



"If . . . you are asked to do a lot of giving without . . . reward," says *Fascinating Womanhood*, which ranks self-effacement with God and the flag, "remember, *when you cast your bread upon the waters, it comes back buttered.*" The phrase sums up the martyred woman today: passive and awed by powerful tides, she willingly surrenders everything to fate while standing in a sea of grease. There-isolated, unabated-she practices . . .

THE MARTYR ARTS

Arlene Ladden

A look at early Christian history shows that woman's lot was anything but a lot. Man's marriage to woman was grudgingly conceded as a necessary evil.¹ She was a "foe to friendship, an inevitable penance . . . a domestic peril."² It was officially questioned whether woman had a soul (in 585, the Council of Macon decided that she did, but only by a single vote).³ Repeatedly admonished to "be in subjection to [her] own husband,"⁴ she was, at best, "a natural temptation, a coveted calamity."⁵ A weak vessel for man's seed, she was a plaque on which he could mount his sexual organ.

For the religious woman, who naturally *believed* her life worthless, there were few alternatives. She could dumbly worship the saints or, if ambitious enough, she could emulate them: St. Simon Stylites ate very little; St. John of the Cross licked the sores of lepers.⁶ And while some women performed no less austerity (St. Rose ate nothing but sheep's gall, ashes and bitter herbs, and she drank the blood of a sick patient), many—martyred through constant devotion and sacrifice—displayed a peculiar brand of sensuality.

Veronica Giuliani—who went to bed with, and kissed, and suckled a lamb, the lamb being a symbol of Christ—is perhaps atypical. But not Mechthilde of Magdeburg, who preferred to see Jesus as "charming," affectionate and 18 years old. Nor Margaretha of Ypern, who thought herself "engaged" to Jesus. Nor Christine Ebner, who imagined she carried Jesus' child. The church deliberately inspired such sensuous imaginings. "Ever let the Bridegroom sport with you within [your chamber]," St. Jerome wrote to a virgin. "When sleep falls on you, He will come beside the wall and will put his hand through the hole in the door and will touch your belly . . ."⁷ With nuns "marrying" Christ in a formal ceremony—their "I love Christ into whose bed I have entered" being roughly equivalent to the modern "I do"—it is not surprising that, while most martyrs sought to transcend the body, female martyrdom at times unveiled a complexion entirely its own. Pocked with the scars of lacerations and burnings, flushed with desire for a polygamous, heterosexual Jesus, it encouraged a centuries-long tradition of woman's self-sacrifice and suffering for man. For only by cleaving to a seeming savior or holy man could a woman hope to rise even a fraction as much as she had fallen.

Take the example of Margaret-Mary Alacoque, a particularly fervent practitioner. She shafted a novice for rivaling her holiness, lest she rival her also in the Savior's affections. And while her frequent convulsions were probably due to austerity—she drank mostly dirty wash-water, and drank nothing at all from Thursday to Sunday (though she occasionally licked up vomit with her tongue)—she was hotly feverish with love of Jesus, even tattooing his name on her chest with a small knife. (When the scars healed, she burned in the insignia with a candle.) Such actions were proof of a beautiful soul.

Suffering has long been a value in the west. An attribute of saints and a must for martyrs, it has also lately been required of the artist, who, as Susan Sontag aptly notes, now replaces the saint as exemplary sufferer.⁸ And Sontag's tenet, I think, can be reversed: the saint, or martyr, was a kind of artist in earlier times. Aestheticians like Jacques Maritain would seem to agree, seeing art as "mak[ing] a form shine on the matter," form being "the profound splendor of the soul shining through . . . the principle . . . of pain and passion." Living in true perfection, he says, "may be metaphorically described as an art . . . an art which only the saints masterfully."⁹

Now, that Margaret-Mary wasn't perfect is not important; it's enough that the church assures us she was. What is important is that she was an exemplary sufferer if there ever was one. She suffered; she suffered wholly and completely—and this gave her a decided advantage. For, notes Sontag, quoting from the diary of a suffering artist, only through such total surrender can we "disarm the power of suffering,

make it our own creation, our own choice,"¹⁰ By giving in to suffering, we mold it, reshape it. We sublimate suffering into art.

That life and art can be one and the same is an old idea. John Dewey¹¹ upheld it, defining art as any activity reshaping experience more meaningfully, coherently and vividly than ordinary life allows. "Emotion," he says, "is . . . the cementing force." By selecting and coloring, it unifies the disparate events of experience, transforming them into *an* experience. "The enemies of the aesthetic," says Dewey, "are neither the practical or the intellectual. They are the hum-drum."

However repugnant Margaret-Mary's actions may seem, by male aesthetic criteria Margaret-Mary was an artist and her martyrdom was art. It dictated her every action, and her every action was contrived to reflect a beautiful soul. Martyrdom provided her with a form for her life, and through it she assumed control over the fragmented matter of her existence. She indulged in suffering; it engrossed her, diverted her, and thoroughly absorbed her. Pain became objectified. Life became a passionate performance (indeed, her breast resembled a theater marquee), soulful, dramatic, cohesive, consistent and meaningful. By classical definitions of art, her life, in assuming a magnitude and order, fulfilled the conditions of the beautiful. In fact, martyrdom for Jesus, and later secularized martyrdom for man, has been one of woman's most pervasive and enduring traditional art forms.

For Margaret-Mary was not alone in indulging in suffering; other women matched her passion. Christine Ebner etched out a cross on the skin of her chest and tore it off. Mary Magdalene dei Pazzi had herself cut, trampled, whipped and burned. Christine of St. Trond had herself bound, hung, racked, buried and baked. Surely, Christianity's chapter on the martyrs and mystics is one of the most astounding chapters in history. Less astounding, perhaps, are the women who, like Felicula or Saints Agnes and Agatha, opted for tortures over marriage. These women were saving themselves for Christ and wouldn't succumb. But there were also martyrs among those who did, like Therese, a nineteenth century madwoman and would-be mystic whose longing for Christ drove her insane until finally, distracted, demoralized and institutionalized, she wrote: "Now I only believe in God and suffering. I feel it is necessary to get married."¹² Therese was deranged, but her resignation reflected a sordid truth: for many who lived in later centuries, marriage itself had become yet another form of martyrdom, supplying an aesthetic where none existed.

The altruistic female sacrificing for a husband was an old ideal. The twelfth-century Marie de France featured her in *Eliduc* where a wife graciously surrenders her husband to a woman he loves. Years later, she welcomes the new wife into her convent where, sisters in Christ, the two women are bound again by love for a single man, the husband and Christ being, metaphorically, one and the same.

By the fourteenth century, with Chaucer's and Boccaccio's patient Griselda, the emphasis had changed.¹³ A female Job, Griselda stands obediently by while her husband humiliates her, repudiates her—even when she believes he murdered her children; her only concern is to meet his wants, however cruel they seem to her. Now the love of one woman for another is strongly de-emphasized—relief can only come from man—and man's worth is wholly unquestioned, woman's soul seeming all the greater for his cruelty.

It was this ideal which began to flourish in the eighteenth century. Because Protestantism had changed woman's role, transposing mystical values to the domestic sphere, later centuries saw the revival of the martyrdom aesthetic in a new light. Aestheticians since Fichte had taught that beauty was subjective—a manifestation of the beautiful soul—many believing, with Muller, that the highest art was the art of life.¹⁴ Now, soulful woman could approach the sublime without ev-



er leaving her immediate neighborhood, not to mention foregoing a trip to heaven. Just as, classically, art was a lofty reflection of nature, the good wife was a lofty reflection of man, so lofty in fact, that she ceased to have substance altogether (a Dorsetshire wedding ceremony likened her to "a Mirrour which hath no image of its own").¹⁵ A young girl (*pupilla*) was said to exist in the pupil of every man's eye,¹⁶ and while this classically meant man's perceptions were soulful, now it stood for another tenet: that woman should only exist in the glazed eyes of man. She was wife only—merely a part of her husband's family, *famulus* meaning servant or slave. As Fichte had also taught: "[Woman's] own dignity requires that she should give herself up entirely as she is . . . and should utterly lose herself in [her husband]."¹⁷

Now Christ was absent. As with Jane Eyre in the Bronte novel, woman was to persist dutifully in soulful devotion to a cynical master and, eventually, his contemplation of her—distanced and mystical in her suffering goodness—might touch his soul and effect his overt transformation. Just as Jane restored the blinded Rochester's vision, so could woman, like the highest art, elevate a husband's vision, turning cynic into believer, teaching and delighting. A classical representation of beauty, she incited compassion and pity, if not fear.

But such idealizations were fiction, pure fairy tale. Bronte's Jane was, in real life, de Sade's Justine. A perpetual victim, she often suffered for men who were unrelenting, unrepenting.

With religious executions a thing of the past and passionate martyrdom for Christ wholly repugnant to the Protestant ethic, the clergy, who now found marriage desirable, transferred the imagery of Jesus onto the husband with new, if pedestrian, significance. The female martyr was now plunked down in the family cottage where, virtuous and sexless, she suffered for her family. There, mystical and beautiful, she persevered. Determined and powerless, she persevered. John Ruskin's directive was typical: "[Woman must be] instinctively, infallibly wise—wise, not for self-development, but for self-renunciation."¹⁸

In fact, she hadn't much choice. The rise of capitalism had, by the eighteenth century, aggravated woman's economic dependence while it banished traditional duties from the home. Domestic spinning, weaving, brewing and baking had once been essential and, however tedious, had used up time. Now, with moral prohibitions still further diminishing woman's activities, idleness exposed the void. By romantically and utterly surrendering to suffering, woman might become absorbed; life's form might assume a grandiose beauty, masking the pettiness of its content. As before, if woman could exalt her suffering, she could shape it, perfect it; she could languish in contemplation of her own sorrow. Formalized and ritualized, it aesthetically formed and informed her life. And the aesthetic became an anaesthetic. For no matter how sentient martyrdom's manifestations, it numbed woman to her own insignificance, protecting her from the more genuine pain of small emotions. The niggling void became flushed with feeling, feeling believed to soften and deepen the soul. Or so believed Madame de Staél, whose exposition on suffering also credited the virtues of habitual submissiveness. Her tract was written to justify suicide. No wonder.¹⁹

Martyrdom was still an art: no longer for Jesus, no longer even for a powerful man whose cruelty masked a beautiful soul. It was now martyrdom for any man, be he a stern patriarch or a sodden drunk, or a stern patriarch and a sodden drunk. As Tolstoy saw it: Wives should be loving, unobtrusive and unassuming—"comforters of the drunken, the weak, and the dissolute."²⁰ Or in Fichte's words: The wife of a degenerate husband "is held all the more in esteem the gen-

. . . she bears it," though still, she must appear to be "lost in the man of her choice."²¹ Wet nurses to alcoholics, wives soaked their men with spirit, and disappeared.

In 1920, in a perverse tribute to pained sensibility, Margaret-Mary Alacoque was canonized. Her emblem was the Sacred Heart. It was increasingly presented more and more bloodily—grotesque, fiery, disembodied, now an isolate lump of throbbing muscle—the pulsing symbol of a female aesthetic and the badge of hundreds of Catholic schools.

The good woman, it thumps, is all heart.

But its beat is getting ever weaker. Like the allure of habitual sacrifice itself. Like the utter devotion (submission) for which it stands—one passion, indivisible, with guilt and oppression for all. Woman's fluid acquiescence has leaked its glamour, and women are letting women know it.

Sacrifice is self-abuse. Death to martyrdom.

1. Since woman was considered a temptress irresistible to the weak, St. Paul preferred marriage when adultery seemed inevitable, conceding: "It is better to marry than to burn." (I Corinthians 7:9).

2. Salimbene, in *From St. Francis to Dante: Translations from the Chronicle of the Franciscan Salimbene (1221-1288)*, 2nd ed., ed. and trans. G. G. Coulton (London: David Nutt, 1907), p. 97. Salimbene falsely attributes these epithets to St. Chrysostom, whose own expression was equally appalling, if less succinct.

3. Bernard Murstein, *Love, Sex and Marriage Through the Ages* (New York: Springer Publishing Co., 1974), p. 94.

4. I Peter 3:1. These sentiments, with virtually identical wording, are expressed also in Ephesians 5:22, Colossians 3:18 and, later, in the first enduring systematization of church law, Gratian's *Decretum* (c. 1140), quoted in *Not in God's Image*, ed. Julia O'Faolain and Lauro Martines (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), p. 130.

5. Salimbene, p. 97.

6. For factual information relating to the saints, martyrs and mystics, I have primarily referred to Henry Osborn Taylor, "Mystic Visions of Ascetic Women," in *The Medieval Mind* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1959), vol. I, pp. 458-486; Rev. S. Baring-Gould, *The Lives of the Saints*, rev. ed., 16 vols. (Edinburgh: John Grant, 1914); Donald Attwater's *The Penguin Dictionary of Saints* (New York: Penguin Books, 1965); and, for the more gruesome cases, Gordon Rattray Taylor, *Sex in History* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), pp. 31-50 and *passim* as well as Havelock Ellis, "The Auto-Erotic Factor in Religion," in *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (New York: Random House, 1936), vol. I, pp. 310-325.

7. Epistle 22 in *Select Letters of St. Jerome*, trans. F. A. Wright (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963), p. 109. The translator has rendered "belly" (*ventrem*) as "flesh"; perhaps he has censored the saint in the interest of delicacy.

8. "The Artist as Exemplary Sufferer," in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Dell, 1961), p. 42.

9. *Art et Scholastique* (Paris: Louis Rouart et Fils, 1927), pp. 20-21, 44, 46. My translations.

10. Sontag, quoting Caesar Pavese, p. 43.

11. "Having an Experience," in *Art as Experience* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1934), pp. 35-37.

12. Therese's case is treated by Ellis, pp. 316-319.

13. See Chaucer's "Clerk's Tale" and the tenth tale of the tenth day in Boccaccio's *Decameron*.

14. For a summary discussion of aesthetic theory from Baumgarten to Knight, see Leo Tolstoy's *What is Art? and Essays on Art*, trans. Alymer Maude (London: Oxford University Press, 1930), pp. 92-110.

15. Quoted by Gwendolyn Bridges and Robert Utter in *Pamela's Daughters* (1963; rpt. New York: Russell and Russell, 1972), p. 25.

16. For a description of this etymology—so cloyingly written as to belie its true meaning—see Iwan Bloch, *The Sexual Life of Our Time*, 6th ed., trans. M. Eden Paul (London: Rebman Ltd., 1908), p. 78.

17. "Fundamental Principles of the Rights of Family," in *The Science of Rights*, trans. A.E. Kroger (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1869), p. 402.

18. "Of Queens' Gardens," in *Sesame and Lilies: Three Lectures*, rev. and enl. (New York: Metropolitan, 1871), p. 152.

19. "Reflexions sur le suicide," in *Oeuvres de Madame la Baronne de Staél-Holstein* (Paris: Chez Lefevre, 1858), vol. III, pp. 711-752.

20. Tolstoy, p. 326.

21. Fichte, pp. 424 and 441. Fichte remarks (p. 441): "She has the power to withdraw her freedom, if she could have the will to do so; but that is the very point: she cannot rationally will to be free." In other words, any woman who chooses freedom is necessarily irrational; thus, she cannot sensibly assess her motives or use her freedom. It is curiously circular reasoning.

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