

PRUDENTIUS' CROWN OF MARTYRS

LIBER PERISTEPHANON

ROUTLEDGE LATER LATIN POETRY



TRANSLATED BY LEN KRISAK
WITH INTRODUCTION AND NOTES
BY JOSEPH PUCCI

ROUTLEDGE



PRUDENTIUS' CROWN OF MARTYRS

Prudentius' Crown of Martyrs offers an English translation, with introduction and commentary, of the *Liber Peristephanon*, Prudentius' vivid collection of lyric hymns in honor of Christian martyrs.

To render Prudentius' metrically varied lines for twenty-first-century readers, Len Krisak relies on the inherent iambic nature of English. The introduction offers insight into social, political, and literary features of the fourth century, the life of Prudentius, the poet's other works, his Latinity and mastery of ancient meters, and the manuscript tradition and the reception of Prudentius in the Middle Ages and beyond.

Given Prudentius' central place in the history of Latin poetry, this translation is a welcome resource for general readers interested in Western literary history. It will also find a home with scholarly audiences working on Late Antique and Early Christian literature and culture, in a wide variety of college classrooms and in academic libraries.

Len Krisak is the author of five books of poetry, *Midland* (1999), *Fugitive Child* (1999), *Even as We Speak* (2000), *If Anything* (2004), and *Afterimage* (2014); and of translations of Horace (*Odes of Horace*, 2006), Virgil (*Virgil's Eclogues*, 2010), Ovid (*Ovid's Erotic Poems*, 2014), and Rilke (*Rilke's New Poems*, 2015). Among many honors, he is the recipient of the Robert Penn Warren Prize, the Richard Wilbur Award, and the Robert Frost Prize. His work has appeared widely in numerous venues, including *Commonweal*, *Raritan*, *The Sewanee Review*, *The Hudson Review*, *Classical Outlook*, and *The Weekly Standard*. He has taught at Brandeis University, Northeastern University, and Stonehill College (all in the US) and in 1995 was a four-time champion on *Jeopardy!*

ROUTLEDGE LATER LATIN POETRY

Edited by Joseph Pucci

Brown University, USA

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PRUDENTIUS' CROWN OF MARTYRS

Liber Peristephanon

*Translated by Len Krisak
With Introduction and Notes
by Joseph Pucci*

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ABBREVIATIONS

- Canali Luca Canali, ed. and trans. *Aurelio Prudentio Clemente, Le Corone*. Florence, 2005.
- Fux, *Passions* Pierre-Yves Fux. *Les sept passions de Prudence* (Peristephanon 2, 5, 9, 11–14): *Introduction Générale et commentaire*. Fribourg, 2003.
- Fux, *Martyrs* Pierre-Yves Fux. *Prudence et les martyrs: Hymnes et Tragédie: Peristephanon 1, 3–4, 6–8, 10, Commentaire*. Fribourg, 2013.
- Hershkowitz Paula Hershkowitz. *Prudentius, Spain, and Late Antique Christianity: Poetry, Visual Culture and the Cult of the Martyrs*. Cambridge, 2017.
- [L. K.] A note or a section of the Introduction written by Len Krisak.
- Palmer Anne-Marie Palmer. *Prudentius on the Martyrs*. Oxford, 1989.
- Pe.* *Peristephanon*
- Roberts Michael Roberts. *Poetry and the Cult of the Martyrs: The Liber Peristephanon of Prudentius*. Ann Arbor, MI, 1993.
- Thomson H. J. Thomson, trans. *Prudentius*. Vol. 2. Cambridge, MA and London, 1953, pp. 99–345.

INTRODUCTION

Joseph Pucci



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I

HISTORICAL CONTEXT; THE LIFE OF PRUDENTIUS; THE POET'S OUTPUT

The world into which Aurelius Prudentius Clemens¹ was born, in the middle of the fourth century, was in transition.² The political, social, and military depredations of the third century, which included the murder of emperors, civil war, invasion, and economic and political collapse, had given rise, by the early fourth century, to Diocletian's tetrarchic reforms, which barely survived his abdication, in 305. And yet from his attempt at reforms arose the powerful figure of Constantine, who, in time, made Christianity a licit religion while plying his own brand of consolidating power over the Roman world, east and west. Of the century's other important emperors—Julian, Valentinian I, Gratian—one, Theodosius, set Christianity on a new path by making it, late in the century the only licit religion. Theodosius' son, Honorius, saw play out during his reign the military and political upheavals of the early fifth century, not least the murder of his mentor and father-in-law, Stilicho, and the sack of Rome by Alaric in 410, by which time, presumably, our poet was dead.

Prudentius came of age, and wrote his large body of poetry, in a time of enormous literary activity in the West. Among important contemporary figures active in the late decades of the century are Augustine, who converted to Christianity in 387; Jerome, who set up a monastic establishment in Bethlehem late in the century in order to further his studies; Paulinus of Nola, who withdrew to a life of ascetic and monastic retreat in the final decade of the century to burnish his spiritual pursuits, and Claudian, whose affiliation with Honorius and Stilicho energized a portion of his large poetic output. Other figures are near contemporaries. Ambrose died in 397, around the same time as Ausonius, the century's longest-lived and most prolific litterateur. Hilary of Poitiers, Proba, and Ammianus Marcellinus are also important literary figures of the second half of the fourth century. The earlier part of the century witnessed the provocative and unique work of authors Prudentius surely would have

read, not least Juvenius, who inaugurated a rich tradition of biblical epic with the publication of his *Four Books of the Gospels*.

Perhaps more than most of his literary contemporaries, however, none of whom mention him in their own works, Prudentius hewed close to his homeland. When he was born there in 348, Spain had been a Roman province for over three centuries, and in time Prudentius became its greatest Christian poet. The year of his birth is secure, since the poet reports in the *Preface* to his collection that he spent his first days under the consulship of Salia, who held that office only in this year (*Praef.* 24–25).³ Although the *Preface* does not report the place in which he was born, Prudentius twice in the *Pe.* speaks of Calagurris, modern Calahorra as “my city” (*Pe.* I.116: *nostro oppido*; *Pe.* IV.31: *nostra Calagurris*). The Roman town of Caesaraugusta, modern Saragossa, cannot be ruled out, but there are good reasons to prefer Calahorra to it.⁴

The *Preface* opens with a declaration that the poet is 57 years old, which places its composition in the year 405, a *terminus ad quem* for Prudentius’ life.⁵ It is assumed that the poet died not long thereafter, since he mentions nothing of the military and political upheavals visited on Roman Spain in the years immediately subsequent to 405, nor of the sack of Rome by the Goths in 410.⁶

Prudentius seems to have followed the path set out for any son of a good family, studying grammar, rhetoric, and law,⁷ but in the *Preface* he frames his education against the backdrop of corruption and moral turpitude, rendering his worldly successes in the legal profession and in civic administration all the more sinful (*Praef.* 7–15). After a legal career, as he reports, Prudentius eventually came into the imperial service by appointment of the emperor, perhaps Theodosius, who was also a Spaniard, and whom our poet likely met, or his son, Honorius.⁸

What the poet means by this appointment is difficult to know with certainty. Some have argued that he was a provincial governor, though, if so, no evidence remains to confirm such an appointment, nor do the poet’s words in the *Preface* give any indication of such a preferment. He simply says that he was made to stand in the rank “nearest” to the emperor (*Praef.* 21). Since Prudentius is hardly forthcoming about his imperial position and the evidence is lacking, it seems safer to assume that he held some lesser office, such as *curator* of a provincial city, or *comes primi ordinis*. Palmer argues that the words *militia* and *proximus*, used by Prudentius in the verses that describe his imperial promotion, go to an appointment as *proximus scriniorum*, a post for which his literary talents would have well-served him.⁹

In any case, he reports a journey to Rome in *Pe.* IX, XI and XII, but otherwise it must be assumed that Prudentius remained in Spain, eventually

retiring from his secular career and converting to some form of lay Christian asceticism that energized a prodigious literary talent and output.¹⁰ Whether he was a literal convert or was brought up in the faith is not known, though he mentions no conversion or pagan affiliations, which perhaps suggest that he was born into the faith. The *Epilogue* to his collection seems to indicate that Prudentius was not wealthy, nor able to mortify himself in ways that would have opened up a life in service to the Church.¹¹ His poetry is his gift and his service. Neither on this score can be considered lacking.

In addition to the *Praefatio*, the *Epilogue*, and the *Peristephanon* (on which see below, Chapter II), Prudentius is the author of six other works. The *Apotheosis* is a hexametrical poem of 1,084 verses, introduced by a twelve-line hymn on the Trinity, also written in hexameters, and a preface of fifty-six lines, composed in iambic trimeters and dimeters. Its topic is the nature of Christ's divinity, less a contentious topic when Prudentius wrote than earlier in the fourth century, but the orthodox view of which gains for the first time a sustained, poetical treatment against the backdrop of didactic poetry so important in the Greco-Roman tradition. The groups Prudentius refutes include the Patripassians (vv. 1–177), the Sabellians (vv. 178–320), the Jews (vv. 321–550), the Ebionites (vv. 551–781), and the Manicheans (vv. 952–1084).

The *Cathemerinon* is a collection of twelve hymns, written in various ancient meters, ranging in length from 80 to 220 verses, and totaling some 1,745 lines. Hymns I and II deal with the crowing of the rooster and sunrise, III and IV with meals, and V and VI with the coming of night and sleep. By distinction, hymns VII and VIII attend to fasting, IX is a hymn for every hour, that is, an all-purpose song that praises Christ, X is for burial, and XI and XII celebrate Christmas and the feast of the Epiphany. Despite the length of more than a few of them, especially in comparison to the hymns of Ambrose, which surely provided models, Prudentius' hymns seem to have served liturgical and daily sacral practices while, at the same time, considerably furthering the development of Christian hymnody, not least in their allusivity and metrical variety.¹²

The *Contra orationem Symmachi* seems to have been completed between the battle of Pollentia, fought in 402, which Prudentius mentions in the poem, and the battle of Verona, waged in 403, which goes unmentioned. Composed in hexameters in two books, the first book is comprised of 657 verses, the second of 1,132. Book I is preceded by a preface of 89 lines, written in Asclepiads; book II by a preface of 66 verses, composed in Glyconics. The poem is a response to an historical event that took place two decades prior to its composition, viz., the speech delivered by Symmachus in 384 arguing for the restoration of

the altar of Victory in the Roman Senate House. Writing in the Christian settlement provided by Theodosius and continued by Honorius, Prudentius takes the prompt provided by Symmachus' more specific plea for toleration to argue against paganism more broadly.

The *Hamartigenia* is a hexametrical work in 966 lines, introduced by a preface of 63 verses written in iambic trimeters. As its title suggests, Prudentius explores in this poem the origin of, and problems associated with, evil, and its consequences, not least against the backdrop of language and its limits.¹³ The poem is framed as a refutation of the heresy put forth by Marcion, who articulated a dualistic notion of good and evil several centuries before Prudentius wrote, but, since Marcionism had long since receded as a credible threat to Christianity by the time he wrote, Prudentius can also be understood to refute in the *Hamartigenia* the problems of evil as defined by Manicheism, which teachings are more immediate to the moment.¹⁴

The *Psychomachia* is comprised of 915 hexameters introduced by a preface of 68 verses in iambic trimeters. The poem combines allegory and moral exemplarism with the personification of the Virtues and the Vices, in order to bring vividly to life the conflicts of good and evil cast in an epic guise. Owing perhaps to the excitement provided by the epical battles waged in its lines, and the poet's attention to the gory details attending to them, the *Psychomachia* was the most popular of Prudentius' poems in the centuries after the poet's death.

Finally, the *Dittochaeon*, also called the *Tituli Historiarum*, is a collection of 48 hexametrical epigrams, each comprised of four lines, that summarize scenes from Scripture. These verse inscriptions may have been written to identify visual art in a church or churches, though their precise function is not known.

Notes

- 1 The name is attested to in the manuscript tradition and in the witness of late ancient authors, such as Gregory of Tours. The poet calls himself only "Prudentius." See Palmer 22.
- 2 I. Lana, *Due capitoli Prudenziiani: la biografia, la cronologia delle opere, la poetica* (Rome, 1962), remains important for the details of Prudentius' biography.
- 3 On the ancient rhetorical and poetical traditions of the *Praef.* in their new Christian contexts see Palmer 9–16.
- 4 The evidence is surveyed by Hershkowitz 12–13 and Palmer 20–22. Lana, *Due capitoli Prudenziiani*, 13, suggests the possibility of Tarragona, but unconvincingly.
- 5 As Charles Witke, *Numen Litterarum: The Old and the New in Latin Poetry from Constantine to Gregory the Great* (Leiden and Boston, MA, 1971), 106,

notes, this is the age that Horace almost reached. The *Preface* is heavily indebted to the *Odes* of Horace, on which see Joseph Pucci, “Prudentius’ Readings of Horace in the *Cathemerinon*,” *Latomus: Revue d’Études Latines* 50 (1991): 677–690.

- 6 Hershkowitz 7–8; at c. *Symm.* 2.696–720, Prudentius mentions the Roman victory over the Goths in 402.
- 7 Palmer 22–23.
- 8 Palmer 26, argues that the emperor “is surely” Theodosius I.
- 9 The argument is intriguing but not definitive; see Palmer 27.
- 10 As Palmer 25 notes, much conjecture has grown up around the particulars of Prudentius’ career. Her summary of the same, 25–27, includes the view that our poet is more likely to have been a provincial governor (26).
- 11 Hershkowitz 9–10.
- 12 On the hymns generally, see Nicholas Richardson, trans., *Prudentius’ Hymns for Hours and Seasons: Liber Cathemerinon* (London and New York, 2016), 4–8.
- 13 Martha Malamud, trans., *The Origin of Sin: An English Translation of the Hamartigenia* (Ithaca, NY and London), 67–75.
- 14 Malamud, *Origin of Sin*, 76–79.

II

HISTORICAL, LITERARY, AND POETIC CONTEXTS OF THE *PERISTEPHANON*

The *Pe.* takes its place in the fourth century in an expanding Christian culture ever the more interested in hagiography, martyrdom and martyr cults, and the relationship of civic identity and faith, and takes shape against the backdrop of these competing strains of Christian activity. The collection is noteworthy for its metrical variety, its length, and its literary boldness, especially in the ways it often exploits the graphic details of violent death.¹ The title, *Peristephanon*, seems not to be owed to Prudentius, since Gennadius, writing in the fifth century, uses the Greek titles only for *Apotheosis*, *Hamartigenia*, and *Psychomachia*, but merely describes the poems of the *Peristephanon* without offering a title, Greek or otherwise. Nor does the conventional grouping of the fourteen poems seem to be owed to Prudentius' hand. There are in fact grounds for doubting that the *Pe.* as we have it was conceived of, or collected, as a discrete gathering at all, though this can hardly lessen an appreciation of the *Pe.* or of its author's voice and vision.²

The collection as conventionally ordered takes in fourteen poems celebrating the martyrdoms of figures who died during the persecutions of the Church by Rome in the first through the early fourth centuries. The poems run the gamut in terms of length, from the eighteen lines of *Pe.* VIII to the thousand-plus lines of *Pe.* X. Six poems recollect martyrs from Spain: Emeterius and Chelidonius of Calahorra (*Pe.* I and VIII); Eulalia of Mérida (*Pe.* III); the eighteen martyrs of Saragossa (*Pe.* IV); Vincent, a deacon from Tarragona (*Pe.* V), and Fructuosus of Tarragona and his companion deacons Augurius and Eulogius (*Pe.* VI). Five poems recollect Roman martyrs: Lawrence (*Pe.* II), Cassian of Imola (*Pe.* IX), Hippolytus (*Pe.* XI), Peter and Paul (*Pe.* XII), and Agnes (*Pe.* XIV). The other poems of the collection celebrate figures further afield geographically: Quirinus of Sisak (*Pe.* VII), Romanus of Caesarea (*Pe.* X), and Cyprian of Carthage (*Pe.* XIII). While no larger principles of order can be detected that might suggest an *ultima manus*, the majority of the

poems are structurally similar, displaying a tripartite composition, with a central narrative framed by introductory and concluding passages that give details respecting the location of the martyr's passion, the nature of his or her cult, an exhortation to sing the praises of the saint, and a prayer, either to the community or the poet, for his or her favor.³

The figures whom Prudentius memorializes are various as to their gender, social and religious status, and martyrdoms. In some instances, Prudentius offers the first extant witness to the martyrs whose deaths he recounts. These include the stories of Eulalia, Emeterius and Chelidonius, the eighteen martyrs of Saragossa, and Cassian of Imola. When he is not the first witness, Prudentius relies on a combination of sources for his material, including official reports of the executions (the *Acta*); other literary works, such as Ambrose's hymns, Damasus' inscriptions, or anonymous accounts of the figures in question; and the legends and lore that had by his time grown up around these figures. To these he adds his own verbal artistry, melding his prized Christian material with earlier diction and imagery drawn from the works of Virgil, Horace, Ovid, Lucan, and Seneca, thus enabling Prudentius to reinvent martyr literature and to set it on new footing.⁴ This he does also by a creative reliance on rhetorical tropes of several stripes, including allegory, metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche, whose exploitation allows Prudentius the chance to recreate the sacred experience of martyr-worship through the textures of the language used to encourage it.⁵ Topically, too, he adds much by way of paying committed attention to the violence of his martyrs' deaths and the unique forms of torture supplied by the authorities to bring them about. Nor does he ignore Scripture as a source of his artistry: Prudentius regularly alludes to stories from, and exploits diction and phrasing owed to, the Bible.

Like the *Cathemerinon*, the *Pe.* is a lyrical collection, and more than a few of its pieces have been transmitted in the manuscript tradition with titles that include the word "hymn." The poems at the point of composition were likely not written for liturgical use, nor does there seem to have been a musical element associated with them. Rather, they were more likely intended for a learned audience that might be influenced by the power, drama, and vivid details of Christians defending their faith in the face of insuperable odds. Parts of them eventually appear in the so-called Mozarabic liturgy in Spain, but in Prudentius' lifetime, and against the backdrop of his intentions, the poems of the *Pe.* seem to have been composed piecemeal, for recitation and discussion among Christian and non-Christian educated elites, as one of several edifying practices meant to confirm the faithful to their faith or to proselytize the pagans.

Pe. I: Though neither they nor the place of their martyrdoms are named in the poem, the manuscript superscriptions of the earliest copies of *Pe. I*, dating from the sixth century, report that the poem celebrates Emeterius and Chelidonius, two martyrs from Calahorra.⁶ The poem is composed in trochaic tetrameters, an appropriate metrical choice to celebrate these soldier-martyrs, since it is associated in Roman antiquity with the *carmina triumphalia*,⁷ the songs of military triumph. Prudentius is the first to report the history of Emeterius and Chelidonius, in which both figures decided to give up the *militia Caesaris* in order to become soldiers of Christ. There appears to have been a local cult devoted to the martyrs in and around Calahorra,⁸ and Gregory of Tours confirms that the tomb of the martyrs was in that city.⁹

Emeterius and Chelidonius were presumably caught up in Diocletian's general persecution of 304, though their execution a decade earlier in the persecution of Galerius cannot be ruled out.¹⁰ It makes sense that both would have turned to the faith, since the army had become by the early fourth century a focal point of Christian belief and of resistance to the cult of the emperor.¹¹ Too, military martyrs likely had a special appeal as the fourth century wore on, especially as monasticism, which was often understood to be a form of *militia Christi*, gained popularity in the West.¹² The poet reports that he relied on living memory (*ut ferunt*, v. 86) for some details, in part due to the fact that, in tandem with the persecution in which Emeterius and Chelidonius were martyred, orders went out to destroy the official records of their deaths. The story of the ring and the handkerchief ascending to heaven at the deaths of the two martyrs seems to be owed to Prudentius alone.

Pe. I is the first poem in all of the manuscripts that record the collection, despite the fact that not all poems are in the same order in all the manuscripts. The poem may reflect the poet's Spanish nationalism or his personal affiliation with the martyrs, coming as they do from his presumed home town. It may even be that they represent a theme the poet privileged in his own life, viz., the placing of the *militia Christi* ahead of the *militia Caesaris*, which the poet reports abandoning, *mutatis mutandis*, in his autobiographical *Praef.*¹³

Pe. II: Composed in iambic dimeters, an Ambrosian meter widely used in hymns of the Church,¹⁴ and, at 584 verses, one of the longer poems of the collection, *Pe. II* celebrates the martyrdom of Lawrence. One of the more popular of the Roman saints and the first to be celebrated,¹⁵ Lawrence was memorialized as early as the fourth century: a basilica was built in his honor by Pope Damasus (re. 366–384), for which he also wrote several inscriptions venerating the saint; Ambrose wrote a hymn (13) honoring Lawrence; and Augustine mentions Lawrence in

several of his sermons (302–305).¹⁶ It appears there was no particular devotion to Lawrence in Spain before Prudentius' time.

There is general agreement that Lawrence was martyred in 258, during the persecutions of Valerian (re. 253–260). Lawrence was a deacon of Pope Sixtus II (re. 257–258), who preceded Lawrence in martyrdom by a few days. Though Prudentius reports in *Pe. II* that Sixtus was crucified—the first to so describe the pope's death—it seems more likely that Sixtus was in fact beheaded. Sixtus' crucifixion perhaps serves larger literary aims. He is the first bishop to play a role in the *Pe.* as the poems are conventionally ordered, and from the cross where he is suffering, Christ-like, he predicts the martyrdom of Lawrence (vv. 22 ff.).¹⁷

Other aims animate Prudentius' artistry in *Pe. II*, not least an interest from a Christian perspective in geography and space. Though *Pe. II* seems to have been written before Prudentius' trip to Rome, the poet nonetheless emphasizes the importance of visiting saintly shrines and the necessity of traversing long distances, if necessary, in order to do so.¹⁸ Too, the fact that Lawrence is a Roman martyr affords Prudentius the chance to articulate a new Christian patriotism centered on Rome as the head of a growing Christian empire.¹⁹ *Pe. II* also points up the ways in which feast days devoted to martyrs, such as Lawrence, and the attendant local celebrations, provided a means to cement civic identity through spiritual activity.²⁰

Pe. III: Written in dactylic trimeters, and the first extant source for her life, *Pe. III* recounts the martyrdom of Eulalia, whose death seems to have occurred in 303, during the persecutions of Maximian, who is named by Prudentius as emperor at the time of her death (v. 77). Prudentius also names Eulalia's native city, Mérida, and otherwise draws on local, oral traditions for his version of her suffering and translation.²¹ Other later sources for Eulalia's passion include a sermon by Augustine, a brief notice by Venantius Fortunatus, a chapter devoted to her in Gregory of Tours' *De gloria martyrum*, the *Cantilena Sanctae Eulaliae*, and an undatable but late prose Passion.²² More than a few readers have noticed the ways in which Prudentius elaborates on the depiction of the "*virgo animosa*" used also to good effect in *Pe. XIV*, the poet's celebration of the virgin Agnes.²³ The poems in fact can be read as complementary, touching on similar themes and emphasizing the incomparability of virginity and martyrdom.²⁴ The poem's allusivity helps to burnish its drama, with linkages to the poetry of Catullus and Virgil that help to eroticize and epicize Eulalia's fate.²⁵

Prudentius describes in *Pe. III* an elaborate burial place for Eulalia, what he calls a *tumulus* (v. 186), richly adorned with gold and laden with marble. Excavations at the necropolis in Mérida have uncovered

a fourth-century cemetery that included an edifice identified as a mausoleum, dating more precisely to the early fourth century. Prudentius' description of Eulalia's burial place does not accord with the excavated site, however, which is much smaller than could accommodate all that he describes in his vivid description of this locale.²⁶

Pe. IV: Written in Sapphics, *Pe. IV* recounts the eighteen martyrs of Saragossa, the first written evidence for these figures,²⁷ but Prudentius also emphasizes in this poem the exemplarity of Saragossa and other Spanish cities that have affiliations with martyrs: Alcalá, Barcelona, Calahorra, Córdoba, Girona, Mérida, and Tarragona (and several cities, too, beyond Spain). Prudentius' treatment of the eighteen martyrs, which includes two other figures, Vincent (also treated in *Pe. V*) and Encratis, is barebones, and likely reflects local, oral traditions short on detail but powerful in the insuperability of the spiritual protection they offer Saragossa.²⁸ The poem's introductory and concluding sections center on liturgical acts, respectively, the Last Judgment, and the contemporary celebration of the martyrs.²⁹ In these opening and closing moments, readers sense the ways in which Prudentius affiliates space and salvation, for his point is that Saragossa is protected by its eighteen martyrs until the very end of the world.

Pe. V: Mentioned in *Pe. IV* (vv. 77–108), *Pe. V* is devoted to the passion of Vincent, who was, by Prudentius' time, a popular Spanish saint. Written in iambic dimeters, an Ambrosian meter widely used in hymns of the Church, and comprised of 576 verses, this piece depicts Vincent in terms reminiscent of the poet's treatment of Lawrence in *Pe. II*. Beyond the shared meter and similar length, these include the title "Levite," suffering on a grill, and lengthy speeches against enemies.³⁰ Born in Saragossa, Vincent was a deacon of Bishop Valerius of that city, though he suffered his martyrdom in Valencia, during the persecutions of Diocletian, for refusing to sacrifice to the idols.

Prudentius' treatment of Vincent's passion is perhaps the most violent of the collection, and includes no fewer than four tortures: the claw, the gridiron, imprisonment, and cutting from shards.³¹ At the same time, the importance of Vincent's death goes beyond the gruesome means by which it is achieved, and touches on the connections between saintly veneration, civic identity, and Christian spirituality. The idea, for example, that Vincent's followers dipped their garments into the blood of the saint may well go to a local Christian practice superimposed on Vincent's story by Prudentius in order to strengthen the saint's connection to Saragossa. Potential sites for Vincent's sepulcher have been conjectured, most notably at the late third- and early fourth-century burial sites excavated in Valencia, at the medieval monastery of St. Vincent

de la Roqueta, but nothing beyond noting the potential connection can be made.³²

Pe. VI: Comprised of 162 Phalaecian hendecasyllabics, *Pe. VI* attends to the passion of Fructuosus, a bishop of Tarragona, and his companion deacons, Augurius and Eulogius, all of whom were burned at the stake in 259, during the persecutions of Valerian (d. 260) and his son and co-ruler, Gallienus (d. 268). An accounting of their martyrdoms, in prose, based on the official report of their trials, existed by the early fourth century and made the details of their deaths well-known in Tarragona and further afield in Spain, and Prudentius largely follows the narrative of these so-called *Acta*.³³ To this reliance Prudentius adds some details about the martyrs' wish that their remains not be scattered about, a wish granted, as he goes on to report, in noting that they were placed in a marble sepulcher. The poet concludes with praises that focus on civic identity and the local importance of the saints.³⁴

Given the early fame and importance of Fructuosus and his deacons in the development of Christianity in Spain, attempts have been made to identify the site in which these martyrs were buried. The necropolis unearthed in Tarragona has been put forward as a possible locale, since the basilica built in the late fifth century was devoted to the three saints and a fragment of an inscription belonging to it clearly names all three. More recently, a smaller basilica has been discovered nearby, dated to the early fifth century, though without conclusive association with our saints. At the least, however, the material record in Tarragona supports the idea that there was an active cult devoted to Fructuosus, Augurius, and Eulogius at the time Prudentius wrote *Pe. VI*, which ought to be understood to energize his motives, both spiritual and literary, in memorializing them.³⁵

Pe. VII: Quirinus, Bishop of Sisak, in Pannonia, is memorialized by Prudentius in *Pe. VII*, comprised of 91 lines written in Glyconics. In fashioning his version of Quirinus' martyrdom, Prudentius seems to have relied to a great extent on Jerome's translation of the entry on Quirinus' passion found in Eusebius' *Chronicon*. Although that entry places the murder in the year 308, it more likely occurred in 304, during the persecutions of Diocletian.³⁶ Quirinus' relics were translated to Rome in the fifth century.³⁷ There is no evidence, as there is for other saints Prudentius celebrates, that Quirinus was well-known in Spain prior to the composition of *Pe. VII* or its circulation.

Pe. VIII: The nine elegiac couplets that comprise *Pe. VIII* are devoted to two unnamed martyrs, surmised to be Emeterius and Chelidonius, the figures recollected in *Pe. I*. The poem is uniquely brief in the context of the other poems of the *Pe.* and may in fact have been intended to serve some other function, such as an inscription on a baptistery.³⁸

Pe. IX: In this piece, Prudentius takes up the martyrdom of Cassian of Imola, in 56 distichs comprised of a dactylic hexameter followed by an iambic senarius. His account is the earliest extant witness to Cassian's passion, but what sources he culls, if any, beyond the picture he describes, are unclear.³⁹ The date of the schoolteacher Cassian's murder, at the hands of his stylus-wielding students, is unknown. The poem is an ekphrasis, a vivid description of an equally striking painting of Cassian's death that Prudentius says he viewed in Imola, at Cassian's tomb, as he was making his way south to visit Rome.⁴⁰ To the extent his ekphrasis reflects what he saw, *Pe. IX* can be understood to reflect local traditions attending to Cassian in place in northern Italy when Prudentius traveled there.⁴¹ While much has been made of the function of Christian pilgrimage seemingly informing the composition of *Pe. IX*, and its implications for Prudentius' biography,⁴² it is also the case that Prudentius relies extensively on ancient diction in his depiction of Cassian's murder, especially words owed to Virgil and Apuleius. This makes what is arguably one of the more powerful visual pieces of the *Pe.* also one of the more densely allusive of Prudentius' compositions, perhaps making the case that the poet's literary aims in the *Pe.* must at the least be placed on equal footing with his spiritual goals.⁴³

Pe. X: Written in iambic trimeters, *Pe. X* recounts the martyrdom of Romanus, a Palestinian and deacon from Caesarea, who died in Antioch in 303 during the persecutions of Diocletian. The poem often appears in the manuscripts at the beginning or end of the *Pe.* collection, but never among the other poems of the collection, which has led more than a few readers to doubt that the poem was envisioned originally as part of the *Pe.* gathering.⁴⁴

Multiple versions of Romanus' story exist. There are two accounts from the hand of Eusebius of Caesarea, one in Greek, the other in Syriac. A sermon by another Eusebius, who hailed from Emesa, offers some details, too, as does a panegyric on Romanus long thought to have been written by John Chrysostom. Prudentius may have known some or all of these sources, but his most likely influence is owed to a Latin translation of Romanus' martyrdom originally composed in Greek, which shares more than a few affinities with *Pe. X*. Among the several points Romanus makes during his passion are those that attend to the power, and wickedness, of the plastic arts.⁴⁵

Pe. XI: The traditions attending to Hippolytus' life remain vexed.⁴⁶ He was a theologian and presbyter from Rome, exiled in 235 to Sardinia, where he was martyred, though he was buried in a crypt located on the Via Tiburtina. He is sometimes confused with the like-named figure from Portus, or with the soldier named Hippolytus involved in the martyrdom

of Saint Lawrence. Damasus, *carm.* 35, an inscription established at Hippolytus' burial site, provides some of the material Prudentius culls in his version of the saint's murder, including Hippolytus' adherence to the Novatian schism renounced only as he was about to die. The striking image of Hippolytus being torn apart by horses brings to mind the similar fate suffered by the ancient Hippolytus, and it seems likely this detail of the earlier figure's death had by Prudentius' day become part of the lore associated with the saint. In any case, it seems unlikely that Prudentius would add so novel and even jarring an element to Hippolytus' story, especially give the wide variety of sources in which the martyrs' death is recounted.⁴⁷ The poem clearly was influenced by Prudentius' trip to Rome, where he seems to have visited Hippolytus' tomb. The piece is written in elegiacs.

Pe. XII: Written in distichs comprised of an initial Greater Archilochean followed by an iambic trimeter, *Pe.* XII memorializes the martyrdoms of the apostles Peter and Paul. Originally called Simon, Peter was a Galilean fisherman who converted to Christianity, became the first of the apostles, and was made head of the Church by Jesus. Paul, a Jew born in Tarsus, eventually converted to Christianity and preached the faith to the gentiles in Greece and Asia Minor. The details of their martyrdoms are matters of scriptural legend. Their festivals were celebrated on the same day, June 29, as early as the fourth century, and both were likely martyred in the persecutions begun by Nero in the mid-60s. It is thought that Peter was crucified, while Paul was beheaded.

Pe. XIII: Composed in the fourth Archilochean meter, *Pe.* XIII takes up the life and death of Cyprian, the details of which, given this bishop's fame, are well-attested. He was born in Africa, ca. 200, converted to Christianity around the middle of the third century, and became Bishop of Carthage not long thereafter. He wrote a number of treatises on matters of Christian faith and practice, and was martyred in the persecutions of Valerian in 258. Prudentius' sources for Cyprian's passion are varied, and he moves beyond the well-established details of the saint's life reported in the historical record, in order to add certain embellishments, owed to rumor or legend, that add drama and vividness to his narrative.

Pe. XIV: The subject of *Pe.* XIV, Agnes is otherwise unknown, as is the date of her martyrdom, though it seemingly took place during the persecutions of Diocletian in 303–304. Ambrose indicates that she was a Roman girl who chose death rather than renounce Christianity. It is possible that Prudentius visited the tomb and basilica of Agnes on the Via Nomentana during his sojourn in Italy. He shows familiarity with the inscription there found, composed for Agnes by Pope Damasus. It remains difficult to determine Prudentius' other sources, though the poet

does agree in some of the details he offers with Ambrose's version of Agnes' suffering and death found in the hymn he wrote in honor of her.⁴⁸ The eroticized language of the poem, especially in respect of the diction used to describe the execution of Agnes, is noteworthy, and points up once again the ways in which Prudentius adds to the material supplied by history, legend, and lore, in order to fashion his treatment in novel terms.⁴⁹ At the least, it allows Prudentius to emphasize the dual nature of Agnes' martyrdom, as attending to her physical chastity and her spiritual incomparability. The poem is written in Greater Alcaics.

Notes

- 1 Palmer 184–188 locates this especially in the context of Lucan's influence, but much of it is original to Prudentius' aims in the *Pe.* to give vent to the beauties of death as an emblem of faith.
- 2 On this see below, Chapter III.
- 3 Roberts 10 with nn2–3.
- 4 The most important treatment is Palmer, but O'Hogan thinks about the importance of geography and space. Still important is M. Malamud, *A Poetics of Transformation: Prudentius and Classical Mythology* (Ithaca, NY and London, 1989).
- 5 Roberts 6–7.
- 6 Roberts 11–12.
- 7 Fux, *Martyrs* 26–28.
- 8 Hershkowitz 88.
- 9 *De gloria martyrum* 93 as reported by Palmer 238.
- 10 Palmer 238 with Fux, *Martyrs* 23, summarize the details of these persecutions.
- 11 Canali 15 n2 summarizes what little can be said of Emeterius and Chelidonius historically.
- 12 Roberts 50–51 with n31.
- 13 Palmer 143; O'Hogan 29 also understands *Pe.* I to be programmatic for the collection, though for reasons that go to the poet's literary aims.
- 14 On Ambrose's hymns, see P.G. Walsh with C. Husch, *One Hundred Latin Hymns: Ambrose to Aquinas* (Cambridge, MA, 2012).
- 15 Palmer 243.
- 16 Hershkowitz 94; on Damasus' inscriptions see D. Trout, *Damasus of Rome: The Epigraphic Poetry* (Oxford, 2015).
- 17 Roberts 109 with n2.
- 18 Hershkowitz 93; O'Hogan 17–18.
- 19 Hershkowitz 93 with M. Mastrangelo, *The Roman Self in Late Antiquity: Prudentius and the Poetics of the Soul* (Baltimore, MD and London, 2008), 3.
- 20 See O'Hogan 85, 92–93 on the relationship of Roman and Christian identities.
- 21 Palmer 240–241.
- 22 On these sources, see Palmer 239.
- 23 Palmer 240–241; Hershkowitz 89; O'Hogan 47.
- 24 Roberts 100–101 so reads these poems.
- 25 O'Hogan 41–48 on Virgil; Palmer 240 on Catullus.
- 26 On this site, see Hershkowitz 112.

- 27 Palmer 241.
- 28 Hershkowitz 92.
- 29 Roberts 30.
- 30 Palmer 245–246.
- 31 Hershkowitz 92 so considers it, with interpretation of the violence offered by Roberts 58–66.
- 32 Hershkowitz 93 on local practice; 114–115 on Vincent’s sepulcher.
- 33 Palmer 207–209.
- 34 Hershkowitz 90–91; O’Hogan 88–89.
- 35 Hershkowitz 109–111.
- 36 Palmer 236–237; G. Galeani, ed., *Prudenzio: Peristephanon VII, Introduzione, Traduzione e Commento* (Alessandria, 2014), 84.
- 37 Hershkowitz 96.
- 38 Hershkowitz 89.
- 39 Palmer 242–243 mentions several, among them Mark of Arethusa and the like-named Cassian of Tingi.
- 40 Hershkowitz 126–134 offers a history of prior work on the poem.
- 41 Palmer 243.
- 42 Developed fully by Roberts 132–148.
- 43 This is the important argument of O’Hogan 51–70.
- 44 Palmer 248.
- 45 O’Hogan 142–143.
- 46 Fux, *Passions* 345.
- 47 Palmer 248–250 discusses these sources.
- 48 Palmer 252–253.
- 49 Hershkowitz 94–95 treats eroticism.

III

TEXTUAL HISTORY AND RECEPTION

Over three hundred manuscripts record Prudentius' poetry, in full or in part, registering the poet's popularity and offering a large but sometimes complicated witness to what Prudentius wrote. The earliest manuscripts are the so-called *Puteanus*, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, Latinus 8084, dating to the early sixth century, which contains the *Cathemerinon*, *Apotheosis*, *Hamartigenia*, *Psychomachia*, and *Pe. I* through v.142; and the *Ambrosianus*, Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana D 36 Sup., from Bobbio, which was copied in the late sixth or early seventh centuries, with some parts owed to later centuries. The *Ambrosianus* was the first manuscript to include parts of *Pe. X*, copying vv. 1–250 and 454–1140, with the rest supplied by a later hand.

A much smaller number of manuscripts contain all of Prudentius' poems. Bergman's edition, published in 1926 as Volume 61 in the *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum*, was based largely on the *Puteanus* and *Ambrosianus*, along with ten other manuscripts, none of which are later than the tenth century, with special reliance on six manuscripts, including the *Puteanus* and *Ambrosianus*, which Bergman considered manuscripts of the first class (Class A in his reckoning, with the remaining six manuscripts relegated to Class B). Bergman perhaps placed too much weight on the authority of age in following the *Puteanus* and the *Ambrosianus*. Not for nothing, Cunningham's edition, published in 1966 as Volume 126 in the *Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina*, reported readings from some thirty-five manuscripts, gathered into five classes, that are otherwise not ranked in relation to each other. Cunningham departs from Bergman's text in around one hundred instances, and in more than a few of these his reading is likely the correct one.

A larger problem with the text of Prudentius' large output goes to the presence in it of variant readings that are hard to chalk up to scribal interpolation. This is especially true with respect to the *Cathemerinon*,

in which two versions of eight verses of *Cath.* 10 (vv. 9–16) exist in the manuscript tradition. More than a few scholars have argued that the presence of this substantial variant goes to Prudentius' own revision of the hymn in order to more clearly express Nicene orthodoxy. Twenty-five further variants have been identified, though there is by no means a scholarly consensus regarding Prudentius' authorship of them.

The manuscript tradition offers no consistent witness to the ordering of the fourteen poems that comprise the *Pe*. What is now called *Pe. X*, dedicated to Romanus of Antioch, is not included among the poems of the collection in the manuscripts and carries its own title in them, *Romanus, Contra Gentiles*.¹ Nor does the gathering of these fourteen poems seem to have occurred until later in the history of Prudentius' text. The title, *Peristephanon*, is not used by Gennadius, writing in the same century in which Prudentius died, who does mention by title the *Apotheosis*, the *Hamartigenia*, and the *Psychomachia*. Too, some of the poems of the collection bear their own titles in the manuscript tradition, by turns either *passio* or *hymnus*, though there is no reason to think these are owed to Prudentius. All of this likely indicates that the poems of the *Pe*. circulated separately and were not ordered, or even gathered, as a collection by Prudentius. On the other hand, in his *Preface*, Prudentius gives evidence of conceiving of some sort of collection of martyr poems ("let my soul devote a song to the martyrs"—*carmen martyribus devoveat*, v. 42) and the *ordo communis* of the *Pe*. is not without any support in the manuscript tradition.² These issues will likely remain controverted.

Although none of his contemporaries mention him, Prudentius was widely read in the centuries after he wrote, as the number of manuscripts recording his works attests. The earliest witness to his popularity is Sidonius Apollinaris (d. 589), who reports that he and his literary-minded friends read Prudentius against the backdrop of Horace. The *Pe*. is mentioned by Gennadius (fl. ca. 575), Sidonius' contemporary, though not by title (see Introduction, Chapter II). Prudentius appears in the list of canonical authors cited by Alcuin (d. 804) in his description of the library of the cathedral school of York, and our poet also is named by Theodulf (d. 821), Alcuin's contemporary, in a poem that records a continental canon similar to Alcuin's insular list.³ Writers from the sixth century who indicate a familiarity with Prudentius include Avitus (d. ca. 520), Ennodius (d. ca. 520), Fortunatus (d. ca. 600) and Gregory of Tours (d. 594). Isidore (d. 636) considers our poet a peer of the classical Latin predecessors on whom he often relies in the *Pe*. and other of his works.⁴ The poem with the greatest popularity in the schools was the *Psychomachia*, which proved attractive for its theology and its allegory. The continued reach of our poet is also proven by the fact that, in

the sixteenth century, nineteen editions of the poet's works appeared, and though he has never been a canonical author in the same way, say, Virgil or Horace are, Prudentius is now the focus of a new generation of scholarship paying fresh attention to the Latin poetry of Late Antiquity.⁵

Notes

- 1 It only appears before or after, never among the poems of the *Pe.*; see Roberts 9 with n1 and Palmer 87–88.
- 2 Roberts 10 with n4. O'Hogan 15, 32 and *passim* thinks about ordering against the backdrop of the recreation of a journey from Spain to Rome and back.
- 3 On these see J. Pucci, "Late Antique Literature in the Western Middle Ages," in S. McGill and E. Watts, eds., *A Companion to Late Antique Literature* (London, 2018), 583–585.
- 4 Richardson, *Prudentius' Hymns* 27.
- 5 On this resurgence of scholarly interest and activity, see S. McGill and J. Pucci, eds., *The Classics Renewed: Reception and Innovation in the Latin Poetry of Late Antiquity* (Heidelberg, 2016), *passim*. Richardson, *Prudentius' Hymns* 26–28 is a concise summary of Prudentius' reception and influence, as is A. A. R. Bastiaensen, "Prudentius in Recent Literary Criticism," in J. den Boeft and A. Hilhorst, eds., *Early Christian Poetry: A Collection of Essays* (Leiden and New York: 1993), pp. 131–134.

IV

Pe. I Trochaic tetrameter (catalectic): — ∪ — x / — ∪ — x // — ∪ — x / — ∪ —
Each line has fifteen syllables in four feet (hence, tetrameter), with two trochees (— ∪) in each foot (/), excepting the last, which lacks a final syllable (hence, catalectic). The final trochees of the first three feet admit of a variable short syllable (x), and the final long syllable of the line can admit of a short vowel (*brevis in longo*), though it is considered for metrical purposes long. A caesura, that is, a regularly occurring division between words [//] falls after the second foot/eighth syllable.

Pe. II and V **Iambic dimeter:** x ~ — / x ~ —
Each line has eight syllables in two feet, with two iambs (x —) in each foot (/) (hence dimeter). The initial syllable of each foot is variable (x) and occasionally the initial syllable admits of two short vowels (one of which may not have been pronounced). This is the meter Ambrose uses in his hymns, so Prudentius' reliance on it in the *Pe.* makes good sense.

Pe. III Dactylic trimeter hypercatalectic: — ∪ ∪ / — ∪ ∪ / — ∪ ∪ x
Each line has ten syllables in three feet (/) (hence trimeter), with one pure (i.e., unvariable) dactyl (— ∪ ∪) in the first two feet, and a final, variable syllable (hence, hypercatalectic) following the pure dactyl of the third foot. Prudentius gathers this metrical line into 43 stanzas of five verses each.

Pe. IV Sapphic: — ∪ / — — / — // ∪ ∪ / — ∪ / — — (three times)
 — ∪ ∪ / — x (one time)

The four-line Sapphic stanza consists of three lines of eleven syllables (hence, hendecasyllabic) in five feet (/), followed by a five-syllable final line in two feet. The hendecasyllabic line consists of a trochee (— ∪) in the first and fourth feet, a spondee (— —) in the second and fifth feet, and a dactyl (— ∪ ∪) in the third foot. In Prudentius' handling of it, the hendecasyllabic line admits of a caesura (/ /) after the fifth syllable, though it can also occur after the sixth. The final line is an adonic, that is, a pure dactyl (— ∪ ∪) followed by a trochee (— ∪) or a spondee (— —), the equivalent of the last two feet of the dactylic hexameter.

Pe. VI Phalaecian hendecasyllabic: $x\ x / \text{---} \text{---} / \text{---} \text{---} / \text{---} \text{---} / \text{---} x$

This eleven-syllable line (hence hendecasyllabic) is in five feet (/). The first foot can be a trochee ($\text{---} \text{---}$), a spondee ($\text{---} \text{---}$), or an iamb ($\text{---} \text{---}$), but tends to be a spondee in later Latin verse. It is followed by a dactyl ($\text{---} \text{---} \text{---}$) in the second foot, a trochee ($\text{---} \text{---}$) in the third and fourth feet, and a final foot that is either a trochee ($\text{---} \text{---}$) or a spondee ($\text{---} \text{---}$).

Pe. VII Glyconic: $x\ x / \text{---} \text{---} \text{---} / \text{---} \text{---} x$

The eight-syllable line in three feet (/) is either a trochee ($\text{---} \text{---}$) or an iamb ($\text{---} \text{---}$) in its first foot, a choriamb ($\text{---} \text{---} \text{---} \text{---}$) in its second foot, and a short, followed by a variable, syllable ($\text{---} x$) in its final foot.

Pe. Elegiac: $\text{---} \text{---} / \text{---} \text{---} \text{---} / \text{---} // \text{---} \text{---} / \text{---} \text{---} \text{---} / \text{---} \text{---} / \text{---} x$ (first line)

VIII $\text{---} \text{---} / \text{---} \text{---} \text{---} / \text{---} // \text{---} \text{---} / \text{---} \text{---} \text{---} / \text{---} \text{---} / \text{---}$ (second line)

and XI The elegiac couplet is a dactylic hexameter (thus six feet) (/) followed by a pentameter (thus five feet) (/). The fifth "foot" of the pentameter is in fact the two long syllables that end their respective half-lines, which, when taken together, form a spondee ($\text{---} \text{---}$). The last syllable of the hexameter is variable, and the first four feet allow the substitution of a spondee ($\text{---} \text{---}$) for a dactyl ($\text{---} \text{---} \text{---}$). There is a caesura (//) that cuts the third foot in two. The dactyl in the fifth foot is regularly observed, though a spondee can be substituted. The first half of the pentameter also allows the substitution of spondee for dactyl, with a long syllable (---) before the diæresis (//), that is, the pause in the middle of the line in which the end of the word corresponds with the end of a metrical foot. The second half of the pentameter allows no substitutions and is always two dactyls ($\text{---} \text{---} \text{---}$) followed by a long syllable (---).

Pe. IX Dactylic hexameter and iambic trimeter:

$\text{---} \text{---} \text{---} / \text{---} \text{---} \text{---} / \text{---} \text{---} \text{---} / \text{---} \text{---} \text{---} / \text{---} \text{---} \text{---} / \text{---} x$ (first line)

$x \text{---} \text{---} / x \text{---} \text{---} / x \text{---} \text{---}$ (second line)

Pe. IX is composed in couplets comprised of a hexameter (on which see above under Elegiacs), followed by an iambic trimeter, a twelve-syllable line in three feet (hence trimeter) (/), comprised of six iambs ($\text{---} \text{---}$), with the short first syllable in the first, third, and fifth iambs variable.

Pe. X Iambic trimeter: $x \text{---} \text{---} / x \text{---} \text{---} / x \text{---} \text{---}$

See above under Pe. IX.

Pe. XII Fourth Archilochian:

$\text{---} \text{---} \text{---} / \text{---} \text{---} \text{---} / \text{---} \text{---} \text{---} / \text{---} \text{---} \text{---} // \text{---} \text{---} / \text{---} \text{---} / \text{---} x$ (first line)

$x \text{---} \text{---} \text{---} / x \text{---} \text{---} \text{---} / x \text{---} \text{---}$ (second line)

Pe. XII is composed in couplets, whose first line is a Greater Archilochian verse, that is, a dactylic ($\text{---} \text{---} \text{---}$) tetrameter (thus, four feet) (/) coupled with three trochaic ($\text{---} \text{---}$) feet. The last syllable of the line is variable. There is a caesura after the fourth foot, and spondees can be substituted for dactyls freely in the first four feet. The second line of the couplet is an iambic trimeter catalectic, an eleven-syllable line in three feet (hence, trimeter) (/), comprised of five iambs ($\text{---} \text{---}$), with the short first syllable in the first, third, and fifth iambs variable, and the final syllable lacking (hence catalectic) in what is normally a twelve-syllable line (see above on Pe. IX and X).

Pe. **Greater Archilochean:** — ∪ ∪ / — ∪ ∪ / — ∪ ∪ / — ∪ ∪ // — ∪ / — ∪ / — x
XIII See above under *Pe.* XII

Pe. **Greater Alcaic:** x — / ∪ — / — // — ∪ ∪ / — ∪ x
XIV Each line has eleven syllables (hence, hendecasyllabic) and five feet (/). The diaresis (//), that is, the pause in the middle of the line in which the end of the word corresponds with the end of a metrical foot, occurs after the fifth syllable and third foot. The first and last syllables of the line are variable. The line is a mixture of spondee (— —), trochee (— ∪), iamb (∪ —), and dactyl (— ∪ ∪).

V

PRINCIPLES OF TRANSLATION [L. K.]

Thinking of myself primarily as a poet, not a scholar, I have proceeded in the case of Prudentius' *Pe.* in fairly conventional fashion, first roughing-out a prose paraphrase of the hymns of the collection, then re-writing them in verse. In doing so, I have tried to make of each hymn a genuine poem, not just a paraphrase. In almost every argument relating to the quality of some new Englishing of Classical or Late Antique Latin poetry—whether the contention occurs on paper or on screen—the issue disputed is usually one of diction: is the tone right, would another synonym be more apt, etc., while there is a tendency to ignore what I feel are equally important questions, especially if the finished translation is to be a poem in its own right, including the best way to handle the meter or meters of the original Latin. I firmly believe that meter is a crucial part of what makes any poem a poem, and on that basis I have striven to find an accentual-syllabic match for the quantitative verse employed by Prudentius in these hymns.

What this means in practice is that Latin elegiacs, for example—a six-foot line capped by a five-foot line—appear here in couplets of six iambic feet followed by five iambs. No attempt has been made to wrench English, which is, as Frost once said, a basically iambic language, into dactyls and trochees. And to attempt quantitative English poetry (a brave but failed attempt made long ago by the English poet Robert Bridges), I am afraid would only lead to disaster. This should help explain why, in one hymn, where Prudentius explicitly mentions his dactyls, the befuddled reader will find my iambs. Prudentius' meters are often beyond my modest skills.

At the same time, the crucial question of rhyme must be addressed. Although Prudentius writes with considerable mastery of what one might call internal effects—assonance, consonance, alliteration, subtle syntactic forms, and so on—an English-speaking translator, unless blessed with a genuinely divine gift, must find some rhetorical feature

of roughly equal weight to lend his work what is traditionally called the music of verse. I have employed a number of different approaches to rhyme patterns in these versions, always looking for ways to let those rhymes fall, I hope, unobtrusively.

One last word about another significant aspect of Prudentius' collection that seems also to have defeated my meager talents: a deeply learned man, well-acquainted with his classic predecessors, Prudentius cannot help echoing Virgil, Ovid, Horace, or the Bible in almost every other line. I hope the reader will see that this is a final, crushing demand made on a translator who already has enough problems to struggle with without matching the author's rich, thick texture of allusion and reference.

In what follows I translate from Thomson's Latin text, who reprints, with occasional changes, the edition of Johann Bergman, *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* 61 (Vienna, 1926).



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THE *PERISTEPHANON*

Translated by Len Krisak



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I

A HYMN IN HONOR OF THE HOLY MARTYRS EMETERIUS AND CHELIDONIUS OF CALAHORRA¹

Heaven has written down two martyrs' names—a pair
That Christ, inscribing them in golden letters there,
Has noted in bright characters of blood on earth.

That's why the whole world honors Spain for its great worth,
With crowns of glory, as a place² that God thought best 5
(And pure enough) to give these bones and bodies rest.

Spain drank the warm blood-stream of these two forced to
die;
Its people flock to martyrs' sands made sacred by
That holy blood. They pray, they offer, and they vow.

And even folk from far-off countries come here now, 10
Since word of this has spread throughout the world, revealing
Here are patrons of that world whom all, by kneeling

And praying honest prayers to, cannot fail but reach.
From here, tears dried, the one who would beseech
Them turns in joy: all proper prayers are heard, he knows. 15

Such care for others' cares this pair of martyrs shows,
That simple prayers are not in vain. At once, they hear,
And at eternal God's throne, whisper in His ear.

From there, great gifts flow down. The very Fountainhead
Chrism and heals the troubled souls of those who've pled. 20
For Christ always says yes to those who witness Him—

Those witnesses whom neither chains nor fear of grim
Death keeps from attesting God, even if it cost
Their very blood. Eternal life repays what's lost.

This is a good death, honoring good men: their doomed- 25
To-be-corrupted flesh that weak-strung sinews loomed,
Goes to the sword; their death defeats their enemy.³

To take that sword-stroke is to suffer beautifully.
The wide wound opens up a gateway for the just:
The soul baptized in blood springs from its home—the breast. 30

These,⁴ who knew well the hard life they had led before,
Soon battled for the holy sites. Well-skilled in war
And arms, they strapped on swords for Christ in His eternal

Cause. They choose the holy Cross, not the infernal
Dragon-flag of Caesar, followed once.⁵ No, now 35
They fly the Cross's sign to make the dragon bow.

To wield a skillful lance they now thought basely mean;
To moat a camp, or smash a wall by siege machine,
The same—or letting blood befoul a godless hand.

About that time, great Rome sent out a cruel command: 40
Return to pagan gods, with true faith sacrificed.
Rome—second heir to Israel— must forswear Christ.

Death's iron sword sought out our faith, to no avail,
For still its strength—from love of Christ—refused to fail,
Welcoming rod and double-claw⁶ and axe. In jail, 45

These two were bound with fettering links and iron bands.
The torturer, each trial, racked them with savage hands,
As faithful speech was punished. Truth was thought a crime.

And then the sword struck hard, beating to earth sublime
Virtue, inhaling the flames the awful pyre made. 50
As goodness burned, it then was sweet; sweet was the blade.

There, two loving brothers' hearts grew warm together
That always had been yoked in faith, brother to brother.⁷
They stood prepared for all their final fate might bring:

If the headsman chopped their necks as offering 55
 (After they'd felt the cracking scourge or scorching grate),
 Or if the leopard or the lion were their fate.⁸

"Shall we bow down to Mammon⁹—we whom Christ has
 saved?
 Made in God's form, shall we by mankind be enslaved?
 Keep separate Heaven's fires and the dark, and may 60

Our lives, once taken when we signed our bond, repay
 That debt in full. Now we renounce the things we owed
 To Caesar, rendering unto God the things of God.¹⁰

You tribunes: go! Leave, you who are their ensigns' lords.¹¹
 And take the golden cuffs¹² that were our wounds' rewards. 65
 The angels call us hence as soldiers who will fight

For our Commander, Christ, whose troops are clothed in
 white.
 He damns your monstrous gods. Reigning on His high throne,
 He damns you, too, with your absurdities of stone"—

Defiant words that bring a thousand tortures more. 70
 For heavy irons ring their necks and chafe them sore;
 Stiff handcuffs clamp down on the martyrs' bleeding wrists.

Some details are forgotten, lost in memory's mists,
 The simple facts unknown: our knowledge can't go on
 (A mocking guard made sure the records all are gone, 75

Lest taught by what those records showed, posterity
 Should publish how and when men bore this agony,
 And for all times to come, sow seed of that sweet word).¹³

But gaps like these mean only that we haven't heard:
 Whether their hair grew long through endless punishments; 80
 Their pains borne, or crowns won by their accomplishments.

One honor wasn't hidden, or by time worn down:
 The way the sacrifice that they sent up had flown
 To Heaven, just like them. They showed the way; they
 shone!

A ring rose in a cloud, the faith-sign of the one, 85
A token piece of cloth the other's pledge. In flight,
Both, caught by Heaven's wind, soared into deepest light.

The ring's bright gold had disappeared at clear-sky-height,
And watching eyes long tracked the white cloth lost to sight.
Both, whisked off to the stars, were lost to human view. 90

All this the crowd saw, and the executioner too,
Who stayed his hand. Stunned, pale, and staring at the sky,
He nonetheless struck, lest those martyrs' glory die.

So, Vascons,¹⁴ pagans once, do you still think a myth
How holy was the blood cruel error let through death? 95
And that those victims' souls went back to Christ, do you

Now know? And can you see the demons they subdue
Here¹⁵—demon-wolves that eat men's captured hearts,
and strangle
Their very minds, choking the senses where they mingle?

The madman brought here—one whose foe's¹⁶ possessed
his soul— 100
His mouth all foaming and with blood-shot eyes that roll,
Is cleansed by trial of sins that are not his. You hear

His awful cries, and yet no torturer is near.
His flesh is ripped, although no whip is seen. The wretch is
Hung from hidden chains until his body stretches. 105

So the martyrs' powers beat him down, constraining
The filthy thief, then burning, torturing, and chaining
Him, until he leaves that man from deep inside.

His prey unharmed, he flees, bloodthirsty jaws denied.
From toe to crown, the wretched victim's safe and well; 110
The demon then confesses he's on fire in Hell.

Why even mention bodies blighted by disease,
But then made whole when pale limbs had begun to freeze?
One shed a facial tumor; one got back his color.

These blessings we enjoy were from our very Savior 115
 When he enshrined these martyrs in our town,¹⁷ where now
 They guard us by the Ebro.¹⁸ Mothers, stand! Sing how

Your children were restored you. Wives, sing hymns that say
 Your husbands safely live in health again. And may
 We consecrate our joy in festival this day!¹⁹ 120

Notes

- 1 On these martyrs, see Introduction, Chapter II.
- 2 The emphasis on “place” recalls the formula common to inscriptions from martyrs’ shrines, on which see Roberts 12 with n5.
- 3 The “enemy” here is both the demon who threatens spiritual corruption and the executioner, who proffers eternal life through death.
- 4 Prudentius means Emeterius and Chelidonius, as he turns now to the specifics of their hagiography.
- 5 Roman cohorts since the third century had deployed standards depicting dragons; see Fux, *Martyrs* 40.
- 6 The iron, hooked “double-claw” was designed to tear flesh; at *Pe.* III.133 a single “claw” rips Eulalia’s side.
- 7 One tradition holds that the two martyrs were brothers and that their father was the martyr Marcellus the Centurion, on whom see below, *Pe.* IV.47 n23.
- 8 The tradition on which Prudentius draws seems to include incarceration and decapitation, but the poet wonders in these lines about other means of torture and death.
- 9 The personified figure of wealth, “Mammon” also stands pejoratively for money, greed, gain, etc., as at Matt. 6:19–21. The opposition of Mammon and Christ is reprised below in vv. 62–63.
- 10 Prudentius draws on the phrasing of Matt. 22:21, Mark 12:17, and Luke 20:24; see Fux, *Martyrs*, 47–48.
- 11 “Tribunes” are military officers; “ensigns’ lords” are those responsible for drilling and maneuvering the armies.
- 12 The poet refers to decorative collars worn by soldiers apparently in token of excellent service; see Fux, *Martyrs* 48 with Canali 21, who indicates that the “golden cuffs” were collars worn by auxiliaries of the army.
- 13 Part of the persecution of Christians involved the destruction of records attending to the same.
- 14 The “Vascons,” a people occupying the present-day Basque region of Spain, seem to have been especially resistant to Christianity, on which see Hershkovitz 56–57 and Fux, *Martyrs*, 55–56.
- 15 Prudentius returns his readers to the tomb of Emeterius and Chelidonius, as above, vv. 10, 11–12, 14.
- 16 By “foe” Prudentius means a demon who has caused the figure in question to become a “madman.” The same figure is called a “filthy thief” at v. 107.
- 17 Calahorra, which Prudentius seems to claim as his own here and at *Pe.* IV.31; see Fux, *Martyrs* 61 and Hershkovitz 12–13.

- 18 The Ebro River runs southeasterly through the present-day Basque region of Spain, eventually emptying into the Mediterranean Sea. By it Canali 25 understands the poet to designate all the people of Spain.
- 19 The poet enjoins his readers to celebrate with the “mothers” and “wives” the feast day of the two martyrs.

II

A HYMN IN HONOR OF THE PASSION OF THE MOST BLESSED MARTYR LAWRENCE¹

Rome, mother of all ancient shrines,
Is sworn to Christ now. Lawrence led
You on to victory over temples
The pagans built to gods now dead.

You triumphed over haughty kings, 5
Controlling nations by their reins,
And now those peoples bear your yoke.
You crushed their gods—vile, monstrous things.

The lone palm that the city of
The toga² lacked was to have brought 10
The pagan nations down, and fought,
And then defeated, filthy Jove,

Not with Cossus³ or Camillus⁴
Might, or troops that Caesar⁵ led,
But by the fight in which the holy 15
Martyr Lawrence fought and bled.

Our faith took up its cause in arms,
Spending its very blood, for by
The means of death it made death die,
And spent its life that it might live. 20

The pontiff Sixtus,⁶ who was nailed
Upon the cross, when he saw Lawrence
Weeping at its foot below,
Said this to calm him as he wailed:

“Cease your sobbing; dry your tears
At my departure, for I go
Before you, brother, since in three
Days’ time you, too, shall follow me.” 25

The bishop’s words before he died
Came true as he had prophesied, 30
For Lawrence, on that foretold day,
Was blessed with glory’s holy palm.

What words, what praises, shall I use
To sing and celebrate the way
His passion went? What worthy psalm 35
Could hymn the manner of his death?

Being the chief man of the seven⁷
Standing by the altar; best
And highest-ranking deacon; Levite⁸
Eminent above the rest, 40

He kept the hidden holy things—
The secrets of the sacred house—
Guarding them with trusty keys
And sharing out the offerings.

The city’s emperor, half-mad, 45
Now sent his prefect to extract
What blood and wealth the churchmen had.
Nourishing a greed for gold,

He thought of how he might exact
This wealth well-hidden in great heaps 50
Of secret riches piled in coin,
Protected in the church’s hold.

He orders Lawrence brought before
Him, probing how to find the box
Of riches crammed with golden store 55
Of coin amassed in hidden heaps.⁹

“You are,” he said, “prone to complain
That we are cruel and unjust;

That we have slashed your Christian bodies
To draw their blood, for which we lust. 60

Well here I stand, a temperate judge
Whose passions aren't those of a savage.
I ask you calmly and discreetly
A thing that you can answer freely.

In your rites, we have been told, 65
The manner, style, and rule
Among your priestly brotherhood
Is offering from cups of gold.

We hear it said that holy blood
Smokes in your silver chalices, 70
And that your tapers have been fixed
To stand in golden candlesticks.

And then, as careless talk declares,
Among your brethren's greatest cares
Is selling off their property 75
To donate thousands of sesterces.¹⁰

Thus disinherited, the children groan
That their grandfathers' rich estates
Have been assigned to auction; that
Their parents have impoverished them. 80

This secret wealth you hide with care
In covert corners of your churches,
And you think it pious when
You leave your dearest heirs stripped bare.

Bring out this treasure that you gain 85
By sorcery and vile persuasion—
The riches that coercion can obtain,
And that you hide in darkened crypts.

The state demands them for its need,
To fill the treasury's public purse, 90
And pay the army's salaries
And offer our commander aid.

I hear that this is in your creed:
To render what is owed to each.
Well, what is his, great Caesar knows: 95
Your coins, on which *his* image shows.

That which you know is Caesar's, render
Unto him.¹¹ That's only right,
For I believe your god has never
Stooped to minting legal tender. 100

Nor when he came down to this earth
Did he bring golden Philips¹² with him;
His words alone were all the worth
That filled his purse when he went preaching.

So be a credit to his teaching— 105
By which you everywhere have sold
Yourselves. Hand over all that gold,
And count your wealth in words alone."

Lawrence answers willingly,
Without tempestuous, rough reply, 110
Placid and ready to obey,
Free in all he means to say.

"That it is rich, I won't deny,"
He says. "Our church is richer far,
In gold and wealth, than any are. 115
Not one in all the world is richer.

Although on every coin his name
Is stamped, Augustus,¹³ with his power,
Can't match us for our silver treasure;
His coin and ours are not the same. 120

Still, I will bring out all God's wealth,
Which fills a bulging chest with treasure.
I'll haul it from its hiding place
And show Christ's riches-without-measure.

But begging your consent, I ask 125
This one indulgence for my task,

So I may capably perform
The duty I have undertaken:

Whatever goods belong to Christ
I first must tabulate, and from 130
This ordered list add up the sum,
Then write it at the bottom line."

The prefect swells with pure elation,
Enjoying, to his delectation,
High hopes, as if the promised gold 135
Were in his vaults right then and there.

It is agreed to that in three
Days' time, Lawrence, praised and set free,
Would stand as his own surety
And bond for the enormous wealth. 140

So then he spends the next three days
Scouring the city's alleyways
And rounding up the legions of
The sick, infirm, and beggarly.

There is a man who cannot see, 145
Eyeless in Rome, his sockets empty.
He figures out his wayward way
By tapping with a guiding staff.

A cripple with a broken knee,
A man with one leg (withered short), 150
And one with one leg only half
The other, drag their limping steps.

Here's one with ulcerated sores
From which the rancid liquids flow,
And one whose hand is withered so 155
The muscles shrink to the elbow.

Lawrence seeks through the streets
For such men, used to being fed
Food from their mother-church's store.
Its steward, he's known them before. 160

Then he counts them one at a time,
 Writing them down name-by-name,
 And sets them standing in long lines
 Before the temple's entrance-way.

The time flows on till comes the day 165
 Agreed on. Now the judge, aflame
 With burning avarice, demands
 The promise kept: Lawrence must pay.

That martyr spoke: "Please, prefect, come—
 And marvel at the wealth displayed 170
 Here, which our oh-so-rich God's laid
 Up in His holy temples' vaults.

You'll see the atrium arrayed
 With golden vessels all aglow,
 And all along the portico, 175
 Piles of treasure, row on row."

The prefect, not ashamed to follow,
 Went along, till at the church's door
 He saw great mobs of beggars standing
 In swarms—a truly ragged sight. 180

And from them rose an awful roar.
 It stuns that judge, who turns on Lawrence,
 Outraged and startled and demanding,
 With menace in his angry eyes.

But Lawrence, in riposte, replies, 185
 "Why gnashing threats? Why so offended?
 Do you think these men are mean
 And something vile you should despise?

This gold for which you burn and thirst
 Must be dug from earth's rubble first, 190
 And penal labor quarries it
 From veins of ore in squalid mines.¹⁴

Or else a river rushing down
 Wraps all its ore in turbid sands.

Because it's caked in earthen mire 195
This rock must be refined in fire.

Gold puts an end to modesty,
And innocence is lost to gold.
Peace dies, and faith is bought and sold.
The Law falls down in obloquy. 200

So why do you exalt this bane
Of glory, thinking it so great?
If you want gold more genuine,
Then you should seek The Light of Men.

These are the Foster-sons of Light, 205
Confined inside their weakened bodies,
Lest through an excess of good health
Their spirits rise with specious wealth.

For when an illness racks the flesh,
It makes the soul grow strong and well. 210
The body strength that starts to swell
Though, makes the spirit limp and weak.

For blood that's hot and burns to sin
Will lose the force that it contains
When ill-health drains its heat and reins 215
In lust with toxins it takes in.

If I were ever forced to choose,
I would prefer to suffer, under
Horrid pain, limbs torn asunder,
But deep inside, a spotless soul. 220

Think of plagues of every kind,
Comparing these two ills:
Would it be worse to bear foul flesh,
Or sores of morals and of mind?

Our people here are maimed and weak, 225
But deep inside are clean and whole.
Both fair in spirit and untainted,
They boast a pure and un-smirched soul.

But leprosy lies deep inside
The bodies that you think so strong. 230
Your crippled error limps along;
Blind superstition cannot see.

Any of your greatest men,
Brilliant in vesture, fair in face,
I can prove far weaker than 235
Any of my poor souls can be.

Here's one who lords it in fine silk,
And whom his chariot puffs with pride.
Edema, though, distends him with
Transparent venom deep inside. 240

Here's one man clenched with grasping greed,
His hands curled back like clawing crooks.
His palms are bent, his nails like hooks
That mean his tendons can't be freed.

And here's another, dragged by vile 245
Desire among the public whores.
He fouls himself with dirt and sewage,
Begging for mire all the while.

Who burns for what mere rank obtains
And writhes with thirst for honored place: 250
Doesn't he pant with bone-deep fevers,
Crazed by fire in his veins?

Whoever can't keep quiet, itching
Over secrets he'd impart,
Is maddened by those urges, scratching 255
The scab that's gnawing at his heart.

Why should I even have to mention
The tumors swelling envious breasts,
Or show the pustule that infests,
Or cite the sores of the malicious? 260

You yourself, who rule in Rome,
Scorning the everlasting God

While worshipping foul devils,
Suffer royal jaundice's evils.¹⁵

These men your haughty pride disdains, 265
And whom you judge detestable,
Will soon depart their ulcerous bodies,
Free of illness, clear of stains,

When they are finally set free
From their corrupted flesh, and in 270
The fairest state the soul can be.
They'll shine in God the Father's house,

Not sordid or infirm or feeble,
As they seem now, but bright beyond
All glory in their robes of purple 275
And the golden crowns they've donned.¹⁶

Then if I had the chance, I'd place
These 'great men of the world' before
Your eyes, to see them face-to-face
And judge their reckoning yourself. 280

You'd see them wrapped in putrid rags,
Their sniveling noses running snot,
Their chins soaked through with drool, their bleary
Eyes blind, eyelids foul with rot.

There's nothing worse than sinners, 285
Nothing as putrid or as leprous;
The sinner's wound is bloody-raw,
And smells just like the pit of Tartarus.¹⁷

So, tables turned, these souls receive
A body formed of purest blight— 290
These who took such rich delight
In figures that they thought so fine.

But here, though, are the coins of gold
I promised you just recently—
Coins Ruin can't entomb in ashes. 295
These can't be lost to thievery.

Here instead are noble gems,
 Lest you believe that Christ is poor—
 Rare jewels shining ever-bright,
 Gracing our church with holy light. 300

See here Christ's virgins, free of sin.
 Or marvel at these aged women:
 Wives once, their husbands all have passed.
 Who were their *first* men, proved their *last*.

Here is the church's necklace, these 305
 The gems with which she has been dressed.
 Thus she manages to please
 Christ, jewels on her lofty brow.

Take all her riches; *there* they are,
 To jewel Romulus's city. 310
 They'll make the emperor's coffers swell,
 And you, too, will be richer far."

"He mocks me!" cries the prefect, raging.
 "He's playing games with metaphors
 To have his sporting way with us, 315
 And yet we let this madman live!

You wretched low-life! Do you think
 That all this mummary you're staging
 Will get you off? That comedy
 Negates your promise, sets you free? 320

And did you think it a rare joke
 To practice with your wit on *me*?
 That I'm a subject fit for laughter,
 The butt your audience is after?

And have the fasces been made null,¹⁸ 325
 And strict authority so weakened?
 Has lenient, lax enforcement worn
 The axe of public power so dull?

You say, 'I freely choose to go
 To die a martyr's death.' I know 330

This protestation as a vain
Belief you boast of—you and yours.

But that's a thing I won't bestow,
To give you what you want me to.
There'll be no easy death, no quick
And painless exiting for you. 335

I'll keep you living and extend
That life with drawn-out punishments
In death's constricting web of torture.
Your suffering will never end. 340

A bed of burning coals is best,
Since open flames would prove too hot,
And so engulf his face—this stubborn
Man—and burn deep in his breast.

Let the fire's vapors languish—
Fumes rising up with modest heat
And tempering the fiery anguish
By degrees, the flesh half-scorched. 345

For us, it's been a lucky boon
Their leader fell into our hands,
For he alone will show this sect
What they should fear . . . and soon. 350

Mount the pyre made for you;¹⁹
Lie on the bed your worth commands.
Then if you can, you may debate
Whether my Vulcan's power is great."²⁰ 355

The savage torturers, as he
Said this, prepared to strip the martyr
Of his robe and bind his limbs
And stretch them in extremity. 360

His face shone beautiful and bright,
With glory all around, like that
That lit the face of the law-giver²¹
When he came down from Sinai's height,

And the Jewish folk disgraced 365
 Themselves, stained by the golden calf.²²
 They shrank from Him and turned their face
 Away. The face of God could not be faced.

It shone like Stephen's radiance,
 Which glorified his face as he 370
 Looked up at Heaven and could see
 It open to him, even though

A hail of stones came down.²³ And those
 Far off could see—those brethren who,
 So recently washed clean of sin, 375
 Were fit to welcome their Christ in.

The wicked, though, denied that sight,
 Their faces covered by the blackest night,
 And veiled in all its sinful darkness,
 Were blind. They failed to see the light. 380

The plague of Egypt, in the same way,
 Condemned those barbarous unbelievers
 To the dark, which to the Hebrews
 Appeared as bright and clear as day.²⁴

The very nature of the smell 385
 The roasting flesh emitted meant
 Sensations different for each people:
 Either burnt flesh or nectar-scent.

The same experience was felt
 As different. Disparate auras made 390
 Avenging horror for the heathens;
 Delight was what the Christians smelled.

So God is an eternal fire,
 And Christ the one true flame whose light
 Inspires the just folk who do right 395
 And burns the evil ones in Hell.

Now, half his body burned away
 By fierce, slow searing, Lawrence, from

His grid, had for the prefect these
Few words he felt that he must say: 400

“This side of me has long been burned
Enough. So you should have me turned.
Then you can try to judge what work
Your Vulcan fire-god has done.”

The prefect gives the order. Lawrence 405
Tells him, “Take and eat! I’m done.
Now you should test me. See if I
Taste better raw or roasted. Try!”

But after he had made this joke,
He looked to Heaven, and he spoke, 410
With one great moan, this prayer of pity
For Romulus’s wretched city:

“O Christ, one godhead and one name;
O glory and the Father’s strength;
O maker of the earth and sky, 415
The power these walls were founded by:

You set the nations’ scepter high
Atop Rome’s citadel, commanding
All obey Quirinus’ toga’d
Heirs²⁵ and yield before their arms, 420

So that by one domain of laws
You might subdue the world, with all
Its different ways of understanding—
Its varied worship, speech, and customs.

See how all men are now in thrall 425
To Remus’ regnum,²⁶ so much so
That now, all different languages
And rites are treated just the same.

This was ordained so that the power
Represented by Christ’s name 430
Might bind the nations everywhere—
All countries—with a single tie.²⁷

Christ, grant your Romans that the city
 By which You've given unity
 To others—all one faith, one mind—
 May be itself a Christian city. 435

Now all its members everywhere
 Share but one creed in comity.
 The conquered world has been made tame;
 May its supreme head grow the same. 440

May she see each disparate race
 Uniting in one state of grace.
 May Romulus join in this faith,
 And even Numa²⁸ now believe.

A Senate full of Catos' heirs²⁹
 Is still led wrong by Trojan errors,
 And at those secret shrines of theirs
 They pray to Phrygian Penates.³⁰ 445

The Senate worships still the two-
 Faced Janus,³¹ Sterculus³² (and others
 I shudder just to name—weird idols
 Of our sires), at Saturn's shrine.³³ 450

Blot out, O Christ, this awful stain.
 Send down your angel Gabriel³⁴
 So Iulus' blinded tribe³⁵ may heal
 And recognize the one true God. 455

Indeed, we even now possess
 Sure pledges of our hope's success:
 The two great heads of the Apostles
 Reign already here in Rome— 460

One who preached before the gentiles,
 The other in the papal chair
 (Opening the doors placed in his care—
 The doors of faith's eternal home).³⁶

Be gone, adulterous Jupiter,
 Whose incest managed to defile 465

Your sister.³⁷ Leave! Let Rome be free.
Her people now are Christ's, so flee!

Paul banishes you from our home,
And Peter's blood drives you from Rome. 470
You put the sword in Nero's hand
To do the deed that turns on you.³⁸

I see an emperor to come³⁹
Who will enforce the word of God,
And won't allow a Christian Rome 475
To serve such sordid pagan rites.

No, he will bolt those temple gates
And wall their ivory doors with stone.
No one will be allowed to pass
Their thresholds barred with brass. 480

Rome's marbles then will shine at last,
Statues un-stained by blood, and those
Of bronze will then be innocent
That now she sees as monstrous gods."

And so his prayer came to its close; 485
So ended his imprisonment
In flesh. His eager spirit broke
Forth, following the words he spoke.

Some senators then raised his body
To their shoulders, so to bear it 490
Away—men whom that martyr's spirit
Of liberty had turned toward Christ.

The sudden love of God the Highest
Had made its home deep in their hearts,
Inspiring them, so that they hated 495
The piddling gods they'd worshipped once.

And so it was that ever since,
The cult of idols has abated.
People have left old shrines behind,
Flocking to the shrines of Christ. 500

Thus in this battle Lawrence wore
 No sword to fight with. Even so,
 He turned the very steel his foe
 Had wielded back against that force.

For even though the devil tried 505
 To kill the witness of our God,
 He was himself run through, and fell.
 Now he lies forever prostrate.

The death that holy martyr died
 Condemned the pagan shrines to death. 510
 So Vesta saw her Lares ended,
 Palladians untouched, unattended.⁴⁰

Those Quirites⁴¹ who used to pray
 With Numa's⁴² sacred wine-cup, now
 Throng to Christian shrines where they 515
 Sing of that martyr in their hymns.

And noble senators, in fact—
 Once Luperci or priestly flamens—⁴³
 Are reverent as they kiss the limens
 Of the apostles and the martyrs. 520

We see the high-born family—
 Both sides from true nobility—
 Dedicate their own dear children;
 They pledge their very own as pawns.

Who wore the fillets once, that priest, 525
 Receives at last the cross of Christ.
 And Lawrence, now she joins your church
 Who was before a Vestal Claudia.⁴⁴

Oh, three and four and seven-times blessed
 Is he who lives in Rome, and who 530
 Can venerate you, there, right where
 Your martyr's bones enjoy their rest,

And who can kneel beside your grave,
 And lave the holy ground with tears;

And who can bow to press his breast 535
Down to the earth, and softly pray.⁴⁵

We are two ranges far away
From you, divided by the Vascon
Ebro⁴⁶ and across the Cottian
Alps and snow-capped Pyrenees.⁴⁷ 540

We've barely heard how Rome
Is filled with buried saints, how rich
Her city soil is, blooming with
So many a martyr's holy tomb.

But we who lack blessings like these, 545
And cannot see, before our very faces,
The holy martyrs' bloody traces,
Can look to Heaven in the sky.

Saintly Lawrence, we seek out
Your passion in that way, for you 550
Have seats in places numbering two:
Your body here; your soul in Heaven.

A freeman in a city none
Can paint, it is a crown you wear,
There in its Capitol. That's where 555
An everlasting senate sits.

I think I see that hero bright
With flashing jewels—he whom
Celestial Rome led to his home
To be its consul for all time. 560

The power you have in trust, the greatness
Of your office, Rome's rejoicing
Citizens all prove. Their voice
In prayer you answer with assent.

Whatever's asked for as they pray, 565
They find that they receive. All ask,
And then are more than glad to say
To others that none goes home sad.

It is as if you're by their side,
 Nurturing your foster-children 570
 In Rome, and feeding them yourself.
 What food they need, you will provide.

O worthy saint of Christ among
 Them, hear a simple country poet
 Acknowledging his heartfelt shame. 575
 He's sinned, and prays that you shall know it.

I am unworthy, I admit,
 That Christ himself should hear his plea.
 But if the martyrs pray for him,
 His soul may heal and he be free. 580

O Lawrence, hear him pray—Prudentius,⁴⁸
 Guilty to his Christ. Free him
 From worldly manacles, and save
 His soul, too long the body's slave.

Notes

- 1 On Lawrence see Introduction, Chapter II.
- 2 On the toga see Canali 27.
- 3 Aulus Cornelius Cossus, consul in 428 and 413 B.C.E., warred against the Etruscans, destroying Veii, and killing that city's defender, Lars Tolumnius. Livy reports much of what is known of this Cossus at *Ab urb. cond.* 4.19.1–6. A second figure of the same name was dictator in 385 and gained fame by defeating the Volscans, as Livy, *Ab urb. cond.* 6.11.10–13 reports.
- 4 Livy, *Ab urb. cond.* 5.49; 7.1, reports that the Gauls besieged and overran Rome in 390 B.C.E., after which both sides agreed to a settlement, whereby Rome was to pay the Gauls one thousand pounds of gold. As the gold was being weighed, (Marcus Furius) Camillus arrived with a Roman army and resumed the fight against the Gauls, whom he defeated easily. He was thereafter called a “second Romulus” and “a second founder of Rome.”
- 5 Julius Caesar is most likely meant, on which see Fux, *Passions* 155.
- 6 Pope Sixtus II (re. 257–258) was martyred in 258 during the persecutions of Valerian (re. 253–260). Lawrence, one of his deacons, met his own death a few days after Sixtus', whose murder was likely by beheading rather than, as Prudentius reports here, crucifixion, on which see Canali 29.
- 7 Prudentius refers to the seven deacons who served Sixtus II, of whom Lawrence was the principal figure, on which see Fux, *Passions* 159.
- 8 “Levite” is another term for “deacon.”
- 9 Lawrence's position among Sixtus' deacons, which, as Prudentius describes, placed him in charge of Sixtus' riches, likely explains the reason he was not immediately executed with Sixtus and the other deacons.

- 10 The *sestercius* or *sesterce* was long-lived as a unit of exchange for the Romans, minted in silver during the Republic, and brass under the empire.
- 11 Prudentius draws on phrasing owed to Matt. 22:21, Mark 12:17, and Luke 20:25: *reddite ergo quae sunt Caesaris, Caesari*.
- 12 "Philips" designates gold coins originally struck by Philip II of Macedon (re. 359–336 B.C.E.), the father of Alexander the Great. Prudentius likely means to evoke earlier moments in Latin poetry, notably in Plautus (*Bacch.* 230) and Horace (*Epis.* 2.1.234), where this term is used more generally to designate money. See Fux, *Passions* 168.
- 13 Prudentius means the current Emperor rather than Octavian, who was first accorded the title "Augustus."
- 14 Part of the persecutions of Christians involved forced servitude in the mines, to which Prudentius refers here.
- 15 Jaundice is the "royal malady," distinct from the "holy malady," epilepsy, on which see Fux, *Passions* 188 and Canali 47.
- 16 Purple and gold symbolize the blood of martyrdom and the conquering power of God's eternal light, contrasted with the purple of royalty and the gold hoarded by the covetous Romans. See Fux, *Passions* 190.
- 17 Prudentius often uses "Tartarus" as a synonym for "Hell."
- 18 The "fasces" were rods bound and carried by the lictors, who preceded the highest magistrates in formal processions, and whose power the "fasces" symbolized.
- 19 There is some disagreement about the accuracy of Prudentius' description of Lawrence's martyrdom. As Canali 55 notes, before Diocletian's time torture by fire was used to force Christians to deny their faith and honor the pagan gods with public sacrifices.
- 20 The Roman god of the hearth.
- 21 I.e., Moses.
- 22 Prudentius recalls the narrative of Exodus 34:29–30.
- 23 Prudentius means St. Stephen, whose stoning is recounted at Acts 7:55 ff.
- 24 Prudentius draws on the story told at Exodus 10:22–23. On the poet's handling of biblical material here see Roberts 104–107.
- 25 "Quirinus" is another name for Romulus, here betokening through the symbolism of the toga the power of the Roman state.
- 26 Remus, killed by his brother Romulus at the foundation of Rome, symbolizes here in his own death the transitory nature of the Roman empire while emphasizing the eternity of Rome as a Christian city. See Fux, *Passions* 208.
- 27 As Canali 61 puts it, Prudentius understands the history of Rome and its achievements as the implementation of a providential plan: the kingdom of Christ needed a unified and pacified world to assert itself and spread the new doctrine.
- 28 Numa was the second king of Rome, following Romulus.
- 29 Prudentius means both Cato the Elder (234–149 B.C.E.), famous for his rigid moralism and his attachment to the olden virtues of the Republic, and Cato the Younger (95–46 B.C.E.), who exemplified opposition to Julius Caesar and who, famously with some complications, committed suicide after the defeat of Pompey's forces.
- 30 Prudentius refers to Trojan Penates, sacral objects that Aeneas was thought to have saved from the burning Troy and brought to Italy, where they were revered in the temple of Vesta and guarded by the vestal priestesses. "Phrygian" is a synonym for "Trojan." See Canali 63; Fux, *Passions* 211.

- 31 Janus is the guardian of entrances, represented by a face looking inward and outward at once.
- 32 Sterculus is associated with manuring the land and is identified sometimes with Saturn, who is named in v. 452. See Fux, *Passions* 212.
- 33 Saturn is the Roman god of sowing and reaping.
- 34 Gabriel, the archangel remembered at Luke 1:36–38, who announced to Mary the impending birth of Jesus.
- 35 Iulus is the son of Aeneas and Creusa, from whom the Julii traced their lineage.
- 36 Prudentius means, respectively, Paul, who preached to the Gentiles, and Peter, considered the first pope.
- 37 Jupiter married Juno, his sister.
- 38 Prudentius refers here to the notion that Peter (and Paul) was killed during Nero's persecutions of the Christians. He treats both apostles in *Pe.* XII.
- 39 This is perhaps a reference to Theodosius (347–395).
- 40 Vesta is the virgin goddess of the hearth and home, whose temple at Rome was attended by the Vestals, who also guarded the Penates (see above, *Pe.* II n30). The "Palladian Lares" refers to those sacral objects brought from Troy to Rome and associated with the "palladium," a most ancient image, thought to be of wood, of Pallas, which legendarily was believed to have fallen from heaven in answer to the prayer of Ilus, the founder of Troy.
- 41 Quirites, from Quirinus (see above, *Pe.* II n25), a name for Romulus, here indicates Romans in general.
- 42 On Numa see above, *Pe.* II n28 and, for his associations with sacral practices, Canali 69.
- 43 "Luperci" are priests associated with the god Luperculus. "Flamen" refers to a priest assigned to a particular divinity.
- 44 Prudentius could have in mind a specific figure, but she is otherwise unknown. More likely, he uses the name "Claudia" for illustrative purposes, though it may be meant to conjure up nobility in the specific figure of Claudia Quinta, a chaste figure associated with the Magna Mater. See Fux, *Passions* 224.
- 45 Roberts 134–135 notes the ways in which the rhetoric of these lines, which feature polyptoton, anaphora, end-stops, and parallelism, reinforces the sense of exemplarity respecting Lawrence and those who venerate him.
- 46 "Vascon" refers to the Vasci, a Basque tribe located in northeastern Spain, through whose territory the river Ebro runs.
- 47 The Cottian Alps run between Italy and southern Gaul, while the Pyrenees separate Gaul from Spain.
- 48 This is the only moment in the *Pe.* in which Prudentius names himself, perhaps gesturing toward the *sphragis* reminiscent of Virgil, *Geo.* 4.563.

III

A HYMN IN HONOR OF THE PASSION OF THE MOST BLESSED MARTYR EULALIA¹

A holy virgin, nobly born,
And nobler still in how she died:
Eulalia. Her bones adorn
Emerita, her place of birth;
Her guardian love protects its earth.² 5

This place that's been so greatly blessed
By her lies far off to the west—
A city rich and powerful,
Made greater by her martyrdom
And by the stone that marks her tomb. 10

She'd seen twelve courses of the sun,
Twelve winters had run on,³ when by her
Strength upon the crackling pyre
She terrified the brutes who racked her.
(She thought her punishment was sweet.) 15

Still young, she'd early on made known
Her face looked towards the Father's throne,
And she was destined not to wed.
Still little, she had put away
The toys with which most young girls play. 20

She scouted roses, scorning amber;
Golden necklaces she'd spurn.
Her mien was serious and stern,
Her step sedate, and in her manner
She was more adult than child. 25

Now when the persecution rose
Against the Lord's good families,
And cruelly commanded them
To burn incense and sacrifice
Kine guts to lethal deities, 30

Eulalia's holy and courageous
Spirit cried out boldly then,
Prepared to shatter that outrageous
Attack, her heart panting for God.
A girl, she fought the arms of men. 35

Her mother's pious care, though, tried
To keep the bold girl home, far off
From town, there in the countryside,
Lest her fierce heart compel the child
To spill her blood for love of death. 40

But holding back, a thing she hated,
And cowardice not tolerated,
She sneaks away at night, unseen,
Flees through the gated fence, and makes
Her way across the desolate fields. 45

Through the rough wasteland, feet torn,
She runs, despite the slashing thorns.
And troops of angels guard her there,
Amid the frightening, silent night,
To serve her for a guiding light. 50

That's how the host of patriarchs
Pursued a pillared beam of light
Able to pierce the pall of night.
(It clearly marked the shining path
That cut through all the hellish darks.)⁴ 55

Like them, the pious girl had earned
Along her way, the light of day,
Free from designs of palling darkness
As she fled Canopus' realm⁵
And won, above, her starry way. 60

Striding hard all night, soon she
 Has covered many miles before
 Dawn spreads out in the eastern sky.
 She stands before authority
 Amid its lictors⁶ in the morning, 65

Crying out, "What is this madness,
 I ask—to damn your souls to fall
 Head-long to Hell; to lavish hearts
 On polished stones; to abjure God,
 Almighty Father of us all? 70

O wretched people, if you seek
 Christ's flock, I'm here—your enemy
 And foe to all your 'sacred' devils.
 I trample under foot your idols.
 With heart and tongue, I worship God. 75

Apollo? Venus? Isis?⁷ Nothing.
 Maximian⁸ himself is nothing.
 Made by the hands of men, they're nothing.
He prays to what's been made by men.
Both are worthless; both are nothing. 80

Even if Maximian,
 The mighty lord (though slave to stone)
 Does prostitute himself to his
 Own gods and make him theirs, why does
 He harrass those of noble heart? 85

Your pious leader and fine judge
 Feasts on the innocent, their blood
 His meat. He makes good souls his food
 And rips their decent flesh; he loves
 To torture those who love our God. 90

So come, you torturer. Burn, slash,
 And tear this body born of clay;
 To kill so frail a thing's not hard.
 But that will never drive away
 The vibrant soul that lives within." 95

Enraged by what Eulalia'd said,
 The praetor⁹ cries, "Take her at once,
 Lictor.¹⁰ Load her with pains that show
 Our gods are real, our emperor's
 Commands demand uncommon dread. 100

Yet oh how I should like, fierce girl,
 Before you die, to turn your ways
 From wickedness! Think of the joys
 You are rejecting that would come
 If worthy marriage filled your days. 105

The family you bereave now follows
 You in tears. Your noble stock
 Is mourning you in their distress,
 Because you're dying at an age
 So close to dowry and to marriage. 110

Rich, brilliant marriage doesn't move
 You, nor your noble elders' love?
 Your recklessness torments them. See?
 Here are the ready instruments
 Of death when torture is involved: 115

Either this sword will lop your head,
 Or beasts will tear you limb from limb,
 Or burning brands will make you theirs,
 By turning you to ashes, dead.
 Your friends will weep and wail for you. 120

What would it take to stop such pain?
 Your finger need but touch one grain
 Of salt and incense, virgin, if
 You only would consent, and you'd
 Escape such awful suffering." 125

The martyr won't reply, but cries
 Out, spitting in the tyrant's eyes
 And scattering the idols. Then
 Using her foot, she overturns
 The meal that on the censers burns.¹¹ 130

At once, two executioners
 Rip through the virgin's slender breast.
 The claw then cuts the young girl's chest
 Apart while slicing to the bone.
 Eulalia counts the wounds it makes. 135

"Lord, see how You inscribe my flesh—
 How glad I am to read these marks—
 Because the victories they proclaim
 Are written in this crimson blood
 That's drawn. They blaze Your holy name." 140

She spoke these words without a tear
 Or moan, both joyful and undaunted,
 Her soul untouched by hideous pains,
 Her body covered with the stains
 Of fresh warm blood that bathed her skin. 145

And then the final torture: not
 The slashing of her wounds or ploughing
 The girl's skin down to her rib-cage,
 But flaming torches all around
 That seared her sides with fiery rage. 150

All down her neck her sweet hair flowed,
 And over-streamed her shoulders, where
 It hid her bashful maidenhood
 And virgin modesty with hair
 That was the glory of her head. 155

Stoked by her hair, the fire burns,
 Crackling and flaming up her face.
 Taking her head, it climbs the crown.
 A speedy death is what she yearns
 For, drinking fire through her mouth. 160

Suddenly, sprung from her mouth,
 A snowy dove appears to fly.
 It's seen to rise up from the martyr's
 Face: Elulalia's soul, milk-white
 And innocent and swift in flight. 165

Her head droops as the soul departs.
 Slowly the raging fire dies.
 Her body soon is granted peace,
 Her conquering soul claps wings and flies
 Up, searching out celestial skies. 170

Even the guard himself has seen
 The bird fly from the young girl's mouth.
 He flees, astonished and struck dumb.
 What he has done, he races from,
 And the scared lictor¹² runs off, too. 175

Then look! The ice-cold winter sends
 Down pouring snow to mask the square,
 And mask Eulalia's body where
 It lies beneath the frozen skies—
 The cover's like a linen shroud. 180

Let those whose human love and tears
 Commonly solemnize last rites,
 Yield their sad office as they stand
 Aside. The snow, at God's command,
 Performs your obsequies, O virgin. 185

Her tomb's now in Emerita,¹³
 Famed city of Vettonia,¹⁴
 Which the well-known river Ana¹⁵
 Passes by, and with green, rapid
 Waters, bathes those stately walls. 190

Here, where the sheen of marble, white
 And lustrous, foreign and domestic,
 Bathes the nurturing chuch in light,
 The sacred soil holds her remains—
 Her honored ashes—in her bosom. 195

Above, the blushing rooftop glows
 From panels lined with gold, while chiseled
 Stones checker the floor so that
 You see a meadow made of roses,
 Or glowing pink with sundry posies. 200

Pluck the purple violets;
 Snip off the blood-red crocuses.
 Our kindly winters do not lack them.
 The cold won't grip the land; it's mild,
 So baskets brim with flowers piled. 205

O girls and boys, give her these gifts,
 Leaves from the verdant trees. But I,
 Amidst your company, will bring
 Her wreaths bound in dactylic feet¹⁶—
 Small, withered things, but joyous yet. 210

And so her bones we venerate,
 And so the altar covering
 Those bones. Placed at God's feet, she'll see
 Us, all her people, while she favors
 Our song meant to propitiate. 215

Notes

- 1 On Eulalia see Introduction, Chapter II.
- 2 Mérida, in western Spain (as v. 7 makes clear), originally Augusta Emerita, the capital of ancient Lusitania. Eulalia was buried here, as v. 10 notes.
- 3 On the circumlocution plied by Prudentius in stating Eulalia's age (12 years old), see Canali 77.
- 4 Prudentius recounts the story of the column of light that guided the Jews fleeing from Egypt at Exodus 13:21.
- 5 Canopus stands by synecdoche for Egypt, where it is located; the flight of Eulalia from Egypt mirrors the flight of the Jews from Egypt recounted in Exodus and mentioned in vv. 52–55 above.
- 6 On the lictors see *Pe.* II.325 above.
- 7 As a divinity of Egyptian origins, Isis furthers Prudentius' focus on Egypt, while Apollo and Venus have clear associations with Roman power. See Fux, *Martyrs* 84.
- 8 Maximian reigned with Diocletian as Augustus between 286 and 305 and, along with Diocletian, persecuted the Christians with especial ferocity.
- 9 The title granted to figures acting either as military commanders or, as here, magistrates of the Roman government. See Fux, *Martyrs* 88.
- 10 See above, v. 65.
- 11 Vv. 123–130 include references to elements of pagan ritual (salt, incense, idols, meals on the censors) that Eulalia rejects, on which see Fux, *Martyrs* 92–93.
- 12 See above, v. 65.
- 13 On Emerita see above, v. 5.
- 14 Vettonia refers to a locale in central-western Spain.
- 15 The Ana is the Guadiana River.
- 16 Prudentius' gift is this poem, whose meter is dactylic tetrameter hypercatalectic.

IV

A HYMN IN HONOR OF THE EIGHTEEN HOLY MARTYRS OF SARAGOSSA

Our people tend a single grave that
Holds some eighteen martyrs' ashes.¹
Caesaraugusta² the name we gave what's
Serving such greatness.

A house angelic great ones fill 5
Won't fear the fragile world will fall;
It holds too many gathered treasures
Christ will be offered.

When God, upon a cloud of flame,
Shaking His flashing hand, shall come 10
To set His scale, to bless or blame,
Weighing all justly,³

Then every town in this great world
Will rise and rush to meet Christ there
With precious relics. They will bear 15
Rich gifts in baskets.

Eloquent Cyprian, your bones
From Afric Carthage⁴ will be shown.
Corduba gives Zoellus, Acisclus, and three
More martyrs' crowns. 20

And Tarraco,⁵ who bore great martyrs:
You'll offer Christ a diadem
Fructuosus⁶ wove with triple gems,
Set in their crown bands.

His name's one gem bound to that band; 25
Twin jewels shine on either hand
Beside it.⁷ Both alike are flashing
Fire that's brilliant.

Little Gerunda⁸ shows one who 30
Enriches her: the saintly Felix.⁹
Calagurris brings those two
Martyrs we honor.¹⁰

Barchinon¹¹ will rise, relying on
Famed Cucufas,¹² fair Narbo¹³ on 35
Its Paulus,¹⁴ and Arelas¹⁵ on
Pious Genesisus.¹⁶

The head of Lusitania's towns¹⁷
Will take its honored maiden's ashes¹⁸
(She who is renowned) to offer 40
Christ at His altar.

Justus' and Pastor's¹⁹ blood, borne in
Complutum's²⁰ arms, will be her joy.
There, lying on each palanquin:
Both of their bodies.

What was built by Massylian kings²¹ 45
Is Tingis;²² the ashes it will bring
Are Cassian's²³—he who tamed the pagans
Under Christ's power.

A few towns will have pleased Him by 50
One, two, or three—perhaps by five—
Martyrs who gave to Christ their lives,
Sacrificed pledges.

But you, Caesaraugusta:²⁴ wearing
Golden olive leaves of peace,
You will come with eighteen, bearing 55
Those holy martyrs.

More numerous than any town
Has, you have martyrs for the Lord.

Richer than all who have adored Him, You'll know His great light.	60
Not many-peopled Carthage, ²⁵ no, Nor Rome herself, enthroned: neither Out-shines you in the gifts you show, Glorious giver.	
From martyrs' holy blood, the jealous Devils fled. They're gone from all Your gates, the darkness, its black pall, Flushed from your city.	65
No fear of shades lies deep within, For plague's been beaten from the people. And there in all your streets lives Christ; Everywhere, there's Christ.	70
You'd think this martyr-land had been Assigned these crowns, so many nobles Rose to Heaven clad in their Gleaming, snow-white robes.	75
Vincent, your triumph came from here, ²⁶ From here the clergy's victory. And here, Valerius's ²⁷ heirs Made Christ's mitres theirs.	80
Each time new bigots stormed, their savage Tempests cruelly come to ravage The world, they rained their terror's fiercest Fury on this church.	
Our folk, each time these horrors ceased, Won honor shedding their fine blood. Our martyrs' numbers, in these gale winds, Constantly increased.	85
Vincent, didn't you, despite A foreign death, ²⁸ sprinkle these lands With your martyr's blood as clear Omen, with death near?	90

They cherish this as if their own
 Soil held the martyr's very bones—
 As if his family tomb embraced
 Vincent's own body. 95

He's ours, though suffering—winning!—in
 A far-off towering town. He gave
 Saguntus²⁹ honor by his grave
 Nearby its shoreline. 100

He's ours, and in our school, the boy
 Learned virtue. Chrismed with the oil
 Of faith, he learned to beat The Foe
 Because of this strength.

He'd learned that in this church eighteen
 Triumphs were won. Taught by such great
 Accomplishments, he won his race
 With the same honor. 105

And here, Encratis,³⁰ strong-willed virgin,
 Rest your bones that held the virtues
 With which you shamed a world that was
 Base and disgraceful. 110

No other martyrs ever lived
 To dwell here in our land, with life
 Still in them. You alone beat death,
 Living in this world. 115

You lived, and told your serial pain,
 And how the flesh you still retained
 Was slashed for spoils, with hideous gashes,
 Horribly wounded. 120

Their butcher tore your flesh apart,
 Shedding your blood, maiming your limbs.
 He lopped your breasts and bared your heart
 Down deep in your chest.

For death's a meager price to pay
 When poisoned pains are washed away. 125

- It grants quick rest to tortured bodies
Finally sleeping.
- The bloody wound, though, long held sway,
Your veins long burning with those pains, 130
Till foul corruption wore you down,
Vitals in decay.
- Although the persecutor's sword
Denied you your ultimate death,
You won a martyr's crown through pain, 135
As if you'd been slain.
- We saw they'd ripped to bits your liver
By the claws. They lay far off,
And pale death had a part of you
Even while living. 140
- This brand new honor Christ then gave
Caesaraugusta to enjoy—
Holy home to the martyr's grave:
Living; eternal.
- So since those white-robed martyrs blessed 145
You and Lupercus³¹ and Optatus
Enriched you, go: write psalms to those
Senators chosen.
- Sing Martial and Successus. Tell
Of Urbanus's death as well. 150
Hymn Julia and Quintilian
Both in your descant.
- You choirs, sing Publius; re-tell
How Fronto won his victory;
Sing good Felix and what befell 155
Caecilianus,
- And how much blood soaked all your battles,
Evotius, and Primitivus;
Let lively praise recall your triumphs,
Apodemius. 160

I still have four more men to praise
 But now my meter fails.³² In days
 Of old the stories say all were
 Called Saturninus.

Love of their golden names makes light 165
 Of verse's laws, but still it's right
 To praise the saints; that's never wrong,
 Nor ever barbarous.

We write true verse when we recite
 To Christ the forms of noted names 170
 The book of Heaven holds for making
 Clear at the end-times.

Before the Father and the Son,
 The angel will recall the names
 Of eighteen saints who guard the town 175
 Since they have graves here.

And add her to that ancient number—
 The girl who lived after such torture.³³
 And Vincent's death! His blood and glory
 Both have come from here. 180

And Gaius and Crementius!³⁴
 (We must not be silent.) It was
 Your fate to win a bloodless honor,
 Battling for glory.

They both professed the Lord, none braver; 185
 Both stood against those roaring robbers.
 Both lightly tasted of the savor
 Martyrdom offers.

Below God's timeless altar, these,
 Served by the mother of empurpled 190
 Saints, seek forgiveness for our venial
 Failings with their pleas.

O let my tears, like righteous rains,
 Wash the names carved in this marble

That's sealed my hopes; now break the chains 195
By which I'm shackled.

Prostrate yourself, with me, great city,
Upon these holy graves; and then,
Their souls and bodies risen again,
You all will follow. 200

Notes

- 1 The martyrs are named by Prudentius at vv. 145 ff. below, on whom see Introduction, Chapter II.
- 2 Modern Saragossa, which lies on the Ebro River in central Spain.
- 3 Prudentius refers to the day of final judgment, drawing on imagery from Matt. 24:30. See Fux, *Martyrs* 118–119.
- 4 Bishop of Carthage (d. 258), to whom *Pe.* XIII, below, is dedicated.
- 5 Modern Tarragona, in northeastern Spain.
- 6 *Pe.* VI is dedicated to Fructuosus, below.
- 7 As Prudentius indicates in v. 25, Fructuosus is the central gem, set between two others, Eulogius and Augurius, both of whom were martyred in 259.
- 8 Modern Girona, a city in northeastern Spain.
- 9 Felix of Girona was martyred in 305.
- 10 Calagurris is modern Calahorra, whose two martyrs, Emeterius and Chelidonius, are celebrated in *Pe.* I, above.
- 11 Modern Barcelona, in northeastern Spain.
- 12 Cucufas (Cucuphas) was martyred near Barcelona in 304.
- 13 Modern Narbonne, in southern France.
- 14 Paul was sent to Narbonne in the middle of the third century, presumably by Pope Fabian (d. 250), as one of the seven “apostles to the Gauls.”
- 15 Modern Arles, in southern France.
- 16 Genesius was martyred in the first decade of the fourth century.
- 17 Modern Mérida, on which see above, *Pe.* III.5.
- 18 The maiden is Eulalia, to whom *Pe.* III is dedicated, above.
- 19 While still boys, Justus and Pastor were martyred near Alcalá late in the reign of Diocletian.
- 20 Modern Alcalá, in central Spain.
- 21 Prudentius confuses the Massyli, associated with Tangier, and the Masaesyli, a people living further west in North Africa, famous for their kings, on which see Fux, *Martyrs* 126.
- 22 Modern Tangier, in northwestern Morocco.
- 23 This is not the Cassian memorialized in *Pe.* IX but rather the figure who vigorously protested the court's decision to execute the centurion Marcellus after he refused to participate in the celebrations attending to Maximian's birthday. See Fux, *Martyrs* 126.
- 24 See above, v. 3.
- 25 In modern Tunisia.
- 26 Vincent, a deacon of Bishop Valerius, is memorialized in *Pe.* V, below. He was born in Saragossa but martyred at Valencia. Here he is depicted as

empowered by the example provided by the eighteen martyrs. He is sometimes said to have spoken for Valerius, who is claimed to have suffered from a speech impediment. See Fux, *Martyrs* 131.

27 Bishop of Saragossa, martyred ca. 315.

28 See above on v. 77.

29 Modern Sagunto, on the east coast of Spain.

30 Encratia was tortured but survived, though her suffering makes her martyr-like, as Prudentius goes on to note at v. 135.

31 Prudentius begins the catalogue of the eighteen martyrs, on whom see Fux, *Martyrs* 143–145. They are otherwise unknown. The final four are simply called “Saturninus,” presumably the name of their *gens*, at v. 164. Canali 107 reports individual names given to them by Eugenius of Toledo (d. 657) in his poem celebrating the basilica in honor of these martyrs, viz., Cassianus, Januarius, Matutinus, and Faustus.

32 Prudentius deliberately violates the Sapphic meter by beginning v. 163 (in the Latin) with a spondee in order to admit the name *Saturninos*.

33 Prudentius means Encratia, mentioned above at v. 109 ff.

34 Otherwise unknown, on which see Fux, *Martyrs* 149 and Canali 109. As Prudentius makes clear, both figures are confessors to the faith, rather than martyrs.

V

THE PASSION OF ST.
VINCENT, MARTYR

Blessèd martyr, bless this day,
The day your victory won renown,
Vincent,¹ and you earned your crown
As the reward for so much blood.

This day, you were the victor over 5
Torturer and judge. You rose
To Heaven from the earth's dark shadows,
Triumphant as you came to Christ.

Now with the angels you are one
Shining brightly in that robe 10
You washed in blood like streams that run,
An undefeated witness when

The one who served their godless idols,
Protected by their awful law,
Tried steel and chains to make you bow 15
In sacrifice to pagan gods.

At first, his words were soft and sweet,
In suasion, like some prowling wolf
Who playing games, deceives the calf
This predator intends to eat. 20

He says, "Earth's ruling king,² who wields
The Roman scepter, now decrees
That everyone should worship in
The cults of ancient deities.

You Nazarenes,³ draw near and listen: 25
 Renounce your barbarous rites. The stones
 Your *princeps* bows before are these—
 The gods your altar smoke must please.”

Hearing this, a Levite,⁴ Vincent, 30
 From the sacred tribe,⁵ God’s servant
 At His altar, one of seven
 Milk-white pillars chosen, cries out,

“*Let* those powers of darkness rule;
Make stone and wood what you bow to,
 Until you turn into dead priests 35
 Of gods who are as dead as you.

But we, O Datianus,⁶ shall
 Proclaim the Father, author of
 The light, and Christ, His only Son.
 He is the true and only One.” 40

This makes the judge *more* agitated.
 “You miserable man! You dare,” he says,
 “With crude speech to have violated
 This power of gods and emperors,

Law sacred and political, 45
 Law mankind yields to every day?
 Doesn’t danger threatening harm
 To your hot youth cause you alarm?

This is the writ you must obey:
 Either you must right now pray 50
 With peat and incense at our altar,
 Or it’s a bloody death you’ll pay.”

And Vincent answered in return,
 “Then come ahead with all your strength
 And all your public power. Still 55
 I shall resist; I always will.

Now listen to the truth we speak:
 Christ and the Father both are God,

And we His witnesses and servants.
Crush us, unless you are too weak. 60

Torture, prison, and the claws;
The flaming, sizzling iron plates;
Even the last great pain—of death—
To Christians is like playing taws.

O senseless, useless men, so vain, 65
With Caesar's stupid, brutish laws!
You order us to worship idols
Who, like you, possess no brain—

Dead gods some sculptor's carved or cast
And forged with bellows. They stand fast, 70
Bereft of speech and motionless,
Immobilized, both blind and dumb.

Your shrines with shining marble walls
Are built for deities like these.
For these the lowing bull gets slaughtered. 75
Stricken in the neck, he falls.

You'll say, 'But there are spirits there
As well.' No, *they* teach only sin.
They try to trap men in some snare,
While roaming in their bloody filth— 80

To secretly impel you to
Whole scores of sins—sins by the slew—
That ruin good men with their slaughter,
And so destroy God's righteous people.

They know full well, and are aware, 85
That Christ has power—that He lives,
And that His kingdom, which the faithless
Quake before, will soon appear.

This truth, they finally exclaim
When driven from the flesh they hide in, 90
Proving the power of the name
Of Christ. Your gods are devils, too."

The praetor⁷ could no longer bear
 The martyr's ringing words. He cries
 Out, "Gag his mouth. He shall not speak
 Another word. For these, he dies!" 95

No more of this revolting screed,
 But give him to the lictors,⁸ *now*!
 They are the Plutos who will feed
 On carved-off flesh from criminals.⁹ 100

Now I'll make this ranter feel
 The weight of our authority
 As praetor. He shall not go free,
 Amused to see our gods killed off.

So, stubborn one, just you alone
 May trample our Tarpeian rites?¹⁰ 105
 And more: you are the only one
 To crush Rome, Caesar, and the Senate?

Tie his arms behind his back,
 And up and down upon the rack,
 Stretch the bones in all his limbs
 Until the joints snap with a crack. 110

Then cleave away the flesh that covers
 His ribs, so in the wounds' recesses
 You can see his viscera
 All throbbing. Chop him into messes!" 115

God's soldier laughed at these commands,
 Mocking the lictors' crimsoned hands
 Because the claws that pierced his guts
 Had not gone in half-far enough. 120

When all these mighty men had failed
 At last in their eviscerating—
 Their panting breath inhaled, exhaled—
 Their arms wore out; their muscles quit.

But Vincent only showed good cheer,
 His face more luminous and clear 125

In happy and serene delight
At seeing you were present, Christ.

“What is this look of rank disgrace?”
Cried Datianus, maddened. “A face
Elated, *challenging*? The tortured
Stronger than the torturer!” 130

That force so practiced it can kill
All criminals with its skill
Gets nowhere in this contest, finding
Its arts of misery defeated. 135

But you two, nurtured by this prison,
You I’ve always found triumphant:
Rest your arms a little to
Recover energy you’ve spent. 140

Then when the wounds are dry again,
The blood all cool and clotted and
About to form a scar, your hand
Will gouge fresh furrows in those guts.”

Then in reply the levite¹¹ said: 145
“If you can see the power of
Your dogs grows weak, then come ahead
Yourself, since you’re a better butcher.

Show them they could tear apart
My deepest self, had they your art. 150
Delve with your hands inside me;
Drink my blood from burning streams.

The ‘punishment’ you think you can
Inflict on me by maiming me
And killing me is nothing. Bodies 155
Die by nature, bloody man,

And there’s something else in the body
That no man can ravage—one
Untouched and still and free
From grievous pain’s atrocity. 160

This thing you struggle to destroy
 With all your fury is just clay—
 A fragile vessel that some day,
 Is doomed to shatter in some way.

Just *try* to shred and batter now 165
 That being who inhabits me.
 Steadfast, he grinds you down, you tyrant,
 With all your cruel insanity.

This—this—is he you must attack:
 One never beaten by the rod; 170
 Invincible; no slave to passion,
 And subject only to his God.”

At this, he’s torn apart afresh
 By creaking hooks that claw his flesh.
 The praetor then, with devilish lips 175
 Hisses out these serpent words:

“So if your hardened heart is set
 So callused in your stubborn breast
 That you won’t let your hand as much
 As touch the beds where our gods rest, 180

At least reveal the places where
 You hide the secret books you read,
 So we can burn the vicious seed
 You sow in flames that they deserve.”

But Vincent, hearing this, exclaims, 185
 “Malignant one, you threaten burning
 Our sacred scriptures, but true justice
 Means that *you*’ll go up in flames,

Because it will be God’s great falx
 Avenging our celestial books, 190
 By burning with its lightning strike
 The tongue that hawks such poison.

You see Gomorrah’s crimes in embers;
 Sodom’s¹² cinders strew the plain

For all to see. They testify
To death and its undying pain. 195

They stand for how you'll die, you snake:
For come some day, the pitch-black tar
Will mix and fuse with bitumen,
To wrap you up in Tartarus."¹³ 200

The words have put him in a passion,
This persecutor, and first ashen
Then red-hot, he rolls his eyes,
Foams at the mouth whose teeth he gnashes.

A little while he hesitates, 205
Then orders, "Let our last, best torture
Be brought to bear: the blazing fire
And bed of crushing iron plates."

The martyr hurries toward his end,
Rushing with a step that's buoyant, 210
Speed generated by his joy.
He's there before his torturers.

Arrived at glory's wrestling place,
Where hope and cruelty would fight,
Martyr and torturer meet face- 215
To-face to join in dubious battle.

A serried grid with far-spaced teeth
Has made for him a rough-spiked bed
On which a mound of burning coals
Exhales its incandescent breath. 220

Freely the holy man, who shows
No fear, climbs on this pyre like
A man who's won his crown and knows
He's mounting toward God's judgment seat.

Salt scattered on the fire crackles 225
Below, thrown off in hissing sparks
That scorch him as they hit their marks
And penetrate his burning body.

Then lard laid down across a fiery
 Branding iron melts and washes 230
 Over it, so smoking liquid
 Slowly drops down on his flesh.

Through all this torture, he remains
 A man not conscious of his pains.
 He lifts his eyes to Heaven, for 235
 His hands are tied down by their chains.

His courage stronger still, he's taken
 From the grid and thrown into
 A dank, dark prison, lest free light
 Should lend his spirit greater might. 240

This prison is, deep down inside,
 A place where blackness goes to hide.
 The narrow stonework of its vault
 Maintains its strangled passages.

It's where eternal night lies hidden, 245
 And the day-star is forbidden.
 It's said this grisly prison has
 All to itself its own dark Hades.

His savage enemy then throws
 The martyr into this abyss 250
 And sets his stretched-out legs in stocks.
 He clamps the martyr's feet with locks,

And, master of the penal arts,
 Adds brand new torments all his own:
 Ingenious tortures never known 255
 To any tyrant of the past.

He has the cell floor strewn with broken
 Pots whose shards are rough and ragged,
 But with points both sharp and jagged,
 All to make the martyr's bed— 260

A bed now armed with grievous pains
 From spikes that stab the victim's back

From underneath. They're always there;
Sleep can't be gotten anywhere.

This deft deviser's built such clever 265
Tools of torture: skillful; well thought-out.
But Christ now puts Beelzebub's!¹⁴
Ingenious, artful plans to rout.

Because the cell, black-blind inside,
Now flashes with a brilliant light. 270
The two clamps of the stocks break free
And both its holes burst open wide.

And by this sign it is made clear
To Vincent: what he'd hoped for oh
So long—the prize of all his toil—is here. 275
Light-giving Christ has now appeared.

And then he sees each broken shard
Of pottery decked out in tender
Flowers as the prison-house
Exhales pure nectar-scent and nard. 280

Even angels stand there in a corps,
Speaking face-to-face before
Him. One of special, noble grace
Addresses him in words like these:

"Rise up, exalted martyr. Rise! 285
Rise up, assured you are secure.
Rise up and join our holy choir
In union that is sweet and sure.

By now your painful course is run,
Your duty of enduring ended. 290
And with this noble death, your passion
Closes; all your suffering's done.

O soldier no one could defeat—
The bravest of the brave—see how
Those very torments tremble now 295
Before you, quaking at your feet.

Christ God has seen this all, and He
 Rewards you with eternity.
 He gives, in generosity,
 The crown of sharing on His cross. 300

Lay down this vessel doomed to die—
 A fabric woven out of dust,
 Which falls apart, as all things must,
 And come in freedom to the sky.”

But even as the angel speaks, 305
 Through shut doors, the light within breaks—
 A piercing brightness that lay hidden,
 Appearing through the door’s thin cracks.

This stuns the man who guards that door,
 Frightening him who had the chore 310
 Of keeping watch all night inside
 That prison-dungeon house-of-death.

And more: he hears the martyr singing
 A song that goes beyond all sweetness,
 As if of an emulous voice. 315
 The bare cell’s echoes now rejoice.

Then creeping to the door, he cringes
 In fear, and tries to look, the best
 He can, in through the narrow gap—
 The joining place of door and hinges. 320

That bed of shards he now can see
 Blooming with flowers everywhere.
 The martyr’s bonds are all torn free,
 And Vincent walks his cell and sings.

When word of such astounding things 325
 Reaches the furious praetor’s ears,
 He sobs at his defeat, ashamed
 And groaning, raging through his tears.

“Take him from his cell,” he says.
 “Restore him with a little balm, 330

So when he is revived he'll serve
To nourish newer pains to come."

From the entire town the faithful
Come together in a throng
To make a bed they mollify 335
And wipe his bleeding gashes dry.

One plants pure kisses by the score
On double cuts the claws have made;
Another gladly licks with joy
The martyred body's purple gore. 340

Many wet a linen cloth
With Vincent's drops of blood, and store
It in their homes to serve them for
A holy safeguard for their children.

The very jailer who maintains 345
The prison—he who keeps the chains—
As long tradition says (which knew),
Instantly believes in Christ.

For while the bolts had locked the door,
He'd seen the dungeon's blinding darkness 350
Burst with brilliant gleams. Despite
The shut cell, it had flashed with light!

When Vincent finally can lie
In rest—a martyr on his bed,
Heart-wearied by the long delay, 355
And burning with a thirst to die

(If we could call it death when soul
Departs the body and is free
From prisoning flesh, restored to God,
Its authoring divinity; 360

This soul that blood has purified,
Washed clean by death and having died,
Yielding a body sacrificed
In sacred offering to Christ),

He lays his head down on the soft 365
 Bed coverings. His soul has won;
 The body it must jettison
 Is left behind. The soul seeks Heaven.

Along the way there opens up
 A straight path to the heavenly Father 370
 (When murdered by his brother Cain,
 Blessed Abel climbed it, vilely slain).¹⁵

Saints in white robes accompany
 Him as he's rising into Heaven.
 John the Baptist¹⁶ summons one 375
 Who like himself has been set free.

The enemy of Christ's name, though,
 Had failed, with all his poisons' gall,
 And now its burning stirred him so
 His vicious heart was all on fire. 380

It was the fury of some raging
 Serpent with his fangs all shattered.
 "This rebel's flown! He's won," he cries,
 "And bears the palm up to the skies.

But there is still one punishment 385
 We can inflict even in death:
 We'll give his body to the beasts
 Or feed it to the dogs as feast.

At once I'll pulverize his bones!
 No tomb-less corpse can lie in state 390
 For common sheep to venerate
 Or wear a martyr's epitaph."

So, frenzied, wicked, he exposed
 The holy corpse (how vile a crime!)
 Among the reeds—a naked thing 395
 Denied the slightest covering.

But neither savage beast nor starving
 Bird would dare, with squalid jaw,

Pollute that saint's so glorious relic
Of triumph with an unclean claw. 400

Even if a malicious bird
From far off circled noisily,
A fiercer one would chase it in
Attack until that bird would flee,

Because a raven, who supplied 405
Elijah with his sustenance,
Performing this task faithfully,
Kept watch and never left his side.¹⁷

This bird, from nearby bushes, drove
Away a savage wolf by beating 410
With its raucous wings and cries,
With feathers slashing at the eyes.

(What infidel would dare believe
A creature ravenous and often
Ready to fight a bull, gave way 415
Before a weapon feather-soft?)

The wolf retreated, growling spite,
Chased by the raven's agile flight
And running from the prey it saw
Because a meek guard threatened it. 420

So Datianus, when you hear
This news, how do you feel? How do
You groan, so pained by what afflicts
You with such awful, piercing pricks,

When you can see yourself defeated 425
By the virtue in the body
You've killed? Even the lifeless bones
Have won out, and you know you're beaten.

But stubborn tyrant: what event
Will set a bound to impotent 430
And wild, ungoverned rage? Is there
No limit that can stop your fury?

“None! I mean to never stop.
 If savage beasts once ravenous
 Grow tame and famished ravens drop 435
 Their frenzy and grow soft and gentle,

I’ll drown that body in the sea.
 The violent waves have never shown
 The shipwrecked mercy, let alone
 Their kindness, which no man has known. 440

Either the wild and vagrant winds
 Will make that corpse its random toy,
 Tossing it everywhere, forever,
 For scaly fishes to enjoy,

Or else below cliffs rough and ragged 445
 The scabrous arrowheaded rocks
 Will slash and tear apart his flesh
 In bays with stones carved sharp and jagged.

Someone who knows the way of boats—
 Of oars and rope and sail—and knows 450
 The means by which a fast craft goes
 When ploughing through the seas,

Must take the body from the marsh
 Where it lies now, untouched, and carry
 It away in some fast wherry, 455
 Far off across the open sea!

But fold the corpse in half and tied
 Up in a rope-bag you’ve supplied
 With some great stone to weigh it down
 And sink it headlong in the sea. 460

And take it quickly far from shore,
 Across the waves, with dripping oars,
 Till looking back, you cannot find
 The distant land you’ve left behind.”

A soldier springs at this command 465
 (Eumorphio was his name, a wild,

Barbaric, daring sort of man,
Who burns to take the work in hand).

He rigs a sack of rope, then sews
The corpse inside and quickly rows 470
A long way out at sea. He throws
The body out amidst a storm.

O God omnipotent in might,
Your power made the universe.
You once becalmed the cresting sea 475
For Christ to tread in Galilee,

In such a way that walking, He
Went on the waves with feet He keeps
Dry, soles the waves don't even wet
While passing over swollen deeps. 480

This was the same might whose decree
Parted the waves of the Red Sea¹⁸
While God's folk walked so fearlessly
Across the waters' dried-up bed.

And now that very power tells 485
The sea to serve the holy body
By drifting with its gentle swells
To reach the curving line of shore.

The mill-stone-heavy weight goes floating
Along as light as white sea-spray; 490
The sack that holds the holy relic
Rides the waves along the way.

The sailors are amazed to see
The sack come drifting back across
The water, floating fluently, 495
Abetted by the wind and tide.

They fight to make the wherry go
Faster as it cuts the waves;
The body races faster, though,
To reach the gentle breast of land. 500

At length, the restful earth receives
The body back with quiet care,
Before the boat, whose hands have striven
Mightily, can reach their haven.

Happy is that bay within 505
The arms of its so-pleasant shore—
A bay whose burial sands now cherish
The martyr's flesh—which cannot perish—

Till the saints, with loving care,
Supply a grave. With many a tear, 510
They mound the site with earth, to tomb
The body till the end-days come!

But when those saints that overthrew
Their foes have given the righteous rest,
An altar will afford the blessed 515
Bones the peace that they are due.

For laid beneath that holy place,
And buried at the altar's base,
They drink the breath of incense from
The offerings that waft down to them. 520

And so the *body*. But the *martyr*
Was lifted to the throne of God,
To join the Maccabean brothers,¹⁹
And Isaiah,²⁰ who was sawn apart.

But these, through all their suffering 525
Gained just one crown, since death supplied
Them with a fitting end—a close
To all their ordeals when they died.

Did he who cut Isaiah in half
Dare any deed like this? Could he 530
Have fed the sawn-up body parts
To beasts, or thrown them in the sea?

Or did that tyrant feed the torn-
Out tongue of Maccabee the martyr,

Or his scalp when it was shorn,
To birds who thirsted for its blood? 535

Only you, twice-famous Vincent,
Won the double victory,
The glory—won the double prize:
Two laurels simultaneously. 540

You triumphed by your cruel death,
And dying, won once more, the champion
Who fought the devil and who trampled
On him with only your body.

Be here with us and hear the plea 545
We make you with our voices' prayer.
Before the throne of God, pray mercy
For our sins; win leniency.

By you yourself, and by that prison
That made your honor ever grow; 550
By all those flames and claws and locks;
And by that prison-house's stocks;

By all the broken earthenware
That grew the glory that you gained,
And by the bed which we, your heir, 555
Have fondly kissed in trembling awe:

Take pity on us as we pray,
So Christ, to hear our pleadings, may
Incline His ear to us, His own,
And not consider all our sins. 560

If we, with heartfelt word and vow,
Pay proper reverence to your day;
If we observe your rites, and bow
Down joyfully before your bones;

Then come to us some little space, 565
And bring the blessing of Christ's grace,

So that the burdens of our souls
May find forgiveness and relief.

That way, there'll be no long delay
Before your noble soul resumes 570
Its body on that final day—
The body matching deeds with spirit,

So that the flesh that shared the fight
And bore the dangers with the soul
Might share with it the glory, from 575
Now *per saecula saeculorum*.

Notes

- 1 Vincent's history is briefly recounted at *Pe.* IV.77 ff., above; on the particulars of his life see Introduction, Chapter II.
- 2 Prudentius means Maximian, Augustus in the West, who is also mentioned at v. 27.
- 3 This designation may be intended to insult the Christians addressed here; see Fux, *Passions* 240.
- 4 As at *Pe.* II.39, "Levite" is a term for "deacon."
- 5 By "sacred tribe" Prudentius means the tribe of Levi, described at Deut. 10:8 as set aside from the others by dint of carrying the ark of the covenant.
- 6 The governor of Spain under Maximian, Datianus oversaw Vincent's arrest and condemnation. He is affiliated with Beelzebub at v. 267, below.
- 7 On the praetor, see above, *Pe.* III.97 n9.
- 8 On the lictors, see above, *Pe.* II.325 n18.
- 9 Pluto is the Roman God of the underworld; "Plutos," another name for the lictors, thus bring death to Vincent.
- 10 The Tarpeian Rock, a cliff on the Capitoline Hill in Rome, is named after Tarpeia, a Vestal Virgin, who, according to legend, betrayed the Romans by opening the city gates for the Sabines in return for their treasure, and who was then killed by the Sabines and buried in the rock. "Tarpeian rites" thus refers to the sacral practices associated with the veneration of divinities whose temples were located on the Capitoline.
- 11 On "levite" see above, v. 29.
- 12 Sodom and Gomorrah, the two cities described in Gen. 19, symbolize the acme of earthly sin and corruption.
- 13 "Tartarus," the pagan underworld, is another term for "Hell."
- 14 Mentioned at 2 Kings 1:2–3, 6, and 16, where the name refers to a divinity worshiped by the Philistines, Beelzebub here symbolizes a demon and stands also for Datianus. See Fux, *Passions* 273.
- 15 The story of Cain and Abel is recounted at Gen. 4:1–18.

- 16 John's history is recounted in the four Gospels and in the Acts of the Apostles. He preached of Christ's coming and in due course baptized him. He was beheaded by Herod Antipas, the ruler of Judea, hence Prudentius' description of him as "set free."
- 17 Prudentius draws on 1 Kings 17:6, which describes ravens bringing Elijah food as a consequence of the drought he announced to Ahab.
- 18 Moses' parting of the Red Sea is recounted at Exodus 14.
- 19 The martyrdom of the seven Maccabean brothers is told at 2 Macc. 7.
- 20 A version of Isaiah's death holds that he was sawn in two, on which see Fux, *Passions* 312 and Thomson 201.

VI

A HYMN IN HONOR OF THE MOST BLESSED MARTYRS FRUCTUOSUS, BISHOP OF THE CHURCH OF TARRAGONA AND AUGURIUS AND EULOGIUS, DEACONS¹

O Fructuosus: blessed Tarraco,²
Because of you and for her deacons, rises
Shining. Far off, you see her fires glow.

God, looking on the Spaniards, is benign,
For it's the mighty Trinity that crown
With triple martyrs this Iberian town. 5

Ardent Augurius seeks out the sky.
Eulogius, beside him and ablaze
With light, heads for the throne of Christ on high.

Fructuosus was their leader, guide, 10
And teacher. Now he is a saint enskied,
Winning a bishop's honorable name.

For when the governor called him to court
At once, that priest went there as he'd been ordered,
With those two deacons, members of his cohort. 15

From there, the torturer who gorged on blood
Was dragging them to harsh captivity;
Fructuosus went freely, joyfully.

But so his friends would not be struck by fear,
Their mentor strongly urged them both along, 20
And from an ardent Christ, their faith took fire.

“Stand with me, men. There’s no need to be scared.
For though the bloody snake calls you to suffering
And death, God’s servants have their prize prepared.

Prison advances Christians toward their crown. 25
Prison lifts them to a holy height.
Prison wins them blessings in His sight.”

They reached their jail cells as they heard these words,
Where they performed baptism’s mystic rite;
Its stunning waters washed the darkness white. 30

Six days here they remained locked up, then stood
At last before their judge and savage enemy.
The racks then shuddered at these brothers three.

Their judge Aemilianus,³ fierce and evil
And haughty, threatened them with torture, 35
Commanding sacrifices to the devil.

He said, “You teach and propagate fresh lies
To make mere girls desert the sacred groves,
Relinquishing the worship that is Jove’s.

Renounce these old wives’ tales, if you are wise, 40
And do what Gallienus⁴ bids you do:
That what our Caesar worships, we shall, too.”

Calmly the priest replies to what he says,
“I worship the eternal Prince of Days,
The Lord who made Gallienus what he is, 45

And Christ, the everlasting Father’s son.
I serve Him, shepherd of His flock.” The judge,
Though, smiles: “Not any more you’re not; you’re *done*.”

He can’t control his ire or check his wrath,
But marks the three for savage, flaming death. 50
Rejoicing, they forbid the crowd its tears.

The priest sees persons offering him a cup
To sip from, but he tells the crowd, “We’re fasting,
And cannot drink, so I must pass this up.

The fasting day's ninth hour⁵ as yet is sealed. 55
 Though I face death, I will not violate
 That sacred law I still hold consecrate.

That's what Christ did as He was crucified.
 Thirsting, He spurned the cup they offered Him.
 Refusing it, He thirsted till He died."⁶ 60

By then they'd reached the place of circling seats
 In tiers—the place where frenzied mobs convene,
 Made mad on blood shed by the savage beasts.⁷

When roars arise from sands where blood runs red,
 And as the gladiator lies struck dead 65
 (His life is cheap), the coarse mob shouts delight.

Here, a swarthy officer, commanded
 To prepare the torture's flaming pyre,
 Had laid the last few brands upon its fire,

Which when it freed the bodies that its flames 70
 Consumed, would burst the cell and set in flight
 Those souls so ardent in their love of light.

At Fructuosus' feet, his loving friends
 Contend to loose his laces. One man bends
 In eagerness to help him shed his shoes. 75

But blessed Fructuosus said no. He said
 The man should stop, and not bow down his head.
 "Death's only harder with such obsequies.

Indeed, I will myself set free my feet
 So I'm un-shod. No ties will slow my pace 80
 As I run to the fire; I shall *race*.

Why does your sorrow drench each tear-wet cheek?
 Why do you ask me to remember you
 To Christ? It is His grace for *all* I seek."

He'd barely spoken when he took his shoes 85
 Off, doing just as once was done by Moses
 When he had dared approach the burning bush⁸

(Moses was not allowed to walk on fire
That was sacred, or face God, before
The traces of his steps had been made pure). 90

As he stood cleansed, an utterance occurred:
A spirit's voice from Heaven spoke this word—
A speech that set to trembling all who heard:

“Believe! This is no suffering that you see.
It passes in an instant, rapidly, 95
Transforming life, not taking it away.

Joyful are the souls that climb through fire
To reach the Thunderer's⁹ heights; there are none higher.
One day, the final fire¹⁰ will flee from them.”

Meanwhile, they enter at an eager pace 100
The roaring flames, which stuns the very furnace
Itself, so that it trembles at their presence.

And then the knots that bound their hands behind
And twisted back, themselves catch fire. All turned
To ash, they fall, the martyrs' flesh unburned. 105

So pain had failed to keep their hands held down.
They raised them to the Father, as if they
Hung on the cross. To God, arms free, they pray.

In ancient times, those three made such a sight
Who walked amidst the flames in Babylon, 110
And sang, and made the tyrant quake in fright.

Back then, though, those were spared by righteous flame
(The proper time for martyrs wasn't yet,
Nor had Christ ordained such worthy death).¹¹

These, as the scalding heat left them unharmed, 115
Prayed the roaring blaze would set them free,
Rushing to finish all their agony.

And so persuaded, God, in majesty,
Commanded that His servants finally
Die, their souls set free to come to Him. 120

A member of the governor's house saw,
Taking the martyrs in, the skies unclose,
And saw that through the stars, that trio rose.

He called his master's daughter to observe
This—proof of how her father'd sinned. The men 125
His court had killed were now alive in Heaven.

Indeed, the child deserved to see this clear
And open sight her father could not see.
His patent guilt made all the household fear.

The martyrs' holy bones and ashes then 130
Were soaked with wine and all were gathered in,
Each man laying claim to them himself.

Such was the brethren's love to carry home
These gifts of consecrated, holy ashes,
Or fold them in their breasts as faithful pledges. 135

But lest these relics (to be raised again
At the Last Day to be with God) should be
Scattered, each in some vicinity,

The three appeared then in white robes that shined,
Ordering their sacred dust be given back, 140
Though mixed, and in a marble tomb, enshrined.

Oh, how our city's¹² head's exalted! Triple
Honor, triple glory we obtain
In towering over all the towns of Spain!

Our delight's extolling these three patrons 145
Of our people for their dear protection.
We Pyreneans¹³ bask in their affection.

Let choirs of both sexes stand and sing—
Grown men, maidens, boys, girls, and the old—
Our Fructuosus; it is right we should. 150

Let hymns resound that praise Augurius!
And mix in music for Eulogius!
Let's sing out praise to equals equally.

Here, let the city's gilded roofs resound;
 There, from the shore, raise up a pleasing sound. 155
 And let the seas in holiday sing out.

One day there'll come a time, when all seems dire,
 When Tarraco is freed by Fructuosus—
 From suffering free; protected from the fire.

Since Fructuosus thrives by Christ, he may 160
 Allay my suffering, too, if he recalls
 My verse's sweet eleven¹⁴ syllables.

Notes

- 1 On Fructuosus and his deacons, Augurius and Eulogius, see Introduction, Chapter II.
- 2 Modern Tarragona, in northeastern Spain.
- 3 Governor of Spain when Fructuosus and his deacons were martyred.
- 4 On Gallienus, see Introduction, Chapter II, on *Pe.* VI.
- 5 The "ninth hour" refers to the point in the day, roughly 3:00 p.m., at which the weekly fasts ended. See Canali 163.
- 6 As recounted at Mark 15:23.
- 7 On the amphitheater of Tarragona, see Fux, *Martyrs* 173.
- 8 Recounted at Exodus 3:2, 5.
- 9 God is called by the Roman name for Jupiter to emphasize that He is the true "thunderer." See Fux, *Martyrs* 180.
- 10 Prudentius means the fire of Hell.
- 11 Prudentius refers to the story told at Daniel 3:91 in which three Jews, having refused Nebuchadnezzar's order to venerate a statue, were thrown into a burning furnace but remained unharmed, after which the king ordered them removed from the fire and allowed them to worship their God unhindered. See Canali 167, 169 and Fux, *Martyrs* 182.
- 12 Prudentius implies that he is a native of Tarragona in calling the city "our town." See above, Part I.
- 13 "Pyreneans" refers to the people of northeastern Spain, whose lands stand proximally to the Pyrenees Mountains.
- 14 I ask the reader's forgiveness for turning Prudentius's hendecasyllabics, a meter of eleven syllables much favored by Catullus, and to which Prudentius refers here, into iambic pentameters [L.K.].

VII

A HYMN IN HONOR OF THE MARTYR QUIRINUS, BISHOP OF THE CHURCH OF SISAk

The city walls of Siscia¹
Cherish, in fatherly embrace,
Quirinus,² a most honored man
Who pastored in God's loving grace—
A martyr granted to that place. 5

Galerius,³ oppressing sore
Illyria's⁴ meandering shore,
Governed good Quirinus, who,
They say, shed luster, by his death
As martyr, upon the Catholic faith. 10

It was no whetted sword, no fire,
No cruel, feral beasts, who caused
His death by shedding saintly blood,
But river waters, in their flood,
Washed him clean and bore him off. 15

Because it does not really matter
If the suffering of a martyr
Be in blood or placid water,
Glory comes from it the same,
Whatever is the liquid stream. 20

From high atop a towering bridge,
They threw headlong into the flood
The bishop of a pious people.
They noosed him to a great mill stone
That hung down from his collarbone. 25

He was, though pitched into the drink,
Grown calm as if by miracle.
It would not let Quirinus sink,
But held the stone's enormous weight—
A wonder floating on the spate. 30

The bishop's flock, far off from shore,
Watched him whom they were frightened for.
(Christ's faithful, numbered by the score,
Had lined the winding river banks;
They massed there in a close-packed throng.) 35

Quirinus, though, his head above
The water, turned to look behind
And saw his flock in fear for him.
He paid his jeopardy no mind,
Though, even in such watery peril, 40

But tried to lend their hearts new strength,
By begging them in soothing words
That such things not make them afraid,
Nor ever cause firm faith to fade,
Or think it were a pain to die. 45

And while he speaks, the river, with
Its racing stream, keeps him afloat.
The depths don't dare—not on their own—
To open up and swallow him;
To sink the man, the rope, the stone. 50

The martyr-bishop sensed
That he'd be robbed soon of the prize
He thought he'd win by having died,
That his ascent would be denied
To his Eternal Father's throne. 55

"Jesus Omnipotent," he said,
"It would be nothing strange for You,
No glory that was specially new
To walk upon the sounding sea
And bid the flowing waters stay. 60

We know that Your disciple Peter,
When his first steps went in the water,
Feared because his feet were human.
With Your strong hand upon him,
You propped his foot atop the sea. 65

We know the River Jordan, too,
Despite its braiding, winding flow,
And while its current raced ahead,
Turned backward in its normal course
To flee and seek its waters' source.⁵ 70

This is the miracle that You
Make happen by Your power, Lord:
I'm buoyed, floating lightly on
The surface of the river's water,
Although my neck drags this great stone. 75

The honor of Your name's fulfilled
Now, and its power manifest
(Dull-witted pagans stand amazed).
Please end, I pray, Christ Who Is Best,
Whatever's hindering my soul. 80

The river water proves Your power
By the giant millstone it sustains.
Then grant the one thing that remains,
That most precious gift of all:
That I may die for You, Christ God." 85

He prays, and breath and voice and warmth
Of life all leave him, very fast.
Meanwhile, his spirit mounts on high.
The heavy stone grows weightier till
The waters take him in at last. 90

Notes

1 Modern Sisak, in Croatia.

2 On Quirinus see Introduction, Chapter II. On the unique name of this bishop see Fux, *Martyrs* 207 and G. Galeani, ed., *Prudenzio: Peristephanon VII, Introduzione, Traduzione e Commento* (Alessandria, 2014), 84.

- 3 Under the tetrarchical system, Galerius was Caesar to Diocletian and Maximian, and ruled the Danubian provinces, harboring an especial hatred for Christianity. He was Augustus in his own right from 305 to 311.
- 4 Illyricum takes in modern Albania, Slovenia, and Croatia, on which see Fux, *Martyrs* 208 and Galeani, *Prudenzio* 90.
- 5 As told at Joshua 3:13.

VIII

ON A SITE IN CALAHORRA WHERE MARTYRS SUFFERED AND WHERE A BAPTISTERY IS NOW

As picked by Christ, this is the site¹ where he enskies,
Through blood and cleansing water, those he tries.

Two heroes² here were killed because of the Lord's name,
Winning by death martyrdom's purple fame.

Here too, His mercy flows down from a limpid fount, 5
Its fresh stream washing sins from one's account.

Who yearns to climb to Heaven's realm—eternity—
May bring his thirst; the path's prepared, he'll see.

Crowned witnesses, to reach those courts, once climbed in
flights;
Now souls washed clean seek out those lofty heights. 10

The Spirit, Who would always come down to this place
To grant the victory palm, now grants us grace.

The earth drinks sacred drops of water or of blood,
Perpetually drenched, streaming for God.

From His two wounded sides Who is Lord of this place, 15
Here, flow His streams of blood; there, waters race.

As each one can ascend from here, our wounded Lord
Will raise him by its waters or the sword.

Notes

1 Prudentius celebrates a site in modern Calahorra.

2 The "heroes" are Emeterius and Chelidonius, the martyrs celebrated in *Pe. I*, above.

IX

THE PASSION OF SAINT CASSIAN OF IMOLA

After Cornelius Sulla,¹ the Italians came
 To call the town of Forum by his name.²
 Here, as I trekked my way to Rome, the master of
 The world, I grew to hope to win Christ's love.
 Before the holy martyr's tomb, I bowed, prostrated 5
 (The tomb Saint Cassian's body consecrated).³

While sorrowing and counting up my sins and all
 My life's distresses and their stinging gall,
 I looked towards Heaven, and before me was the saint:
 The martyr's picture done in colored paint. 10
 He bore a thousand wounds, his parts all torn and nicked.
 It showed his skin with small stabs, punched and pricked.
 Countless boys around him (pitiful, the sight!)
 Jabbed him with what they used to write:
 Small styluses they ran across their blocks of wax 15
 And used to note their lessons' droned-in facts.

I asked the verger, who said, "This is not mere lore,
 Stranger, or some old wife's tale from of yore.
 This picture is the story of what happened, told
 In books. It shows the steadfast faith of old. 20

In the school for many boys that he'd been leading,
 Cassian sat and taught writing and reading.
 And he was skilled at noting down the words, and quick
 To mark down speech in wax, with signs he pricked.
 But sometimes, that young mob, that thought him too
 severe, 25
 Too stern, were stirred to anger and to fear

(Boys always find their lessons hard, their teachers cruel,
And youth is never glad to grind in school).

Now storms of persecution rose, Christians hard-pressed,
Who fiercely sought the glory of the blessed. 30

The ruler of these angry pupils then was torn
From class for showing pagan altars scorn.
And when the torture artist asked what was his trade—
This man so feisty, with a rebel's soul—they made
Him this answer: 'He teaches young boys how to write— 35
To mark down words in signs that they indite.'

'To make these boys a gift of him, now take him out,
This man who used to lash them with a knout.
Let them mock and wound him as they will, in play,
Hands dipped in Cassian's blood—a holiday! 40
How nice to think their master should himself provide
Such sport to those he was so wont to chide.'

And so they strip his clothes and bind his hands in back,
As angry boys with styluses attack.
For then it pours out: held-in animosity 45
Long silent; simmering venom now set free.
Hurled tablet boxes smash the master in the face,
And splintered bits go flying every place,
As wax-clad boxwood cracks against his cheeks. Blood
flows
Across wet 'pages' crimson from the blows. 50

With steel pricks, others launch again their sharp attacks—
The ends that scratch the letters on the wax.
Some cut with ends that scrape those letters they efface
To make the slab a new and glossy space.
One stabs, the other cuts, Christ's servant. One drills in, 55
Piercing soft flesh; the other splits the skin.

As one, two hundred hands have gashed his flesh; from all
These wounds, and all at once, the red drops fall.
The worse tormentor was the boy who slashed the skin—
Not the student boring deep within, 60
For he who wounds his victim subcutaneously,
Avoiding death, has studied cruelty,

- While he who brings on death more quickly from his drilling
Through the vitals, brings relief by killing.
- He begs the boys, 'Be strong, and let that strength out-vie 65
Your years. Such strength, let cruelty supply.'
But those so young grow weak, their blows to no avail.
His pains grow worse as these small demons fail.
- One boy cries, 'But teacher, why complain and groan?
The hands that gave these weapons were your own. 70
You see? Those thousand characters, we give back now—
What you taught us while we cried. So how,
When *you* said, "Use your styluses," can you complain?
You bade us never carry them in vain.
So, Stingy, we no longer beg the holiday 75
You vetoed all the time when you held sway.
We *like* to prick out scratch with scratch and line with line,
Linking curved strokes together by design.
Feel free submitting our long marks to your inspection,
In case some hand has need of your correction. 80
Yes, punish all our faults. You have the power to,
If someone's written carelessly on you.'
- That's how they sported with their master's body, yet
Those pains went on with which he'd been beset.
At length, Christ, merciful in Heaven, gave commands 85
And Cassian's soul was loosened from its bands.
The pains that check that soul and snare his life then cease.
The heart is opened; Cassian is released.
Blood gushes from its inmost, hidden source to flow
Out through the channeling veins. It's forced to go 90
From there out countless holes pierced in the flesh. The
heat
Of pulsing life departs its vital seat.
- So, stranger, this is the amazing martyr's story
You see in glistening colors: Cassian's glory.
Reveal then any worthy wish you'd have come true— 95
Any desire or hope consuming you.
Believe: the martyr hears all prayers, and all he knows
Are truly good, he answers, prospering those."

Obeying him, I clasp the tomb and weep and moan.
 My lips warm Cassian's altar, my breast his stone. 100
 Then, murmuring, I called to mind in private thought
 My griefs—and what I feared and what I sought—
 While praying for the home I'd left in jeopardy,
 And for my faltering hope of joy to be.
 And I was heard! For all went well with me in Rome, 105
 And I sing Cassian's praise, now that I'm home.

Notes

- 1 Lucius Cornelius Sulla Felix (ca. 138–78 B.C.E.), held the consulship twice, in 88 and 80 B.C.E. and was dictator in 81.
- 2 Forum Corneliai, modern Imola, in northern Italy.
- 3 On Cassian see Introduction, Chapter II.

X

THE DECLARATIONS OF ST. ROMANUS THE MARTYR AGAINST THE PAGANS

Romanus,¹ champion of Christ's divinity,
Hear me. Within my mute mouth, animate the tongue.
Be generous. Grant me, all too dumbstruck, graceful song,
And help me sing your wondrous glories, for you know,
As well as any knows, the mutest men can speak. 5

In torture, they cut out your tongue that played with throat
And palate once. They couldn't stop your witness, though.
Your lips went on acknowledging the one true God.
The voice that testifies to truth cannot be stilled;
Its channel cut out, still it throbs, and can't be killed. 10

Just so, my stammering, sticking speech, the tongue for which
Goes plodding on to make these inharmonious measures.
But if you bless my heart with your supernal dew,
And flood my soul with milk that's spiritually rich,
This grating voice will free those sounds it's now denied. 15

As the Evangelist² has written, the Messiah
Himself instructed the Apostles in this way:
"Don't struggle for the words you'll need ahead of time.
When what I teach is ready for you to proclaim,
I'll furnish the unready with what they must say." 20

Left to myself, I'm mute, but Christ most eloquent
Will be my tongue, providing me with perfect words.
He'll tell us of the screaming storms the devil raised
While he was being quelled and meeting his just death—
A scourge grown worse than ever at his dying breath. 25

It's like the way a snake that's wounded by a spear
 And biting on the steel and shaking it, with fangs
 Clamped down, grows wilder, wilder in its pain, half-crazed.
 The lance has entered far too deeply, though, and sticks,
 Of all the pointless biting peril, unaware. 30

It chanced Galerius ruled the Roman world back then:³
 A man, the ancients tell us, who was cruel, hard,
 Implacable and ruthless. For he'd sent this edict
 Far and wide across the empire: that all men
 Who wished to live must pledge apostasy to Christ. 35

Speaking through the emperor was that same snake
 Who once, on exiting the cemetery tombs,
 Cried out to Christ, "Why do You come so soon? Oh, why
Now ruin my kingdom? Spare me, Son of Him Most High,
 Oh, please, else force me to possess that herd of swine."⁴ 40

Keen to obey, the prefect Asclepiades⁵
 Commanded that his soldiers seize the people of
 The Church, taking them from their very sanctuaries.
 From there they were to be clapped into prison if
 They wouldn't spurn the teaching of the Nazarene. 45

That prefect meant to break into the church, so keen
 He was to smash to bits the Holiest of Holies.
 So he prepared to execute his plan—obscene,
 Profane—to raze the very sacrificial altar,
 By smashing through the doors and tearing down its stone. 50

On hearing this surprising news, a holy man,
 The resolute Romanus, bent on warning, ran
 Ahead to tell the flock of well-armed enemies
 En route, exhorting timid hearts with rousing words
 To stand before the coming storm and not give way. 55

The Christians, in a faithful league of unity,
 And of one spirit, were a fearless company
 Of mothers, husbands, little children, and young women,
 All firmly set on faith, with brave determination
 To choose to die before their teaching's abjuration. 60

The soldiers, driven back, reported to that judge
That it was Romanus who led the stiff-necked people,
And that all were burning with a bold resolve
That they would bare their throats before the Roman sword,
To meet a martyr's death in glory and with courage. 65

Then comes the order that Romanus be arrested
And rushed to court because he is the guilty one
Inflaming and inciting all that stubborn flock.
An unresisting victim, of his own accord
He gladly goes to trial, his hands behind his back. 70

His passion for the martyr's crown is greater than
The lictor's⁶ art: he bares his ribs before that man
Without reserve, for gashing by the two-forked claws,
And dashes through the doors, his torturer in tow.
The ushers stand amazed; his martyr's valor awes. 75

As they stand face-to-face, the tyrant hectors him:
"You are a monstrous villain, infamous and base:
Disturber of the city's peace; a stormy wind
Among the fickle mob. You roil their fitful mind,
Until that stupid rabble won't obey the law. 80

This unschooled multitude believes a cunning story
That makes its sham appeal to how they lust for glory.
So now they claim that they'll be blessed to live forever,
Should they, like the Giants, lose their war against
The gods and end up buried under Etna's flames.⁷ 85

It's *you*, you wretch, who've tried to stage these bloody
 games
Exhibiting disaster by those citizens
Who'll die for their impiety—for bringing sin
To the world. They must be killed because of what you teach,
So *you* cause them to die. *You* lead them on to evil. 90

I truly think it only just the fate your wicked
Instigation's urged so many men to suffer,
Should fall back on you. And for deaths soon to come,
The first one who will die should be yourself—that *you*
Should undergo the very pains you urged them to." 95

His answer back was bold: "O prefect, without shirking
 By some reservation, I will gladly die,
 The single sacrifice for all our faithful flock.
 For if you ask me, I am more than worthy to
 Endure the worst your ruler's cruelty can do. 100

The slaves of devils and their idols all should mock
 Are not allowed to enter the most holy house
 Of our salvation, lest that purest site of prayer
 Be defiled. I know the Holy Spirit will
 Not *ever* let you step across that blessed sill— 105

Unless you choose to join us, worthy finally
 Of your admission. God the Father, may this be!"
 Incensed by what's been spoken, Asclepiades
 Ordered Romanus' body broken on the rack
 By hooked and corded stretching and evisceration. 110

But as he raged, his servants made the observation
 That Romanus came from a long and noble line;
 That all his civic work made him a citizen
 Of worth. So Asclepiades removed the rack,
 To spare a nobleman plebeian punishment. 115

"Then let a lashing flurry rip his noble back.
 The leaded whip should swell his withers as they're torn.
 Each man is beaten in accord with social rank
 Because it matters if he's lordly or low-born:
 The prisoner's status regulates his tortures' form." 120

And so the martyr's lashes came down in a storm.
 Through all those lead-tipped strokes he sang a hymn, then
 stood
 Revived and said, "Far be it from me that the blood
 My parents gave me, or the law, should make me noble.
 It's Christian faith that raises man and makes him good. 125

If you should search man's heritage, how he began,
 By drawing up the family tree of the first man,
 You'd see we're born from out the mouth of God the Father.
 Who serves Him well, with true nobility is graced.
 Who does not serve the Father will become debased. 130

A fine new honor comes to glorify our line—
 A great distinction, like some office in the state—
 If just one righteous man will testify to Christ
 When he's been scarred with marks of iron and of fire,
 And if from torture's wounds in glory he'll expire. 135

Don't think by being 'kind' that you are sparing me,
 And don't assume I crave indulgent leniency.
 No, I'm *ennobled* by your whips; don't hesitate.
 I will be raised up if I win this victory.
 My mother's and my father's birth will count for little. 140

Even these great ranks proud men like you attain:
 What do you think they're worth, when they are gone so soon?
 What are the rods, the axes, bordered togas, curial chairs?
 What are the lictor and tribunal and the thousand
 Honored marks that swell you, then collapse in ruin? ⁸ 145

When you begin a consulship you scatter grain
 For chickens (oh, the shame of it!)—the work of slaves.⁹
 The ivory-eagle bearer puts on regal airs
 Because of it! He's swollen—arrogant with pride—
 Because a piece of bone is fashioned like a bird.¹⁰ 150

And bowing to a statue at an altar's base,
 Kowtowing to a piece of oak—what's more absurd
 And abject? What could be more vile before my eyes?
 And I'm aware that when the Mother of Mt. Ida
 Rides her car, the barefoot nobles stand aside.¹¹ 155

And there's that small black stone carved with a woman's
 face.
 Set in a silver case, it's drawn by chariot
 As your procession leads it to the washing place
 (You take your shoes off so the ground abrades your feet
 Until you come at last to Almo's little stream).¹² 160

And there's that other vile procession. When you race
 As Luperci, how could you more debase yourselves?
 Shouldn't I believe you are the vilest slave
 When you run naked, striking girls in every street—
 Whipping with leather strips to bring fertility?¹³ 165

O Rome the powerful, by far the greatest city
 In the world: your rulers, rites, and ways I pity!
 Come, prefect, let us discourse, if you do not mind,
 Your 'mysteries.' For now you're going to have to hear,
 No matter what you wish, the lowly things you worship. 170

In this crazed fury that has filled your breast, I fear
 No terrors—not your gruesome visage, nor your head
 Held high, or that grim look by which you threaten me
 With torturous death. If you would persevere
 Here, come then: fight me with cool reason, not with frenzy. 175

Toward God the Father and our Christ, apostasy
 Is your command—to worship males and females by
 The thousands, gods and goddesses, their children, grand-
 Children and great-grandchildren of both the sexes,
 The spawn of rife adultery, base progeny. 180

Their girl-gods marry, suffering at the hands of lying
 Lovers who use them. Incest flares up like a brand,
 And partners cheat and steal, each pair a specious nexus.
 Wives cheated on by husbands hate their mistresses.
 Gods—gods!—are trapped in bed by Vulcan's snaring
 mesh.¹⁴ 185

Where are the altars on which you command the flesh
 Of slaughtered rams must smoke with turf? Or must I go
 To Delphi? But the bad name of that boy says no,
 Who lost his manhood to the cunning Phoebus by
 A 'wrestling match' out on the field of exercise. 190

(And then that god grieved, after he had killed the boy
 With a discus, deciding he'd immortalize
 His budding lover.)¹⁵ When he had been hired to graze
 Another's herd, young Hermes stole it from the lazy
 God, who ended up robbed both of kine and bow.¹⁶ 195

Perhaps it's Cybele's fine pine grove I should go
 To? No. That boy stands in my way who chose to geld
 Himself (He fled that one by whom he'd not be held).
 His cutting saved him from that Cybele's foul lust—
 A eunuch she must mourn for in eternal rites.¹⁷ 200

Or should I worship at great Jupiter's abode?
 If he were called to trial by your Roman law,
 You'd trap him in the meshes of the Julian Code.¹⁸
 Convicted by Scantinian statute, too, he'd pay
 The price, since you would judge him more than fit for
 jail.¹⁹ 205

Or do you think the founder of your 'golden age'
 Deserves our worship—he you tell us hid away,
 A fearful fugitive, afraid of what his son
 Might do? Should Jove hear Saturn's still alive, he'd flail
 Any accomplices who'd helped his lucky father.²⁰ 210

And tell us what you think that we should do when there
 Are gods who disagree, their altars everywhere.
 The war god Mars would be indignant—in a rage—
 If Lemnos' Vulcan were adored.²¹ And anyone
 Enshrining Hercules would taste the wrath of Juno.²² 215

You say your poets spin these stories as they please.
 But they *believe*—and *worship*—mystic cults like these,
 As you do, too. What they invent, they venerate!
 Why does your reading of their sins afford such pleasure?
 Why is it clapped for when you see it on the stage? 220

That rapist-swan is personated by some actor.²³
 A player dances as the bull-horned malefactor
 Jove the Thunderer,²⁴ while you, priest, sit and watch
 These things and laugh, though never giving them the lie,
 Despite the staining of the good name of this 'god.' 225

Priest, why do you convulse in laughter when great Jove
 Pretends to be Alcmena's spouse?²⁵ A dirty harlot
 On the stage bemoans the wounded youth Adonis²⁶
 With all her whoring lechery wrapped up in scarlet,
 Yet you're not angered by the 'sacred' Queen of Cyprus? 230

In fact, these tall tales tell their truths in statues
 Where sculpted bronze embodies crimes we plainly read.
 What does Jupiter's attendant eagle mean?
 It is the racing armor-bearer turned to pimp,
 Bringing the tyrant god his rent-boy Ganymede.²⁷ 235

Or what of Ceres, robe tied back, with outstretched lamp?
Clearly Pluto has absconded with the teen
Her wandering mother searches for throughout the night.²⁸
Then there's the spinning Hercules, who can be seen—
Spinning as the fool of the Omphalean queen.²⁹ 240

Must I condemn those monstrous rural 'nature' gods
Like Faunus and Priapus and the piping Pan?³⁰
And Nymphs who live in lakes or haunt some inland sea
As if they were no better than the likes of frogs—
With seaweed for the robes of their divinity? 245

Good judge, is this the worship you expect of me?
Can you revere these *things* if you are sane? Can you
Imagine these are *gods*? You must convulse with laughter
At the merest thought of such absurdities.
They are what drunken crones dream of in phantasies. 250

If we're to worship all the false divinities,
Then you should be the very first to start. Revere
Them all—yes, every entity on earth that someone
Worships: Egyptian gods and Latin gods, the ones
Rome prays to and the ones Canopus³¹ begs for blessings. 255

So if you pray to Venus, venerate the ape
As well! You honor Aesculapius's serpent;³²
Why not the dog, the ibis, and the crocodile?
Why not devote your holy altars to the leeks,
And worship pungent garlic or the fiery onion? 260

You will not honor vegetables, yet all the while
Burn incense to your household Lares³³ caked with smoke.
But why are hearths deserving in their 'majesty'
More than anything that grows in garden grounds?
For if such pottery's divine, then why not leeks? 265

You call the image carved in bronze a thing of beauty.
How shall I curse the studios of the sculpting Greeks,
Who've manufactured gods for all the foolish nations?
For Myron's tongs and Polyclitus' maul are *fons*
Et origo of all of heaven's generations.³⁴ 270

When art is great and strong, idols can be its yield:
 By curling Jove's rough beard; by gently waving Liber's³⁵
 Flowing locks in ringlets, polishing his hair
 And bunches of the grapes and berries that are his;
 By setting snakes to bristle in Minerva's shield. 275

It terrified mankind by planting grim fear there,
 So that mere brazen bolts would frighten them (they think
 They are the Thunderer's).³⁶ They quake at hissing Gorgon
 Venom, thinking a youth just come from Indian triumphs
 Can thyrsus-flog them even while he's fogged with drink.³⁷ 280

And when they see Diana with her dress above her knees,
 To ease her chase, they fear that huntress-maiden's bow.³⁸
 Or if by chance the molten bronze's shimmering flow
 Has made a Hercules whose face looks hard and grim,
 They think he's threatening them unless they worship him. 285

What terror in the frightened folk will seize their hearts
 If carvers make a Juno³⁹ true-to-life, enraged!
 It is as if she looks away repelled, her face
 Averted from the victim that they sacrifice,
 Her stony visage intimating empty threat. 290

Why isn't Mentor⁴⁰ deified, at least not yet?
 And Phidias⁴¹ himself goes on without a shrine.
 For after all, *they* make your gods and what's divine.
 Besides, with less hard work, and burning energy,
 Their furnaces would cast no Joves for men to see. 295

Surely you blush, you fool who bows to metal idols,
 When you recall the altar-food you've wasted all
 Your life in worshipping absurdities like these—
 Gods molded out of ladles, basins, frying-pans,
 And tankards that your metallurgists melted down. 300

At least I understand such thoughts in serf and clown.
 They fear the sight of parti-colored wool on tree
 Stumps,⁴² and are conned by every charlatan they see.
 To them, the old wives' tales and gossip of a clutch
 Of toothless crones are sacred, filling them with fear. 305

How is it though, that educated scholars such
 As you—men living lives of carefully-thought-out rules—
 Know nothing of the principles of everything
 Both human and divine, or of the regal King
 Who rules creation whole, and first created it. 310

Eternal God, whom humankind can't comprehend,
 Who can't be limited by what we think or see,
 Surpasses any wisdom of humanity.
 We cannot know or grasp Him with our eyes. Out far;
 In deep: He fills and overfills both without end. 315

Before the first day ever was, He was and is.
 Both now and always in the past His life was His.
 Himself the one true light and maker of true light,
 He sent that light He was, and He who is the bright
 Diffusion coming from the light is Christ the Son. 320

The power of the Father and the Son are one—
 A single splendor from the light was what was sown,
 And wholly from the Godhead-source, pure radiance shone.
 God is one, and single in His mighty being.
 One power made the universe, made all that is: 325

Heaven and earth; the awful depths of all the seas
 The globes that rule the night and day with different beams;
 All winds and tempests, with the lightning and the rain;
 The evening star, the heat, the snow, the star-built Wain;
 Springs, hoarfrosts, veins of ore, and all terrestrial streams. 330

He made the mountain dell, the crag, the level plain,
 And all the feral beasts that crawl or swim or fly.
 He made the yoked beasts and the giant brutes and kine,
 Along with every flower, tree, shoot, bush, or vine
 That either scents the air or yields us food and wine. 335

So everything, but not by labor or by skill,
 By God was made to be; the power of His will
 Commanded it. What had not been was thus created—
 The world. In all its forms, it was created by
 The Father's power, ever-present in the Word. 340

Learning of Him—what He is—you now have heard.
 Learn too, how to adore Him and what His temple is,
 And just what offerings He orders to be His.
 Now know the priests He wants, the prayers He'd have us
 pray,
 The nectar He commands that we should sacrifice. 345

God has set His temple in the soul of man—
 A living, breathing, sentient thing, serene and clear,
 Which nothing can dissolve or ruin, which cannot fade.
 It's beauty is exalted and a thing of grace,
 In every lovely color, every varied shade. 350

And at its holy threshold, a priestess stands there—
 The virgin Faith, guarding the first gate—with her hair
 Bound back in regal ties. What she'd have sacrificed
 Are souls that please the Father and that gladden Christ—
 Pure, shining, and sincere souls of which she is sure. 355

A modest mien paired with a heart that's innocent;
 A body that is chaste; a peace that is serene;
 The fear of God, which is all wisdom's measurement;
 A temperance in fasting and in abstinence;
 Unflagging hope; a hand that shows munificence: 360

From offerings like these, a pleasing mist arises
 That surpasses incense, saffron, and the scent of balm,
 Or air that has been spice-drenched in Persian perfume.
 Ascending from these souls, it reaches Heaven's height,
 Where with its sweetness it will make for God's delight. 365

Whoever fights this creed and tries to stamp it out
 Forbids a chaste life and the quest for the devout—
 Forbids our striving souls to reach for what is high,
 Calling our subtle fire back to earth, and won't
 Allow the power of all that's wise to come to life. 370

How blind those nations are that wallow in the mire!
 How carnal are the gentiles' hearts! What thick-skulled error!
 And oh, how lost in darkness are the people who
 Love only this world and devote themselves to corpses.
 Their eyes are fixed on earth, and never on what's higher! 375

Isn't it the ultimate insanity
 To think those beings gods whom marriages create?
 To think to find the spiritual in earthly things,
 Or choose what mundane altars hold to consecrate,
 Believing what's created could create in turn? 380

Or pray to tree trunks that some axe cut down, and then
 Sprinkle chiseled tombstones with the blood of swine?
 To offer up on altars bits of beef, when well
 You know that those you deify are only men?
 And to wreath the ash-filled urns of *criminals*?⁴³ 385

O judge of this world only, stop imposing such
 Great wickedness on people who are brave and free.
 For nothing's greater than the love of truth, and those
 Professing God's eternal name will fear no ill,
 Since even death itself lies subject to their will." 390

All through the martyr's discourse, Asclepiades⁴⁴
 Had slyly nursed the rage inside his heart, for he
 Was seething deep within, and this ferocity
 Had simmered silently, but now was rising,
 Till the anger broke at last as he began to speak: 395

"By Jupiter! What claptrap do I hear this *person*
 Spouting? He stands amid our altars and the figures
 Of our gods—right in this court!—while I admit
 That I stay silent, and he bawls out his harangue,
 Fouling all that's holy with his heinous tongue. 400

O blighted rites! O ancient ways we once saw fit
 To follow! This our age now carps at Numa's laws,⁴⁵
 Devised to help us thrive. What crass, new-fangled flaws
 Have given us these heretics who claim that we
 Must use our 'reason' to renounce divinity? 405

Now this new-bred Christian doctrine rises up
 At last, after a thousand years have rolled down since
 Rome's birth, not going back to Nestor's⁴⁶ day. Whatever
 This new dogma is that's just sprung up, it never
 Was back then. To know how things began, ask Pyrrha.⁴⁷ 410

Where was this Highest God of yours when mighty Mars
 Blessed Romulus, his boy, who built the citadels
 Of newly-founded Rome atop its seven hills.
 She owes her fortunate foundation and her strength
 To Jupiter the Stayer⁴⁸ and the other gods. 415

All this was ordered from the start—the legacy
 Our fathers left: the emperor, who is divine,
 Triumphs when every man has prayed before his shrine.
 (His foes go down, and glory's won by troops well-trained,
 So he can lead the peaceful world his laws restrained.) 420

Then gird yourself, you wretch, whoever you may be.
 With us, in proper rites, beseech the gods that they
 Protect the emperor. You'll pray—or else you'll pay
 The price—in blood—all enemies of Rome must pay.
 To spurn his temples is to spurn the emperor.” 425

To this, Romanus answered: “I will never pray
 For the emperor's health or for his great brave men,
 Except that they take on the faith and are reborn
 In Christ's baptismal waters for the Father, and then
 Receive the comfort of the Paraclete⁴⁹ from Heaven, 430

So to reject the darkness of idolatry
 And thus discern the light of hope eternal,
 Which can't infuse the humors of the eyes that see,
 Or shine its way through windows just corporeal,
 But radiates instead from deep down in pure hearts. 435

The mortal eye sees only what's material,
 And being what will die, it only sees what dies.
 The soul is pure, so all it sees is purity,
 Which is the reason why the shining soul alone
 Perceives the dazzling glow of God's divinity. 440

As for your emperor, I wish this light were known—
 Your emperor and mine, should he *agree* he's mine.
 For if he opts to fight against the Christian name,
 An emperor like that will not be one for me,
 Because I won't obey a man commanding sin.” 445

“You just *stand* there?” the ministers hear the judge exclaim.
 “You stand with your avenging hands behind your backs,
Not tearing up his flesh and ploughing it to pieces,
 Ripping deep inside to find where his life hides,
 The place from which this ranting lèse-majesté spews?” 450

The heinous soldiers tear apart both sides and sinews
 With their razored steel as he is hanging there.
 They plough long gashing furrows in his tortured flesh
 And cut his body up into a criss-crossed mesh,
 Until his breast shines bright where all his bones lie bare. 455

The soldiers pant and puff, all runneling with sweat,
 The martyr whom they savage, quiet, calm, serene.
 Amid all this, Romanus, of his own free will,
 Speaks out: “O prefect, if it’s truth you want, I mean
 To tell you that your tortures haven’t hurt me yet. 460

What pains me is the error you’re professing still,
 And that you drag along these people with you, who
 Come running here in crowds from everywhere to see
 This spectacle—a pagan mob who make me grieve
 Because they quake at this, my bloody destiny. 465

Well, hear me—everyone! Hear my proclaiming cry:
 From here I raise my voice. *I’m* raised above you high,
 For Christ, the Father’s brightest glory, He who’s God,
 The maker of the world and thus partaker with us,
 Has pledged eternal life to those who will believe— 470

The saving of the soul. Only it never dies,
 But living on, encounters one of two great fates:
 It sinks in darkness, or in Heaven radiates.
 If it has followed Christ, it wins the Father’s glory.
 Cut off from Christ, it’s handed down to Tartarus.⁵⁰ 475

I must care for the quality of the reward
 I’ll earn one day—what comes to my eternal soul.
 I’m not concerned about how it will soon be gone,
 Because by its own nature’s laws it’s bound to die.
 Destruction hounds it; let what must dissolve pass on. 480

It doesn't matter if I'm torn by fire or chains,
 Or if some cruel illness tortures my weak flesh,
 Since often much disease comes armed with greater force.
 The violence of claws that tear one's sides apart
 Is less than pleurisy, with all its piercing pains. 485

The skin that searing iron plates have burned is not
 The match for fever in the veins, which burns red-hot
 With lethal plague, or flames that spread across, and roast,
 The skin, while furious inflammation raises blisters.
 That feels like being cauterized with sizzling irons. 490

You think I suffer, stretched out, hanging on this rack,
 My feet torn from my legs, hands tied behind my back,
 While joints make awful snapping sounds and tendons crack.
 But it's like men who scream their bones are being torn
 Apart by swelling gout or torturous arthritis. 495

You all quake at this bloody work of bloody men,
 But are the hands of doctors any gentler when
 They practice savage, Hippocratic butchery?⁵¹
 They cut the living tissue till the blood, drawn fresh,
 Stains their knives that scrape away the putrid flesh. 500

So think of surgeons with their bloody steel that probes
 My ribs when they are healing me by cutting me:
 What brings me back to health is never bitter. No,
 It only seems these men destroy limbs that decay.
 Rather, they heal the living soul inside my body! 505

Besides, who doesn't know how pitifully corrupt
 That body is—impure, and doomed to waste away?
 It's dirty and it swells; it suffers, oozes, smells.
 It puffs up with a rage and gives desire free rein,
 While gall and liver spots disfigure it with stain. 510

Don't men fight for gold all for the body's sake?
 And tatted clothes and gems and silk and purple all
 Are lusted after by a thousand means to please
 The flesh. Gourmands will end up corpulent in time,
 While lust makes people sample every kind of crime. 515

So executioner: heal all these ills, I pray.
 Remove the kindling that can light the fire of sin.
 Find the gangrene of the flesh; cut it away.
 For that will save the soul and set it free from pain
 When it no longer wears what tyrants may chop off. 520

Don't be afraid, you people standing in the crowd.
 I only lose what everyone at last must lose—
 Both king and subject, poor and wealthy all alike.
 So dies the flesh of senators as well as slaves;
 For both, it turns to dust when planted deep in graves. 525

This thing we throw away is slight and of small cost
 If we are so afraid to lose what must be lost.
 Why does our will so fail to stop what must occur?
 Why doesn't nature and its law transform to glory?
 So let us prize that loss which nature's law demands, 530

And rather, see the shape of that prize yet to come
 To those who persevere—a prize that *never* dies.
 The spirit, Heaven's once again, rises and flies,
 And standing in that royal court where Christ is king,
 Will there enjoy the blessed light of God the Father. 535

Some day, the heavens will be rolled up like a book.⁵²
 The whirling sun's great globe will fall to earth in ruin,
 As will, at last, that sphere that rules the months—the moon.
 Then only God and all the righteous and the just
 Will still endure, attended by eternal angels. 540

O wise man, spurn the pleasures of this present life,
 For it must end some day and you must leave it all.
 Let go your body, for the grave will end its story.
 Set off instead to sail toward God and coming glory.
 Know what you are, and triumph over world and time." 545

The martyr's speech had hardly ended with these words
 When Asclepiades the prefect, in a rage,
 Broke in with "Let the executioner transfer
 His blows to this one's ranting mouth; now turn your cords,
 Your hands, and all your wounding blades to rip his jaws. 550

Shatter the place where so much verbiage issues from.
 Pierce through those cheeks that bellow his loquacity,
 So he can use no gushing wind. Let him go dumb,
 Since nothing that our law commands will end this drivell.
 Torture his very words, yes, even as he speaks.” 555

The wicked lictor executes: he rakes both cheeks,
 As ordered, clawing them with furrowed scores of lines
 And tracing those with bleeding gashes in the face.
 He tears apart the martyr’s bristling, bearded skin
 Until he’s cleft the whole face, right down to the chin. 560

And *still* the martyr speaks, despite the streaming blood:
 “I owe you, sir, my thanks and deepest gratitude,
 Since now I open all these mouths to speak of Christ.
 Before, I had just one—not much to praise His name,
 And hardly equal to the lauding of my God. 565

But now I’ve countless mouths from which I may proclaim.
 My voice can issue from un-numbered fissures, sounding
 Forth on this side and on that and in all ways
 Professing Christ and God the Father in their glory.
 For every wound, there is a mouth, propounding praise.” 570

Incensed by constancy like this, the judge commands
 The torturer to pause, then speaks these words: “I swear
 By all the fires of the sun—that sun whose circles
 Alternate and regulate our day and night,
 And by returning bring the year with all its light— 575

That now the awful pyre’s flames that we prepare
 For you will burn your flesh—the end that it deserves,
 Since it’s so wicked in its opposition to
 Our ancient rites, and though defeated will not yield
 To pain, but strengthens still, for all that it goes through. 580

What deadened feeling put this rigor in your heart?
 Your mind is stubborn and your body has been steeled,
 So rigidly this newborn doctrine rules. For surely
 This Christ of yours lived only yesterday, and you
 Yourself admit that he was hammered to a cross.” 585

“It is that cross which saves us from unending loss,”
 Romanus answered. “This is our redemption. You,
 A godless man, I know can’t grasp that mystery,
 Because your understanding’s blind, you cannot see
 To know our doctrine; night knows nothing of the day. 590

But even in the dark I’ll lift a shining torch,
 So that the sound shall see, the blind man mask his eyes.
 ‘Put out the light,’ the irredeemable will say.
 ‘Such brightness only harms a man who cannot see.’
 Now, heathen, hear the very things you most despise: 595

The Everlasting King begot an everlasting
 King, Who lives in Him. Yet neither was ‘begun,’
 For time does not constrain Him Who is first the *fons*
Et origo of all beginnings—days and years.
 Christ is from the Father. He and Christ, are one. 600

The Son revealed himself before our human eyes,
 A mortal frame that immortality assumed,
 So that eternal God, Who bore a body doomed,
 Could make it possible for us to take the path
 To Heaven. *God* rose again; the *man* was put to death. 605

Death battled God while God wore human flesh, but fighting
 What is ours, it yielded to what never dies.
 You think us foolish, O you men so worldly-wise.
 The Highest Father, though, chose foolish, worldly things
 So worldly, foolish men might wisely know of God. 610

You speak again of Mars’s wolf, reminding us
 Of vultures’ ancient omens and of Romulus.⁵³
 But if you say *we* are ‘too new,’ what’s newer than
 Those tales? Barely a thousand years fill up the span
 From now till back when Romulus’s Rome began. 615

And I could name—had I but world enough and time—
 Six hundred kingdoms founded oh-so-long-ago
 Throughout the world, renowned before the Gnosian she-
 Goat suckled Jove,⁵⁴ the sire of Mars—or so they say.
 But they are gone, as all of these will be one day. 620

This cross of Christ, which you call new, was clearly known
 By signs expressed and spoken of in ancient writings
 When humankind began at earth's nativity.
 Christ's coming was predicted in a thousand ways
 And wonders by the words of prophets who agree. 625

Kings, judges, prophets, princes: all, by all their deeds
 And wars, by their religious rites, and by the pen,
 Showed that the cross was long predicted, long foretold—
 A cross that was foreshadowed back in days of old.
 Those ancient times drank in the symbol of the cross 630

Until at last the prophets' words were verified,
 And now it's true, what that tradition prophesied.
 It shines before us from a visage we can see,
 To banish any doubt with truth and certainty,
 In case it not be seen by doubters, face-to-face. 635

We hold that though the body must itself surrender
 To be swallowed by the grave, it does not die,
 Because Christ raised His body from the cross—the cross
 He perished on—and bore it to His Father's throne,
 To show us all the way that we might rise again. 640

That cross is *ours*; we climb the gibbet mortal men.
 For though Christ died, as God He came back down for us—
 Christ, who in dying is a man, that being of
 A double nature. Dying, He has conquered death,
 And so returns to what's eternal and undying. 645

Let my few words suffice about the underlying
 Mysteries of our salvation and our hope.
 Now I shall speak no more; we aren't allowed to scatter
 These pearls of Christ among the swine that are unclean,
 Lest filthy beasts should trample on such holy matter. 650

But since I can't convince you with deep reasoning,
 Let us have recourse to what we have close at hand:
 Let us seek a decision from natural judgment,
 Which through an artless, simple mind, may understand.
 Bring out some guileless soul to judge at your command. 655

Give us a boy of seven years of age, or less,
 Who will be free from bias, hating none, and not
 Subservient to erroneous reasoning. Let us
 Test him by experiment to see what youth
 Says we should follow—what a strong young mind calls
 truth.” 660

The prefect quickly took up the martyr’s challenge,
 Commanding that a small boy barely weaned be picked
 From all the children in the crowd and be brought forward.
 “Ask him anything you like,” said the prefect,
 “And we’ll agree with what this boy decides is right.” 665

Romanus, in his wish to quiz the child, was ardent.
 Testing his innate reason, he asked that innocent,
 “Which is most apt and reasonable, my little son?
 The worship of one Christ, and through that Christ, the Father?
 Or to pray to gods who take a thousand shapes?” 670

The little child was quick and smiling as he said,
 “Whatever it may be that men call God is one,
 And that which is a part of one must be one, too.
 Since Christ is one, then Christ is God. This must be true.
 Not even children think there are a thousand gods.” 675

That prefect was abashed, ashamed, and of two minds.
 It wasn’t fitting that the law should act against
 An innocent young child, but anger wouldn’t let
 The judge spare someone who had spoken words like that.
 “Who taught you,” he demanded, “how to say such things?” 680

Then in response, he said, “My mother did, and God
 Taught her. Led by the Spirit, she absorbed from Him
 That nourishment she fed me with from infancy,
 And drinking from her twin breasts as a babe, I drank
 The milk that made me learn of Christ’s divinity.” 685

“Then bring the mother here,” cried Asclepiades,
 “And let that impious teacher witness all that she’s
 Created with the doctrine she has taught her child.
 Let her be tortured by the death of him she taught,
 And let her weep for one she has miseducated.” 690

It would be more strength wasted by us than we ought
 To spend on such a baggage. And besides, the pain
 He feels will not be much; he'll die with little pause.
 But *seeing* that, *her* pain will be far worse—worse than
 Her limbs would feel if they were torn by bloody claws.” 695

The words were barely out before he gave the word:
 To hoist the boy on high and beat his bottom with
 Their hands, then strip him, whipping him with willow
 switches,
 Scoring his tender back with vicious blows from which
 More mother's milk than boyhood blood was seen to flow. 700

What stone-cold boulder could endure the hideous sight?
 What hardened iron or uncompromising brass
 Could bear to watch, when blood was drawn with every stroke,
 In bleeding freshets? Soon, the switches all were soaked.
 Their lashings drank in gouts that fell from sodden welts. 705

They say that tears ran down to wet the cheeks of scowling
 Men who tortured him, and as the drops flowed freely,
 They washed down on the lips of those so fiercely growling.
 Even the scribes could not maintain dry eyes, and neither
 Could the common folk or watching dignitaries. 710

Only his mother showed no sign of grief. Alone
 Of all of them, her brow was bright with joy that shone,
 For pious hearts stand stronger in their piety
 Because of love of Christ. Firm in the face of pain,
 Unyieldingly they steel their tender, loving feelings. 715

The little boy cried out in thirst, under the strain
 Of torture that went on and on. His fiery breath
 Was driving him to beg for just a sip or swallow.
 His steely mother though, her countenance severe,
 Rebuked him with stern words while she was standing near: 720

“My son, I'd almost think some weak fear grips you; dread
 Of all your pain has almost overcome you. This,
 However, isn't what I promised God my body's
 Child would be. I bore you in the hope of glory—
 That you should never yield to those who wished you dead. 725

You cry out, begging water, though here, close at hand,
Is that eternal, living spring that's always flowing.
And only this gives liquid life to all that lives,
Within, without, in spirit and in flesh, bestowing
On those who drink of it, fresh immortality. 730

Soon you will have reached that fluent spring, if only
In your deepest heart your one true, passionate desire
Is seeing Christ, because one gulp is more than you
Will ever need to quench your thirst and quell the fire
Burning in you, so you can drink that blessed life. 735

It's *this* cup—this, my son!—that you're to drink from now.
A thousand infants drank from it in Bethlehem.
Their milk forgotten, with no thought of mothers' breasts,
Their bitter cups were turned to sweet and so restored
Their lives, as blood became the honey of the Lord.⁵⁵ 740

My brave son, strive to be like them in what you do.
My noble boy, you are your mother's greatest pride.
The Father has decreed all times of life the times
For great, courageous deeds; no age has been excluded.
He grants His triumphs to the mewling newborn, too. 745

You know, as I have often told you, when you'd play
With what I taught, and make child-sounds say what words
say,
That Isaac was a boy, his father's only child,
Who, marked for sacrifice, and seeing sword and stone,
Freely showed his victim's neck to Abraham. 750

And I have told you of that struggle, so well-known:
A mother's valiant seven sons once bravely waged
It, barely boys. Their courage was of men full-grown
When though they faced a lethal fate, this very mother
Spurred them not to spare blood spilt to win their crown. 755

Their stoic mother saw prepared before her eyes
The lethal tools by which her children would be killed,
And yet rejoiced each time the sizzling, oil-filled skillet
Fried and seared one of her sons, or else the awful,
Scalding torture plates were pressed against their flesh. 760

The torture tore away the temples' skin and hair,
 Ripped from their brows, so that the bloody skull was bare
 Down to their necks, disfiguring their heads in shame,
 And still she cried out, 'Bear it, sons! These heads will wear
 Soon crowns all set with jewels—a royal diadem.'⁵⁶ 765

Then the tyrant gave the order, and a young
 Boy's tongue was cut out, and the mother said, 'Now we
 Have won our proper share of glory. Only see:
 The best part of our body is God's sacrifice—
 The faithful tongue that's offered up, beyond all price. 770

It speaks our spirit's truth, declaring what we feel.
 It serves the soul and heralds what lies in our breast.
 Let it be offered first to bless the sacrament
 Of death, to be the other members' first redeemer.
 Devoted, it will lead, soon followed by the rest.' 775

That mother seven times subdued her enemies
 By urging on the Maccabees with words like these,
 And won as many triumphs as the sons she'd borne.
 My life, my child: you hold it in your hands to win
 By this one birth, the fruitful glory I'd dwell in. 780

By the site in which you were conceived—this faithful
 womb,
 The loving place where for ten months you had your home—
 If ever you found sweet the nectar of our breast;
 If gentled in my lap and pleased by toys with which
 You played; endure! Honor the Author of these riches. 785

The way that you were born, your life, its mystery,
 And how you grew from nothingness, is lost to me.
 That One alone Who made you at your birth—He knows.
 Devote yourself to Him by whom you had that gift.
 You would do well to give to Him the gift He gave." 790

Encouraged by his mother's words, the boy was laughing
 At the switch, the pain of all those blows,
 Which made the prefect pass a judgment far more grave:
 "Have the child imprisoned. Torture even harder
 Him who is the source of all this gall—Romanus." 795

And all along the furrows just now ploughed, they started
 In with fresh new coultering. Where only lately
 They had drawn the razored steel, they went back through
 Those open gashes till the wounds bled once again.
 But proud in victory, Romanus calls them lazy men: 800

“You weaklings, with your little women’s hands! In all
 This time, you couldn’t smash the frame of this one,
 crumbling,
 Little body, scarcely even held together.
 And yet, eluding utter ruin, it fails to fall,
 Defeating all the powers of your feeble hands. 805

Dogs are faster when they tear dead flesh apart,
 And vultures bite more powerfully devouring scraps
 Of carrion. But you grow weak and faint because
 Your hunger lacks true energy. Your gluttony
 Is beastly, but your appetite is weak at heart!” 810

Romanus’ words igniting Asclepiades’
 Fury, he rushed to his last judgment with this sentence:
 “If our delay displeases you, then a quicker end perhaps
 Will do. We order you condemned, consumed by fire.
 Soon there will be nothing left of you but ash.” 815

But as the grim-faced lictors hurried him from court,
 Romanus, looking back, exclaimed, “I now appeal
 To my own Christ against your cruelty—not that
 I tremble with the fear of death to come, but that
 Your verdict shall be proved to count for nothing real.” 820

“Why put off killing both of them?” the prefect said,
 “The teacher *and* the boy, conjoined in this vile creed.
 The child is scarce a man. A sword shall cut his head
 Off, and the other shall be eaten up in flame.
 They’ll die together, though their deaths are not the same.” 825

And then they reached the execution site, the mother
 Clasp ing her son as she carried him on her breast.
 He might have been the first-born lamb that Abel bore
 By basket to where he’d be sacrificed to God—
 One chosen from the sheepfold, purer than the rest.⁵⁷ 830

The executioner called up the boy; his mother
 Turned him over. Tears abjured, she kissed him once,
 And kissing, said, "Good-bye, my precious, sweetest one.
 When you are come into the blessed realm of Christ,
 Remember me, my advocate who was my son." 835

Those were her words. Then as the headsman's sword-blade
 fell
 Upon the little neck, the woman, who knew well
 The Psalms, sang out a hymn, a song of David: "Precious
 In the sight of God is one who dies His saint.
 He is Your servant and Your faithful handmaid's son."⁵⁸ 840

Repeating this, she spread her robe and reached beneath
 The sword stroke and the blood to catch with her own
 hands
 The stream that burst in gushes from the veins that bled—
 To catch the small round head whose mouth drew one last
 breath.
 She caught it and then pressed it to her loving breast. 845

Across the yard, the smoky-faced cremator made
 A giant pyre with bone-dry pinewood, christening
 With streams of boiling pitch the tinder he had laid
 Below the logs and piled-up straw and kindling, all
 Designed to feed the flames and spread them ever-faster. 850

And now, with twisted arms wrenched back behind him by
 The yoking wooden fork,⁵⁹ Romanus, haled before
 The blazes, said, "I know that I shall never die
 By fire. That is a Passion not my destiny,
 Not yet, because a miracle will come to be." 855

Just then there came a massive crash, as clouds burst out
 In storm. The downpour was headlong, torrential—black
 Rain drowning out the fires with its drenching drops.
 Men fed the half-burnt brands with oil. Too late: the soaked-
 Through kindling had by now already been extinguished. 860

The loathsome executioner was trembling, shocked
 By this, and trying, by whatever means he could,
 To coax a flame from sodden embers of the wood.

He nursed the dying coals with tow in handfuls, looking
For a spark of fire in all the walls of water. 865

Then when the judge was told of this, he burst with rage
At the report. It stirred his wrath to toxic fury.
“How long must we be mocked by this almighty Mage
And made the subject of his sport?” he asked. “He turns
Our torture into play, by some Thessalian spell.”⁶⁰ 870

Perhaps, were he to offer to the sword his neck,
There’d be no wound! Perhaps the blows that disconnect
His body from his head will heal and all will come
Together once again, re-joined. Perhaps that head
Will sit back on his shoulders, standing there erect. 875

So let us start, first cutting off some body-part
By steel sword-blade, letting the rest of him still live,
Lest this most criminal of men not fall by one
Act only and this traitor die one death alone.
I’ll have him die as many deaths as he has members. 880

Let’s test him. Can he re-enact that Lerna tale,
Breaking out in brand new, sprouting limbs as he
Renews himself by what his shrunken body’s lost?
For then it is a very Hercules we’ll see—
Someone who’s used to cauterizing hydra wounds.⁶¹ 885

Right now, bring us a surgeon/artist-with-a-knife,
An expert severing the flesh’s ligaments
And cutting the tendons that hold together life.
I want a man who fixes dislocated bones
Or knits them back together when they’re broken. 890

First, have him cut the tongue out by its roots, since that’s
The most iniquitous of all the body’s organs.
It mocks our gods, as only insolence is spoken.
Its foul invective has blasphemed our ancient law
And boldly scorned the emperor with impudence.” 895

A doctor called for, one Aristo, quickly comes.
Told to stick out his tongue, the martyr instantly
Obeys. Thrust out, it opens up the throat deep down.

Aristo finger-palps the palate, so that he
Can search the voice's source and find the place to wound. 900

Then, pulling the tongue far out of the mouth, he sticks
His scalpel deep inside, down to the very gullet.
And all the time he slowly cut off what connects
The tongue, the martyr never bit, or clamped his teeth
To close his mouth, or swallowed up the blood that flowed. 905

Steadfast in suffering, jaws open wide, he stood
Firm while the blood ran gushing out, a lovely red
Wreath that went flowing from the chin down which it spread.
He was rejoicing at the noble stain he viewed—
Blood on his breast that made his cloak maroon and regal. 910

And so the prefect—thinking that a tongueless man,
Because bereft of speech, could be compelled to sacrifice,
And that his insults of the gods could not be spoken—
Ordered him brought back, now rendered mute and broken,
Where once he'd terrified his judge with storms of words. 915

Again he set the altar by his judgment throne
With incense and with crackling fire on the coals;
With bull guts and pig bladders. Romanus, however,
On entering the court, and seeing these things done,
Blew on them all as if he looked on living devils. 920

This tickled Asclepiades, who laughed and said,
"No doubt you're ready even now to spew your noxious
Words, the way you used to do? Well, go ahead
And treat us to your orator's discourse. I *freely*
Offer you the chance to use your voice as *freely*." 925

Romanus, from his heart-depths, fetched a long-drawn sigh,
A groaning exhalation of his protest. Then:
"Who speak of Christ, their tongues have never failed such
men,
And there's no need to ask what organ has control
Of words, when He who gives words is the one extolled. 930

That He who gave our voices strength to aspire
From deep down in the lungs, and starting in the mouth's

Roof, now will make the palate's sounds reverberate,
Now change that power by the closing of the teeth;
And that the tongue that does this is a limber thing— 935

For should He tell the throat to play like pipes, and blow
In concert with harmonious breath, and doing so
Should shape clear words there in the channels of that
throat;
Or that the lips set in the mouth should utter speech,
Now closed a bit, then opened wide like cymbal pairs— 940

Then who could doubt that nature's first design, because
That primal plan was once a thing *created*, can
Be changed by its creator if He pleases? He
Can make and then *un*-make a system's settled laws
In such a way that speech will need no helping tongue. 945

Do you want to know the power of our God?
He steps out on the flowing waters of the sea
And when He does, its flimsy substance turns to pavement,
As laws by which the seas were made are violated!
Water, once wont to bear up swimmers, bears His steps! 950

We know full well the might of the divinity
In Christ and in the Father, who are venerated:
The gift of speech to those struck dumb; the quick step lent
The halt and lame; clear hearing offered to the deaf;
And for the blind, the daylight they have never known. 955

If any witless man thinks these are but a fable,
Or if you once thought they were unbelievable,
Not worth your faith, you are permitted now to know
Them true. Here stands a man, his tongue cut out, who
speaks.
Admit they're miracles, for you have proved them so!" 960

The prosecutor, stunned, is overcome with dread,
As fear and fury give the man a heart of darkness.
He doesn't know if he's awake or if he's dreaming.
Confused, he wonders what this prodigy might be.
Dread shatters him, and maddened rage, by which it's fed. 965

He cannot check a murderous heart that has free rein.
 Nor does he know where fury's weapons should be aimed.
 At last, he has the guiltless surgeon summoned, charged
 With having been corrupted by some bribery—
 Of perpetrating fraud by rank conspiracy, 970

Either by having used a dull and blunt-edged knife
 In vain inside the mouth, or else, by some deft trick
 Of art, by finding some way that he might inflict
 A small cut, damaging the tongue by one slight wound,
 But never having cut away the many cords: 975

“It can't be done—saving the voice's clear-cut sound,
 Preserving in the empty cavity the word—
 Because it takes the tongue's control to make words heard.
 And though the breath resounds inside the hollow vault,
 It's just an echo that comes out, but not true speech.” 980

Defending his integrity these lies impeach,
 The surgeon says, “Look through his fissured throat yourself,
 Inquisitively poking with your careful thumbs.
 Inspect the open jaws between the teeth and gums
 To find if any hidden cord controlled his throat. 985

For had I pierced the tongue with some slight wound,
 Or tiny hole, its deft vibration making sound
 Would then have quavered, faltering, disabling speech,
 Because the mistress of the voice, when it is injured,
 Means the exercise of speech will then be lost. 990

But if you like, let's see what sort of growl comes from
 A beast without a tongue, what kind of grunt you'll get
 From pigs who've had their tongues torn out. I know that I
 Can *prove* no harsh and snarling voice, no uncouth cry,
 Can ever leave the throat of creatures stricken dumb. 995

O honored judge, I swear upon the emperor's life
 That I've performed my surgeon's art most honestly,
 And done what you've commanded with integrity.
 Only this man can know what god supplies his words,
 But as for me, how mute men speak, I cannot see.” 1000

These were Aristo's words of self-defense, but they
 Were impotent against that torturer of Christians.
 Unmoved, he whipped himself to frenzy, more and more,
 Demanding whether someone else's spattered gore
 Had drenched Romanus, or the wound had been his own. 1005

This was Romanus's response: "Behold me here
 Before you. This is truly *my* blood, not an ox's.
 Poor pagan, don't you know the ox-blood that I cite?
 It is the blood of your own sacred beast condemned
 To slaughter—blood you drench yourselves with in that
 rite.⁶² 1010

Truly, the pontifex descends, deep in the ground,
 A trench, dug out—descends to be made holy, clothed
 In wondrous robes. And ribbons for the rite are bound
 Around his brow, his hair held by a golden crown.⁶³
 His silken robe is girded by a Gabine cincture.⁶⁴ 1015

Up above, they lay the planks to make a stage,
 With scattered open timbers, loose, with cracks between.
 And then they saw or bore holes through the makeshift floor,
 And pierce the wood repeatedly with sharp-edged tools,
 Ensuring that it has a raft of little holes. 1020

And then a great, grim bull with shaggy brows is led
 There wreathed in garlands, with the flowers hung across
 His shoulders and encircling his horns. The victim's
 Temples glitter from the gold that binds them, as
 The metal plates give his rough hair a golden gloss. 1025

And when the victim-beast at last is stationed there,
 They stab his breastworks with a holy hunting-spear.
 The ample wound then vomits up its red-hot blood,
 Which pours down on the perforated bridge below—
 A steaming stream that billows in its spreading flow. 1030

Then blood pours down through all those myriad chinks—
 A thousand paths for letting fall that putrid rain.
 And down there in the pit, the priest turns up his face
 Trying to catch each dirty drop of gore. His robe
 And body bathe themselves in what befouls and stinks. 1035

He tilts his head back, letting red contagion pour
 Down cheeks and ears and nostrils, and even his lips!
 He bathes his very eyes in this disgusting flow,
 And lets his mouth drink blood that saturates his tongue,
 Until the whole of him has taken in the gore. 1040

Then when the blood's all gone and all the serving priests
 Have hauled the bull's stiff carcass off the planks, the chief
 Priest, gruesome to behold, ascends from out his trench,
 Showing the head and beard he's let the beast's blood
 drench.
 So too, the saturated ribbons and his robe. 1045

Defiled by the pollution of the unclean blood
 That's fallen, foul and putrid, from the recent victim,
 He's greeted reverently by all the audience—
 Because a slaughtered ox's blood has showered him
 While he stood underneath it in a loathsome hole. 1050

And do you want me to discuss your hecatomb,
 A hundred beasts slain all at once in sacrifice,
 While all their separate gore combines to swell a flood
 The augurs sometimes cannot get through short of swimming
 To navigate round such a mounting sea of blood? 1055

Why even censure, though, that bounteous store of meat
 The gods consume, and all those butchers who have slain
 The teeming herds—men soaked in blood from what they've
 killed—⁶⁵
 When there are rites in which *self*-maiming's what you've
 willed,
 By slicing off your limbs and offering up the pain? 1060

Some blood-crazed worshipper will madly stab his arm,
 Slashing it in offering to the Mother goddess.
 Mad, frenzied whirling's said to mark these sacred rites,
 And hands that fail to cut are called undutiful.
 The heavens' prize is won by wounds that do most harm. 1065

And still another offers up his genitals.
 To please the goddess by his manhood's mutilation,
 He makes himself a half-man as a shameless gift.

The source of seed is hacked away to give her food
And help her grow from his abundant flow of blood. 1070

Both sexes fail to please the goddess' sanctity,
So he retains a gender in between the two:
He is no longer *he*, yet cannot be a *she*.
The Mother of the Gods is pleased she can supply
Herself with those whose polished razors leave them
beardless!⁶⁶ 1075

Then there's the consecrands who take the holy seal
By heating little needles in the ovens till
They're red-hot. Then they sear their limbs, while body
parts
That end up branded with a scorching iron's weal
They then declare as consecrated to the goddess. 1080

And when the soul has left his body and it's borne
Along in funeral procession to the tomb,
They lay down plates that press upon these very parts.
Fine sheets of gold then spread across the charred 'man's'
skin,
And what the fires once burned, fine metal covers up. 1085

Such are the sufferings pagans are compelled to bear.
Such are the laws they follow of the cults they're in.
Thus the devil mocks those whom he would ensnare,
And who must undergo these vile indignities
By his command—cruel torture-marks they're forced to
wear. 1090

But this our blood comes out of *your* barbarity,
For you're the ones, you pagans, who by godless
Cruelty have wounded us, the innocent.
Let us alone and we will shed no blood, but make
Us suffer bloodshed and we win the victory. 1095

But now I shall be silent as the end draws near—
The end of suffering; the glory of my passion.
O wretch, no longer can you torture me as you
Have done, by gouging out my guts. Monster, I fear
That you have lost, and must retire from the fight.” 1100

“Oh, yes, my torturer and butcher both will stop,
All right,” the prefect threatened. “But the killer’s hand
Will stand in for them; he will strangle you to death.
There is no other way to end your chattering
Except by choking off the channel of your breath.” 1105

That’s what he said, then had that man dragged from the
court
And thrown in prison, deep down in its poison shadows.
There, with garrotte in hand, a murderous lictor crushed
The martyr’s neck, his passion ending finally.
The soul, unchained, made straight for Heaven and was free. 1110

They say the prefect wrote the facts in a report,
Then sent the details to the emperor—a set
Of perfect scrolls recording that whole tragedy.
He cheerfully inscribed the evil he had done
On bundled rolls prepared for their longevity. 1115

But time is long and it destroys such man-made things.
The grime will blacken them, dust coat them where they lie.
Old age will shred them as they’re buried under ruins.
But pages Christ has written? They will never die.
In Heaven, not one letter ever fades away. 1120

An angel stood before the throne of God and wrote
Down everything the blessed martyr said and suffered.
And it was not the words alone that he took note
Of, but the wounds as well: his pen drew perfect pictures
Of Romanus’ sides and cheeks and chest and throat. 1125

He marked the quantity of blood, the force and flow,
How in each case the gash had coultured out its furrow:
Whether the wound were long or short or deep or wide
Or superficial; how bad the pain had been; how long the cut.
He made sure every drop had been identified. 1130

This record book is there in Heaven’s registry,
Saving the monuments of everlasting glory.
The Judge Eternal shall, some day, read every story,
And with a justly even balance, weigh our pain
Against the many prizes martyrs may obtain. 1135

I wish that from the flocks of goats at God's left hand,
 I might be picked out though so very far away,
 And at Romanus' prayer, our Greatest King might say,
 "Romanus' prayers are for this man. Bring me this goat
 Now made a lamb. Here, he shall wear a fleecy coat." 1140

Notes

- 1 On Romanus see Introduction, Chapter II; and on the series of tortures applied to him, see Canali 193.
- 2 Matthew 10:18–20 recounts this scene.
- 3 Galerius was Caesar at Diocletian and Maximian when Romanus was martyred; see above, *Pe.* VII.6 n3. He was emperor in his own right from 305 to 311.
- 4 Prudentius quotes from the story of Jesus and the Gadarene Demoniacs, reported at Matthew 9:28–34.
- 5 Otherwise unknown.
- 6 On the lictor, see above, *Pe.* II.325 n18.
- 7 Prudentius draws on the Greek myth of the Giants, who warred on the gods but were defeated and imprisoned in the earth under volcanic mountains.
- 8 Prudentius speaks in various ways of Roman power: rods and axes were traditionally carried by lictors; the curial chair was the seat of consuls; the toga praetexta was edged with purple and worn by consuls and other high officers of state; and the lictor and the tribunal were offices of state.
- 9 Prudentius refers to the method of taking auspices in which grain was spread before chickens, whose willingness or refusal to eat determined the content of the omen.
- 10 The ivory eagle was hoisted in military triumphs and later by consuls in procession. See Fux, *Martyrs* 287.
- 11 "Mother of Mt. Ida" refers to Cybele, or the Great Mother. An image of her was situated in a car, which processed during the Megalesia, the celebration honoring her.
- 12 The "black stone" representing Cybele was brought to Rome from Phrygia in 204 B.C.E. The stone was washed in a yearly ritual in the Almo's small stream. See Fux, *Martyrs* 289.
- 13 The "Luperci" were priests devoted to Lupercus, a Roman god associated with protecting sheep from wolves. Prudentius refers here specifically to the rituals they plied in celebration of Lupercus, which included running through the streets and striking women with goat-skins. See Canali 205, 207.
- 14 Homer (*Od.* 8.266 ff.) recounts the story of Hephaestus, the Greek god of the forge, who trapped his wife, Aphrodite and her lover, Ares.
- 15 Prudentius refers to the story of Hyacinth's accidental death at the hands of Apollo, the god who loved him, after a discus the god threw ricocheted off the ground and fatally wounded the boy. Apollo enshrined the memory of his lover by creating an eponymous flower from the blood from Hyacinth's wound.
- 16 Condemned to serve a mortal for a year for having killed the Cyclops, Apollo became the shepherd to the flock of Admetus, King of Pherae. Prudentius points up Apollo's presumed laziness, in that the god Hermes, though a mere baby, was able to steal Apollo's flock, his bow, and his arrows.
- 17 Attis castrated himself in a night of frenzied veneration of Cybele.

- 18 Prudentius means the *Lex Iulia de adulteriis*, a law enacted by Augustus in order to curb adultery.
- 19 The "Scantinian statute" refers to the *Lex Scantinia*, a law enacted to control sex-crimes against, among others, freeborn male minors.
- 20 Prudentius refers here to Saturn, who was expelled from heaven by his son, Jupiter, and took refuge in Latium.
- 21 Vulcan is associated with the island of Lemnos because he was cast down to its shores by Jupiter, who took umbrage with Vulcan's attempt to rescue his mother, Hera, from Jupiter's advances.
- 22 Because Hercules was the son of Jupiter and Alcmena, he was hated by Juno, Jupiter's wife.
- 23 Jupiter became a swan in order to seduce Leda, a mortal woman.
- 24 The reference is to Jove's seduction of Europa by disguising himself as a white bull.
- 25 Jupiter took on the appearance of Amphytrion in order to seduce his wife, Alcmena.
- 26 Adonis was loved by Venus but killed by a wild boar while on the hunt.
- 27 Ganymede was taken up by an eagle, sometimes Zeus himself in the form of an eagle, to live with the gods and serve as his cup-bearer.
- 28 The teen is Persephone, daughter of Ceres, who was carried off by Pluto to the underworld.
- 29 For murdering Iphitus, Hercules was for a year's duration made a slave to Omphale, Queen of Lydia, during which time he did work normally associated with women. Omphale eventually freed Hercules and made him her husband.
- 30 Faunus is the god of the forest, depicted typically with horns. Priapus is the god of fertility, depicted often with an over-sized penis. Pan is the god of shepherds and flocks and is often affiliated with rustic music, hence "piping Pan" here.
- 31 A city, by synecdoche for Egypt.
- 32 Asclepius is the Greek god of healing.
- 33 On the Lares, see above, *Pe.* II.511 n40.
- 34 Myron of Eleutherae and Polyclitus were both Greek sculptors who flourished ca. 450 B.C.E.
- 35 Another name for Dionysus, the god of wine.
- 36 On the "Thunderer," see above, *Pe.* VI.98 n9.
- 37 The "young man" is Dionysus, mentioned (as Liber) in v. 272).
- 38 Diana is the goddess of the hunt.
- 39 Wife of Jupiter and queen of the gods.
- 40 Mentor, who flourished ca. 100 B.C.E., was a Greek artist who most famously worked with silver objects.
- 41 Phidias (d. ca. 430 B.C.E.) was a Greek sculptor and painter, whose works were (and remain) among the most important and well known of Greek antiquity.
- 42 Tree-stumps often functioned as boundary markers and were venerated as such, adorned in clothing or decorated, often with accompanying sacrifices. Similarly, in honor of Cybele, celebrants sometimes processed to her temple displaying a pine-tree wrapped in wool. See Thomson 251 and Canali 219.
- 43 On the particulars of these pagan acts, see Fux, *Martyrs* 334–335.
- 44 Prudentius returns now to the figure of the prefect to whom Romanus has been speaking at some length.

- 45 The institution of many Roman religious practices is traditionally ascribed to Numa Pompilius, the second king of Rome (d. 673 B.C.E.).
- 46 Nestor, king of Pylos, and a figure in the Trojan War, represents here by synecdoche the wisdom and authority of larger-than-life figures from the past.
- 47 Prudentius refers to the legend in which Pyrrha and her husband, Deucalion, replenished the human race after Zeus' great flood by casting stones to the ground, which immediately became men and women.
- 48 A formal title of Jove in his role as a protector of those in battle.
- 49 Another term for the Holy Spirit.
- 50 On Tartarus, see above, *Pe.* V.200 n13.
- 51 Hippocrates of Kos (fl. ca. 450 B.C.E.), one of the earlier figures in the development of Greek (and Western) medicine.
- 52 Prudentius refers to the ancient art of publishing books in papyrus rolls. The specific image here goes to a book that has been read, thus it is "rolled up" again, that is, "closed."
- 53 Romulus and Remus were nursed by a she-wolf after their great-uncle, King Amulius of Alba Longa, fearing the twins would threaten his rule, ordered them abandoned in a basket in the Tiber. When grown, the brothers determined to build a city but disagreed about the hill upon which to locate it. Relying on bird augury to settle the matter, Romulus saw twelve vultures, while Remus saw six.
- 54 Jupiter was fed as an infant on Crete by a she-goat named Amaltheia.
- 55 Prudentius refers to the story of the massacre of the innocents, reported at Matthew 2:16–18, in which King Herod of Judea ordered the execution of all male children two years and under in the vicinity of Bethlehem, in retribution for the deceit of the Magi, whom he had sent to Bethlehem to investigate the predicted birth of Jesus, whom he planned to kill. Prudentius also draws on the theme of the massacre in *Pe.* XII.
- 56 Prudentius recounts the story related at 2 Macc. 7, in which an otherwise unnamed mother is arrested, along with her seven sons, and ordered to eat pork. As each son refuses, each is tortured and killed before their mother's eyes, who also dies, though by what means is not clear.
- 57 The story is recounted at Gen. 4.
- 58 Psalm 116:15–16 (115:6–7 in the Vulgate).
- 59 On which see Thomson 285.
- 60 "Thessalian" refers to Thessaly, in Greece, famous for its witches.
- 61 The "Lerna tale" refers to the story of the labors of Hercules, one of which involved the killing of the hydra that lived in the swamps of Lerna, whose many heads grew back each time they were severed by the hero, until Iolaos struck upon the idea to cauterize the stumps.
- 62 Prudentius goes on in vv. 1011–1050 to describe the *taurobolium*, associated with the veneration of Cybele and of Mithras. See Thomson 294–295.
- 63 On these adornments see Canali 271.
- 64 The association of the name with the cincture are unknown; the cincture holds at the waist that part of the priest's toga normally thrown over his shoulder.
- 65 Prudentius describes the *lectisternium*, at which ceremony meals were served to images of the gods placed on dining couches.
- 66 Prudentius refers to the castration endured by priests devoted to Cybele; see above on Attis, vv. 196–200.

XI

TO BISHOP VALERIANUS
ON THE PASSION OF THE
MOST BLESSED MARTYR
HIPPOLYTUS¹

In Rome, I cannot count the graves of saints deceased,
Valerianus,² you who are Christ's holy priest.

You ask the names cut on their stones, each elegy.
But to repeat them all is far too hard for me.

So many Righteous were destroyed by impious rage 5
While Trojan Rome adored its gods of ancient age.

Many a sepulcher bears carving on its stone
That tells us of the martyr, so his name is known.

But there are silent marble tombs as well that close
The unknown martyrs there, and merely number those, 10

So you may learn how many piled-up bodies came
To be there, but you cannot read a single name.

For I recall I learned that underneath one stone
Lay buried the remains of sixty men alone,

The names of which are known only to Christ, for He
Has joined them to His friends, His faithful company.

Now while I scanned these monuments, I tried to read
What might escape me—any ancient, chiseled deed—

And found Hippolytus, an Elder who'd believed
Novatus' schism,³ claiming we were all deceived. 20

He had been raised up to a martyr's crown and won
That shining prize through bloody tortures undergone.

Does it surprise you that old man, misled, should drift
To wrong belief, then join our catholic faith, God's gift?

For when our raging foes had borne him off, and he 25
Was facing death as an exultant victory,

His many loving friends went with him on the way,
Asking which faith was best. That's when they heard him
say,

"O my poor friends, avoid Novatus' awful schism;
Come back to us, the people of catholicism. 30

Let one faith flourish—what was founded as the true,
First church that Paul, and Peter from his chair, held to.

I rue the teaching I once taught. I see what I
Thought *far* from God is owed your reverence; is *nigh*."

He used these words to turn the people from the false 35
Path so they'd travel down the righteous road that calls.

He was their guide to shunning turns along the way—
The very man who once had led them all astray.

He faced a maddened ruler in his very court—
A man oppressing Christians near the Tiber's port, 40

And who'd left Rome that day to smash and crucify
With persecution all of those who lived nearby.

Then inside Rome the earth ran red, but not content
With righteous blood he'd shed, there was more crime he
meant.

Seeing the Janiculum,⁴ soaked red with blood, 45
The squares and rostra,⁵ too, the Subura⁶ a flood,

He took his rage as far as to the Tyrrhene coast
And all the seaport's neighborhoods that lay the closest.

Amongst his crowding staff, in state, he sat up high
Above them all, above his men who made men die, 50

Ardent that the stubborn Christians who said no
To idols would renounce their faith, and let it go.

Whole ranks of them, with long and filthy prison hair,
He called to trial for punishments beyond compare.

So here were heard the dragging, creaking chains, the
 crashing 55
Of the rods, and there, the snapping leather lashes,

As the claw went through the ribwork, laying
Open cavities and viscera it was flaying.

By now the pointless trial had filled the judge with fury,
And his torturers and killers had grown weary, 60

For not a single suffering servant of our Christ
Dared to let his precious soul be sacrificed.

And so that mad judge said, "Give up the useless claw
Now, torturer, and kill them as prescribed by law.

This one, behead; cross-hoist the other to the skies 65
To have the hungry raptors feast upon his eyes.

Then bundle these in bonds and cast them in the fire;
Let all these prisoners be consumed on just one pyre.

Now, put these others on some leaky boat and drive
Them out to sea. We'll see if any can survive! 70

And when that rickety thing has borne them through the
 crashing
Waves, and foundered, swamped by all the waters'
 smashing,

Her rotten strakes will split apart, and that will be
The end, as she goes to the bottom of the sea.

Some squamous monster, gorged with bodies, will provide 75
Its filthy gut to be their grave, down deep inside."

And then, amidst this judge's arrogant commands,
They haled an old man to the bar with tied-up hands.

The young men round the judge were crying out. They
said,
Of those who worshipped Christ, the old man was the head, 80

And were he quickly killed, then all the hearts of these—
The ones he led—would bow to Rome's divinities.

They called for some inventive tortures to be tried—
Some new deaths—so the others would be terrified.

The judge sat with his head thrown back, and asked,
"What does 85
He call himself?" And they replied, "Hippolytus."

"Then he shall *be* Hippolytus,⁷ and scare a team
Of spooked wild horses that shall tear him seam from seam."

They forced a pair of beasts, when he had barely spoken,
To learn of bridles and to bow their necks for yoking. 90

Not stable-raised, nor gentled by some trainer's hand,
Unbroken, they had never learned a man's command,

But wild, and from a wandering herd, had just been
caught,
Their nervous spirits still untamed and yet untaught.

Already that reluctant team was in its harness leather— 95
Discordant partners with their heads brought close together.

Between their backs, a rope, and not a pole, divides
Them, as along the flanks it touches both their sides.

And from this yoke the rope extended many paces
Back beyond the hooves, and trailed them in their traces. 100

And to the end of it, where on the dusty ground
The wheel tracks followed their careening round and round,

They tied Hippolytus's legs with rope and noosed
His ankles with a tight knot that could not be loosened.

Then all was ready: harnesses and whips that sting; 105
Wild horses to supply the martyr's suffering.

They spooked the horses then with sudden shouts and
whips
That lashed them hard; they rowelled the spurs in to their
tips.

This was the last thing that old man was heard to say:
"My flesh is theirs, but Christ, come steal my soul away." 110

Wherever trembling nerves and clamor drive the horses,
That pair of beasts breaks forth in headlong, wild, blind
courses.

Spurred by their racing spirit and their impetus,
And urged by din, they race, not knowing of their onus.

They speed through woods, past rocks. No stream bank blocks
their course; 115
No river's racing torrent matches them in force.

At fence and hedge, they knock all barriers to the ground,
Racing through rough terrain; up hill, down dale, they bound.

As bristling thicket-thorns tear up the body bit-
By-bit, they rip apart his flesh, dismembering it. 120

Some parts cling to bushes, some, from rocks, run red;
Some stick to limbs, some soak the earth as if it bled.

A wall there shows a painting of this savagery
In all its colors' evil specificity.

Above the tomb, a life-like image of his bloody
Corpse appears—a painting of his bleeding body. 125

Excellent father, there I saw the bleeding tops
Of rocks, and stains on briers with their crimson drops,

And where a hand quite good at greenery had caught
Vermilion images of crimson blood, well-wrought. 130

The broken bones were clear to see, all wrenched or shattered;
They lay about in chaos, where they had been scattered.

And there was Hippolytus's loving flock
That tracked his broken course, in tears, in shock.

Eyes searching as they went, they gathered mangled parts. 135
Though stunned with grief, the people clasped these to their
hearts.

One holds the martyr's noble head while he caresses,
Clasped to his loving breast, its noble, snow-white tresses.

Another gathers shoulders, severed arms, and knees,
With elbows and the martyr's bare extremities. 140

Amidst the blood-soaked sand, they use their robes for
drying,
Lest one drop remain to taint the dust it's dyeing.

And where the stains have stuck to thorns with blood's
warm spray,
They press their sponges as they whisk it all away.

As to the sacred body parts, the woods possessed 145
No more of them; they found their proper final rest.

And when the pieces all were counted up, the toll
Of them was found complete; the body was made whole.

The rough terrain all cleared, each rock wiped dry, each
limb,
He was complete; the land held no more parts of him.⁸ 150

They chose a place to site the tomb, departing from
The river mouth: the saint's remains would lie at Rome.

Not far outside the wall, past where some crops are grown,
There lurks a gaping, tomb-like cave, with pits deep down:

Down through these hidden depths a staircase winds its way. 155
A light shines there (as to its source, no one can say;

It's at the threshold only that the light has shone
Down through the cleft; it lights the entrance way alone).

Descending, one can easily perceive black night
There filling up the secret cavern with no light. 160

But openings cut in the roof at vaunting height
Occur at times. Deep in the cave they let in light.

Whatever doubt you feel about the narrow, weaving
Halls that branch in gloom you fear no light's relieving,

There are yet, piercing through the vault, beyond all count, 165
Holes where light penetrates the disembowelled mountain.

The gift of sunlight keeps the underground all lit.
Though sun is hidden, we receive its benefit.

This is the secret place Hippolytus's body
Found, beside an altar sanctified to God— 170

Both as a table for the Blessed Sacrament
And also as the martyr's faithful sentinel,

Guarding his bones in hope of Christ's deliverance,
Giving the Host to Tiber's bank-side residents.

The altar's always there for suppliants: a place 175
Most wondrous and serene, where there are hope and grace.

Soul-sick and body-sick, when I bowed down and prayed,
Each time I did so I was given Heavenly aid.

That I return with joy; that, reverend priest,⁹ I may
Embrace you; and that I can write these words today, 180

I owe Hippolytus, whom Christ our God gave powers
Of answering whatever pleading prayer is ours.

What his soul sloughed off is kept inside that shrine—
A monument whose massive silver makes it shine.

A rich hand lined it with smooth, gleaming plates; 185
Now like a bright concave mirror, it scintillates.

The entrance's Parian stone¹⁰ left him still not content,
So precious metals added to its ornament.

At dawn, adoring people come, and everyone 190
Does reverence all day long, until the setting sun.

Pilgrim and Latin mix, and what they're members of
Is one great populace joined by religious love.

They kiss that gleaming silver that's so bright and sleek,
Anointing it with balsam; tears run down each cheek.

Then when the months have passed and the new year has
come— 195
When there arrives the feast day of his martyrdom—

Can you conceive the zeal with which the saint is praised,
Or count the prayers to God those throngs have often
raised?

Majestic Rome coughs up her citizens—a stream.
Plebeian and patrician hosts, their hearts aflame, 200

Shoulder to shoulder, phalanx-like, they're one in worth
(Our faith forbids all signs of rank bestowed by birth).

And too, from Alba's gates¹¹ the troops deploy in files,
In white robes, marching out in lines that stretch for miles.

Down different streets, exultant, joyous cries rise from 205
All parts: Picenian¹² and Etrurian¹³ people come.

Ferocious Samnites¹⁴ come, as do Campanians who
Live in Capua.¹⁵ They meet with folk from Nola,¹⁶ too,

And all are glad, with families dear to the heart
And eager to begin; all cannot wait to start. 210

The happy multitudes fill up the broadest plain—
Such throngs so densely packed the ground can scarce
contain.

For massive crowds like these the cave is far too small,
Despite its ample mouth, it cannot hold them all.

Hard by, though, stands a church known for its ornament 215
That's regal. Then and there the giant crowds will enter

This high-walled church, sublime and proud in majesty
And greatly grand from rich gifts from its laity.

The ceiling rests on raftered beams two columns hold
In lengthy rows; its surfaces are clad in gold. 220

Below two lower roofs, framed by the peristyles,
Are widened spaces next to slender double aisles.

All down the church's middle space, a nave runs up,
Beneath a roof that rises to a loftier top.

Facing is an ambo that a stairway raises 225
Up; from this, the priest proclaims God's praises.

Even when full, the church can barely hold the waves
Of folk. Commotion roils the entrance to the nave's

Wide-open, loving, mother's arms as they embrace
Her children who then swarm her breast to find a place. 230

If I remember, lovely Rome now celebrates
This martyr on the August Ides.¹⁷ She nominates

That old-style date herself. Oh, I would have you then,
Dear master, keep that day when it comes round again.

Believe me, he will bless those folk who venerate 235
Him and reward them for their honoring this date.

With Cyprian, Eulalia, Chelidonius, too,¹⁸
As with their feasts, let his come round each year for you.

So may Almighty Christ, for this, answer the prayer
You pray for those whose lives have been placed in your
care. 240

So may your pen be full, the wolf kept under lock
Who cannot snatch a lamb and so cut down your flock.

So when I'm left behind, the pasture's lone, sick sheep,
May you, O careful pastor, bring me home to keep.

So when your pens hold milk-white lambs all free of taint, 245
You rise to Heaven with Hippolytus the saint.

Notes

- 1 Fux, *Passions* 345 rightly notes that the traditions attending to Hippolytus' life remain vexed, on which see Introduction, Chapter II, Thomson 304–305, and Canali 283–285.
- 2 The poem's addressee is Valerianus, most likely bishop of Calahorra, on whom see Hershkowitz 10 with n43. The poem, as Palmer 117 suggests, is likely also a report to Valerianus on Prudentius' travels to Rome.
- 3 The schism centered on the penalties to be exacted on lapsed Christians, with Novatian arguing the most severe position, viz., that only God could grant forgiveness to Christians who had lapsed from the faith. In due time, Novatian and his followers were excommunicated, though adherents to his position could still be found in the seventh century.
- 4 A hill in western Rome, though not one of the seven legendary hills.
- 5 The *rostrum* was a speaker's platform in the Roman Forum adorned with *rostra* (i.e., beaks) from ships involved in the war of 338 B.C.E.
- 6 Subura (or Suburra) is a district in Rome, lying between the Viminal and Esquiline Hills, heavily populated in ancient times.
- 7 The judge decides that the means of death shall mimic that suffered by the mythological Hippolytus, son of Phaedra.
- 8 On this ekphrasis, see Hershkowitz 134–137. As Prudentius makes clear at v. 127, he is an eyewitness to this depiction, which, as Canali 291 notes, was either a fresco or on stained glass.
- 9 Prudentius addresses Bishop Valerianus once again.

- 10 I.e., marble; Paros was famous in antiquity as a source of marble.
- 11 Prudentius refers to Alba Longa, mother city of Rome, founded by Aeneas' son, Ascanius.
- 12 A reference to the inhabitants of Picenum, a region of ancient Italy in the northern part of modern Abruzzo.
- 13 Etruria, a region of central Italy now including Tuscany and Umbria.
- 14 The name designating an ancient people of south-central Italy.
- 15 Inhabitants of Campania, an ancient region of southeastern Italy still so-named; Capua was a chief Campanian city, sometimes called a "second Rome" because of its wealth and beauty.
- 16 A city of Campania.
- 17 I.e., August 13.
- 18 Prudentius mentions the martyrs he celebrates in *Pe.* I (Chelidonius), III (Eulalia), and XIII (Cyprian, also mentioned at *Pe.* IV.17).

XII

THE PASSION OF THE APOSTLES PETER AND PAUL¹

“Friend, why do joyous people, more than usually, now
congregate?²
All over Rome, they run to celebrate.”

“For apostolic triumph! Two whose feast day here is annual
Famously died: Saint Peter and Saint Paul.
It was the same day, one full year apart; the same day saw
them both 5
Receive the laurel by a noble death.

Washed by the near-by river, well they know—the Tiber’s
marshy leas—
That they were hallowed by two victories.
For they saw both the cross and sword, by which a rain of
sacred blood
Fell twice to soak the grass that felt its flood. 10
First came down his death sentence that killed Peter. Nero’s
vile decree
Commanded that he hang from some high tree.
But he, because he feared to court the glory of his Master by
Competing with His being *raised* to die,
Insisted they should hang him with his feet straight up, but
head foremost, 15
So that he faced the bottom of the post.
And then his hands were tied below, his feet placed pointing
at the sky—
A posture that he was made nobler by.
For Peter, knowing Heaven’s won more quickly by humility,
Lowered his head, and set his spirit free. 20

And when the circling wheel that turned the year had once
 more made its way
 To where the dawn began that self-same day,
 Nero spewed out his burning fury on the neck of Paul, and
 said,
 "Now let 'the gentiles' teacher lose his head."
 Saint Paul himself had prophesied his mortal end was soon
 to come: 25
 "I go to Christ; this life, I am free from."
 Haled off, he met his punishment: killed by the sword,
 without delay,
 His words proved true right to the hour and day.³

Now Tiber separates their bones, with both banks
 consecrated,
 As it flows between tombs venerated.⁴ 30
 There, resting in a house of gold, lies Peter, on the right
 bank's ground,
 Amid grey olive trees, where streams resound.⁵
 For water coming from a rock face has revealed a steady
 spring
 That yields a source of sacred chrisoming.
 It flows through priceless marble as it smoothly glides on
 down the hill, 35
 To a green basin that its waters fill.

There is an inner part of the tomb where the sounding
 stream cascades,
 Then rolls through a deep chilling pool. In shades
 Of varied colors, painting up above tinges the waves like
 glass,
 While gold-green glows and there is glistening moss. 40
 The water here turns blue, as it reflects the purple
 stalactites,
 As though the pool were danced on by the lights.
 The One True Shepherd fosters there His flock with
 water almost iced
 (He sees they thirst for the rivers of Christ).

Elsewhere, the Ostian Road's⁶ the site where Paul's
 memorials abide,⁷ 45
 The Tiber grazing close its left-bank side.

A splendorous place, it is the seat our pious emperor dedicated,⁸
And with a princely wealth it's decorated.

And then he plated all the beams in gold within that sacred
space,
So light shone like the dawn sun's radiant face. 50
He set beneath the golden-panelled ceiling propping pillars
made
From Parian marble,⁹ in four rows arrayed.
He gave the curving arches gleaming colored glass for
covering—
Colors that floral meadows boast in spring.

So there you see, bestowed by God Most High, the double
dowers of 55
The faith, which togaed Romans show their love.
Look all around you: see how Romulus's people make their
way
In two directions—two feasts on one day!
But let us hasten on with quickened steps, attending both of
them,
And in each one enjoy some praising hymn. 60
We'll go some distance, till at Hadrian's bridge¹⁰ the
roadway crosses over
The Tiber, then seek the left bank of the river.
Our watchful bishop first performs the sacred rites on one
side, then
Hastes back to make his offerings again.
It is enough, what you have learned in Rome; now celebrate
this way, 65
When you get home, this double holy day."¹¹

Notes

- 1 On Peter and Paul see Introduction, Chapter II.
- 2 The poem is a dialogue between a pilgrim visiting Rome and a passer-by.
- 3 On the historical details of the martyrdoms, see Canali 301, Fux, *Passions* 413–415, and Thomson 322–323.
- 4 Two basilicas, containing their respective sepulchers, were built to celebrate the two martyrs.
- 5 Constantine built a church over Peter's tomb, which was replaced by the present St. Peter's Basilica in the sixteenth century.
- 6 The *Via Ostiensis*, the road leading from Rome westward to the port at Ostia, ran along the Tibur until it left the city through the Porta Trigemina

- 7 Constantine built a church to house Paul's body, which was enlarged under Theodosius and Honorius.
- 8 This most likely refers to Theodosius, who invited Prudentius to court in 379, though Honorius cannot be ruled out. See Canali 305.
- 9 See above, *Pe.* XI.187 n10.
- 10 Prudentius means the *Pons Aelius*, built by Hadrian, now the Ponte St. Angelo.
- 11 The distance separating the two churches means worshippers must travel quickly from St. Peter's to St. Paul's.

XIII

THE PASSION OF CYPRIAN¹

He's made the whole world shine, though Punic² earth gave
Cyprian his birth.
That was his homeland, but he was the world's great glory
and its teacher.³
As martyr, he's a native son, but by his love and speech,
he's ours.
He rests in Libya,⁴ yet through the world, his tongue
confirms his powers.
Of all his body, *that* remains alive, for that alone can't die 5
As long as Christ lets mankind live, and lets this world
below go on.

As long as any book still lives, or any holy scripture, those
Who love the Lord will read you, Cyprian, and learn what
you have taught.
God's Spirit is the author for the prophets, and into them
he flows,
A fountain down from Heaven. Just so, He flooded you
with eloquence. 10
Oh, how your speech outshines the brightest snows! Oh,
what a fresh new savor—
Ambrosial liquor—comforting the heart the way it bathes
the palate
And penetrating where the soul's enthroned. Its flow sustains
the spirit,
Spreading through the body, making us feel God within our
marrow.

Father, show the source from which you drew us this
un-looked-for blessing. 15

The apostolic words had still no powerful interpreter.
 A richly-gifted eloquence was picked so he could teach the
 world
 And act as servant to the works of Paul, and as expositor
 By which the un-formed minds of men might be refined,
 and come to better
 Know the work of fear as well as sound Christ's most
 profound enigmas.⁵ 20

He had been, once, the slyest young man skilled in
 wicked artistry,
 Holding nothing holy; using fraud to blacken modesty;
 Casting magic spells amid the sepulchers to summon up
 A passion in some wife, or foul the law of marriage sanctity.⁶
 Then suddenly, Christ stopped this manic rage for selfish
 luxury. 25
 He swept the dark from Cyprian's heart and drove away its
 awful frenzy,
 Filling it with love of Him, and faith, and shame for what he'd
 done.

And now his face and gleaming style were changed from
 what they once had been;
 His visage lost its pampered skin and passed into severity.
 The flowing and luxuriant hair was cut now, tresses closely-
 cropped. 30
 His speech turned modest-sober. Holding to His rule, he
 sought the hope
 Of living in the righteousness of Christ, and tried to learn our
 doctrine.
 So by these merits, he became most worthy. Advancing to
 claim
 That highest seat, that throne from which to teach, he took a
 bishop's name.

Valerian and Gallienus⁷ both held power at that time. 35
 Together, they mandated death for all professing faith in
 God.
 They ordered multitudes of vile and earth-born things
 revered as gods.
 But learned Cyprian stirred peoples' souls against such deities,

Urging them that none fall short in winning honor due to
courage;
That no one lapse in faith by fearing to take up its promised
prize. 40

“This torture’s light,” he said, “if only you compare it to
what’s yet to be:
Unending joys which God himself has pledged us for
our bravery.
Our pain’s the price we pay in hopes of light and the
eternal day;
With wingèd time, all grief and suffering will quickly
fly away,
And nothing is so grave that death won’t end, granting
us rest.” He’d be 45
The first to die this noble death and lead them in blood-
sacrifice.

Then he submitted, head bowed to the sword, and offered
up his blood.
Whoever’d bond his soul to Christ, should follow
Cyprian’s example.
For when he’d kindled men’s hearts with such words,
and readied them for Christ,
They led him off in bonds before the rest, the governor
enraged. 50

Secluded and remote, a dungeon lies in wait at Tyrian
Carthage⁸—
A place the sun can never see, a cavern dark as any Hell.
His two hands locked in chains, and he imprisoned in this
dreadful cell,
The saintly Cyprian called out on God Most High, speaking
His name:

“Father of Christ, and all-powerful God from whom the
whole world came, 55
And You, Christ, Father of all men, whom You so love and
won’t let die:
In goodness You bestowed on me compassion when,
envenomed by

The serpent, I was stained with sin. You washed me clean,
 and from then on
 You bade me to be Yours, and I became another Cyprian—
 A new man for the old, no more the guilty sinner I had been. 60
 If by Your ready grace You purified my once corrupted heart,
 And if it please You, visit this dark prison. Scatter all its
 gloom.
 And from the prison of the body, take this soul of mine.
 Come part
 It from the bondage of this world, so I may shed my blood
 for You.
 Don't let my judge rein in his frenzied wrath. Don't let my
 torturer 65
 Restrain his hatred or grow merciful, thus robbing me of
 glory.
 And grant that none may backslide of the flock I shepherded
 for You
 Lest any of Your people fall or waver, weaker than their
 suffering,
 So I can give You back their numbers whole, and pay You
 what I owe."

The Lord approved these words, and from then on the
 Spirit came to flow 70
 Through all the Carthaginian folk. He was the author of a
 braver
 Temperament within them, so that with His urging they
 might warm
 Their hearts toward seeking shining glory by the risking of
 their blood.
 He taught them courage—never to surrender, nor let
 suffering win,
 But to be rapt by love of glory, think like Christ, and
 never waver. 75

Tradition says⁹ there was a pit that had been dug out
 by decree
 Amidst a field and filled with smoking lime near to capacity.
 The heated limestone rocks would pour out fire and snow-
 white, burning dust
 That could incinerate all that it touched; its very breath was
 death.

They say an altar was erected by the top edge of the pit, 80
 And Christians were compelled to sacrifice a grain of salt
 to it,

Or else the liver of a sow, or dive into the pit's deep center.
 At once, three hundred all together leapt with great alacrity,
 And in the powdery vortex sank, devoured by that arid sea,
 Which folded over all their plunging mass and took them 85
 to its depths.

Their bodies all turn white, and whiteness takes their souls
 aloft to Heaven.

The White Throng justly gained this name from that day
 forth for ever more.

And Thascius,¹⁰ meanwhile, made joyous by what his have
 sacrificed,

Was haled to court to face the proconsul's ungovernable
 rage.

Ordered to declare his way of life, he said, "I worship *the* 90
 One God and teach the sacred mysteries of our salvific
 Christ."

At that, the judge cried, "Guilt enough! For Thascius
 himself admits

It and denies Jove's thunderbolt. You executioners: prepare
 The steel blade. Let this enemy of 'idols' pay the penalty."

Cyprian gave proper thanks to God, singing triumphantly. 95
 Africa wept when that man passed away—he by whose
 teaching she

Grew wise, and by whose eloquence she boasts of being
 so well taught.

Then, weeping still, she raised a tomb and sanctified his holy
 ashes.

Cry no more at such great blessing! He has won the realm
 of Heaven,

Though nonetheless he moves across the earth and never 100
 leaves this world.

He teaches still, and still expounds, instructing us in
 prophecy.

Not only does he train the folk of Libya, but goes from east
 To west, in guiding Gauls and helping Britons he's the tutor
 of.

He guards Hesperia and spreads the word of Christ in
farthest Spain.

Indeed, he is both teacher here on earth and martyr too, in
Heaven.

105

Here, he instructs us; there, our patron, he bestows on us
his love.

Notes

- 1 On Cyprian see Fux, *Passions* 433–434 and Introduction, Chapter II.
- 2 I.e., Carthage, the city which Cyprian served as bishop and where Prudentius indicates that he was born.
- 3 Cyprian was known both before and after his conversion as a model of oratorical and rhetorical skill.
- 4 Synecdoche for “Africa.”
- 5 Prudentius conceives of Cyprian as an interpreter of the writings of Paul, which include fourteen letters, seven incontrovertibly from Paul’s hand, the others less authentically so.
- 6 The trickery practiced by Cyprian is in fact a feature of the life of Cyprian of Antioch, on which see Canali 309.
- 7 On Valerian and Gallienus, see Introduction, Chapter II on *Pe.* VI.
- 8 Carthage was founded by Dido, the exiled princess of the Phoenician city of Tyre.
- 9 The story to follow relating the martyrdom of the three hundred is separate from the story of Cyprian’s martyrdom but added by Prudentius because “tradition” had handed it down to posterity. On its details see Thomson 334–335 and Canali 313.
- 10 “Thascius” is a name by which Cyprian sometimes styled himself.

XIV

THE PASSION OF AGNES¹

Her grave lies there in Romulus's home²:
Agnes—a brave girl and exalted martyr.
Within the sight of all their palaces,
That maiden guards the citizens of Rome.
And she looks out for strangers, too, when they 5
Are pure of heart and faithful as they pray.
She wears a double crown of sainted martyrs:
One for her chastity kept free from sin,
One for the death she freely entered in.

They say that scarcely nubile, just a child, 10
It happened that when she was still that young—
But dearly loving Christ—she took a stand,
Refusing to obey the foul command
Of Roman power that would have her give
Herself to idol worship, losing faith. 15

At first attacked with artful words, then by
The smooth tongue of a judge, then threats of torture,
She showed a strength such things could not pry
From her. She even offered up her body
To their torture, not afraid to die. 20

Then the cruel persecutor said,
“Though she may find it easy bearing pain,
And though she holds life cheap, the purity
She vowed is dear—a thing she must maintain.
So I will force her to a brothel's work 25
Unless she lays her head down on the altar,
Begging pardon of Minerva³—she
Who is a virgin like her—one she keeps

Insulting. All the men will have resort
To this new creature they will use for sport.” 30

“You will not,” Agnes says. “Christ won’t forget
His faithful people, and He will not let
Our chastity be lost, and us abandoned.
He’ll stand by us, the chaste, and not permit
This gift of sacred purity to be 35
Defiled. So blood your sword blade if you must;
You won’t profane my body with your lust.”

When she had done, he ordered she be placed
Upon a corner of the public square.
But people wouldn’t look while she stood there; 40
Saddened by the virgin’s plight, they faced
Away, so none might view her modesty.

But one man, happening to crudely gaze
At her, was not afraid to look her figure
Up and down with his lubricious eyes, 45
When suddenly a lightning bolt of fire
Struck him in those eyes with flashing blaze.
He fell down, blinded by the searing flare,
And spasm’d in the dusty public square.

His friends then raised him from the ground half-dead, 50
Weeping words of death. The virgin, though
Sang Christ in triumph as she made to go;
Sang God the Father in a holy hymn,
Because when sinful danger threatened her,
Her chastity won victory and made 55
The brothel into something clean and pure.

Some say that being begged, she poured out prayers
To Christ, so that the sinner might again
Have sight, and that the breath of life was then
Restored him and his vision was made whole. 60

But this was Agnes’ *first* step toward the court
Of Heaven; God granted her one more ascent.
For fury drove her bloody enemy
To rage. “I’m losing,” he said groaning. “Go

And draw your sword out, soldier. Implement 65
The emperor's imperial commands."

When Agnes saw the grim man standing, naked
Weapon drawn, her joy increased. And so
She spoke: "I am ecstatic such a man
Has come—a sworded man who's cruel and wild— 70
And not some languid, perfumed, epicene,
And limp young thing, to ruin—if he can—
My honor, thinking I would be reviled.

This lover, rather—*this* one, I admit—
Pleases. I rush to meet him on my way, 75
His hot desires suffering no delay.
I'll take his steel deep in my breast, up to
The hilt, as deep as it can plunge. Thus wed
To Christ, I will out-leap the darkest sky
And rise to the empyrean on high. 80
Eternal Ruler, open heaven's gates
That once were barred against those born below,
And call a soul that follows You, O Christ,
That to the Father I be sacrificed."

Her prayer done, she humbly bowed her head 85
And worshipped Christ, her bent neck more than ready
To receive the blow to come. Her wish
Was granted by the executioner:
A single stroke decapitated her—
So quick a death that she had felt no pain. 90

The spirit, bodiless, then springs from there,
Free at last, leaping into the air.
Angels guide her on the shining path;
She marvels at the world beneath her feet.

And as she rises, she looks down to see 95
The darkness, and she laughs at how the sun
Goes round, and how the worlds entwine and spin;
And at the life lived in things' black whirlwind,
And how the world pursues pure vanity:
Kings, tyrants, power, rank; the stupid pride 100
And pomp of dignitaries' pageantry;

The cloth of gold and silver all pursue
 By evil means; the splendor that they see
 In countless palaces that they erect;
 Robes richly sewn, laced through with vanity; 105
 Wrath, fear, desires, dangers; how long grief
 Trades places soon enough with joy too brief;
 The smoke-black brands of spite and jealousy
 That pall the honor of humanity
 And blot out hope. And foulest of the lot, 110
 The squalid clouds of heathen adoration.

Agnes tramples all of this; it's tread
 Under her foot, her heel upon the head
 Of that fierce serpent, crushing him who splatters
 Poison on every worldly, earth-bound thing, 115
 Which ends in hell. A virgin stamps him down.
 He drops the crests atop his blazing crown.
 In such defeat, he dare not raise his head.

Meanwhile, God has set a double crown
 Upon the unwed martyr's brow. And from 120
 Eternal light, grace sixty-fold has come,
 Securing her first crown, and for the other
 There exist rewards a hundred-fold.⁴

O happy maid, O glory new, who dwell,
 So nobly bright in heaven's citadel, 125
 Please turn your face with those twin diadems
 Upon our masses of impurities—
 You on whom alone the Father of
 Us all bestowed the gifts to cleanse a brothel!
 I shall be made chaste by your shining face 130
 If you grant my heart your atoning grace.
 Nothing's foul which you bestow in love,
 And deign to touch with your restoring sole.

Notes

- 1 On Agnes see Canali 317, Fux, *Passions* 463–464, and Introduction, Chapter II.
- 2 I.e., Rome.
- 3 The Roman goddess associated with the arts, wisdom, and war, as Prudentius goes on to note, she, like Agnes, is a virgin.
- 4 Prudentius culls imagery from the parable of the sower described at Matt. 13:3 ff.

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