

WOMEN MARTYRS, ANIMALS, AND GOD'S PRESENCE IN ANCIENT CHRISTIAN TEXTS

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ABSTRACT

The main aim of this paper is to examine the martyrdom of some Christian women (Blandina, Perpetua and Thecla) in close connection with the animals they have to face. On the one hand, these wild beasts become the incarnation of the Devil, ready to harass the female martyr; on the other hand, the animal, perceiving God's living presence in the female martyr, does not devour her. The wild beasts acquire symbolic meaning, strictly intertwined with God's providence.

Keywords: animals, God, female martyrs, allegorical meaning.

Replete with stories of gods and men interacting with animals, classical literature also encompasses a broad range of interaction between women and animals, as in the case of the myth of Europa riding on a cow, or the tale of the princess and priestess Io, transformed into a heifer by Zeus. We also find animals whose association to a deity must be interpreted symbolically: Pallas Athena with the owl, or Artemis,

worshipped in Ephesus, to whom was attributed in Greek literature the epithet *πότνια θηρῶν*, 'the lady of the wild beasts', a famous title used already in the Homeric poems¹. Furthermore, animals often represent the best way through which the pagan gods come into close contact with women, sometimes to punish them². In other cases, animals assume a central role in situations in which women who have refused to have an intercourse with a god are made pregnant: for example, Zeus transformed himself into a swan to possess the charming Leda³.

Such a rich series of animals with symbolic meaning, that incarnate vices and virtues, finds fertile ground in the Biblical world, too. The relationship of men towards animals perhaps should be presented under the prism of the creation of the world. We specifically read in Genesis: 'and God created the beasts of the earth after their kind, and the animals after their kind and all that creep on the earth after their kind and God saw that it was good' (Gen 1:25). After his creation man is given dominion over all the animals 'over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth' (Gen 1:28). The dominion over the animals extends to their naming when God brought all the animals in front of him to give them their name: 'and brought them unto Adam to call them and whatever Adam called every living thing, that was its name' (Gen 2:19). Thus man has authority over the animals as well as over all creation, having been created 'in the

1 See Homer, *Il.* 21,470. This feature of Artemis will become a *topos* in classical literature: e.g. *H. Hymn. Aphr.* 16 ff.; Aristophanes, *Thesmoph.* 114 ff.

2 This is the case of Arachne, turned into a spider by Athena, because the girl, skillful in weaving, dared to challenge the goddess, saying that her skill was greater than that of Athena, goddess of wisdom, weaving, and strategy: Athena cursed her and all her descendents to weave for all time. For the Latin sources about this myth see Ovid, *Metamorph.* 6,1-145; Pliny the Elder, *Nat. Hist.* 7,56,196.

3 For a first approach to Greek mythology see Graves (1955) and Graves (1968); Hard (1997).

image of God'. The animals looked on man as the master of the complete creation and for this reason they not only submitted to him but also lived in harmony between themselves⁴.

Keeping this context in mind, it is notable that, from Genesis to the Apocalypse, from the serpent to the dragon, the Bible starts and ends with a symbolic beast and both stories have two women as protagonists: Eve and the serpent in Genesis 3 and a sun-dressed woman, identified as the Virgin Mary in subsequent Christian exegesis, who has to fight against a terrible dragon in chapter 12 of the Apocalypse. In the Old Testament, where a negative assessment of woman coexists with positive female models⁵, the Wisdom Books in particular offer relevant examples of positive and negative female *typoi* compared to certain animals⁶, whereas in the Song of Songs the beloved spouse is identified as a 'dove', an appellation of endearment and an antonomasia which is universally accepted in a positive meaning⁷.

Besides symbolic animals and human stereotyped *typoi*, early Christianity frequently reveals real and direct contact with wild animals during the persecutions carried out by the Roman authorities against the Christian believers between the second and the third centuries⁸. In such sentences of death, Christians, often cast to different kinds of animals, are exposed usually to lions, but sometimes also to dogs, although lions are the most commonly used animals for this purpose due to their

4 In many instances, in the Old Testament, we see the pre-fall relationship of man with the animals, where an explicit promise is given to the Prophet Elijah, that he will be provided care for his feeding, 'and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there' (1 Kgs 17:4). We see the raven is a bird by nature despised bird – that does not even care for its young – carrying meat and bread to the prophet.

5 See for instance Eccl 7:26; Prov 21:19; 8:22.

6 See for instance Prov 17:12; 30:15 ff.; Sir 25:15-16; 26:7-8.

7 See Sg 2:14; 4:2.5; 5:2; 6:9.

8 For a first approach see MacMullen (1984) and MacMullen (1997).

ferocity⁹. On the basis of certain typologies codified by the ancient world, animals, introduced as real protagonists of real events, are entitled to acquire also a symbolic role within the narration, becoming pieces of an allegorical and exegetical framework, whose major purpose aims to interpret the events in the light of the accomplishment of the Scripture prophecies or of the *providentia Dei*.

God calls the martyrs to counter-attack the wild beasts and to affirm until the end of the world that Christ and his doctrine are true and that the Christian Church is the only true religion. These martyrs believe so firmly in these truths that they die bearing witness to them. They allow themselves to be killed without fighting back in order to prove that the Christian faith is true.

The doctrine of the New Testament lays emphasis on the paradox, according to which life is death, and death is life¹⁰, a new life that, in order to join God, often includes the participation of wild beasts. The martyrdom of Ignatius of Antioch appears relevant. Writing to the Christians in Rome, he strongly suggests that they do not intercede for him: 'I would have quite a profit, if I had to face the wild beasts waiting for me. I should hope to find them with the right disposition. I should caress them, so that they would quickly devour me, differently from what would happen to someone else afraid of touching them. If they showed these intentions, I would urge them indeed'. Then, he bursts out with one of the famous examples in the history of martyrs: 'I am the wheat of God. I need to be ground by the fangs of the beasts to be

9 Lions are fearful beasts for the prophet Amos, who offers the basic biblical comments on them. Their roar is so terrifying that it can be compared to the voice of God (Am 3:8). See Grant (1999), p. 15.

10 See Tibiletti (1983), vol. II, pp. 3314-3319 with bibliography; Pohlenz (1967); Spanneut (1957); Colish (1990).

transformed into Christ's purest bread'¹¹. Once he arrives in Rome in the year 107, the Bishop of Antioch is 'ground' by the wild animals of the arena, a death considered as a privilege from his point of view. In fact, to describe these animals the martyr adopts expressions characterized by tenderness and lyricism: 'Caress them – he writes – so that they would become my grave, leaving nothing of my own body: in this way none would be charged with my funerals'¹². Although Ignatius' model for dealing with the beasts is the apostle Paul, who claims to 'die daily', Ignatius goes beyond Paul, who never faced the beasts or mentioned them when listing his trials and tribulations (2 Cor 11:23-27)¹³. Reading Ignatius' words carefully, we cannot fail to notice how the animal loses its ferocity in order to become 'something else' in a vision provided by the Christian faith, that makes human frailty be overcome, so that the animal ends up being an *instrumentum per gloriam Dei*. Ignatius implores those who are trying to set him free from martyrdom not to save him: in his view to be thrown to the wild animals is the right way to join God, to be the beasts' nourishment is the means to delight in God.

This phase of 'heroic Christianity' sees not only men as victims of persecutions, but also women, bravely suffering their martyrdom in defense of the Christian faith. In doing so, the experience of the persecutions creates a substantial equality between the two sexes. If in classical literature the *imbecillitas feminea* or *imbecillitas muliebris* is a particular and more precarious condition of the general *imbecillitas humana*, in the Christian tradition on the basis of Stoicism¹⁴ a woman can

11 Ignatius of Antioch, *Letters to the Romans* 4,1.

12 Ignatius of Antioch, *Letters to the Romans* 4,2.

13 Grant (1999), pp. 16-17.

14 The Stoics elaborate their theory of 'virile woman', γυνή ἀνδρεία or *mulier virilis*: the woman has to become man, just like a child has to become as wise as an old man (*puer senex*). It is the transformation of the so-called *infirmi* into their

acquire strength and ataraxy; in such a way she becomes a *mulier virilis*¹⁵.

The martyrdom of some Christian women also provides a dramatic setting for their encounter with several types of wild beasts. Although these animals become the incarnation of the Devil, ready to harass the martyr, presented as a fellow of God, in some contexts the situation is different. The animal, sensing God's living presence in the female martyr led into the arena to be thrown *ad bestias*, does not devour her.

BLANDINA

In his *Ecclesiastical History*, Eusebius of Caesarea introduces a very interesting document: the *Letter of the Churches of Lyon and Vienne to the Churches of Asia and Phrygia*, where the persecutions in Gaul in the years 177-178 are described¹⁶. Being the object of various hostilities, Christians are arrested and conducted in front of the authorities to be interrogated. Among them, besides people of considerable importance and social status, emerges a woman: Blandina, one of the main characters of the events the unknown writers refer to. She is a slave, humble and frail, God's instrument to demonstrate that what appears trivial and bad to the human eyes is indeed a sign of

opposite. According to Seneca, Musonius Rufus and many other thinkers, philosophy is necessary to the female human being in order to acquire strength and ataraxy, not to fall into tears and sorrow, to keep away from what is usually defined as γυναικεῖον, typical of women and blameworthy, or *muliebre and puerile*, a feature of women and childish.

15 On the theory of *mulier virilis*, I simply mention a few texts: Giannarelli (1980), pp. 9-25; Mattioli (1983); Vogt (1991), pp. 172-187; Castelli (1991), pp. 29-49; Consolino (1992), pp. 95-117.

16 See Eusebius of Caesarea, *Hist. Eccl.* 5,1,3-5,2,8. The Greek text with the title, *The Martyrs of Lyons*, appears with an English translation in Musurillo (1972), pp. 62-85. About that persecution see Turcan-Rougé (1978). On the origin of the Church in Gaul see Duval (1971); Simonetti (1973), pp. 117-131.

God's glory¹⁷. In poor health and unable to survive torture, she seems to get stronger and stronger the more the executioners abuse her. She simply repeats: 'I am a Christian' over and over. This behavior infuriates her torturers and they whip her until they are tired out¹⁸.

Finally, they decide to lead her into the arena, where other Christians are being beaten. She is hung on a post and exposed as bait for the wild beasts, and there she seems to hang in the form of a cross¹⁹. Sentenced to death, Blandina is thrown to the wild animals of the amphitheatre, but the animals do not touch her:

But none of the animals had touched her, so she was taken down from the post and brought back to the gaol to be preserved for another ordeal: and thus for her victory in further contests she would make irreversible the condemnation of the crooked serpent, and tiny, weak, and insignificant as she was she would give inspiration to her brothers, for she had put on Christ, that mighty and invincible athlete, and had overcome the Adversary in many contests, and through her conflict had won the crown of immortality²⁰.

With her immobility Blandina might seem passive, but since the author in his account makes her the subject of every action that indicates encouragement, stimulus and persuasion, she becomes the active protagonist of God's providence²¹; her prayers give courage to her fellows, who see in her the figure

17 See *Martyr. Lugd.* 5,1,17 (ed. Musurillo [1972], pp. 66-67). See also Guillaumin (1972), pp. 93-98; Mazzucco (1989), pp. 115-119; Valerio (1990), pp. 40-47; Frend (1978), pp. 166-177.

18 See *Martyr. Lugd.* 5,1,18-19 (ed. Musurillo [1972], pp. 66-67).

19 See *Martyr. Lugd.* 5,1,41 (ed. Musurillo [1972], p. 74) ἡ δὲ Βλανδῖνα ἐπὶ ξύλου κρεμασθεῖσα προύκειτο βορὰ τῶν εἰσβαλλομένων θηρίων, ἥ καὶ διὰ τοῦ βλέπεσθαι σταυροῦ σχήματι κρεμαμένη.

20 *Martyr. Lugd.* 5,1,42 (ed. Musurillo [1972], pp. 74-75). I quote Musurillo's translation for this passage (p. 75). When it is not specified, the following translations are mine.

21 This observation is due to Mazzucco (1989), p. 119.

of the crucified Christ in his suffering but also in his victorious dimension: Blandina is *figura Christi*²². Once again through Blandina we find Jesus on the cross; his victory over his ancient enemy is renewed. Although she comes into close contact with the wild animals, she leaves safe and sound, to the point of being submitted to other trials; emerging victorious in many other fights, Blandina will make the sentence of the serpent irreversible. *Proficiens* on the long path towards her *sanctitas*, the female martyr encounters not simply the fight with the wild beasts, but with the serpent, that must be interpreted through a figurative meaning: Blandina has to fight against the Antichrist, the head of the devils, ready to bite whoever wants to progress on the path of faith.

Blandina's courage makes her comparable to a man, to the point of being portrayed as strong as an athlete, because she is wearing a new garment, the garment of Christ²³. This condition allows her to enter into another dimension and to engage in intimate conversation with her spouse; she is glad and delighted for her future passing, as if she has been invited to a bridal banquet, and not given to the beasts²⁴. After torments, the animals, and the hot griddle, she – the noble and generous mother who supported her fellow Christians like the Maccabean mother²⁵ – is wrapped into a net and dragged by a wild bull. Even after this animal has badly injured her, she does not feel any pain, because she possesses such a hope in

22 See *Martyr. Lugd.* 5,1,41 (ed. Musurillo [1972], pp. 74-75).

23 See *Martyr. Lugd.* 5,1,42 (ed. Musurillo [1972], pp. 74-75). For some Biblical references see Rom 13:14; Gal 3:27. About a woman as *miles* and/or *athleta Christi*, see Giannarelli (1980), pp. 25-28; always useful the famous work by von Harnack (1963).

24 See *Martyr. Lugd.* 5,1,55 (ed. Musurillo [1972], pp. 87-88) ἔσπευδε πρὸς αὐτοὺς χαίρουσα καὶ ἀγαλλιωμένη ἐπὶ τῇ ἐξόδῳ ὡς εἰς νυμφικὸν δεῖπνον κεκλημένη ἀλλὰ μὴ πρὸς θηρία βεβλημένη.

25 On the Maccabean mother see Willem van Henten (2012), pp. 122-127 and also Schneider (2000); Pizzolato-Somenzi (2005); Momigliano (1968).

the object of her faith, as to be in intimate familiarity with Christ, completely immersed in him:

At length she was put in a net, and thrown to the wild bull. After being tossed a good deal by the animal, she no longer perceived what was happening because of hope and possession of all she believed in and because of her intimacy with Christ. Thus, she too was offered in sacrifice, while the pagans themselves admitted that no woman had ever suffered so much in their experience²⁶.

PERPETUA

In the *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis*, a small group of Christian prisoners is waiting for the trial sentence. Two autobiographical documents are smuggled out of the prison and an unknown writer puts them together, adding a prologue and a description of the martyrdom of those believers²⁷. That is the origin of the *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis*, the first autobiography, a sort of prison diary, written by a woman in Christianity, able to impress the reader with its intensive and precise depiction of the four visions²⁸, in which the woman

26 *Martyr. Lugd.* 5,1,56 (ed. Musurillo [1972], pp. 78-81). I quote from Musurillo's translation (pp. 79-81).

27 For some editions of the text see Musurillo (1972), pp. 105-131; Amat (1996); Bastiaensen-Hilhorst-Kortekaas-Orbán-van Assendelft (1987), pp. 114-147 (text), pp. 412-452 (commentary); Formisano (2008). The Latin text with an English translation is also provided by Bremmer-Formisano (2012), pp. 14-32. In this article I follow Musurillo's edition. A short overview about date, place, title, composition, and genre of the *Passio Perpetuae* is in Bremmer-Formisano (2012), pp. 2-7. See also Bremmer (2007), pp. 81-82; Formisano (2008), pp. 11-22. On the fact that the auctor was not Tertullian, as has often been suggested, see the convincing arguments of Braun (1992), pp. 287-299. The volume published by Bremmer-Formisano (2012) also affords various articles, devoted to analyzing the historical, religious and literary context of the *Passio Perpetuae*. See also Farina (2009); Prinzivalli (2001), pp. 118-140.

28 See Amat (1989), pp. 177-191; Lanata (1966), pp. 61-98.

writing describes her coming martyrdom²⁹: no one other text depicts the future expectations of the martyrs, the fears of death and the afterlife in such a vivid narration, as the *Passio Perpetuae* does³⁰.

Perpetua, a *matrona liberaliter instituta*, whose family is composed by father, mother, two brothers, and her baby, is an African martyr of the 203 A.D.³¹. In chapter 20.1 Perpetua is exposed in the arena along with another woman, Felicitas³², to a fierce cow, in order for their sex to match that of their antagonist. The anonymous author of the text deliberately specifies that, differently from bulls, cows are not used as animals in the arena. This aspect is confirmed by the many African mosaics depicting beasts and all sorts of theriomachies and so illustrate the various animals that normally performed in the arena³³. The unusual presence of this animal has been initiated by the Devil, the chief master of the persecutions and the passions of the martyrs, in order to test the female gender of the two sentenced Christian women. By keeping this in mind, it is worth noting the parallelism established by the author: 'sentenced woman' – 'female beast'; the female gender is a feature that brings together the human victim and the killer animal, creating a sort of correspondence³⁴. The verb *aemulari*,

29 Useful critical essays: Corsini (1975), pp. 481-541; Sardella (1990), pp. 259-278.

30 See Bremmer (2000), pp. 97-111.

31 Perpetua's young brother, Dinocrates, died at the early age of seven. On her cultural background see Mckechnie (1994), pp. 279-291; Ameling (2012), pp. 78-102.

32 On Felicitas see Bremmer (2012), pp. 35-53.

33 See Dunbabin (1978), pp. 65-87.

34 For further discussion on the cow's sex see Shaw (1993), pp. 3-45 and Shaw (1996), pp. 269-312. It is worth noting that in the *Acta* 1,9,3-4 and 2,9,3-4 the two women are not attacked by the same animal and are not together as they face death. Instead, they are paired off with men: Perpetua and Saturus are attacked by lions, while Felicitas and Revocatus by leopards. See Williams (2012), pp. 66-68.

employed in the text, conjures up the concept of imitation, but also of fight and competition between the female martyr and her enemy:

For the young ladies (*puellis*), however, the devil, in order to mimic their sex even in the matter of the beast (*sexui earum de bestia aemulatus*), obtained an extremely fierce cow (*ferocissimam vaccam*), a quite out of the ordinary thing procured for that very purpose³⁵.

After that, the fierce cow starts its assault in the arena. Although Perpetua and Felicitas are wounded, they try to resist and, as the crowd clamor that this spectacle is enough for them³⁶, the two women are invited to go to the *Porta Sanavivaria*: the winners' door or, better, the Gate of Life. Passing through this door means to have a first victory against the Devil, since the two women survive the cow's attack³⁷. Perpetua does not feel any pain during the fight, she does not perceive the ache of her wound, because she is totally immersed in the Spirit and the ecstasy (*in spiritu et in extasi*)³⁸. Felicitas, her companion, who had foreseen that this would have happened in the moment of the martyrdom, gives an explanation: when in prison, some days before, she was giving birth to a child and was moaning during the labour, a guard mocked her for this, asking her what she would do, when she was in front of the ferocious animals. Referring to Christ, who assists the martyr during suffering and death, the woman answered: 'Now, I am the one suffering what I suffer, but then another inside me will suffer for me, because I will be suffering for him'³⁹.

35 *Passio Perpet.* 8,20,1 (ed. Musurillo [1972], pp. 128-129).

36 See Potter (1993), pp. 53-88.

37 See *Passio Perpet.* 8,20,7 (ed. Musurillo [1972], pp. 128-129). On the symbolic meaning of this gate see Böhme (2012), p. 231.

38 See *Passio Perpet.* 8,20,8 (ed. Musurillo [1972], pp. 128-129).

39 *Passio Perpet.* 8,15,5-6 (ed. Musurillo [1972], pp. 122-125).

If the female martyr becomes an *alter Christus*⁴⁰, the beast, a cow in this case, is an *instrumentum*, a symbol of the Devil. This appears clear in a previous vision that Perpetua had: she sees the Dean Pomponius in her dream, coming to knock at the door of the jail to call her to the arena⁴¹. Perpetua pictures herself in the arena, she looks at the crowd stupefied. She is aware to be destined to the ferocious beasts; instead, she is surprised to be confronted, not by wild beasts ready to attack her, but by a repellent-looking (*foedus*) Egyptian, who has devils as servants, while Perpetua has angels to assist her⁴². Perpetua does not name him immediately, but during the course of the vision, his identity as Satan becomes clear; her fight will be against the Devil, a common topic in early Christian texts of martyrdom. In ancient Christian literature Satan often appears as an Egyptian, as well as the Pharaoh who persecuted God's people⁴³, but perhaps Perpetua's picture of Satan as an Egyptian derives from the common conception among Roman and Carthaginian Christians of a black devil, in keeping with the way of darkness⁴⁴.

Perpetua's preparation for the battle conjures up a striking image, when in the course of her fight with the Egyptian she writes: *Et expoliata sum et facta sum masculus*, that is to say: 'I was stripped down and became a man'⁴⁵. This statement sets out a relevant concept, not only in order to gain a better understanding of the deep significance of this vision, but also of the theological and religious context of the *Passio*. Although

40 See Moss (2010).

41 This vision is narrated at chapter 10.

42 See *Passio Perpet.* 8,10,5-6 (ed. Musurillo [1972], pp. 116-119).

43 Tertullian, *De Bapt.* 9,1.

44 See Van Beek (1938), p. 34, n. 9; Butler (2006), pp. 74-75. See also Robeck (1992), pp. 62-63. The *Epistle of Barnabas* 4,9 refers to Satan as the 'black one' (ὁ μέλας).

45 *Passio Perpet.* 8,10,7 (ed. Musurillo [1972], pp. 118-119).

according to Bremmer the significance of this motif is not immediately clear⁴⁶, the expression aims to stress the *aequalitas* reached by the female martyr. Presenting a compelling blend of masculine and feminine qualities, the gender order is crossed or cancelled in the martyrdom. A woman may assume a different identity, or even better she may reach a different dimension. This is the topic of the *mulier virilis*, the necessity for a woman to leave the female dimension, characterized by physical and moral weakness, and become a man in spirit⁴⁷. Christ himself incarnated into a man, proposed to the Christian believers as an *imitatio*: a new perspective opens up for Perpetua⁴⁸.

Before going down in the arena, Perpetua is rubbed with the oil, which not only recalls that used by the athletes, but also in the Christian faith corresponds to the holy chrism: actually she is an *athleta Christi*, ready for the fight against the Egyptian adversary, who is rolling in the dust⁴⁹. Adding to his satanic *persona* this last movement, the Egyptian refers to the prophecy in Genesis, made by God in the garden to the serpent, condemned to crawl on its belly and bite the dust: 'Upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life' (Gen 3:14). Perpetua compares herself to Eve in Genesis but also to the woman of the Apocalypse at the end

46 See Sigismund-Nielsen (2012), p. 116.

47 Perpetua's compelling blend of masculine and feminine has been read in connection with early Christian imagery, in particular with the topic of women making themselves male and the theological erasure of gender along with other distinctions in the kingdom of heaven.

48 The series of visions that structure the text, breaking the narrative unfolding in time and each taking away one aspect of Perpetua's femininity, eventually bring out a masculine aspect in Perpetua, and a trace of difficulty of getting rid of gender.

49 See *Passio Perpet.* 8,10,7 (ed. Musurillo [1972], pp. 118-119). All Perpetua's visions can be read according to the three Christian sacraments: Eucharist, baptism and postbaptismal anointing. See Corsini (1975), pp. 492-508.

of her vision, when she pictures herself crushing the head of her enemy with her feet:

The fight took place, we started to punch each other. He kept trying to grab me by the feet, but I kicked him in the face. Then, he lifted me up, but I managed to hit him harder, not having to press my feet on the ground. Taking advantage of a moment of break, I put my hands together, interlaced my fingers, and I grabbed his head. He fell down flat on his face and I pressed his head under my heel (*calcavi illi caput*)⁵⁰.

The last gesture of Perpetua represents the realization of the curse by God to the serpent in Genesis 3:15: 'And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel'. The Latin expression used in this context of the *Passio*, *calcavi illi caput*, refers to that adopted in chapter 4,7, where in her previous vision Perpetua notices an enormous dragon, guarding the stairs that lead to Heaven, who attempts to frighten aspirants from ascending⁵¹:

At the foot of the ladder was a dragon, exceeding great, lying in wait for those going up and terrifying them so that they might not dare to ascend ... I said: 'Nay, in the name of Jesus Christ he shall not hurt me' ... Then, using it as my first step, I trod on his head and went up (*calcavi illi caput et ascendi*)⁵².

On the one hand, there is an obvious parallel to the dragon, the ancient serpent who is the Devil and also Satan, a prominent figure in the Johannine Apocalypse⁵³; on the other hand, this encounter recalls a vision from the *Shepherd of Hermas*, in which Hermas is terrorized by a sea-monster, raising a cloud of dust⁵⁴. After calling upon the Lord for rescue, he puts on the faith of the Lord and subdues the beast; similarly, in the *Passio*, after Perpetua speaks Jesus' name, the

50 *Passio Perpet.* 8,10,11 (ed. Musurillo [1972], pp. 118-119).

51 See *Passio Perpet.* 8,4,4-10 (ed. Musurillo [1972], pp. 110-113).

52 *Passio Perpet.* 8,4,7 (ed. Musurillo [1972], pp. 110-111).

53 See Godding (2000), pp. 145-157.

54 See *Hermas*, *Vis.* 4,1,1-2,4.

dragon, as though afraid, protrudes his head from underneath the ladder⁵⁵. The dragon is, of course, only another Egyptian, a mask of evil which Perpetua has to defeat on her difficult path towards God, her *ascensus* through horrific dangers. The symbol of Perpetua's victory over the dragon/Satan, which has several parallels in Scripture⁵⁶, shows Satan as the one deterring her from confessing her faith through martyrdom, but in the role of new Eve Perpetua perceives that she does not have the oppressive consequences of original sin, cancelled by the Virgin Mary, seen as the opposite of Eve and the model of purity⁵⁷. Like Blandina, Perpetua is also destined to triumph over the serpent of Genesis and the Devil of the Apocalypse (12:9; 20:2)⁵⁸. Augustine of Hippo, recalling Perpetua's vision, writes: *caput serpentis antiqui quod fuit praecipitium feminae cadenti, gradus factus est ascendenti*, 'the head of the ancient serpent, that was the loss due to a woman's fall, has become the ladder for her elevation' (*Serm.* 280,1)⁵⁹. Perpetua's victory is not over the beasts, but over the Devil which the beasts represent, and also a victory over Satan, as explicitly stated at the end of her vision: 'I realized I did not have to fight against wild animals, but against Satan. But I also knew I would win the victory'⁶⁰. The dragon, the Egyptian, and the fierce cow,

55 See Butler (2006), pp. 67-68.

56 Apart from the curse on the serpent in Gen 3:15, we can mention the passage of Joshua 10:24-25, where Joshua invites the men of Israel to 'put your feet on the necks of these kings', and then he says: 'Be strong and courageous, for thus the Lord will do to all the enemies against whom you fight'. Another parallel is represented by Luke 10:19 in a dialogue between Jesus and his disciples.

57 At the beginning of his *Sermon* 280 Augustine of Hippo will note that, while the Virgin Mary through Christ has redeemed the entire humanity, Perpetua has only redeemed and purified herself from womanly sins. See Sigismund-Nielsen (2012), pp. 116-117.

58 See Petraglio (1979), pp. 15-29.

59 See Augustine of Hippo, *Sermones* 280-282 (*Patrologiae cursus completus, series latina* vol. 38, pp. 1280-1286). See also Elm von der Osten (2008), pp. 275-298.

60 *Passio Perpet.* 8,10,14 (ed. Musurillo [1972], pp. 118-119).

interpreted throughout an allegorical meaning, anticipate the final fight against Satan.

If it is true that the Christian martyrs are destined to die, once down in the arena, they change their prescribed death, as Perpetua's martyrdom shows. The cow would not kill her; it is she who offers her throat to the gladiator, firmly guiding that unskillful hand, in order to taste some pain⁶¹. As the beasts refuse to be executioners, the professional gladiator is called and 'she took the trembling hand of the young gladiator and guided it to her throat'. The editor of the text applauds Perpetua's zeal, claiming that Satan greatly fears this woman, who cannot be martyred except by her own will⁶².

THECLA

The connection of the Christian female martyr with other wild beasts becomes more relevant in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, an apocryphal story, where the anonymous author, in keeping with the Greek novel, indulges in the martyrdom's account adding several stages and encounters of Thecla with various animals⁶³. Born in Iconium of eminent but pagan parents, Thecla renounces her engagement to a young man the moment in which she hears from her window the apostle Paul, arrived in town, preaching his sermons in the house of Onesiphorus. For three days she will not move from that window, and will not answer to her mother or her fiancé, Thamyris. Sentenced to be burnt at the stake, just for having refused to get married, she will survive the torment. In the meantime, Thecla's mother, Theocleia, and her fiancé, Thamyris, concerned that Thecla will follow Paul's demand

61 See *Passio Perpet.* 8,21,9 (ed. Musurillo [1972], pp. 130-131).

62 See *Passio Perpet.* 8,21,10 (ed. Musurillo [1972], pp. 130-131).

63 For the critical edition of the Greek text, from which I quote, see Lipsius-Bonnet (1959), I, pp. 253-272. For a detailed analysis see Albrecht (1986), pp. 246-277.

that one must fear only one God and live a life of chastity, form a mob to drag Paul to the governor, who imprisons him. When Paul is put in prison, Thecla escapes during the night and she helps him run away from prison, bribing the guards with her jewels. When the apostle is led away, the girl accompanies him along his missionary *iter*, but as soon as the two arrive in the city of Antioch, a nobleman, named Alexander, desires Thecla and attempts to take her by force. Thecla fights him off, assaulting him in the process, and for her behavior she is put on trial⁶⁴. The virgin is condemned to another martyrdom and sent into the arena with the wild animals:

Thecla, abruptly taken away from Tryphaena, was stripped down and covered in a vest, then she was cast into the arena. Lions and bears were pushed towards her. A wild lioness, which had run to her, lay down at her feet. The women in the crowd cried aloud. Then a she-bear ran towards her; the lioness went to her and slaughtered her. Again, a lion, which belonged to Alexander and was trained to attack people, ran towards her. The lioness, after having attacked the lion, was killed along with him. The women complained even more, because her helper, the lioness, had died⁶⁵.

Immediately after the parade of the animals that will take part in the martyrdom (chap. 28), Thecla, down in the arena, sees a 'ferocious lioness' running towards her⁶⁶. Considered an example of ferocity and cruelty and chosen to represent the empire of Babylon according to Daniel, or the haughtiness of Jerusalem in the lament of Ezekiel⁶⁷, also the lioness, like the lion, can acquire a positive value in the Christian tradition, becoming expression of the Church, mother of the apostles

64 See *Acta Pauli et Thecl.* 7-32 (ed. Lipsius-Bonnet [1959], I, pp. 240-258).

65 See *Acta Pauli et Thecl.* 33 (ed. Lipsius-Bonnet [1959], I, pp. 258-260).

66 For a study about the animals in Thecla's account see Di Marco (2008), pp. 121-130.

67 See Dan 7:4; Ez 19:1-9.

nourished and defended by Christian doctrine⁶⁸. In the apocryphal text the lioness assumes a positive prerogative; in fact, she does not harm Thecla, but she prostrates herself at her feet. The miracle of the wild beasts unable to attack the heroine is already common in pagan literature – for instance, Antia in the tale of Xenophon of Ephesus (chap. 4,6)⁶⁹. In the Bible we should keep in mind the episode of the prophet Daniel, left unharmed in the lions' pit having enjoyed angelic protection; in this way he will be able to demonstrate his innocence (Dan 6:17 ff.). In Thecla's case the lioness not only does not harm her, but she also falls at her feet in a sign of veneration. The kneeling of the animal proves the recognition of a divine power in Thecla, towards whom the animal expresses submission and worship. In Genesis 18:2 Abraham's reaction in front of the Lord is significant: 'He raised his eyes and saw three men close to God. As soon as he saw them, he ran towards them and he lied in prostration'. It is the same action of the lioness⁷⁰.

We have also to notice that the protagonist of the prodigy in Thecla's account is a female animal. A relevant relationship takes place that overcomes the limits of the species (animals and humankind), but not those of gender. Thecla's martyrdom creates a close connection with the women attending her martyrdom in the arena, but not with the men. In this way the women, who are the only ones able to perceive the thaumaturgic power of the saint, establish an empathetic rapport with Thecla⁷¹. This aspect should not surprise the

68 See for instance Gregory the Great, *Mor. in Iob* 18,35,56; 30,8,26-27. See also Ciccarese (2007), pp. 14-17.

69 For the text see Papanikolaou (1973).

70 On the presence of friendly lions in some Christian texts see Grant (1999), pp. 17-19.

71 Generally, during their life the female saints work miracles only on other women. See Giannarelli (1993), pp. 376-380.

reader. Excluded from every relevant aspect of social life and confined to the domestic context, women are the first to welcome the new religion, thanks to the dignity attributed to them by the New Testament⁷², in keeping with Paul's doctrine: 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Gal 3:28). In Thecla's case we can take advantage in noticing, according to Willy Rordorf, that 'the whole narration reveals a feminine sensibility' and that in Anatolia, where this account takes place, 'women had a primary role in the first Christian communities'⁷³. Taking into account the studies carried out by Gilbert Dagron, Rordorf states that the *Sitz im Leben* by Thecla is a women's liberation movement⁷⁴.

This atmosphere of unity, exquisitely feminine, is interrupted by the arrival of a ferocious female bear. Having no hesitation in protecting Thecla, the lioness attacks and kills the female bear; in this way the lioness assumes the characteristics of helper and mediator between human frailty and animal ferocity. The contrast between these two animals may be interpreted symbolically, as an opposition of two different human types. Generally, the female bear indicates evil and perversion: 'Evil in a woman alters her features, making her face look gloomy like the one of a she-bear', we read in Sirach 25:17. The she-bear might represent the mean woman, attached to the *saeculum*, namely paganism, far from conversion and hostile to the Christian faith; instead, the lioness is the woman who has tamed her wildness and has recognized the value of the divine δύναμις, the power of the Christian preaching, realizing an inner transformation of her own nature. She is able to make a positive aspect prevail: the

72 See Hamman (1972), pp. 61-67.

73 See Rordorf (1986), pp. 43-52 (51).

74 Dagron (1978), pp. 36-38.

virtue of courage present in her nature. As in the fight it is the lioness, symbol of Christianity, who triumphs, this victory might be interpreted as the triumph of the repentance (*μετάνοια*): everything that is fragile, true, and dignified, both in a physical and in a psychological context, dominates what represents the brute material strength⁷⁵.

Once the she-bear is dead, a lion, belonging to Alexander and trained to attack man, enters the arena. The lion, prototype of the ambivalent beast and interpretable *in bonam* or *in malam partem* in Christian exegesis, is introduced with his negative zoo-ethological features, such that force becomes imposition, power takes the form of tyranny, and courage is transformed into cruelty⁷⁶. The lioness engages in fighting with the lion and dies while killing him. The fight reveals the opposition between the brutal violence of men's world, hostile to the virgin, whose death, personified by the lion, is deeply desired, and the triumph of the values of the Christian faith, represented by the lioness. The distinction in the arena, where different animals depict the contrast between the female gender, inspired by the Christian faith, and the male one hostile to Christianity, is recreated in the public attending the martyrdom: on the one hand we have the male citizens against Thecla and her values, on the other hand the Antiochian women in favor of the protagonist and of Christianity. Two different worlds, two different attitudes are at work, stimulated by the figure of Thecla, the main character of a unique event.

When the lioness dies in the fight, the sorrow for the torment suffered by Thecla is followed by that for the sad end

⁷⁵ See also Di Marco (2008), pp. 125-126.

⁷⁶ See Ciccarese (2007), pp. 11-48. For the presence of the lion in the *Acts of Paul* see Grant (1999), p. 19.

of her ally. After that, more ferocious animals, whose species is not indicated, are cast into the arena:

Then they cast many beasts, while she stood praying, her hands stretched. As soon as she finished her prayer she turned, she saw a large pit full of water and said: 'Now it is time for me to get washed'. She plunged in saying: 'In the name of Jesus Christ I shall be baptized in this last day'. Seeing this, the women and the whole crowd started crying saying: 'Do not plunge in the water', to the point that even the governor was weeping, because the seals were about to devour such a beauty. She had plunged into the water in the name of Jesus Christ, but the seals, seeing the fire of a lightning, suddenly came afloat dead⁷⁷.

Thecla starts praying, and as long as she is praying the fight is interrupted. The prayer creates a stasis, the animals sense they are witnessing a moment of sacred contemplation. Both in pagan and Judeo-Christian context such moments underline the presence of divine epiphanies. One should keep in mind what happens in chapter 18 of the *Gospel of James*, when rivers, wind, sky and air react with stillness at the moment of Christ's birth⁷⁸. After her prayer Thecla turns and sees a vat of water, and, since she thinks it may be her last chance to be baptized, she jumps into the vat, proclaiming that she is baptizing herself. In that moment not only the women, but almost the entire crowd, even the governor, burst into tears. In the vat there are ferocious seals and for this reason the crowd does not believe that Thecla will survive their attack. The concept of seals as aggressive animals, capable of devouring people, sounds strange. This idea could be explained recalling the belonging of these animals to the family of sea mammals, considered impure in Leviticus 11:10-12. We cannot also exclude the possibility that the author assimilates

⁷⁷ See *Acta Pauli et Thecl.* 34 (ed. Lipsius-Bonnet [1959], I, pp. 260-261).

⁷⁸ For the Greek text with an Italian translation see Bonaccorsi (1961), pp. 94-97. For a comment see Giannarelli (2004), pp. 40-41.

the seals to the family of the cetaceans, depicted as devilish and ferocious animals in Christian exegesis on the basis of the episode of Jonah (Jon 1:1-2:11)⁷⁹. In his *Hexaemeron*, Basil of Caesarea puts them together with the cetaceans⁸⁰. The exegetical interpretation of the Church Fathers about the Biblical history of Jonah would be noticeable: the great fish, which God ordains to swallow Jonah, becomes an infernal monster, whose belly represents the abyss of the earth, where man ends up once dead, but also Jonah' story is prone to be interpreted as a new birth par excellence⁸¹.

As Jonah remains three days and three nights in the whale's belly, the allegorical interpretation of his story foreshadows Christ's death and resurrection: Jesus will stay for three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. This reading makes Jonah a privileged subject in Christian art, especially in the decoration of sarcophagi or in the catacomb frescos, evoking a new life and also the theme of baptism⁸². It is worth noting that in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* the protagonist pronounces a statement of self-baptism, while she plunges into the water: 'In the name of Jesus Christ I shall be baptized in this last day'⁸³. Like Jonah, after her immersion in the water Thecla acquires a new status in Christ, making possible something which in terms of dogma would be impossible: a self-baptism, one in which the first baptism is repeated and heightened. Anyway, there is no doubt that Thecla does not have any power over these devilish animals: God himself intervenes. A lightning of fire gets into the vat and the seals come afloat dead.

79 See Ciccarese (2002), pp. 191-201.

80 See Basil of Caesarea, *Hexaemeron* 7,1-2. See also Di Marco (2008), p. 127.

81 See Grant (1999), p. 20.

82 See Angelini (2010), pp. 237-264.

83 See *Acta Pauli et Thecl.* 34 (ed. Lipsius-Bonnet [1959], I, pp. 260-261).

As in the case of the Apologists who, addressing themselves to the Greek-Roman world, endeavor to make the Christian faith accessible to the pagans, the Christian martyr sentenced of death in the arena uses his death to communicate with the Greek-Roman audience through his body language. If we consider the question from the point of view of the rituality performed in the arena, the behavior of Thecla transforms her physical humiliation and suffering into the triumph of her bodily dimension by remaining unharmed; such aspect breaks the rituality itself, introducing a dissent, where rituals work in order to promote social solidarity and affinity. In fact, it is only at this stage of the account that the Antiochian women intervene to save Thecla, since more beasts have been thrown against her:

But the women howled, because more terrible beasts were cast; some threw leaves, others lavender, cassia, cardamom. Actually there were several scents. All the animals that had been urged towards her did not touch her, as if they had fallen asleep. Therefore, Alexander told the governor: 'I own really ferocious bulls; let us tied them to the maid fighter'. However saddened, the governor agreed and said: 'Do whatever pleases you'. They tied her by her feet among the bulls, they put incandescent tools under their genitals so that they, utmost upset, could kill her. They startled. But the fire, after having burnt everything around, broke the ropes; it was like if she were not tied anymore⁸⁴.

The women scatter various scents in the arena, making the ferocious animals fall asleep. The reaction of the Antiochian women might seem subversive, made against a sentence issued by the governor, but probably it is again part of a women's word, which uses specific tools to intervene: perfumes. The scene also demonstrates that the tools of feminine beauty, considered negative, can also acquire a positive value if properly used. But, if we read the episode

84 See *Acta Pauli et Thecl.* 35 (ed. Lipsius-Bonnet [1959], I, pp. 261-262).

from a Christian prospective, the use of these substances may assume a sacral role: the *πλῆθος μύρων*, utilized by the Antiochian women, would make Thecla a Christ's athlete. After her self-baptism, there would be a sort of anointment, finalized to consecrate her virginal status as a perfect Christian disciple. At the scattering of the perfumes the fierce animals are taken by sleep and do not touch Thecla. The Antiochian women have cast a sort of spell, which immediately recalls in the mind of the reader the action of Medea in Apollonius Rhodius' *Argonautica*, when the heroine makes the snake that guards the Golden Fleece fall asleep by the help of a magic potion (4,156 ff.).

Despite the failure of the attacks of this latter herd of wild animals, Alexander does not give up. He suggests to the governor to tie Thecla to two horrible bulls of his own, and, in order to make them even wilder, they also put burning hot plates against the genitals of these ferocious bulls. Considering that the bull is symbol of sexual performance, while fire recalls the erotic sphere and love, in this sense the fire burning the genitals becomes symbol of the *libido*, the carnal passion⁸⁵. The last trial shows Thecla fighting against the enemy that attempts to corrupt those women who have chosen chastity and virginity: this enemy is carnal desire. Obviously, concupiscent cannot do anything against a virgin, free from passions and desires. Thecla gradually gets rid of her external feminine features: first of all, the jewels given away and utilized to corrupt the jail guards when she went to visit Paul, then she cuts her hair to follow the apostle, finally she puts on men's clothes when she goes to look for Paul⁸⁶. Even in her relationship with men Thecla is the winner. She rejects her

85 See Di Marco (2008), pp. 128-129. For the issue of chastity in Christianity see Clark (1981), pp. 240-257.

86 See Mazzucco (1989), pp. 19-20.

fiancé Thamyris, then Alexander, and she does not even belong to Paul. She belongs to God only, and she is his maid-servant; for this reason the wild beasts do not devour her⁸⁷. By keeping the whole account in mind, we are able to understand why Thecla will be destined to become the model or the prototype of virginity in Christianity⁸⁸: in the dialogue *The Symposium or on chastity* by Methodius of Olympus, a Christian author of the IV century, the female martyr intones the singing and leads the chorus of ten virgins. If each one of them makes an eulogy of virginity as the perfect Christian life and the best path to imitate Christ, at the end of the *Symposium* Thecla herself chants to Christ, her spouse, while the other virgins answer with the refrain 'I keep myself pure for you, I carry my torch ignited and I come to meet you, my spouse'⁸⁹.

Thecla leaves the arena victorious: having faced various animals, she has overcome different tests; she has also created an empathetic relationship of gender with the Antiochian women and with the animals, to the point of neutralizing the power and ferocity of these wild beasts. The women of the city protest against the injustice, and Thecla is protected from death, first by the lioness who fights off the other beasts, and then by a series of miracles, until finally the women of the city intervene. The thaumaturgic power, performed by this youth on the animals, and her remaining unharmed after the attacks of all these beasts aim to demonstrate the presence of a divine δύναμις. In virtue of her relationship with the wild beasts, she can be compared to the goddess Artemis, πότνια θηρῶν: Thecla, the saint of Iconius, virgin, apostle, and maid-servant

87 See *Acta Pauli et Thecl.* 37 (ed. Lipsius-Bonnet [1959], I, p. 263) Ἐγὼ μὲν εἶμι θεοῦ τοῦ ζώντος δούλη· τὰ δὲ περὶ ἐμέ, εἰς ὃν εὐδόκησεν ὁ θεὸς υἱὸν αὐτοῦ ἐπίστευσα· δι' ὃν οὐδὲ ἐν τῶν θηρίων ἤψατό μου.

88 See Giannarelli (2007), pp. 47-62; Hayne (1994), pp. 209-218.

89 Methodius, *Symp. Hymn.* 285-292 (ed. Musurillo-Debidour [1963], pp. 310-321).

of God, possesses all the characteristics to substitute the cult of Artemis, very common in Anatolia.

The great number of martyrs throughout the Roman Empire and the considerable amplitude and diversity of miracles related to their deaths serve to operate as a mechanism of conversion for people of the Mediterranean basin. The miracles, worked through different animals, are more than simple facts, because they reveal the beauty and power of the Christian faith: the relationship between the female martyrs and the wild beasts in the arena, if read adopting a symbolic key, would be the civilization of virginity facing concupiscence, the civilization of the weakness dominating the brutal ferocity, spirit directing matter.

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