Desiring Salvation: Following Fear and Finding Pleasure in the *Martyrdom of St. Ariadne*

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> One who feels fear towards adversities is in a state of astonishment in quite the same manner as one who feels desire; in each case, the agitation causes distress whenever one is startled by an unexpected sight. What does it matter whether one is feeling joy or pain, *desire or fear*, if, whenever he sees anything that is better or worse than his expectation, his eyes are bewitched, and he is stupefied in mind and body?
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> (Hor. *Epist*. I.6.9–14)[1]

The writings of late Roman authors, such as Horace, remind us of the messy boundary between feelings. That desire and fear run tangentially, bumping into each other, diverting, fumbling in the in-between, and confusing the other; these are observations about the complicated nature of being human. This *feelingness*[2] that Horace evokes in his sixth epistle, which is attributed to the poet and the performer, is also identifiable throughout ancient literature and across genres. How these responses can startle, confound, and direct the mind and the body was just as pressing a question in the ancient world as it is for us now. Emotions play a significant role throughout premodern literature, including in early Christian narratives. This paper is primarily interested in the use of fear and desire in early Christian martyr acts.

As recent scholarship has suggested, martyrdom was a widely diverse practice. Candida Moss suggests that suffering is a key component of scholarly efforts to define and understand martyrdom. Her connection builds from the suffering servant and crucifixion imagery of the gospel stories to bridge the development of Christian rhetoric of affliction with the evolution of hagiographic material.[3] All of which is to say that despite literary similarities and theological motivations shared between early martyr stories, there never was a homogeneous "martyrdom." This diversity, which Moss presents geographically, should inform our reconstructions of this ancient narrative trope. A multiplicity of genre is certainly necessary. The problem here remains that even in definitions of martyrdom that embrace variety, there are *still* prerequisites for what populates our archives. Bold suffering, voluntary suffering, energetic and courageous encounters with death are features that even the most open definitions of this genre require of our narratives.

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[1] My translation of the Latin text provided by, Horace, "Epistle I.6," in *Epistles*, ed. H. Rushton Fairclough (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1926).

[2] I opt to employ "feelingness" in place of emotion and affect in many places in this paper. I am inspired and guided by the linguistic work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick who writes of "unexhaustive possibility" and the whirlwind of imprecise and messy language. Feelingness evokes some imprecise other-thing that I find most helpful in thinking with ancient articulations of "emotions" and "affect." There is a thingness to feeling. *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, 2nd ed., Series Q (Durham, N.C. London: Duke University Press, 2004), 2.

[3] Candida R. Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom: Diverse Practices, Theologies, and Traditions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 8.

What, then, are we to do with texts that do not conform to these characteristics yet still name themselves *martyrdoms*? With these contributions and emendations to our genre, why is it that our reflexive impulse is to identify a text as "martyrdom" only when and if there is valorous acceptance of violence and state-sanctioned death? Further, how do we reconcile the existence of "martyr" texts in which willful characters *desire* reprieve from violence and suffering?[4] Or, stories that imagine alternative unions with Christ, unions that reject death?

If we understand martyr stories as *promising* a final death scene, what types of texts, knowledge, and discourse might we be excluding from our archives? How might an approach that follows textual presentations of fear and desire without violent death or purposeful suffering disrupt our expectations and conclusions about this genre? In this paper, I use the *Martyrdom of S. Ariadne*, a fourth-century Christian narrative, as an example of ancient texts' resistance to our scholarly devised and imposed system of division. A system of division that is, in itself, quite messy. I argue that *Ariadne* complicates traditional martyrdom genre expectations by exploring themes of fear, desire, and intimacy without a masculinized and violent death, challenging readers to reconsider the role of violence and salvation in late antique narrative.

TEXT OVERVIEW

I will begin with an introduction to this text, for which there is no published modern language translation. Dated to the fourth century CE and preserved in a now-lost manuscript from the tenth century, *The Martyrdom of St. Ariadne* is an early Christian narrative that follows the trial, persecution, and entombment of a young slave girl. This curious text has received limited scholarly attention since the publication of the Greek by Franchi de' Cavalieri in 1901.[5] *Ariadne*'s limited exploration, however, is not reflective of the text's peculiar and surprising contents. This short hagiography is set in Roman Anatolia sometime during the mid-second century CE.[6] In this paper, I am most interested in the text's presentation of fear and desire and the subversion of masculinized death with the feminized entombment of the martyr's body.

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[4] My understanding of 'willfulness' is informed by Sara Ahmed's presentation of willfulness as " a diagnosis of the failure to comply with those whose authority is given," (1). Willfulness in *Ariadne,* is a refusal to comply to modern conceptions of genre through her defiance in the face of imperial violence. The very pursuit of safety is an act of willful resistance to our expectations and to the imperial penal code. While stretching beyond the subject of this paper, I hope to return to this elsewhere. See Willful *Subjects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014); An application of Ahmed's theory to premodern texts is by Christy Cobb, "Euclia's Story: Coordinated Sexual Assault, Violence, and Willfulness in the Acts of Andrew," in *Sex, Violence, and Early Christian Texts*, ed. Christy Cobb and Eric M. Vanden Eykel (Lanham: Lexington Books, an imprint of The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc, 2022), 37–52.

[5] Franchi de' Cavalieri, *I Martirii Di s. Teodoto e Di s. Ariadne*, vol. 6, Studi e Testi (Bibliotteca Apostolica Vaticana) (Rome: Tipografia Vaticana, 1901).

[6] A most interesting study of Ariadne that places the strange narrative in conversation with epigraphical evidence from the 2nd century CE can be found in Peter Thonneman's article. He is able to convincingly reconstruct the political situation of 2nd century Prymnessos through his identification of a stone decree which matches the strange imperial edict present midway through the trial scene of the narrative. From this, the character who enslaved Ariadne, Tertullos, is perhaps, based in the historical figure featured in the material evidence. This study further strengthens the relevancy of this narrative in better understanding late antique Roman Anatolio. See "The Martyrdom of Ariadne of Prymnessos and an Inscription from Perge," *Chrion*, no. 45 (2015): 151–70.

Related is the use of phallic imagery–and resulting 'wounding'–to mark scenes of violence in the text. Lacerations caused by spears and iron hooks work to contrast the martyr's final entombment–the opening of the earth–as a divine act of maternal-like protection from this phallic violence.

I now offer a summary of the contents of this text. This story starts at the trial of Ariadne, an enslaved Christian, in the house of a Phrygian proconsul, Tertullos. She is on trial for refusing to bow to the Roman emperor and refusing to celebrate the birthday of her enslaver's son. In court, Ariadne maintains her identity as a Christian and remains steadfast in her opposition to state-sanctioned worship of the emperor and her enslaver. While being publicly questioned, the governor of the province asks many times - who are Ariadne's parents? To what family does this Christian girl belong? Were her parents enslaved, too? At the end of her trial, Ariadne repeats the famous words attributed to many Christian martyrs, "I am a Christian," and is thrown into jail. While in custody, Ariadne is subject to the standard tortures: intense beatings and grotesque physical mutilation. All the while praying for a reprieve.

Ariadne is kept in prison and starved until her scheduled execution. After days of prayer, God miraculously opens the prison doors, and Ariadne escapes. Tertullos' imperial forces are sent after her as she runs from the jail. She begins praying and crying to God appealing to the biblical stories of the three men in the fiery furnace and Daniel in the lion's den, begging for divine intervention and safety. Before the guards reach her, a mountain opens up and encloses around her, entombing her body. This is the divine answer to her prayer. As her body is encased in the mountain, Tertullos' men become agitated and turn on each other. When Tertullos hears that Ariadne has escaped and her body is now inside a mountain, more men are sent to retrieve her when a series of natural disasters and strange angelic appearances scare the men, and they run away from the mountain. When they return to the city, they tell the people about their unusual encounter at the mountain, proclaim Ariadne's God as the true God, and convert. Following this mass conversion, the people in Phrygia established a feast day commemorating the life of Ariadne. Here, the text ends.

One immediately striking feature of this narrative is the absence of a death scene. In most other early martyrdoms, the martyr dies at the end of the story. For example, in the third century CE *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas*, the martyrs suffer intense torture and violent murders in the Roman arena.[7] In the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, it is only after his gruesome death that Christians rush to collect his remains and celebrate his martyrdom.[8] In both of these and many more, the martyrdom is denoted as complete once the martyr has died. In *Ariadne*, however, the text neglects to tell us if she dies at all. When she enters the mountain, she disappears from our view; it seems that she is united with Christ in *martyrdom* while alive. Something similar occurs in the tradition of Thecla, who is most popularly recognized as a disciple of Paul in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*.[9] In a later fifth-century text, the *Life and Miracles of Thecla*, the story of Thecla ends with her descent into the earth; she, too, never dies.[10] Perhaps the finality of death or its absence is one minor distinction between *Ariadne* and most of its contemporary literature, but it does illustrate precisely the diversity of *martyrdom* that Moss argues for in her book.[11]

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[7] I refer to the English translation of the Latin text by Thomas J. Heffernan, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[8] For an English translation see *Polycarp's Epistle to the Philippians and the Martyrdom of Polycarp: Introduction, Text, and Commentary*, trans. Paul Hartog, Oxford Apostolic Fathers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[9] Moss, 5-10.

[10] In two longer manuscripts of the *Acts*, Thecla descends into the earth to escape the murderous pursuit of doctors who are enraged at her miraculous healings. These versions of the *Acts* date later and seem to be

While *Ariadne* and the proto-martyr, Thecla, seem to borrow from similar traditions of bodily absorption in the earth, there stands a considerable distance between the two characters. In each text of the "Thecla" tradition, we are presented with what Andrew Jacobs has called a "genderbending" Thecla.[12] She rejects aristocratic life and marriage in favor of joining Paul in ministry around the ancient Mediterranean. She conceals her gender and performs the role of a masculine subject in the *Acts*, and she takes on even more masculinized attributes in her later *Life*. She is brave in the face of state violence, showing no fear and boldly encountering near-death experiences, much like Perpetua and Polycarp. Ariadne does none of this; once she enters prison, she prays repeatedly for reprieve. She does not wish to face death at the hands of the empire.

This text presents martyrdom in an unusual way, in which the martyr is not executed by the state but is rather *martyred* in an act of divine intervention. In her study of martyrdom and its origins, Candida Moss raises the question I am hinting at most eloquently, "Is martyrdom an event, or even a practice and performance, in which an individual is executed?"[13] So, does martyrdom require an execution at all? Martyrdom was a fluid concept shaped to fit Christian dialogues and devotion in many different forms. Moss shows this fluidity with examples of martyrs and early Christians such as Thecla, and she notes the modern hesitation to view Thecla as a "proto-martyr" because, as stated above, she was never executed. Still, she argues convincingly that "martyr" in antiquity denoted authority "as much as death and self-abasement, and as such, was mechanistically powerful in asserting the legitimacy of one's position."[14]
The appeal for legitimacy through the use of the title martyr seems to be one motivation behind our text's identification of Ariadne as a "martyr." So, we see here that conversations about martyrs, violence, and even death can be complicated.

THEORETICAL GUIDES

To better understand the way that *Ariadne* plays with genre and feelingness, I look to the work of Brian Massumi, an affect theorist whose work illuminates our perception of threat, fear, and pain. The utility of affect in studying late ancient narrative is still evolving, providing us with new methods for mapping, retelling, and repositioning the messy histories of embodied discourse and written feeling populating our archives. Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg write of affect, saying, "Affect…can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension…or

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later additions, which Andrew Jacobs discusses at length in his recent publication on the *Life*. For an excellent English translation and introduction to this text see Andrew Jacobs, *The Life of Thecla: Apocryphal Expansion in Late Antiquity*, Early Christian Apocrypha 11 (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2024).

[11] Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*.

[12] Jacobs, *The Life of Thecla: Apocryphal Expansion in Late Antiquity*.

[13] Candida Moss, *The Myth of Persecution: How Early Christians Invented a Story of Martyrdom* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2014) 2.

[14] Moss, 4.

even leave us overwhelmed by the world's apparent intractability."[15] In literature, even the premodern, traces of movement and inundation are often inexplicably linked to authorial imaginings of what we term here to be, affect. As Horace writes in his Epistle, ancient authors conceived of the feelingness of experience, putting to language the messy interplay between emotions like fear and desire.

Beyond the satirical and philosophical, affect also lends its usefulness to the narratival. The foundational rhetorical and pedagogical insights provided by Horace, Aristotle, and other early authors populate the background of late antique narrative. Just as desire, fear, and arousal are observed in literature describing the Roman gladiatorial fights, these messy feelings are adopted in the literature of early Christianity, too. As David Frankfurter has very convincingly shown, sado-erotic voyeuristic fantasies of violence in the arena motivated and expanded the presentations of brutality in many martyr stories.[16] Fear and desire, then, are entangled within the narrative, the motivations in its production, and in its imagined reception.

Feelingness is everywhere in the premodern literary landscape, and what I hope to suggest in this paper is that our generic genre expectations implicate an imagined and standardized affective valence. I look to Brian Massumi's work on ontologies of threat to illuminate further our contested and occasionally divergent late antique presentations of fear in martyrdom. In his essay, "The Future Birth of the Affective Fact," Massumi's inquiry is directed at imagined and politicized threats surrounding the discourse of terrorism in the aftermath of 9/11.[17] The rhetoric of fearmongering and manufactured hysteria has continued to incite fear and violence amongst Western audiences, and his analysis suggests that imagined and expected future realities shift how we (and, in this case, premodern readers) perceive discourse. He writes, "Threat is from the future. It is what *might* come next."[18] It is the anticipation, the promise, of what is to come that evokes feelings of fear and anxiety. How, then, could Massumi's observations about the present world illuminate functions of texts in the past? I suggest that his formulation of affect maps well onto the function of martyr stories in antiquity, specifically, the *Martyrdom of Ariadne*, discussed here. Martyrdom literature, then, is defined by the *anticipation* of suffering violent and grotesque horrors instead of by the *consummation* of them through death.

Does the text, then, move the narrative and *us*, its readers, further into the rhetoric of a, to quote Massumi, "political ontology of threat"? Does Ariadne's fear guide us into an alternative picture of martyrdom, one that resists and subverts imperial violence?

FEELING THE TEXT

I turn now to think with and through the narrative. Parentage, particularly questions of motherhood, has been a question from the story's inception, and it poses problems for Ariadne's belonging. Readers know this from the public inquiry into her background while on trial. Further complicating this pursuit of identification is Ariadne's enslavement status, gender, and ethnicity, which serve to further ostracize her from the imperial governor and her aristocratic enslaver. While on trial, the inquisitor makes the question of Ariadne's ancestry a public matter. What country is she from? Were her parents enslaved? Was she sold to Tertullos? Was her family Christian, too? With each question, the governor presses closer and closer to the often painful and violent reality of enslavement and further flays open the complex and perhaps unknowable history of Ariadne's family.[19] Tertullos responds that her parents are dead, and she had been sold into slavery. And so, Ariadne is family-less. She is charged for her identity as a Christian, but in doing so, her identity as an enslaved Phrygian woman is also put on trial.

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[15] Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, "An Inventory of Shimmers," in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 1.
[16] David Frankfurter, "Martyrology and the Prurient Gaze," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 17, no. 2 (June 2009): 215–45.
[17] Brian Massumi, "The Future Birth of the Affective Fact: The Political Ontology of Threat," in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 52–70.
[18] Massumi, 53.

When she is thrown into prison, she is put there alone. The text does not tell us of other prisoners sharing her cell nor of other Christians who protested the pagan festivities for which Ariadne is on trial. The tortures she endures in prison are of the same creativity as we see in other early martyrdoms. She is beaten and whipped, hung from the ceiling, and her flesh is stretched with large iron hooks. During these torments, she maintains her identity as a Christian and refuses to acknowledge the divinity of the emperor. This is just as we expect from our genre. Perpetua, Thecla, and Polycarp retain their steadfast adherence to Christianity when threatened with violence; this is a shared feature.

While waiting to be brought out for her execution, Ariadne refuses food and prays constantly. This is where I suggest that this text begins to deviate from our expectations. In *Perpetua,* the martyr not only embraces death but actively works to bring it about quickly. When the Roman soldier hesitates to kill her, Perpetua grabs the sword and brings it up to her throat, encouraging him to deal the final blow. Perpetua not only accepts death but desires it, showing no signs of fear or hesitation. She is the active and masculine presence, bringing the phallic sword into her own body when the effeminate Roman soldier hesitates to do so. I should make quite clear that observing the narrative's impetus for readers and spectators alike to derive pleasure from the constant victimization of the martyr in imperial custody is but one method of confronting the components of this genre.[20]-Ariadne differs from this in the martyr's aversion to death at the hands of the state. We could, perhaps, even say that this narrative legitimizes the agency necessary for an enslaved woman to resist and outsmart, literally outrun, her oppressors. At the very least, this narrative plays with the possibilities that complicated feelingness creates, leaving room for imaginative resolutions to late antique state violence.

In contrast, Ariadne prays not for strength nor joy for her anticipated death but instead to be saved from the hands of the Roman state. God intervenes and opens the prison doors, and Ariadne flees on foot, continuously praying. When imperial guards are sent after her, she prays two powerful invocations. The first,

> "Help! With my eyes to the mountains where my help will come from, My help comes from the Lord who made the heavens and the earth."

And,

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[19] On the violent and sexualized realities of enslaved women in early Christian contexts see, Jennifer A. Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity* (Oxford, GB New York: Oxford university press, 2002); Jennifer A. Glancy, "Slavery and Sexual Availability," in *The Oxford Handbook of New Testament, Gender, and Sexuality*, ed. Benjamin H. Dunning, 1st ed. (Oxford University Press, 2019), 627–44.

[20] Frankfurter, "Martyrology and the Prurient Gaze."

> "The helper of the helpless, see my soul, for many dogs are pursuing me. Do not deliver your slave into the hands of the wicked but show your mercy quickly. O temple, the mediator between God and humans, hear the supplication of your slave. O Lord my King, listen to your slave."[21]

Her journey away from the prison is motivated by her fear of dying at the hands of the Roman state. The narrative uses this fear and the *anticipation* of the unknowable future (will she be captured and executed or will she get away) to drive the story to a resolution of Ariadne's desire for belonging. Her fear of imminent and imagined violence, as Massumi articulates, drives her actions to pursue safety. The imperial guard is an object of perceived threat that drives Ariadne away from the city into the wilderness. Her anxiety allows her to follow her desires for salvation and family, whereas a bold stance in the arena would leave her identity still unresolved. As her prayers are answered, the side of a mountain splits open, and "it stretched out its bosom like a nursing mother, and it broke open its own womb ready to receive Christ's bride."[22] Here, we are reminded of the uncertainty of Ariadne's lineage and her identity as an enslaved orphan. In this miraculous moment of anthropomorphic change, a mountain becomes enlivened and takes her body into its womb, like a nursing mother.

Fear and displaced desire infuse the genre of martyrdom, illuminating the contours of this complex category of meaning-making in late antique imagination. Rather than desiring a masculine-coded death, like Perpetua, Ariadne desires a feminized safety that provides her with the intimacy of a new family structure. Desire shifts, in this text, from phallic death (i.e., stabbing) to yonic salvation in the creation of the mountainous womb. So, the moments of impending penetrative violence in *Ariadne* are resolved through *wounding*, rather the womb-ing, of the landscape in the text.

What this image does for our ideas of the martyrdom genre is to upend them. Our expectations are for a valiant and brave death, inviting the phallic impalement of imperial swords into her body or a joyful embrace of the jaws of beasts in the arena. Instead, we are gifted an ending that envelopes the martyr in feminized safety amidst the creation of a new womb. This ending, while perhaps not what we expect, is just as successful in imagining the anti-imperial rhetoric Christian martyrdom becomes known for.[23] Ariadne is saved from the swords of the empire through the ultimate image of femininity, a pregnant mother.

And so, this narrative rectifies the very problems of the genre I pointed to by following the flow feelingness. The text creates space for a martyr to be afraid; is she less an example of late antique martyrdom for her fear? Does her desire for family invalidate the need for the heavenly bridegroom? Rather than twist this story to fit neatly into prescriptive notions of what makes a martyr, we find a new imagination for subverting oppression by listening to and following fear. Slipping into the embrace of a new mother–a mother that protects, nourishes, and transforms–*Ariadne* illustrates a different type of resistance that allows the enslaved Christian woman to demand salvation in the face of unimaginable violence. Rather than assume an inattentive embrace of suffering and torture, the narrative of *Ariadne* presents martyrdom in light of an embrace of fear and desire for belonging through the creation of a new family within the mountain.

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[21] My translation from the Greek text provided in de' Cavalieri, *I Martirii Di s. Teodoto e Di s. Ariadne*.

[22] My translation, de' Cavalieri.

[23] David Eastman outlines his rendering of the genre which is defined by imperial resistance in rhetoric and knowledge formation. David L. Eastman, "The Linguistic Turn and the Expanding Horizons of Early Christian Martyrdom," *Religion and Theology* 28, no. 1–2 (July 20, 2021): 26–40.

CONCLUSION

The *Martyrdom of St. Ariadne* challenges our conventional understanding of early Christian martyrdom by presenting a narrative where fear and desire play pivotal roles in shaping the martyr's journey. Ariadne's fear of state-sanctioned violence and her desire for divine protection offer an alternative perspective of martyrdom that resists the masculinized ideal of embracing death and suffering. Instead, this story emphasizes a feminized salvation, where the landscape itself becomes a maternal protector, enveloping her in safety.

By examining *Ariadne's* narrative through the lens of affect theory, particularly Brian Massumi's insights into the anticipation of threat, we gain a deeper understanding of how early Christian texts evoke and manipulate emotional responses. Rather than being a sign of weakness, Ariadne's fear becomes a powerful narrative force that propels her towards a miraculous reprieve. This shifts the focus from a glorified acceptance of death to a profound desire for salvation and belonging. Further, the interplay between fear and desire in Ariadne's story complicates the traditional genre of martyrdom literature. Unlike the brave deaths of Perpetua, Felicitas, and Polycarp, Ariadne's escape from violent death subverts the expectation of martyrdom as necessitating execution and contented torment. Her entombment within the mountain, symbolizing a new birth, challenges the patriarchal and violent imagery often associated with martyrdom, offering a different perspective on resistance.

Where do we go from here? I have hoped to offer evidence for a nuanced approach to martyr literature that follows fear to illuminate new possibilities for reconstructing ancient narratives. We can offer new insights into the early Christian imagination by resisting the impulse to let our systems of genre and their implicit checklists of conformity command our archives. Emotion, or rather, the messiness of feelingness, opens up a literary world of colonial resistance. These stories, which we so often render arousingly masochistic, can also point us toward fuller understandings of imagined agency in which even the enslaved woman, whose daily life is populated with violence, can subvert the empire by crying out to her God, fearfully begging for reprieve.

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