

THE ART OF LOOKING DANGEROUSLY: VICTORIAN IMAGES OF MARTYRDOM

By Maureen Moran

BETWEEN 1863 AND 1865 Gerard Manley Hopkins maintained a “little bk. for sins” as a record arising from his daily examination of conscience (6). Many of the failings seem sexually oriented: “Looking with terrible temptation at Maitland” and “Looking at temptations esp. at Geldart naked” (191, 174). The poet’s guilty annotations of the illicit homoerotic pleasures of spectatorship are even more striking when the devout Hopkins associates perverse desire with the contemplation of bodies tortured for a religious cause: “Evil thought slightly in drawing made worse by drawing a crucified arm on same page,” or, even more directly blasphemous, “The evil thought in writing on our Lord’s passion” (167, 157).

Nor do Hopkins’s intimate revelations represent an idiosyncratic and atypical Victorian preoccupation with the dangers of bodily looking, even when the object of the gaze is sanctioned by connection to religious belief and spiritual heroism. Throughout the period there was an on-going public debate about the boundaries distinguishing purity from prurience in the artistic display of fleshly bodies portrayed in private, vulnerable, or distressing circumstances. In 1885, for example, two striking paintings of martyrs caused considerable public interest: Charles Mitchell’s *Hypatia* (Figure 6), exhibited at the Grosvenor Gallery and John William Waterhouse’s *Saint Eulalia* (Figure 9), presented at the Royal Academy. “A British Matron” wrote in outrage to the *Times*, deploring the violation of boundaries of artistic taste and moral decorum in the presentation of nude female bodies:

Can any one venture to deny that, at an exhibition purporting to be for general edification, or entertainment, no picture should find place before which a modest woman may not stand hanging on the arm of father, brother, or lover without a burning sense of shame? (10)¹

Other correspondents reinforced a similar moral anxiety that the “stealthy, steadfast advances of the cloven foot” were at hand (Another British Matron 10). Such “indecent pictures” also shocked due to their size and prominence; they eclipsed all else, since “every modest person in turning-away from them is obliged to give a very perfunctory glance on others which have the misfortune to be near them” (Clericus 6). Yet “Common Sense” defined the boundary of taste differently: “we do not go to picture galleries to wonder at the ‘painter’s skill,’ but to derive enjoyment and refinement from seeing what is most beautiful in art. The human form is the most beautiful and perfect shape known” (6). Edward J. Martyn

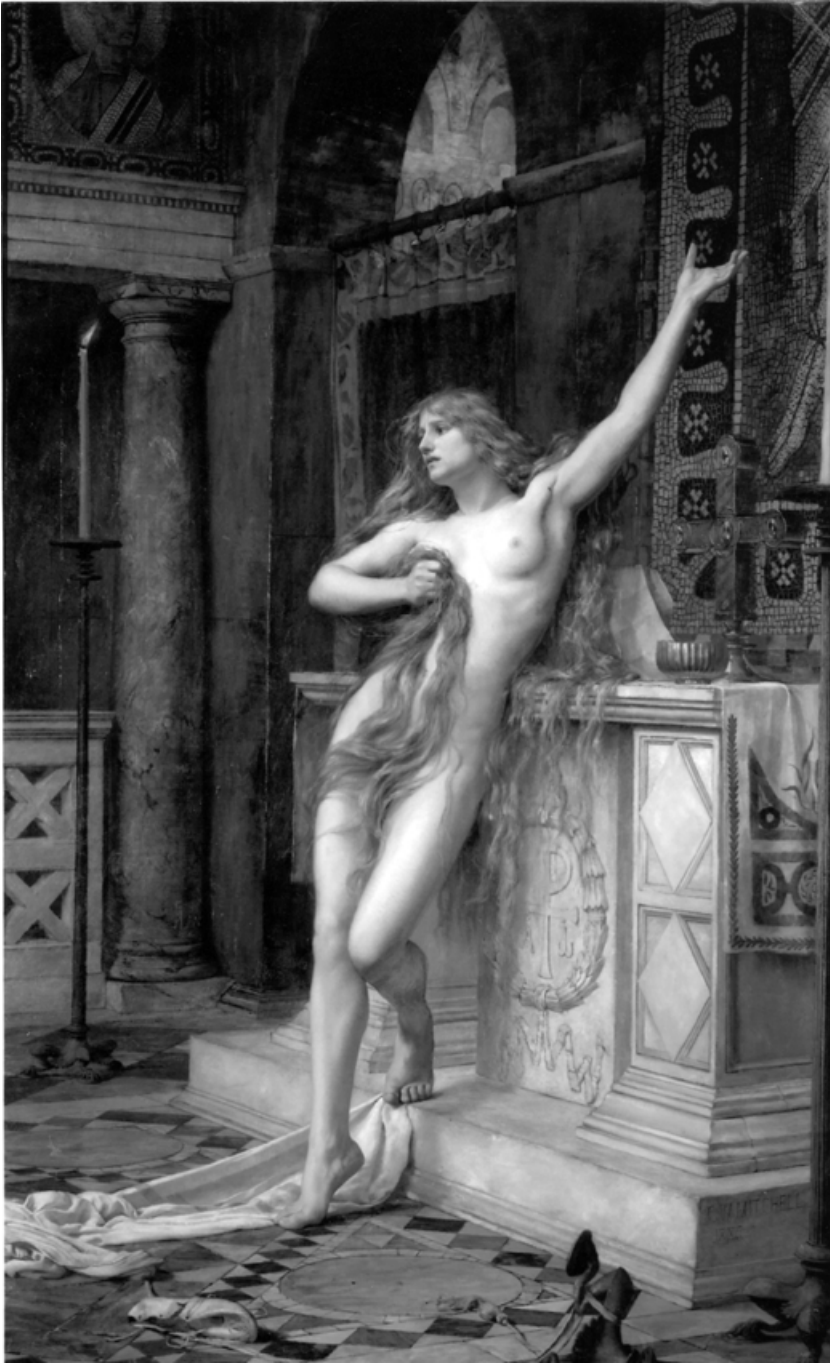


Figure 6. Charles William Mitchell, *Hypatia*. Oil on canvas, 1885. Courtesy of Laing Art Gallery, Tyne and Wear Museums.

called attention to the importance of the spectator in assessing potentially transgressive art, such as nudes: “painting must necessarily be only judged by the few, as it takes years of observation and study before the eye becomes trained so as to see the true merits of a work” (10). These comments serve as a good illustration of how, in Victorian middle-class culture, those boundaries that validate the acceptable portrayal of the body seem porous and volatile. They offer no epistemological certainties. It is the position of the observer that determines the significance and meaning of bounded spaces and systems.

Victorian images and narratives of martyrdom offer a particularly fruitful area for exploring boundaries that define the material body and establish its value in the period. Martyrdom presents both a legitimate and an illicit spectacle. The broken body can be viewed as a means to spiritual triumph or a voyeuristic object appealing, at best, to erotic curiosity and, at worst, to perverse and violent desires. Renée Overholser and Julia Saville among others have done excellent work on the religious-sexual dynamic inflecting the theme, style, and tone of writers like Hopkins, with attention particularly to moral masochism. This essay offers a different perspective on the contradictory cultural meanings attributed to Victorian depictions of martyrdom, including the use of martyrdom to blur boundaries between religious belief and secular agnosticism. It is my contention that these meanings are not mutually exclusive alternatives but gradually become interrelated in a subtle and complex way. Affecting portrayals of the stoic early Christian martyrs reinforce conventional middle-class religious and secular behaviors and assumptions, such as the value of self-sacrifice, of spirit over matter, of obedience to a higher authority. However, this decoding depends on a simultaneous appreciation of martyrdom as a radical act which transgresses, even obliterates, key boundaries. Martyrs are heroic *because* they oppose the orthodoxy of their day; their spiritual reward depends on participation in a sado-masochistic economy; their self-obliteration becomes the method of self-assertion and self-definition. Martyrdom tales and tropes participate in a particular cultural dynamic: the desire for stability and certainty through definition of acceptable identities and behaviors coupled with the need to accommodate strangeness as the new orthodoxy. The strategies used to present the bodily spectacle of martyrdom illustrate how cultural boundaries are renegotiated in the period. Unbounded boundaries, simultaneously permitting the radical and the orthodox to rewrite each other, are a key cultural strategy both to maintain the status quo and to normalise new, transgressive positions.

The fluidity of Victorian martyrdom discourse is clearly apparent when used to delineate the boundaries between religious denominations. Protestant references to martyrdom reflect the cultural anxieties occasioned by recurrent fears of “Papal Aggression” and the re-establishment of Catholicism as a strong subversive and un-English force in Britain. For example, Pugin (writing as a Catholic convert) recalled the ways in which the horrific Catholic torture of Protestant martyrs was used during his childhood to inculcate clear differences between the true Protestant religion and the false Whore of Babylon (Ward 1: 85–86). New editions of Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs* reinforced distrust of persecuting, oppressive Rome as well as Foxe’s association of Protestantism with the national temperament, with true Englishness (Wolffe 112, 127). But curiously, the same discourse is used by Catholics to assert their difference from Protestants *and* their English roots. The Victorian Jesuit historian, John Morris, promotes a collective and national identity for the contemporary Catholic community by linking Catholic martyrs to true Englishness: “The blood of the Martyrs shed on English soil has kept it fertile” (103). From a religious perspective the cultural meanings attributed to martyrdom are not fixed, but clearly dependent on the position of the spectator or reader.

Additionally, martyrdom tropes and narratives bleed into secular debates and, by so doing, begin to erode boundaries between religious and worldly values.² Martyrdom imagery is to be found in the representation both of large-scale political events and the prosaic daily experience of ordinary people. Frequently its use extols conventional and conservative social behaviors, such as willing self-sacrifice and manly endeavor for a cause. For example, in reports from the Crimea, territorial warfare is characterized as holy through the use of martyrdom imagery which represents soldiers as hero-martyrs and Christ figures (Watson 20). On a more mundane level, in sermons on old age, John Mason Neale urges the elderly to endure their aches and pains like submissive martyrs in the hope of comfort in the next life: “if no suffering, then also no crown” (qtd. in Litvack 171).

In these instances bodily anguish is linked to the metaphorical “beauty” of a soul stamped with the figure of Christ in His Passion. As Adrienne Munich suggests, such allegorical representations usefully separate rational meaning and emotional response (39). Torment is sanitized by its inclusion in a religious and spiritual framework. But in other examples, martyrdom discourse generates meaning precisely because it is associated with the shocking and unconventional. For some individuals the martyr’s suffering body is an image projecting a radical need to escape orthodox identity in the quest for self-definition. Annie Besant’s reading of stories of early Christian martyrs prompted masochistic fantasies in which she imagined herself “flung to lions, tortured on the rack, burned at the stake” (qtd. in Cominos 163). Similarly, in terms of popular culture, gory Victorian martyrdom tales offered a legitimate route to satisfying wayward bodily curiosity and dallying with transgressive sensations within acceptable readerly boundaries (Maison 156).

Because martyrdom texts can encompass the orthodox and the radical simultaneously, they enable readers to make sense of new cultural meanings or even entertain oppositional readings at the same time. However, this effect depends on the ways in which the text structures the reader’s own response to the act and art of looking. Indeed, Victorian martyrdom narratives are as much texts about how to look at and make sense of spectacles of the unimaginable, of violent, profane physical excess, as texts about how to gain spiritual victory. As such they depend largely on two distinctive structural features: the construction of an implied reader with a “double-gaze” and the depiction of the “invisible-visible body.” Both strategies simultaneously accommodate the unorthodox and the conventional in order to make sense of the unrepresentable.

The most obvious example of the double-gaze is the way in which martyrdom texts assume the reader’s capacity to consider the spectacle from two different historical positions – that of the early centuries of Christianity and that of the nineteenth century. Partly this is done through the drawing of explicit parallels between the Early Church and Victorian everyday life. In Charles Kingsley’s *Hypatia* the prosperous and hypocritical ancient Alexandria is directly connected by many details to a materialistic mid-nineteenth-century Britain that pays lip service to the outward trappings of piety. For example, a superficial Christian matron “with simpering face and downcast eyes” is attired in a way which is suspiciously like fashionable dress of the 1850s: “Her gown was stuffed out behind . . . bedizened, from waist to ankle, with certain mysterious red and green figures” (87; ch. 7). Notwithstanding its essential comparison between paganism and Christianity, the novel manages to reflect popular anti-Catholic fervour occasioned by the re-establishment of the Catholic hierarchy in 1850. Kingsley characterises certain of his early Christians as “morbid” due to their effeminate “Catholic” obsession with “[m]onastic celibacy” and

“isolation from family and national duties” (xv; Pref). Similarly, in the martyrdom novel *Callista*, Newman offers a “rebuttal” to Kingsley’s text as an aid to Victorian Catholics undergoing religious persecution like their early Christian predecessors. To understand fully, the reader must inhabit a double-time, simultaneously both early Christian and modern.

This double positioning is obvious in other elements of martyrdom in Victorian writing. Most early Christian martyrs are converts or secret believers who gradually move from the position of accepted insider at one with the pagan establishment, to that of rejected, demonised outcast. Because they step outside the accepted social boundaries of their time, they are rumored to be unnatural, even monstrous bloodsuckers who devour small children and turn pagans into beasts (*Callista* 7; ch.1). Yet these martyr protagonists are, simultaneously, not outcast at all. As Christians they represent the true orthodoxy for a nineteenth-century reader. Here again the ideal reader must employ a double-gaze in order to grasp the economy of martyrdom. It is necessary to perceive both the temporal cost of social marginalization and persecution (signalling a martyr’s heroism) and its spiritual gain (ennoblement as a saint and inclusion in the community of the blessed) for in this lies the rationale for embracing a transgressive position.

Such a double-gaze also affects secular boundaries inscribed in Victorian martyrdom writing, such as those pertaining to class and gender. Martyrdom helps to define the borders of the ideal collective social body for Victorian readers. Repeatedly the early Christian community is characterised by its solidarity, its confident sense of purpose, and its practical social action. In Wiseman’s *Fabiola* Christians demonstrate “disinterested love . . . between strangers” (34; 1: ch. 7), and profess social principles of inclusiveness and equality: “there is no distinction known or admitted between Greek or barbarian, freeman or slave” (18; 1: ch. 4). Paradoxically the martyrs who promote this anti-hierarchical social structure are portrayed in ways likely to appeal to orthodox Victorian views of social rank and status that are strictly bounded. Martyrs behave in an innately superior way. In *Fabiola* Agnes goes to her death with “a noble air . . . a greatness of look and manner” (266; 2: ch. 29). Many other martyrs in these texts are elite or in an advanced place in social and political circles. Even the Christian slave of *Fabiola* is really a free woman entrapped through the deceit of her brother; and all martyrs tend to have the intelligence, bearing, and articulateness of the well-educated middle class.

The most despicable enemy in martyrdom novels is usually the ignorant lower class, the pagan rabble, whose blood lust and restless desire for excitement and distraction stimulate persecution and purges. Christians are martyred to satiate the mob’s class envy, economic, and social dissatisfaction, even desire for yet further sensational entertainments. Like the depiction of martyrs as intuitively middle class, such overt demonization of the lowest on the social and racial hierarchy reflects Victorian secular fears of mob-rule and reinforces bourgeois boundaries between social groups. In *Callista* the pagan riffraff who lead the persecution are disgusting to the omniscient narrator, more for their social and racial position than their beliefs, which are rarely mentioned:

the filthy beggars . . . the tumblers and mountebanks who amused the gaping market people . . . pipers from low taverns and drinking-houses . . . brutal blacks . . . with their appetites written on their skulls and features . . . troops of labourers . . . ragged and famished, wasted and shameless, leapt and pranced. (107; ch.18)

In *Hypatia* Kingsley similarly locates the threat of social destabilisation with the lower classes (as well as those who represent celibate Catholics). Monks, “dockworkers,” and “fishwives” are among the intolerant mob that carries out the purge of the Jews in the novel (77; ch. 6). In other words, the reader must employ a double-gaze to create the social meanings of the text. The “new” social inclusivity and spiritual mobility endorsed by Christianity is ultimately validated by the exclusive qualities of early Christian martyrs and their demonstrably middle-class positioning in terms of Victorian secular experience.

The representation of martyrs’ behavior also has a complex effect on gender boundaries, once again arising from the required double-gaze of the spectator. On the one hand qualities of traditional manliness and femininity are inscribed. Male martyrs are brave, stoic, and forthright. In *Fabiola* the tribune and secret Christian, Sebastian, supports his fellow Christians during the furious persecution “as a general on the battle-field . . . ready to give his own should it prove to be the required price” (237; 2: ch. 24). Such courageous leadership, endurance, and self-sacrifice are traditional concepts of secular as well as spiritual manliness in the period. In the same novel, conventional flower epithets describe Agnes’s martyrdom and inscribe her as the model Victorian child-woman, compliant and pure:

As the child knelt alone, in her white robe, with her head inclined, her arms modestly crossed upon her bosom, and her amber locks hanging almost to the ground, and veiling her features, she might not unaptly have been compared to some rare plant, of which the slender stalk, white as the lily, bent with the luxuriance of its golden blossom. . . . (270; 2: ch. 29)

Yet these traits are valued and endorsed *because* they are juxtaposed with other elements in a martyr’s behavior that violate traditional gender boundaries. In the course of glorifying God through self-sacrifice, the staunch fortitude of male martyrs is allied with a feminized posture of submission, not defiance. Sebastian in *Fabiola* may be military in disposition but is also marked by the same meekness as Agnes; and, in a sexual transposition violating the boundaries of masculinity, he describes his own approach to a martyr’s death “as is the bride when the bridegroom is announced, coming with rich gifts, to conduct her to her new home” (149; 2: ch. 7).³ Similarly, female martyrs are perceived as capable of intellectual robustness and a tough resilience of spirit that speaks of an unfeminine strength and independence. Kingsley’s spectacle of the pagan but righteous Hypatia at the moment of death provides a telling example of how unorthodox gender models can be accommodated within a traditional framework associating woman with beauty, emotion, suffering, and submission.⁴ The reader is doubly-gendered and doubly-positioned so as to perceive the spectacle from orthodox and transgressive perspectives: with (female) empathy for violated womanhood, with (male) voyeuristic pleasure at the vulnerable naked female body, with moral admiration for Hypatia’s non-Christian integrity and hope for her “baptism by fire”:

On, up the nave, fresh shreds of her dress strewing the holy pavement – up the chancel steps themselves . . . She shook herself free from her tormentors, and springing back, rose for one moment to her full height, naked, snow-white against the dusky mass around – shame and indignation in those wide clear eyes, but not a stain of fear. With one hand she clasped her golden locks around her; the other long white arm was stretched upward toward the great still Christ appealing – from man to God. Her lips were open to speak . . . the dark mass closed over her again . . . and then wail on wail . . . thrilled like the trumpet of avenging angels. (362; ch. 29)

Over thirty years later Charles Mitchell's *Hypatia* (Figure 6), a visual representation of the same scene, also constructed a double-gaze, though with different effects for the boundaries defining gender difference. At the Royal Academy exhibition, Mitchell's painting was glossed with the relevant extract from Kingsley's novel quoted above. The drama of the written text and the direction of the figure's gaze imply an imaginative viewpoint, that of the murderous rabble approaching Hypatia to kill her. The painting's formal composition (with Hypatia slightly off-centre and looking out of the painting to our left) invites the spectator to follow her eye-line beyond the frame to the mob and momentarily look back in the mind's eye from their perspective. From this angle, the figure would be visible in a pose that endorses a conventional model of middle-class femininity. Her loose hair is no erotic sensuous tangle, but a discreet veil of maidenly modesty. Her pose is static, typical of classic nudes read traditionally as icons of ideal purity and beauty. While the figure looks directly at her persecutors, her expression is less the titillating mix of "shame and indignation" described by Kingsley, than a calm, chaste sorrow at the wicked purposes of men. Even at the moment of death she gestures upward to direct lustful minds to higher transcendent truths, fulfilling her womanly role as spiritual guide.

Yet this is only an imagined perspective point; Mitchell's decision not to represent the vicious mob ensures the painting makes no explicit connection to voyeuristic sexual or sadistic pleasures, or even shock and pity at the victimisation of the vulnerable weaker sex.⁵ Instead the dominant viewing position constructs a re-reading of this image of femininity that is more New Woman than humble virgin. Oddly contorted and twisted to the side, the body draws attention to its physicality as something strange and unfamiliar, with little resemblance to the graceful classical nudes of Leighton and Alma-Tadema. Moreover, the angle does not invite erotic appraisal despite the bare breast. If anything its taut muscularity is more typical of a classical warrior at bay than a fleshly, vulnerable woman.⁶

The impact is one of bodily strength, a new version of noble femininity. This is no submissive martyr-victim but a woman of physical power and presence. Next to her robust personal character, the trappings of Christianity are dim and devoid of meaning. Even the figure of Christ to whom she appeals in Kingsley's text is incomplete and occluded in Mitchell's work, visible only by the partial sandaled foot in the mosaic emerging from the dark margins at the upper right corner of the painting. This angle of vision switches attention from the glories of religious belief to the glories of secular courage; it presents a woman to be valued primarily for her public heroism and purpose, rather than her spirituality or sexual potential. Such representations of the vulnerable physical body are key ways in which martyrdom texts erode boundaries and legitimize the unorthodox.

While Mitchell's *Hypatia* rejects conventional ideas about a woman's fragility and dependence to emphasise a more modern view of woman's strength of body and character, many depictions of female martyrs use ambivalence in a more disturbing way to hold contradictory cultural meanings about the female body in balance. On the one hand such bodies are rendered passive and silent by virtue of religious submission to God. Callista, for example, makes no attempt to avoid torture by powerful social forces because she has a higher loyalty. In this earthly existence she acquiesces to male control. Her quiet acceptance of physical pain is emphasised as part of her holiness. At her martyrdom she is silent; the only sounds are the grating of the rack and the crunch of her joints which are "drawn out of their sockets, and then snapped in again" (204; ch. 33). Yet the martyr's suffering does voice a spiritual insight through moral resistance. Martyrs' suffering bodies speak of higher

authority and the importance of the immortal soul over the physical body which can easily be abused and brought low.⁷ As Newman suggests, bodily suffering helps to teach “distaste for the luxuries of life [so] as to be impatient of them” and to “forget ourselves” in favor of Christ and His sufferings (1837; 168, 163). In this way a spectator’s fascination with the tortured physique has a valid spiritual dimension.

But this depiction of self-sacrifice has another, less noble, implication. A legitimised portrayal of mutilation suggests the feminized submissive body is no more than an object to be acted upon. Even in death it remains a commodity, sought and traded superstitiously; the rabble visits Callista’s body by night “to get portions of the flesh for magical purposes; a finger, or a tooth, or some hair (206–07; ch. 34). Such representations of the body dramatise that secular pattern of domination and submission typical of Victorian family life (Cominos 167). They also parallel the marriage market itself where women’s bodies are exchanged for promises of future status and security. In this way representations of the martyr’s experience of suffering can cross spiritualized boundaries of spectatorship and reveal a more worldly preoccupation with the body as object of erotic desire, of physical and economic appropriation.

That Victorians themselves found something titillating *and* dangerous in the eroticization of the mutilated body is clear in personal papers as well as public documents. Kingsley sent his fiancée explicit drawings of a naked St. Elizabeth of Hungary in erotic, tortured poses and of lovemaking with both man and woman tied to a cross (Maynard 92; Chitty 65–86). Nonetheless, in his review of Anna Jameson’s *Sacred and Legendary Art*, Kingsley dismisses most legends of saints and martyrs as unnatural and unhealthy in their Catholic denial of the body based on “prudish and prurient foulmindedness” (1849: 285, 287). Similarly, William Ullathorne, the Catholic Bishop of Birmingham, appealed indirectly through Newman to stop Frederick Faber’s series on the Lives of the Saints with its graphic details of tortures and penances, including bondage, flagellation, and laceration, so “unsuited to England and unacceptable to Protestants” (qtd. in Ward 2: 246–48). The sensational blend of religion, crime, sex, and violence dramatized in depictions of the martyr’s suffering body brings with it the promise of a particular kind of understanding, both spiritual and psychosexual. The erotic desire to possess by seeing is mixed with the spiritualised interpretation of such spectacle. This condition of scopophilia, “the eroticized desire to see,” on the part of spectators and readers, suggests that martyrdom texts are as much about visual inspection and sexual curiosity as about the moral lessons and higher spiritual truths which a silent body can, paradoxically, teach (Brooks 9).

Philip Calderon’s 1891 painting, *St. Elizabeth of Hungary’s Great Act of Renunciation* (Figure 7) is a case in point. The work depicts St. Elizabeth’s surrender of worldly goods and power, symbolically indicated by her nakedness. This is not a solitary act of divestiture, but takes place in the presence of her confessor, Conrad of Marburg, and other religious figures. The painting caused outrage from both Catholics and Protestant social purity groups, who read it as a licentious depiction of perverse Catholic practice or of an erotically charged female body.⁸ Much public debate focused on the historical accuracy of this scene; but the boundary distinguishing great art from prurient pornography was the central underlying concern. While Calderon’s fine draughtsmanship was never questioned, the painting’s achievement was primarily assessed in terms of its implications for spectatorship, particularly with respect to the ambivalent role of Conrad. The repeated charge of indecency drew attention to the display of Elizabeth “stark naked in a church in the presence of men,” an insult to her noble purity



Figure 7. Philip H. Calderon, *St. Elizabeth of Hungary's Great Act of Renunciation*. Oil on canvas, 1891. Courtesy of the Tate Gallery. © Tate, London 2003.

and a calumny on her apparently prurient confessor who encouraged this self-abasement (Clarke 4). Even the *Punch* topical parody of the painting (Figure 8) plays on the possible motivations of the onlookers as the essential point of interest in Calderon's work. Harry Furniss's cartoon links the painting to another recent scandal, the inspection of the back of the female acrobat, Miss Zaeo, by certain London County Councillors (McEvansoneya 261). Notorious for her skimpy costumes, Zaeo is depicted in the cartoon at the mercy of a group of voyeurs, one complete with binoculars.

It is not difficult to see why various constituencies would object to Calderon's strange vignette from the saint's life. On the one hand the unifying points of light in the painting suggest the ascetic purpose of this flagrant and intimate physical self-exposure. These partially illuminate a crucifix and the discarded clothing of Elizabeth as well as the saint's kneeling, submissive presence. However, it is the nude body, face hidden, that dominates the space from the point of view of lighting, mass, and structure. Female nakedness infiltrates and erodes the interpretative boundaries of the spectacle. Elizabeth's sinuous serpentine pose might implicitly hint at the dangerous temptations of female sexuality, but her bowed head and exposed back offer the humiliation and degradation of the female body as a subject for aesthetic contemplation and pleasure. Even more striking is the extent to which the painting draws its erotic impact from the theme of bodily looking itself, for Elizabeth is vulnerable

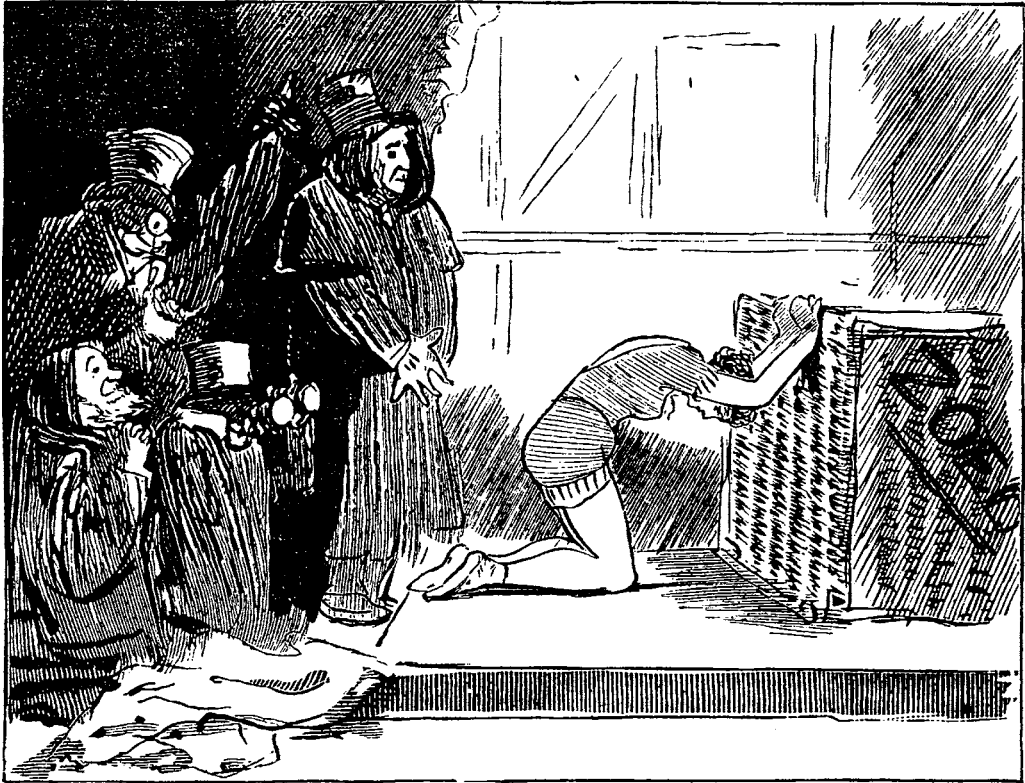


Figure 8. “The penance of Zaeo in the presence of some Members of the County Council. P. H. Calderon, R. A. Woodcut,” from *Punch* 100 (9 May 1891): 227.

to inspection from the other characters in the painting as well as the external spectator. The monk covers his eyes, in a gesture of horror and guilt at witnessing such transgressive display and abjection of the female body. The two nuns are lost in prayer; one averts her gaze from the saint as if retreating into her own sense of modesty, discretion and privacy; the other gazes heavenward in wondering ecstatic prayer but this only serves to emphasize an irreligious link between spiritual gratification and physical degradation. Most explicitly, the upright Conrad stares intensely at his spiritual protégé. His figure is all unpitying, stern authority. His feelings remain veiled and hence suspect; a curious voyeur or sadistic “brute,” he is represented as a figure in unhealthy control of Elizabeth’s spiritual formation and director of her gesture of self-negation.

In martyrdom images and narratives, then, the glorification and ennoblement of the unnatural body (abject in its exposed, maimed presence) as well as the perverse connection of violence with uplifting display point to contradictory messages about bodies and ways of looking at them in Victorian culture. These competing moral lessons (from the spectacle of the suffering “body spiritualised”) and profane desires (from the spectacle of the suffering “body eroticised”) reinforce the sense in which Victorians, to use Mary Douglas’s anthropological terms, see the body as “a bounded system in which boundaries...are threatened or

precarious” (4). The ways in which those boundaries for legitimizing spectatorship of the suffering body are inscribed, challenged, and transformed is apparent in the constructions of the martyr’s physical presence as well as the angle of observation. In particular many martyrdom narratives naturalise controversial fleshly portrayals through a device that might be called the invisible-visible body.

Nineteenth-century critics prescribe dainty strategies to represent the body *in extremis*, as if suspecting something of the dangers of looking upon it. For example, they often advocate decorum and discretion in the visual portrayal of the martyr’s death agony to avoid undue excitation or revulsion of the spectator. Anna Jameson urges that the mystical heart of Christianity – “the deification of suffering” – requires pathos not terror; its artistic representations “should speak . . . ‘Of blessed consolations in distress’; but not of the horrid cruelty of man towards man” (1: 17). Yet, contrary to such advice, even the most pious of churchmen – the Cardinal of Westminster – could present martyrdom with what can only be called disturbing physical relish. In *Fabiola* the torture of St Lawrence on the gridiron is related in an eyewitness report that might seem to promote a sadistic savoring of physical agony. Like a verbal equivalent of time-lapse photography, the description offers a violent macabre enactment of death’s “melting down” of physical identity:

To look at his tender flesh blistering and breaking over the fire, and deeply scored with red burning gashes that cut to the bone when the iron bars went across; to see the steam, thick as from a cauldron, rise from his body, and hear the fire hiss beneath him, as he melted away into it; and every now and then to observe the tremulous quivering that crept over the surface of his skin, the living motion which the agony gave to each separate muscle, and the sharp spasmodic twitches which convulsed and gradually contracted his limbs; all this, I own, was the most harrowing spectacle I have ever beheld in all my life. But to look into his countenance was to forget all this. His head was raised up from the burning body and stretched out, as if fixed on the contemplation of some most celestial vision. . . . And every feature, serene and sweet as ever, was so impressed with an eager, longing look, accompanying the upward glancing of his eye, that you would willingly have changed places with him. (173–74; 2: ch. 13)

It is possible to see the ways in which boundaries are violated *and* restored here by the construction of an “invisible” visible body. The real impact of the physical torture is both evident and shrouded. The excessive sensory detail – for this is an overdetermined physical presence – so overwhelms that it becomes difficult to perceive the whole for the parts and to respond emotionally. The body is fragmented with the erotic effects both of fetishizing it as displaced desire, and of highlighting its vulnerability and insignificance through the literal performance of its unmaking. The effect is both to transfix and to repel. However, the horror is balanced, even obscured, by the response of the reporting spectator *within* the text. The narrator, Diogenes, has an unusual way of looking which schools the reader about how to look as well. Showing neither perverse pleasure nor fear nor sorrow, Diogenes responds with empathy to the real Lawrence, that is, to the mind which contemplates a transcendent deity, not the melting body of which martyr, narrator and reader become less and less aware. Boundaries are transgressed, extended, re-established. Shock and perverse fascination are displaced by a reading that ultimately points away from the body and to the soul. The reader cannot forget the process of bodily destruction but the impact of the description underlines the point that “celestial vision” is achieved because of bodily anguish, not despite it.

A similar strategy is apparent in the verbal description of a painting about martyrdom in Kingsley's *Alton Locke*, that of Guido's St. Sebastian in the Dulwich Picture Gallery. Here there is explicit reference to the erotic pleasure to be gained from the inspection of physical torment, not just a voyeuristic thrill but also the taboo sensations of same-sex desire. This time the narrator is implicated in these illicit feelings: "my attention was in a moment concentrated on one figure . . . I hurried straight towards it . . . My heart swelled within me, my eyes seemed bursting from my head with the intensity of my gaze" (79–80; ch. 6). The fragmented depiction of the saint's body – dismembered in narration if not in reality – at once reveals the objects of sado-masochistic pleasure, and disguises for the reader (though not the spectator) the body as part of a living, integrated and sensate subject:

The breadth and vastness of light and shade upon those manly limbs, so grand and yet so delicate, standing out against the background of lurid night, the helplessness of the bound arms, the arrow quivering in the shrinking side, the upturned brow, the eyes in whose dark depths enthusiastic faith seemed conquering agony and shame, the parted lips. (80; ch. 6)

Interestingly, the restoration of the boundary of legitimate response to the body is also linked to desire, not now in a spiritual way (the body negated in order to reach God) but with an acknowledgement of the sane healthiness of heterosexual feelings. Kingsley ensures his narrator-spectator is distracted from the perverse effeminacy of idolatrous Catholic imagery by the arrival of an enchanting female presence, but here too the spectator within the text is motivated by sexual attraction, not religious commitment; she was "the most beautiful I had ever yet beheld . . . connecting that peerless face and figure with all lovely things which heaven and earth contain" (81; ch. 6). In this episode spectatorship leads to an endorsement of the connectedness of body and soul, and banishes the prioritization of soul at the expense of the disposable body.

Other images of martyrdom from late in the period demonstrate how bodily representations in a religious context come to redefine and legitimize new secular attitudes more in tune with the principles of cultural modernity. Such images focus even more insistently on the art of bodily looking and interpretation in their concern with the *spectacle* of martyrdom; and the physical body rendered simultaneously present and absent plays an important role in the readjustment of cultural boundaries which these images signify.

Walter Pater's *Marius the Epicurean*, published in 1885, is set in the Roman empire of second century A.D. and, through the experiences of the eponymous hero, evaluates a range of ethical philosophies from pantheistic paganism to Stoicism, Epicureanism, and Christianity itself. Pater makes use of martyr and related amphitheatre scenes to renegotiate the boundaries between moral purity and an aesthetic admiration of the flesh and material world more generally. The early Christianity of Pater's martyrs strains the boundaries of orthodox nineteenth-century religious understanding. It is largely a humanistic faith, celebrating the body and rejecting evangelical austerity and traditions of asceticism. The novel aligns the attractions of Christianity with refined worldly behaviour: "debonair grace," "mystic attractiveness," and "courtesy" (204; ch. 22). Its rituals and communal benevolence are signs less of atonement for sin and adoration of a transcendent God, than of a "gaiety, or grace, in the handling of life" (204; ch. 22). In this way Pater gradually associates perfection of the spirit with earthly existence and bodily health and fulfillment. Marius never does become a Christian, but he takes comfort from an aesthetic interpretation of the faith as one

regenerating (not replacing) “the earth and the body, in the dignity of man’s entire personal being” (210; ch. 22). As a pseudo-martyr Marius adopts the restrained, thoughtful agnosticism suited to a free-thinking late Victorian and refined by an ideal of human sympathy: “the only principle, perhaps, to which we may always safely trust is a ready sympathy with the pain one actually sees” (244; ch. 25).

In fostering Marius’s own “power of sympathy,” various scenes of bodily torment and martyrdom are crucial, but their effect for the hero and their impact on the reader arise primarily from Pater’s subtle handling of bodies simultaneously present and obscured. At a Eucharist ceremony, for example, Marius hears the *Epistle of the Churches of Lyons and Vienne* recounting the horrific sufferings of many martyrs. The indirect representation of the sufferings (a reading of a letter from a witness) serves in part to obscure the physical impact of martyrdom. While not wholly invisible, the bodies as physical entities are absent. The details of the torments are for the most part related in summary form and are often generalised and abstract; there is no invitation to imagine details. The martyrs suffer “pang and shame”; bodies are vaguely “torn asunder” (249; ch. 26).

The process of un-making bodies is also obscured and conventional literary decorum preserved by Pater’s distinctive use of sensory detail. The martyrdoms seem to occur in some other remote order of existence. Here tactile sensations are threatened but withheld. When Blandina is “hung upon a stake . . . as food for the assault of the wild beasts,” they will not touch her and she is returned to prison (250; ch. 26). On the rare occasion when the novel does dwell on the sadistic torture of individuals, Pater uses both delicate reserve and oppositional sensations to deflect any voyeuristic potential of the scene. This strategy also has the curious effect of suggesting that spiritual commitment serves bodily comfort and health, not the other way around. When Sanctus is tortured by “red-hot plates of brass [applied] to the most tender parts of his body,” the emphasis shifts, but not, as with Wiseman’s Lawrence, to heavenly consolation. Instead Pater describes the martyr’s own *bodily* sensations as a way of suggesting peace of mind; Sanctus feels “cooled and fortified” (250; ch. 26). Through revealing and pointing away from the suffering body, Pater gradually shifts the boundaries of faith from transcendent eternity to an ideal earthly existence. The “strange new heroism” of martyrdom secures Marius’s secular hope in the human spirit, in the reinvigoration of the material world through a new “company of mankind” (248; ch. 26).

Pater uses the same strategy to draw attention in other parts of the novel to the sensibility required of his new “faithful.” His description of the bizarre savageries of the Coliseum (including cruelty to animals as well as to martyrs) emphasizes the moral implications of any spectatorship of the body. The episode draws on the novel’s association of aesthetic sensitivity with early Christianity and with moral and affective responses. At the amphitheatre as elsewhere, spectatorship itself is a significant moral act, not an entertaining way of passing the time or of satisfying vulgar curiosity. Pater’s use of metonym and euphemism when handling the violent spectacles makes this point with his characteristic indirection. His delicacy respects the boundaries of dignity for the exposed victim and reader; at the same time the obliqueness captures the shallow indifference of the watching crowd who have no empathy or sadness for those who have shed blood. The blazing arena is “covered again and again during the many hours’ show with clean sand for the absorption of great red patches there, by troops of white-shirted boys, for whom the good-natured audience provided a scramble of nuts and small coin” (135; ch.14).

Regenia Gagnier has perceptively argued that Marius's response to such scenes maps across late Victorian economic theories of Individualism. He is akin to "the autonomous but protective maternal" model, using "refined senses (Epicureanism) to feel the pain of others (Christianity)" and thus evolving into "an ethical epicurean" (330). But such scenes also contribute powerfully to the development of a moral aesthetics of spectatorship. Pater reflects on the spectacle of martyrdom in an unusual authorial address that gives new meaning to the ethical implications of the art of bodily looking. For him the boundaries between propriety and prurience depend less on the artist's intention and subject matter than on the integrity of the perceiver:

That long chapter of the cruelty of the Roman public shows may, perhaps, leave with the children of the modern world a feeling of self-complacency. Yet it might seem well to ask ourselves . . . when we read . . . of great religious persecutions on this side or on that . . . what thoughts, what sort of considerations, may be actually present to our minds such as might have furnished us, living in another age, and in the midst of those legal crimes, with plausible excuses for them. (138; ch. 14)

Faithfulness to one's own cultivated sensibility, even when that defies popular opinion and legal statutes, characterises Pater's modern saint as the potential martyr to orthodoxy itself. Pater's representations of martyrdom thus continue to invoke traditional acknowledgement of the personal danger of heroic moral choice; but he has shifted the boundaries so that it is the homosocial aesthete, like Marius, who stands heroically against the middle-class establishment, Victorian or Roman. As Marius realises at the amphitheatre, "what was needed was the heart that would make it impossible to witness all this" (139; ch. 14). However much a Victorian reading public might condemn as immoral such reliance on worldly aestheticism and the "effete" refined sensibility, Marius's (and Pater's) philosophy had at least been effective "in protesting; 'This, and this, is what you may not look upon!' – Surely evil was a real thing" (139; ch. 14).

John Waterhouse's *Saint Eulalia* (Figure 9), exhibited in the same year as the publication of *Marius*, also disturbs the boundary between sacred and profane through a similar use of Christian martyrdom and reflections on spectatorship itself. Waterhouse actually invites the spectator to make sense of Eulalia's story by replacing religious commitment with agnostic and secular values. The painting focuses on St. Eulalia after martyrdom and includes many of the attributes associated traditionally with her – the miraculous fall of snow in Rome after her death, the doves which issued from her mouth as her soul was released. Yet Waterhouse uses these traditional motifs to create a new variation of the invisible-visible body with ambiguous effects. A perverse linking of female abuse, sex, and death is apparent through the representation of the martyr's body: that of an adolescent female (not the legendary child-martyr), half-clothed and recumbent, her beautiful hair streaming back, unloosened. On its own, separated from religious iconography, the figure invites the reader to fantasize sexual scenarios. The brutal phallic spear of the soldier nearest the foreground reinforces a sense of aggressive sexual experience, if not rape. But simultaneously, the hair forms a dark blood-like pool, and Eulalia's position can be read as a semi-crucifixion. The frayed ropes on her wrist, the cross at the side, instantly turn secular images of female abuse or sexual experience into a religious persecution. No sooner is the body perceived, than it is rendered subordinate, in essence invisible, partly by virtue of its odd foreshortened perspective. The central space and middle plane of the painting – the space that the heroic and inspirational martyr might

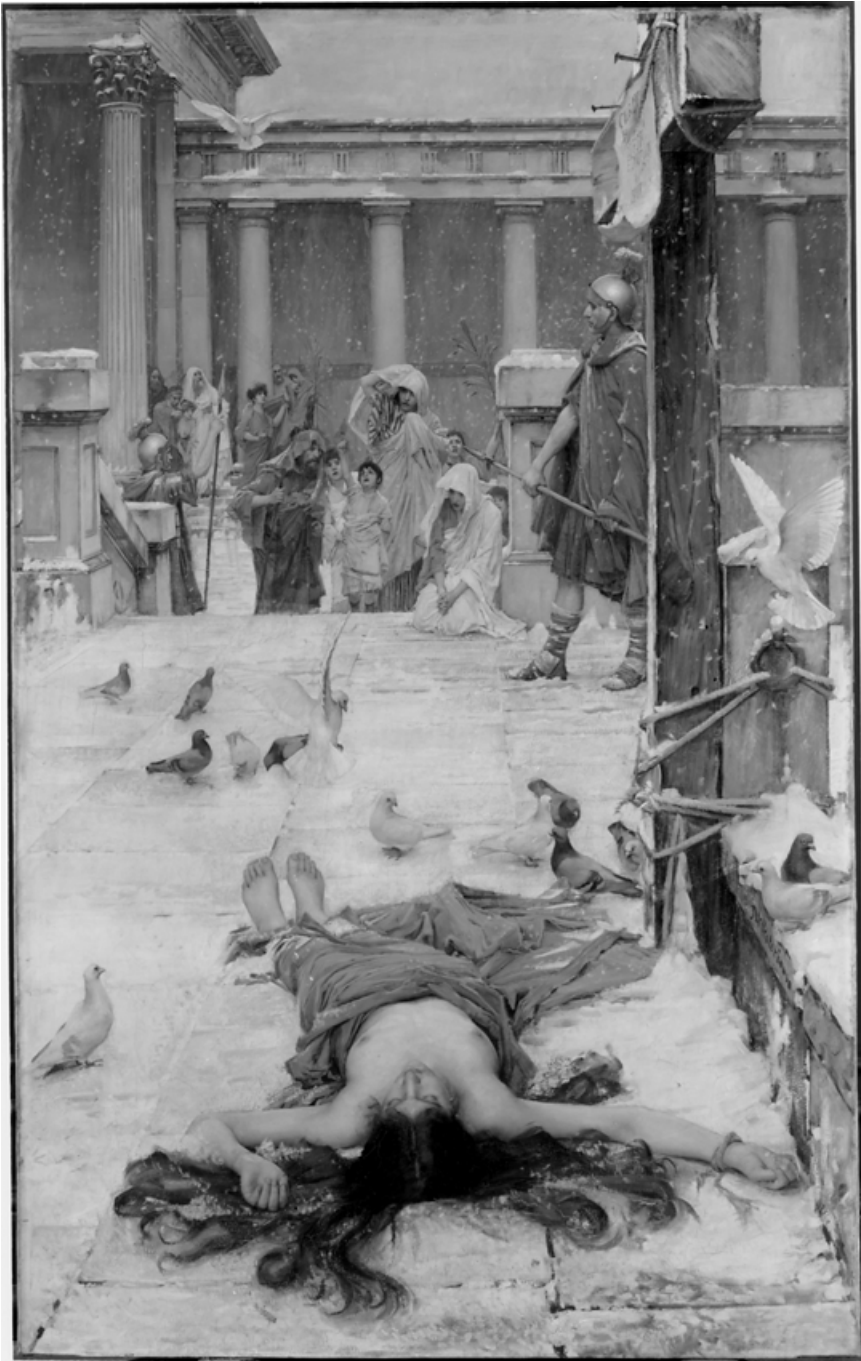


Figure 9. John William Waterhouse, *St. Eulalia*. Oil on canvas, 1885. Courtesy of the Tate Gallery. © Tate, London 2003.

traditionally be expected to fill – is empty.⁹ The miraculous doves resist interpretation as symbols for Eulalia’s soul or the Holy Spirit. Indifferent to the martyr and without structural or formal connection to her, they mingle with common pigeons, scrounging in the slush for food.

Spectatorship itself is an explicit subject in this painting. All figures look – though no one at the body. In effect, this also renders the spiritual significance of the martyr’s dead body invisible. The soldiers, perhaps executioners, stand guard but neither tremble at nor mock the Christian saint. Passers-by also avoid her; no inspiration is gained as in Wiseman’s eyewitness testimony to St. Lawrence’s death. No one heeds the youth with the martyr’s palm held aloft. Not even the miraculous fall of snow seems to reinforce belief. Spectatorship becomes a distanced suspicion or curiosity at an unusual natural event – read perhaps as an omen of bad luck or as a physical discomfort, but certainly not as spiritual epiphany. Material “common sense” is legitimized as a possible response. Such a reading does indeed return the spectator’s attention to the martyr’s body and the belief it symbolizes, but the consequences are more secular than religious. The painting speaks of a feeling of pathos, for the neglect and isolation of this woman, of nostalgia for the lost capacity of death to elicit a message of comfort.

Sabine Baring-Gould’s fictionalised version of St. Eulalia’s martyrdom appears in the climax of his novel, *Perpetua*. Here the detailed description of the devices of the torture regime displace attention from the naked body of the saint stretched upon the rack:

Again the windlass creaked . . . there was naught to be heard – an ominous stillness, only the groaning of the windlass, and now and then a word from one executioner to his fellow. (309–10; ch. 23)

Perpetua’s touching stoicism and determination to honor her commitment to God, not paganism, express the typical model of martyrdom as witnessing to spiritual truth. Yet the text is resistant to this old orthodoxy, despite Baring-Gould’s own clerical profession. What is unfamiliar, what challenges the standard reading is the silence and invisibility of the martyr’s suffering *to the reader*. The torment is not represented in dramatized form, through sensory details of the anguished body, nor reported directly by an eyewitness. Instead, this martyr’s invisibility is foregrounded by the miraculous fall of snow that hides “from the eyes of the ravening multitude the spectacle of the agony of Christ’s martyr” (310; ch. 23). Ironically, heavenly decorum masks testimony. Spectators depart, no more the wiser; the snow “whitened the bloodstained, trampled sand . . . buried the woollen cloak and the extended, quivering limbs” (311; ch. 23). The spiritual values traditionally bounded and defined by martyrdom are no longer accessible, widely articulated, open to reading. At best the meaning of death, violence, and bodily sacrifice is obscure, beyond representation or accessible collective interpretation.

By the end of the century particular cultural values associated with a national identity defined in part by its Christianity – the prioritization of soul over body, of spiritual over material, of sacred over secular – are no longer protected by clear boundaries. An exploration of Victorian narratives and images of martyrdom shows how cultural borderlines at different points obliterate, acknowledge, and then gradually accommodate the new secular orthodoxy. In 1849 Charles Kingsley could profess “a manly admiration for those old spiritual heroes to whose virtue and endurance Europe owes it that she is not now a den of heathen savages” (1849; 289). In 1897 Sabine Baring-Gould presents, perhaps unconsciously, the new cultural

map, charting the earth rather than the heavens. Perpetua is forgotten by all save a few. The new orthodoxy requires new boundaries that leave their own unrepresentable gaps: “The general public had seen a show, and the show over, they had other concerns to occupy them” (314; ch. 24).

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NOTES

1. Smith identifies “A British Matron” as J. C. Horsley, the treasurer of the Royal Academy and a long-standing opponent of nudes in painting, or, more precisely, of the use of female nude models for Royal Academy classes. He joined forces with social purity campaigners to attack galleries “with immoral paintings” and artists and critics whose taste for contemporary European nude paintings encouraged “an influx of vice from abroad” (1996: 227).
2. The informative special number of *Victorian Literature and Culture* on Victorian Religion (Maynard and Munich) offers a number of valuable articles exploring connections between religious discourse and secular concerns such as female autonomy, family stability and racial anxieties. In particular, essays by Susan M. Griffin (279–94), Miriam Elizabeth Burstein (333–58) and Gabrielle Ceraldi (359–72) explore links between anti-Catholic rhetoric and gender identity. However, none of these pieces address popular imagery of martyrdom and the associated problems of spectatorship of the abject body.
3. See also Lankewish who suggests the image of the Heavenly Bridegroom represents “alternatives to the gender and sexual norms of Victorian England” (241).
4. Munich shows this is a shared response to female martyrs in the work of Kingsley and Hopkins (55). Chitty offers interesting insights into the anxieties of Kingsley’s male readers encountering this passage and the novel more generally. Tennyson cringed at Hypatia’s nakedness; Lewis Carroll worried about the tasteless portrait of Christians here and throughout (154).
5. Twentieth-century art critics have read *Hypatia* as a study in female oppression. Smith suggests that the painting, like other 1885 nudes, demonstrates “a masculinist need to subdue the feminine and reassert control” at a time when there was much social agitation to better the plight of women (1996: 234). Similarly, Prettejohn argues that sensational martyrdom pictures were essentially psychological studies building tension “between the visual appeal of the unmutated female nude and the spectator’s consciousness of the horrifying tortures inflicted on the historical women” (63). Neither critic pursues the double perspective Mitchell offers which was certainly noticed in Victorian reviews and commentaries. The painting eroded boundaries of conventional morality by its allusion to the decadent Roman empire; but the imposing and expressive figure of Hypatia and the careful architectural detail reasserted the painterly value and dramatic worth of Mitchell’s work and connected bodily looking to the inspirational poses of the classical heroic type.
6. Critics at the time commented on the figure’s “lean” (if not androgynous) appearance; indeed Smith argues that Mitchell employed a male model for many of the figure details, most evident in the handling of the limbs (1999; 236).
7. Readings of any intense pain by Victorians such as Harriet Martineau frequently explain the experience as having a spiritual cause and effect: the “chastisement of a Father” or verification of an unseen, transcendent order (7). See also Hinton who cites “the pain . . . of martyrdom and sacrifice” as “the highest good we can in our present state attain” (16).
8. Prolonged correspondence in the newspapers culminated in Parliamentary questions about the purchase for the nation of the “obscene and blasphemous and ridiculous” work by the Chantrey Trust (*Hansard*; 354: col. 799). The moral dubiousness of bodily looking was further indicated in Lord Salisbury’s complacent reassurances the painting would be lodged in an isolated corner of a

secluded gallery, “reserved for the study of those who are practising art and who are superior to the prejudices [about the offensive nature of the painting] . . . it will be deprived of the power either of injuring public morality or offending the prejudices of religious minds” (*Hansard* 355: col. 1522). The Prime Minister also pointed out the good sense of such a solution; display by a private collector would be unthinkable. In a domestic environment the painting could be viewed by all manner of people, including maidservants, without regulation.

9. The point is further reinforced by Trippi’s analysis of the use of multiple diagonals and space in the structure of the painting. The many diagonal lines keep the eye moving rather than resting primarily on the martyr’s body. While the painting is crowded with figures it also conveys a sense of much open, blank space (66–67).

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