

The Sex Life of a Psalm: Augustine and Textual Sexuality in *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 127 [128]

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ABSTRACT

In the tradition of Roland Barthes and Jean-François Lyotard, this study explores the notion of textual sexuality, specifically in Augustine's sermon on Ps 127 [128]. The libidinality of the ancient near-eastern context of the psalm is discussed, with special emphasis on the virile male body and the fertile female body. There-after, Augustine's prosopological exegesis of the psalm is discussed. He presents the text as an involucrum, which is in itself a sexually nuanced term. The involucrum must be voyeuristically undressed, penetrated and impregnated through meditation, which eventually leads to the mystical birth of "true" and "spiritual" meaning. In Augustine's reading, Christ is now indicative of the beautiful and virile male, with the church as both fertile wife and progeny. The paper provides a glimpse into the "sex life" of a psalm by highlighting literary and textual libidinality, and presents it as a creative reading strategy for a post-modern society shaped by various sexualities.

A LE PLAISIR DU TEXTE

The plasticity of the term textual sexuality, or perhaps the erotics of textuality, as related to Augustine's writings, has become all too evident in its *Forschungsgeschichte*, spanning more than four decades. To demonstrate, the first example I advance is that of Jean-François Lyotard's reading of Augustine in his seminal (pun intended) masterpiece, *Libidinal Economy* ([1974] 1993).¹ Lyotard opens his first chapter with two readings of Augustine's *De Civitate Dei* that illustrates the inherent tension between "play and madness, simulacrum and truth," which Augustine desperately aims to uphold, but in fact fails.² Often the borders between "play and madness," or text and pleasure, are blurred, and in Lyotard's analysis, the fissures resulting from dichotomising these two poles become quite apparent. Lyotard's study of Augustine's *Confessiones* reached its climax in his full-length study of the work.³ In this monumental opus, Lyotard contrasts and connects the sensual with the spiritual, between eroticism and mysticism, and critiques the very phenomeno-

¹ Jean-François Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy* (trans. Iain H. Grant; London: Athlone, 1993), 6–12.

² Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, 7.

³ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Confession of Augustine* (trans. Richard Beardsworth; Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2000).

logy of the self evident with Augustine, that points not to a definition or discovery of the self, but rather losing the self in the conundrum of broken, human spirituality, salvation and sin. However, the merit of Augustine's thinking for notions of libidinality is substantial,⁴ as I now move to my second example. In her study entitled, *Desire and Delight: A New Reading of Augustine's Confessions* (1992),⁵ Margaret Miles utilises Roland Barthes's notion of the "pleasure of the text" (*le plaisir du texte*),⁶ and reads the *Confessiones* as a text that awakens and feeds the licentious reader's pleasure. A more recent publication, *Seducing Augustine* (2010),⁷ also reads Augustine's *Confessiones* from a similar site of erotic textuality. Furthermore, these two studies mentioned above follow a line of thinking already exhibited twenty-five years ago in Patricia Cox Miller's excellent article in the *JAAR*: "'Pleasure of the Text, Text of Pleasure': Eros and Language in Origen's *Commentary on the Song of Songs*."⁸ As with Lyotard, we find that Burrus, Jordan and MacKendrick acknowledge this Augustinian tension seen in the first example – what I call, loud antiphonies of desire – but positively states:

Both Augustine's seduction and his seductiveness require these tensions, by which he leads some of us more to one side, and some more to another, but all of us, he hopes, however deviant our paths, to God – that is, to a joy without end or reservation, traced and resisted in the ever-tempting flesh, drawing our voices into a multiple and sometimes dissonant chorus of praise.⁹

These two examples of readings provided the impetus for this study. While considering these tensions, here I attempt a libidinal reading of an Augustinian sermon on Ps 127 [128], which was preached on the feast day of the martyr Felix, possibly on 14 January 407 C.E.¹⁰ The textual sexuality, or *le*

⁴ Cf. especially: Erin Sawyer, "Celibate Pleasures: Masculinity, Desire, and Asceticism in Augustine," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 6/1 (1995): 1–29; Alan Soble, "Correcting Some Misconceptions About Augustine's Sex Life," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 11/4 (2002): 545–69.

⁵ Margaret Miles, *Desire and Delight: A New Reading of Augustine's Confessions* (New York: Crossroad, 1992).

⁶ Roland Barthes, *Le Plaisir du Texte* (vol. 4 of *Oeuvres Complètes*; Paris: Seuil, 1973), 217–64.

⁷ Virginia Burrus, Mark D. Jordan and Karmen MacKendrick, *Seducing Augustine: Bodies, Desires, Confessions* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010).

⁸ Patricia Cox Miller, "Pleasure of the Text, Text of Pleasure: Eros and Language in Origen's *Commentary on the Song of Songs*," *JAAR* 54 (1986): 241–53. Another interesting case is the study of Virginia Burrus, *The Sex Lives of Saints: An Erotics of Ancient Hagiography* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

⁹ Burrus, Jordan and MacKendrick, *Seducing Augustine*, 127.

¹⁰ The dating is not confirmed. For a more in-depth discussion, cf. Anne-Marie La Bonnardière, "Les Enarrationes in Psalmos prêchées par saint Augustin à l'occasion de fêtes de martyrs," *Recherches Augustiniennes* 7 (1971): 73–103; Augustine, *Saint*

plaisir du texte, of Augustine's interpretation of the Psalm will be highlighted. The value of such a libidinal reading lies in the fact that the Psalm under discussion displays a diverse *Wirkungsgeschichte*, with a kaleidoscopic array of reading possibilities. In her study of the reception of the Psalms, Susan Gillingham has convincingly shown the capacity, or in Lyotard's terms, *le pouvoir*, of the Psalms for multiple contexts and applications.¹¹ This study then reads the Psalm with Augustine, a man struggling to balance sexual tension and divine provenance. I therefore present this reading as a voyeuristic peep into the 'sex life' of a psalm, and hopefully by accomplishing this, expand the horizon for creative readings of the Psalms for new, post-modern contexts.

B EROTIC DOMESTICITY IN PSALM 127

Even before proceeding to Augustine's reading of the psalm, the reader must acknowledge that Ps 127 itself exhibits numerous sexual motifs. Without these Augustine's reading would not be possible at all. The motif of fertility is especially evident in the psalm, which was associated with pilgrimages to Jerusalem (see especially 127:5-6).¹² It frames the fertility statement in a chiasm with vv. 1 and 4. Ps 127[128]:1-4 [BHS] reads:

שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלוֹת אֲשֶׁר־יְרֵא יְהוָה הַהֶלֶךְ בְּדַרְכָּיו:¹

יָגִיעַ בַּפִּיךָ כִּי תֹאכַל אֲשֶׁר־יָד וְטוֹב לָךְ:²

אֲשֶׁתְּךָ | כְּגִפְןַּי פְּרִיָּהּ בִּירְכָתִי בַיְתֶךָ בְּנֵיךָ כַּשְׂתֵּלִי זֵיתִים סָבִיב לְשַׁלְחָנְךָ:³

הִנֵּה כִי־בֵן יִבְרָךְ גֹּבֵר יֵרֵא יְהוָה:⁴

Verse 3 is the crucial statement for Augustine's reading. The psalm speaks of the blessed *pater familias*, who is blessed in two fundamental dimensions of his life: his work and his house. While v. 2 focuses on the labour, v. 3 is distinctly related to the household. We see here the image of the fertile wife, like a fruitful vine, and healthy growing children like olive shoots. In her study on the female body in Hosea, Alice Keefe has shown how the fertile body of the female also serves as a symbol for the social body.¹³ This is exhibited in vv. 5 and 6 of the psalm. Although her body still belongs to her husband, her honour is located in her fertility and ability to bear healthy children – sons in par-

Augustine: Expositions of the Psalms (121–150) (vol. 6; trans. Maria Boulding; New York: New City Press, 2004), 98. The numbering of the psalm follows the numbering of the LXX, which was also followed by Augustine.

¹¹ Susan Gillingham, *Psalms Through the Centuries* (vol. 1; Oxford: Blackwell, 2008).

¹² James Limburg, *Psalms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 441.

¹³ Alicia A. Keefe, *Woman's Body and the Social Body in Hosea* (New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 162–89.

ticular – a very important civic duty.¹⁴ The agricultural metaphors (the vine and the olive), relating also to sexuality, are common in ancient Israelite literature,¹⁵ and relates to v. 2 which states that the husband will eat the fruits of his labour. The blessed man in the psalm is then the perfect example of masculinity – he obeys the commands of the Torah, he works hard and is successful, and his household is bearing fruit - he is virile and dominant.

Therefore, the household with a healthy sex life, like prosperous harvests, is the epitome of blessing. It is also related to the blessing and peace of Zion, that is, Jerusalem. Like the fruitful wife of the husband in Ps 127, so too must the social body of Zion be fruitful and prosperous. The ideal household is also the ideal society. Blessing is explained in sexual terms of fruitfulness and fertility. This is an excellent example of Foucault's link between sexuality and the constructions of society.¹⁶ The fertile female body is used as a strategy for social prosperity. The rhetoric of libidinal and erotic domesticity also eroticises society, and the important civic duty of bearing children. It is linked with the fear of the Lord, i.e. upholding the commandments of the Torah. Sexuality, religious texts and religious observances are interlinked in this instance, showing once again the interplay between sexuality and textuality. The fertile body, as strategy, is parallel to the blessed society. Augustine's strategic paraphrasing, coupled with his typical prosopological exegesis, would not lose this erotic textuality, already prevalent in the context of the psalm as found in the Hebrew Bible.

C EXEGESIS OR STRIP-TEASE?

We can now examine Augustine's method of reading Ps 127. His approach has been commonly described as being prosopological. The implication is that in the textual drama that is the psalm, there can only be two role players: Christ and the church.¹⁷ But before this is discussed, it should be asked: how does

¹⁴ Studies on the body as strategy in the Psalms include: Hennie Viviers, "Liggaamlikheid as Strategie in Psalm 124," *IDS* 34/1 (2000): 1–13; Susanne Gillmayr-Bucher, "Body Images in the Psalms," *JSOT* 28/3 (2004): 301–26; Johan H. Coetzee, "'Yet Thou Hast Made Him Little Less Than God': Reading Psalm 8 from a Bodily Perspective," in *My Words Are Lovely: Studies in the Rhetoric of the Psalms* (ed. Robert L. Foster and David M. Howard, Jr.; New York: T & T Clark, 2008), 91–106.

¹⁵ For a general discussion of this feature in ANE religion, cf. Karen Armstrong, *A Short History of Myth* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2005), 43–60.

¹⁶ Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure* (vol. 2 of *The History of Sexuality*; trans. Robert Hurley; New York: Vintage, 1985), 1–32. See also: Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990), 127–50; Lois McNay, *Foucault and Feminism: Power, Gender and the Self* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992).

¹⁷ Gillingham, *Psalms Through the Centuries*, 38–39. Cf. also: Gerald Bonner, "Augustine as Biblical Scholar," in *The Cambridge History of the Bible* (ed. Peter R. Ackroyd and Christopher F. Evans; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

Augustine actually read the psalm? What are the dynamics of this prosopology? In the second section of his exposition of the psalm, he gives an overture of his exegetical method:

Quid ergo sibi hoc vult, fratres? Ne desiderando temporalem et terrenam felicitatem,¹⁸ perdamus coelestem, Propheta tamquam involucrum nobis constituit. Involucrum hoc nescio quid habet intus.¹⁹

What does it mean then, brothers? I think the prophet has handed us something like a wrapped-up parcel, so that we do not lose heavenly happiness by pursuing temporal, earthly well-being. This wrapped-up parcel has something important concealed inside it.²⁰

Augustine calls the psalm a "wrapped-up parcel," according to Boulding's translation. The Latin reads *involucrum*. This term is important to understanding the Augustinian prosopology at work in this sermon, and Boulding's translation struggles to capture the nuance present in the word. *Involucrum* has common sexual nuances attached to it. In Cicero's *De Natura Deorum* 2.37, the word is used to denote a shield-cover, and used with the word *vagina* (and especially *integumentum*²¹), the sheath of a sword: "...ut clipei causa involucrum, vaginam autem gladii..." (...a shield-case is made for the sake of a shield, and a sheath for the sake of a sword...).²² It is something that covers, something that hides. It calls for the reader to be a voyeur, a psychoscopic *penetrator*,²³ as a shield is absorbed by its cover, or a *gladius* penetrates the *vagina*.²⁴ The ety-

1970), 541–62; Michael Cameron, "The Christological Substructure of Augustine's Figurative Exegesis," in *Augustine and the Bible* (ed. Pamela Bright; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 73–103; Anne-Marie La Bonnardière, "Augustine, Minister of the Word of God," in *Augustine and the Bible* (ed. Pamela Bright; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 245–51.

¹⁸ Derivatives of the words *felix* and *felicitas* occur frequently in the psalm, possibly (as a word play) to allude to the martyr Felix, whose feast was the context for this sermon.

¹⁹ Augustine, "In Psalmum 127: Enarratio: Sermo ad plebem," n.p. in *Enarrationes in Psalmos* (collected in *S. Aurelii Augustini Opera Omnia: Patrologiae Latinae Elenchus*; ed. Jacques-Paul Migne; Garnier: Paris, 1844-1855) [cited 2 August 2011]. Online: http://www.kennydominican.joyeurs.com/LatinPatrology/PL_Augustine/esposizioni_salmi/index2.htm.

²⁰ Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms*, 99.

²¹ Ulrich Krewitt, "Allegorese außerchristlicher Texte," *TRE* 1/2 (1978): 286.

²² Piet A. Meijer, *Stoic Theology: Proofs for the Existence of the Cosmic God and of the Traditional Gods (Including a Commentary on Cleanthes' Hymn on Zeus)* (Delft: Eburon, 2008), 81–82.

²³ For an extensive discussion of Roman sexualities, cf. Holt N. Parker, "The Teratogenic Grid," in *Roman Sexualities* (ed. Judith P. Hallett and Marilyn B. Skinner; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 47–65.

²⁴ For the sexual use of the words *gladius* and *vagina* in Latin, cf. James N. Adams, *Latin Sexual Vocabulary* (London: Duckworth, 1982), 20–21, 86–96; respectively. It

mological link to *volvo* is related again to Cicero's use of a scroll that must be "unrolled."²⁵ Etymology, however, can be treacherous, and a sense of continuity of interpretation needs to be present for validation. I have illustrated the textual eroticism of *involutrum* which was present in Cicero, and now I aim to show its continuity in medieval Latin interpretation. The medieval French scholastic, Peter Abelard, was most aware of the sexual connotations of *involutrum*. Frese illustrates:

This elegant Abelardian *involutrum-in-defence-of-involutrum* adheres closely to Augustine's orthodox theory and practice of divinely authorized writings and their properly plural interpretation. In the *involutrum* with which he communicates his fairly unoriginal position, however, Abelard adds the vivid involucral dimension of sexual/textual ambages...The sexual conduct of Abelard's erotically elusive *involutrum* thus invokes a series of authoritative, textual references...²⁶

We find similar tendencies with medieval scholars commentating on classical and late ancient authors. Wilhelm of Conches has similar readings of *involutrum* and also *integumentum* in his discussion of the writings of Juvenal, Boethius, Chacidius and Macrobius. A similar *Wirkungsgeschichte* is found with John the Scot and later, Bernard Silvestris.²⁷

The word *involutrum* may also refer to a womb²⁸ (hence, *volva/vulva*). In this regard Augustine also quotes Ps 126 [127]:4:

Sicut sagittae in manu potentis, sic filii excussorum...et figuris rerum tamquam mysteriorum involucris cooperuerunt intellectum; qui intellectus prodire non potuit ad homines, nisi involucri illa excuterentur: unde dicti sunt *illi filii excussorum*, qui de Prophetis excussis profecerunt.²⁹

"Like arrows in the hand of the mighty archer are the children of those shaken out" [Ps 126 (127):4]... [The prophets spoke with] figurative expressions like the wrappings of mysterious parcels. The contents could not be disclosed until the wrappings were shaken out;

is also discussed by Brent D. Shaw, "Body/Power/Identity: Passions of the Martyrs," *JECS* 4/3 (1996): 274.

²⁵ Dolores W. Frese, *An Ars Legendi for Chaucer's Canterbury Tales: Re-Constructive Reading* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1991), 242.

²⁶ Frese, *Ars Legendi*, 241-242.

²⁷ Krewitt, "Allegorese außerchristlicher Texte," 1/2: 286.

²⁸ Frese, *Ars Legendi*, 242.

²⁹ *Enarrat. Ps.* 127:2; PL 36 n.p. [cited 2 August 2011]. Augustine, "In Psalmum 127," http://www.kennydominican.joyeurs.com/LatinPatrology/PL_Augustine/esposizioni_salmi/index2.htm.

this is why the apostles were called "children of those shaken out". They began their mission from the shaking-out of the prophets.³⁰

The apostles are the sons "shaken out" (*excutio*) from the prophets. The prophets were pregnant and at the appropriate time, gave birth to the apostles. In Augustine's thinking, the text, as *involucrum*, must be penetrated (perhaps then, *eisegesis*, with its connotation to penetration, would be a more appropriate word than *exegesis*). After it has been penetrated, it will give birth to new meaning. Abelard himself also commonly referred to the pregnancy of words.³¹ Penetration of the text takes place as a strip-tease, a voyeuristic unwrapping or undressing of the text. Reading becomes foreplay. Visualisation is crucial to this logeroetic enterprise, as Augustine himself states: "...*et tangentes quod intus est et non videntes, dicamus forte lignum pro auro, aut testam pro argento*"³² (...if we only feel what is inside without seeing it, we might mistake gold for wood or think that silver was only clay).³³ The very process of prosopological reading becomes libidinal, and the titillating excitement of what lies behind the *involucrum* drives the passion for interpretation. Perhaps then *involucrum* should be listed among the words in Adams's *Latin Sexual Vocabulary* (1982).³⁴ The continuity of its interpretative nuances from Cicero, through late antiquity (Juvenal, Boethius, Chacidius and Macrobius), even into the later medieval period (Abelard, Silvestris, Wilhelm of Conches) becomes hard to ignore. The mystery behind the *involucrum* must be seen, and penetrated by thought and meditation, leading to the birth of mystical knowledge. This is the *modus operandi* of reading Ps 127 as suggested by Augustine. Reading is also *coitus*, love-making. The text is the body, the syntax, in Lyotard's words, is the skin³⁵ – all logosensual conductors with the sole purpose of the reader's *jouissance*³⁶ – pleasurable enjoyment, that is, *le plaisir du texte*.³⁷ This type of reading is characterised by what Augustine calls *spiritualiter* (reading with the spirit), in contrast to *animaliter* (literally, reading "like an animal," only concerned with materiality).³⁸ This is proper allegory, according to Augustine, and only then can the intention of the text be comprehended. With both an inherently erotic text (cf. especially Ps 127:3) and a voyeuristic *eisegesis*, we can now proceed to view what Augustine discovers in this sensual reading of the psalm.

³⁰ Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms*, 99.

³¹ Frese, *Ars Legendi*, 242.

³² Augustine, "In Psalmum 127," Online: http://www.kennydominican.joyeurs.com/LatinPatrology/PL_Augustine/esposizioni_salmi/index2.htm.

³³ Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms*, 99.

³⁴ Adams, *Latin Sexual Vocabulary*.

³⁵ Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, 76–82.

³⁶ Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, 60–66.

³⁷ Barthes, *Le plaisir du texte*, 38–39.

³⁸ Cf Augustine, "In Psalmum 127," Online: http://www.kennydominican.joyeurs.com/LatinPatrology/PL_Augustine/esposizioni_salmi/index2.htm.

D AUGUSTINE AND THE AESTHETIC PSYCHOCHRISTOLOGY

Augustine states that the "blessed man" in Ps 127 is Christ.³⁹ The third verse of the Psalm under discussion reads: "Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine on the sides of your house, your children like olive seedlings around your table." Furthermore, the fruitful wife and children both typify the church. Christ, as the virile and masculine *pater familias*, has many children with his wife – these are the members of the church. Playing exhibitionist, Augustine portrays Christ's seductive beauty:

Sponsus ille quo nihil est pulchrius, qui quasi foedus apparuit inter manus persequentium, de quo paulo ante dicebat Isaias: *Et vidimus eum, et non habebat speciem neque decorem*. Ergo sponsus noster foedus est? Absit: quomodo enim illum virgines amarent, quae in terra maritos non quaesierunt? Ergo persequentibus foedus apparuit...non enim habebant oculos unde Christus pulcher videretur.

He is a bridegroom unsurpassed in beauty, yet he appeared ugly in the hands of his persecutors, for of him Isaiah had said not long before, "We saw him, and there was no fair form or comeliness in him" [Isa 53:2]. Can that really be true, that our bridegroom is hideous? Perish the thought! How could he have been loved by virgins who sought no earthly husbands? He seemed only ugly to his persecutors...for they lacked the eyes to see Christ's beauty.⁴⁰

Even men cannot withstand the beauty of Christ. Christ is described almost in homoerotic terms,⁴¹ and Augustine reaches a climax in this section: "*Omnes homines superat illius pulchritudo*" (his beauty surpasses all other human beauty!).⁴² Christ was appalling to carnally (*animaliter*) minded eyes, but irresistible to the psyche, the spiritual (*spiritualiter*) eye. This psychochristology implies therefore that the physical body is marginalised for the sake of

³⁹ Augustine, "In Psalmum 127," Online: http://www.kennydominican.joyeurs.com/LatinPatrology/PL_Augustine/esposizioni_salmi/index2.htm.

⁴⁰ Augustine, "In Psalmum 127," Online: http://www.kennydominican.joyeurs.com/LatinPatrology/PL_Augustine/esposizioni_salmi/index2.htm; Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms*, 104.

⁴¹ Both Barthes and Baudrillard notes that seduction destabilises gender and other hierarchical constructs: Barthes, *Le plaisir du texte*, 16; Jean Baudrillard, *De la seduction* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 1979), 22; Burrus, Jordan and MacKendrick, *Seducing Augustine*, 7.

⁴² Augustine, "In Psalmum 127," Online: http://www.kennydominican.joyeurs.com/LatinPatrology/PL_Augustine/esposizioni_salmi/index2.htm. Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms*, 104.

the larger, communal body of Christ, a typical Pauline discourse.⁴³ The spiritual reading must lead to exemplary moral behaviour.

This morality is enflamed, according to Augustine, by chaste fear and love for the Bridegroom (...*multi fortasse hoc timore casto inflammabuntur in amorem castum...*; ...many of you will be enkindled by chaste fear and thereby catch fire with chaste love).⁴⁴ The relationship between the husband-Christ and the wife-church is based on love, and not fear. It is truly a case of absence making the heart grow fonder. An adulteress, according to Augustine, fears the return of the husband, while the chaste woman fears his departure and longs for his return.⁴⁵ The *parousia* of Christ is seen as the satisfying of the passionate anticipation of the longing wife.

E MARTYRDOM AS ORGASM

In his next line of thinking, Augustine changes the very foundation of the psalm. As it was stated earlier, the erotic domesticity served the function of constructing the blessed *pater familias*, a bastion of masculinity and virility, and also an *exemplum* of the ideal Israelite society. But here, Augustine spiritualises this domesticity. The blessed man is no longer the same as the man in the Ancient Near Eastern context of the psalm. It is now the person who has become one with Christ. He uses the example of the martyr Felix:

Ergo, fratres, Felix martyr et vere felix et nomine et corona, cuius hodie dies est, contempsit mundum. An forte quia timebat Dominum, inde erat felix, inde erat beatus, quia uxor eius tamquam vinea fertilis erat in terra, et filii eius circumdederant mensam eius? Omnia ista perfecte habet, sed in corpore illius qui hic describitur: et quia sic ille intellexit, contempsit praesentia, ut acciperet futura.

This is why the martyr Felix, whose festival we keep today, had the strength to spurn the world, brothers. And truly Felix was an apt name for him; he was felicitous in his name and felicitous in the crown he won. Does that mean that because he was a God-fearing man he deserved the felicity and blessedness here on earth of a wife like a fertile vine and children all round his table? He certainly enjoys these blessings to perfection, but within the body we are

⁴³ See 1 Cor 12; Dale B. Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

⁴⁴ Augustine, "In Psalmum 127," Online: http://www.kennydominican.joyeurs.com/LatinPatrology/PL_Augustine/esposizioni_salmi/index2.htm. Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms*, 104–5.

⁴⁵ Augustine, "In Psalmum 127," Online: http://www.kennydominican.joyeurs.com/LatinPatrology/PL_Augustine/esposizioni_salmi/index2.htm.

talking about in this psalm; and because Felix understood this, he turned away from present joys to gain those still in the future.⁴⁶

The audience would now ask how Ps 127 would be applicable to the martyr Felix, and Augustine explains. There is a new *oikonomia* present, different from that of the context of the psalm in the Hebrew Bible. There is now a heavenly domesticity at work, and although Felix seems cursed rather than blessed, with no fertile wife and sprouting children around him, in this new heavenly *oikonomia*, he is indeed blessed. It starts with an important discursive shift, an event of body-swapping. Felix enjoys the blessings now not within the body of a virile and masculine *pater familias*, but within the Christic body that is the church (*omnia ista perfecte habet, sed in corpore illius qui hic describitur*). In fact, Felix enjoys these blessings now in the way they were "intended" to be enjoyed, in the future, perfected sense. The word-play between "felicitous" and "blessed" is clear (*inde erat felix, inde erat beatus*). The implication is that the death of Felix was both masculine (*forte*) and also, I would argue, fertile. The notion of the blood of the martyrs as seed, or rather, sperm, is one that dates back very early, famously extrapolated by Tertullian.⁴⁷ The virility of Christ and fertility of the church is especially demonstrated in the effect of the killing of the martyrs. Martyrologies are highly eroticised and sexual discourses, and represent the pornographic *imaginaire* of early Christianity.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Augustine, "In Psalmum 127," Online: http://www.kennydominican.joyeurs.com/LatinPatrology/PL_Augustine/esposizioni_salmi/index2.htm. Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms*, 102.

⁴⁷ Johannes N. Vorster, "The Blood of the Female Martyrs as the Sperm of the Early Church," *R&T* 10/1 (2003): 66–99.

⁴⁸ Showing the relevance of this issue, several studies have extrapolated the socio-cultural and psycho-sexual tendencies of early Christian martyrologies; cf. Victor Saxer, *Morts, Martyrs, Reliques en Afrique Chrétienne aux Premiers Siècles: Les Témoignages de Tertullien, Cyprien, et Augustin à la Lumière de l'Archéologie Africaine* (Paris: Éditions Beauchesne, 1980); Peter R. L. Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women & Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 65–82; Judith Perkins, *The Suffering Self: Pain and Narrative Representation in the Early Christian Era* (London: Routledge, 1995); Shaw, "Passions of the Martyrs"; Gillian Clark, "Bodies and Blood: Late Antique Debate on Martyrdom, Virginity, and Resurrection," in *Changing Bodies, Changing Meanings: Studies on the Human Body in Antiquity* (ed. Dominic Montserrat; London: Routledge, 1998), 99–115; Vorster, "Female Martyrs"; Elizabeth A. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); Lucy Grig, *Making Martyrs in Late Antiquity* (London: Duckworth, 2004); Stavroula Constantinou, *Female Corporeal Performances: Reading the Body in Byzantine Passions and Lives of Holy Women* (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 2005); Virginia Burrus, *Saving Shame: Martyrs, Saints and Other Abject Subjects* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); David Frankfurter, "Martyrology and the Prurient Gaze," *JECS* 17/2 (2009): 215–45; Patricia Cox Miller, *The Corporeal Imagination: Signifying the Holy in Late Ancient Christianity* (Phila-

With Augustine, however, the sado-eroticism of these antique martyr-narratives is substituted with a spiritualised discourse relating to martyrdom. The sexualised death of the martyrs, and the erotic act of reading, and even prurience, as demonstrated by Frankfurter,⁴⁹ teases the one who would engage the martyrological text/discourse. In the light of textual sexuality and the sex life of the psalm, the literary death of the martyr Felix (and others), and the resultant impregnation and birth via death as signified by both Tertullian and Augustine, could be surmised in Barthes's notion of reading as *la petite mort* ("the little death" – referring to orgasm), the final encapsulation of *jouissance*.⁵⁰ The climactic death of the martyr is also logo-orgasmic, and impregnation and birth (in Augustine's case, church growth) is inevitable. As Barthes relates orgasm to the ancient Greek notion of the expenditure of the vital life-force,⁵¹ so too the spectacular expulsion of the martyr's life becomes orgasmic - *la petite mort par excellence*.

F THE CHURCH AS WIFE AND PROGENY OF CHRIST

The problem Augustine faces with his prosopological reading of the psalm is the fact that there are more than two characters in the psalm. There is the man, the wife and the children. Augustine only has two surrogates for these, namely Christ and the church. To overcome this exegetical difficulty, Augustine proposes a dual-ontology of the church – the church is both the wife and the progeny of Christ. Augustine explains:

Quae est uxor, ipsi sunt et filii? In istis carnalibus nuptiis et coniugiis, alia uxor et alii filii: in Ecclesia quae uxor, ipsi filii. Ad Ecclesiam enim pertinebant Apostoli, et in membris Ecclesiae erant. Ergo in coniuge ipsius erant, et coniux erant secundum portionem suam quam in membris obtinebant.

Who is the wife? And who are the children? In carnal marriage relationships the wife and the children are distinct, but in the church's case wife and children are identical. The apostles belonged to the church and were among the church's members. This means that they

delphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009); Jennifer A. Glancy, *Corporal Knowledge: Early Christian Bodies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); and several articles in the edited volume: Jakob Engberg, Uffe H. Eriksen and Anders K. Petersen, *Contextualising Early Christian Martyrdom* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2011).

⁴⁹ Frankfurter, "Martyrology and the Prurient Gaze."

⁵⁰ Barthes, *Le plaisir du texte*, 36–40; cf. also: Elizabeth Locey, *The Pleasures of the Text: Violette Leduc and Reader Seduction* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 20–22.

⁵¹ Ralph Norman, "Jouissance, Generation and the Coming of God," *Theology and Sexuality* 14/2 (2008): 153-80.

were within Christ's consort, but at the same time they were his consort, with regard to the share they had among his members.⁵²

Augustine continues to build on the notions of fictive kinship relationships among Christians, which enables relations and familial positions to be fluid and mobile. He especially refers to Matt 12:48-50: "Who is my mother, who are my brothers?" And he stretched out his hand over his disciples, saying: "These are my mother and my brothers...those who do the will of my Father..." But by quoting this passage, Augustine complicates his situation, because now the church is also Christ's mother. How could this be possible? Augustine explains that this is because Christ is inside Christians, who are born out of the church every day. The fluidity of fictive kinship relations makes it possible to avoid connotations of incest (which was a common accusation against Christians in the first few centuries).

The fertility of the church is representative of its blessing according to Augustine. In his explanation of Ps 127:5a: "The Lord bless you from Zion," he explains that blessing is not dependant on ethnocultural identity. This blessing is related to Gen 1:22: "Increase and multiply." Augustine warns that the primary meaning of this verse is spiritual, in the sense of the church being multiplied. But he does not hesitate to provide guidelines for people who are physically virile and fertile, who have many children. Functioning almost as a type of pedagogic birth-control, Augustine advises that it is not in the number of children that blessing lies, but in bringing up good children. This is applicable to both the earthly household and the church.

Finally, Augustine admonishes his audience that the blessedness of this fertile physical and spiritual life is subject to attacks from the devil. Augustine constructs an elaborate polemology against fleshly desires. Now the tension mentioned in the introduction of this study comes to the fore. He states:

Videtur enim quia pugnae non desunt, et pugnamus cum concupiscentiis nostris. Pugnamus foris cum infidelibus et inoboedientibus hominibus; pugnamus intus cum suggestionibus, cum perturbationibus carnalibus...

You are well aware that warfare never ceases, for we must fight our unruly desires. We wage outward battles with unbelievers and rebels and inward battles against the urges and tumults of the flesh...⁵³

⁵² Augustine, "In Psalmum 127," Online: http://www.kennydominican.joyeurs.com/LatinPatrology/PL_Augustine/esposizioni_salmi/index2.htm. Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms*, 109.

⁵³ Augustine, "In Psalmum 127," Online: http://www.kennydominican.joyeurs.com/LatinPatrology/PL_Augustine/esposizioni_salmi/index2.htm. Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms*, 114.

The outward battles probably refer to the struggle in the North African church between the Catholics and the Donatists and Circumcellions. Wars for church buildings and land between Catholics and Donatists were common, and laced with religious intolerance and invective. After taking over a building, for instance, the Donatists performed purification rituals like whitewashing the walls, sprinkling holy water and scraping the altars to rid the space of the defilement caused by the Catholics.⁵⁴ The Donatists considered themselves the new Israel, and the Catholics were regarded as the ungodly nations surrounding Israel and threatening them with defilement.⁵⁵ The inward battles rage against the human desires (*concupiscentii*). Even though the language of erection and penetration is present throughout the sermon, there is still a strong apprehension against physical lust. This tension is maintained in the homily.

G POST-COITAL REMARKS

This article aimed to provide a libidinal reading of Augustine's sermon on Ps 127; by peeping through this late ancient lens on the text, we have caught a glimpse of the "sex life" of a psalm; how it functioned libidinally and erotically. By utilising the theories of Lyotard and Barthes, the textual sexuality of both the sermon and the Psalm was highlighted. Psalm 127 contains numerous references to fertility, and masculinity – two key aspects of sexuality. In the ancient near-eastern context of the psalm, the virile body of the blessed man and his fertile wife served as social parallelisms. The fertile wife is indicative of the ideal society. Augustine's reading adjusts this perspective. The virile man is now the symbol of Christ, and the fertile wife the symbol of the church (i.e. the ideal Christian society). Augustine's method also had an inherent libidinality, especially with his view of the text as *involucrum*, which must be voyeuristically undressed and penetrated via meditation – thereafter follows impregnation and semantic birth – meaning is created. This erotic *eisegesis* is implemented by Augustine in his preaching of Ps 127 on the feast day of the martyr Felix. Christ is the beautiful, strong and virile man in the psalm, irresistible and potent, with his loving and fertile wife, the church. The children are also the church, since the church gives birth to them. The martyrs are especially highlighted by Augustine, since their orgasmic deaths symbolised insemination and thus, church growth. A constant tension, however, was present throughout the sermon, which is typical of Augustine's thinking on sexuality in general.⁵⁶ The spiritual sexuality is erected as the opposite pole of sinful, earthly lust. The spiritualisation of sexuality and especially fertility makes Augustine's reading creative and seductive to his listeners and to readers of the text today.

⁵⁴ Glen W. Bowersock, Peter R. L. Brown & Oleg Grabar, eds., *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1999), 378.

⁵⁵ Maureen Tilley, "Sustaining Donatist Self-Identity: From the Church of the Martyrs to the *Collecta* of the Desert," *J ECS* 5 (1997): 21-35.

⁵⁶ Cf. especially: Sawyer, "Celibate Pleasures"; Soble, "Augustine's Sex Life."

We have seen in this study a reading of the Psalm that was sensitive to its textual sexuality. The psalm, with its references to fertility and masculinity, has a sex life of its own, duly noted by Augustine and strategically spiritualised. The value of this reading for scholarship and laity today lies in its continuity of similar sexual readings from late antiquity, through the medieval period, and into the post-modern philosophical *imaginaire*.⁵⁷ Whether it emanates from Augustine, Abelard, Barthes or Lyotard, textual sexuality cannot be ignored. It illuminates aspects of the source-text, in this case Ps 127, which are valuable for a reading in a society daily shaped and influenced by individual sexualities. Textual sexuality has the potential to be an invigorating and creative reading strategy in post-modern society. It challenges us to adopt a new rhetoric, a new language, when approaching ancient texts.

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⁵⁷ Cf. for example: Jurie H. Le Roux, "Augustine and the Study of the Psalms (Or: The Psalms as a Book of Enjoyment and as an Answer to a Question)," *OTE* 16/3 (2003): 624–33; Jurie H. Le Roux, "Augustine, Gadamer and the Psalms (Or: The Psalms as the Answer to a Question)," in *Psalms and Liturgy* (ed. Dirk J. Human and Cas J. A. Vos; London: T & T Clark, 2004), 123–30.

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