

1 About Bodies, Gender, and Identity

This Element is about embodiment (Streete, 2009: 12). Specifically, it is about the way in which bodies are used as symbolic arenas for the performance of identity and vehicles for the inscription of that identity: in this case, a Christian one (Streete, 2018: 40).¹ Given its orientation toward the end of the present age, and its marginal position in the Roman Empire, emergent Christianity found embodiment a problematic aspect of being in the world. Christians developed two broad responses to that world as they embraced the idea of being in, yet not of, it. The first response, martyrdom, was a testimony to the strength their faith lent to fragile bodies, particularly those of women, perceived as the “weaker sex” (1 Pet 3:7), and the ability to overcome bodily limitation to attain the resurrection life, one that was conceived of as being in a bodily, if not fleshly, form. As will be shown in Section 3.2, Candida Moss (2019) demonstrates how hazy this idea of “bodily” form was in early Christianity.

The second response, asceticism, complemented and later continued martyrdom as a means of bodily transcendence, with participation in the spiritual world while still in the physical flesh, which was perceived as either a burden or an envelope. As Sebastian Brock and Susan Ashbrook Harvey (1987: 14) remark,

Martyrdom and asceticism are two forms of the same event: humanity’s encounter with the divine, specifically through the imitation of Christ, God incarnate. In times of peace it is the saint’s *Life* that is shown to mirror the work of Christ, usually with asceticism providing the manner of imitation. In times of persecution, it is the saint’s death, or rather the manner of the saint’s death, that proves significant: martyrs’ passions pivot on that event and what led up to it.

¹ While early Christianity was not monolithic, so that one might more properly speak of “Christianities,” discourses about martyrdom and ascetic behavior were shared by several varieties of Christianity, even those that might oppose them as deviating from “true” Christianity.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-009-05415-7 – Violated and Transcended Bodies: Gender, Martyrdom,
and Asceticism in Early Christianity

Gail P. Streete

Excerpt

[More Information](#)

As Mary Douglas (1996: 65) famously observed, bodily representation is inseparable from the society in which those bodies are located: “The social body constrains the way the physical body is perceived. The physical experience of the body, always modified by the social categories through which it is known, sustains a particular view of society.” The microcosmic body reflects the macrocosmic society (its universe), and vice versa. Whatever form of Christianity they practiced, early Christians thought a good deal about bodies, their thinking developing from the intersection of cultures in which Christianity as a distinct religion emerged. From Judaism, Christianity developed the idea of the person as a living being, an animate entity made in God’s image, one that God had endowed with breath (Gen 2:7), and, later, one that would be raised by God with the righteous in some recognizable, perhaps bodily form (4 Macc 18:17–19). In Hellenism, particularly in Greek philosophy and medicine, Christian writers and theologians found the concept of the “soul” (*psychē*), usually identified with mind or intelligence, and the mind’s often problematic relationship to the body, in which the body, characterized as *sarx*, or flesh, and its passions could prove an impediment to the soul and its reasoning powers. The Roman contribution to Christian thinking about bodies seems to have been one of display or spectacle: captive bodies marched in the triumphs of victorious Roman generals, or the disposable bodies on show in the arena in the *agon* (struggle or contest), to be dispatched by gladiators or beasts: “For the Romans . . . killing was not clandestine, nor was it to be ignored: the killers, the killing, the dying and the dead all were to be seen” (Kyle, 1998: 2). Yet from the Romans also, via Greco-Roman Stoicism, came the performance known as the heroic or noble death, the release of the embattled soul from the body by one’s own hand at the appropriate moment. Marcus Aurelius (*Meditations* 11.3) claimed that noble suicide had to be “without theatrics,” exhibiting an aristocratic Roman distaste for Christian martyrdoms (Droge and Tabor, 1992: 162). What the average person may have thought or felt about their bodies is unclear, since most of our evidence comes from texts written by the literate, but one thing is certain: bodies and their breakability and expendability were visibly present on a daily basis in the social and political realms of slavery, warfare, childbirth, gladiatorial combat, executions, and routine torture of slaves and criminals.

For the early Christians, as for their contemporaries, “Bodies mattered as much . . . as they do now – and particular bodies mattered more and embodied more power and authority than others” (Vander Stichele and Penner, 2009: 40–1). Bodies, moreover, had status as well as gender. For example, slaves were routinely referred to as “the bodies, *ta sōmata*” in Greek (Glancy, 2002: 10). Even when the Roman Empire became Christian, the bodies of female slaves and those of the underclasses (the *humiliores*) were not expected to be held in the same honor as those of the freeborn and upper classes (*honestiores*): as Theodosian Codex 9.7.1 (326 CE) indicates, the virtue of chastity was neither expected nor possible for these lower-class women because of their “worthless life” (Brown, 1988: 24).² The ancients also understood the concept of “performing gender” long before postmodernism used the phrase and did not employ a strict gender binary, using a sliding scale or spectrum of masculinity and femininity, but this is not to say that women’s and men’s bodies remained physically undifferentiated, at least in the literature. As Vander Stichele and Penner (2009: 67) note, “Gender [in the ancient world] was not so much a given, but rather something that had to be acquired and proven,” by demonstration and observation. Gender, in other words, was performed. Bodies perceived as passive, ones that could be dominated and penetrated, whether male or female, were defined as “feminine,” while those that were active and dominant were defined as “masculine” (Vander Stichele and Penner, 2009: 61). Torture was a violation of the body that made even male bodies technically female but could also make female bodies male through their steadfast endurance of pain (B. Shaw, 1996: 293). In the *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas*, for example, Felicitas’ birth pains are portrayed as more painful than what she will endure in the arena (*Martyrdom*, 15.6), childbirth being an ancient site of pain and the need for endurance for women, as envisioned by men. Euripides’ Medea declares, “I would very much rather stand three times in the front of battle than bear one child” (*Medea*, 250–1).

² For a more developed discussion of the intersection of gender and class in martyrdom and asceticism, see Section 4.1, “Bodies and Status.”

The body itself was classically understood as having two and possibly three components or realms: *sarx*, the flesh, which humans shared with animals; *psychē*, mind or soul; and *pneuma*, spirit or breath, an element that humans sometimes shared with the divine life, along with the *psychē*'s ability to reason. The fleshly part of the person was linked to the passions; the mind, if properly developed, was the seat of rationality and could control the body and its passions, as in Plato's Allegory of the Charioteer (*Phaedrus*, 246 c–254 c); while the spirit was the immortal part of the person, sometimes identified as soul, but in Jewish and Christian teaching, as the divine breath that God shared with human beings (Gen 1:26–27). Like their Greek and Roman contemporaries, the early Christians often saw the domain of flesh as inimical to that of the spirit, which was allied with God (Miles, 2013: 142). In its most extreme expression, found in some forms of Gnosticism, with its emphasis on the division between material and spiritual, this conflict was outright warfare: the true human, like the Divine, inhabited the spiritual realm, even while physically in the flesh, and any regard for the realm of the flesh – the material world – was a form of delusion. Some Gnostic Christians³ even inveighed against martyrdom, the use of the body as a form of testimony, as a cruel deception about the means of redemption. In the Coptic *Apocalypse of Peter* (6. 79. 22–31), for example, Christians are deceived into thinking that they imitate Christ in their deaths – an essential feature of martyrdom – when in fact the “living Savior” is “glad and laughing” (Streete, 2018: 42). Nonetheless, the orthodox Christian teachers and theologians⁴ who later dominated Christianity could not depict the flesh or the body, the entity that held together flesh and spirit, as wholly evil and still subscribe to the canonical view that God had created a good material universe that included human beings along with their mortal bodies. Because of their Greek philosophical studies, however, they struggled

³ “Gnostic” in this context refers to those who believe that we are saved by the secret knowledge the “Savior” (Jesus) came to impart: that the true human in the image of God is spirit.

⁴ “Orthodox” refers primarily to the Christian beliefs as developed in the third to eighth centuries, based on creeds, an accepted canon, and several Ecumenical (worldwide Christian) councils.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-009-05415-7 — *Violated and Transcended Bodies: Gender, Martyrdom, and Asceticism in Early Christianity*

Gail P. Streete

Excerpt

[More Information](#)

with this concept. Given the evidence of the gospels and the letters of Paul, these theologians had to understand the body of Christ as sacrificed, dead, and buried, which rose in bodily form, and as the body celebrated as redemptive in the ritual of the Eucharist. In the end, by attaching desire to the unruly flesh (*sarx*), they managed to exempt Jesus Christ, though incarnate, from human desire, and also to problematize human sexuality, locating it in the lower element of the body, and assigning the fallibility of the flesh primarily to the female gender (Miles, 2013: 141–2).

1.1 Bodily Existence in the New Testament

This development happened over some time. The pages of the New Testament, perhaps more than the writings of the early Church fathers, members of a classically educated literate elite, give some indication of ordinary Christian belief and practice, although highly redacted by literate members of the community, from the mid-first century to approximately the late second. Here we see Christian teachers, as the end of the present age and the return of Christ recede further into the future, having to deal with the bodily here-and-now but also with the continuing anticipation of a bodily resurrection, however far in the future. Paul's writings especially wrestle with defining "body" and its struggle between the competing realms of spirit and of flesh. In Galatians, Paul treats flesh versus spirit as an aspect of anti-circumcision (for Gentiles), but he does not limit it to that: "If you sow in your flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh, but if you sow from the spirit, you will reap eternal life from the spirit" (Gal 6:7).⁵ He also expresses a belief that would become highly influential in martyrologies: "I carry the marks of Jesus branded on my body," as if on the body of a slave (Gal 6:17). The fleshly mark of belonging to God was for him no longer circumcision, but the imprint of service, persecution, and self-denial. Paul again uses the conflict of flesh versus spirit in his letter to the Romans: "I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my [bodily] members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (Rom 7:23–4).

⁵ All scriptural quotations in English, unless otherwise noted, are from the New Revised Standard Version.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-009-05415-7 – Violated and Transcended Bodies: Gender, Martyrdom, and Asceticism in Early Christianity

Gail P. Streete

Excerpt

[More Information](#)

Paul continues to set flesh against spirit: “For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit” (Rom 8:5–6).⁶

The letter to the Colossians, whose authorship by Paul is disputed, does not emphasize the conflict of spirit versus flesh so much as it does the victory through bodily suffering of the witness to Christ: “I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh. I am completing what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body: that is, the church” (Col 1:24). Christ’s own body was the vehicle for the “indwelling” of the Deity (2:9). Similarly, in 2 Corinthians, Paul distinguishes his authentic apostolic authority from that of the would-be “hyper-apostles” because he and his companions are “always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be visible in our bodies” (2 Cor 4:10).

1.2 Body Metaphors in the Corinthian Correspondence

The Corinthian correspondence gives us Paul’s most memorable use of body as metaphor. It is a metaphor for unity: the newly baptized become part of an actual new creation or foundation (*ktisis*; 1 Cor 5:17), the church as the body of Christ: “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body . . . and we were all made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Cor 12:13). Here, body and spirit have no conflict and together symbolize the unity of the “body of Christ,” the church, in which the spirit dwells (12:27). Paul continues to emphasize bodies, both actual and metaphorical, in two ways: first, through the importance of sexual self-control in Chapter 7, which is later to become a major influence on norms of ascetic behavior; and second, in his discourse on resurrection in Chapter 15. In the first, Paul acknowledges but does not endorse marriage: for him, it is a stopgap for sexual immorality and lack of self-control (7:2–9). Far better, he thinks, is to “be anxious about the affairs of the Lord” rather than to be anxious for worldly things like pleasing one’s spouse (7:12–13). Paul offers an athletic training metaphor (*askēsis*) for earthly life, one that he delineates

⁶ See also Jn 3:6.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-009-05415-7 — *Violated and Transcended Bodies: Gender, Martyrdom, and Asceticism in Early Christianity*

Gail P. Streete

Excerpt

[More Information](#)

more fully in 9:26–7: “So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air, but I punish my body and enslave it.” Here, he seems to imply a distinct mind/body hierarchy, in which the body (here, the realm dominated by flesh) should be a slave, disciplined by the mind.

In Chapter 15, Paul addresses the problem that the Gentiles in his audience had with the Jewish idea of the resurrection of the body: clearly, when one dies (however one dies), it is the physical body, allied to the flesh, that dies. How can that be raised? Paul envisions a spiritual “body” that involves the transformation of the human entity: “It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body” (15:44). Otherwise, Paul believes, the resurrection of Jesus, whose incarnation and crucifixion are foundational for his faith, makes no sense. This idea of the transformation of the transitory physical body into the eternal resurrected body plays a great role in the stories of the martyrs, as we will see in Section 4.1 with the afterlives of Perpetua and Saturus in the *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas* (11:2; 12:27; 13:4).

1.3 *The Discipleship of Equals*

Although Paul initially may seem to have advocated a “discipleship of equals,” in Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s (1983: 95) phrase, claiming that “in Christ” differences such as male and female do not prevail (Gal 3:27–8); nevertheless, as Christianity departs from its radical roots and comes closer to conformity with “this world,” the divide between women’s and men’s physical bodies persists in this life, if not in the resurrection. Despite Jesus’ saying that “In the resurrection, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven” (Matt 22:30), later letters like the Deutero-Pauline, Pastoral, and Catholic Epistles, which are concerned more with taking the existing world as it is and transforming it in a Christian direction, characterize women who reject marriage as “silly” and “overwhelmed by their sins, and swayed by all kinds of desires” (1 Tim 3:6–7); subject to their passions (Tit 3:3); and also as the “weaker sex” (1 Pet 3:7). A wife can even be considered the “body” belonging to her husband (Eph 5:28). Similarly, slaves, whose bodies were at the disposal of their owners, especially female slaves, who were the “reproductive bodies” of their

masters (Glancy, 2002: 11), were enjoined to be obedient (Eph 6:5–8; Col 3:22–4; Tit 9–10) and even to endure being beaten because Christ also suffered (1 Pet 2:18–25). Suffering is a form of imitation of Christ.

2 Equal Opportunity: Martyrs and Ascetics

There were nonetheless two realms in which men and women, slave and free, were truly equal or, rather, one in which women became men and were therefore equal to them: martyrdom and the ascetic life. In the first part of what follows, on the subject of early Christian martyrdom, I will examine a selection of martyrologies, focusing on those collected by Herbert Musurillo (1972), the hagiographies from the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles (J. K. Elliott, 1993), and Palladius' *Lausiac History* (Clarke, 1918), together with Brock and Harvey's (1987) *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient*. I will not attempt to examine whether or not some or all of the martyrologies are "authentic": Allison Elliott (1988: 25) claims that "seventy authentic *passiones* survive." Moss (2013: 18) considers far fewer authentic or historical: she holds that six "can be treated as reliable": the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, the *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas*, the *Apologies* of Justin Martyr, the *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs* (which will not concern us here) and the *Martyrs of Lyons and Vienne*, as recorded by Eusebius in his *History of the Church*. Nonetheless, the point is not the historicity or reliability of these martyr accounts. As L. Stephanie Cobb notes, these texts are never meant to be history but to be "rhetorically effective" and "religiously instructive" (Cobb, 2016: 9). With regard to their depiction of women, Ross Kraemer offers the caveat that we need to attend "far more carefully to the degree to which the rhetorical uses of gender obscure our version of antiquity" (Kraemer, 2011: 11).

2.1 Martyrologies and Hagiographies as Propaganda for the Virtues

Martyrologies, like hagiographies – the stories of ascetic holy men and women – provide examples for Christian behavior and model definitions of Christian identity, not only as they adopt and modify accepted Greco-Roman

Cambridge University Press

978-1-009-05415-7 — Violated and Transcended Bodies: Gender, Martyrdom, and Asceticism in Early Christianity

Gail P. Streete

Excerpt

[More Information](#)

definitions of virtue but also as they add specific Christian virtues to the list, virtues that imitate, surpass, and ultimately replace Roman public, as well as private, virtues. These virtues (for men) include *parhēsia* (the open speech of free citizen males), which is often eschewed rather than embraced by women, in favor of imitating the silence of Jesus during his ordeal. Only in the gospel of John does Jesus have any extended speech: otherwise, as the evangelist Luke indicates, his silence is that of the sacrificial lamb (Acts 8:30–55, quoting Isa 53:7–8). In martyrdoms, moreover, actual speech is not necessary: like the body of Jesus, the bodies of the martyrs embody speech. Their public *martyria* (witness) in the arena becomes a form of free and open speech even more potent than their spoken responses at their trials.

One of the most important, maybe even central virtues in these accounts is *andreia* (Greek) or *virtus* (Latin), both of which literally mean “manliness” but are usually translated as “courage.” Courage or fortitude is one of Stoic philosophy’s cardinal or governing virtues, together with *sōphrosynē*, self-control, or in its more severe form, *enkrateia*, self-mastery (Cicero, *On Invention*, 2.53; Cobb, 2008: 6–8; Cooper, 1996: 17). Women’s virtues are more often characterized by the private qualities of modesty and chastity. But in the arena, women could also imitate and often surpass the primary male virtue of *andreia*, effectively becoming men (Cobb, 2008: 5; Streete, 2018: 41). Yet private female virtues could also be publicly displayed: Perpetua demands that she and Felicitas not be exposed naked in the arena (although she has no problem being naked as a male gladiator in one of her visions, *Martyrdom*, 10.7), and she even straightens her torn dress and pins up her disheveled hair when she is tossed by the mad heifer, “more mindful of shame (*pudor*, modesty) than of pain (*dolor*),” as the narrator in the Latin version of the *Martyrdom* puns (20:4–5). Susan Hylen (2015: 119), who calls Thecla a “modest” apostle, demonstrates that there was a “complexity” in both Roman and Christian norms of modesty that did not necessarily make women passively obedient but might also be willingly embraced by them as a marker of Christian identity. In the less public, but still visible, arena of ascetic practice, women also became men by exercising *sōphrosynē* and *enkrateia*, often adopting male dress and living as men. Stories of “harlot saints” who chose this route as a form of penitence abound, as will later be shown in Section 3.5. For the most part, however,

the main virtue of the female martyr is *andreaia*, the public virtue by which she becomes a man; the main virtue of the female ascetic is *enkrateia*, another prime masculine virtue, which entails mastering the passions and controlling sexual desire and its expression. Both virtues are complementary rather than separable or exclusive.

2.2 Martyrdom and Christian Identity

Christians as an entity, although not always under that name, made their first appearance in the writings of Roman historians of the second century CE. Suetonius (69–122) mentions an expulsion of Jews from Rome by the emperor Claudius (41–54) in 49 CE, because of riots *impulsore Chresto*, “at the instigation of [one] Chrestus” (*Claudius*, 25), which has often been taken to refer to disputes between Jewish sects, including the upstart followers of Jesus. “Chrestus,” however, is a fairly common slave name, and the expulsion may have occurred because of Roman fears of another slave uprising like that of Spartacus and his allies in 73 BCE. Suetonius also commends the emperor Nero (*Nero*, 16) for regulating several organized groups, including his “punishment inflicted on the Christians, a class of men given to a mischievous superstition.” This punishment is briefly mentioned by Suetonius before he passes on to Nero’s regulation of chariot drivers: he seems to treat both equally and to approve of both as contributing to the Roman order.

The Roman historian Tacitus (56–120) describes this punishment of Christians in greater detail in his *Annals* 15.44–5. In his account, the emperor Nero was suspected of having started the Great Fire of Rome in 64 but cleverly “fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace.” Tacitus goes on to trace the “most mischievous superstition” to its origin with “Christus,” who “suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus.” Tacitus relates how those who pleaded guilty (presumably after torture) gave information that convicted a “multitude,” not so much because of the fire but of their hatred of mankind.” He describes the spectacle of their punishment in the Circus Maximus as including “mockery of every sort,” in which