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The Severed Breast

A Topos in the Legends of Female Virgin Martyr Saints¹

The legend of Saint Agatha (ed. Unger 1877: 1, 1–14) relates that Quintianus, consular official in Sicily, was inflamed with love for the beautiful, highborn, and Christian young virgin.² He had her brought before him, but quickly perceived the firmness of her religious convictions: due to her commitment as *sponsa Christi*, she would neither tolerate his advances nor sacrifice to the heathen gods. Accordingly, he turned her over to Aphrodisia and her nine daughters, who kept a bordello, but since they were unable to overcome Saint Agatha's resistance, Quintianus summoned her before the court, where he himself was the judge. Upon her refusal to comply with his demands, her face was beaten with fists, whereupon she was imprisoned and then stretched on the rack and tortured. But Saint Agatha's delight in the torments caused Quintianus to inflict on her further torments: he ordered her breasts to be torn off with iron hooks, after which she was starved in prison. However, she was miraculously healed by a vision of one of the apostles. Quintianus then ordered Saint Agatha to be rolled naked over sharp pebbles strewn on the ground and sent back to prison, where she gave up her spirit on 5 February 253.

While the physical sufferings of Saint Agatha may seem excessive and exceptionally spectacular, they are by no means unique. Indeed most of the sufferings, if not all, resemble accounts of sadomasochistic tortures by pagan tormentors, full of gore and eloquence, in the lives of other female saints, who repulse the spiritual assaults — the

¹ I confine this study primarily to the corpus of Old Norse-Icelandic saints' lives, although discussion of the topos of course applies to hagiography in general.

² Unger presents three versions of the legend. The first version is based on Stock. Perg. 2 fol. (1–6), the second on AM 233a fol. (7–13), and the third on NoRA fragm. 70 (13–14). According to Foote (1962: 27), the Latin source was a form of *BHL* 133.

attempts at conversion — of a male antagonist, as well as his sexual advances.³ Saint Barbara, for example, was first stripped of her clothes, beaten with ropes, lacerated with sharp combs, and then imprisoned; secondly, she was burnt; thirdly, her breasts were cut off;⁴ and, finally, she was led naked through the city.⁵ Saint Dorothy was first cast into a vessel of burning oil and starved in prison; secondly, she was lacerated with hooks; thirdly, her breasts were burnt with torches; and fourthly, her face and body were beaten to a pulp.⁶ Saint Margaret of Antioch was hung upon a rack, beaten with rods, and lacerated with iron rakes, then imprisoned, and finally bound and put in a tub full of water.⁷ Fides, one of Saint Sophia's three daughters, was punished by being beaten, by having her breasts torn off, by being thrown on a red-hot gridiron, and by being put in a cauldron full of boiling wax.⁸ Spes, the second daughter, was first beaten with ropes, then thrown into a fiery furnace, and finally placed in a cauldron full

³ As Delehay (1927) notes, borrowings from other legends are common: "Les Vies de saints remplies d'extraits d'autres. Vies de saints sont très nombreuses, et il en est qui ne sont guère autre chose qu'un centon hagiographique" (95). Often a compiler of a saint's life had only scanty information about the saint in question, and, in order to satisfy the devout curiosity of pilgrims and others and supply edifying reading matter from such inadequate data, he would take the only course open to him and make liberal use of the method of development used in the schools or else fall back on borrowings from other writers: "Avec plus ou moins d'imagination et de faconde, d'innombrables hagiographes se sont résignés à suppléer au silence des sources, en racontant, sur la matière, ce qui leur paraissait vraisemblable Il s'agit, par exemple, d'un martyr. Le cadre de la narration est nettement dessiné. D'abord, une description plus ou moins détaillée de la persécution. Les chrétiens sont partout recherchés; un grand nombre tombent aux mains des soldats, et parmi eux le héros du récit; il est arrêté; et jeté en prison. Mené devant le juge, il confesse sa foi et endure d'affreux supplices. Il meurt, et son tombeau devient le théâtre d'une foule de prodiges" (86–87).

⁴ See Miles (1991: 157, fig. 27), which shows a fifteenth-century painting by Master Francke in the National Museum of Finland, Helsinki. The painting depicts an executioner beating Saint Barbara with a knotted cord while another cuts off her breast with a big knife.

⁵ The legend of Saint Barbara was edited by Unger (1877: 1, 153–157), who used Stock. Perg. 2 fol. as his base text with variants from AM 429 12mo. Foote (1967: 26) argues that the source is *BHL* Suppl. 913a.

⁶ The legend of Saint Dorothy, extant only in AM 429 12mo, was edited by Unger (1877: 1, 322–328). It is based on a Latin text related to *BHL* 2324.

⁷ The legend of Saint Margaret was edited by Unger (1877: 1, 474–481). Unger used AM 235 fol. as his base text with variants from AM 233a fol. According to Widding, Bekker-Nielsen, and Shook (1963: 320), the source was a text related to *BHL* 5303.

⁸ The legend of Saints Fides, Spes, and Caritas was edited by Unger (1877: 1, 369–376). Unger used as his base text AM 233a fol., AM 235 fol., and Stock. Perg. 2 fol.; variants are quoted from AM 429 12mo. Foote (1962: 28) maintains that the Latin source was a form of *BHL* 2971, but notes that the incipit is like that noted for *BHL* Suppl. 2968b.

of boiling wax. And Caritas, the third daughter, was stretched on the rack and then thrown into a fiery furnace. None of these measures succeed in wounding the virgins in any meaningful way, however: angels fly to their aid and smash to pieces the heathen idols and torture devices, earthquakes set them free, and their mutilated bodies are invariably restored in a miraculous fashion. And throughout these lengthy, but fruitless physical assaults, the virgin's spiritual resolve remains undaunted. She succumbs neither to torments nor to sexual advances, but perseveres in the aggressive defense of her chastity, her *integras*, because she enjoys a spiritual bond with Jesus Christ, her immortal bridegroom.⁹ The blow that eventually kills her seems a fortuitous stroke that is allowed to produce its natural effect only because the saint — and God — have decided it may.

Most scholars who have studied the legends of female virgin martyr saints have been struck by the extraordinary emphasis on the saints' physical sufferings and the writers' lingering over these episodes. As Gad (1961) observes:

Legenderne om de *kvindelige martyrer* indtager en særstilling blandt martyrlenderne, fordi amplifikationerne af passionsmønstret her er særlig talrige. Med meget eftertryk skildres det, hvorledes troen får de svage unge piger til at blive helte og bære pinsler og trodse forfølgerne med mandsmod. "Viriliter age" lyder det også til de kvindelige martyrer, og virkningen af martyrens mod er så meget større, når det viser sig, at den svage kvindelige natur kan udholde det samme som de mandlige krigere for troen. (31)

A number of scholars have commented on the apparently sexual orientation of the tortures. Atkinson (1983: 189) draws attention to the fact that while both men and women were beaten and burned, women saints were also sexually humiliated and assaulted, stripped naked, taken to brothels, and subjected to tortures such as the severing of their breasts. Although the accounts of the sufferings of male saints reach similar degrees of incredibility without any consideration of the

⁹ Cf. also Cazelles (1991), who, commenting on the topics of sacrifice and suffering, points out that "[m]ost noteworthy is the often mentioned relation between physical suffering and female sanctity. Indeed, if the history of sainthood originated with that of the martyrs of early Christianity, it seems that martyrdom was gradually to become a predominant if not the sole mode of female characterization. The fact that women—martyrs and non-martyrs alike—tended to be portrayed in a sacrificial context and were sanctified to the extent that they castigated their bodies is certainly a remarkable element in the discourse proffered by medieval hagiographers" (16).

limitations of human endurance, it is a fact that male saints were spared corresponding sexually humiliating tortures.¹⁰ Saint Blaise, for example, was beaten with cudgels, imprisoned, hung from a rafter and torn with combs, and imprisoned again.¹¹ Saint Theodore was starved in prison, hung from a limb and torn with iron hooks so as to expose the bones, and burnt on the stake.¹² Saint Vincent was stretched on the rack, burnt by red-hot embers, torn by iron hooks, seared, singed, and roasted on a gridiron, and thrown into a prison the floor of which was covered with sharp pebbles.¹³ And Saint Vitus was beaten, imprisoned, placed in a fiery furnace into which was poured boiling wax, oil, and lead, thrown before a lion, and stretched on the rack.¹⁴ Although not included in the extant corpus of Old Norse-Icelandic saints' lives, the *passio* of Saint James the Dismembered may serve as another example and one that is of interest in this context. Saint James, a native of Persia, was sentenced to death member by member. First his fingers were cut off one by one, next his toes, then his feet, hands, arms, and legs. Each time a member was cut off, Saint James had a suitable comment, altogether twenty-eight times, until finally his head was cut off as the twenty-ninth and last member. What is noteworthy about the sufferings of Saint James the Dismembered in comparison with those of female virgin martyrs, so many of which have their breasts, the most visible sign of their female gender, severed, is not so much what is cut off, but rather what is not cut off: the insignia of his maleness. In fact, not a single male martyr is described as being castrated in the legends.

¹⁰ The masterpiece as far as accounts of torments are concerned is unquestionably the martyrdom of Saints Clement of Ancyra and Agathangelus, which goes on for no less than twenty-eight years. This *passio* is, however, not found in the extant corpus of Old Norse-Icelandic saints' lives and it is not known if it was ever available to an Icelandic audience.

¹¹ The legend of Saint Blaise was edited by Unger (1877: 1, 256–271). Unger prints two versions, one based on AM 655 4to IX (269–271) and another based on AM 623 4to with variants from Stock. Perg. 2 fol., which also supplies a portion of the text (256–269). According to Foote (1962: 23), the Latin original followed was a form of *BHL* 1377.

¹² The legend of Saint Theodore, extant only in AM 235 fol., was edited by Unger (1877: 2, 310–314). According to Widding, Bekker-Nielsen, and Shook (1963: 333), the source is *BHL* 8077.

¹³ The legend of Saint Vincent was edited by Unger (1877: 2, 321–326), who based his text on Stock. Perg. 2 fol. According to Foote (1962: 24), the Latin source was a form of *BHL* 8639.

¹⁴ The legend of Saint Vitus was edited by Unger (1877: 2, 327–334), who based his text on AM 180b fol. According to Widding, Bekker-Nielsen, and Shook (1963: 336), the source is a text related to *BHL* 8711.

Because of this different treatment of male and female martyrs, Atkinson (1983: 189) claims that it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the descriptions of the sufferings of female virgin martyrs were experienced as erotic. Heffernan (1988), in a similar vein, argues that “[t]he dominant image of the female invariably turned sacred biography into something akin to a sexual melodrama, replete with anguish and physical cruelty depicted in an unabashedly erotic manner” (281–282). Gad (1971) comments on “den utilslørede sadisme, der ikke skjuler hvilke instinkter genren også vender sig til, og som hos Agatha er af mere klart sexuel karakter end i andre” (58). Carlé (1980) goes so far as to assert that the legends of female virgin martyr saints may have served as a kind of pornography:

The pornographical details are especially numerous, though extremely unvaried in details, in the last part of each legend, when the woman is tortured and humiliated in various ways in order to break her down and make her sacrifice to the Roman gods. Keeping in mind that the story began with a conflict concerning the sexual integrity of the woman, the writers of the legends could gain some pornographic value from these situations as well. The most common examples will be about women who are raped in prison, or undressed in court; the amputation of the woman’s breasts is also rather common. On the whole, the legends could be described as ‘yellow’ literature, sadistic scenes, staged on the great theater of society. (82)

A similar assertion is made by Atkinson (1983): “On the highest level they [the legends] inspired faith and courage, perhaps especially in women, for whom these were the only models of active and heroic femininity. . . . But on the lowest level, their indulgence — perhaps even delight — in the details of sexual abuse can only be described as pornographic” (190).¹⁵

The possibility that the legends are a by-product of some libidinal

¹⁵ Unlike Heffernan (1988) and Gad (1971), Atkinson (1983: 190, n. 51) distinguishes between *erotic* writings, which “are designed to arouse sexual feelings,” and *pornographic* writings, which “arouse such feelings through suggestion of violence, abuse, or degradation of the sexual ‘object.’” The distinction is an important one often overlooked in studies of saints’ legends, although the labeling of writings as *pornographic* presumes at once a uniform and a male audience. The issue is one of reception, for a female audience would not, one can generally presume, become sexually aroused by such displays of violence against women. A related issue concerns the reception of iconographic images of the saints, for which the term *pornographic* stands as starkly inadequate. The application of the term *pornographic* here betrays an undimensional perspective of iconography, its cultural function, and its multiple audiences.

restraint that generates vivid sensual fantasizing under the guise of anti-sensual polemics cannot be excluded. Nor can the possibility be denied that the legends served as models of female piety and courage; indeed, as demonstrated by Goodich (1982: 178), the legend of Saint Catherine of Alexandria (ed. Unger 1877: 1, 400–421), whose intellectual superiority and eloquence so confounded the pagan philosophers that she convinced them to convert, thus condemning them to martyrdom, enjoyed great popularity especially in the thirteenth century, and she often appears in contemporary saints' lives as patroness and advisor to many holy women.¹⁶ (It is worth noting, however, that in the legend of Saint Catherine, the issue of her womanhood is subordinate to her intelligence and eloquence and, accordingly, she is spared sexually humiliating tortures.¹⁷)

This essay seeks to demonstrate that the legends of female virgin martyr saints and the description of their sufferings in particular could, and perhaps should, be viewed and interpreted not only as inspiring religious narratives and/or pornographic writings, as argued by Atkinson, but as a reflection of the medieval theology of womanhood and the patristic views of the female body. After all, the saints, whether male or female, martyrs or confessors, are intended merely to serve as a vehicle for the transmission of religious images, and most of the legends of the saints are designed simply, if not exclusively, to bring out some religious truth or moral principle. The reason for the legends' apparent simplicity, their lack of inspiration and originality, is obvious. The audiences were primarily illiterate, and the context for most of these texts was an oral one. They were read to an assembly, and the demands of orality required texts that were lexically familiar, easily remembered, didactically pointed, and relatively short (Hefferman 1988: 266). Accordingly, complexity yields to simplicity: the num-

¹⁶ The text is based on AM 233a fol., but the beginning (400–401) is from Stock. Perg. 2 fol., from which variants are also cited as well as from AM 429 12mo and AM 667 4to II. Foote (1962) argues that “[t]he beginning and end of the Icelandic work are clearly derived from a text of the *Passio auct. Pseudo-Athanasio*, BHL 1659, with only the first half of the epilogue, BHL 1660, included. Numerous passages within the text point to the same source. It is, on the other hand, also possible to find matter and wording in the Icelandic which can otherwise only be related to other versions of the *Passio*, variously BHL 1657, 1663, 1667” (26).

¹⁷ By contrast, the queen, who in the legend is converted to Christianity by Saint Catherine, has both her breasts cut off. In some respects, Saint Catherine is comparable to Saint Christina (whose legend is not found in the extant corpus of Old Norse-Icelandic saints' lives). In the legend of Saint Christina, both the issue of her womanhood and the matter of her eloquence are stressed; accordingly, the tormentor cuts off not only her breasts, but also cuts out her tongue so as to silence her.

ber of characters is usually very limited, and the plot generally simple. Idealized figures take the place of historical portraits and often become no more than a personification of an abstraction; instead of an individual, only a type is presented. Whether the female saint is called Agatha, Barbara, or Dorothy, she is, generally speaking, endowed with the same qualities (aristocratic background, irresistible beauty, firmness of religious conviction, and, of course, virginity), voices the same thoughts (the refusal to apostatize, the rejection of the offer of material possessions, and the defense of her chastity), and undergoes the same ordeals (psychological and physical tortures and death by the sword); the personal element has been removed. The senses — what can be touched, seen, or heard — govern the understanding: ideas are replaced by pictures, and the supernatural — the soul's mysterious commerce with God — is blended with the marvellous and made concrete; hence the many miracles. As Delehaye (1927) observes:

Le cerveau de la multitude est ... étroit, incapable de porter l'empreinte d'un grand nombre d'idées, même de n'importe quelle idée complexe, incapable aussi de se livrer à des raisonnements subtils ou suivis, tout préparé, au contraire, à recevoir les impressions des sens. Le concept s'efface aisément, l'image est durable; c'est le côté matériel des choses qui attire le peuple, et c'est aux objets sensibles qu'il attache toutes ses pensées et ses sentiments. (38)

This process of "simplification" was, in part, accomplished through the rhetorical structure of the legends, through the use of linguistic figurative devices, such as metaphor, metonymy, hyperbole, and synecdoche. And since the comprehension of the legends is mediated primarily through language, the identification of these tropes and the proper interpretation of their meaning are essential for the understanding of the narratives themselves, their symbolism, and their didactic purposes (Heffernan 1988: 25–26).

The tortures, taken as a whole, in the legends of male and female martyr saints are naturally to be viewed as a ritualized reenactment of the *imitatio Christi*; as such, their sufferings serve the same purpose. What distinguishes the female martyrs from their male counterparts is, as Atkinson points out, the nature of their tortures. In a great number of scenes of physical mutilation in the legends of female virgin saints, the focus of torture is on the saint's breasts. The statement that the virgin's breasts were battered, burned, pierced, cut, or severed entirely occurs so regularly in the legends that it is nearly formulaic.

Thus, in the legend of Saint Agatha, it is said about her tormentor that he “let slite briost af henni med iarnkrokum” (1, 9), in the legend of Saint Barbara that he “let skera or henni briostin” (1, 156), in the legend of Saint Dorothy that he “let . . . taka stor blys logandi ok brenna af henne briosten” (1, 325), and in the legend of Saint Fides that he “liet . . . slita af henni bædi briostin med iarnkrokum” (1, 372); concerning the latter it is added that “or sárum hennar rann miolk en eigi blod” (372). Many more examples could be cited from outside the Old Norse-Icelandic corpus of saints’ lives.

Why this obsession with breasts? Anson (1974), arguing that “the cutting off of her [the saint’s] breasts and the whipping . . . bring to the surface a latent sexual sadism of great psychological interest” (27), notes that the severing of breasts may represent “a ‘euphemism’ for the pre-execution defloration of virgins practiced to meet the Roman law that forbade their execution”, but comments that “[e]ven if this explanation is correct, it does not preclude a psychological interest in such sadism as well” (27, n. 69).

While it is possible that this particular element in the sufferings of the female saints echoes ancient Roman legislature, Anson’s observation — coupled with what seems almost a preoccupation with the saints’ breasts — more importantly suggests that “the severed breast” should be taken not at face value, as an example simply of male sexual aggression, but as a synecdoche that has become nearly a hagiographical cliché, and that the sexually humiliating tortures should not be summarily dismissed as mere fantasy or hagiographical exaggeration, but be viewed as allegorical. As Heffernan (1988) stresses, “[t]hese *vitae sanctarum* are elaborate tales whose meanings are far more complex than one which praised misanthropy or feminine heroics” (267).

The legends of the female virgin martyr saints were composed at a time when the virginal religious life was extolled by the Church Fathers as a superior way of life that promised a more perfect form of eternal bliss.¹⁸ Saints Tertullian, Cyprian, Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine, and Anselm all devoted lengthy treatises to the topic, some using legends of virgin saints to demonstrate to their readers that virginity entailed struggle, aggressive defense, but ultimately great apocalyptic and eschatological rewards. The legends themselves generally abstain from theological explications; that virginity is a prerequisite for salva-

¹⁸ The tradition of virginity has been thoroughly studied by Bugge (1975).

tion is the foundation upon which they are built, and few legends are as explicit as the legend of Saint Agnes:¹⁹

Svo þroadis ok vox hreinlifs kraptr af godum dǫmum hinnar helguztu Agnesar, at margar meyar i Romaborg helldu hreinlifi sino allt til daudadags, þviat þer nunnur eignaz eilifan sigr ok seļu an enda, ef þer hallda hreinlifi an efa fyrir drottin voru Jesum Cristum. (1, 21–22)

Kinship with the corporeal life, with the distractions of sexual activity, personal attachments, and notions of domesticity, redirects the gaze away from the proper love that is to be channeled toward God. Further, sexual activity erodes both consciousness and rational control. Virginity thus draws the individual away from the corporeal and relocates a core of being within the spiritual while promoting intensified and final love of God and, as a consequence, approximates a recovery of the purer prelapsarian state (see McLaughlin 1974: 233). It is this view that Saint Cecilia attempts in very simplistic terms to convey to Valerian, her husband, on their wedding night:²⁰

Þu enn ynniligsti dreingr! hlutr er sa einn er ek vil segia þer, ef þu heitr ath leyna, medan ek vil at þu leynir. . . . Eingill guds er unnandi minn, sa er med miklu vandlæti geymir likama minn, ok ef hann finnr, at þu tekr æ mer med ohreinni ast, þa man hann þegar reidaz þer, ok mant þu tyna fegrd æsku þinnar; en ef hann finnr, at þu elskar mik hreinn i æst ok vardveitir meydum minn ospilltan, þa man hann elska þik sem mik ok syna þer miskunn sina. (1, 277)

Obviously, virginity is predictable of both sexes; it involves complete sexual abstinence, which can also apply to celibacy on the part of the male. Although the Church extolled the virtues of the chaste life for both men and women, female virginity received disproportionate emphasis and exaggerated admiration, becoming, in large measure, a defining characteristic of the female saint, while for men virginity was neither emphasized in the same way nor became a prevalent or

¹⁹ The legend of Saint Agnes was edited by Unger (1877: 1, 15–22). Unger used as his base text Stock. Perg. 2 fol. (15–19) and AM 429 12mo (19–20); variants are taken from AM 429 12mo, AM 235 fol., and AM 238 fol. I. The text of the defective AM 233a fol. is printed on p. 22. Foote (1962: 27) argues that the source is *BHL* 156.

²⁰ The legend of Saint Cecilia was edited by Unger (1877: 1, 277–297). Unger based his text on Stock. Perg. 2 fol. (276–279, 289–297), with the missing text and variants supplied from AM 235 fol. (279–287) and AM 429 12mo (287–289). According to Foote (1962), “[t]he source for the original translation from which these texts are derived was a form of the longer recension of the *Passio Caeciliae* (*BHL* 1495)” (26).

mandatory emblem of male sanctity in the lives. As Newman (1995) remarks, while the path of the male religious was marked by the continual struggle to acquire virtues, the virgin “already *has* the exalted virtue that defines her state, and must apply herself only to preserving it” (29). The Church’s view of virginity is ambiguous and by no means consistent throughout the Middle Ages, but the basis for the unequal definition of virginity as it is applied to the female was, of course, in origin, the association of the soul-flesh dualism with the male-female bipolarity in patristic theology. While it was believed that men’s and women’s souls were equal,²¹ their bodies were not; women had a conflict of body and soul that men did not, and as the flesh was inferior to the soul, so were women subordinate to men. The transcendence of the body and the means of severing the ties with Eve, whose transgression bound women to the pains of childbirth (cf. Genesis 3:16: “I will multiply thy sorrows, and thy conceptions: in sorrow shalt thou bring forth children, and thou shalt be under thy husband’s power, and he shall have dominion over thee”), was achieved through the struggle for sexless perfection, through virginity. It was thus through virginity that woman came closest to resemble man and adopt his attributes. As McLaughlin (1974) points out: “For the female, virginity is not an affirmation of her being as a woman but an assumption of the nature of the male which is identified with the truly human: rationality, strength, courage, steadfastness, loyalty” (234). Only as a virgin, as a sexless being, could a woman rise to equality with the male, but in order to achieve this equality, she had to transcend not just her body (as men who chose celibacy did) and all earthy desires, but her entire female nature. For the female, virginity is thus not an affirmation of her being as a woman; her salvation involves a complete repudiation of her sexuality, a negation of her nature, both physically and mentally, and an assumption of the nature of the male. As Bullough (1974: 1383) notes, this is implied as early as the fourth century by Saint Jerome, who in his *Commentarius in Epistolam ad Ephesios* wrote that “quandiu mulier partui servit et liberis, hanc habet ad virum differentiam, quam corpus ad animam. Sin autem Christo magis

²¹ Saint Paul in his statement, “there is neither Jew nor Greek: there is neither bond nor free: there is neither male nor female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28), specified what would become the Christian position of spiritual egalitarianism. Thus, as Schulenburg (1978) observes, “theoretically in sainthood, where the sexual barriers were to be non-existent, there should have been an equality in membership” (119).

voluerit servire quam sæculo, mulier esse cessabit, et dicetur vir" (567). Similar views are expressed by Saint Ambrose and others.

The "equality" of which the Church Fathers write is, of course, a celestial condition and not a temporal one. Nonetheless, the transformation from female to male is given literal expression in the legend of Saint Perpetua (McNamara 1976: 154).²² It is related that the night before being condemned to the beasts, Saint Perpetua sees in a vision herself being led by the deacon to the arena:

And he took my hand, and we began to go through rugged and winding places. At last with much breathing hard we came to the amphitheatre, and he led me into the midst of the arena. . . . And I saw much people watching closely. And because I knew that I was condemned to the beasts I marvelled that beasts were not sent out against me. And there came out against me a certain ill-favoured Egyptian with his helpers, to fight with me. Also there came to me comely young men, my helpers and aiders. And I was stripped, and I became a man. (10)

A number of other saints' lives corroborate this idea by describing female saints of heroic chastity and spirituality, who shed all affinity with the female sex by literally donning a masculine disguise. The best known of these female transvestite saints is no doubt Saint Pelagia, a wealthy and beautiful woman of Antioch, who was converted to Christianity by Bishop Nonus.²³ She gave all her possessions to the poor, and, without letting anyone know, left by night for Mount Olivet, where she donned the robe of a hermit, moved into a small cell, and served God in strict abstinence for the rest of her life. She was held in high esteem and was called Brother Pelagius. Her sex was not revealed until her death:

... sua sem likit var þuegit, er aller hugðu karllmann vera. af hinv harðaðzta livi. er hon hafðe haft. þa fannzt kuennmannz lik þar. . . . þvi nest toko þeir byskopar er þar varo. munkar oc lærðer menn. oc allt folk. at dyrkka. ok at lova. þann laðvarð. oc herra er giærnna lœysir. þa alla. sem til hans vilia kalla. (79)

²² The legend of Saint Perpetua and her slave girl Felicity is not found in Old Norse-Icelandic translation. The text here cited is Shewring's (1931) translation.

²³ The legend of Saint Pelagia is included in *Barlaams ok Josaphats saga* (ed. Rindal 1981). The text of the legend (77–79) is based on Stock. Perg. 6 fol. with variants from AM 232 fol.

A similar tale is told of Saint Marina.²⁴ When her father was widowed and entered a monastery, he dressed his daughter as a male and asked the abbot to admit his son. He agreed, and Marina was received as a monk and was called Brother Marinus. One of her duties in the monastery was to fetch supplies. Now and then she stopped at the house of a farmer, whose daughter conceived a child by a soldier. She accused Marinus of having seduced her, and Marinus was banished from the monastery. The woman's son was sent to the abbot and entrusted to Marinus to be raised. After three years, Marinus was readmitted into the monastery, where he died within a short time. When the monks came to prepare her body for burial, they discovered her true sex.

Ok er þessi hinn helgi líkami var beraðr, birtiz þar konu líkami. Af þersum fáheyra atburð fannz fólkinu svá mikit um, at nærr mátti engi vatni hallda. Ábótinn rann þegar til þessa helga líkama grátandi, sagði sik misgjört hafa er hann hafði pinat guðs brúði, ok þar til stóð hann í sinni sút yfir þersum helga líkama, at rödd kom af himnum svá mælandi, at fyrir síðleika Marinæ brúðar Krists vóru ábóta fyrirgefin sín rangendi fyrir því at hann vissi eigi at hon væri kona, ok þóttiz hann réttu fylgt hafa. Litlu síðarr varð sú kona er logit hafði á guðs mey gripin af djöfli svá at hana varð at fjötra. Var hon þá leidd til leiðis guðs ambáttar. Varð djöfull þá at segja, at hann hafði eggjat hana til at gjöra þenna glæp. En fyrir helga bæn guðs brúðar verðr hon á sjaunda degi frelst af þersum úhreinum anda fyrir þers miskunn er jafnan ömbunar góðu illt, at guð drottinn verði því framarr dýrkaðr í sínum helgum mönnum. (150–151)

As Bullough (1974: 1382–1383) points out, Christianity has been hostile to transvestism (cf. Deuteronomy 22:5), but more so to men wearing women's clothes than to women wearing men's clothes. The reasons for this are obvious: the female transvestite would be imitating the superior sex and attempting to become rational, while male transvestites would be imitating the inferior sex and becoming less rational, i.e., they would be losing status. In fact, Bullough argues that there are reasons to believe that “the Christian church to a certain extent encouraged women to adopt the guise of men and live like men in order to attain the higher level of spirituality normally reserved to

²⁴ The legend of Saint Marina, extant only in AM 657 a-b 4to, was edited by Gering (1882–1884: 1, 149–151). Widding, Bekker-Nielsen, and Shook (1963: 320), citing Karel Vrátný, note that the legend is a close parallel to *Speculum Ecclesiae*

males" (1383). Bullough further draws attention to the fact that in folk belief transvestism among women was generally admired and not usually punished and makes the interesting observation that there are no male transvestite saints. However, as McLaughlin (1974) observes: "[E]ven the masculinized female saint never wholly escapes her female dependence and weakness, for in the idealized portrait she is often the bride of Christ, her weakness by nature overcome by the strength of Christ" (235).²⁵

With the characteristics of the saints' legends as a literary genre, the medieval theology of womanhood, and the patristic view of the female body in mind, we can now return to the legend of Saint Agatha and those of other female virgin martyrs. It is in the light of these considerations that the sufferings typical of female virgin saints, such as the severing of their breasts, must be seen. It may seem paradoxical that a literary genre that seeks to extoll matters of the soul and negate those of the body should dwell on the corporeality of its protagonist, the female virgin martyr saint. But paradox stands at the center of the virgin martyr as she navigates the movement from the corporeal to the spiritual, for in having had stripped from her the outward mark of gender identity, the virgin martyr fulfills Saint Jerome's pronouncement in both literal and symbolic fashion: in the violent (and sexual) mutilation of the body, in suffering the torments that negate her perceived function as sexual and procreative, the virgin martyr redefines herself as *sponsa Christi* within the celestial state. The process that began with self-denial of her own sexuality, moves through the mutilation of the outward signs of the sexual presence to achieve, paradoxically, authentication of the sexual self realized in spiritual union with God, as demonstrated very clearly in the legend of Saint Agnes:

Minn líkami er samteingdr hans líkama, ok eigum vit bædi brudhvilu saman; hans meýiar skemta mér dyrligum sǫngum, af hans munni tok ek hunang, ok hans blóði eru roðnar kinnr minnar, ok ek em halldin af hans fadmlagi. Hans modir er mæ, ok hefir fadir hans eigi konu atta. Þeim em ek fǫstnud, sem einglar þjóna, hans fegrð undraz sol ok tungl, af hans ilm endrlifna daudir, ok af hans atöku styrkiaz síukir,

²⁵ See also Bynum (1987), who sees cross-dressing as "primarily a practical device" for women: "Women sometimes put on male clothes in order to escape their families, to avoid the dangers of rape and pillage, or to take on male roles such as soldier, pilgrim, or hermit." Men, in contrast, "gained nothing socially by [cross-dressing] except opprobrium", and to them it was "primarily a religious symbol" (291).

hans audæfi spillaz alldreghi ne þverra; honum einum vardveiti ek tru
 minna, ok hönnum felumzt ek æ hendi af ollu hiarta ok med ollum
 ahuga; þa em ek hrein, ef ek ann honum, ok þa mæ, ef ek fylgi
 honum. (1, 16)

As Robertson (1991: 272) observes, physicality, then, is not only a woman's problem, it is also her solution, and it is for this reason that the legends of female saints tend to make issues of the body of primary importance in their descriptions of the saint's trials. Within this context, the symbolic significance of the severing of the saint's breasts seems obvious. The breasts are the most visual aspect of the saint's womanliness, and their amputation presents in a dramatic and concrete manner the defeminization which, according to medieval theology, is essential for her salvation. Only by negating her female nature can she transcend the weaknesses and limitations of her sex, and only as a sexless being is she viewed as nearly spiritual equal to the male.

Heffernan (1988), one of the few critics to call specific attention to the topos of the mutilation of the breasts, explains the paradoxical transformation as follows: "[T]he virgin becomes the bride of God, and finally the mother of God, while retaining her virginity. Her breasts as the symbol of her maternity are mutilated and finally severed, to underscore the miraculous metamorphosis of the virgin into a nurturing mother, virtually a deity in her own right" (283). The notion that such scenes of mutilation are attended by eroticism or must be understood as pornographic reduces the vital complexity of the topos. If, in the male gaze, scenes of sexual mutilation are construed as erotic, the final transformation of the virgin — the ungendering of the body that paradoxically reengenders it as bride and nurturing mother — refocuses the narrative away from male discourse and appropriation, reclaiming it within a specifically female locus distinct from male experience.

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