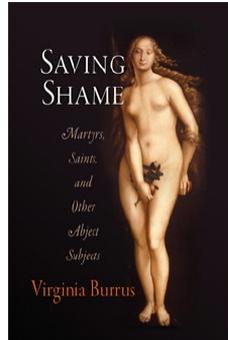


○ REVIEW OF VIRGINIA BURRUS, *SAVING SHAME: MARTYRS, SAINTS AND OTHER ABJECT SUBJECTS*

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This volume is another in the series, *Divinations: Rereading Late Ancient Religion*, published through University of Pennsylvania Press. In 2005, I had the pleasure of reviewing another volume in this series, Daniel Boyarin's *Borderlines*. I am pleased to say that *Saving Shame* lived up to the expectations of the series Boyarin's book had aroused in me.

Burrus sets out to re-examine the dynamics of shame in a range of ancient Christian texts, impelled in part by a renewed interest in the play of shame in her own life (briefly sketched in the book's Preface). The substantive body of the book consists of four chapters exploring the 'cultural legacy of shame conveyed by ancient Christian literatures of martyrdom, and asceticism, christology and confession' (5). These chapters are framed by a theoretical Introduction and Afterword. Burrus engages with a range of recent scholarly treatments of shame in contemporary societies and in ancient Mediterranean cultures which she will interweave with perspectives of gender and sexuality in her readings of selected ancient Christian texts. While she represents her work as a 'detour down ... distant passages of historical recollection' (xi), her readings of these ancient texts not only shed light upon the dynamics encoded within them, but enable Burrus and the reader, alike, to reflect upon the cultural legacy of these encoded dynamics both in contemporary (Western) Christianities and the societies they sustain. In the Afterword, she applies the insights gained from her 'detour' to contemporary (cultural) political debates on the role of shame in United States society.

In chapter 1, 'Shameless Witnesses', Burrus examines a range of martyrdom texts, both of red and white martyrdom. But these are prefaced by a 'prelude' on 'apocalyptic' shame, the interplay of shame and martyrdom in an analysis of shame in John's Apocalypse. The Apocalypse is 'proto-martyrological, if not even hyper-martyrological' (18), but the ambivalence of martyrdom that John strains to overcome is revealed tellingly in the interplay of the two women of the Apocalypse, the whore of Babylon and the heavenly woman clothed in the sun. The former is

shameless in her shamefulness but will be destroyed while the latter is hounded and persecuted but preserved. Burrus rightly describes these women as doubles. Indeed, they are even closer - the heavenly woman and Lady Babylon are both faces of Jerusalem. The former as Burrus points out is the chaste bride Jerusalem while the latter is the shameless whore Jerusalem also known 'prophetically' as 'Sodom and Egypt' (and also Rome) 'where also (the) Lord was crucified' (Rev. 11.8). The shamefully shameless Lady Babylon's martyrdom (Rev. 18) serves as a framework for Burrus to then introduce the reader to four 'spectacles' (19) of red martyrdom, the letters of Ignatius of Antioch, the Martyrdom of Polycarp, the Martyrs of Vienne and Lyon and the Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicity. Burrus then presents the almost red martyrdom of Thecla before concluding the chapter examining accounts of white martyrdom in the *Life of Antony*, the *Life of Martin* and the *Life of Symeon the Fool*. For the red martyrs, their public witnessing victimage is, by the norms of their Greco-Roman world, a space of ultimate shame and yet they claim this space with pride and by their endurance and surrender put their erstwhile shamers to shame. The inversion of shame honor dynamics is also a feature of ascetic performances: '... the holy men and women of the wilderness (were) dramatically flouting social convention, and thus also tempting shame by acting shamelessly' (36).

There is no greater shame than the shame of flesh and so the central Christian notion of the divine incarnate in the flesh of a Jew from Galilee and put to death on the cross was one fraught with dynamics of shame and shamelessness (c.f. Philippians 2.5-11). This interplay of shame and Christology - 'an embarrassment of flesh' (44) - is the subject of chapter 2. For both John's Gospel and Tertullian in his *On the Flesh of Christ* the fleshly divine provides a gateway to transformation of flesh, to a renewed dignity and integrity potently erotic. Most surprising for me was Tertullian's shameless advocacy of the maternal, of the womb and birthing. He challenges Marcion 'You detest a human being at his birth; then how do you esteem anybody?' (cited 53). A very different response to the enfleshed divine is found in Apocryphon of John. The Apocryphon reads John and the Genesis creation accounts against the grain, if not parodically, to assert a primal shame or fall of Sophia through not respecting masculine authority, from which the world of flesh thus ensues. This is overcome by Sophia facing, embracing her shame and entering into the dark realms of flesh to restore her children to the realms of light. Burrus then turns her attention to the work of Origen, primarily his *On First Principles*. In an extensive, fascinating and quite detailed discussion she explores the way flesh for Origen is a site of 'Divine Becoming'. The world of flesh is also the world of text, scripture. As flesh, Scripture is 'cryptic ... laced with both falsehoods and stylistic infelicities' making the 'task of interpretation and thus the process of revelation ... endless ... Logos ever manifests in and as the suffering of the interpreted text, even as it thereby ever eludes the reader's grasp' (70). There are echoes here of rabbinic notions whereby reading scripture is a process of continuing revelation that cannot be exhausted. Burrus concludes the chapter with brief discussions of incarnation and two-natured Christology in Athanasius' *On the Incarnation of the Word* and Gregory of Nyssa's *Catechetical Oration*. Again, themes of transformation, fulfillment recur with Gregory of Nyssa imagining an 'endless perfectibility of a created nature ever malleably transformed by the Word' (80).

It is to the worlds and lives of early Christian asceticism that Burrus turns in her third chapter, 'The Desire and Pursuit of Humiliation'. Palladius' *Lausiac History* is a 'hagiographic travelogue' (93) which 'takes its readers on a virtual pilgrimage to the ascetic settlements of the Mediterranean where the destinations are not places but persons'. Ascetic humility is the recurring trope, a hu-

mility grounded in humiliation and stripping of the self. Humility is experienced in humiliation. Burrus explores several types of humility/humiliation encountered and celebrated in the text. The first is a Job model of righteous suffering. The ascetic, Benjamin, at 80 having attained 'the height of ascetic perfection' (85) as signalled by his gift for healing, is struck down with dropsy in the last months of his life. His body swells and swells and on his death 'the door and jambs of his house' had 'to be dismantled' for the body to be removed (85). Benjamin's attitude to his illness is one of gratitude. A second type of sickness including swollen bodies comes as a form of chastisement, affliction to cure ascetics of their own attachments or vices, as in the case of John, who, beset by avarice, is stricken with elephantiasis such that every part of his body swells up. A third type of affliction is not physical but spiritual in which ascetics undergo relentless attacks by demons thus reminding them of, humiliating them by, their own vulnerability to temptation. Another form of humiliation is self-inflicted. Ascetics disguise themselves and court humiliation by their peers such as the case of a nun who pretends madness and demon possession 'with the result that she is both verbally and physically abused ... by the sisters in the monastery ... for many years' (90). She endures all this torment willingly without complaint until a visiting anchorite falls at her feet and asks her blessing as an icon of piety and spiritual mother. Her sisters are thus shamed but in the face of her newly recognised status the nun leaves the convent to seek another humbling horizon of anonymity. A variant of the theme is that of the deliberate shaming of one ascetic by another. In the examples Burrus highlights, gender is sharply accentuated for in both accounts a woman is deliberately humiliated by a man. Palladius' mentor, Evagrius, not only appears in the *Lausiac History* but himself wrote a number of texts on spiritual practice. Burrus presents Palladius' portrait of his mentor before then exploring the dynamics of shame, humiliation and humility in Evagrius' own writings. Evagrius makes explicit what is implicit in the *Lausiac History*. The ascetic goal is a stripping away of all privilege, including selfhood, to dissolve into 'a divine communion of love' (100). Agape is the goal of ascesis. In considering the *Lausiac vitae*, Burrus observes that women are 'ambivalently privileged in many ancient Christian texts due to their perceived greater vulnerability to shame' (92). The Christian ascetic order inverts that of the world – the site of greatest humiliation and humility is the most privileged. While many women receive privilege through class and sexuality, women and the feminine do not rank highly in secular ladders of privilege giving women an advantage in the quest for humiliation. In the *Life of Synclctica* – a text combining the genres of *vita* and spiritual teaching – the holy woman is rewarded with ultimate humiliation in the flesh, a white martyrdom leading to death and apotheosis. Synclctica is a model of humility through humiliation and self-abnegation (through fasting). Humility and humiliation surface regularly in her teachings. According to Synclctica pride and arrogance are the greatest of evils to be constantly resisted. She herself has the gift of healing and becomes a Joblike figure struck down with disease at the end of her life. Her flesh begins to disintegrate and she loses the power of speech (but not of healing). Compared at the outset to Thecla, she is rewarded by mortal illness as a form of martyrdom through the progressive putrefaction of her living (and dying) flesh. Towards the end, her body emits an overwhelming stench so that 'her caregivers are forced to withdraw' (106). Stench becomes the mark of sanctity and ultimate victory. Thus Synclctica's 'feminized soul and ... feminine body most powerfully convey the link between corruptibility and joyous transformability' (109).

It has been argued by Peter Brown, Elaine Pagels and others that Augustine represents, even effects, a dramatic shift if not inversion of Christian thinking and theology. In chapter 4,

'Shameful Confessions', Burrus examines Augustine's *Confessions* and *City of God* together with the *Conferences* of Cassian. She 'triangulates' these texts with Sophronius' *Life of Mary of Egypt*. In his *Confessions*, Augustine pushes the boundaries of older Christian 'coming outs' and notions of the shame or scandal of flesh, to confess the shame of his very humanity. While Augustine teases his audience with the prospect of revealing the foulest sin, his wretched moments are an adolescent incident involving theft of pears and his grief and pain at the death of his (male) friend and also of his separation from the unnamed woman, mother of his son. What links these incidents are human solidarity and connectedness (according to Augustine he only steals the pears out of the pleasure of the company of others, the peer group of his friends with whom he carries out the theft) – 'Augustine prefers to confess the pleasures of relationality' (121) – indeed it is his very humanity that is the source of shame. Sexuality is the marker of that humanity as it is the sign of relationality. While Augustine promotes an eschatological vision of a human sexuality, a human body, that is fully under the control of the will, in this fallen world such control does not yet exist. The human is subject to unbidden desires, stirrings, erections, which give the lie to human autonomy. That such autonomy is premised in Livy's account of Lucretia's heroic suicide, impels Augustine to invert her story in *City of God*. He pulls the rug out from under not only her own heroic virtue, but the heroism too of Christian martyrs. Burrus' analysis of Augustine and of the dynamics of confession in Cassian's *Conferences* is rich with insight. And as I am writing in the days after Barack Obama and John McCain were interviewed by Pastor Rick Warren at the Saddleback Forum, Burrus' analysis had a strong contemporary resonance. Behind Warren's quest to expose the personal depths of Obama and McCain could be glimpsed the confessional practices of Cassian's *Conferences* and Augustine's own *Confessions* – 'one never gets to the bottom of it all' (114). And how odd too – such practices are not part of Australian politics while my own Catholic experience of confession was an intensely private and personal experience, the content of confession not at all part of the public domain.

Nevertheless this chapter seemed to strain with the scope of what Burrus attempts here. In the previous chapters she is reading much shorter texts and narratives, whereas these three works are very much larger. The chapter reads more like a prolegomena to a detailed study of Augustine, than the final major chapter of this book. Perhaps that's the result of attempting to triangulate Augustine and Cassian with Mary of Egypt. Mary's *Life* gets very short treatment, not quite short shrift, but very fleeting nonetheless, more like a coda (but perhaps I fell under the confessional spell, and like Zosima, her confessor, wanted much, much more).

This is a very rich book not just for the study of early Christianity but also for reflecting on our contemporary world. For me it was only marred by the use of endnotes, requiring the reader to flick backwards and forwards, breaking the flow of reading. Despite that I got caught up in the book finding myself agreeably surprised by Tertullian and enthralled by Origen. I was deeply moved by the accounts of the 'gnatman' Macarius of Alexandria, of Evagrius, Syncletica and others. Many of these stories called to mind the holy fools of Russian Christianity, in particular St Xenia of St Petersburg. As a gay man I found strong affinities between coming out and those early martyrs outing their Christianity. As an undergraduate student at University of Queensland in the early 90s I was part of regular camp-ins in the university's Great Court which were public celebratory shameless displays of lesbigaytrans pride. With music, dance, hugging and kissing we would celebrate our sexuality for all the world to see. For many people participating, the camp-ins were a profoundly affirming and liberatory act. On a number of occasions even some

of the spectators overcame their fears of disclosure and joined us. As Burrus observes ‘shamelessness ... manifests as a turning or conversion *within shame*’ so that ‘defiant appropriation of the stigma thus both contests shaming ... and renders it unexpectedly productive’ (151). Since those days there have been considerable legal and social changes for LGBT people in my part of the world and so sadly the camp-ins haven’t happened for a long time. Instead for the last few years the Great Court has resonated to the spectacle of a lone preacher who would come each Thursday lunch time and loudly preach and sing from his very large Bible while being ignored by students and staff around him. It must take a certain courage but where is the shame? He has too much of an aura of certainty around him, perhaps, for shame. And how would he respond if one day he had to share that space with a camp-in? Ironically, of course, coming out has its roots in US evangelical confessional cultures (with which that preacher is aligned) and may be one of their most successful exports. Holy fools, queer coming out, Catholic rites of confession and evangelical confessional practices (and their secular media counterparts) all trace lines of descent from the texts and practices explored in *Saving Shame*.