

## Flinders Humanities Research Centre for Cultural Heritage and Cultural Exchange

### Life Writing Symposium

#### ‘Constructing the life of the medieval virgin martyr as death’. Abstract

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*Passio* of the virgin martyr were extremely popular in the medieval world, providing a model and inspiration for women. Such Lives are distinguished from the biographies of female saints, which gave detailed accounts of women known to the writer, while virgin martyr Lives were legendary, formed from stories several centuries old, that were often adapted and supplemented according to the circumstances. Some, for example, were written for anchoresses, those committed to a perpetually enclosed life; others were used on saints’ days in church. The result is stories that are highly conventionalised in both structure and imagery, forming a body of literature that reflects attitudes to women and virginity, as well as raising some intriguing and complex questions about the nature of female agency and spirituality.

While male saints could also be celibate, the term ‘virgin martyr’ is applied only to women, thus designating the most important quality of their sanctity: sexual purity that overcomes the besetting sin of woman, seen at its source in Eve’s weakness in Eden. The martyr of the early church was a radical, standing against the Roman state for the sake of a kingdom ruled by Christ. In medieval Christendom, such a stance was no longer possible, and virginity became the new martyrdom, reflecting a struggle between the forces of heaven and the world. Virginity was *imitatio Christi*, the highest aspiration of the Christian. While some Lives looked back to the earliest days of the church, others expanded the virgin’s opposition to more generalised masculine power structures such as father, suitor, or secular rulers. In either case, the significance of such stories for medieval women offers paradoxical readings of obedience.

In this paper I firstly explore the highly conventional nature of the stories through a range of medieval *passio* to establish the qualities of the virgin martyr and the basic elements of her story. It will become clear that the virgin martyr is a basic type: young,

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pure, beautiful, committed to Christ and prepared, usually desirous, to suffer for Christ. She has limited family support; sometimes her parents worship pagan gods and reject her beliefs, sometimes she is abandoned by parents. Her story is one of confrontation with a male authority figure who asks, then demands, that she marry. Her absolute refusal instigates various types of tortures, including being stripped, torn, and attacked in ways that connote some kind of sexual attack. Nonetheless, in every case the woman escapes with her virginity intact. After the initial attack, the tortures are neutralised in some way; the virgin is revealed as victorious and ultimately invulnerable to male power. In every case the virgin is killed. Christ calls her to heaven; she is beheaded and ascends in glory.

This study of the conventions of the virgin martyr Life establishes the base for the discussion which forms the second part of the paper. Several major issues emerge.

These stories revolve around the sight and the suffering of the female body. While youthful beauty expresses the way in which holiness shines through the virgin, it is also the cause of her sexual attraction. Torture focuses upon the sexual body in scenes where the horror is heightened by the effects it has on the beauty of the sealed virginal body.

The martyr's virginity is manifest most strongly in its testing; it is only when it is most at risk that virginity is most clearly seen. Usually expressed in terms of its vulnerability and fragility, virginity is paradoxically most powerful when most exposed to violation.

Death is the only state where virginity is assured. These stories thus portray a relentless urgency for the virgin to seek the life of heaven.

The implications of such issues are further explored through the medieval literary and social context. A comparison with male martyr stories reveals that, while the male is tortured, the body is not the central focus of the story. Men may be tempted from without, often by other women, while it is the female body itself that is the central cause of the virgin's suffering. This reflects the pervasive theological and medical belief in the essentially bodily, inferior and sexually volatile nature of women, while men were considered to be superior and rational. The female virgin suffers because she does battle with her own body and its inclinations; her major achievement is to die with her virginity

intact. Male martyr Lives, however, show men defeating evil or winning virtue in a variety of ways that have little connection with their bodily state.

The female who stands against the male figures represents a disturbing element in both Christian and secular society. Both the church and medieval society supported marriage as an acceptable and stable social structure, and while virginity is encouraged by the church Fathers as the pinnacle of the holy life, it is nonetheless a state that is not easily accommodated. The Lives of the virgin martyrs thus offer models of commitment to Christ as lover and spouse, thus returning virgins to an alternative but in some ways equivalent position to that of a married woman. Nonetheless, the conflict between the virgin and her male opponents reveals disturbing Christian social investment in male ownership and exchange.

The apparent narrative simplicity of these Lives belies the complex and often paradoxical position of the medieval virgin martyr. She is at once powerful and vulnerable, beautiful and horribly disfigured, sexually intact and sexually attacked, obedient and rebellious. Her position in medieval society both disrupts and confirms the male structures of power. She is, finally, a figure whose status can only be assured in death.