Like the other Seminar presenters this year, I have been asked to address the theme of gender in early Christian history. I have chosen to do so by focusing on martyrdom. I shall suggest that martyrdom is a site and source of the queering of conventional Greco-Roman ideas and ideals of gender— not of their affirmation and replication, as others have argued.

But before I proceed, a few methodological caveats:

My interest is martyrdom, not persecution. For me, that means that the questions are primarily literary, on the one hand, and theological, on the other, rather than social or political in any direct way. In other words, we will be engaging the history of Christian representations and ideas— or, better yet, the history of the Christian imagination.

We will also, to an extent that is difficult to assess, be engaging the history of the winners. As a literary and theological construct, martyrdom proved extraordinarily successful. For second-century Christians, however, that success was arguably still on the horizon. There were dissenters, most famously Clement of Alexandria and some others often called “gnostic.”

Martyrdom was a thing, so to speak, but it was not yet the thing that we now “know” it to be.

Following traditional dating, the martyrdom accounts that I will be considering fall roughly between the mid second and mid third centuries, a period generally held to be formative for ideas about martyrdom. However, current scholarship is more cautious regarding the dating of these texts. They may not all have been written immediately after the events that they purport to describe. As Éric Rebillard has recently stressed, most of the earliest martyrdom accounts are not attested before the Greek writer Eusebius of Caesarea, on the one hand, and the Latin writer Augustine of Hippo, on the other—that is, before roughly the year 300 and roughly the year 400, respectively.

Thus, here we tell the history of early Christianity retrospectively, as so often.

In what follows, I shall be drawing on Rebillard’s 2017 collection _Greek and Latin Narratives About the Ancient Martyrs_, which includes a mere ten texts, as contrasted with Herbert Musurillo’s widely consulted 1972 collection of twenty-eight, for example. Rebillard’s selection is somewhat idiosyncratic, in that he simultaneously rejects the criterion of “authenticity” put into place by the famous French hagiographer Hippolyte Delehaye (and largely followed by Musurillo), while seeming to propose something rather similar, albeit more strictly defined: he includes (1) only free-standing accounts of martyrdoms (2) said to take place pre-260, (3) where those works are externally attested before the middle of the fifth century. Despite its idiosyncracy, for present purposes Rebillard’s collection has the advantage of giving us a workable number of texts, conservatively selected as a sampling of the earliest circulating Christian martyrdom accounts. The texts that he includes are: Carpus, Papyrus, and Agathonice; Pionius of Smyrna; Polycarp of Smyrna; and The Martyrs of Lyon and Vienne (all attested by Eusebius); and Marian and James; Cyprian of Carthage; Fructuosus of Tarragona and His Companions; Montanus, Lucius, and Their Companions; Perpetua, Felicity, and Their Companions; and The Scilitan Martyrs (all attested by Augustine). All of the texts most frequently referenced in discussions of martyrdom and gender are on this list.

In making the case that martyrdom narratives queer gender, I must take account of a competing argument that martyrdom in fact reinforces conventional concepts and hierarchies of gender. An early version of this argument was put forth by Stephen Moore and Janice Capel Anderson in a 1998 article titled “Taking It Like a Man: Masculinity in 4 Maccabees,” though their concern was not with Christian martyrdom texts but rather with a first-century Jewish text that strongly influenced Christian writers. Identifying “[m]astery—of others and/or of oneself” as “the definitive masculine trait” in antiquity, Moore and Capel Anderson argue that, “[a]s much as anything else, 4 Maccabees is about what it means to be a true man,” where manhood aligns with a life lived in conformity with both reason and Jewish law. Stephanie Cobb brings a similar argument to bear on Christian martyrdom texts in her 2008 monograph, _Dying to Be Men: Gender and Language in Early Christian Martyr Texts_. “The stories of the martyrs do not reject or even substantially revise common understandings of sex and the virtues and hierarchies accompanying them,” writes Cobb. “On the contrary, the texts are culturally conservative in the sense that they utilize cultural expectations of manliness,

justice, and volition in their descriptions of Christians.” Martyrdom tales appropriate (and thereby affirm) culturally dominant ideals of gender in the service of Christian identity, according to Cobb, much as 4 Maccabees does for Jewish identity, in Moore and Capel Anderson’s account. The martyrs, not their persecutors, are shown to be the true men—victors rather than victims, dominant rather than subjugated, active rather than passive. The discourse of gender thus remains stable and unquestioned; what is contested is who gets to claim the prize of true masculinity.

Cobb unfolds her argument in three main parts. First, she highlights the centrality of the male-dominated space of the amphitheater in accounts of martyrdom, together with the frequent comparison of martyrs to gladiators, athletes, and soldiers, all quintessentially male figures. Second, she notes that martyrs are characterized narratively as possessing the typically masculine virtues of “self-control, volition, physical and emotional strength or stamina, and resistance to persuasion.” Third, she points out that female martyrs are represented in both masculinizing and stereotypically feminine ways, strategies that, in her view, correspond to “inter- and intra-communal situations” respectively: that is, compared to pagans, they are (allowed to be) men, but compared to Christian men, they are (still forced to be) mere women.

In making the case that martyrdom texts transform and challenge rather than reinforce conventions of gender, I shall begin as Moore and Capel Anderson do, with 4 Maccabees. This text, which appears to have influenced the writers of many early Christian martyrdom accounts, already contains most of the gendered features that will be of interest to us. From there I will consider, in traditional chronological order, the Martyrdom of Polycarp, the Martyrs of Lyon and Vienne, and the Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas, making mention of some of the other texts in Rebillard’s collection along the way. I shall keep Cobb’s tripartite schema in mind as I proceed, attempting to counter her arguments, or at least to nuance them differently. (1) Where she emphasizes the frequent comparison of martyrs to the quintessentially masculine figures of gladiators, athletes, and soldiers, I will also emphasize the consistent depiction of martyrs’ bodies as differing from the mature male body typically associated with such figures—as old, disabled, young, enslaved, or female. (2) Where she notes that martyrs manifest typically masculine virtues, I shall lean more heavily into the ways that they differ, also noting their critiques of hypermasculine aggression. (3) Finally, where she sees masculinizing

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7. Cobb, Dying to Be Men, 6–7.
8. Cobb, Dying to Be Men, 7.
9. Cobb, Dying to Be Men, 8.
representations of female martyrs as (merely) strategic with respect to apologetics, while also strategically undercut by simultaneous insistence on their modesty and submissiveness, I shall suggest both that it is not so simple to return masculinized female martyrs to their “proper place” and that the maternal body has a positive and productive role to play in accounts of martyrdom. Can we really say that gender has not changed significantly when non-men are seen to prevail in masculine roles and spaces, when mastery is translated almost entirely into self-mastery and aggression into endurance, or when female bodies are privileged over male ones in their capacity to bear witness?

Taking It Like a Woman (or an Old Man or a Boy): 4 Maccabees

“The subject that I am about to discuss is most philosophical, that is, whether devout reason (εὐσεβὴς λογισµός) is sovereign over the passions (τῶν παθῶν)” (1.1), writes the author of 4 Maccabees, the first-century CE Greek treatise also known, appropriately, as “On the Supremacy of Reason.” The answer is clear from the start: “If, then, it is evident that reason rules over those passions that hinder self-control (σωφροσύνης), namely, gluttony and lust, it is also clear that it masters the passions that hinder one from justice (δικαιοσύνης), such as malice, and those that stand in the way of courage (ἀνδρείας), namely anger, fear, and pain” (1.3-4). As proof of this claim, the author offers the examples of “the noble bravery (ἀνδραγαθίας) of those who died for the sake of virtue, Eleazar and the seven brothers and their mother.” Their story, drawn from 2 Maccabees 6-7 (ca. 100-90 BCE), is set in the relatively distant time of the Hellenistic emperor Antiochus IV (175-164 BCE), but its message is directed toward readers living under Roman rule. The passions, we learn, cannot be eradicated but they can be resisted by those who are philosophically minded—not least through adherence to the ancestral law of the Jews. As David DeSilva notes, for the author of 4 Maccabees, the Torah was “the teacher of the highest philosophy and the trainer of the cardinal virtues so prized by Stoics, Platonists and Peripatetics alike.”10 Of those virtues, the one most spectacularly on display in the text is andreia (also referred to by cognates such as andragathia)—that is, courage or manliness.

In interrogating “what it means to be a true man,” 4 Maccabees also implicitly contrasts “two types of sovereignty associated with masculinity—sovereignty over others and sovereignty over oneself,” as Moore and Capel Anderson observe.11 Traditionally, these two are assumed to coincide—a man who cannot control himself is not thought to

be able to control others-- but here they are (at least partly) opposed. The first type, exemplified by the enraged emperor Antiochus, is strongly critiqued; the second type, exemplified by the heroic Judaeans who resist him, is just as strongly endorsed. Antiochus’s lust for control over others makes him a tyrant and a bully, cruelly torturing and executing an old man, seven boys, and their elderly mother. In contrast, the Judaeans accept their inability to control their situation while demonstrating astonishing feats of emotional self-control and physical fortitude, thereby drawing on cultural models not only of the philosopher but also of the athlete.

Sheer bodily endurance is at the center of this spectacular resistance to tyranny. When the elderly Eleazar, stripped of his clothing, cannot bear the pain of torture anymore, he falls to the ground, only to be kicked by a guard, yet still he does not acquiesce. “But he bore the pains and scorned the punishment and endured the tortures. Like a noble athlete the old man, while being beaten, was victorious over his torturers” (6.9-10). Following Eleazar’s execution, the seven brothers and their mother are subjected to still more grotesquely brutal tortures and deaths, which they face with unflinching strength, again and again proving masters of their own anger, fear, and pain and thereby resisting being mastered by Antiochus and his torturers. The author exclaims, “Reverence for God was victor and gave the crown to its own athletes. Who did not admire the athletes of the divine legislation? Who were not amazed?” (17. 15-16).

The mother, said to be imbued with “a man’s courage” (15.23), is pronounced “more noble than males in steadfastness, and more courageous than men in endurance” (15.30), by virtue of having witnessed her sons’ executions without giving way to grief or attempting to dissuade them from their chosen paths. Like Abraham, she has resisted the powerful force of her own parental affection and has thus proved herself a “soldier of God” who by conquering her own passions “conquered even a tyrant and in word and deed ... proved more powerful than a man” (16.14).

While Moore and Capel Anderson note the novelty of the (nearly) exclusive emphasis on self-mastery as opposed to mastery of others, they are also inclined to minimize the difference. Masculinity still coincides with domination, even if its tactics have shifted and it has been unlinked from the kind of body we would expect it to be associated with—that of “an elite male in his prime.” Moore and Capel Anderson conclude: “On the one hand, the oppressed have triumphed; on the other, they have been implicated in a contest of manhood that is itself inherently oppressive.” They further note that the mother of the Maccabees, after having demonstrated masculine virtue, is, tellingly, returned “to her proper place” in a (possibly interpolated) passage at

the end of the story, in which she boasts of her chastity as maiden and wife and praises her deceased husband for his exemplary role as father to their sons (18.6-19).14

But perhaps gender has shifted more decisively than Moore and Capel Anderson grant. Brent Shaw detects in 4 Maccabees “a moral revolution of sorts” in the displacement of classical definitions of manhood by hypomone, or “the passive value of merely being able to endure.” “Praises of active and aggressive values entailed in manliness (andreia) by almost all other writers in the world of the Maccabees could easily fill books,” Shaw notes. In contrast, “silence, passivity, submissiveness, openness, suffering—the shame of allowing oneself to be wounded, to be penetrated, and of simply enduring all of that—were castigated as weak, womanish, slavish.”15 In other words, for Shaw, masculinity in 4 Maccabees is far from business as usual (even if it also doesn’t come out of nowhere: Shaw acknowledges the faceted complexity of ancient manhood more generally).16 Thus it may not be simply “ironic”—as Moore and Capel Anderson have it17—that bodies that are weak, womanish, or slavish are the privileged exemplars in a text that has so dramatically redefined andreia. Precisely such bodies might be expected to harbor the capacity for passive endurance, as opposed to aggression. Their prominence registers the ambivalence and uncertainty of a cultural moment in which the excesses of imperial rule have rendered masculinity qua domination deeply problematic, posing the challenge of imagining masculine virtue otherwise.

Unlinked from domination, is andreia even appropriately translated “manliness” anymore? Or has virtue transcended gender, when “taking it like a man” looks a lot like taking it like a woman, under the particular conditions and pressures of the early empire? To claim transcendence is probably to claim both too much and too little. Better to say that 4 Maccabees reveals the complexity, the instability, even the reversibility, of gender in such a moment, as well as the slippages between gender and other distinctions such as age or status. Yes, sometimes playing the man looks a lot like playing the woman—or the boy, or the elder, or the slave. Sometimes, then, a woman—or a boy, or an elder, or a slave—might be seen to play the man. In 4 Maccabees, a woman not only proves the truest man of all, modeling the highest levels of courageous self-restraint in the face of both her sons’ torture and death and her own, but also thereby proves the truest mother. No surprise that undercurrents of discomfort tug at a text that has allowed (cultural?) gender to drift so far from (naturalized?) sex, producing unsettling

hybridities: thus, the mother of the Maccabees must also rhetorically defer to her sons’ father, at the very last moment, giving a nod to feminine submissiveness. But the cat is out of the bag, so to speak.

“Be a Man”: The Martyrdom of Polycarp

The figure of Polycarp, protagonist in the earliest surviving full-blown Christian martyrdom account, traditionally dated c. 155, appears to owe much to the figure of Eleazar from 4 Maccabees. Like Eleazar, Polycarp is referred to as an “old man” (πρεσβύτης) (7.2, 7.3; cf. 4 Macc 5.6), notable for “his age” (τὴν ἡλικίαν αὐτοῦ) (7.2; cf. 4 Macc 5.4, 5.6), and he is asked by the judge to “have respect for his age” by renouncing his faith, as is Eleazar (9.2; cf. 4 Macc 5.12, 6.12). Indeed, the text specifies that Polycarp has served Christ for eighty-six years (9.3); whether it refers to years from birth, from conversion, or from ordination, this number is impressive indeed. And just as Eleazar’s fall during his torture underlines his physical frailty (4 Macc 6.7), so do the details that Polycarp scraped his shin when he was being rushed from the carriage (8.3) and that he fumbled when removing his shoes (13.2) underline Polycarp’s physical frailty. Like all of the Maccabean martyrs, Polycarp is fearless and defiant despite his lack of manly vigor, enduring even the agony of being burned on a pyre without moving, although not nailed to the stake (13.3). In his death he is compared not only to a sacrificial ram (14.1) but also to an athlete who receives a prize and crown of immortality, in another echo of 4 Maccabees (17.1, 19.2; cf. 4 Macc 17.11-16).

Once again we see that a body less than fully masculine, because elderly and weak, is imbued with masculine virtue in the form of hypomone or passive endurance (19.2). But what makes Polycarp of central interest for the analysis of gender is a single line spoken by an unidentified heavenly voice as he enters the stadium: “Be strong, Polycarp, and be a man (ἀνδρίζου)” (9.1). In this text, which does not feature a single female character, the martyr’s ordeal in the arena is explicitly represented as a contest in which manhood is made or unmade. Intriguingly, it remains unclear who is representing it thus: “and no one saw who spoke” (9.1). However, we should probably not make too much of that ambiguity or introduce the possibility of irony where it is not positively warranted. Let us assume that the voice is authoritative and intended to be taken seriously. Let us assume that “when the narrator wants to sum up Christian identity in one emphatic imperative, it is not ‘Love your enemies,’ or ‘Be full of faith,’ or even ‘Be like Christ,’ ... --it is ‘Be a man,’” as Cobb puts it.19

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18. DeSilva, 4 Maccabees, 150–51.
19. Cobb, Dying to Be Men, 80.
But still we may ask: what does the making of Polycarp’s manhood look like? It looks not like the aggression of the strong but like the suffering endurance of the weak. It also looks like bread baking in an oven, we read, or gold and silver being forged in a furnace, and it has a particular fragrance too, like frankincense (15.2). In the end, all that is left are Polycarp’s bones, more precious than jewels or gold (18.2), and a text patiently copied and recopied by his disciples (22). How do we describe the gender of such bodily remains, of such material relics, in all of their fragility and tenacity?

"Just Like a Noble Mother": The Martyrs of Lyon and Vienne

The influence of 4 Maccabees can be felt to an even greater degree in the account of the martyrs of Lyon and Vienne, excerpted in Eusebius’s Ecclesiastical History (ca. 300). Like 4 Maccabees, this text depicts a group of martyrs that includes an old man, a boy, and a maternal figure, among others both slave and free, male and female. Like the Judaean witnesses of 4 Maccabees, these Christian martyrs are described repeatedly and explicitly as “athletes” or “contestants.” Like their Maccabean counterparts as well as Polycarp they face an opponent—or in this case, a whole mob—who becomes increasingly enraged, savage, and cruel.

Pothinus, the leader of the Christians of Lyon, is said to be ninety years old, “very weak in body,” “scarcely able to breathe because of this physical weakness,” “his body exhausted by age and illness” (5.1.29). When he is brought to the tribunal, he is beaten by an angry mob “showing no respect for his age” (we recall the elderly Eleazar being kicked when he has fallen) and two days later Pothinus dies in prison (5.1.31). However, most prominent in the account are four Christians who are strong enough to face torture and wild animals not just once but repeatedly—Sanctus, Maturus, Attalus, and Blandina. Of these, Blandina, a slave woman, claims center stage, a stage she will share at the end with the boy Ponticus.

Blandina’s performance is not without suspense. Appearing “worthless and unsightly and contemptible,” she does not inspire confidence even among her fellow Christians. In particular, her mistress or owner, who is imprisoned with her, is “anxious that she might not be able to make a bold confession because of the weakness of her body.” In the end, however, she demonstrates an astonishing capacity for endurance. “Blandina was filled with such power that those taking turns to inflict every form of torture on her from dawn to dusk failed and gave up, confessing that they were defeated and had nothing left to do to her.” Her torturers marvel that she is still alive, as “her

20. DeSilva, 4 Maccabees, 151.
entire body was torn and laid open.” Compared to a “noble athlete,” she is not broken but rather strengthened by the torture to which she is subjected (5.1.17-19). Blandina is subsequently exposed to beasts in the arena, and her fellow “contestants” are encouraged by the sight of her hanging on a stake in the form of a cross: “For in their contest they saw through their sister, even with their bodily eyes, the one who was crucified for them” (5.1.41). Another layer of theological significance is added to this christological figuration, as Blandina is also framed as a second Eve, paralleling Christ as the second Adam (cf. 1 Cor 15.21-22, 45-47): “She was preserved for another contest, so that by emerging victorious through many competitions she might render inexorable the judgment against the crooked serpent (Is 27.1; cf. Gn 3.14-15) and encourage her brothers. Though small, weak, and insignificant, she put on the great and unconquerable athlete Christ, she overwhelmed the adversary many times, and in her context she was crowned in the crown of immortality” (5.1.42).

Having survived this first exposure to the beasts, Blandina is returned to the arena, along with the youth Ponticus (who is possibly a slave as well), and they are subjected to every form of torture. As his sister in Christ, she supports and encourages Ponticus, who dies first. Then, finally, it is her turn. “And last of all the blessed Blandina, just like a noble mother who has encouraged her children and sent them ahead in victory to the king, undergoing herself through all the contests of her children, hastened to them, rejoicing and exulting in her departure, as if she were summoned to a wedding feast and not thrown to the beasts” (1.5.53). Her exceptional status as a woman is emphasized: “Even the pagans confessed that never had a woman among them suffered so many and so great tortures” (1.5.56). The reference to the mother of the Maccabees is clear.

Cobb remarks that the author of this text “describes Blandina in highly masculinized terms” as an athlete and also a Christlike figure, offering her “as an inspiration to men.” Yet at the same time the author “does not allow Blandina to stay fully masculinized,” argues Cobb, but rather “highlights Blandina’s femininity by placing her—indeed forcing her—into a maternal role.” Cobb suggests further that Blandina is forced into the mother’s role so that she can subsequently be forced to sacrifice it, thereby “achieving the masculine ideal of detachment from this world.”

That Blandina, already masculinized, should be decisively feminized in this last scene so as to have her femininity erased is a curious (perhaps a “forced”) argument, it seems to

me. It is also one that disallows the fluidity of gender and the power of generativity that the text itself seems happy to grant both Blandina and other (metaphorical) mothers.  

For Blandina is not the only maternal figure in this text. A Phrygian named Alexander actively encourages other Christians to make their confession and in so doing he appears to spectators “like someone giving birth (ὡςπεθερ ὃδίνων)” (1.4.9). This brief description evokes Galatians 4:19: “My little children, for whom I am again in the pain of childbirth (ὡδίνω) until Christ is formed in you...”--a Pauline line that the male martyr Pionius also cites elsewhere (Martyrdom of Pionius of Smyrna 12.4). In addition, the description aligns Alexander with a previously mentioned “virgin mother,” apparently a figure for the church, who is said to rejoice that those whom she has formerly “miscarried” when they denied their faith (cf. 1.5.11) are reconceived and reborn when they prove able confess their faith (1.5.45-46). We should not, then, miss the fact that the maternal role is not always assigned to women, nor is it necessarily (if ever) renounced. Rather, accounts like that of the Martyrs of Lyon and Vienne refashion the maternal body as a source and signifier both of the power of compassion that unites the martyrs and in turn unites them with Christ, and of the hopes and possibilities that may emerge (that sometimes can only emerge) in through pain and suffering.

“And I Became a Male”: The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity

The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity is justly famous for its two female protagonists, for the fact that both of them are recent mothers whose maternal bodies are poignantly on display in the narrative, and for its inclusion of what purports to be the prison diary of Perpetua, recording several visions that she received during her incarceration. As Craig Williams notes, “[t]his is a text which compels its readers to notice gender with an insistence matched by only a few other surviving texts in the classical Greek and Latin tradition.” Indeed, the Passio presents us with an embarrassment of riches, with respect to gender. Here I want to focus on three aspects of the text, continuing the foregoing analysis--first, the centrality of the overtly and explicitly masculine space, roles, and bodies of the arena; second, the appeal to implicitly masculine virtues or traits such as domination or self-mastery; and third, the prominence of maternal bodies.

22. Note that other martyrdom texts that compare women to the mother of the Maccabees have “real” mothers in mind, e.g., the mother of the martyr Marian (Martyrdom of Marian and James 13.1-3) and the mother of the martyr Flavianus (Martyrdom of Montanus, Lucius, and Their Companions 16.3-6).

In her final vision, received the day before she is to be sent to fight wild animals in the arena, Perpetua sees herself facing not beasts but an Egyptian fighter. “There came to me handsome young men as my helpers and supporters,” she writes. “And I was stripped naked, and I became a male (et facta sum masculus). And my supporters began to rub me with oil, as is the custom in such a contest” (10.6-7). This striking scene recalls the heavenly voice that urges Polycarp, upon his own entry into the arena, to “be a man (ἀνδρίζου)” (Pol. 9.1). Having declared herself to have done just that, Perpetua defeats the Egyptian in a very demanding pankration match and receives a branch with golden apples as a prize as she exits the arena in triumph (10.13). As Cobb frames it, her declaration marks “the culmination of her ascent to masculine Christianity,” following her detachment from the roles of mother, daughter, and woman.24 Yet Perpetua’s masculinity wobbles, even in the moment of its culmination, between the grammatically feminine form of the speaking subject—facta sum—and the masculine form—masculus—that seems to mark her transformation. Moreover, the invocation of the (doubly) masculine form is not repeated, and the moment proves fleeting—“a passing, albeit startling, detail in a swiftly moving, symbolically complex narrative,” as Williams observes.25 The lanista or gladiator trainer who oversees the fight not only calls her “daughter” at the end (10.13) but also refers to Perpetua with feminine pronouns—hanc, haec—immediately after her self-described transformation (10.9), as does Perpetua herself, when she declares, “sublata sum: I was raised up...” (10.11). In this dreamlike narrative, it is apparently possible to imagine Perpetua simultaneously as a “she” and as one who, at least momentarily, has the male body of a pankration athlete, a body that hits and kicks and grabs and throws and tramples—a body that dominates in the arena. Furthermore, the anticipatory vision of Perpetua’s victorious male body will itself be rewritten by the memory of the body of a “delicate young girl” on display in the arena (20.2), recorded (at Perpetua’s own invitation [10.15]) by a narrator writing in the third person.

I would suggest that this ambiguity and fluidity extends to Perpetua’s gender in the Passio more broadly. As Anna Rebecca Solevag argues, “The text oscillates between male and female characteristics in the descriptions of Perpetua.”26 She is indeed depicted as possessing what Cobb designates typically masculine virtues, such as “self-control, volition, physical and emotional strength or stamina, and resistance to persuasion.”27 As Cobb also notes, this comes out particularly strongly in her absolute

27. Cobb, Dying to Be Men, 7.
refusal to be swayed when her father pleads that she take pity on her family by renouncing her Christian faith. From the start, Perpetua is unmoved by any such attempts to change her mind: “I cannot be called anything but what I am, Christian” (3.2). In her certainty and self-composure, she proves more manly than her groveling father, who eventually addresses her not as daughter but as mistress (domina), as if inverting their roles (5.5). Yet at the same time Perpetua is moved by the suffering of her loved ones, nor does she become any less compassionate in the course of her self-narration, I would argue. She is “tortured by anxiety” for her nursing infant (3.6) and relieved first when he is able to join her in prison (3.9) and then when he is weaned shortly after her sentencing (6.8). Similarly, she is saddened when she remembers her deceased younger brother Dinocrates (7.1) and relieved when a vision assures her that he has achieved peace in the afterlife (8.4). Her devastation matches theirs when she sees that her mother and brother are themselves devastated on account of her (3.8). Above all, she is saddened by her father’s desperate attempts to save her, and she tries to comfort him (5.6); when he is whipped because of his interference with her trial, “it was as if I were being whipped myself,” she writes (6.5), and she is once again saddened by his wretchedness when he visits her in prison shortly before her scheduled execution (9.3).

Cobb exaggerates Perpetua’s detachment in an effort to emphasize her masculinization, so much so that she misrepresents the text at points. “Interestingly, the editor tells us that her father speaks words that would move all creation, but these words do not persuade Perpetua to change her mind,” Cobb asserts, adding: “Perpetua resists what almost seems like a gravitational pull of emotion. She stands firm against nature itself; her disinterestedness highlights her masculinity.”28 But the comment that her father’s words would move all creation is part of the “diary” portion of the text, delivered in Perpetua’s own voice, not the editor’s. (Whether Perpetua actually authored it is another matter, but that point is crucial neither to Cobb’s reading nor to mine). Moreover, Cobb does not mention that the comment is followed by the statement, “I was sad (ego dolebam) at his unhappy old age” (9.2-3). With respect to the third-person (non-diary) portion of the Passio, Cobb rightly notes the masculinizing depiction of Perpetua entering the arena with an assertive gaze, yet once again she fails to mention a telling detail, namely, that Perpetua is referred to in distinctly feminine terms in the same passage: “Perpetua followed, her face shining and her step sure, as a wife of Christ, as a beloved of God (ut matrona Christi, ut Dei delicata), turning aside everyone’s gaze with the force of her stare” (18.2; emphasis added). As Williams notes, “the chiastically

arranged phrases *matrona Christi* and *Dei delicta* place Perpetua in two distinct roles available to Roman women: the married lady ... and the beautiful young lover,” thereby creating an “oxymoronic juxtaposition” with the reference to the *vigor* or force of her gaze.29 To the very end, the narrator mixes typically “feminine” traits and behavior (such as Perpetua’s rearranging her hair and dress when she is thrown by a cow in the arena [20.4-5]) with typically “masculine” traits and behavior (such as her guiding the executioner’s trembling hand to her throat [21.9]).

Perpetua’s body may be envisioned as male but it is also a maternal body, not metaphorically but in tender flesh, and as such it is above all a breast-feeding body, tethered to Perpetua’s infant by his need for her milk and her anxiety for his welfare. Her initial visions all turn on nursing and nurture, as if exploring and negotiating her own relationship to this maternal body. The first effects an inversion: Perpetua, who is at odds with her father, climbs a treacherous ladder and receives sweet, milky cheese from a gray-haired shepherd who welcomes her, calling her “child” (*tegnon*) (4.9). In this vision, it is she who is granted nourishment, from a “nursing” paternal figure. Subsequently her infant is spontaneously weaned so that she is no longer distressed by his care or by pain from her breasts (6.8). Two more visions follow swiftly, seeming to displace both her anxiety and her relief: she sees her little brother, who died at age seven, transported from a place of punishment where he suffers from pain and thirst (7) to one of refreshment, where he is healed and able to drink his fill (8). In her first three visions, Perpetua’s body, however “literally” maternal, thus also becomes a figure available for, and interwoven with, the expression of the care and nurture with which the Christian god sustains those who place their faith in that god utterly.

Perpetua’s maternal body is doubled by that of Felicitas, a slave woman not mentioned in Perpetua’s diary but introduced in the framing narrative. Pregnant at the time of her arrest, Felicitas grieves that her pregnancy may prevent her from being executed with her fellow Christians. In response to their collective prayer she goes into labor prematurely, delivering a girl, but not without struggle. “She was in pain, laboring with natural difficulty for a delivery at eight months,” we read (15.5). One of her jailors goads her, asking how she will face the ordeal of the arena if childbirth proves so daunting. “Now I suffer what I suffer,” she responds, “but there another will be in me, who will suffer for me, because I am to suffer for him” (15.6). Subsequently, Felicitas is said to go “from blood to blood, from midwife to net-fighter, about to bathe after childbirth in a second baptism” (18.3). Thus Felicitas’s body—not incidentally a slave body30—becomes the locus of passive endurance, and the pain of childbirth becomes a

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model for the pain of martyrdom, likewise a productive suffering. But whereas the pain of childbirth is suffered alone, martyrdom is a shared suffering, a com-passion, uniting the martyrs with Christ and through Christ with one another. In the end, it unites the two young mothers, despite their disparate social status. Both are paired in the arena with “the most savage of cows (ferocissimam uaccam),” as our narrator tells it--another feminizing touch, as the animal’s sex is said to emulate their own (20.1). Initially naked, they are clothed when the crowd expresses horror at Perpetua’s physical delicacy and Felicitas’s dripping breasts (20.2). Facing the heifer, Perpetua is tossed on her back, her tunic ripped; covering her thigh and tidying her hair, she sees that Felicitas has been struck down and helps her to her feet (20.3-6). “And the two stood together” (20.7). As in Perpetua’s vision, they are released through the “gate of life,” in a kind of rebirth of their own (20.7), only to be subsequently executed along with their fellow prisoners and thus indeed reborn into eternal life, according to the logic of martyrdom; Perpetua is the last to die (20.8-9).

In this text, as in 4 Maccabees and the Martyrs of Lyon and Vienne, maternal figures express far more than a mere desire to “ensur[e] that the female martyr is placed safely back within the confines of proper, domestic femininity,” as Cobb has it (though that may also be a factor).31 The “mother martyrs” Perpetua and Felicitas affirm the shared vulnerability and interdependence of all flesh, as Judith Perkins argues.32 More specifically, in the Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas, motherhood becomes a property not only of the individual body but of the communal body, and also of god, as Solevag argues.33 Maternal figures express the divine nurture, encouragement, and compassion that the martyrs perceive in one another, as well as the conviction that bodily pain may prove productive, and that death may give rise to new life.

Conclusions

All readings are not equally good, yet no single reading of a text can be declared the “right” one. Early Christian martyrdom texts are complex. Their potential meanings cannot be exhausted even by multiple interpretations: that is why we are still reading them and arguing about them, of course. Here I have offered you brief interpretations of four texts; more than that, on the basis of those interpretations, I have risked some general claims about early Christian martyrdom texts as such. At every step along the

31. Cobb, Dying to Be Men, 123.
way, I might have interpreted, I might have argued otherwise, as others sometimes have. All of this is obvious but perhaps bears repeating nonetheless, in a context in which you are being asked to cast ballots regarding the persuasiveness of my claims!

My thesis is that early Christian martyrdom texts queer gender. That is to say, they resist and subvert understandings of gender that were widely held in the ancient Mediterranean and that are arguably, to a great degree, still operative in our own context as well. The simplest version of this conventional understanding is that masculinity is active and dominating, femininity passive and submissive, that masculinity aligns with virtue and femininity does not—or at least it aligns with only lesser, more passive virtues. Masculinity and femininity exist on a spectrum, moreover, and one’s position on that spectrum is never stable or secure. Masculinity is always at risk.

Our texts leverage that risk by representing martyrdom as a kind of contest or competition in which manhood might be lost or won. Rather than subjects of public torture and execution, martyrs are seen to be victorious athletes, tested and proven in the combat of the arena and in the rhetorical combat that precedes it. But who are these manly victors? They are, overwhelmingly, non-men—that is, women, children, elders, disabled, slaves. Their bodies are otherwise than the expected ones.

Correspondingly, they skew virtue. They do not win by dominating but simply by enduring—by refusing to break. The only thing they control is their own wills; the cost of their victory is not someone else’s life but their own. Andreia—courage, manliness—has been significantly revised, then. At the very least, the emphasis has shifted. The martyrs’ passive resistance is seen as strength, the aggression of the rulers who torture, sentence, and execute them as weakness.

Counterbalancing the representation of martyrs as masculine athletes is the representation of martyrs as birthing mothers and the consequent privileging of maternal bodies, both literal and metaphorical. Pain proves generative, in the labor of martyrdom as in birthing. Suffering alone becoming suffering—with—compassion. Martyrdom gives birth to new life, to new bonds of love, and to new forms of nurture.

What, then, is the gender of martyrdom? It is neither masculine nor feminine nor does it simply transcend such distinctions. Rather it is hybrid, queered, crossing, emerging.
Bibliography


