Martyrology and the Prurient Gaze

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Martyrology and the Prurient Gaze

DAVID FRANKFURTER

This paper uses a range of early (100–400 C.E.) martyrological narratives, in association with novels and apocalyptic discourses of the same era, to show the appeal of such narratives to early Christian audiences’ prurience into sadogerotic violence. The sado-erotic voyeurism invited can be placed in historical and performative continuity with the Roman spectacle, literary ambivalence over female chastity, and both geographical and heresiographical fantasies about the sexual and cultural predilections of the Other. The spectacle of sado-erotic violence allows the enjoyment of erotic display at the same time as the disavowal of that enjoyment, which is projected onto the violently punitive actions of Roman authorities, heathen mobs, or (in eschatology) angels of hell. It also allows masochistic identification with victims’ eroticized brutalization and dissolution.

MARTYROLOGY/PORNOGRAPHY

The discussion of martyrology and its graphic details has grown quite sophisticated in recent years. Where once historians would scrutinize the texts for historical reliability and for evidence of Roman judicial savagery, we are today alerted to the various functions of the suffering body as a theatrical and literary spectacle and to the social—the identity-consolidating—implications of remembering acts of primal victimization in illo tempore.

I am grateful to the Casablanca Group, to participants at the Boundaries and Bodies conference and at the special session on fantasies of violence sponsored by the Violence and Representations of Violence group (SBL Annual Meeting, November 2006), and especially to Virginia Burrus and Laura Nasrallah for invaluable criticism.

As the martyr’s body is progressively raked, flayed, burned, and gutted, a community forms with links to a past and a shrine and a memorial calendar. Martyrology now becomes an exercise in viewing and imagining, of vicarious participation, of cult formation, and even—in some historical instances—of mobilization to violence in honor of the martyr.

But, to quote Tertullian, “Why should it be lawful to see what it is shameful to do?” He is addressing Christians who still enjoy theater and arena; but I extend the question to martyrology itself, in which bodies—often erotically charged bodies—are imaginatively put through sexual display and graphic torture for a frankly prurient gaze. How could this work? How could the sexually anxious Christian engage in precisely the voyeurism that Tertullian and his ilk condemned—for whom even the private erotic gaze was forbidden, as Clement declares? Where many folk outside the ekklēsia adorn their chambers with painted tablets hung on high like votive offerings, regarding licentiousness as piety, and, when lying upon the bed, while still in the midst of their own embraces,...
Certainly there were ways of sublimating the urges and the images these leaders denounced. In her evocative essay “The Blazing Body,” Patricia Cox Miller demonstrated the ardent (if still restricted) eroticism that the church father Jerome could use in his efforts to influence young ladies—a stimulating but distinctly anti-carnal exegesis of the Song of Songs. Miller has always invited us to sense these passionate undercurrents and countercurrents in late antique writings, and any paper that seeks to take the poetic or erotic seriously in late antique culture is in her debt. But here I imagine the virgin Eustochium, the recipient of Jerome’s letter on the sublimation of eroticism, putting it down to go back to the sultry lines of the Song of Songs itself, or maybe to pick up her new pamphlet on the martyrdom of the comely virgin Agnes. For I contend in this paper that, in framing graphic, often explicitly sexualized, scenes of violent atrocity within the context of Roman judicial savagery, early Christian martyrologies allowed their audiences to contemplate in safe form scenes that were so fascinating, even titillating, that they could not legitimately be enjoyed otherwise. They were, in a sense, pornography, although the modern peculiarities of this term lead me to prefer the broader, more psychodynamic category “sado-eroticism.”

I take eroticism in general to denote the objectified representation of sexuality, whether intercourse or bodies, for the purposes of titillation. Such objectification may well involve such narrative contexts as violence, exoticism, and perversion, especially when sexuality itself is culturally signified in violent terms or cannot be legitimately represented except as perversion or as demonic or as the perpetration of the Other. In these sado-erotic contexts, arousal itself is mixed—indeed, safely mixed—with horror, outrage, or disgust, and it derives as much from the fantasy of pain, passivity, self-obliteration, and punitive rage as it does from the representation of sexual fulfillment. Sometimes titillation comes from a masochistic identification with victim (manifestation of innocence and desire), sometimes from a sadistic identification with the aggressor (manifestation of control and punishment). These boundaries are fluid. However, the erotic engagement


involved in these fundamentally voyeuristic experiences is always repudiated in the culture of the martyrology, and that repudiated excitement, I will argue, inevitably translates into a rage against the source of arousal: the martyr. The aggressor himself comes to represent that rage; in that sense we may call these materials sado-erotic.6 I am hardly the first to point out the pornographic features of martyrology; but rather than dwell on the political implications of objectifying bodies and desire I want to examine the relationship between the eroticized voyeurism of martyrologies and the framing of sexualized violence as the work of some monstrous Other: Roman, barbarian, or heretic.7 It is not so much to define an enemy or an ideology that this literature operates as to provide legitimate spectacle for the prurient gaze, to excite fantasy without owning it.

OUTRAGEOUS SIGHTS

In order to expose a theme in ancient martyrologies that should have some resonance with the modern reader, I begin with an early modern analogue. I then turn to antiquity with a scene from a novel roughly contemporaneous with martyrologies, and then to a series of exemplary martyrological vignettes from Latin and Greek Christian worlds.

The “True” Abduction Narrative in Colonial Fantasy

The first text comes from the most popular narrative of Indian abductions circulating in the eighteenth century. It claims complete authenticity, yet we should notice how the framework of “Indian cruelty,” as the title establishes it, provides license for the sado-erotic gaze:

[N]o heart among us but was ready to burst at the sight of the unhappy young lady . . . , a lady in the bloom of youth, blest with every female


accomplishment that could set off the most exquisite beauty! Beauty, which rendered her the envy of her own sex, and the delight of ours, enduring the severity of a windy, rainy night! Behold one nurtured in the most tender manner, and by the most indulgent parents, quite naked, and in the open woods, encircling with her alabaster arms and hands a cold rough tree, whereto she was bound, with cords so straitly pulled, that the blood trickled from her finger’s ends! Her lovely tender body and delicate limbs, cut, bruised, and torn with stones, and boughs of trees as she had been dragged along, and all besmeared with blood!8

The scene provokes outrage in one way, yet, as commentators have remarked, sado-erotic detail in another. Indeed, we might—in a psychoanalytic mode—plausibly regard the outrage the text elicits as the simultaneous rejection of that very titillation the text provokes. The Indians in the text come to bear the reader’s own erotic and punitive impulses, while the abused and exposed feminine body invites masochistic identification as well.9 The theme of the Other’s hypersexual aggression on “our” women’s arousingly vulnerable purity has extended far and wide in western history, conjuring similarly sado-erotic vignettes of “real” feminine victims of African-American, Jewish, Arab, Indian, and Chinese men.10

Victim, Aggressor, and Erotic Gaze in an Ancient Novel

The second text comes from the second-century novel Leukippe and Clitophon by Achilles Tatius. This text was read, no doubt, with only slightly less credulity than the abduction narrative above, since the portrait of


the savages and their horrific rites adheres to most assumptions about untamed peoples on the periphery of the empire. But the text’s program is more subtle than the reification of cultural boundaries. As Simon Goldhill has pointed out, the author repeatedly equates sight and sex: “not only is looking the height of erotic stimulation, but even [its Stoic “theory” of sight] is pretty sexy stuff.”11 “You have no idea how marvelous a thing it is to look on one’s beloved,” says one character. “This pleasure is greater than that of consummation, for the eyes receive each others’ reflections. . . . Such outpouring of beauty flowing down through them . . . is a kind of copulation at a distance.”12 But then let us note the kind of distanced copulation the youthful narrator experiences as he watches his virginal beloved sacrificed:

[The bandits] were leading a girl to the altar with her hands tied behind her back. . . . They poured a libation over her head and led her around the altar to the accompaniment of a flute and a priest intoning what I guessed was an Egyptian hymn. . . . Then at a signal . . . one of the attendants laid her on her back and tied her to stakes fixed in the ground. . . . He next raised a sword and plunged it into her heart and then sawed all the way down to her abdomen. Her viscera leaped out. The attendants pulled out her entrails and carried them in their hands over to the altar. When it was well done they carved the whole lot up, and all the bandits shared the meal. . . . I [the narrator] . . . just sat there staring. It was sheer shock: I was simply thunderstruck by the enormity of the calamity.13

By withdrawing to Clitophon’s vantage point the text highlights the secretive gaze, the guilty voyeurism on the spectacle of Leukippe’s (apparent) disembowelling. The violent, and clearly phallic, penetration of the girl’s belly is public only to insiders, but spectacle to the secret outsider.14 It is

a dramatic construction duplicated in modern movies like the 1933 *King Kong* and the 1987 *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, wherein concealed heroes behold elaborate scenes of ritual atrocity.\(^{15}\)

### Victory or Strip-Tease? The Martyrdom of Perpetua

We turn now to a more familiar text, the *Martyrdom of Perpetua*, focusing on the details—the spectacle—of death and violence itself as the editor constructs it, not as Perpetua tries to imagine it in her own account. It is a spectacle constructed not through chaos and horror but a series of explicit directives to signs of sexual flowering, veiling, and receptivity, all in subtle parody of the maternity Perpetua tries valiantly to disavow in her own journal (3, 5–6; cf. 15). Perpetua and Felicitas “were stripped naked, placed in nets [reticulis] and thus brought out into the arena. Even the crowd was horrified when they saw that one was a delicate young girl and the other was a woman fresh from childbirth with the milk still dripping from her breasts.”\(^{16}\)

Obviously the nets don’t conceal much. Like the mesh lingerie painted on a series of stucco figurines of young women in Roman Carthage [Figs. 1–2] or the jewelry bedecking the exotic courtesan Pelagia as she rode through Antioch, sexuality is highlighted and eroticized through its partial concealment.\(^{17}\) Indeed, after her first toss by the heifer, Perpetua “pulled

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that repressed sensuality, displacing it with ideas of nourishment, it seems clear that adult medieval people, in common with ancients and moderns, had a powerful sexual response to female breasts” (Visualizing Women, 98).

down the tunic that was ripped along the side so that it covered her thighs, thinking more of her modesty than of her pain. Next she asked for a pin to fasten her untidy hair; for it was not right that a martyr should die with
her hair in disorder” (20.4–5; ed. and trans. Murillo, Acts of the Christian Martyrs, 128–29). The author has Perpetua offering an erotic glimpse of her body, turning the spectacle of the arena into a spectacular strip-tease, reminiscent of Ovid’s famous advice for a woman’s erotic positioning in the Ars Amorata.18 To be sure, the author might be trying to frame this as

modesty in distress, yet what he reveals runs counter to that theme, much as Apuleius describes with the servant-girl Fotis: stripped completely, she “shaded her smooth femininity with her rosy fingers—more from a desire to provoke than to protect her modesty.”\footnote{19} Or, as in some later martyrologies (like those of Agnes and Thecla), young women’s nudity is declared, yet screened by hair, fire, or blazing light.\footnote{20}

Finally, in the end, Perpetua herself “took the trembling hand of the young gladiator and guided it,” with its erect sword, presumably, “to her throat” (21.9; ed. and trans. Murillo, \textit{Acts of the Christian Martyrs}, 130–31). After all her assertiveness, male penetration is the final act in this dramatically eroticized spectacle. This text runs in two directions simultaneously: one that stresses the pretense of modesty and control and one that exhibits sexuality with graphic close-ups.\footnote{21}

Martyr as Erotic Heroine: Prudentius on Agnes

We might not pick up on the erotic spectacle of young soldier, erect sword, and nude and comely girl if we did not recall, first, Lucius’s sex-play with Fotis in \textit{The Golden Ass} (2.17) and, more pertinently, the speech Prudentius attributes to the virgin Agnes in his \textit{Crowns of Martyrdom}.\footnote{22} Agnes’s first punishment for being a Christian is to be exhibited publicly like a prostitute, highlighting her erotic role. Yet passersby avoid her out of pity (except for one boy who, gazing lewdly at her, is instantly struck dead). Then, when a soldier is sent to dispatch her and

\begin{quote}
Agnes saw the grim \textit{virum} standing there with his naked sword, her gladness increased and she said: “I rejoice that there comes a man like this, a savage, cruel, wild man-at-arms, rather than a listless, soft, womanish youth bathed in perfume, coming to destroy me with the death of my honor. This lover, this one at last, I confess it, pleases me. I shall meet his...
\end{quote}


\footnote{20} See Constantinou, \textit{Female Corporeal Performances}, 36–38.


\footnote{22} See the excellent literary analysis of the Agnes episode by Martha A. Malamud, \textit{A Poetics of Transformation: Prudentius and Classical Mythology} (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 156–72, as well as Grig, \textit{Making Martyrs}, 79–85, and Burrus, “Reading Agnes.” In Jerome’s most heated sado-erotic spectacle of a Christian woman’s mutilation (for adultery) we even find that the phallic sword, staple of female martyrdoms, at one point goes \textit{languidus} (Ep. 1.7).
eager steps half-way and not put off his hot desires. I shall welcome the whole length of his blade into my bosom [papillas], drawing the sword-blow to the depths of my breast [pectus]. . . .”\(^{23}\)

The *Crowns of Martyrdom* is a work “loosely based” on Spanish martyrological traditions, Anne-Marie Palmer has concluded, “but designed to satisfy the pious curiosity of the faithful who want as rousing a picture as possible of their heroes.”\(^ {24}\) And in this especially stirring episode Prudentius moves his audience from eroticized *spectacle* in the case of Agnes’s unconsummated prostitution—teasingly introduced, then removed—to an eroticized *speech* that asserts the virility of her penetrator (who functions both as *virum* and Christ).\(^ {25}\) Even prior passion accounts (like one by Ambrose of Milan) accentuated the erotic spectacle: exhibited nude in a brothel, Agnes’s hair grows down to cover her. (Of course, women’s long hair also provided erotic spectacle in the Roman world: that which conceals can also serve to reveal.)\(^ {26}\)

**Prurience, Repudiation, and the Savage Other:**

*Sozomen on a Heathen Atrocity*

There is an almost unabashed eroticism in the spectacles of Perpetua’s and Agnes’s martyrdoms, as if the dramatic power these women gained on the final stage was somehow encapsulated in sexual power. The martyr Irene is also made to stand naked in a brothel. The martyr Agathonike, having been led to the public place of execution, “removed her clothing and gave it to the servants,” at which point the crowd beheld her naked *pulchritudinem* and lamented her imminent roasting.\(^ {27}\)

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27. Marina of Antioch, sub-
ject of a Byzantine martyrology, puts it most explicitly, while stripped and bleeding before the prefect: “‘Do whatever you want [with my body] and whatever is pleasing to your eyes.’ . . . And all those nearby marvelled at seeing her body destroyed.”28 Indeed, as enticingly as they are all displayed in narrative, all these girls are ultimately punished; for the alluringly nude female posed an intense ambivalence to early Christians.

Truly, it was erotically adorned women who seduced the Watcher Angels, so warns the patriarch Reuben after confessing that the mere sight of Bilhah’s naked body impelled him once to rape her.29 For Evagrius the very “demon of fornication imitates the form of a beautiful naked woman, luxurious in her gait, her entire body obscenely dissipated—who seizes the intellect of many persons and makes them forget the better things”; while monks at the monastery at Bawit could gaze regularly at a painting of St. Sissinios spearing a mostly naked demoness Alabasdria, who rises to the spear in a pleading gesture.30 The nude female, source of excitement, must be framed clearly as monstrous or as suffering at monsters’ claws in order to sanction the erotic gaze and even allow masochistic identification with her suffering.31 Titillation itself becomes confused with anxious repudiation, leading to those scenes of sado-eroticism that punish viciously those who sexually excite the reader for eliciting that excitement.32 And this indeed is what we find in Sozomen’s story of a fifth-century attack on nuns in Syrian Heliopolis, perpetrated by local heathens:

They stripped the holy virgins, who had never been looked upon by the multitude, of their garments, and exposed them in a state of nudity as
a common spectacle for the salacious and their insults [εἰς κοινὸν τῶν θεόμοιν τῶν θέστρον τε καὶ ῥημίν]. After numerous other inflictions they at last shaved them, ripped them open, and concealed in their viscera the food usually given to pigs; and since the swine could not distinguish but were impelled by the need of their customary food, they also tore in pieces the human flesh.33

In its obscene cruelty the story bears all the hallmarks of an atrocity legend. Such legends have perennially circulated around social conflicts, from late antique Egypt to modern Rwanda. Propagandists portray erstwhile outsiders as perpetrating the most sadistic acts on the most vulnerable of insiders—babies, children, women—to ramify social boundaries and mobilize violent responses as retaliation or pre-emption.34 Here the “outsiders” are the heathens and “our” victims are the cloistered virgins. But the cruelty Sozomen recounts is as sexualized as what Achilles Tatius has the bandits do to Leukippe: the child-resistant abdomens of the cloistered virgins, like the breasts of saints Barbara and Agatha, become the objects of grotesque mutilation—indeed, punishment. The sadistic heathen mob in Sozomen plays a role similar to the Indians in the abduction narrative, allowing readers “to disassociate themselves from collusion with the punishments they fantasize.”35 Such legends function both to demonize the Other and to provide that voyeuristic confusion of disgust and arousal; and it is important to understand the demonization in conjunction with the prurience—the disavowed excitement.

**Imagining Male Bodies in Agony and Dissolution**

The nude, partially-nude, or otherwise sexually-provocative-yet-resistant bodies of young women provide the clearest victims for the violent delectation of the prurient gaze. Indeed, as victims their function for early Christian fantasy would have crossed audiences’ gender boundaries, potentially arousing women’s vengeance fantasies (e.g., against nubile sexuality withheld) as likely as men’s masochistic identification (e.g., with martyrs as

35. Caviness, Visualizing Women, 115; see also pp. 36 and 84–119.
symbols of the sexual body victimized). These texts offered far more complex imaginative experiences than simply tableaux for male misogyny.

But depictions of male martyrs’ sufferings also conveyed sado-erotic fantasy, either in the narration of pain or in the spectacle of bodily dissolution. Although his nudity is not highlighted, the Lyons martyr Sanctus aroused such belligerence among his persecutors, according to a late third-century text, that “they finally tried pressing red-hot bronze plates against the tenderest [τρυφερωτάτους] parts of his body,” before he is reduced to “one big bruise and wound, stretched and distorted beyond any human form.”

Sado-erotic themes of male pain and dissolution have parallels in the ancient novel as well. Achilles Tatius’s beautiful Charicles is torn to bits behind a crazed stallion, “gashed with as many incisions as there were points on the broken wood” that speared him, then trampled by the horse so that he was “no longer recognizable as Charicles.” It is a scene anticipating both Ignatius of Antioch’s famous appeal to be chewed to bits in the Roman arena (Romans 5–6) and, more pertinently, Prudentius’s epic account of the martyr Hippolytus of Rome. This name, Martha Malamud has shown, would already have conjured in audiences’ minds the mythical Hippolytus, “the only male in Greek and Roman myths who is celebrated for his chastity” and who dies (like Charicles) in a horrifying chariot accident, “a tree trunk impaling his groin.” But Prudentius takes it further. Dragged by two horses across hill and dale, the Christian Hippolytus’s aged “body is shattered, the thorny shrubs which bristle on the ground cut and tear it to little bits. Some of it hangs from the top of rocks, some sticks to bushes, with some the branches are reddened, with some the earth is wet.” And “one could see,” in a painting that Prudentius claims to know, Hippolytus’s “parts torn asunder and lying scattered in disorder up and down at random. . . . One [devotee] clasps the snowy head, . . . while another picks up the shoulders, the severed hands, arms, elbows, knees, bare fragments of legs.” The male body provides the medium for imagining utter dissolution, eroticized through the listing of members.

Achilles Tatius also uses painting descriptions (*ekphraseis*) to capture the male body in display; and one such description certainly anticipates martyrologies. His characters come upon a depiction of Prometheus and the eagle that captures the spectacle of the male body in agony in its very ambivalence—as horrific and yet fascinating, and conveyed not through sorrow but the victim’s every limb and wound:

Poised at mid-incision, his beak continues to cut an already gaping wound, deeply inserted in the gastrointestinal trench, excavating for the liver, which the artist has slightly revealed through the abdominal slit. . . .

Prometheus is caught in a painful convulsion: one side of his torso is contracted as he draws up his thigh towards himself, actually pressing the eagle deeper into his wound; his other leg is tautly stretched out. . . . Signs of his agony are etched on his face: arching brows, lips twisted to expose the teeth. You would have pitied the pain in this painting.

No such pity, of course, is invited in martyrologies, where pain itself (for martyr and, vicariously, for audience) is invited as something positively joyous in its details and forms: “What tortures they were! How novel and how cleverly invented by the Devil’s poisoned mind! Marian was hung on the rack till he bled, . . . he was so tortured that the very pain gave him joy.”41 Thus we read a third-century North African author’s enthusiasm for pain itself. In the later work of Prudentius the speeches of Roman torture-masters offer exquisite descriptions of agonies to come for the horrified yet salacious anticipation of the audience: “‘Tie him with his arms behind and rack him upwards and downwards till the joints of his bones in every limb are rent asunder with a crack. Then with cleaving strokes lay bare his ribs of their covering, so that his organs shall be exposed as they throb in the recesses of the wounds’”—*ut per latebras vulnerum iecur reectum palpitet*.42 Images of the pain and suffering of male bodies in these early texts seem to proceed systematically toward the spectacle of self-annihilation. This climax means to be erotic in itself, for the intrinsically transgressive joys of pain and abuse become the very means of ego-annihilation and the dissolution of all boundaries.43 And

even then the body parts can maintain memories of erotic power, like the tongue of Cyprian that, following his dismemberment, remains “potent everywhere . . . it alone cannot die. . . . Like an ambrosial liquor which soothes the heart, bathing the palate and penetrating to the seat of the soul, while it . . . spreads through the whole frame, [his tongue] makes us feel God within us entering our marrows.”44 Our memory of a man once known for soft skin, flowing hair, and irresistible love-charms continues in the sensation of his penetrating tongue.45

SADO-EROTIC FANTASY AND THE PRURIENT GAZE IN ROMAN CHRISTIAN CONTEXT

Now, it is clear in my brief discussions of each of these texts that I credit their authors, editors, and transmitters with full imaginative agency. Whatever the historical realities, the literature itself comes to function on its own terms as spectacle, as theatre. The eroticization of the female (or male) martyr and the graphic details of punishment become equal and complementary parts of the overall pornography of martyrdom: her sexualization, her exhibition, our prurient fascination, her punishment for arousing our prurience, the erotic spectacle of pain itself, and the fantasy of climactic dissolution. Even the less sexualized, more plainly cruel martyrdoms of the Coptic and Syriac cycles sanction a voyeurism toward the spectacle of bodily mutilation.46 In either case, spectacles we should not gaze at, that should not excite on their own terms, are sanctioned as legitimate, even pious, through their framing as the monstrous acts of Romans or heathens or savages and as the heroic resistance of comely Christian martyrs. The agency behind the girl’s (or boy’s) nudity, exposure, and pain cannot therefore be ours—the audience—but the beastly Romans’. It is a simple

44. Prudentius, Crowns of Martyrdom 13.4–5, 13–14 (ed. and trans. Thomson, Prudentius, 328–29), on which see Malamud, Poetics of Transformation, 118–21. As Malamud points out, Prudentius uses lingua to indicate both the living tongue and its living speech, but the two are intentionally elided, such that the arousing attributes of the speech implicitly derive from the tongue.
45. Compare the vitality of the excised tongue of Christina: Passion of Christina 30.1–6, discussed in Constantinou, Female Corporeal Performances, 53.
matter of impulse projection and fantasy as the audience identifies alternately with the brutalized martyr and the monstrous forces of brutality, cringes at the torture, and relishes the blood.

*Sado-Erotic Fantasy and the Culture of Public Spectacle*

But does the introduction of the category fantasy and its psychodynamic implications impose a needlessly anachronistic grid on ancient martyrology? I would argue not. The increasing scholarly emphasis on spectacle in Roman public culture and in the texts that critiqued that public culture has opened up historians to a world of mimesis and staging as articulate as Clifford Geertz’s Indonesia. If fantasy in its most basic sense arises from setting drama apart, at some bucolic or exotic distance, then the very staging of public spectacle put the brutality of the arena to the service of civic fantasy. In Kathleen Coleman’s famous study “Fatal Charades” we see civic fantasy enacted publicly through the costumed bodies of the condemned, while Apuleius’s scene of a condemned woman’s public rape by donkey crystallizes broader Roman fantasies about women and equines. Sexually condemning people to animals may have served a process of degradation, but it also brought to spectacle a vibrant folklore of human/animal crossovers. Finally, Van den Hoff has noted the predilection for an “aesthetics of horror” in the early Roman empire: scenes of cruelty involving children, youth, and women from myth and legend, which might stir audiences to outrage and excitement both. Overall, this culture of spectacle,
especially of spectacles that mediate civic myth, popular folklore, bodily dissolution, and sexual perversion, amounted to a culture experimenting with fantasy; and “those condemned to die” in the Roman arena, David Potter points out, “became part of the fantasy world which people came to the arena to appreciate.”

Conceptualizing martyrrology as spectacle allows us to place the performance of martyr accounts—their public reading and homiletic commentary—in historical and cultural relationship with the experience of the Roman arena, as heir to the same prurient desires that the arena had stimulated. It is clear that martyrrologies were normally performed (or depicted visually) so as to invite public, collective consumption. Thus the dynamics of prurience and sado-erotic arousal explored in this paper would have been real factors in audiences’ historical engagement with those texts. Moreover, those audiences—“spectators” to the horrors described—included both men and women, all of whom brought to the martyrrologies’ own sado-erotic voyeurism their various capacities for the objectification of desire, for the erotic appreciation of the naked body, and for prurience into horror, atrocity, and sexual degradation. A sixth/seventh-century martyrology of Catherine of Alexandria has the (married) empress herself besmitten with Catherine’s immense beauty and so “desperately longing for her.” Even with more brutal imagery such prurience is hardly exclusive to or typical of men, as contemporary consumer demographics of slasher films and graphically violent novels attest.


55. See James B. Twitchell, Dreadful Pleasures: An Anatomy of Modern Horror (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), and on women’s engagement with sado-
Now, some of the readers of this essay might want to imagine diverse, even “counter-erotic” readings of these texts among these historical audience members—that some ancient readers could refuse the voyeurism, as it were. Should we then take sado-erotic voyeurism as only one, perhaps even marginal interpretation of these texts in their historically performative settings? I argue not. Indeed, before we impute the diverse agencies of a modern readership to ancient audiences, we should consider the religious context of these texts in performance. For early Christianity was a religious movement consumed by the definition of its own boundaries, which it persistently conceptualized through bodies: Christ’s, infants’, women’s, martyrs’. It was a religious movement that had, by the third century, long revolved around the transvaluation and inversion of spectacles of punishment and pain in order to signify transcendence, mediation, and the supercharged body: spectacles that ranged from Jesus’ crucifixion according to Paul and the gospels, through the Book of Revelation, to the earliest legends of martyrdom. In the service of inversion and transvaluation of the obscene—of horrific cruelty—martyrologies carried a persistently didactic meaning, hardly conducive to multiple readings: this is why you should glory in her torture and this is what you should gaze upon as he suffers; this is how you should view her death; this is what you should remember of his time on earth. In the Martyrdom of Perpetua a posthumous editor’s description of the spectacle of her martyrdom (chs. 4–21) means to focus audiences’ gazes away from the visionary authority once evident in her prison diary (chs. 2–10) and rather to her and her companions’ bodies in torment. Inversion of pain, torment, and death becomes a principal theme of Christian narrative culture. And one of the most basic forms of inverting horror, atrocity, disgust, and degradation is to maintain the prurient gaze and invite its complex passions.

Indeed, the sado-erotic prurience that martyrologies invite seems to have gone unquestioned by church fathers throughout late antiquity. Augustine of Hippo, who gave sermons on the feast day of Perpetua and Felicitas following the reading of their martyrlogies, himself stressed the heroines’

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56. E.g., 1 Cor 1.23–24; Mark 15.39; Rev 5. See esp. Christopher A. Frilingos, Spectacles of Empire, chap. 4. I am pushing an idea left somewhat undeveloped in Averil Cameron’s programmatic Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991), on the essential figularity of Christian discourse, especially around the body (ch. 2, esp. 68–73): that is, the “worst thing” becomes a symbol for the “best thing”—but requires our attention to its gruesome features.
transcendence of their “femininity in body,” “the sexuality of their flesh,” and “what is shameful to consider in their members”—thus subtly endorsing an eroticized gaze on those very features. “What could be more lovely [suavius] than this spectacle?” he asks.57 After a reading on the torments of St. Vincent Augustine ironically challenges the audience:

Who would want to see an executioner at his savage work, and a man, lost to all humanity, tearing furiously at a human body? Who would enjoy observing limbs wrenched apart by the machinery of the rack? Who would not oppose the natural state of a man being violated by human technique, bones disjointed by being stretched, laid bare by the flesh being clawed off them? . . .

In a word, our interest in one and the same spectacle is quite different from that of the persecutor. He was enjoying the martyr’s punishment, we its cause; he was taking pleasure in what he was suffering, we in why he was suffering; . . .58

We differ from the torturer not in the fact of our pleasure and excitement in beholding torture, Augustine suggests, but in ideological perspective. And even that distinction is rather forced, for his audiences were clearly enjoying the torture itself, which constituted the spectacle.

Such North African churches seem to have embraced the reading of martyrlogies enthusiastically, but elsewhere church leaders viewed these texts with some suspicion. Was that suspicion due to their pornographic content? The Decretum gelasianum (fifth/sixth century C.E.), while celebrating how the accounts (gesta) of the holy martyrs “shine with the multiple agonies of torture,” nevertheless prohibits their reading in churches because many, it affirms, are the works of heretics. The Council of Trullo (692) likewise affirms that “stories of martyrs have been fabricated by the enemies of truth,” and that these books (if they could have been distinguished) are not to be read publicly.59 Given church leaders’ invariable enthusiasm for martyrological gore and for a pious curiositas into the powers that gore

revealed, the prevailing issue in circumscribing or proscribing their public, liturgical use seems to have come down to concern that they could be conduits for heretical claims, most likely in the sense of sanctioning martyr cults not strictly authorized by bishops. This struggle over claims to authentic martyrs—as popular mediators and as symbols of collective identity—goes back to second-century conflicts over New Prophecy and continued through late antiquity across the Mediterranean world. But no parties to this struggle ever questioned the need to depict women’s and men’s bodies under torture in as graphic a way possible. For this reason we should take the prurience into sado-erotic violence as, indeed, central to the promotion and reception of martyrologies throughout late antiquity, as it had once been central to Roman public culture.

**Punishing Virgins**

My use of ancient novels as counterparts to martyrology reflects a larger entanglement of violence and the erotic in Roman literary and visual culture that can also help us understand the prurient aspects of martyrology. Achilles Tatius, Heliodorus, and Livy all use the chastity of beautiful women as a point of tension—a challenge that the reader is meant to put to the test. The sado-erotic violence to which Leukippe and Lucretia (in Livy 1.57–60) are put as a result of their chastity seems to follow from their unavailability and beauty. Even with the more substantial character of Longus’s Chloe, the reader is encouraged “to derive pleasure from her constant victimization,” including the bloody deflowering that Daphnis and reader both foresee (3.19). In this way, the Roman Christian reader is primed to take similar glee in the sado-erotic testing of the virgin martyr: the more spectacular her unavailability, the more spectacular the violence

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wreaked on her body. The short narrative of Potamiaena’s martyrdom manages to parallel the “boundless struggle [μυρία μὲν . . . ἄγωνισσαμένης]” the girl waged for the sake of her virginity against suitors [ἐρωστός], with the “boundless endurance [μυρία δὲ ἀναστάτης]” she waged bodily under “tortures terrible and horrifying to describe.”

This resistance of the virgin to the normal sequence of social passages—from girl to wife, from virginity to maternity—could inspire audiences’ admiration only at one level. At another level that refusal seems to spark a punitive rage that is enacted through the person of the torturer or in Sozomen’s atrocity story, a heathen mob. Resistance to social-sexual maturation puts the subject in an interstitial zone, betwixt-and-between life-stages. As the ghost of the untimely dead lurks between productive life-stage and contented ancestor, so the one who rejects progression through social-sexual stages oscillates disturbingly between femininity and virility. It was Arnold Van Gennep who pointed out that the crisis of such an interstitial being lies in her threat to the entire social body, whose integrity is predicated on everyone’s passing through stages. Thus with the virgin martyr, the audience must force her sexually back into her nubility—through sexualized dress, undress, and punishment. Even in cases like Agnes’s, in which the virgin martyr denounces human suitors while radiating erotic allure, our imputation to her of some transcendent asexual power is misplaced—a wishful cover for the fundamentally erotic nature of her performance. It is not in some shift to asexual or counter-sexual power that she revels in her assertive, teasing declarations, but—in the words of feminist psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin—“her capacity

66. Similar images of the violent rape and/or murder (by bandits, police, or other assailants) of pious virgins continue to motivate popular hagiographical legends in Latin America: see Frank Graziano, Cultures of Devotion: Folk Saints of Spanish America (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 16–17, 151–57. In these cases Graziano sees a partial reflection of the victimization felt by the devotees and legend-tradents (Graziano, Cultures of Devotion, 20–21).
to evoke desire in the other, to attract. Her power does not reside in her own passion, but in her acute desirability.”68 And the listening audience, like the narrative audience, is drawn along, beholding their desire in her power and their frustration in her suitors’, and thus they enthusiastically comply with her torture and obliteration.

The Other as Repository of Libertine Fantasies

Another context in which fantasies of violence and the erotic were consistently intertwined can be found in depictions of foreigners and other denizens of the periphery. “There be monsters!”—but Romans were rarely satisfied by merely declaring their whereabouts. The Roman prurience into Irish incest, Jewish cannibals, child-killing demonesses, Christian baby-eaters, heretics’ perverse ceremonies, and the diverse human sacrifices rumored to take place at various times points again to a fantasy of dangerous, often eroticized, monstrosity that in many ways had to be situated closely enough to be real. Jews “as a race are prone to lust,” asserts Tacitus, and “among each other nothing is taboo” (Histories 5.5; ed. and trans. Clifford Moore, Tacitus, LCL 111 [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956], 182–83). For Strabo the Irish cannibalize their dead fathers and copulate publicly with their mothers and sisters (Geog. 4.5.4). The depiction of bandits in Achilles Tatius discussed earlier, taken together with Pliny’s catalogue of monstrous races (Natural History, Book 7) and Epiphanius’s catalogue of monstrous heretics (Panarion) would suggest that Romans, including Christian Romans, had the capacity to use barbarian and peripheral cultures as resources of fantasy much as we do with our pulp fiction and movies: virginal women abducted by naked, orgiastic, drum-playing, bloodthirsty savages, or simply the National Geographic issue with bare-breasted girls from the jungle. The frontier becomes the space of freedom, of inversion, or unrepressed aggression and bestial behavior—in a word, fantasy—set-off safely on the cultural and spatial periphery.69 We don’t act this way; they do; but we clearly enjoy thinking

68. Benjamin, Bonds of Love, 89, describing the apparent power of the sexually assertive woman.

about what they do and how they go about doing it. The framing—as the actual customs or atrocities or perversions of the Other—releases fantasy from the viewer’s responsibility. Prurience becomes morally safe, since it is clear that the perpetrators are ethnically and morally suspect.

Violence and Erotic Prurience in Fantasies of Eschaton and Judgment

My argument so far has been that the eroticized voyeurism involved in early martyrrology corresponds historically and culturally to similar angles of prurience (a) in Roman spectacle culture, especially its “aesthetics of horror,” (b) in its predilection for sado-erotic treatments of beauty and chastity in narrative, and (c) in the various Roman and late antique constructions of savage cultures. Repudiated as the judicial savagery of Roman governors, public spectacles, or the customs of the Other, graphic, often sexualized atrocities were safe to contemplate as fantasy. As a literary character the female martyr may be trying to exercise subjectivity and power—by reframing her nakedness, for example, as ideological rather than shameful or erotic—but the effort is inevitably drowned out in the voyeurism of the spectacle itself.70

There is one more area in which sado-erotic fantasy could be played out from a safe distance, in a setting potentially rich in drama: apocalyptic eschatology. And here we also confront directly the imaginative culture of early Christians.71 The fantasies held up in early Christian texts spring from a kind of Schadenfreude, developing scenes of vengeance against outsiders (whom we can often identify as intimate rivals, not real outsiders). 2 Thessalonians, Revelation, 6 Ezra, and the Apocalypse of Elijah revel in the spectacle of divine vengeance effectively doing to enemies what their authors could not (2 Thess 1.6–9; Rev 14.10–20; ApocEl 4.22–23). There are, of course, many ways to analyze these scenarios and curses in terms of speech acts, prophetic idiom, and diverse traditions of Chaosbeschreibung. We need not gainsay these approaches when we note that the texts’ protracted and graphic scenes of the suffering of the unrighteous also provided audiences with a safely set-off context for fantasizing aggression, either against opponents and sinners or against our own, as in

ch. 4; and in general Irvin C. Schick, The Erotic Margin: Sexuality and Spatiality in Alteritist Discourse (London: Verso, 1999).
70. Cf. Miles, Carnal Knowing, 54, 56–57.
scenes of the suffering of the righteous. And it is Tertullian who, in his voyeuristic glee, gives us an immediate notion of the life-world in which these judgment scenes were received, presenting eschatological torture itself as a kind of spectacle:

How vast the spectacle that day, and how wide! What sight shall wake my wonder, what my laughter, my joy and exultation? As I see all those kings, those great kings, . . . groaning in the depths of darkness! And the magistrates who persecuted the name of Jesus, liquefying in fiercer flames than they kindled in their rage against the Christians! Those sages, too, the philosophers blushing before their disciples as they blaze together. . . . And then there will be the tragic actors to be heard, more vocal in their own tragedy; and the players to be seen, lither of limb by far in the fire; and then the charioteer to watch, red all over in the wheel of flame; and, next, the athletes to be gazed upon, not in their gymnasiums but hurled in the fire. . . . Such sights, such exultation. . . . What are those things which eye hath not seen nor ear heard, nor ever entered into the heart of man? I believe, things of greater joy than circus, theatre or amphitheatre, or any stadium.

If the audience’s own aggression and erotic prurience are repudiated in martyrologies by imputing the impulses to Roman savagery, the apocalyptic judgment scenes sanction it through declaring the sinfulness of the victims and the divine justice of the punishments. These are adulterers, the angel declares, and God wills these punishments. As cruel as they may seem, they are appropriate:

Some suffer in hanging by their genitals, others by their tongues, some by their eyes, others in hanging upside-down. Women will be tortured [crucibuntur] in their breasts, and young men by hanging by their hands [or penises?]. Some virgins are burnt on a gridiron. . . . By these various tortures the acts of each are shown forth. Adulterers and pederasti are tortured in their genitals. . . . As for the fact that women are sentenced to be punished by tortures in their breasts, these are women who lasciviously

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have yielded their bodies to men; and their men will be nearby in tortures, hanging by their “hands” [or penises?] for this reason.\textsuperscript{75}

Punishing women sexually for being sexual has, of course, a long tradition as a pornographic topos. Those bodily features that stimulate excitement—hair, breasts—become the foci of aggression in these scenes of hell, much as in martyrologies.\textsuperscript{76} The historian Saul Lieberman once argued that these tableaux of pain drew on the same traditions of Roman punishment as the early martyrologies—an importation of sado-erotic spectacle in this case to an emergent Jewish subculture clearly sharing in the same eschatological fantasies as early Christians.\textsuperscript{77} But it is here clearly a violence of repudiation. Excitement is not mine but comes from her, so it is her body parts that must be tortured; and the reader will gaze upon that righteous torture, appreciating every detail. So also in a small Egyptian Christian shrine the devout could gaze on a naked woman in hell, condemned to suckle two serpents.\textsuperscript{78} The sado-eroticism of martyrologies clearly participated in the same tradition of exhibiting, then punishing women for their sexuality.\textsuperscript{79}

\textit{The Focused Gaze: Dismemberments}

There is much more, of course, that can be said about the meaning of the body parts on which violence is focused in all the literature I have discussed. Breasts, thighs, throats, chests, bellies, eyes, all have the symbolic capacity


\textsuperscript{77} Lieberman, “On Sins and their Punishment,” 48. Thus a rabbinic saying about the Day of Judgment proclaims hopefully, “you will be among those who behold the punishment of the sinners rather than among those who are beheld receiving punishment; you will be among the spectators rather than among the gladiators” (\textit{Pesiqta de Rab Kahane} 28.3, ed. and trans. William G. Braude and Israel J. Kapstein [Philadelphia, PA: JPS, 2002], 583). The Christian interest in sexualized punishments of sinners is epitomized in the mid-second-century \textit{Apocalypse of Peter}.


\textsuperscript{79} Cf. the story of Susanna and the Elders, in which the chaste yet comely matron is stripped (31–33) and almost stoned as an adulteress by the rapacious elders before she is cleverly saved by the hero Daniel. See Lawrence M. Wills, \textit{The Jewish Novel in the Ancient World} (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1995), 56–58.
to represent sexuality, maternity, power, vulnerability, and other human features—especially in a cultural world that marked the female body as a symbolic field for conceptualizing control.80 Indeed, as Nicole Loraux has shown, symbolism can become quite paradoxical within a single spectacle, as when a character wants to project, say, victorious androgyny by exposing her breasts, while her audience sees eroticized femininity.81 The sado-erotic focus on one part of the body, even to the extent of chopping it off, may also be ambiguous, conveying misogynistic rage or, as Madeleine Caviness has suggested, a rejection of the phallic gaze, which seeks to objectify and appropriate the female body in its completeness, through—instead—the representation of dismemberment.82 The tongue is speech and vital organ; the centurion’s sword is military tool, instrument of sacrifice, and phallicus; nakedness is shameful yet enticing too, inviting sensual comparison with the nude statuary of civic culture. Loraux and others have alerted us to the importance of what is exposed, what is stabbed or excised. When Perpetua finds her thigh exposed, our—the reader’s—attention is drawn to that brief glimpse, as it is to the polyvalence of her loosened hair: it is not just a sign of mourning, as the author suggests, but also a sign of sexual allure (triggered only accidentally). The spectacle of martyrdom clearly did not always convey what Christians wanted to declare to their audiences.83

CONCLUSION

My main point through all these texts has been fairly simple: that in framing spectacles of violence, especially sexualized violence, as the acts of some savage or otherwise inhuman agents, martyrologies—like eschatology and novels—reduced the audiences’ conflict over enjoying those spectacles and engaging with them as fantasy: as Augustine’s homily on Vincent


82. Caviness, Visualizing Women, 37–38, 43: “This strategy is the most complete challenge to objectification because it resists voyeurism by appropriating fetishization to its own ends.”

demonstrated, much rhetorical effort went into reducing this conflict over voyeuristic pleasure.84 Agency is so entirely ceded to the dramatic perpetrators that the woman becomes punished for her own allure—exposed in a brothel, suspended in hell, stabbed through with a sword. Febronia, a Persian Christian of incredible beauty who had always remained cloistered—a spectacle behind closed doors, whom the audience beholds only through the eyes of other women—is subjected, in a late antique Syrian text, to breathtakingly explicit tortures, including the severing of her breasts.85 The prurient fascination with these spectacles and the excitement they inspire derives from their wrongness, from the transgressions they represent—the torture of the righteous virgin—or, in the case of hell scenes, the transgressions punished. In Bataille’s terms, “the essence of eroticism is to be found in the inextricable confusion of sexual pleasure and taboo.”86 Unless the scene is clearly demarcated as the work of savages, heretics, witches, or heathens—as intrinsically transgressive—the voyeuristic components of that scene cannot be enjoyed directly, whether through sadistic or masochistic identification. At the same time, the sexual and violent features of clearly transgressive actions become exciting in themselves by virtue of this safe Otherness.

And as one ventures into these inverse imaginative worlds sanctioned as punitive spectacle, savage custom, and heretic rite, eroticism becomes combined with cruelty—with unleashed aggression—so that a whole range of erotic and aggressive impulses becomes confused in a single narrative tableau—a perverse oscillation between horror and lust, spectacle and censure, voyeurism and lament. Where, we might ask, lies the pleasure in imagining this confusion of aggression and submission, of eroticism and rage, of primary-process symbols of devouring and expelling that seems to lie behind sado-erotic tableaux? Is it, as Bataille would say, the spectacle of transgression itself, which both affirms and tramples the moral boundaries that affirm our social selves?87 Or “those strong fantasies of

84. See above, p. 233–34.
85. Martyrdom of Febronia 27–31 (trans. Brock and Harvey, Holy Women of the Syrian Orient, 154–76). Compare the legend of Anahid, who also suffers mastectomy: Brock and Harvey, Holy Women of the Syrian Orient, 95. The Febronia text explicitly denotes nakedness as shame (23) and breasts as solely maternal (27, 29), details that might suggest a predominantly female gaze or even authorship (pace Brock and Harvey, Holy Women of the Syrian Orient, 25). The seventh-century Miracles of St. Artemios thus refer to Febronia as she who “assists in thaumatourgia when it is a matter of women” (45), ed. Virgil S. Crisafulli and John W. Nesbitt (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 222.
86. Georges Bataille, Erotism, 108.
disintegration and reintegration which lurked in the back of the mind of ancient men,” as Peter Brown once suggested?388 Or, as some feminist psychoanalytic scholars have proposed, is it the sense of annihilating boundaries, an experience of primary continuity, that comes from imagining transgression, merging pleasure and pain, submitting self to other, and achieving ego-dissolution?389

Some contemporary interpreters see fit to appropriate the violent scenarios behind these experiences as vehicles to a kind of transcendent, self-obliterating submission—akin to late medieval mystics’ visualization of Jesus’ punctured, bleeding body. There is, to be sure, some sense to this use of the sado-erotic features of early Christian materials, for it both recognizes the importance of transgression in rapture (as per Bataille) and opens up new, more frankly erotic routes to transcendence.390 Yet I would contend that this is a distinctly modern reading of martyrological violence, serving a culture with a distinctive array of sexual choices and anxieties; and its creative optimism should not blind us to the implications of how these scenarios of obscene mutilation were used in late antiquity.391 How, indeed, were these scenarios interpreted in late antiquity and the early middle ages?

For one thing, the materials I have discussed in this paper were presented publicly not as a transgressive reading of the eroticized body among others, but rather as the supernal spectacle of that body, in a sub-culture (Christianity) clearly in the process of distancing itself from the normal (and highly diversified) erotic accoutrements of wall-painting, figurine, poetry, theatre, and sex-manual. Set against the ebullient eroticism of Apuleius (Metamorphoses) or Longus (Daphnis and Chloe), the scenes in the Perpetua narrative and in Eusebius’s narrative of the martyrs of Lyons claim an implicit hegemony over the way the body (or bodies) might be objectified and eroticized: to wit, through violence and dismemberment. In limiting the erotic imagination to this prurience and yet at the same time disavowing erotic excitement and pleasure, these materials in their cultural context become boundary-reifying rather than transcendent, and inflammatory rather than ecstatic.

388. Brown, Cult of the Saints, 82.
389. E.g., Benjamin, “Master and Slave”; Caputi, Voluptuous Yearnings; Williams, Hard Core.
391. See Benjamin, “Master and Slave,” 294–97, on the peculiarity of masochistic fantasy to modern western culture and its crises.
And how did people act in response to that tension between prurience and denial of arousal? Examples surge forth, first, from the annals of medieval heresy and early modern witchcraft trials, in which clerics’ and jurists’ prurience into the obscene practices of alleged witches translated into cruel tortures and executions that in no way could be called mutual or transcendent. Instead, bodies were sought out to personify the disavowed fantasies of inquisitors and to suffer the brutality of that disavowal. Thus, fantasies of violence and the denial of erotic arousal lead inevitably to real violence against those who call forth or must embody those fantasies.92

But perhaps the most historically pertinent example of the potential of martyrrologies to incite violence, not just to provide passing sado-erotic spectacle, occurred on the island of Minorca in 418, following its Christian community’s acquisition of relics of St. Stephen. These relics, we know, would have been celebrated with readings of Stephen’s death by stoning at the hands of Jews of Jerusalem.93 Accordingly, under the leadership of the new bishop of the Minorcan Christians, Severus, who narrates the entire episode, the Christians rose up and, in a violent pogrom, forced the Jewish community to convert. While the Christians’ violent zeal had a clearly millennialist character, the role of some kind of Stephen martyrrology in framing historic and current animosity against Jews is indisputable. What shaped the Minorcan Christians’ interpretation of the martyrrology, then, was not just the sado-erotic fantasy of Stephen’s body battered with rocks to unrecognizability but the agency of the Jews depicted in the story—the instigators of violent spectacle, the embodiments of audiences’ rage against their own prurience.94

This intense, often dramatized ambivalence towards eroticism and the enjoyment of sado-erotic spectacle should remind us of that Freudian truism, “the return of the repressed.” Those obscene images that persist in our imagination as the perpetration of the Other, that overwhelm us with perversity and transgression, that stick in our minds and invite our prurience despite all our efforts to deny their erotic appeal, have invariably demanded action to punish the sources of those images—as a final act of obliterating what we cannot admit lies within. Revenge becomes the result of excitement repudiated and projected. And if the cloistered nun or third-century Christian lacked the means to respond to such narrative spectacles in any way other than to embrace sado-eroticism, monks and bishops of the fourth and fifth centuries, similarly awash in endless rehearsals of sado-erotic martyrdom stories, often took violent action against heretics, Jews, and traditional cult adherents in manifest response to those narratives of ancient dismemberments—those original obscenities hitherto unavenged.95

In the end, we return to Tertullian’s question, “why is it lawful to see what it is shameful to do,” with the answer that in texts all things are lawful . . . as long as they are properly set-off as Roman brutality, heretic obscenity, or the just torments of sinners. Within those frames Christian writers allowed a potent culture of sado-erotic spectacle, rehearsed in texts and depicted in art and, from the fifteenth century, recreated in inquisition. It is an imaginative trajectory captured less in Jerome’s advice to the virgin Eustochium, that she sublimate her passions with asceticism, than in a letter he wrote fourteen years earlier to his friend Innocentus. Here he describes the torture and repeated stabbing of a young Christian woman convicted of adultery, earnestly praying as her body is raked and the blood flows, all to the governor’s savage glee, and all spelled out in Jerome’s meticulous detail.96

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