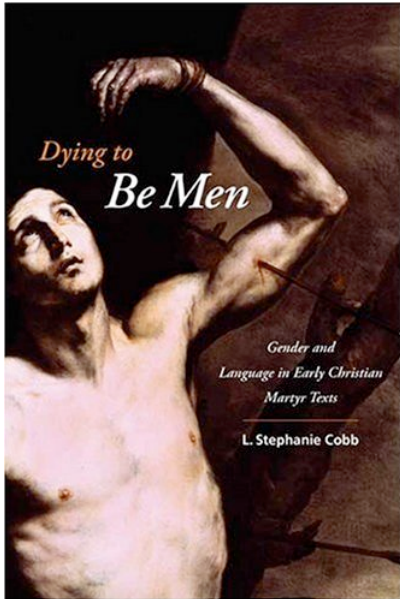


RBL 09/2009



Cobb, L. Stephanie

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

Gender, Theory, and Religion

New York: Columbia University Press, 2008. Pp. xiii + 208. Hardcover. \$50.00. ISBN 0231144989.

Jan Willem van Henten
University of Amsterdam
Amsterdam, The Netherlands

The first thought that came to mind when I took Stephanie Cobb's book in hand was: Is there still something new to say about a topic so many scholars have worked on productively (thinking of studies by Elizabeth Castelli, Virginia Burrus, Stephen Moore, Daniel Boyarin, among others)? The answer is affirmative; Cobb applies social-identity theory to ancient martyrdoms and focuses upon the actions of the martyrs. She emphasizes: "to be a Christian was to embody masculinity" (3). Bishop Polycarp proves the point: when he was facing death, he was exhorted by a heavenly voice to be strong and be a man (*andrizou*; Martyrdom of Polycarp 9). Cobb's working hypothesis is that passages about martyrdom construct suitable Christian identities by appropriating Greco-Roman constructions of gender and sex. The Christian martyrs exemplified Roman virtues in the arena and personified Roman masculinity. The martyrs, therefore, do not subvert the Greco-Roman focus on masculinity but appropriate the conventional cultural expectations of manliness, honor, and justice.

The set-up of the book is thematic. Chapter 1 offers introductions in social-identity theory and ancient notions of gender and sex. Social identity concerns the processes of categorization, identification, and comparison. Applied to martyrdom, it implies that scholars focus on how the martyrs are defined as a group and how their group membership

influences and explains intergroup relations. Ancient differentiations concerning sex were defined by the binary oppositions of hot versus cold, dry versus moist, and hard versus soft. The male sex was superior and characterized by dryness, heat, and hardness. Ideal women were modest, chaste, beautiful, fertile, and loyal to their families.

Chapter 2 deals with the amphitheater, the setting of the martyrdoms as contributor to the depiction of the martyrs as ideal males. The amphitheater was an important location where honor was defended and power negotiated. In this setting, Rome demonstrated what justice was and what criminals and traitors deserved. Roman administrators were very much present in the amphitheater, exercising their power among the audience in a symbolical and real way by deciding the fate of the gladiators. Christians transferred the virtues of the gladiators to the martyrs. The martyrs demonstrated their braveness and heroism in line with Roman ideals. They even showed that they were able to withstand the power of the Roman authorities until the very end, thus demonstrating their superiority in this way.

Chapter 3 focuses on narrative tools of masculinization in the martyrdom passages. Cobb analyzes how Christian authors present the martyrs as more masculine than their persecutors. One narrative strategy is to show that martyrs controlled their emotions: passions were associated with women. Another way is highlighting that the martyrs chose their own moment of death, emphasizing that they and not their opponents had control over life and death. Agathonike, who threw herself upon the stake, like the Maccabean mother, is just one example among many (Martyrdom of Carpus A 44; 4 Macc 17:1). Also interesting in this connection is that several martyrologies emphasize that the martyrs were just and their opponents unjust (e.g., Martyrdom of Polycarp 19). Social-identity theory also helps to explain why proximate others in the narratives, Jews and apostate Christians, are characterized even more negatively than pagans, as ignoble and unmanly persons.

Chapter 4, entitled “Putting Women in Their Places,” deals with the internal social relations in the Christian communities and the processes of masculinization and feminization of female martyrs connected with these interactions. Cobb argues in this chapter that Perpetua, Felicitas, Blandina, and Agathonike are presented not only as masculine heroes but also as exemplary women.

The reading of martyrdoms as windows into identity constructions is a most promising avenue, and Cobb clearly demonstrates how social-identity theory can contribute to this approach. Her book offers a coherent discussion of gender and sex in Christian martyrdoms with a strong thematic focus. Another strength of the book is that it deals not only with the statements of the martyrs highlighted in the texts but also with their

acts and gestures, which are as important as their final words. Cobb also convincingly argues that the gendered language in the martyrdoms is complex and ambiguous: apparently authors have aimed at masculinizing female martyrs as well as feminizing them. Cobb suggests that female martyrs were expected to behave as males in the arena, but within their Christian community they had to remain loyal to the traditional virtues of women.

Sometimes the primary sources seem to be more complex than Cobb wants us to believe they are. On pages 9–10 she criticizes Judith Perkins's argument that the body in pain was important to constructions of early Christian identity. She suggests that the martyrdoms point out that the martyrs were not affected by torture and pain. This is true for several passages, but other passages indicate that pain could be very real, such as *Passion of Perpetua* 21 about Perpetua screaming when the sword of the young gladiator who had to execute her struck her bones. Her companion Felicitas also suffered terribly; because of her premature labor she insisted on dying with her fellow-martyrs (*Passion* 15). Both passages use the motif of suffering to articulate aspects of the martyrs' identity.

Cobb seems right that female martyrs were masculinized as well as feminized. However, her argument in chapter 4 that this feminization is elaborated by presenting the martyrs as role models of the "good woman" who is chaste, modest, and loyal to the family seems to me to be hardly supported by passages of martyrdom (see 107–23). The shocking scene of the execution of Perpetua and Felicitas in *Passion of Perpetua* 20 does focus upon the martyrs' femininity, but in a very different way, as women displayed as spectacle. Cobb also claims that motherhood is "the quintessential female role in the martyrologies" (115), but with respect to Perpetua and Felicitas one could also argue the other way around, that the narrative depicts how the relationship between the women and their babies is changed through anticipated and realized martyrdom. Their choice to become martyrs goes hand in hand with leaving behind their babies and family, an action that marks their transition to "Christ's household" and their new status as future martyrs. The detail of Felicitas's dripping breasts during her execution may emphasize this transition in a most dramatic way. Finally, Cobb perhaps overstates her case when she claims that masculinity is in many of the martyr texts "the very definition of Christianity" (91; see also 3). If so, most gladiators would have been good Christians, which most of them were obviously not. It is true that some of the martyrdoms do not focus much upon the content of Christian beliefs, but the individual articulation of such beliefs was important for the martyrs, as their standard answer "I am a Christian" to their opponents during trial suggests. In spite of these questions and criticisms, Stephanie Cobb's book is warmly recommended to any scholar who is interested in early Christian martyrdom, gender, and identity constructions.