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Among the records expressing medieval attitudes on violence, those provided by hagiography may offer specific and enriching insights. This paper will focus on medieval female hagiography as a genre that not only contributed to the development of the notion of divine sacrifice, but that also conditioned the social response to violence against women during the Middle Ages. In the quest for the bonds between sex and violence,¹ feminist authors have turned, among others, to the study of religious issues and their anthropological interpretations. Among these, René Girard's approach to communal violence remains a vital theoretical construction. Departing from such notion, he perceives certain affinities between violence and sex:

Like violence, sexual desire tends to fasten upon surrogate objects if the object to which it was originally attracted remains inaccessible; it willingly accepts substitutes. And again like violence, repressed sexual desire accumulates energy that sooner or later bursts forth, causing tremendous havoc.²

Feminist interpretations account for these seemingly paradoxical similarities by stating that patriarchal societies have institutionalized violence in order to preserve a system based on the male possession and alleged protection of women against other men. These theories reveal the links between patriarchal oppression and the view of violence as acceptable or even attractive, the myth of rape as desired by women being one of its main consequences. It is precisely in warfare situations where this "chattel" quality of women comes to the fore and sexual violence is most freely exerted. In most of these societies then, violence is still associated to a basically mimetic and retributive reaction, carried out by men and translated as a virile heroic attitude that renders their actions as decisive to the community's welfare.

Notwithstanding this, violence must have been sensed since early times as a kind of unstoppable disease, and societies have consequently sought ways to contain it. According to Girard, when facing the almost unavoidable contagion of imitative violence, these early human groups developed control mechanisms that put a limit to the propagation of hostilities,

such as the concept and practice of sacred violence –that which is carried out by the group order to prevent the gods’ wrath falling over the community.

As a primary model to elude the aggression of outward forces –natural disasters, plagues–, as well as to curtail intra-groupal bloodshed, the articulation of sacrificial violence would ensure peace and survival. Through the death of a victim or scapegoat, the contagion effect of violence is suspended and peace returns to the community with the blessings of the god. Although in this system collective anger is oriented towards some outcast person or minority group, the gratitude due to the god may ultimately be transferred to the scapegoat itself, who has somehow elicited the break in the chain of hostilities, and who occasionally might even acquire divine attributes. Thus, it is Girard’s contention that many of our myths derive from violent sacrificial rituals that have conveniently been sublimated and concealed.

While most cultures have veiled the element of sacrificial violence in their origin myths, some key episodes in the Old Testament not only evince this content but even acknowledge the presence of the scapegoat as a particular victim with individual human claims. Hence, within this biblical tradition, the account of Christ’s crucifixion is presented as the ultimate instance in the historical development of the idea of the victims’ vindication. Christ’s voice is a subjective one that denounces the cruelty of his sacrifice and submits to it only with the aim of eradicating such a system forever. His is presented for once as the definitive means to overcome the Old Testament bloody sacrifice pattern and to replace universal violence with a peaceful model. The magnitude of such action would encompass the redemption of the community at large, since any guilt or transgression of its members would by far be compensated through the death of this very special victim, which would make any present or future offerings redundant. However, on the other hand, the resurrection motive would turn his sacrifice ineffectual, since death’s beneficial effects would be interrupted, and might instead reproduce new violence.

This twofold circumstance could have conditioned the diverse responses to violence of the early Church. While some authors delved on the theory that Christ’s passion had brought about the end of the ancient sacrificial system and the inauguration of a new peaceful order, some other interpretations of the event led to the reproduction of new sacrificial violence. It is precisely in the martyrs’ acts that this peculiar fork in the road of Christianity may be perceived, and it is here where the administration of gender categories proved useful to the emergence of the Christian model.

Early members of the Church understood the reversal overcome by Christ’s sacrifice within a larger subversive order that granted salvation to the meek and humble, thus calling

for a general inversion of classical ideological tenets. Christians took pride in the self-debasement of their god, who in becoming a human being and a sacrificial victim, had taken on the set of attributes so far characteristic of the female gender. Women, traditionally perceived through their bodily values and roles, were consequently attracted to the Christian scheme, given their subordinated place in the social configuration of the ancient world. As the experience of future mystics would make clear, the roles of giving birth, healing or nurturing, arising from the female bodily condition, very soon became metaphors for Christ's works and sacrifice. Thus, the early Christian women would have been easily prompted to identify with his passion through these bodily metaphors.

But could these Christian followers, men and women, evade the model of the sacrificial scapegoat that Christ had supposedly come to supersede? For one, they did recognize the futility of ancient sacrificial rituals, which once they had had to conform to as members of the Jewish or Roman cultures. In fact, one of the trials to which they were exposed in the judicial procedure was the recanting from their Christian belief by complying with the worship of the pagan gods and of the emperor. In defending instead a kind of worship away from blood, animals or sacrificial altars, they betrayed the imperial cult and ideology. It would have been contradictory to present themselves to the Romans as new surrogate lambs.

Early Christian authors counteracted such meek stance through the special emphasis placed on the vivid and fervent spiritual experience of the martyr, founded on the concept of "passion", the glorification of passiveness in front of pain and death. Ironically, this inner passion coalesced into the classical heroic pattern based, not on passiveness, but on action; hence in the first accounts of martyrs' deaths, after the episodes dedicated to the saints' stay in prison, interrogation and torture, the definitive moment of death takes place in a scenery quite distant from that of the temple where old sacrificial victims used to be slaughtered: martyrdoms were conceived precisely as public spectacles that took place in arenas or amphitheaters:

The portrayal of the martyrs as gladiators and their struggles as gladiatorial contests reflects not only the contemporary cultural scene of violence and its influence on Christian literature but also the conscious Christian appropriation of the culture of violence in transforming the image of martyrs.³

Despite this, their punishment was but a reenactment of Christ's offering, and hence their acceptance of torment and their death fostered simultaneously the perpetuation of the sacrificial cycle which Christ's death had originally meant to preclude, according to Mark Heim.⁴ Thus, the early Church couldn't help reproducing the inherent violence that its definitive alliance with the empire would entail.

Martyr legends drawing on the Roman judicial consular acts are given full narrative form in *passionales* from the 4th century onwards and illustrate the ecclesiastical adoption of this twofold standard of the culture that sustains the idea of the empowerment of the victims to justify new violence. In most of these stories gender-based violence becomes an asset of the narrative style in search of pathos. The role of women reveals contradictory standpoints. On the one hand, their alleged humbleness and weakness become symbolic weapons through which they embody instead the strength of the low. On the other hand, they are granted the power to oppose, reply and defy not only the devil, but the civil authorities and the patriarchal model that would make them obey their fathers, suitors and husbands and comply with their matrimonial and reproductive duties. Therefore, in these accounts they are given the chance to become independent women who follow their own accord when abandoning their family roles as daughters, brides, wives or even mothers. Such is the case of Perpetua of Carthage, an early 3rd century young mother who insists on leaving her just born baby in her father's care in order to rush into martyrdom. In the autobiographic account of her passion she tells of a dream she had while in prison in which she becomes a *virago*, a man-like woman, here in the shape of a fighter in the arena:

[...] out against me came an Egyptian, foul of aspect, with his seconds: he was to fight with me. And some handsome young men came up beside me: my own seconds and supporters. And I was stripped naked, and became a man. And my supporters began to rub me with oil, as they do for a wrestling match; [...] And we joined combat, and fists began to fly. He tried to grab my feet, but I struck him in the face with my heels. And I felt airborne, and began to strike him as if I were not touching ground. But when I saw there as a lull, I locked my hands, clenching my fingers together, and so caught hold of his head; and he fell on his face, and I trod upon his head. The populace began to shout, and my supporters to sing jubilantly.⁵

This heroic attitude that calls for the reversal of gender roles will be underscored mainly after the 4th century, when –under Constantine– the situation of the Church improved substantially and saw the dramatic development of a dialectic movement entertained by the early Fathers against Jews and gentiles; doctrinal issues were accompanied by the refashioning of previous symbols, the most important one being the instrument of torture *par excellence*: the cross, which now turned into an emblem of triumph, not of shame. The account of the *inventio crucis* or discovery of Christ's cross by Constantine's mother, empress Helena, spread throughout the eastern and western territories and hers was one of the most influential models for later hagiographical depictions of charitable widows, empresses, and Germanic queens. In the 9th century Old English version of the story by Cynewulf, the royal mother is an intrepid woman whose endeavor to find the hidden cross leads her to Jerusalem, where she is the one who commands the cruel torture on the Jew who must reveal the whereabouts of the buried cross.⁶ Here, the *virago* figure, the woman with the male role of fighting that we saw in Perpetua of Carthage, evolves into that of an agent of torture who inflicts pain on God's behalf.

By the 6th century, hagiographical authors emphasized the model of the *virgo* or virgin as a martyr in order to inspire female audiences into a life of ecclesiastical seclusion and chastity. In these examples, female heroism is based on the saint's capacity to reject the sexual advances of pagan suitors, their virgin bodies standing for the solidity and purity of their faith.⁷

Ancient authors had identified female qualities as standing for bodily principles which they opposed to the spiritual male ones. However, Christian authors did not reject the body, but acknowledged instead its capacity to comprise both fleshly and spiritual values. The classical assumption of the female principle as secondary and frail in comparison to the male one turned these vulnerable women into the perfect objects on which to reflect on Christ's bodily redemptive nature. Female martyrs stood for the spiritual power the body contains and projects departing from its fallen fleshly matter. Consequently, these bodies had to be exposed to all kinds of aggression –hanged by the hair, mutilated, immersed in water, burned with oil– just to reappear again as redemptive symbols, stubbornly healthy and strong, charged with divine power, waiting for glorious death. In early passions, the torment is presented as impressive, but still, victims bear the pain patiently. Their bodies become a *locus* of truth, through which the ultimate revelation of godly power will issue through their resistance to endless torture, the saints' happy death and the capacity of their dead body to work miracles.⁸

The conception of women as mainly related to body and matter also accounts for the presence of the sexual element in these torments, which suggests the moral ambivalence of such stories as for the readers' response. In opposition to the male saints' pattern, it was through physical attributes that female heroism captured the imagination of medieval audiences. In the accounts, public denuding is exerted on the saints (Lucy, Margaret, Agnes), or else they are forced into brothels (Agnes, Lucy), or have to transvestite (Thecla) to live among men, and the possibility of sexual violence against them is normally implied. In witnessing mutilation and beauty, torment and virtue side by side, male audiences, readers or viewers would themselves be exposed to inner struggle in having to sublimate the nudity and sexual innuendoes, as well as the allurements of the ravishment and rape motives involved in torture.⁹ Somehow the stubborn resilience of the female saintly body, which accepts torture but miraculously evades rape would render the sexual ingredient as fuel to this extreme violence. When dealing with virgin martyrs, this dangerous liaison would arouse contradictory feelings: "the virgin martyr legend thus affords a safe distance from which to indulge 'innocent' escapism as well as less innocent fantasies of 'harmless' violence against women"¹⁰.

In none of these legends do the virgin martyrs complain or reject the possibility of pain, sacrifice being perceived as a figural must to all Christians; however, they invariably reject seduction from the pagan suitors. The influence of this model on medieval women led to occasionally extreme results; many of the nuns of 9th and 10th century convents decided to mutilate themselves under the imminence of Danish assaults, hoping their self-disfigurement would inhibit the aggressors from rape before the slaughter.¹¹ To religious women, the virgin martyr examples would be most heartening. As for their lay sisters, whose contact with male violence was not so exceptional, it is hard to know whether they would be encouraged to react against domestic violence or whether the basic sacrificial scheme would invite submissive responses to marital duties.

In late medieval accounts, the female models of *virgoes* and *viragoes* evolve diversely: in literary pieces –such as the Jacobus de la Voragine's *Legenda Aurea*, ca. 1280s– martyrs no longer suffer at all when tortured, but maintain a distant pose, confident that an omnipotent and increasingly paternal god will take their side and help them overcome pain inflicted by other men. Their weakness disappears under the divine coverage and their dialectical powers turn them invincible. If pain is evoked, it is also triumphantly avoided, thus provoking a double fiction and addiction in readers: the *virago* figure dissolves, since violence more and more becomes justified as a divine and male issue in the struggle against

heathenism. It is God, as a father and a man, the one who protects the saint and endows her with the divine gift of resistance.

In art, the proliferation and increase of saintly portrayals enabled a new emblematic and synthetic treatment of such figures, which appear now devoid of their narrative setting and simply associated to their instrument of torture. In the depictions of books of hours, bloody and cruel torture is hardly apparent, and the saints have been transformed into aristocratic ladies whose dignity disavows any signs of bodily violence. These saints conveyed a sense of authority and majesty, being completely out of reach in their depictions. Still, as enactments of middle-class and aristocratic romantic models, they are found reading, an activity which might in theory reinforce the submissiveness of pious women at a moment in which the Church no longer needed *viragoes* but complying devotees.

On the other hand, the narrative bloody and sexually marked referent went on being reproduced and cruelty stressed simultaneously, exacting compassion from female audiences who identified with the saint's agony and thus justified their own. Both the detached and the dramatic types of female depictions survived into Renaissance and Baroque types, endowing women with the fiction of empowerment, while simultaneously stressing the sacrificial system that ultimately meant submission before male violence.¹²

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Notes

¹ Beyond the feminist liberal perception of the public/private dichotomy, or the economic standpoint of socialist authors, the work of Susan Brownmiller, Catherine MacKinnon, Andrea Dworkin or Susan Griffin, among others, provide feminist thinkers with a more particularly critical focus on the question of violence founded on sex and defined through the patriarchal model. Thus, Andrea Dworking sees violence as inherent to sex, the latter having been institutionalized through the former to turn women into sexual objects. In her view, therefore, rape becomes a metaphor of the sexual relations. This is further proved in MacKinnon's analysis of pornographic practices that eroticize violence and present an idealized depiction of the predatory nature of sexual relationships in western culture. Susan Griffin concludes that rape has become a symbolically perfect combination of sex and violence which justifies the basic means of male control over women. According to Brownmiller, the possibility of sexual violence has become a constant threatening component of female consciousness, justifying female fear and the need of protection from a higher institution which, paradoxically, derives from the same patriarchal order which produces the intimidation motive. The very exchange system described by Lévy-Strauss, implies the same association of rape and conquest in societies which are at war. Just as at moments of peace women are bartered in order to enhance cultural and economic exchange among men, in times of war it is again through the violence inflicted on women as male property that men from hostile sides harm one another.

² R. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, p. 35.

³ H. Rhee, *Early Christian Literature: Christ and Culture in Second and Third Centuries*, p. 94.

⁴ M. Heim, *Saved from Sacrifice*, p. 246. In fact, it is telling that while Christ's passion is portrayed with a pain so extreme that he complains against his father's decision not to intervene, martyrs never lose control of the process, keep impassibly their faith in God's support and don't grumble over God's will to test them. Here the cruelty of the Romans is stressed over that of the god who has decided their lot. In their imitation of Christ's example, they hardly share the scapegoat aspect, God seeming to help them through the avoidance of pain: he watches over the process, guaranteeing that their torment be heroic in the amount of cruelty they are exposed to, but never so unbearable as Christ's.

⁵ *Passio SS. Perpetuae et Felicitatis*, translated by P. Dronke, *Women Writers in the Middle Ages*, p. 4.

⁶ Thus, as a personification of the new Church, this royal mother would stand as the epitome of the heroic badge the early Church had granted women after the martyrdom experience. The Church was starting to create its own victims in return, in a perverse system that leaned on the excuse of the sacrificial model in order to reproduce new violence.

⁷ The powerful abbesses of Anglo-Saxon double houses would avail of this model and enjoy a degree of freedom and resourcefulness hardly ever found at that time. Such was the spread and influence of these legends

that they might turn occasionally counterproductive. Thus, the martyrdom of Saint Margaret inspired the 11th century English provincial noblewoman Christine of Markyate to vindicate his right to choose religious life and become a recluse, despite the attempts by his family and even the English ecclesiastical hierarchy to make her fulfill her matrimonial vows.

⁸ Future authors would relate these female bodies to the Eucharistic form, which also underwent the violence of being broken and consumed (Bynum), a bodily sacrifice in order to save the faithful through its spiritual compactness.

⁹ See C. Hahn, *Portrayed on the Heart: Narrative Effect in Pictorial Lives of Saints from the 10th to the 13th Century*.

¹⁰ K. Winstead, *Virgin Martyrs: Legends of Sainthood in Late Medieval England*, p. 12.

¹¹ According to Schulenburg, Ebba the Younger, daughter of Ethelfrith of Northumbria, was abbess of the monastery of Coldingham during one of the periods of the Danish invasions (ca. 870). Roger of Wendover's chronicle presents the invaders cutting the throats of both young and old, at the sight of which Ebba "...took a razor, and with it cut off her nose, together with her upper lip unto the teeth, presenting herself a horrible spectacle to those who stood by. Filled with admiration at this admirable deed, the whole assembly followed her maternal example (...) on beholding the abbess and all the sisters so outrageously mutilated, and stained with their own blood from the sole of their foot unto their head, they retired in haste from the place". The first case of self-mutilation is that of the nuns of St Cyr monastery, Marseilles; when attacked in the year 738 by the Saracens on Provence, they are said to have: "cut off their noses in order to irritate by this bloody spectacle the rage of the barbarians and to extinguish their passions. With incredible zeal, she (Eusebia) and all of her companions accomplished this act; the barbarians massacred them in the number of forty, while they confessed Christ with an admirable constancy." In a less vehement fashion, we have figures as that of bearded St Wilgefortis. In most depictions she is presented crucified, her breasts meeting the contrast of her beard, which she is supposed to have grown out of her anxiety not to be recognized as a woman. In England, the interest for these martyrs is made evident mainly in the attempt of some early 13th century recluses to have a group of female lives written for them. The legendary is known as the Katherine Group, since it contains the lives of Saint Margaret, Katherine and Juliana, three martyrs who share the same disposition to remain virgins despite all enemies.

¹² Throughout modern history, the Church has been accused of having availed of the notion of empowerment of the weak as an excuse to impose its own criteria as legatee of ancient sacrificial violence. To feminist eyes, the Church has encouraged women to accept injustice and suffering, still in their role of victims who offer themselves to the oppression of the patriarchal order (and end up even in self-hatred). The choice nowadays is one of reproducing the vindication of women as victims (of the Church) while simultaneously reinterpreting the sacred texts from a feminist perspective that takes women out of that condition.