



The Pleasure of Martyrdom
El placer del martirio
O prazer do martírio

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Abstract: A late thirteenth-century *Stoning of St. Stephen*, currently in the Cathedral Museum in Mainz, Germany, shows the martyr smiling radiantly in the midst of his execution. In contrast to Stephen's saintly bliss, his executioners scream in rage. The narrative of St. Stephen, from the Acts of the Apostles, reports that those present at Stephen's trial 'viderunt *faciem eius tamquam faciem angeli* [saw his face as if it had been the face of an angel]' (Acts 6:15). Although the biblical story describes Stephen as crying out to God at the moment of his death, the makers of the Mainz relief applied the description of the saint as angelic – which they understood to mean that he smiled softly – to the martyrdom in order to highlight his joy at dying for Christ. Stephen's calm joy makes him angelic, while the anger of the attackers makes them demonic. The Mainz relief is far from the only representation of a blissful saint in medieval art. Early Christian and medieval hagiography is full of saints who taunt their persecutors or are described as smiling while they die. This is also true, for example, in the story of St. Vincent. In contrast, the persecutors of these saints often experience debilitating, blinding rage. Drawing on visual and textual hagiographies, this paper explores the implications of martyrs' smiles, arguing that their calm pleasure in the face of suffering both asserts the power of their belief in salvation and serves to disarm their persecutors. The contrast between calmly smiling saints and their immoderate enemies underlines the importance of emotional restraint for Christian virtue.

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Resumo: Uma cópia tardia do século XIII do Apedrejamento de Santo Estevão, atualmente no museu da Catedral de Mainz, Alemanha, mostra o mártir sorrindo radiantemente durante sua execução. Em contraste à alegria santificada de Estevão, seus executores gritam em ódio. A narrativa de Santo Estevão, presente nos Atos dos Apóstolos, relata que aqueles presentes no julgamento de Estevão “*viderunt faciem eius tamquam faciem angeli* (viram sua face como a face de um anjo) (Atos 6:15). Ainda que a história bíblica descreva Estevão chorando a Deus no momento de sua morte, os artifices do relevo de Mainz aplicaram a descrição do santo como angelical – o que eles entenderam significar que ele sorriu suavemente – para o martírio, a fim de destacar sua alegria em morrer por Cristo. A calma alegria de Estevão faz dele angelical, enquanto ira dos que o atacam faz deles demoníacos. O relevo de Mainz esta longe de ser a única representação de um santo alegre na arte medieval. Cristianismo arcaico e hagiografia medieval são cheios de santos que ridicularizam seus perseguidores ou são descritos como sorrindo enquanto eles morrem. Também é verdade, por exemplo, na história de São Vicente. Em contraste, os perseguidores destes santos frequentemente estão debilitados, cegos de raiva. Baseando-se em hagiografias visuais e textuais, este trabalho explora a implicação dos sorrisos dos mártires, argumentando que a sua calma e prazer diante do sofrimento afirma o poder na crença de salvação e serve para desarmar seus perseguidores. O contraste entre o sorriso calmo dos santos e os imoderados inimigos sublinha a importância do controle emocional para a virtude cristã.

Keywords: Emotion – Martyrdom – Art History – Sculpture – Thirteenth Century.

Palavras-chave: Emoção – Martírio – História da arte – Sepulcro – Século XIII.

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I. The Pleasure of Martyrdom

A Stoning of St. Stephen, currently in the Cathedral Museum in Mainz, Germany, once decorated the Collegiate Church of St. Stephen in that same city (Fig. 1). The relief almost certainly belongs to a rebuilding of the church that began in

1258, and has been dated to ca. 1270 or to ca. 1300.² St. Stephen, at the centre of the relief, smiles radiantly while being stoned to death. Taking this *Stoning* as my chief example, I argue in the following that the smiles ascribed to martyrs in the mid-thirteenth century highlight the similarities between saints and angels and distance martyrs from those who persecute them. Martyrs' smiles express both joy, which is contrasted with the sinful anger of the persecutors, and a moral strength that derives from God and contrasts with secular masculinity and political power.



Figure 1. *The Stoning of St. Stephen*, Cathedral Museum, Mainz, ca. 1270-1300. Photo: Dommuseum Mainz.

In what follows, I add to the newly developing research in the history of emotions. Several art historians have examined emotion in Gothic sculpture, and

² ARENS, Fritz. *The Cathedral of Saint Martin at Mainz and the Cathedral Museum*, SUMNER, W. L. (trans.). Mainz: Rheingold-Verlag, 1939 dates the relief to 1300, whereas the current museum label dates it to 1270.



have even turned their attention to smiles, yet none of these studies investigates martyrs' smiles.³ On the other hand historians, art historians, and literary scholars often mention that Christian martyrs are joyful in the face of great suffering, and even are eager for that suffering, yet this observation is typically made in passing. Furthermore, these scholars tend to assume that martyrs' smiles can be easily attributed to a God-given strength to withstand great pain.⁴ Thus, the semiotic associations and moral implications of martyrs' smiles have yet to be addressed.

The Book of Acts records that Stephen was the first of seven deacons whom the apostles appointed to care for widows. He performed numerous miracles and gained influence in the community, causing some of the Jews to become jealous. When these men tried to argue with him, they were:

non poterant resistere sapientiae et Spiritui quo loquebatur
not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit that he spoke.⁵

In order to exact revenge, these men convince others to accuse Stephen of blasphemy. When Stephen goes before the council and is accused of blasphemy:

³ See SVANBERG, Jan. 'The Gothic Smile'. In: *Kunstler, Austausch, Internat Kongress für Kunstgeschichte* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1993), II, pp. 357-71 and BINSKI, Paul. 'The Angel Choir at Lincoln and the Poetics of the Gothic Smile'. In: *Art History*, 20, 1997, pp. 350-74. Analyses of smiling figures in the thirteenth-century sculpture in Bamberg Cathedral appear in BEENKEN, Herman. 'Der lachende Engel im Bamberger Dom'. In: *Zeitschrift für Bildende Kunst*, 59, 1925-26, pp. 96-106. All agree that sculpted smiles are an innovation of the thirteenth century and, as Binski's and Beenken's titles suggest, these early smiles are associated especially with angels. For smiles as an "essentially ambiguous facial gesture" in thirteenth-century sculpture, see GERTSMAN, Elina. 'The Facial Gesture: (Mis)Reading Emotion in Gothic Art'. In: *Journal of Medieval Religious Cultures*, 36, 2010, pp. 28-46.

⁴ For this interpretation applied to Stephen's expression in the Mainz *Stoning*, see WILHELMY, Winfried. 'Steinigung des Hl. Stephanus'. In: WILHELMY, Winfried (ed.), *Seliges Lächeln und Höllisches Gelächter. Das Lachen in Kunst und Kultur des Mittelalters*. Regensburg: Schnell und Steiner, 2012, p. 198. The *Seliges Lächeln* catalog offers an overview of writings about laughter throughout the Middle Ages, as well as examples of smiling figures in imagery. Probably the most sophisticated analysis of martyrs' calmness during torture and execution, which, however, does not look at smiles, is HAHN, Cynthia Jean. *Portrayed on the Heart: Narrative Effect in Pictorial Lives of Saints from the Tenth through the Thirteenth Century*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001, pp. 68-9 and 84-7.

⁵ Acts 6. 10. All Biblical references are to the Vulgate at www.vulgate.org.



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omnes qui sedebant in concilio viderunt faciem eius tamquam faciem angeli.
all that sat in the council [...] saw his face as if it had been the face of an angel.⁶

After two Jews offer false testimony against Stephen, he argues his case through a retelling of Jewish history. The Jews in the council react to Stephen's arguments by dragging him outside the city and stoning him to death:

audientes autem haec dissecabantur cordibus suis et stridebant dentibus in eum
[...] exclamantes autem voce magna continuerunt aures suas et impetum fecerunt unanimitate in eum.

hearing these things [Stephen's defense against the charges of blasphemy], they were cut to the heart and gnashed with their teeth at him [...] and they, calling out in a loud voice, stopped their ears and with one accord ran violently upon him.⁷

While being stoned to death, Stephen looks to the heavens and sees Jesus standing at the right hand of God. In imitation of Christ's Passion, Stephen cries out:

Domine Iesu suscipe spiritum meum [...] Domine ne statuas illis hoc peccatum
Lord Jesus, receive my spirit [...] Lord, do not hold this sin against them.⁸

One final character is important to the story of St. Stephen. During the stoning,

testes deposuerunt vestimenta sua secus pedes adolescentis qui vocabatur Saulus.
[...] Saulus autem erat consentiens neci eius
the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man, whose name was Saul. [...] And Saul was consenting to his death.⁹

This Saul is, of course, the future St. Paul, and his presence at Stephen's martyrdom is an important contribution to his later conversion on the road to Damascus. In one of his sermons about St. Stephen, St. Augustine argued that it

⁶ Acts 6. 15. Jacobus quotes this exactly in his text.

⁷ Acts 7. 54 and 7. 56.

⁸ Acts 7. 58-59.

⁹ Acts 7. 57 and 7. 59.



was in fact Stephen's dying prayer for his executioners that enabled Saul's conversion.¹⁰

On the relief, Stephen kneels alone in the central panel. His lips are curved upwards and pressed together into a closed-mouth smile. This delicate smile indicates what I am calling the 'pleasure of martyrdom,' which characterises many martyr stories, but it also points to a specific type of pleasure – the joy of the angels and of the blessed in Heaven. Stephen's whole body conveys his blessedness. His smooth, semi-circular eyebrows appear to be a continuation of his small, delicate nose. His eyes are shaped like crescent moons, with the corners pulled downwards. His hands are missing but seem to have been pressed together in prayer.

The four figures flanking Stephen markedly contrast his look of blessed joy. The two attackers immediately flanking Stephen raise stones above their heads in over-large hands and have large, heavy, square faces. Both have large pieces of fabric wrapped around their waists with the front part serving as a sack for more stones. Both also raise the front foot, giving the impression that they lean forward in order to throw the stones with greater force. The raised legs have the further effect of lifting the sacks of stones hanging from their waists so that they are higher and project further from their bodies than they would if they were to hang straight. Given their location below the waist, this projection of the garments may suggest sexual arousal.

At the far right of the relief is a bearded man who wears a hat with a strap under his chin. He cradles a green garment full of stones with his left hand and his right arm, though now broken away, probably originally raised a stone above his head. Unlike the two central attackers, who turn toward Stephen and therefore appear to the viewer in profile, this figure faces forward out of the relief. Like the other two attackers, his mouth is open.

His eyebrows are pulled together and his brow is marked by three curved creases, so that the top half of his face appears similar to that of the attacker on the left

¹⁰ AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO. 'Sermon 382: Sermon on the Birthday of Saint Stephen the First Martyr'. In: *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, ROTELLE, John E. (ed.), HILL, Edmund (trans.). New York: New City Press, 1990, X, pp. 375-79.

panel. However, the bottom half of his face features only two diagonal creases that extend from his nose down to his beard, rather than the radiating creases of the other attackers. The result is that he appears less angry than the central attackers.

Saul stands at the far left. His left hand holds what must be the cloaks of the three attackers. His right arm is bent at the elbow and his right forefinger is extended, although the tip has broken away. He almost certainly originally pointed toward Stephen and his martyrdom at the centre of the relief. To my knowledge, in no other medieval representation of St. Stephen's martyrdom does Saul turn away from the attack, yet without knowledge of the original installation any explanation for this action would be tentative at best.



Figure 2. *The Stoning of St. Stephen*, Cathedral Museum, Mainz, ca. 1270-1300. Detail: Stephen's face. Photo: Author.

Stephen's face becomes completely visible when a viewer walks to the right (Fig. 2). His head, neck, and the top of his shoulders project entirely from the relief.



Seen from this position, his face resembles those of contemporaneously sculpted angels. For example, roughly contemporaneous angels from Cologne Cathedral share Stephen's upturned lips, dimples, delicate noses, prominent cheekbones, raised eyes and eyebrows, and even the face-framing curls, although their overall style and appearance is quite different (Figs. 3 and 4).

Both St. Stephen and the angels in Cologne may have been influenced by the many sculpted angels at Reims Cathedral; except that his teeth are hidden from view, Stephen also very closely resembles the Angel of the Annunciation from Reims (Fig. 5).¹¹

Stephen's resemblance to angels accords with the Biblical description of the saint during his trial ('all that sat in the council [...] saw his face as if it had been the face of an angel'¹²), so that the sculptors creatively transferred Stephen's angelic appearance from one context to another.

¹¹ The sculpture at Reims was hugely influential in thirteenth-century Germany, so this resemblance does not suggest any direct link between Reims and the Mainz relief. The bibliography on the influence of the thirteenth-century sculpture at Reims in Germany is vast and the details of that relationship remain a subject of considerable interest even in the most recent scholarship, as e.g. HEINRICHS, Ulrike. 'Die Skulpturenzyklen der Hochgotischen Kathedrale von Reims und ihre Ausstrahlung im Deutschsprachigen Raum: Überlegungen zur Chronologie und zu den Prozessen der Stilentwicklung'. In: KROHM, Harmut and KUNDE, Holger (eds.), *Der Naumberger Meister: Bildbauer und Architekt im Europa der Kathedralen*. Petersberg: Michael Imhof Verlag, 2011, pp. 359-81. Two particularly influential early studies are DEHIO, Georg. 'Zu den Skulpturen des Bamberger Domes'. In: *Jahrbuch der Königlichen Preussischen Kunstsammlungen*, 11, 1890, pp. 194-99 and PANOFSKY, Erwin. *Die Deutsche Plastik des elften bis dreizehnten Jahrhunderts*. Munich: Kurt Wolff Verlag, 1924.

¹² Acts 6. 15.

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Figure 3. *Angel with Guitar*, Cologne Cathedral, late thirteenth century. Photo: Bildindex Marburg.

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Figure 4. *Angel with Psalter*, Cologne Cathedral, late thirteenth century. Photo: Bildindex Marburg.



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From this position, the face of the executioner on the left panel is also fully visible (Fig. 2). The contrast in the faces of the two men could hardly be starker: whereas Stephen's head is small and round, the attacker's is heavy and square; whereas Stephen's lips are pressed together, curved upwards, and bordered only by two small dimples, the attacker's mouth is open and deep creases seem to radiate from his lips; whereas Stephen's eyebrows arch evenly and the smoothness of his forehead is broken only by what seem to be extra, curved bones, the attacker's eyebrows undulate and are pulled tightly together while his forehead is deeply and dramatically furrowed. Stephen's neck, cast in shadow, is also smooth, while the attacker's Adam's apple juts out pointedly.

The smoothness of Stephen's face echoes in his drapery, which begins to crease only at mid chest, while multiple vertical folds shape the executioner's tunic. The drapery corresponds, too, to the men's very different actions. Stephen calmly presses his hands together in prayer before his chest while the executioner stretches his arms above his head to hold the rock.



Figure 5. *Angel of the Annunciation*, Reims Cathedral, ca. 1230s. Photo: Author.

Saul's face appears in profile from this position, without any clear emotional markers. His broken finger is also prominently visible here and seems to point right at the viewer. Confronted both by Stephen's smiling face and Saul's pointing finger, the viewer standing here is especially implicated in the unfolding narrative. Stephen's joyous gaze and Saul's finger suggest three interpretations: First, they heighten Stephen's role as exemplar. He models the saintly joy of martyrdom, and Saul reinforces the importance of this modelling by pointing to it. An

alternative interpretation sees Saul's pointed finger as a gesture of accusation. This interpretation imagines a viewer who has not followed Stephen's lead, and this type of viewer becomes responsible for Stephen's suffering. S/he has more in common with the angry attackers who flank Stephen. Finally, Saul's point emphasises the importance of Stephen's actions for his own forthcoming conversion. Many martyr stories conclude with mass conversions. While this is not the case with the story of Stephen, the importance of his martyrdom for St. Paul (the Christian convert *par excellence*) means that Stephen can be credited with the indirect conversion of millions.



Figure 6. *The Stoning of St. Stephen*, Cathedral Museum, Mainz, ca. 1270-1300. Detail: Right-central attacker. Photo: Author.

Moving around to the other side of the relief brings the face of the attacker on the right panel into view (Fig. 6). Similarly to the left attacker, his mouth is open, exposing his top teeth, and his undulating eyebrows are drawn tightly together. His face is also large and square-edged, and his Adam's apple bulges from his neck. Clearly, the attackers appear very angry, especially in contrast to Stephen's calm. Yet their masculinity also seems to be highlighted by their square faces and



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prominent Adam's apples as well as by the rock sacks suggestive of erections, while Stephen appears almost gender neutral.¹³ Not only does this gender difference increase the differences between Stephen and his attackers, but gender neutrality is characteristic of angels.

¹³ In a somewhat similar vein, Catherine Conybaere has examined the Life of St. Laurence in Prudentius's *Peristephanon* and argued that, in mocking his attackers, St. Laurence takes on a feminine role and is ambiguously gendered: 'That Laurence bases his resistance around laughter places him in a countercultural mode that contradicts the imperatives of aggressive, hegemonic masculinity.' Her use of the term 'laughter' is, however, misleading because Laurence does not laugh, but rather verbally mocks his killers, and it is this mockery that is the subject of her study. CONYBAERE, Catherine. 'The Ambiguous Laughter of Saint Laurence'. In: *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 10, 2002, pp. 175-202 (p. 192).



Figure 7. The Stoning of Saint Stephen, *Images de la vie du Christ et des saints*, late thirteenth century. Bibliothèque nationale, Paris, Vouv. Acq. Fr. 16251, fol. 76r. Photo: ARTstor.



No other thirteenth-century illustration of Stephen's martyrdom with which I am familiar so clearly parallels representations of angels for Stephen's appearance. Stephen's angelic appearance is unusual in part because it contradicts the biblical narrative, in which Stephen looks up to the heavens and cries out to God while being stoned. Yet, to have sculpted Stephen's head tilted back and upwards might have hidden his face from viewers, depending upon how the relief was installed. Furthermore, if Stephen's mouth were open as if calling out, he would appear more similar to his attackers.

An illumination showing Stephen's martyrdom from a late thirteenth-century Flemish manuscript, in which Stephen cries out, provides a revealing comparison to the Mainz relief in this regard (Fig. 7). While Stephen appears smaller, more delicate, and more androgynous than the other figures on the Mainz relief, he is considerably larger than they in the manuscript. The evilness of the attackers is asserted at Mainz by their screaming faces and violent action, whereas the manuscript relies more upon the 'iconography of rejection,' including dark skin; a large nose and ear on the right attacker and a pig nose on the left attacker; and bright, particolored clothing.¹⁴ The sculptors of the Mainz relief instead insist upon the anger and brute physicality of the attackers, downplaying any markers of religious affiliation. By including such strong markers for both anger and lust, the designers of this *Stoning* emphasised the fleshliness of the attackers, recalling Prudentius's statement that flesh is,

'filthy, it swells up, it runs, it stinks, it hurts, it is puffed up with anger, or unbridled in desire, [...] [and] it is the prompter of sin.'¹⁵

In contrast, Stephen is iconographically linked with decidedly un-fleshy angels. In Christian theology, both saints and angels have privileged access to God and are permitted to occupy Heaven in advance of the Last Judgment. Most relevant to the present study, they tend to smile serenely. That is why, I suggest, the sculptors at Mainz chose to show Stephen's angelic appearance by sculpting him

¹⁴ For the 'iconography of rejection,' see especially STRICKLAND, Debra Higgs. *Saracens, Demons and Jews: Making Monsters in Medieval Art*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003 and MELLINKOFF, Ruth. *Outcasts: Signs of Otherness in northern European Art of the Late Middle Ages*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.

¹⁵ Quoted in translation in HAHN, p. 70.



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with a delicate smile. As residents of Heaven, saints and angels occupy a space free of emotional suffering. Several medieval writers claimed that bodies in heaven were impassable; that is, that they were free from both bodily corruption and emotional suffering. Impassibility is one of the four ‘wedding gifts’ that Christ as bridegroom gives to the resurrected bodies in heaven.¹⁶ The other three dowries are *claritas* (clarity or beauty), *agilitas* (a weightlessness and ability to move extremely fast), and *subtilitas* (extreme thinness or incorporeality).¹⁷ Writing *ca* 1225-1230, Robert Grosseteste contrasted these gifts with the torments suffered by those in hell. He opposed impassibility to the thirst, lust, sorrow, weeping, and ‘gnashing of teeth’ that these bodies experience.¹⁸ Even when they experience horrible suffering, including violent deaths, on earth, saints anticipate that they will join God in Heaven soon, and this confidence in the end of suffering shows on their faces. The smile as expression of saintly joy and blessed impassibility also collapses time, because the saints already inhabit Heaven in the viewer’s own time.

Impassibility was sometimes attributed to martyrs. The thirteenth century seems to have been a period of transition with regard to the pain of martyrs. Late Antique authors tended to describe martyrs as superhuman, suggesting that they did not feel pain, whereas late medieval authors focused on the humanity of Christ and the saints, whom they praised precisely because they suffered.¹⁹ Thirteenth-century authors such as Thomas Aquinas sometimes suggested that some martyrs might have been impassable, but mostly they praised martyrs’ fortitude, that is, their ability to withstand suffering without revealing that they suffered.²⁰ Stephen’s smile on the Mainz relief matches the ambiguity of

¹⁶ For the theology of the ‘wedding gifts’ (*dotēs*), see WICKI, Nikolaus. *Die Lehre von der himmlischen Seligkeit in der mittelalterlichen Scholastik von Petrus Lombardus bis Thomas von Aquin*. Studia Friburgensia N.F. 9. Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 1954. For resurrected bodies, see BYNUM, Caroline Walker. *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1995.

¹⁷ GOERING, Joseph. ‘The *De Dotibus* of Robert Grosseteste’. In: *Mediaeval Studies*, 44, 1982, pp. 83-109, with an edition of GROSSETESTE’s text at 102-09.

¹⁸ GROSSETESTE, 4. 3. In: GOERING. ‘The *De Dotibus* of Robert Grosseteste’, pp. 106-07.

¹⁹ See COHEN, Esther. *The Modulated Scream: Pain in Late Medieval Culture*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2010, pp. 227-56 for notions of impassibility in the later Middle Ages.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 244-48. Thomas discusses the pain of the martyrs in several parts of his *Summa Theologiae* as well as the *Questiones de quodlibet* and the *Scriptum super sententiis magistri Petri Lombardi*.



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contemporaneous theology with respect to martyrs' impassibility: he smiles either because he has escaped pain or because he is able to bear it. That is, he demonstrates either impassibility or fortitude.

Saints smile in the face of suffering also because this very suffering is part of what provides them access to Heaven. The story of St Vincent (another deacon) in Jacobus of Voragine's *Golden Legend* shows a powerful example of a saint taking pleasure in martyrdom, presenting sharp contrasts of emotions and assigning these emotions moral values. The story of Vincent's torture and martyrdom begins as follows:

Tunc iratus Dacianus episcopum in exilium mitti precepit, Vincentius uero, tamquam contumacem et presumptuosum inuenem, ut eius exemplo alii terreantur, in eculeo distentum membris omnibus dissipari. Cumque totus corpore dissiparetur, ait Dacianus: 'Dic mihi Vincenti, ubi tuum nunc miserum corpus conspicis?' 'At ille subridens ait: 'Hoc est quod semper optauit.' Tunc iratus preses cepit ei Omnia genera tormentorum minari, nisi ei assensum preberet. Cui Vincentius: 'O felicem me, quo mihi irasci te grauius putas, modo melius incipis miserere. Insurge ergo miser et toto malignitatis spiritu debacchare: uidebis me dei uirtute plus posse dum torqueor quam possis ipse qui torques.

Wrathful, Dacian ordered the bishop to be sent into exile. On the other hand Vincent, that contumacious and presumptuous youth, had to be made an example that would frighten others, so by the governor's command he was stretched on the rack and torn limb from limb. When he had been thus mutilated, Dacian [the governor] said to him: 'Tell me, Vincent, how does your miserable body look to you now?' But the saint, smiling, replied: 'Indeed, this is what I have always longed for!' Angrier than ever, the governor began to threaten him with every sort of torture unless he yielded to his commands, but Vincent exclaimed: 'O happy me! The angrier you become with me, the more you begin to do me favors! Up, then, wretch, and indulge your malicious will to the full! You will see that by God's power I am stronger in being tortured than you are in torturing me!²¹

²¹ JACOBUS DE VORAGINE. *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, RYAN, William Granger (trans.). 2 vols. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993, I, pp. 105-06. Translation is Ryan's, with some modifications of my own. The original is from IACOPO DA VARAZZE. *Legenda Aurea*, MAGGIONI, Giovanni Paolo (ed.). 2nd edn. Florence: Sismel, 1998, I, p. 175. Prudentius does refer to Vincent as laughing, and Jacobus quotes that part of his text toward the end of his own, but not here.



In this passage Jacobus engages the classic Christian rhetoric of reversal. Vincent becomes powerful because he is forced to endure torture and Dacian becomes weak because of his power to command torture. In a sermon about St. Vincent, Augustine offers similar analysis:

Si consideremus perturbationem torquentis et tranquillitatem tormenta patientis, videre facillimum est quis erat sub poenis, and quis poenas. [...] Tanta in Vincentio penarum asperitas seviebat in membris et tanta securitas resonabat in verbis ut putarem alium loqui et alium torqueri. Et vere sic erat. Caro enim patiebatur et spiritus loquebatur.

If we consider the torturer's calm, it is very easy to see who is under punishment and who is above it. [...] So great was the harshness of the pains inflicted on St. Vincent's members, and so great the confidence sounding in his words [...] His flesh suffered and his spirit spoke.²²

Jacobus not only emphasises Vincent's pleasure in and desire for bodily suffering and death, a common feature of most of his martyr stories, he actually describes Vincent as "smiling" (*subridens*). This rhetoric of reversal is furthermore embedded within an emotional script that juxtaposes anger (*iratus*, twice used to describe Dacian), fright (*terreantur*, what Dacian wants to do to others), and happiness (*felicem*, how Vincent describes himself). As the story continues, the governor begins to berate and to whip his own servants, and then is "beside himself with rage." Vincent's strength persists throughout the attack and his joy increases, while Dacian's anger and violence escalate; that is, their emotions develop in opposing directions as the story goes on. In a later section of Jacobus's narration, following Prudentius's account, Jacobus notes that Vincent:

Ridebat hic miles dei manus cruentas increpans quod fixa non profundis intraret artus ungula.²³

laughed, mocking the bloody hands that could not force the iron claws still deeper into his limbs.²⁴

²² From AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO. 'Sermo 276 in festo martyris Vincentii III'. In: *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Latina*, MIGNE, J. P. (ed.). Paris: Garnier, 1895, 38, cols. 1255-56. Quoted and trans.: COHEN. *The Modulated Scream*, pp. 235 and 323.

²³ IACOPO DA VARAZZE. *Legenda Aurea*, p. 179.

²⁴ JACOBUS DE VORAGINE. *The Golden Legend*, p. 108



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Vincent expresses his joy verbally, through his facial expression, and even through the bodily act of laughter. While laughter and mocking are usually condemned in Christian sources, in this case Vincent's mocking laughter is a further aspect of the reversal that is so central to Christian narrative, and demonstrates his God-given power over Dacian.²⁵ Ultimately, Vincent dies in a blaze of glory:

Faudent quantocius ministri crudeles domino crudeliori, sed ecce rex pro quo miles patitur penam commutate in gloriam. Nam tenebra carceris ab immense luce expellitur, testarum asperitas omnium florum suavitate mutatur, pedes dissoluuntur et angelorum solation uenerando perfruitur. Cumque super flores cum angelis psallens incederet, modulation dulcis et mira suauitas floris procul diffunditur.²⁶

But behold! The King for whom the soldier suffers commutes his suffering to glory. The darkness of the dungeon is dispelled by dazzling light [...] the shackles fall from his feet, the saint enjoys the solace of angels; and when he walks on the flowers and joins in the angels' chant, the lovely melody and the wonderful perfume of the flowers spread abroad.

Dacian's guards witness this and convert to Christianity.²⁷ This, of course, is the purpose of martyrdom: to convert unbelievers. It is a purpose, furthermore, which the Mainz relief and Jacobus's version of the story of St. Vincent equally highlight.

Both martyr stories emphasise the pleasure of dying for Christ, specifically by presenting the saints as smiling while they die. These smiles link the martyrs to angels and give them strength, whereas their angry attackers become weak

²⁵ On mocking laughter as suggestive of foolishness and of forgetting about God, see LECLERQ, Jean. 'Ioculator et saltator': S. Bernard et l'image du jongleur dans les manuscrits'. In: PLANTE, Julian G. (ed.), *Translatio Studii. Manuscript and Library Studies Honoring Oliver L. Kapsner*. Collegeville, MN: St. John's University Press, 1973, pp. 124-48. On mockery as a political tool in the Middle Ages, see ALTHOFF, Gerd. 'Vom Lächeln zum Verlachen'. In: RÖCKE, Werner and VELTEN, Hans Rudolf (eds.), *Lachgemeinschaften. Kulturelle Inszenierungen und soziale Wirkungen von Gelächter im Mittelalter und in der Frühen Neuzeit*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2005, pp. 3-16.

²⁶ IACOPO DA VARAZZE. *Legenda Aurea*, p. 177.

²⁷ JACOBUS DE VORAGINE. *The Golden Legend*, p. 106.



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despite their greater physical power. Both saints model ideal Christian behaviour in that they suffer physically for Christ and respond with calm joy. These contrast markedly with the secular and sexual masculinity that characterises their persecutors, thus reinforcing that saintly power is from God and brings them close to the angels.