



Painful Pleasure. Saintly Torture on the Verge of Pornography
Placer doloroso. La tortura santa en el limiar de la Pornografía
Prazer Doloroso. A tortura santa no limiar da Pornografia

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Abstract: Within female hagiographical narratives, stimulating, pornographic, and often sadistic endeavours can be detected; gendering the tortured body parts such as the tongue, teeth or the breast and thus supporting the development of (negative) erotic fantasies. This paper will explore the connection between pornography, torture, and hagiography and investigate the ambiguity of this ‘painful pleasure’, which, despite any assumptions, is not only enjoyed by the male torturer when cutting off these symbolically significant body parts, but recurrently so it seems also by the saint herself, who more than once cheerfully exclaims that ‘the pains are my delight’ (St Agatha).

Resumo: Nas narrativas hagiográficas femininas, insinuações provocantes, pornográficas e sádicas podem ser detectadas, dando conotação sexual às partes do corpo torturadas, como a língua, dentes e mamas e assim contribuindo para o desenvolvimento (negativo) de fantasias eróticas. O documento irá explorar a conexão entre a pornografia, a tortura e a hagiografia e investigar a ambiguidade deste ‘prazer doloroso’, que apesar de todas as suposições, o ato de ferir essas partes simbólicas do corpo não é apenas apreciado pelo torturador masculino, como demonstram as citações recorrentes da própria santa: ‘as dores são meus deleites’ (St Agatha).

Keywords: Women Saints – Hagiography – Torture – Pornography – Body.

Palavras-chave: Santas – Hagiografias – Tortura – Pornografia – Corpo.

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While being tortured severely, barely imaginable for readers of and listeners to the story, Saint Agatha's reaction to the pains she must suffer is surprisingly one expressing delight. 'The pains are my delight', she literally exclaims, 'it is as if I were hearing some good news'² – an announcement, which enrages her male tormentor to such an extent that he redirects his attention not only back at her already mutilated body, but especially at her breast – the utmost signifier of her femininity – and has it brutally cut off.

Once more, contemporary readers might expect a reaction denoting anguish and pain, a cry for heavenly relief for her suffering, yet instead, Agatha angrily replies in several versions of her legend: 'Are you not ashamed to cut off that which you yourself wanted to suck?'³ With this statement, the maternal implications of the female breast are set aside and the torture itself is turned into a form of male sexual aggressiveness towards women and consequently into a sexually motivated penetration.

The torture of the breast 'informs men's concerted efforts to control – to design and administer – gendered social arrangements that maximise male pleasure and minimise frustration'⁴ or as Gulley notes, the torture itself has 'an association of failed sexual corruption with Agatha's breast [which] encourages the audience during the later torture scene to view the cut off breast as a sign of successful sexual penetration, particularly when compar[ing] the torn flesh with the clearly intact flesh'⁵ – the hymen.

Agatha's exclamations link pain with delight, connect pain with pleasure and allow the tormentor to direct all of his rage at her breast. Furthermore, taking

² DE VORAGINE, Jacobus. *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, RYAN, William Granger (ed. and trans.). 2 vols. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995, I, p. 155.

³ DONOVAN, Leslie A. *Women Saint's Lives in Old English Prose*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1999, p. 41.

⁴ MILES, Margaret R. *A Complex Delight: The Secularization of the Breast 1350-1750*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008, p.3.

⁵ GULLEY, Allison. 'Suffering and Salvation: Birthing Pains in Aelfric's Life of Agatha'. In: *Medieval Perspectives*, 17, 1, pp. 105-20 (pp. 113-14).



her utterances literally, then not only the male torturer seems to enjoy the spectacle of the penetration with the result of cutting off symbolically significant body parts, but perversely, so it seems, Agatha herself does as well. In addition to being undoubtedly a legend about a virgin suffering severe bodily tortures in order to be united with God, the narrative of Agatha in particular unfolds a sexual level of reading and interpretation. Sainthood torture is here presented as being on the verge of pornography with sadistic fetishes being executed which are based on the tortured saint and which try to trigger and stimulate hidden erotic fantasies.⁶ The exemplary portrayal of the legend of Saint Agatha makes thus room for the argument that there is a connection between hagiography and pornography.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, pornography is ‘the printed or visual material containing the explicit description or display of sexual organs or activity, intended to stimulate sexual excitement.’⁷ Even though hagiography does not offer us an explicit description of sexual activity – the scene from the legend of Saint Agatha, nevertheless, indicates a sexual tension within her martyrdom. It shows the sadistic sexual stimulation of a woman’s body, which is performed through a painful penetration of the skin, its orifices, and sensual spots.

However, as light forms of violence, such as scratching, biting, hitting are said to increase sexual excitement, pain and pleasure often go hand in hand and at times no clear boundary between pain and pleasure can be defined as Sorgo reminds us.⁸ It is exactly ‘this conjunction of sexual pleasure within the frame – the pleasure of the woman being manipulated and restrained and the one doing this manipulating and restraining; and the pleasure of the viewer from outside the frame, both watching the scene and living it vicariously’ which makes a comparison between hagiography and pornography possible.⁹

To connect hagiography with the erotic and the pornographic allows for four preliminary conclusions. First of all one has to keep in mind that ‘hagiography is not history’ and everything mentioned within the texts and adaptations is

⁶ BURGWINKLE, William and HOWIE, Cary. *Sanctity and Pornography in Medieval Culture. On the Verge*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011, pp. 34-35.

⁷ ‘Pornography’. In: *Oxford English Dictionary*. www.oxforddictionaries.com. 4 April 2013.

⁸ SORGO, Gabriele. *Martyrium und Pornographie*. Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1997, p. 136.

⁹ BURGWINKLE and HOWIE. *Sanctity and Pornography in Medieval Culture*, p. 13.



arguably placed there for a reason.¹⁰ Secondly, most martyrical legends are the result of the fantasies and enthusiasm of male clerical writers and thus the gender roles are noticeably defined.¹¹ Hence, thirdly, to connect pornography with hagiography means to understand an historical and textual development starting with the earliest manuscripts with their partially erotic undertones and their cultivation of hidden sexual fantasies.¹² Furthermore, in both genres, the locus for the connection between pain and pleasure, the staging ground for action, stimulation, and penetration, is the body.

In this respect two ideas have to be taken into consideration: First of all, as Sorgo argues in her work on martyrdom and pornography, in both hagiographic and pornographic narratives, the characters are not supposed to develop, but must adhere to their designed roles in order to communicate a certain phantasm, which in Agatha's case is related to sexual excitement.¹³ Even though the stimulation and penetration of the virginal body is the centre of attention, Agatha's actual virginity, as scholars and frequent readers of hagiography are well aware, will remain intact as this 'life of sexless perfection was of paramount importance' in the creation of female sainthood throughout the Middle Ages.¹⁴ In the end, the penetrated virgin will die sexually untouched, devoted and joyful for the higher cause, much as the sexually penetrated woman at the end of the most common pornographic scenarios thankfully embraces the ejaculation, marking the end of the penetration.

Secondly, the success of the narratives depends on the length of the descriptions surrounding the body. Whereas images allow for an obvious, effective display of pornographic actions or pseudo-pornographic actions, the success of textual examples depends on the length and explicitness of the descriptions. '[T]he more the body speaks and the more it is tortured and effectively restored, the longer the text becomes'.¹⁵ This text-body

¹⁰ ELLIOT, Allison Goddard. *Roads to Paradise: Reading the Lives of Early Saints*. Hanover: University Press of New England, 1987, p. 7.

¹¹ SORGO. *Martyrium und Pornographie*, p. 162.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

¹⁴ TIBBETTS SCHULENBURG, Jane. *Forgetful of their Sex. Female Sanctity and Society, ca. 500-1100*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998, p. 127.

¹⁵ CONSTANTINO, Stavroula. 'Female Corporeal Performances: Reading the Body in Byzantine Passions and Lives of Holy Women'. In: *Studia Byzantina Upsaliensia*, 9, 2005, p. 58.



interrelation works both ways, ‘the less functional, the shorter the text’.¹⁶ As Constantinou summarises ‘this analogy between text and body suggests that the one stands for the other; the body ‘writes’ the text and the text ‘writes’ the body’ and while doing so, martyrical legends, comparable to pornographic narratives make efforts to persuade listeners to adopt the point of view of the body.¹⁷ The viewer, reader or listener is consequently the other most significant intersection between both genres, as both can only unfold their complete effect, if the description of the scenarios are created in such a way that the penetration – positive or negative – has an effect on the reader, whether stimulating or daunting.

In the following, this paper will dwell further on the body and its readers as the two major intersections between pornography, torture, and hagiography, focusing, in contrast to most recent scholarship, on textual rather than iconographic examples. It will argue that, even though the martyrdom is not visible on canvass, textual representations of martyrical *vitae* are also subconsciously and linguistically coded, thus belonging to what Robert Mills, in his work *Suspended Animation*, entitled ‘pious pornography’, having the same effect as the image, once all codes have been decoded.¹⁸

Everything is centred on the body, its performance and the hidden codes its penetration transmits. As Burgwinkle and Howie propose in their work *Sanctity and Pornography in Medieval Culture*:

Both [hagiography and pornography] are body focused, ostentatious, and attract attention. They produce the body as a spectacle, challenge theoretical notions about the limits of sensation and enact a process of synesthetic corporeal interaction such that the viewer believes that s/he can feel what the other is feeling or that the other is in him even more than himself.¹⁹

All spaces, orifices, limbs, interior and exterior organs are consequently taken as much into the custody of the usually male tormentor as all orifices, limbs and body parts are taken into the custody of the usually male sexual

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 58. See also MILLS, Robert. *Suspended Animation: Pain, Pleasure and Punishment in Medieval Culture*. London: Reaktion Books, 2005, p. 106.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

¹⁹ BURGWINKLE and HOWIE. *Sanctity and Pornography in Medieval Culture*, p. 8.



penetrator within pornography.²⁰ The spectacular (mal-)treatment of the body attracts the reader's attention, but, particularly in hagiography, the recurring, cumulative tortures of specific body parts explicitly sensitises the reader to them. In the legend of Saint Agatha the reader is hence sensitised to the breast, in the legend of Saint Apollonia to the martyr's teeth and in the martyrdom of Saint Christina the focus is set on her glossectomy for example.

What all of these saints just mentioned have in common is that the reader is made to focus on these specific body parts with the help of the textual examples as well as the wording created and translated by authors and compilers. Depending on the popularity of the legend, the iconographic examples support this assumption by portraying the saint with a certain relic – thus the display of breasts on a plate usually indicates Saint Agatha and Saint Apollonia is commonly shown holding a pincer with one of her teeth.

Consequently, the strong focus on a certain body part indicates another common denominator within these legends, namely that these body parts are placed within the *vitae* for a reason as they are historically, metaphorically and, as further analysis will show, also sexually coded. Whereas the breast is easily identifiable as the utmost signifier of femininity and its unsuccessful removal opens up a complex discourse on gender and the historical and religious symbolism behind female body parts and body fluids – several saints' breast wounds lack milk instead of blood – the codes behind teeth and tongues may not be as obviously sexual and need further explanation.

In medieval common knowledge, the mouth was on the one hand considered a 'lock' with the teeth functioning as the final 'barrier', deciding what ideas and thoughts enter and leave the body.²¹ On the other hand, however, from Antiquity up to the nineteenth century, the mouth was linked to the female genitals and the tongue was often paralleled with the clitoris.²² The clitoris was in return often described as a 'little tongue' and belonged to one of 'woman's shameful members'.²³ Being aware of this bodily ambiguity, the legend of

²⁰ SORGO. *Martyrium und Pornographie*, p. 137.

²¹ LE GOFF, Jacques and TRUONG, Nicolas. *Die Geschichte des Körpers im Mittelalter*. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta. 2007, p. 84.

²² GALEN. *On the Usefulness of the Parts of the Body (De usu partium)*, TALLMADGE MAY, Margaret (trans.). 2 vols. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1968. 2, 622-623, 658-659, 660-661.

²³ MAZZIO, Carla. 'Sins of the Tongue in Early Modern England'. *Modern Language*



Saint Christina also offers, comparable to that of Saint Agatha, a sexually motivated penetration of the virginal body.

The destruction of the tongue and the subtraction of teeth are arguably codes, are 'euphemism[s] for the pre-execution defloration of virgins'²⁴, turning the mouth into a symbolic vagina, which is easier to manipulate than the actual genital, as the virgin has to remain an intact screen on which female desires of a male audience have to be projected.²⁵

Whereas the extraction of teeth thus grants access to the saintly, virginal female body, Christina's glossectomy goes even beyond entering, as it can be seen as a symbolic elimination of the source of her womanhood, of the repulsive member of lust and female sexuality – the clitoris. By deforming mouth, teeth, and tongue, the masculine penetrator is able to enter the virginal body with less resistance from the authorities and the saintly virgin, without destroying the actual virginity, which was, as previously mentioned, necessary in the creation of female sanctity.²⁶

Furthermore, what the legends of Saints Agatha and Christina have in common is that the penetrations of the virgins, these unfortunate copulation scenes, are only successful on the outside. Only the obvious, visible body parts are destroyed, yet the destruction can neither end the lives of these saints nor prevent them from being united with Jesus. Moreover, even the functions of these body parts remain intact; the penetration removes barriers only physically but keeps the women pure spiritually. Saint Christina even picks up her severed tongue and throws it into the face of her tormentor. And her tongue, this instrument of speech and this symbolic clitoris takes away his eyesight.²⁷

By doing so female reason wins over male reason, virginal and bodily purity over the male gaze on this sexually perceived body, and, more generally, Christianity over paganism. As this example of the body and its body parts

Studies, 28, 1998, pp. 93-124 (p. 101).

²⁴ ANSON, John. 'The Female Transvestite in Early Monasticism: The Origin and Development of a Motif'. In: *Viator*, 5, 1974, pp. 1-32 (p. 26).

²⁵ SORGO. *Martyrium und Pornographie*, p. 70.

²⁶ TIBBETTS SCHULENBURG. *Forgetful of their Sex*, p. 127.

²⁷ BUTLER, Alban. *Butler's Lives of the Saints*, THURSTON, Herbert et al (eds.). 4 vols. New York: Kennedy, 1956, III, p. 174.



has shown, hagiography can thus also work as a form of (subconscious) stimulation of sexual excitement or at least plays with erotic undertones once the historical and metaphorical codes behind the mentioned body parts have been deciphered.

Taking the analysis back to a more theoretical level, the argument that the function of the reader/viewer is similar if not identical in hagiography and pornography still needs further clarification. Arguably, both genres can only have the desired effect of emotional reaction, if we, the secret viewers, the secret intruders of the scenery are emotionally responding to what we read, see or listen to. Consequently, the reader intentionally or unintentionally becomes the witness, the secret attendant, the voyeur of these horrifying and sickening spectacles and is fascinated and repulsed at the same time.

This *voyeurism* is a central point in the establishment and survival of literature in general and in hagiography and pornography in particular. These legends serve as a voyeuristic arena for the reader, who is tempted to believe in the conveyed reality. The audience turns into hidden observers, into the unnoticed invaders of the scenes, who cannot intervene in the horrible happenings. As Goulemot describes this scenario in relation to erotic narratives:

Everything turns on the gaze: the reader must be made to see, for the book can give rise to the desire for pleasure, only by describing those bodies offered up to stimulate desire or by depicting the gestures and postures of the moment. Therein lies the origin of its own tension, its strange and undeniable power.²⁸

The same formula is applicable to the hagiographical narrative, as the overall success of the legend also depended on the usage of picturesque language and colourful descriptions of the events. The crueller or more fantastic the legend, the more it was spread among the population. Hagiography thereby does give 'rise to the desire for pleasure', the 'pleasure' of being united with God in the afterlife, the 'pleasure' of the torturer and the 'pleasure'/desire to imitate the powerful, incorruptible virgin in her quest for the maintenance of her chastity. Nevertheless, the construction of the gaze, the descriptive elements as well as the precise presentation of the act involving the body, are not only significant

²⁸ GOULEMOT, Jean Marie. *Forbidden Texts: Erotic Literature and its Readers in Eighteenth-Century France*, SIMPSON, James (trans.). Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 1995, p. 43.



and necessary elements of successful 'pious pornography', they also characterise the limits erotic description can experience.

According to Goulemot, the body and its description is offered to the eye from a distance, a necessary distance in the creation of imagery, because the reader should 'take up the proper distance in order to see, to admire and to examine'.²⁹ The reader is not supposed to identify with the masses, but predominantly with the penetrated. As Sorgo claims, this is a form of *imitatio*, a 'becoming one' with the penetrated.³⁰ As Burgwinkle and Howie sum up the body of the reader is turned into a 'body in the act of becoming' and 'is thus both affirmed and challenged' by the images created by the martyred bodies.³¹ By 'envisag[ing] the heroic body that defies the tormentors attempts to shape it against its will', but 'still resist[ing] death and await[ing] the next torture, regardless of its defilement' it 'allows viewers a glimpse of their own bodies as similarly fragile – yet never beyond redemption'.³²

In conclusion, legends depended on their usually male clerical authors and their enthusiasm for living out their fantasies on their female protagonists. Once decoded these textual penetrations of the female body and highly symbolic body parts allow as much of a gendered and sexual reading as the iconographic example, thereby paralleling in several ways pornographic narratives if we as readers are 'affirmed and challenged by it' and take up the proper distance to admire and examine them.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 47ff.

³⁰ SORGO. *Martyrium und Pornographie*, p. 175.

³¹ BURGWINKLE and HOWIE. *Sanctity and Pornography in Medieval Culture*, p. 22.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 22.