



Topel, Sanna

The Sex Lives of Saints

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The Sex Lives of Saints

An Erotics of Ancient Hagiography

Virginia Burrus

PENN

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Introduction: Hagiography and the History of Sexuality

“erotic experience is possibly close to sanctity”

George Bataille, *Essays on Death and Sensuality*

The Sex Lives of Saints? What could such words possibly signify? Surely everyone knows that the repression of erotic desire is the hallmark of Christian sanctity; a “sex life” is precisely what a proper saint lacks. At most, ascetic eros—encoded as yearning for God—may be seen as the residue of an imperfectly sublimated sexuality. Better yet: it is a merely metaphorical expression for a purely asexualized love. Worse still, it reflects pleasure derived from practices of self-cruelty, rooted in a pathological hatred of the body.

It is difficult simply to contradict such widespread and thus all too easily anticipated doubts. Nonetheless, I find myself moved to pursue a different path of interpretation. The wager is at once intellectual and spiritual: might it be possible to take *common knowledge* by surprise, to disturb its resigned certainties, to disturb it with the stirrings of a most *uncommon* love, and thereby to enable a *different* knowing of both “sex” and “sanctity”? My title, though lightly ironic, is not intended to be oxymoronic: ancient Lives of Saints, I suggest, are the site of an exuberant eroticism. Resistance to the pervasive anti-erotic interpretation of hagiography (and of asceticism more generally) is crucial to the excitement—or, more conventionally phrased, the “significance”—of this argument. That sanctity can be recast as an erotic art, that the holy life carries us to the extremities of human desire, that (conversely) “erotic experience is possibly close to sanctity”—these are admittedly queer notions, seductive insinuations, even downright perverse proposals, in relation to traditional readings of the Lives, whether popular or scholarly, literary-historical, or doctrinal. I take the risk of transgressing more than a few cherished orthodoxies in the hope of thereby uncovering a theory and practice of eroticism that is responsively attuned to the hallowed texts of the Christian past while also remaining unapologetically attentive to an urgent need of the present moment—namely, to affirm the holiness of a love that is simultaneously embodied and transcendent, sensual and spiritual, painful and joyous; that may encompass but can by no

means is limited to (indeed, may at points entail discipline: refusal of) the demands of either biological reproduction or institutionalized marriage; but furthermore resists the reductions of the modern cult of the organ. In the stories of saints who steadfastly reject both the comforts and the confinements of conventional roles and relationships (swapping and discarding "identities" like so many threadbare cloaks), we may discover not only evidence of the historic transformation of desire but also testimony to the transformative power of eros.

If the interests that impel this work are thus revealed to be broadly theoretical and theological, at once undeniably political and inescapably personal, the approach is first and foremost historical, pursuing my own disciplinary orientation. The suggestion that hagiography conveys a sublime art of eroticism rather than a repressive morality of sexuality implicitly raises questions and disrupts assumptions about the position of Christianity in the "history of sexuality"—the by-now conventional label for a wide-reaching scholarly conversation flourishing in the wake of the publication of the first three volumes of Michel Foucault's ambitious (and unfinished) *History of Sexuality*. Although the subsequent chapters will not come closely to an explicitly Foucaultian analysis, here at the outset I want to map the larger historical trajectory of my argument by offering a fresh reading of Foucault's own employment of Christianity in the history of desire. If Foucault's thought provides a promising point of departure, it will also draw me into a broader web of contemporary discourses of eroticism, within which I will subsequently situate readings of the hagiographical texts of late antiquity.



"The so-called Christian morality is nothing more than a piece of pagan ethics inserted into Christianity. Shall we say then that Christianity did not change the state of things?" This is the question (following upon an assertion) that Foucault poses for himself in his oft-revised and teasingly unfinished attempt to insert Christianity into the history of sexuality.¹ It is also the question on which this present work turns. In respect to sexuality, how *did* Christianity change the state of things? What revisions and interruptions in ancient Mediterranean conceptions of erotic pleasure and sexual ethics were introduced with the rise of the church?

The "so-called Christian morality" to which Foucault refers crystallizes in a sacralized monogamy in which sexuality is a means legitimated by its reproductive end, while pleasure (a necessary evil at best) is shadowed by

suspicion. Like Foucault in the cited passage, I am here less interested in the consolidation and transmission of such an incipiently heterosexist status—in which the Christianization of Roman culture did, admittedly, play an enormously significant role—than in the simultaneous eruption of a powerful crosscurrent of asceticized eroticism. This “countererotica,” resonant with “counterpleasures,” is arguably not only more innovative, historically speaking, but also more central to Christian thought and practice in the period of antiquity and well beyond. Indeed, in the wake of two decades of intensive scholarly focus on ancient Christian asceticism, the “so-called Christian” marital morality, characteristically prohibitive, begins to take on the appearance of a reluctant concession, an ambivalent by-product of a movement that, for all its immense diversity, was consistently and subversively antiramital from its very beginnings. As historian of Christianity Mark Jordan puts it, “We must recognize . . . that Christian marriage was justified against a line of virginity (rather than apart from them). It is not clear how far Christian marriage is an alternative ideal and how far it is a derivative ideal”—derivative, that is, not only in respect to Roman ethics but also in respect to Christian asceticism, due to its structurally dependent and secondary status.¹ Departing from Foucault’s script—perhaps—I would go so far as to propose that there exists within Christianity a distinctive *eroticism* that does not so much preclude as effectively resist and evade the *sexual* *eroticism* that likewise emerges (derivatively) in late antiquity and eventually culminates in the production of a modern, western regime of “sexuality.”² If it is scarcely an accident, it remains nonetheless also a paradox, that the authority of Christian tradition has come to be unquestioningly aligned with the interests of heterosexism and “family values.” One of the aims of this book is to make that paradox once again palpable, to explore its tensions, and thereby to begin to trace a transformative theology of eros from the stifling grip of a repressive morality of sexuality.

I say that I am perhaps departing from Foucault’s script, because Foucault himself is, I think, intriguingly ambivalent. For Foucault, ancient Christian asceticism constitutes both the matrix of modern “sexuality”—and thus the end of a still more ancient *ars erotica*—and, at the same time, an emergent strategy for escaping sexuality’s disciplinary power. Christianity—as an ensemble of “techniques” that historically produces “the desiring subject”—is, in other words, at once the problem and the promise. The problem is perhaps easier to spot. Foucault locates the distinctiveness of Christianity in the rise of a “hermeneutics of the self” resting on practices of self-examination and confession in which “the problem is to discover

what is hidden inside the self?"¹⁰ Intertwined are two sets of constraining obligations: "those regarding the faith, the book, the cogito, and the obligations regarding the self, the soul, the heart, are linked together." The political context of such a doubly telling witness is no longer civic but "pastoral": self-examination and confession are structured around relations of total obedience, not to a code of law but to a divine will, and the goal is not the sacrifice of the citizens for the city but rather the modification of the self ("a kind of everyday death") for the sake of "life in another world"—"a renunciation of this world and of oneself" that is at the same time "a kind of relation from oneself to oneself."¹¹ In this guise, ancient Christian practices of purifying self-relation are presented as the precursor to "the modern hermeneutics of the self."¹² The problem for Christianity is not (as it was in classical antiquity) penetration or domination but rather "erection," which is to say, desire itself.¹³ (This uncompromisingly androcentric formulation succinctly conveys the persistent suppression of the feminine in the history of sexuality, amplified in Foucault's own *History*—a subject to which I shall return.) Or Foucault's reading, as with Christianity—whether Augustine's or John Cassian's version¹⁴—initiates a trajectory of discursive ejection (a transformation of "sex into discourse") that eventually intersects, via the seventeenth-century confessional, with the modern practice of psychoanalysis.¹⁵

Having relentlessly exposed the circulation of knowledge, power, and pleasure that inheres in such a confessional sexuality, indeed having virtually equated (modern) sexuality with "power/knowledge," Foucault may appear—as Jean Baudrillard charges—to have rendered himself and his readers captive to a totalizing power of his own discursive fabrication.¹⁶ Readers less skeptical of Foucault's argument than Baudrillard may be all the more prone to question whether it is at all possible to escape the iron grasp of this disciplinary regime on which, according to Foucault himself, our very sense of "self" depends. And if escape is not possible, from what vantage point can "sexuality" be critically engaged? This is the question raised by philosopher Judith Butler in a sharp interrogation of Foucault's resolve—and basically incoherent—emancipatory idealism.¹⁷ "We are prisoners of the historical space of nineteenth-century psychiatry," notes philosopher and historian of science Anolok Davidson, in a more sympathetic glossing of Foucault's text. The gloss takes on a faint sheen of hope, as Davidson gives voice to the longing for liberation: "Perhaps there will come a time when we can think to ourselves, 'How do I love thee; let me count the ways,' and no longer fear any possible perversion."¹⁸

Foucault approaches such a possible time to come by a necessarily indirect route: “a long detour” into the past.¹⁴ It is in the course of this detour, I would suggest, that the lingering opposition of “repression” and “liberation” critiqued by Butler begins to be more effectively deconstructed, giving way (however ambiguously) to a subversive reperformance of historical styles of self-formation that surface “the possibilities that emerge when the law turns against itself and spawns unexpected permutations of itself” (as Butler herself frames the desired outcome of a radically Foucaultian theory and practice).¹⁵ Seeking not to concede and to question his own subjection to the modern discourse of sexuality that he explores in the first volume, Foucault describes his genealogical experiments in the later volumes of the *History of Sexuality* as a form of “asceticism” (an exercise of oneself in the activity of thought). “The object was to learn to what extent the effort to think one’s own history can free thought from what it silently thinks, and so enable it to think differently.”¹⁶ He acknowledges the “irony in those efforts one makes to alter one’s way of looking at things,” wondering aloud, “Did mine actually result in a different way of thinking? Perhaps not and yet something has shifted: the journey rejuvenates things, and alters the relationship with oneself.”¹⁷

Retracing the path of his own already ancient thought, Foucault thus encounters himself from new angles. In his *History of Sexuality*, Christianity as an iterative technique of ascetic self-creation is not only the missing volume—tragically curtailed by the author’s death—but also the receding frontier of a yet unthought difference. “What is expected” of ancient ascetics, Foucault reminds us in his lectures, “is humility and mortification, detachment with respect to oneself and the establishing of a relationship with one self which tends toward a destruction of the form of the self.”¹⁸ Therein lies “the deep contradiction, or, if you want, the great richness, of Christian technologies of the self: no truth about the self without a sacrifice of the self,” he proclaims. Therein lies also the “deep contradiction, or, if you want, the great richness” of Foucault’s positioning of Christianity, and also of his positioning of himself in relation to Christianity; I would suggest, far from leading inevitably to the modern subject of sexuality, the ancient Christian discourse of desire, Foucault insists (verging on inconsistency!) “actively refuses the ‘positive self’ on which the modern subject is grounded, in Christianity sacrifice rather than positivism ‘was the condition for the opening of the self as a field of indefinite interpretation.’”¹⁹ Thus, for Foucault, “the texts of the early church” become, surprisingly, “a way out” of sexuality²⁰—a “way out,” in other words, of the particular modern disciplinary

regime that produces not only the concept of "sexual identity" but also the categories of "heterosexuality" and "homosexuality" which are grounded in a rigid binarism of "opposite sexes." Christian asceticism is, moreover, a "way out," as implies, not only or even primarily because it is "pre-modern" but rather because it was always already resisting closure, eluding essence.

Among Foucault's earliest "spiritual masters" (paving the way for his subsequent encounter with the ancient ascetics) are his more immediate philosophical predecessors, notable among them Georges Bataille and Maurice Blanchot: he acknowledges his specific debts to "the former's experience of eroticism and the latter's of language, understood as experiences of dissolution, disappearance, denial of the subject (of the speaking subject and the erotic subject)."¹¹ In an early essay honoring Bataille through an appreciative engagement of his magisterial tome *Eroticism*, Foucault is already sketching a history of sexuality. Here he initially marks the difference between a "denatured" modern sexuality and "the Christian world of fallen bodies and of sin" which is linked to the "whole tradition of mysticism and spirituality" in which experiences "of desire, of capture, of penetration, of ecstasy . . . seemed to lead, without interruption or limit, right to the heart of a divine love of which they were both the outpouring and the source returning upon itself."¹² At the same time, Foucault partly closes the gap between ancient traditions of Christian spirituality and the excessive reaches of modern philosophy: "The thought that relates to God and the thought that relates to sexuality are linked by a common form, since both, to be sure, but never in our day with as much insistence and difficulty as in Bataille." In a rereading of Bataille's intertwined concepts of limit and transgression, Foucault locates "eroticism" at the transgressive edges of sexuality in "an experience of sexuality which aims, for its own ends, an overcoming of limits to the death of God."¹³ For Foucault, the positive "death of God" draws close to a "negative theology" while also maintaining a critical distance: "Transgression contains nothing negative, but attains limited being—attains the limitless into which it leaps as it opens this zone to existence for the first time," he states, continuing even more paradoxically: "But correspondingly, this affirmation contains nothing positive: no content can bind it, since, by definition, no limit can possibly restrict it."¹⁴ Transgression, he notes, still following Bataille closely, was "originally linked to the divine, or rather, from this limit marked by the sacred it opens the space where the divine functions."¹⁵

In necessity, Foucault observes, sexuality has been absorbed by language. He thus finds particular promise in a philosophy that "experiences

itself and its limits in language and in this transgression of language which carries it, as it did Bataille, to the faltering of the speaking subject?" ("I will go so far as to say that in my opinion, philosophy is also the death of language," writes Bataille, threatening—but also failing—to subside into silence: "c'est là le sacrifice.") In Foucault's early essay, the "philosopher" that is perched at the linguistic limits of the modern discourse of sexuality approaches the "religious asceticism" celebrated by Bataille; it also draws near to the "sacrifice of the self" that Foucault later discovers in the ancient Christian discourse of subjectivity: "The deliberate loss of self in eroticism is manifest," argues Bataille. "No one can question it"—a posited limit to inquiry that seems to invite its own transgression.) Is the "philosopher" here invoked by Foucault not even a kind of "theology" that anticipates his own faltering (unfinished, speaking about Christianity and also a style of "spiritual" self-formation that foreshadows his virtual appropriation of the techniques of ancient asceticism)?

Foucault's asceticism has perhaps been nowhere more brilliantly illuminated than in David Halperin's *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*. Declaring that "the guy was a fucking saint!" while at the same time identifying to the dynamics of desire and identification that infuse the archetypal inscription of "sanctity" ("Michel Foucault: *Just one!*"), Halperin proceeds in his first essay to demonstrate, via the punctual style of anecdotal illustration, the coherence of thought and practice in the ascetic life of Foucault: "His was his speech, so was the manner of life" and "as his manner of life, so his speech" (thus Lucius writes what is already, by the end of the third century, familiar convention [*Church History* 6.2.6-7]). In a second essay, Halperin effectively refuses the temptations of narrative closure by enacting his resistance to prior biographical accounts (indeed, to the presumptions of "biography" itself) and thereby drafts an open-ended narrative of his own, a retelling of the life joyously fired by passion and therein leaving its claim to a true witness.¹⁰ In all these respects, Halperin follows the dictates—or perhaps rather simulates the higher ambitions—of the hagiographical tradition to which his title teasingly alludes. The Foucault whom he presents is finally not so much "gay" as "queer," proffering less an identity than a transformative strategy of resistance to the fixing of identity: "It is from the eccentric positionality occupied by the queer subject that it may become possible to envision a variety of possibilities for reordering the relations among sexual behaviors, erotic identities, constructions of gender, forms of knowledge, regimes of narration, logics of representation, modes of self-constitution, and practices of community."¹¹ Foucault's "queerness"

is, on Halperin's reading, performed by a retrieval of Greek and Roman styles of self-cultivation. "To practice a stylistics of the self ultimately means to cultivate that part of oneself that leads beyond oneself, that transcends oneself: it is to elaborate the strategic possibilities of what is the most impersonal dimension of personal life—namely the capacity to realize oneself by becoming other than what one is. This is what Foucault came to see himself as having done all his life."¹⁰ Halperin's Foucault is thus, paradoxically, an ascetic even *in love*, "before sexuality" and also before Christianity.

"It is significant that Halperin's work does not develop any of Foucault's reflections on Christian texts," as Mark Vernon notes.¹¹ Indeed, Halperin appears rather deliberately to *slide* Foucault's interest in Christianity, even as he represents him as an ascetic saint. Jeremy Carrette, in contrast, retraces Halperin's critical reading of Foucault's biographies, most notably James Miller, in an overt attempt to "rescue [Foucault's] silenced discussion of Christianity."¹² He suggests that "the stylization of Foucault in Miller's work, to which Halperin is so opposed, unwittingly rests on a particular religious distortion of Foucault."¹³ Carrette deploys an alternate tactic, approaching Miller's work as "a negative from which to draw out the central theoretical issues underpinning Foucault's work on religion."¹⁴ Arguing that Miller has viciously misconstrued Foucault not only as a sexual pervert (as Halperin amply demonstrates)¹⁵ but also as a dangerous "mystic" courting a "limit-experience" in the erotic practices of sadomasochism, Carrette acknowledges nonetheless that there is insight to be extracted from the twisted strands of this account.¹⁶ He affirms especially that "Foucault created a fascinating theological sub-text through the encounter with the event paré," above all, Barthele (and, through Barthele, Sade).¹⁷ However, "Foucault, like Barthele before him, substitutes the mystical idea as soon as it is introduced. Foucault and Barthele are attempting to demarcate a new space in literature with inadequate old language."¹⁸ Moreover, while "the pleasure from physical pain in martyrdom or religious suffering and BDSM . . . may constitute a parallel event and hold a common denominator in the suffering body," sadomasochism and religious eroticism cannot be simply identified, nor, he implies, *can* Foucault make this mistake.¹⁹

Does Carrette protest a bit too much in his defense of Foucault, even as he also strains to "rescue" Miller's perversely "distorted" insights? Such complexly textualized ambivalence may be worth unpacking. To be sure, prior traditions of religious spirituality should not be conflated with more recent philosophies and practices of eroticism that similarly seek the sacred in the radical disruption of the subject through a violent traversal of the

boundaries that separate self and other, sacred and profane, life and death, pleasure and pain. More importantly, neither of these should be *confused* with oppressive acts of violence designed to “break” the psyche. At the same time, where modern discussions of Christian asceticism remain unavoidably limited by the specter of a widely discredited “masochism” (associations both typically dismissive and difficult simply to dismiss), a more precise articulation of the relation between asceticism and sadomasochistic eroticism would seem to be called for. Foucault’s work (*Discipline and Punish*) may indeed be read as initiating such an articulation, not least through its subtle strumming to the resonance perceived via “genealogy” between ancient Christian asceticism and ambiguously secularized, modern discourses of desire, particularly at their most excessive, self-transgressive limits.⁴ It is at this point, as Carrette acknowledges, that Foucault’s work intersects powerfully with the prior texts of Bataille, who observes that the experiences of both eroticism and sanctity, traversing the boundaries of historical periods, “have an extreme intensity The saint is not after efficiency. He is prompted by desire and desire alone and in this resembles the erotic man.”⁵

The call for a closer—arguably sketchily apologetic—consideration of the relation between sadomasochistic and ascetic eroticisms has not, in fact, gone unheeded. Karen Mackendrick’s *Unbearable Games*, a work heavily influenced by both Bataille and Foucault, responds to just such a call, lending considerable philosophical nuance to the intuition that there are significant connections to be drawn between the lives of ancient and medieval saints and the modern pursuit of “countermeasures” (dramatically instantiated in *self* eroticism, an ensemble of practices that span and thus blur the boundaries between: the most esoteric reaches of intellectual theory and the most inarticulate depths of bodily practice). The erotic pleasures that interest Mackendrick “are pleasures that queer our notion of pleasure, consisting in or coming through pain, frustration, refusal. They are pleasures of exceptional intensity, refusing to make sense while still demanding a philosophical untolding. This untolding takes odd forms, that of an infinite self-reflexion or a capture of language in the very act of description.”⁶ Not unlike practitioners of sadomasochistic sex, “ascetics,” Mackendrick suggests, “intensify both the Christian turn against the body and the incarnate and corporeal aspects of that ‘some’ tradition, revealing in their practice the seductive, defiant elements of religious practice that radically problematize its disembodiment, its hierarchicality, even its misogyny.”⁷ (Mackendrick, unlike Bataille, perceives the limits of “erotic *erw*”: she notes that gender is “another of the boundaries with which [erw] delights in playing.”⁸) Drawing

attention to the inherent excessiveness of asceticism, as well as its paradoxical carnality, Mackenzie delineates the "movement of transgression by intensification" in which the (un)achievable aim is "the refusal of finitude, exhaustion, and limit—*all through the body!*" In and through the extremes not only of self-denial but even of self-mutilation, the ascetic, however ambivalently, pursues both pleasure and desire. Citing the argument of literary critic Geoffrey Galt Harpham, she notes that "the ascetic in fact courts temptation": "the ascetic desire for desire, and for tempting objects of desire, is strong." Ascetic desire is paradoxical, taking pleasure "both in its increase . . . and in its own violent denial," to the point that satisfaction is "removed from the picture." Thus eros arrives in the refusal of the telos of satisfaction: pleasure is perversely intensified through the prolongation of pain and worldly power is undermined, even as God's grace is provoked "through a violent defiance" in the "subtle seductions" of asceticism, Mackenzie argues. "A transgressive eroticism has drawn close indeed to satiety in this perversely reverent (indeed, surprisingly theological) philosophical unfolding of the 'counterpleasures.'"

Harpham's *Ascetic Impulse in Culture and Critique*, to which Mackenzie alludes, not only partly anticipates and affirms certain aspects of her argument, as we shall see, but also brings the study of ascetic eroticism onto a specifically literary terrain. Encompassing extended essays on Athanasius's fourth-century *Life of Antony* and Augustine's *Confessions*, Harpham's work closely aligns asceticism with textuality and, more especially, with narrativity. He locates both asceticism and narrative in the relational dynamic of temptation and resistance, which he understands as inherent in desire. "Narrative is an ascetical act of desire, an act of temptation, doubled, self-limiting, and self-resisting."¹⁷ Here Harpham explicitly rejects the notion of desire as perpetual limitless motion or sheer transgression, underlining instead the dependence of desire on resistance and hence on temptation. Temptation is suspended in paradox: "in temptation, notions of transgression and limit are in force, but have not yet become identical or indivisible."¹⁸ Narrative, as an ascetical act of desire, includes both the temptation of closure and the resistance to that temptation. "All the totalizing operations of narrative operate through resistance to de-totalizing operations; and so while narrative can organize a human life, it cannot do so simply or unequivocally; for all its coherence functions are implicated in their opposites."¹⁹

Narrative thus parallels, or includes, the "process of Christian self-formation" that Harpham has described earlier, which "derived from its

paper counterpart not only in being more extreme, to the point of self-deformation, but also in being complemented by an activity of self-unforming."¹⁷ Hagiographical narrative can thus by no means be simply identified with the interests of a paucal subjectivity, for example: "For within its fascinated concentration on the masculine, hagiography focuses on the doubling and self-subversion of the subject, in which it ceaselessly discovers gaps or concentrations of desire. In other words, hagiography both establishes the masculine program and destabilizes it, 'feminizing' the subject by exposing its enigmas of desire and even the 'masochism' of its rigors." Narrative produces both orders of coherence and "incoherence and carnivalization."¹⁸ In hagiography, the sexual subject—the subject itself—is continually deformed, unformed, and reformed in the dynamic of a desiring resistance, a resisting desire. Harpham caps his study with a hagiographical tribute to "Saint Foucault," highlighting the power of Foucault's theories and practices of resistance, most subtly articulated in his late—and, as Harpham notes, increasingly appreciative—reengagement with ancient Christian asceticism.¹⁹

Having returned, with Harpham, to my initial point of departure—Michel Foucault's evocatively ambiguous placement of Christianity in the history of sexuality—I am also carried to the brink of my own literary-historical reading of the counterpleasures artfusing the Lives of Saints:

* * *

Ancient hagiography—a practice of writing intriguingly revived in contemporary engagements with Foucault—provides a promising site for excavating the charred remains of those erotic theories and practices that once fired ancient Christian discourse and that continue to smolder and spark at the transgressed edge of western modernity, not least in Foucault's own *Life's* work. Harpham follows time-hallowed tradition in beginning the history of hagiography with Ananias's *Life of Antony*: "The master text of Western asceticism is the *Life of Antony*."²⁰ Perversely, I will begin instead with Jerome's *Life of Paul* written roughly fifteen years later. Perhaps I am thereby resisting the temptation to inscribe closure on the narrative of hagiography by fixing its point of "origin" too securely.²¹ Undoubtedly I am also seduced by Jerome's own perversity. The point is not only that a Church Father notoriously accused of a unique level of obsession with sex seems a likely ally for a historian of ancient Christianity unusually preoccupied with eroticism. More importantly, Jerome, a supremely self-conscious writer, attracts an account of hagiographical "beginnings" by studiously insisting on

his own initiative, refusing to be read as a mere follower of either Athanasius or his Latin translator Evagrius. (This is a gesture of refusal that other hagiographers will emulate; hagiographers, constantly repeating itself, is always beginning again.) Jerome forces us to acknowledge the violence of creativity at work in those writerly acts of textual recycling—citation, iteration, imitation, mimicry, dislocation, translation, recomposition, fragmentation, and recombination—through which the Holy Life is produced and ever again reproduced, never quite the same as before. He refuses to conform to even a norm of his own making, authoring three remarkably different, yet (as I will show) equally “vulgar” Lives of male saints—Paul, Marcellus, Hilarion, whose hagiographies are the focus of Chapter 1. The very aspects of these literary Lives that have most frequently irritated critics—overt inconsistency, excessive embellishment, and disjunctive narrativity—are here credited with the success of Jerome’s literary-erotic project. Psychoanalytic-literary critic Leo Bersani’s understanding of the “shattering of the self” aimed at in certain styles of interruptive and iterative narrativity (edgily positioned, as it happens, in relation to the theories of both Foucault and Harpham)¹⁶ provides an illuminating, if not unproblematic, theoretical context for such a reinterpretation of Jerome’s hagiographical oeuvre. At the same time, Bersani’s revision of Freud’s theory of sexuality enables a rethinking of “sublimation” not as the defining characteristic of an ambiguously repressive asceticism but rather as the concision of *all* erotic desire.

Jerome also writes of women, and his prefigure of his dear friend Paula will carry us into Chapter 2, where Gregory of Nyssa’s fraternal *Life of Adromachos* and Augustine’s filial “confession” of Monica are likewise mine for traces of a distinctly “feminine” avowal of sanctity. If the men’s Lives considered in the first chapter can be read as resistant romances, the earliest women’s Lives pivot on the profaned death of a much-beloved subject and cleave closely to the traditions of both martyrology and letters of consolation, around which lie funeral speeches of praise and lament. A “woman,” it seems, must die in order to get a Life. The element of masochism (already conveyed in Bersani’s theorizing) is here foregrounded, via the work of both Mackenzie and Lynda Clark: if psychoanalysis, as well as much popular culture, has tended to perceive women as (at best) merely distant masochists, hagiography radically denaturalizes the feminine as the unstable and utterly reversible site of a decidedly *perverse*, even affectively *feminist*, masochistic subjectivity that actively resists patriarchy from within the very structures of misogynistic discourse. Thus the repressed feminine returns, however ambivalently, to the history of sexuality. This chapter ends by opening a

dialogue with Jacques Derrida and Shoshana Felman regarding the position of “woman” as subject of both death and survival in testimonial literature that straddles the boundary between (male) autobiography and (female) biography.

The gendering of the subject of hagiographical writings is not neutralized (as is frequently claimed) but rather intensified, on this reading. It is also rendered remarkably unstable and fluid, as the subsequent chapters further emphasize, repeating (with a difference) the alternation between male and female lives. The soldier and the harlot, exotically eroticized figures of hypermasculinity and hyperfemininity respectively, take gender to its extremes of reversibility. Chapter 3, which considers Sulpicius Severus’s reportedly supplemented *Life of Martin*, picks up themes from the previous two chapters, suggesting that the soldier saint is not only virtually “queer” but also practically a “woman.” The main emphasis, however, is on the disturbingly sadistic strain of violence in the *Life*, which simultaneously replicates and subverts the explosive pressures of empire, with its pervasive call to “dominate and subvert”; the situation of desire within the complex hybridization of late antique Mediterranean culture is explored through engagement with (post)colonial critics Anne McClintock and Homi Bhabha.

Three Lives of “harlots” — Susan Mary Feagha, and Mary of Egypt — are considered in Chapter 4. These somewhat later hagiographies are not only the least overtly martyrial but also the most explicitly “erotic” of the texts considered. The *Life of Mary of Egypt*, in a pleasing symmetry, will return us not only to the desert but also to Jerome’s *Life of Paul*. Whereas the harlot saints have consistently been read as repenting of their transgressive sexuality, I will argue, in contrast, that their sanctity inheres in their unrepentant—if nonetheless transfigured—seductiveness. Jean Jaurillard’s understanding of seduction here provides the major theoretical intervention, read explicitly against its antifeminist (as well as, implicitly, its anti-foucaultian) grain.

The theoretical eclecticism of this approach will not, I hope, seem merely arbitrary. The “queer,” the “heteromasochistic,” and the “seductive” are overlapping (though by no means identical) concepts that collectively participate in a political and intellectual project that was also Foucault’s—namely a reconceptualizing of eroticism that exceeds and thereby partly evades the constraints of modern “sexuality.” Such an overlapped field of theorizing matches, as it has seemed to me, the similarly complex field of countererotics opened up within ancient hagiographical literature. Before addressing that literature directly, it remains for me to say a bit more about

such a posited “concretotics” loosening, without cutting loose from, the intertextual weave of contemporary scholarship in which I have already situated this work.

Faintly love begins with resistance to the temptations of “worldly” eroticism—resistance not merely to the transient pleasures of physical intercourse (opening onto a broader realm of remotest sensory delights) but also to perverting familial and political hierarchies, institutionalized relations of domination and submission that both structure, and are structured by, relations of sex and gender. Yet such resistance to cultural norms, aptly coded in contemporary terms as “cruel,”¹⁰ does not take an anti-erotic turn, proffering the sterile safety of a desexualized “agape” in exchange for the turn repression of sexual desire. Rather, it gives rise to an exuberant act of eroticism in which the negativity harbored within resistance is eclipsed by the radical affirmation of desire also conveyed in resistance. That resistance to desire should increase desire admittedly presents a perplexing paradox: “Whereas the power of what seems to be a force or a mere negation, or the pleasure of what seems to be only pain and frustration?” queries Mackenzie, “Resistance . . . is a means of intensification: it disciplines the forces of desire so that their expression is not stylized and intensified. Desire is given time to grow; its quick release and undoing are prevented.” In the process, she suggests, “the very nature of desire” is altered: it becomes a “desire beyond subjectivity.”¹¹ The ongoing, iterative disruption of the subject within the movement of desire emphasized by Mackenzie is, for Bersani, the primary effect of all eroticism, revealing “jouissance as a mode of excess.”¹²

Ancient hagiography I am suggesting participates in such a self-mortifying *jouissance*, such a civilly erotic joy in which the performative “death” of the self becomes the saturating matrix of life’s renewal—giving rise, in the field of literature, to ever-new lives. The self that is sacrificed as desire extends “beyond subjectivity” is a self defined by its constructed isolation or soundness, its approach toward the sterility of stasis.¹³ In holy love, “transcendence” does not complete or fulfill the self, rather as Jean-Luc Nancy puts it, “it cuts, it breaks, and it exposes.”¹⁴ Thus, erotic “self-shattering” differs dramatically from the “unmaking” of the self effected by techniques of torture that *intensify*—rather than *disrupt*—the isolation of the subject. As Elaine Scarry notes, in torture “the creature world of thought and feeling, all the psychological and mental content that constitutes both one’s self and one’s world, and that gives rise to and is in turn made possible by language, ceases to exist.”¹⁵ The pain inflicted in totalizing acts of

oppression, she argues, *shuts down* the generative processes of subjective transcendence by which humans continually create amiable, self-extending worlds. The agonizing pleasure pursued in sadomasochism, in contrast, *increases* transcendence to the point that the boundaries of individual subjectivity—the distinctions between the “internal” and the “external”—effectively dissolve. Such dissolution is partial and transient, though its effects may be enduring and even momentous. As Bataille observes (in an important qualification of his own pervasively, even hyperbolically, celebratory rhetoric of “sacrifice”), “Continuity is what we are after, but generally only if that continuity which the death of discontinuous beings can alone establish is not the victor in the long run. What we desire is to bring into a world founded on discontinuity all the continuity such a world can sustain.”¹⁷ However, if the processes of self-destruction enacted in political torture and crucifixion are thus very nearly opposite, they are also, paradoxically, tightly linked. Indeed, crucifixion may be seen to mimic and thereby subvert the “sanctifying” operations of torture, effecting not a destruction but rather a reconstruction (and a reconstruction) of subjectivity through “dissonant displacements” that reconfigure the relations between power and resistance, life and death, body and spirit, by disrupting their oppositional inscription.¹⁸ As Nancy puts it, the “break” in the subject conveyed in the movement of love “is nothing more than a touch, but the touch is not less deep than a wound.”¹⁹ When *jouissance* is understood as “a mode of access,” the *essence* emerges into view as an erotically joyful “body in pain,” disclosing suffering as the vehicle of the ongoing unmaking and remaking of worlds.²⁰

For the writers of holy Lives, it is God who measures the unfolding expanse of such a sublime erotic ambition. “You need to consider where God is in this, because God’s position is a sexual option,” quips theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid. “‘God’s position,’ we might say, is at the ever-receding point where the ‘object’ of desire witnesses and eludes the subject, thereby temporarily disrupting the subject’s self-certainty in the lilt of ecstatic dispossession—a disruption that lives on in the body’s memory, as MacKendrick reminds us, enabling ‘the knowledge, impossible without a subject, of a possibility beyond subjectivity.’”²¹ God inheres in the paradoxical act of self-sacrifice (a sacrifice at once “God’s” and “ours”) that is the gift of sanctity and the lure of a love that reverses all limits. The sacrifice—which is also a seduction—is mutual and reciprocal, inscribing the irreducible relationality of God and creation. As Baudrillard puts it, “One seduces God with faith, and He cannot but respond, for seduction, like the challenge,

is a reversible form. And He responds a hundredfold by His grace to the challenge of faith."¹⁷

Is the God of the countererotic theology that I can retrieve just close kin to the God of mysticism's "negative theology," revived in the impersonal "sacred" of modern philosophers? Yes, but only insofar as there is a corresponding move within such a theology toward a "negative" or "impersonal" understanding of the human subject. Only, furthermore, insofar as the "negativity" of both God and human subjectivity marks an abyssal plitude, and "impersonality" is seen as the effect not of the lack but of the extremity of passion, the active suffering of desire through which "personhood" is transcended and exceeded. God is encountered in the hagiographical texts in the moment when the beloved body traverses the boundary between life and death, in the saint's last, rejoicing breath, in the disciple's lingering embrace of a corpse that already slips beyond the grasp of transient particularity—dissolving into finest dust, mingling with desert sand, participating again in the capacious potentiality of the cosmos. God is encountered in other such moments of violent traversal, transition, and reversibility, in the transvestite, the transgendered, the transfigured and disfigured subject, in the astonishing mobility and convertibility of the saint, the bottomless capacity for radical metamorphosis.¹⁸ God appears (and also disappears) in the movement of love between and beyond persons, in the slide from the personal to the impersonal, from the self to the loss of self, from the discontinuous individual to the continuity of all existence. As Bataille puts it, the sacred or the divine—the God also glimpsed in a "negative theology founded on mystical experience"—arises in "the revelation of continuity through the death of a discontinuous being to those who watch it as a solemn rite" sacredness, grounded in sacrifice, thus aligns closely with eroticism, which likewise inheres in the revelation of continuity through the dissolution of separative selves.¹⁹ Indeed, argues Bataille, "all eroticism has a sacramental character."²⁰ "Epigone of Christian religious experience and bursts of erotic impulses are seen to be part and parcel of the same movement."²¹ Despite his strident critique of Christianity, Bataille understands his own work on eroticism as "neither to 'theology' than to scientific or religious history."²² ("Thus it is that it can be so easily drawn into the citational weave of a work of 'religious history' that itself draws near to 'theology'")

The transpersonal God of negative theology continues, however, to yield intermittently to the shattering play of personifications within the Christian theological imaginary, in the context of a tradition that has remained, for the most part, not only productively "positive" in its metaphorical

strategies but also persistently anthropocentric in its erotic fantasies. (Though we should not fail to note the fertile caves and springs, deserts, forests, and mountaintops, the fauns and centaurs, the lions and the wolves haunting the borders of the hagiographical texts.) In a recent theological act of self-proclaimed "incestuous" Althaus-Rad does not negate but rather multiplies the "sexual option" of a personified "God's position," receiving a parodically perverse acrology: "God, the Fagget; God, the Drag Queen; God, the Lesbian; God, the heterosexual woman who does not accept the constructions of ideal heterosexuality; God, the ambivalent, not easily classified sexuality."¹¹ The theologian's tone is here both vividly ironic and deadpan serious. In the inevitable interplay between liturgical and theological, she wonders, "can we keep carrying the burden of a theology which leaves us alone when having sex?"¹² The "we" whom Althaus-Rad invokes is a deliberately provocative (but not random or unconsidered) collectivity of transgressively desiring subjects, including lecher venders without underwear, adulterers, sadomasochists, and transvestites. Her recounting of the "sexual stories" of everyday saints repeats the challenge of hagiography—to pursue God in the extremities of human striving.¹³

A divine sexual orientation courts transcendence through the risk of transgression; its sublimity far exceeds the bounds established by the concept of a de eroticized "sublimation"; its goal is not the chastening of the sexual subject but rather the seduction of salvific grace through the sacrifice of a "self" reified—and thus embodied—in its very "sexuality"; its literary expression refuses the temptation of a reductive detachment of historical facts and carnal acts from the ethereal, figural, or fantasy upon which all desire is borne. In the Lives of Saints, we are able to perceive the crucial intersection of eroticism and theology. There we encounter no "safe sex" but only risks worth taking. (That the risks are all too real is evidenced by long histories not only of sexual repression but also of political oppression enacted in the name of God's desire.) There we encounter no "sexual orthodoxy" but only the continually re-performed trial of historical witnesses testifying passionately to the possibility of divine eros—which is to say to the twinned (intertwined) possibilities of God and of love.

Such theoretical and theological reflections are conveyed by the historical argument that undergirds this book. The readings of ancient texts that follow adhere to a rough chronological order. They are not, however, intended to inscribe a narrative of internal development but rather to expose (albeit incompletely) the complex and shifting intertextual weave of a late ancient literary practice. To the extent that hagiography "leads toward

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