The "Cheap, Unseemly, and Readily Despised" One: A Rhetorical Understanding of Blandina's Gendered Performance in *The Martyrs of Lyons and Vienne*

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Abstract

The Martyrs of Lyons and Vienne is a second-century Christian martyrology. Of the victims narrated in this letter, the female slave Blandina appears to have a prominent role. This thesis analyzes how the author uses Blandina as a rhetorical tool to communicate his concept of martyrdom to his audience. Each time she makes an appearance in the amphitheatre, an authoritative, gendered image is invoked by her performance. Each metamorphosis (athlete, Christ, and mother) embodies the necessary qualities that constitute the ideal martyr identity. Because Blandina exemplifies all three personas, she is constructed to be a 'super martyr.' Blandina's remarkable performance aims to change the audience's beliefs regarding the weakness of this female slave, or the potential weakness of any Christian body, in order to demonstrate that all Christians are capable and ought to embrace martyrdom.

Résumé

Les martyrs de Lyon et Vienne est un martyrologe chrétien du deuxième siècle. Parmi les victimes rapportées dans cette lettre, une femme esclave, nommée Blandina, semble avoir un rôle marquant. Ce mémoire analyse la manière dont l'auteur se sert de Blandina comme instrument de rhétorique dans le but de communiquer son idée de martyre à son auditoire. Une image autoritaire et genrée s'impose à chaque fois que Blandina fait son apparition dans l'amphithéâtre. Chaque métamorphose (athlète, le Christ, et mère) possède les qualités nécessaires pour incarner l'identité du martyr idéal. Puisque Blandina illustre les trois personnages, elle est l'exemple d'un martyr exceptionnel. La performance remarquable de Blandina a pour but de changer les croyances de l'auditoire au sujet de la faiblesse de cette femme esclave, ou de la faiblesse potentielle de tous les Chrétiens, afin de prouver que chaque Chrétien est capable de faire face au martyre et de le subir quand le temps viendra.

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List of Abbreviations

APTh	*Acts of Paul and Thecla*
Haer.	*Refutation of All Heresies* (Hippolytus)
Hist. eccl.	*Ecclesiastical History* (Eusebius)
Hist. an.	*History of Animals* (Aristotle)
Ign. *Rom*.	*To the Romans* (Ignatius)
LSJ	*A Greek-English Lexicon* (H.G. Liddell, R. Scott, and H.S. Jones)
Lyons	*Letter of the Churches of Lyons and Vienne* or *The Martyrs of Lyons and Vienne* (as it has been preserved in Eusebius' *Hist. eccl.*)
Mart. Pol.	*Martyrdom of Polycarp*
PGL	*Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Ed. G.W.H. Lampe)
PPF	*Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*
Soph. Jes. Chr.	*Sophia* (or *Wisdom*) *of Jesus Christ* (Nag Hammadi Codex III,*4*)
TLG	*Thesaurus Linguae Graecae: A Digital Library of Greek Literature*

INTRODUCTION – Why Blandina?

The Letter of the Churches of Lyons and Vienne, or *The Martyrs of Lyons and Vienne* (*Lyons*), is a second-century text preserved in the fourth-century *Ecclesiastical History* (*Hist. eccl.*)[1] by Christian polemicist and Roman historian, Eusebius of Caesarea. The original form of this Greek-language martyrology[2] was a letter sent from two Gaulic communities in Lugdunum (Lyons) and Vienne, modern-day France, to communities in Asia Minor and Phrygia, modern-day Turkey. The letter recounts in dramatic detail the tortures and deaths undergone by a variety of Christians. As one scholar puts it, the social status of the Christians in *Lyons* "ran the gamut of possibilities (slave, free, wealthy, citizen, noncitizen, male, female, young, educated, and old)."[3] The letter projects a heightened awareness of and dissuasion against those who have lapsed in their confessions as Christians. It paints a picture of confessed Christians going to their martyrdom "cheerfully" and adorned with "the sweet smell of Christ," whereas the lapsed "were downcast, humiliated, ugly, and filled with disgrace" (1.35). The letter ends

[1] I have chosen to cite *Lyons* using the numbering system from *Hist. eccl*. The letter is found in Book V of Eusebius' work and covers chapter one and a small part of chapter two. When citing "1.16," for example, this signifies verse 16 from chapter 1 of Book V. Because I wish to treat this martyrology independently of Eusebius' work, I will be citing *Lyons* instead of *Hist. eccl*. when referencing the letter.

[2] Unless otherwise noted, any quotations from *Lyons* are from Frederick W. Weidmann, "The Martyrs of Lyons." *Religions of Late Antiquity in Practice*, ed. Richard Valantasis. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000). Typos were corrected. Some translations are my own; they are based on the consultation of the following critical editions of the Greek text: Herbert Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs: Introduction, Texts and Translations*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972); Kirsopp Lake, *The Ecclesiastical History*. Vol. 1, Books 1-5. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1975 [1926]). I also consulted the English translations by Musurillo, Weidmann and Lake. Any citations in Greek of *Lyons* are found under Eusebius' *Hist. eccl.* in the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae: A Digital Library of Greek Literature*. All punctuation from *TLG* has been removed.

[3] Candida R. Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom: Diverse Practices, Theologies, and Traditions*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012) 106.

by indicating that those who are persecuted did not wish to be identified as martyrs for "they concede the title of martyr to Christ" (2.3). They are simultaneously martyrs and not.

Several of the victims narrated in this letter have prominent roles, but I would argue that one victim stands above the rest, that is, the female slave Blandina. The letter describes three separate occasions in which she is subjected to the arena. Upon her first appearance, Blandina is immediately introduced as the lowliest of the low. The letter describes the rage of the amphitheatre audience that is mounted against the female slave, she who is "cheap, unseemly, and readily despised among human beings" (1.17). However, Blandina's initial, uncomplimentary portrayal appears to be reversed almost instantly. Each time she makes an appearance in the amphitheatre, an authoritative, gendered image is invoked by her performance. When she first appears in the arena, her actions evoke those of a noble athlete; in her second appearance, she figures as crucified Christ; lastly, she is portrayed as a mother to the martyrs, much like the mother of the Maccabees (2 Macc 7:20-3). Both ends of the gender continuum are represented in her performance in the arena: (1) the language of athlete and Christ are part of a masculine discourse; and (2) the language of motherhood is evidently a feminine one.

The scholarship on *Lyons* is not overly extensive. There are a few important chapters within books and some articles, but to my knowledge, there is no book-length academic study of this martyrology in the English language. W.H.C. Frend, when he discusses the Jewish roots for the Christian concept of

martyrdom, uses the example of *Lyons* to make his case for the second century.[4] Candida R. Moss' chapter entitled "Gaul: The Victors of Vienne and Lyons" is a recent analysis of the text, in which she demonstrates that the Christians of Gaul represented one of many distinct and diverging theologies of martyrdom in the early church.[5] Boudewijn Dehandschutter dedicates a chapter to exploring religious identity in *Lyons*.[6] The biblical references in *Lyons* are analyzed by Denis Farkasfalvy in his article "Christological Content and Its Biblical Basis in the Letter of the Martyrs of Gaul."[7] An issue of translation is discussed by Elizabeth A. Goodine and Matthew W. Mitchell in their article "The Persuasiveness of a Woman: The Mistranslation and Misinterpretation of Eusebius' *Historia Ecclesiastica* 5.1.41."[8] Paul Kereszetes, J.W. Thompson, and Paul Allard discuss the authenticity of the letter within Eusebius' work.[9] There are various other articles and discussions about *Lyons*, but little scholarly attention has been paid to the figure of Blandina, despite her importance in *Lyons*. Scholarship that refers to Blandina is usually limited to a few sentences or

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[4] William H.C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church: A Study of a Conflict from the Maccabees to Donatus*. (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1967).
[5] Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, 100-121.
[6] Boudewijn Dehandschutter, "A Community of Martyrs: Religious Identity and the Case of the Martyrs of Lyons and Vienne." *More than a Memory: The Discourse of Martyrdom and the Construction of Christian Identity in the History of Christianity*, ed. Johan Leemans. (Leuven, Belgium; Dudley, MA: Uitgeverij Peeters, 2005) 3-22.
[7] Denis Farkasfalvy, "Christological Content and Its Biblical Basis in the Letter of the Martyrs of Gaul." *SecCent* 9:1 (1992): 5-25.
[8] Elizabeth A. Goodine and Matthew W. Mitchell, "The Persuasiveness of a Woman: The Mistranslation and Misinterpretation of Eusebius' *Historia Ecclesiastica* 5.1.41." *JECS* 13:1 (2005): 1-19.
[9] Paul Keresztes, "The Massacre at Lugdunum in 177 A.D." *Historia* 16:1 (1967): 75-86; James Westfall Thompson, "The Alleged Persecution of the Christians at Lyons in 177." *AJT* 16 (1912): 358-384; James Westfall Thompson, "The Alleged Persecution of the Christians at Lyons in 177: A Reply to Certain Criticism." *AJT* 17 (1913): 249-258; Paul Allard, "Une nouvelle théorie sur le martyre des chrétiens de Lyon en 177." *Revue des questions historiques* 93 (1913): 53-67; Paul Allard, "Encore la lettre sur les martyrs Lyonnais de 177." *Revue des questions historiques* 95 (1914): 83-89.

paragraphs. None of these studies, however, have looked at all three of her appearances, and the metamorphoses they conjure,[10] together.

Compelling female martyrs, such as Thecla from the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* and Perpetua from the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*, have been the subject of substantial recent scholarship. Although scholarship on Blandina is sparse, this is not the case with Thecla and Perpetua, who have entire books dedicated to their study.[11] This inequality may be due to a scholarly propensity to investigate elite women in martyrologies. As a female slave, Blandina may fall under the radar, much like Felicitas, to whom the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* is also dedicated, yet who is also largely ignored by scholars. It may also be a question of agency. Perpetua demonstrates agency through preserving her thoughts and memories in her diary, through refusing her father's pleas to recant, and by objecting to the pagan costumes arranged for her performance in the arena. Thecla also demonstrates agency by ignoring the wishes of her mother and fiancé,

[10] According to the Merriam-Webster online dictionary, the verb "conjure" means "to bring to mind," but it can also have a supernatural connotation. It can signify "to summon by or as if by invocation or incantation" and "to affect or affect by or as if by magic." As this thesis will demonstrate, Blandina's performance is extraordinary. I would even argue that it has a bit of a supernatural component to it, especially in her second appearance in the arena. When Blandina visually becomes Christ before those who are within the contest, the text also mentions her well-strung prayer. Her prayer may or may not be directly associated with the fact that she is seen in the shape of a cross, but her visual embodiment of Christ is as though affected by magic. It is astonishing that an insignificant female slave can appear like a very influential male figure; there is a mysterious component to this transformation. The verb "conjure," therefore, is a fitting term because of its supernatural connotation, even if *Lyons* does not assign such a nuance to Blandina's metamorphoses.

[11] To name only a few examples: Jan N. Bremmer and Marco Formisano (eds.), *Perpetua's Passions: Multidisciplinary Approaches to the* Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Rex D. Butler, *The New Prophecy & "New Visions": Evidence of Montanism in* The Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas. (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2006); Jan N. Bremmer (ed.), *The Apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla*. (Kampen: Kok Pharos Pub. House, 1996); Stephen J. Davis, *The Cult of Saint Thecla: A Tradition of Women's Piety in Late Antiquity*. (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Scott Fitzgerald Johnson, *The Life and Miracles of Thekla: A Literary Study*. (Washington, DC: Center for Hellenic Studies, Trustees for Harvard University; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

by defending herself against the public advances of an Antiochene, through self-baptism, and by dressing in men's clothing and preaching. Because agency is not demonstrated by Blandina in *Lyons*, she may simply not be of interest to scholars who discuss the roles and status of women in formative Christianity. However, these are inadequate reasons for neglecting to provide a full study of a martyr who clearly has a central place in *Lyons* and whose performance invokes significant questions regarding gender in the early church.

An in-depth study of Blandina is therefore absent from the scholarship of early Christian martyrdom; this gap is unfortunate because her performance in the amphitheatre shares some of the gender-bending tendencies identified by scholars in the better-studied female martyrs.[12] A detailed study of Blandina would add to and nuance contemporary discussions and knowledge of early Christian interest in gender. This thesis will consider Blandina's multiple personas as an interlocking complex, which in turn will allow a more thorough understanding of her rhetorical purpose in *Lyons*.

The shifts in Blandina's appearances raise important but previously unasked questions, namely: (1) In what ways is the status of Blandina, as a Christian and as a female, shifting in the audience's eyes with every one of her appearances? (2) Why is the text concerned with shifting Blandina's gender? (3) What does Blandina's gendered performance inform us about gender in early Christianity? My thesis will investigate these questions.

[12] These inclinations towards gender-bending in early Christian martyrologies will be explored in chapter four.

In this thesis, I will argue that Blandina's metamorphoses in the arena, where her body invokes different, gendered images that bring into question her initial introduction as the "cheap, unseemly, and readily despised" one, demonstrate that her body is an instrument, a vehicle, which the author[13] of the letter uses 'to think with.' Blandina is a tool to achieve the rhetorical purposes of this letter. The shifting of gender aims to change the audience's beliefs regarding the weakness of this female slave, or the potential weakness of any Christian body, in order to demonstrate that all Christians are capable and ought to embrace martyrdom.

Gail Corrington Streete argues that early Christian bodies acted as "sight" (spectacle) and "site" (as a symbol and referent) in martyrologies;[14] this is true of Blandina. She not only appears as these different, gendered personas before an audience in the amphitheatre, but these images are also the means by which the author of the martyrology carries out his rhetorical goals of persuading Christians to welcome martyrdom under threat of persecution. If a lowly, female slave can find the strength to perform in such a way, then a logical conclusion upon reading or listening to this letter is that any Christian has the capacity to do so.

In order to understand Blandina's metamorphoses in the arena, it is crucial to comprehend the rhetorical aims of the letter. As I briefly mentioned above, *Lyons* is fundamentally concerned with Christians who do or may deny their identity under threat of persecution. For this community, one's identity is fully

[13] For simplicity's sake, I will refer to the author in the singular, but the question remains open whether it is one or several writers who penned this letter. The author(s) do not refer to him/themselves in the letter and so it is unknown who and how many participated in its production.
[14] Gail Corrington Streete, *Redeemed Bodies: Women Martyrs in Early Christianity*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 2.

encompassed by the term 'Christian;' this label stands above one's name, city, and ethnicity (1.21). Deriving from this anxiety, *Lyons* also shows a prominent concern for the weakness of the body. This thesis will employ the methods of rhetorical criticism and gender analysis to examine *Lyons*; the former method will allow a methodical study of the letter's anxieties and objectives, which, when hand-in-hand with the latter method, will demonstrate how Blandina's authoritative, gendered transformations are the means by which the letter's rhetorical goals are endeavoured. These methods will allow me to argue convincingly that Blandina's spectacle in the arena ("sight") provides a drastic, hyperbolic example that demonstrates that any Christian has the capability to become a powerful Christian martyr. Blandina's body becomes an instrument that is inscribed by the language of the text and manipulated to strengthen adherence to a Christian identity ("site").

The first chapter will contextualize early Christian martyrdom by bringing together some of the vast scholarship on the subject. I will look at the leading theories regarding the discourse of martyrdom through two major frameworks: the construction of identity by means of martyr narratives and the dynamics of power in the performance of martyrdom. Martyrologies are constructed, highly rhetorical stories of persecution, and *Lyons* needs to be approached and understood as such. The second part of this chapter will summarize *Lyons* in more detail and I will explore the martyrology within the context of Eusebius' *Hist. eccl*. I will advocate that the preservation of *Lyons* within a fourth-century text does not posit any major concerns that would problematize reading *Lyons* as a second-century production.

In my second chapter, I will use aspects of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's understanding of rhetorical criticism and apply it to *Lyons*.[15] With every martyrological account, there lies a rhetorical purpose for preserving its events in writing. By setting up the rhetorical interests of the author of *Lyons*, I will be able to argue that Blandina is a crucial component of his rhetoric. Rhetorical criticism will allow me to explain in the following chapter why the letter wishes to represent the female slave through three different personas, and to what end.

In my third chapter, I will give some important considerations regarding the construction and understanding of sex and gender in antiquity, while also arguing that modern approaches to gender and sex need to be considered because contemporary understanding of these concepts undoubtedly shapes the manner in which scholars approach sex and gender in ancient sources. I will rely heavily on the monumental work of Thomas Lacqueur.[16] An understanding of sex and gender in antiquity will allow me to closely analyze each appearance independently in order to contextualize them within an early Christian and ancient Greco-Roman discourse.

In the fourth and final chapter, I will bring the three metamorphoses together in order to understand how they act as an interlocking complex to realize the rhetorical aims of the letter. Martyrologies are tools of propaganda and therefore women, such as Blandina, need to be understood within such a context. By arguing that Blandina's portrayal in *Lyons* is highly influenced by its rhetoric,

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[15] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Rhetorical Situation and Historical Reconstruction in 1 Corinthians." *Rhetoric and Ethic: The Politics of Biblical Studies*. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999) 105-128.
[16] Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).

such a thesis will allow me to challenge some of the scholarly developments regarding female Christian martyrs. For instance, some scholars have attempted to reconstruct 'woman' and women's roles in early Christianity from martyrologies. I will argue that Blandina is an excellent example of why martyrologies are inadequate tools for such reconstruction. I will disagree with scholars who argue that martyr narratives promote a means of liberation from or resistance to the gender stereotypes of the prevailing Hellenistic culture. Martyrologies are employing a masculine discourse not to challenge stereotypes, but because it is the necessary discourse to adopt in order to speak the language of martyrdom. It is necessary to question both how martyrologies are informing our knowledge of early Christianity and what modern scholarship on martyrdom informs us about today's reader. The case of Blandina will allow me to approach such a topic.

CHAPTER I – Context and Text

As one of the earliest Christian martyrologies, *Lyons* wishes to construct and perpetuate its own ideology of martyrdom. The author of this text shows special concern for the terminology of martyrdom as well as with the creation of a hierarchical structure of martyrs.[1] He is participating in a second-century conceptual dialogue which revolves around understanding the arrests and defining the deaths of Christian community members. One of the ways in which the author deals with the situation is to honour these persecuted Christians by wresting meaning out of their deaths. In turn, by giving more honour to some deaths over others, he is also shaping his understanding of what defines a martyr and what defines a superior martyr.

The second century presents a significant shift in the concept of martyrdom and in the use of the term μάρτυς, the Greek word from which we derive our term 'martyr.' μάρτυς is translated simply as "witness" in the *LSJ*,[2] and may have meant "witness" in a judicial sense,[3] or it could also be understood in the sense of an observer.[4] The majority of scholars will agree that the term μάρτυς, understood as one who chooses death rather than renouncing his or her beliefs, and whose persecution usually demands witnesses, was used in this sense

[1] For simplicity's sake, I will refer to the author in masculine terms, as the probability is higher that the author was male. I will discuss issues of authorship and sex in chapter four.
[2] Liddell, Scott, and Jones, *LSJ*, 1082AB.
[3] Ben Witherington III states that μάρτυς "came to connote a guarantor of the truth about something." In *Revelation*. (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 67.
[4] Such a use can be observed in the New Testament where one who observed the resurrection of Christ was identified as a μάρτυς (cf. Acts 1:8, 22; 2:32; etc.). See: Charles Freeman, *A New History of Early Christianity*. (New Haven, CT; London: Yale University Press, 2009) 205-6.

from the second century onwards.[5] This change in the meaning of μάρτυς does not mean that the concept of martyrdom was nonexistent before the second century,[6] but rather, early Christians were shaping the use of μάρτυς to become a term with which they could communicate and identify the experiences of persecution undergone by some community members.

Although the idea of martyrdom existed before the Christian movement, Candida R. Moss argues that a full-fledged concept of martyrdom was first developed among the early Christians. The ideology of martyrdom took on a specific significance in Christianity.[7] Many scholars have looked to the second-century *Martyrdom of Polycarp*[8] to discuss the shift and development of the concept of martyrdom,[9] but I argue that *Lyons*, as a second-century text, also emerges within this flux and participates in the redefining of μάρτυς.

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[5] Glen Warren Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*. (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 17; Paul Middleton, *Radical Martyrdom and Cosmic Conflict in Early Christianity*. (London; New York: T&T Clark, 2006) 10. Candida R. Moss acknowledges this academic tendency in *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, 3.

[6] The tendency by some scholars to understand martyrdom as beginning at the moment when μάρτυς is compatible with the modern definition of 'martyr' has been challenged by Moss in *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*. She is wary of accepting this linguistic transformation as "a fait accompli in the second century," (3) arguing that "in using a modern definition of martyr to gauge important linguistic and ideological shifts, we write a history of linguistic victors" (5). Some scholars, such as Frend, trace the concept of martyrdom within Judaism, citing the books of the Maccabees and Daniel as strong examples of Jewish martyr narratives, which would later "influence the Christian theology of righteous suffering." In *Martyrdom and Persecution*, 47. Other scholars, including Moss, list the noble or heroic deaths of Greco-Roman figures, such as "Achilles, Athenian funeral orations, the tragedies of Euripides, and the deaths of the philosophers, most notably the iconic figure of Socrates," as having influenced ancient ideas regarding self-sacrifice. In *The Other Christs: Imitating Jesus in Ancient Christian Ideologies of Martyrdom*. (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010) 10.

[7] Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, 1.

[8] The *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, written around 150, is often recognized as one of the earliest Christian martyrologies, if not the earliest. See: Shelly Matthews, *Perfect Martyr: The Stoning of Stephen and the Construction of Christian Identity*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010) 6.

[9] Although the letters of Ignatius of Antioch, who died in Rome in 107 C.E. according to Eusebius (see: Stephen E. Young, *Jesus Tradition in the Apostolic Fathers: Their Explicit Appeals to the Words of Jesus in Light of Orality Studies*. [Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2011] 158, footnote 23), are earlier than the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, they are apparently "wholly untouched by the language of martyrdom" according to Bowersock. He claims that, if in Ignatius' time the

The rhetoric of *Lyons* is a distinct experiment in defining identity vis-à-vis martyrdom. In order to understand how this letter constructs identity, it may be more useful to think of early Christian martyrdom not as a historical event,[10] but rather as a discourse[11] or as a memory.[12] Such a statement does not deny or question the factuality of early Christian martyrdom, for something undoubtedly did happen within the early communities, and the letters, journals, and various other written accounts narrating such events deal with the reality of what happened, but in this thesis it is not my objective to investigate the historical events of Lyons and Vienne. Rather, I am exploring, through the medium of Blandina, the intended goals of the author of *Lyons* in his preservation and recounting of the events.

In the first part of this chapter, I will summarize a few leading theories developed by scholars who have studied early Christian martyrologies as rhetorical, literary productions. My aim in studying Blandina is to understand what the author of the text wishes to accomplish through his narration of her three personas in the amphitheatre. By understanding how martyrologies are discourses of meaning, it will be easier to understand why it is more suitable and more productive to study and understand Blandina as a tool of rhetoric than it is to

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term μάρτυς had meant martyr as the term is used today, "Ignatius would undoubtedly have availed himself of the word." In *Martyrdom and Rome*, 77.

[10] Elizabeth A. Clark claims that early Christian writings "should be read first and foremost as literary productions before they are read as sources of social data." In *History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004) 159.

[11] Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999) 94; Shelly Matthews, *Perfect Martyr*, 4.

[12] Elizabeth A. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making*. (New York; Chichester, England: Columbia University Press, 2004) 34.

approach her as a historical person.[13] As I will argue in later chapters, the author of *Lyons* has structured his letter in such a fashion so as to highlight Blandina's impressive performance, which aids in fulfilling his rhetorical goals.

PART I – The discourse of martyrdom

In this section, I will explore the leading theories regarding the discourse of martyrdom within two major frameworks: the construction of identity through martyrologies and the dynamics of power in the performance of martyrdom. These theories will demonstrate how early Christian martyrologies shaped the story of persecution to become a much more powerful story about martyrdom. Before beginning, there are a few points I will make here in regards to treating *Lyons* as a discourse. There are three historiographical principles that influence "the relationship of event to discourse."[14] These are enumerated by Shelly Matthews. The author's perspective of the events shapes the historical narrative. On account of this influence, and "because [historical narratives] deal with issues of law, legality, and legitimacy, it is also the case that they are inextricably bound up with issues of authority and the social order." This kind of writing "can be understood as an ideological act." Lastly, historical writing shares commonalities with the language of myth and literature. Matthews explains: "Events in themselves do not possess the qualities of coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure. These formal qualities are imposed upon events by historical

[13] Just as approaching early Christian martyrdom as a discourse does not deny the events themselves, approaching Blandina as a rhetorical tool rather than as a historical person does not deny her historicity or her importance as a martyr, nor does it insinuate that the personas she embodies in the arena are fictional.
[14] Matthews, *Perfect Martyr*, 21.

narratives."[15] Preserving and narrating historical events gives a particular meaning to the events as determined by the interests and goals of the author.

The author has the power to construct reality through text, which, according to Averil Cameron, early Christianity is categorically accountable for doing. In fact, "Christians built themselves a new world."[16] In the case of early Christian martyrdom, the authors of martyrologies shape and lend particular meanings to the deaths of community members by portraying these deaths as martyrdoms. Henten and Avemarie succinctly capture this construction when they state, "[p]eople only become martyrs because others make them so."[17] In a way, martyrdom was a rejection of "the *meaninglessness* of death itself."[18]

1. Martyrdom and the construction of identity

Martyrologies are important literary sources because they are significant sites for the construction of identity among Christians.[19] It is through language that a martyr is created.[20] The representation of the persecuted in these martyr acts is mediated through the social categories and perceptions of early Christian groups. Authors of martyrologies shape these events, these stories, to become events about martyrdom, in contrast to stories about execution or the lions' dinner.[21] They shape the meaning of the events, which shapes the significance of the martyr's death. It becomes a process through which a persecuted Christian's

[15] Matthews, *Perfect Martyr*, 21.
[16] Averil Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire: The Development of Christian Discourse*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991) 21.
[17] Jan Willem van Henten and Friedrich Avemarie, *Martyrdom and Noble Death: Selected Texts from Graeco-Roman, Jewish and Christian Antiquity*. (London; New York: Routledge, 2002) 7.
[18] Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 34. Her italics.
[19] Matthews, *Perfect Martyr*, 7.
[20] Matthews, *Perfect Martyr*, 4.
[21] Boyarin, *Dying for God*, 95.

identity is understood within the framework of martyrdom. Judith Perkins argues that the memory of suffering bodies in early Christian narratives imparts "a self-definition that enabled the growth of Christianity as an institution."[22] So powerful are martyr narratives for the formation of an early Christian identity that early Christian apologist Tertullian famously proclaims in his *Apologeticum* that the blood of the martyr is the seed of the church (ch. 50).

Elizabeth A. Castelli argues that the framework through which early Christians understood martyrdom draws "upon broader metanarratives about temporality, suffering and sacrifice, and identity."[23] By infusing martyrdom with "particular meanings," such as equating suffering with salvation, a discourse of martyrdom emerges.[24] The Christian martyr is represented and understood by early Christians as a suffering body. Suffering becomes a triumphant force in martyrologies. Perkins argues "that the discursive focus in the second century on the suffering body contributed to Christianity's attainment of social power by helping to construct a subject that would be present for its call."[25] In other words, by understanding the deaths of community members as martyrdoms, the authors of martyrologies not only give meaning to these deaths, they create a Christian identity that revolves around this concept of suffering, and attain social power as a consequence of infusing such meanings into these deaths.

Matthews points out that "identities do not emerge whole and contained at fixed points in time but rather are constructed over time through social and

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[22] Judith Perkins, *The Suffering Self: Pain and Narrative Representation in the Early Christian Era*. (London; New York: Routledge, 1995) 12.
[23] Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 25.
[24] Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 34.
[25] Perkins, *The Suffering Self*, 3.

linguistic processes."[26] This is true of Christian identity. Categories of identity and meaning are produced through martyr narratives,[27] among other early Christian writings, and Christians come to understand themselves through such categories and representations.

Daniel Boyarin also explores the construction of identity in martyrologies, stating that such texts "seem to be a particularly fertile site for the exploration of the permeability of the borders between so-called Judaism and so-called Christianity in late antiquity."[28] He argues that scholars before him assumed that Judaism and Christianity are two separate entities already within the early centuries C.E., "a sort of pure Christianity, pure Judaism."[29] Martyrologies should instead be approached as "evidence for the close contact and the impossibility of drawing sharp and absolute distinctions between these communities."[30] Martyrdom was one medium among others through which authors of martyrologies worked to fix the boundaries that would render Judaism as not-Christianity.

In order to construct identity, it demands the juxtaposition to an Other. Identity necessitates difference and so a boundary is created between 'us' and the Other. On this topic, Judith Lieu writes:

> Thus boundedness is integral to the idea of identity, for it is boundaries that both enclose those who share what is common and exclude those who belong outside, that both ensure continuity and coherence, and safeguard against contamination or invasion—or so it seems. It is part of the

[26] Matthews, *Perfect Martyr*, 6.
[27] Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, 17.
[28] Boyarin, *Dying for God*, 21.
[29] Boyarin, *Dying for God*, 96.
[30] Boyarin, *Dying for God*, 117.

> seduction of identity that the encircling boundary appears both given and immutable, when it is neither.[31]

Early Christian martyrologies negotiate such boundaries; they portray Christian community members as innocent victims who are maltreated by the Other. The Other varies from text to text, but this group is oftentimes represented as pagans,[32] Jews,[33] or the devil.[34] This kind of juxtaposition is also present in *Lyons* and will play a role in the text's rhetoric, which I will explore in the next chapter.

2. Martyrdom and the performance of power

As mentioned in the previous section, early Christian martyrologies are interested in narrating the execution of community members in such a way that these become stories about martyrdom. These martyrdoms are oftentimes reported as being staged before viewers in an amphitheatre. Martyrologies are largely interested in demonstrating how Christians suffered in public, before an audience that witnessed their acts. Spectatorship seems to be an indispensable constituent of the martyr narrative;[35] the audience members' screams, jeers, and demands are often reported in these stories. Rarely are deaths in private recounted; however, *Lyons* does mention the strangulation of Christians in prison, but I will later demonstrate how their deaths are narrated with the concern of creating a hierarchy of martyrdom.

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[31] Judith M. Lieu, *Christian Identity in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman World*. (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004) 98.
[32] For example, the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*.
[33] For example, the stoning of St. Stephen as narrated in the Acts of the Apostles. See: Matthews, *Perfect Martyr*.
[34] *The Martyrs of Lyons* accuses "the Evil One" of assaulting the martyrs (1.6). The devil is the principal antagonist in the letter. The devil is oftentimes described as working through pagans and Jews.
[35] According to Castelli, "[m]artyrdom *requires* audience (whether real or fictive)." In *Martyrdom and Memory*, 34. My italics.

Bowersock writes that it is not "in the interest of advancing the case for Christianity to suffer martyrdom in a place where few could witness it." He claims that Christians would show up in urban places on a regular basis to undergo martyrdom.[36] So ingrained is this concept of martyrdom as a public matter that Peter Brown writes: "Many [persecuted Christians] were denied even the dignity of a public death."[37] It was also in the interest of the Roman Empire to make examples of criminals by publicly depicting their punishments and deaths.

Kathleen M. Coleman, in her article "Fatal Charades," studies cases of Roman punitive measures brought against criminals that involved role-play in a theatrical context. Public humiliation was a major aim in punishment. It was an unquantifiable measure that "validate[d] the processes of the law by distancing the onlooker from the criminal and reducing the possibility of a sympathetic attitude towards him on the part of the spectators."[38] The audience's gaze magnified the shame and inferiority of the criminal. The audience was very much a participant in this public performance; "the spectators by their presence endorse[d] the workings of justice, and by their participation they help[ed] to fulfil its aims."[39] Coleman studies how four centuries of performances in the Roman amphitheatre confirm the audience's approval of such punitive means.[40] The audience was fascinated by the spectacle of violence.[41] In fact, it appears that the performance,

[36] Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, 42.
[37] Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988) 141.
[38] Kathleen M. Coleman, "Fatal Charades: Roman Executions Staged as Mythological Enactments." *JRS* 80 (1990): 47.
[39] Coleman, "Fatal Charades," 72.
[40] Coleman, "Fatal Charades," 57.
[41] Coleman, "Fatal Charades," 58.

the torture itself, was the more important function of punishment, and fatality was "almost incidental."[42]

Through such disciplinary measures, imperial Rome exercised and demonstrated its power and superiority. The regime of power in antiquity aimed to make the visibility of the few an example for the many,[43] and the Romans were no exception. The public destruction of a minority of criminals reaffirmed the authority of the Roman Empire. Public torture had "a special significance in ancient societies" because it enabled imperial Rome to manifest its power;[44] the emperor displayed his power over life and death in the amphitheatre.[45]

However, Brent D. Shaw demonstrates that within martyrologies Christians emerged victoriously in this power struggle because of the endurance they exhibited in the arena.[46] Their performance, at least as it is narrated in martyrologies, posed a challenge to imperial authority because it re-conceptualized power. Martyrologies create a universe of meaning where they "provide a means for reconceiving positively the apparent disgrace of the victims of persecution."[47] One of the consequences of this symbolic world created by early Christians is the difficulty that lies in extracting "details about the charges, the numbers, and the processes involved in the early persecutions."[48] As I will demonstrate in the following chapter, the author of *Lyons* is uninterested in the

[42] Coleman, "Fatal Charades," 69.
[43] John B. Thompson, "Social Theory and the Media." *Communication Theory Today*, eds. David Crowley and David Mitchell. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994) 42.
[44] Doron Mendels, *The Media Revolution of Early Christianity: An Essay on Eusebius's* Ecclesiastical History. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub., 1999) 60.
[45] Coleman, "Fatal Charades," 73.
[46] Brent D. Shaw, "Body/Power/Identity: Passions of the Martyrs." *JECS* 4:3 (1996): 311-312.
[47] Lieu, *Christian Identity*, 254.
[48] Lieu, *Christian Identity*, 258.

chronological order of the events he is narrating; he does not explain how stating "I am a Christian" is an offence punishable by death.[49] Instead, the world of the text becomes a medium through which the author wants to honour the arrests and deaths of community members. He does so by shaping their performance in the arena into a powerful, meaningful death – martyrdom.

By understanding suffering as salvation, early Christians disrupted the judicial "circuit of power" of Rome and expressed "a competing theory of power."[50] Early Christian martyrologies are often rife with reversals: the weak find strength through their persecution, the persecutors find loss in their inability to easily defeat the Christians, and Christians aid the 'weak' and 'incapable' persecutors in completing their task of ending the Christian's life. This tendency of reversal is present in *Lyons*, for instance, when Blandina's torturers declare that they are themselves defeated (1.18).

Many martyrologies state that the public performance of Christians converted audience members; if these instances are true, it implies that Roman punishment ultimately failed and even worked against imperial authority. Whether these instances are fictional or not, martyrologies narrate the subversion of hegemonic powers; even if this subversion is only in the world of the text,

[49] *The Martyrs of Lyons* is not the only martyrology to avoid such an explanation. According to Lawrence Cunningham, "[i]f we look at both the pagan and Christian accounts of the persecutions from the earliest period, it seems that the very name (*nomen*) 'Christian' was sufficient to trigger the punitive arm of Roman justice." In "Christian Martyrdom: A Theological Perspective." *Witness of the Body: The Past, Present, and Future of Christian Martyrdom*, eds. Michael L. Budde and Karen Scott. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub., 2011) 7.
[50] Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 48.

martyrologies provide "a language of, and hence a means for, resistance to those facing similar violent circumstances."[51]

Early Christian martyrologies construct the story of persecution to become a story of martyrdom;[52] therefore, the manner in which the authors of these martyr acts approach and narrate the events is highly rhetorical. As Castelli points out, such texts "require approaches that treat them in their textuality rather than approaches that presume their documentary status."[53] For this reason, I will analyze *Lyons* and Blandina's performance from a rhetorical perspective. Before doing so, the second part of this chapter will summarize and contextualize *Lyons* and I will make a few remarks in regards to the martyrology's preservation in the fourth-century *Hist. eccl*.

PART II – *The Martyrs of Lyons and Vienne* and Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*

1. Summary of *The Martyrs of Lyons and Vienne*

This section will only be a brief outline of *Lyons*, given that considerable portions of the text will be looked at in closer detail in subsequent chapters. *Lyons* opens by addressing its audience: "The slaves of Christ sojourning in Vienne and Lyons of Gaul to the siblings throughout Asia and Phrygia who hold our same faith and hope regarding redemption" (1.3). The letter immediately references the oppression experienced in Lyons and Vienne at the hands of τὰ ἔθνη, "the gentiles" or "the pagans." It is not entirely clear why the Christians of the Lyons

[51] Matthews, *Perfect Martyr*, 4.
[52] Castelli writes that "[o]ne might even go so far as to argue that they did not simply *preserve* the story of persecution and martyrdom but, in fact, *created* it." In *Martyrdom and Memory*, 25. Her italics.
[53] Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 26.

and Vienne communities are persecuted.[54] The text indicates in verse 1.5 that Christians begin to be excluded from certain public spaces: they are shut out of their homes, the baths, and the public square. This harassment appears to be local. In verses 1.7-9, after some indeterminate amount of time, Christians are attacked physically by an enraged mob, dragged to the forum, and interrogated by the tribune and city authorities.

Although the text gives no historical pretext for the targeting of these Christians,[55] it understands and embeds these events in apocalyptic significance. The author of *Lyons* presents the persecution as a "prelude to [Christ's] imminent final coming," where the opponent, the persecutors, are "preparing and training his own against the slaves of God" (1.5). In verse 6, the martyrs are assaulted by "the Evil One," but through their torture, they illustrate that "the sufferings of the present time are not worthy to be compared to the coming glory which will be revealed for us" (cf. Romans 8:18). The devil is the principal antagonist in the letter and "[t]he language of victory is most consistently connected to the defeat of Satan."[56] The martyrs' bodies become the site for a cosmic war between Christ and Satan.[57]

[54] At the time *Lyons* is written, there was no imperial persecution against the Christians, and there would be none until the fourth century. See: Frederick W. Weidmann, "The Martyrs of Lyons," 399.
[55] James H. Oliver and Robert E.A. Palmer speculate that a ten-year plague that swept across the empire may have heightened the suspicion that old gods were being neglected and therefore Christians' refusal to make an offer to the idols posed as a much more noticeable threat. In "Minutes of an Act of the Roman Senate." *Hesperia* 24 (1955): 327.
[56] Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, 114.
[57] Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, 108.

The Christians of Lyons and Vienne may have been accused of atheism, a charge not uncommonly made against early Christians.[58] Vettius Epagathus makes "a defense on behalf of the siblings that neither atheism nor impiety was to be found among us" (1.9). Some of the standard accusations made against Christians are present in *Lyons*: "they falsely alleged against us Thyestean feasts and Oedipean sexual intercourse and such things as for us it is neither appropriate to speak about or to think about, or even to believe might ever happen among human beings" (1.14). The refusal "to swear by the idols" (1.53) may also have been a factor in their persecution.

The letter recounts in detail the excessive and dramatic torments undergone by ninety-year-old Pothinus, the church administer of Lyons; the deacon Sanctus of Vienne; Marturus, a newly baptized Christian; Attalus of Pergamene descent; among various other Christians, and of course, Blandina. In the narration of Sanctus' experience in the arena, it is clear that the term 'Christian' comes to represent "an ultimate, a non-negotiable, identity that even redefines familial and other social roles."[59] Sanctus confesses to being Christian "in place of name, city, ethnicity, and everything otherwise" (1.21).

The author of *Lyons* is not reluctant in detailing the tortures: the bodies of the Christians are broken, opened, and burned; they are dragged, they suffer blows, undergo the gauntlet of whips, are exposed to the beasts, and are placed on the iron seat. Moss notes that there is a division at work in this text between pain and suffering. These two terms are often viewed as synonymous, yet according to

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[58] Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity: The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation. Volume I*. Revised and Updated. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2010) 47.
[59] Lieu, *Christian Identity*, 255.

the logic of this letter, "they are clearly demarcated from one another."[60] For instance, in verse 23, one reads in regards to Sanctus: "In him Christ, while suffering, was achieving great glory, rendering the opponent idle and showing, for the example of others, that there is nothing fearful where the Father's love is, neither is there anything painful where the glory of Christ is." Suffering in Christ is not the equivalent of experiencing pain. In fact, in the following verse, we read that "not punishment but cure was what, through the grace of Christ, the second torture became for him" (1.24).

After the tortures of these Christians culminate in their deaths, their bodies are next burned and their ashes swept into the Rhone River. The letter ends by confirming the glory of the martyrs. They are "emulators and imitators of Christ," and by means of the tortures they have undergone, they have made their testimony "not once, or even twice, but many times" (2.2). Surprisingly, the text mentions how these martyrs "neither pronounced themselves martyrs, nor did they leave it to us to address them by this label; on the contrary, if any one of us ever in a letter or in speech called them martyrs, they rebuked that one severely" (2.2-3). Christ is understood as the true martyr.

The persecution of Lyons and Vienne "was the greatest battle for them" (2.6) and the persecuted were "departing to God as victors in everything." In their departure, they left no affliction, "but rather joy, peace, harmony, and love" (2.7). The letter, at least as it is preserved in Eusebius' *Hist. eccl.*, ends here.

[60] Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, 110.

2. Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*

Eusebius' fourth-century *Hist. eccl.* is the only source for the second-century letter *Lyons*. Eusebius was a Roman historian and Christian polemicist.[61] His *Hist. eccl.* is a chronological account of the history of the Christian church from its beginnings in the first centuries, starting with the apostles, and ends with Eusebius' own period in the fourth-century. This work is interested in the successions of bishops in the principal sees, martyrdom, heresies, the history of Christian teachers, and more. Martyr stories occupy a rather large share of the work. Eusebius divides his *Hist. eccl.* into ten books; each book is divided into various chapters, and includes summaries before each book. The books are not consistent in size, which likely demonstrates "a division based on contents" rather than a "quantitative division."[62] Eusebius incorporates "copious quotations"[63] from a variety of sources, especially letters, into his account. Eusebius includes *Lyons* as a letter, from which he claims to quote directly. He incorporates lengthy extracts from the epistle and includes some of his own editorial comments between quotations.

Lyons is undoubtedly one of the focal texts in the *Hist. eccl.* and it receives quite a bit of attention by Eusebius. Marie Verdoner confirms the importance of this letter in the *Hist. eccl.*; it "can be ascribed a certain value, both due to the placement as well as the emphasis given to the event by the separate

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[61] Timothy D. Barnes argues that Eusebius was primarily a biblical scholar, but circumstances, such as instances of persecution, demanded that he become a Christian apologist. In *Constantine and Eusebius*. (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1981) 164.
[62] Marie Verdoner, *Narrated Reality: The* Historia ecclesiastica *of Eusebius of Caesarea*, ed. David Brakke, Anders-Christian Jacobsen, and Jörg Ulrich. (Frankfurt; New York: Peter Lang, 2011) 39.
[63] Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 128.

introduction."[64] Located in Book V, *Lyons* takes up all of chapter one and a small portion of chapter two. It is positioned in the middle of Eusebius' work and takes up about a third of the fifth book.

From a rhetorical-critical perspective, transmission of this letter may pose a problem, for it is embedded in Eusebius' view of history. The letter is preserved for posterity by a church historian who has his own motivations in keeping a copy of this letter. His history seeks to construct, instruct, and convince. Eusebius indicates that he repeats here portions of the account as may be *needful* for the present purpose. Additions or modifications may have been made to the original letter.[65] One example that demonstrates the difficulties in approaching this text are Eusebius' contradictions in dating the martyrology. Moss remarks that his "own inconsistencies make the events recorded by this single source difficult to date: in the *Chronicon*, he dates the persecution to 166-167; in the *Eccl.His.*, to 177." The latter date is the generally accepted one.[66]

It is necessary to consider whether or not Eusebius edited *Lyons* because this may alter or even change the rhetoric of the original letter. By means of this thesis, I am analyzing *Lyons* in order to explore some of the gender and martyr dialogue of the second-century. I will argue below that, although Eusebius' *Hist. eccl.* is a fourth-century text, *Lyons* can nevertheless be approached as a second-century production. I will spend the rest of this chapter identifying some concerns

[64] Verdoner, *Narrated Reality*, 44. Barnes also confirms the letter's importance within Eusebius' work: "Eusebius gives the episode both emphasis and prominence: it begins Book Five of the *History* and leads him to reflect on the nature of Christian historiography." In *Constantine and Eusebius*, 137.
[65] Dehandschutter, "A Community of Martyrs," 5-6.
[66] Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, 103.

regarding Eusebius as a historian and will consider the concept of history writing in antiquity.

Eusebius of Caeserea was born in the third century, possibly between 260 and 265, and died somewhere between 337 and 340. He likely had a traditional Greek education, probably in Palestine,[67] where he became bishop around the year 313. His *Hist. eccl.* was written at the beginning of the fourth century, and was probably published in two or more editions.[68] Eusebius may have started compiling some of the books as early as the end of the third century;[69] the first edition(s) may have included fewer volumes.[70] Therefore his work is likely a long-term production.

Eusebius compiled his own history of Christianity, perhaps in emulation of Jewish historian Josephus,[71] but some scholars have found the title of 'historian' to be an unsuitable designation for this author. His writings are often received by scholars as being far from objective. Jacob Burckhardt accused him as "the first thoroughly dishonest historian of antiquity."[72] Doron Mendels maintains that Eusebius' "rhetoric is not neutral," his understanding of "history is a patchwork of imaginative information," and his stories are "both apocryphal and real."[73] Mendels thinks that Eusebius writes "more like a modern journalist or editor" than a historian. Barnes acknowledges some of Eusebius' flaws, recognizing that

[67] Verdoner, *Narrated Reality*, 31.
[68] Verdoner, *Narrated Reality*, 37.
[69] Timothy D. Barnes, "The Editions of Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*." *GRBS* 21:2 (1980): 200.
[70] Barnes, "The Editions," 199.
[71] Anthony Grafton, *What was History? The Art of History in Early Modern Europe*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 108.
[72] Quoted in Michael J. Hollerich, "Religion and Politics in the Writings of Eusebius: Reassessing the First 'Court Theologian.'" *CH* 59:3 (1990): 309.
[73] Mendels, *Media Revolution*, 20.

when the Christian polemicist paraphrases, he sometimes misreports or changes the emphasis of the original document. When Eusebius quotes directly from his sources, he occasionally cuts the quotations in the middle of a sentence, thereby sometimes misrepresenting his source.[74]

Eusebius acknowledges quite openly that he is deciding what people need to know or what they should disregard (VIII, 2:2-3).[75] Mendels states that *Hist. eccl.* therefore "looks more like a modern newspaper than a linear, Thucydidean history."[76] He claims that martyrdom's substantial role in the *Hist. eccl.* is due to its status as "newsworthy."[77] Eusebius' works are among the media channels the Christian church used in order to convey its strength;[78] Eusebius' history has an important purpose and it wishes "to produce a relevant history of Christianity."[79]

It is beneficial to pause here to look at the concept of history writing in antiquity in order to situate Eusebius and his *Hist. eccl.* within their historical context. The concept of historiography varies greatly on the time period, culture, and location. In the late antique period in Roman society, history writing was the production of plausible, chronological history through the use of various sources. If there were gaps in sources, then it may have been necessary to offer details that were also plausible. Furthermore, depending on the foci of the author, very different stories were generated. With the advent of Christianity, many scholars

[74] Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 140-41.
[75] Mendels, *Media Revolution*, 3.
[76] Mendels, *Media Revolution*, 20.
[77] Mendels, *Media Revolution*, 30.
[78] Mendels, *Media Revolution*, 4.
[79] Mendels, *Media Revolution*, 21.

distinguish "a distinctly Christian view of history."[80] Historiography became a matter of connecting God and the world. There was a prominent concern for continuity: "history showed a development with a unique beginning, central event, and ultimate goal, told by Scripture."[81] History developed into "the sacred story."[82]

From a source-criticism perspective, Eusebius is a cautious historian for he uses and quotes directly from a wide variety of sources. However, he is ideologically biased in the manner in which he selects, uses, and interprets these sources. Some scholars find Eusebius guilty of reading the Constantinian church back into the time of Peter and Paul.[83] According to Mendels, the reader has "the impression that Christianity spread majestically throughout the world from the outset."[84] Such a manner of reading history is evidently problematic, but the manner in which he reads his sources should not automatically discredit the source material itself. The harsh accusations made against Eusebius' history are being addressed by more recent scholarship. Michael J. Hollerich says that older scholarship's propensity to accuse Eusebius of bad history "seems in retrospect to have been written with one eye focused on the later history of church-state relations, leading to anachronistic portrayals of Eusebius as a kind of court theologian or minister for ecclesiastical affairs."[85] More recent scholars like

[80] Ernst Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, & Modern.* Third Edition. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007) 77.
[81] Breisach, *Historiography*, 78.
[82] Breisach, *Historiography*, 82.
[83] Barnes writes that Eusebius "projected the Church of the late third century back into the first two centuries and assumed that Christian churches had always been numerous, prosperous, and respectable." In *Constantine and Eusebius*, 142.
[84] Mendels, *Media Revolution*, 13.
[85] Hollerich, "Religion and Politics," 312.

Robert M. Grant advocate approaching Eusebius "as a human being, neither a saint nor intentionally a scoundrel."[86]

It would be impossible to argue that any history writing is truly objective. Modern history writing claims and strives to be objective, but simply by making the decision to write about one topic over another, this form of writing is already subjected to personal interests and agendas.[87] By choosing which sources to work with, any historian, including Eusebius, constructs and communicates his understanding of history.[88] Much like my approach to martyrologies, it may be more useful to think of history writing as a discourse or a memory. The memory work completed by Eusebius is a form of culture making;[89] he is choosing which writings, which memories of early Christianity, to preserve. *Hist. eccl.* therefore *is* the history – the memory – of the church, as viewed by Eusebius. Memory is "a particular, socially constructed version of the past,"[90] which is how we should understand historiography. Eusebius is not a dishonest historian; his work, as a production of Christian collective memory, is his, and consequently, Christianity's history.

Although Eusebius clearly had his motivations in preserving *Lyons* in his work, it is extremely difficult to pinpoint any modifications he may have made to the letter. He proceeds by quoting large portions of the text and only making

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[86] Robert M. Grant, *Eusebius as Church Historian*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980) 164.
[87] Denis McQuail, in his study of media, states that one can recognize an "open, but unintentional, bias in the *selection* of topics, events and news angles." Quoted in Mendels, *Media Revolution*, 19. Italics already in text. Mendels suggests that McQuail's research can be applied to the study of ancient historiography.
[88] According to Barnes, Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History* "reflects the interests and the limitations of its author." In *Constantine and Eusebius*, 140.
[89] Castelli's *Martyrdom and Memory* explores the formation of memory by early Christians in its relation to culture making.
[90] Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 12.

marginal comments. He does not summarize the letter itself, but quotes verbatim excerpts of the letter that are important for his present purpose; this word-for-word reproduction "confers a relatively high degree of credibility of the information."[91] Paul Keresztes writes: "there is nothing in this moving description of the Lugdunum [Lyons] tragedy that would discredit the historical value of what we have, thanks to Eusebius' transmission, of the original document."[92] I agree with Kereszetes; very few scholars accuse *Lyons* of being false and of those who do, not many scholars are convinced by their arguments.[93] For this reason, I will treat and analyze *Lyons* as a second-century literary text, which means the author's portrayal of Blandina will be explored and contextualized within a second-century dialogue.

[91] Mendels, *Media Revolution*, 29.
[92] Keresztes, "The Massacre at Lugdunum," 75.
[93] One scholar to make such an accusation is Thompson in "The Alleged Persecution."

CHAPTER II – The Rhetoric of *The Martyrs of Lyons and Vienne*

This thesis seeks to understand the authoritative, gendered metamorphoses of Blandina in the amphitheatre. In order to accomplish such an analysis it is necessary to first identify the rhetorical concerns of the author of this text. Such an approach will allow me to discern the letter's prominent interest in deniers and martyrs. I will later demonstrate how Blandina's portrayal is intertwined in this interest and I will describe the intended results. Martyrologies are highly rhetorical texts, and I will explore how the metamorphoses undergone by this female slave are narrated and constructed with a specific purpose.

It is highly doubtful that the sole concern of the author of *Lyons* in penning this letter is to recount the details of a specific historical event. The author is inconsistent, or perhaps put more accurately, he is uninterested in the chronological order of the events. For instance, it is unclear how long the arrests take place in the two communities. In *Lyons* 1.13, no conclusive time frame is given: "day after day the worthy ones were being arrested." At times it is ambiguous whether the Christians who are currently confessing are newly arrested members, or are part of the Christians who have already confessed and are confirming their confessions. Furthermore, several of the martyrs narrated in this text make an appearance in the amphitheatre on more than one occasion. However, when one tries to map out precisely which round of torture the Christian is entering (first round? third instance?), it becomes less and less

apparent. Sanctus, Maturus,[1] Attalus, and Blandina enter the arena in 1.17, but no description is given of the tortures of Maturus and Attalus until later in the text, when they are led anew in the arena. It is unclear whether they were even tortured in the first instance, although it is probable, and whether a consistent number of tortures is applied to each Christian. Are Blandina and Sanctus being tortured more than the other Christians, taking into account that each are described as having undergone three separate rounds of torture? Or are their tortures being narrated in more detail in *Lyons* because these two figures are of special interest to the author? Such observations demonstrate that this martyrology is not interested in precisely relating historical details. The author of *Lyons* wishes to accomplish something more in his narration of its martyrs, and as I will argue later, especially in his narration of Blandina.

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza specifies that rhetorical criticism is focused "on the persuasive power and literary strategies of a text that have a communicative function in a concrete historical situation." Such a rhetorical discourse is produced by a particular situation that invites a response among its audience, drawing out certain kinds of emotions, principles, and identifications that invite the possibility of altering the situation. Rhetoric attempts to convince its reader "to *act rightly*."[2] By narrating the deaths of Christian martyrs in the communities of Lyons and Vienne, what kind of reaction is the author of *Lyons*

[1] The names Sanctus ("Mr. Holy") and Maturus ("Mr. Martyr") can easily be interpreted in a symbolic way; it is convenient that these Christians hold such names. Their names may further demonstrate the highly rhetorical nature of *Lyons*, where the author has carefully constructed his perception of the events at Lyons and Vienne by giving nicknames or special titles to some of the Christians he wishes to specially honour. In regards to Blandina's name, see footnote 51 on page 73.

[2] Schüssler Fiorenza, "Rhetorical Situation," 108. Her italics.

wishing to elicit from his audience? How is the portrayal of Blandina's metamorphoses in the arena engaging the audience and to what end?

I have divided this chapter into three parts. The first section will discuss how *Lyons* presents and approaches the subject of Christian deniers. The second section will observe how the letter constructs a type of hierarchy of martyrs in which each Christian is positioned. Lastly, I will discuss the relationship the letter constructs between the deniers and the martyrs. As an extraordinary martyr, Blandina holds a special position and influence in this relationship.

1. Dealing with deniers

When detailing some of the features of *Lyons* in the previous chapter, I purposefully did not acknowledge one of its central characteristics, if not its most important one. Without a doubt, *Lyons* is primarily concerned with Christians who deny or recant a previous confession when under the pressure of torture. I wish to observe this feature now because it is tightly intertwined with the rhetorical aims of this martyrology.

In *Lyons* 1.11, a division is established between the first martyrs, who appear to be included in the first person plural subject, or "we" of the text, and those who failed in their confession, about ten in number (ὧν καὶ ἐξέτρωσαν ὡς δέκα τὸν ἀριθμόν), who form the third person plural subject, or "they" of the text. The text reads:

> ἐντεῦθεν δὴ διεκρίνοντο οἱ λοιποί καὶ φανεροὶ οἱ ἕτοιμοι ἐγίνοντο πρὸς τὸ μαρτυρεῖν οἳ καὶ μετὰ πάσης προθυμίας ἀνεπλήρουν τὴν ὁμολογίαν τῆς μαρτυρίας ἐφαίνοντο δὲ καὶ οἱ ἀνέτοιμοι καὶ ἀγύμναστοι καὶ ἔτι ἀσθενεῖς ἀγῶνος μεγάλου τόνον ἐνεγκεῖν μὴ δυνάμενοι ὧν καὶ ἐξέτρωσαν ὡς δέκα τὸν ἀριθμόν οἳ καὶ μεγάλην λύπην καὶ πένθος ἀμέτρητον ἐνεποίησαν ἡμῖν καὶ τὴν προθυμίαν τῶν λοιπῶν τῶν μὴ συνειλημμένων ἐνέκοψαν

> Thereupon, those remaining became distinguished from each other; the first martyrs who were clearly ready and who were fulfilling the confession of martyrdom with all enthusiasm, and those who appeared unready, untrained, and still weak, not being able to bear a straining of a great contest, of whom about ten in number even aborted. These effected in us great grief and immeasurable sorrow, and cut off the enthusiasm of the others who had not been arrested (1.11).

Denial is understood in two ways here. First, it is seen as a failure in training and strength; these Christians are unable to face the strain of the conflict because they have not properly prepared themselves to allow for a full confession. This feature may confirm a notion in early Christianity that Christians needed to train themselves for the prospect of martyrdom. Moreover, denial not only affects the Christians who have failed in their confession, but affects the morale of the entire Christian group. The deniers are narrated as having caused great grief and mourning among the other Christians and they have also hindered the zeal of those who have not yet been arrested.

In 1.12, those who have confessed are concerned with the possibility that the non-arrested members of their group may falter in their confessions (τὸ ἄδηλον τῆς ὁμολογίας). Denial is a central concern to this group and becomes a greater fear than martyrdom itself.

> In verse 25, a Christian denier is explicitly identified. The text reads:
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> καὶ Βιβλίδα δέ μίαν τῶν ἠρνημένων ἤδη δοκῶν ὁ διάβολος καταπεπω-κέναι θελήσας δὲ καὶ διὰ βλασφημίας κατακρῖναι ἦγεν ἐπὶ κόλασιν ἀναγκάζων εἰπεῖν τὰ ἄθεα περὶ ἡμῶν ὡς εὔθραυστον ἤδη καὶ ἄνανδρον
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> As for Biblis (one of those who had denied), the Devil, who was thinking to have put her in check already and was further wishing to condemn her through blasphemy, led her to punishment, necessitating that she say the ungodly about us, as though she were an easily broken and now cowardly thing.

In verse 11, the Christians who do not confess are described as failing in their confession. It is in this passage concerning Biblis that the language of denial (the verb ἀρνέομαι) is first used. She is one among the group of deniers (μίαν τῶν ἠρνημένων). This passage establishes that denial is the result of the devil's work. In verse 26, the audience is informed that Biblis becomes conscious of the situation "as if to say she awakened out of a deep sleep." She then confesses (Χριστιανὴν ἑαυτὴν ὠμολόγει) and is added to the ranks of the martyrs (τῷ κλήρῳ τῶν μαρτύρων).

Having recognized that the act of denial is an active possibility among some of the Christians who are arrested, *Lyons* then seeks to demonstrate the nonsensicality of such an action. The text reads:

> Those who became deniers (ἔξαρνοι γενόμενοι) at the first arrest were themselves confined and shared in the terrors. At this time denial (ἐξάρνησις) was no advantage. Rather, the ones confessing (οἱ μὲν ὁμολογοῦντες) that which they were, were confined as Christians (no other charge being forwarded against them), while the others were held as murderers and foul creatures, being punished twice as much as the rest (1.33).

The text makes clear that denying one's Christian identity does not result in any kind of advantage or escape from pain. In fact, it worsens it! Martyrdom is understood positively in verse 1.34, where it is associated with joy (ἡ χαρὰ τῆς μαρτυρίας). A firm separation is made between those who deny and those who confess. Those who deny find themselves, according to the author of *Lyons*, in a much worse situation than had they confessed in the first place. Martyrdom is a more agreeable event in contrast to denial.

As the letter nears its end, there is an unexpected switch in attitude towards deniers in 1.45-48. The earlier reproach, which figured so strongly, is

now softened. The text reads: μάρτυρες τοῖς μὴ μάρτυσιν ἐχαρίζοντο, "the martyrs were supplying grace to those who did not make testimony" (v.45).[3] The ones who did confess to being Christian are able to intervene on the behalf of deniers. It would not be unthinkable to reason that Blandina also provided prayers, for she has already made her confession at this point in the text and is therefore, according to the logic of *Lyons*,[4] one among the martyrs.

In verse 46, the text reads:

> For it is by the martyrs that most of the deniers (τῶν ἠρνημένων) were measuring themselves, and were conceiving again and coming alive again, and were learning to confess (ἐμάνθανον ὁμολογεῖν). And now living and braced up, they proceeded to the governor's judgment seat cheered by a God who does not wish for the death of a sinner [cf. Ezek. 33:11] but is kind with regard to repentance, in order that they might again be questioned by the governor.

Birth language is used in connection to confession. Denial is understood as a kind of abortion; in verse 45, the virgin mother miscarries or aborts the deniers (οὓς ὡς νεκροὺς ἐξέτρωσε), but is receiving them back alive with their present confessions (τούτους ζῶντας ἀπολαμβανούσῃ). In other words, those who had denied are again brought to birth. Those who encourage the Christians to confess are themselves seen as undergoing labour. Alexander the Phrygian is described in this manner in 1.49: "[Alexander] was advancing to the judgment seat and by signals encouraging them in their confession. He appeared as though in labor to those standing around the judgment seat." As he urges the Christians to make their confession, he appears as one who is giving birth.

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[3] The verb χαρίζομαι can also mean "say *or* do something agreeable" and "show favour *or* kindness." In Liddell, Scott and Jones, *LSJ*, 1978AB.

[4] The title of 'martyr' does not insinuate death, but rather imminent death in *Lyons*. This topic will be examined in the next section of this chapter.

Much like there is an unanticipated switch in attitude towards deniers near the end of *Lyons*, there is also a change of attitude on the part of the imperial power. The emperor now claims that "if particular ones were to deny, these were to be let go" (1.47). This clemency should entice any weak Christians to deny, but it is counterbalanced by a greater appeal in verse 48: "Christ was greatly glorified by those who had formerly denied but then made their confession." Although there is now incentive for denial, it is no longer an option for these Christians. Instead, confession and its consequences are to be embraced in order to demonstrate one's faith and in order to gain "a perception of the bridal garment, or a concept of the fear of God" (1.48).

The author of *Lyons* leaves out living deniers. He narrates the successful confessions of Christians, but gives no further indication of those deniers who continued to renounce. This loophole may be intentional. It may well be the case that Christian deniers were released and did not face any (more) tortures. This being said, it would not be in the rhetorical interests of the author to discuss such instances and so nothing is said of them in *Lyons*.

The author of *Lyons* employs deliberative discourse in order to achieve his rhetorical aims. Deliberative rhetoric has a goal of persuading "the audience to take action for the future and to believe that this action is in its best interest."[5] Through his use of fear, the author of *Lyons* creates the choice between two ends, confession or increased torture through denial, and he wishes to persuade his audience that the best action one can undertake in a similar instance is to confess one's identity as a Christian. Denial does not provide any advantage. The author

[5] Schüssler Fiorenza, "Rhetorical Situation," 114.

also uses the martyrs and their performance in order to communicate and influence his audience to act in a similar way if martyrdom becomes a reality for them. This observation leads me to the next section of this chapter: how does *Lyons* understand the role of martyrs and where does Blandina fit in this martyr construction?

2. Martyr construction

As I mentioned above, the author of *Lyons* creates a strong binary opposition between those who confess and those who deny. The rhetoric of the text is interested in not only promoting confession over denial, but also rendering confession as the only logical option when faced with torture. Once confession has been established, the author of the text then seeks to understand and situate such a Christian within some kind of organized body or system. The author creates for himself a hierarchy of martyr terminology. I am arguing here that the author of *Lyons*, by situating the Christian's death within a hierarchy, is attempting to understand this persecution and acknowledge the Christian's arrest and death. In other words, the persecution of Lyons and Vienne is a messy situation and the author is trying to make sense of it by honouring those Christians who were persecuted.

2.1 Constructing ὁ κλήρος τῶν μαρτύρων

The author of *Lyons* creates a special title for the group of persecuted Christians he wishes to recognize: ὁ κλήρος τῶν μαρτύρων, or "lot of the martyrs." It is a term used almost from the onset of the text. The term κλήρος in Greek means "lot" or "portion," as in those who are chosen or assigned by lot to

do something. The author of the Acts of the Apostles reminds his reader how Judas had been one of the twelve apostles and therefore one of the κλήρος (1:17). His death, however, leaves an opening in the group of twelve apostles. The eleven remaining apostles cast lots for the two nominated men, Joseph called Barsabbas and Matthias, and the κλήρος falls to Matthias. He is added to the eleven apostles (1:26). In Acts, as in *Lyons*, κλήρος is used to designate a specially-designated group of people; ὁ κλήρος τῶν μαρτύρων may be better translated as "the ranks of the martyrs," which is the translation adopted by Musurillo.

In *Lyons*, the first named martyr to be narrated is Vettius Epagathus (1.9-10) and his testimony is described as having been equal to that of the elder Zacharias[6] (ὡς καίπερ ὄντα νέον συνεξισοῦσθαι τῇ τοῦ πρεσβυτέρου Ζαχαρίου μαρτυρίᾳ). He makes his confession (τοῦ δὲ λαμπροτάτῃ φωνῇ ὁμολογήσαντος), with the result that he is added to ὁ κλήρος τῶν μαρτύρων (v.10). The next mention of these ranks is with Biblis (1.25-26), the Christian woman who originally denied and then later confessed herself a Christian. The result of her confession is that she, just like Vettius Epagathus, is added to ὁ κλήρος τῶν μαρτύρων.

The last mention of these ranks is in verse 48. This reference is found in the passage (1.45-48) which teaches deniers how to become martyrs. Those who previously denied have learned to confess and are now confessing, with the result that they are added to the ranks of the martyrs. This passage seems to create a step-by-step guide to martyrdom. The first step is to learn to confess: δι ἐκείνων

[6] Ζαχαρίας is the father of John the Baptist, according to the Gospel of Luke's birth narrative of John (Luke 1).

γὰρ οἱ πλείους τῶν ἠρνημένων ἀνεμετροῦντο καὶ νεκυΐσκοντο καὶ ἀνεζωπυροῦντο καὶ ἐμάνθανον ὁμολογεῖν, "for it is by the martyrs that most of the deniers were measuring themselves, and were conceiving again and coming alive again, and were learning to confess" (1.46). The second step is the act of confessing:

> ἐδοξάζετο δὲ μεγάλως ὁ Χριστὸς ἐπὶ τοῖς πρότερον ἀρνησαμένοις τότε παρὰ τὴν τῶν ἐθνῶν ὑπόνοιαν ὁμολογοῦσιν καὶ γὰρ ἰδίᾳ οὗτοι ἀνητάζοντο ὡς δῆθεν ἀπολυθησόμενοι
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> Christ was greatly glorified by those who had formerly denied but then made their confession contrary to the supposition of the gentiles, for they had been examined separately so that they actually might be let go. Making their confession they were added to the lot of the martyrs (1.48).

Finally, in order to truly prove one's status as a martyr, the Christian must complete the third step, which is to confirm his or her confession: καὶ ὁμολογοῦντες προσετίθεντο τῷ τῶν μαρτύρων κλήρῳ, "making their confession they were added to the lot of the martyrs" (1.48). Once these steps are completed, the Christian can then be added to the martyr ranks. The author of *Lyons* delineates confession as the means of becoming a martyr.

The concept and use of the term ὁ κλήρος τῶν μαρτύρων may suggest that the author of *Lyons* understands these Christians as being predestined to become martyrs. Martyrdom is their allotted charge that they must take up. If this speculation is correct, then it explains the very strong rhetoric against deniers in this letter. Denial should never be an option because it is one's lot or fate to become a martyr. The author of *Lyons* is very deliberate in his use of terms. In the following sections, I will more carefully outline which terms are used and how he uses them in order to commemorate these persecuted Christians.

2.2 Understanding 'martyr' in *The Martyrs of Lyons and Vienne*

In *Lyons*, death is not a necessary component to becoming a martyr. The author labels some of the living, confessed Christians as μάρτυρες. Sanctus is among these Christians. His time in the amphitheatre is first narrated in verses 1.20-24.

> τοσαύτῃ ὑποστάσει ἀντιπαρετάξατο αὐτοῖς ὥστε μήτε τὸ ἴδιον κατειπεῖν ὄνομα μήτε ἔθνους μήτε πόλεως ὅθεν ἦν μήτε εἰ δοῦλος ἢ ἐλεύθερος εἴη ἀλλὰ πρὸς πάντα τὰ ἐπερωτώμενα ἀπεκρίνατο τῇ Ῥωμαϊκῇ φωνῇ Χριστιανός εἰμι τοῦτο καὶ ἀντὶ ὀνόματος καὶ ἀντὶ πόλεως καὶ ἀντὶ γένους καὶ ἀντὶ παντὸς ἐπαλλήλως ὡμολόγει ἄλλην δὲ φωνὴν οὐκ ἤκουσαν αὐτοῦ τὰ ἔθνη
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> He resisted them with such certainty that he did not declare his own name or nationality or from which city he came, not even whether he might be slave or free, but to all the questions he responded in Latin: "I am a Christian." This he confessed in place of name, city, ethnicity, and everything otherwise (v.20).

During his inquisition, he makes his confession. In verse 22, Sanctus is firm in his confession: στερρὸς πρὸς τὴν ὁμολογίαν (the third step in becoming a martyr). His body then becomes a testimony (τὸ δὲ σωμάτιον μάρτυς, v.23) to the tortures he has undergone. μάρτυς is here used in the sense of a witness. In verse 24, the lawless ones are torturing Sanctus, who is identified as a martyr (στρεβλούντων τὸν μάρτυρα). Sanctus is still living, and appears again in later rounds of torture. He does not become a martyr as a result of death; rather his identification as a martyr is made in close connection with his confession. Lieu picks up on this relation when she argues that a Christian identity was enacted in confession: "[I]t is when confronted with the choice of confession or denial that the true commitment for or against identity is made, and so, implicitly, until that moment

there is only potential." It is through confession that a Christian achieves his or her true identity.[7]

In a fascinating passage in chapter two, the Christian confessors are evidently being addressed or referred to by the Christian community as martyrs, but they refuse to accept such a title. The letter reads:

> ὥστε ἐν τοιαύτῃ δόξῃ ὑπάρχοντες καὶ οὐχ ἅπαξ οὐδὲ δὶς ἀλλὰ πολλάκις μαρτυρήσαντες καὶ ἐκ θηρίων αὖθις ἀναληφθέντες καὶ τὰ καυτήρια καὶ τοὺς μώλωπας καὶ τὰ τραύματα ἔχοντες περικείμενα οὔτ αὐτοὶ μάρτυρας ἑαυτοὺς ἀνεκήρυττον οὔτε μὴν ἡμῖν ἐπέτρεπον τούτῳ τῷ ὀνόματι προσαγορεύειν αὐτούς ἀλλ εἴ ποτέ τις ἡμῶν δι ἐπιστολῆς ἢ διὰ λόγου μάρτυρας αὐτοὺς προσεῖπεν ἐπέπλησσον πικρῶς ἡδέως γὰρ παρεχώρουν τὴν τῆς μαρτυρίας προσηγορίαν τῷ Χριστῷ τῷ πιστῷ καὶ ἀληθινῷ μάρτυρι καὶ πρωτοτόκῳ τῶν νεκρῶν καὶ ἀρχηγῷ τῆς ζωῆς τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ ἐπεμιμνήσκοντο τῶν ἐξεληλυθότων ἤδη μαρτύρων καὶ ἔλεγον ἐκεῖνοι ἤδη μάρτυρες οὓς ἐν τῇ ὁμολογίᾳ Χριστὸς ἠξίωσεν ἀναληφθῆναι ἐπισφραγισάμενος αὐτῶν διὰ τῆς ἐξόδου τὴν μαρτυρίαν ἡμεῖς δὲ ὁμόλογοι μέτριοι καὶ ταπεινοί
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> …so that though being in such a state of glory and though making testimony not once, or even twice, but many times, and though brought back again from the beasts having burns, scars, and bruises all around, they neither pronounced themselves martyrs, nor did they leave it to us to address them by this label; on the contrary, if any one of us ever in a letter or in speech called them martyrs, they rebuked that one severely. Gladly did they concede the title of martyr to Christ, the trustworthy and true martyr, firstborn from among the dead and beginning of the life of God. They would also remember the martyrs who had already gone before, and say, "These are already martyrs whom Christ deemed worthy to be taken up at their confession, sealing their martyrdom through their exodus, but we are common and humble confessors" (2.2-3).

These confessed Christians do not deem themselves worthy of being called martyrs. Could this be a reflection of a communal division regarding the usage of 'martyr' as a title? Is this group of Christians refusing to be called martyrs because they are still living? Although it may very well be the case that there was

[7] Judith M. Lieu, *Neither Jew nor Greek? Constructing Early Christianity*. (Edinburgh; New York: T&T Clark, 2002) 213.

some conflict regarding the use of martyr as a title in this time period, the author of *Lyons* is not likely reflecting this type of division here in his letter. Rather, this passage promotes the humbleness of these Christians,[8] which is emphasized twice in this passage. First, when they refer to themselves as "common and humble confessors" (2.3) and secondly, in 2.5, when they are "humbling themselves under the strong hand by which now they are being greatly exalted" (ἐταπείνουν ἑαυτοὺς ὑπὸ τὴν κραταιὰν χεῖρα ὑφ ἧς ἱκανῶς νῦν εἰσιν ὑψωμένοι). This emphasis on their humility makes them even more worthy of being called martyrs. The author of *Lyons* presents these Christians as not undergoing martyrdom for the sake of becoming a martyr or for fame. They are doing it "with the fear of God" (φόβου θεοῦ, 2.4). They have taken up their lot of martyrdom.

In his own understanding of 'martyr,' the author of *Lyons* understands confession as the *means* to martyrdom, whereas death is its outcome or consequence. Neither torture nor death are the necessary components to becoming a Christian martyr. Rather the author of *Lyons* renders confession as its most important constituent.

2.3 Hierarchy of terminology

The author of *Lyons* is fascinated with terminology and with hierarchy and titles. He is compelled to rank every arrested Christian. This obsession is more important than the events themselves. As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, at times there is confusion in the chronology of the events. This disorder

[8] Not unlike the humbleness promoted by Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, in his letter to the Romans when he wishes to dissuade the Christian community in Rome from stopping his persecution at the hands of imperial power. For instance, he writes, "if indeed it be the will of God that I be thought worthy of attaining unto the end" (Ign. *Rom*. 1) and "for indeed I am not worthy, as being the very last of them, and one born out of due time" (9).

is a result of the author's lack of interest in chronology. Rather the author's primary interest lies in categorizing martyrs and placing them in a binary opposition to deniers, in order to dissuade denial. In this section I will observe the hierarchy of martyr terminology.

Firstly, the author of *Lyons* does not label every Christian who confesses or who dies as a result of being Christian as a martyr. Such an instance can be found in verse 27:

> καταργηθέντων δὲ τῶν τυραννικῶν κολαστηρίων ὑπὸ τοῦ Χριστοῦ διὰ τῆς τῶν μακαρίων ὑπομονῆς ἑτέρας μηχανὰς ὁ διάβολος ἐπενόει τὰς κατὰ τὴν εἱρκτὴν ἐν τῷ σκότει καὶ τῷ χαλεπωτάτῳ χωρίῳ συγκλείσεις καὶ τὰς ἐν τῷ ξύλῳ διατάσεις τῶν ποδῶν ἐπὶ πέμπτον διατεινομένων τρύπημα καὶ τὰς λοιπὰς αἰκίας ὅσας εἰώθασιν ὀργιζόμενοι ὑπουργοὶ καὶ ταῦτα διαβόλου πλήρεις διατιθέναι τοὺς ἐγκλειομένους ὥστε ἀποπνιγῆναι τοὺς πλείστους ἐν τῇ εἱρκτῇ ὅσους γε ὁ κύριος οὕτως ἐξελθεῖν ἠθέλησεν ἐπιδεικνύων τὴν αὐτοῦ δόξαν
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> When the punishments of the tyrant had been rendered idle by Christ through the endurance of the martyrs, the Devil thought up other instruments – confinement in prison in the darkest and harshest place, stretching of feet on the stocks hyperextended to the fifth hole, and other assaults as many as attendants, being angry and filled with the things of the Devil, are accustomed to dispatch on the confined – so that most were strangled in prison (as many as the Lord, who was illustrating the self-originating glory, wishes to depart thusly).

It is curious to note that in this passage the author makes mention of Christians who die in prison, an inglorious death. Why would such a death be narrated if the author wishes to propagandize martyrdom? The author may simply be reflecting the reality of the situation; not all arrested Christians died in the arena, but many also died in prison.[9] The Christians who died in prison are not labelled as οἱ μάρτυρες by the author, but are οἱ μακάριοι, or "blessed ones." In his translation,

[9] For instance, in the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*, Secundulus does not make it to the arena, but dies in prison (ch.5).

Weidmann translates οἱ μακάριοι as martyrs, but I argue here that the author of *Lyons* is purposefully not using the term μάρτυρες. To translate the term μακάριος in the same manner as the term μάρτυς does not adequately reflect the distinction the author is trying to establish in the Greek. The author wishes to remember these Christians who have died in prison by marking them as οἱ μακάριοι, but they do not have the same kind of status as those who die before many witnesses in the amphitheatre. The author of *Lyons* is placing οἱ μακάριοι and οἱ μάρτυρες on different echelons in his hierarchy of martyrdom. As for Lake, he translates οἱ μακάριοι in verse 27 as "the blessed saints." The Greek term for saint is ἁγίος and as I explain in more detail below, this term was applied generally to early Christians, therefore in the context of *Lyons*, to translate οἱ μακάριοι as "blessed saints" does not pose any major problems.

Having observed the Greek language carefully, I have been able to extrapolate a hierarchy of martyrdom as understood or created by the author of *Lyons*. He uses the following terms to describe the arrested Christians in his community: οἱ ἁγίοι, or "the holy ones" (1.4, 14, 57); οἱ μακάριοι μάρτυρες, "the blessed martyrs" (1.4, 16), οἱ πρωτομάρτυρες,[10] "the first martyrs" (1.11), οἱ μάρτυρες, "the martyrs" (1.11, 23, 24, 43, 45, 62; 2.2, 3), οἱ μακάριοι, "the blessed ones" (1.27), οἱ ὁμόλογοι, "the confessors" (2.3), and ὁ κλήρος τῶν μαρτύρων, "the ranks of the martyrs" (1.10, 26, 48). There are other individuals added to this hierarchy of martyrdom who are not among the Christians being persecuted in Lyons and Vienne. As I previously mentioned, Christ is situated at

[10] The term πρωτομάρτυρες does not appear in the *TLG* version of Eusebius' *Hist. eccl.*, but exists in other editions of his work. The *PGL*, for instance, cites *Hist. eccl.* 5.1.11 as one of the texts that uses the term (1200B).

the top of this hierarchy in 2.3. There are also "the martyrs who had already passed away" (τῶν ἐξεληλυθότων ἤδη μαρτύρων) who "are already martyrs" (ἤδη μάρτυρες). Lastly, there is Στέφανος ὁ τέλειος μάρτυς, "Stephen, the perfect martyr" (2.5).

ὁ ἁγίος is a term used to speak of Christians in the early communities. Paul uses the term in some of his letters. In Philippians 1:1, he addresses his letter to τοῖς ἁγίοις, "the saints" in Philippi, meaning the members of the Christian community. In the deutero-Pauline letter Ephesus, the author addresses the community in a similar fashion (Ephesians 1:1). In the same letter, deutero-Paul describes how Christ gave the apostles, prophets, and other leaders with the view of perfecting οἱ ἁγίοις, again referring to followers of Christ (4:12). Similar uses of the term can also be found in Philippians 4:21 and Colossians 1:2. According to Lampe, the term is applied to prominent individual saints and categories of saints, among which is the category of martyrs.[11]

The use of οἱ ὁμόλογοι in the Greek patristic works is only found in *Lyons*. The term is used by the martyrs who are refusing the title of martyr, in order to humble themselves, so that they may place themselves below the martyrs that have actually died. As I demonstrated in the first chapter, ὁ μάρτυς can mean witness, martyr or confessor. In *Lyons*, all three meanings are represented. ὁ μάρτυς is used in the sense of witness in 1.23, in the sense of a martyr in 1.45, and in the sense of confessor in 2.2 and 2.3. The term ὁ πρωτομάρτυς is usually applied to Christ, St-Stephen, or Thecla.[12] In *Lyons*, however, it is used in a plural

[11] Lampe, *PGL*, 19AB.
[12] Lampe, *PGL*, 1200B.

sense in order to designate the first martyrs of the persecution. No other Greek patristic text uses this term in such a way, which may indicate a special use of this term. By combining the terms ὁ πρωτος and ὁ μάρτυς to make one term, the author of *Lyons* may be deliberately trying to make these Christians in Lyons and Vienne comparable to other well-known martyrs.

Based on my analysis of how the above terms are used in *Lyons*, I am proposing the following hierarchy of terminology, as created by the author of *Lyons*:

Hierarchy of Martyrdom:

the ranks of the martyrs (ὁ κλήρος τῶν μαρτύρων)

Christ the trustworthy and true martyr (Χριστος τῷ πιστῷ καὶ ἀληθινῷ μάρτυρι)

Stephen the perfect martyr (Στέφανος ὁ τέλειος μάρτυς)

the martyrs that already passed away (οἱ ἐξεληλυθότες ἤδη μάρτυρες)

the martyrs (οἱ μάρτυρες)
- the first martyrs (οἱ πρωτομάρτυρες)
- the blessed martyrs (οἱ μακάριοι μάρτυρες)

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the confessors (οἱ ὁμόλογοι)

the blessed ones (οἱ μακάριοι)

↑ the holy ones / saints (οἱ ἁγίοι) ↓

The goal in realizing the structure of the martyr hierarchy in *Lyons* is to situate Blandina within it. I am proposing that Blandina, despite being a female slave, a fact which would place her on the lowest stratum of the social hierarchy according to ancient Greco-Roman social norms, is placed just below Christ and Saint Stephen, but above all the other martyrs that figure in the letter. In the next section I will demonstrate how Blandina is the heroine among the martyrs. She is

presented by the author of *Lyons* as a kind of 'super martyr,' one who symbolizes hope to deniers and provides a model for martyrs.

3. Blandina among the martyrs

Lyons does not explicitly label Blandina as a martyr. There is one section of the text where her status as a martyr could be inferred. In verse 17, the reader is introduced to Sanctus, Maturus, Attalus, and Blandina. In verse 18, there is mention of Blandina's mistress: αὐτὴ τῶν μαρτύρων μία ἀγωνίστρια, "who was herself one contender among the martyrs." This may infer that Blandina also belongs to this group of martyrs. The text is not precise. Although the author of *Lyons* feels the necessity to rank the persecuted Christians within a hierarchy of martyrdom, I propose that he is placing Blandina in an elevated position not through any explicit label, and not solely by narrating her actions in the arena that deem her worthy of high esteem as a martyr, but also in the language used in relation to those who are witnessing Blandina's actions. There are two examples I would highlight here. The first example is in verse 18, which is Blandina's first appearance in the arena. The text reads:

> ἡ Βλανδῖνα τοσαύτης ἐπληρώθη δυνάμεως ὥστε ἐκλυθῆναι καὶ παρεθῆναι τοὺς κατὰ διαδοχὰς παντὶ τρόπῳ βασανίζοντας αὐτὴν ἀπὸ ἑωθινῆς ἕως ἑσπέρας καὶ αὐτοὺς ὁμολογοῦντας ὅτι νενίκηνται μηδὲν ἔχοντες μηκέτι ὃ ποιήσωσιν αὐτῇ καὶ θαυμάζειν ἐπὶ τῷ παραμένειν ἔμπνουν αὐτήν παντὸς τοῦ σώματος περιερρωγότος καὶ ἠνεῳγμένου καὶ μαρτυρεῖν ὅτι ἓν εἶδος στρεβλώσεως ἱκανὸν ἦν πρὸς τὸ ἐξαγαγεῖν τὴν ψυχήν, οὐχ ὅτι γε τοιαῦτα καὶ τοσαῦτα
>
> Blandina became filled with such power that those who were torturing her, successively and in every way, from morning until evening, gave up and were exhausted, and themselves confessed that they were defeated, having nothing which they might further do to her, and they marvelled even that she remained breathing. Her whole body being broken and opened, they

> even made testimony that one kind of wrenching torture was sufficient to make the soul depart, let alone such things to such an extent.

There are two terms from this excerpt that are important for the present purpose: αὐτοὺς ὁμολογοῦντας and μαρτυρεῖν. Both of these examples utilize the language of martyrdom, but it is not Blandina who is here described as confessing and testifying. Rather it is the torturers who are witnessing her performance who have themselves confessed (αὐτοὺς ὁμολογοῦντας) to being defeated before her astonishing endurance and who declare (μαρτυρεῖν) that she has endured enough torture that should have killed her. This is a powerful inversion. The author of *Lyons* is very aware of his use of the language of confessing and witnessing, and therefore the use of such terms in relation to the torturers vis-à-vis Blandina's performance is significant.

The second example is in Blandina's final appearance in the amphitheatre. Near the end of verse 56, the letter reads: ἐτύθη καὶ αὐτή καὶ αὐτῶν ὁμολογούντων τῶν ἐθνῶν ὅτι μηδεπώποτε παρ αὐτοῖς γυνὴ τοιαῦτα καὶ τοσαῦτα ἔπαθεν, "and so she was sacrificed, and the gentiles were confessing that never among them had a woman suffered such things for such a time." Once again there is a language of confession associated with those witnessing Blandina's tortures (αὐτῶν ὁμολογούντων), but this time it is τὰ ἔθνη, "the pagans," who consist of a larger, more general group in comparison to the torturers mentioned in verse 18. The term τό ἔθνος is likely a reference to the audience members, and may once again include the torturers and perhaps the pagan officials.

In two of the three appearances of Blandina, there is a pattern of confession and testimony surrounding her tortures. This choice of language is

deliberate. Unlike the other Christians who are labelled as martyrs, Blandina does not need to be explicitly identified as one because the language surrounding those who observe her performance in the arena are the ones who are doing the witnessing, thereby confirming her status as a martyr. Whereas the term μαρτυρέω, when used in relation to the other martyrs, functions as testimony given by the Christian in regards to their faith, in the case of Blandina, μαρτυρέω refers to the testimony given by others upon seeing Blandina's performance. What does this say about her position in the hierarchical structure of martyrdom? Because the author of *Lyons* has deliberately and carefully chosen the language of his letter, if understood in a judicial sense, the torturers and pagans are testifying to a truth found in Blandina's incredible strength and fortitude under torture. There is something significant that is taking place visually in Blandina's performance, which is having an effect on her audience members. No other persecuted Christian is narrated in this letter as having an effect of producing confession and testimony on the audience. The case of Blandina is distinctive.

Another example that confirms Blandina's elevated status in comparison to the other martyrs is found in verses 51 and 56. Alexander the Phrygian is described as conversing with God in his heart: κατὰ καρδίαν ὁμιλοῦντος τῷ θεῷ (1.51). In a similar fashion, Blandina has communication with Christ: ὁμιλίαν πρὸς Χριστόν (1.56). Both phrases use the verb ὁμιλέω, which has a range of meanings, but in this context could mean in a physical sense, such as "to be together" or "in company with," or in the sense of social contact, such as "to hold

converse" or "to associate with."[13] These verses may indicate a kind of communion between the divine and the Christian, or may specify a dialogue between both parties. A difference is established here. Blandina converses with Christ in a more direct fashion than does Alexander, who is in contact with God *in his heart*. He communicates with him interiorly, whereas Blandina has direct communication with the divine. This difference is very important because, if according to the hierarchical logic of this text Christ is the true martyr, Blandina's direct conversation with Christ places her in a more notable position in the hierarchy. No other Christian is mentioned in this letter as having direct contact with the divine. Once again, this is significant because Blandina comes into a relationship with Christ that is not experienced by the others. She is singled out by the author of *Lyons* as having an experience that is unique among the Christians.

Lastly, I wish to mention that Blandina not only converses with Christ, but she visually becomes Christ in verse 41. I will be looking at this section more closely in the next chapter, but I make mention of it here in support of my argument regarding Blandina's special status among the martyrs. The letter reads: βλεπόντων αὐτῶν ἐν τῷ ἀγῶνι καὶ τοῖς ἔξωθεν ὀφθαλμοῖς διὰ τῆς ἀδελφῆς τὸν ὑπὲρ αὐτῶν ἐσταυρωμένον. Weidmann translates this as "while they were watching from within the contest and with eyes from some distance away, saw through their sister the one who was crucified on their behalf." Lake translates this as "while they looked on during the contest, and with their outward eyes saw in the form of their sister him who was crucified for them." I disagree with Weidmann's translation of τοῖς ἔξωθεν ὀφθαλμοῖς. He understands these eyes as

[13] Liddell, Scott and Jones, *LSJ*, 486B.

belonging to those who are further away, most likely the audience members, whereas Lake understands this as "outward eyes" which is not very helpful in understanding what the Greek is attempting to accomplish. I would render this phrase into English by saying "through their bodily eyes" or "through their corporeal eyes." They are seeing Blandina physically take on the shape of Christ. They are not just imaging this transformation, by seeing it with their 'internal' eyes or imagination. She externally (ἔξωθεν[14]) becomes Christ through the act of being seen. A miracle is taking place here. Much power is placed in this letter upon the sense of sight and here there is a significant transformation visually taking place.

This correspondence between Blandina and Christ heightens her place in the hierarchy of martyrdom. The author of *Lyons* seems to be positioning Blandina in the closest position to Christ (and St-Stephen), and in the highest position among the persecuted Christians of Vienne and Lyons. The text is structured in such a way as to present Blandina in this close relationship with Christ. By rendering Blandina and Christ as counterparts, the author is also constructing the model martyr. Blandina has attained a level of communion with Christ that is not found with the other persecuted Christians. I will explore this point in more detail in the next chapter, but I wish to emphasize here that Blandina is a type of 'super martyr,' a martyr that stands out among the martyrs. This status is achieved by the text through its narration of actions and gaze, instead of any kind of explicit categorization. The language of the text indicates

[14] ἔξωθεν is an adverb that can here mean "from without *or* abroad" and "outside." In Liddell, Scott and Jones, *LSJ*, 600A.

that tremendous things are happening visually in relation to Blandina's performance in the amphitheatre and all of these unique events confirm a special status that she has with Christ and among the other Christians. In the final chapter I will demonstrate how Blandina's performance therefore becomes a tool against denial by rendering martyrdom accessible to all Christians.

CHAPTER III – The Metamorphoses of Blandina

There are two essential constituents to Blandina's identity: female and slave. Due to space constraints, this thesis will only analyze the gender component. There are a few points, however, that I will make here in regards to slavery in antiquity. Roman society was hierarchically organized and a strong division was made "between those who possessed honor, the free citizens, and those who lacked it, the slaves."[1] Slaves were vulnerable to physical and sexual control and abuse. They lacked control over their bodies. According to Jennifer A. Glancy, every level of ancient documentation, including Christian, "represents slaves as bodies."[2] Corporeality defined the slave. On account of this, "it is not surprising that the experience of slavery was conditioned by gender and sexuality."[3] The concept of slavery is intricately intertwined with the concept of gender and so many of the observations I make about Blandina's gender can also be applied to her slave status. In other words, Blandina's performance is not only about her gender status, but also of her slave one.[4]

1. Gender considerations

Blandina is narrated by the author of *Lyons* as having undergone the amphitheatre on three separate occasions. In each episode, Blandina takes on a different, gendered persona. When she figures as an athlete, she embodies a

[1] Sheila Briggs, "Gender, Slavery, and Technology: The Shaping of the Early Christian Moral Imagination." *Beyond Slavery: Overcoming Its Religious and Sexual Legacies*, ed. Bernadette J. Brooten. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) 162.
[2] Jennifer A. Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity*. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006) 29.
[3] Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity*, 9.
[4] J. Albert Harrill writes: "The slave Blandina, for example, does display the reversal of normal domestic hierarchies in dramatic and forceful spectacle." In *Slaves in the New Testament: Literary, Social, and Moral Dimensions*. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006) 162.

masculine body, according to ancient Greco-Roman society. She also transforms into crucified Christ, generally viewed as male.[5] Lastly, Blandina acts like a mother, therefore embodying a female persona. Below I will detail Blandina's appearances, but first I will make a few remarks regarding to the concept of gender. Modern theorists make a distinction between 'sex' and 'gender,' a distinction that did not exist in antiquity. It would be anachronistic to apply such a distinction to the ancient world.[6] However, both modern and ancient approaches to gender and sex need to be considered because contemporary understanding of these concepts undoubtedly shapes the manner in which scholars approach sex and gender in ancient sources. It is important that modern dichotomies of the human body should not be forced onto ancient sources.[7]

1.1 Gender vs. sex

The difference between gender and sex is not an easy or uncomplicated distinction to discern. Theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, Thomas Laqueur, among many others, have written extensively on such a topic.[8] Simone de Beauvoir, a French philosopher from the twentieth century, famously

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[5] There are some early Christian groups, however, which viewed Christ as a bodiless, therefore sexless being. Those groups were termed docetics by individuals such as Bishop Serapion of Antioch (quoted in Eusebius, *Hist. eccl*. Book VI, 12.6) and Hippolytus (*Haer.* 8.8.2-10.11). Doceticism was not a distinct sect in early Christianity, but rather there were various Christian groups that held a docetic view of Christ. See: Birger A. Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism: Traditions and Literature*. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007) 196-198. Some of the texts from the Nag Hammadi corpus promulgate such a view, for instance, "The One Who Is is immortal and eternal, and being eternal, is without birth, for whoever is born will die; unconceived … with no human form, for whoever has a human form has been made by another" (*Soph. Jes. Chr.* 94).

[6] Diana M. Swancutt, "*Still* Before Sexuality: 'Greek' Androgyny the Roman Imperial Politics of Masculinity, and the Roman Invention of the *Tribas*." *Mapping Gender in Ancient Religious Discourses*, eds. Todd Penner and Caroline Vander Stichele. (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2007) 28, footnote 66.

[7] Dale B. Martin, *The Corinthian Body*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995) 3.

[8] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*. (New York: First Vintage Books Edition, 2011); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. (New York: Routledge; Chapman & Hall, Inc. 1990); Laqueur, *Making Sex*.

wrote in her book *Second Sex* that one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one.[9] This statement alludes to the non-biological, constructive concept of being a woman. Modern theorists frequently understand sex as a biological truth, whereas gender is a social creation and interpretation; it is a culturally-learned phenomenon. It is a malleable category that has retained an air of consistency, an appearance of truism, which makes its construction appear natural. It allows society to make the equation 'sex = gender'. I will briefly refer to Judith Butler's work on the subject to clarify this distinction.

Judith Butler's groundbreaking book *Gender Trouble* approaches the concept of gender as a social construction. Butler describes gender as an identity that is "instituted though a stylized repetition of acts" or a bodily performance that is not static in time. She illustrates that the body is signified in and through discourse by "performativity." This performance requires the constant repetition of public action. Furthermore, "[t]his repetition is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established." This performance maintains gender within its binary form of male and female. An individual is gendered through their acts and also through an *audience* that is able to witness the repetitive acts.[10]

Butler is interested in the ways that the body comes into being through the marks of gender: "'the body' appears as a passive medium on which cultural meanings are inscribed or as the instrument through which an appropriative and

[9] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 283. She does not distinguish between the concepts of gender and sex.
[10] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 140.

interpretive will determines a cultural meaning for itself."[11] She writes that the body itself is also a construction: "Bodies cannot be said to have a signifiable existence prior to the mark of their gender."[12]

It can be quite difficult to distinguish between the concepts and characteristics of sex and gender simply because the two have been enmeshed for so long that one seems to 'naturally' implicate the other. Butler argues that gender "is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end."[13] This process is forever taking place. Although gender is constructed, it has been long understood as a truism because that is *how* gender has been constructed.

As I mentioned above, there is no distinction made in antiquity between gender and sex because the two are viewed as the same; this division between the two categories is part of a modern scholarly discourse. In the second century, the period in which *Lyons* was written, one's anatomy determines one's social roles, actions, clothing, etc. In other words, sex controls the gendered performance of individuals. Thus to diverge from one's predetermined set of social actions, as Blandina does when she embodies both male and female characteristics, communicates something to the reader. I will advance my argument concerning what Blandina's performance imparts to the reader in the next chapter. In this chapter, I will narrate and detail Blandina's three gendered, authoritative performances in the arena. Before doing so, I will elaborate a bit more on the concept of sex and gender in antiquity.

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[11] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 8.
[12] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 8.
[13] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 33.

1.2 Sex and gender in antiquity

Thomas Laqueur's work *Making Sex* looks at the concepts of sex and gender from the Greeks of antiquity to the twentieth century, ending with Freud. Laqueur proposes that prior to the seventeenth century, "*sex*, or the body, must be understood as the epiphenomenon, while *gender*, what we would take to be a cultural category, was primary or 'real.'" This means that gender "was part of the order of things," whereas "sex was conventional."[14] He explains that anything that was said about sex "already has in it a claim about gender."[15] Sex prior to the Enlightenment was not an ontological category, but a socially constructed one,[16] much like the concept of gender is understood today.

Laqueur observes the works of medical researcher Galen of Pergamum (c.130-200); Galen demonstrated that women were essentially men, but without the vital heat "of perfection." Women had the same reproductive parts as men, but women's were turned in and hidden inside the body. The vagina was understood as an interior penis.[17] Women were inverted beings; their organs were in the wrong places, and were less perfect than men.[18] Writing five centuries earlier than Galen, even Aristotle, who regarded the bodies of men and women as distinctively adapted to the roles that distinguish them, "did not regard these adaptations as the signs of sexual opposition."[19] When explaining the anatomical differences between male and female, Aristotle wrote that the organs between both sexes are similar, except that the female sex has a womb, but this womb is

[14] Laqueur, *Making Sex*, 8. His italics.
[15] Laqueur, *Making Sex*, 11.
[16] Laqueur, *Making Sex*, 8.
[17] Laqueur, *Making Sex*, 4.
[18] Laqueur, *Making Sex*, 26.
[19] Laqueur, *Making Sex*, 29.

comparable to the male scrotum. For Aristotle, as for Galen, females had "the penis of the male, but inside the body."[20] Sex in antiquity, therefore, was understood in terms of a one-sex model, the male.

L. Stephanie Cobb, using Laqueur's one-sex model, speaks of sex in terms of a continuum. There was only one sex and a person's position on this continuum, meaning their degree of difference, is governed by how masculine one acts. Unlike the concept of man and women today, there is no bipolar difference between the sexes in antiquity. Therefore, sex "is established by comparison: an individual is more or less masculine than another."[21] Sex differentiation does not lie solely on anatomical features, but how one performs his or her sex. In theory, therefore, one had the possibility of 'changing' their sex by embodying roles and characteristics that would place them towards the opposite end of the one-sex continuum. Popular stories hold that a woman's interior penis could drop if she performed masculine activities, such as running too fast. Pliny the Elder, for instance, "testified to having seen an African woman turn into a male on her wedding day."[22]

The perfect male end of the continuum would have been seen as superior to the "imperfect, defective, or deficient maleness (what we might call 'femaleness')" extremity.[23] Because the one-sex continuum defines the standard as always being men,[24] it seems that woman alone has 'gender.'[25] Laqueur writes:

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[20] Aristotle, *Hist. an.* 10.5.637a23-25, as quoted in Laqueur, *Making Sex*, 33.
[21] L. Stephanie Cobb, *Dying to be Men: Gender and Language in Early Christian Martyr Texts*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008) 25.
[22] Cobb, *Dying to be Men*, 26.
[23] Cobb, *Dying to be Men*, 26.
[24] Maud W. Gleason argues that gender distinctions in antiquity "purported to characterize the gulf between men and women but actually divided the male sex into legitimate and illegitimate

> In a public world that was overwhelmingly male, the one-sex model displayed what was already massively evident in culture more generally: *man* is the measure of all things, and woman does not exist as an ontologically distinct category. Not all males are masculine, potent, honorable, or hold power, and some women exceed some men in each of these categories. But the standard of the human body and its representations is the male body.[26]

To ancient writers, women were not only considered inferior to men, they were "inferior *men*."[27]

While there was the possibility of movement on the continuum, men were expected to perform their masculinity, and women were to avoid the masculine end.[28] The personas invoked by Blandina's performance, as they are narrated by the author of *Lyons*, place her along both ends of the one-sex continuum.

2. First appearance – noble athlete

Blandina's first appearance in the arena is narrated in verses 17 to 19. She enters the amphitheatre along with Sanctus the deacon from Vienne, Maturus the novice, Attalus of Pergameme descent, among others. Blandina is immediately introduced as the lowliest of the low. The rage of the amphitheatre audience is mounted against Blandina, she who is identified as "cheap, unseemly, and readily despised among human beings" (1.17). One verse later, there is a reference to Blandina's mistress, therefore the reader is made aware that Blandina is also a slave; "her status sinks lower."[29] As a female slave, she has "two strikes against

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members." Gender is about grades of masculinity; it is grounded in the concept of manhood. In *Making Men: Sophists and Self-Presentation in Ancient Rome*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995) 80.
[25] Laqueur, *Making Sex*, 22.
[26] Laqueur, *Making Sex*, 62. His italics.
[27] Cobb, *Dying to be Men*, 28. Her italics.
[28] Cobb, *Dying to be Men*, 29.
[29] Weidmann, "The Martyrs of Lyons," 401.

her masculinity,"[30] and therefore sits at the lowest end of the one-sex continuum. And this is exactly what the text intends: Blandina belongs to the lowest stratum of society.

Blandina's initial, uncomplimentary portrayal appears to be reversed almost immediately. She is "deemed worthy of great glory by God" (1.17), and although she is weak and lowly, she becomes "filled with such power that those who were torturing her, successively and in every way, from morning until evening, gave up and were exhausted" (1.18). The irony of reversals does not end here. The reader is made aware of Blandina's name, but her mistress remains unnamed. The "mistress is defined and located in terms of Blandina."[31] Her slave body is transformed through her martyrdom, where it becomes a site of honour and nobility.[32]

Even though Blandina is the one being tortured, it is the torturers who "themselves confessed that they were defeated" and they "marveled even that she remained breathing" (1.18). One verse later, she is no longer identified as disreputable, but rather she is said to be "like a noble athlete," and she finds rest and alleviation through her testimony, stating: "I am a Christian, and among us there is nothing petty" (1.19).

By performing like an athlete, Blandina exemplifies masculinity. The language of athleticism is employed by the author because it belongs to the world of martyrdom and the amphitheatre. In order to withstand torture, virility and

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[30] Cobb, *Dying to be Men*, 114.
[31] Weidmann, "The Martyrs of Lyons," 401.
[32] J. Albert Harrill, "The Domestic Enemy: A Moral Polarity of Household Slaves in Early Christian Apologies and Martyrdoms." *Early Christian Families in Context: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue*, eds. David L. Balch and Carolyn Osiek. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003) 252.

courage would have been necessary tools for the arena. According to ancient writers, these virtues are equated with masculinity.[33] When Blandina is thrust into the arena, she has no choice but to participate in a milieu "that requires a male virtue (courage)."[34] Blandina embodies a male characteristic, the athlete, because this is the type of characteristic expected and necessary for the symbolic universe of the arena. "The heroine is praised because she transcends the perceived limits of her gender and its social values and both embodies and promotes the 'perfect' *masculinity of martyrdom*."[35] Blandina participates as she should in amphitheatre, with bravery, an attribute which would not have conformed to her gender.[36] The author of *Lyons* inscribes a male-like role on a female body. In her first performance, she moves to the perfect male end of the one-sex continuum.

3. Second appearance – crucified Christ

Blandina's second appearance in the amphitheatre is first indicated in verse 37, when she is led into the arena with Marturus, Sanctus and Attalus, and her gendered metamorphosis is described in detail in verses 41 to 42. The latter verses read as follows:

> ἡ δὲ Βλανδῖνα ἐπὶ ξύλου κρεμασθεῖσα προύκειτο βορὰ τῶν εἰσβαλλομένων θηρίων ἢ καὶ διὰ τοῦ βλέπεσθαι σταυροῦ σχήματι κρεμαμένη διὰ τῆς εὐτόνου προσευχῆς πολλὴν προθυμίαν τοῖς ἀγωνιζομένοις ἐνεποίει βλεπόντων αὐτῶν ἐν τῷ ἀγῶνι καὶ τοῖς ἔξωθεν ὀφθαλμοῖς διὰ τῆς ἀδελφῆς τὸν ὑπὲρ αὐτῶν ἐσταυρωμένον ἵνα πείσῃ τοὺς πιστεύοντας εἰς αὐτὸν ὅτι πᾶς ὁ ὑπὲρ τῆς Χριστοῦ δόξης παθὼν τὴν κοινωνίαν ἀεὶ ἔχει μετὰ τοῦ ζῶντος θεοῦ καὶ μηδενὸς ἀψαμένου τότε τῶν

[33] Cobb, *Dying to be Men*, 30.
[34] Streete, *Redeemed Bodies*, 31.
[35] Streete, *Redeemed Bodies*, 32. My italics.
[36] To avoid confusion, I will continue to use the contemporary term 'gender' to refer to what would have been understood as 'sex' in antiquity. When referring to Blandina's gender, I am speaking of those characteristics that would position her on the imperfect male end of the one-sex continuum.

> θηρίων αὐτῆς καθαιρεθεῖσα ἀπὸ τοῦ ξύλου ἀνελήφθη πάλιν εἰς τὴν εἱρκτήν εἰς ἄλλον ἀγῶνα τηρουμένη ἵνα διὰ πλειόνων γυμνασμάτων νικήσασα τῷ μὲν σκολιῷ ὄφει ἀπαραίτητον ποιήσῃ τὴν καταδίκην προτρέψηται δὲ τοὺς ἀδελφούς ἡ μικρὰ καὶ ἀσθενὴς καὶ εὐκαταφρόνητος μέγαν καὶ ἀκαταγώνιστον ἀθλητὴν Χριστὸν ἐνδεδυμένη διὰ πολλῶν κλήρων ἐκβιάσασα τὸν ἀντικείμενον καὶ δι ἀγῶνος τὸν τῆς ἀφθαρσίας στεψαμένη στέφανον
>
> And Blandina, having been hung from a piece of wood, was exposed as food to the beasts, which were being thrown in. When she was hung – with the result that she was seen in the shape of a cross, through her well-strung prayer – she stirred up much zeal in the contenders, while those from within the contest saw through their corporeal eyes their sister, the one who had been crucified on their behalf, so that she might persuade those who believe in him that everyone who suffers on behalf of the glory of Christ has fellowship with the living God forever. And then not even one of the beasts touched her. When she was taken down from the piece of wood, she was again taken back into the prison in order that she be kept secure for another contest, so that having prevailed through more exercises, she might make the condemnation against the crooked snake inevitable and might encourage her brothers and sisters. She, the small, weak, and despicable one, having clothed herself in the great and unconquerable athlete, Christ, and having forced out the adversary through many lots and through her contest, was crowned with the crown of immortality.[37]

This scene involves some striking visual effects. Blandina is described as being exposed to the beasts while she is suspended from a post "in the shape of a cross." The other martyrs are said to have seen in Blandina "the one who had been crucified on their behalf." She therefore visually ceases to be a female slave, and becomes an important male instead: Christ. Blandina puts on "the great and unconquerable athlete, Christ" as if he were a garment.[38] The image of athlete is

[37] My own translation.

[38] In early Christian texts, it is not uncommon that one's Christian identity is closely linked to the language of garment. Through baptism, an individual sheds his old garment, meaning his old life, and puts on a new garment, meaning Christ, in order to become Christian. For instance, in Galatians 3:27, Paul states: "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ." The verb ἐνδύω is used in both *Lyons* and Galatians. According to Daniel Boyarin, "[b]aptism is a re-enactment for every Christian of the crucifixion of Christ, that is a putting off of the body of flesh and a recladding in the spiritual body of the Risen Christ." In *Galatians and*

again invoked, much like her first appearance. Blandina obtains "the crown of immortality." A crown is "due to the athlete at the successful completion of his fight,"[39] and this crown is what Blandina obtains through her strength and endurance in the amphitheatre.

Blandina is not the only martyr to be placed in a special relation to Christ in this martyrology. For instance, in the case of Sanctus the deacon from Vienne, the text indicates that Christ was achieving great glory in him, and so it seems that Christ is working through Sanctus (1.23). As for ninety-year-old Pothinus, the mob is described as "flanking him and making all kinds of screams as though he himself were Christ" (1.30). However, Blandina is the only one who visually becomes Christ; she is the unique martyr who embodies the shape of Christ. According to Candida R. Moss, this imitation of Christ "served to bolster [the martyrs'] status among readers of their letter in Asia Minor."[40] This suggestion points to a rhetorical purpose in such an association. When discussing *Lyons*, W.H.C. Frend writes that behind the martyrs' actions, there "lies the whole theology of martyrdom in the early Church. They were seeking by their death to attain to the closest possible imitation of Christ's Passion and death. This was the heart of their attitude."[41] Blandina, in her visual embodiment of Christ on the cross, is the martyr who exemplifies the closest imitation of his passion and death. Blandina's second metamorphosis in the arena confirms the special status she holds among the martyrs.

Gender Trouble: Primal Androgyny and the First-Century Origins of a Feminist Dilemma, ed. Christopher Ocker. (Berkeley, CA: Center for Hermeneutical Studies, 1995) 18.
[39] Farkasfalvy, "Christological Content and Its Biblical Basis," 11.
[40] Moss, *The Other Christs*, 15.
[41] Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution*, 14.

Elizabeth A. Goodine and Matthew W. Mitchell, in their article, "The Persuasiveness of a Woman: The Mistranslation and Misinterpretation of Eusebius' *Historia Ecclesiastica* 5.1.41," identify a translation issue in this passage that affects the depiction of Blandina. They look at the phrase ἵνα πείσῃ in verse 41, and rightly argue that there are two possible candidates for its subject: Blandina and Christ. One might think that there is a split among translations in the choice of subject, but Goodine and Mitchell point out that most prefer the latter translation.[42] Others avoid the option "by rendering the clause with an infinitive."[43]

The reason that translators, such as Musurillo,[44] understand Christ as the subject of ἵνα πείσῃ is likely due to the immediately preceding phrase τὸν ἐσταυρωμένον, which I translate as "the one who had been crucified," meaning Christ. Goodine and Mitchell, however, argue that Blandina is the best subject of ἵνα πείσῃ, for both syntactical and theological reasons. They remark that the structure and syntax of verses 41 and 42 imply "that Blandina is the subject of πείσῃ, in part for the simple reason that she is the primary subject throughout the entire passage"[45] and "[t]hese two sentences contain a structurally identical pattern with Blandina as the subject governing a finite verb, followed by a ἵνα clause."[46] Blandina is first named at the beginning of verse 41, and all the actions in the two verses focus on her. It is therefore peculiar that translators do not recognize Blandina as the subject of ἵνα πείσῃ.

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[42] Goodine and Mitchell, "The Persuasiveness of a Woman," 3.
[43] Goodine and Mitchell, "The Persuasiveness of a Woman," 4.
[44] Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*.
[45] Goodine and Mitchell, "The Persuasiveness of a Woman," 5.
[46] Goodine and Mitchell, "The Persuasiveness of a Woman," 7.

For both Goodine and Mitchell, the theological consequences of denying Blandina as subject cannot be ignored: "To deny Blandina her place as the subject of this clause disrupts the process by which this text suggests Christ works in the world, that is, with and through a human being, even a lowly human being."[47] By entering into communion (κοινωνία) with Christ, Blandina "comes to share actively in his power of persuasion."[48] This passage depicts Blandina in such a way that there seems to be an intended blending between Blandina and Christ. She herself "becomes the mediating Christ."[49] Goodine and Mitchell argue that if the author of this letter intended Christ to be the subject of ἵνα πείσῃ, "he might have said that Christ entered Blandina."[50] Instead, the text says that Blandina "clothed herself in the great and unconquerable athlete." She is still herself, while also putting on Christ.

As I argued in chapter two, the rhetorical purpose of *Lyons* is to construct the ideal identity for the Christian martyr through the letter's portrayal of Blandina, the 'super martyr.' I will demonstrate in chapter four how the author of *Lyons* seeks to persuade the audience through the most drastic, hyperbolic example: even a female slave can become a powerful Christian martyr. By allowing Blandina to be the subject of ἵνα πείσῃ, this interpretation fits in well with the letter's purpose. Blandina's suffering body is used to persuade and strengthen adherence to a Christian identity,[51] therefore it is only logical that at

[47] Goodine and Mitchell, "The Persuasiveness of a Woman," 4.
[48] Goodine and Mitchell, "The Persuasiveness of a Woman," 9.
[49] Goodine and Mitchell, "The Persuasiveness of a Woman," 10.
[50] Goodine and Mitchell, "The Persuasiveness of a Woman," 13.
[51] Is it no surprise, then, that Blandina's name means "the Persuasive One?" See: Jan Willem van Henten, "Martyrdom and Persecution Revisited: The Case of 4 Maccabees." *Märtyrer und Märtyrerakten*, ed. Walter Ameling. (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2002) 62.

this heightened moment in the text, when she is visually depicted as Christ on the cross, she is the one who "demonstrates that such communion and power are a possibility for all who suffer with Christ."[52] For Goodine and Mitchell, this κοινωνία is the "very reason for which the martyrs died," therefore to deny Blandina's agency here is to deny this intimate relationship with God.[53]

4. Third appearance – mother of the martyrs

Blandina is brought back into the arena "on the last day of the beast-fights," which is narrated in verses 53-56. In her third and final appearance in the amphitheatre, Blandina is led in with Ponticus, a youth of fifteen years. Both individuals remain steadfast in their refusal to swear by idols (1.53) and so they are exhibited "to all the terrors" and "all the punishments." Ponticus dies (1.54), but Blandina is subjected to more torture. The text describes Blandina as πάντων ἐσχάτη in verse 55, meaning "last of all,"[54] which possibly functions as a double entendre. This description may refer to Blandina's lowly status as a female slave; she is last among the martyrs in terms of social position. πάντων ἐσχάτη may also refer to the chronological order of Blandina's death. Blandina is the last martyr whose death is narrated in the text. She may therefore be the last of all the martyrs of Lyons and Vienne to be put to death.

Verse 55 continues as follows:

> καθάπερ μήτηρ εὐγενὴς παρορμήσασα τὰ τέκνα καὶ νικηφόρους προπέμψασα πρὸς τὸν βασιλέα, ἀναμετρουμένη καὶ αὐτὴ πάντα τὰ τῶν

[52] Goodine and Mitchell, "The Persuasiveness of a Woman," 9.
[53] Goodine and Mitchell, "The Persuasiveness of a Woman," 15.
[54] This expression is likely adopted from 1 Corinthians 15:8, where Paul indicates that he was the last one Christ visited when he was risen: "Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me."

> παίδων ἀγωνίσματα ἔσπευδεν πρὸς αὐτούς χαίρουσα καὶ ἀγαλλιωμένη ἐπὶ τῇ ἐξόδῳ ὡς εἰς νυμφικὸν δεῖπνον κεκλημένη ἀλλὰ μὴ πρὸς θηρία βεβλημένη
>
> …just like a well-born mother who has encouraged her children and sent them before her as victorious ones to the King, even repeating all the contests of the children herself, she hastened to them, being pleased and rejoicing exceedingly at the end, as if having been glorified at a bridal feast, instead of having been thrown to the wild beasts.[55]

Blandina acts like a mother to the martyrs, who ensures her 'children' are sent triumphantly to the King (τὸν βασιλέα), which may also be a double-entendre; the "king" or "ruler" may refer to the emperor and it can be a reference to God. Blandina is next thrown into a net and exposed to a bull; she is thrown around until she loses consciousness. Verse 56 ends as follows: ἐτύθη καὶ αὐτή καὶ αὐτῶν ὁμολογούντων τῶν ἐθνῶν ὅτι μηδεπώποτε παρ αὐτοῖς γυνὴ τοιαῦτα καὶ τοσαῦτα ἔπαθεν, which I translate as "she too was sacrificed, as the pagans were themselves confessing that never among them did a woman suffer such and so greatly among them."

There are two points I wish to consider here: the use of the verb θύω to refer to Blandina's death (ἐτύθη καὶ αὐτή) and the application of motherhood imagery. It is significant that the author of *Lyons* describes Blandina's death as a sacrifice; her death is the only one characterized as such in this letter. It is hardly coincidental that in Blandina's previous appearance in the arena she is likened to Christ, a figure who was interpreted almost immediately as a sacrifice for the sake of humanity (see Heb 10:10; 1 Cor 5:7). The Christian church has long understood the death of Christ as significant precisely because of its understood

[55] My own translation.

role as an atoning sacrifice.[56] It is all the more noteworthy then that Blandina, in her imitation of Christ through her martyrdom and in her physical transformation as Christ in her second appearance in the arena, dies a death where the language used to describe it would invoke a further association between her and Christ.

The verb θύω suggests that her destruction was for the sake of something deemed as having a higher importance or call. Her death in *Lyons* is therefore the "last" one, not only in chronological terms where her death is the last narrated one, but also in the sense that it is the most valuable death. Her death produces confession in the pagans; in other words, her sacrifice produces an acknowledgment of her worth. Blandina has the power to convince non-Christians of her strength and fortitude. Her actions may also have the consequence of persuading the pagans of the power of Christianity, or at least influencing the pagans in the world of the text. Her sacrifice therefore extends to both the Christian and non-Christian communities.

The second point of discussion is the imagery of motherhood. As previously mentioned, Blandina's final appearance invokes the figure of a mother. The mother image may be best described as *überkonnotiert*,[57] super-saturated with meaning or connotations, in *Lyons*. There are multiple allusions to this image: the virgin mother is mentioned on multiple occasions, denial is paralleled to botched motherhood (abortion), Alexander the Phrygian appears as if in labour, the

[56] S. Mark Heim, *Saved from Sacrifice: A Theology of the Cross*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2006) 20.
[57] Expression suggested by Katharina Waldner to adequately describe the use of mother imagery in this letter.

possession of motherly feelings is an important quality to being a martyr, and Blandina is likened to a mother to the martyrs.

This imagery is invoked in approximately the last third of *Lyons*, beginning with verse 45: "The martyrs were supplying grace to those who did not make testimony, and there was great joy for the virgin mother, who was recovering those living ones whom she had aborted as dead." The image of a virgin aborting is indeed a paradoxical image; it is a poignant illustration to communicate the text's rhetoric concerning denial. The Christians who denied when faced with persecution are viewed not only as dead, but terminated, rejected by the mother of the figure that is central to their beliefs. However, if a Christian finds strength and confesses after having previously denied, he or she can still be recovered; abortion becomes reversible. As for confession, it is symbolized by birth: "For it is by the martyrs that most of the deniers were measuring themselves, and were conceiving again and coming alive again, and were learning to confess" (1.46). The image of motherhood is tied up in the text's rhetoric concerning denial. Confession is a successful birth, it signifies being alive in one's Christian identity; whereas denial is an aborted life, denying both joy and proper birth to the virgin mother.

Alexander the Phrygian, a physician by profession, is mentioned in verse 49. He encourages confession by those who had formerly denied. His intervening actions read as follows: παρεστὼς τῷ βήματι καὶ νεύματι προτρέπων αὐτοὺς πρὸς τὴν ὁμολογίαν φανερὸς ἦν τοῖς περιεστηκόσιν τὸ βῆμα ὥσπερ ὠδίνων, "[Alexander] was advancing to the judgment seat and by signals encouraging them in their confession. He appeared as though in labor to those standing around

the judgment seat." While Alexander is urging the Christians to make their confession, he appears as one who is giving birth. Confession is once again tied up with birth, and consequently with the imagery of motherhood. It is paradoxical that it is a *man* who is connected to this image. This allusion again lends itself to a metaphorical understanding of motherhood in the framework of *Lyons*.

Lyons ends with the continued use of the imagery of motherhood. The letter closes as follows:

> For they did not boast with regard to those who had fallen but were themselves acting out of abundance, providing help for those in need in this manner: having motherly feelings and shedding many tears on behalf of the latter in front of the Father, they asked for life and that one gave it to them; in turn they divided this life among others, thereby departing to God as victors in everything. … They left behind no affliction for their mother and no strife or battle for the siblings, but rather joy, peace, harmony, and love (2.6-7).

Confessed Christians act like a mother by showing maternal love in order to support other martyrs and by encouraging confession among those who have previously denied. The letter finishes with a reference to the confessors' mother, a probable reference to the virgin mother, and not their biological mother. Through their confession, martyrdom and departure through death, these Christians affect only positive things in the mother. A connection between confession and motherhood is strongly established by the author of *Lyons*.

The image invoked of Blandina as mother to the martyrs has some obvious parallels with the mother of the Jewish apocryphal text 2 Maccabees. This text recounts the story of a Jewish mother and her seven sons who are arrested by the ruler Antiochus IV. They are instructed to eat pork, which they refuse, and are subsequently tortured and killed one by one. The mother is the last to die, having

observed each of her son die before her. She is described as having endured the event with great courage and even spoke words of encouragement to her sons in their trial:

> The mother was especially admirable and worthy of honorable memory. Although she saw her seven sons perish within a single day, she bore it with good courage because of her hope in the Lord. She encouraged each of them in the language of their ancestors. Filled with a noble spirit, she reinforced her woman's reasoning with a man's courage (7:20-21).

The story is also narrated in 4 Maccabees:

> Nevertheless, though so many factors influenced the mother to suffer with them out of love for her children, in the case of none of them were the various tortures strong enough to prevent her reason. But each child separately and all of them together the mother urged on to death for religion's sake. O sacred nature and affection of parental love, yearning of parents toward offspring, nurture and indomitable suffering by mothers! This mother, who saw them tortured and burned one by one, because of religion did not change her attitude. She watched the flesh of her children being consumed by fire, their toes and fingers scattered on the ground, and the flesh of the head to the chin exposed like masks (15:11-15).

The Maccabean mother "does not succumb to *motherly feelings*."[58] Although a mother, she does not act fainthearted (cf. 4 Maccabees 16:5). Similarly, Blandina acts with courage when she encourages Ponticus to remain resolute in the arena. Blandina is metaphorically like a mother. Candida R. Moss suggests that this comparison between Blandina and the mother of the Maccabees "is amplified by the use of the plural noun *tekna* (children). Blandina is paired only with the youth Ponticus, rendering the plural *tekna* suggestively metaphorical."[59] *Lyons* and the two Maccabean books emphasize the femaleness and weakness of two women (cf.

[58] Anders Klostergaard Petersen, "Gender-bending in Early Jewish and Christian Martyr Texts." *Contextualising Early Christian Martyrdom*, eds. Jakob Engberg, Uffe Holmsgaard Eirksen, and Anders Kolestergaard Petersen. (Frankfurt am Main; New York: Peter Lang GmbH, 2011) 243. My italics.
[59] Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, 112.

4 Maccabees 15:5), while also admitting awe at their steadfastness in such circumstances.

Blandina is at the center of this metaphorical motherhood in *Lyons* for she is the only martyr specifically likened to a μήτηρ, or "mother," in comparison to Alexander who is equated to someone who is in labour, but not actually linked to the term μήτηρ. Furthermore Blandina is not likened to just any mother, but specifically to a martyred mother who has been positively received and well commemorated within the Christian tradition; such an allusion further heightens Blandina's elevated status among the martyrs. The author of *Lyons* does not identify Blandina as a biological mother, although he does not deny it either. What matters to the author is that Blandina embodies a metaphorical role of motherhood. Her non-identification as a biological mother may be in order to emphasis her position as a metaphorical mother. The text rejects the social norms regarding motherhood as it does not necessitate biological motherhood, nor does it necessitate femaleness, as is the case with Alexander, to apply this image. The image of the mother does not have the effect of feminizing Blandina or the others to whom this image is applied. Rather, the text makes use of the characteristics invoked by the concept of motherhood to strengthen its rhetoric concerning denial: mothers undergo labour to give new life and mothers are supporting figures who should be emulated by martyrs in order to encourage confession among their community members.

The language and imagery of motherhood is not unique to this martyrology; it is exploited in other acts, most notably in the third-century *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*. This text claims to be the first-hand prison

diary of Perpetua, a young, nursing mother who is imprisoned with her baby. As the narrative develops, the milk from Perpetua's breasts dries up, her baby no longer desires the breast, and she gives him up and stops worrying about his welfare. According to Cobb, it is necessary for Perpetua to reject motherhood if she is to progress in her martyrdom: "it was a bond that had to be severed if she was to give herself over fully to God and attain martyrdom." Motherhood impedes martyrdom. Such a rejection is remarkable because it meant "leaving behind the quintessential marker of femininity."[60]

Some scholars have commented on Perpetua's embodiment of masculine features and her rejection of femininity,[61] a transformation that, according to Cobb, "is highlighted by the incremental separation from her child."[62] *Lyons*, on the other hand, uses motherhood to communicate certain ideals of martyrdom, but it does not refer to biological motherhood to accomplish this. Biological motherhood may be something that also needs to be rejected by the martyrs in *Lyons*; the author is not clear on this matter. The metaphor of motherhood is not a matter of femininity; rather, it is one of the text's rhetorical tools, one which is applied to Blandina so that she again functions as an instrument to dissuade denial.

[60] Cobb, *Dying to be Men*, 103.
[61] Kerstin Aspegren, *The Male Woman: A Feminine Ideal in the Early Church*, ed. René Kieffer. (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 1990); Marie-Louise von Franz and Daryl Sharp, *The Passion of Perpetua: A Psychological Interpretation of Her Visions*. (Toronto, ON: Inner City Books, 2004); Cobb, *Dying to be Men*.
[62] Cobb, *Dying to be Men*, 103.

CHAPTER IV – Blandina, Gender, Rhetoric

In the previous chapter I demonstrated how the author of *Lyons* confers masculine qualities to Blandina by describing her as a noble athlete; I also discussed how he visually depicts her as a male when she takes on the form of Christ. I noted how she is feminized by the text when she is likened to a mother to the martyrs. Blandina's performance in the amphitheatre is significant because it moves around on the one-sex continuum. Each persona is positioned at a particular end of the continuum and as her personas change, her location changes. This shifting seems to reflect what some scholars have identified as gender-bending tendencies found within early Christian texts. This gender-bending is usually recognized in Christian female martyrs who exemplify male characteristics or who are appreciated for the masculine traits they embody in the arena.[1] This chapter will seek to answer the following questions: Why is there an interest in alluding to both genders in Blandina's performance? What is the purpose of invoking and associating such images with Blandina? And finally, by way of these answers, how are we informed about gender and early Christianity?

1. Blandina, masculinity, and martyrdom

In chapter three, I explored the concepts of sex and gender in ancient Roman society. I will now look at these concepts within early Christian martyrologies. Martyr texts, in the same way as ancient Greco-Roman medical texts, "promulgate a particular idealised picture of manhood as exemplifying the highest level of human existence, i.e. a human existence conceived of entirely in

[1] Cobb, for instance, devotes her book *Dying to be Men* to this topic.

terms adhering to masculinity."[2] Martyrdom is inherently masculine. Because masculinity is an achieved state in the ancient world,[3] martyrdom, due to its performative nature which is grounded in masculine virtues, is a milieu where masculinity can be and is built up. The world of the amphitheatre is a setting that requires courage, perseverance, and agility, qualities that are found at the perfect male end of the one-sex continuum. To be a martyr is to embody male characteristics or to be a man; martyrs are the personification of Roman masculinity.[4] This is made explicit in the martyrdom of Polycarp of Smyrna, when a voice from heaven comes to Polycarp as he enters the amphitheatre to face his death. The voice proclaims: "Be strong, Polycarp, and be a man (ἀνδρίζου)" (*Mart. Pol.* 9.1).[5]

When a female is successful in the arena or in any other 'masculine' setting, her achievement is understood in her relation to man. "If a woman achieved something good or distinguished herself in ethical, religious or intellectual matters, she was not praised as being a woman of good qualities but as a woman who had become manly."[6] This may explain the envisioned sex transformation of the third-century martyr Perpetua. In her diary, Perpetua narrates four visions she experiences during her imprisonment, while waiting for

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[2] Petersen, "Gender-bending," 236.
[3] Gleason, *Making Men*, 59.
[4] Cobb, *Dying to Be Men*, 5.
[5] Musurillo translates this as "Be strong, Polycarp, and have courage." However, Castelli writes that even though we need to be cautious against reading modernity's gender awareness back into ancient texts, "it seems to me that the ancient sources betray considerable gender awareness all their own – and the arena was most certainly a site for the production and maintenance of idealized masculinity. It does not seem to me to be so great a stretch to imagine that the use of 'ἀνδρίζου' here means to work with the notion that courage and endurance are masculine values." In *Martyrdom and Memory*, 231, footnote 128.
[6] Aspegren, *The Male Woman*, 11.

her execution in the arena. In her final vision, she is brought into the amphitheatre where she understands she must fight an Egyptian. Helpers come up to Perpetua and she is stripped naked, where she realizes that she "became a man" (ch. 10). Virginia Burrus has remarked that Perpetua does not simply present herself as a man from the onset of the dream. Rather, "she *shows* us the moment of her transformation … immediately our gaze is confounded, less by what we don't see than by what we do see, namely a 'masculine' body."[7] Although this transformation only happens in a dream state, it remains significant that Perpetua envisions her performance in the arena within a masculine body. It is through the body of a man that she conquers her enemy.

The masculine nature of martyrdom explains Blandina's first metamorphosis as an athlete. Since males repeatedly were the actors in athletic performances or rituals, athletes were stylized to be hyper-masculine in the ancient world. Athleticism and martyrdom require the same masculine characteristics. Therefore when Blandina is thrust in the arena, she has no choice but to participate in a milieu that requires male virtues.[8] The language of athleticism and masculinity is applied to Blandina by the author because it belongs to the world of martyrdom and the amphitheatre; the two are intertwined. Blandina embodies characteristics from the perfect male end of the one-sex continuum because these are the types of characteristics expected and necessary for the universe of the arena. In regard to the images of Christ and mother invoked in Blandina's performances, the masculinity of martyrdom may not be as helpful

[7] Virginia Burrus, *Saving Shame: Martyrs, Saints, and Other Abject Subjects*. (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008) 30. Her italics.
[8] Streete, *Redeemed Bodies*, 31.

here in explaining these metamorphoses. Blandina's performance needs to be understood in both the contexts of *Lyons* and the experiences of women in early Christianity.

2. Kate Cooper and *The Virgin and the Bride*

Kate Cooper's argument in *The Virgin and the Bride* provides a persuasive manner for approaching the experiences of Christian women in the ancient Greco-Roman world. She proposes that the seemingly perplexing success of the Christian tradition appears to be tied up with the Roman Empire's perception of the relationship between sexual morals and civic virtue, as expressed by the empire's political and moral theorists.[9] Early Christians imagined "their own moral heroes as men who eschewed earthly heirs for an otherworldly family, and won the empire itself for their pains. The *female figure of the virgin* was the cultural icon by which they broadcast their message."[10] The female virgin was a tool through which early Christian men communicated certain Christian ideals. She explains how early Christian discussion regarding women and sexual continence is a question of authority and social order, a conflict that is between men, and is not really about women.[11] Furthermore, "[i]f we allow that many ancient accounts of female behaviour are shaped rhetorically to put a judgment of male character, this means that their reflection of reality is distorted."[12] The female virgin does not necessarily represent the experiences of early Christian

[9] Kate Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996) ix.
[10] Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride*, ix-x. My italics.
[11] Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride*, 55.
[12] Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride*, 13.

women, but rather, the experiences of the female figure were moulded with a rhetorical purpose within the early Christian church.

Historian Peter Brown adopts French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss' axiom that women are good 'to think with,' which Brown uses and contends that early Christian men used women to think with because they regarded "women as creatures less clearly defined and less securely bounded" by societal structures.[13] Such a manner of thinking about women in early Christianity means that traces of 'woman' in Christian texts does not necessarily correlate to women's experience. As a woman, Blandina is less firmly bounded by societal norms.

Throughout this thesis, I have been referring to the author of *Lyons* as a male author for two reasons. First, a male authorship is the default assumption for ancient texts, given no indication to the contrary. Second, if the above scholars are correct in their assertion that men in antiquity used women 'to think with,' it is reasonable to think that Blandina's gendered performance was also shaped by a male author.

Taking Cooper and Brown's arguments into consideration for the study of women in early Christianity, it becomes clear that the best manner in which to approach Blandina's gendered role in *Lyons* is to recognize her rhetorical function within the text. In chapter two, I analyzed how Blandina is narrated in such a way that she is a type of 'super martyr' and so she functions as a role model. I will now observe another rhetorical aim of her gendered performance.

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[13] Brown, *The Body and Society*, 153. A similar argument can be made about slaves in antiquity. Because slaves were susceptible to physical and sexual abuse and lacked protection of their bodies, Glancy argues in *Slavery in Early Christianity* that "the bodies of slaves were not themselves neatly bounded nor defined entities" (12). As both a female and a slave, Blandina is an especially ill-defined body within the Roman Empire.

3. Blandina as tool of the text

I here wish to argue that Blandina's visual and literary metamorphoses in the arena demonstrate that her body is an instrument, a vehicle, which the author of the letter uses 'to think with.' Simply put, Blandina is a tool to achieve the rhetorical purposes of this letter. As I noted when explaining the rhetoric of *Lyons*, there is a heightened concern in this text regarding Christian deniers. The personas assumed through Blandina's performance aim to change the audience's beliefs regarding the weakness of this female slave, or the potential weakness of any Christian body, in order to demonstrate that all Christians are capable and ought to embrace martyrdom. Blandina therefore serves as a hyperbolic example of the potential power and strength of any Christian facing persecution. I am not denying a similar function to the other characters in *Lyons*, but the goal of my thesis is to comprehend what is transpiring in regards to the shifting of Blandina's gender in the text, and I understand it as tightly tied up with the rhetoric of the text.

Gail Corrington Streete argues that early Christian bodies acted as "sight" (spectacle) and "site" (as a symbol and referent) in martyrologies;[14] this is true of Blandina. She not only appears as these different, gendered personas before an audience in the amphitheatre, but these images are also the means by which the author of the martyrology carries out his rhetorical goals of persuading Christians to welcome martyrdom under threat of persecution. If a lowly, female slave can find the strength to perform in such a way, then any Christian has the capacity to do so. Although Blandina may be on the lowest stratum of society, her lowly

[14] Streete, *Redeemed Bodies*, 2.

status is manipulated by the author of *Lyons* and rendered into the text's most powerful tool.

By representing Blandina as the pinnacle of the Christian martyrs of Lyons and Vienne, the author demonstrates that even if Christians have a 'deficiency' like Blandina, any and every Christian is eligible to be a Christian martyr. Everyone is able to endure the tortures of the amphitheatre. Any Christian is able to become a noble athlete; each is worthy of putting on the unconquerable body of Christ; all Christians can embody motherly feelings in order to dissuade deniers. Every Christian has the potential to be "crowned with the crown of incorruptibility" (1.42). Female or weak male Christians are able to exemplify the necessary masculine qualities for martyrdom, just as males are able to embody maternal feelings and actions, as seen with Alexander the Phrygian. The example of Blandina allows the reader to understand that any Christian can endure martyrdom. Her physical body tells the reader that she lies on the imperfect end of the one-sex continuum, but her Christian body, her martyred body, places her simultaneously on the ideal masculine end. Both masculine and feminine attributes are required for victory, which Blandina demonstrates through her performance that relies on both ends of the continuum.

It is notable that Blandina's three personas can be understood as invoking images that correspond to the three predominant 'religio-ethnic' groups of this time: the noble athlete corresponds to a pagan ideal, an ideal of Greek philosophy; the image of crucified Christ is a central theme to Christianity; and the allusion to the mother of the Maccabees is a reference to a Jewish image. An appeal to such images may indicate a rhetorical attempt to re-appropriate these images in order to

imbue them with Christian meaning. These images may be evidence of boundary negotiations between these predominant groups; perhaps the author of *Lyons* is attempting to universalize the language of martyrdom or Christianity by using images that correspond to all three religions. Such thoughts are a discussion for a different project, but I introduce them here because if the above scenarios are true, Blandina's performance attempts to accomplish much more than I have argued in this thesis. The author may not solely be communicating to a Christian audience through his narration of Blandina's metamorphoses; he may have a larger audience in mind. Blandina's performance may be shaped to convey and convince a Christian, pagan, and Jewish audience of the power of Christianity.

4. Women in early Christian martyrologies

4.1 Scholarship

Some scholars have attempted to reconstruct 'woman' and women's roles in early Christianity from martyrologies. This can be seen in the works of Susanna Elm, Elizabeth A. Castelli, and Virginia Burrus.[15] These attempts are problematic due to the highly rhetorical nature of these narratives. As I demonstrated above, Blandina's experience is shaped by the author of *Lyons* with specific goals. Blandina's performance is not her own, but the one narrated by the author. This is not to deny the existence of Blandina or her impressive role in the arena. Rather, given her rhetorical function, it is not practical to reconstruct the experience of women from her experience, or even that of other female martyrs. Even Perpetua's diary, which purports to contain personal experiences written by the

[15] Susanna Elm, *Virgins of God: The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity*. (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*; Burrus, *Saving Shame*.

matron's own hand, and thus could provide a more intimate encounter with a Christian female's experience, has been challenged on the grounds of its authenticity.[16] Reconstituting 'woman' and women's experiences in early Christianity needs to be carried out quite cautiously. Although there have been many recent attempts to demonstrate a more empowered role for women in the early Christian movement,[17] scholars and others must be wary of their own rhetorical aims in reading such hopeful interpretations of early Christianity. Such readings have been used to justify a more empowered role for women in the church today; they argue that such a role is rooted with the church's beginnings.[18] In a way, these scholars are also shaping the experiences of early Christian women to fit their own goals.

Another trend in early Christian scholarship is the argument made by some scholars[19] that the gender-bending tendencies, or gradual masculinization, of some

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[16] Early Christian theologian Augustine raised doubts regarding the authorship of Perpetua's diary, according to Joseph Farrell. He writes, however, that most scholars assume the text's authenticity. Nevertheless, her diary as we have it today has been "constructed on the foundation of Perpetua's own account of her last days." Furthermore, given that it is framed by an opening and a conclusion written by an anonymous redactor, the martyrology is "surrounded by [a tendentious] interpretive frame." In "The Canonization of Perpetua." *Perpetua's Passions: Multidisciplinary Approaches to the* Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis, eds. Jan N. Bremmer and Marco Formisano. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) 311. For more discussion on the diary's authenticity, see: Jan N. Bremmer, "Perpetua and her Diary: Authenticity, Family, and Visions." *Märtyrer und Märtyrerakten*, ed. Walter Ameling. (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2002) 77-120.

[17] See, for instance: Anne Jensen, *God's Self-Confident Daughters: Early Christianity and the Liberation of Women*, trans. O.C. Dean, Jr. (Louiseville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996). Also see footnotes 19 and 32 of this chapter.

[18] See, for instance: Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Women in the Pre-Pauline and Pauline Churches." *USQR* 33 (1978): 153-166; Luise Schotroff, *Let the Oppressed Go Free: Feminist Perspectives on the New Testament*, trans. Annemarie S. Kiddler. (Louiseville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993); Leonard J. Swidler, *Jesus was a Feminist: What the Gospels Reveal about His Revolutionary Perspective*. (Lanham, MD: Sheed & Ward, 2007).

[19] The following sources use the cases of Perpetua and/or Thecla in order to argue that these females were able to break away from Greco-Roman gender values: Mary R. Lefkowitz, *Women in Greek Myth*. Second Edition. (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007) 161-62; Mary R. Lefkowitz, "The Motivations of St. Perpetua's Martyrdom." *Heroines and Hysterics*. (London: Duckworth, 1981) 53-58; Judith Perkins, "The *Passion of Perpetua*: a Narrative of Empowerment." *Latomus* 53:4 (1994): 837-847; Perkins, "Suffering and Power." *The Suffering*

early Christian female martyrs, gestures to a rejection of Greco-Roman understanding of sex and gender. There are two female martyrs who are typically referenced to make this point: Perpetua and Thecla. Such scholars believe that the actions performed by these Christians, both inside and outside the amphitheatre, demonstrate that Christianity offered these females an opportunity to break away from rigid Greco-Roman patriarchal values. I will briefly explore the two texts which narrate Perpetua and Thecla's experiences. I will demonstrate the ways some scholars read gender-bending tendencies in these females' performances, what this means in terms of Christianity and gender, and whether this scholarship aids in understanding Blandina's metamorphoses.

The *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* (*PPF*) dates from the beginning of the third century and the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* (*APTh*) was written in the second century. As previously mentioned, *PPF* is the journal of a young mother who is imprisoned along with her baby and other initiates. *APTh* is the story of an engaged young woman who leaves both her mother and fiancé in order to follow a strange itinerant man called Paul, that is, the apostle Paul, who preaches chastity. The act narrates her adventures in the amphitheatre after she is sentenced to death in two separate instances. Both times she escapes through the grace of divine intervention. Thecla is never actually executed, although later tradition will identify her as a martyr, and she lives out the rest of her life "enlightening many with the word of God" (ch. 43).

Self, 104-123. For more examples of scholars who argue that martyrologies are a means of liberation or of resistance from gender stereotypes through their positive portrayal of female Christians, see footnote 32 of this chapter.

Several examples are extracted from these narratives to demonstrate the progressive masculinization of Perpetua and Thecla in their martyrdoms. For instance, in the course of the narrative, the reader first encounters Thecla while she is gazing out the window, glued to it "like a spider" (ch. 9). She is a silent character, located within the womanly sphere of the household. As the narrative develops, Thecla leaves this sphere to go out in public alone at night. Eventually she leaves her town in the company of the preacher Paul. In one instance of the narrative, Thecla is left to defend herself against the advances of the Antiochene Alexander when Paul cowardly denies any association with her. Alexander embraces Thecla on the open street, but she fights back, ripping his cloak and taking the crown off of his head (ch. 26). She shames Alexander by removing his garments. At a later point in the narrative, Thecla baptizes herself in a pool with seals, proclaiming: "In the name of Jesus Christ I baptize myself on the last day!" (ch. 34). In this instance, she imitates the authority of Paul who has previously denied her baptism. According to Davis, the importance of this act is highlighted by the fact that it is narrated twice in the text.[20] Finally Thecla travels independently, dressed in men's clothing, cuts her hair short, and proclaims publicly in the fashion of men. Within the text, Thecla transforms from a voiceless character in the home to become a public-speaking figure.

As for Perpetua, the reader is first introduced to her as a nursing mother. As the narrative develops, eventually the milk from her breasts dries up and she gives up her baby. Her identity as mother is diminished and in her last vision she visually becomes a man: "And I was stripped and became a man" (ch. 10).

[20] Davis, *The Cult of Saint Thecla*, 458.

Perpetua acts very much in control throughout the narrative. This is most evident in her encounters with her father. On numerous occasions she demonstrates the commitment to her confession, despite her father's pleads to recant. When Perpetua and those imprisoned with her are being prepared for the arena, she steadfastly refuses to put on the pagan costume arranged for her, and she even convinces the guard to allow her and the others to wear their own garments (ch. 18). As she enters the arena on the day of her martyrdom, she is described as having cast down the gaze of all (ch. 18). Brent D. Shaw remarks that this act "signalled an aggressiveness that was not one of conventional femininity."[21] Although Perpetua is exposed to the gaze of the audience which should have magnified her shame, she reverses the intended shame by making eye contact with those witnessing her execution. She is in control until the very end of her life, where she is the one to guide the sword of the gladiator to her throat. In both *PPF* and *APTh* the reader can detect a gradual elimination of female characteristics and an adoption of masculine traits.

Are Perpetua and Thecla transforming into males and leaving behind all traces of their femaleness like an "unwanted garment," as has been argued by Burrus?[22] Or, because they embody characteristics that fall on both ends of the one-sex continuum, much like Blandina's performance, is it possible to speak of an androgynous transformation? The state of androgyny was of particular interest in the early church. In his essay entitled "The Image of the Androgyne," Wayne A. Meeks explores the use of the symbol of unification of both male and female

[21] Brent D. Shaw, "The Passion of Perpetua." *Past and Present* 139 (1993): 4.
[22] Burrus, *Saving Shame*, 33.

genders within some groups of early Christianity, especially in its application "as a prime symbol of salvation."[23] Daniel Boyarin asserts that "the myth of the primal androgyne" is "the dominant structuring metaphor of gender for the early church and for the Christian west as a whole."[24] According to some interpretations of Paul's statement in Galatians 3:28,[25] baptism was a ritual that bestowed an androgynous state on the new Christian.[26] This new state, for instance, "would logically account for Thecla's transvestite ritual."[27]

However, the use of the term 'androgyny' to speak of the gendered performances of Thecla, Perpetua, or Blandina, is misleading when situating this concept in the ancient Greco-Roman world. Dale Martin explains that androgyny in antiquity was defined in male terms.[28] An androgynous figure embodied a change from woman to man or from man to more manly, meaning this transformation was predicated on the adoption of characteristics that would place one on the perfect male end of the one-sex continuum. Vorster also confirms the same: "the figure of the androgyny was on the one hand product of phallocraticism and on the other hand functioned to entrench the virtues of manliness."[29] Androgyny, in the ancient world, "functioned as such to negatively

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[23] Wayne A. Meeks, "The Image of the Androgyne: Some Uses of a Symbol in Earliest Christianity." *In Search of the Early Christians: Selected Essays*, eds. Allen R. Hilton and H. Gregory Snyder. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002) 3.
[24] Daniel Boyarin, *Galatians and Gender Trouble*, 28.
[25] "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."
[26] J.L. Welch, "Cross-Dressing and Cross-Purposes: Gender Possibilities in the Acts of Thecla." *Gender Reversals and Gender Cultures: Anthropological and Historical Perspectives*, ed. Sabrina P. Ramet. (London; New York: Routledge, 1996) 71.
[27] John Anson, "The Female Transvestite in Early Monasticism: Origin and Development of a Motif." *Viator* 5 (1974): 7.
[28] Martin, *The Corinthian Body*, 231.
[29] Johannes N. Vorster, "Androgyny and Early Christianity." *R&T* 15: 1/2 (2008): 106.

valorise women and those outside the enclosed circle of free, adult males."[30] It was not a state that demonstrated the rejection of Greco-Roman values regarding sex and gender; rather, it further valued the perfect male end of the one-sex continuum. Androgyny was "a site for the complete disappearance of womanhood."[31] There is no male or female in androgyny because there is solely male. This is consistent with the concept of the one-sex continuum.

The stories of Perpetua, Thecla, Blandina, and of other powerful female martyrs are not a means of liberation or of resistance from gender stereotypes through their positive portrayal of model female Christians, as has been argued by some scholars.[32] These martyrologies are predicated on the renunciation of sexuality and/or maternity. Although *Lyons* does use the imagery of motherhood as part of its rhetorical strategy, it does so only at a metaphorical level; it implies to some degree a rejection of literal motherhood because it does not communicate ideal martyr characteristics through an actual mother. Rather, by applying the imagery of motherhood to both males and females, the text calls attention to the characteristics of motherhood, and not to motherhood itself. As for sexuality, it is only in its rejection, namely through virginity, "that gender parity ever existed."[33]

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[30] Vorster, "Androgyny and Early Christianity," 129.
[31] Vorster, "Androgyny and Early Christianity," 104.
[32] See, for instance: Karen Armstrong, "The Acts of Paul and Thecla," *Feminist Theology: A Reader*, eds. Ann Loades, Karen Armstrong, et al. (London: SPCK; Louisville, KY: W/JKP 1990): 83-90; Jan N. Bremmer, "Magic, Martyrdom and Women's Liberation in the Acts of Paul and Thecla," *The Apocryphal* Acts, 36-59; Virginia Burrus, *Chastity as Autonomy: Women in the Stories of the Apocryphal Acts*. (Lewiston, ME: E. Mellen Press, 1987); Stevan L. Davies, *The Revolt of the Widows: The Social World of the Apocryphal Acts*. (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press; London: Feffer & Simons, 1980); David M. Scholer, "'And I Was a Man': The Power and Problem of Perpetua." *Daughters of Sarah* 15:5 (1989): 10-14.
[33] Daniel Boyarin, "Paul and the Genealogy of Gender." *Representations* 41 (1993): 17. In making this argument, Boyarin references Elizabeth A. Clark, "Ascetic Renunciation and Feminine Advancement: A Paradox of Late Ancient Christianity." *Ascetic Piety and Women's Faith: Essays in Late Ancient Christianity*. (Lewiston, NY: E. Mellen Press, 1986) 175-208.

In the ancient world, the category 'woman' existed because of her reproductive functions and her subordinate position in sexual relations, putting her at the passive, imperfect male end of the one-sex continuum, and so a woman escapes her category by avoiding sexual relations.[34] It is remarkable, however, that the question of virginity is not associated with Blandina nor is it an apparent concern for the author of *Lyons*.

These martyrologies are appropriating Roman values regarding power. Cobb confirms this:

> The stories of the martyrs do not reject or even substantially revise common understandings of sex and the virtues and hierarchies accompanying them. On the contrary, the texts are culturally conservative in the sense that they utilize cultural expectations of manliness, justice, and volition in their descriptions of Christians. The authors of the early martyr acts appropriate Roman constructions of power – in particular, the power of masculinity.[35]

Reverence is given to those women who adopt qualities that are associated with the perfect male end of the one-sex continuum. Spiritual progress is understood in male terms.

What I wish to emphasize here is that this blurring of gender boundaries found in these martyrologies needs to be understood at a narrative level. I am using the case of Blandina to demonstrate that her embodiment of these personas, which changes her position on the one-sex continuum, should not be used by scholars to reconstruct women's experiences in early Christianity. It would be erroneous to do so. Rather, the metamorphoses of Blandina have been constructed in such a way as to fulfill the rhetorical interests of the author of *Lyons*.

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[34] Boyarin, "Paul and the Genealogy of Gender," 12.
[35] Cobb, *Dying to Be Men*, 13.

4.2 Blandina's place within scholarship

The case of Blandina does not challenge preconceived notions regarding sex and gender in antiquity. Streete argues that martyrs can "be used to project whatever ideals the emerging propaganda wishes to promote" and therefore the behaviour of a martyr preserved in martyrologies is indeed meant to be extraordinary. It "provides no mandate for changing women's roles 'in either the religious or the social sphere.'"[36] Blandina is portrayed as embodying these personas because such personas allow her the strength to endure the ordeal. A martyr is a noble athlete because he or she must remain strong and endure multiple contests. A martyr is like Christ in that Christ is the martyr which these Christians wish to emulate through their martyrdom and a martyr is also like Christ in that he works through these martyrs by giving them the strength in order to endure the tortures. A martyr is like a mother because the text specifically states that "having motherly feelings" (2.6) is necessary in order to support other martyrs and prevent any from recanting. Blandina, who is on the lowest stratum of the social and gender ladder, embodies these three personas. The author of *Lyons* seeks to persuade its audience through the most drastic, hyperbolic sample: even a female slave can become a powerful Christian martyr.

In fact, this text not only demonstrates through Blandina that any Christian has the capacity of enduring persecution, but it is also defining what a Christian martyr *is*. In other words, it determines what are the necessary qualities and characteristics that will enable the strength to undergo the tortures of the arena. A

[36] Streete, *Redeemed Bodies*, 30, referring to and quoting Sebastian Brock and Susan Ashbrook Harvey's work on Syrian women martyrs. See: *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient*. Second Edition. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998).

martyr is strong, courageous, and energetic, like an athlete; a martyr imitates the death of Christ, therefore he or she must act like the "great and unconquerable athlete, Christ" (1.42); a martyr is encouraging and compassionate, like a mother.

The author of the text is thinking through the concept of a martyr, through his representation of Blandina. The text is defining the boundaries of a martyr by creating an example of an extraordinary martyr. It is speaking and establishing a language of martyrdom through such images and Blandina is one of the mediums imbued by this language.

In summary, by arguing that Blandina's portrayal in *Lyons* is highly influenced by its rhetoric, I am able to challenge some of the scholarly developments regarding female Christian martyrs. Blandina is an excellent example of why martyrologies are inadequate tools for reconstructing women's roles. I therefore disagree with scholars who argue that martyr narratives promote a means of liberation from or resistance to the gender stereotypes of the prevailing Hellenistic culture. Martyrologies are employing a masculine discourse not to challenge stereotypes, but because it is the necessary discourse to adopt in order to speak and define the language of martyrdom. Martyrologies are tools of propaganda and therefore women, such as Blandina, should be understood within such a context.

CONCLUSION – Paths for Future Scholarship

This thesis has analyzed how the author of *Lyons* uses the figure of Blandina as a rhetorical tool to communicate his concept of martyrdom to his audience. He constructs the ideal martyr identity through three powerful, gendered images. The characteristics invoked by each of these personas constitute the qualities necessary to become a compelling martyr. It is Blandina's "insignificant physical appearance" which allows the author to "highlight her heroic behaviour as a martyr."[1] Her female slave body is easily inscribable by the language of the text, it is manipulated to strengthen adherence to a Christian identity, and it is to be universalized to all Christian selves. Blandina confesses and performs like a martyr – she embodies the ideal Christian identity as it has been constructed by the author of *Lyons*.

This thesis has approached Blandina's representation through an understanding of the categories of gender and sex in antiquity. Blandina's performance engages with cultural perceptions of these categories in interesting ways. The question of gender within the early church is not an uncomplicated one. Early Christian writers played with the nature of gender as a means to achieve their rhetorical goals. Early Christian texts interact with, question, and destabilize gender. Such texts are not limited to martyrologies nor do they all belong to what would become orthodox Christianity. The corpus of texts found at Nag Hammadi, for instance, is often regarded as marginal to discussions of the formation of early Christianity, but many of its texts interact with Christian beliefs and belong to the

[1] Henten and Avemarie, *Martyrdom and Noble Death*, 121.

struggles that are significant for the definition of Christian identity and community.[2] Part of this struggle involves questions of gender and gender's role in determining spiritual advancement. For instance, in the last logion of the *Gospel of Thomas*, a text which is composed of 114 sayings attributed to Jesus, woman's spiritual progress is understood as some sort of transformation to male:

> (1) Simon Peter said to them, "Mary should leave us, for females are not worthy of life."
>
> (2) Jesus said, "Look, I shall guide her to *make her male*, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. (3) For every female who makes herself male will enter heaven's kingdom."[3]

For the community that lies behind this text, a progressive move towards masculinization allows access to the heavenly sphere.

Issues of gender and spiritual advancement are also found in the Montanist group, a movement of the late second century. The prophetesses Priscilla and Maximilla were female colleagues of Montanus, the founder of the New Prophecy group. Interestingly, Maximilla would refer to herself in masculine terms when she spoke her Spirit-filled prophecies.[4] As for the Marcionite movement, women "sometimes wore men's attire to show transcendence of the earthly concerns of femininity."[5] As these examples demonstrate, the question of gender is not restricted to Christian martyrologies; it is a pervasive issue within the early movement and arguably throughout the history of Christianity.

As I proposed in the first chapter, Christians came to understand themselves through the categories and representations found in early Christian writings,

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[2] See: Elaine H. Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*. First Edition. (New York: Random House, 1979).
[3] My italics.
[4] Franz, *The Passion of Perpetua*, 70.
[5] Lynne C. Boughton, "From Pious Legend to Feminist Fantasy: Distinguishing Hagiographical License from Apostolic Practice in the *Acts of Paul*/*Acts of Thecla*." *JR* 71:3 (1991): 378.

including martyrologies. Because these texts promulgate an attitude that idealizes masculinity, Karen Jo Torjesen has remarked that it is a "social fact that female metaphors cannot be used for excellence or perfection."[6] Similar to Boyarin's argument that martyrologies were permeable sites for the borders between so-called Judaism and so-called Christianity, a similar argument can be made about the borders between male and female. However, the movement is one-sided. It is desirable to embody the characteristics that would place oneself at the perfect male end, but the same is not true for the other way around.[7] In fact, martyrologies are oftentimes interested in positioning pagans on the non-perfect end of the one-sex continuum. For instance, "[w]hen pagans are described as 'lawless,' they are being accused of unmanly behavior since masculinity is related to justice." Gendered language is used in martyrologies to differentiate the 'us' of the text and the Other.[8]

Some individuals have looked back to the early church, to the period before orthodox Christianity, in order to demonstrate that women had power and influence in the earliest centuries, but their notable position was later stamped out by male authors and patriarchy.[9] Examples of these prominent women are drawn from some of Paul's letters, Nag Hammadi texts, ascetic stories, martyrologies, among other sources. The example of Blandina demonstrates that, due to the highly rhetorical

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[6] Karen Jo Torjesen, "Martyrs, Ascetics, and Gnostics: Gender-crossing in early Christianity." *Gender Reversals and Gender Cultures: Anthropological and Historical Perspectives*, ed. Sabrina P. Ramet. (London; New York: Routledge, 1996) 89.

[7] The imagery of motherhood in *Lyons* is a bit of an exceptional case, however, because the author uses *metaphorical* motherhood to highlight characteristics that fall on the imperfect male end of the one-sex continuum; he is not advocating for martyrs to position themselves on the weaker end of the continuum by being like a mother, rather they should have motherly *feelings*.

[8] Cobb, *Dying to be Men*, 14.

[9] See, for instance: Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*. Tenth Anniversary Edition. (New York: Crossroad, 1994); Karen Jo Torjesen, *When Women Were Priests: Women's Leadership in the Early Church and the Scandal of their Subordination in the Rise of Christianity*. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995); Jensen, *God's Self-Confident Daughters*.

nature of martyrologies, these texts cannot be carelessly used for reconstructing women's experiences and therefore cannot speak for 'women's power' in early Christianity. Perpetua and Thecla are typically the female martyrs whose authority are noted, but the next step in early Christian scholarship should be one which seeks to understand these women within their own narrative, instead of accepting their historicity at face value. As was the case for Blandina, this caution does not deny the existence of such powerful female martyrs nor is it an attempt to erase all women from early Christian history. Rather, such an exploration would examine more closely *why* these females' performance are narrated in the way that they are and what is the author of the text trying to communicate to his audience through the portrayal of these actions.

It could be argued that the purpose of analyzing Thecla and Perpetua is for what they communicate to us today, which is one acceptable way to appreciate a text. However, if one tries to use and apply this approach in order to reconstruct history, it becomes a weak and ultimately ineffective method. First, one should ask why the author chose a powerful *female* to communicate his message. Second, one needs to inquire whether such women represent the typical female experience or whether these women have been preserved in writing on account of their uncommon power, meaning their noteworthiness, or to adopt Mendels' term, their 'newsworthiness.' These directions for future scholarship will allow further understanding of the complex gender dynamics found in early Christianity.

In her book *In Memory of Her,* Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza sets out to challenge the common understanding "that androcentric texts and historical sources

are a reflection of 'how things really were.'"[10] Rather, "texts must be interrogated not only as to *what they say* about women but also *how they construct what they say* or do not say."[11] Although I do not agree with the whole of Schüssler Fiorenza's approach to women in the early church,[12] I am of the same opinion that these texts should not be taken at face value and that they need to be contextualized within a rhetorical framework that "must observe the prescriptive, projective, and perspectival character of its source-texts and artifacts."[13] It becomes more fitting to approach early Christian women from the perspective of memory, rather than history, an approach I advocated in chapter one with regard to history writing and martyrologies. These considerations keep the question open as to whether women's experiences in the early church can ever be known. If Peter Brown is correct in claiming that early Christian men used women to think with, then can women ever be approached from a historical perspective in early Christian texts? Can we ever know what women thought and how they acted without the mediation of men's analysis of women? Scholarship needs to take a step back to ask itself whether it is even feasible to reconstruct women's experiences in the early church instead of making the assumption that it is.

The case of Blandina is significant because she has been an understudied figure, yet this thesis has demonstrated that her performance, as it has been preserved in *Lyons*, has the ability to inform and nuance modern scholarship of gender in

[10] Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, xix.
[11] Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, xx. Her italics.
[12] For instance, she argues that her book "seeks to repossess this heritage as the memory of those women and men who have shaped Christian beginnings as religious interlocutors, agents of change, and survivors in the struggles against patriarchal domination." *In Memory of Her*, xxx. As I demonstrated with Blandina, women need to be understood within their rhetorical value in the text, and the important gender dynamics that usually revolve around their actions do not advocate a rejection nor do they even demonstrate a conscious struggle against Greco-Roman patriarchal norms.
[13] Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, xxi.

martyrologies in very important ways. I began from the micro, the individual, to say something about the macro, the experience of women in general. Her example has allowed me to challenge the ways in which some scholars have neglected to approach martyr accounts as highly rhetorical texts. Blandina is an instrument of persuasion and needs to be analysed as such. Her body is the means by which *Lyons* is thinking through the problem of Christian deniers and constructing his own role model for the ideal Christian martyr. By studying the appearances of Blandina as an interlocking complex with the goal of understanding how the text is functioning, and what are its consequences on the scholarship of early Christian women, I also have been using Blandina 'to think with.'

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