

Gender and Holiness

Men, women and saints
in late medieval Europe

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4 Pain, torture and death in the Huntington Library *Legenda aurea*

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Modern viewers often find medieval images of bloody and horrific martyrdoms extremely unsettling. Laurence is roasted alive, Sebastian is shot full of arrows, Bartholomew's skin is flayed, Agatha's breasts are severed, Anastasia is burned at the stake and countless other martyrs are stabbed, boiled, stoned and beheaded. Such imagery is used throughout the Middle Ages; in fact, the use of violence and death as signifiers of sainthood is an established artistic tradition whose roots can be traced back to early Christian and Byzantine iconography. Such images leave little to the imagination; blood flows freely and severed body parts abound. With the creation of the *Legenda aurea*, or *Golden Legend*, in the second half of the thirteenth century, popular interest in and devotion to these martyrs and their tortures reached an unprecedented level, and the text itself swiftly became one of the most widely read and reproduced texts of the later Middle Ages.

The *Legenda aurea* was a compendium of hagiographic and other liturgical material, compiled by the Dominican Jacobus de Voragine and organised according to the Church calendar.¹ The work seems to have been written with a clerical audience in mind; preachers often used it as a sourcebook for sermons and readings on important feast days.² In fact, very few of the over one thousand surviving manuscripts of the Latin text are illustrated beyond one opening miniature or historiated initial; many have absolutely no decoration of any kind. In contrast, manuscripts of the text in translation were more often illuminated. In particular, manuscripts of the *Légende dorée*, the French translation by Jean de Vignay made in 1333 at the instigation of the French queen Jeanne de Bourgogne, were often lavishly decorated.³ Most of these manuscripts had royal or aristocratic patrons or owners, and thus were not compendia for the clergy but rather showpieces for the elite.

The earliest surviving extensively illuminated manuscript of Jacobus's text is not one of the many translations, but rather one in the original Latin.⁴ A Parisian production of between 1270 and 1280, it is illustrated with 135 column miniatures surviving from the original 178. Because the scale of illumination is so unusual for a manuscript of this kind, it is possible that it was produced for someone affiliated with the court of Philip III, perhaps even Frère Laurent, Philip's Dominican confessor. A marginal note on folio 11v indicates that the manuscript was in England by the third or last quarter of the fourteenth century.⁵ It was owned by several generations of the Ingilby family at Ripley Castle before being purchased by the Huntington Library.

One of the most remarkable features of the Huntington Library *Legenda aurea* is the concentration on graphic, bloody tortures and violent martyrdom scenes. This fragmentation of the narrative and isolation of the martyrdom scene is not unique to *Legenda aurea* manuscripts, and Jacobus himself emphasises the gruesome nature of the martyrdom stories. His text is filled with detailed descriptions of various tortures; altogether he describes eighty-one different types. The images of violence, torture and death so ubiquitous in the Huntington Library *Legenda aurea* are part of a tradition of honouring the violent end of a martyr's life as the supreme example of their holiness; in this way the martyr is most like Christ, witness to the paradox of divinity revealed through the crucible of human suffering.

However, the accounts of torture and execution in the *Legenda aurea* are generally part of a much broader narrative concerning the steadfast faith, good works, miracles and other worthy pursuits of these saints, and the emphasis on violence in the imagery of the manuscript usually does not reflect the focus of the written accounts of the lives of the martyrs. In fact, individual miniatures may diverge from the text so that the visual image is horrifically enhanced in comparison to its textual counterpart. For example, on folio 64v the martyr Felicula is shown naked from the waist up (with her pendulous breasts fully evident), suspended from an apparatus and raked with combs, her orange-red blood covering her body (Fig. 4.1). The textual legend of Felicula (in the chapter devoted to Petronilla, daughter of Peter the Apostle) recounts that after rejecting the sexual overtures of count Flaccus she was simply 'tortured on the rack'; there is no mention of either her nudity or the bloody raking. The miniature diverges not only from the text, but also from the accompanying instructions to the illuminator still extant in the margin. These state that Felicula is dead, but her eyes are open and



Figure 4.1 'The torture of St Felicula', *Legenda aurea*, 1270–80.

Source: Huntington Library HM 3027 fol. 64v. Reproduced by permission of *The Huntington Library, San Marino, California*

she stares with anxiety at the torturer on her right. The image, as the first thing the reader/viewer sees upon examining the chapter, is by its very nature more arresting and memorable than either the surviving instructions to the illuminator, though prominent, or the text itself. The resulting miniature is more violent than the text requires. Felicula's graphically flowing blood, her facial signifiers of discomfort and her nudity are all visual clues that would have been contextually meaningful to a late thirteenth-century viewer. Tradition-bound as some of this martyrdom iconography and imagery may be, certain cultural assumptions are on display along with the decapitated and dismembered bodies of the saints.

The martyrdom imagery in the Huntington Library *Legenda aurea* stands at the crossroads of a change in the medieval perception of pain and its religious and social implications. Pain is not a pre-discursive sensory experience but rather a culturally constructed phenomenon,⁶ and the late medieval perception of pain differs dramatically from our own. Although it may seem that pain is the human experience we most want to avoid, Esther Cohen has used the word 'philopassianism' – the deliberate attempt to feel as much pain as possible – to describe one aspect of the experience of pain in the later Middle Ages.⁷ The idea of the usefulness of pain permeated late medieval society; pain and its judicious application was thought of as a means to salvation, purgation and truth. In general, the violent imagery of the Huntington Library *Legenda aurea* is part of a late medieval rhetoric in which violence is normalised as reflective of social realities and cultural assumptions, privileged as a harbinger of truth and sanctity and utilised as a means to spark religious devotion and reinforce memory.

Felicula is but one of the many virgin martyrs whose codified legends are included in the *Legenda aurea*. These young, beautiful women are tortured and killed not because of their Christianity *per se*, but rather because their beliefs keep them from succumbing to sexual temptation. In spite of this leitmotif present in so many virgin martyr legends, through martyrdom women could leave behind their culturally constructed gender roles. The concept of masculinity and femininity as categories which are fluid, blurred and capable of being transgressed seems to have been a commonplace in the Middle Ages, with pertinent examples to be found in both secular and sacred realms. There are a number of so-called 'transvestite romances', such as *Le roman de silence* (written in the thirteenth century, contemporary with the *Legenda aurea*), that feature cross-dressing women and challenge the essentiality of gender, suggesting that it is socially performative rather than biologically fixed.⁸ Legends of martyrs such as Perpetua sometimes described the physical transformation of women into men as a signifier of their uncommon holiness.⁹ Despite the particular social roles prescribed for medieval men and women (at least in part determined by an Aristotelian understanding of male and female biology), there were opportunities, and even encouragements, for slippage between the categories, particularly for women. From the earliest days of Christianity, 'becoming male' was a metaphor applied to women who were uncommonly devoted to their Christian beliefs, particularly if they renounced their sexuality. The notion of 'becoming male' became a signifier for female spirituality; women martyrs and ascetics who had cast off the constructed characteristics of their gender 'progressed'

towards an advanced spiritual state that was described as masculine.¹⁰ This conception of the spiritual woman recast as a man is a prominent theme in patristic writings. Augustine, Tertullian, Jerome and Ambrose are a few of the Church Fathers who proclaimed that certain women, through their spiritual fortitude and the denial of their femininity, have attained, as Tertullian puts it, 'an allegorical manhood'.¹¹ According to Jerome, 'as long as woman is for birth and children, she is different from men as body is from the soul. But when she wishes to serve Christ more than the world, then she will cease to be a woman and will be called a man.'¹² Martyrdom accounts often described women who rejected feminine roles and even miraculously changed their physical appearance. Many of the female saints included in the *Legenda aurea* become 'masculinised' through either physical or social metamorphosis. The motif of the forced mastectomy, for example, associated most closely with Agatha (fol. 33) but experienced by a number of virgin martyrs, removes the most visible physical sign of femininity, and implies a process of masculinisation that ultimately connotes a state of spiritual grace, attainable by women only if they suppress physical and social indicators that are understood to be manifestations of the female.¹³ Even if their feminine bodies are not transformed/deformed into masculine ones through vision or through torture, most of the women martyrs included in the *Legenda aurea* abandon some quality that is gendered female in medieval discourse. The renunciation of sexuality through virginity is one of the leitmotifs of female martyrdom accounts, of course, but even those who are not virgins often give up something feminine or maternal to further their spiritual goals. Thais, Mary of Egypt and Mary Magdalen, once sexually active, renounce their sinful pasts and embrace a life of asceticism and chastity. Paula abandons four of her five children; she sails away to the Holy Land as her children cry with outstretched arms on the shore. Several virgin martyrs (Ursula, Daria and Cecilia) are engaged or even married but do not consummate the relationship. These feminine-gendered traits are all explicitly tied to the body, to sexuality and its results.

If women martyrs become more masculine in their move towards spiritual grace, perhaps male martyrs become more feminine in their intimate connection to their bodies. At a time when Christ was increasingly written and depicted undergoing bodily suffering – which can be understood as a feminising experience – it would be appropriate for his male witnesses also to become more feminised through their submission to physical violence. Although the gospels describe the humiliation, torture and death of Christ, they make no mention of any physical pain during these ordeals;¹⁴ some early Christological controversies focused on the question of a divine Christ's ability even to experience bodily suffering.¹⁵ Similarly, the *passio* of many early Christian martyrs stress either their superhuman ability to withstand pain, or often their complete imperviousness to any physical distress.¹⁶ Early martyrdom accounts stated that the physical markers of torture were miraculously absent from the bodies of saints.¹⁷ Before the thirteenth century, most medieval depictions of the Passion of Christ and the tortures of the martyrs are aligned with this view of the extraordinary ability of Christ and his witnesses to overcome pain either physically or spiritually, depicting them with placid faces and intact bodies. Images of suffering were reserved for sinners, especially the damned tortured in hell.

Yet by the thirteenth century Christ was increasingly portrayed, in text and image, as a flagellated, bleeding, suffering man, privileging his humanity rather than his divinity.¹⁸ Liturgical and theological developments during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries helped to further this emphasis on Christ's suffering and the idea of pain as a signifier of heavenly grace. In the late eleventh or early twelfth century, Anselm wrote the influential treatise *Cur Deus Homo* (Why God Became a Man) in which he detailed the connection between the suffering Christ and human redemption.¹⁹ The writings of Bonaventure (d. 1274) on the Passion of Christ and the late thirteenth- or early fourteenth-century *Meditationes vitae Christi* are typical of an increasing focus on the suffering undergone by Christ before and during the Crucifixion. In his *De perfectione vitae ad sorores* Bonaventure writes:

You will see even more clearly how cruel was the death of Christ if you consider that whatever is more sensitive suffers more. In general, the body of a woman is more sensitive than that of a man; but never was there a body that felt pain as keenly as that of the Saviour, since his flesh was entirely virginal, conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin.²⁰

Here Bonaventure not only emphasises the humanity of Christ through his capacity for feeling pain, but he even indirectly hints at the idea that the experience of pain is feminising for men.

As Christ's witnesses, martyrs – both male and female – began to be depicted fully experiencing physical torture, both in word and image. The depiction of martyrs' naked bodies in the images in the Huntington Library *Legenda aurea* may represent an elision of gender. When nudity is portrayed in the illustrations of this manuscript, a fine line between the legs functions as a generic stand-in for the genitalia of both sexes. Just as medieval Christian ideas about sex and gender are built on older traditions, the stripping of the martyrs and the display of their ambiguously gendered bodies are a link to the earliest practices of Christianity, specifically the ritual of baptism. A naked martyr, particularly one who is depicted with ambiguous, androgynous physical gender, suggests a rebirth into a state of grace in which gender is transcended.

Both textual and artistic traditions suggest that as a part of baptism early Christians were disrobed, immersed in water and redressed to reflect their entrance into the community of Christianity.²¹ Nudity as part of baptism signified a stripping away of the cares of the material world, and a return to innocence as exemplified in the pre-lapsarian Adam and Eve.²² So too martyrs were stripped (albeit forcibly), baptised in blood and clothed in the glory of heaven, entering the company of the elect. For the martyrs, nudity could connote purity and sinlessness, relieving the soul of its earthly trappings before its entrance into heaven. The ritual of baptism was also perceived to erase distinctions and unify opposites, as in Paul's reminder to the Galatians that in Christ 'There is neither Jew nor Greek: there is neither bond nor free: there is neither male nor female.'²³ Texts such as the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas and the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles also employ the motif of 'making the two one', the union of male and female. Ultimately such a metaphor could

connote the renunciation of sexuality by eliminating gender difference, and a rejection of ties binding one to the everyday world, as if through baptism and an ascetic lifestyle the Christian can attain a pure state of unfettered spirituality.

However, much of the martyrdom imagery in the Huntington Library *Legenda aurea* seems to reinforce binary gender through particular forms of torture and execution. Although there are a few instances of male nudity, for the most part the male martyrs are shown clothed and decapitated, while female martyrs are stripped and penetrated, with knives, swords and arrows. In the text of the Huntington Library *Legenda aurea*, decapitation is the most common method of martyrdom. The beheading of Blaise (fol. 32v) is a typical visualisation of these standardised textual scenes – the seated king directs the action while a white-capped executioner with a hitched-up tunic grabs the head and raises his sword to deliver the final blow to the kneeling martyr (Fig. 4.2). With very few exceptions, death by decapitation in the illustrations seems to be male-gendered, and by extension a superior method of execution.

Beheading practices underscore beliefs about the power of the head.²⁴ Although beliefs about the supreme power of the head and the use of bodily metaphors in



Figure 4.2 ‘The execution of St Blaise’, *Legenda aurea*, 1270–80.

Source: Huntington Library HM 3027 fol. 32v. Reproduced by permission of *The Huntington Library, San Marino, California*

general were in use in antiquity, in Christian discourse ideas about the privileging of the head and its connection to dominant masculinity were established by Paul.²⁵ He described Christ as the head of the body of the Church, and pushed the analogy further to locate men as the heads of their women.²⁶ The division of the body into higher parts ruling over the lower ones became a commonplace of medieval medical and theological discourse; the head was often described as the organ containing the soul and thus the ruling body part.²⁷ By the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the head as dominant body part was appropriated as a metaphor for the prince, or king, as the ruler of his realm, with one of the most famous examples of this type of analogy appearing in John of Salisbury's *Policraticus* of 1159.²⁸ The depiction of the severing of the head and other body parts in martyrdom imagery is reflected in actual practice, both religious and secular; the bodies of the saintly and the aristocratic were divided and housed or buried in different meaningful locations in order to distribute their power and influence.²⁹ Having a relic of the head of a saint was thought to be as valuable as having the entire body,³⁰ and in instances where the corpse was partitioned, it was believed that the true body rested wherever the location of the head might be.³¹

The emphasis on decapitation was also paralleled by the late medieval system of criminal justice. The beheading of a medieval criminal suggested that the condemned was no common offender. There was an iconography of public execution during the Middle Ages, and the victim's social position was indicated through signs such as the type of clothing he wore, the type of transportation used to convey him from jail to the place of execution and the method of execution itself.³² Prior to their execution criminals of an exalted social status might be divested of certain items, such as their insignia of office, but only lower-class criminals, male and female, were completely stripped; they were often displayed or even paraded about in public. Decapitation tended to be a practice reserved for the nobility;³³ it sometimes happened that a criminal sentenced to a less glorious death would petition to have his mode of execution changed to decapitation.³⁴ It was also a practice generally reserved for men; female criminals were more likely to be burned or buried alive in an attempt to obliterate completely the more problematic bodies of criminal women.³⁵

In general, the criminal justice practices of the later Middle Ages offer striking evidence that the martyrdom scenes, both textual and visual, in the Huntington Library *Legenda aurea* would have had particular resonance for a contemporary viewer. The bodily sufferings of the saints captured in word and image in the manuscript were reminiscent of those endured by accused criminals. In a revival of ancient Roman law, by the thirteenth century torture began to be used as a means of extracting confession in court.³⁶ Pain in this context became a means of discovering truth, with the body as its locus. After confession was extracted, the criminal might be punished in a way that included judicial pain and even public execution. Public ceremonies of torture and execution were conceived as lavish spectacles of power, confirming an authoritative right to mete out punishment in public on a grand scale. Such events were theatrical pageants of propaganda; in fact, words describing these spectacles were derived from the theatre.³⁷ The voyeuristic

attraction/repulsion of execution itself and the ritual of events leading up to the ultimate act ensured that executions became a type of spectator sport. From the point of view of the punishing authority, the spectacle of public punishment served as a means of moral instruction as well as a deterrent to those watching. The power of viewing is seen in the ubiquitous figure of the seated king who is a feature of most of the martyrdom scenes in the Huntington Library *Legenda aurea* and elsewhere. He functions simultaneously as sovereign, judge and witness, although in the context of the martyrdom scenes he is a symbol of anti-Christian forces, of heresy, of sadistic voyeurism, of government gone bad.

In the later Middle Ages the spectacle of punishment and death was intended to secure not only social order but also spiritual forgiveness. Since bodily pain on earth in the form of illness or punishment was believed to subtract from pain in purgatory, witnesses could watch with the idea that the infliction of earthly suffering was in some sense compassionate.³⁸ In most areas of Europe, criminals sentenced to death by beheading knelt on the ground with their backs to the executioner, so that their heads might be severed with a broad sweep of the sword.³⁹ This kneeling position was one of both prayer and penitence, and must have seemed both poignant and appropriate to the viewing populace. It is also the position commonly used in decapitation scenes featuring martyrs, including those in the Huntington Library *Legenda aurea*. The parallels between the martyrdoms of early Christians and the executions of contemporary criminals were clear to late medieval people, and execution ceremonies even mimicked (and inspired) martyrdom accounts.⁴⁰ The reader/viewer of the violence inherent in the text and imagery of the Huntington Library *Legenda aurea* is in part prepared for it by his social and cultural milieu, and in turn the pain and torture evident in the *Legenda aurea* can be seen to legitimise and make inevitable contemporary social norms.

For martyrs, like criminals, decapitation had connotations of privilege, both political and spiritual. Decapitation was reserved for citizens of ancient Rome; thus Paul was beheaded while Peter was crucified. And while martyrs were able to survive a multitude of horrific tortures that would fell the normal person, beheading usually (although not always) completed the task, and thus it was the means by which the martyr achieved his or her reward. In fact, beheading had such hagiographic and cultural overtones of privilege that the artist of the Huntington Library *Legenda aurea* has even diverged from the canonical text; Matthew, Maurice and Simon are not beheaded in their legends but are in the accompanying miniatures (fols 129, 130 and 148); in the text Matthew is specifically stabbed in the back, Maurice is trampled by horses and Simon is crucified.

Although executions of medieval criminals took class- and gender-specific forms, in the text of the *Legenda aurea* both male and female martyrs are ultimately decapitated. This literary similarity has led some scholars to assert that gender plays only a minor role in martyrdom accounts. Although men and women are treated differently in details of martyrdom stories, such as the emphasis on female beauty and virginity, the victimisation of female martyrs has been overemphasised in recent feminist literature.⁴¹ Even if female martyrs are tortured in exclusively feminine ways (such as having their breasts cut off), both male and female martyrs are most

commonly despatched by decapitation and all are victorious over death, receiving their ultimate reward in heaven. In certain instances, the women martyrs actively encourage their torturers, seeking the martyr's palm. It has been suggested that this active participation in their fate gives the martyrs a measure of control, and thus leads to empowerment, dulling the sadistic nature of these legends;⁴² others have suggested that violence done to the female body is a corporeal vehicle for spiritual meaning.⁴³

Yet something happens in the translation of text into image. Even if textual accounts of female martyrdom mention the abilities of the women to engage in intellectual debate, and even if they end with a beheading and an entry into heaven, images of female martyrs often undo the idea of privilege and create meanings and viewer responses fraught with ambivalence. An ongoing textual narrative leads the reader from bodily torture to spiritual release, but hagiographic imagery often focuses on the torture itself, presenting the martyrs in frozen moments of passivity and bodily display. Even if in the text women die by other methods, including beheading, they are usually depicted with their often-sexualised tortures in progress; only rarely are women beheaded in the imagery of the Huntington Library *Legenda aurea*. Just as images of male martyrdoms occasionally diverge from the text to privilege decapitation, images of female martyrdoms in the manuscript sometimes modify the torture of the text, creating a visually prurient image out of a more mundane literary account. The virgin martyr Lucy survives numerous tortures while trading barbs with the evil consul Paschasius until he is 'at the end of his wits'. Taking pity on him, his friends thrust a dagger into her throat, but still she continues to speak. In the image of Lucy's martyrdom (fol. 4v), the dagger is plunged into her stomach instead, becoming in effect a pseudo-rape, and completely erasing the significance of Lucy's miraculous ability to continue speaking even with a knife through her throat (Fig. 4.3). The penetration of the stomach, common in scenes of female martyrdom, can be read as a sexual metaphor, as the belly (like the mouth) was associated with the sexual organs.⁴⁴

In general, the images of the tortures of the virgin martyrs are often conceived in such a way that their punishments become forms of sexual molestation. They are stripped and displayed, their breasts are grabbed and mutilated, their bellies are penetrated with phallic swords. The women stand naked, their white bodies glowing in contrast to the fully clothed figures of the king and his accomplices. In many legends of female martyrs, especially virgin martyrs, involuntary nakedness is a humiliating part of the torture endured. Texts often describe their public stripping, whereas there is little mention of the nakedness of male martyrs.⁴⁵ This distinction between the treatment of female and male martyrs in texts and images suggests an ambivalence concerning the nakedness of Christian women, a preoccupation with women's bodies that is both religious and prurient. When an avowed virgin is naked, the connotations are even more complex: nakedness connotes both virginity and fallen virginity, both purity and shame. These strippings are complicated; the women sometimes state that they are unashamed, and yet they may conveniently grow hair or readjust their clothing to cover their nudity. Yet even if texts describe the sprouting of hair or other miraculous means of concealing female nakedness,



Figure 4.3 ‘The torture of St Lucy’, *Legenda aurea*, 1270–80.

Source: Huntington Library HM 3027 fol. 4v. Reproduced by permission of *The Huntington Library, San Marino, California*

images more often present the women without recourse to modesty. In the Huntington Library *Legenda aurea*, some female martyrs are in fact *not* stripped in the text, but are naked in the miniature; Anastasia is one such example (fol. 8; Fig. 4.4). Of the surviving miniatures, there are no examples of ‘miraculous modesty’ for the female martyrs.

The naked female body can be seen as a site of multivalent meanings; the stripped and tortured female martyr could represent spiritual heroism and yet still be a spectacle for the male gaze, personified in the figures of the voyeuristic kings. The inclusion of the king is particularly appropriate for a female martyr, as often this generic figure is symbolic of a man in the story who has been sexually rejected by her. The stripped woman is sadistically titillating to him; she has refused his advances, and therefore he tortures her both mentally and physically, through the humiliation of being stripped and the pain of being mutilated. The legends of



Figure 4.4 'The torture of St Anastasia', *Legenda aurea*, 1270–80.

Source: Huntington Library HM 3027 fol. 8. Reproduced by permission of *The Huntington Library, San Marino, California*

the virgin martyrs are both stories of Christian faith and tales of sexual denial and frustration, with an emphasis on sexuality and physicality that is less common in the lives of male martyrs.

On rare occasions, some male martyrs are in fact represented partially or fully nude. However, there seems to be an awareness of the impropriety of male nudity in the Huntington Library *Legenda aurea*, in both text and image. In the legend of Hippolytus, the Roman general Decius orders that he be stripped; the saint says to him, 'You haven't stripped me, rather you've clothed me!' Infuriated, Decius responds, 'How can you be so stupid, not even blushing at your nakedness?' For Hippolytus, the removal of earthly garments is a preparation for the cloak of martyrdom, but for the Roman general, the martyr's nudity is clearly intended to be embarrassing and humiliating; faced with the prospect of losing this contest of significations, Decius orders that Hippolytus be clothed once again. Significantly,

in the few cases where there is total male nudity, the king is absent. Although he is a stock figure in the scenes of male decapitation, as well as in the scenes of female torture and execution, whether they are clothed or nude, no voyeuristic king appears with the few male martyrs who are depicted naked. Some images suggest an implied self-consciousness on the part of the male martyrs; Laurence is stripped in the text and shown naked in the miniature illustrating his legend in the Huntington Library *Legenda aurea*, but he covers his genitals as he lies roasting on an iron grill (fol. 97v; Fig. 4.5). Even if the text calls for male nudity, it is often not followed in the imagery of the manuscript: Andrew, Cyriacus and Dionysius are all stripped as part of their torture but they are pictured fully clothed in the manuscript (fols 1, 97 and 142v).

Even though male and female martyrs may in some instances renegotiate the body and transcend the binary system of gender, ultimately it is through their bodies that they attain salvation and holiness. In the Huntington Library *Legenda aurea*, gender is a factor in the differentiation of the ways the martyrs are tortured and displayed. So martyrs escape the confines of gender only to have them reinscribed in the images of their bodies. With this in mind, we might consider yet again how often hagiographic texts and imagery record the stripping of female martyrs, and



Figure 4.5 'The torture of St Lawrence', *Legenda aurea*, 1270–80.

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how infrequently male martyrs are represented in this way. Although the transcendence of gender for martyrs who are women is constructed as a *transformation* from female to male, from body to soul, from material to spiritual, the images of the virgin martyrs in the Huntington Library *Legenda aurea* freeze them explicitly at the moment that they are most identified with the body. The stripped and displayed virgin martyrs are forever caught unclothed and their sex (at least their breasts) revealed, even if they are 'masculine' in their uncommon spirituality, their rejection of culturally ordered feminine roles and their embrace of martyrdom. The paradox is that although beheading is a privileged method of execution, male-gendered both in this manuscript and in medieval judicial practice, the codification and standardisation of the beheading scenes renders the male martyrs nearly visually anonymous. In contrast, although women usually suffer the additional humiliation of public stripping, a loaded signifier of both sexuality and criminality in the later Middle Ages, the combination of nudity with their individualised tortures makes them easily identifiable and ultimately more memorable.

The connection of violence and memory provides a tool to understand how a viewer might have reacted to the numbing repetition of martyrdom scenes in the Huntington Library *Legenda aurea*. The thirteenth century brought an increasing concern about the art of memory through a revival of interest in Aristotelian teachings about memory and sense perception.⁴⁶ The power of the images in the Huntington Library *Legenda aurea* makes them more than just a visualisation of the written narrative; the pictures had devotional, didactic and mnemonic functions. The author of the Roman treatise *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, widely circulated in the later Middle Ages and Renaissance, has a telling prescription for fixing memories in the mind; this is most easily accomplished if 'we somehow disfigure them, as by introducing one stained with blood or soiled with mud or smeared with red paint, so that its form is more striking'.⁴⁷ When text is turned into image, how much more fearful and memorable for the spectator. Thomas Aquinas's prescriptions for good mnemonic tools fit the violent imagery of the Huntington Library *Legenda aurea*; he stated that 'Man cannot understand without images. . . . We remember less easily those things which are of subtle and spiritual import; and we remember more easily those things which are gross and sensible.'⁴⁸ Mitchell B. Merback has explored the pedagogical potential of violent visual imagery in his analysis of a set of woodcuts by Lucas Cranach the Elder illustrating the martyrdoms of the Twelve Apostles; in this case, the scenes were intended for the teaching of children. He draws parallels between art and life as children were often brought to executions and expected to derive moral lessons from witnessing such events; these lessons were impressed upon the memory by subsequent slappings or whippings inflicted on the child.⁴⁹ Here pain, both vicariously viewed and personally experienced, becomes a mnemonic tool of instruction and reinforcement. Since the Huntington Library *Legenda aurea* was probably a manuscript that was used for personal devotion rather than public display, the images functioned as a type of memory device to recall the text and its significance. A focused, private contemplation of the martyrdom scenes would only intensify the depth of the experience; a viewer might find them both stimulating and disturbing, both attractive and repulsive.

In a social and religious context where pain was an indicator of judicial truth through torture and redemption through physical suffering, the late medieval audience for the Huntington Library *Legenda aurea* would have understood the tortured and beheaded body, male or female, as a locus for spiritual salvation. But the same people who could view images of martyrdom with outrage and devotion perhaps could also appreciate the potential for prurience inherent in such scenes. By the time the Huntington Library *Legenda aurea* was produced, the public stripping, punishment and execution of criminals served as an example of how scenes of martyrdom could be viewed and analysed, and conversely such spectacles themselves were often modelled upon martyrdom accounts. This was especially true if the accused was a popular or sympathetic figure, yet even if the punishment was deemed appropriate and deserved, public punishments of criminals evoked a variety of responses. Such spectacles of public punishment could frighten, horrify, reassure, tantalise and even arouse empathy in the viewer. In the end, both criminals and martyrs stood outside the normal community, their bodies functioning as sites for meaning mapped onto them by late medieval society. The martyr, often a social outcast in perception or practice, glides between the apparent polar opposites of body and spirit, suffering and impassibility, passivity and assertiveness; he or she may even transcend the biological and cultural constrictions of sex and gender. The difficulty of fitting the martyr into set parameters produces a myriad of interpretative strategies through which to understand the meaning and power that this type of sainthood offered to the faithful of the Middle Ages.

Notes

- 1 Recent scholarship on the *Legenda aurea* includes A. Boureau, *La Légende dorée: Le Système narratif de Jacques de Voragine (†1298)*, Paris, Les Éditions du Cerf, 1984; S.L. Reames, *The Legenda aurea: A Reexamination of its Paradoxical History*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1985; B. Dunn-Lardeau (ed.), *Legenda aurea: Sept siècles de diffusion*, Montreal, Éditions Bellarmin, 1986; B. Dunn-Lardeau (ed.), *Legenda aurea – la Légende dorée (XIIIe–XVe s.)*, Montreal, Éditions Ceres, 1993; B. Fleith, *Studien zur Überlieferungsgeschichte der Lateinischen Legenda aurea*, Subsidia Hagiographica 72, Brussels, Société des Bollandistes, 1991; and G.P. Maggioni, *Ricerche sulla composizione e sulla trasmissione della Legenda aurea*, Biblioteca di Medioevo latino 8, Spoleto, Centro italiano di studi sull'alto Medioevo, 1995. The best translation of the *Legenda aurea* in English is *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, trans. W.G. Ryan, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1993, based on the second edition of the Latin transcription published by T. Graesse in 1850. The edition was reprinted in 1890 and a photo-offset reproduction produced in 1969: *Jacobi a Voragine Legenda Aurea Vulgo Historia Lombardica Dicta*, ed. T. Graesse, Osnabrück, Otto Zeller Verlag, 1969.
- 2 Boureau, *La Légende dorée*, pp. 21–5; Reames, *Reexamination*, pp. 85–100.
- 3 H. Maddocks, 'Pictures for Aristocrats: The Manuscripts of the *Légende dorée*', in M. Manion and B.J. Muir (eds), *Medieval Texts and Images: Studies of Manuscripts from the Middle Ages*, Chur, Harwood Academic Publishers, 1991, pp. 1–23.
- 4 Huntington Library, San Marino, California (HM 3027). See M. Easton, 'The Making of the Huntington Library *Legenda aurea* and the Meanings of Martyrdom', unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 2001; and C.W. Dutschke, *Guide to Medieval and Renaissance Manuscripts in the Huntington Library*, San Marino, The Huntington Library, 1989, vol. 2, pp. 590–4, fig. 62.