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Dying to Be Men

GENDER AND LANGUAGE IN
EARLY CHRISTIAN MARTYR TEXTS



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For my parents,

Sue and Jimmy Cobb

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What Is a Christian?

CONSTRUCTING A CHRISTIAN IDENTITY

We are what we are because they are not what we are.

—HENRI TAJFEL

In the 1960s and 1970s social psychologists began generating new hypotheses about the relationship between identity and group formation.¹ In particular, these theorists focused on group categorization and its effect on cognitive biases (e.g., bias in favor of one's in-group). In his work on racism and discrimination, for example, Henri Tajfel sought to determine the minimal requirements necessary for discrimination in favor of an in-group and against an out-group.² His experiments showed that discrimination is related to categorization: individuals categorize objects and people in order to make the world meaningful, but the very act of categorizing involves discrimination. Tajfel's work served as a corrective to an overemphasis on personal identity by insisting that social identity was equally important. He defined social identity as "the individual's knowledge that he/she belongs to certain groups together with some emotional and value significance to him/her of the group membership."³ Thus, social identity theory highlights the process of group formation and its effect on an individual's behavior.

This social psychology approach to group formation was more fully formulated in the 1970s in the work of John Turner and others.⁴ An important development in social identity theory at this time was Turner's hypothesis of self-categorization. Building on Tajfel's studies, Turner argued that people are capable of categorizing themselves in the same ways they categorize others: as we organize the world into manageable groups, we assign ourselves to certain ones. Through a process of comparison, individuals who are similar to the self become the in-group, while individuals who are different are assigned to various out-groups.

Social identity theory suggests that the formation of identity may be motivated by the desire to make the world meaningful, to reduce uncertainty, and, most important, to establish and affirm the self's role in society.⁵ Identity, therefore, is produced in the service of self-esteem: one's in-group is always perceived as superior to other groups, thus group membership enhances the individual's self-esteem. Humans categorize the world, identify with particular categories, and favorably judge their groups in order to feel better about themselves. Each of these processes—categorization, identification, and comparison—plays an equally important role in the formation of identity.

Applying social identity theory to the martyr acts demonstrates the role that the written records of the martyrs played in the process of categorization and identity making. Rather than concentrating solely on the psychology of individual Christians mentioned in the texts, social identity theory requires that we examine how and why individuals define themselves (or in this case, how authors define their characters) as part of a group and how group membership influences and explains intergroup encounters.

CONSTRUCTING SOCIAL IDENTITY

Categorization

In the *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas*, the editor narrates Perpetua's insistence that she can go by no name other than "Christian."⁶ In this instance Perpetua is described as an interchangeable group member; she has no individuating characteristics but instead locates her identity within a larger social group. When she prays for her brother Dinocrates, however, the editor highlights Perpetua's individuality.⁷ In this case, the text's heroine is differentiated from a social group and is described as an individual responding to a specific personal relationship. These two examples of differing identity—social versus personal—can be explained by the foundational tenet in social identity theory: we know who we are by comparing ourselves to others. In Tajfel's words, "we are what we are because they are not what we are."⁸ Identity, in other words, is formulated not independently but comparatively. Categorization, however, does not result in fixed identities. Indeed, one of the most important aspects of social identity theory is its assertion that identities are fluid and form in response to specific occurrences or interactions.

A person's identity, moreover, is comprised of both personal and social aspects. Sometimes we understand ourselves in terms of group membership but other times in terms of our uniqueness. Thus in different circumstances we identify ourselves as more or less a group member: the saliency of one's personal identity ("me" versus "not me") or social identity ("us" versus "them") is situationally determined.⁹

Identification

When Papyrus was hung up and scraped and withstood six men torturing him, he made no sound but endured the ordeal as a noble athlete.¹⁰ His reaction to torture was so courageous that the proconsul wondered about his extraordinary capacity for endurance. The martyr acts suggest that torture and death provided opportunities to demonstrate one's Christian identity. Indeed, in the martyrologies one's reaction to torture often points to one's social group. Dominic Abrams and Michael A. Hogg describe the process of an individual's identification with a particular group as follows: "First, people categorize and define themselves as members of a distinct social category or assign themselves a social identity; second, they form or learn the stereotypic norms of that category; and third, they assign these norms to themselves and thus their behavior becomes more normative as their category membership becomes salient."¹¹

The process of self-categorization outlined by Abrams and Hogg can be seen in the early Christian martyr accounts. While conversion and catechism (which I see as the equivalent of phases one and two in Abrams and Hogg's description) are typically not narrated, they are certainly presupposed.¹² The final phase of self-categorization—conforming to prescribed standards of group behavior—is the focal point of the martyrologies. As individuals face torture and persecution, their actions conform to the principal attributes of Christian identity, namely, courage, strength, reason, and justice. Since these traits were those most closely associated with masculinity in antiquity, in the texts under consideration here, it appears that to be a Christian was to be a man.

The effect of self-categorization is seen most clearly in its explanation of social influence. When personal identity is salient, the individual interacts with others on an interpersonal level. When social identity is salient, however, a person ceases to identify as a unique individual. This process, referred to as "depersonalization," results in the activation of one's social identity.¹³ No longer is the self seen as unique; rather, the person identifies as an inter-

changeable member of a group, as the embodiment of group norms. When a member regulates his behavior to conform to the group's standards, he reaffirms his membership in the group.

Comparison

The repeated claims to Christian masculinity in the martyrologies stem from the third aspect of the construction of social identity: comparison. As individuals categorize the world, they identify with certain groups, which they then judge more favorably than others. Favorable group comparison is accomplished by viewing one's own group as superior to similar groups. In this case, social identity is salient and individuals achieve positive self-esteem simply by identifying with the group.

Group comparisons, however, require a shared understanding of the kinds of power and resources that are desirable. Thus, a group is labeled "better" or "worse," "acceptable" or "unacceptable," "us" or "them" by attaining or forfeiting a specific commodity. Accordingly, the symbols and values employed by groups in competition are not idiosyncratic. Groups and their members compete for resources or powers that are valued by the culture at large. Hence Abrams and Hogg note that "many, if not most significant social identities reflect moral traditions and practices which extend beyond particular communities; they are properties and products of cultures."¹⁴ Intergroup competition typically results in value judgments being placed on individuals or social groups based on the possession of specific resources.

In the ancient world masculinity was a particularly valued commodity. Marcus Aurelius explains that the life of reason is comprised of justice (*δικαιοσύνης*), truth (*ἀληθείας*), self-control (*σωφροσύνης*), and manliness (*ἀνδρείας*).¹⁵ If, as I argue, masculinity is a primary attribute of Christian identities in the martyrologies, we should expect to find evidence of competition over this socially agreed-upon ideal. Indeed, as we will see, such evidence is abundant. The martyr accounts, moreover, do not merely assert Christian masculinity—they provide examples of it. In situation after situation, the martyrs show self-restraint, courage, and other masculine virtues while non-Christians display a less potent form of masculine behavior. The martyr accounts claim that Christians embody the attributes of the "life of reason"; the claim that Christians possessed justice, truth, self-control, and manliness did much to enhance Christians' self-esteem.

SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY APPLIED

Threats to Group and Self-Esteem

The subordination of self-esteem occurs when “low status groups acquiesce to majority rule.”¹⁶ If Christians, for example, submitted to demands to offer sacrifices to the gods (thus acquiescing to the majority rule), the consequence might have been a lowered self-esteem. In this case, group cohesion might also suffer, which could lead to the dissolution of the group. Many ancient Christian authors attest that Christian resistance to pagan hegemony and the display of masculine endurance during torture and death bolstered the martyr’s self-esteem. When non-Christians witnessed Christian confidence, it could spark conversion, as Tertullian famously asserted: “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.”¹⁷

Threats to self-esteem usually occur as challenges to the group’s possession of a particular resource and can originate both outside and inside one’s group. When group identity is being threatened, the importance of an individual’s performance of social identity is raised because each person is perceived as a representative of the group. In these cases, an individual’s performance is evaluated, and the group either affirms or rejects the person’s claim to group membership—that is, his social identity—based on the enactment of group characteristics. When a member’s actions do not conform to group norms, she is perceived as a threat to group identity and is rejected.¹⁸

Social identity theory, furthermore, predicts that we should expect a nonconforming in-group member to be rejected more vehemently than an out-group member because the in-group member is supposed to be a prototype of the group. The rejection of the in-group member—referred to as the “black sheep effect”—protects group identity by confirming the group’s standards: rejection eliminates the threat. Since in-group rejection occurs only when group cohesion is threatened, instances of it can provide important information about group identity.¹⁹ If, as I argue, masculinity is a key element in group identity, then it is surely not coincidental that only apostate Christians—nonconforming in-group members—are described as unmanly. These individuals are placed entirely outside of the group by denying they possess even inferior forms of the group’s ideals (i.e., they are “unmanly,” not “less manly”). The group, then, reaffirms its unity by expelling the unmanly Christian; this action also restores members’ self-esteem by reestablishing group superiority.

Self-esteem is based not only on successful competition, however, but also on the perception of an individual’s power. Jean-Paul Codol explains the importance of “the attribution to oneself of a certain power over the mate-

rial and social environment. The conception of oneself as the origin of certain effects, the feeling that one can influence things and people, the ability to guide or master, at least to some extent, the events in the surrounding world—all this is directly associated with a positive self-image.”²⁰ The authors of the martyrologies enhance Christian self-esteem by portraying the martyrs as influencing physical outcomes. In these accounts, the persecutor has surprisingly little authority over life and death: the martyrs decide their own fates. The martyr’s will, according to these texts, is the origin of her condemnation. Attending to the issue of choice enhances self-esteem because these texts emphatically insist that Christians did not acquiesce to pagan will. The authors, therefore, did not have to abandon “objective” history altogether by narrating the *physical* victory of the martyrs over their persecutors. The focus on masculine self-control was itself a persuasive statement of Christian power over other groups. Thus textual masculinity was a potent source of positive self-esteem.

Actions Contrary to Self-Interest

Group politics and social identification help us understand an individual’s behavior when it appears to be contrary to his self-interest, such as, in this case, the quest for death. Theories of group politics suggest that inclusion in a group provides adequate motivation for an individual to suppress her will or desire (personal identity) for what is advantageous for the group (social identity).²¹ In the first centuries of the Common Era, Christians, as illustrated by those memorialized in martyrologies, had to identify strongly with group commitments to preserve the Christian movement. Strong commitments, notes Hardin, result in a “willingness to run grotesque risks of personal harm for a meager group benefit.”²² This willingness, indeed desire, is perhaps the most unsettling aspect of the Christian martyrologies, but it provides a compelling example of the strength of Christian identity. The martyr’s manly attitude toward death placed him solidly within the group. Thus social identity theory enables us to understand the seemingly psychotic behavior of Christians as the activation of social identity.

From the perspective of social identity theory, the description of the martyrs as masculine is logical: it set them apart from the (less masculine) Jews and pagans, and, by claiming that Christians possessed a culturally valued commodity, it enhanced self-esteem. The centrality of masculinity to Christian identity also explains why Christians would submit to martyrdom (due to the saliency of social identity) and why Christians who did not conform to

group norms were rejected (the black sheep effect). But as Christians were tortured and stood in the arena to die at the Roman ruler's directive, they appeared to lack clear signs of masculinity, such as the exercise of power over oneself and the ability to control the actions of others. Self-determination was central to ancient understandings of masculinity. Marcus Aurelius, for example, describes his adoptive father, emperor Antoninus Pius, as "a mature man [ἀνὴρ πέπειρος], complete, indisposed to flattery, having the power to manage his own affairs as well as those of others."²³ The description of condemned criminals—standing unarmed in the arena facing beasts or gladiators—as self-determining seems nonsensical. To understand how the claim for Christian masculinity could be made, therefore, it is necessary to detour briefly into a selective discussion about gender and sex in the Roman world.²⁴

SEX AND GENDER IN ANTIQUITY

When Polycarp entered the arena for his trial, he heard a voice from heaven saying, "Be strong, Polycarp, and be a man [Ἴσχυε, Πολύκαρπε, καὶ ἀνδρίζου]."²⁵ This divine exhortation to Polycarp is striking: isn't Polycarp already a man? In Perpetua's fourth and final vision she participates in a contest with an Egyptian who is later designated "the devil." As Perpetua's attendants removed her clothes to prepare her for battle, she realized that she had become a man (*facta sum masculus*).²⁶ These examples raise an important question: what does masculinity entail in antiquity? How can Polycarp—anatomically male—be exhorted to "be a man" and Perpetua—anatomically female—declare that she has become a man?

Scholars have long agreed that gender is a socially constructed category. Thomas Laqueur, however, devotes his book *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* to arguing that sex is also socially constituted. He writes,

To be sure, difference and sameness, more or less recondite, are everywhere; but which ones count and for what ends is determined outside the bounds of empirical investigation. The fact that at one time the dominant discourse construed the male and female bodies as hierarchically, vertically, ordered versions of one sex and at another time as horizontally ordered opposites, as incommensurable, must depend on something other than even a great constellation of real or supposed discoveries.²⁷

Laqueur concludes that empirical data do not hold the answers to constructions of sex: "Science does not simply investigate, but itself constitutes, the

difference my book explores: that of woman from man."²⁸ Thus, explanations of sex differences and the gendered characteristics accompanying them are best understood as illustrations of cultural beliefs, not objective facts.²⁹

That males and females are different is common sense in our world, but what constitutes common sense differs among cultures and ages. The discussion that follows, therefore, may seem counterintuitive to readers not familiar with ancient views of gender and sex. Scholars who work in modern gender theory, moreover, may find the ancient system frustratingly unsystematic. The belief that anatomy and character are intricately interwoven, always interdependent and inseparable, for example, makes little sense to a modern reader, who differentiates between the physiological and the psychological, the anatomical and the emotional. But the theoretical distinctions between sex and gender that lie at the core of modern scholarly discourse are foreign to the ancient system.³⁰ As Dale Martin reminds us, we must not force our system of sex differentiation onto ancient authors. Rather we must strive to understand the ideologies that inform our sources: "Perhaps the most interesting way to proceed toward an understanding of the ancient body is to try to wipe clean our slate of corporeal vocabulary and attempt the (ultimately impossible) task of taking an imaginative leap into the past, recognizing that even 'things' like bodies, minds, and matter will not only look, but actually be, quite different in a world so unlike our own."³¹

Sexual Categorization

One of the first problems we encounter when we "leap into the past" is sexual categorization. Modern Western society does not often acknowledge this difficulty, having solved the dilemma by canonizing two anatomically identifiable bodies—male and female—and relegating other sexual bodies to that catchall category labeled "unnatural."³² Interestingly, ancient constructions of sex allowed for more ambiguity, because the terms "masculine" and "feminine," "male" and "female," "manly" and "womanly" described types of individuals, not simply their anatomy. In fact, one of the most important aspects of ancient sex construction is its insistence on the fundamental similarities between male and female bodies. We must leave behind the binary formula of male-female if we hope to understand ancient authors who often wrote of sex in terms of a continuum, what Laqueur calls the "one-sex model."³³ According to the one-sex model, differences between males and females are not of kind but of degree, and a person's position on the continuum is determined by the preponderance of maleness or femaleness.³⁴ Sex, like identity, is established by comparison: an individual is more or less masculine than another. As the second-century medical writer Galen notes, "All the parts,

then, that men have, women have too, the difference between them lying in only one thing, which must be kept in mind throughout the discussion, namely, that in women the parts are within [the body], whereas in men they are outside."³⁵ Galen asserts that when examining a female body, "you could not find a single male part left over that had not simply changed its position; for the parts that are inside in woman are outside in man."³⁶ It is as if Galen thought, to borrow Laqueur's words, "a man could be squeezed out of a woman."³⁷

The location of the generative organs—external or internal—might seem an obvious sign of sex, but it was the *possession* of identical organs, not the *position* of them, that mattered because positions could change. Indeed, one of the most interesting aspects of the one-sex model is its allowance—in theory, at least—for one's sex to change. The transformation of female to male, in fact, was the subject of popular stories dating back at least to the time of Pliny the Elder. These stories often focused on women who performed what were perceived to be masculine activities (e.g., running too fast or jumping over a fence) and subsequently became men (that is, their genitalia descended and they were identifiably sexed as male).³⁸ Pliny insisted that accounts of females becoming males were not just idle stories. He testified to having seen an African woman turn into a male on her wedding day.³⁹ If, therefore, men and women are biologically comparable—made up of the same "stuff"—sex differentiation cannot rely solely on anatomical observation. That males and females were more alike than different, however, did not result in biological or social equality: for many reasons, the male form was superior to the female.

The Superiority of the Male

According to many ancient authors—from the contributors to the Hippocratic tradition to Aristotle and beyond—the hierarchical ranking of male over female was the result of the placement of the genitalia, the quality of the sperm, or the temperature and dryness of the body.⁴⁰ Sex was understood as a continuum, with perfect maleness at one end and imperfect, defective, or deficient maleness (what we might call "femaleness") at the other.⁴¹ Humans were believed to be composed of both male and female elements, however, so individuals were placed somewhere between these two extremes. "This hot/cold, dry/moist, hard/soft system," Martin notes, "does not relate simply to the division between men and women. Every body contains the same spectrum within it."⁴² For example, Philo, a first-century Jewish philosopher, writes, "In the soul, just as in families, there is, on the one hand, a male element [ἀρρηνη] derived from men [ἀνδρῶν], and on the other hand, a female

element [θῆλεια] derived from women [γυναικῶν]."⁴³ In Philo's discussion, the female element is clearly inferior—indeed, it is offensive and even dangerous—and, for one's safety and health, it should be amputated just as one would amputate a hand that had been used in an assault.⁴⁴

In an exegesis of Exodus 12:5, Philo also notes the relative perfection of male to female. In his comments on the sacrificial requirement of a perfect male sheep, he writes, "And [it is to be] male, first, because the male is more perfect than the female. Wherefore it is said by the naturalists that the female is nothing else than an imperfect male."⁴⁵ Philo, it seems, was speaking about sex differences in general, since, as the exegesis continues, his description of female and male reaches beyond the sheep with which he began: "For progress is indeed nothing else than the giving up of the female nature by changing into the male, since the female nature is material, passive, corporeal and sense-perceptible, while the male is active, rational, incorporeal and more akin to mind and thought."⁴⁶ The status of male to female is further clarified by the virtues Philo assigns to each. Males possess those virtues toward which all people should strive (particularly rationality), while females possess qualities all people should avoid (particularly passivity and materiality).⁴⁷ Interestingly, however, Philo holds out the possibility of women moving up the scale of perfection by overcoming their femininity (i.e., by becoming male).⁴⁸

The superiority of male to female is also clear in Galen's writings: "The female is less perfect than the male for one, principal reason—because she is colder; for if among animals the warm one is the more active, a colder animal would be less perfect than a warmer. . . . Now just as mankind is the most perfect of all animals, so within mankind the man is more perfect than the woman, and the reason for his perfection is his excess of heat."⁴⁹ Galen argues that the imperfection of women lies in the lack of heat required to draw the generative parts to the outside of the body. This defect, as Galen calls it, is not a total loss for humanity: although the female is "in all respects" less perfect than the male, this imperfection "provided no small advantage for the race; for there needs must be a female. Indeed, you ought not to think that our Creator would purposely make half the whole race imperfect and, as it were, mutilated, unless there was to be some great advantage in such a mutilation."⁵⁰ So, according to Galen, confidence in a perfect creator need not be shaken by the clear imperfection of women; the existence of both male and female derives from and serves the divine will.

Ancient physicians, physiognomists, and philosophers had to account not only for differences between males and females but also for differences among males. Why were some men stronger, more powerful, and more virtuous—i.e., more masculine—than others? Aretaeus, a contemporary of Galen,

attributed the variations among men to the quality of semen. He believed semen contributed to men's "health, strength, [and] courage."⁵¹ He writes, "For it is the semen, when possessed of vitality, which makes us men, hot, well braced in limbs, hairy, well voiced, spirited, strong to think and to act, as the characteristics of men prove. For when semen is not possessed of its vitality, persons become shrivelled, have a sharp tone of voice, lose their hair and their beard, and become effeminate."⁵² Aretaeus refers to two distinguishable groups: those whose semen possesses vitality and those whose semen does not. It is clear that the former is by far the superior of the two groups. He establishes maleness by means of a number of different characteristics, not all of which are anatomically based. Since the second group is described in terms reminiscent of those used to describe women (e.g., sharp tone of voice, less hairy, effeminate), Aretaeus may be advancing a common belief that both men and women produce or possess sperm, but the sperm is of differing qualities.⁵³

Maleness, furthermore, was not an arrived-at state but rather the goal of a lifelong quest that required self-control, wisdom, and virtue. Although anatomically sexed males were closer to the perfect state of masculinity, they, too, had continuously to strive to be men.⁵⁴ Males began their quest for manliness from the moment of birth. They were expected to develop masculine characteristics, but *development* is the key; they could, at any moment, fail at the task and slip down the continuum toward femininity.⁵⁵ Since women not only were inferior to men, but were, in fact, inferior *men*—a belief expressed repeatedly in the ancient literature—they could move up the continuum toward masculinity.⁵⁶ Because sex categories were not fixed, individuals were aware of the possibility that their actions or demeanor could propel them up or down the scale of manliness.

Physiognomy: The Science of Sex Assignment

The existence of the science of physiognomy in antiquity demonstrates that sex assignment was not based solely on anatomy. Polemo, a second-century physiognomist, explains how sex assignments were made:

You may obtain physiognomic indications of masculinity and femininity from your subject's glance, movement, and voice, and then, from among these signs, compare one with another until you determine to your satisfaction which of the two sexes prevails. For in the masculine there is something feminine to be found, and in the feminine something masculine, but the name "masculine" or "feminine" is assigned according to which of the two prevails.⁵⁷

Polemo's observations provide another example of the assumption that all humans are comprised of both male and female elements. When Polemo continues, however, he addresses not only masculine comportment but also masculine virtue: sex and virtue, it turns out, are so integrally related that a person's sex can be determined by his or her personality and character. He writes,

The male is physically stronger and braver, less prone to defects and more likely to be sincere and loyal. He is more keen to win honor and he is worthier of respect. The female has the contrary properties: she has but little courage and abounds in deceptions. Her behavior is exceptionally bitter and she tends to hide what is on her mind. She is impulsive, lacks a sense of justice, and loves to quarrel: a blustering coward. . . . It is possible to find masculine qualities also in women.⁵⁸

Polemo restates the conclusions of other authors we have examined. He assumes a one-sex model and suggests that the preponderance of masculinity results in an identifiably more virtuous character. Men are stronger and braver, more sincere and loyal than women. We should note, however, that Polemo also testifies to the instability of sex determinations: masculine qualities (strength, bravery, sincerity, honor) can be found in women. While sex and gender were linked in antiquity so that sexually identified males were expected to perform the socially defined roles of masculinity, things were much more complex in the mess of reality. It is not unusual, as we will see, for anatomically sexed females to be portrayed as masculine (i.e., embodying culturally assigned attributes of men) or for anatomically sexed males to be portrayed as feminine (i.e., embodying the attributes of women).

Physiognomists like Polemo also give us clues as to how authors might describe their characters as a means of signaling sex. For example, people described as dark-skinned or very light-skinned were considered cowardly, a decidedly unmasculine trait.⁵⁹ A person described as strong and brave was believed to embody the characteristics most associated with masculinity, while the person who was deceptive might be depicted as feminine. Masculinity and femininity, like identities, are always relative terms: an individual may be warmer and drier or stronger and braver than another person—regardless of his or her sex—and thus be manlier. Rather than the binary formula male/female, then, it is more helpful to think in terms of an economy of exchange: in the martyrologies, when Christian social identity is salient, individuals—male and female alike—must cultivate masculine characteristics and suppress feminine ones.

Sex and Power

The sociopolitical import of masculinity and femininity in antiquity was integrally related to the issue of power. A person's location on the male-female continuum constituted his social power. To be a male was to exert control over oneself and others, to show oneself capable of governing by ruling a household properly. To be a male was to *perform* masculinity. As Laqueur notes, in the ancient world "to be a man or a woman was to hold a social rank, a place in society, to assume a cultural role, not to be organically one or the other of two incommensurable sexes."⁶⁰ He continues, "Serious talk about sexuality is thus inevitably about the social order that it both represents and legitimates. . . . Almost everything one wants to say about sex—however sex is understood—already has in it a claim about gender. Sex, in both the one-sex and the two-sex worlds, is situational; it is explicable only within the context of battles over gender and power."⁶¹

Sex and gender are indicators not only of social power, but also, as we have already seen, of character, demeanor, and virtue. Males—because they are stronger, warmer, and hairier, speak with deep voices, and have external genitalia—represent the more perfect end of the continuum. With warmth, hair, and other male attributes come rationality and the four classical masculine virtues of justice, self-control, wisdom, and manly courage. Cicero, in fact, identifies virtue itself with masculinity: "For it is from the word for 'man' that the word virtue is derived." He restates his conclusion in unambiguous terms: "We must exercise [scorn of death and pain] if we wish to prove possessors of virtue, or rather, since the word for 'virtue' is borrowed from the word for 'man,' if we wish to be men."⁶² Similarly, Plutarch equates virtue with masculinity.⁶³ Females, on the other hand, because they are weaker, colder, have less hair, speak with high voices, and have internal genitalia, represent the more imperfect end of the spectrum. For females to display the virtues of self-control or courage, they must suppress their femininity and become male.

Women's Virtues

Ancient constructions of sex assigned women to the lower end (i.e., the less manly end) of the continuum, but women were also associated with positive characteristics. If we are to recognize the ways the authors of the martyrologies feminize their heroines—and, therefore, not dismiss feminizing rhetoric as banal and insignificant—we must familiarize ourselves with what ancient authors characterized as ideal womanly behavior. Seneca, in a let-

ter to his mother, describes the ideal woman as chaste, having no desire for jewels or riches, unadorned by cosmetics, and modest.⁶⁴ Valerius Maximus commends the loyalty of women to their husbands: "Tertia Aemilia, wife of the elder Africanus and mother of Cornelia of the Gracchi, was so accommodating and patient that although she knew that one of her slave girls had found favour with her husband, she pretended to be ignorant of it, lest she, a woman, charge a great man, world-conquering Africanus, with lack of self-control." Thuria, wife of Quintus Lucretius, hid her husband from authorities at the risk of her own life. Sulpicia disguised herself as a slave in order to follow her husband to Sicily.⁶⁵ Juvenal describes the woman worth marrying in this way: "Let her be handsome, charming, rich, and fertile; let her have ancient ancestors ranged about her halls; let her be more chaste than all the disheveled Sabine maidens who stopped the war—a prodigy as rare upon the earth as a black swan! Yet who could endure a wife that possessed all perfections?"⁶⁶

Roman inscriptions also record women's merits. Asë is recognized in a first-century C.E. inscription as "a woman who was chaste and cultivated and who glorifies both her city and her family with praise won for her conduct."⁶⁷ A second-century C.E. inscription from Pergamum reads,

Farewell, lady Panthia, from your husband. After your departure, I keep up my lasting grief for your cruel death. Hera, goddess of marriage, never saw such a wife: your beauty, your wisdom, your chastity. You bore me children completely like myself; you cared for your bridegroom and your children; you guided straight the rudder of life in our home and raised high our common fame in healing—though you were a woman you were not behind me in skill.⁶⁸

This man's statement of his wife's accomplishments summarizes well the evidence considered to this point: commendable women were loyal to their families, modest, chaste, not greedy, beautiful, fertile, and virginal. If the ideal for women was to be, for example, beautiful, descriptions of female Christians as beautiful must carry as much hermeneutical weight as descriptions of their manliness.

Masculinity and Social Status

I have discussed the relationship of male to female on the spectrum of masculinity, but up to this point we have considered only free men and women. Social status, however, also affected a person's placement on the scale of masculinity. Since control over one's life was an important part of mascu-

linity, slaves would certainly be located near the bottom of the spectrum. Indeed, there is some evidence that slaves were not considered human—and thus sexed—at all. Richard Saller explains:

According to Latin antiquarian writers, during the Campitalia held in January woolen balls and male and female woolen dolls were hung in the cross-roads—one ball for each slave in the household and one doll for each free member. . . . The ritual gave crude, stark expression to a model of the household in which all members, free and slave, gained protection through this rite, but in a fashion that distinguished visually between those symbolically humanized and gendered, and those dehumanized in form.⁶⁹

The relationship of social status and masculinity can also be seen in Artemidorus's dream interpretations: a dream is inauspicious if the person dreams of engaging in same-sex relations with an equal, but the dream has mostly auspicious meanings if the sex partner is of a lower social status. Rules for sexual morality hinged on accepting one's proper place—either as the dominant, penetrating male or the submissive, penetrated female. Young boys and slaves (regardless of sex) were placed in the female, or submissive and penetrated, category, and thus were acceptable sex partners for free male citizens.⁷⁰ The claims of the martyrologies—that Christian men, women, and slaves were manlier than their persecutors—are the all grander and more surprising when considered in the light of ancient constructions of sex and gender.

To enable us to grasp the full significance of depicting the martyrs as masculine, the stories must be understood within the context of the construction of sex in antiquity and its association with virtue. Without this understanding, the exhortation to Polycarp to “be a man” and Perpetua's vision of becoming a man are no more than clichés. Attending to the ways the authors of the martyrologies employed current discourses about sex and virtue, however, reveals the group-building work done by the narratives: equating Christianity with masculinity enabled Christians to establish order in their world. Claiming such a culturally valued trait, moreover, enhanced Christian group esteem.

2

Noble Athletes

GLADIATORIAL, ATHLETIC, AND MARTIAL IMAGERY
IN THE MARTYR ACTS

Without an adversary, virtus shrivels.

—SENECA, *DE PROV.* 2.4

Your one salvation was to join my camp and die with an unconquered neck.

—LUCAN, *BELL. CIV.* 9.379–380

Since claims to masculinity in the ancient world were claims not only to strength but also to power and authority over others, Christians could hardly claim for themselves a masculine status: second- and third-century Christians lived at the mercy of the Roman ruler and died by his caprice. As the locus of attack, moreover, the martyrs' battered bodies should have been proof of their lack of masculinity. The textually masculinized martyr, however, challenged the perception of domination. The literary tool of masculinization inscribed resistance to pagan hegemony onto the body of the martyr.

One way the martyrologies demonstrated Christian masculinity was by depicting their heroes as gladiators and athletes—some of the most potent cultural symbols of masculinity—thereby revising their audiences' expectations of the events narrated. As gladiators and athletes, the martyrs were not passive victims of Roman power but active participants in a fight for honor.¹ Even though Christian power was not evident in the public sphere—that is, the martyrs did not wield visible political authority—Christians' perception that they possessed power was all that was needed to affirm a masculine social identity and to enhance their self-esteem.

The martyrs are often portrayed as athletes (ἀθλητής) who contend in conflicts (ἀγών). The heroes and heroines of the martyrologies are referred to as trained (γυμνάζ), while those unable to compete successfully are described as untrained or unprepared (ἀγύμναστος). This athletic language is used in conjunction with amphitheatrical language to portray the martyrs as active—and thus manly—in approaching death. As virile fighters, gladia-