The Voice of the Victim: Gender, Representation and Early Christian Martyrdom

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A victim's message is magnified by the cruel fascination of violence, but it is notoriously slippery in memory. It is a problem illustrated in our own day by the case of Roop Kanwar, a twenty-year old Rajput who died — whether it was the death of a hero or that of a victim is unclear — in 1987. Her death has been the subject of an international debate over the practice of women 'becoming *sati*' — joining a husband in death by immolation on his funeral pyre. Conflicting accounts of the young woman's death — in one, she mounts the funeral pyre voluntarily, and waits serenely for the flames to engulf her, in another, she is drugged and thrust on the pyre by in-laws whose motives are cravenly economic — have engendered a debate which reaches as far as the issues of the position of women, nationalism, and the influence of the West in South Asia and beyond.[1] The image of the death of a young woman bears within it such evocative power that it is peculiarly vulnerable not only to contesting voices who wish to annex its power, but also to a kind of rhetorical outward spiral, gathering significance as it attracts to itself concerns beyond its point of origin.

Similar issues are raised by early Christian martyr texts. Tertullian of Carthage argued seventeen centuries ago that 'the blood of Christians is a seed'[2] from which the Church would go forth and flourish: it was an oft-stressed point of the Christian apologists that persecution of the meek could only back-fire. Yet it is only in the half-generation since the publication of Michel

[1] For a summary of the issues, see John Stratton Hawley, 'Hinduism: *sati* and its defenders', *Fundamentalism and gender*, ed. John Stratton Hawley (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 79–110.
[2] Tertullian, *Apology* 50, 13.

Foucault's *Discipline and punish*[3] that scholars have begun to explain *how* the paradox of authority and humility in the Roman arena would actually have been enacted. In scholarly terms, we know more about the drama of the arena than we have at any time since Antiquity, and a handful of recent studies have turned this knowledge to striking, Foucauldian use.[4] The present essay seeks to assess in light of this recent work, the state of our understanding of early Christian martyr texts, and particularly those texts which celebrate the particular strength and vulnerability of a martyr heroine.

The spectacle of the arena was centred around a crushing assertion of the right order of society. Along with animals and professional gladiators, the criminal element were put to an intentionally humiliating death for the entertainment of their social superiors.[5] In such a society, so pointedly aware of the dynamics of authority and representation, for a Christian to subvert humiliation by embracing death with equanimity would have constituted a powerful social gesture. We are beginning to understand the terms of the contest over subjectivity and allegiance which the martyr acts document, in particular the role of the accounts themselves in asserting and shaping the martyr's meaning. Still to be addressed is the question: what is the relationship between the contest which took place in the arena itself, and the contest which remains on the page? We find ourselves, in the martyr acts, confronted with a complex relation obtaining among parties living, dead, and dying: the author, his (presumably, his) audience, the martyr him- or herself, and the Roman crowd. The voice of the author and the voice of the martyr are often difficult to distinguish from one another; in general, this is the author's intention. The martyr's acutely embodied and gendered performance establishes him or her as the bearer of a supremely authoritative voice, one which lends its power to the anonymous writer as a sharer in the martyr's truth.

A single, dazzling text from the early third century points up these issues by providing the exception that proves the rule. This is the prison diary of Vibia Perpetua, a married woman of the

[3] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and punish: the birth of the prison*, trans. A. Sheridan (New York: Pantheon, 1977).

[4] David Potter, 'Martyrdom as spectacle', *Theater and society in the classical world*, ed. Ruth Scodel (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 53-88, offers an analysis of the drama of the Christian in the arena as one which subverted precisely the intent of a ritual by which the social order was meant to be reinforced. Other particularly significant studies in this area include Carlin Barton, 'The scandal of the arena', *Representations*, 27 (1989), 1–36; Kathleen M. Coleman, 'Fatal charades: Roman executions staged as mythological enactments', *Journal of Roman Studies*, 80 (1990), 44–73; Brent D. Shaw, 'Body/power/identity: passions of the martyrs', *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 4 (1996), 269–312; see G.W. Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), for a recent and perceptive overview of literature in this field.

[5] Potter, 'Martyrdom as spectacle', 53–4.

educated classes[6] martyred at Carthage on 7 March 203. While we have few martyr authors to begin with[7] — in general our martyr texts are written by other authors some days, years or even centuries after the fact[8] — in the case of Perpetua we have a rare juxtaposition of evidence: both the martyr's own view of the situation and an independent eye-witness account of her death.[9]

The Victim and the Veil of Power

> A few days later there was a rumour that we were going to be given a hearing. My father also arrived from the city, worn with worry, and he came to see me with the idea of persuading me. 'Daughter', he said, 'Have pity on my grey head — have pity on me your father, if I deserve to be called your father, if I have favoured you above all your brothers, If I have raised you to reach this prime of your life. Do not abandon me to be the reproach of men. Think of your brothers, think of your mother and your aunt, think of your child, who will not be able to live once you are gone. Give up your pride! You will destroy all of us! None of us will ever be able to speak freely again if anything happens to you!'[10]

This extract from Perpetua's prison diary illustrates a number of important issues which will concern us. To be a victim was not to be voiceless in the Roman Empire; rather, it was to risk notoriety not only for oneself but for one's associates, in a context where there was safety in obscurity. In allowing herself to be executed for a crime which carried connotations of something very like political treason, the twenty-two year old Perpetua knew she would place her surviving family at risk in the context of the patronage and mutual surveillance governing Roman civic life.

Recent scholarly attention has tended to focus on the hierarchical reversal implied by this scene: for example, the fact that the terms of the Christian polity can reduce a Roman paterfamilias to begging, rather than ordering, his daughter to conform to accepted social norms.[11] This sundering of community brought about by the move to Christian allegiance would have been painful to all parties, and frightening to those left behind. It is not impossible, then, to

[6] On Perpetua's family, see Timothy David Barnes, *Tertullian: a historical and literary study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 70.

[7] Perpetua differs from Ignatius of Antioch, the earliest (d. *c.* 98-117) and most expansive of our martyr authors (unless one includes Paul of Tarsus in this category), in that her own account is accompanied by that of an eye-witness to her death. On Ignatius, see the commentary of William R. Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985).

[8] On issues of authenticity in the martyr acts, see Gary Bisbee, *Pre-Decian acts of martyrs and commentarii* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988).

[9] On the issues surrounding the relationship between Perpetua and the eye-witness 'editor', see Brent D. Shaw, 'The passion of Perpetua', *Past and Present*, 139 (1993), 3–45.

[10] *The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas*, 5; here and throughout I have followed the edition and translation (with occasional alterations) of Herbert Musurillo, *The acts of the Christian martyrs* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972) for its ease of availability, though readers should be aware of the criticisms of Fergus Millar, *Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s. 24 (1973), 239–43, and Jan den Boeft and Jan Bremmer, 'Notiunculae martyrologicae', *Vigiliae Christianae*, 35 (1981), 43–56.

[11] E.g. see, Judith Perkins, *The suffering self: pain and narrative representation in the early Christian era* (London: Routledge, 1995), 105.

feel some sympathy for Perpetua's father, though the Christian tradition has tended otherwise.

Attention to what Robert Wilken has called 'the piety of the persecutors'[12] can illuminate the context of the martyrdom event, one which our accounts both presume and in some sense subvert. A recent article by James Rives, borrowing Wilken's phrase for its title, focuses on the piety of one particular 'persecutor', the proconsul Hilarianus before whom Perpetua and her companions are tried. Rives makes the point that there was a wide latitude for proconsuls to handle accusations brought against the Christians each according to his own sense of the danger, if any, posed by the presence of Christians to the social and religious order in his province. Rives then goes on, through inscriptional evidence, to flesh out the Hilarianus before whom Perpetua was tried as an administrator of particular religious conservatism. It is in fact Perpetua's refusal to 'offer sacrifice for the welfare of the emperors',[13] in Hilarianus's phrase, which the diary offers as his motive for condemning her and her companions to the beasts.

The martyr acts stress the threat which Christian martyrs posed to their persecutors by their unwillingness to deny participation in the Christian 'superstition' — even when proconsuls were willing to turn a blind eye to participation in Christian cult. The martyr's challenge is one which engages with Roman cultural and thought structures regarding dominance, but rather than reinforcing the existing social order, the structure is mobilized for the purpose of social subversion. Attention to the role of *religio* in knitting together and reinforcing the allegiances, loyalties, and dependencies of the civic order, and more particularly the role of the emperor cult and its attendant rituals, will do much to reveal the peculiar divisiveness of the martyr's gesture, and the urgency of the martyr's claim for allegiance on both viewer and reader. The more clearly we understand the hierarchical infrastructure of ritual, symbol, ideology, and political or economic relationships carried by imperial civic cult, which Richard Gordon has characterized as 'the veil of power',[14] the more likely we will be to be able to attach real social meaning to the gestures of non-participation performed by the Christians of the Roman Empire.

Breaking Frame: Body, Authority, Performance

This brings us to another study which has had a considerable impact on recent approaches to early Christian martyrdom, Elaine

[12] James Rives, 'The piety of a persecutor', *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 4 (1996), 1–25, citing Robert Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans saw them* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994).

[13] *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas*, 6.

[14] Richard Gordon, 'The veil of power: emperors, sacrificers and benefactors', *Pagan priests*, eds Mary Beard and John North (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press), 199–231.

Scarry's *The body in pain: the making and unmaking of the world.*[15] Scarry's subject — one which bears an evocative if incomplete relationship to the judicial violence of the Roman Empire — is the psychological and social mechanisms governing physical torture in modern totalitarian regimes, a process which she refers to as 'the conversion of absolute pain into the fiction of absolute power'.[16] Scarry proposes that the peculiar importance of torture to totalitarian regimes is in its erosion of the identity and self-understanding of the victim by a barrage of physical and verbal abuse. By a Pavlovian mechanism, such abuse reinforces in the victim the notion that any attempt at self-assertion will lead to self-destruction. In turn, the fear of torture becomes a spur to docility among those who are able to avoid themselves becoming victims.

One can imagine how the martyrs' willing acceptance of self-destruction as the price of their truth could short-circuit such a system. It seems to have been precisely the ability of the martyrs to hold on to their meaning in the face of dismemberment and death which most impressed onlookers, or at least those who wrote the recorded martyrdom accounts. As Maureen Tilley, the scholar who has done the most to adapt Scarry's line of inquiry to the problem of early Christian martyrdom, puts it: 'In spite of danger, fire, and sword, martyrs rarely scream in their agony. On the contrary, they calmly lecture their torturers on the unity of God and who will be where in the afterlife'.[17]

Tilley argues that by responding to pain in an unexpected way, the martyrs were able to 'turn the tables' on their torturers, facing their torturers 'not with a well-known battle-ground but with an unfamiliar jungle'.[18] Her essay has the further merit of attempting to account for how the martyrs were able to achieve this feat. Drawing on the 1975 *Amnesty International Report on Torture,* Tilley analyses the compensatory behaviours that would-be martyrs were able to bring to bear on their situation, particularly a sense of community which combated the factors of isolation and intimidation, and an ascetic discipline which allowed them both to prepare for physical pain and to reconfigure its meaning. What we may wish to add to this extremely useful attempt to account for the martyrs' technique is further attention to the contest over meaning. The martyrs, or at least their thanatographers, seem to have had a keen sense of the role of self-understanding in the struggle for dominance.

These reflections lend pungency to another of the best-known passages of Perpetua's prison diary:

[15] (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).
[16] Scarry, *The body in pain,* 27.
[17] Maureen Tilley, 'The ascetic body and the (un)making of the world of the martyr', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion,* 59 (1991), 467–79; here, 467.
[18] Ibid., 467.

While we were still under arrest (she said) my father out of love for me was trying to persuade me and shake my resolution. 'Father', said I, 'do you see this vase here, for example, or water-pot or whatever?' 'Yes, I do', said he. And I told him: 'Could it be called by any other name than what it is?' And he said: 'No'. 'Well, so too I cannot be called anything other than what I am, a Christian'. At this my father was so angered by the word 'Christian' that he moved towards me as though he would pluck my eyes out. But he left it at that and departed, vanquished along with his diabolical arguments.[19]

From the outset, Perpetua presents her dilemma as one of naming: whether she should allow herself to be 'let off the hook' by allowing her offensive religious views to be passed over in silence.

To understand how this refusal to remain silent constituted a social threat it may be useful to draw on recent contributions to linguistic theory, especially the inter-disciplinary area of discourse analysis. Drawing on the contributions of J.L. Austin and Erving Goffman, a recent article by Bronwyn Davies and Rom Harré has argued that the conversational 'frame' (to use Goffman's term) by which speakers indicate the terms of their relationship by the forms of address which they adopt in speaking to one another, is not a static exposition of existing terms, but rather the dynamic medium through which the terms of the relationship are negotiated and even contested. Thus 'who one is is always an open question with a shifting answer depending upon the positions made available within one's own and others' discursive practices'.[20] This would mean that the spectacular enactments of social power undertaken in the arena were not merely *reflections* of the social order: by requiring, and — generally — obtaining the humiliation of those who had stood out of place, they brought the social order into being. For a martyr to best his executors by dying with dignity, his message intact, was more than a symbolic gesture: it struck at the heart of the social contract.

In the case of Perpetua this meant that a great deal was at stake where the matter of a name was concerned. It is not only her desire to assert her own idea of her identity, but her claim of ontological certainty, which creates the problem; it is essentially an attempt to control the socio-linguistic frame. Even in death she is able to assert an alternative reality — and of course her willingness to die in order to do so lends power to the gesture.

This leads us naturally to a final contemporary approach to our material, one drawn from a study by the classicist Page duBois of the practice of judicial torture in fifth-century Athens. It was only under physical torture, duBois reminds us, that the humblest categories of individual, such as slaves, were able to give judicial evidence under Athenian law. The Greek word for inquiry by

[19] *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas*, 3.

[20] Bronwyn Davies and Rom Harré, 'Positioning: the discursive production of selves', *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior*, 20 (1990), 43–63; here, 46.

torture, *basanos*, was also the word for 'the touchstone used to test gold for purity'.[21] Torture was understood, by analogy, as a process of determining what was true or genuine. The logic behind this was that a slave, because of his or her low rank, would be constantly under pressure, not only from his or her owner but from other higher-ranking individuals, not to tell the truth but to give false evidence which was convenient to the individual attempting to influence the testimony — whether by bribe or by threat. Torture was, then, a mechanism for discerning truth both because of the slave's fear of physical pain, but also because it provided the slave with a face-saving device against the wrath of the person who had attempted to control the testimony. An inconvenient truth spoken under extreme duress might find, if not compassion, at least a contemptuous acceptance of the excuse of physical weakness.

This system, still in force in the Roman period, carried within it a paradox: the torture victim who was willing to die in order to prove his point had a certain advantage in establishing the truth of his position. According to the theory of the basanos, the fact that the testimony did not change under torture led inexorably to the conclusion that it was true. By establishing a link between torture and truth, the ideology of the basanos would have lent a powerful cultural resonance to the defiance of the martyrs, willing to suffer unto death for the sake of asserting their truth.

This has repercussions for the most basic representational aspect of the phenomenon of martyrdom, the word 'martyr' itself. *Martyria,* of course, means 'witness'. The traditional explanation for the use of this particular term to characterize those who willingly died for the faith has been to emphasize the wide semantic range of the word — so, for example, just as the apostles had been eye-witnesses to the resurrection of Christ, so the martyrs were the eschatological witnesses of Christ's imminent return.[22]

Yet when the Christians were brought in for questioning, the fact that our sources characterize them by the term *martyros* emphasizes the judicial aspect of the encounter in a way substantially different from the understanding of the magistrate who would have ordered the inquiry.[23] Put simply, the interrogation of the martyr, and even the execution itself, is re-cast as the questioning of a witness: evidence is brought forward, and its truth is evaluated. But the question has shifted: from 'is this person guilty of the charged crime?' or even 'is the superstition of Christianity really dangerous

[21] Page duBois, *Torture and truth* (London: Routledge, 1991), 7.

[22] W.H.C. Frend, *Martyrdom and persecution in the early Church* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1967), 65ff.

[23] Shelby Brown, 'Death as decoration: scenes from the arena on Roman domestic mosaics', *Pornography and representation in Greece and Rome,* ed. Amy Richlin (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 180–211, offers a striking approach to the problem of how the Roman elite would have represented the events of the arena.

to men and gods?' it takes an entirely new shape. By framing the martyr as a witness under torture, rather than as a criminal under investigation, the martyr acts re-frame the martyr event as addressing the question, 'is the martyr's assertion — the Christian faith — actually true?'

The link which the martyrdom accounts draw between the martyrs' unwillingness to apostasize, and their refusal to change this position even in the arena and unto death, becomes a confirmation of the truth of the view of reality which they espoused. If this reading is correct, then the term *martyros* itself is a triumph of socio-linguistic framing. By assuring that the encounter is perceived as putting the truth of the Christian message on trial, the martyr acts in fact challenge the reader to put the proconsul himself on trial as one who is unable to apprehend the truth of the evidence set before him.

Gender and the Gaze

There is still more to the story. The ancient ideas of heroism, authority and charisma drew on, and often exaggerated, the piquancy of Mediterranean gender conventions: in this sense, the portrayal of the martyrs as fleshy, gendered men and women was both unavoidable and evocative. The authoritative speaker of court and courtroom was paradigmatically male, but his was an intrinsically agonistic notion of gender performance. One was not, simply, 'masculine enough': rather, according to what John Winkler has called the logic of zero-sum competition, a man's attainment of masculine credibility was won at the expense of others in the cut and thrust of allegations over military and sexual prowess, a jostling for rank both brutal and playfully homosocial.[24]

Physicality was not only metaphorical. Maud Gleason has shown how men's scrutiny of one another's voice and gesture was based in the hope that clear signs could be read from these which would index the veracity of each man's meaning.[25] Such scrutiny was understood, at least in part, to be wishful thinking: the motivations of other men's hearts were unknowable, as likely as not to be unthinkable. We know too that men had good reason for concealing the motives which they held dearest. Those in power above them were watching just as closely as were their peers.[26]

Watching was both a weakness — e.g. the anxious scanning for clues to another's meaning — and a sign of strength. Much of our literature from Antiquity stresses the disarming self-consciousness

[24] See e.g., Michael Herzfeld, *The poetics of manhood: contest and identity in a Cretan mountain village* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985); John Winkler, *The constraints of desire: the anthropology of sex and gender in ancient Greece* (London: Routledge, 1990).

[25] Maud W. Gleason, *Making men: sophists and self-presentation in ancient Rome* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

[26] Shadi Bartsch, *Actors in the audience: theatricality and doublespeak from Nero to Hadrian* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

of being watched. To show oneself unmoved by such scrutiny was to reveal a strength that some revered as god-given — this, too, was performative.[27] This strength came from the perception that above and more perspicacious than the gaze of men was God's all-seeing, terrible and benevolent gaze; his gaze unmanned and unmasked those on view and those who presumed to take the role of viewers.[28] Our authors are conscious of the power of these notions of gaze and performance, and seek to offer a niche where the reader can find his or her own implied presence as a partaker in the spectacle.[29]

Such notions of masculine authority were not far from the sensibility of Christian writers even when they wrote of female martyrs. Most famous is Perpetua's vision transforming her into a male wrestler;[30] Blandina, too, is represented in a gender-crossing light as she endures a crucifixion which intentionally echoes that of Jesus.[31] In a sense, these texts partake of the paradigm of the 'male woman' made famous by Kerstin Aspegren.[32]

But the violence is also pornographic, and in this wise the genre invites the proposal of a heroine whose vulnerability an audience can guess at even as they admire her valiant conduct. The charm of a heroine's fear was a stock technique of ancient as of modern authors.[33] When, in the *Acts of Agape, Irene and Chione*, the lovely Irene is condemned to labour in a brothel by a sneering governor, the reader is meant to be titillated by her blushes even as he admires her fortitude.[34] Similarly, when the martyr Basilides stops to engage with a passing kindness a Christian maiden who has had rough treatment from a jeering crowd, one understands that the episode has been included not only to call attention to Basilides' nobility of spirit, but also for the sake of the same titillation.

It is this latter kind of scene which contemporary literary theory imagines as marked by the implication of a male readership: a woman, reading such texts, would be drawn into imagining herself as a *male* reader in order to accept the proposed objectification of

[27] The boldness of Perpetua's gaze, deflecting that of the staring crowd by *vigor oculorum*, is commemorated at *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas*, 18.

[28] Blake Leyerle, 'John Chrysostom on the gaze', *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 1 (1993), 159–74, discusses the dynamics of the earthly spectator and the divine gaze as seen through the eyes of an Eastern bishop two centuries later.

[29] An analogous phenomenon to that charted by Harry O. Maier, 'Staging the gaze: early Christian apocalypses and narrative self-representation', *Harvard Theological Review*, 90 (1997), 131–54.

[30] *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas*, 10; on the context of this dream, see Patricia Cox Miller, *Dreams in late Antiquity: studies in the imagination of a culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 161ff, and literature cited there.

[31] *Martyrs of Lyons*, 41.

[32] Kerstin Aspegren, *The male woman: a feminine ideal in the early Church* (Uppsala: Uppsala Universiteit, 1990).

[33] On the charms of fear, see Amy Richlin, 'Reading Ovid's rapes', in Richlin, *Pornography and representation*, 158–79; here, 162ff

[34] *Acts of Agape, Chione and Irene*, 5.

women and/or erasure of their femininity.[35] Similarly, Lorraine Code's concept of 'rhetorical spaces' would imply that such typifications of woman serve to delimit the subject positions through which women can be heard as speakers.[36] Yet it is also possible that women themselves would have grasped, and on occasion used to advantage, the *pathos* of a heroine which these texts attempt to mobilize;[37] this may also be true in the case of the 'male woman'. Perpetua's dream implies that the boundaries imposed by gender on the imagination could shift according to occasion and cultural milieu.[38]

None of this is meant to imply that the authors of the martyr acts would have been female. With the striking exception of Perpetua herself the authors adopt a specifically 'male' standpoint.[39] Both masculine and feminine typologies are squarely cut to fit the purpose of rhetoric and authority for the author's message, the truth of the Christian's claim to eternal life. Where the vulnerability of a heroine is stressed, it serves as an enhancing apposition to her heroism, and as a means of discrediting her — and by implication the author's — opponents.

It was a standard feature of Greek and Roman literature that retaliation for mistreatment (or abduction) of a woman was one of the most effective ways to raise an army.[40] Perhaps in the spirit of amplifying the intended reader's own sympathy, the authors of the martyr acts represent the crowds as pitying the martyr heroine: thus the crowd at the martyrdom of Carpus, Papylus and Agathonike call out to her to have pity on herself and her children, and wail all the more furiously at her execution when she is stripped for burning and her striking physical beauty is fully revealed.[41]

[35] Jonathan Culler, *On deconstruction. theory and criticism after structuralism* (London: Routledge, 1983); Janice A. Radway, *Reading the romance: women, partiarchy, and popular literature* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1984). See the discussion of the issues, particularly the notion of the 'resisting reader', in Holly Montague, 'Sweet and pleasant passion: female and male fantasy in ancient erotic novels', Richlin, *Pornography and representation*, 231–49.

[36] Lorraine Code, *Rhetorical spaces: essays on gendered locations* (London: Routledge, 1995).

[37] Kate Cooper, *The virgin and the bride: idealized womanhood in late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 65.

[38] On the Montanist context for Perpetua, see Frederick Klawiter, 'The role of martyrdom and persecution in developing the priestly authority of women in early Christianity: a case study of Montanism', *Church History*, 49 (1980), 251–61, and now Christine Trevett, *Montanism: gender, authority and the new prophecy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

[39] Even the text of Perpetua's diary itself is preserved in a form which has been edited by what seems to be a male editor: see the argument of Shaw, *Perpetua*, and literature cited there.

[40] Sandra Joshel, 'The body female and the body politic: Livy's Lucretia and Verginia', in Richlin, *Pornography and representation*, 112–30; for Augustine's early fifth-century critique of the social assumptions behind this literary topos, see Dennis Trout, 'Re-textualizing Lucretia: cultural subversion in the *City of God*', *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 2 (1994), 53–70.

[41] *Martyrdom of Carpus, Papylus and Agathonike*, 6.

Conclusion: The Voice of The Victim

It is not easy to know the truth about these and similar practices, and even if one were to find out, it would be difficult to convince others; and it is just not worth the effort to try to persuade people whose heads are full of mutual suspicion.[42]

While the victim's truth is slippery in memory, the victim's voice, amplified by the magnetic horror of the arena, was possessed of a quality of authenticity rare to the Roman ear where matters of creed or allegiance were concerned. It spoke confidently to a society which had no secure purchase on the broader problem of how to distinguish the true from the false, with emperors and philosophers agreeing that there was no exact science for discerning religion from superstition, the charlatan from the saint. This is one of many reasons why legitimation by biography — the legitimation of an idea through association with the life and death of an exemplary individual-became increasingly popular during our period.[43]

With this in mind, we may remember with new interest the final words of Perpetua's diary, which ends on the eve of her appointed day in the arena. The story of her death, alongside her companions, is given in the hand of an anonymous editor, who has often been criticized for his (presumably, his) tendency to emphasize the feminine modesty of Perpetua, which some contemporary readers have found ironic given Perpetua's own willingness to imagine herself as a naked male wrestler in a wrestling-match.[44] Surely the peculiar magnetism of Perpetua's account is the fact that while other martyrs' stories are told in the mixed voice of prurience and censoriousness of editors very like her own, her prison journal gives us access to the vivid, bold, and unapologetic voice of the martyr herself. Her boldness reveals itself in the very precision with which she grasps the problem of how her own voice will be made vulnerable in a future beyond her death and lost to her control: 'This is what happened up to the day before the contest. As for what is to happen at the contest itself, let him write of it who will'.[45,46]

[42] Plato, *Laws* 933a-b, as cited in C.R. Phillips, III, '"Nullum crimen sine lege": socio-religious sanctions on magic', *Magika hiera: ancient Greek magic and religion*, eds Christopher A. Faraone and Dirk Obbink (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 261–76.

[43] On the emergence in late Antiquity of the holy man (or woman) as an icon of objectivity, see Peter Brown, *The making of late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978).

[44] *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas*, 10, and Shaw, 'Passion of Perpetua'.

[45] *Martyrdom*, 10.

[46] Margaret Y. MacDonald's interesting treatment of the passage in Pliny the Younger's letter 10 to the Emperor Trajan, in which he mentions judicial torture of two female Christian slaves, unfortunately came to my attention too late to be discussed in the present essay. See M.Y. MacDonald, *Early Christian women and pagan opinion: the power of hysterical women* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).