

The Creation of a Christian Identity in a Christianized Empire:

Eulalia, Agnes, and Gender-Bending in Prudentius'

*Peristephanon Liber III and XIV*

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## ABSTRACT

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While Constantine worked diligently to unite the Roman Empire under the banner of Christianity in the early fourth century after the Edict of Milan and Council of Nicaea, it was the Edict of Thessalonica in 380 under Theodosius I that made Christianity the Roman state religion. During this time of conversion and great change within the empire, as well as earlier in the fourth century, new adherents to the religion were unsure about what it meant to be a Christian as well as how one should act in order to present themselves as a true believer. Many were still very familiar with their ancestral and polytheistic traditions, but were unsure of the character of this new, singular God. They had questions concerning their identity within this new framework. Was everything different now that they had accepted Christianity? Were their actions supposed to be entirely different than what their ancestors had taught them?

To address the issue of Christian identity during this period, Prudentius, a Spanish Christian, composed many works in the late fourth and early fifth centuries, including his *Peristephanon Liber*, a compilation of fourteen Christian martyr texts. In these texts, Prudentius used gendered language to show the superiority of the Christian martyrs. The Christians were depicted as having self-control, active, and having a willingness to die while the pagan persecutors and judges were seen as being filled with wrath, unjust, and unable to properly govern. By using gendered language that was familiar to the new converts of the Roman Empire with respect to sexuality and masculinity, Prudentius sought to help create a masculine Christian identity that was both recognizable and superior to the masculinity of the previous regime.

In order to prove this, an analysis on gender in the ancient world and its scholarship will be summarized. I will then describe the two martyr texts that portray women as the protagonist: Eulalia and Agnes. By analyzing the gendered language of these texts, I hope to show how Prudentius used gender, something that the Romans already understood, to invert traditional gender roles and present the Christians as the more masculine and the pagans as more feminine. By bending gender, Prudentius sought to teach these new Christians that being a Christian made a person not only masculine, but also a superior masculine figure than if they still believed in paganism. By focusing on the language of these texts and using secondary sources, I show that Prudentius, like previous Christian authors, used gendered language and female protagonists in order to show these new Christians what it meant to be a true believer, thus attempting to create a superior Christian identity in a newly Christianized society.

Keywords: Prudentius, *Peristephanon Liber*, Eulalia, Agnes, gender, gender-bending, martyr, hagiography

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### *Introduction*

As Lawrence, a Christian martyr in Rome in the mid-third century CE, was roasted alive, the poet Prudentius described the actions and words of the martyr. He writes,

postquam vapor diutinus  
decoxit exustum latus,  
ultra e catasta iudicem  
compellat adfatu brevi:  
“converte partem corporis  
satis crematam iugiter,  
et fac periculum, quid tuus  
Vulcanus ardens egerit.”  
praefectus inverti iubet.  
tunc ille: “coctum est, devora,  
et experimentum cape  
sit crudum an assum suavius.”

After a long time, the heat consumed his burned side, he [Lawrence] voluntarily compelled the judge with a brief speech, saying: “Turn this part of my body which has been sufficiently and continually burned and create proof what your burning Vulcan can accomplish.” The prefect ordered that he be turned. Then he said, “It has been cooked. Devour it and make an experiment whether it is sweeter raw or roasted.”<sup>1</sup>

In early Christian martyr texts, authors portrayed Christian men and women as strong, masculine figures in the ancient sense while also depicting the persecutors of these Christians as cowardly and effeminate.<sup>2</sup> By accusing the Romans of being guilty of the very crimes that they accused the

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<sup>1</sup> Prudentius, *Peristephanon Liber*, II.397-408. The Latin text is taken from the Loeb edition. See Prudentius, *Prudentius*, vol. 2. Trans. H.J. Thomson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961). Attalus makes a similar statement about the pagans and cannibalism in *Martyrs of Lyons*, I.52. See Herbert Musurillo, “The Martyrs of Lyons,” in *Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972). Note: All translations are my own.

<sup>2</sup> The masculine nature of the martyrs has been observed and analyzed extensively by scholars. For more on the masculinity of the earlier martyrs, see Stephanie L. Cobb, *Dying to Be Men: Gender and Language in Early Christian Martyr Texts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Candida Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom: Diverse Practices, Theologies, and Traditions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012); Elizabeth Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Anders Klostergaard Petersen, “Gender-bending in Early Jewish and Christian Martyr Texts,” in *Contextualising Early Christian Martyrdom* (Frankfurt am Main et al.: Peter Lang, 2011), 225-256; and Antti Marjanen, “Male Women Martyrs: The Function of Gender-Transformation Language in Early Christian Martyrdom Accounts,” in *Metamorphoses: Resurrection, Body and Transformative Practices in Early Christianity* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), 231-247.

Christians, such as cannibalism,<sup>3</sup> Lawrence attributed ancient feminine characteristics to these pagans, among which were their lack of justice and barbaric nature rather than being just and civilized citizens, two important proper and masculine traits.<sup>4</sup> Throughout early martyr literature, Christians were depicted as athletes,<sup>5</sup> having greater endurance than their torturers,<sup>6</sup> and having volition to choose their own fate.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, Roman magistrates, who should represent the pinnacle of masculinity, were portrayed as effeminate figures by showing a lack of self-control by acquiescing to their own wrath,<sup>8</sup> lacking justice by administering punishment that seemed too harsh or hypocritical to the onlookers or the martyrs themselves,<sup>9</sup> and more while they carried out the execution of Christians.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For example, the Christians in the *Martyrs of Lyons* were accused of “Θυέστεια δεῖπνα καὶ Οἰδιποδείους μίξεις” (“Thyestean feasts and Oedipal unions”). See *Martyrs of Lyons*, I.14.

<sup>4</sup> In Plutarch’s *De Cohibenda Ira* (On the Control of Anger), he states that manliness (ἀνδρεία) is in harmony with (συμφερομένη) justice (δικαιοσύνη). See Plutarch, *De Cohibenda Ira*, 457D. See also Cobb, *Dying to Be Men*, 70.

<sup>5</sup> Blandina, among other martyrs, is portrayed as an athlete (ἀθλητής) during her tortures. See *Martyrs of Lyons*, I.19.

<sup>6</sup> Blandina is portrayed as the masculine figure as she outlasts the endurance of her torturers and conquers them in their own craft. In *Martyrs of Lyons*, I.18, the author writes, “Blandina was filled with such power so that they were weakened and exhausted after they tortured her in succession in every manner from early in the morning until evening. They themselves admitted that they have been conquered...” (Βλανδῖνα τοσαύτης ἐπληρώθη δυνάμεως ὥστε ἐκλυθῆναι καὶ παρεθῆναι τοὺς κατὰ διαδοχὰς παντὶ τρόπῳ βασανίζοντας αὐτὴν ἀπο ἐωθινῆς ἕως ἑσπέρας καὶ αὐτοὺς ὁμολογοῦντας ὅτι νενίκηνται...).

<sup>7</sup> Perpetua is portrayed in this exact manner as she leaves her family and child for martyrdom. She is even the cause of her own death. In *Perpetua and Felicitas*, 21.9-10, the author writes, “And she brought the trembling hand of the young gladiator to her own throat. Perhaps such a woman, who is afraid of having a defiled spirit, is not able to be killed in any other way unless she wished it” (*et errantem dexteram tirunculi gladiatoris ipsa in iugulum suum transtulit. Fortasse tanta femina aliter non potuisset occidi, quae ab immundo spiritu timebatur, nisi ipsa voluisset.*). The Latin was borrowed from J.A. Robinson, “The Passion of S. Perpetua” in *Texts and Studies 1.2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1891), 61-95. Accessed March 10, 2018, Retrieved from: <http://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/Iris/Cite?2016:001:0>.

<sup>8</sup> One of the most prominent themes in *Martyrs of Lyons* is anger and wrath. *Martyrs of Lyons*, I.57-58 describes the crowd’s reaction after Blandina’s death and their inability to satiate their rage and bloodlust after the deaths of the Christians, eventually leading to their forbidding of burying the martyrs.

<sup>9</sup> After the deaths of Carpus, Papyrus, and Agathonicê, the author describes the crowd, “Those who saw this wailed, saying, ‘It is a terrible sentence and these commands are unjust’” (οἱ δὲ ἰδόντες ἐθρήνησαν λέγοντες, δεινὴ κρίσις καὶ ἄδικα προστάγματα.”). See *Carpus, Papyrus, Agathonicê*, 45. The Greek text was borrowed from Herbert Musurillo, “The Acts of Carpus, Papyrus, and Agathonicê: Recension A,” in *Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972).

<sup>10</sup> Cobb portrays this contrast well in her third chapter of *Dying to Be Men* (2008).

One author who depicted these martyrs similarly was Prudentius, a poet from Spain in the late fourth and early fifth centuries. Prudentius' time of writing was an important period for early Christian history. While Constantine worked diligently to unite the Roman Empire under the banner of Christianity in the early fourth century after the Edict of Milan and Council of Nicaea, it was the Edict of Thessalonica in 380 under Theodosius I that made Christianity the Roman state religion. During this time of conversion and great change within the empire, as well as earlier in the fourth century, new adherents to the religion were unsure about the proper teachings of the church, which made the church vulnerable to rising factionalism during this time,<sup>11</sup> as well as what it meant to be a Christian and how one should act in order to portray themselves as a true believer. Many were still sympathetic to their ancestral and polytheistic traditions, but were unsure of the character of this new, singular god and what their identity was. Was everything different now that they had accepted Christianity? Were their actions supposed to be entirely different than what their ancestors had taught them?

To address the issue of Christian identity in this time period, Prudentius composed many works in the late fourth and early fifth centuries, including *Hamartigenia (The Origin of Sin)*, *Contra Orationem Symmachi (Against the Speech of Symmachus)*, and his famous *Psychomachia (The Fight for Man's Soul)*. Along with these works, he wrote his *Peristephanon Liber (Crowns of Martyrdom)*, a compilation of fourteen Christian martyr texts that depicted men and women in Spain, Rome, and other regions within the empire during times of Christian persecution. The purpose of this thesis is to describe the gendered discourse of Prudentius' *Peristephanon Liber*. By co-opting prevailing gendered norms of sexuality and masculinity that were recognizable to the recently pagan figures of the Roman Empire, like in earlier martyr texts, Prudentius sought to

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<sup>11</sup> Prudentius, *Prudentius*, vol 1. Trans. H.J. Thomson. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), x.

help create a masculine Christian identity that was both familiar to new believers and superior to the masculinity of received tradition.

While plenty has been written about women in earlier martyr texts as well as common themes in Prudentius' *Peristephanon Liber*, particularly concerning the martyrdom of Lawrence, very little has been written about Prudentius' gendered language within the work. Petersen claimed in his article about gender-bending in early martyr texts that the use of gender transformation in martyrdoms proves that the Christian idea of gender is similar to the conception of gender in the ancient Greco-Roman world but does not describe Prudentius and his accounts.<sup>12</sup> Cobb's work posited that masculinity and gender portrayals were a pivotal part of martyr literature, but only focuses on women in martyr accounts most likely written before the time of Constantine, such as Perpetua and Felicitas, Agathonice, and Blandina.<sup>13</sup> Many authors, including Cobb and Coon, also claimed that gendered language was used as a didactic tool for instructing Christians about proper righteous conduct and the universality of Christ's redemption.<sup>14</sup> Certain martyr texts that illustrate the didactic nature of these texts include the martyrdoms of Polycarp,<sup>15</sup> Pionius,<sup>16</sup> Perpetua and Felicity,<sup>17</sup> and Marian and James.<sup>18</sup> Regarding Prudentius, Levine discussed briefly Prudentius' use of violence within the text, but argued more how Prudentius sought to surpass pagan poets with his skill in poetry rather than

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<sup>12</sup> See Petersen, "Gender-bending," 225-256.

<sup>13</sup> See Cobb, *Dying to Be Men*, 92-123.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 93. See also the introduction of Lynda L. Coon, *Sacred Fictions: Holy Women and Hagiography in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997).

<sup>15</sup> Herbert Musurillo, "The Martyrdom of Polycarp," in *Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 1.1-2; 19.1; 22.1.

<sup>16</sup> Herbert Musurillo, "The Martyrdom of Pionius the Presbyter and his Companions," in *Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 1.2.

<sup>17</sup> *Perpetua and Felicitas*, I.

<sup>18</sup> Herbert Musurillo, "The Martyrdom of Saints Marian and James," in *Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 1.3. See also Cobb, *Dying to Be Men*, 93.

elaborating what the gendered language implied.<sup>19</sup> Lastly, Malamud discussed some of the sexual components in Prudentius' poem on Agnes, but focuses on its comparisons to mythology rather than its implications for the poet's readers.<sup>20</sup>

Because little has been written about Prudentius' bending of gender in his *Peristephanon Liber*, I hope to add to the analysis of these scholars and posit that Prudentius, like previous Christian authors, used gendered language within his *Peristephanon Liber*. By focusing on the language of these texts, I show that Prudentius used his female protagonists in order to illustrate to his newly Christianized readers what it meant to be a true believer. Being a true adherent to Christianity meant that, regardless of sex, one must shed his or her femininity and become masculine figures. By comparing and contrasting Christian masculinity with that of the pagans, Prudentius attempts to create a superior Christian identity in an increasingly Christianized society.

### *Emasculation in Non-Christian Texts*

Prudentius' gendered discourse is not unique within the world of Roman literature. Ancient texts outside of Prudentius' martyr texts also focused on gender-bending within their respective accounts for a variety of reasons. By recognizing this language outside of martyr accounts, we can see how its use was intentional and that this language had a purpose for their intended audiences. In *2 and 4 Maccabees*, Hellenistic Jewish texts, Eleazar and a woman, along with her seven sons, were depicted as superior masculine figures to Antiochus IV, the Seleucid king.<sup>21</sup> Antiochus IV was supposed to be the pinnacle of masculinity due to his kingly status, as

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<sup>19</sup> Robert Levine, "Prudentius's Romanus: The Rhetorician as Hero, Martyr, Satirist, and Saint," in *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric* 9, no. 1 (Winter 1991): 5-38.

<sup>20</sup> For more, see chapter 6 of Martha A. Malamud, *A Poetics of Transformation: Prudentius and Classical Mythology* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).

<sup>21</sup> In the first chapter of her book, Candida Moss discusses how early Christian martyr texts borrowed ideas from Jewish martyr narratives, especially that of Maccabees. See the first chapter of Candida Moss,

opposed to the rather youthful sons and the ninety-year-old Eleazar, who would be seen as less masculine figures due to their age and lesser status.<sup>22</sup> DeSilva describes the reasoning of this gendered language, “The contest of the martyrs, faced with giving up their manner of living or dying for it, would prove whose way of life was superior – that of Antiochus or that of Jews rounded up by him to be compelled to renounce Judaism.”<sup>23</sup> However, while the authors portrayed these Jewish men as masculine through their bravery, eloquence in their speech and logic, and being composed, they also repeatedly portrayed Antiochus IV as a feminine figure who frequently fell into a rage,<sup>24</sup> one who treated his prisoners rather poorly,<sup>25</sup> and was even called a “savage beast” by the seventh son.<sup>26</sup> By showing the king’s inability to control himself, treating his prisoners worse than what befitted the crime, and being considered a wild animal, the author showed that it was not one’s earthly status that brought about admirable and masculine attributes, but one’s faithfulness to god, thus proving that Judaism was superior to paganism.

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*The Myth of Persecution: How Early Christians Invented A Story of Martyrdom* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2013). In addition, Petersen argued how both Christian and Jewish thought concerning gender were similar to the Greek and Roman worlds around them. See Petersen, “Gender-bending.”

<sup>22</sup> Skinner writes concerning age and one’s masculinity, “Male status, the prerogative of the citizen and head of household, is a function of age as well as of sex, hinging upon control...Any loss of physical vigor due to old age, infirmity, or overindulgence in carnal pleasure, any analogous lapse of moral resolve, or any diminution of social standing, can weaken the bulwarks of masculinity and cause reversion to a passive ‘womanish’ condition.” Marilyn B. Skinner, “Ego Mulier: The Construction of Male Sexuality in Catullus,” in *Catullus* (Oxford Readings in Classical Studies), ed. Julia Haig Gaisser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 456.

<sup>23</sup> David Arthur DeSilva, *4 Maccabees: Introduction and Commentary on the Greek Text in Codex Sinaiticus* (Boston: Brill Publishers, 2006), 246.

<sup>24</sup> For example, “And being enraged, the king commanded that they heat up pans and cauldrons” (ἔκθυμος δὲ γενόμενος ὁ βασιλεὺς προσέταξεν τήγανα καὶ λέβητας ἐκπυροῦν). *2 Maccabees*, 7:3. The Greek text comes from Alfred Rahlfs, *Septuaginta*. Vol. 1 (Stuttgart: Württembergischen Bibelanstalt, 1935).

<sup>25</sup> Authors depict rulers as those who inflict unfair and cruel punishments. In the account of the seven sons, the verb αἰκίζω (maltreat) is used in *2 Maccabees*, 7:13, 15. In *4 Maccabees*, 12:14, the sons are seen as blameless (ἀναιτίως) as they are tortured and killed.

<sup>26</sup> The seventh and youngest son said to Antiochus IV, “Although you are a man, you were not ashamed, most savage beast, to cut off the tongues of those who have similar feelings and are from the same elements and, maltreating them, to torture them in this way” (οὐκ ἠδέσθης ἄνθρωπος ὢν, θηριωδέστατε, τοὺς ὁμοιοπαθεῖς καὶ ἐκ τῶν αὐτῶν γεγονότας στοιχείων γλωττοτομήσαι καὶ τοῦτον κατακίσας τὸν τρόπον βασανίσαι). *4 Maccabees*, 12:13.

Instead of these tortures and deaths emasculating and degrading Eleazar and the seven sons, the author of the text used the verb “to crown” (στεφανοῦν) to depict the heroic, athletic, and masculine nature of these martyrs.<sup>27</sup>

While the seven sons and Eleazar were portrayed as superior masculine figures to Antiochus IV, the mother of the seven sons was also depicted in a similar light, thus exhibiting a stronger contrast between the masculine natures of the pagans and the Jews. While Antiochus IV was depicted as a wrathful figure, the mother of the seven sons had self-control and exhorted each of her sons to martyrdom, thus exhibiting her volition and separation from earthly desires.

The author writes,

ὑπεραγόντως δὲ ἡ μήτηρ θαυμαστὴ καὶ μνήμης ἀγαθῆς ἀξία ἥτις ἀπολλυμένους υἱοὺς ἑπτὰ συνορῶσα μιᾶς ὑπὸ καιρὸν ἡμέρας εὐψύχως ἔφερεν διὰ τὰς ἐπὶ κύριον ἐλπίδας ἕκαστον δὲ αὐτῶν παρεκάλει τῇ πατρίῳ φωνῇ γενναίῳ πεπληρωμένη φρονήματι καὶ τὸν θῆλυον λογισμὸν ἄρσενι θυμῷ διεγείρασα λέγουσα πρὸς αὐτούς...

The mother was exceedingly admirable and worthy of good memory who, although she saw her seven sons destroyed in the span of one day, bore everything with good courage on account of her hope in the lord. She, being filled with a noble mind, called each of them with their ancestral name and, inciting her feminine reasoning with a manly spirit, said to them...<sup>28</sup>

She then encouraged each of her sons to endure their tortures, delivering multiple speeches to give them courage. The mother was admirable on account of her active nature during the tortures and executions of her sons. Rather than having the mother objectified as a passive figure, as would be expected, the author used active verbs and participles to portray her assertive participation during these events. The author’s description of the mother rousing her feminine reasoning (θῆλυον λογισμὸν) with a manly spirit (ἄρσενι θυμῷ) also clearly portrays how she is transgressing ancient gender norms.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 17:15.

<sup>28</sup> 2 *Maccabees*, 2:20-21. The Greek text for 2 *Maccabees* was also borrowed from Rahlfs (1935).

In *4 Maccabees*, the author made an encomium of the mother, devoting multiple chapters to her bravery and masculinity. The author writes,

καὶ μὴ θαυμαστὸν ἡγεῖσθε εἰ ὁ λογισμὸς περιεκράτησε τῶν ἀνδρῶν ἐκείνων ἐν ταῖς βασάνοις ὅπου γε καὶ γυναικὸς νοῦς πολυτροπωτέρων ὑπερεφρόνησεν ἀλγηδόνων. ἡ μήτηρ γὰρ τῶν ἑπτὰ νεανίσκων ὑπήνεγκεν τὰς ἐφ' ἐνὶ ἐκάστῳ τῶν τέκνων στρέβλας.

And do not think it amazing if reason ruled those men during their tortures, since also the mind of the woman despised various sufferings. For the mother endured the tortures of her seven young sons one after another.<sup>29</sup>

Here, the mother's endurance (ὕπήνεγκεν) is portrayed. While each of her sons bore their own torture, the mother watched each of her children as they were tortured and executed, thus bearing the cumulative pain of all of her sons. In addition to her endurance, the author also praised her for her love of their religion more than her family.<sup>30</sup> Regarding familial relations for early Christians, Cobb writes, "persuasion by and in reference to family poses the most significant risk for Christian women."<sup>31</sup> The author of *4 Maccabees* agrees, stating that mothers are the weaker (ἀσθενόψυχοι) sex and are more devoted to their children.<sup>32</sup> Despite this weakness, however, the mother of the seven sons exhibited her masculinity by forsaking her earthly relations. The author writes, "Her pious reasoning, which became manly amidst these misfortunes, strengthened her to temporarily disregard her love for her children." (αὐτῆς ὁ εὐσεβῆς λογισμὸς ἐν αὐτοῖς τοῖς πάθεσιν ἀνδρειώσας ἐπέτεινεν τὴν πρόσκαιρον φιλοτεκνίαν παριδεῖν).<sup>33</sup> The use of ἀνδρειώσας describes how the mother has become more manly, which has allowed her to sever her ties with her children. Through the masculine actions of Eleazar, the seven sons, and the mother in 2 and 4 *Maccabees*, readers were able to properly determine proper conduct in the face of persecution.

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<sup>29</sup> *4 Maccabees*, 14:11-12.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* 15:1-3.

<sup>31</sup> Cobb, *Dying to Be Men*, 122.

<sup>32</sup> *4 Maccabees*, 15:5.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* 15:23.

The actions of these protagonists were so influential that it even inspired early Christian thinkers and martyrs, including Ignatius of Antioch<sup>34</sup> and Polycarp of Smyrna.<sup>35</sup>

While other religious texts portrayed similar gendered language to Christian martyr narratives, pagan literature is also riddled with gendered discourse. Cassius Dio, who wrote in the late first and early second centuries CE and who lived during the time of some of the early Christian martyrs, described the rape of Lucretia and sharply contrasted Lucretia's masculinity with Sextus Tarquinius' femininity. While, mythically, the rape of Lucretia occurred in the late sixth century BCE, Dio's account of Lucretia is valuable due to the contemporary nature of his writing with other Christian texts and his effective portrayal of gender-bending within this account. Cassius Dio writes,

καὶ τὰ μὲν πρῶτα ἀναπειθεῖν αὐτὴν ἐπειρᾶτο συγγενέσθαι οἱ, ὡς δὲ οὐδὲν ἐπέβαινε, ἐβιάζετο. ἐπειδὴ δὲ οὐδὲν οὐδὲ οὕτως αὐτῷ προεχώρει, καινὸν δὴ τινα τρόπον ἐξεῦρεν... ὅτι μὲν γὰρ ἀποσφάζειν αὐτὴν εἶπε, παρ' οὐδὲν ἔθετο, καὶ ὅτι καὶ τῶν οἰκετῶν τινα προσκαταχρήσεσθαι ἔφη, καὶ τοῦτο ὀλιγώρως ἤκουσεν· ἐπεὶ μέντοι παρακατακλιεῖν τε αὐτῇ τὸ τοῦ δούλου σῶμα καὶ λόγον ὡς καὶ συγκαθεύδοντάς σφας εὐρών ἀποκτείνεει διαδώσειν ἐπηπέλιψεν, οὐκέτ' ἀνεκτὸν ἐποίησατο... εἶλετο μιχθεῖσα αὐτῷ... τοιαῦτα ἅττα εἰποῦσα οὐκ ἀνέμεινεν ἀντακοῦσαί τι, ἀλλ' εὐθέως τὸ ξιφίδιον ὑφελκύσασα αὐτὴ ἑαυτὴν ἐφόνευσεν.

First he attempted to persuade her to have intercourse with him, but since he accomplished nothing, he used force. Since he did not succeed anything with this, he invented some new guise... She did not take any thought when he said that he would kill her, and she listened contemptuously when he also said that he would kill one of her servants. However, when he threatened that he would lay the body of the servant beside her and give a report that he, after finding them sleeping together, killed them, it was no longer bearable... [she] chose to be joined together with him... after she said these things [to Collatinus and her father], she did not wait to listen to something in return, but immediately drawing out the dagger she killed herself.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>34</sup> DeSilva goes into deeper detail on this topic. See David Arthur DeSilva, *4 Maccabees* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 149-150.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 150-151.

<sup>36</sup> Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, II.16-19. The Greek text was borrowed from Cassius Dio, *Dio's Roman History*, trans. Earnest Cary (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1914).

The language in this text depicts Lucretia as the more masculine figure than Sextus, who was the son of a king and, therefore, supposedly one of the most masculine Roman figures of the time.<sup>37</sup> The king's son is shown as being unable to use rhetoric to seduce (ἀναπαίθειν) her, is unable to overcome Lucretia by force (ἐβιάζετο), and must resort to trickery (καινὸν τινα τρόπον ἐξεῦρεν) and threats (ἐπηπείλησεν) in order to obtain what he wanted.<sup>38</sup> Lucretia, however, was depicted as the more masculine figure through overpowering Sextus (οὐδὲν οὐδὲ προεχώρει) and exhibiting her ability to willingly make her own decisions (εἴλετο; ἑαυτὴν ἐφόνευσεν). While she eventually acquiesced to Sextus' demands because of his treachery, Lucretia further exhibited masculine qualities through her ability to choose to kill herself in order to make herself as an example to future Romans, whereas Tarquinius was chased out of the city by Brutus, exhibiting an example of cowardice in addition to his shame. By depicting Lucretia as the more masculine figure, readers of the text are able to determine what characters and what attributes are worthy of praise and emulation while also being able to determine what other traits ought to be avoided.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Skinner describes gender as a social status. Depending on the factors of one's birth, citizenship, and respectability, one is inherently more masculine than one who does not enjoy the same benefits and status. See Marilyn B. Skinner, *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2014), 256-258.

<sup>38</sup> While strength and one's ability to speak well were seen as masculine traits, the use of deceit and trickery was looked down upon. For an example, Vergil's *Aeneid* X.734-735 describes Mezentius' masculine nature as he kills Acron and Orodes. As Orodes flees, Vergil writes, "[Mezentius] rushed against the enemy to meet him and bore himself, man against man, being better not at all by deceit but by his strong arms" (*obvius adversoque occurrit seque viro vir / contulit, haud furto melior sed fortibus armis*). The Latin text was borrowed from the Loeb edition. See Virgil, *Aeneid VII-XII and Appendix Vergiliana*. Trans. by H. Rushton Fairclough (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

<sup>39</sup> This style of writing is not unique in the ancient world. Other historians, such as Livy, used *exempla* to instruct their readers about proper traits. In *Ab Urbe Condita*, I.9, Livy describes how the purpose of his history was to help readers see the proper conduct and character of earlier Roman figures in order to evaluate the decline in Roman morals during their own time. Through Livy's use of *exempla*, readers could see the laudable—and often masculine—traits of proper Roman figures, male and female alike.

## *Gender-Bending in Prudentius' Peristephanon Liber*

### *Peristephanon I: Emeterius and Chelidonius*

Similar to Jewish, pagan, and other hagiographical literature, Prudentius emphasized gender-bending as a didactic tool for his readers in his *Peristephanon Liber*. This theme is portrayed in his first poem: the martyrdoms of saints Emeterius and Chelidonius, two Spanish soldiers who left the military for Christianity and were subsequently martyred in the late third/early fourth centuries. By beginning his *Peristephanon Liber* with gendered language, the poet sought to tell the reader the importance of finding similar language within the rest of the work in order for them to recognize what it means to be a proper, masculine Christian. Using the account of Emeterius and Chelidonius, Prudentius sets up important themes and ideas for the rest of his work, including that of gender-bending.

Iamne credis, bruta quondam Vasconum gentilitas, quam sacrum crudelis error immolarit sanguinem? Credis in Deum relatos hostiarum spiritus? Cerne quam palam feroces hic domantur daemones, qui lupino capta ritu devorant praecordia, strangulant mentes et ipsas seque miscent sensibus. Tunc suo iam plenus hoste sistitur furens homo spumeas efflans salivas, cruda torquens lumina, expiandus quaestione non suorum criminum. Audias, nec tortor adstat, eiulatus flebiles, scinditur per flagra corpus, nec flagellum cernitur, crescit et suspensus ipse vinculis latentibus. His modis spurcum latronem martyrum virtus quatit, haec coerces, torque, urit, haec catenas incutit; praedo vexatus relictis se medullis exuit.

Do you now believe, once irrational gentiles of the Vascones, what cruel delusion sacrificed [the martyrs'] holy blood? Do you believe that the spirits of the victims were brought back to god? See what ferocious demons are openly conquered, who devour their hearts, choke their own minds, and mix with their senses as when a sacrificial victim is seized by a wolf. Then the person, raging, becomes possessed by his enemy while exhaling foamy spittle and twisting his bloody eyes, in order to be cleansed by the examination whose judgments are not his own. You, although no torturer is present, would hear tearful wailings; his body is torn with whips although a whip is not seen; and he appears suspended with hidden chains. In these manners the *virtus* of the martyrs shatters the unclean brigand. The *virtus* confines, tortures, burns, and hurls chains upon them. The robber, being distressed, casts off their abandoned innermost parts.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Prudentius, *Peristephanon Liber*, I.94-109.

Here, Prudentius is writing to a group that was previously pagan, but has now become Christian. Claiming that the Roman religion was a “cruel delusion” (*crudelis error*), the poet quickly claims how the previous regime was both unjust and unable to think properly because of its polytheistic religion. Prudentius then goes on by stating how Christians are able to triumph over their persecutors—supposed men who were taken by wild devils, foaming at the mouth while their eyes rolled like an insane person—thus showing their lack of independence as well as their bestial, carnal nature rather than that of an independent, civilized, and masculine individual. To finish the quote, Prudentius then uses the word *virtus* to show how Christian manliness and courage is superior to that of the Romans.

Regarding the layout for the rest of Prudentius’ work, Palmer writes that *Peristephanon Liber* 2, 3, 4, 5, and 14 “use classical reminiscences mainly to qualify the actions of the martyrs who are viewed in this way as the heroic proponents of the new *virtus* posited as a Christian ideal in *Pe.* 1.”<sup>41</sup> While Palmer claims that this is a new Christian *virtus*, I argue that while Prudentius seeks to posit the Christian ideal, this ideal is not new. Rather, Prudentius uses the same gendered language and examples of Roman *virtus* to create a superior, masculine, Christian identity. By beginning his *Peristephanon Liber* with gendered language, Prudentius describes to his audience how Christian manliness surpasses that of the pagans and that his readers should continue to look out for and recognize these instances within the work.

The two examples that will be elaborated upon in this work are poems 3 and 14, Eulalia and Agnes. Of the fourteen poems, these are the only two where women are the sole protagonists of the work, although other women are mentioned in other places in the text.<sup>42</sup> Instead of only analyzing one of the poems, I am in agreement with Roberts’ analysis that *Peristephanon Liber* 3

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<sup>41</sup> Anne-Marie Palmer, *Prudentius on the Martyrs* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 153.

<sup>42</sup> For example, the unnamed woman in *Peristephanon Liber X* who willingly gave her son for martyrdom.

and 14 are “complementary” and that they are “meant to be read as a pair.”<sup>43</sup> Each of them depicts young girls who scorn marriage and sex in order to obtain martyrdom and eternal life and endure similar tortures and experiences. By reading them together, we can see a clearer depiction of Prudentius’ gendered language within his text as well as what he expected of his newly Christianized readers.

### ***Peristephanon III: Eulalia***

With Prudentius having set the stage to depict the masculinity of the Christians and the effeminacy of the pagans, the poet later describes the account of the first female martyr within his work, Eulalia—a thirteen-year-old martyr of Merida, Spain in the very early fourth century. The fifth longest martyr text of the work,<sup>44</sup> Prudentius spends much of his time depicting the masculinity of the female martyr and is unabashed of reminding the reader of her female sex.

The poet writes concerning Eulalia’s character,

iam dederat prius indicium  
tendere se Patris ad solium  
nec sua membra dicata toro:  
ipsa crepundia reppulerat,  
ludere nescia pusiola;  
spernere sucina, flare rosas.  
Fulva monilia respuere,  
ore severa, modesta gradu,  
moribus et nimium teneris  
canitiem meditata senum.”

Now she had previously given an indication that she offered herself to the throne of the Father and that her body was not dedicated to the marriage bed. She, as a young girl, pushed away rattles and was ignorant of playing. She hated amber, blew away roses, and cast out golden necklaces. She was serious in demeanor, modest in her gait, and practiced hoary old age with her excessively tender manners.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Michael Roberts, *Poetry and the Cult of the Martyrs: the Liber Peristephanon of Prudentius* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1993), 101.

<sup>44</sup> Those that are longer include the texts concerning Lawrence (II), Vincent (V), Romanus (X), and Hippolytus (XI).

<sup>45</sup> Prudentius, *Peristephanon Liber*, III.16-25.

At the beginning of this text, Prudentius focuses on some of her masculine traits. Eulalia shows a strong use of volition—the ability to make and stand by her own decisions rather than being subservient. Rather than focusing on an earthly marriage, sex, or other secular enticements as was expected of most women, Eulalia focused on her salvation. However, within the next ten lines, Prudentius then emphasizes her femininity by adding, “As a woman she challenged the weapons of men” (*femina provocat arma virum*).<sup>46</sup> Regarding the youthfulness and virgin nature of these women, Malamud writes, “Adolescence is a time of wavering, uncertain identity, when sexuality is polymorphous and undetermined, when girls and boys seem indistinguishable.”<sup>47</sup> By depicting the actions of a young maiden who is at an age of having an uncertain identity, not unlike Prudentius’ current readers as Christianity was adopted as the state religion, readers are able to more clearly discern between the praiseworthy traits of the Christians and the feminine, less laudable traits of the pagans and learn how obtaining and maintaining a masculine nature is possible and imitable.

In order to become a martyr, Eulalia shows a masculine volition by running away from home to meet the governor. The saint was kept in her quiet home in the countryside on account of her mother worrying about Eulalia’s love of death (*amore mortis*).<sup>48</sup> Escaping in the middle of the night, Eulalia’s journey, while only consisting of a few lines, tells of the effort, strength, and holiness that the girl possessed. Travelling through briars and a rough landscape for many miles, Eulalia tears up her feet, evidencing the difficulty of her journey.<sup>49</sup> Despite Eulalia’s hardship, Prudentius compares the young girl with the Israelites who fled Egypt with Moses in Exodus. Although dark, Eulalia was accompanied by angels and a pillar of light that guided her, similar to

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid. III.34-35.

<sup>47</sup> Malamud, *Poetics of Transformation*, 158.

<sup>48</sup> Prudentius, *Peristephanon Liber*, III.40.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. III.41-50.

how a pillar of fire guided the Israelites in the book of Exodus.<sup>50</sup> By exhibiting Eulalia's righteousness and willingness to die, Prudentius shows his readers how Christians are able to receive divine aid as they exhibit proper Christian masculine conduct despite conflict and hardship, which teaches readers the reward of living a righteous life.

In addition to Eulalia's portrayed masculinity through her actions, Prudentius also compares Eulalia to characters within Vergil's *Aeneid*, particularly Aeneas and Ascanius. Palmer, who focused his work on Vergil's influences on Prudentius in his *Peristephanon Liber*, writes, "In the case of Eulalia, the most striking of the three examples in Prudentius' treatment (Eulalia, Agnes, Encratis in *Pe.* 4), the contrast between the martyr's youth and sex and her masculine courage is deepened and explored by deliberate frequent reference to Virgil's poetry."<sup>51</sup> The Vergilian references are not ornamental, but meant to depict Eulalia's masculinity similar to that of the founders of Rome and, therefore, the founders of Roman culture and life. For example, Palmer states how *Peristephanon* 3.47 uses similar language to Aeneas' descent into the underworld in *Aeneid* 6.462.<sup>52</sup> During her nighttime journey, Prudentius gives Eulalia the epithet *pia virgo* (pious maiden), the same adjective used to describe Aeneas.<sup>53</sup> Lastly, as Eulalia enters into the tribunal, Prudentius labels her as *superba* (proud).<sup>54</sup> This word, which can also imply arrogance and stubbornness—negative characteristics—was used as a common epithet in epic poetry.<sup>55</sup> By portraying Eulalia as an epic figure and similar to the founders of Rome, readers are able to make connections with their pagan culture while seeing the masculine and proper characteristics of Eulalia more clearly, thus implanting their masculine identity.

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<sup>50</sup> Exodus, 13:21.

<sup>51</sup> Palmer, *Prudentius on the Martyrs*, 155.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* 160-161.

<sup>53</sup> Prudentius, *Peristephanon Liber*, III.56.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.* III.64.

<sup>55</sup> Palmer, *Prudentius on the Martyrs*, 163.

As Eulalia appeared before the tribunal, Prudentius paints a scene that will effectively contrast the masculinity of the Roman tribunal with that of young Eulalia.

mane superba tribunal adit  
fascibus adstat et in mediis  
vociferans:...

Early in the morning she arrived proudly at the tribunal and stood present in the middle of the fasces, calling out:...<sup>56</sup>

Prudentius depicted Eulalia, merely thirteen years old and, therefore, barely in the earliest stages of womanhood, surrounded by symbols of masculine power. The martyr stood proudly before the governor and the tribunal, both of whom were deemed very masculine and powerful figures on account of their status and position as well as their male sex. The poet also mentioned the fasces as well, symbolic of Roman power and *imperium*.<sup>57</sup> By being surrounded, Eulalia, to Roman eyes, was meant to be seen as a lesser, effeminate figure and one who is doomed to a dishonorable death. However, Prudentius displayed these masculine symbols in order to set the stage for his Christian audience. In spite of everything working against her, Prudentius will eventually display Eulalia's superior masculinity through her courage, volition, and more, thus overthrowing the pagan's masculinity.<sup>58</sup> In addition to power, the fasces was also a religious symbol, symbolic of having strength through unity. While one piece of wood can easily be broken or torn apart, the tightly bound fasces were difficult to destroy altogether.<sup>59</sup> While this

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<sup>56</sup> Prudentius, *Peristephanon Liber*, III.63-65.

<sup>57</sup> For more on this, see Anthony J. Marshall, "Symbols and Showmanship in Roman Public Life: The Fasces," *Phoenix* 38, no. 2 (1984): 120-41. doi:10.2307/1088896.

<sup>58</sup> Skinner writes, "The only way to establish one's own gender was to degender another." Skinner, *Sexuality in Greek & Roman Culture*, 323.

<sup>59</sup> Aesop's fable *The Old Man and His Sons* describes this symbolism. In the fable, an old man had many sons. As he was dying, he called his sons together, asking them to bring a bundle of sticks to him. When it was brought to him, the father asks them to break the bundle of sticks. After their failure to break the bundle, the father asked them to break each individual stick. When this was performed, the old man told his sons that the same would happen to them if they were divided. By being united, they would be unbreakable. See Fable 493 of Aesop, *Aesop's Fables*, trans. Laura Gibbs (Oxford: Oxford University

symbolism was important to Rome's history, Prudentius applies this easily recognizable symbol to the Christian church for his readers. While Eulalia—symbolizing the single rod—can easily be torn apart and destroyed, the church—the fasces—is impossible to destroy. Drews states that the fasces, in addition to being a symbol of Roman *imperium*, is also a symbol of the relationship between men and the god that protects them during their campaign.<sup>60</sup> By using a well-known symbol for his readers, Prudentius shows the supernatural nature of the Christian church and how it cannot be destroyed by pagan hands. The fasces, rather than symbolizing earthly *imperium*, now symbolizes god's protective relationship over his Christians as well as his church and authority. By portraying the scene around Eulalia, Prudentius works to remind the readers how despite everything working against Eulalia's favor, her masculine nature would surpass that of the pagan tribunal and, therefore, the pagans in general.

Despite all of these masculine images around her, Eulalia shed her femininity and exhibited masculine traits superior to those standing before her. In earlier martyr texts, many women protagonists, including those of Perpetua, Blandina, and others, stayed particularly quiet within their respective court trials, often relying on the words of the men, as they were all judged and sentenced to death.<sup>61</sup> Eulalia, however, exhibited masculinity by not only speaking in the court, but also speaking with a calmness and logic that fiercely denounced pagan beliefs and the actions of Roman rulers. Eulalia began by saying

Maximianus, opum dominus  
et tamen ipse cliens lapidum,  
prostituat voveatque suis  
numinibus caput ipse suum:  
pectora cur generosa quatit?

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Press, 2002), 227-228. For the fasces as a religious symbol, see Robert Drews, "Light from Anatolia on the Roman Fasces," *The American Journal of Philology* 93, no. 1 (1972): 40-51. doi:10.2307/292899.

<sup>60</sup> Drews, "Light from Anatolia," 50.

<sup>61</sup> For more regarding women and silence during their court trials, see Marjanen, "Male Women Martyrs," 242.

Maximian, lord of powers and, nevertheless, a man himself dependent upon rocks, prostitutes himself to his gods and he devotes himself to them. Why does he vex noble hearts?<sup>62</sup>

Eulalia began by stating how one of the very Roman emperors, Maximian, is an effeminate figure.<sup>63</sup> The woman states that Maximian, one of the rulers of the vast Roman Empire, did not hold supreme power because he was in vassalage (*cliens*) to his gods—gods that were made of stone—, which shows his lack of common sense. Eulalia then labels the emperor as one who prostitutes (*prostitutat*) himself to the gods. By claiming him as a prostitute, Eulalia denigrates Maximian’s masculinity. To Eulalia, Maximian is not a powerful masculine figure and not even considered a citizen, but one who sells himself for a living. Eulalia then adds,

dux bonus, arbiter egregious,  
 sanguine pascitur innocuo,  
 corporibusque piis inhians  
 viscera sobria dilacerate,  
 gaudet et excruciare fidem.  
 ergo age, tortor, adure, seca,  
 divide membra coacta luto.  
 solvere rem fragilem facile est:  
 non penetrabitur interior  
 exagitante dolore animus.

The good leader and excellent ruler feeds on innocent blood and, while longing for pious bodies, he tears apart their temperate innards and rejoices in torturing the faith. But come, torturer. Scorch, slash, and destroy my body which was gathered together with clay. It is easy to destroy this fragile thing. But my inner spirit will not be penetrated by the vexing anguish.<sup>64</sup>

On top of claiming how Maximian prostitutes himself to his gods, Eulalia describes the pagan emperor as a beast who hungers and feeds on innocent blood, the antithesis of a civilized Roman individual. Roberts writes concerning the cannibalistic nature of Maximian, “Such a diet of flesh

<sup>62</sup> Prudentius, *Peristephanon Liber*, III.81-85.

<sup>63</sup> Maximian was Augustus along with Diocletian from 286 to 305. Eulalia mentions Maximian because Spain was under his charge rather than Diocletian’s.

<sup>64</sup> Prudentius, *Peristephanon Liber*, III.86-95.

and blood immediately puts the tortor/iudex beyond the pale of human civilization.”<sup>65</sup> In contrast, Eulalia describes the Christians as having pious bodies (*corporibus piis*) and a temperate nature (*sobris*), both laudable masculine characteristics. Eulalia also adds that her spirit is impenetrable (*non penetrabitur*). The use of the passive form reinforces Eulalia’s active and masculine nature through not being the passive, receptive, and feminine individual by being sexually penetrable—she uses her own volition to achieve her desire for martyrdom. Rather than being seen as an upright and civilized ruler, Eulalia portrays the emperor, the very apex of pagan masculinity, as one that is unjust, bestial, and one who prostitutes himself to his gods while portraying herself as a superior masculine figure.

The young Eulalia continued to exhibit masculinity as the governor attempted to convince her to not die for her faith. With Eulalia being at the prime age for marriage, the governor begs her to change her ways so that she could marry and reproduce. Prudentius writes,

quam cuperem tamen ante necem,  
 si potis est, revocare tuam,  
 torva puellula, nequitiam.  
 respice gaudia quanta metas,  
 quae tibi fert genialis honor.  
 te lacrimis labefacta domus  
 prosequitur generisque tui  
 ingemit anxia nobilitas,  
 flore quod occidis in tenero,  
 proxima dotibus et thalamis.

Nevertheless, fierce little girl, I would desire before I kill you, if it is possible, that you revoke your wickedness! Look upon how many joys you would reap, which joys a marriageable honor bears to you. Your house follows you, shaken with tears, and the excellence of your family groans anxiously for you, because you are dying in youthful bloom near the age of dowry and marriage.<sup>66</sup>

By reminding Eulalia of her age, the governor tells her and Prudentius’ readers that it is time for her to think of marriage and finding a husband. However, like other martyrs both before her and

<sup>65</sup> Roberts, *Poetry and the Cult of the Martyrs*, 66.

<sup>66</sup> Prudentius, *Peristephanon Liber*, III.101-110.

during this time period, such as Natalia, Perpetua, and Blandina,<sup>67</sup> Eulalia disregarded her temporal relations and focused on gaining salvation through martyrdom. Feminine familial weakness is evidenced by multiple pleas from Perpetua's father and the crowd around Agathonice to not go through with their martyrdoms on account of their children or familial relations. This is contrasted by Germanicus and Polycarp in the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, who were told to have pity on themselves and their old age.<sup>68</sup> Roberts agrees with Cobb's previous statement that family relations were a threat to these female martyrs exhibiting their masculinity and adds the usefulness of portraying a young, marriageable girl as the protagonist of the text. "Prudentius' contemporaries felt the assaults of the 'sins of the flesh'; for a Christian virgin of marriageable age, the thorns of sexual temptation were sharpest. A virgin martyr gloriously exemplified the victory that could be achieved over temptations of the body."<sup>69</sup> Eulalia not only overcame the risk of succumbing to her feminine desire of being attached to earthly familial relations, but was entirely successful in her focus of her own martyrdom rather than worrying about her own life and the lives of those who cared for her.

Eulalia's volition is further seen in her response to the governor's words. In addition to mentioning marriage, the governor offered her freedom if she so much as touched the salt.

haec, rogo, quis labor est fugere?  
 si modicum salis eminulis  
 turis et exiguum digitis  
 tangere, virgo, benigna velis,  
 poena gravis procul afuerit.

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<sup>67</sup> Natalia, a martyr of the early fourth century, urged her husband, Adrian, to become a martyr and disregard their relationship as husband and wife; Perpetua willingly gave her baby and severed her relationship with her father to become a martyr; Blandina, a slave woman, was portrayed as a mother of the other Christian martyrs as she urged them on in their tortures and eventual deaths.

<sup>68</sup> *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, III; IX.

<sup>69</sup> Roberts, *Poetry and the Cult of the Martyrs*, 95.

I ask you, what deed is sufficient to flee these things? If, maiden, you wish to favorably touch with your fingers a modest amount of the salt and a little of the incense, the severe punishment will immediately be absent from you.<sup>70</sup>

Here, Eulalia's firmness is clearly depicted to Prudentius' audience. The governor is not commanding her to actually perform a sacrifice, but offers that she would be released if she just touched some of the sacrificial items. However, the saint refused to even be seen with these items, showing Prudentius' readers her active nature as well as the importance of maintaining their beliefs and refusing to worship idols even in the slightest sense. Eulalia's response further illustrates this.

martyr ad ista nihil; se enim  
infremit inque tyranni oculos  
sputa iacit, simulacra dehinc  
dissipat inpositamque molam  
turibulis pede prosubigit.

The martyr said nothing to these things; but she herself roared and hurled spit into the eyes of the tyrant. Then she scattered the images and she trampled the meal which was placed in the incense-burning vessel with her foot.<sup>71</sup>

Not only did Eulalia decline the governor's invitation, but actively destroyed the idolatrous images and offerings while spitting into the eyes of the governor. In addition to showing Eulalia's volition, Prudentius' uses of *sputa iacit* and *molam* to describe the meal further depict the effeminacy of Maximian and the pagans. Among the many meanings of *iacio* in the *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, one implies some form of sowing.<sup>72</sup> With *sputa* being added into this phrase, Prudentius is describing some graphic gender-bending, namely, Eulalia's ejaculation onto Maximian. The language here thus describes Eulalia as the masculine figure while Maximian is the passive and emasculated figure. Adams describes that *molo* ("to grind wheat") was a sexually

<sup>70</sup> Prudentius, *Peristephanon Liber*, III.121-125.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.* III.126-130.

<sup>72</sup> See *iacio* in the *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, ed. P.G.W. Glare. 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 894.

aggressive term used in many Roman works to symbolize the activities of a male adulterer with someone else's wife and the actions of a *cinaedus*.<sup>73</sup> With Eulalia's previous declaration that Maximian prostitutes (*prostituat*) himself to his pagan gods, the offering (*molam*) in this passage symbolizes Maximian prostituting himself to these offerings as the passive receptacle of the pagan's adulterous customs. Not only is this pointing out Maximian's lack of common sense for religion, but also depicts him as a passive and feminine individual. In addition to emasculating Maximian, Eulalia is also emasculating the pagan gods. Due to the sexually aggressive nature of *molo*, Eulalia acts as the masculine and aggressive figure as she casts aside the ground-up offering, thus also denigrating the pagan gods. Avoiding any possible interpretation that Eulalia was tempted by touching the offerings, the saint worked to destroy these images to show Prudentius' readers her strong willpower and how Christians are masculine and unbending when it comes to their beliefs.

All of Eulalia's actions build up to the climax of the story: Eulalia's torture and subsequent martyrdom. Here, Prudentius portrays Eulalia's strength and endurance. Regarding masculinity, Skinner writes, "To be a Roman *vir*, a 'real man' was to be *hard* in every sense – physically to be impervious to pain or fatigue, mentally to be stern and unyielding."<sup>74</sup> In her tortures, her breasts were torn, claws struck her sides into the bone, and she was eventually burned alive.<sup>75</sup> However, despite all these horrid tortures, Eulalia remained strong. She praised god, claiming how the marks on her body are symbols of the Lord's victory. After Eulalia's short speech, Prudentius writes,

haec sine fletibus et gemitu  
laeta canebat et intrepida;  
dirus abest dolor ex animo,

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<sup>73</sup> Adams, *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary*, 153.

<sup>74</sup> Skinner, *Sexuality in Greek & Roman Culture*, 280.

<sup>75</sup> Prudentius, *Peristephanon Liber*, III.131-135, 146-150.

membraque picta cruore novo  
 fonte cutem recalente lavant.

She sang these words without tears or a groan, cheerful and unshaken; the fearful pain was absent in her spirit, and her limbs, painted with new blood, washed her skin with a warmed stream.<sup>76</sup>

As Skinner stated regarding Roman manhood, Eulalia was masculine both physically and mentally. She endured her tortures being impervious to pain and fatigue while she also glorified god as she was experiencing her tortures. No tears were shed and no groans were uttered.<sup>77</sup> The amount of pain that she endured is evidenced in the last three lines as Prudentius painted a picture for his audience of the blood that was pouring and coloring her body. Mentally, she was stern and unyielding in her decision to carry out her martyrdom, as seen from her refusal to touch the sacrificial offerings, her rejection of her earthly relationships, and her insistence on suffering and dying for her beliefs. Prudentius continued to portray Eulalia's masculinity by showing her strength and her endurance in her tortures and eventual martyrdom.

After the torture, Eulalia was burned alive, which allowed Prudentius to further portray Eulalia's rejection of marriage, sex, and womanhood as well as her masculine nature.

crinis odor ut in iugulos  
 fluxerat involitans umeris,  
 quo pudibunda pudicitia  
 virgineusque lateret honos,  
 tegmine verticis opposito,  
 flamma crepans volat in faciem  
 perque comas vegetata caput  
 occupat exsuperatque apicem;  
 virgo citum cupiens obitum

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid. III.141-145.

<sup>77</sup> The fact that Eulalia did not groan and was unshaken because of her tortures is not unique to martyr literature. Cicero describes how pain, an evil, can be overcome through patience, fortitude, and other manly virtues. He then cites certain examples, including some Spartan youth who endured lashings until streams of blood poured from their backs. Cicero writes, "[Of them], not only was there any shouting by anybody, but they also did not groan" (non modo nemo exclamavit umquam, sed ne ingemuit quidem). Cicero, *Tusculanae Disputationes*, II.14. The Latin text was borrowed from Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, trans. J. E. King (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1927).

appetit et bibit ore rogam.

Her scented hair flowed upon her neck falling upon her shoulders, by which covering of the head would cover behind it her modest chastity and her virgin honor. The flames, sounding, flew to her face through the aroused hair, seized her head, and rose to the top. The maiden, desiring a fast death, grasped and drank the flames with her mouth.<sup>78</sup>

Prudentius emphasized Eulalia's feminine sex by describing her long, fragrant hair (*crinis odor*) and how it covered her breasts. The use of *virgo* and *virgineus honos* also imply her virgin nature and female sex. Although the covering of her breasts for modesty is in accordance with early Christian thought and teaching,<sup>79</sup> the fact that the hair covers her breasts, like the use of *penetrabitur* mentioned earlier, implies Eulalia's rejection of marriage and feminine values. By covering her body, Prudentius implies that Eulalia's body is impenetrable to the gaze of those who are viewing the spectacle.<sup>80</sup> Until her death, Eulalia remains true to her word that nothing inflicted upon her—even their very sight—will penetrate her and her spirit. In addition to her impenetrable nature, Eulalia exhibited the apex of volition by willingly allowing herself to die. By drinking the flames into her open mouth, she allowed her body to be penetrated orally by the flames. This lethal penetration led to her dying of her own volition and not through the actions and gaze of her torturers. While Prudentius portrayed Eulalia's femininity by depicting her hair and body, the poet sought to contrast her feminine sex with her masculine nature in order to show the audience Eulalia's masculine use of volition and her impenetrable nature despite her manner of death and torture.

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<sup>78</sup> Prudentius, *Peristephanon Liber*, III.151-160.

<sup>79</sup> For example, see *1 Corinthians*, 11:15 and Tertullian's *On the Veiling of Virgins*.

<sup>80</sup> Carlin Barton analyzes how the gaze was a means of penetration and emasculation by means of one's eyes. For more, see Carlin Barton, "Being in the Eyes: Shame and Sight in Ancient Rome" in *The Roman Gaze: Vision, Power, and the Body*, ed. David Fredrick (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 216-235.

Even after Eulalia's death, Prudentius takes one last jab at the femininity and cowardice of the pagan rulers by striking terror into the hearts of her executioners. Not only did she show her masculine nature by withstanding a number of tortures and preaching Christianity boldly to the pagans who questioned and tortured her, but her death itself also exhibited a miracle both unexpected and terrifying to her executioners.

emicat inde columba repens  
 martyr is os nive candidior  
 visa relinquere et astra sequi;  
 spiritus hic erat Eulaliae  
 lacteolus, celer, innocuus.  
 Colla fluunt abeunte anima  
 et rogi igneus emoritur  
 pax datur artibus exanimis,  
 flatus in aethere plaudit ovans  
 templaque celsa petit volucer.  
 Vidit et ipse satelles avem  
 feminae ab ore meare palam  
 obstupefactus et adtonitus  
 prosilit et sua gesta fugit,  
 lictor et ipse fugit pavidus.

Then, unexpectedly, a dove brighter than snow sprung out of the mouth of the martyr. It seemed to leave her and go to the stars. This was the milk-white, swift, and unharmed spirit of Eulalia. Her neck yielded as her soul went forth and her fiery grave died down. Peace is given to the lifeless joints. Her soul, rejoicing in the ether, clapped and she, flying, sought the heavenly regions. The executioner himself saw that the bird went out plainly from the mouth of the girl. Astonished and rattled, he broke forth and fled from the things which occurred. The trembling lictor himself also fled.<sup>81</sup>

While Eulalia followed the ancient ideal of masculine figures being hard physically and mentally, the governor and others were portrayed as the opposite of Eulalia. The appearance of the white dove shows Eulalia's purity, uncontaminated and, more importantly, un-penetrated by the things of the secular world. In contrast, rather than ignoring the spectacle or refusing to let fear control them, both the executioner and the lictor were not only terrified at what just

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<sup>81</sup> Prudentius, *Peristephanon Liber*, III.166-175.

happened, but even fled the scene. These supposedly masculine figures were ruled by their emotions, unable to quell their fear. By running away, the executioners exhibited their cowardice, a feminine trait. By contrasting Eulalia's masculinity with the Roman tribunal's effeminacy, Prudentius exhibited to his Christian audience what constituted true masculinity. Similar to the mother of the seven sons in *4 Maccabees*, Perpetua, Blandina, and other female martyrs, Eulalia was strong, had great endurance, used her own will rather than being coerced, and had courage in the face of persecution, torture, and death. She was also portrayed similarly to other praiseworthy Roman figures such as Lucretia by exhibiting her willingness to choose her own fate and overcoming a powerful male's influence. On the other hand, Maximian and the other Roman figures were depicted as prostitutes, cowards, unjust, and bestial. Eulalia throughout her passion refused to be the passive, feminine figure, but, as a woman, she fought the arms of men and succeeded, thus helping Prudentius create a masculine Christian identity in the early Christian empire.

#### ***Peristephanon XIV: Agnes***

Prudentius' fourteenth and final poem of his *Peristephanon Liber* depicts the second female protagonist, Agnes, a young maiden who died in Rome possibly in the early fourth century. The poet begins his last poem discussing the location of Agnes' tomb. The tomb is located in the house of Romulus (*Romulea in domo*) and it is established within view of the palaces (*conspectu in ipso condita turrium*).<sup>82</sup> The use of *condita*, an important verb within the poem of Vergil's *Aeneid* to describe the foundation of Rome, as well as the placement of Agnes' tomb in the central part of Rome, implies her closeness not only with Rome, but also

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<sup>82</sup> Prudentius, *Peristephanon Liber*, XIV.1, 3.

with the city's origins.<sup>83</sup> By also calling her a strong woman and a glorious martyr (*fortis puella, martyr inclyta*), Prudentius describes a masculine female martyr whose tomb implies a Christian re-founding of Rome and Christian religious rule over the city and its borders in order to effectively close his compilation of martyr texts.<sup>84</sup> By reiterating these same themes and tying these martyrs to Rome, readers are able to fully grasp the importance of their masculine Christian identity.

Prudentius sets Agnes apart from other previous female martyrs and characters by giving her two crowns: one for her martyrdom and one for her virginity.

duplex corona est praestita martyri:  
intactum ab omni crimine virginal,  
mortis deinde gloria liberae.

A double crown of martyrdom was manifested in the martyr: her virginity was untouched by every sin, and then the glory of her free death.<sup>85</sup>

While Prudentius applauds her for her active, masculine nature, the use of a double crown also emphasizes the importance of her martyrdom. The only other person within the *Peristephanon Liber* to have received a double crown is Vincent in *Peristephanon* 5. In the fifth poem, Vincent is viciously tortured by the judge Datianus in Saragossa, Spain, in the early fourth century.

Gendered language is used heavily within this text as well,<sup>86</sup> but the second crown is given to Vincent because of the masculinity of his corpse. After his death, Datianus, enraged that Vincent

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<sup>83</sup> The proem of Vergil's *Aeneid* states that his poem will be about a man, who, after enduring and experiencing many hardships, eventually establishes a city (*dum conderet urbem*). The verb is then used throughout the poem, most notably in the scene that depicts the death of Turnus in *Aeneid* XII.950. While there is a lot of scholarship about Vergil's use of *condo* in the *Aeneid* and what it implies, Prudentius' use of *condo* further signifies his Vergilian influence, regardless of its use in the epic. See also Malamud, *Poetics of Transformation*, 150-151.

<sup>84</sup> Prudentius, *Peristephanon Liber*, XIV.2.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.* XIV.7-9.

<sup>86</sup> *Peristephanon Liber V* is littered with gendered language, emasculating Datianus while showing the masculine nature of Vincent. For example, Datianus escalates in his rage to the point of becoming a beast while Vincent is portrayed as an athlete who exhausts his torturers and mocks them for their weak tortures. For more, see *Ibid.* V.121-128 and 201-204.

was able to die on his own terms rather than through the judge's torturers, sought to desecrate the corpse by throwing it to the beasts and, when that failed, into the sea. The corpse emerged undefiled from these events, and Prudentius claims

tu solus, o bis inclyte,  
 solus bravii duplicis  
 palmam tulisti, tu duas  
 simul parasti laureas.  
 in morte victor aspera,  
 tum deinde post mortem pari  
 victor triumpho proteris  
 solo latronem corpore.

Oh twice famous man, you alone not only bear the prize of a double reward, but you have also obtained two laurels. The victor in a cruel death, you then crushed the brigand with only your body after your death as the victor with an equal triumph.<sup>87</sup>

Because Agnes is double crowned like Vincent, Prudentius seeks to instruct his audience that not only are Christians more masculine than their pagan counterparts, but that Christian women are capable of receiving these very same rewards.

After introducing Agnes and her tomb, Prudentius portrays Agnes as a masculine figure.

Prudentius writes,

aiunt iugali vix habilem toro  
 primis in annis forte puellulam  
 christo calentem fortiter inpiis  
 iussis renisam, quo minus idolis  
 addicta sacram desereret fidem.  
 temptata multis nam prius artibus  
 nunc ore blandi iudicis inlice,  
 nunc saevientis carnificis minis,  
 stabat feroci robore pertinax  
 corpusque duris excruciatibus  
 ultro offerebat non renuens mori.

They say it happened that she, as a young girl scarcely fit for the marriage bed and one who burned for Christ in her earliest years, strongly resisted the impious decrees. She refused to assent to idols and desert her sacred faith. For although

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid. V.537-544.

she was first urged with many arts, first with an alluring mouth of a flattering judge, then with the threats of a savage executioner, she, unyielding, stood with bold strength, and in the end offered her body to the harsh tortures, not refusing to die.<sup>88</sup>

Prudentius, like with Eulalia, focuses on the youthfulness of Agnes and how she was barely of marrying age. Despite her young age and lack of a solid identity, as mentioned earlier by Malamud, the use of masculine terms to depict strength shows her masculine nature. The phrase *christo calentem* brings about themes of sexuality and sexual language that is iterated throughout this martyr narrative, which culminates in her death by beheading. In addition to this, the use of *desereret*, a military term for cowardly retreat, portrays Agnes as a brave soldier who willingly fights and accepts her fate. The *blandi iudicis inlice* indicates her rejection of courtship and marriage. Agnes is similar to Eulalia in many ways, but Prudentius' portrayal of Agnes as a soldier enables readers to see and understand the masculinity of Agnes in order to further entrench their Christian identity.

Agnes' masculinity and fearlessness of torture and death led the judge to sentence her to a different form of punishment: being placed in a public brothel to lose her virginity. While a brothel is a likely place of eliminating any masculinity that a woman may have through passivity and being penetrated, Agnes defied the men and maintained her masculine nature within the brothel as well. Everyone within the brothel kept their distance from her so that they might avoid gazing at her and her modesty.<sup>89</sup> However, one unnamed man boldly and lustfully stared at her.

Prudentius describes what happened to this man.

En ales ignis fulminis in modum  
Vibratur ardens atque oculos ferit,  
Caecus corusco lumine corrui  
atque in plateae pulvere palpitat.

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid. XIV.10-20.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid. XIV.38-42.

Behold, a winged fire in the manner of a thunderbolt was hurled and, burning, struck his eyes. He fell down, blinded by the flashing light, and he convulsed in the dust of the street.<sup>90</sup>

In this scene, which Malamud describes in detail,<sup>91</sup> Prudentius portrays Agnes as that of Jupiter/Zeus. By using this similar language, Agnes is shown as Zeus, the king of the gods who wields the mighty thunderbolt, a powerful phallic symbol.<sup>92</sup> By being portrayed as Zeus, Agnes strikes the man, leaving him blind and convulsing on the floor and, therefore, impotent. In addition to this, the *ales fulminis* in line 46 is similar to Horace's *Ode* IV.4.1, which describes Zeus' rape and abduction of Ganymede. With the connection to Ganymede, Prudentius portrays the emasculated man as a rape victim. While the man was the victim, Prudentius portrays Agnes as an athlete and soldier, stating that she left the brothel triumphant (*triumphans*), that her virginity (*virginitas*) was conqueror (*victrix*), and that the judge exclaimed in the passive voice that he was conquered (*vincor*) because of Agnes' actions. Rather than Agnes being the passive figure within the brothel, Prudentius portrays the girl as the active, masculine figure by portraying her like Zeus, an athlete, and a soldier.

After the brothel fails to harm Agnes mentally and sexually, the judge then determined to have her executed.<sup>93</sup> Although Agnes was sentenced to be decapitated, her reaction to first seeing the executioner not only exhibits Agnes' sexuality, but also her masculine nature. Prudentius writes,

ut vidit Agnes stare trucem virum  
mucrone nudo, laetior haec ait:  
“exulto talis quod potius venit  
vesanus, atrox, turbidus armiger,  
quam si veniret languidus ac tener  
mollisque ephebus tinctus aromate,

<sup>90</sup> Ibid. XIV.46-49.

<sup>91</sup> Malamud, *Poetics of Transformation*, 163-164.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid. 164.

<sup>93</sup> Prudentius, *Peristephanon Liber*, XIV.61-66.

qui me pudoris funere perderet.  
 hic, hic amator iam, fateor, placet:  
 ibo inruentis gressibus obviam,  
 nec demorabor vota calentia:  
 ferrum in papillas omne recepero  
 pectusque ad imum vim gladii traham.  
 sic nupta Christo transilium poli  
 omnes tenebras aethere celsior.  
 aeterne rector, divide ianuas  
 caeli obseratas terrigenis prius,  
 ac te sequentem, Christe, animam voca,  
 cum virginalem, tum Patris hostiam.”

As Agnes saw that the savage man stood there with his naked sword, she said, being more joyful: “I rejoice that such a person has come who is insane, cruel, and a wild man-at-arms rather than if a languid, soft, and gentle young man bathed in perfume came to me, who would destroy me with the burial of my modesty. This man, I confess, is my lover. This man pleases me. I will go to meet his hurrying footsteps. I will not delay his burning desires. I will receive the entire blade into my breast, and I will drag the strength of the sword to the depths of my chest. Thus being married to Christ I will leap higher than the ether over all the darkness of the sky. Eternal ruler, open the doors of heaven which were first barred against those born of the earth. Also, Christ, call upon the soul who follows you, previously a virgin’s soul, now a sacrifice to the Father.”<sup>94</sup>

Here, we see the torturer wielding the phallic symbol of the naked sword (*mucrone nudo*) before Agnes. Rather than fear for her life or preferring a less honorable mode of death such as hanging, Agnes welcomes it readily.<sup>95</sup> She declares her torturer her lover (*amator*), despite his savage and cruel nature. However, Agnes is grateful that her *amator* is not some weak figure. Her lover is not weak, but savage and insane. Her use of *languidus* to describe what he is not implies a sense

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid. XIV.67-84.

<sup>95</sup> Catherine Edwards writes that the act of suicide was “often a strikingly effective means of conveying the dignity and moral status of the individual performing the act.” See Catherine Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 179. Anton Van Hooff mentions the modes of death in his work. He specifically describes how hanging was viewed in detail in 64-72. More specifically, he states that hanging was “vulgar” (65) and “looked upon as the death of the desperate” (68). See Anton J.L Van Hooff, *From Autothanasia to Suicide: Self-killing in Classical Antiquity* (New York: Routledge, 1990). See also Valerie M. Hope, *Roman Death: The Dying and the Dead in Ancient Rome* (London: Continuum, 2009), 58.

of sexual impotence and passivity in intercourse.<sup>96</sup> In addition, the use of *mollis* implies someone who is passive sexually, particularly through anal or oral sex, while *tinctus aromate* is often used to depict a feminine lover.<sup>97</sup> Prudentius describes all of this to show the supposedly masculine nature of Agnes' executioner in order to more effectively portray Agnes' masculinity, similar to Eulalia being surrounded by masculine images. In the following lines, Agnes declared that she would become the bride of Christ, her actual lover, reminding the reader of Agnes' burning for Christ (*christo calentem*) at the beginning of the text. The surrounding lines depict explicit sexual language about how she is penetrated deeply by the entirety of the sword (*omne, inum*). *Inum* is particularly sexual, as it often refers to either the anus or vagina and implies being penetrated entirely.<sup>98</sup> The breasts (*papillae*), one of the symbols of female sexuality and fertility, are not spared from the sword as well. Agnes' cry that the gates of heaven be opened (*ianuas caeli*) is another instance of sexual language. *Ianuas* often refers to vaginal and other orifices,<sup>99</sup> so to describe the gates of heaven as an erotic entrance implies that she is penetrating the doors by means of her masculinity. While there is of feminine sexual language about Agnes, the apogee is not Agnes being penetrated by the sword, but her masculine penetration of heaven through overcoming her strong, powerful torturer.

In addition to the sexual language of the previous passage, the continued masculine traits of Agnes is portrayed as well by the poet. Her ability to choose and accept her final fate despite being a prisoner sentenced to execution evidences her lack of passivity. Her willingness to run

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<sup>96</sup> Adams, *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary*, 46.

<sup>97</sup> For *mollis*, see *mollis* and *mollitia* in *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, 1240-1242. See also Skinner, *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture*, 280-281, 326-327. Regarding *tinctus aromate*, Prudentius describes how many men seek to emasculate themselves through a variety of means, including the use of perfume. See Prudentius, *Hamartigenia*, 279-305.

<sup>98</sup> Adams, *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary*, 47.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.* 89.

towards her executioner also portrays her active nature.<sup>100</sup> Lastly, her mode of execution depicts her masculine nature as well. As mentioned previously, the cowardly and effeminate deaths of the ancient world included hanging and other similar forms of death.<sup>101</sup> The masculine death entailed some form of penetration by a blade. While she wasn't stabbed in the stomach as she originally assumed, her decapitation still achieves the same result. Portrayed as a soldier in the beginning of the text, Agnes dies a soldier's death by receiving her execution by the sword, as if a Roman soldier died at his post.<sup>102</sup>

The death of Agnes and her subsequent rise into heaven is the final part of Prudentius' *Peristephanon Liber*. The ascension of Agnes' spirit gives the poet one final opportunity to reiterate the common themes of his work, including gender and their Christian identity. Although a long passage, there are many important parts of this passage that are worth recognizing.

exutus inde spiritus emicat  
 liberque in auras exilit. angeli  
 saepsere euntem tramite candido.  
 miratur orbem sub pedibus situm,  
 spectat tenebras ardua subditas  
 ridetque solis quod rota circuit,  
 quod mundus omnis volvit et implicat,  
 rerum quod atro turbine vivitur,  
 quod vana saeculi mobilitas rapit:  
 reges, tyrannos, imperia et gradus  
 pompasque honorum stulta tumentium,  
 argenti et auri vim rabida siti  
 cunctis petitam per varium nefas,  
 splendore multo structa habitacula,  
 inlusa pictae vestis inania,  
 iram, timorem, vota, pericula,  
 nunc triste longum, nunc breve gaudium,  
 livoris atris fumificas faces,  
 nigrescit unde spes hominum et decus,  
 et, quod malorum taetrius omnium est,  
 gentilitatis sordida nubile.

<sup>100</sup> Prudentius, *Peristephanon Liber*, XIV.75.

<sup>101</sup> See footnote 95 concerning proper modes of death and suicide.

<sup>102</sup> Malamud mentions this as well in *Poetics of Transformation*, 171.

haec calcat Agnes ac pede proterit  
 stans et draconis calce premens caput,  
 terrena mundi qui feros omnia  
 spargit venenis mergit et inferis;  
 nunc virginali perdomitus solo  
 cristas cerebri deprimit ignei  
 nec victus audit tollere verticem.  
 cingit coronis interea Deus  
 frontem duabus martyris innubae:  
 unam decemplex edita sexies  
 merces perenni lumine conficit,  
 centenus extat fructus in altera.

Then the disembodied spirit sprang forth and leapt freely into the air. Angels surrounded her as she flew along the bright path. She is amazed at the world which was placed under her feet. She, high in the air, saw the darkness placed under her and laughed at the sun which went around in a circle and which the entire world both turned and entwined. She laughed at the things that dwell in a black whirlwind, things which the vain inconstancy of the world seizes: kings, tyrants, *imperium*, rank, the displays of those who are swollen with foolishness, the strength of silver and gold which is sought with rabid thirst by everyone through various impious deeds, the dwelling places built with much brilliance, the empty amusements of embellished garments, anger, fear, desires, hazards, first long sadness and then brief joy, the smoking torches of black envy from which darken the hopes and honors of people, and things which are more loathsome than every evil: the unclean cloud of paganism. Agnes trampled and crushed these things with her foot as she stood and pressed the head of the serpent with her heel, which beast scatters all the earthly things of the world with its venom and buries them in hell. Now that he is conquered by the foot of the virgin he lowers the crests of his burning head and, conquered, does not dare to raise his head. Meanwhile, God crowns the head of the virgin martyr with two crowns; the reward which brings forth sixty-fold from eternal light completes one of them, profit an hundredfold is extant in the other.<sup>103</sup>

The concept of the spirit ascending into heaven and laughing at the world below them is a literary *topos* that is seen elsewhere in Roman literature.<sup>104</sup> By using a similar theme that was used in other pagan literature, Prudentius sets the stage for his audience to understand the masculinity of Agnes and the Christians. It is perhaps also worthy to note Malamud's analysis of how *spiritus* is a masculine noun, thus claiming that women can only obtain eternal life if they

<sup>103</sup> Prudentius, *Peristephanon Liber*, XIV.91-123.

<sup>104</sup> For example, see Pompey's ascension to heaven in IX.1-18 of Lucan's *Pharsalia* and Publius Cornelius Scipio's description to Scipio Aemilianus in Cicero's *De Re Publica* VI.9-26.

are in the male guise.<sup>105</sup> Here, Prudentius points to the many supposedly masculine aspects of pagan culture and emasculates them in order to describe how their feminine weaknesses prevent them from being masculine like the Christians. Prudentius and Agnes first ridicule what made the Romans masculine, particularly their idea of gender as status and authority (*reges, tyrannos, imperia*). Prudentius then describes the many other weaknesses of paganism, including their greed, desire for power and recognition, and jealousy towards others. The poet then effectively wraps all of this up by describing these traits as belonging to those under the filthy cloud of paganism (*gentilitatis sordida nubile*). Lastly, the serpent, while deemed to be a symbol of the devil by Christians, was a symbol of masculinity in Greek and Roman culture.<sup>106</sup> By crushing the head of the serpent, the female, masculine Agnes shows that Christian masculinity, through the use of many of the similar words and metaphors as pagan texts, is superior to pagan masculinity. By ridiculing these symbols of power, authority, and pagan masculinity, Prudentius attempted to show readers that secular powers have no lasting place in life, but that their Christian god holds all the power and that the pagan's culture of masculinity was inferior to the Christian's.

### *Conclusion*

In conclusion, the ability to shed one's feminine attributes and become a masculine figure was paramount to Prudentius' lessons to his readers in his *Peristephanon Liber*. Where does this analysis lead us in our understanding of Prudentius and this time period of uncertain identity and Christian growth? We can further analyze Prudentius' gendered language both within his other martyr narratives and his other texts. As mentioned earlier, Prudentius' poem on Vincent is riddled with gendered language. While the creation of a masculine Christian identity is a logical conclusion, is there another reason for Prudentius' gendered discourse in the passion narratives

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<sup>105</sup> Malamud, *Poetics of Transformation*, 171.

<sup>106</sup> Adams, *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary*, 30-31.

of male martyrs? In addition, Prudentius' *Psychomachia* depicts the battle for one's soul between virtues and vices. However, everyone within the work is a female character. Why would Prudentius consider this a good idea and how does it affect our understanding of the work and the creation of a masculine Christian identity? Gendered language is located in his *Origin of Sin* as well. In addition, how do these instances portray Prudentius' view of women? Did he use these instances as a tool to shame men to become better Christians or did he hope to establish that women should be valued and have a more prominent position within the church? Further analysis of Prudentius' gendered language can allow us to deepen our understanding of Christianity, its growth during this time period, and how these new Christians viewed themselves as a people and a religion as it was adopted as Rome's state religion. While this paper focused solely on portrayals of gender and the creation of an identity within Prudentius' *Peristephanon Liber*, studying gender within Prudentius' works may also help nuance or even reject recent scholarship on Prudentius' misogynistic nature.<sup>107</sup>

Perhaps the best example to explain why achieving masculinity is so important to Prudentius and his readers is the account of Eleazar, the Jewish martyr of *4 Maccabees*, as he stood in front of Antiochus IV. Eleazar responded to the king's call to eating pork and sacrificing to idols,

χλευάζεις δὲ ἡμῶν τὴν φιλοσοφίαν ὥσπερ οὐ μετὰ εὐλογιστίας ἐν αὐτῇ βιούντων  
σωφροσύνην τε γὰρ ἡμᾶς ἐκδιδάσκει ὥστε πασῶν τῶν ἡδονῶν καὶ ἐπιθυμιῶν  
κρατεῖν καὶ ἀνδρείαν ἐξασκεῖ ὥστε πάντα πόνον ἐκουσίως ὑπομένειν καὶ  
δικαιοσύνην παιδεύει ὥστε διὰ πάντων τῶν ἡθῶν ἰσονομεῖν καὶ εὐσέβειαν  
ἐκδιδάσκει ὥστε μόνον τὸν ὄντα θεὸν σέβειν μεγαλοπρεπῶς.

You scoff at our philosophy as if we do not live with prudence by this. But it teaches us self-control, so that we conquer every pleasure and desire. It also trains us in manliness, so that we endure every toil willingly. It also teaches us justice,

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<sup>107</sup> For example, see Prudentius, *Hamartigenia*, 264-278, where he describes women as *sexus male* ("the weaker sex").

so that in all our accustomed doings we judge equally. It also teaches us piety, so that we properly worship the only living god.<sup>108</sup>

By living in accordance with their religious teachings, one becomes more masculine, even more than rulers and others who are deemed to be a stronger masculine figure. Authors of early Christian martyr texts such as Prudentius had this in mind, never failing to illustrate the masculinity of these martyrs, while also depicting the effeminacy of the antagonists of these texts. By depicting a Roman's inability to control themselves both sexually and temperately, lack of justice, cowardice, bestial personality, and weaknesses, Prudentius portrayed the Christian martyrs as stronger masculine figures in order to create a Christian masculine identity that surpassed that of their pagan counterparts. The comparison of protagonists and antagonists by Prudentius placed Christians in a superior light, which taught contemporary and later Christians how to become powerful figures regardless of their sex, circumstance, and life experiences.

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<sup>108</sup> *4 Maccabees*, 5:22-24.

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