

A Life in the Shadow of the Cross

Gender-based violence in Early Christian Martyr Stories

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Hierbij verklaar en verzeker ik, Sonja H.P. Dahlmans, dat deze scriptie zelfstandig door mij is opgesteld, dat geen andere bronnen en hulpmiddelen zijn gebruikt dan die door mij zijn vermeld en dat de passages in het werk waarvan de woordelijke inhoud of betekenis uit andere werken – ook elektronische media – is genomen door bronvermelding als ontlening kenbaar gemaakt worden.

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*"You are not hidden. There's never been a moment, you were forgotten."*¹

¹ Daigle, Lauren. "Rescue." Look Up Child. Centricity Music, 2018, CD.

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ABSTRACT

Early Christian martyrdom accounts often feature gender-based violence used against female martyrs such as: (attempted) rape, sexual torture, and condemnation to the brothel. Modern scholarly interpretation treats this gender-specific violence as incidental compared to the martyrdom in the arena or public execution. By analysing early Christian martyr accounts and their contemporary scholarly interpretation, this study will show that the gender-specific sufferings of female martyrs in early Christian martyr texts has largely been treated separately from their martyrdom and thus the female-specific experience of early Christian discourse has been, in a sense, made invisible.

Key words: gender-specific suffering, persecution, martyrdom, vulnerability, invisibility,

*For my dear friend, Marlies, who has faced the darkness with me,
and brought me back to the light, time after time.*

In loving memory of my dear friend, Wout Kranendonk. †

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

Recently, I came across a book by two journalists, Parkinson and Hinshaw, with a compilation of the stories that they had collected from a group of, predominantly, Christian school girls from northern Nigeria who were abducted by the terror group Boko Haram back in 2014.² These girls were abducted from the Chibok Government Secondary School for Girls in the middle of the night and spent more than three years in captivity under very harsh conditions, involving beatings, rape and death threats, malnutrition, hard labour and daily intimidation and pressure to marry a jihadist and convert to Islam, to which some girls finally gave in.³ Their case received worldwide attention after many celebrities, including First Lady at the time, Michelle Obama, demanded on social media, under the #BringBackOurGirls, for their immediate release.

Although many of the Chibok girls were finally rescued, others, until today, remain in Boko Haram captivity. Parkinson and Hinshaw managed to speak to some of the so-called Chibok girls who were willing to share their story concerning the more than three years they have spent in captivity while all they had was each other and their shared, Christian faith, to cling to. One thing in particular struck me while I was reading their stories for the first time; the eldest woman from the group Naomi Abuma who was then twenty-four years of age said after her release that they sang a song they had learned from listening to one of their favourite Gospel singers on the radio, called ‘Mama Agnes’ about earning the Martyrs Crown:⁴

*“It is a must for trials to come. But if we stand firm to the end,
we will receive the crown, and be like the angels”.*⁵

I was puzzled; the martyr stories I was familiar with, and as I remembered them, were about martyrs fighting with wild beasts in the Roman arenas, in front of a live audience, or being burned alive also as a form of public spectacle. Surely martyrs were not young girls, abducted and then hidden away from the public eye, somewhere in the woods, clothed in a

² Joe Parkinson and Drew Hinshaw, *Bring Back Our Girls: The Untold Story of the Global Search for Nigeria’s Missing Schoolgirls* (Harper Collins Publishers, 2021).

³ Parkinson and Hinshaw, *Bring Back Our Girls*, chap. 16 and 22, Kobo.

⁴ Parkinson and Hinshaw, *Bring Back Our Girls*, chap. 19, Kobo.

⁵ Note: For all Biblical references I have used:

Joseph Allen, Jack Norman Sparks, Michel Najim, Theodore Stylianopoulos eds. *The Orthodox Study Bible: Ancient Christianity Speaks to Today’s World*, (this specific citation is probably a reference to James 1:12, 1674).

black niqab, or were they?⁶ And yet, here were these girls, victims and survivors of abduction, torture such as beatings and lashings as well as severe mental and emotional pressure and undernourishment to coerce them into marriage and religious conversion who were certain they had earned the Crown of Life by keeping their faith amidst their captivity and hardship because they did not give in under pressure and remained faithful to Christ.⁷ Later I found that this echoes the writings of Augustine of Hippo in his sermon number 273 in which he also states that Agnes, a young Christian martyr, was rewarded with a martyr's crown for being both a martyr and a virgin.⁸ And in sermon 281 Augustine writes that the martyrs Perpetua and Felicity earned a "more splendid crown" because they, being frail women, part of the weaker sex (according to Augustin), did not give in under pressure of torture.⁹

Similarly, Numansen and Ossewaarde, two scholars at the social sciences department of the University of Twente (The Netherlands), collected stories from descendants of the Assyrian and Chaldean Christian victims of abduction, rape, forced marriage and religious conversion during the *Sayfo* (the sword), the name Aramaic-speaking Christians give to the persecution of Assyrian, Aramaic and Chaldean Christians under the Ottoman Empire in the early 20th century.¹⁰ Their article is called 'Heroines of Gendercide' and shows how third and fourth generation children and grandchildren not only acknowledge what happened to their maternal ancestors but also how they felt a certain pride that these women, who the interviewees referred to as martyrs, although they suffered gender-based sexual violence, forced marriage and conversion (to Islam), did not (truly) convert in their hearts.¹¹ The narrative goes that women were forced to choose between sacrificing the lives of their loved ones, which was used to pressure them, or to suffer sexual violence, forced marriage and conversion, which is -among their descendants- regarded as a form of martyrdom.

Bjørnlund studied similar sentiments from Armenian victims of the genocide which some called 'A Fate worse than Dying' meaning that there was a sentiment among Armenian victims and their descendants implying that the rape, sexual violence and forced Islamization of women and

⁶ Note: A *niqab* is an Islamic garment that covers a woman's body and hair almost entirely.

⁷ Parkinson and Hinshaw, *Bring Back Our Girls, chap. 19, Kobo.*

⁸ John E. Rotelle, ed., *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century, Sermons Vol. VIII,* (New City Press, 1990).

⁹ Rotelle, *The Works of Saint Augustine.*

¹⁰ Sofia Mutlu-Numansen and Ringo Ossewaarde, "Heroines of gendercide: The religious sensemaking of rape and abduction in Aramean, Assyrian and Chaldean migrant communities," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 22, no. 4 (2015): 428-442.

¹¹ Numansen and Ossewaarde, "Heroines of gendercide," 435 – 436.

children was considered worse than dying, at least by some Armenians.¹² With regard to Armenian victims of abduction and rape, Roodzant as well writes how an abducted and raped young Christian Armenian girl, Gulizar Agatchian, after being rescued from her abductor and rapist is re-baptized to the Christian faith and receives a new name, Hripsimé, after an Armenian virgin martyr from old.¹³

As a journalist I have been writing about this specific subject for almost a decade, and, although there is a growing attention for gender-based religious persecution, these stories still do not gain the same attention that, for example, gruesome suicide attacks receive.¹⁴ Perhaps this is due to what Cobb calls our contemporary fascination for the ‘gut and gore’ of martyrdom, i.e., a preoccupation with violent attacks on places of worship or other public places or events, which often lead to many people getting injured or killed.¹⁵ In October 2023 the United Nations General Assembly asked me to join a panel discussion about gender-based religious persecution and to share my thoughts why especially within the media this is still not making the headlines. My answer was threefold; first, sexual abuse seems invisible because it does not happen in plain sight but rather hidden away from the public eye, second, identification with victims of abuse is more difficult when women or girls lose their identity and are only viewed as part of a group, as for example with the girls named the Chibok girls, and, finally, because we still tend to view sexual abuse or rape as a side-effect of war or armed conflict rather than as an intentional act of war or war crime in and of itself.

In order to increase awareness and reduce gender-based violence, international policies need to work towards a better protection of women and girls from (ethno)religious minorities. Renowned institutions and organizations such as the International Criminal Court of Justice, Doctors without Borders, the United Nations and others have recently started treating abduction, sexual violence, forced marriage and religious conversion explicitly as a form of religious persecution targeting women from (ethno)religious communities.¹⁶ Enforced

¹² Matthias Bjørnlund, “A Fate Worse than Dying: Sexual Violence during the Armenian Genocide,” in *Brutality and Desire; War and Sexuality in Europe's Twentieth Century*, ed. Dagmar Herzog (Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 16 – 58.

¹³ Dirk Roodzant, *De Armeense Gruwelen: Nederland en de vervolgingen van Armeniërs in het Ottomaanse Rijk, 1889-1923* (Uitgeverij Verloren, 2021) p. 62.

¹⁴ John Pontifex, John Newton, Fionn Shiner, *Hear Her Cries: The kidnapping, forced conversion and sexual victimisation of Christian women and girls* (Norwich: Aid to the Church in Need UK, Swallowtail Print, 2021)

¹⁵ Stephanie L. Cobb, *Divine Deliverance: Pain and Painlessness in Early Christian Martyr Texts* (University of California Press, 2017).

¹⁶Note: See for example the 2022 Report by the United Nations General Assembly on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Gender Equality (OHCHR), “Gender-based violence and discrimination in the name of religion or belief”, August 2020.

marriage and religious conversion is also acknowledged by many governmental and non-governmental organizations alike as a violation of human rights and freedom of movement.¹⁷ Christian persecution watchdog Open Doors, for seven years, annually publishes their so-called Gender Report in which they highlight gender-based violence and persecution. It is fair to say that, perhaps only recently, the current general view does not only consist of physical violent attacks, but also can, and often does, include gender-based violence (such as sexual harassment, rape, sexual slavery and forced prostitution), abduction, forced marriage and religious conversion.

As Open Doors, as well as other organisations such as the United Nations, has argued, women are twice as vulnerable as men when it comes to persecution, firstly because of their religious identity and, secondly, because of their gender.¹⁸ This is the case today, but it can very well be argued that this was already the case in early martyr stories concerning Christian women and girls such as Agatha, Agnes, Lucy, Blandina and others. Abduction, forced marriage, forced conversion, sexual harassment and violence as well as forced prostitution certainly are re-occurring subjects within early Christian martyr stories.¹⁹

Women and girls, as we know from the martyr acts written in the second and third centuries of Rome, such as Agatha, Agnes, Blandina, and Perpetua, suffered not only because they identified as Christians but also because of their gender. Several martyr stories, including those of Perpetua, Felicity, and Thecla, depict Christian women martyrs who faced public humiliation. Agnes for example suffered (attempted) rape and was, by way of punishment, forced to work in a brothel, as were Agatha, Lucy and Dorothy. Early Christian martyr stories depict the punishment of many female martyrs as forced marriage, forced re-conversion to Roman gods and sexual violence. Furthermore, Agatha and Sophia's three daughters Fides, Spes and Charitas (Hope, Faith and Love) had their breasts cut off in the martyr narratives. These examples illustrate not only the physical punishments female martyrs endured alongside their male counterparts, but also the contemporary understanding of gender-specific violence in these early Christian martyr texts.

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/ahrc4348-report-freedom-religion-or-belief-and-gender-equality>

¹⁷ Note: See for example the article by the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights (OHCHR), "Forced Marriage: A Violation of Human Rights", January 2023, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/stories/2023/01/forced-marriage-violation-human-rights> .

¹⁸ Open Doors, *The Hidden Face of Persecution: The Targeted Abuse of Christian Women Worldwide*, (Witney: Open Doors UK, 2020).

¹⁹ Barbara K. Gold, *Perpetua: Athlete of God*, (University of Oxford Press, 2018), chap. 2, Kobo.

Even though the gender-based violence is mentioned in martyr narratives, it must also be said that the “full” accomplishment of sexual abuse often does not seem to take place in early Christian martyr stories because through divine intervention these female martyrs are spared from actual rape and forced prostitution. For example, in the martyr story of Agnes, an attempted rapist falls to the ground when he tries to touch her and when she, by way of punishment, is forced to work in a brothel the story describes how her hair grows each night as a matter of coverage to hide her female body parts, such as her breasts. This divine mediation, preventing female martyrs from being violated or raped, is acknowledged by Wolf who also mentions that while the breasts, the most visible feminine part of their body, of some female martyrs are severed at the same time, she argues, male martyrs are not castrated in early Christian martyr stories.²⁰

Furthermore, early Christian martyr stories, concerning both male and female heroes and heroines, continue to attract the interest of scholarly interpretation today. For example, many critical reflections, also from a feminist perspective, have been written in the past decades concerning the martyrdom of Perpetua (and Felicity). Scholars such as Gold, Cobb and Streete have contributed to the scholarly debate with regard to Perpetua’s story by using a gender-specific critique on the masculine language and the patriarchal lens through which these accounts were written and the male-dominated culture and society wherein these martyr stories took place. To give an example, both Cobb and Gold mention that Early Christian martyrdom was portrayed as a matter of heroic and even athletic endurance, which became predominantly connected with masculinity.²¹ Vorster, in an in-depth critique on Tertullian’s statement that “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church,” challenged the idea of so-called regulatory body.²² In this article, Vorster argues that the bodies of female martyrs were crushed between two rivalling powers, i.e. the Roman Imperium and the Early Christian patriarchal leadership.²³ However, what seems to be missing is a comprehensive analysis on the gender-based violence female martyrs faced, which their male co-religionists did not suffer, as well as the double vulnerability for women which is based on their gender and their Christian identity as part of the female suffering within these martyr stories.

²⁰ Kirsten Wolf, “The Severed Breast: A Topos in the Legends of Female Virgin Martyr Saints,” in *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 112 (1997): 97 – 112.

²¹ Stephanie L. Cobb, *Dying to be Men: Gender and Language in Early Christian Martyr Texts* (University of Columbia Press, 2008) 14 – 15.

²² Johannes N. Vorster, “The Blood of Female Martyrs as the Sperm of the Early Church,” in *Religion and Theology* 10, no.1 (2003) 66 – 99.

²³ Vorster, “The Blood of Female Martyrs as the Sperm of the Early Church.”

In this thesis, therefore, I will examine primary texts to explore the portrayal of gender-based violence by early Christian authors and to evaluate the contemporary perception of sexual violations of female martyrs from the early Church by feminist scholars in the field of religious sciences. I will contend that martyr texts mention specific feminine suffering, such as rape, forced marriage, and religious conversion, but often conceal these incidents with obscure terminology as this thesis will demonstrate in chapter IV. Another way of veiling sexual violations in early Christian martyr texts was that according to many martyr narratives the sexual violence was never regularly achieved due to divine intervention. By this I mean that for example Agnes suffered an attempted rape, but her attacker fell down to the ground before he could actually harm her. However, the threat of rape or other forms of sexual violence is persistent across many martyr accounts. Contemporary analysis of early Christian martyr texts have often dismissed the significance of gender-based (sexual) violence because primary texts claim this is not actually achieved through divine intervention. This has caused modern scholars to not notice the significance of it, hence, they have not focused on these forms of feminine torture as much as on the violent death in the arena. We cannot find explicit mentioning of sexual violence, nor do we know whether these stories are historically accurate, however, we can very well assume sexual violence did occur frequently and women who lived on the margins of Roman imperial society were extremely vulnerable. This thesis examines and tries to answer the following questions:

What were the specific forms of suffering that especially women endured?

- *How was rape or sexual assault in the Roman Empire perceived?*

- *In what way were sexual assault, rape and forced marriage of female martyrs portrayed in martyr texts?*

How do contemporary scholars within the field of religious studies interpret sexual violations in early Christian martyr texts?

- *Is the vulnerability of female martyrs recognized in contemporary analyses?*

- *Do modern-day scholars recognize a separation between being a martyr and a virgin in early Christian martyr stories?*

In the following chapter (II) I will provide the reader with an overview of the contemporary scholarly debate on the subject of gender-based violence against women in early Christian martyr texts. Then, I will give some clarity on the chosen definitions for martyrs or martyrdom as well as the way rape and sexual violence are viewed today and, by using definitions from Roman Law, how these forms of gender-based torture and persecution were understood in early Christianity. Finally, I will explain the chosen methods and methodology for my research, and I will also give a brief explanation why these methods will benefit this study.

Next, in chapter III, I will discuss the social and legal background of Roman imperial society during the second century or the beginning of the third century AD. This is the time in which the martyr accounts of Thecla, Perpetua and Blandina were written. Thecla and Perpetua are described as free citizens, who had a wealthy, well-educated background. Specifically the social status of Perpetua as a free Roman citizen prior to as well as after her captivity will be discussed with regard to her being stripped naked and exposed to the public in the arena. The other female martyr that will be discussed here is Blandina who is portrayed as a slave-woman and does not fit within the narrative of a free, well-educated Roman citizen; therefore, I will also provide a brief background on how slaves were treated in Roman society at the time. Then, I will turn to a discussion on public nudity and humiliation as part of the martyrdom of female martyrs such as Thecla, Perpetua and Blandina. Finally, I will summarize the contemporary focus by scholars such as Gold and Cobb on gender stereotype language as well as power structures between men and women in this early Christian martyr text.

Then, in chapter IV I will examine gender-based violence and persecution in martyr stories from the third and fourth century AD. I will start this chapter by giving an overview of how sexual violence and rape were perceived in the Roman Empire at the time the martyr stories of Agnes, Agatha and many other young female martyrs were written. What type of sexual abuse did these Christian martyrs face? I will discuss martyr accounts concerning (attempted) rape, forced marriage, condemnation to the brothel and sexual violence. Finally, I will engage with contemporary interpretations of gender-based violence in Early Christian martyr accounts both by historians as well as scholars in the field of religious studies.

Finally, chapter V will summarize the results of this study and the outcome of my research questions. Here, I will also highlight some of the similarities between gender-specific persecution in the Early Church and the many cases that are happening today. Sexual violence

aimed at Christian women and girls as part of their martyrdom and persecution is and has been part of the Church from the beginning. I will argue that we first need to understand the sexual violence that was part of the martyrdom of women during the early years of the Church and how we interpret these gender-specific forms of martyrdom, in order to be able to understand the gender-based religious persecution women and girls are facing today.

CHAPTER II STATUS QUESTIONIS & METHODOLOGIES

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I will start by giving an overview of the current debate among scholars in the field of religious studies and theology on gender-based violence in early martyr accounts. The intention for this contemporary scholarly survey is to better understand what has been written so far concerning gender and sexual violence in early Christian martyr texts. Next, I will provide an outline of the definitions that are used in this study, which includes how rape was perceived in Roman law and society as well as our contemporary understanding of rape and other forms of sexual violence. The definition paragraph also includes a brief outline of the current scholarly debate on sexual violence, rape and power structures and an overview of the current understanding of sexual violence and rape. Then I will discuss the methods that were used to examine gender-based violence in Early Christian martyr accounts and their contemporary scholarly interpretation and offer a brief outline of the structure of the subsequent analyses. A final section offers some further remarks on the technical aspects and limitations of this study.

2.2 STATUS QUESTIONIS

There has been a lot of scholarly interest the past decades in Early Christian martyr texts, specifically the martyr story of Perpetua. Some scholars have applied a more feminist approach to these texts, focusing on, and critiquing, masculine stereotypes and gender norms in Early Christian literature. For example, Gold, a classicist scholar, has argued that the bodies of female martyrs were often viewed as a sign of weakness, but she also recognizes that there was an underlying fear of rape in some of these texts.²⁴ Gold has tried to emphasise on the self-agency of Early Christian martyrs such as Thecla and Perpetua by re-interpreting the choices they made.²⁵ According to Gold, prostitution and other sexually related forms of punishment were common fare for Christian women at the time.²⁶ Whether Gold considers gender-based forms of punishment a part of female martyrdom, the focus of this thesis, is not clear, but she has definitely put these gender-specific forms of torture forward.

²⁴ Gold, *Perpetua, chap. 2, Kobo*.

²⁵ Gold, *Perpetua, chap. 2, Kobo*.

²⁶ Gold, *Perpetua, chap. 2, Kobo*.

Additionally, Cohick recently connected the contemporary #MeToo movement, in which women speak openly about their own experiences with (verbal) sexual abuse, to early Christian female martyrs, mainly with respect to their bravery.²⁷ For example, Cohick praises female martyrs like Perpetua, Blandina and Thecla for their self-agency rather than their victimhood, and focusses on their exemplary modesty, but does this without mentioning the related sexual harassment and violence. Therefore, she fails to notice – as the title of her article, ‘The Martyrs and #MeToo’, suggests – the link between the experienced sexual abuse of Christian women, both historically and in the present. Cohick does mention the shift in these women regarding themselves as agents rather than victims, and she may have thought this obvious enough, given the article’s title, but she does not explicitly mention the sexual intimidation and/or abuse.

Streete, a religious studies scholar, argues that female martyrs from early Christian martyr literature are portrayed as if they were “becoming men”. For Streete, the female martyrs in these stories did not “reject the roles social order expected or demanded, but they adopted the ideal Christian men originally had chosen and promoted for themselves.”²⁸ Streete questions where the authority lay to baptise, cast out demons or to preach. She comes to the conclusion that some of the heroines of early Christian martyr acts indeed did take up some of these roles and therefore were portrayed as “becoming men.”²⁹ With regard to (attempted) violations of early Christian martyrs, according to Streete, divine power was not working through women (as with their male counterparts) but rather working to rescue women. For her, this divine interference was in order to resolve the choice these female martyrs had made to live a chaste life.³⁰ Streete focusses often on the threat of rape in martyr literature, almost always in combination with saving a virgin’s chastity. The claim by classicist and Greek literature scholar Gold that sexually-related forms of punishment were quite common during the early years of the Church is not considered in Streete’s analysis.

In addition, for Cobb gender roles within early Christian martyr literature were fluid; stereotyped roles, authority ascribed to feminine and masculine figures, are often considered to be interchangeable.³¹ She recognizes that many of the characters within early Christian martyr stories are not necessarily examples of perceived masculinity, i.e. young virgins, old men,

²⁷ Cohick, “The Female Martyr’s #MeToo Message.”

²⁸ Gail P.C. Streete, *Redeemed Bodies: Women Martyrs in Early Christianity*, (John Knox Press, 2009), 9 – 10.

²⁹ Streete, *Redeemed Bodies*.

³⁰ Streete, *Redeemed Bodies*.

³¹ Cobb, *Dying to be Men*.

mothers and slaves, but she argues these characters are portrayed as superior in masculinity opposed to their persecutors.³² Certain virtues such as controlling one's emotions and insensitivity to pain were, according to Cobb, perceived to be masculine within early Christian martyrologies.³³ As for the subject of this thesis, the sexual violence against early Christian martyrs, this is not emphasised much in Cobb's book *Dying to be Men*, but she does spend time trying to analyse what it meant that Perpetua was stripped naked. Cobb however views this particular scene as a demonstration of gender fluidity; Perpetua becoming masculine, from passive to active, from being feminine to becoming masculine.³⁴ Thus, Cobb's reading of Perpetua's masculinization at the triumphant moment of her martyrdom, in a sense, obscures the female-specific suffering she has endured.

On the one hand, both Cobb and Streete, highlight the differences in the way femininity and masculinity were portrayed in Early Christian martyrologies, including their perceived strength or vulnerability. On the other hand their analysis of these writings is almost exclusively done in light of gender-specific aspects, focusing on a masculinizing paradigm and on social and cultural gender roles at the time, from both Roman society as a whole as well as the (male) authors of the Early Christian martyrologies. In this way, unfortunately, the gender-specific vulnerability to sexual violations Christian female martyrs endured, is being overlooked. In addition, Gold seems to be more interested in the cultural and societal background of the Roman Empire in which these martyr stories emerged and the different forms of punishments and treatments male and female martyrs received from their persecutors based on their gender.

2.3 DEFINITIONS

To have a clear understanding of the main terms and definitions in this thesis and debate I would like to discuss martyrdom, sexual violence and rape in modern and Roman times. Initially the Greek word *μάρτυς* could indicate, a mundane, general meaning of 'witness' to an event, for example at a trial. Its basic sense is "witness," and, according to Alexandru Moldovan "A witness is someone who attests a fact or event which he saw with his own eyes and heard with his own ears."³⁵ Within the Biblical context, as well as in early Christian non-Biblical texts, it came to have a specialized meaning, i.e., "martyr (dying for Christ)." Within the Bible,

³² Cobb, *Dying to be Men*, 61.

³³ Cobb, *Dying to be Men*, 64 – 66.

³⁴ Cobb, *Dying to be Men*, 106.

³⁵ Alexandru Moldovan, "Witness – Confessor – Martyr; A New Testamentary Perspective", in *International Journal of Orthodox Theology* 5, no. 4 (2014): 155 – 176.

different concepts of the word occur. For example, the sense of being a witness to an event is also apparent in 1 Timothy 6:12 where it is said that: *ἐκλήθης καὶ ὁμολόγησας τὴν καλὴν ὁμολογίαν ἐνώπιον πολλῶν μαρτύρων* (lay hold on eternal life, to which you were also called and have confessed the good confession in the presence of many witnesses).³⁶

Second, we find a definition regarding a martyr as someone who dies for the faith in Acts 22:20 where it speaks of Stephen, often considered the first martyr of the Church: *καὶ ὅτε ἐξεχύνετο τὸ αἷμα Στεφάνου τοῦ μάρτυρός σου, καὶ αὐτὸς ἤμην ἐφειστώδης καὶ συνευδοκῶν καὶ φυλάσσων τὰ ἱμάτια τῶν ἀναιρούντων αὐτόν* (And when the blood of your martyr Stephen was poured out, I myself also stood by, consenting and watching over the garments of those killing him).³⁷ Note that the biblical verse here also mentions those watching what happened, but the martyr here is the one, Stephen, whose blood is being spilled for the faith.

An essential aspect of martyr texts and the understanding of martyrdom in general within the early years of Christianity was that it was in connection with public suffering. For example, in his letter to the Corinthians Paul speaks of the apostles being put on display by God and compares this even to death in the Roman arena which he calls a public spectacle for the whole universe (*θέατρον τῷ κόσμῳ*).³⁸ McLarty wrote in that same line of thought, arguing that for early Christian martyrs, the suffering of the body was made visible, and it became a spectacle of endurance for believers and non-believers alike.³⁹ Theologian Moltmann explained that Christ's death and his suffering and rejection on the Cross was brought into an eschatological arena by the martyrs, making their death a public testimony.⁴⁰ These public spectacles could even include a theatrical element in which convicted criminals would have to engage in dramatic, public role-plays ending in a criminal punishment, as stated by Molinari.⁴¹

The idea that martyrdom involves public suffering is in contrast with the report by Open Doors which states that the suffering of women is often hidden (from the public eye). This study also includes martyr accounts in which Christian women were stripped naked in front of a

³⁶ Allen, Sparks, Najim and Stylianopoulos, eds. *The Orthodox Study Bible* 1506.

³⁷ Note: Greek text from the webpage *Bible Hub Analysis*, Acts 20:22 <https://biblehub.com/text/acts/20-22.htm>

³⁸ Note: Greek text from the webpage *Bible Hub Analysis*, 1 Corinthians 4:9 https://biblehub.com/text/1_corinthians/4-9.htm

³⁹ Jane D. McLarty, "Early Christian Theologies of Martyrdom" in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Christian Martyrdom*, ed. Paul Middleton (Hoboken, New Jersey, John Wiley & Sons Ltd., 2020).

⁴⁰ Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God; The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

⁴¹ Andrea Lorenzo Molinari, "Women Martyrs in the Early Church; Hearing Another Side to the Story" in *Priscilla Papers* 22, no. 1 (2008): 5 – 10.

Note: See also Kathleen M. Coleman's "Fatal Charades; Roman Executions Staged as Mythological Enactments" in *The Journal of Roman Studies* 80 (1990): 44 – 73.

crowd in the Roman arena. However, even though this took place during, or as an element of, a public spectacle, the emphasis in these martyr stories does not lie on the emotional and spiritual trauma this may have caused. When we look at the forced marriages and forced prostitution some of the female martyrs in these stories endured, whether sexual violence took place or was an underlying threat, typical for these type of abuses is that they merely took place behind closed doors, out of sight from spectators or witnesses.

Consequently, this leads to an important question: what precisely constitutes martyrdom? Is it an exact emulation of the suffering of Christ – the *Imitatio Christi* – or can we include any form of suffering for Christ, whether this takes place in the public sphere, just like Christ’s crucifixion, and thus, does martyrdom always involve spectators? In this study I looked into some of the ways public nudity and (attempted) rape were weaponized in the early days of Christianity to degrade these women religiously, morally, psychologically and socially.

Equally important is that, as Hartney noted, early Christians considered it an honour to be selected for mistreatment.⁴² This becomes apparent in the martyrdom of Ignatius of Antioch who is so eager to be martyred that he begs his brothers and sisters in the faith not to stop him from going to the arena.⁴³ But where, as Hartney mentioned, emulating Christ’s death meant being admired and celebrated for such exemplified demonstrations of bravery and selflessness, the question remains how being raped or stripped naked would fit into this narrative. Did it require, as Cobb and Streete argued, becoming male? But if so, where does specific gender-based violence fit within that line of thought? As mentioned above, in my view, sexual violations against Christian female martyrs, was largely hidden. Rather than explicitly stating how vulnerable Christian women were, the language used to describe their suffering was often baptismal or eucharistic. In addition, as Streete noted, female martyrs from Early Christian martyr stories are often described as being rescued from sexual assault through divine intervention.

At the same time it is important to consider the definition of sexual violence and rape as it is defined by governments, non-governmental organizations (NGO’s) and other institutions that focus on (mental) health, victims aid and/or advocates that offer legal assistance to victims,

⁴² Aideen M. Hartney, *Gruesome Deaths and Celibate Lives: Christian Martyrs and Ascetics* (Phoenix Press, 2004) 4.

⁴³ John Behr, “The Christian Art of Dying”, *Sobornost Incorporating Eastern Churches Review* 35, no. 1 – 2, (2013): 136 – 147.

to be clear what is currently understood when we use these terms. In their 2002 report on Violence and Health the World Health Organization (WHO) defines rape as:

“Any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed, against a person’s sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work.”⁴⁴

This definition is accepted by, among others, Doctors Without Borders; an organization of medical professionals who work in countries and regions where there is armed conflict or war or where there are other situations that can create vulnerability of women and children which could lead to human rights violations, including sexual violence, sexual enslavement or rape.⁴⁵

It is equally important to provide the reader with a summary of how sexual violence and rape were perceived in Roman society and ethics during the time the early Christian martyr stories were written. However, it is not possible to give a straightforward definition of sexual violence and rape in Late Antiquity, due to the fact that our contemporary understanding of rape and sexual violence is different from the understanding during the Roman Empire. For example, according to Webb, the often used Latin word *stuprum* could mean rape, outrage, adultery or illicit sex (meaning sex outside of marriage).⁴⁶ Besides, the laws with regard to what we currently perceive as rape, abduction and sexual violence changed during the time that the Roman Empire existed.⁴⁷ Free Roman women, meaning those who were considered citizens, could rely on a variety of civil as well as criminal legal protection in cases of rape, according to Nguyen, whereas slaves, prostitutes and foreigners, due to their social status could not file a rape case.⁴⁸ Legally speaking, in the Roman period, a slave could not be raped, contrary to our own understanding. We will explore this contrast in social class and cultural differences further

⁴⁴ World Health Organization (WHO), “Understanding and addressing violence against women” (2012) https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/77434/WHO_RHR_12.37_eng.pdf .

⁴⁵ Note: See Doctors Without Borders webpage wherein they have used the definition of rape and sexual violence as stated by the WHO, <https://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/latest/care-victims-sexual-violence-organization-pushed-its-limits-case-medecins-sans-frontieres#:~:text=149..criminal%20laws%20of%20most%20countries>.

⁴⁶ Webb, “Latin Declamation and Augustine on Rape.”

⁴⁷ Nghiem L Nguyen, “Roman Rape: An Overview of Roman Rape Laws from the Republican Period to Justinian's Reign” *Michigan Journal of Gender & Law* 13, no.1 (Davis Polk & Wardwell, 2006): 75 – 112.

⁴⁸ Nguyen, “Roman Rape.”

in chapters three and four, using the martyr accounts of Thecla, Perpetua, Blandina, Agnes and Agatha, and other examples when necessary.

Furthermore, in Roman mythology for example, rape and abduction of women occurred frequently, which according to Papakonstantinou had a symbolic meaning, supported by political factors or motivations.⁴⁹ Similarly, Cosgrave has argued that losing your *existimatio* or public face, effected more than just a person's private subjectivity but their place within Roman society.⁵⁰ And as Coleman has demonstrated, humiliation, including public nudity, created a clear boundary between the criminal and the rest of society.⁵¹

At the same time it is important to realize that, even though the above give definition of rape or sexual violence may seem, at least on the surface, very straightforward, how rape is perceived today by various scholars is a question that is not easily answered. There seems to be a division between experts from various disciplines such as theology, law and the social sciences on both sides of the debate, that is of great importance for this study. Roughly speaking one could argue that there are two dominant groups of scholars; one group represents those who would argue that rape is not about sexual desire but about the desire to gain power or control, the second group states rape is far too complex to define it only as a matter of power and/or powerlessness.⁵² The idea of power, or the lack of it, also seems to be the focus of many feminist critical interpretations of martyr texts from scholars in our contemporary time as we have seen in the introduction.

2.4 METHODOLOGY AND OUTLINES

The goal of this research was to survey existing arguments and suggest new perspectives on gender-specific violence and persecution in early Christian martyr accounts. For this, I have applied literary-criticism as described in *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology*, meaning to make an attempt to fully understand a literary text by making use of the age, nature of these literary works, as well as the historical and cultural background in which they were written.⁵³

This method also includes looking at the language literary texts were originally written

⁴⁹ Nephelē Papakonstantinou and Anne Stevens (translator) "Raptus and Roman Law: Teaching about Sexual Crime in the Schools of Rhetoric (Rome, Turn of the First and Second Centuries CE)." *Clio. Women, Gender, History* 52 (2020): 21 – 44, <https://www.jstor.org>.

⁵⁰ Cosgrave, "Captive-taking in the Late Roman Republic and Early Principate."

⁵¹ Kathleen Coleman, "Fatal Charades."

⁵² Melanie Webb, "Latin Declamation and Augustine on Rape."

⁵³ Alan Richardson and John Bowden, *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology* (SCM Press Ltd., 1983).

in, and the way these texts were transmitted to us.⁵⁴ This specific type of research method includes analysing and evaluating information from multiple sources- and fields of study to make connections and combine the information that is found.⁵⁵ Since my goal was twofold; trying to a) find an answer to the nature of gender-specific violence, including an understanding of sexual violence in Roman imperial society and within Early Christian martyr texts, and, b) to make a survey of contemporary scholarly interpretation of gender-based violence in Early Christian martyr texts, with respect to the specific vulnerability of women and girls, including the question whether this was perceived as an aspect of martyrdom, I used literary-historical analysis and feminist-literary critical approach.

2.4.1 Literary - historical analysis

The primary methodology of this thesis a literary-historical analysis to examine the time, culture and society wherein the original martyr texts were written, to achieve a better understanding of the early Christian community for which these martyr texts were originally written. Understanding the milieu and time in which a text was written, or that of its author, can provide new insights and better meaning of what was written. In this way, by using historical text analysis, we may achieve a better understanding of what motivated people, and how they interpreted the historical events they witnessed.

Literary-historical analysis applies a historical context to a text or a literary genre, for example, in the case of this research the third and fourth centuries Virgin-Martyr stories. This is important because during the imperial period, the way women were protected with regard to their bodily integrity depended heavily on their social status. For this purpose, I have used the work of scholars in Roman law, Roman social history (including clothing and hairstyles), and Roman religious practices.

Whereas the literary-historical analysis in general is often applied for the analysis of biblical texts, in this present study it is applied to patristic texts from the first four centuries of the Church. The focus here, however, is not on patristic interpretations of biblical texts, but on Early Christian martyr texts that were written during this time, or the events within these texts were situated during these centuries. The purpose of this approach is not merely the description

⁵⁴ Richardson and Bowden, *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology*.

⁵⁵ Hannah Snyder, "Literature review as a research methodology: An overview and guidelines" *Journal of Business Research* 104, (2019): 333 – 339, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0148296319304564>.

of the historical time, but additionally it aims to discover the theological and symbolical meaning that lie hidden in these texts. After all, Early Christian martyr texts, as Cobb has argued, were written with a pastoral (and theological) purpose in mind and not necessarily to give an accurate historical account of the events written in these literary works.⁵⁶ Bundy describes studying patristics as the survey of all aspects of the period these literary works were written in that can contribute to a better understanding of these texts.⁵⁷

2.4.2 Feminist-literary criticism

For this study I have also made use of feminist literary criticism.⁵⁸ This method, within the context of early Christianity studies, critiques what is perceived as a primarily male-dominated perspective within literary texts, but it critiques the history of interpretation, including biblical scholarship, from what is considered a predominately male perspective, as well. In *A Handbook of Critical Approaches* a well-known theory, originally by literary criticus and writer Showalter, concerning the development of the feminist literary approach is outlined. This consists, according to Showalter, of three different historical phases:

- 1) The feminine phase (1840 - 1880), during this early phase, women writers were imitating male (literary) traditions. To illustrate: some women authors wrote under a male pseudonym, hiding their female identity.
- 2) The feminist phase (1880 - 1920), wherein women advocated for their (equal) rights.
- 3) The female phase (1920 -present), in this final phase, women no longer depended upon opposition, for example, positioning themselves against misogyny in male (written) texts, but rather rediscovered female literature, including reclaiming the female role and identity in these works.

Feminist literary criticism of early Christian literature, Biblical and non-Biblical, seeks to correct the imbalance both in the text itself and its use of 'gendered' language or symbolism, and in the early modern scholarship in effort to re-interpret texts from a feminine point of view by highlighting female voices and perspectives, even if they are on the level of sub-text or must

⁵⁶ Stephanie L. Cobb, *Pain & Painlessness*.

⁵⁷ David D. Bundy, "Patristic Research: The Status Quaestionis," *The Asbury Seminarian*, Vol. 35: No. 4, 32 – 38.

⁵⁸ Note: For definitions on literary analyses, for both the literary-historical as well as the feminist literary criticism, I made use of the manual in *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*, 5th edition (University of Oxford Press, 2005).

be reconstructed based on comparative literary and historical information.⁵⁹ For example, this method looks at literary sources, in this case Early Christian writings concerning female martyrs, to examine whether gender stereotypes and expectations are involved in these narratives. Because many of the contemporary scholars whose work I engaged with make use of this method, I have applied feminist literary criticism to see whether it could help me create an enhanced understanding of gender stereotypes within the martyr stories as well as within the time and culture, i.e. the Roman Empire and the early Christian minority that was present at the time.

Of crucial importance for this research, is that feminist literary criticism clearly is a political approach.⁶⁰ Meaning that male-female relations, power and stereotypical gender roles in culture and society have a decisive function within the feminist literary critical approach.⁶¹ To scholars using this specific approach, it is clear that the female voice in literature or in literary texts has long been silenced or has not been recognized at all.⁶² Without wanting to disqualify the importance of this broader approach, this study seeks to (re)discover female voices from early Christian martyr texts from a more personal perspective, focussing on what Messina-Dysert has called the ‘assumed qualities of shame, self-blame and invisibility’ of rape victims.⁶³

2.4.3 Applying methods

The application of these methods in attempting to answer the primary research has led to the following structure for the subsequent analytical chapters. Firstly, chapter III focusses on public humiliation and nudity in the martyr stories of Thecla, Perpetua and Felicitas. The choice to use these examples was primarily made because each of these women exemplifies a different social status within the Roman imperial society at the time, i.e., second and third centuries imperial Roman society, which had great implications regarding expected social behaviour and, subsequently, their treatment within that society. This choice was also made out of a more practical reason, because contemporary authors in the field of New Testament and Early

⁵⁹ Note: See for example the webpage by Study Smarter on English Literature which gives a detailed definition of feminist literary critique, <https://www.studysmarter.co.uk/explanations/english-literature/literary-criticism-and-theory/feminist-literary-criticism/>

⁶⁰ Wilfred L. Guerin, Earle Labor, Lee Morgan, Jeanne C. Reesman and John R. Willingham eds., *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*, 5th edition, (University of Oxford Press, 2005), 223.

⁶¹ Guerin, Labor, Morgan, Reesman and Willingham, *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*, 226.

⁶² Guerin, Labor, Morgan, Reesman and Willingham, *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*, 225.

⁶³ Gina Messina-Dysert, “Rape and Spiritual Death” *The Journal of the Britian and Ireland School of Feminist Theology* 20, no. 2, Academic Press of Sheffield, (2012): 121 – 132.

Christian studies have written a extensively on these female martyrs, especially Perpetua, hence, a lot of material was available.

Chapter IV offers a survey of Early Christian martyr accounts with regard to sexual violence and rape. To understand how rape and sexual violence was perceived during the first four centuries AD when these texts were written, I have used material from legal experts, specialized in the Roman Empire. It is important to acknowledge, as Cosgrave has argued, that studying sexual violence in Roman imperial context is problematic because there was no word to denote rape at the time these texts were written.⁶⁴ This is why it sometimes is necessary to look at how these definitions are perceived today.⁶⁵ Since some female martyrs from these martyr accounts were slave-women, for example Blandina, this research also included work by specialists in the history of slavery in the Roman Empire, as well as legal experts on sexual violence in Roman Law.

In chapter V, I will summarize my findings and then turn toward a reflective approach that seeks to utilize the insights from the study of these ancient texts to help us better understand contemporary issues. Here, I will also reflect on the way contemporary scholars have used the feminist literary approach and why this specific form of analysis can be problematic. Finally, I will argue why I think this study is important, also in connection with contemporary gender-based persecution, and I will share some recommendations for a more personal approach.

2.5 FURTHER REMARKS ON TERMINOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS OF THIS STUDY

This research is not an attempt to provide an accurate historical description or analysis of what may have happened. The martyr stories that have been transmitted from the Early Church may be partially true or partially fictive and which part would fall into either of these two categories, is not for me to answer. Also, martyr stories often served for pastoral purposes, or as Cobb explains, within the context of Christian worship with a theological meaning that should not be underestimated.⁶⁶ To illustrate; according to second century Christian theologian and author Tertulian the suffering of Christian martyrs was to be considered as a triumph and, because the sufferings and (public) practical examples time and again attracted new converts.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Elinor Grace Cosgrave, “Captive-taking in the Late Roman Republic and Early Principate: Historical Realities and Elite Representations,” PhD. Diss. (University of Leeds, The School of Languages, Cultures and Societies, 2021).

⁶⁵ Cosgrave, “Captive-taking in the Late Roman Republic and Early Principate.”

⁶⁶ Cobb, *Devine Deliverance*, 9.

⁶⁷ Tertullian, “Apology” (*Apologeticum*, Latin) in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Volume III*, Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson & Arthur Cleveland Coxe eds. (Cosimo Inc., 2007).

What I do try to recover is how gender-based violence and persecution was perceived in the early days of the Church as well as how scholars today analyse the gender specific events that are part of these martyr stories.

Secondly, I would like to explain that I use the words gender-based and gender specific violence because almost all contemporary studies use these terms. I am not using these terms to take a stand in the current debate concerning the use of the terms gender or biological sex, because that falls outside the scope of this study, and it would take up too much space to fully acknowledge the present-day discussions concerning the preferred use of these terminologies and their implications. When using the word gender in this study, I am referring to male or female bodies or masculine and feminine language and stereotypes, especially in their historicized contexts.

Lastly, I find it important to clarify here that by researching gender-based violence, and the gender aspect of persecution and/or martyrdom committed against female martyrs today and in the past, either in real life or as part of a literary genre, I am not in any way trying to suggest that men cannot suffer as well or that persecution or (sexual) violence aimed at male martyrs is of less importance than that of their female co-religionists.

2.6 CONCLUSION

In summary, there has been a renewed interest in Early Christian martyr texts the last decades. Some of this contemporary scholarly attentiveness has interpreted the stories concerning Early Christian female martyrs through a lens of gender stereotypes as well as a male-dominant perspective from the authors of these primary texts. However, there has been little attention from contemporary scholars, specifically from within the religious studies, to the gender-based violence that lies at the background of these narratives.

Because there is no equivalent from Roman imperial time to our present-time understanding of rape and sexual violence, we need to look at contemporary definitions of these terms and try to apply them to Early Christian literature in order to understand what lies hidden. To be able to do so, we need to examine the time, culture, society and legislation of the Roman Empire, predominantly the first four centuries AD, in which these martyr accounts were written, therefore I have made use of the historical-critical analysis. Then, we need to compare this with our contemporary understanding of rape and sexual violence to engage with the -often hidden- threat of rape in Early Christian martyr texts, for which I used the feminist-literary approach.

The latter research approach is used in two ways; 1) to make a survey of the current interpretation of Early Christian literary texts, and, 2) to offer a different approach to some of the work that has been done by feminist scholars regarding sexual violence and public nudity in Christian martyr accounts.

Because this study is concerned with sexual violence based on women's religious identity as well as their gender, I therefore have used material provided by persecution watchdogs Open Doors and Aid to the Church in Need who both have documented cases of gender-based religious persecution happening in our contemporary time. The overall conclusion of these reports is that sexual abuse of Christian women is 'complex, hidden and violent' and that it differs from male persecution, particularly in that the latter form is much more public.⁶⁸

In the following chapters I will demonstrate the results of my literature-review of contemporary scholarly interpretation of Early Christian female martyr accounts as well as the literary-historical method that I have applied to understand the time and culture of the Roman imperial time in which these martyr texts were written.

⁶⁸ Open Doors, *The Hidden Face of Persecution: The Targeted Abuse of Christian Women Worldwide*, (Open Doors UK, 2020).

CHAPTER III PUBLIC HUMILIATION

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In the martyr accounts of Thecla, Blandina and Perpetua, all three female martyrs are stripped naked and exposed to the public in the arena. Perpetua is not only naked when she fights in the arena, but she is also stripped naked in the last of her (four) visions which she has while waiting in prison for her trial.⁶⁹ The nakedness of all three women is mentioned in their martyr stories, however, this is done in a casual way; i.e. it may be mentioned but the focus of the martyr narrative shifts away from this form of public humiliation and sexual denigration. Conversely, contemporary interpretations by scholars within the field of religious studies have treated the public exposure of female martyrs not as an important part of their persecution, but rather as examples of eroticised literature or as a demonstration of power tensions between the heroine and her family. Other contemporary interpretations focus mainly on stereotype gender roles within the broader Christian community or church leadership. I will argue that these accounts of public nakedness should be treated as a form of sexual harassment that was part of the gender-specific persecution of female martyrs by the Roman Empire.

I will explain in what way public humiliation was part of punishment within the Roman Empire and the way this happened. Consequently, this will also mean examining how sexual violation was perceived at the time, since being stripped naked was often part of public punishment and humiliation. Next I will provide an overview of how these early Christian martyr narratives involving public nudity of female martyrs are discussed by contemporary religious scholars. Lastly, I will summarize how contemporary historians answer the question why Roman authorities used public shaming as part of punishment and demonstrate by using primary texts, such as the *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas*, how early Christian authors interpreted this. But I will start by giving a very brief overview of some of the pertinent aspects of Roman society during the second and third centuries when the martyr texts of Blandina, Thecla and Perpetua were written to provide more context to the society and culture that set the stage for the martyr texts of these three female martyrs.

⁶⁹ Gold, *Perpetua*, chap. 2, Kobo.

Within Roman empirical society there was a division between the household (*domus*, Latin) and the public (*spectaculum*, Latin). As Vorster has explained, the separation between these two spheres was to establish social order and to create cultural identity within Roman society.⁷⁰ On the one hand, there was the public life, the *spectaculum*, which was inhabited mostly by men. On the other hand, the *domus* or the household, was predominantly occupied by women. Economics and politics belonged to the public, male-dominated sphere.⁷¹ There were other people who also took part within the public atmosphere.⁷² However, they were not free citizens but rather viewed as *infamia* (Latin), i.e. people (mostly men) who were dishonoured or discredited.⁷³ This was opposed to the Roman concept of *dignitas* (Latin), meaning men from the elite class who were associated with honor, virtue, prestige and dignity.⁷⁴ This division between the *infamia* and *dignitas* in Roman ethos, meant a legal construct that would withdraw legal protection Roman citizens did enjoy from those labelled *infamia* such as prostitutes, actors, gladiators and such.⁷⁵ *Infamia* was not only a legal construct, but also indicated loss of reputation, honor and social standing.⁷⁶

With respect to the two domains, though, some scholars, such as Strong have argued that these boundaries were not as stable or coherent as it may seem.⁷⁷ Generally speaking however, the division between the household and the public was clear.

Moreover, the concept of the *domus* was also important with regard to sexual violence, as Cosgrave has argued, for some specific situations.⁷⁸ The *domus* was the part where mainly women and children lived, and therefore, in times of war, the inner walls of a city where they would hide from attacks by enemies.⁷⁹ After the men of the city were defeated and killed, the women and children who were hiding behind the walls of the *domus*, would then be raped and

⁷⁰ Johannes N. Vorster, "From the Domus to the Spectaculum; Family and Martyrship in Early Christianity", *Scriptura* 104, South-Africa: Stellenborgh University (2010): 388 – 405.

⁷¹ Matthew J. Perry, "Defining Gender" in: *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Law and Society* ed. Paul J. Du Plessis, Clifford Ando & Kaius Tuori (Oxford: University Press, 2016).

⁷² Neil Ackerman, "The Female Prostitute in Ancient Rome: An Identity," *The Post Hole* 46, (2015): 8 – 14.

⁷³ Robert Knapp, "Legally Marginalised Groups: the Empire" in: *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Law and Society* ed. Paul J. Du Plessis, Clifford Ando & Kaius Tuori (Oxford: University Press, 2016).

⁷⁴ Ari Z. Bryen, "Crimes Against the Individual: Violence and Sexual Crime," in *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Law and Society*, Paul J. Du Plessis, Clifford Ando & Kaius Tuori eds. (University of Oxford Press, 2016).

⁷⁵ Imran Rasljanin, "Infamia in the Sight of Roman Law", *Science International Journal* 2, (2023): 53 – 57

⁷⁶ Rasljanin, "Infamia in the Sight of Roman Law."

⁷⁷ Anise K. Strong, *Prostitutes and Matrons in the Roman World* (University of Cambridge Press, 2016).

⁷⁸ Cosgrave, "Captive-taking in the Late Roman Republic and Early Principate."

⁷⁹ Cosgrave, "Captive-taking in the Late Roman Republic and Early Principate."

enslaved.⁸⁰ In that perspective, the idea of the *domus* would mean women and children had some sort of initial protection, but this could be taken away from them in the context of war. Indeed it was seen as simply part of warfare and the sacking of the city, hence the boundaries of public and private no longer mattered as such. Apart from the wartime context of abduction and rape, in Roman imperial society free women would have legal protection but only when they stayed within the boundaries of the *domus*. A respectable *matronae*, a married Roman wife, would not go outside of her house without a male guardian.⁸¹ In public, married women from the elite class were recognizable by the *stola* they wore, unmarried virgins wore a so-called *toga praetexta*.⁸² On their wedding day, young girls would change their *toga* for a *stola*, as an indicator for their new role and social status as a wife, during a ceremony called *toga virilis*.⁸³

3.2.1 Citizens

Aside from Blandina and Felicitas, the female martyr stories that this chapter engages with in most cases concerned a heroine from the elite class. Perpetua was part of an elite family, the Vibii, who were given Roman citizenship approximately one hundred years prior to the start of the martyr text.⁸⁴ Women of the Roman elite would have only one career opportunity which was marriage and having children.⁸⁵ They were never independent from their family and, according to De Marre, after the first century AD married women remained under the control of their father, the *pater familias*.⁸⁶ The reason for this change may have been that divorce and re-marriage were rather common which would place a woman under the control of a new husband and family every time she would re-marry. According to Gutierrez Roman women, in both the Republic and the later Empire, were under a life-long guardianship called *tutela perpetua milierum*.⁸⁷

Tertullian described the early Christian female martyr Perpetua as a “married matron” and according to Gold the shorter version of the martyr account of Perpetua described the young

⁸⁰ Cosgrave, “Captive-taking in the Late Roman Republic and Early Principate.”

⁸¹ Patricia Gutierrez, “The Vestal Virgins: A Paradoxical Phenomenon of Greco-Roman Society” Notre Dame University, (2018).

⁸² Lauren Caldwell, *Roman Girlhood and the fashioning of Femininity* (University of Cambridge Press, 2015), 57.

⁸³ Caldwell, *Roman Girlhood and the fashioning of Femininity*, 57.

⁸⁴ Gold, *Perpetua*, chap. 6, Kobo.

⁸⁵ Martine Elizabeth Agnès de Marre, “The Role and Position of Women in Roman North African Society” (2002): 45.

⁸⁶ De Marre, “The Role and Position of Women in Roman North African Society” (2002): 45.

⁸⁷ Gutierrez, “The Vestal Virgins.”

woman as “married in a respectable fashion”.⁸⁸ Meanwhile, the other prominent female martyr, Thecla had maidservants and she is called a mistress in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, so it is clear she was also depicted as being from a well-respected family.⁸⁹ She was betrothed to a man called Thamyris but decided she would follow Christ instead. The fact that she was engaged to be married also indicates Thecla was a citizen, because slaves or prostitutes could not marry according to Roman law.

3.2.2 Slaves

Regarding slaves in the Roman Empire, Taylor has noted that they were considered the lowest in rank with regard to their social status by the elite.⁹⁰ The status of slaves, Taylor explains, was at the bottom of the social and legal hierarchy and they were viewed as objects rather than persons.⁹¹ With regard to the household and their place in Roman society, slaves would mostly be part of the broader Roman *familia*; a concept wherein not only a father, mother and their child(ren) lived, but the slaves of a family as well.⁹² It was also not unlikely that the slaves of such a household would follow their master(s) in their religion.⁹³ It is important to acknowledge that losing your ‘public face’ (*existimatio*, Latin) could only affect free citizens.⁹⁴ Slaves were viewed as property and not as persons, which also included unavoidable sexual services to their owners, and prostitution of slave women was widespread.⁹⁵ Marriage was not possible for slaves, although there were marriage-like relationships called *contubernia*.⁹⁶

Furthermore, Vierow notes that the death decree in the arena would have stripped the condemned not only of their clothes, but more importantly, of their identity, making them into

⁸⁸ Gold, *Perpetua*, chap. 1, Kobo.

⁸⁹ Note: “The Acts of Paul and Thecla” is a second century, apocryphal Christian text. It is an account of the apostle Paul, his travel and work in Iconium (Asia Minor), where he meets a young woman, called Thecla. I have used an online version taken from “The Apocryphal New Testament,” translation and notes by M.R. James (Clarendon Press, 1924), <https://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/actspaul.html>.

⁹⁰ Tristan S. Taylor, “Social Status, Legal Status and Legal Privilege” in *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Law and Society*, Paul J. Du Plessis, Clifford Ando & Kaius Tuori eds. (University of Oxford Press, 2016).

⁹¹ Taylor, “Social Status, Legal Status and Legal Privilege”.

⁹² Jonathan Edmondson, “Slavery and the Roman Family” in: Bradley K, Cartledge P, eds. *The Cambridge World History of Slavery 1, The Ancient Mediterranean World (2011): 337 – 361*.

⁹³ Rodney Stark, “Reconstructing the Rise of Christianity: The Role of Women” in *Sociology of Religion* 56, no. 3, Oxford, University Press (1995): 229 – 244.

⁹⁴ Bryen, “Crimes Against the Individual: Violence and Sexual Crime.”

⁹⁵ Richard Gamauf, “Slavery: Social Position and Legal Capacity” in *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Law and Society*, Paul J. Du Plessis, Clifford Ando & Kaius Tuori eds. (University of Oxford Press, 2016).

⁹⁶ Mary E. Sommar, *The Slaves of the Churches: A History*, (University of Oxford Press, 2020), 40.

slaves.⁹⁷ Clothes as well as hairstyle were an indicator of a person's social status or identity within the Roman Empire.⁹⁸ By becoming Christians and face prosecution, elite women such as Thecla and Perpetua became slave-like in the eyes of Roman society. Hence, this is why they could be stripped naked in front of a crowd which would otherwise be unthinkable for Roman elite women who would normally remain within the protected private sphere.

3.2.3 The marginalized "other"

Apart from free citizens and slaves there were other categories of people living on the margins of Roman society. It is beyond the reach of this research to give a complete and accurate overview of all inhabitants within the Roman imperial society, but for the sake of completeness I will highlight that there were other groups who were neither slaves nor free citizens and who lived on the margins of Roman society. Common people, the so-called *humiliores*, were gradually moved to the edges of empirical society.⁹⁹ Others such as the *infamia* (prostitutes, gladiators and actors), soldiers, handicapped people and outlaws were set aside from normal societal life according to Knapp. Christians would eventually be treated as outlaws, in other words, they were not viewed as part of normal society.¹⁰⁰

It is in light of the tension between these divisions; between the *domus* and the *spectaculum*, the free woman and the slave, being married or refusing to marry and live an ascetic life, that female martyr stories were written.

3.3 PUBLIC HUMILIATION

As we have established, the social order within the Roman empire was maintained by a separation between the *domus* from the *spectaculum* and between the *infamia* and the *dignitas*. Social status led to different rights and obligations and criminals were punished in front of a crowd. In Roman empirical context, according to Hallett, being stripped naked in public would have also indicated punishment and humiliation.¹⁰¹ Crimes involving sexual violence were connected with the integrity of the Roman empirical household (the *domus*), hence normally considered a private matter. According to Bryen *stuprum* or *iniuria* were considered to be

⁹⁷ Heidi Vierow, "Feminine and Masculine Voices in the Passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas", in *Latomus* 58, No. 3, (1999): 600 – 619.

⁹⁸ Croom, *Roman Clothing and Fashion*.

⁹⁹ Knapp, "Legally Marginalised Groups: the Empire."

¹⁰⁰ Knapp, "Legally Marginalised Groups: the Empire."

¹⁰¹ Judith P. Hallett & Marilyn B. Skinner eds., *Roman Sexualities*, (University of Princeton Press, 1997).

offensive to the father, the *pater familias*, or the husband (or both).¹⁰² The next chapter will deal with the Roman concept of rape, abduction and sexual violence, *stuprum* and *iniuria*. Sometimes, as Rašljanin explained, people could be declared *infamia* by means of punishment.¹⁰³ This is important, because it shows that degradation and shame were used as a form of public punishment and it also demonstrates that honor was not only linked to the social or moral sphere, but it had legal consequences as well.¹⁰⁴ In addition Coleman writes that humiliation, for example of a criminal offender, also functioned as a way to distance Roman society from a criminal.¹⁰⁵ This humiliation also served, during a public process, to avoid any form of sympathy the public may have had for the offender.¹⁰⁶

We can find similar public shaming not only of female martyrs individually, but with the connection to shaming of the Christian community through the nakedness of these female Christian martyrs in early Christian literature. Molinari mentions, although in a speculative manner, that rape was used as a punishment for Christian women of the Early Church by means of public humiliation with the example of Christian women being persecuted as ‘Danaids and Dircae’.¹⁰⁷ This is a reference to the ‘Epistle of Clement of Rome’ (Also known as *I Clement*) wherein it is stated:

*“It was by reason of jealousy that women were persecuted, and were subjected under the guise of Danaids and Dirces, to dreadful and unholy violence, until they won the goal for which their faith had struggled, and they received, despite their feebleness, a noble prize.”*¹⁰⁸

Moreover, according to Bonar, specifically for the Corinthians, to whom the letter in I Clement was addressed, there was an underlying threat of sexual violation of Christian women used by the Roman assembly as an example, a veiled message that violence might also come to other communities.¹⁰⁹ This message, Bonar argues, would not only bring to mind the persecuted and sexually demeaned Christian women, but also functioned by way of

¹⁰² Bryen, “Crimes Against the Individual.”

¹⁰³ Imran A. Rašljanin, “Infamia in the sight of Roman Law”, *SCIENCE International Journal*, 2, no. 4, (2023) 53-57.

¹⁰⁴ Rašljanin, “Infamia in the sight of Roman Law” 54.

¹⁰⁵ Kathleen Coleman, “Fatal Charades.”

¹⁰⁶ Coleman, “Fatal Charades.”

¹⁰⁷ Molinari, “Women Martyrs in the Early Church.”

¹⁰⁸ Chance E. Bonar, “Danaids and Dirces in Roman Corinth: Sexualized Violence and Imperial Spectacle in I Clement” in: Christy Cobb and Eric Vanden Eykel eds. *Sex, Violence and Early Christian Texts* (Lexington Books, 2022), chap. 2, Kobo.

¹⁰⁹ Bonar, “Danaids and Dirces in Roman Corinth.”

eliciting the Corinthians as a Roman *colonia* and their own participation in Roman spectacular culture.¹¹⁰ This is similar to what Adams writes concerning Latin writers who described sexual violations, threatening to carry these out more often than actually doing so, by means of verbal aggression which would create fear among the audience, imagining these crimes were perpetrated against them.¹¹¹ From this explanation it is clear that sexual denigration of Christian women happened and that Christian communities as well as Christian authors were aware of it even if, as Baldrick-Morrone argued, the included message did not only concern these women's misery.

3.4 CONTEMPORARY SCHOLARLY INTERPRETATION

As demonstrated above, the early Christian female martyrs mention that women were stripped naked and humiliated in front of a crowd. Public nudity as described in the martyr stories of Blandina, Thecla and Perpetua has attracted a lot of scholarly interest, however, the focus seems to lie more on critiquing early Christian writers than Roman society and legislation. Some scholars have interpreted the written details considering public nudity and humiliation of female martyrs as a form of sexualised or eroticised intention from early Christian authors. For example, Jackson describes these narratives as 'eroticised deaths'.¹¹² Jackson concludes that the public exposure of these female martyrs existed alongside their sexualised and eroticised suffering, an intent that she ascribes to the authors of these narratives.¹¹³ Additionally, with regard to Ambrose (fourth century bishop of Milan and author who wrote about the martyr Agnes) Jackson states: "The narratives regarding their deaths take the eroticism of Ambrose to extreme lengths, integrating erotic imagery and language with graphic accounts of bodily mutilation, and heavily implied sexual threats."¹¹⁴

Furthermore, according to Gold there is an undercurrent of eroticism in the *Passio* and she continues stating that Perpetua is described in sexualised tones (*Passio* 18, 20).¹¹⁵ Cooper writes: "But the violence is also pornographic, and in this wise the genre invites the proposal of a heroine whose vulnerability an audience can guess at even as they admire her valiant

¹¹⁰ Bonar, "Danaids and Dirces in Roman Corinth."

¹¹¹ J.N. Adams, *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary* (Duckworth & Co., 1982): 137.

¹¹² Rosie, J. Jackson, "Sacrifice, Salvation and Sex: The Female Body and the Shaping of Christian Antiquity," Ph.D. Diss. (University of Manchester, 2019).

¹¹³ Jackson, "Sacrifice, Salvation and Sex" 105.

¹¹⁴ Jackson, "Sacrifice, Salvation and Sex" 122.

¹¹⁵ Gold, *Perpetua*, chap. 3, Kobo.

conduct.”¹¹⁶ Vierow suggests that the author of the martyr text regarding Perpetua and Felicitas intended to provoke male readers by describing the image of two naked women, one with her breasts still lactating.¹¹⁷ By contrast, Miles has convincingly demonstrated that nakedness is seldom associated with sexuality or lust in patristic writings and that this connection is of later date.¹¹⁸ Thus, I find it somehow hard to believe early Christian authors would have added such descriptions out of a sexual motive or hidden desire.

Nevertheless, some of the images in the *Passio* undoubtedly could be interpreted as indicating female sexuality, as some scholars have argued, at least within the cultural timeframe in which the *Passio* was written. For example, the portrayal of Perpetua using a hairpin to re-fashion her dishevelled hair in front of the crowd, whereas in Roman empirical society women typically dressed their hair in the privacy of their own home, may have had an erotic appeal to the audience listening to her martyr story.¹¹⁹ This particular emphasis on her long hair being tied or wrapped with a hairpin certainly indicated, within a Roman context, that she was a mature, sexually active woman.¹²⁰ Trying to arrange her dishevelled hair may as well refer to her desire to show in front of the crowd her triumph, rather than her defeat, since dishevelled hair in Roman custom at the time was typical for female mourners as Sande has pointed out.¹²¹ In this case, Perpetua’s triumph would be receiving the martyr’s crown, hence, rather than facing death through her martyrdom, the author indicates that she would receive eternal life.

Another contemporary scholarly interpretation of such public shame and denigration, is through a lens of gender roles and power structures within early Christian literature. Cobb views the way that the author of the *Passio* describes Felicitas her breasts lactating, as indicative of forcing her into a maternal role because Cobb argues motherhood was the most important female role in martyrologies.¹²² What Cobb referred to is one particular scene in the martyr narrative concerning Perpetua and Felicitas wherein the naked breasts of both women are described when they were put under pressure to wear a dress commonly worn by priestesses of

¹¹⁶ Katherine Cooper, “The Voice of the Victim: Gender, Representation and Early Christian Martyrdom” in *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 80, no. 3 (1998): 147 – 158.

¹¹⁷ Vierow, “Feminine and Masculine Voices in the Passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas.”

¹¹⁸ Margaret R. Miles, *Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West* (Beacon Press, 1989).

¹¹⁹ Elizabeth Bartman, “Hair and the Artifice of Roman Female Adornment” in *American Journal of Archaeology* 105, no. 1, (2001): 1 – 25.

¹²⁰ Bartman, “Hair and the Artifice of Roman Female Adornment.”

¹²¹ Siri Sande, “Panegyrics, Poetry and Hair in the Late First and Early Second Century AD”, in *Norwegian Journal of Greek and Latin Studies* 95, no. 1 (2021): 192 – 233.

¹²² Cobb, *Dying to be Men*, 115.

the Roman goddess Ceres which they refused.¹²³ Only when the public is appalled by seeing both women almost naked, their feminine frailty exposed, they accepted wearing unbelted robes, which were habitually worn by lower class women, without further objection.¹²⁴

3.5 PUBLIC HUMILIATION AS GENDER-SPECIFIC SUFFERING AMONG EARLY CHRISTIAN WOMEN

As we have seen, Christian women in martyrologies did suffer physical torture and were killed either during a spectacle in the arena or burned at the stake or beheaded just as male martyrs did. But what makes these stories different is that female martyrs also suffered from public shaming and denigration because they were exposed naked in front of a crowd by way of punishment. In the martyr story of Blandina, the *Letter*, there are two scenes in which her nudity is reported. Firstly we are told that she, together with Maturus and Sanctus, was ‘publicly exposed to the wild beasts’ and the second mentioning of her public nudity states that she (now alone) was ‘hung up fastened to a stake, and *exposed*, as food to the wild beasts’.¹²⁵ The last part of Blandina’s martyr story recounts that ‘she was at last enclosed in a net and cast before a bull’.¹²⁶ According to Gold, the net the author of the martyr text is referring to was similar to the see-through net that Perpetua and Felicitas were forced to wear at the end of their martyrdom, which Gold classifies as sexual humiliation.¹²⁷

Blandina (*Letter from the Churches in Lyons and Vienne to the Churches in Asia*) was a slave-woman who converted to Christianity. She was arrested with a group of other martyrs, including her mistress. Similar to the martyr stories concerning Thecla, Agnes, Perpetua and many others, Blandina was stripped naked.¹²⁸ This fact of her public nudity is mentioned, however, with regard to legal protection against sexual harassment slaves such as Blandina would have none. Caldwell explains that a free Roman virgin (*virgo*) would even lose legal protection against such sexual crimes when she was dressed as a slave.¹²⁹ This clearly indicates that slave women like Blandina had no legal protection against any form of sexual harassment

¹²³ Note: A highly recommended source on the history, cult and liminality regarding the Roman goddess Ceres is Barbetta Stanley Spaeth, *The Roman Goddess Ceres* (University of Texas Press, 1996).

¹²⁴ Alexandra Croom, *Roman Clothing and Fashion*, (Amberley Publishing, 2010).

¹²⁵ “The Letter from the Churches in Lyons and Vienne to the Churches in Asia.”

¹²⁶ “The Letter from the Churches in Lyons and Vienne to the Churches in Asia.”

¹²⁷ Gold, *Perpetua*.

¹²⁸ Gold, *Perpetua*.

¹²⁹ Caldwell, *Roman Girlhood and the fashioning of Femininity*, 56.

or violence. We do not know from the martyr account whether Blandina was married or not, but the text does refer to her as both a sister and a mother:

“But they failed in effecting this; for Ponticus, encouraged by his sister, so plainly indeed that even the heathens saw that it was she that encouraged and confirmed him, after enduring nobly every kind of torture, gave up the ghost; while the blessed Blandina, last of all, after having like a noble mother encouraged her children, and sent them on before her victorious to the King trod the same path of conflict which her children had trod, hastening on to them with joy and exultation at her departure, not as one thrown to the wild beasts but as one invited to a marriage supper.”¹³⁰

Since Blandina was a young woman in her early twenties, we can assume she was likely not the mother of the other martyrs who are portrayed here as her children, hence, this was meant in a spiritual manner, although, according to Goodine, she could indeed have been Ponticus’ (biological) sister.¹³¹ However, what is more interesting here is that the author refers to Blandina as a *noble* mother connecting her with the ideal example of the Roman matron contrary to her Roman social status as a slave, who as we have seen, were regarded as objects rather than persons.

To Gold, Perpetua’s refusal to wear the religious cloth, indicated that the female martyr took matters in her own hand, breaking away from traditional Roman behaviour as a respectable matron.¹³² What Gold referred to is that in the Roman Empire, clothing and hairstyle were an indicator of a person’s social status.¹³³ For example, a married matron would wear a stola, a prostitute a toga.¹³⁴ For a woman of good standing, legal protection with regard to her bodily integrity would only have validity in case she was properly dressed.¹³⁵ Thus, the consequence of not being properly dressed, which would certainly have been the case for a woman who was stripped naked in public, according to social standards meant that a matron would lose her reputation (*existimatio*, Latin) and her social standing (*dignitas*, Latin).¹³⁶

¹³⁰ “The Letter from the Churches in Lyons and Vienne to the Churches in Asia.”

¹³¹ Elizabeth A. Goodine, “Standing at Lyon: An Examination of the Martyrdom of Blandina of Lyon” in *Gorgias Studies in Early Christianity and Patristics* 25 Gorgias Press LLC, (2014).

¹³² Gold, *Perpetua*.

¹³³ Croom, *Roman Clothing and Fashion*.

¹³⁴ Croom, *Roman Clothing and Fashion*.

¹³⁵ Croom, *Roman Clothing and Fashion*.

¹³⁶ Catherin Edwards, “Unspeakable Professions; Public Performance and Prostitution in Ancient Rome”, in: Judith P. Hallett and Marilyn B. Skinner eds. *Roman Sexualities* University of Princeton Press (1997): 66 – 95, <http://press.princeton.edu/titles/6152.html>

According to Stanley Spaeth the role of Ceres as the Roman goddess of fertility was emphasised by images of her being big-breasted.¹³⁷ Breasts during a Roman funeral or mourning ceremony were often described as blooded and beaten, but the breasts of Felicitas are far from that, they are lactating, indicating life rather than death.¹³⁸ Note also that Perpetua started singing Psalms (*Passio* 18:7) when they entered the arena, singing Psalms is also mentioned in one of her four visions (*Passio* 10:12), in contradiction with Roman tradition that women during a funeral ceremony would sing lamentations, strike their breasts and tear their hair, according to Hans-Josef Klauck.¹³⁹

Furthermore, for religious people, such as priests and priestesses, their clothes visibly distinguished them from other Roman women, freedwomen or slaves. It was this particular dress that would identify them as a religious woman, a priestess of the Roman goddess Ceres, that Perpetua and Felicitas refused to wear. However, a closer examination of the *Passio* reveals that this was also a model for other martyr texts; the group of martyrs, including Perpetua and Felicitas, declined to offer sacrifices to the Roman gods, aware that doing so would result in their execution. In short, they would rather die than pay their respects to the Roman gods that they did not believe in. We must view their refusal to wear the dress, symbolizing a Roman goddess they no longer believed in, within a similar religious context. This becomes apparent shortly before Perpetua dies, when she tries to cover herself, as mentioned before, with the unbelted robe. The author or narrator of the *Passio* explains that she did this out of concern for her chastity. Indeed, as a respectable Roman matron, Perpetua would likely have been aware of her public nudity and tried to protect herself from the crowd gazing at her. But what the martyr text is also telling us, perhaps in a rather implicit way, is that her faith was so strong that she would rather face public humiliation than wear the dress resembling a goddess she no longer believed in. In other words, just as the group of Christian martyrs, both men and women, refused to sacrifice to the Roman gods and consequently chose death, for these women it also implied choosing public nudity and shame rather than wear a dress resembling a Roman goddess and therefore their refusal has to be understood as part of their martyrdom.

¹³⁷ Barbetta Stanley Spaeth, *The Roman Goddess Ceres*, (University of Texas Press, 1996).

¹³⁸ Gold, *Perpetua*.

¹³⁹ Hans-Josef Klauck, *The Religious Context of Early Christianity: A Guide to Graeco-Roman Religions*, (T&T Clark, 2000).

Likewise, in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* we read that Thecla refuses marriage to which her jilted fiancé, Thamyris responds:

*“Thecla, my betrothed, why do you sit thus? And what sort of feeling holds you distracted? Come back to your Thamyris and be ashamed.”*¹⁴⁰

What is important here is that Thecla is summoned, by Thamyris, to feel shame for her refusal to marry, i.e. her refusal to behave as expected of a young elite virgin from the elite class of Roman citizens. Upon her refusal to accept the offer of her fiancé to do as she is told and feel ashamed for her denial of Roman customs in an appropriate, private manner, she consequently is exposed naked in public (ordered by the governor and her own mother), bringing a protected young woman from the *domus* to the *spectaculum*. This demonstrates that, even for a noble woman like Thecla, the choice she made to follow Paul, i.e. Christianity, immediately caused friction, and, despite being from the noble class, she was stripped naked for not following social and cultural norms at the time. Again, just as Perpetua and Felicitas did, Thecla chooses public humiliation and shame over returning to what was expected of her, marriage, according to Roman customs at the time. Neither of these women embraces public nakedness as if it was nothing to them, but rather, when put on the spot they cared more about their Christian faith than anything else, including their lives and their social and legal status.

When the young martyr perseveres in her desire to remain unmarried and follow the apostle Paul, she then is stripped naked in the arena and condemned by the governor to be burned at her mother’s request. Moreover, some scholars have viewed the refusal by Thecla (*Acts of Paul and Thecla*) to marry her fiancé as an expression of her agency, or more accurately, female agency i.e. female influence or power.¹⁴¹ According to Cohick and Brown Hughes such agency is entwined with decision-making. In their view Thecla’s decision to remain unmarried is demonstrative of the self-governance of an ascetic life.¹⁴² Gold follows a similar line of thought, arguing that female martyrs from early Christian literature showed bravery and self-governance by making their own decisions which fuelled the anger of their

¹⁴⁰ “The Acts of Paul and Thecla”.

¹⁴¹ Lynn H. Cohick & Amy Brown Hughes, “Thecla: Christian Female Protomartyr and Virgin of the Church” in *Christian Women in the Patristic World: Their Influence, Authority, and Legacy in the Second through Fifth Centuries*, (Baker Publishing Group, (2017).

¹⁴² Cohick & Hughes, “Thecla: Christian Female Protomartyr and Virgin of the Church.”

parents, respectively the father of Perpetua and Thecla's mother.¹⁴³ The latter even demanded that her daughter would be burned for rejecting marriage.¹⁴⁴

3.6 CONCLUSION

To sum things up, punishment in the Roman Empire during the Early Church period included public humiliation of both individuals and those that were perceived to represent state enemies such as Christians. Roman imperial society depended greatly on social status and honor, especially for free elite men and women. Losing your public face so to speak was not a minor issue in a society so much aware of social expectations. Furthermore, your legal rights depended on your social status and, as we have seen, a convicted Christian would have lost all their *existimatio*.

I have demonstrated that Christian female martyrs in the martyr accounts from the Early Church endured sexual humiliation and denigration such as public nudity, and thus this act was not simply incidental but an intentionally gender-specific part of the punishment. This is evident from the martyr stories of Perpetua and Felicitas, Thecla, Blandina and many others. What is important here is that their public nakedness is part of their martyrdom rather than being an incidental side issue in a martyr text. Just as martyrs chose death over sacrificing to Roman gods, these female martyrs chose, when confronted by the authorities including their own families in some of these stories, public nudity over living according to the social and cultural norms at the time when these were conflicting with their Christian beliefs.

Contemporary scholarly interpretation of these female martyr accounts tend to focus on either a perceived sexualised or eroticised intent with the (male) author in mind, or they view the decisions that female martyrs make as a demonstration of female agency and self-determination, thus giving some attention to gender-specific aspects but nevertheless not fully appreciating (and sometimes even outright obscuring) the specifically female trauma – social, physical and psychological – of the public shaming by forced nudity. As I have shown, however, these stories hint at an underlying threat of rape and sexual abuse and explicitly play on the gendered aspects of public shame when aimed at Christian women, not (only) because of their religious identity but also because of their gender. By contrast, rarely do we see stories of men from early Christian martyr accounts who are being forced to marry (or do other sexual

¹⁴³ Gold, *Perpetua*.

¹⁴⁴ Gold, *Perpetua*.

acts), and if they are punished, the attention to (or even the fact of) their public nakedness is hardly present nor are their nude bodies used to shame the entire Christian community.

Sometimes we need to read between the lines, because martyr accounts are not always outspoken regarding the underlying threat of public nudity and sexual abuse. As Cosgrave has convincingly demonstrated, sexual violence in Roman context was never explicitly shown, for example in art, but it was implied.¹⁴⁵ Even though we have very few explicit references to rape or sexual violence in Roman times, Cosgrave argues that it undoubtedly occurred frequently and that it was used as a weapon of war.¹⁴⁶ Since Roman empirical law did not have one word to denote or define rape, let alone other forms of sexual degradation or violence, we are bound to interpret these martyr texts using our contemporary view on sexual violence when we read early Christian martyr stories.

Vanden Eykel and Cobb have argued that we must prevent that sexual denigration and violation is concealed.¹⁴⁷ Whether this is because authors of early Christian martyr stories used veiled language, or because contemporary scholars of these texts interpret what was written through a lens of present-time debate regarding gender-roles and their influence on societal and cultural norms and expectations.

We rather need to shed a light on what was hidden underneath:

“Buried within the texts of early Christianity are numerous examples of sexual violence. For centuries these stories have been overlooked, their flames extinguished, and the violence within them has often gone unaddressed.”¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁵ Cosgrave, “Captive-taking in the Late Roman Republic and Early Principate.”

¹⁴⁶ Cosgrave, “Captive-taking in the Late Roman Republic and Early Principate.”

¹⁴⁷ Christy Cobb & Erik Vanden Eykel, *Sex, Violence and Early Christian Texts*, (Lexington Books, 2022).

¹⁴⁸ Cobb & Vanden Eykel, *Sex, Violence and Early Christian Texts*, Introduction, Kobo.

CHAPTER IV GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The threat of sexual violence, including attempted rape, is prevalent in the so-called Virgin-Martyr stories that were written during the third and fourth centuries AD. These Virgin-Martyr stories, as a relatively established literary genre, follow a certain pattern: the female martyr refuses marriage, mostly out of a desire to live an ascetic life, and for this she is consequently punished by the Roman authorities, sometimes along with other members of her family.

Contemporary scholars have viewed these Virgin-Martyr stories from a gendered perspective, i.e. most have interpreted the (attempted) sexual violence in these stories as indicators of male sexualised or voyeuristic descriptions of these women. I will argue that sexual assault in these Virgin-Martyr stories is part of their martyrdom. I will outline how withstanding sexual assault and forced marriage served as examples of Christian values considering chastity and virginity and opposed Roman sexual morality at the time. In that respect, the presumed condemnation to the brothel which is mentioned for example in the martyr stories of Agatha and Agnes, is important for this study since it is mentioned by Christian authors at the time as shameful not only for individual female martyrs, but for the entire Christian community that challenged Roman imperial sexual norms and morality.

First, I give an overview on how sexual violence and rape were perceived within Roman imperial society and law. In this paragraph I also outline some aspects of marriage during that time, since many Early Christian martyr accounts included female martyrs who refused marriage and were consequently punished for that. Following this, I will provide insight into the way Early Christian authors focused on the virginity of female martyrs and the tensions that rose between Roman imperial and Christian view regarding sexual morality which lay at the heart of these martyr stories. This will be demonstrated by focusing on Roman protection of virginity versus patristic interpretations of virginity for which I will use works by Tertullian (Early Christian author, 160 – 240 AD) and Ambrose (author, bishop of Milan from 374 – 397 AD) and, subsequently, give an overview of gender-based violence in Virgin-Martyr stories. Next, I will give an overview of sexual violence and rape in primary martyr texts, focusing briefly on what was called condemnation to the brothel. Then, I will emphasise on the way sexual violence and rape were described, in other words, what sort of language was used in

Early Christian literature concerning gender-based violence. Finally, I will give a summary of contemporary scholarly interpretation of these Early Christian female martyr narratives, followed by a conclusion of the important aspects of this chapter.

4.2 SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND RAPE IN ROMAN LAW AND SOCIETY

It is important to realise, as Cosgrave has noted, that it is difficult to study sexual violence in Roman legal context, since there was no word to denote rape according to our contemporary understanding of sexual violence.¹⁴⁹ Different words, *stuprum*, *raptus*, *vis* and *iniuria*, were used to describe what is defined today as rape or sexual violence. It was however only a small group of women, elitist Roman citizens, who were protected by any of these laws. Although the laws involving sexual harassment and sexual violence only benefited a few women, the scope of what it could mean was much wider used and it included (attempted) seduction, physical assault, homosexuality, abduction as well as forcible rape.¹⁵⁰ Which laws were applied depended on the historical period and, as Nguyen explains, legal development progressed through time.¹⁵¹

By contrast to our contemporary view on rape which is based upon the action of the perpetrator, Nguyen states that in Roman law the possibility of legal charges as well as punishment for rape depended on the victims' status.¹⁵² Meaning, only when a victim was considered a person, there could be legal consequences. As slaves, for example, were not considered persons but were rather viewed as property, any such sexual assault (by our terms) against them by their masters (or those given leave by their masters) was not legally relevant. In fact, even if someone sexually assaulted someone else's slave without permission *from the master*, this would only be regarded as illegal when it was deemed to have offended the master of the slave – that is, as if someone made use of your “property” without permission.¹⁵³

Nguyen also adds that female citizens were granted protection within the household (the *domus*), meaning under the protection of a male guardian.¹⁵⁴ Coleman notes that Roman society at the time was very class-conscious and punishment for what was considered capital crime

¹⁴⁹ Cosgrave, “Captive-taking in the Late Roman Republic and Early Principate.”

¹⁵⁰ Nguyen, “Roman Rape.”

¹⁵¹ Nguyen, “Roman Rape.”

¹⁵² Nguyen, “Roman Rape.”

¹⁵³ Bryen, “Crimes Against the Individual.”

¹⁵⁴ Nguyen, “Roman Rape.”

reflected a person's social status.¹⁵⁵ Roman societal order was created around a division between private and public life, the *domus* and the *spectaculum* as I have demonstrated in the previous chapter. It is important to bring this back to mind, because women were viewed as passive units within a family rather than being independent individuals.¹⁵⁶ Also, it is important to note that in the case of an offence against a person, such as sexual violence, it was the *pater familias*, the head of the household, that would be able to press legal charges, not the victim.¹⁵⁷ The *pater familias* was responsible, meaning his domestic jurisdiction, not only for free people within his household, but also his slaves, according to Bryen.¹⁵⁸ With the adaptation of the *lex Iulia de adulteriis coercendis* under emperor Augustus (in 18 BC) sexual conduct that might offend either father or husband or which could compromise the chastity of an unmarried woman (or boys) became criminalised.¹⁵⁹ Note however, that these sexual offences were only crimes when they offended a father or a husband, not the victim.

4.3 PROTECTING VIRGINITY

Castelli set out to define what she calls the 'highly complex unfolding ideology of virginity' in Early Christianity.¹⁶⁰ But was this developing emphasis on virginity within Early Christianity really that complex? For the topic of this chapter, the Virgin-Martyr literary genre, it is important to look at Roman imperial understanding of virgins and the patristic response to this ideal because virginity was closely connected to legal protection regarding sexual violence. According to Caldwell, under emperor Augustus virginity became a public policy concern and during his reign the state regulated marriage as well as the sexual behaviour of its citizens.¹⁶¹ Sexual acts with widows, divorcees, boys and young girls of martial age was regarded *stuprum*, meaning illicit sexual behaviour but this had to concern penetration.¹⁶² Bryen adds that this regulated more the illicit objects of men's desire, whether the victim was willing or not and for women this meant that they had to be of marriageable age.¹⁶³

¹⁵⁵ Coleman, "Fatal Charades."

¹⁵⁶ Nguyen, "Roman Rape."

¹⁵⁷ Bryen, "Crimes Against the Individual."

¹⁵⁸ Bryen, "Crimes Against the Individual."

¹⁵⁹ Bryen, "Crimes Against the Individual."

¹⁶⁰ Elizabeth Castelli, "Virginity and its meaning for women's sexuality in early Christianity" *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 2:1 (1986): 61-88.

¹⁶¹ Caldwell, *Roman Girlhood and the fashioning of Femininity*, 43.

¹⁶² Caldwell, *Roman Girlhood and the fashioning of Femininity*, 43.

¹⁶³ Bryen, "Crimes Against the Individual."

Moreover, according to Caldwell, Augustan legislation made married women, *matronae*, into legal subjects, capable of damaging or assisting the state. Subsequently, unmarried virgins were not considered active participants, but remained primarily legal objects, not harming nor helping the state.¹⁶⁴ The *virgo* hereby became a legal and ethical subject, capable of protecting herself -by means of clothing and behaviour- against sexual harassment, but when she failed to do so, i.e. when she did not properly dress herself, or behaved in an appropriate way, she could no longer rely on legal protection from the state.¹⁶⁵ This meant that a young virgin from the elite class was expected to make her legal status -as a virgin- noticed by means of her clothing as well as her behaviour, to discourage any attackers, if she failed to do so, she was denied full protection from harassment.¹⁶⁶

Despite the fact that there were some legal repercussions for sexual harassment and rape, speaking about sexual violence within Roman society was a different matter. To illustrate, according to Cosgrave, art did not explicitly show rape or sexual violence, but it was implied. She also argues that even when there was silence concerning rape in Greco-Roman writings, there is no doubt sexual violence took place frequently.¹⁶⁷ This will be further discussed in the paragraph on veiled language later in this chapter. Cosgrave argues that it is precisely because of this silence, that it is necessary to look at how we perceive rape and sexual violence in our contemporary time, to interpret sexual violence in Roman imperial time.¹⁶⁸ Similarly, it can also be argued to do the same regarding sexual harassment or violence as portrayed in female martyr texts from Early Christianity. This would mean to re-interpret Virgin-Martyr stories, trying to perhaps discover unpleasant or uncomfortable facts. Cobb and Vanden Eykel write:

*“Many of them (ancient Christian stories) are undeniably beautiful in so many ways, and for centuries they have been sources of light, encouragement and comfort for readers. But they are also dangerous things, for behind all of their light and beauty lurks a dark ugliness that is easily ignored or not easily seen.”*¹⁶⁹

Equally important, when discussing the protection of virginity, we also need to look at child marriage during the Roman empire since, as mentioned before, young girls from the so-called Virgin-Martyr stories were punished for refusing to marry. The younger a girl was

¹⁶⁴ Caldwell, *Roman Girlhood and the fashioning of Femininity*, 61 – 62.

¹⁶⁵ Caldwell, *Roman Girlhood and the fashioning of Femininity*, 50

¹⁶⁶ Caldwell, *Roman Girlhood and the fashioning of Femininity*, 55 – 56

¹⁶⁷ Cosgrave, “Captive-taking in the Late Roman Republic and Early Principate.”

¹⁶⁸ Cosgrave, “Captive-taking in the Late Roman Republic and Early Principate.”

¹⁶⁹ Cobb & Vanden Eykel, *Sex, Violence and Early Christian Texts*, Introduction, Kobo.

married, the more her virginity at the time of her first marriage would be assured, but traditionally the age for marriage was set at twelve during Roman imperial times, although this was not always observed.¹⁷⁰ Medical documents have been preserved in which doctors warn against the health risks of early marriage and consequently giving birth at a young age.¹⁷¹

All of the above sheds a different light on the Virgin-Martyr stories wherein young girls refuse marriage and are consequently punished. The Roman imperial idea of virginity as a physical matter with a initiating ceremony during a girl's first wedding in which she visibly becomes a *matrona* was opposed by Early Christian authors such as Tertullian for example, who defined virginity in a more spiritual manner as achieved at birth and at second-birth, meaning when becoming a Christian believer.¹⁷² Ambrose as well when he wrote that heaven is the home of virginity.¹⁷³ Note also that Ambrose places Roman (Vestal) virgins in direct opposition to Christian virgins, stating that the chastity of "their" (the Romans) virgins is appointed for a term.¹⁷⁴ Whereas the Christian virgins, which he refers to as "ours" are so much stronger as they overcome powers they cannot see, conquering not only over flesh and blood but over Satan himself.¹⁷⁵

4.4 GENDER-SPECIFIC MARTYRDOM IN VIRGIN-MARTYR ACCOUNTS

Part of the sexual violence in the third and fourth centuries Virgin-Martyr accounts was condemnation to the brothel, for example in the martyr stories of Agnes and Agatha.¹⁷⁶ Ambrose, in his book *On Virginity*, also describes an unnamed Christian martyr from Antioch being sent to a house of ill-repute (i.e. a brothel) because she refused a marriage proposal.¹⁷⁷ Tertullian also addresses Roman authorities specifically with regard to the punishment of Christian women by sending them to a brothel, i.e. into forced prostitution, which according to

¹⁷⁰ Caldwell, *Roman Girlhood and the fashioning of Femininity*, 106.

¹⁷¹ Caldwell, *Roman Girlhood and the fashioning of Femininity*, 106.

¹⁷² Tertullian, "On Exhortation to Chastity" in: Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson & Arthur Cleveland Coxe eds. *Ante-Nicene Fathers: Volume IV Latin Christianity* (Cosimo Classics, 2007).

¹⁷³ Note: For the work "On Virginity" by Ambrose, I have used the online page Fourth Century Christianity, this specific citation is from "On Virginity", chap. 5:21 – 22, <https://www.fourthcentury.com/ambrose-on-virgins/>.

¹⁷⁴ Ambrose, "On Virginity," chapter 4:15.

¹⁷⁵ Ambrose, "On Virginity," chapter 4:19.

¹⁷⁶ Eileen Mary Harney, "The Sexualized and Gendered Tortures of Virgin Martyrs in Medieval English Literature," PhD Diss. (University of Toronto, 2008).

¹⁷⁷ Ambrose, "On Virginity," book I.

him the Christian community considered much worse than any other punishment and any other death.¹⁷⁸:

“Therefore God suffers that we thus suffer; for but very lately, in condemning a Christian woman to the leno (a brothel-keeper) rather than to the leo (lion) you made confession that a taint on our purity is considered among us something more terrible than any other punishment and any death.”¹⁷⁹

Note that Tertullian speaks in the plural here, implying that the punishment to work in a brothel effects the entire early Christian community to which it is, according to Tertullian, a stain upon its chastity. A stain so unbreedable that this type of punishment is viewed more dreadful than any death, including the martyr’s death Christians were facing. Equally important here is that Tertullian connects the indicated sexual abuse, by being sent to the brothel, to suffering for God. With regard to this type of punishment, condemnation to the brothel as we know from many Virgin-Martyr stories, Jackson writes that by the third century Christian women and girls who refused to give up their faith and become respectable matronae, were condemned to the brothel.¹⁸⁰ From Tertullian, Ambrose and Prudentius, who wrote concerning virgins who were thrown into a brothel by Roman authorities, we learn nothing other than that, sexual harassment or even abuse once these girls were inside the brothel is suggested, certainly given the fact that they all lament on virgins and their chastity, but it is not explicitly mentioned. Besides, actual sexual violence never happens in the so-called Virgin-Martyr stories, because through divine intervention all virgins were saved from such traumatic events.¹⁸¹

In addition, prostitutes in imperial Roman society bore the stigma of being *infamia* together with for example gladiators and actors.¹⁸² These so-called *infamia* were people that were considered living in the public sphere (the *spectaculum*) but who were without *existimatio* or a public face. Where gladiators and actors could lose this label, for prostitutes this would last their entire life.¹⁸³ Condemning Christian girls who refused to marry and have children according to social order and public duty at the time to the brothel meant they would be carry that stigma for life.¹⁸⁴ The Roman arena served, as Coleman explained, to publicly humiliate

¹⁷⁸ Tertullian, “Apology” in: Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson & Arthur Cleveland Coxe eds. *Ante-Nicene Fathers: Volume III Latin Christianity* (Cosimo Classics, 2007) 55.

¹⁷⁹ Tertullian, “Apology” 55.

¹⁸⁰ Jackson, “Sacrifice, Salvation and Sex.”

¹⁸¹ Jackson, “Sacrifice, Salvation and Sex.”

¹⁸² Ackerman, “The Female Prostitute in Ancient Rome”

¹⁸³ Ackerman, “The Female Prostitute in Ancient Rome”

¹⁸⁴ Jackson, “Sacrifice, Salvation and Sex.”

and shame those who were considered enemies of the state.¹⁸⁵ By condemning Christian women to the brothel, or force them into marriage and with that, inside the *domus* again, the openly expressed challenges to Roman sexual morality the Early Christians demonstrated, could be hidden behind closed doors, making women's bodies a tool to effectively punish the entire community.

4.4 VEILED LANGUAGE

In order to understand and interpret Early Christian martyr texts regarding possible sexual harassment and violence, it is important to familiarize oneself with the language that was used at the time for male and female body parts as well as sexual acts between them. According to Cosgrave there was a silence in Greco-Roman writings concerning sexual violence, however, she claims that it undoubtedly took place frequently.¹⁸⁶ Molinari noted that it is possible that Christian women were raped in public.¹⁸⁷ for which he uses the example of being forced to play mythological parts such as the text in I Clement regarding the Danaids and Dirce. The use of euphemisms regarding sexual violence in art, literature or even Roman imperial society as a whole, does not stand on its own. As Adams explained there was a wide range of words and language for various sexual body parts and sexual acts, often euphemistical in use.¹⁸⁸

On top of that, there were much more words to describe the male sex organ compared to vocabulary for the female sex organ.¹⁸⁹ This, Adams notes, suggests that the male sex organ was considered less shameful to speak about, even in public places such as streets and gardens.¹⁹⁰ The female sexual part was rendered an object of shame and abuse.¹⁹¹ In contrast, the male sexual organ was associated with power, authority, pride and strength.¹⁹² It was within this context of the shame and abuse that was connected with the female body and female sexuality that these Early Christian martyr stories were written. See, for example, how Tertullian, in the quotation above, illustrates that a woman was 'condemned to the *leno* rather than the *leo*', using as little words as possible to describe the horror of both punishments, i.e.

¹⁸⁵ Coleman, "Fatal Charades."

¹⁸⁶ Cosgrave, "Captive-taking in the Late Roman Republic and Early Principate."

¹⁸⁷ Andrea Lorenzo Molinari, "Women Martyrs in the Early Church: Hearing Another Side to the Story" in *Priscilla Papers, Early Christian Women* 22, no. 1 (2008) <https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/women-martyrs-early-church/>

¹⁸⁸ Adams, *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary*.

¹⁸⁹ Adams, *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary*, 90.

¹⁹⁰ Adams, *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary*, 90.

¹⁹¹ Adams, *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary*, 79.

¹⁹² Adams, *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary*.

condemnation to the brothel and *damnatio ad bestias* (capital punishment in which someone is sent to fight wild animals -here the *leo-* in the Roman arena). Another example is the reference to Danaids and Dirces in I Clement (see chapter III) without any further explanation.

In addition to the above, we must bear in mind that, as Cobb has argued, martyr texts had a pastoral function.¹⁹³ Pettersen demonstrated rather convincingly that we find many references to baptism and the eucharist in the account of Perpetua.¹⁹⁴ According to Pettersen when for example Perpetua is rubbed in with oil before she fights with an Egyptian in her second vision, the oil could refer to the custom at the time when athletes were rubbed in with oil before fighting in the arena, but it could also refer to chrismation for a catechumen (which Perpetua is at the start of the martyr account).¹⁹⁵ As Gold has noted, the Egyptian in her vision could refer to the Devil.¹⁹⁶ After Perpetua has conquered the Egyptian, or the Devil, she is greeted by her coach with the words '*filia, pax tecum*' (daughter, peace be with you, Latin) which Pettersen calls an eucharistic reference.¹⁹⁷ During the eucharist the priest says *pax tecum* to which the believer(s) answers with *Et cum spiritu tuo* (and with your spirit, Latin).¹⁹⁸

Also, several scholars have interpreted the way Perpetua, undressed, stares back at the crowd as a moment of breaking with cultural norms regarding feminine behaviour at the time. For example, Shaw writes that 'Her ability to stare directly back into the faces of her persecutors, not with the elusive demeanour of a proper *matrona*, broke with the normative body language in a way that signalled an aggressiveness that was not one of conventional femininity.'¹⁹⁹ Gold follows this line of thought with almost identical wording 'Perpetua's aggressive gaze here breaks with the conventional attitude and demeanour of a proper *matrona*.'²⁰⁰ The specification 'aggressive' is an interpretation by both authors and is not in the original martyr text. From a theological standpoint, however, overlooked in most contemporary scholarly analyses, I argue that given the fact that the *Passio* includes so many references to Baptism and the Eucharist we need to take into consideration that the author referred to the

¹⁹³ Cobb, *Divine Deliverance*.

¹⁹⁴ Alwyn Pettersen, "Perpetua: Prisoner of Conscience" in *Vigiliae Christianae* 41, no. 2 (1987): 139 – 153.

¹⁹⁵ Pettersen, "Perpetua: Prisoner of Conscience"

¹⁹⁶ Gold, *Perpetua*.

¹⁹⁷ Pettersen, "Perpetua: Prisoner of Conscience."

¹⁹⁸ Note: This is a common peace greeting ritual that is still common for example in the Roman Catholic mass and also the Anglican churches. See for example L. Edward Phillips, "The Kiss of Peace and the Opening Greeting of the Pre-anaphoral Dialogue" in *Studia Liturgica* 23, (1993).

¹⁹⁹ Brent D. Shaw, "The Passion of Perpetua" in *Past & Present* 139, no. 1 (1993): 3 – 45.

²⁰⁰ Gold, *Perpetua*.

practice of naked baptism that was common at the time.²⁰¹ Bieler explains how in the Early Church nude Baptism was viewed as a means of *imitatio Christi*; to imitate Christ who hung naked on the Cross.²⁰² Concerning the ‘aggressive stare’ both Shaw and Gold mention regarding Thecla and Perpetua standing naked in front of a crowd without shame, it could be interesting to do more research into possible gnostic influences in these Early Christian martyr texts, but this is beyond the reach and purpose of this thesis.

4.5 CONTEMPORARY SCHOLARLY INTERPRETATION

As I have demonstrated in the previous chapter on public humiliation and nudity, contemporary scholarly interpretation on sexual violence in female martyr accounts also views these stories as sexualised, meaning by the authors of the Early Christian martyr narratives. Gold for example, speaks of Agnes (predominantly in the martyr text by Prudentius, a Christian poet and proconsul, 348 – 413 AD) as eroticised and sexualised.²⁰³ Gold also describes the martyr death of Agnes as sexualised.²⁰⁴ Similarly, Burrus has argued that the detailed account of Agnes her martyrdom as written by Ambrose contained erotic images lying just underneath the story where, for example, the sword was to be equated with a penis and the young girl’s violent death with sexual intercourse.²⁰⁵ It is fair to say that, according to Adams, indeed such metaphors were used to describe the male sex organ, comparing it for example with agricultural tools as well as military weapons.²⁰⁶ Likewise, Adams also explains that sexual deeds were compared with violent acts.²⁰⁷ Since, however, martyr acts served primarily as pastoral texts, it seems at odd that Ambrose, bishop of Milan at the time, would suggest any pornographic or sexualised content while trying to highlight exemplary behaviour from female martyrs to educate Christian communities at the time regarding sexual ethics.

In addition, from a feminist literary critique there seems to be not much commentary on the pressure put on female martyrs, and Roman girls of the elite class in general, to marry. Even when we consider the Virgin-Martyr accounts exclusively as a fictional, literary genre, the fact that Roman imperial society pressured young girls into marriage at a very young age, still

²⁰¹ Andrea Bieler, “Bodies at Baptism,” in: Lizette Larson-Miller & Walter Knowles eds. *Drenched in Grace: Essays in Baptismal Ecclesiology Inspired by the Work of Louis Weil*, (Pickwick Publications, 2013): 3 – 13.

²⁰² Bieler, “Bodies at Baptism.”

²⁰³ Gold, *Perpetua*.

²⁰⁴ Gold, *Perpetua*.

²⁰⁵ Virginia Burrus, “Word and Flesh: The Bodies and Sexuality of Ascetic Women in Christian Antiquity” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 10, no. 1 (1994): 27 – 51.

²⁰⁶ Adams, *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary*.

²⁰⁷ Adams, *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary*.

stands. Caldwell, among others, notes that although some medical professionals argued against early marriage, it appears these views were isolated from societal norms and values at the time.²⁰⁸ Caldwell also notes that Roman society was not deeply worried by the idea of children under puberty being sexually active.²⁰⁹

In her book *Divine Deliverance*, Cobb demonstrates rather convincingly that early Christian martyr texts depicted the suffering of martyrs not as painful, but rather that through divine intervention the martyr did not feel pain or Christ suffered on their behalf.²¹⁰ A similar argument could be made with regard to sexual violations specifically in the so-called Virgin-Martyr narratives. Female martyrs escape rape and forced marriage through divine miracles, or, if marriage could not be avoided, it was not consummated.²¹¹ For example, in Ambrose's story of the anonymous Antiochene virgin, this Christian woman, condemned to the brothel, is saved by a soldier and with his help she manages to escape this place before any sexual crime is committed.²¹² At the end of the narrative, both soldier and virgin die an honourable martyr's death.²¹³ Prudentius describes how the young Virgin-Martyr Agnes is condemned to the brothel but her hair grows long, covering her naked body and protecting her from the gaze of the male cliental.²¹⁴

Boyarin writes that there was a shift in the fourth century from earlier virile, perhaps even masculinized second century female martyrs such as Perpetua and Thecla to what he describes as 'thinking with virgins.'²¹⁵ In his perspective these female virgin martyrs functioned as examples for male ascetic life.²¹⁶ Ambrose himself wrote that "virginity is not praiseworthy because it is found in martyrs, but because virginity itself makes martyrs".²¹⁷ This does raise the question how women who were not able to successfully overcome their rapists were perceived, a question Augustine (bishop of Hippo, 354 – 430 AD) addressed in his work *City*

²⁰⁸ Caldwell, *Roman Girlhood and the fashioning of Femininity*, 107.

²⁰⁹ Caldwell, *Roman Girlhood and the fashioning of Femininity*, 108.

²¹⁰ Cobb, *Divine Deliverance*.

²¹¹ Jackson, "Sacrifice, Salvation and Sex."

²¹² Ambrose, "On Virginity."

²¹³ Cobb and Vanden Eykel, *Sex, Violence and Early Christian Texts*, (Lexington Books, 2022), Introduction, Kobo.

²¹⁴ Note: for the poems by Prudentius, I have made use of an old copy of *Prudentius*, translated by H.J. Thomson (University of Harvard Press, 1958), here in reference to Prudentius' work on Agnes, "Crowns of Martyrdom III," 153,

https://ia600201.us.archive.org/13/items/prudentius00pruduoft/prudentius00pruduoft_bw.pdf

²¹⁵ David Boyarin, "Thinking With Virgins: Engendering Judeo-Christian Difference," *Historia* 3 (1999): 5–31

²¹⁶ Boyarin, "Thinking With Virgins."

²¹⁷ Ambrose, "On Virginity," 3:10.

of God.²¹⁸ Webb notes that according to Augustine, women who were raped (for example during war) as living before the eyes of God, only in need of their conscience (*testimonium conscientiae*, Latin) as proof of their innocence.²¹⁹

As I have argued before, martyr texts served a pastoral purpose, educating the Christian community and from this perspective it is not uncommon to try to digest the theological instructions that may lie underneath the narrative of Early Christian literature. At the same time, we must also not close our eyes to the possibility that these condemnations to the brothel actually took place and that women and girls in the Early Church did indeed suffer gender-specific religious persecution. Gold adds a rather interesting point of view with regard to how male and female suffering in early Christianity was perceived, reflected in martyr texts, when she explains that the Greek word *patientia* was initially perceived as a feminine form of long lasting endurance, for example when giving birth.²²⁰ The initial meaning or interpretation of *patientia* she argues, was a form of suffering which meant enduring pain or grief that could not be prevented, and thus, had to be endured. Rather than martyrs who sometimes actively sought their martyrdom, *patientia* was out of the hands of the victim in early interpretations and very much connected with female suffering.²²¹

For example, this female form of endurance is apparent in the story of the female slave, Blandina who is described as follows:

*“Blandina, through whom Christ showed that things which appear mean and obscure and despicable to men are with God of great glory, through love toward him manifested in power, and not boasting in appearance.”*²²²

Other than Thecla and Perpetua from the second century martyr account that Boyarin classifies as ‘virilized and masculinized’ women, Blandina only endured. But in her silent endurance lies another aspect hidden that is missing from contemporary scholarly interpretation, and that is the Roman imperial idea that as a slave, Blandina would not have been regarded as a person but rather more or less viewed as an object as Bryen explained.²²³

²¹⁸ Melanie Webb, “Augustine’s Response to Rape in City of God I.20: Self-testimony and Neighbour love” during a conference hosted at St. Chad’s College, University of Durham, (2013), https://www.academia.edu/4198317/Augustine_s_Response_to_Rape_in_City_of_God_I_20_Self_testimony_and_Neighbor_love.

²¹⁹ Webb, “Augustine’s Response to Rape in City of God I.20.”

²²⁰ Gold, *Perpetua*.

²²¹ Gold, *Perpetua*.

²²² The Letter from the Churches in Lyons and Vienne to the Churches in Asia.

²²³ Bryen, “Crimes Against the Individual.”

Contrary to elite class women such as Thecla and Perpetua, a slave woman like Blandina would not look, as Gold described it, with an ‘aggressive gaze’ at the hostile crowd in the arena.²²⁴ Note also how the crowd turns itself against the slave woman Blandina, twice, while both in the story of Perpetua and Thecla, both from the elite class, there is no anger described towards these female martyrs.

In addition, as Coleman has pointed out, physical suffering can be measured for example by counting the number of lashes or the amount of blood that is spilled.²²⁵ By contrast, emotional or mental suffering is very difficult to measure by such standards.²²⁶ For example, when it comes to martyrdom and the suffering of the martyrs, we find that in many of the early Christian martyr texts the suffering of women is praised, often in comparison with the suffering of their male fellow sufferers. As for example Cohick finds these early female martyr acts exemplary for women today and praises these early Christian women’s bravery and boldness.²²⁷ This is in line with the third century theologian Ambrose who gave a lengthy description of the frailty of Agnes’ body and her vulnerability, however, he did so to show that she was able to endure as much as her fellow male sufferers.²²⁸ And Tertullian also speaks of Perpetua as a ‘*fortissima martyr*’ (the bravest martyr) because she endured pain and suffering in the arena for such a long time.²²⁹

There was, as I have highlighted in chapter 2, no Roman equivalent for our understanding of rape. We see this for example when Thecla is ‘embraced in the street’ by a man, there is a suggestion of sexual harassment, but this is not explicitly mentioned as such.²³⁰

4.6 CONCLUSION

To sum things up, I have outlined that the acknowledgment and protection against sexual harassment, rape, abduction and forced marriage in Roman imperial times was only for a privileged few, i.e. young girls of marital age from the elite class of citizens. For so many other women such as slaves, prostitutes and the so-called *humiliores* or *infamia*, there was no legal protection against sexual violence, nor were they part of a household where these women and

²²⁴ Gold, *Perpetua*.

²²⁵ Coleman, “Fatal Charades.”

²²⁶ Coleman, “Fatal Charades.”

²²⁷ Cohick, “The Female Martyr’s #MeToo Message.”

²²⁸ Ambrose, “*On Virginity*.”

²²⁹ Gold, *Perpetua*.

²³⁰ “The Acts of Paul and Thecla.”

girls could rely on protection from a *pater familias*. Marriage or a future marriage was the measuring stick, in a sense, by which women and girls were regarded from a legal perspective. Since *humiliores*, *infamia* nor prostitutes could marry under Roman imperial law, legislations regarding protection in cases of sexual violence did not apply to them. Lawful protection developed to protect future Roman matrons and their legitimate children and not so much as a means to protect the individual girlchild. During the Roman imperial time, young girls, not only from Christian martyr stories, were indeed pressured to marry and have children.

I have demonstrated how Roman imperial ideas concerning virginity were opposed by Early Christian authors such as Tertullian and Ambrose as part of their critique on the sexual morality of their time, including having sex with young children and child marriage. For example, I have discussed the punishment some young female martyrs experienced in these martyr accounts, which was called ‘condemnation to the brothel’, i.e. forced prostitution. Consequently, a new type of Christian heroism emerged with the literary genre of the Virgin-Martyr stories in which young girls from the elite class withstood threats of sexual violence and forced marriage, often through divine intervention. This created some form of two-tiered martyrdom; young girls protecting their virginity, aspiring to be chaste, as well as dying a martyr’s death. This two-tiered martyrdom is apparent for example in the work of Ambrose of Milan and the poet Prudentius.

Sexual abuse, as well as sex organs and sexual acts, were often hidden and veiled out of shame either from an individual or a more communal perspective, as we can see from the writing by Tertullian, and as Coleman and others have mentioned this was intentionally done.²³¹ Just like the authors of Early Christian martyr acts at the time claimed that martyrs did not feel pain, sexual harassment and abuse of female martyrs in the stories of Agnes, Agatha, Palagia and so many others, supposedly did not actually take place.

Analyses by contemporary scholars from the field of religious sciences and theology emphasise on what they see as the self-agency or determination of female martyrs. For example the definition of Perpetua’s ‘aggressive stare’ by Gold, Shaw and others seems to lack a more theological approach, as I’ve explained above, with regard to Baptism and the Eucharist. There is also an idea that is quite frequently used to interpret the martyr story of Agnes (and other female martyrs) which is the claim that the Early Christian author had sexualised, eroticised, voyeuristic or even pornographic intents as we have seen. Apart from the fact that it is difficult

²³¹ Coleman, “Fatal Charades.”

to, centuries later, know what the intention of these authors was, again, here more theological as well as socio-cultural reflection seems to go amiss. Early Christian authors wrote from within Roman imperial culture and society which they heavily criticized, their works therefore often reflected reactions on sexual morality within the Roman empire such as their opposing ideas concerning virginity and early marriage.

CHAPTER V CONCLUSION

To start with, I will summarize specific gender-based forms of persecution female martyrs in Early Christian martyr texts endured. Then, I will highlight important aspects concerning sexual violence in the Roman Empire during the time these martyrologies were written or are said to have taken place. Next, I will give a brief overview of how these incidents of public nudity and shame, as well as (the threat of) sexual violence are described in Early Christian martyr texts.

In the second paragraph of this concluding chapter, I will give an outline of the most important findings regarding the contemporary scholarly interpretation of the sexual violence in these texts, focussing on the question whether the vulnerability specifically women had, according to their martyrologies, is acknowledged by religious (and other) scholars today. In addition, I will also emphasise briefly on how the separation of martyrdom and virginity, which is specifically mentioned by the third century author and bishop Ambrose (of Milan), is treated in contemporary analyses of Early Christian martyr texts.

Subsequently, the third paragraph will focus on gender-specific religious persecution happening today, in which I will also reflect on the sexual violence during the Armenian Genocide and the Assyrian Genocide (*Sayfo*) and the forced Islamization of women and children during the last years of the Ottoman Empire.

Finally, I will explain emphasise on some of the patterns I have found in how we address the issue of gender-specific religious persecution past and present, trying to connect the martyr stories that were part of this study with contemporary reporting of gender-based religious persecution. At last, I will highlight why I think this study matters for us today, and give some recommendations.

5.1 GENDER-BASED SUFFERING OF FEMALE MARTYRS

Martyr accounts from the Early Church indicate that Christian women and girls suffered gender-based persecution such as public nudity, (attempted) rape, forced marriage, forced prostitution and sexual torture. These women were targeted because of their Christian identity *and* their biological sex, i.e. because they were women. Gender-based torture and suffering was not always explicitly mentioned, but sometimes hidden by use of veiled or euphemistic language, according to the custom at the time. In Graeco-Roman culture it was not common to

explicitly mention rape or sexual violence. When mentioned, this was mostly done to demonstrate the brutality of opponents or enemies, especially with regard to rape in war time, rather than highlighting the suffering of women.²³²

Furthermore, there was no legal equivalent in Roman law and society to our contemporary views on sexual violence and rape, and, the concept ‘one law for all,’ did not exist, i.e. Roman imperial legal protection with regard to sexual violence was only provided to a specific and small group of women who belonged to the elite who had citizenship. Legislation concerning protection of elite women and girls was primarily meant to protect virgins, young girls who were expected to marry, from sexual harassment.²³³ Initially, sexual violence was viewed as an offense against fathers or husbands rather than a direct offense against a woman’s personal integrity. This changed during the first and second century when sexual violence against elite women became a state matter (see chapter IV). Women from the elite class, such as Perpetua, Agnes and Thecla, were no longer protected against sexual violence and public humiliation when they chose to follow Christ instead of the Roman traditional gods.

Another important aspect is that only women from the elite class, or freed women, could marry. Roman imperial legislation did not protect any woman from other social class or status, since this protection was immediately connected to a woman’s marital state or possibility, meaning protection from sexual violence was legally guaranteed for a married Roman *matron* or a *virgo*, i.e. a young woman from the elite class who was expected to marry. Other women, such as slave women or women who had lost their legal privileges such as the *infamia* did not have any protection against sexual violence. As for female slaves, they were not regarded as a person, but were viewed as property (of their owners).

As I have demonstrated Early Christian authors such as Tertullian and Ambrose developed a sexual morality, based on their theological beliefs, concerning virginity and chastity which were opposing Roman imperial legal and cultural ideas regarding the Roman, elite *virgo* and *matrona*. Both the Roman culture at the time, as well as the Christian opposing views from the Early Church, as is apparent in the martyr texts from this study, considered the chastity of women and girls as reflective of the reputation and standing esteem of the entire Roman society, or, on Early Christian communities. Therefore, public nudity of, and sexual

²³² Cosgrave, “Captive-taking in the Late Roman Republic and Early Principate.”

²³³ Caldwell, *Roman Girlhood and the fashioning of Femininity*.

violence against Christian women could be, and indeed was, used as a tool to shame the early Christian communities, or at least this is what Early Christian martyr stories seem to tell us.

5.2 CONTEMPORARY SCHOLARLY INTERPRETATION OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN MARTYR TEXTS

In answer to my initial question how contemporary scholars interpret the sexual violence that is part of the martyrdom of Early Christian female martyrs, I have demonstrated that scholars today often interpret the sexual violence in Early Christian literature as written from a male perspective, focussing on what they call a sexualised, eroticised, voyeuristic or even pornographic intent by Early Christian authors. Not much attention is given to the idea that what authors such as Tertullian, Ambrose and Prudentius wrote concerning the sexually harassment or other forms of sexual violence Christian women in imperial Rome experienced, may have been true, partly true or possibly true. This is also the case with the literary genre of the Virgin-Martyr; as Caldwell has explained, it was very likely that young girls from the elite class were indeed pressured into marriage at a young age. Of course, we do not know whether the martyr stories of Agnes, Agatha, Perpetua, Thecla or others happened the way they were written or if these events happened at all. However, it is fair to say that parts of these stories could have very well taken place and eventually found their way into Early Christian martyr texts, by way of opposition to the sexual norms at the time.

Some of the scholars whose interpretations of these female martyr stories were used in this study, like for example Cobb, Gold and Streete, have used a more feminist literary approach, i.e. they have analysed these Early Christian martyr accounts emphasising mostly on the political, social and cultural constructs and the underlying gender norms of the time. The risk of emphasising on merely political or social constructs, is that this can easily become a distant, more theoretical exercise rather than a focus on individual female suffering and pain. In a way, one might argue, that the consequence of this approach could still silence women's voices.

For example, many scholars have tried to interpret the martyr story of Perpetua and Felicitas, specifically because this is the only martyr narrative that has been transmitted from the Early Church, written from a female perspective. But this re-interpretation of this early martyr text focusses predominantly on cultural and societal gender norms and stereotypes, rather than on Perpetua her own story. In addition, authors such as Cobb, Gold and Streete, have focussed more on a critique of Early Christian male authors, the so-called patristic writers,

than on Roman imperial norms and legislation considering sexual harassment and rape. This approach has resulted in neglect of, or not acknowledging, the (threat of) sexual harassment and rape as transmitted through these martyr texts. In short, the specific gender-based vulnerability of women and girls from Early Christian martyr literature is dismissed.

Furthermore, contemporary scholars view sexual crimes, and the way these are portrayed in Early Christian martyr stories, mainly through a lens of masculine and feminine stereotyped roles. The gender-specific vulnerability of female martyrs in this way is lost in a power structure perspective which does quite the opposite; i.e. the gender-based peril of women and girls is lost in contemporary scholarly interpretation of Early Christian martyr texts, due to a focus on male strength, power and authority. Returning to the feminist literary critical approach (as I have explained in chapter II), which some of the scholars whose work I have analysed here have used, I argue that sometimes their analyses focuses on opposing supposed masculinized authors and patristic works, rather than emphasising on the traumatic and painful experiences these stories tell us regarding sexual violence of female martyrs. This is similar to what Eagleton, in her article on how women are represented in literature, noticed when she found that some of the authors who initially set out to write about the roles women play in society, gender roles and the politics of sexuality, to their own surprise found that they were focussed merely on male dominance rather than on women.²³⁴

This is problematic, because, as Messina-Dysert noted, victims of sexual violence can feel unable to express pain.²³⁵ Semerdjian, with regard to the Armenian Genocide, has noted that sometimes the victims, or their relatives, “deemed the stories of sexual violence and forced marriage too painful and too emotional for historical study.”²³⁶ Therefore, and this was the main goal of the #MeToo movement, it is of crucial importance to highlight cases of sexual violence and provide a safe place for women to speak out about such experiences in order to help women and girls today, and, prevent that such stories remain hidden in the dark, waiting years or even centuries, to be discovered.

Contemporary scholarly interpretation dismisses sexual violence as part of women’s martyrdom and places rape, public nudity and condemnation to the brothel within a frame of

²³⁴ Mary Eagleton, “Literary Representations of Women” in: Gill Plain & Susan Sellers eds. *A History of Feminist Literary Criticism*, (University of Cambridge Press, 2007): 105 – 119.

²³⁵ Messina-Dysert, “Rape and Spiritual Death.”

²³⁶ Elyse Semerdjian, *Remnants: Embodied Archives of the Armenian Genocide* (University of Stanford Press, 2024).

male and female stereotypes or female self-determination or self-agency. Paradoxically, this results in viewing the piercing with a sword of the young female martyr Agnes as an indicator of penetration, as I have demonstrated in chapter IV, and yet it fails to recognize the actual indications, or threats, of rape in the text.

Finally, scholars today seem to treat the Virgin-Martyr stories, from the third and fourth century AD, as literary works that originated in a void rather than as literary texts that were opposing already existing Roman imperial views on virginity and marriage. In short, because the feminist literary approach is often applied to emphasise on and criticise social and cultural behavioural norms, this spotlight on society at large, consequently by applying this method, we can lose the suffering of individual woman and girls out of sight. Consequently, public nudity and humiliation, as well as the (threat of) sexual violence that is apparent, or at times hidden but indicated, in Early Christian martyr accounts is not treated as a specific female suffering as part of women's martyrdom.

Nevertheless, from a feminist literary critique it is arguable that Early Christian literature does follow a male-dominated approach in this sense, that the female martyrs from the accounts that were part of this study, focus on what female martyrs, despite their sex, could physically endure. As Coleman has argued, physical torture is much more measurable by for example, counting the number of lashes or wounds, then psychological or mental suffering.²³⁷ Mockery and humiliation according to Coleman was sometimes part of the punishment, and occasionally local authorities took matters in their own hands.²³⁸ Wallshein argues, the crucifixion is filled with immense *pathos*, described with bloodied language, composed of wounds, death and agony.²³⁹ If this gruesome violence were indeed the only way the passion of Christ was described, than perhaps public humility and nudity or being condemned to the brothel can in no way be part of imitating or partaking in the suffering Christ. However, as Coleman mentioned as well, part of Christ's punishment was indeed also mockery and humiliation thus the question remains open why feminist literary critique has not picked up on this much, specifically because some Early Christian authors did make that connection.²⁴⁰

²³⁷ Kathleen M. Coleman, "Fatal Charades: Roman Executions Staged as Mythological Enactments" *Journal of Roman Studies* 80, (1990): 44 – 73.

²³⁸ Coleman, "Fatal Charades."

²³⁹ Laurèn Andrea-Lucia Wallshein, "Feminine Faith and Bodily Politics in Early Christianity" (2014), https://www.academia.edu/37456997/FEMININE_FAITH_AND_BODY_POLITICS_IN_EARLY_CHRISTIANITY

²⁴⁰ Coleman, "Fatal Charades."

In addition, the attitude to not mention sexual harassment and violence is also reflected in Early Christian literature itself, often by using veiled language. This is precisely what Cobb and Vanden Eykel have argued, As I have demonstrated in chapter four, Roman art, including literature, did not mention sexual violence explicitly. In a society where shame and honor were such an integral part of how individuals and even entire communities were perceived, such as the Roman imperial society in the first three to four hundred years, public humiliation and sexual denigration were used to shame the ‘Other’. Since the Christian community was still growing not only in numbers, but also in developing its own identity, it was key to find a way to control the narrative, and, with that, a way for authors and audience to give (theological) meaning or interpretation to these texts. Remember, as Cobb has noted, that martyr texts were written with a pastoral purpose for the growing Early Christian Church in mind.²⁴¹ This is similar to what Numansen and Ossewaarde, with regard to the Assyrian Genocide (*Sayfo*), have called ‘making religious sense of rape.’

In the previous chapters, I have demonstrated that gender-specific suffering is part of the martyrdom of women from Early Christian martyrologies. This is also clear from the work of authors such as Ambrose, Tertullian and Prudentius who pointed in that direction, as I have demonstrated in chapter four, yet contemporary scholarly interpretations dismiss this gender-based aspect of female martyrdom. Centuries later, as Numansen and Ossewaarde have noted, descendants of the women who were sexually violated, forcibly married and converted to Islam during the Assyrian Genocide, regarded their grandmothers (or great-grandmothers) as martyrs.²⁴²

5.3 CONTEMPORARY GENDER-SPECIFIC RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION

This leads us to the role gender-based violence has played throughout the history of the Church, including today. Just as in the Early Christian martyr accounts, Christian women today undergo gender-based persecution to punish or shame not only these victims, but their families or the larger Christian community, echoing what authors such as Tertullian wrote concerning the shame that was felt by the entire Christian community by condemning a Christian woman to the brothel.²⁴³

²⁴¹ Cobb, *Divine Deliverance*.

²⁴² Numansen and Ossewaarde, “Heroines of gendercide,” 435.

²⁴³ Miller, Brown, Fisher & Morley, *Invisible*.

According to Open Doors, the violence against Christian women and girls is on the rise.²⁴⁴ In their report, Aid to the Church in Need, states that gender-based persecution continues to be neglected.²⁴⁵ Semerdjian, in her latest book *Remnants*, notes that stories of sexual violence committed against women and girls during the Armenian Genocide, which took place at the beginning of the twentieth century during the last years of the Ottoman Empire, although central to the objectives of genocide, are often relegated to one single-page mention within the existing historiography.²⁴⁶

Besides underreporting, another aspect that can undermine the goal to trace witnesses or remnants of sexual violence, in the case of this study gender-based religious persecution, is the lack of evidence of sexual harassment or rape, caused by various obstacles which I will summarize here.

1) Victims of gender-specific religious persecution can, as the report by ACN shows, remain silent can fear bringing shame on not only themselves, but also on their family or their (ethno)religious community as a whole.²⁴⁷ In fact, the report claims this is the main reason for the underreporting of these sexual crimes.²⁴⁸

2) As Semerdjian notes concerning the Armenian Genocide, witness accounts of abduction, sexual violence and forced marriage can be erased by (local) authorities.²⁴⁹

2) With regard to the abduction and forced marriage and conversion of Coptic Christian girls from Egypt, Christian Solidarity International in their report, governments, in reversal of the countless witness testimonies, deny what is happening or even turn these accusations around by claiming women and girls voluntarily leave their families for good and convert to Islam.²⁵⁰

3) Another obstacle is that government officials not always allow parents or other relatives to report the abduction of their daughters.²⁵¹

²⁴⁴ Open Doors Team/Timothy, “Why are Christian Women and Girls particularly vulnerable to Persecution?” (2022),

<https://www.opendoorsuk.org/news/latest-news/christian-women-vulnerable/> .

²⁴⁵ John Pontifex, John Newton, Fionn Shiner/Aid to the Church in Need UK, “Hear Her Cries; The kidnapping, forced conversion and sexual victimisation of Christian women and girls,” (Norwich: Swallowtail Print, 2021)

²⁴⁶ Elyse Semerdjian, *Remnants*.

²⁴⁷ Aid to the Church in Need, “Hear Her Cries”, p. 8

²⁴⁸ Aid to the Church in Need, “Hear Her Cries”, p.8

²⁴⁹ Semerdjian, *Remnants*.

²⁵⁰ Christian Solidarity International, “Tell My Mother I Miss Her: The Disappearance, Forced Conversions and Forced Marriages of Coptic Christian Women in Egypt,” 5 and 10.

²⁵¹ Christian Solidarity International, “Tell My Mother I Miss Her,” 16

5.4 NEED FOR THIS STUDY AND FURTHER RECOMMENDATIONS

In this study, I have tried to offer a re-reading of Early Christian martyr texts, focussing on, almost hidden, traces of gender-specific violence. By using both the historical critical, as well as the feminist literary critical approach, I have tried to uncover the different layers underneath some of the Early Christian female martyr stories and shed a light on the sexual harassment and the (threat of) sexual violence that female martyrs from the Early Church suffered.

Moreover, we need to question how we today respond to gender-based persecution and martyrdom not only from present-day examples, but also from the past, since, as Cohick mentions there are striking similarities between the stories of persecuted women today and those from the beginning of Christendom.²⁵² Understanding that gender-based sufferings have always been part of the Church, throughout history and in our present time, is an important step towards recognition of our own ideas and biases concerning suffering and martyrdom, and, consequently, to a new approach of these definitions in order to come up with a new strategy to not only acknowledge these cases, but to be able to deal with these forms of persecution and see them as such.

Furthermore, we need so realise that martyrdom is not restricted only to public, violent death, but it can also include more subtle, silent forms of suffering, specifically aimed at women and girls who often remain silent out of fear for repercussions aimed at themselves, their families, or their communities at large. Shame is another, rather important, reason to remain silent, and shame can also include a feeling of humiliation for both victim and/or their relatives or communities. It is important to remember what Coleman wrote about mockery being used against Christ.²⁵³ This is emphasised by Tombs when he argues that it was not the pain, but rather the shame, of the Cross that inspired first century authors.²⁵⁴ Tombs notes that in our contemporary time the pain of the Cross, too often takes a central place in our understanding of Christ's suffering, but that we find the that the unspeakable shame and scandal of it hard to understand.²⁵⁵

²⁵² Cohick, "The Female Martyr's #MeToo Message."

²⁵³ Coleman, "Fatal Charades."

²⁵⁴ David Tombs, "The Crucifixion of Jesus: Torture, Sexual Abuse and the Scandal of the Cross." in: Caroline Blyth and Johanna Stiebert eds., *Rape Culture, Religion and the Bible*, Routledge Focus, 2023

²⁵⁵ Tombs, "The Crucifixion of Jesus."

All of this shows us that there are different ways of suffering and martyrdom for Christ, sometimes as a spectacle, in front of a crowd, but too often in the silent endurance of pain and suffering. Equally important is the idea of spiritual death Messina-Dysert highlighted, which is another way of dying to oneself, rather than a physical death, but equally painful.²⁵⁶ This brings us back to some of the victims of the Armenian Genocide who called the abduction, rape and forced marriage and conversion ‘A Fate worse than Dying.’

The underlying question therefore is, do we see the suffering Christ in a sexually violated woman?

²⁵⁶ Messina-Dysert, “Rape and Spiritual Death.”

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