

The Creation of a Christian Identity in a Christianized Empire: Eulalia, Agnes, and Gender-Bending in Prudentius' *Peristephanon Liber* III and XIV

While Constantine worked diligently to unite the Roman Empire under the banner of Christianity in the early fourth century after the Edict of Milan and Council of Nicaea, it was the Edict of Thessalonica in 380 under Theodosius I that made Christianity the Roman state religion. During this time of conversion and great change within the empire, as well as earlier in the fourth century, new converts to the religion were unsure about what it meant to be a Christian as well as how one should act in order to portray themselves as a true believer. Many were still very familiar with their ancestral and polytheistic traditions, but were unsure of the character of this new, singular God and what their identity was. Was everything different now that they have accepted Christianity? Were their actions supposed to be entirely different than what their ancestors have taught them?

Faced with this identity crisis, Prudentius, a Spanish Christian, composed many works in the late fourth and early fifth centuries, including his *Psychomachia*, *The Origin of Sin*, and his famous *Letters to Symmachus*. Along with these works, he wrote his *Peristephanon Liber*, a compilation of fourteen Christian martyr texts. In these texts, Prudentius used gendered language to show the superiority of the Christian martyrs. The Christians were depicted as having self-control, active, and having a willingness to die while the pagan persecutors and judges were seen as filled with wrath, unjust, and unable to properly govern. By using gendered language that was familiar to the new converts of the Roman Empire with respect to sexuality and masculinity, Prudentius sought to help create a masculine Christian identity that was superior to the masculinity of the previous regime.

While plenty has been written about women in early martyr texts as well as Prudentius' *Peristephanon Liber*, particularly concerning the martyrdom of Lawrence, very little has been written about Prudentius' gendered language within the work. Cobb's work proves that masculinity and gender portrayals were a pivotal part of martyr literature, but only focuses on women in martyr accounts before the time of Constantine. In his article, Levine discusses briefly about Prudentius' use of violence within the text, but discusses more about how Prudentius seeks to surpass pagan poets with his skill in poetry rather than what the gendered language implies. By focusing on the language of these texts and using secondary sources such as those listed above, I hope to show that Prudentius, like previous Christian authors, used gendered language and female protagonists in order to show these new Christians what it meant to be a true believer, thus attempting to create a superior Christian identity in a newly Christianized society.

In order to prove this, I will research the two martyr texts that portray women as the protagonist: Eulalia and Agnes. By analyzing the gendered language of these texts, I hope to show how Prudentius used gender, something that the Romans already understood, in order to invert traditional gender roles by making the Christians masculine and the pagans more feminine. By using gender-bending, Prudentius sought to teach these new Christians that being a Christian made a person not only masculine, but also a superior masculine figure than if they still believed in paganism. This also applied to women, whose already effeminate nature was still deemed more masculine than the Roman judges and magistrates, who were deemed as the pinnacle of masculinity in Roman culture. This can lead to a number of other research topics as well. Prudentius may have done this to shame converts and lifelong Christians alike into becoming more masculine figures, encouraging them to follow Christ more fervently. This may also help nuance or even reject recent scholarship on Prudentius' misogynistic nature. By focusing on

specific women, Prudentius might be misogynistic towards unfaithful or pagan women, but sees the manly Christian women as praiseworthy and capable of masculinity, which is no different than how others have portrayed early saints, martyrs, and Christian gender in general. While the creation of a masculine Christian identity is the central focus of this presentation, it can also lead to further work into these other questions, which can be useful for scholars.

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