

## REVIEW

### THE EARLY MARTYR NARRATIVES

Éric Rebillard, *The Early Martyr Narratives: Neither Authentic Accounts nor Forgeries. Divinations: Rereading Late Ancient Religion*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020. Pp. 192. Hardback, \$59.95/£48.00 ISBN 978-0-8122-5260-6.

In this concise and densely argued volume Rebillard sets out to shift the debate around early Christian martyrdom narratives, away from questions of authenticity to the very nature of the texts themselves: they are ‘living texts’, each an anonymous ‘performance of a story that has been adapted to a particular context’ (86). Consequently, it is a misunderstanding of their nature to attempt to use them to reconstruct the history of persecution—rather, they must be read as Christian ‘textual productions’ (87). This argument is set out in four chapters.

Rebillard begins in the first chapter with a rejection of the notion of ‘authenticity’, instead seeking to establish the earliest martyrdom narratives, not by their content (which he regards as a problematic method) but by including Greek and Latin narratives (since those in other languages are translations of originals in these languages) that both deal with pre-260 CE martyrdoms and are attested by external reference pre-300 CE. The reason for the 300 CE cut-off date is the difference made to the work of remembering the martyrs by the context of the Great Persecution under Diocletian and the later freedoms granted by Constantine. These criteria give Rebillard a small corpus of five works comprising the *Martyrdom of Pionius*, the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, the *Letter of the Churches of Lyon and Vienne*, the *Life of Cyprian*, and the *Passion of Perpetua, Felicity, and their Companions*. Rebillard next examines the evidence for the time of actual composition for each of these narratives, by looking at the earliest context in which they were used. For instance, he follows Walter Ameling’s argument that *MPion* was published as part of a debate about the position of the ‘lapsi’ (Christians who sacrificed in response to Decius’ edict), and was using the authority of Pionius to advocate a particular position, therefore supporting a pre-300 CE date for the text. (It would perhaps have been useful to have something, however brief, of Ameling’s argument in Rebillard’s own text.) Rebillard is unable to find secure evidence that the *Letter of the Churches of Lyon and Vienne* was composed pre-300, and so his corpus is reduced to just four texts. He persuasively concludes that in each text

examined the context for the composition was not to hearten Christians undergoing persecution, or to aid in conversion, ‘but to weigh in on ecclesiastical controversies by citing the authority of the martyrs’ (14).

Chapter 2 clears the ground for the continuation of Rebillard’s argument by dealing with the asserted origin of some of the martyrdom accounts in contemporary court records or protocols. This is of course an attractive notion for those wanting to assert the authenticity of the accounts, implying as it does the preservation of the *ipsissima verba* of the martyrs. Rebillard narrows the field of texts under consideration to those that are primarily in the form of a dialogue (with introduction and conclusion), and suggests that none (even for martyrdoms before 260 CE) can reliably be dated before the fourth century. He argues that it was unlikely that it would have been possible for a Christian or their lawyer to obtain the necessary authorisation from a magistrate to access trial records before the official recognition of Christianity. For Rebillard, the court-record passages within the early martyrdom narratives are there because of the ‘truth value’ of this particular style of narrative—that is, for literary rather than historical reasons.

Chapter 3 tackles head on the question of ‘forgery’ as a term applied particularly to the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* by Bart Ehrman. Ehrman regards *MPol* as a forgery because there are eyewitness claims, but the account was written by someone living after the events. In a careful analysis of the text, Rebillard shows that we must distinguish between the ‘I’ claims within the narrative (of the church in Smyrna) and the colophon delineating the chain of transmission. The colophon itself varies in the different manuscripts, functioning, Rebillard suggests, as the cue for the audience on how to understand the text. Over time or in different contexts, this framing changes—the text therefore is both anonymous and fluid: these are ‘stories without authors and without texts’ (43), as Rebillard quotes from the work of Christine T. Thomas on narratives such as the *Alexander Romance* and the Apocryphal Acts. This becomes an important concept for Rebillard’s understanding of the martyrdom texts. Rebillard goes on to examine sample textual variants in the ‘so-called Donatist and Catholic versions of African martyr texts’ (46), which cannot be put down to scribal error, and at the same time are not easily categorised into earlier or later versions. Rather, he suggests they are different *performances* of a text. A redactor does not hesitate to tweak the narrative to emphasise certain aspects or to add, for instance, a Donatist flavour to the martyrs’ speeches. The traditional approach in a critical edition to creating a single, purportedly original version of the text is reductive, Rebillard suggests, taking no account of the nature of these works, and so results in the modern scholar losing access to potential insights to be found in the individual versions. (Rebillard gives us a useful example in Appendix 2 of an alternative synoptic presentation of six versions of the *Scillitan Martyrs* account.) He employs the bibliographic taxonomy of ‘Work’, ‘Expression’, ‘Manifestation’, and ‘Item’ to clarify this view of how the

texts are to be understood; so, for *MPol*, the Work is the story of the martyrdom; the Greek text and Latin translation are Expressions; these Expressions are embodied in different Manifestations—which can in the case of a single surviving manuscript example overlap with the Item (the single physical example of a Manifestation). We have therefore in our modern edition an Expression rather than the Work itself. This is an interesting and attractive theory, essentially exhorting us to waste no further time trying to get to an ‘original’ from which the variants spring, because this ultimately gets us no further in understanding the texts themselves.

In his fourth and final chapter Rebillard turns to examining how the narrative of the martyrdom texts works—what kind of beast are we dealing with? He avoids the term ‘genre’—he does not wish to devise a new genre for these texts—but rather through an examination of their narratorial technique Rebillard seeks to demonstrate their conscious literariness. ‘Fictional’ elements in the narrative do not imply that the entire narrative is ahistorical: Rebillard examines ancient categories of narrative and concludes that the concept of *argumentum*/πλάσμα, with its criterion of verisimilitude differentiating it from *fabula*/μῦθος, offers a way of understanding the martyrdom accounts. There is an element of ‘fictional complicity’ (64)—Rebillard rejects the notion of ‘reader contract’ as anachronistic—that is established through the use of *topoi*, one of which he suggests is the phrase ‘I am a Christian’. However, Rebillard maintains that this does not mean that the audience for a text would conclude that the entire work is false: since they believe in the existence of the martyrs, they assume and expect (a small) core of historical fact. A key tenet, however, of this final chapter is ‘The audience acknowledges that many of the truth-claims of premodern texts are moral rather than factual’ (65).

Rebillard goes on to survey his selected group of martyrdom accounts in terms of what they themselves tell us about their narration, focussing on the role of the narrator. He concludes that in all cases this reveals ‘an insistence on their textuality’ (80). A particularly engaging section that concludes this chapter is a discussion of the use of documents within these accounts, such as the court protocol format: Rebillard argues that this addresses the ‘impossibility of testimony’ (84)—one cannot both suffer martyrdom and write about it.

Rebillard’s overall conclusion to the work usefully reviews the steps in his argument: we must abandon approaches that see the texts as ‘authored’; they are a performance of a living text; there is no ‘original’ text; moral truth is what matters. As a consequence, ‘we need to retire the early martyr texts from being used by historians of the repression and persecution of Christians and promote their study as textual productions in the larger context of Christian writings’ (87).

Rebillard's work forms a welcome addition to the ever-growing body of scholarship on these fascinating texts. His argument for a reading that gets away from anxiety over authenticity invites us to give room to a richer approach that sees these texts as an aspect of the making of Christian identity. His particular contribution in this volume is his attention to the narrativity, the literariness of the texts, which leads us to read them not simply as 'history' but as Christian interpretation and representation of the martyr mythology. The conciseness of this work lends a concentrated focus on the issue that invites engagement and, it is to be hoped, further study.

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