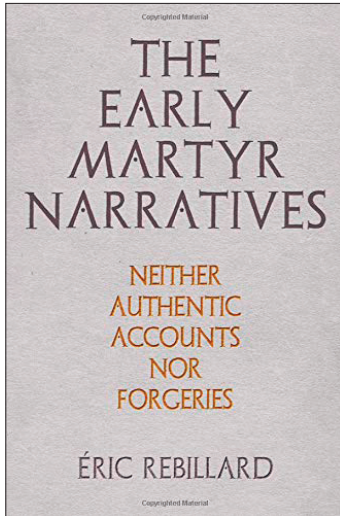


THE EARLY MARTYR NARRATIVES



REBILLARD, ÉRIC (2020). *The Early Martyr Narratives. Neither Authentic Accounts nor Forgeries*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 192 pp., 58, 20 € [ISBN: 978-0-8122-5260-6].

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I AM NOT SURE I CAN THINK OF ANOTHER BOOK IN EARLY CHRISTIAN studies that states its central argument so succinctly in its subtitle, but Éric Rebillard's latest book excels in brevity and elegance, so perhaps the subtitle is not entirely surprising. Although we know as soon as we pick up the book what R. will be arguing, the question remains as to why he maintains that the early Christian martyr narratives are "neither authentic accounts nor forgeries", and how he comes to this conclusion. His path through ancient materials – as well as his engagement with modern schol-

arship – is well laid out in this brief volume (eighty-seven pages of text, not counting appendices and endnotes). Each of the book's four chapters builds on the arguments of the previous chapter, making sequential reading essential.

The Early Martyr Narratives is what I would call a “European-style” book: detailed and thorough, it differs markedly from the perhaps flashier “American style” of scholars of martyr narratives based in the United States such as Candida Moss or Bart Ehrman, both of whom he engages and yet with whom he ultimately disagrees. At issue is Moss's and Ehrman's assessment of early Christian martyr narratives as “forgeries” or even “fraud”, which R. finds entirely beside the point he wishes to make. Throughout this book, R. argues vehemently against this dubious criterion of “authenticity” that Moss and particularly Ehrman want to question. Authenticity presumes that an original text once existed as an eyewitness account, unsullied by later redactions and emendations. To search for the authentic, original text behind later redactions is a natural way for New Testament scholars to think about textual productions. R. rejects this approach entirely. Instead, he argues, each iteration of a martyr narrative constitutes a legitimate textual performance, such that martyr narratives are best understood as “living texts”. Further, he argues, “the intended audience did not expect a precise historical report and was prepared to hear or read a version of the story” (p. 5). R. claims that historical accuracy was never the point of martyr texts; rather, “ancient audiences could believe in the historicity of the martyrs, but were not concerned to hear or read a truthful story” (p. 5). This is a provocative claim, and I fully suspect that R. is right. And yet, his claim remains unproven. How can we know what ancient audiences expected of a text? Indeed, was there only one audience and one response?

R.'s first move (Chapter One) is to establish a corpus of the earliest extant martyr narratives. He accomplishes this, crucially, not through internal cues concerning dating, but through locating their *terminus ante quem* in patristic literature. His initial data set, then, is a tiny corpus of four texts, all of which concerned Christian persecution prior to 260 CE, and which are attested in external evidence before 300 CE. These texts are BHG 1546, the *Martyrdom of Pionius*; BHG 1556-59, the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*; BHL 2041, the *Life of Cyprian by Pontius*; and BHL 6633, the *Passion of Perpetua, Felicity, and Their Companions*. This list itself strikes me as, so far, uncontroversial. R. then attempts to lessen the 40-year difference between the time of writing and the time of their *terminus ante quem* by examining the social context in which each text was first attested. His stated interest is in the “function or role the texts performed in the earliest context in which they were used” in order to derive “a sense of what early Christians expected of these narratives” (p. 13).

When R. does determine the texts' function, it is striking. He already set us up for this conclusion in his introduction: "Texts were not produced simply in response to the events they report" (p. 5). R. argues, provocatively, that the point of martyr texts was not to document the persecutions, nor to use these texts for missionizing and converting, despite Tertullian's famous claim that "the blood of Christians is seed!". At the conclusion of chapter one, R. writes, "The small group of texts that I can determine to be produced before 300 were exploited to promote agendas unrelated to the martyrdoms themselves. Their utility lay in the authority that was granted to the martyrs and could be put to the service of a cause or a party" (p. 20).

Chapter Two confronts the issue of court recordings and protocols incorporated into martyr texts. Three texts contain such court recordings: the *Acts of Justin*, the *Acts of the Scilitan Martyrs*, and the *Acts of Cyprian* – already identified as a group by Timothy Barnes. R. argues that it was only after the Great Persecution that the protocol form was used in martyr narratives, as a sort of authenticating strategy. This chapter contains invaluable information on Roman court protocols and their availability to members of the public at various stages of the Roman Empire and late antiquity. R.'s key finding is that court protocols were used primarily after the fourth century. Freely available, these documents could be added to or redacted by the author of the martyr narrative rather freely. Not only did incorporating a court recording work as an authenticating strategy, it also worked well for adapting martyr narratives for liturgical use (pp. 34-35).

In Chapter Three, R. draws on Christine Thomas's assessment of ancient novels and the apocryphal acts as "stories without authors and without texts" or "open texts" (p. 43), before arriving at his preferred term, "living texts". He writes, "Ultimately, I suggest that we abandon the pursuit of an alleged original and recognize all versions as independent performances" (p. 46). R. then demonstrates the utility of this approach by arranging various manuscripts of the same martyr narrative in parallel columns, such that their differences become evident. These differences from one text to the other cannot be reconciled, nor dismissed as "scribal errors". His point is clear: it would be foolhardy to claim which "performance" of a narrative is the original *Urtext*. We simply cannot tell – but at any rate, any search for an original, "authentic" text desensitizes us to a martyr narrative's essential fungibility, freely adaptable to differing settings and communities. Although R. does not come out and say this bluntly, most of the scholarship on martyr narratives rely upon critical editions that did, in fact, edit various manuscript "performances" together into a master text. He is right: another approach – what he calls a "different model" (p. 57) – is necessary to fully understand the role of the storyteller in each "independent performance", in that each subtle addition or redaction produces a complete, useful text that spoke to

particular concerns in its specific context. It is in this sense, then, that each martyr narrative is a “living text”.

In the final chapter, R. takes on the issue of “history” versus “fiction”. Within the world of sacred texts, the issue is, needless to say, highly charged. R. argues for martyr narratives’ resolute “textuality”, which is to say, he maintains that ancient readers or listeners would have been perfectly capable of recognizing literary tropes, and of understanding the work that a trope does within a text. He uses the example of the oft-repeated line in martyr narratives, “I am a Christian!” which, he notes, did not mean that Christians undergoing interrogation in a Roman tribunal all said the exact same thing which eyewitnesses carefully wrote down for posterity, but that as a recognizable trope, the point of the cry “I am a Christian!” was to mark this text as doing a certain kind of work, including (perhaps ironically) authenticating the narrative itself.

This book is compact; it packs a lot of technical information into its pages, much of which concerns manuscript variants. This degree of technical detail, however, is necessary to support R.’s argument: that martyrdom narratives “cannot be studied with the traditional categories mobilized in favor of or against their authenticity” (p. 84). Indeed, this book has a real structural elegance; the chapters flow seamlessly from one to the other, and each of R.’s claims builds upon the previous. He does not try to do too much, nor develop a grand theory that applies equally to every single martyr narrative. At the same time, his argument that martyr texts “cannot be reducible to an ‘original’ form” (p. 58) mostly likely *could* be extended to martyr texts in general. Most compelling to me is his argument that “In each case, we find that it is a context of intra-ecclesiastical conflict during a period free of persecution” (p. 4) where these martyr stories came to function as “living text”, deployed not for the reasons we conventionally think martyr stories were used (*i.e.*, to build up faith during times of persecution, or to aid in inspiring people to convert – although I never found this second argument convincing), but generally within intra-ecclesiastical disputes, wherein the martyrs became important confessors to bolster one group’s theological position against another’s. With this, R. accomplishes his aim to “decouple the history of the persecutions from the history of martyr narrative writing” (p. 87).

To offer only two mild critiques: I was intrigued by R.’s mention of Derrida’s concept of hauntology in the introduction (p. 3), but R. unfortunately never delves into his insights; hauntology is left hanging, and if it indeed “haunts” this book or even the ancient texts that it treats, it is difficult to see. Beyond page 3, “hauntology” or “haunting” is never mentioned again, which seems to me a bit of a missed opportunity. A second critique concerns R.’s assessment of martyr narratives as “living texts”. Although I fully agree with this, I wonder if a turn to literary theory might

provide additional technical language to support his claims. Literary theory provides ample vocabulary to outline the difference between a narrative, a story, a plot, even – to borrow from Vladimir Propp and Viktor Shklovsky – the chronological plot (the *fabula*) versus the way in which an author organizes a story (the *sjuzhet*). Instead – mystifyingly, to me – R. turns to the data model proposed by the rather obscure Functional Requirements for Bibliographic Records (FRBR) with their taxonomic model of Work, Expression, Manifestation, and Item (p. 57). It is not clear to me that this taxonomy works better for R.'s purposes than other commonly used terms drawn from literary critical theory. This is all the much stranger to me, considering R.'s insistence throughout that we consider martyr narratives not as historical testimony, but as textual productions – a perspective with which I fully concur.

In the final few paragraphs, R. argues, “The moral truth of the story was what mattered” (p. 86). Again, I agree. But R.'s book does not end here, precisely, but proceeds with another thirty pages of appendices, containing Latin and Greek texts and their English facing-page translations. These include texts and translations of various manuscript editions of the *Acts of the Scilitan Martyrs*, preparations for a synoptic edition that further support R.'s contention that each text constituted an independent performance rather than a derivation from a single narrative that became progressively more corrupted as it moved from telling to telling, or more accurately, copying to copying. This is a learned book, and a refreshing “take” on an old problem; one that holds promise for those of us who consider other early Christian “textual productions” and the work that these did for the communities which drew on them to support their sense of what mattered.