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Dying to be Men: Gender and Language in Early Christian Martyr Texts

L. Stephanie Cobb

New York: Columbia University Press. 2008. xiii + 208 p.

In *Dying to be Men*, L. Stephanie Cobb presents a compelling argument for the centrality of masculinity (as figured in a Roman context) as an identity forming characteristic of early Christian martyrs' acts. Cobb focuses on a few select martyr acts, such as the Martyrdom of Polycarp, Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas, and the Letter of the Churches of Lyons and Viennes, although she draws from other martyr texts as well. Cobb poses the question "what, then, is a Christian?" (2) and proceeds to offer an answer, from the point of view of early Christian communities. In exploring the martyrologies of the early Church, she suggests the question is answered by actions, that "to be a Christian was to embody masculinity" as it was understood by the Roman culture at the time (3). Ultimately, if a Christian was able to "be a man" (as God exhorted Polycarp to be) (5), he or she was able to gain power over the Roman authorities and culture that stood against them. The authors of the martyr acts "appropriated cultural indicators of masculinity to challenge the perception of Christian weakness and victimization" (125).

Cobb begins her study of Christian gendered discourses by considering how social identity is constructed, via categorization, identification, and comparison, as well as how gender and sex were categorized in the ancient world. Chapter One lays the theoretical groundwork for what is to follow. Important to Cobb's analysis of ancient gender ideology is the "one sex model" that conceives of all beings on a scale of manliness. Women are simply less manly than men, just as some men are less manly than others. In fact, some women can be more manly than some men, and one can constantly move up or down the scale. This fluid notion of manliness allowed for the repositioning of Christian martyrs by the authors of martyr acts.

In Chapter Two, Cobb turns to the actual martyr texts, looking at how they situate the action of the martyrdoms in the arena. Cobb contends that the arena already served as a locus of power negotiations, and that Christian authors of martyr texts capitalize on the preexisting dialogue of power to build group identity against the pagan majority. Cobb also looks at the language of the athlete and gladiator in the context of the Roman world and how it allowed these authors to subvert the otherwise feminized act of dying, transforming it into a masculine triumph.

Chapter Three focuses on narrative strategies of masculinizing the martyr, particularly in relation to various out-groups (pagans, Jews) as well as in-groups (apostate Christians). Masculinity in the Roman world was strongly related to a few key virtues (mastery of the passions, volition, justice, and resistance to persuasion), and Cobb notes that these very virtues are integral to how the acts represent the martyrs. She highlights the importance of the continuum of masculinity, with martyred Christians represented as the most manly (displaying the most virtue), pagans and Jews singled out as less manly, and finally with apostate Christians described as outright unmanly.

In Chapter Four, Cobb turns to female martyrs in various martyr texts and examines how they too are masculinized as a means of building group identity, but are simultaneously feminized in order to preserve important values within the Christian group. Cobb looks specifically at the narratives concerning Perpetua, Felicitas, Blandina and Agathonike. Cobb focuses on how ancient authors of the martyr texts navigated their need to identify the female martyrs as paradigms of manliness in comparison to the pagans, Jews and apostate Christians, while still maintaining a social order in which women had a certain place and certain duties.

In her conclusion, Cobb revisits her opening narrative, describing her university days and Christian group identity, in order to highlight the importance of group identity and the value of understanding identity as it was conceived of in the past. She reiterates her major points, re-contextualizing the overall notion of why Christians worked so hard (in a narrative sense) to define themselves as male. She claims the martyr texts present a revisionist history, wherein condemned criminals are presented as masculine gladiators, and Roman authority is emasculated in comparison -- a narrative strategy consciously employed to shift the balance of power. In this way, the death of the Christian is not a loss, but a gain. Acting like a man allows Christians, women and men alike, to become "spiritually empowered" (128) long before they control real earthly power.

Cobb's argument is presented clearly and argued effectively. Useful applications of social theory to her textual sources make for an academic text that is concise and easily read. Anyone from higher level undergraduates to established scholars in the field will gain from reading this book. At times, her conclusions seem almost effortless, making the reader wish they had thought of it first. Alas, that honour goes to Cobb. Her treatment of the martyr texts and the Greco-Roman sources is even handed and suggests a high level of comfort in the area.

It would have been nice to see some of the other side of the coin, however.

Cobb's argument, although strong, would have been well served by the addition of the Roman view on the masculinity of the Christians. Understandably, the Romans were in less of a position to need to construct an identity (being the dominant force), and surviving descriptive references to Christians are rare, but some exploration of their response could have had a positive effect on the overall work. In addition, her occasional focus on 4 Maccabees (an important antecedent for martyrdom) could stand to be more fully contextualized for readers not fully versed in the realm of Christian martyrs.

That being said, Cobb writes a book that is an excellent addition to the scholarship of early Christianity which should be read by anyone with an interest in the topic.

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