her sin. Febronia’s lack of bodily legibility has deeply disturbed Selenos; she has resisted passivity in marital structures, she has rebuked sexual penetration in favor of holy chastity, and yet she is not mortified by her naked form—a cultural symbol of weakness, dishonor, and immorality in secular and Pagan society. Peter Brown writes that by renouncing sexual activity, women were thought to have broken the “sound barrier” of sexual shame which the tradition of veiling and mortification through clothing aimed to enforce. 63 A woman immune to sexual shame was “a sport of nature, a third sex.” 64 To Selenos, Febronia embodies a degree of sexuality, an expression of gender, and, ultimately, a mode of being that defies Roman categorization. Febronia then compares herself to a male olympian, inquiring, “doesn’t he enter the arena naked, until he has conquered his adversary?” 65 In this challenge, Febronia overtly aligns herself with the masculine and unabashedly appropriates associations of activity. The linguistic markers of “woman” and “feminine” were perhaps already inappropriate to employ with Febronia and her fellow virgin martyrs. As Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray have argued, 66 this lexicon has problematized representation. Instead of granting representation, “woman” and “feminine” denote representation’s other and, as Maia Kotrosits put it, symbolizes that which “mysteriously eludes the symbolic order.” 67 In the representational

62 Febronia’s hagiographer was likely referencing Thecla, who similarly stands naked before her persecutors. Officials even offer Thecla clothing to cover herself, but she refuses. However, in Thecla’s trial, the narrative diverges as a cloud appears and shields her naked body from the crowd.

63 Brown, 80.

64 Ibid, 81. Peter Brown is referencing Tertullian’s treatise De Virginitibus Velandis, where the “third sex” is mentioned. Tertullian writes of the unveiled woman disapprovingly, but the significance of the act remains salient.

65 S. Brock and S. Harvey, 166.


economy, conformity to what would constitute being a “woman” is simply accepting a projection by men of their own experience. While men are endowed with individuality, womens’ difference relegates them to a life of embodying men’s inferior counterparts. It is precisely this projection of inferiority that men depend on to realize themselves as human. Febronia does not fit comfortably within Selenos’ masculinized symbolics of experience as she troubles the active/passive binary, resulting in a critical troubling of Selenos’s humanity—which, in the Roman empire, was intrinsically intertwined with his citizenship. Straying from her position as representation’s other, Febronia has not only arrogated masculine semiotics but destabilized Selenos’s sense of self.

What follows is a grotesque milieu of assorted tortures, likely ordered in a desperate attempt to reassert the ontological hierarchies that Febronia has disrupted. Selenos commands his soldiers to “stretch her out between four men and apply fire beneath her; let four soldiers stand over her and lacerate her back with rods’…a fire was lit and it burnt her intestines…her flesh was lacerated and was beginning to come off in bloody strips.”68 The attack continues with Selenos demanding that the soldiers “stretch her out on a plank and comb her flanks with iron nails; then apply fire until you burn her very bones…since this accursed and foul woman will not reply to the judiciary, let her tongue be cut out.”69 The phallic nature of the weapons used to penetrate Febronia only emphasizes the eroticism of the torture. Although maintaining her virgin status in life, the rods, iron nails, and eventually the surgeon’s knife used to sever her breasts, penetrate and denote Febronia to the penetrated in a symbolic rape—an assault on the feminine means of salvation and an effort to render her effeminate through the act of violence. Despite this, Febronia is miraculously still alive. Selenos orders that her hands and feet be amputated, which the soldiers struggle to accomplish—“the executioner placed the block under her right foot and

68 S. Brock and S. Harvey, 166.
69 Ibid, 167.
brought down the ax, but failed to sever the foot; he struck a second time but failed again…the blessed woman…tried to put her other leg on the wooden block, asking for it to be cut off as well.”

Offering her left foot to the executioner again disrupts expectations of passivity, altering the dynamic from one of domination to one of permissible, mutual action. Febronia has made herself equal with her executioners as they both work towards a common objective. She has surpassed victimhood by reasserting autonomy and effectively undoing the feminization Selenos attempted to construct through violence. Seemingly exhausted by this scene, Selenos orders that her head be cleaved from her body, so the executioner “took a sword, grabbed hold of her long hair—like someone going to slaughter a lamb—and thus dispatched her, cutting off her holy head”

With her body mutilated, Febronia shifts from that of the symbolic, social abject—the unwanted woman in the masculine imperial Self—to the physical abject, the corpse. Of the corpse, Julia Kristeva writes,

The corpse (or cadaver: cadere, to fall)... upsets even more violently the one who confronts it as fragile and fallacious chance…refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live…there, I am at the border of my condition as a living being

While Selenos has succeeded in physically punishing Febronia for threatening the Roman economy of subjectivity, he has potentially destabilized his own positional masculinity by neutralizing the Other against which his manhood is measured. Fichte asserts that the I posits itself by opposing, but in murdering Febronia, has Selenos truly reasserted the degree of difference between masculine and feminine that she transgressed? In the Christian context, with

---

70 Ibid, 170.
71 Ibid, 170.
72 Kristeva, 3.
73 Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks (New York, New York: Grove Press, 2008).
the promise of resurrection, it is more likely that the martyr is emancipated from the social order that created said degree of difference, trading in the psychic structures that make men human for the queer egalitarian pledge of the divine. Kristeva’s theory runs parallel to notions of resurrection, as she sees expulsion as a process of becoming. Kristeva writes, “the one that they ferret out, emphasize, evaluate…it is thus that they see that ‘I’ am in the process of becoming an other at the expense of my own death.”\textsuperscript{74} Abjection in Christendom is thus a process of extermination and, paradoxically, creation.

This emblematic metamorphosis of the feminine body is commonplace in women’s hagiography. It is so prevalent that many scholars have argued that the mutilation of women’s bodies initiate a masculinization that is necessary for the formation of Christian identity.\textsuperscript{75} According to Stephanie Cobb, the creation of this masculine Christian identity was a functional strategy. She writes, “Christians are portrayed homogeneously: they are all manly…the victory of Christian women over pagan and Jewish men underscored the superiority of Christian masculinity.”\textsuperscript{76} The masculine virgin martyr is often painted as a mere tool of the male-dominated Church. However, this analysis of the masculinized martyr’s position applies a certain amount of twenty-twenty hindsight, given that—during the time of persecution—the Church lacked a centralized institutional structure. While it is true that an organized ecclesiastical framework had evolved prior to the Council of Nicaea and itinerant preaching gave way to resident leadership\textsuperscript{77}, the degree of consensus between pious communities on biblical

\textsuperscript{74} Kristeva, 3.
\textsuperscript{76} \textit{Ibid}, 126.
interpretation, devotional practices, and hierarchical guidance remained in flux.\(^78\) Luis Josué
Salés codifies this tendency to stagnate the martyr’s masculinity as the “compulsory
masculinisation thesis” and questions if the outright identification with the male body and its
associated behaviors is ultimately reductive and restrictive. Salés asks, “is this so-called
masculinisation really that discursively transparent, that referentially stable?”\(^79\) The
assertion—made by scholars such as Stephanie Cobb and Gail Corrington Streeter\(^80\)—that the
virgin martyr’s expression of masculinity furthers patriarchal oppression and Christian
dominance sentences these once-transgressive martyrs to a fixed masculine identity, condemning
her to perpetuate the social orders that she originally troubled. I argue that, in the context that
Christianity emerged, this is antithetical to the egalitarian reverie that initially prompted religious
conversion. Paul had famously promised in Galatians 3:28 that “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 Jesus.” Of this countercultural movement that rebuked the fixity of hierarchical gender,
Peter Brown asserts that “it was the victory of the written word that ran counter to the
conventional wisdom of the sociology of premodern societies.”\(^81\) Cobb and Corrington Streeter’s
fixed masculinity is additionally incongruent with the *imitatio Christi*, as Christ—from a Roman
perspective—did not align with imperial hegemonic masculinity, nor was he undoubtedly male
in the Christian context. Eventually, Church doctrine would return to its preoccupation with the

---

\(^{78}\) See Carly Daniel-Hughes, “The Apostle of Failure: Queer Refusal, the Corinthian Letters, and Paul’s
Unflattering Characterization in the Acts of Thecla” again for an example of the disconnect between
preaching and practice. Daniel-Hughes exhibits how Paul’s letters to religious communities often lacked
authority in actuality, failing to police religious procedures and enforce gendered hierarchy. Paul’s refusal
to baptize Thecla, her auto-baptism, and her rejection of Paul’s vision of what a religious woman *should*
look like—made explicit in his letter to the Corinthians—is of particular relevance.

\(^{79}\) Salés, 86.

\(^{80}\) Gail Corrington Streeter, *Redeemed Bodies: Women Martyrs in Early Christianity* (Louisville, KY:

\(^{81}\) Brown, xl.
body and harness its potential for societal reorganization. However, drawing focus to these future paternalistic developments flattens the early Christian martyr’s experience, preventing the narrative from the analysis it is due. While Salés utilizes his resistance to the fixed masculine identity to posit that the telos of the virgin martyr’s narrative is to “articulate a Christian femininity that queered contemporary notions of womanhood,”82 I similarly reject this compulsory masculinisation, but contend that the martyr’s masculinisation is temporary because it is another step in undoing the book of Genesis. The transformation of the body can be read as masculinisation in opposition to Eve’s creation, metaphorically transforming her into Adam. However, to be completely free from sin, the martyr must additionally undo masculinity. This “compulsory” masculinity is merely a transient state that all subjects of Christ must ultimately transcend. Salés argues that, rather than masculinisation, Febronia returns to a state of girlhood; he emphasizes her youth and frames her double mastectomy as restoring the pre-pubescent body of the Saint83. Salés writes that transitioning to girlhood is “socially queer inasmuch as it represents an inversion of heteropatriarchal and chromonormative expectations of women.”84 This argument is particularly convincing, and despite Salés specifying girlhood, his analysis does not have to work in total opposition to my claim that this transformation results in gender incoherence. If we think back to Lee Edelman’s use of the Lacanian framework and aligning Febronia with the Queer operating in the Id or the “Real,” the figure in this stage is most commonly associated with the child who has not been socialized into an Ego or identity—in this case, a gender identity. Therefore, Salés’s assertion that Febronia experiences a reversal towards a childlike existence can effectively coexist with an interpretation of Febronia’s eventual

82 Salés, 87.
83 Ibid, 103.
84 Ibid, 104.
transcendence of the body, as movement in either direction troubles gender, returning the subject to a state of essential humanity sans legible body or gender expression.

**II.III Eclipsing the Body**

“For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we will see face to face”

1 Corinthians 13:12

As Febronia lay lifeless on the floor of the arena, Lysimachos’s eyes welled with tears. Racked with guilt, the very soldiers who dismembered her attempted to piece her back together, gathering “her head, feet, and hands, all the parts of the blessed girl’s body that had been removed” and wrapping them in a mantle. Her body was delivered back to the convent of Nisibis, and in a symbolic disidentification, the onlookers scrambled to snatch away parts of her dissected body for themselves—her mutilated breasts, her amputated tongue, rogue strips of flesh. Primus held them at bay with swords drawn. Once delivered back to Bryene and Thomais, Febronia’s mothers in Christ attempt to “rebuild” her body, “they put each of her limbs exactly in place…[arranging] her head, feet…and all the other parts, whereas her teeth were placed on her chest. The crowds filled the coffin with so much myrrh…that her body could not be seen.”

Years later, a bishop comes to the convent wishing to take Febronia’s body—or at least a limb—as a relic for his newly built shrine. Upon unlocking her coffin, Bryene and the bishop find that “Febronia’s body was like a ray of sun, and it was as though fire and lightning were

---

85 S. Brock and S. Harvey, 171.
86 Ibid, 171-172.
87 Likely a reference to Old Testament tropes of looking into the face of God and being met with a blinding light. This visual metaphor extends to holy men such as Moses in the book of Exodus, whereupon he converses with God and the light is transferred to him to convey prophetic wisdom. Exodus 34:30 reads, “so when Aaron and all the children of Israel saw Moses, behold, the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come near him”. Moses remedies this by veiling his face, functionally feminizing him as this practice is reserved for women. Febronia’s hagiographer decides not to shroud her light, which, when read in opposition to the story of Moses, could be seen as another form of gender transgression.
flashing out from her. Even in death, Febronia’s body remains somewhat in flux. She is divided yet whole, visible yet shrouded; as a blinding light her presence is entirely sensual yet utterly intangible. Her hagiographer’s indecisiveness surrounding the materiality of her body is ultimately reflective of an ideological shift that occurred during the time her vita was written. Febronia’s trial takes place during the height of martyrdom when notions of resurrection were aligned with Paul’s explanation of the phenomenon in first Corinthians. The metaphor of a seed was immensely popular, suggesting a profound change in both appearance and materiality.

Comparing seed sowing to the transformation of the corporeal body, Paul writes,

For as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ…someone will ask ‘How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come? Fool! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And as for what you sow, you do not sow the body that is to be…it is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body…we will not die, but we will all be changed.

Caroline Walker Bynum writes that this metaphor of transformation is distinct because it suggests very little continuity of identity. She outlines three potential forms of continuity: spatio-temporal, numerical, and appearance. Of these three, Paul’s metaphor of the resurrected body is only the “same” as the corporeal body in numerical identity. This conception of resurrection allows for the greatest transformation, as visual markers such as gender and race are removed from consideration, and aspects that may constitute a

---

88 Ibid, 175.
89 Roughly 100 C.E. to 325 C.E.
90 While pagans had their own conceptions of an afterlife, historians of funerary practice have argued that the prevalence of the memento mori was symbolic of a resurrected corpse that bore the same image of the corpse in the grave. Romans of the upper echelon frequently had death masks made or funerary portraits painted to display in the lararium or columbarium. These images of the dead made the body accessible to ‘read’ and pass judgment on long after their bodies have decayed and proved illegible. See Apuleius, The Golden Ass (Oxford, England: Oxford World's Classics, 2008) for a primary source that reflects varied Roman funerary practices.
91 1 Corinthians 15:22-15:51, NRSV.
spatio-temporal cultural identity such as ethnicity and learned custom are similarly inconsequential. Functionally, resurrection that merely maintains numerical identity leaves no opportunity to “carry over” or reconstruct secular kyriarchal hierarchies in the Kingdom of Heaven. Febronia’s transformation into a bright “ray of light” similarly masks her identity. Just as her material body was illegible to the Roman Empire due to its fluidity between masculinity and femininity, her divine body is illegible as it has eclipsed both poles of the gender spectrum and actively resists any visual identification with biological sex.

Paul writes that “all die in Adam,” but it is difficult to gauge whether he is simply referring to post-lapsarian Adam as representative of the corporeal being, or Adam as illustrative of a state of masculinity and essential humanity. For clarity, I look to The Secret Gospel of Thomas, a gospel which contains one hundred and fourteen extra-canonical sayings attributed to Jesus Christ and was ostensibly recorded by Didymos Judas Thomas. The final Logion of the gospel reads,

Simon Peter said to them, “Make Mary [Magdalene] leave us, for females are not worthy of life”. Jesus said, “Look, I shall guide her to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every female who makes herself male will enter the Kingdom of Heaven.”

This language of transformation is not uncommon in the Secret Gospel of Thomas. However, it matters in which formation said metamorphoses occur. What queers Jesus Christ’s final saying in the second century context of the gospel is the ability for a woman to gain subjecthood through virilization. As we know, the virile woman borders upon monstrous in the Imperial context—this self actualization is only possible in a holy register. Simone de Beauvoir makes clear the folly of secular female virilization in The Second Sex; she writes,

---

We are shown woman solicited by two kinds of alienations; it is very clear that to play at being a man will be a recipe for failure; but to play at being a woman is also a trap…the real problem for the woman refusing these evasions is to accomplish herself as transcendence…behavior of alienation is considered feminine, and behavior where the subject posits his transcendence is considered masculine”

What is troubled both in Logion 114 and in de Beauvoir’s analysis is that maleness is not the final stage of transformation, and thus not the peak performance of gender, as it would be in the Roman corporeal register. Maleness and perfection are no longer synonymous in the realm beyond the secular. The aim is for Mary Magdalene to surpass masculinity and become a “living spirit.” Although Christ’s sentence ends “so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males”, the assumption is not that the living spirit is one of masculinity in the Kingdom of Heaven, but rather that Jesus’s apostles—who happen to be male—are closer to achieving this status of the “living spirit” on Earth. Like the masculinity described by de Beauvoir, they have posited transcendence. This positioning is merely the activity associated with masculinity, which the virgin martyr appropriates in her rejection of passivity/penetration and its associations with domestic and imperial social order. She then embodies this activity in her tribunal, often undergoing a physical transformation which may visually align her with the biologically male form, but always performing “masculine” traits as they are associated within the Roman Empire. However, final transcendence always requires an abstraction of the body, whether this be

---

95 Febronia and Agatha both have their breasts amputated in the arena, but I hesitate to align this with a definitive trans identity. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes in her 1993 book, *Tendencies*, that “a word so fraught as ‘queer’…never can only denote; nor even can it only connote; a part of its experimental force as a speech act is the way in which it dramatizes locutionary position itself. Anyone’s use of “queer” about themselves means differently from their use of it about someone else (8-9). Because of this emphasis on self identification, I hinge my argument on Febronia’s identification with male olympians and her behavior as a figure that disrupts reproductive futurity, as those aspects of gender expression are within her control. The mastectomy can be seen as supplemental evidence but if used otherwise, it services the fixed masculine identity that misrepresents martyrdom.
disidentification or literal physical illegibility. The hierarchy of salvation must then be female → male → living spirit, reflective of the descending processes of mankind’s lapse, being essential spirit → Adam → Eve. This notion would be congruent with Christ’s statement regarding Mary Magdalene’s resemblance to the maleness of her cohorts and becoming wholly perfect in the temporal world where the emphasis on gender remains pertinent. However, both Mary and the Apostles must abdicate the body entirely to fully realize the living spirit, undoing the original sin that both Eve and Adam were culpable for. In logion 22, Christ tells his apostles the benefits of gender convergence, stating, “when you make male and female into a single one…then you will enter [the Kingdom].” This same logion praises gender’s dissolution, reading “the male will not be male nor the female be female.”

The living spirit is therefore androgynous or likely lacking a physical body entirely. This emphasis on unity, overcoming the division of the sexes, and abandoning expressions of gender is ultimately a plea for postlapsarian mankind to return to a state of pure essence and harmony directly under God. For Mary to “become male” is to atone for the sin of Eve, just as Febronia, Thecla, Perpetua, and countless feminine martyrs would eventually do. However, for male not to be male, the living spirit must be the soul of humanity that was created before Adam’s physical form was made manifest in the Garden of Eden.

Transcendence therefore marks a new form of citizenship—a new mode of “becoming”—that does not depend upon the physical body and in fact, repudiates it as a condition of Heaven. Simone de Beauvoir writes that a woman's project “is not repetition, but surpassing herself…her misfortune is to have been biologically destined to repeat Life, while in her own eyes Life itself does not provide her reasons for being, and these reasons are more important than life itself.” Christianity aimed to resolve this condemned lot through the promise

---

96 Pagels, Logion 22.
97 Ibid, Logion 22.
98 De Beauvoir, 74.
of resurrection and a new mode of being. Where the corporeal world marks teleological “success” as dependent upon the body and its functions,99 early Christianity recognizes “success” as the dissolution of these indicators of difference. The social abjectification of women cannot theoretically exist after the body is abstracted, given that the Self, the Other, and the Abject predicate upon a representational economy that sustains itself through legible variance between man and woman, masculine and feminine, activity and passivity.

III - Conclusions

Frantz Fanon writes that man is an affirmation, one which we must keep repeating.100 The ungendered, sanctified body was one whose affirmation was repeated through hagiographic prose, but its declaration ceased as Christian landscapes began to shift and the faith moved into dominant culture. The tradition of hagiography shifted alongside it, no longer valuing the fluidity and illegibility that flourished in counter-cultural contexts. I previously mentioned that the materiality of Febronia’s corpse was the subject of indecision.101 Given that her hagiography was written in the early medieval period, I believe this indecision was a residual of a changing conception of resurrection—one which favored continuity of appearance and materiality. These aspects became inseparable from the notion of identity to the medieval individual, who increasingly valued bodily sensuality.102 With this change, the corporeal social hierarchy which maintains itself through domination and difference is reproduced in the Kingdom of Heaven. One must wake up from the early Christians’ egalitarian reverie. Despite these developments, it is my hope that this study has effectively demonstrated that early Christian hagiography—specifically the narrative arc of the feminine martyr—gave women ways to define

---

100 Fanon, 197.
101 See section II.II.
themselves outside of Imperial subjectivity, which relied on punitive ideologies of bodily difference. The objective of this study was to apply modern critical theory to reveal that female saints’ hagiographies are not simply banal narratives shrouded by mysticism. Instead, their systematic narrative repetition affirms a gender of sanctity which is inherently anti-imperialist in its androgyny. The martyrs and their hagiographers’ understanding of gender is amazingly similar to our contemporary conceptions; they knew, as we know, that gender is repetitively performed, fluid, yet tethered to social and cultural sensitivities. Additionally, we both search for an answer to the same question—how can we shape each other and define ourselves reciprocally, without domination, without violence, without hierarchy? In this pursual, modernity treads in the footsteps of these early saints, their backs turned towards us. With effort, someday we might pass them, turn around, and stand face to face.
Works Cited


