

Syracuse University

SURFACE

Religion

College of Arts and Sciences

1995

Reading Agnes: The Rhetoric of Gender in Ambrose and Prudentius

Virginia Burrus
Syracuse University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://surface.syr.edu/rel>



Part of the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Burrus, Virginia, "Reading Agnes: The Rhetoric of Gender in Ambrose and Prudentius" (1995). *Religion*. 99.
<https://surface.syr.edu/rel/99>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Arts and Sciences at SURFACE. It has been accepted for inclusion in Religion by an authorized administrator of SURFACE. For more information, please contact surface@syr.edu.

Reading Agnes: The Rhetoric of Gender in Ambrose and Prudentius

VIRGINIA BURRUS

Readings of two late fourth-century versions of the tale of the virgin martyr Agnes illumine the place of gender within a late ancient Christian discourse that locates itself in complex relation to both a Christian and a classical past. In Ambrose's account, the tale of Agnes, juxtaposed with that of Thecla, constitutes a reworking of the apocryphal tale of the conversion and witness of a sexually continent woman. In Prudentius' text, allusions to the virginal heroine of classical tragedy represent Agnes as a new Polyxena. Through such intertextual play, the ambiguously gendered virgin martyr emerges not only as a model for the disciplining of the would-be *virago* of female asceticism but also as a representation of the "body" of a discourse of orthodoxy that deploys the dual rhetorics of martyrdom and empire, inscribing itself as feminine in an ascetic subversion of the masculine discourse of classical speech, whereby the transcendently male authority of this Christian discourse is paradoxically asserted.

It was a favorite story in the post-Constantinian church, when the days of imperial persecution were for most Christians long past: a trembling young girl, brought before the magistrate, courageously defies her male oppressors; shattering expectations of age and sex, she manages against all odds to preserve both her virginity and her faith, an audacious act of self-assertion finalized by the welcomed death of executioner's sword. *Virgo* or *virago*: what kind of heroine is this girl anyway? Or to put the question otherwise: how much female audacity could the late ancient church really tolerate? The answer seems clear enough: not much. The question of *why* is more intriguing but best approached, I believe, along routes both circuitous and digressive. This essay follows one such indirect path toward interpreting the particular "patriarchalism" of late ancient Christianity. The immediate objective is to trace the literary transformation of would-

be “manly” women—*viragines*—into femininely docile *virgines*, exploring how female audacity was both entertained and firmly restrained through two fourth-century tellings of the tale of the virgin martyr Agnes. This proposed analysis of a tale’s narrative workings is not, however, intended as an end in itself, but rather as one means of addressing the historical problem of the place of gender within late ancient Christian discourse.¹

It is Averil Cameron who has most recently and clearly articulated the importance of discourse for the rise of Christianity in late antiquity. In *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire*, she defines this term broadly: “all the rhetorical strategies and manners of expression . . . particularly characteristic of Christian writing.”² Like the French philosopher Michel Foucault,³ Cameron is convinced that discursive practices are not secondary or “superstructural” phenomena but are themselves productive of power; to put it simply, ideas (as well as the social practices with which they are inevitably entangled) make history. Persuaded, then, of the importance of a genealogical investigation of the linguistic practices of early Christians, Cameron traces the dual strategies of accommodation and paradox by which distinctly Christian “manners of expression” emerge from within the classical tradition and eventually come to subsume and control that tradition. The hallmarks of the emergent Christian discourse are, according to Cameron, its assertively and self-consciously figural or representational character and its central use of biographical narrative. She suggests that a rhetoric of the human body works to knit together the

1. Still less is this intended as a direct analysis of social relations in the late fourth-century church. As John J. Winkler notes in connection with ancient Greek literature, “The texts we study are, for the most part, rather like men’s coffeehouse talk. Their legislative intent contains a fair amount of bluff, of saving face: they regularly lay down laws which are belied by the jokes those same men will later tell” (*The Constraints of Desire: The Anthropology of Sex and Gender in Ancient Greece* [NY: Routledge, 1990], 70). The social history of male-female relations within late ancient Christianity can be neither detached from nor simply identified with the cultural history of gender.

2. Averil Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire: The Development of Christian Discourse* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1991), 5.

3. Although Cameron is sparing in her direct allusions to Foucault, Foucauldian influence is unmistakable. As reviewer Greg Woolf notes, “if one intellectual presence pervades the book it is that of Michel Foucault, and in particular the Foucault of the *History of Sexuality*, vols. 2 and 3 of which C. reviewed. . . .” (*Journal of Roman Studies* 83 [1993]: 257–258, 257). Other reviewers have likewise called attention to the significance of Cameron’s earlier review essay (“Redrawing the Map: Early Christian Territory after Foucault,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 76 (1986): 266–271) for setting the agenda of her book (e.g., T. D. Barnes, *American Historical Review* [1992]: 1188–1189, and Mark Vessey, *Journal of Literature and Theology* 6 [1992]: 291–292).

doubled truth claims of symbol and story, while at the same time facilitating a blurring of the boundaries of both public and private spheres and elite and popular literature. In this context, the figures and lives of women leap into dramatic relief—even as gender itself remains, on Cameron’s reading, incidental to the impulses that most powerfully shape the “totalizing” or repressive Christian discourse of late ancient Mediterranean culture. The apocryphal literature of the pre-Constantinian period gives access to a realm of remarkable narrative productivity and flexibility marked by sensitivity to the interpenetration of private and public spheres and interest in the lives of women as well as of men: both the early elaboration of Marian traditions and the stories of ascetic heroines like Thecla are well known, if not generally given the scholarly attention they deserve, as Cameron persuasively argues. In the post-Constantinian period, *Lives* of male and female saints pick up the narrative thread of the earlier apocryphal literature; however, it is above all in the highly figural—indeed, iconic—discourse of Marian virginity that interest in the female body is focused and heightened, complementing but also frequently overshadowing interest in the body of Christ.⁴

Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire delicately abstains from problematizing gender *per se*. It thereby indirectly scores a significant rhetorical point: in the case of ancient Christian texts, gender as well as sexuality are often most helpfully read as by-products of other, more central rhetorical constructions or strategies. As Cameron notes elsewhere, “the discourse about women in early Christianity . . . is part of a much more complex whole.”⁵ However, Cameron’s effectiveness in relativizing gender scarcely precludes the possibility of analyzing ancient Christian texts in terms of this category. Rather, by implicitly locating gender in relation to a broader discursive field, this work clears space for the more precisely situated examinations of the rhetoric of gender that have already begun to emerge.⁶ As gender is brought to the center of analysis in dialogue

4. On accommodation and paradox, see Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire*, 87–88; on the figural character of Christian discourse and its use of biographical narrative, 23, 50, 92–93; on the rhetoric of the body, 57–58, 68–72, 115, 145, 150, 165–170, 228; on public and private, 141, 149, 180–181, 202–203; on elite and popular, 7–8, 36–39, 107–113, 186–188; on the apocryphal traditions, 89–118; on saints’ *Lives*, 141–154; on the figure of Mary, 72–73, 165–180.

5. “Redrawing the Map,” 270.

6. Cameron herself has, of course, long enriched the scholarly study of late ancient Christianity with her sensitivity to gender; gender is a central category in an earlier version of chapter five of her *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire*: “Virginity as Metaphor: Women and The Rhetoric of Early Christianity,” *History as Text: The Writ-*

with Cameron's text, a number of questions arise—questions to which the following reading of two versions of the virgin martyr Agnes' tale represents just one, partial response. How does the representation of female virginity shift between the pre-Constantinian period and the late fourth and early fifth centuries, that is, between the apocryphal Thecla and the patristic Agnes? How do narrative articulations of female virginity in the post-Constantinian period complement the more strictly figural or iconic representations emphasized by Cameron's study of Mariology? Finally, how are we to understand the rhetoric of female virginity in relation to strategies of cultural appropriation and accommodation, as well as subversion or paradox, as Cameron positions it? Behind these inquiries into the construction of the virginal female lies the challenge of taking seriously the androcentrism of ancient Christian discourse: as in ancient literature generally, most frequently "the cultural polarity between the genders is made internal to one gender," and it is the articulation not of female but of male identity that lies at the heart of these texts' concerns.⁷

This present study seeks, then, to illumine certain aspects of the late ancient Christian rhetoric of gender by tracing its narrative articulation in two late fourth-century accounts of the tale of the virgin martyr Agnes: the treatise *On Virgins* composed by Ambrose, bishop of Milan, circa 377, and the slightly later literary "hymn"⁸ to Agnes that comprises the final poem in the martyriological *Book of Crowns* written by the Spaniard Prudentius.⁹ The example of Cameron's work urges, however, that it

ing of Ancient History, ed. Averil Cameron (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 181–205. Nor is Cameron alone in her application of the insights of literary theorists, cultural anthropologists, and philosophers to a gender analysis of the cultural products of late ancient Christianity: here the works of Elizabeth Clark and Margaret Miles (among others) come quickly to mind. The vigor and sophistication of the scholarship emerging from a generation nurtured on the likes of Cameron, Clark, and Miles is well represented by the work of Kate Cooper (among others); see, e.g., Cooper's "Insinuations of Womanly Influence: An Aspect of the Christianization of the Roman Aristocracy," *Journal of Roman Studies* 82 (1992): 150–164.

7. Winkler, *The Constraints of Desire*, 50.

8. A.-M. Palmer argues persuasively that Prudentius' poems were not intended for liturgical use but are purely literary compositions; use of the term "hymn" therefore requires qualification (*Prudentius on the Martyrs* [Oxford: Oxford UP, 1989], 57–97).

9. For a brief synopsis of views on the dating of Ambrose's treatise, see Yves-Marie Duval, "L'Originalité du *De virginibus* dans le mouvement ascétique occidental: Ambroise, Cyprien, Athanase," *Ambroise de Milan: XVI^e Centenaire de son élection épiscopale* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1974), 9–66, 11. Prudentius's work is more difficult to situate chronologically: Italo Lana dates *Peristeph.* 14 after Prudentius' retirement in the 390s and before his journey to Rome in 401–402 (*Due Capitoli*

is not enough to identify the rhetorical workings of gender in these texts or even to begin to relate these to other textual deployments of gender, without also raising the question of their broader significance. In particular, it is necessary to begin to locate gender in relation to the discursive formation of late ancient orthodoxy—or, in Cameron's terms, in relation to the peculiarly "totalizing" discourse of an "imperial" Christianity.

With this larger challenge in mind, I offer the following provisional sketch of one broad discursive context against which the constructive gender "play" in the accounts of Agnes can be read. Put briefly, I suggest that we take careful note of the masculine self-representation of fourth-century Christian orthodoxy, recognizing further the distinctive assertiveness and ambiguity of the emerging Christian rhetoric of masculinity. The assertiveness of this masculinized speech illumines the competitive rhetorical economy within which it seeks to usurp the privileged maleness of the classical discourse. Its ambiguity constitutes both its vulnerability and its peculiar power—on the one hand introducing the uncertainty that demands constant reassertion, on the other hand allowing a "bending" of gender identity through which the strategies of both a feminized resistance and a masculinized hegemony can be mobilized simultaneously.¹⁰ Having come this far, it must be acknowledged that such generalized claims regarding the position of the rhetoric of gender within the late ancient Christian discourse of orthodoxy can do no more than "frame" this present essay. Separately and somewhat crudely drawn, this tentative thesis initially emerges external to the textual analyses which it encloses. Nevertheless, precisely as a frame it may serve us well, allowing certain aspects of the readings of Ambrose and Prudentius to leap into focus,

Prudenziiani [Rome: Editrice Studium, 1962], 42–43); more recent scholars are, however, skeptical of efforts to construct such a precise chronology for Prudentius, e.g., Palmer, *Prudentius on the Martyrs*, 23–24, 29–30.

10. In highlighting the possibilities of "gendered" readings of rhetorical negotiations of relative status, I do not intend to deny the significance of other factors or strategies of representation. Peter Brown's recent work raises the question of the social conditions of persuasive speech in late antiquity, suggesting that the impact of autocracy was simultaneously to narrow the range of opportunities for free speech, on the one hand, and to accentuate its social and cultural value, on the other hand; the heroic, plain-speaking philosopher or ascetic who sought to persuade the emperor played a complex role, being required simultaneously to claim the absolute authority of transcendent truth (and thereby exert power over the emperor) and to express submissiveness to the all-powerful emperor (*Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity: Toward a Christian Empire* [Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992]). Brown's account suggests, then, that what I would call the ambiguous "feminization" of male speech is not a uniquely Christian phenomenon, but rather represents yet another way in which Christian discourse proved remarkably well adapted to the social and cultural conditions of late antiquity.

while signifying the existence of a broader fourth-century interpretive context within which the “meanings” of Agnes, virgin martyr, take shape.

REWRITING THECLA: AMBROSE’S *DE VIRGINIBUS*

This textual exploration begins with a brief foray into the narrative thicket of bishop Ambrose’s early work *On Virgins*, a collage of homiletic pieces reworked into the form of a written treatise in praise of female virginity, dedicated to the Milanese bishop’s virgin sister Marcellina.¹¹ Among the earliest western ascetic texts, Ambrose’s treatise defends the novel practices of Christian ascetics on several different fronts.¹² Crucial to the bishop’s apologetic strategies is his complex manipulation of gender, in which asceticism’s threat to destabilize conventional gender roles is both minimized and turned to its own advantage. Ambrose explicitly defends the church’s right to remove the sexual bodies of elite Roman daughters from one sphere of social interchange¹³ by inscribing virginity with the seductively heroic drama of martyrdom, on the one hand, and the reassuringly patriarchal vow of marriage, on the other. This construction of virginity functions not only to renegotiate the category of femininity, but also to redefine masculinity, as the author represents his own struggles to align the act of writing with the virtue of modesty, and to conjoin the assertive claims of a sublimated phallic sexuality with the empowering receptivity of a feminized submissiveness.¹⁴

Following an initial defense of his own authorial role, Ambrose opens his reflections on virginity with a striking account not of the life but of the death of the Roman virgin Agnes. Condensing the familiar tale of the

11. Duval argues against the traditional view that Ambrose’s treatise is a carelessly compiled composite document, suggesting rather that the text shows signs of a careful synthesis not only of possible pre-existing homiletic material but also of two earlier treatises on virginity composed by Cyprian and Athanasius respectively (“L’Originalité du *De virginibus*,” *passim*).

12. Duval, “L’Originalité du *De virginibus*,” 60–64.

13. See Peter Brown, *The Body and Society* (New York: Columbia, 1988), 341–345.

14. Writing is not inevitably construed in masculinized or “phallic” terms; however, there does seem to be a specifically gendered tension reflected in Ambrose’s protestation that there is no contradiction between the act of writing and the (typically feminine) virtue of modesty (*pudor*). “Majore siquidem pudoris periculo auditur vox nostra quam legiture; liber enim non erubescit” (*de virg.* 1.1). “Malui enim me in periculum deduci pudoris, quam non obsequi voluntati earum, quarum studiis etiam Deus noster placido se indulget assensu. . . .” (*De virg.* 2.1). Cf. the use of the language of “modesty” in the Thecla account (*De virg.* 2.3). For Ambrose’s *De virginibus*, I have used the edition in *PL* 16, 187–232. Translations are my own.

virgin martyr into its most basic components, he highlights the heroine's youth and precarious virginity, her unexpected strength and courage in the face of persecution, and her fierce embrace of a death figured in sacrificial and paradoxically erotic terms. "Not a bride," as the text insists, Agnes yet hurries to her execution as to her wedding; the threats of the executioner and the flatteries of her many suitors are alike dismissed on the grounds of her loyalty to Christ as "spouse." "She both remained a virgin and obtained martyrdom," concludes the bishop, with the air of having said it all (*De virg.* 1.2).¹⁵

Such rhetorical finality proves misleading, and in a move that complicates the seeming simplicity of the tale of the Roman Agnes, Ambrose subsequently introduces into the center of his textual collage three other closely linked figures: Mary mother of Christ (*De virg.* 2.2), Thecla "whom the teacher of the gentiles instructed" (*De virg.* 2.3),¹⁶ and an unnamed virgin of Antioch (*De virg.* 2.4). The virgin of Antioch, we learn, was sentenced to a brothel by her persecutors, whence she escaped dressed in male clothing, only to return voluntarily to claim her right to a martyr's death. Ambrose protests that he includes her striking tale in order to demonstrate that Mary and Thecla are not unattainable models of the past: "I will set before you a recent example of this sort," he promises, "so that you may understand that the apostle is the teacher not of one, but of all" (*De virg.* 2.3).¹⁷ But exactly what "sort" of example is it that bears repeating, and is this third heroine's relative contemporaneity in fact her primary rhetorical asset?

It quickly becomes apparent that Ambrose's tale of the unnamed virgin of Antioch serves to "exemplify" for his ascetic readers not merely female virginity, but more precisely female virginity threatened and defended through a witnessing and sacrificial death. To this end, the introduction of the well-known figure of Thecla is apparently crucial. If Mary models the "discipline of life" (*disciplinam vitae*) it is the apostolic Thecla, Ambrose tells us, who teaches young women "how to be sacrificed" (*doceat immolari*) (*De virg.* 2.3). But here Ambrose must succeed in obscuring the awkward narrative fact of Thecla's triumphant survival of persecution. It is by juxtaposing Thecla's story with that of the Antiochene martyr that Ambrose brings Thecla directly, and Mary indirectly, under the control of the late fourth-century tale of the virgin martyr, with its necessary fatal conclusion. Whereas Thecla's struggle in the arena sets the seal on Mary's

15. "Et virgo permansit, et martyrium obtinuit."

16. ". . . quam gentium Doctor instituit."

17. "Hujuscemodi recens vobis exemplum profero, ut intelligatis Apostolum non unius esse doctorem, sed omnium."

virginal life, the Antiochene virgin's self-chosen death completes Thecla's triumph. And all three tales are framed and thereby contextualized not only by Agnes' story of virginal martyrdom, which opens the larger work *On Virgins*, but also by the remarkable tale of the *self*-martyrdoms of Pelagia and her mother and sisters, with which Ambrose's treatise comes to a sudden and dramatic end. Facing a mob who would rob her of both her faith and her purity, Pelagia, we are told, adorns herself in bridal dress and plunges a sword into her own breast; her mother and sisters, subsequently pursued, elude similar threats to their chastity and piety through a baptismal death-by-drowning (*De virg.* 3.7). As Ambrose offers Pelagia's case as a "clear answer" to the question of the merits of virginal suicide (*De virg.* 3.7), he once again affirms the essential link between virginity and an eroticized self-sacrificial death.

Ambrose's deft recontextualization of the popular stories of Mary and Thecla directs our glance backwards, calling particular attention to the radical transformation taking place in the narrative tradition surrounding Thecla and other continent women survivors whose tales are preserved in the late second-century apocryphal acts of apostles discussed by Cameron. The shift does not merely consist in the obscuring of Thecla's survival of persecution with a veil of implied victimization, as part of a broader pattern of reinterpreting asceticism as martyrdom. Ambrose has also eroticized and subjugated the now emphatically *virginal* Thecla through a selective rescripting of a supporting character's role. Among numerous episodes involving Thecla, the apocryphal acts include the account of the heroic witness of a female lion who dies in the arena protecting Thecla from the attack of a male lion (*A. Paul et Thecl.* 33). *On Virgins* restricts its focus to this one narrative episode, at the same time collapsing the protecting and attacking lions into a single ambiguous masculine figure. In Ambrose's text, the lion initially represents the sexual violence signalled by both the "rage" (*furor*) of Thecla's would-be husband and the "immodest eyes" (*impudicos . . . oculos*) of the male onlookers who gaze upon the spectacle of her nakedness; yet, "by some transfusion of nature" the beast achieves a restrained attitude of masculine reverence for the self-sacrificing virgin who, we are told, freely offers to the lion her "vital parts" (*vitalia ipsa*). By the end of the episode, the single, tamed lion has been pluralized, facilitating his merging with the male spectators, similarly transformed from a state of transgressive immodesty to one of respectful modesty:

The lions taught a lesson in chastity when they did nothing but kiss the vir-

gin's feet, with their eyes turned to the ground, as though bashful, lest any male, even a beast, should see the virgin naked. (*De virg.* 2.7)¹⁸

Thecla's triumph is here more ambiguously represented than in the apocryphal acts. Through the manipulation of the figure of the lion, the subjugating force of male sexual violence has not been defeated so much as sublimated. On one reading at least, the lion's averted, feminized gaze continues paradoxically to restrain the virgin; the very gesture of honoring her—indeed, of freely mirroring her feminine subjugation—becomes itself the vehicle of her constraint. Her feet in the lion's mouth (as it were), Ambrose's virginal Thecla remains, like Agnes and the other virgin martyrs of this text, a captive in the spectacle.

REWRITING POLYXENA: PRUDENTIUS' *PERISTEPHANON LIBER*

If Ambrose's telling of the tale of Agnes directs us chronologically "backwards" to the apocryphal Thecla, it may also serve to propel us "sideways" into the Spaniard Prudentius' roughly contemporaneous telling of the Agnes tale. The lines of influence linking the two versions are not completely clear; however, it is likely that there is at least indirect historical contact between Ambrose's text and Prudentius' slightly later poem, given both the circumstantial evidence of Prudentius' probable sojourn in Milan and the complex narrative overlappings.¹⁹ Prudentius' version of the Agnes tale combines elements found in the tales of both Agnes and the Antiochene virgin in Ambrose's treatise *On Virgins*, while his poems to Agnes and to another virgin martyr, Eulalia, seem to split aspects of the Agnes tradition mediated not only by Ambrose's *On Virgins* but also by poems to Agnes attributed to Ambrose and Damasus of Rome respectively.²⁰ Yet for all the parallels between their narrative traditions and indeed between the social and cultural locations of these two former

18. "Docuerunt etiam castitatem, dum virgini nihil aliud nisi plantas exosculantur, demersis in terram oculis, tamquam verecundantibus, ne mas aliquis vel bestia virginem nudam videret."

19. See Palmer, *Prudentius on the Martyrs*, 24–31, 250–253.

20. This Prudentian "splitting" of the Agnes tradition has been remarked upon most recently by J. Petruccione in a nuanced study of the complex intertextual play at work in Prudentius' hymn to Eulalia ("The Portrait of St. Eulalia of Merida in Prudentius' *Peristephanon* 3," *Analecta Bollandiana* 108 [1990]: 81–104, 84–85). The reliability of the attribution of Ambrosian authorship of the hymn to Agnes, which has been both contested and defended (as noted by Petruccione, 84, n. 9) is not absolutely crucial to my arguments; Fontaine's recent critical edition of the so-called Ambrosian hymns judges the Agnes hymn probably, but not certainly, authentic (Ambroise de Milan, *Hymnes* [Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1992]).

provincial governors, Prudentius' own ascetical literary collage,²¹ organizing itself most explicitly around not virginity but martyrdom, offers obvious contrasts with Ambrose's work. Ambrose's treatise reads—perhaps quite intentionally²²—like the somewhat hurried and energetic improvisation of an active churchman, accustomed to appealing to the narrative imagination of a more popular Christianity. Prudentius' highly self-conscious poetry, on the other hand, presents itself as the polished product of a cultivated Christian leisure, directly engaging the authority of an already classicized literary past. Although both authors exploit the productive tension between the local veneration of martyrs and the universalized significance attributed to the martyrial *exemplum*, Ambrose's ecclesiastical politics draw him eventually to a more concrete manipulation of sacred topography;²³ in contrast, the lay ascetic Prudentius—however determined to put his native Spain on the imaginative map of Christianity—appears ambivalent, even subversive of reductively literalizing interpretations of cultic practice or episcopal authority.²⁴ Given these differences, it is perhaps all the more striking that Prudentius' more complex and elaborate

21. Petruccione has persuasively argued the centrality of the ascetic agenda (commonly acknowledged in the case of Ambrose's treatise) for Prudentius' martyrial poems ("The Portrait of St. Eulalia").

22. Particularly in reference to Book III, Duval emphasizes the probable intentionality of the stylistic shifts that have seemed to modern commentators marks of incoherence or editorial negligence; Duval suggests rather that changes in rhythm, tone, speaker, and implied audience are rhetorical devices designed to break the monotony of the prescriptive discourse and lend conversational energy and interest to the treatise ("L'Originalité du *De virginibus*," 16).

23. As best exemplified in the well-known incident of Ambrose's discovery and transfer of the bones of Gervasius and Protasius to the bishop's new basilica; Harry Maier highlights the crucial role of such "topographical" strategies in the conflicts between Nicene and Homoian factions of Milan ("Private Space as the Social Context of Arianism in Ambrose's Milan," *Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s. 45 [1994]: 72–93, 88–89).

24. Note that there is debate in recent scholarship about Prudentius' attitude toward the cult of the martyrs. Martha Malamud suggests that Prudentius' martyrs are "literary composites, almost as abstract as the allegorical characters who make their way through the *Psychomachia*," resembling but little the saints whose veneration is documented in other, contemporary texts (*A Poetics of Transformation: Prudentius and Classical Mythology* [Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1989], 177–179). Michael Roberts disagrees with this extreme representation of Prudentian alienation: "I read Prudentius' poetry as an expression of devotion to the martyrs, while Malamud is inclined to see evidence, especially in the use of classical allusion, of an attitude critical toward that devotion" [*Poetry and the Cult of the Martyrs: The Liber Peristephanon of Prudentius* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 4]. The polysemic nature of the Prudentian texts may yet accommodate some version of both interpretations: does the poet not simultaneously strengthen the cult of the martyrs and subversively reinterpret the significance of its practices?

gendering of the virgin martyr Agnes resonates so powerfully with the eroticized rhetoric of gender already encountered in Ambrose's text.²⁵

Prudentius opens his poem with the report that the child Agnes, a vowed virgin, is brought to public trial when still "hardly old enough to wed, . . . a little girl . . . of tender years, but aglow for Christ" (*Peristeph.* 14.10–12).²⁶ Like Ambrose, he emphasizes Agnes' refusal to sacrifice to the pagan idols, even when wooed with seductive flatteries and threatened with physical torture or death. The magistrate is forced to seek a new strategy of persuasion, and here the text echoes not Ambrose's tale of Agnes, but rather his account of the martyrdom of the unnamed virgin of Antioch. The "savage tyrant" quickly invokes the threat of rape: should Agnes persist in her refusal to sacrifice, Prudentius' magistrate now warns, Agnes' punishment will be not death but "enslavement to young men's games" (*Peristeph.* 14.21–30).²⁷ The virgin responds by declaring her confidence that Christ will protect her chastity, if not her life: "You may stain your sword with blood as you will—but you will not stain my limbs with carnal lust" (*Peristeph.* 14.36–37).²⁸ Subsequently the magistrate orders that Agnes be exposed in the public square. Only one man dares to look upon the girl's "fearful place" (*verendum locum*):²⁹ "with rakish gaze and with no fear he scrutinized her holy form," Prudentius recounts. Immediately the offending eyes are struck with "a swift flame, like a flash of lightning," and the man falls to the

25. Note the lack of evidence for Prudentius' actual relationships with women. Pe-trucciono suggests, quite reasonably, that Prudentius' portraits of Agnes and Eulalia "are more concerned with instructing the present than with lauding the past," providing a "model of feminine piety" especially targeted at aristocratic women ascetics ("The Portrait of St. Eulalia," 86); nevertheless, the social context of Prudentius' discourse on gender cannot be reconstructed with any precision. For a synthetic view of Prudentius' representation of women throughout his poetic corpus, see Jacques Fontaine's comprehensive essay, "La Femme dans la poésie de Prudence," *Mélanges Marcel Durré, Revue des études latines* 47 bis (1970): 55–83; on Prudentian Mariology, see Rebecca Weaver, "The Power of Chastity for Mary and Her Sisters: The Empowerment of Women in the Poetry of Prudentius," *Mary in Doctrine and Devotion* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1990), 42–57.

26. "... iugali uix habilem toro primis in annis . . . puellulam Christo calentem. . . ." For *Peristephanon* 14, I have used the critical edition of M. Cunningham, CCL 126, 386–389. English translations generally follow Elizabeth A. Clark, *Women in the Early Church* (Wilmington, Delaware, 1983), 109–114.

27. "Tum trux tyrannus: ' . . . Omnis iuuentus inruet et nouum ludibriorum mancipium petet.'"

28. "Ferrum inpiabis sanguine, si uoles, non inquinabis membra libidine."

29. Malamud notes Prudentius' careful avoidance of even a direct naming of Agnes' genitals, calling attention to the "paralyzing power" attributed to exposed female genitalia in the mythological traditions of antiquity (*A Poetics of Transformation*, 162–163).

ground as if dead (*Peristeph.* 14.43–49).³⁰ Agnes then sings a psalm of triumph, having gained a first victory. Some recall, adds Prudentius ambiguously, how she paused amidst her victorious celebrations to heal the stricken man.³¹

From the perspective of Prudentius' text, the magistrate's problem is no longer persuasion but the enforcement of his threats. If Agnes' virginity cannot be defiled, her life can still be taken, so the magistrate summons the executioner. Now Agnes' eyes transgress: gazing upon the "savage man" who stands with "naked sword," the girl responds joyously to this opportunity to win a second triumph (*Peristeph.* 14.67–68).³²

I revel more a wild man comes,
 A cruel and violent man-at-arms,
 Than if a softened youth came forth,
 Faint and tender, bathed in scent,
 To ruin me with chastity's death.
 This is my lover, I confess,
 A man who pleases me at last!
 I shall rush to meet his steps
 So I don't delay his hot desires.
 I shall greet his blade's full length
 Within my breast; and I shall draw
 The force of sword to bosom's depth.
 As bride of Christ, I shall leap over
 The gloom of sky, the aether's heights. . . . (*Peristeph.* 14.69–80)³³

The vivid eroticism of Agnes' speech both strengthens and complicates the previous suggestion that martyrdom may be identified with rape. Having begun by emphasizing that the twelve-year-old girl is just barely

30. "Intendit unus forte procaciter os in puellam nec trepidat sacram spectare formam lumine lubrico. En ales ignis fulminis in modum uibratur ardens atque oculos ferit." Malamud notes the ambiguity of agency here: is it Agnes or God who hurls the thunderbolt? (*A Poetics of Transformation*, 163).

31. The rhetorical force of this reported speech seems to me ambiguous: is the reliability of the report undercut, or is its significance rather privileged, by its association with oral tradition? Cf. Petruccione's suggestion, in relation to an instance of reported speech in *Peristeph.* 1.86, that the oral source is not only highly valued but associated with divine providence, signifying the ultimate triumph of truth over the Devil's envious attempts to repress that truth ("The Persecutor's Envy and the Rise of the Martyr Cult: *Peristephanon* Hymns 1 and 4," *Vigiliae Christianae* 45 [1991]: 327–346, 329).

32. "Vt uidit Agnes stare truce[m] uirum mucrone nudo, laetior haec ait: . . ."

33. "Exulto, talis quod potius uenit uaesanus atrox, turbidus armiger, quam si ueniret languidus ac tener mollisque ephebus tinctus aromate, qui me pudoris funere perderet. Hic, hic amator iam, fateor, placet. Ibo inruentis gressibus obuiam, nec demorabor uota calentia; ferrum in papillas omne recepero pectusque ad imum uim gladii traham. Sic nupta Christo transilium poli omnes tenebras aethere celsior. . . ."

of marriageable age and is “aglow for Christ,” Prudentius now suggests that Agnes welcomes the sword as deflowering penis and embraces death as marriage to a true man, Christ.³⁴ Agnes’ christocentric arousal here serves to frame and thereby recontextualize the enclosed narration of her triumphant resistance to the phallic threat represented by the magistrate and his cohorts—a narrative cycle that is, as we have seen, notably absent in Ambrose’s version of the Agnes tale.³⁵ Though Prudentius’ Agnes has initially rejected and then resoundingly defeated the “savage tyrant” who attempts seduction and threatens rape, she now not only forgives her assailant (or so “some say”) but also welcomes in unambiguous and explicitly sexual terms the “savage man” who is simultaneously executioner and Christ.³⁶ Prudentius has thus exaggerated both Agnes’ defiance and her receptivity. Invoking a potential tale of liberation only to subvert that narrative, the poet compromises Agnes’

34. As noted above, both Ambrose and Damasus of Rome wrote poems to Agnes as well, and Prudentius’ text here resonates—perhaps intentionally—with the more muted tones of the Italian poems. The hymn attributed to Ambrose, like Prudentius’ own work, opens with an allusion to Agnes’ emergent sexual maturity: “Ripe she was for martyrdom, ripe not yet for marriage” (*Matura martyrio fuit, matura nondum nuptiis*) (*Hymn.* 65.5, *PL* 17, 1214–1215). The hymn’s author goes on to observe that parental concern to protect “chastity’s enclosure” proved ineffective in the face of Agnes’ devotion to Christ: “Her faith, incapable of restraint, opened the guardian gates” (*Metu parentes territi, claustrum pudoris auxerant, solvit fores custodiae fides teneri nescia*) (*Hymn.* 65.9–12). Damasus’ poem to Agnes echoes the Ambrosian hymn’s suggestion that Agnes’ parents were unable to preserve her childhood innocence: in his poem, the security of a nurse’s lap dissolves under the force of Agnes’ passion, as she fearlessly faces the “savage tyrant” who wants “to burn her body with flames” (*Fama refert Sanctos dudum retulisse parentes Agnem cum lugubres cantus tuba concrepuisset, nutricis gremium subito liquisse puellam; sponte trucid calcasse minas, rabiemque tyranni: urere cum flammis voluisset nobile corpus, viribus immensum parvis superasse timorem. . . .*) (*Carm.* 29.1–6, *PL* 13, 402–403). While Agnes’ parents are absent from Prudentius’ treatment of the Roman martyr, note that Prudentius’ Eulalia, like Thecla, makes a *nocturnal* escape from a parentally imposed confinement (*Peristeph.* 3.36–45).

35. Damasus reports that Agnes’ flowing hair covers her nakedness (*Carm.* 7); Ambrose, that she carefully rearranges her torn clothing, lest someone see her uncovered (*Hymn.* 25–28). But neither of these Agnes texts includes the story of her forced prostitution or miraculous release. We have seen that Ambrose’s account of the unnamed virgin of Antioch contains an analogous episode, and there are other parallels as well; in the tale of the Antiochene virgin, however, the miraculous release is mediated by a soldier, and there is no punishment of the transgressive gaze (*De virg.* 2.4). Malamud mentions several versions of the brothel story, though she surprisingly omits reference to the Ambrosian tale (*A Poetics of Transformation*, 157, 166–167).

36. Cf. Carlin A. Barton’s study of the “powerful, erotically charged figure of the gladiator” (*The Sorrows of the Ancient Romans: The Gladiator and the Monster* [Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1993], 47). The swordsman of gladiatorial combat is evoked by the figure of the executioner, as well as the virgin, in the virgin martyr tale.

rescue from sexual violation and indeed undermines her very resistance through his spectacular scripting of her climactic speech. If our eyes were initially struck blind when we followed the narrative gaze to look upon Agnes' nakedness, now our sight is indeed restored as Prudentius gives us full permission to observe her sexualized encounter with death.³⁷

However, Prudentius' tale is not quite complete, and further complications precede narrative resolution. Agnes has welcomed the sword to her breast in a gesture which is simultaneously erotic and heroic. Her speech concludes with a shift of metaphor, as she takes up sacrificial imagery to interpret her impending death,³⁸ and Prudentius then goes on to describe the execution as follows:

Her fate thus sealed, she bent her head,
She worshiped Christ as suppliant,
That her sinking neck, more readily,
Might endure the threatened wound.
By the hand of the soldier she received
Fulfillment of her great desire,
For with one stroke he cleaved her head. (*Peristeph.* 14.85–89)³⁹

Death itself is paradoxically anti-climactic in most tales of martyrdom, which focus instead on the dialogical foreplay between martyr and tyrant.⁴⁰ But Prudentius has a reason for lingering at the moment—or rather, as we shall see, at the *place*—of execution. Here, in a move so subtle we almost miss it, he silently substitutes a submissively bent neck

37. A mere hint of uncertainty is introduced with the possibility that Agnes may return the gaze; recall her phallic thunderbolt (Malamud, *A Poetics of Transformation*, 164). On the topic of the female gaze in ancient texts, see Blake Leyerle's analysis of Chrysostom's rhetorical manipulation of the gaze, whereby he asserts his hierarchical superiority over feminized objects (in this case, male ascetics living in "spiritual marriage"); Leyerle's reference to Chrysostom's construction of the "transgressive female gaze" highlights the technique of "shifting of blame" but also hints at the implicit challenge to the "secure and privileged vantage" of the male voyeur: who watches whom? ("Chrysostom on the Gaze," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 1 [1993]: 159–174, 160). I thank Patricia Cox Miller for first drawing my attention to the question of Agnes' own "gaze."

38. Malamud discusses Prudentius' punning play on the sacrificial connotations of the name Agnes, evocative of the Latin *agna*—"lamb"—as well as the Greek *hagnē*—"chaste" (*A Poetics of Transformation*, 152).

39. "Sic fata Christum uertice cernuo supplex adorat, uulnus ut inminens cervix subiret prona paratius. Ast ille tantam spem peragit manu, uno sub ictu nam caput amputat. . . ."

40. See the discussion of Alison Goddard Elliott, *Roads to Paradise: Reading the Lives of Early Saints* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1987), 23–41.

for the breast Agnes has defiantly offered,⁴¹ thereby compromising even Agnes' power to claim full complicity in her death-marriage, now still more clearly inscribed as rape. At the same time, Prudentius deftly flicks a curtain to expose for a moment a piece of the complex web of intertextual relationships within which he is resituating this story of martyrdom. Briefly, behind the proffered breast and ultimately more vulnerable neck of Agnes, we glimpse the shadowy flesh of the Polyxena of Virgil, Ovid, Seneca and Euripides: a virgin who, like Agnes, seeks to relocate and thereby reinterpret a death that would define her as sacrificial victim and dead hero's bride.

It is to Virgil's treatment of Polyxena that Prudentius most directly alludes, addressing Agnes as "O virgo felix," a verbal echo of the *Aeneid's* brief reference to the Trojan Polyxena as a "virgin fortunate" in her escape from slavery and rape through a sacrificial death on the tomb of the Greek Achilles (*Aen.* 3.321–324).⁴² But the accounts of the scene of Polyxena's execution in Ovid and Seneca offer still closer parallels to Prudentius' own dramatic composition. Ovid, unlike Virgil, is able to identify the *misfortune* in the virgin's story while emphasizing the courage of a response which, he observes, defines her as "more than a woman" (*Metamorph.* 13.451).⁴³ His Polyxena, like Prudentius' Agnes, breaks out in impassioned speech upon seeing her sacrificer standing and gazing upon her with sword in hand. Begging Neoptolemus, the son and proxy of the dead "bridegroom" Achilles, not to delay her death but immediately to sink his sword into her *throat or breast*, she offers her

41. As also noted by Malamud, without reference to the tragic parallels: "One of the peculiarities of this poem is that Agnes is cheated of the death by phallic sword thrust she anticipates so eagerly. . . . This decapitation seems to function as a sort of curb on her female sexuality" ("Making a Virtue of Perversity: The Poetry of Prudentius," *Ramus* 19 [1990]: 64–88, 81–82). Cf. Malamud's discussion of Agnes' decapitation elsewhere, in the context to the "genitalized" head of the Medusa figure, ambiguously phallic in Prudentius' appropriation (*A Poetics of Transformation*, 160–164).

42. "O felix una ante alias Priameia virgo. . . ." Cf. Prudentius' *peristeph.* 14.124: "O virgo felix, o nova gloria. . . ." The Virgilian reference in Prudentius is actually more complex, as noted by A. Mahoney, *Vergil in the Works of Prudentius* (Washington, 1934), 180–181, and discussed by Palmer, *Prudentius on the Martyrs*, 178–179. Immediately following Prudentius' reference to Virgil's Polyxena is an allusion to a passage in *Aen.* 12 in which Evander, mourning the death of his son Pallas in battle, speaks bitterly of "nova gloria in armis." Agnes' execution is thus compared both to the "happiness" or "good fortune" of Polyxena's sacrificial death and to the "glorious" military death of Pallas. Particularly in the latter case, the comparison is strongly in Agnes' favor: *her* happiness is real and eternal, *her* attribution of glory uncompromised by the bitter irony of grief.

43. "fortis et infelix et plus quam femina virgo."

executioner a choice which is intriguingly juxtaposed with the actual and proposed physical locations of death in Prudentius' text. In Ovid's account, unlike Prudentius', the young man responds by plunging his sword into the virgin's chest (*Metamorph.* 13.455–480).⁴⁴ The tragedian Seneca is not immediately interested in the precise bodily location of death's entry but finds other ways to emphasize the virility of a Polyxena whom he describes as admired for both her luminous beauty and her "brave and death-defying spirit," an "audacious *virago*" who does not draw back from the sword but turns toward it "with savage and fierce expression" (*Troades* 1131–1164).⁴⁵

One final text needs to be brought into consideration if we are to comprehend more fully the implications of Prudentius' decision to bypass Agnes' breast in favor of her neck. The Latin versions of Polyxena's death look back to Euripides' early portrayal, which approaches its own climax in the following passage:

She seized her veils and tore them from the shoulder down to the middle of her side near where the navel is, uncovering her breasts and her bosom as lovely as that of a statue. Then placing one knee on the ground, she uttered these words of utmost audacity: "Here is my bosom, young man. Strike

44. "atque Neoptolemum stantem ferrumque tenentem; inque suo vidit figentem lumina vultu, 'utere iam dudum generoso sanguine' dixit 'nulla mora est; at tu iugulo vel pectore telum conde meo' iugulumque simul pectusque retexit. . . ." Cf. Prudentius: "ut vidit Agnes stare truce virum mucrone nudo, laetior haec ait: '. . . ferrum in papillas omne recepero pectusque ad imum vim gladii traham. . .'" (*Peristeph.* 14.67–84). Such parallels may not bear the weight of a demand for "proof" of direct influence or conscious allusion. Nevertheless, I think it highly likely that Prudentius here has Ovid in mind. Palmer discusses the influence of Ovid's *Fasti* on the *Peristephanon* and refers to a dissertation by S. M. Hanley ("The Classical Sources of Prudentius," Cornell Univ., 1959) in which the author notes the important influence of the *Metamorphoses* as well (*Prudentius on the Martyrs*, 104, 111–121, 155). Malamud's nuanced study of Prudentius' allusive technique likewise highlights the influence of the *Metamorphoses* on *Peristephanon* 13 (*A Poetics of Transformation*, 143–144, 179); Malamud also cites Alexander Denomy's observation that Ovid's account of Polyxena's death seems to have influenced the Ambrosian hymn to Agnes (150, n. 3, citing Denomy, *Old French Lives of Saint Agnes* [Cambridge, Mass., 1938]).

45. "ut primum ardui sublime montis tetigit atque alte edito iuvenis paterni vertice in busti stetit, audax virago non tulit retro gradum; conversa ad ictum stat truci vultu ferox. tam fortis animus omnium mentes ferit. . . ." (*Troades* 1146). Note that while Prudentius reserves the designation of *trux*, or "savage" for the magistrate and executioner (*Peristeph.* 14.21,67), he joins Seneca in emphasizing the virgin's "ferocity": "stabat feroci robore pertinax" (*Peristeph.* 14.18). The general influence of Senecan tragedy on Prudentius' martyrial hymns is discussed by Palmer (*Prudentius on the Martyrs*, 188–193).

there, if that is where you would like to strike. If you would prefer the neck, here is my throat ready." (*Hecuba* 557–565)⁴⁶

Nicole Loraux illuminates the meaning of the choices here presented by the Euripidean Polyxena, a set of choices we have seen picked up again in Ovid's account. In a literary genre in which, as she describes it, "a remarkable overdetermination . . . requires women to die by the throat, and only by the throat," Euripides uses tragedy's "topography of the body" to question the boundaries of gender.⁴⁷ May not the virgin Polyxena claim the virile death of a sword plunged into a defiantly bared chest? But the tragedian entertains the possibility of boundary transgression only to reassert gender distinctions more firmly: in the end, Euripides' Polyxena, like Prudentius' Agnes, dies of a wound not to breast but to neck.

We have seen that Ovid and Seneca, unlike Euripides, are willing to grant the virgin at least the outward sign of a noble and manly death, admittedly still limited and controlled by bridal and sacrificial interpretations. But when Prudentius sets out to rewrite Polyxena as the Christian Agnes he returns to the resolution favored earlier by Euripides. Prudentius does not fail to exploit the exaggerated boldness of the Latin Polyxena as he shapes his portrait of Agnes, but like the Greek tragedian he compromises his portrayal of manly womanhood at the final, fatal moment. Refocusing the narrative gaze on the vulnerability of the female neck, Prudentius provides Agnes with the place of death which for him, as for ancient Greek tragedy, reestablishes her essential femininity in sexualized subjugation.⁴⁸ But the message now rings more harshly. Euripides' Polyxena offers both breast and throat only to die by the more feminine death of the throat. But Prudentius' still more virile Agnes offers *only her breast*, so that it is in complete and chilling disregard of her words that her *neck* is severed. More violently even than Euripides'

46. With slight modification, I am following the English translation appearing in Nicole Loraux, *Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman*, trans. A. Forster (Cambridge, Mass., 1987), 56.

47. Loraux, *Tragic Ways*, 52.

48. Prudentius here follows the tradition of Agnes' death mediated by Ambrose's *On Virgins*, against Damasus' report that Agnes was burned to death (a form of death that reappears in Prudentius' poem for the virgin martyr Eulalia, closely associated with the Agnes tradition); nor is Agnes the only one of the martyrs whom Prudentius represents as dying by the sword (on the death of martyrs in the *Peristephanon*, see Michael Roberts, *Poetry and the Cult of the Martyrs*, 68). The point is not, then, that Prudentius necessarily constructed Agnes' decapitation based solely on the example of Polyxena (as mediated above all through Ovid), but that he chose this particular alternative over other possibilities and furthermore recontextualized the severing of Agnes' neck by placing it in juxtaposition to her request that the sword be plunged into her breast.

Polyxena, the Christian Agnes must be wrenched back into her womanly place. She is not after all audacious *virago* but docile *virgo*.

Or is she? Perhaps we should resist the temptation to seek a “final word” which would resolve the tensions and ambiguities of the late fourth-century tale into one all-too-neat judgment.⁴⁹ Only by explicitly problematizing female audacity can the tale of the virgin martyr attempt to restrain the heroism of women. And because the tale must therefore become engaged in the construction and contemplation of the heroic *virago*, its message of virginal docility always carries with it the potential for its own subversion. As Loraux observes, woman does finally “acquire a body” in the tragic “interplay of glory and death.” Yet Loraux quickly adds that this tragic body is “a body through which death will come to [the woman].”⁵⁰ Indeed, in Prudentius’ Christian rewriting of the tragic tradition, Agnes’ pubescent body emerges into sharp visibility precisely as a text of death unadorned by the distracting ambiguities of a saintly *Life*.⁵¹ The enclosure of the virginal body protects and reassures, but also restrains; ultimately it demands its own unloosing.⁵² In the tale

49. Note that the tale’s “duplicity” can be perceived from various perspectives. Malamud observes that “whatever Prudentius’ intentions in writing this poem, in the end he produced a paradox”; she highlights the peculiar “instability” of readings of Agnes’ sexuality, as “the figure of Agnes oscillates between victimized virgin and powerful, Medusa-like figure” (*A Poetics of Transformation*, 171–172). The “duplicity” may not reside only in the poetic text. I am reminded of Carlin Barton’s contention that the gladiator—to whom the martyr stands in closest relation—“was a skilled dissembler” (*The Sorrows of the Ancient Romans*, 40). And Carol Gilligan calls attention to the submerged awareness in our own culture of “the ability of [adolescent] girls to tell it from both sides and to see it both ways,” as a product of the conflicting pressures both to “know what they know” and not to “know what they know” at a crucial developmental juncture (“Joining the Resistance: Psychology, Politics, Girls and Women,” *Michigan Quarterly Review* 29 [1990]: 501–536, 529).

50. Loraux, *Tragic Ways*, 49.

51. Elliot contrasts the hagiographic genres of *Passion* and *Life*, emphasizing the anti-biographical “abnegation of personal identity” which is central to the *Passion* (*Roads to Paradise*, 19). Does the virgin’s peculiar capacity to convey death contribute to the broader success of the tale of the virgin martyr within the corpus of passion literature? Cf. Malamud’s reading of Prudentius’ poem to the virgin martyr Eulalia in terms of the intersection of textuality and sexuality in the death of the virgin martyr: “as she dies she becomes, literally, a text, as her executioners carve bloody marks into her breast and side” (“Making a Virtue of Perversity,” 76). Malamud further suggests that the poem to Agnes is in some sense a rewriting of the Eulalia poem, “an attempt to transcend, by verbal and intellectual sleight of hand, the disturbing implications of *Peristephanon* 3, collapsing sexuality and textuality in a rather desperate attempt at closure and control” (86).

52. Cf. Malamud’s discussion of the “tension between imagery of confinement and imagery of release” in Prudentius’ hymn (*A Poetics of Transformation*, 152).

of the virgin martyr, however, the (re)opening of the female body and the releasing of its fearsome productivity and power can only take place through a surpassing act of violence which extracts woman's salvation at the cost of her bodily integrity. Unable to escape the control of the dominant narrative whose opposition gives it birth, the story of female resistance and liberation is inevitably encoded in the savagely violent terms of the virgin martyr's tale. The fierce virgin finally rushes to her own destruction.⁵³

ORTHODOXY AND THE RHETORIC OF GENDER

These two late fourth-century tellings of the tale of the virgin martyr represent, from one perspective, an innovative rewriting of the apocryphal tale of the conversion and witness of a sexually continent woman. At the same time, the virgin martyr story can be read as a subtle reworking of the virginal heroine of classical tragedy. Each narrative reinscription reflects a distinct balancing of the rhetorical strategies of accommodation and paradox. In Ambrose's telling, the post-Constantinian tale of Agnes locates itself explicitly in relation to the apocryphal stories of Mary and Thecla. An impression of continuity is achieved in part by a radical recontextualization of the earlier tales of sexually continent women, now brought under the control of the particular erotic and sacrificial metaphors that shape the late fourth-century representations of virginity. On the other hand, as Prudentius situates the tale of Agnes in relation to classical culture through allusions to the tragic figure of Polyxena, a "totalizing" Christian discourse defines itself paradoxically, by asserting the absolute transcendence of the Christian heroine whose privileged relationship to the one heavenly bridegroom Christ relativizes the standing of all other virginal brides. Yet, at the same time, the relation of the Christian virgin to the classical virgin is presented as one of similarity rather than difference, in literature that favors techniques of rhetorical heightening or exaggeration over strategies of direct negation, drawing status from the highly valued classical past it claims to supersede.

53. Cf. Martha J. Reinecke's discussion of medieval women mystics: "I suggest that such self-inflicted violence, even when interpreted as the rebellion—cultural, political, and spiritual—of women who quested after freedom, was always already the rebellion of bodies colonized by the larger culture. Their bodies were not so much free as they were fractured by the conditions of their production within the larger social body of late medieval Christendom." ("‘This Is My Body’: Reflections on Abjection, Anorexia, and Medieval Women Mystics," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 58 [1990]: 245–265, 259).

I suggested at the outset that the late ancient Christian rhetoric of virginity must be read not only against competing rhetorics of virginity but also against the broader discursive context of late ancient Christianity. Kate Cooper has proposed that the apocryphal stories of Thecla and other continent women invoke a rhetoric of gender that functions primarily to negotiate *male* relationships and status; she suggests that the subversive message of the apocryphal *Acts* can only be fully grasped when we recognize how these texts deploy the classical rhetorical tropes of womanly listening and womanly speech to represent the characters of men.⁵⁴ Similar arguments can be pressed in relation to the later tales of virgin martyrs, which must likewise be understood not only as expressions of a male impulse to control powerful ascetic women but also as an aspect of the late ancient construction of maleness itself—a construction that is, furthermore, acutely problematized in the context of an “imperial” Christian discourse. To state the thesis in general terms: post-Constantinian Christianity lays claim to the power of classical male speech; yet at the same time late ancient Christian discourse continues to locate itself in paradoxical relation to classical discourse through a stance of feminizing ascesis that renounces public speech.⁵⁵

This distinctly gendered tension within late ancient Christian discourse plays itself out in the two fourth-century accounts of Agnes, both of which invite an implied male listener into a complex dual identification with both male sacrificer and female victim. If the executioner’s gender is relatively secure, his availability as a Christian role model is clearly compromised by his opposition to the heroic martyr. Compromised, but not

54. Kate Cooper, “Apostles, Ascetic Women, and Questions of Audience: New Reflections on the Rhetoric of Gender in the *Apocryphal Acts*,” *SBL Seminar Papers* 1992. See also her “Insinuations of Womanly Influence.”

55. I was recently struck by the similarities between the argument I am proposing here and Daniel Boyarin’s intriguing suggestion that early rabbinic Judaism articulates an “antiphallic” masculine gender on the cultural margins of the Roman Empire. The “castration” of Jewish men in relation to the larger Roman culture is rewritten as “circumcision,” while the elaborate exclusion of women from the world of Torah-study reconstitutes the masculinity of men who have—in Boyarin’s terms—renounced “the phallus, . . . not the penis.” I am grateful to Professor Boyarin for generously sharing with me an unpublished paper, “Rabbis and Their Pals; or, Are There Jews in ‘The History of Sexuality’?,” part of a larger project tentatively entitled *Antiphallus; or, Jewishness As a Gender*. Both the continuity and the ‘otherness’ of rabbinic Judaism in relation to Christianity are revealing, as Jewish and Christian men are seen to deploy strikingly different rhetorics of sexuality for the construction of counter-masculinities within the context of late ancient Greco-Roman culture. For the broader construction of rabbinic Judaism as a cultural resistance movement within hellenism, see also Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

completely ruled out, for the swordsman remains ambiguously identified with the phallic Christ, and the virgin martyr is inscribed not only as bride but also as victim in a Eucharistic rite that serves to define the priestly authority of “bishops” in apostolic succession to a Christ construed as both victim and sacrificer.⁵⁶ On the other hand, while the Christ-like virgin clearly stands as a symbol of the true or orthodox Christian, the virgin’s gender is ambiguously represented. Indeed, in the terms of the narrative, the virgin’s impenetrability becomes a mediating category of sexuality that allows a play of gendered meanings: the virgin is “she” who is penetrated by sacrificer or Christ and “he” who paradoxically penetrates in relation to a feminized executioner; but ultimately the martyr cannot be adequately defined in terms of the classical categories of gendered sexuality.⁵⁷

The tale of the virgin martyr does not, however, utilize gender ambiguity to articulate a genderless Christian identity. Rather, it allows for a distinctive reworking of the rhetoric of gender within the context of an “imperial,” “totalizing” or “orthodox” Christian discourse that remains clearly male-centered. As the link between the categories of sexual penetration and gender is complicated, the female must be relocated in relation to a male voice that utilizes rhetorical strategies of accommodation

56. See Nancy Jay, *Throughout Your Generations Forever: Sacrifice, Religion, and Paternity* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1992). A narrative analogue to the ritual sacrifice of women that gives birth to male identity and male bonding is Livy’s telling of the stories of the rapes and deaths of Lucretia and Verginia, in which “women are made dead and men come alive” (Sandra R. Joshel, “The Body Female and the Body Politic: Livy’s Lucretia and Verginia,” *Pornography and Representation in Greece and Rome*, ed. Amy Richlin [New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992], 112–130, 128). It is surely significant that the popularity of tales of virgin martyrs coincides chronologically with the articulation of a distinctly sacramental episcopal authority. Although Ambrose’s episcopal preoccupations are more obvious and have rightly received much more scholarly attention, Prudentius’s writings contribute an interesting perspective on the role of the bishop. As Roberts suggests, Prudentius’ representation of the figure of the martyr-bishop Cyprian serves both to exalt the bishop as teacher and writer and to make episcopal teaching authority and protection universally available: “the blessings of episcopal martyrs . . . are available to all directly and without intermediary through prayer at their shrines” (*Poetry and the Cult of the Martyrs*, 129). Though Roberts does not emphasize the explicitly priestly dimension of episcopal authority in Prudentius’ martyr poems, it seems to me that Prudentius also presses Eucharistic allusions in a more universalizing interpretive direction, so that the priestly (self-) sacrifice of Cyprian—who “submitted his head to the sword and made an offering of his blood (sanguinem dicare)” — becomes a metonym for the sacralized life of the ascetic Christian, in a partial displacement and diffusion of episcopal authority.

57. On the centrality of sexual penetration for defining relations of dominance and submission in classical antiquity (including gender), see, e.g., Winkler, *The Constraints of Desire*.

as well as subversion to claim the speech and moral persuasiveness of both the public and the private spheres.⁵⁸ Here, again, the peculiarly flexible tale of the virgin martyr proves productive of multiple interpretations. While the virgin can be read as a positive trope for maleness, she also serves to define the male negatively through her very femaleness. Similarly, on one level, the tale makes manliness more available to women and thereby threatens to deconstruct the categories of gender; yet the narrative simultaneously works decisively to refeminize the potentially audacious virgin in relation to a phallic Christ. A privileged maleness is thereby reestablished, while remaining delicately positioned in relation to the masculine speech of classical discourse. Thus, finally, in the tale of the virgin martyr, categories of gender defined by relationships of sexual penetration are not so much discarded as disrupted, rearranged in an asceticized discourse that enables an ambiguously masculine Christian orthodoxy to deploy powerfully the dual rhetorics of empire and martyrdom.

Virginia Burrus is an Assistant Professor of Early Church History at Drew University

58. Cf. Cooper's discussion of the invocation of rhetorics of conjugal unity and womanly influence as part of a broader pattern of public appeal to an explicitly privatized moral realm: "The continuous deployment of insinuations about a man's private life, whether by friends or by enemies, served to index his moral sense and his self-control" ("Womanly Influence," 152). Cooper persuasively contrasts the continuity of this classical rhetorical strategy with the changed social context in which it was deployed in the later Empire, highlighting the strategic advantage of the emergent ascetic elite, men whose professions of celibacy protected their private lives from the rhetorical insinuations of married rivals. My own emphasis is slightly different: in the changed rhetorical context, ascetic men did not simply throw off the burden of the private sphere, resulting in a frozen rhetorical privilege representing loss of "elasticity" in the rhetorical economy (as Cooper puts it, 164); rather, on another reading, they profited from an increased rhetorical maneuverability in relation to public and private spheres, able to position themselves as immune either to the "private" temptations of greed or lust or, alternatively, to the "public" intemperance of overweening ambition.