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The virgin and the church in hagiography

In the Golden Legend the martyrdoms of the saints are no more dwelt upon than are the trivial incidents of their lives; it is as though all human experience, measured against one supreme spiritual adventure, were of about the same importance.

Willa Cather, Letter of 23 November 1927 to the editor of *Commonweal*

Ultimately, to be a saint is to be a saint *for others*, to acquire the reputation of saint from others and to play the role of saint for others.

Pierre Delooz, *Sociologie et Canonizations*

The personal is political

Jeanne d'Arc, certified virgin and visionary, apparently possessed a remarkable power: while on the road and sleeping alongside of her soldier-companions, she was able to deflect any prurient thoughts that they might be having about her. At Jeanne's posthumous Rehabilitation, the Duke of Alençon said that, even after seeing *la Pucelle's* breasts – "quæ pulchræ erant" ("which were beautiful") – he was not sexually aroused.¹ One of the King's men, Gobert Thibault, testified that he had questioned a number of soldiers, who asserted that "they never felt sensual desire when they saw her."² Jeanne's squire Jean d'Aulon concurred:

[S]ometimes when I was dressing her wounds I have seen her legs quite bare, and I have gone close to her many times – and I was strong, young and vigorous in those days – never ... was my body moved to any carnal desire for her, nor were any of her soldiers or squires moved in this way, as I have heard them say and tell many times.³

Jeanne's virginity was thus not confined to the contours of her physical body, but was realized in the realm of the social as a force capable of dampening the potential ardor of the men around her. In other words, the men who came into contact with Jeanne came to "know" her virginity through narrativizing its public "effects" as an absence of desire. Anthropologists sometimes classify cultures by the degree to which they are driven by an honor/shame dichotomy; in such cultures (usually

organized by patriarchy), female virginity often serves as a metonym for the honor of the entire community. As Sherry B. Ortner puts it, certain "male-defined structures represent themselves and conceptualize their unity and status through the purity of their women."⁴ Geraldine Brooks expresses this idea more trenchantly when she speaks of "the dangerous female body" that has been forced "to carry the heavy burden of male honor."⁵ In Jeanne's case, it could be said that her power resided not so much in her body, emanating outward, but in the *response* to it, a response located in public space, shaped by shared notions about sanctity and femininity (and apparently masculinity, in d'Aulon's case). Jeanne's virginity had a communal function, taking on symbolic value, not so much for herself, but for those who bore witness to it.

The testimony of Jeanne's companions has been absorbed into the larger narrative of *la Pucelle's* life, details in a hagiography, or "sacred biography," as Thomas Heffernan prefers to call it,⁶ that reproduces the sacred and secular value and power of virginity. The story of Jeanne's virginal force-field also illustrates the uneasy relationship of hagiography to history, for certain elements of hagiographical narrative resist a post-Enlightenment, positivist notion of history. In his critique of traditional historiography, Hayden White distinguishes between fiction and history by arguing that the forms ("systems of meanings production," or "modes of emplotment") are the same, but the content ("real" rather than 'imaginary' events") is different.⁷ Yet as his scare quotes demonstrate, "real" and "imaginary" are problematic adjectives, and this is particularly true with respect to the content of the saint's life. While White does not specifically discuss hagiography, this hybrid genre furnishes a fine test case for his theories, particularly when White argues that, in the historical narrative, "experiences distilled into fiction as typifications are subjected to the test of their capacity to endow 'real' events with meaning." He adds: "it would take a *Kulturphilistinismus* of a very high order to deny to the results of this testing procedure the status of genuine knowledge." Indeed, hagiography functioned and still functions as "genuine knowledge" for many communities worldwide. Though the nature of that knowledge has changed over time, hagiography continues to be a productive mode of representation for its redactors and readers, figuring, as White would put it, "another order of reality."⁸ In the present chapter, while my chief interest is in proofs of virginity and how they function as the sign of the "docility-utility" (Foucault's words) of virginal bodies in the hagiography of late antiquity and the Middle Ages, I also consider how the hagiographic blend of history, biography, panegyric, and allegory privileges meaning over event and the general and exemplary over the specific (even in narratives that are markedly detailed and localized) in order to produce "useful" virgins.⁹

Most obviously, the saint's life is "useful" in that it serves as a model, however idealized, for Christian behavior. But the saint and the saint's virgin body also came to represent the "body" of the Church metonymically, serving as the first line of defense, the lightning rod, the decoy, as it were, for the institution behind it. Ever since Christ said "this is my body," the way was cleared to construct parallels (both actual and hierarchical) between the individual body and the

collective Church. In fact, the *female* virgin body, produced through a series of mystifications as closed, sealed, intact – both a wall and a door, as the Song of Songs puts it (8: 9) – came to function as the most apt homology between the self and the institutionalized Church, even when that self was gendered male.

The body of the female virgin and the body of the Church came to be equated often enough in patristic texts on female virginity. Jerome avers that “no vessel of gold or silver was ever so dear to God as the temple of a virgin’s body”; Ambrose says that the virgin is a living *templum Dei*.¹⁰ In commenting upon Song of Songs 4. 12, Ambrose also says that “Christ says this [that is, “Hortus conclusus, soror mea, sponsa, Hortus conclusus, fons signatus”] to the Church which He wishes to be a virgin, without spot, without wrinkle. ... And no one can doubt that the Church is a virgin.”¹¹ With such rhetorical equations in mind, historian Peter Brown calls the early virgins of the Church “human boundary-stones,” whose presence marked a “privileged, sacred space.”¹² A violation of a consecrated virgin could thus be construed as a violation of the Church, both literally and figuratively. In fact, rape is precisely the story that is suppressed in the hagiography of late antiquity and the later Middle Ages. Inviolable virginity was produced as essential – and I use this word in both its traditional and current critical senses – to the construction and continuance of the Christian Church.

Menaced virgins

The “proofs” of virginity under discussion in this chapter have little in common with the medical and pseudo-medical tests for physiological virginity or marital fidelity discussed in the last chapter; moreover, it is important to distinguish between a “test” of virginity, which suggests that one’s virginity is in doubt, and a “proof” of virginity, which is a public affirmation of the “fact” of one’s virginity/chastity. Such an affirmation of virginity is most visible in what I call the tale of circumvented rape or near-rape, which invariably includes two parts: 1) the threat of rape, and 2) the prevention of rape, usually by miraculous means. In this type of tale, a pagan official or suitor either attempts to rape a consecrated virgin himself, or he sends her to the brothel to be raped. However, the rape is never committed, for a miracle prevents it. Bunyan’s Pilgrim says, “I was clothed in Armour of proof,” and the menaced virgin is clothed in similar armor of proof when she must face her accusers, torturers, and would-be rapists. In the legends in which circumvented rape surfaces as a trope, the consecrated virgin may lose her limbs or her life, but never her virginity. *Virginity* always outlasts the *virgin*. In every society, says Foucault, the body finds itself “in the grip of very strict powers, which imposed on it constraints, prohibitions or obligations.”¹³ The female virgin body carried severe obligations indeed, as its very public, agonistic proofs attest.

A few words about rape are in order at this point, for the subject of rape has recently received a good deal of scholarly attention, both as a historical phenomenon and a literary trope. Kathryn Gravdal’s *Ravishing Maidens: Writing Rape in Medieval French Literature and Law* is one example of such attention, and has led

me to call a rape a rape: no more circumlocutions such as “he forced his attentions on her” or “he attempted to seduce her.”¹⁴ In the scores of saints’ legends that I have read for this study, it is very clear that rape is indeed the issue. However, so far as I have been able to determine, there are no extant saints’ lives in which a virgin is actually raped by a Roman consul or in a brothel; I have never read a narrative which describes rape, or says that rape was committed, or even creates a “before and after” scenario, as in, for example, Richardson’s *Clarissa* and Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*. It is possible to argue that rape is “represented” in hagiography through a rhetoric of silence, if not displacement and substitution, but the fact remains that there are no direct narratives of rape in hagiography. As we shall see, the unrepresentability of rape is a correlative to the unrepresentability of virginity. At the point at which the two converge in the saint’s life is precisely and paradoxically the moment when the female body becomes most visible – subject to narrativization – while the actual circumstance or moment recedes into the background.

In the first half of this chapter, I examine the evidence for near-rape and rape that exists outside of the traditional hagiography of late antiquity. I am defining “traditional” or “standard” hagiography as any narrative that *plots* the story of a saint or saints, as opposed to a summary of or reference to a story. For example, Augustine and others acknowledge that many vowed virgins were subjected to rape, but they provide only reports, not direct, consciously-plotted narratives. In the second half of the chapter, I examine the hagiographical legends themselves. Stories of near-rape exist in a number of different permutations (ranging from short anecdotes to substantial narratives in verse and prose) from late antiquity to the end of the Middle Ages. However, most tales of circumvented rape, and the most sensational of them, were first recorded from the second to the fourth centuries, at a time when the Church was under particular assault both within the Roman Empire and at its ideological margins. The fourth century in particular marks the institutionalization of a number of foundational saints’ legends, which are then recycled and reshaped over and over again in the Middle Ages. I begin with the earliest-known accounts of the legend of Agnes in order to emphasize its syncretic features and to identify the role narrative plays in its development. I then turn to the fully-narrativized legend of Agnes as told by Jacobus de Voragine in the *Legenda Aurea*, and also discuss his version of the legends of three other menaced virgins of late antiquity: Agatha, Euphemia, and Lucy. The *Legenda Aurea*, most likely completed before 1267, gathers together tales from a range of sources, and includes over one hundred and thirty saints’ lives from the second to the thirteenth centuries. The *Legenda Aurea* becomes the major source for subsequent retellings, surviving in over eight hundred Latin MSS alone.¹⁵ This compilation highlights the more prominent features of conventional hagiography, and it is the conventions of the genre, those elements that come to define it, which are my particular concern as I examine the ubiquitous motif of circumvented rape. As Simon Gaunt observes, “[h]agiography creates the illusion of a united textual community, unchanging over time, for whom differences of gender (or class, for that matter) are entirely naturalized,” but he does so in order to read

against such effects in his study, *Gender and Genre*.¹⁶ However, I am interested in reading *with* such effects, in reading the illusion itself, in order to explore how this illusion might function in/as Christian ideology. I argue that the menaced virgin in the near-rape narrative is more useful as a metonym, as an inviolate body that stands in for the Church, than as an actual, historical person. Hayden White argues that metonymy is “reductive”; it allows one to “simultaneously distinguish between two phenomena and reduce one to the status of a manifestation of the other” (emphasis mine).¹⁷ The virgin indeed figures as a “manifestation” of the Church, but does so most effectively when she is lifted out of her historical moment and textualized in the discourse of hagiography. I am not so concerned with contextualizing the “facts” of a given saint’s life, and how such facts were originally established (an almost impossible task), collected, and interpreted at various times. Rather, I am concerned with interrogating the assumptions and conventions of hagiography in order to discover what the genre can reveal about the uses of the female virgin martyr in the early Church, and how and why the trope of near-rape persists into the Middle Ages, long after its immediate historical context is lost. While it would be a mistake to assume that the legends of Agatha, Agnes, and Lucy were read throughout the Middle Ages in the same way that they were read in late antiquity, it is clear that the story of the menaced virgin continued to resonate outside of the particular confines of the beleaguered Christian community of late antiquity. Joyce Wogan-Browne points out that most collections of saints’ lives in medieval England were produced for women in religious houses (whose reading pleasure may have been as much vicarious as instructive), and notes that the figure of the virgin martyr was especially popular in the vernaculars of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. She argues:

If [violence] is a literary convention necessary for the posing of obstacles for the heroine to overcome, it is a convention which a contemporary audience was able to accept as a true representation of the life of someone known to them.¹⁸

Jeanne d’Arc prayed to the virgin martyrs Catherine and Margaret (who “spoke” back), and took them as models for her own behavior on the battlefield and on trial. Medieval hagiographers often drew comparisons between their subjects and the virgin martyrs of antiquity. The trope of near-rape remained a productive, if not central, episode in subsequent retellings.

Real women, real rape

Perhaps the earliest hagiographical tale of divine intervention can be found in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* (c. AD 185–95). Thecla of Iconium endured a number of trials because of her vow of chastity: first, her own mother condemns her to be burned because she will not marry, but a rainstorm miraculously extinguishes her bonfire. Then when a certain Alexander attempts to rape her, she fights him off. Brought before the courts for her presumption, she is condemned to the beasts,

but time after time they refuse to harm her. Thecla is humiliated by being stripped in public view, but the crowd is prevented from seeing her naked by a “cloud of fire” that surrounds her. Finally Thecla is left in peace, and she goes off to live as a hermit in a cave. When she is around ninety years old, a group of men appear, with rape evidently their intention. However, her prayers open a rift in the rocks and she vanishes within, never to be seen again.¹⁹ Another early tale of circumvented rape can be found in the *Acts of Saint John* (ca. mid-second century to mid-third century). Here, the pious Drusiana dies from shame when the obsessed (if not diabolically possessed) Andronicus threatens her with rape.²⁰ Andronicus goes so far as to break into Drusiana’s tomb in order to have intercourse with her dead body, but is prevented by an angel from doing so.

R. G. Collingwood said that the “scientific historian never asks himself [sic]: ‘Is this true or false?’ ... The question he asks himself is: ‘What does this statement mean?’ ... the scientific historian does not treat statements as statements but as evidence.”²¹ Yet I *do* want to know if Thecla, when sentenced to the arena to be devoured by beasts, actually “asked of the governor that she might remain a virgin until she should fight the beasts.” Was she really turned over to Queen Tryphaena for the safeguarding of her virginity until then?²² I am perfectly willing to discount the miracles in the tale, but I want to know if there is a kernel of truth in her plea for protection. Yet even Tertullian and Jerome argued that the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* was spurious, though the cult of Thecla survived for centuries afterward. (The Vatican finally decanonized her in 1969.) Perhaps there was no “historical” Thecla, but did the textual “Thecla” have sisters now lost to history? Were consecrated virgins really threatened with rape, or actually raped? During the Great Persecutions, were Christian women who refused to sacrifice – thus making themselves candidates for execution (as decreed by the Edicts of Diocletian) – actually sent to the brothel to be raped? We can cite examples from twentieth-century history in which rape is made a part of a program of oppression: one of the hard lessons of Bosnia is the fact that the Bosnian Serbs have used rape routinely as a terrorist tactic. And consider the case of the hundreds of Korean women who recently initiated suits against the Japanese government for the actions of Japanese troops during World War II. Some 100,000 women were kidnapped, raped, and forced into prostitution in order to serve Japanese soldiers in occupied countries from Korea to Indonesia. Such women were known as *ianfu*, “comfort women.”²³

The documentation that we have for these contemporary events has no equivalent in late antiquity or the Middle Ages. When we look outside standard hagiographies for “evidence” of rape and near-rape, we must turn to such invested and interested writers as Lactantius, Eusebius, Jerome, Ambrose, and Augustine (some of these, also wrote standard hagiography, of course). In his accounts of martyrs in the *Ecclesiastical History* (written c. 300, and revised c. 313 to 326) and *The Martyrs of Palestine*, Eusebius, who, along with Lactantius, chronicled the organized persecutions of Christians under the fourth-century emperors Diocletian and Maximian, suggests that rape (or the threat of rape) of a condemned consecrated virgin was all too routine in the days of the early Church. In the *Ecclesiastical History*, Eusebius reports that

the women were not less manly than the men in behalf of the teaching of the Divine Word: as they endured conflicts with the men, and bore away equal prizes of virtue. And when they were dragged away for corrupt purposes, they surrendered their lives to death rather than their bodies to impurity.²⁴

Eusebius tells of the many Christian women in Thebais who "were bound by one foot and raised aloft in the air by machines, and with their bodies altogether bare and uncovered, presented to all beholders this most shameful, cruel, and inhuman spectacle."²⁵ He also reports the story of a woman of Antioch and her two daughters, who drown themselves rather than submit to "the things terrible to speak of that men would do to them – and the most unbearable of all terrible things, the threatened violation of their chastity."²⁶ In the *Martyrs of Palestine*, Eusebius recounts how one Ædesius attempted to intervene when a judge of Alexandria "consign[ed] women of greatest modesty and even religious virgins to procurers for shameful treatment."²⁷ Eusebius does shift from reportage to direct narrative in one instance: Potamiæna, says Eusebius in the *Ecclesiastical History*, was "famous ... for the many things which she endured for the preservation of her chastity and virginity. For she was blooming in the perfection of her mind and her physical graces." The judge Aquila, frustrated in the face of her unwavering faith, after "having inflicted severe tortures upon her entire body, at last threatened to hand her over to the gladiators for bodily abuse."²⁸ At this point, instead of relating a stock story of divine intervention, Eusebius tells us that, "being asked for her decision [to renounce Christianity], she made a reply which was regarded as impious. Thereupon she received sentence immediately."²⁹ Potamiæna may have been saved from rape by her "impious" remarks (perhaps a condemnation of pagan worship³⁰), but she was not saved from death: she was killed by having burning pitch poured over her body.

Throughout the *Ecclesiastical History* and *The Martyrs of Palestine*, Eusebius focuses not on miracles, but on the strength and perseverance of the Christian martyrs, many of whom he himself saw tortured and put to death. Scholars today judge Eusebius to have been a reliable historian, especially given the standards of his day, yet he undeniably had an agenda – which is not say, of course, that there is such a thing as a historian without an agenda. For example, Eusebius says of Book VIII of his *History* that he will "introduce into this history in general only those events which may be useful to ourselves and afterwards to posterity. ... the sacred conflicts of the witnesses of the Divine Word."³¹ Eusebius shapes the stuff of history to support a Christian teleology, and in the process, the virgin martyr is transformed into a social document, "useful" for those who would read such a "text." As I will argue in more detail, rape is not a "useful" narrative in a semiotic system in which the inviolate virgin functions as a metonym for the institution of the Church.

In *On the Preservation of Virginity* (*De Vera Virginitatis Integritate*, between 336 and 364) Basil, Bishop of Ancyra (modern Ankara), also records that vowed virgins were raped, in a passage worth quoting at length:

In the time of the persecutions virgins who had been pursued because they remained faithful to the Husband and were given to impious men managed to preserve their bodies from being defiled for He for whom they had suffered paralyzed and struck with impotence the violence those impious men tried to use on their bodies, and He preserved their very bodies, I tell you, completely free of corruption by an astonishing miracle, or else if they had been taken by violence, as their soul took no part in the fleshly pleasures, they seemed to mock their dead bodies and they gave their soul, which had refused to give in to the sensual pleasure of the one who had outraged them, to their true Husband, pure and more shining in its fidelity and virginity.³²

Basil not only attests to the miracles that saved certain virgins from rape, but asserts that the virgin who did not consent to sexual assault remained miraculously uncorrupt, even after bodily death.

Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine each embed stories about menaced virginity in their respective exhortations to chastity, yet they use the saint's life in the service of another project: to formulate doctrine on whether or not suicide in order to preserve virginity is justified. At the same time, these writers use the near-rape narrative to affirm that it is not the body that sins, but the will, and that spiritual virginity is not only more valuable than physical, but also impervious to corruption. For example, in *De Virginibus*, Ambrose tells the story of "a virgin at Antioch" who is consigned to the brothel, but who is saved by a soldier who switches places with her. He declares:

The Virgin of Christ can be exposed to shame, but she cannot be contaminated. Everywhere she is the Virgin of God, and the Temple of God: houses of ill-fame cannot injure chastity, but chastity does away with the ill-fame of the place.³³

Though not unsympathetic, Ambrose is more interested in the story for its power to inspire: "Listen, ye holy virgins, to the miracles of the martyr, forget the name of the place."³⁴ Offered up as a model to be emulated, the martyr counts far more than her historical moment. As Ambrose said of Agnes, the virgin of Antioch (whose very name is forgotten, or at least thought not worth recording) represents a "new kind of martyrdom!" ("Novum martyrii genus") – that is, a new kind of *witnessing*, as in the original sense of *μαρτυρ* – a witnessing that works on and through the abstracted virginal body.³⁵

In *De Civitate Dei*, Augustine acknowledges that Christian women, even *quasdam sanctimoniales* (certain consecrated virgins), were raped in the attack on Rome by the Goths. His announced subject is "whether the violation of captured virgins, even those consecrated, defiled their virtuous character, though their will did not consent."³⁶ His audience is other Christians: "Nor are we here concerned so much to deliver a reply to those not of our kind as to bring comfort to our own people themselves."³⁷ This careful designation of audience strikes me as an instance of paradigm-building. While Augustine's comment may be intended to dismiss

pagans as unworthy of hearing his message and to draw in the already converted, it also reveals a conscious attempt to use these women as exempla only, as fodder for the fashioning of doctrine. Augustine goes on to argue that "no matter what anyone else does with the body or in the body that a person has no power to avoid without sin on his own part, no blame attaches to the one who suffers it," for "purity is a possession of the soul, [and not] lost when the body is violated."³⁸ This is, apparently, the only *consolatio* available for believing Christians.

Pope Leo (d. 461) takes up the nature of violated virginity in a letter to the Bishops of Africa about a number of consecrated virgins who had apparently been raped. The women were anxious about their continued status as virgins. While Leo regrets that these women ("handmaids of the lord who lost their perfect virginity because they were violated by barbarians") can no longer compare themselves to "undefiled virgins," he adds, "although all sin has its source in the will, and a mind which did not yield could remain uncorrupted by the pollution of the flesh, it will hinder [the women] less if they grieve over having lost even in their bodies what they could not lose in their minds."³⁹ According to patristic writers, the proper object of discipline is the mind or spirit, not the body; therefore, these women should take comfort in the fact that they did not consent, even though they must undergo a reduction in heavenly rank.

As far as I can determine, there are no Roman – that is, non-Christian – sources that attest to the rape or attempted rape of the consecrated virgin during the persecutions of Christians in late antiquity. Not surprisingly, we must rely on the persecuted, not the persecutors, to tell this story. However, we do find evidence of laws against, or at least limiting, forced prostitution, which suggests that consignment to a brothel was not entirely a fiction in imperial Rome.⁴⁰ Let us also consider an intriguing remark that Ambrose makes in *De Virginibus* that leads us, albeit circumstantially, to an alleged custom in certain state executions. He says that, at the time of her martyrdom, the virgin Agnes was "not yet of fit age for punishment but already ripe for victory" ("Nondum idonea poenae, et jam matura victoriae").⁴¹ According to Ambrose, Agnes was twelve years old when she died. In Roman society, a "fit age" for a woman was marked by the onset of the menses and/or the loss of virginity. Perhaps Ambrose had in mind the idea, or more likely the myth, that virgins could not or should not be executed by the Roman state. In the *Annals* (c. AD 116–18), Tacitus tells a story about the over-ambitious but doomed Sejanus, a prefect under Tiberius from AD 14–31. Tiberius ordered Sejanus' family to be killed, including his young daughter. Tacitus says carefully: "It is recorded by authors of the period that, as it was considered an unheard-of thing for capital punishment to be inflicted on a virgin, she was violated by the executioner."⁴² Suetonius also recorded this story in *The Lives of the Caesars* (AD 120); however, he is less careful and more sure about rape as a general practice: "Since ancient usage made it impious to strangle maidens, young girls were first violated by the executioner and then strangled."⁴³ This story was intended to illustrate the cruelty and depravity of Tiberius. To be sure, it is tenuous evidence for any sort of Roman "policy" on rape. However, it does suggest that rape as an

instrument of humiliation and punishment had the status of an open secret (to borrow a phrase from D. A. Miller) in imperial Rome and its provinces.⁴⁴

Based on what little evidence we have for the historicity of near-rape and rape, we might construct the following scenario: in the cities of the Mediterranean in late antiquity, chastity came to be one of the more obvious practices and symbols of all that set Christians apart from pagans. The identity of the young woman and that of the Christian community she represented depended upon her professed and visible virginity. If one were a pagan official, one might conclude that the best way to undermine a Christian woman's faith and demoralize her family and friends would be physical violence and sexual assault. Tertullian suggests as much in the *Apologeticum*, when he rhetorically addresses Roman officials: "Nam et proxime ad *lenonem* damnando Christianam potius quam ad *leonem* confessi estis labem pudicitiae apud nos atrocior omni poena et omni morte reputari" (emphasis mine). The striking phrasing works just as well in English, as the following translation demonstrates: "Yes, but lately, when you condemned a Christian girl to the *pander* rather than the *panther*, you admitted that we count an injury to our chastity more awful than any penalty, any death" (emphasis mine).⁴⁵ In his *Peristephanon* (usually dated 405), Prudentius steps into the mind of Agnes' tormenter (*trux tryannus*), having him declare that, while Agnes "scorns life as of little worth, still the purity of her maidenhood is dear to her. I am resolved to thrust her into a public brothel."⁴⁶ Tertullian's and Prudentius' narratives of the brothel are indeed much stylized, but they also carry the ring of psychological truth for the emerging Christian community.

Fictional women, fictional rape

The question of the historicity of the near-rape narrative is further complicated by the fact that hagiographical accounts of threatened but divinely protected chastity have their analogues, if not their partial origins, elsewhere. For example, in his *Controversiae* (first quarter of the first century), Seneca the Elder offers for debate the story of a virgin "captured by pirates and sold; she was bought by a pimp (*lenone*) and made a prostitute."⁴⁷ (Seneca does not say whether this story is true or not.) The Greek prose romance or novel, sometimes referred to as a "chastity romance,"⁴⁸ furnishes ample evidence that the motif of the threat of rape and divine or magical intervention, or, in some cases, a creaking *deus ex machina*, circulated before the bulk of late antique hagiography was written down. Scholars have long noted that the earliest hagiography has much in common with the Greek novel of antiquity;⁴⁹ in fact, the plot lines are often very similar. In Xenophon's *An Ephesian Tale* (mid-second century AD?), for example, the heroine Anthia is sold to a brothel, but she avoids rape by faking epilepsy; in Heliodorus' *Aethiopica* (third–fourth century AD?), the heroine Chariclea is saved time and again from rape by a number of *deus ex machina*s. In Achilles Tatius' *Leucippe and Cleitophon* (third quarter, second century AD), Leucippe at one point declares:

"Bring on the instruments of torture: the wheel – here, take my arms and stretch them; the whips – here is my back, lash away; the hot irons – here is my body for burning; bring the axe as well – here is my neck, slice through! Watch a new contest: a single woman competes with all the engines of torture and wins every round."⁵⁰

The hyperbolic language in this passage parallels the more serious rhetoric found in the earliest hagiography. (As we have seen, Ambrose speaks of a "new kind of martyrdom"; compare this to Tatius' phrase, "a new contest." In fact, writers of hagiography often compared the martyr to the athlete in the arena.) This passage raises the possibility that Tatius knew the conventions of some saints' lives well enough to caricature them, and, given the urbane and mannered tone of *Leucippe and Cleitophon*, such a parody is a likely possibility. However, it must be said that comparing the dates of the Greek novel with the earliest hagiographical accounts of the menaced virgin presents a number of problems. Without a way to recover oral tradition and transmission, charting the flow of influence, from novel to hagiography, or hagiography to novel, is extremely difficult. These novels, long neglected by mainstream classicists, are just now beginning to receive serious attention. As we learn more about them, their readership, and their dissemination, we will surely learn more about the origins of the menaced virgin of late antique and medieval hagiography. Suffice it to say that the story of female chastity under assault seems to have been a perennial popular subject, and remains so today, as hundreds of Barbara Cartland novels attest.

In the Greek novel, highly entertaining and often self-consciously sensational fictions, the story of menaced virginity is easily consumed as just one more titillating tidbit. Indeed, the same can be said of the hagiographical tale – what differs (what is supposed to differ) is the context in which one reads the story. Yet what ties the two genres together are shared assumptions about the uses and significations of the virgin. The ideology that structured the virgin's tale in the Greek novel also shaped the parallel plot in the emerging literature of the Christian Church. In both contexts, the virgin functions as an originary figure, as an occasion, for a number of very specific social structures and regimes. (In fact, as the story of Lucrece and countless tales of gods and their sexual interest in mortal women attest, the rape narrative also has the potential for inaugurating change in social relations.⁵¹) Sherry Ortner, in "The Virgin and the State," even hypothesizes a connection between the rise of the state and

the ideological linkage of female virginity and chastity to the social honor of the group, such chastity being secured by the exertion of direct control over women's mobility to the point of lifetime seclusion, and/or through severe socialization of fear and shame concerning sex.⁵²

Ortner defines the state as any development of a central locus of power and the attendant administration to support it. Not only would such a definition apply to the Greco-Roman state of the second through fourth centuries (in its various

permutations), but also to the early Church (a syncretic institution shaped by Greco-Roman/Judaic/Middle-Eastern values). It seems that virgins and their proper supervision and disbursement required a complicated bureaucratic infrastructure as well as heavily-regulated customs and rituals in both the profane and the sacred spheres.

Both the Greco-Roman state and the early Church could count a wealth of virgins among their assets, though how they choose to deploy such assets differed radically, of course. In the secular realm of late antiquity, the virgin was not only an object of exchange between men, but also served as a sign that the homosocial system was functioning properly. In the context of the early Church, however, the consecrated virgin came to figure very differently. As Peter Brown has shown in *The Body and Society*, as a treasure saved up, exempt from marriage (however humble or dynastic), the Christian virgin came to be seen as undermining the authority of the state, which hitherto had had sole power over virtuous bodies, their manners and their management. However, as the interests of the Church and the state gradually merged, or at least came to be reconciled, the vowed virgin secured a respected place in the larger culture, serving as an important and powerful symbol in both fiction and history.

Local heroines

In Robertson Davies' novel, *Fifth Business*, the main character Dunstan Ramsay is a "saint-hunting, saint-identifying, and saint-describing" scholar. "There is a saint," Ramsay says, "for just about every human situation."⁵³ In fact, female saints and martyrs do exist for every occasion in the hagiographical legends of late antiquity and their retellings and additions in the Middle Ages. Women may be represented as heroic and proactive; other times, they may be depicted as helpless victims. Sometimes women martyrs are silent; sometimes they speak out; they may be young girls, often still children, or quite advanced in age; they may be noble and wealthy or poor and humble; they live in rural areas, in cities, and come from every country. Women saints may be virgins, wives, mothers, widows, transvestites, and even reformed prostitutes. It simply is not possible to generalize about the representation and function of the female saint. Influenced by feminism and cultural studies, many scholars (Amy Hollywood, Elizabeth Petroff, Elizabeth Robertson, and Karl Uitti, among others) have demonstrated how diverse the hagiographical corpus can be, especially in the late Middle Ages. In doing so, they are often reacting against earlier studies in hagiography that tended to produce a grand Theory of Everything, ignoring gender difference in the process. Yet it is important to remember that hagiography itself is invested in working out an overarching teleology, in spite of the fact that it employs no uniform strategies of representation: legends may be quite detailed, anchored to particular places and times, or be quite abstract and stylized. Moreover, a given saint's life often changes function and direction in the hands of different redactors and readers, gaining or losing detail and clarity.⁵⁴ Such changes cannot always be charted as a case of chronological, narratorial "evolution," though one can discern quite a difference

between the hagiography of late antiquity (however much recycled in the Middle Ages) and the "sacred biographies" written in the Middle Ages about contemporary figures. Just why this is so is complicated, but I would like to offer one reason here: as violence against Christians lessened – when, for example, state persecutions ceased with the accession of Constantine in AD 306 – new narratives, reflecting new and different challenges to the Church, developed alongside stories of torture and near-rape. In fact, not many new accounts of near-rape and miraculous intervention were added to the store of legends after the fourth century (though, of course, the legends of late antiquity were retold over and again), but we can find a few scattered examples, such as the story of Jutta de Huy (born c. 1160). Widowed early – after wishing to remain a virgin in the first place – she is attacked by a friend of her dead husband's. Her biographer adds a dramatic flourish to the story:

What should she do? ... To whom should she turn? If she wished to escape there was no place to go. If she tried to resist, the man was stronger. If she cried out, she was afraid the aggression would become public and the ensuing scandal would compromise both of them forever.⁵⁵

As events near crisis, a woman Jutta takes to be the Blessed Virgin appears; though the young man cannot see her, the sound of footsteps scares him off, and Jutta is saved.

Other medieval tales in which divine intervention plays a part are not so much about the menaced virgin as they are about the man who menaces her. In the *Gemma Ecclesiastica* (c. 1190), Geraldus Cambrensis tells two stories of divine intervention. In the first, a cleric carries a girl into St. Mary's Church in order to rape her, but the statue of Mary takes a candelabrum in hand and strikes him with it; in the second, another cleric is killed by a falling crucifix while attempting to rape a young girl.⁵⁶ However, Geraldus intends these anecdotes to serve as a lesson to men on the swift and just retribution of God, not as a celebration of female virginity.

More often, the motif of divine intervention is much diminished or disappears altogether by the medieval period. The story of Christina of Markyate (d. c. 1155–66) is a good example of rape prevented by pluckiness and perseverance rather than by miracle. According to her *Life*, when Christina was assaulted by the Bishop of Durham, she used a ruse to lock him in a room, thus saving herself from his embraces. Attempting to force her to marry, Christina's own parents unceasingly tried to arrange her rape (or, at least, her abduction) by her suitor. At one point, she chose confinement in a closet-sized cell for four years in order to avoid attacks upon her virginity.⁵⁷

We also find tales of virgins of late antiquity and the Middle Ages who wished to avoid marriage who were granted not the grace of stamina and bravery, but that of a physical deformity, such as blindness, leprosy, or tumors. The legend of Wilgefortis (a tale whose origins may well be traced to Gregory the Great in the sixth century) is particularly sensational in this regard. Purportedly the daughter

of a pagan king of Portugal, she took a vow of chastity, and then was betrothed to the King of Sicily. She prayed to become ugly, and, miraculously, grew a beard. The lover gave up his suit, and the girl's enraged father had her crucified.⁵⁸

There are other medieval tales in which the virgin takes a more active part in protecting her chastity, either through self-mutilation or through suicide (a common motif found alongside the motif of circumvented rape in late antique martyrologies.) Jane Tibbets Schulenberg provides a number of medieval examples of self-mutilation, and recounts the story of two sisters who place rotted chicken parts between their breasts to stave off attacks on their virginity. She also tells the story of St. Ebba and the other members of her convent who cut off their noses and lips to deter the intentions of Danish invaders. Horrified by the sight, the Danes lose all interest in rape, and settle for burning the convent and all its inhabitants.⁵⁹ Schulenberg has done a marvelous piece of detective work in identifying the historical foundations for such horrifying tales. An analogue to the tales that Schulenberg has collected can be found in the Middle English *An Alphabet of Tales*: a prince, we are told, sends his men to kidnap an unnamed nun who has refused his advances. When she asks why she alone arouses the prince's lust, the soldiers tell her that the prince thinks her eyes are beautiful. She immediately plucks them out and puts "paim in a dissh" to be presented to the prince.⁶⁰ This tale came to be attached to Saint Lucy in the Middle Ages, because, as Hippolyte Delehaye explains, Lucy was often depicted as carrying two eyes on a platter – or, at least, what medieval people thought were eyes.⁶¹ As this anecdote demonstrates, such tales have a way of migrating from their historical moment into legend, there to be diffused and used over and again.

In order to explain this phenomenon, it may be helpful to borrow M. M. Bakhtin's distinction between centripetal and centrifugal forces in language and apply it to the heterogeneous genre that we call hagiography. It sometimes seems that hagiography is constituted of two contrary desires – the first a centripetal impulse, to create and maintain a homogenized, authoritative discourse (by flattening difference and privileging universality), and the second a centrifugal impulse, to interrogate or critique the power of such a discourse (by registering difference and highlighting the particular). In fact, the *study* of hagiography is made up of similar conflicting centripetal and centrifugal desires. Such fluctuations and fashions suggest that Graham Pechey, in "Bakhtin, Marxism and Post-Structuralism," is correct when he asserts: "There are no monologic texts ... only monological readings."⁶² Authoritative discourse (formed by centripetal forces) and its opposite, internally-persuasive discourse, do not necessarily represent innate qualities of discourse; they indicate functions or roles that discourse assumes in a social context. At certain points and in some places, when the centripetal forces of hagiography prevail, the universalized and de-historicized virgin is a more useful figure than the local version. I would argue that, in the first four centuries of the Church, when its founders and defenders were working most actively to establish and secure ecclesiastical authority, the tale of the menaced virgin was constructed in such a way as to remove the virgin martyr from history and re-place her in an idealized, transcendent narrative. Such a move, which aestheticizes and displaces

real pain and suffering, expedited an untroubled, unproblematic identification between the virgin (and through her, every believing Christian) and the Church. Medieval redactors of hagiography, as they adapted legends in which the trope of near-rape appears for their own purposes and particular audiences, also inherited and preserved this identification of virgin and Church.

Universalized symbols

Our earliest extant version of the legend of St. Agnes is Ambrose's account in his sermon, *De Virginibus* (377). Here, the trope of menaced virginity as I have described it is barely discernible. Ambrose gives us not a narrative of what "happened" to Agnes, but an abstract panegyric that focuses on her bravery and eloquence in the face of her executioner. The closest he comes to suggesting that her virginity may have been threatened is found in the following passage:

What threats the executioner used to make her fear him, what allurements to persuade her, how many desired that she would come to them in marriage! ... She both remained a virgin and she obtained martyrdom.⁶³

Similarly, no trace of threat can be found in two other early accounts; first, in the hymn, *Agnes beatae virginis*, dated later than Ambrose's sermon (and sometimes attributed to him), but written before the end of the fourth century, and second, in what is known as the inscription of Saint Damasus (Pope 366–84), thought to have been composed in between Ambrose's sermon and the hymn.

As we have already seen, Prudentius provides us with a quite explicit reference to the threat of the brothel in the *Peristephanon* on the cusp of the fifth century. Prudentius gives us a fully-plotted narrative, complete with dialogue and differing points of view. The miraculous is prominently featured. In his thorough and invaluable study of the origins of the Agnes legend, A.J. Denomy points out that we do not know if these early texts represent separate threads of the legend, or if they form part of a common genealogy.⁶⁴ It strikes me that Prudentius' embellishments must have come out of a very different rhetorical context than that in which Ambrose, Damasus, and the writer of Agnes' hymn are writing. It may be that Prudentius was influenced by a tradition represented by the Greek *Passio of Saint Agnes*, which also includes a reference to the threat of the brothel. Again, we are unable to identify clearly the trajectory of influence; i.e., which text, the *Passio* or the *Peristephanon*, antedates the other. I would argue that it is likely that the conventions of the Greek novel influenced the writer of the *Passio* and/or Prudentius. Our next account, the Latin *Gesta sanctae Agnes*, is usually dated as fifth century or early sixth, with some seventh-century additions. Its sources are thought to be diverse, including Ambrose's and Prudentius' accounts, and, perhaps, the Greek *Passio*. The *Gesta* is the source for the legend of St. Agnes that we find in the *Legenda Aurea*.⁶⁵

If one examines all of these versions of the legend, one might plausibly argue that the seeds of the near-rape narrative can be found in Ambrose's sermon. So

Denomy suggests, though he concludes that the origins of this episode are pagan and classical. The number of miraculous details increases from redaction to redaction, which certainly gives the legend more coherence, if less veracity. Jody Enders recently observed that "the New Historicist tendency to revel in indeterminacy proves just as problematic as the Old Philologist tendency to try to resolve it," and trying to solve the problem of the origins of the near-rape episode in the legend of St. Agnes as well as in other, similar legends of late antiquity using Old Philology to make a New Historicist argument is tricky indeed.⁶⁶ I quoted Donna Haraway in the Introduction, and her words are worth repeating here:

Technologies and scientific discourses can be partially understood as formalizations, i.e., as frozen moments, of the fluid social interactions constituting them, but they should also be viewed as instruments for enforcing meanings.⁶⁷

The trope of near-rape is an excellent example of a "formalization" or "frozen moment"; not a matter of fact, but of fiction, a result of a teleocentric Christian "technology." While the original impetus or inspiration (mainly irrecoverable, though available to speculation) for the narrative is lost, its effects remain beyond the particular historical moment of its creation.

Let me now turn to the legend of St. Agnes in the *Legenda Aurea*, which, despite Voragine's rhetorical arrangements and innovations, still serves as a fine example of a "formalization," and a formalization which served as a primary source for the bulk of vernacular saints' lives throughout the Middle Ages. The tale begins with a proprietary gaze: a prefect's son sees Agnes on her way home from school, and falls in love with her. He offers marriage to Agnes, but she spurns him in no uncertain terms: "Go away, you spark that lights the fire of sin, you fuel of wickedness, you food of death! I am already pledged to another lover!"⁶⁸ The boy then sinks into lovesickness, and his father seeks out Agnes to find out who her betrothed is. Once it is made clear to him that Agnes is talking about Christ, he orders her to sacrifice to the virgin goddess Vesta, or else she will be sent to a brothel. She refuses to sacrifice, and, when she is stripped, her hair miraculously grows long enough to cover her entire body (this detail is first found in the *Gesta sanctae Agnes*).⁶⁹ An angel throws a mantle of light around her once she enters the brothel, and this light is enough to deter anyone who approaches her. The prefect's son urges his companions to "take their pleasure" with her, but they are too terrified (I.103).⁷⁰ The prefect's son then "in a fury rushe[s] in to force himself upon Agnes" and is struck dead (I.103).⁷¹ Though Agnes restores him to life, the prefect, too cowardly to set her free in the face of public opinion, turns her over to a deputy, who orders her to be burnt. The flames do not harm her. She is subjected to more tortures, and finally dies with a dagger through her throat.

Let us consider a few more examples of what we might call centripetal narratives – that is, narratives that dramatize the miraculous and the global at the expense of the historical and local – in the *Legenda Aurea*. In the legend of Euphemia, the judge Priscus sends Euphemia to prison for refusing to sacrifice to the gods, and there tries to rape her. However, as Voragine says,

she resisted manfully, and the power of God paralyzed his hand. Priscus thought he was under some kind of spell. He sent his head steward to promise her all sorts of things if she would do his will, but the man was unable to open the jail door with keys or to break into it with an ax, and finally was seized by a demon, screamed, tore his own flesh, and barely escaped with his life. (II.182)⁷²

The Romans then try to behead her, but are unsuccessful. Priscus consequently orders that the city's ruffians be rounded up in order to "enjoy her as long as they liked, until she dies exhausted" (II.182).⁷³ But when Priscus' chancellor goes to Euphemia's cell, he is miraculously converted and refuses to give her over to the waiting crowd. After several attempts to torture her, all of which fail, Euphemia is finally stabbed to death by a follower of Priscus', who does so "in order to avenge the offence given to his master" – that is, the apparent frustration Priscus felt at his inability to break Euphemia (II.183). It is significant that no torture, however ingenious, is able to have an effect on her physical body; for example, Euphemia was to be "crushed like an olive between great millstones," but the stones turn to harmless powder. That the virgin saint can only be killed by the (phallic) sword or knife is a motif repeated over and over again in hagiographical legend.⁷⁴ It is very tempting to read this and other deaths as a displacement, as a rhetorical substitution for the act of rape itself. In a way, death is less complicated than rape, for it is a "discourse" that prevents any further traffic with the virgin/virgin body; it is an end to a narrative, an end to change and exchange. As the Church Fathers warned over and over again, so long as the virgin is in circulation, she is in danger. It is also possible that the depiction of the virgin's death functioned as a cathartic moment for its original audience, whose sense of what was at stake in the near-rape narrative would have been much greater than our own. Better the virgin lose her life and keep her virginity, for her reward in heaven would be that much more.

Stories of overt sexual humiliation and torture (another strategy of displacement and substitution) are frequently found in the near-rape narrative; for example, according to their legends, Agatha, Candida, and Febronia were first publically stripped and then had their breasts removed as part of their torture.⁷⁵ The story of Agatha is particularly well-known in the West. (Though Jerome includes Agatha in his martyrology, it is likely that her martyrdom is completely fictitious.) Depending on the version of the story, her breasts were cut off, ripped off, or, in the *Legenda Aurea*, twisted off. In each version, Agatha's breasts are miraculously restored. A detail that anticipates (and promises) the resurrection of the body at the Last Judgment, the restoration of Agatha's breasts also focuses the reader's attention on gender and how it matters: it is as if Agatha's sex must be initially asserted and foregrounded in order for it to be fully recuperated when she is later saved from rape through divine intervention.

In the *Legenda Aurea*, before Agatha is tortured, she is handed over to a brothel by the consul Quintianus. Voragine inserts some sound psychologizing at this

point: Quintianus is "determined to get [Agatha] in his grasp. Being of low degree, he would gain respect by lording it over a noble, her beauty would satisfy his libido, he would steal her riches to feed his avarice, and, being a pagan, he would force her to sacrifice to the gods" (I.154).⁷⁶ Quintianus gives the prostitute Aphrodisia a month to debauch Agatha – by what means Voragine doesn't say. Predictably, in the face of Agatha's prayers and incessant weeping, Aphrodisia fails, declaring: "It would be easier to split rocks or reduce iron to the softness of lead than to move or recall that girl's mind from its Christian intention" (I.154).⁷⁷ The "miracle" is not so much an example of divine intervention as it is of divine protection. However, whatever the form of the miracle, here, as in other tales, only virginity is saved, not the body itself: after being rolled naked over broken pots and live coals, Agatha dies in prison. Abstract virginity counts far more than the specific, fleshly body, according to a logic in which the soul's eternity supersedes the body's chronicity. When particular bodies are effaced, only the abstract idea remains, transcending and transmuting the historical moment into a universalizing, identificatory experience. The paradox inherent in the hagiographical narrative is that this operation takes place when the virgin body is at its most visible and vulnerable to the gaze – that is, when the virgin is narrativized most explicitly and vividly as a female body.

Lucy, my next example of the menaced virgin, is unhappily betrothed. (Lucy is supposed to have died in 304, in the persecution ordered by Diocletian. We can trace the earliest evidence of her cult to an inscription of c. 400.) She begins to give away her possessions, which alarms and angers her intended. After all, what she distributes to the poor was to be his. (We can discern traces of an antique pagan *realpolitik* in this tale of an unauthorized distribution of wealth.) He turns her over to the consul Paschasius, who in turn summons procurers: "invite a crowd to take their pleasure with this woman, and let them abuse her until she is dead" (I.29).⁷⁸ However, when they try to carry her off, she remains fixed to the ground. Even a thousand men and a thousand oxen cannot move Lucy. Finally, as in the story of Euphemia, "the consul's friends, seeing how distressed he was, plunged a dagger into the martyr's throat" (I.29).⁷⁹ Yes, how distressed *he* was: just as Priscus was so disturbed by Euphemia's steadfastness, so is Paschasius at his wit's end because he cannot harm the virgin Lucy. Once again, what cannot be violated by the act of rape is penetrated by a phallic weapon. In fact, that Lucy is stabbed in the throat (*guttur*) may well be significant, for in the gynecology of late antiquity, the throat was considered to be homologous to the neck of the uterus.⁸⁰ What cannot be narrated directly is merely suggested through a substitution of body parts. Moreover, that the throat is the site of the voice is surely significant. In this respect, death has a double valence, for while it protects Lucy from her would-be rapists, it also silences her so that she is no longer able to speak to and against her oppressors. It is also worth noting that hanging, not the sword, was "the privileged instrument of female death" in ancient Greece; in Rome, hanging was described as "a feminine death, unworthy of a man," whose only honorable death lay in the sword. In this and other hagiographical tales, it

may be that death by the sword actually honors the female virgin martyr by recognizing her *aretē* (that is, manliness, which is a quality of the spirit, not the body).⁸¹

These and other stories of near-rape chronicle the resistance to early Christianity within the cultures of the eastern rim of the Mediterranean, but also capture a deep anxiety about how one defines and determines virginity itself. Perhaps more than other notions about human sexuality, virginity is perceived as a "natural" condition, an ideal that resides somewhere in the body and spirit. This belief underpins a number of fundamental assumptions about the ties that bind a society together. Female virginity in particular serves as an important counter in homosocial relations among men. As Patricia Klindienst Joplin provocatively puts it, "the virgin's hymen must not be ruptured except in some manner that reflects and ensures the health of the existing political hierarchy."⁸² The Church, in fact, monopolizes the homosocial bond by monopolizing the hymen, by refusing to allow its goods on the market at all.⁸³ Perpetual virginity is valued precisely because the virgin remains perpetually *unexchanged*.

Gender and genre

In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir notes: "Most female heroines are oddities: adventuresses and originals notable less for the importance of their acts than for the singularity of their fates."⁸⁴ This is certainly true of the Christian heroines I have discussed in this chapter. Hagiography specializes in singular fates that take on symbolic, universal significance, as many a medieval hagiographer knows. The Abbot of Bonne-Esperance, for one, is well aware of this feature of the saint's life. In his life of the blessed Oda of Hainault (d. 1158; the Abbot was writing soon after), he describes how she cut off her own nose on the day of her wedding in order to preserve her chastity. Oda's story is unusual in that she is not martyred in attempting to save her virginity; she lives to become a nun and ultimately a prioress. This deviation from the conventions of the saints' life seems to disturb the Abbot's sense of order. He argues that Oda's act of self-mutilation, which had obviously been done out of love for God, is indeed a kind (*genus*) of martyrdom. "Martyr igitur & Virgo Oda est, quia virginitas esse non potest sine martyrio" (Oda is martyr and virgin, because virginity is not possible without martyrdom), he declares.⁸⁵ Almost a century later, Thomas Aquinas offers support for the Abbot's position in a *sic et non* disquisition on martyrdom. In the *Summa Theologiae*, he asks, "is death essential to the idea of martyrdom?" ("utrum mors sit de ratione martyrii?").⁸⁶ Citing Jerome and Gregory, Aquinas first answers:

We read that certain women held their lives in praiseworthy contempt in order to preserve their physical virginity ... there are occasions on which persons are robbed of that physical virginity, or an attempt is made to rob them of it, because they confess the Christian faith. ... *So it appears that the term martyrdom should be used rather for a woman's loss of her physical virginity*

for belief in Christ, than for the further loss of her bodily life. (51, 53, emphasis mine)⁸⁷

In this regard, Aquinas specifically mentions Agnes and Lucy. Argued in this way, then, the answer is no: death is not necessary to martyrdom, for rape is a kind of martyrdom in itself. On the other hand, the answer is yes: "the perfect idea of martyrdom requires one to endure death for Christ's sake."⁸⁸ Yet this is a qualified yes, for Aquinas goes on to say that his authorities "speak of martyrdom figuratively" ("loquuntur de martyrio per quamdam similitudinem").⁸⁹ However, since one cannot know if a woman lost her virginity (through rape) for love of Christ, or because she did not value her virginity enough, the question is moot. In short, for many ecclesiastics, as R. Howard Bloch has observed, "the only real virgin ... is a dead virgin."⁹⁰ As I suggested earlier, death is the ultimate form of monologic discourse, the only real insurance against tampering with the borders and boundaries of the body – individual or ecclesiastical.

The Abbot of Bonne-Esperance transforms the stuff of Oda's life into a textual artifact, to be consumed by, and subsumed in, dominant ecclesiastical culture. Along with Aquinas, he asks us to focus not on the literal story, but on the figurative. Moreover, I would say that the Abbot impels us to contemplate the genre itself. In fact, I would argue that genre and consecrated virgin follow a very similar trajectory in the hagiographic tale of near-rape. Allon White says that certain genres are

sealed off from heteroglossia ... immune from an intertextual interference. Nothing can intervene across their endless cycles of telling and retelling, production and consumption ... [a genre is] a kind of discursive economy which cannot expand its base because it has not developed a division of linguistic labour to any significant extent.⁹¹

We can substitute *virgin* for *genre* with uncanny ease: *virgins* are "sealed off from heteroglossia ... immune from an intertextual interference." And, as I said before, *virgin* is substituted for *church* with equal ease in the long history of Christianity. What Mary Douglas argues in *Purity and Danger* has special relevance here: "the body is a model which can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious ... the powers and dangers credited to social structure [are] reproduced in small on the human body."⁹² Ambrose seems to be as mindful of the implications of Douglas' point as any modern anthropologist would be.

Even the names of the saints underscore the discursive designs of these tales of near-rape. For example, Wilgefortis "is" a *virgo fortis* (strong virgin), and goes under other names as well, including that of Liberata. She is called Uncumber in England: weighed down by superfluous hair on the one hand, she is equally free of a superfluous husband on the other.⁹³ Of course, I am not the first to notice the messages so blatantly foregrounded in these names; hagiographers themselves go on endlessly about them. Euphemia, Voragine tells us, may mean either "good

woman" or "sweet sound" (*euphonia*).⁹⁴ Voragine provides a number of interpretations for Agatha: "saint of God," or "a 'goddess' who does not love earthly things," or "one who speaks perfectly," or "one in higher servitude" (that is, in the service of God), or "one who is solemnly consummated."⁹⁵ (On the other hand, the wicked Aphrodisia, whatever her powers in certain circles, does not live up to her name when it comes to her charge to corrupt Agatha. Perhaps we should read her name as an example of antiphrasis.⁹⁶) These polysemous names, or, better, epithets, help to distance us from imagining real virgins and real rape: horror in these stories is successfully suppressed and aestheticized at the point at which we are directed to contemplate the figural, not the literal.

Unrepresentable rape and the represented church

At this juncture, I cannot resist the punning possibilities of the Abbot of Bonne-Esperance's name: he is indeed, like many another believing medieval Christian, in "good hope and expectation" that virginity is both a physical and mental condition that can somehow be recognized and measured, and therefore preserved. If rape is the aporia, the gap in the text, that hagiographers are determined to avoid, then the moment of divine intervention can be read as a moment of *anti*-aporia: an attempt to fix the textual/sexual body for all time.

Within the context of the Church, virginity, I have been arguing, is intended to function as the supreme expression of what Mikhail Bakhtin calls monologic or authoritative, discourse. Authoritative discourse is, Bakhtin says, "fully complete"; it

has but a single meaning, the letter is fully sufficient to the sense and calcifies it ... it demands our unconditional allegiance ... authoritative discourse permits no play with the context framing it, no play with its borders, no gradual and flexible transitions.⁹⁷

With Bakhtin's words in mind, let us return to the stories of Agatha and Lucy in the *Legenda Aurea*. It seems to me that Quintianus' lust for Agatha cannot be separated from the fact that he is both a) a representative of Roman authority and b) a pagan. The fight over Agatha's body is thus located firmly in the public sphere – both *his* desire and *her* virginity are politicized. But Agatha's spiritual resolve is stronger than rock or iron. In other words, as Aphrodisia says, "that girl's mind" – as well as her other body parts – is admirably, transcendently monologic. Agatha's virginity shores up the Christian Church and guards against the riot of heteroglossia, Bakhtin's term for multi-voiced and many-intentioned discourse. It is important to note that, in the hagiographical paradigm, in which the details of a particular virgin's martyrdom drive the narrative, a virgin may be tortured – the Syriac hagiographies are particularly graphic in this regard⁹⁸ – but she *must* remain intact, sexually inviolate. To imagine her otherwise is too much of a threat to the system. The raped virgin is a paradox, an oxymoron that would cause the whole system of stable, fixed signs to collapse.⁹⁹ In this closed literary and hagiographic economy, rape must remain unrepresentable in order to insure

that the virgin may continue to function as the first line of defense of the monologic.

The superordinary weight of Lucy's body, in metonymic relation to the religious body, has a special resonance when we pursue this line of thought. Impervious to persuasion, rhetorical or otherwise, Lucy's resolve is both spiritual and literal: she simply cannot be moved. (In these stories of frustrated fathers, suitors, and political appointees, "over my dead body" becomes a literal place indeed.) The metaphors that cluster around the notion of weight are the same that cluster around authoritative discourse. Violation cannot exist in the same space.

Authoritative disorders

I have been arguing that the female virgin functions as a metonym for a monologic discourse that the early Church sought to erect around itself, and that the medieval redactors of saints' legends perpetuated. Rape, the ultimate literal and figurative violation, is absent in the hagiographical narrative because neither the idea of the virgin nor the institution of the Church can tolerate such a violation. Actually, it would be more accurate to say that the virgin represents a *desire* for an absolute, unambiguous, transcendent discourse – a desire that is actually frustrated in and by the very act of attempting to create such a discourse. Consider, for example, how these tales of near-rape skew the narrative focus toward the virgin's body in a way that invites readers and listeners to situate themselves as voyeurs or victims (depending on their subject position). Indeed, a number of scholars have suggested that the stories in which a virgin is stripped, tortured, and/or sent out to be assaulted and defiled, had a certain titillating appeal for medieval audiences – and has a similar appeal for modern readers, I should add. (By gathering together these stories, I am aware that I reproduce their titillating effects for yet another audience.) Elizabeth A. Castelli argues that, because the "practices and discourses of martyrdom" are "embedded in an androcentric framework ... the sexual objectification of women is in some measure predictable and is tied not only to the historical experience of martyrdom but to its retelling."¹⁰⁰ It is in this paradox of vicarious, recurring violation that I would locate a breach in the figuration of the monologic, inviolate virgin. In other words, the very circulation, the constant repetition of, the near-rape narrative – and the readerly enjoyment and consumption thereof – threatens and undermines a monologic discourse that hagiography tries to maintain/sustain as it works along its centripetal axis. As Tertullian and other patristic writers asserted over and over again – while violating their own admonitions to so argue – chastity is best maintained by a deliberate non-play of signifiers, by absence and silence. However, hagiography, in which the virgin is made subject to narration, which is inherently unstable and mutable, forces the virgin into play, and it is motion, not stasis, that puts her at risk.

In order to illustrate the point that the menaced virgin's tale often contains the seeds of its own deconstruction, let us return to the legend of Agnes in the *Legenda Aurea*. In defense of her chastity, Agnes uses language that depends upon an eroticized vision of love (recall: "Go away, you spark that lights the fire of sin, you

fuel of wickedness, you food of death! I am already pledged to another lover!). At one point, Agnes even declares to her distressed suitor: "The one I love is far nobler than you ... his love is chastity itself, his touch holiness, union with him, virginity ... Already his chaste embraces hold me close, he has united his body to mine" (I.102).¹⁰¹ Agnes – so willing to speak and so willing to allow her words to be used against her – is produced by an appropriated discourse in which the language of carnal love is used to represent a purely spiritual ardor. Such words incite everyone who hears her, first to anger, then to lust, and finally to murder. (Agnes has a profane cousin in Iphigenia: both women sacrifice themselves on the altar of the monologic, for a cause that insists on their compliance and complicity.) The struggle for her body/the Church's body is explicitly located in a discourse that never fully escapes or suppresses its original context. This language actually compromises Agnes' inviolate position because of its profane resonances. In its often-eroticized narratives of torture, threatened sexual assault, and murder, the story of the menaced virgin often reveals – or at least hints at – that which it seeks to suppress. The near-rape narrative is a bait-and-switch game that always leaves the audience fully aware of the bait that has been withheld.

To paraphrase Clifford Geertz, the saint's life is a story that Christians of late antiquity and the Middle Ages told themselves about themselves.¹⁰² And they told it over and over again, following a script first written on Christ's body. One of the effects of this repetitive performance is to elide "real" experience, real suffering, real death in order to privilege both an Imaginary and an imaginary past. Moreover, hagiography, its miraculous content and repetitive formulae, its borrowings (obvious to us in hindsight, but perhaps just as obvious to much of its original readership, or at least to a portion of its educated readership), its resistance to documentation and authentication, and its overt ideological intentions, interrogates history in its most empirical, transparent form. Put another way, *Christianity* is capable of resisting history – that is, human-made history – in order to privilege an eschatology in which truth-value is registered on a different scale altogether.

Art Historian Adrienne Auslander Munich says that "absolute virginity tells no story about itself but enables the story to be told."¹⁰³ "The story to be told" is not that of Euphemia, Agnes, Agatha, or Lucy, or of Thecla (or of Iconium, Agape, Chionia, Hirena, and other menaced virgins), but of the ecclesiastical body that subsumes theirs. Hagiography, in telling the story of the menaced virgin martyr, is really telling the story of a Church that reserved to itself the right to recognize, sanction, and reward virginity.