

## The Elegiac *Puella* as Virgin Martyr\*

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**SUMMARY:** This paper explores the ideological currents running through Maximianus's subversive revival of the genre of Augustan love elegy in the beleaguered Rome of the mid-sixth century. The third elegy narrates an apparent childhood reminiscence of the poet, a failed romance with a young girl, Aquilina. But it soon becomes clear that, in the character of Aquilina, Maximianus has deliberately blurred the literary archetypes of the elegiac *puella* and the virgin martyr from Christian hagiography. This bizarre configuration allows the elegist simultaneously to provoke questions about the representation of female figures in both genres. By likening the elegiac *puella* to the martyr, Maximianus highlights the latent violence of elegiac topoi. By likening the martyr to the elegiac *puella*, Maximianus highlights the eroticism that often has a prominent place in accounts of virgin martyrdom. Not merely a formal experiment or the product of Augustan nostalgia, Maximianus's elegies represent a real attempt to reinvent elegy's questioning stance in a new social and religious context.

WHEN JUSTINIAN LAUNCHED AN INVASION OF ITALY IN 535, IT WAS THE beginning of a protracted series of disasters for Rome. T.S. Brown calls it a "holocaust" (1984: 2)—a military campaign that lasted until 554 and laid unprecedented waste to the Italian land and people. By 568, Italy was captured again by Lombard invaders, and the description in the letter of Pope Pelagius

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I of the countryside and Italian society during the intervening period is grim. This physical desolation was accompanied by massive ideological upheaval. After the deposing of the final emperor, Romans nevertheless enjoyed a period of stability under the Ostrogothic king Theodoric the Great, whose reign was hailed by a number of writers as restoring Rome to a position of prominence in the liberal arts.<sup>1</sup> But by 524, Boethius, the leading intellectual of the age, was dead, and soon Rome was faced with invasion justified by the claims of the Greek-speaking East to be the new Rome.<sup>2</sup> In a period of such dramatic social and political instability, Romans understandably sought solid ideological ground. Indeed, in the spring of 544, those still in the city of Rome flocked week after week to St. Peter's Basilica to hear the poet Arator recite his new work, the *Historia Apostolica*, in which Arator confidently predicted that "these walls, invincible through the touch of His hand, holy through His triumph, will never be destroyed by any enemy" (1.1074–76).<sup>3</sup>

There are, though, many possible poetic responses to such instability, and it is striking that this period also witnesses the re-emergence of an old genre which had originated precisely in a time when Roman political and social life had just undergone a radical and violent transformation. Paul Allen Miller memorably describes the Augustan elegists as "augurs of instability" (2004: 25), probing the discourses that structured personal and political life, already disrupted by the upheaval of the civil wars. In the six elegies of the sixth-century elegist Maximianus, references to current political affairs are, by contrast, comparatively shadowy and vague. Instead, the elegies narrate a series of apparently autobiographical episodes, relating (usually unsuccessful) sexual encounters from the author's boyhood and his adulthood, and lamenting the decrepitude and sexual impotence brought on by his old age. But by explicitly situating the boyhood episodes in the time of Boethius (who appears as a character in the third elegy), Maximianus establishes an internal chronology in his elegiac cycle that compels the reader to view the

<sup>1</sup> Ennodius 290.17 (*urbs amica liberalibus studiis*); 225.28; 282.26; Cassiodorus, *Variae* 10.7. See Riché 1976: 26–31; Moorehead 1992.

<sup>2</sup> On Justinian's *renovatio* ideology in Italy, see Amory 1997. Justinian propagated his reconquest as a *renovatio* of law, classical Roman identity, and religion, but "since Italy had known the ideology of law under Theodoric, had contained familiar and educated Goths who were not always classified barbarians, and was the home of the popes, the apostolic see and the Eternal City, Justinian's restoration of the past was an illusion" (1997: 144).

<sup>3</sup> "haec invicta manu vel religiosa triumpho/ moenia non ullo penitus quatiuntur ab hoste." See Hillier 1993: 1–10 for the background to this poem's composition and recitation. St. Peter's, incidentally, did survive the wars, although, by 550, after Totila's third siege, few remained in Rome to frequent it (Lees-Migne 1967: 107).

narratives of his adulthood against the backdrop of Rome after Boethius's death, thereby setting his complaints about his old age and sexual impotence dramatically in the period of (old) Rome's own political impotence, at some point in the middle of the beleaguered sixth century.<sup>4</sup> The body-state metaphor is pursued to parodically sexual lengths in Maximianus's text, but the very real breakdown it signifies is never completely out of sight. In the fifth elegy, a Greek prostitute dissolves into tears when the poet's attempted sexual encounter with her is foiled by an onset of impotence. Challenged by the poet as to the extremity of her reaction, she rebukes him, saying that her tears are not for their "private chaos, but for the universal chaos" (*Non fleo privatum, sed generale chaos*, 5.110). It is a valuable programmatic cue: these are not merely private poems.

My interest in this paper is not, however, in the broad connections between the elegies and the political situation in sixth century Rome, but rather in how Maximianus continues the questioning stance typical of Augustan elegy. Indeed, in the poem examined here, Maximianus turns that questioning stance back on to the genre of elegy itself by viewing it through the lens of new religious and poetic paradigms. In the third elegy, the poet narrates a failed love affair he had as a young child with a girl called Aquilina. In the character of Aquilina, the poet parodically blends the two character types of the *puella* from Augustan elegy and the virgin martyr from late antique popular hagiography.<sup>5</sup> The implications of this allusion are multiple. On the one hand, the intertextual juxtaposition of the elegiac *puella* with suffering Christian heroines serves to highlight the latent violence of elegiac topoi, the degree to which the suffering of the female is mandated by the conventions of the elegiac genre. But this intertextual configuration can also be read the other

<sup>4</sup>For the latest discussion of the dating of the elegies, see the remarks of Schneider 2003 at 50–54, who dates the poems to the mid-sixth century. It is sufficient for my discussion, however, to note that the poems establish their own dramatic date. The idea of Ratkowitsch 1986 that the poems date from the late ninth century has been much resisted; see the criticisms of Shanzer 1988. Of the commentaries, Webster 1900 is still very useful, and asks some very modern questions considering its age. So, at 7: "The statements heretofore made in the matter of the authorship of the six elegies here edited are faulty, in that they take for granted that the *ego* of the poems is the author's self. Now, it is very necessary to consider the validity of this hypothesis—just as it might be of interest to open up the personal question in the lyric and elegiac poetry of the Augustan period."

<sup>5</sup>While Schneider 2003: 87 does mention the connection between the character of Aquilina and Christian martyrs, neither its extent nor its impact on interpretation of the poem are much explored by him. Schneider astutely suggests that the false quantity *passiö* in line 42 is a marker of the parodic tone of the passage.

way: we can equally interpret the poet's parodic vision of the Christian martyr as an erotic *puella* as simultaneously commenting on strategies of female representation in martyrological texts. Viewing the virgin martyr through an elegiac and specifically Ovidian lens subversively suggests a similarity in the reduction of women in both genres to *materia* for the reader's entertainment or titillation, as well as vehicles for the communication of the ideals of a male-centered discourse. More than merely the recounting of a personal anecdote, in this poem Maximianus truly carries on his elegiac prerogative as an "augur of instability." By the juxtaposition of thematically and chronologically disparate social and poetic discourses, the poet explores the foundations of these discourses and exposes the base of their social power.

The critical passage for my interpretation of the third elegy is Aquilina's speech to her young elegiac lover at lines 35–42. Although he is still a child in this poem, the poet has humorously introduced himself in the stereotyped role of the elegiac lover in lines 5–6, which are a virtual catalogue of Augustan affectations: "Captus amore tuo demens, Aquilina, ferebar / pallidus et tristis, captus amore tuo" ("Captured by your love, out of my mind, I was borne away, Aquilina, pale and saddened, captured by your love"). The young lovers try to conduct their love affair in secret, but their attempts are foiled by the poet-persona's *paedagogus* and Aquilina's *tristissima mater*. At line 29–30, we hear that Aquilina's mother has beat her, intending to cure her daughter's metaphorical, amatory wounds with literal wounds ("medicare parans vulnera vulneribus"). Having endured such blows, Aquilina ascends to eloquence (3.35–42):

Tunc me visceribus per totum quaerit anhelis  
 emptum suppliciis quem putat esse suis.  
 Nec memorare pudet turpesque revolvere vestes,  
 immo etiam gaudens imputat illa mihi.  
 "Pro te susceptos iuvat" inquit "ferre dolores,  
 tu pretium tanti dulce cruoris eris.  
 Sit modo certa fides atque inconcussa voluntas;  
 quae nihil imminuit passio, nulla fuit."

Then, with her innermost parts panting, she seeks me out everywhere, he whom she thinks she has bought with her punishments. Nor is she ashamed to recount it, and roll back her stained clothing—on the contrary, in her joy she ascribes it all to me. "For you I love to bear the pains I've undertaken: you'll be the sweet reward for so much blood. Just let our faith be sure and our will be unshaken. Passion which has brought no loss was never passion at all."

The full implications of Aquilina's speech only become clear through an examination of their cultural background. Latin poetry celebrating Christian

martyrs experienced its first great efflorescence in the late fourth century, with Prudentius's book of martyr poems, the *Peristephanon*, and the martyr epigrams of Damasus, and its popularity certainly persisted in the sixth century; we know from sixth century editorial subscriptions on Prudentius manuscripts that Prudentius was popular in Maximianus's time (Riché 1976: 81). Stories about young girls allowing themselves to be tortured and killed for Christ were not merely literary entertainment—although this they certainly were; Kazhdan remarks that “hagiographical writings were the mass media (*Trivialliteratur*) of the time” (1990: 131). These stories were also circulated in the sixth century, as they were in medieval Europe, as moral *exempla*, in order to inculcate into young Christian women ideals of both piety and chastity.<sup>6</sup> As to the popularity of young female martyrs specifically, two of Prudentius's fourteen *Peristephanon* poems deal with 12-year-old girls—St. Eulalia (poem 3) and St. Agnes (poem 14)—portrayed, like Aquilina, as being young enough still to be in the control of their parents.<sup>7</sup> Another virgin martyr text stands out particularly for its similarities in plot with Maximianus's elegy: the fifth-century *Passio Agnetis* (PL 17: 735-42), which claims to have been written by Ambrose. Here, the story is set in motion by the young son of an urban prefect, who sees the (here 13-year-old) Agnes and falls in love with her on the way home from school. Agnes, though, rejects him and claims she has already been betrothed to her own, nobler lover, Christ.

Virgin martyr narratives use erotic motifs paradoxically to underscore the virgins' rejection of earthly love.<sup>8</sup> Prudentius's poem for Agnes is especially explicit here: the young virgin, unforgettably, at the climax of the poem, addresses her savage executioner with his “naked sword” (*mucrone nudo*) as her lover (*amator*), welcoming the tip of his sword (*pectus ad imum*) [*Perist.*

<sup>6</sup>Some comments of St. Ambrose in his treatise *De virginibus* may give a sense of how the virgin martyr story was to function in the late fourth century, prescribing as they do the intended emotional response of different members of society: “natalis est sanctae Agnes, mirentur viri, non desperent parvuli, stupeant nuptae, imitentur innuptae” (It is the festival day of St. Agnes: let men marvel, let young boys keep hope, let married women be amazed, let virgins imitate, *De virginibus* 2.5). Grig 2004 provides an examination of the social dimensions of the martyr cult in late antiquity. Cf. Kazhdan 1990 and Rapp 1996 on the continuing role of virgin martyr narratives in the East.

<sup>7</sup>A convenient summary of sources proving the popularity of St. Agnes (the “archetype” of the virgin martyr) is provided by Grig 2005. Eulalia was commemorated by Augustine (Morin 1891) and Gregory of Tours (*Liber in Gloria Martyrum* 90). A passion of St. Eulalia also survives from the sixth century (Petrucione 1990: 83).

<sup>8</sup>On the redeployment of erotic motifs from classical love poetry in virgin martyr narratives, see Baker 1993 (on Propertian reminiscences); Clarke 2006 (on allusions to Catullan epithalamia).

14.67–78]).<sup>9</sup> In the *Passio Agnetis* 3, the young Agnes rejects the advances of her would-be earthly lover by referring to Christ as her other lover (*amator*), “whose nobility is loftier, whose strength is greater, whose appearance is more handsome, whose love is sweeter, and who is more refined, with every type of charm” (*PL* 17.736).<sup>10</sup> But aside from these overt references, there is a pervasive, systemic eroticization in the story patterns of these myths, with plots revolving around the disrobing and exposure and piercing of female flesh and with female sexuality constantly invoked as an index of moral purity and social wellbeing. At the same time, there is often, simultaneously, a defeminizing of the female in virgin martyr narratives, not merely in the ostensible rejection of female sexuality but also in the emphasis on the virgin’s “masculine” willpower, often greater than that of the male persecutors around her. Not all hagiographies are completely unself-conscious about these tendencies of sexualizing and gender role reversal; there is a real sense of irony, for example, in Agnes’s love-struck young male admirer in the *Passio Agnetis* being described as a young male Dido.<sup>11</sup> Still, the narrative restraints and moral-didactic purpose of these stories mean that much of the eroticism of the virgin martyr story remains below the surface of the text: a driving force, but one either unspoken or explicitly denied.

By parodically inserting virgin martyr elements into an openly eroticizing narrative, Maximianus’s text serves to expose the eroticism on which the martyrological genre grounds its representation of the virgins. He underlines the paradox of the persistent sexualizing and desexualizing of the virgin martyr in popular hagiography by embodying that paradox, creating an enthusiastically sexual virgin martyr, who, indeed, wishes to martyr herself precisely to lose her virginity. By fulfilling so brazenly this fantasy of “simultaneous sacralization and sexualization” (Grig 2005: 115), he exposes this sexual fantasy as a fundamental aspect of the virgin martyr as a cultural construction.<sup>12</sup> For Szövérfy, Maximianus’s poems “contain many satirical

<sup>9</sup> On this poem, see especially Malamud 1989: 149–180.

<sup>10</sup> “cuius est generositas celsior, possibilitas fortior, aspectus pulchrior, amor suavior, et omni gratia elegantior.”

<sup>11</sup> The boy is described as “insanissimus iuvenis, amore carpitur caeco,” which obviously calls to mind Dido, “caeco carpitur igni” (*Aen.* 4.2). Is this likening of the male character to such a canonical paradigm of uncontrolled female sexuality—an almost camp gender reversal of such a famous part of Vergil—a parodic mirror of the defeminizing of the virgin martyr in the narrative?

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Grig on Saint Agnes: “The body of the female saint is exposed and sexualized, and at the same time sacralized and forbidden to us. The voyeuristic gaze of the audience is both provoked and denied” (2005: 115). Of course, it would be misleading to reduce

elements which are mainly directed against the sensuous character of women and obviously designed to express the poet's feelings toward the female sex" (1968: 366). But if attention is paid to the structure of Maximianus's inter-textual configurations, his images of female sexuality can be read, rather, as a critique of how this sexuality is exploited in contemporary martyrological discourse. Given the immanence and power of this discourse, this is quite a subversive critique.

In accordance with this desire to undermine virgin martyr motifs by linking them with, and thereby implicitly drawing parallels with, erotic elegiac motifs, Aquilina's speech begins by walking the line between martyrological commonplaces and a deliberately, provocatively visceral eroticism. "Visceribus . . . anhelis" in line 35 is a startling detail. On the basis of the parallels, the primary reference is apparently to Aquilina's open wounds,<sup>13</sup> but the vivid phraseology also has a variety of other wider associations. So, the use of *viscera* may be close to that in early Christian literature, where it often signifies the place within the believer from which one makes appeals to God (See Webster 1900 ad loc). *Anhelus*, also, is used in Christian literature for "passion" for God; indeed, Maximianus may specifically be recalling Prudentius's third *Peristephanon*, in which the 12-year-old St. Eulalia faces the persecutors, as Prudentius puts it, *pectus anhela Deo*—"in her breast panting for God" (34–35).<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, *anhelus* is used in pagan literature of sexual passion,<sup>15</sup> and *viscera* is evidently amongst the crudest of terms for female genitalia, appearing with this signification in the *Carmina Priapea* (66.4; see Adams 1982: 95).

virgin martyr narratives merely to the expression of these subtextual sexual drives. As Averil Cameron 1989 and Peter Brown 1988 (among others) have shown, virginity assumes a pivotal role in early Christian rhetoric because it emblemizes so many ingrained social and theological concerns. My concerns here are, however, guided by Maximianus's text, and what is provocative in this parodic version of the virgin martyr narrative, is precisely how starkly and reductively sexual it is.

<sup>13</sup> So, cf. "anhela in pectore fumant / vulnera" at Val. Fl. 2.232–33, although Spaltenstein 2002 ad loc suggests that *anhela* means not *hiantia* here (the older view) but *stridentia*, referring, he says, (with anatomical over-specificity?) to the whistling sound made by the punctured lung.

<sup>14</sup> At lines 34–35, wherein Eulalia confronts not only her pagan persecutors but the values of an entire Roman pagan, androcentric, militaristic civilization: "And with a heart in her young breast panting for God, she, a woman, challenges 'arms, the man' . . ." (*et rube pectus anhela deo / femina provocat arma virum*). For *anhelare* / *anhelus* in a Christian sense, cf. [Augustine], *de Vita Eremitica* 1: "ad Christi anhelarent et suspirarent amplexum" (they pant and sigh for the embrace of Christ).

<sup>15</sup> See e.g. Tib. 1.8.37; Stat. *Silv.* 3.5.31; *Anth. Lat.* [Shackleton-Bailey] 10.2, 247.117.



In lines 37–41, there is a cluster of references to typical martyrological motifs, amusingly perverted by their links to erotic material. The idea in line 36 of bodily sacrifice has obvious Christian overtones, although of course, in this satirical context, the figure for whom Aquilina is suffering is not God but a lascivious young boy. The economic metaphor (*emptum, pretium*) calls to mind Christ's purchase of human salvation through suffering, a purchase which martyrs purported to enact again and again in their *imitatio Christi*.<sup>16</sup> Aquilina rolling back her clothes, presumably to display her wounds proudly, brings to mind the similar pride which St. Eulalia takes in her wounds in *Peristephanon* 3: Prudentius represents the young girl counting her wounds, "delighting" in reading these marks as Christ's signs on her small frame. At the same time, she is enthusiastically unclothing herself in front of her lover—an inherently erotic gesture, and one which amusingly reverses the forced disrobing in front of men so common as a form of humiliation in virgin martyr narratives.<sup>17</sup> Aquilina's joy in her suffering (*gaudia*, 38) also recalls a familiar trope from martyr poetry, in which willing victims often disconcert—or convert—their oppressors through their excited happiness at the pain they are receiving for Christ.

Line 40 does not simply reproduce the meaning of line 36: when Aquilina is represented as declaring that Maximianus will be the "reward of such great blood," she recalls the synecdochal Christian idiom by which "blood" can refer to the martyrdom as a whole (See discussion of Roberts 1993: 39–41). The phrase *certa fides* in line 41 appears to recall the widespread use of the same phrase in Christian literature as part of professions of faith (so Schneider 2003: 218), although we are also no doubt to think of the professions of *fides* by elegiac lovers, most prominently (and transparently) Ovid.<sup>18</sup> Of course, the word *passio* in line 42 also points clearly to a martyr context: the word was used both in the more restrictive sense of the actual death of the martyr, and in the more generalized sense of the account of the martyrdom as a whole (See Roberts 1993: 39–41, 43). Here again, though, there is a sexual double entendre; Maximianus's rather odd choice of the verb *imminuere* may be accounted for by its alternate meaning "to deflower" (cf. the section

<sup>16</sup> For the history of the economic metaphor, see Grensted 1920: 5–6, 32–55; cf. particularly 1 *Corinthians* 7.23: "You were bought with a price."

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Cazelles, writing on Old French hagiographies of the thirteenth century: "Invariably, the ordeal of female martyrs begins with a theatrical removal of the heroines' clothing, a scene that has no equivalent in the Passions which commemorate male saints" (1991: 52).

<sup>18</sup> See McKeown 1989 on Ovid, *Am.* 1.3.5–6 for the *fides* of the elegiac lover, an idea which may develop from Catullus's professions of amatory *fides* (76.3, 87.3).



of Ausonius's *Cento Nuptialis* called the *imminuatio*).<sup>19</sup> Thus, at least on one reading of Aquilina's closing *sententia*, the virgin martyr closes by asserting that *passio* without deflowering was never *passio* at all. One thinks of Saint Agnes welcoming her executioner's sword into her in *Peristephanon* 14, a sword which "clearly evokes a deflowering penis" (Grig 2005: 116). Finally, one other detail about Aquilina would have put Maximianus's readers in mind of virgin martyrs: her name.<sup>20</sup> St. Aquilina was yet another 12-year-old virgin martyr, who was said to have been killed by pagan Roman persecutors in 293; she is best known for the church dedicated to her in Constantinople, which was destroyed in the Nika Riots in 532.<sup>21</sup> So, just as Cynthia's name in Propertius's text was chosen to evoke an aspect of Callimachean poetics rather than as part of the mimetic representation of an actual personality (so Wyke 2002: 27–29), Aquilina's name was also deliberately chosen to evoke a cultural reference-point.

By blurring the lines between elegiac *puella* and virgin martyr, the poem also encourages us to ask other questions about issues of female representation in both genres. If, as Maria Wyke 1989 famously argues, the elegiac woman is merely a *scripta puella*, a "written woman," a sign through which the male poet communicates ideas about his art and his social status, then the martyr is, even more so, an effect of discourse, through the commemoration of whose death a culture communicates its ideals. Moreover, to the extent that martyr poetry presents itself as the mimetic representation of the life of an actual woman, it effaces its own role in the construction of the virgin martyr as an "identity." Martyr poetry does not merely represent martyrs—it *makes martyrs*. Maximianus's third elegy subversively links these martyr stories with a genre which is much more open, comparatively, about the constructedness of its female characters (and has much less to lose by it): we might think, for example, of Ovid's playful suggestions of the textual aetiology of his Corinna. This would be impossible within the martyrological tradition, though often the characters within martyr poetry have no firmer basis in reality than in elegy; the virgin martyr, like the elegiac *puella*, is, in personified form, a body of generic conventions.

<sup>19</sup> I owe this observation to Professor Michael Roberts.

<sup>20</sup> Pace Spaltenstein, who argues that because the name "Aquilina" had not previously appeared in literature, readers would not have been able to deduce her character in advance, as they might do with Lycoris, Maximianus's amour in the second elegy (1983: 197).

<sup>21</sup> For a summary of traditional legends about the life of St. Aquilina, see Sauma 1994: 89–90; on the Church of St. Aquilina, see the *Chronicon Paschale* (622–23), with the comments of Bardill 1997: 70, 85–86.

To return to the narrative of the third elegy, still wracked by love-sickness, the poet-persona consults Boethius—praised in line 47 as the *magnarum scrutator maxime rerum* (“the greatest at grasping at great things”)<sup>22</sup>—for advice. Boethius suggests that Maximianus be rougher with the girl (3.63–70):

“Fac,” ait, “ut placitae potiaris munere formae.”  
 Respondi: “Pietas talia velle fugit.”  
 Solvitur in risum exclamans, “Pro mira voluntas!  
 Castus amor Veneris dicito quando fuit?  
 Parcere dilectae iuvenis desiste puellae,  
 impius huic fueris, si pius esse velis.  
 Unguibus et morsu teneri pascuntur amores,  
 vulnera non refugit res magis apta plagae.”

“Make sure you get your hands on her pleasing beauty’s gift,” he said. I replied: “My sense of duty shuns wishing for such things.” He dissolves into laughter, exclaiming: “What remarkable will! Tell me: when was Venus’s love ever chaste? My dear boy, cease to spare your beloved girl: you’ll have done her wrong if you want to do her right. Tender loves are fostered by fingernails and the love-bite; something quite fit for hitting won’t shrink from wounds.”

Boethius’s advice is not merely cruel, but redundant, given Aquilina’s pre-existent *vulnera*; and not merely redundant, but illogical, since the major obstacle in their love-affair is not Maximianus’s lack of assertion but the lovers’ parental objection. Instead, I suggest, the point of these lines lies in the way they continue to blur elegiac and martyrological motifs. Here, Maximianus disturbingly brings into alignment the lascivious figure of the Ovidian *praeceptor amoris* with the sinister figure of the persecuting official in martyr texts. It may be that Boethius is simply being a good Ovidian, parroting the advice that Ovid dispensed long ago, “You may apply force: girls like *that* kind of force” (*vim licet appelles: grata est vis ista puellis*, *Ars. Amat.* 1.673). Yet the *topos* of the sweetness of violence had been thoroughly reclaimed and redeployed in martyrological literature, and, especially given Aquilina’s speech, it is hard not to see the martyrological echoes here.

When Boethius urges his young pupil to cease “sparing” the girl, he sounds like nothing so much as the persecuting official urging his executioners to move in on the Christians. From Prudentius’s *Peristephanon*: “Do you just stand there, officers?” the judge says with a shout. “Do you just stand there

<sup>22</sup> Shanzer 1983: 189–90 adduces Lactantius, *Mort.* 10.1 for the ironic connotations of *scrutator*; a more damning use is Vulg. *Prov.* 25.27 (*sic qui scrutator est maiestatis opprimitur gloria*).

and hold back your avenging hands?" (10.446–47).<sup>23</sup> Fingernails and love-bites are, to be sure, endorsed by the elegiac genre as enhancing love's passion,<sup>24</sup> but *vulnera* and *plaga* in line 70 recall the far more serious violence inflicted on martyrs, and it would have been an easy slide for Maximianus's readers from *unguibus* in line 69 to the *ungulae* (the "claws," from a diminutive form of *unguis*), the torture device most strongly associated in Prudentius's *Peristephanon* with the torture of martyrs. We see the image of the petulant fingernails of the Augustan lover blurring into the hard, heated metal of the executioner's claws.

The alignment of the *praeceptor amoris* with such a sinister figure from Christian literature represents a brutally deromanticizing reading of the elegiac tradition. Leslie Cahoon and Ellen Greene have argued that the postures of the Ovidian persona itself represent a critique of the violence and objectification inherent in elegiac conventions and in Roman culture at large.<sup>25</sup> Maximianus makes the same connection from a new, sophisticatedly intertextual, perspective. If virgin martyr stories provocatively wed images of violence and eroticism, they are not the first genre to have done so, since elegy also fixates on a female body that is fetishized, laid bare and, at times, physically harmed by male violence.

Boethius then immediately undermines his advice by successfully bribing the parents to let the children be together.<sup>26</sup> Once he does this, the love affair loses all of its appeal—"a permitted sin becomes worthless" (*Permissum fit vile nefas*, 77), the young lover says, again a familiar Ovidian sentiment (cf. *Am.* 2.19.25–26, 3.4.45–46). Aquilina recedes saddened, *tristis*, and Maximianus,

<sup>23</sup> Per. *Prud.* 10.446–47: "Statis ministri?" clamitans iudex ait. / "statis manusque continetis vindices?"

<sup>24</sup> See McKeown 1989 on Ovid, *Am.* 1.7.39–40, 41–42 on scratching and love-bites in Roman elegy.

<sup>25</sup> The degree to which Augustan elegy can be understood as commenting on and critiquing violence, as symptomatic of both love itself and society at large, has been the object of considerable interest over the past twenty years. So, for example, Hemker 1985: 46, for whom the *Ars Amatoria* "criticizes the philosophy of those who subscribe to the narrator's attitudes towards women"; Cahoon 1988: 307, for whom "Ovid manipulates the reader into a vicarious participation in the *libido dominandi* and then into a growing unease at the consequences of domination"; and Greene 1998: 95, for whom Ovid's purpose as a self-aware elegist is to "expose what he considers to be the harsh realities behind the elegiac mask." Somewhat differently, cf. Fredrick 1997: 173, for whom "elegy's wound are ambiguous metaphors for the transformation of elite masculinity into text."

<sup>26</sup> This detail might have been suggested by the similar, but unsuccessful attempt in the *Passio Agnetis* of the young boy's father to buy Agnes's love through plying her with gifts.

in what can only be sarcasm, grandiloquently invokes *Virginitas* and claims that Aquilina will always remain chaste through his efforts (83–84).<sup>27</sup> At this point, Boethius abruptly reverses his former advice (87–88):

“Macte,” inquit, “iuvenis, proprii dominator amoris,  
et de contemptu sume trophaea tuo.”

“Well done, young man!” he said, “Master of your own lust! For your contempt, take your victory trophies.”

The surprise ending of the third elegy is that the poet-persona, not Aquilina, ends up playing the Christian virgin. (Note also the role reversal of Aquilina becoming *tristis* in line 80, an adjective with which the poet had introduced himself in line 6).<sup>28</sup> Even Boethius’s choice of phrasing seems to echo a metaphor used with reference to virgins; so, the sixth century bishop Avitus can similarly write to his young sister, of the virgin’s mastery of *libido*: “in your joy you would bear the highest victory trophy from the trampled enemy” (*De Virginitate* 378 [MGH AA 6.2, p. 286]).<sup>29</sup> But it is all a sham. It was not an ascetic *contemptus* but a mere loss of sexual interest which motivated the split; indeed, it was the very sinfulness of the act which was attractive in the first place. Moreover, Boethius’s slippery *post hoc* alteration of his advice to fit the facts at hand leads one to wonder what side he is actually on: elegiac eroticism or Christian chastity? Both, in effect, are emptied of their significance, presented merely as a series of discursive cues that can be shuffled to fit the facts at hand.

<sup>27</sup> “Salve sancta,” inquam, “semperque intacta maneto, / virginitas, per me plena pudoris eris” (“Hail, holy virginity!”, I say “Always remain intact! Through me you’ll be fully chaste,” 83–84).

<sup>28</sup> Boethius’s congratulatory *macte* here may also recall the similar *macte* of the moralizing Cato in the anecdote retold at Horace *Sat.* 1.2.31–36. Here, Cato congratulates a young man coming out of a brothel for satiating his lust with prostitutes rather than high-born wives. As Hooley 1999 emphasizes, the anecdote has a destabilizing irony of its own: the stern moralist Cato encouraging, under the name of virtue, the satisfaction of, as Hooley puts it, “low sexual gratification.”

<sup>29</sup> “Laeta feras summum calcato ex hoste tropaeum.” Cf. Diehl, *Inscr. Lat. Christ. Vet.* 2032a: “consecratae virginitatis et confessionis victricia portantes tropaea.” As is appropriate to the role-reversal in this passage of the poem, *trop(h)aeum* also has distinct martyrological connotations. Roberts notes that “the earliest written evidence for the veneration of the apostles in Rome, the words of the early third-century priest Gaius (preserved in Eusebius, *H.E.* 2.25.7), calls the commemorative structures erected to the martyrs *tropaea*” (1993: 171). Mohrmann 1954: 158–67 surveys the range of uses of the word in connection with martyrs in early Christian literature.

The ironies of this conclusion to the poem are strengthened if we read it in light of the four lines which frame the poem in the elegiac cycle. As a bridge between the second and third elegies of the collection, Maximianus says (3.1–4):

Nunc operae pretium est quaedam memorare iuventae  
atque senectutis pauca referre meae,  
quis lector mentem rerum vertigine fractam  
erigat<sup>30</sup> et maestum noscere curet opus.

Now it is worthwhile to recount certain events of my youth, and say but little about the events of my old age. With these, the reader may excite a mind broken down by the world's twists and turns, and come to know this tragic business.

In the autobiographical mode of the elegies as a whole, Maximianus says that he will “recount certain events of his youth.” But arguably Maximianus already frames his story of foiled underage sex parodically as a kind of morality tale, anticipating the twist at the end of the poem. He says that his telling of the story is “worthwhile” for the reader, suggesting the instructive value accorded to moral *exempla*. He will recount these events (*memorare*) just as Aquilina will recount the events (*memorare*, line 37) of her suffering when announcing herself as a virgin martyr; we might note that *memoria*, the noun with which *memorare* is cognate, was used in late antiquity to denote a shrine to a martyr or saint (Cf. TLL s.v. *memoria* 2.B.2). Telling these stories will encourage the reader (if that is the meaning of the ambiguous phrase “mentem . . . erigat”), as they recognize this sad story—the very mixture of tragedy and joy which martyrological narratives typically promise. To the second-time reader, these lines also foreshadow the conclusion of the poem. Maximianus closes the poem by noting wittily that, once their sexual sins were permitted, “the very wish for such things vanished;” “both saddened,” they went their separate ways, “a chaste life the reason for the split” (3.93–94).<sup>31</sup> Accordingly, with the usual sexual double entendre on the noun,<sup>32</sup> Maximianus warns his reader at the beginning of the poem that his sex (*opus*)—or, in the end, the lack of it—will prove “tragic.”

The mind to be excited by such a story is one “broken down by the world's twists and turns” (*rerum vertigine fractam*). Whose mind? The image reminds us of the mental and physical upheavals of senescence suffered by the poet-persona and presented at length in the first elegy. It may also remind us of

<sup>30</sup> I assume that Schneider's *errigat* is a typographical error.

<sup>31</sup> 3.93–94: “. . . ipsum talia velle fugit./ Ingrati, tristes pariter discessimus ambo:/ discidii ratio vita pudica fuit.”

<sup>32</sup> See Adams 1982:157, and cf. Max, *El.* 5.56 for the same pun.

the political chaos hovering in the background behind the poetic collection as a whole. Or is the *vertigo rerum* occasioned by the very act of reading this poem? Is the mind broken down the reader's own? The *vertigo* in question could well describe the plot twists and surprising reversals of poetic tropes of the third elegy, and also perhaps catches a sense of the reader disorientation engendered by the poem's ideological twists and turns. A young boy, naively imagining himself as an elegiac lover, is counseled against his will (by the philosopher Boethius no less) to be violent with his *puella*. A female child uses the language and ideas she has learnt from the venerable genre of virgin martyr stories as a sexual come-on to her erstwhile boyfriend. Finally, the laudatory language of Christian virtue is an arbitrary sham, conveniently adaptable to fit the details at hand.

The world of the third elegy is one completely deprived of ideological solid ground. In this sense, it represents the opposite of poems which, in times of intense political and military instability, seek to establish reader confidence in the coherence and continued strength of systems of thought or belief. The bracingly cynical elegies of Maximianus represent a world in which the fabric of such systems has come apart, and confidence in them may no longer be possible. At a time of contentiousness over the moral status of poetry itself, when Christian poetry found the very justification for its existence in its ability to inspire faith in its readers, Maximianus's poetry sought instead to reinstate the questioning stance of an old genre towards the powerful discourses that shape perception of the world at large.

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