Genre Analysis and Early Christian Martyrdom Narratives: A Proposal

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This essay takes its inspiration from one of John Collins’s longstanding research interests: literary genre. In the 1970s, Collins participated in a groundbreaking study of the apocalypse genre as a part of the Society of Biblical Literature’s Biblical Literature Genres Project, culminating in the publication of the seminal issue of *Semeia* 14 under Collins’s editorship (1979). Collins’s own contributions to that issue have been highly influential, as have the many publications over the intervening three decades in which he picked up, expanded, clarified, and further nuanced his earlier ideas about the apocalypse genre.1 My interest here is in exploring the implications of Collins’s theoretical genre-related insights, but with a different literary corpus in view: namely, early Christian martyrdom accounts of the first few centuries C.E.2

One finds in contemporary scholarship on martyrdom literature several common presuppositions related to genre. First, virtually all historians agree that persecutions of early Christians were not as frequent and systematic as the accounts themselves imply;3 as such, they should not be taken generically

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2 The traditional categories of “Christian,” “pagan,” and “Jewish” have been challenged from a number of directions. In this chapter, I use the qualifier “Christian” with the understanding that definitions of Christianity/ies have always been contested, and were especially so in the first few centuries of the Common Era.

3 As G. E. M. de Ste. Croix put it, “Official publication of imperial constitutions [was] an extremely inefficient and haphazard process.” “Why Were the Christians Persecuted?” *Past*
as “nonfiction.”

Second, scholars today take it for granted that genre is significant; they recognize that, in Derridean terms, “there is no genreless text.”

Third, most martyrdom scholars are cognizant of the complex ways in which generic features influence both authorial practices and readerly expectations, and thus scholars typically avoid the sharp classificatory demarcations made by previous generations.

Fourth, in recent decades, scholars of ancient Christianity have been preoccupied with the intended and unintended sociorhetorical functions that martyrdom narratives fulfilled in early Christian communities. This latter focus has given rise to a variety of proposals.

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6 How ancient writers and readers conceived of genre and how genre functions in the readerly experience are different questions, though scholars often conflate them. See John Frow’s definitional distinctions in Genre (New York: Routledge, 2006), esp. 10.

7 Some contemporary scholars strongly disparage the work of the Bollandists. See, e.g., Lucy Grig, Making Martyrs in Late Antiquity (London: Duckworth, 2004), 146–51.


9 Here, I focus on narratives specifically, though “martyrdom literature” obviously includes non-narrative texts (e.g., sermons and exhortations, philosophical and theological apologetic treatises, revelation discourses, apocryphal acts, etc.). See Candida Moss, “Current Trends In The Study Of Early Christian Martyrdom,” Bulletin for the Study of Religion 41 (2012): 22–29 at