



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Preposterous revelations: Visions of Apocalypse and martyrdom in Hollywood cinema 1980-2000

Copier, L.T.

Publication date

2009

Document Version

Final published version

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Copier, L. T. (2009). *Preposterous revelations: Visions of Apocalypse and martyrdom in Hollywood cinema 1980-2000*.

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

Chapter Three

Muscular, Monstrous, Maternal: Female Martyrdom in ALIEN3

Observe how complex is a mother's love for her children, which draws everything toward an emotion felt in her inmost parts...

4 Maccabees 14:13

Introduction

The Book of Maccabees, from which the epigraph of this chapter is taken, is one of the earliest examples of female martyrdom in the Judeo-Christian tradition. 4 Maccabees recounts the martyrdom of a Jewish mother and her seven sons, who refused to break Jewish law and eat forbidden food. One by one, the seven brothers are gruesomely martyred, while the mother is forced to watch them die. As David A. DeSilva argues, the apocryphal Book of Maccabees is an influential martyrological text.¹ It is a philosophical demonstration, influenced by Platonism and Stoicism, on the “mastery of devout reason over the passions.” In 4 Maccabees, DeSilva notes, “the principal emotion that the mother has to master is maternal love” (71). She urges her sons to die for their faith, rather than renounce that faith and remain alive. Renouncing their faith would mean only temporary security, whereas a courageous death guarantees eternal life. Therefore, DeSilva argues, “by urging her sons on to die for God’s Torah, she is not losing them but rather ‘giving rebirth for immortality to the whole number of her sons

¹ In the view of DeSilva, the text influenced the thinking of Ignatius (whom I mentioned in the previous chapter). Furthermore, the ideology of the text resembles Revelation. Both 4 Maccabees and Revelation are concerned with bearing witness, conquering the enemy occurs by dying, and the death of the martyr is “not a degradation, but rather the path to eternal honour” (1998: 148).

(16.13)'" (73-74). Thus, the mother displays an extreme form of maternal love, which is expressed in her wish to see her sons die, knowing that in death she and her sons will be reunited for eternity. The complexity of maternal love, exemplified in the epigraph with its paradoxical and lethal qualities, is the focus of this chapter.

In this chapter, I explore a number of representations of female martyrdom, cases where women take up the role of the martyr. My aim is not to contrast these representations with the representations of male martyrdom to point out the difference between male and female martyrdom. Rather, female martyrdom, in my view, should be regarded as a separate entity. Its significance lies in the fact that women who chose the role of the martyr, determined by masculine values as this concept may be, in their act of martyrdom, at least temporarily, transgress the prevailing binary. Although some discursive elements of male martyrdom are relevant for female martyrdom as well, such as the defiance of authority and the manifestation of visions, a simple comparison between the two would reduce the significance of the female martyr.

I present the cases of three classical female martyrs, Thecla, Perpetua, and Blandina, whose martyrologies show the diversity among female martyrs. I develop my position in contradistinction to Elizabeth Castelli, whose final assessment of female martyrdom deems it no more than a "Pyrrhic victory" (*Martyrdom* 67), suggesting that the women who could endure the most gruesome acts of physical torture in the end still remained, and were valued by society as, women. Instead, I argue that these martyrs lay bare a gendered continuum between masculinity and femininity. The crucial marker of the female, the ability to bear children, is a recurring element in classical martyr stories. This repetition of the maternal in martyr discourse is of particular interest to me.

Subsequently, these texts will be read against a secular and contemporary manifestation of female martyrdom: Ellen Ripley

(played by Sigourney Weaver) of the science fiction film series ALIEN.² The character of Ripley, who is smart, competent, moral, and courageous, has had a profound influence on the genre of the action film. She serves as the prototype for a new female lead, which differs from the typical action, science fiction, and fantasy film heroine.³ Apart from these masculine qualities, Ripley also embodies a feminine quality: a mothering instinct. This instinct was latent in ALIEN, although it almost got her killed as she searched for her lost cat.⁴ In the sequel, ALIENS, Ripley discovers a little girl named Newt and begins to transform from the accidental heroine of the first film into the Good Mother of the second.⁵ The character of Newt functions as a surrogate daughter. Ripley actively sets up a new nuclear family, consisting of her, Newt, and corporal Dwayne Hicks. At the end of the film, Ripley manages to rescue her new “family” from the impending nuclear detonation of the planet.

Unfortunately, Ripley’s newly forged family is wiped out at the beginning of ALIEN3 (USA: David Fincher, 1992). After the narrow escape at the end of ALIENS, Ripley ends up on a planet populated by monkish men. In this setting, her femininity, read as transgression, becomes a pronounced aspect of her character. In ALIEN3, Ripley’s

² The series now consists of four films: ALIEN (USA: Ridley Scott, 1979), followed by ALIENS (USA: James Cameron, 1986), and ALIEN3 (USA: David Fincher, 1992), the supposedly final installment of the series. However, Ripley was brought to life one more time in ALIEN: RESURRECTION (USA: Jean-Pierre Jeunet, 1997).

³ More than any other film genre, science fiction has served to reinforce stereotypical notions of masculinity and femininity. The genre is even more dominated by males than the western (Bell-Metereau 1985: 209). An exception to the rule is the science fiction television series Star Trek, which features many female characters.

⁴ In one of the first articles on ALIEN, Judith Newton reads Ripley’s search for Jonesey the cat as “as impulsive, humanitarian, and therefore traditionally feminine action.” This, Newton suggests, robs Ripley of her feminist qualities and “subtly reinvests [her] with traditionally feminine qualities” (1990: 86).

⁵ The sequel also reveals an important aspect of Ripley’s character background: the fact that she has a daughter. Due to Ripley’s “hypersleep,” which lasted over 57 years, her daughter has died of old age by the time Ripley is rescued and awakens again in ALIENS.

perennial battle with the alien(s) reaches its climax. The film ends with the gruesome event of Ripley giving birth to the alien.⁶ In the final scene of the film, she chooses a martyr's death by deliberately plunging into a cauldron of molten lead. Her death, I argue, is governed by intertextual and iconographical elements from classical martyrdom discourse. I address two readings of the ALIEN film series. The films of the ALIEN series have been subject to extensive analysis in film studies, particularly with regard to the representation of their female hero. Analogous to the classical martyrs, the character of Ripley, the self-sacrificial heroine of ALIEN3, is endowed with feminine as well as masculine traits. The two readings upon which I focus appear to be different: while the first, by Yvonne Tasker, proposes a "positive" evaluation of the female heroine, the second interpretation, by Barbara Creed, uncovers a "fundamental problem" within the general representation of women in film, and hence cannot but be negative in conclusion. Yet, the two readings share a common denominator: both highlight the conflation of the female with the maternal. The question then is, when Ripley's martyrdom is read against classical martyrdom, to what extent does this contemporary representation reconfigure its historical predecessors?

⁶ The traumatic event of an alien birth is by no means novel within the ALIEN series; in the two preceding films, several characters fell victim to this gruesome death. Ripley's destiny is cleverly foreshadowed in ALIENS, when she, just awakened after 57 years of sleep, is troubled by the nightmare of her giving birth to an alien. As Lynda K. Bundtzen remarks with respect to this scene, the spectator's confusion about the actual status of a scene (is it a dream or is it real?) is a common "cinematic trick." She argues, "we believe the dream to be reality, and the film thereby enacts an unthinkable horror, the potential birth of Alien otherness in Ripley's body" (106). Ripley's dream can also be read as a sign of premonition.

Dynamics of Repetition

Before I turn to the cases of the classic female martyrs, I want to point out the *a priori* preposterous nature of the two components in my constellation of cultural texts. As Castelli argues in relation to the martyr Thecla, her martyr story exemplifies the “culture making” dimensions of martyrdom that “depend upon repetition and dynamics of recognition” (*Martyrdom* 136). The continual retelling and rereading of this story in literature as well as in the visual arts raise the question of historical accuracy and the relevancy of the past today. Castelli inquires into the status of the historical predecessor as well as into its “function as a meaningful resource for the present” (136). Castelli’s argument has strong affinities with my own. Factual historicity recedes (136). The question of whether Thecla, or any of the other classical martyrs, are actual historical figures cannot be unequivocally answered. That question is irrelevant, Castelli argues, since the “commemorative narratives and representations take on lives of their own in rereadings, retellings, reinscriptions” (136). Crucial in this quote is the “lives of their own” these martyrs take on. These “lives” should be understood as a-historical, in the sense that they exceed their historical context, although they trace an alternative historicity of their own.

The crux of her argument regarding martyrdom and history resonates with my approach of history as preposterous in Bal’s sense. If there is a history, Castelli claims, it “oscillates and adapts itself over time, sacrificing none of its authority in its changing focus, its amplification of details, and its *transformation* of its object” (137, emphasis added).

This formulation exemplifies the analytical usage of the concept of preposterous history. Although my prime object, the contemporary manifestation of female martyrdom in Hollywood cinema, may be centuries away from Castelli’s object, her method of reading the object, through quotation, citation, allusion, and

iconography, is as relevant for my project as for hers. The discourse of martyrdom is powerful because of its adaptability and, critically, the transformation of the object that it allows. The object is not only appropriated and translated, but changed inherently.

The second element in my preposterous constellation, the film *ALIEN3*, displays a similar form of historical transformation. The adaptability of the film rests on a particular technological quality, namely, the DVD player. I want to emphasize an important, but often overlooked connection between the matter of film, celluloid, and the analysis of film. In her book entitled *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image*, Laura Mulvey addresses the effect of the digital revolution on cinema. New technologies such as video, but more importantly DVD, have transformed the way we experience film. The experience of watching a film on DVD is far removed from that of the traditional cinema audience bound to watch a film in its given order at 24 frames per second, Mulvey claims. A new kind of interactive spectatorship is introduced, as the viewer is capable of skipping, repeating, slowing down, speeding up, and reversing the traditional flow of cinema.

This type of spectatorship has implications, Mulvey argues, “for the cohesion of narrative, which comes under pressure from external discourses, that is, production context, anecdote, history” (27). This argument has far-reaching consequences for the traditional methods of film theory and film analysis. The release of old films in a special edition format, which often includes restored and previously unseen material, Mulvey argues, “transforms the ways in which old films are consumed” (21). A restored and extended version of a film can, and perhaps should, be the incentive for a new analysis. Due to technological development, the original object is transformed, no longer what it was before. Here one can observe the link between Castelli and Mulvey. In their work, they emphasize the transformative powers of history and technology respectively. For that reason, their

work constitutes the theoretical frame that carries this chapter. I call the DVD an instance of preposterous technology. In the case of ALIEN3, one should reconsider earlier interpretations since, thanks to the DVD, a crucial augmentation has been incorporated into the film text: an alternative ending that has not been seen before in the film version. Before discussing the preposterousness of the film, located in both its main character and its several endings, I will elaborate on the paradoxical gender status of classical female martyrs.

The Paradox of the Classical Female Martyr

In the Christian discourse of martyrdom, gender and power often work in conflicting ways. Although one can claim martyrdom to be what one commentator called an “equal opportunity employer” for women and men, martyrdom largely draws on and generates ideals of “masculinity” (Corrington Streete 349). The previous two chapters showed the connection between martyrdom and masculinity, and how the two mutually reinforce one another. In the historical context, martyr images frequently entail masculine notions of identity such as gaining power over one’s opponents, self-mastery, and endurance (Penner and Vander Stichele 177). As Elizabeth Castelli remarks, “the martyr’s death is a masculine death, even when (or perhaps especially when) it is suffered by a woman” (*Martyrdom* 62). This paradox points to the subversive influence that stories of female martyrdom can exert over discourses of gender.

Castelli continues to argue that notions of masculine and feminine characteristics within the discourse of martyrdom are, at the same time, ambivalent and unstable. Gender is flexible to a certain extent, in that women can take on male characteristics. One explanation for this ambivalence resides in the status of gender as “a dimension of worldliness that can be left behind with enthusiasm and without regret,” Castelli states (62). The spiritual act of martyrdom transcends the earthly sufferings of the flesh, and renders that flesh,

whether male or female, obsolete. However, Castelli adds, this dynamic at the same time preserves the intrinsic dichotomy between male and female: “the gender binary need not always be binding though its intrinsic value system ... [yet] remains relentlessly intact” (63). Women can be martyrs on the condition that they abandon their femininity and adopt the masculine values of strength, endurance, and steadfastness. Hence, gender difference is at once transgressed and reaffirmed by the female martyr who dies like a man. Castelli’s evaluation of martyrdom as a paradoxical domain where gender rules may be transgressed, though ultimately reaffirmed, opens up a range of possible readings of female martyrs.

Three Christian martyrs serve as the basis for my discussion on female martyrdom. Two of them are well known, Thecla and Perpetua. The third, Blandina, is more obscure; yet, her story has close intertextual connections with the story of Perpetua as well as with the already mentioned Jewish account of female martyrdom in 4 Maccabees. Blandina’s text functions as a possible connection between earlier, Jewish, martyrdom and later, Christian, martyrdom. The similarities between these three stories point out the intimate relationship of influence between accounts of Jewish and Christian martyrdom.

Daniel Boyarin proposes to read the Jewish and Christian discourses on martyrdom not as two opposing entities, but as two complexly related parts of one larger religious system. Rather than focusing on the prevailing dichotomy, it should be broken down through a close analysis of recurring motifs, themes, and images. Analogous to Boyarin’s claim on the futility of pinpointing the origin of martyrdom—pointless in view of the fact that martyrdom came into being as a perennial recirculation the starting point of which cannot be traced back—are the striking similarities and variations on themes and images these texts display.

My starting point for dissecting this network is the account

of Thecla's martyrdom. The text is collected in the *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, a series of post-biblical writings that transmit deeds and experiences of apostles and other persons of the apostolic generation. Thecla's story, which has the characteristics of a romance novel, can be found in the "Acts of Paul and Thecla." Thecla meets the apostle Paul when she overhears him preaching, and becomes mesmerized by his message. She is converted to Christianity, and breaks off her engagement to another man in order to follow Paul. When Paul is banished from the city of Iconium for his teaching, Thecla is condemned to death by burning. When she voluntarily climbs the pyre, God quenches the fire with a great thunderstorm. Thecla and Paul escape together to the city of Antioch. There, Thecla is courted by an imperial priest named Alexander. When she scornfully rejects him, she is condemned to death for a second time. This time, she will have to fight with wild animals. Again, Thecla is saved, as the animals refuse to attack her; the lioness sent out against Thecla sits down at her feet.

Thecla escapes death and martyrdom proper for the second time in a row. This leads to the paradox that Thecla is commemorated as a martyr, while not having actually suffered a martyr's death. Instead, she is released by the prosecuting authorities and rejoins Paul, who instructs her to teach the word of God. Thecla now cuts her hair and puts on men's clothing in order to be able to travel and evangelize. She rids herself of the external markings of her gender in order to take up the role of teacher and evangelist, a role that was not readily available to women.⁷ This aspect of Thecla's story suggests an important element of female martyrdom: the renunciation of femininity in favor of masculinity. Thecla's masculinity resides in the taking on of the external trappings of masculinity. Femininity cannot only be discarded in favor of an exterior display of masculinity, as Thecla did, but the female martyr

can also adopt a masculine mental state. This asset of the female martyr will be dealt with in more detail in the story of Perpetua.

The third century Christian and partly autobiographical text, *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas*, recounts the imprisonment, dreams, visions, and ultimate death in the arena of the young Roman lady Perpetua and the slave woman Felicitas. It is no exaggeration to claim that Perpetua is the most famous female martyr in Western culture, perhaps only exceeded by the illustrious Joan of Arc. The key point I want to highlight is the gender transformation that Perpetua experiences in her vision the night before she is to be martyred. Perpetua's gender transformation differs significantly from Thecla's. Thecla takes on the visible markers of masculinity, whereas Perpetua undergoes a transformation in her way of thinking about herself as a woman and, crucially, as a mother. In Perpetua's account, the reader can trace her decision to become a martyr and to break away from traditional female and family patterns. In comparison to Thecla, this implies a more subversive transformation: Perpetua may be feminine on the outside, but she is masculine on the inside. The case of Perpetua is thus useful in two ways: it serves as a classic instance of female martyrdom as well as an example of the complex association and connection between the feminine maternal and the masculine martyr. This connection is absent in Thecla's story, but plays a crucial part in Perpetua's narrative.

The martyrdom of Perpetua has been the subject of much scholarly attention because it consists of an autobiographical section, the prison diary of Perpetua, and a pro- and epilogue written by an anonymous editor. The authenticity of the diary is generally undisputed and, as such, it presents the earliest extant writing by a Christian woman. Perpetua belonged to a group of Christians who

⁷ One could argue that Thecla is an example of what is called "passing." What typifies the act of passing are the appropriation of physical gender cues, in this case the cutting of hair, as well as certain behavioral attributes.

were arrested and subsequently executed. In her diary, Perpetua recounts the sufferings of prison life, her strained relationship with her father who desperately tries to convince Perpetua to abandon her Christian faith and, above all, the visions she experiences. Her fourth vision especially has attracted the attention of feminist scholars.

In this fourth and final vision, Perpetua finds herself in the arena facing an Egyptian opponent.⁸ She is stripped of her clothes and, at that moment, discovers that she has become a man: “And I was stripped naked, and I became a man.” In this dream, the physical markers of the male sex have replaced the markers of Perpetua’s female sex. The implication of this change is that Perpetua’s womanly weakness, a weakness that is taken to be physical as well as mental, is replaced by masculine strength, in the physical and mental way. Her mental strength and fervor, already immense as the story points out time and again, is matched by an equally powerful physical strength. Perpetua’s masculine mind, ready to face martyrdom, fits her male body, which will serve as the vehicle of that martyrdom. In the remainder of her vision, Perpetua defeats her Egyptian adversary by stepping on his head and she leaves the arena victoriously through the Gate of Life. This divine vision provides Perpetua with the mental strength and conviction that she will be victorious in the case of the real execution that will take place the next day.

According to the editor, who introduces the account of Perpetua’s death, she acted exceptionally bravely. He writes that the gladiator who was supposed to kill Perpetua was unable to do

⁸ Perpetua interprets her own vision, and particularly her Egyptian adversary, as a metaphor of the battle she, as a Christian, will have to wage against the Devil (personified by the Egyptian). She writes in her diary: “And I awoke; and I understood that I should fight, not with beasts but against the devil; but I knew that mine was the victory.” *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, translated by W.H. Shewring (London: 1931).

so. Perpetua guides and steadies his sword to her neck, which the editor views as a truly courageous act: “Perchance so great a woman could not else have been slain [...] had she not herself so willed it.” Perpetua’s shift from femininity to masculinity is different from Thecla’s shift, in that Perpetua undergoes a symbolic physical change. Her body takes on male characteristics in her vision, in contrast to Thecla who hides the female characteristics of her body. Perpetua’s masculine transformation also entails her repudiation of maternity, ultimately of her own child. Perpetua’s body, from the onset of the story marked as a maternal body capable of bearing children and feeding them, is adjusted to her mind. As a result, after her vision, Perpetua’s mind and body are aligned: they both have, in a symbolical manner, become masculine.

Margaret Miles provides an explanation for Perpetua’s miraculous gender transformation. The metaphor of “becoming male” was frequently used for women “who undertook to live an uncompromising Christian faith” and by women who “sought to union with Christ in martyrdom” (“Becoming Male” 55). Perpetua’s vision seems directly related to this metaphor. The vision’s physically powerful image provided her with the strength to prevail in the arena. In accordance with Miles’ interpretation, Castelli argues that Perpetua’s martyrdom problematizes conventional thought on the constrictions of gender: “Perpetua’s spiritual progress is marked by the social moving away from conventional female roles” (“I will Make Mary Male” 35).

The text recounts how Perpetua, the daughter, moves away from her father, who begs her to give up her faith to survive persecution by the Roman authorities. In the final move, which completes Perpetua’s detachment from femininity, she gives up her baby, refusing the maternal function.⁹ Perpetua gradually strips off what Castelli describes as “the cultural attributions of the female body” (35). This process is completed when even the physical marks

of femaleness have been removed. Only then is Perpetua ready to enact her martyr's death. The potential conflict between the roles of mother and martyr become apparent. Perpetua's story points to the incompatibility between these roles: mothers cannot be martyrs and vice versa. The two roles are mutually exclusive.

In her book *Perpetua's Passion: The Death and Memory of a Young Roman Woman*, Joyce Salisbury addresses the question whether Christian women had to renounce their motherhood to attain "Christian spiritual perfection" (87). A relevant document in this respect is 4 Maccabees. The influence of 4 Maccabees on early Christians is evident.¹⁰ Salisbury notes that the story functions primarily as an indication of what had changed in the conception of martyrdom from the Jews to the Christians. In the context of Judaism, the text is read as an account of the preservation of a brave, separate community within a dominant culture. The mother plays a vital part in the continuation of religion, law, and family. Christianity, however, created new communities, urging individuals to break away from existing family or societal structures. Therefore, Salisbury concludes, "Christian witness was more individual than Jewish community solidarity" (89). Perpetua's becoming masculine and her renunciation of the values of maternity can be read as signs of this Christian individuation in martyrdom in contrast to the Jewish conception of martyrdom, which stresses the centrality of family

⁹ Mary R. Lefkowitz states with regard to the stories of Christian women martyrs that many of them display a "surprising eagerness to abandon young infants." Felicitas gives away her newborn daughter. Similarly, Lefkowitz mentions the case of Eutychia and the Greek myth of the women of Theban, who abandoned and, in some cases, murdered their sons (1976: 419).

¹⁰ Galit Hasan-Rokem points out the close similarities between 4 Maccabees and the story of Perpetua. She states, "the further development of the female martyrological legend in early Christian and rabbinic Jewish cultures occurs not only simultaneously but also in mutual communication, constituting a dialogue of narratives" (2000: 123). See also DeSilva on the influence of 4 Maccabees on the martyrs of Lyons, one of the martyrs there was Blandina (1998: 151).

identity.

Perpetua may have been in doubt as to whether she should, or could, combine the roles of Roman mother and Christian martyr. As Salisbury puts it, “motherhood represented a physiological state that seems to have been inconsistent with martyrdom” (142). Initially, she had allowed her family to take care of her infant son but, after her sentencing, she wanted to have her son with her in prison. Her father refused. From that moment, Perpetua is no longer a mother. She is strengthened in this decision by the appearance of a sign of divine approval: her baby has no more need for her breast. Unlike the mother of 4 Maccabees, she gives up her son and dies alone. So, Perpetua’s story adds another characteristic to the female martyr: next to the renunciation of femininity, these women deal with the impossibility of being a mother and a martyr at the same time. Perpetua’s vision of becoming male is a literal representation of this impossibility, whereas the vision simultaneously provides her a momentary way out of this impossibility, or suspends the impossibility temporary. However, once Perpetua fulfills her actual martyrdom, both her femininity and her maternity come back with a vengeance.

Female Martyrdom as Ambiguous Spectacle

In my discussion on gender and martyrdom so far, it may appear that the physicality of the martyr is insignificant. The stories of Thecla and Perpetua point to the gender bending and transformation of the female body, and thereby render that particular body obsolete. The attainment of martyrdom comes at the cost of female appearance and physique, which are traded for a masculine body and mental state. However, as these stories unfold and reach their climax in the arena, the spectacular return of the female body is inevitable.

The stories of both Thecla and Perpetua are often considered rare examples of models for the behavior of female

Christians or, more generally, women. However, as Gail Paterson Corrington argues, these seemingly positive images should not be taken for granted. The valuation of Perpetua as what Bal has called a “proto-feminist heroine,” alluring as this description may be, ignores the underlying gender model upon which the figure of Perpetua is based (241). This model, Corrington argues, is distinctively masculine. Perpetua’s act of making herself masculine signals not only her denial of the female body and sexuality, but also indicates a clear valuation of masculinity over femininity. Corrington’s line of argumentation reiterates Castelli’s evaluation of female martyrdom: the female martyr remains caught in a gender binary that privileges the masculine over the feminine. Put differently, masculinity, separated from a strictly anatomical fact, is taken to be the measure of virtue. As Corrington explains, women such as Perpetua “pattern themselves after models of power and autonomy available in their world and in its literature: the male apostles, who in turn are patterned on the model of Christ” (23).

Since representations of women in the early Christian world were absent, male models were the only ones available to women who wished to gain spiritual empowerment. Miles is even more pronounced in her assessment of the development of a religious self in women: “for women, then, courage, conscious choice, and self-possession constituted gender transgression” (“Becoming Male” 55). However, Perpetua’s masculinity also works the other way around. Castelli observes that a woman taking on masculine virtues delivers a strong message to male readers, effectively “shaming [them] into more forthright displays of piety” (Visions 15).

Even though “becoming male” was applauded by male Christians and regarded as a crucial step in acquiring religious identity, the stories of female martyrdom all point to a recurring confusion over the status of the female-body-made-male. The display of the naked female body during public execution, the martyrdom

proper, solicited varied emotions from the gathered crowd, such as grief, excitement, disgust, as well as, Miles points out, “voyeuristic glee” (*Becoming Male* 57). The public denuding of women was one way of stripping them of dignity and power. Nevertheless, the display of the nude female body does not result in the disempowerment of the victim in all cases.

The stories of the female martyrs Perpetua and Thecla, together with the martyrdom of Blandina, served as my template. In all these martyrdoms, the ambiguous pleasures of looking at the female body are a recurring trait. In contrast to Thecla and Perpetua, Blandina’s story is not well known. Eusebius, a bishop who is mostly remembered for his *History of the Church*, transmitted the account of her martyrdom. Blandina, a slave woman belonging to a Christian master and a converted Christian herself, was part of a group of Christians from Lyon and Vienne, two Christian communities in the South East of France. The group was arrested and subjected to the most horrible tortures, which Eusebius describes in painstaking detail (van Henten and Avemarie *Martyrdom and Noble Death* 98-100). Even though Blandina is admittedly one of the weaker members of the group, on account of being a woman, she withstands the torment gloriously. Eventually, she is the last martyr to die.

Blandina’s martyrdom exemplifies the display of the tortured body. After extensive torturing and attacks by wild beasts, her torn body is fixed to a stake for general exhibition. To evaluate this display as mere spectacle for the onlookers is a serious misapprehension. The opposition between the active gaze of the crowd and the passive to-be-looked-at-ness of the martyr does not do justice to the premium martyrdom places on bodily suffering. As van Henten remarks with regard to Blandina and her fellow martyrs, “the battered body is evidence of the martyrs’ triumph and their participation in Christ’s suffering” (99-100). The display of the battered body proves the subject’s martyrdom.

In contrast, the case of Thecla can be read as a story of voyeuristic delight and denial. Miles' reading of Thecla's trials proposes "clothing and nakedness [as] leitmotifs" of the story ("Becoming Male 58). Contrary to Blandina, Thecla did not die a martyr, and the physical excesses Blandina endured do not befall her. However, Miles argues, Thecla's punishment is situated in her enforced public nakedness. The governor who orders Thecla's execution plays a crucial role in the seesaw of a voyeuristic desire thwarted and fulfilled. Initially, he orders Thecla to strip, only to be overwhelmed by the beauty of her body. In the arena, her naked body is miraculously clothed with a cloud of fire, which protects her from the stares of the crowd and from the animals meant to kill her.¹¹ After this unsuccessful execution, the governor orders Thecla to be clothed again. Thecla obeys, but stresses that only she herself and ultimately God have final control over whether she covers or strips her body. By linking the integrity of her body to her religious integrity and subjectivity, Thecla renders outside forces powerless. After her failed martyrdom, Thecla decides to hide the physical markers of her femininity. She cuts her hair and dresses in a masculine fashion. This reinforces the connection between physical and spiritual devoutness.

In the case of Perpetua, the means of execution is connected precisely to her femininity and sexuality. The execution of women was an unusual practice, and the authorities seized the opportunity to put on a grand spectacle for the crowd. Perpetua and Felicitas were to be killed by a wild beast. Interestingly, the beast was a heifer, a female cow, whereas a bull would have been

¹¹ Thecla's mode of execution displays strong parallels with the mid-second-century Martyrdom of Polycarp. Like Thecla, *Polycarp* was sentenced to the pile and yet is unharmed by the fire: "The fire, making the appearance of a vault [...] made a wall round about the body of the martyr; and it was there in the midst, not like flesh burning, but like [...] gold and silver refined in a furnace." Online source: the Internet Medieval Source Book: <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/martyrdom-polycarp-lightfoot.html>

the customary choice. This, Salisbury asserts, points to a symbolic dimension of the execution. Whereas the use of a bull “signaled [the] sexual dishonor” of the accused woman, the use of a heifer can be read as an indication of the even more serious nature of the offense. The deliberate choice of a female, instead of a male animal signals the women’s sexual degradation (141). Perpetua and Felicitas were no mere adulterers; their crimes were of a more severe order. Salisbury, following Brent Shaw’s reading of Perpetua, states that the women were suspected of being of a “different sort of sexuality” (141). Shaw argues that their sexuality was mocked to such an extent that they were simply not “real women” enough to be adulterers. “After all,” he remarks, “where were their husbands?” (7-8). It is safe to assume that the absence of Perpetua’s husband was caused by her conversion to Christianity. She had either rejected him or he had rejected her.

In the execution of the two women, the aspect of female nakedness, again, plays a crucial role. The condemned are brought into the arena naked, only covered by a net.¹² Upon seeing the women, the crowd protests against the fact that the physicality of the two reveals them to be mothers. The sight of these young, vulnerable and, most notably, maternal bodies was too much for the onlookers. Or, as Salisbury speculates, “the incongruity of lactating mothers shedding their blood in the arena” might have robbed the crowd of their viewing pleasure (142).¹³ Felicitas and Perpetua are dressed, brought back into the arena and killed. Salisbury underlines the incompatibility between the roles of martyr and mother: “mothers made milk, martyrs blood” (142).

In the descriptions of the three female classical martyrs, the

¹² The net apparently made it easier for the wild beast to attack its victim. As Shaw notes with respect to this method of execution, it appears to have been a typical form of shaming. Both Blandina and Thecla were subjected to this type of punishment (1993: 8, note 22).

recurring themes of female martyrdom have become evident. Crucial is their ability to transcend the limits of their female corporeality and its concomitant notions of femininity. As I have shown, female martyrs stretch the common assumptions about gender and gendered behavior. In their acts and behavior, they constitute a transgression of femininity to masculinity. In the story of Thecla, the physical integrity of her female body is coupled with a devout religious and mental attitude. The changes Thecla undergoes can be understood as mere changes in outward appearance; yet, such a reading would undercut the fact that her outer appearance and inner piety are strongly dependent on each other. Thecla's outward manifestation is an integral part of her mental state of mind. Blandina refutes common conceptions of the female as being the weaker sex. She is praised for her "manly," understood as physical and mental steadfastness, behavior in her martyrdom. She is literally the last (wo)man standing in the martyrdom of Lyon and Vienne.

Finally, the story of Perpetua offers the most challenging and complex picture of female martyrdom. In her vision, she transgresses the physical boundaries of her femininity. Her dream of becoming male uncovers the discourse on courage as a masculine trait. Perpetua's unease with her martyrdom, expressed in her uncertainty about whether she will be brave enough to face it, is represented in that dream. It functions as an empowerment for her, despite the fact that, after she wakes from that dream, she is still very much a woman. Ultimately, Perpetua acts heroically in the arena. More importantly, though, is her renunciation of her motherhood. In the abandonment of her child, Perpetua goes beyond set female behavior.

¹³ A contemporary example, which contests this classical paradigm, is the way in which Palestinian women, the so-called "mothers of the martyrs" combine the practice of maternal activism and sacrificial discourse. For a critical discussion on the empowering as well as the constraining effects of this image, see Julie Peteet (1997).

Despite Perpetua's unfeminine act of child abandonment, the markers of femininity persist. In all three stories, the transgressive move toward masculinity, or a changed appearance of femininity, is cut short. The recurring elements of nakedness, submission, and the maternal reinstate the femininity of the classical martyr. In the second part of this chapter, I look at Ripley as a contemporary female martyr. In her martyrdom, the three elements of nakedness, submission, and maternity are configured differently. The first two are virtually absent, whereas the maternal, due to the absence of the nudity and submission, is invested with a different significance. Ripley's divergent femininity is constructed and visually represented as corporeal. This, strangely enough, empowers her, since she does not have to discard or transcend that physique in the way the classical martyrs were forced to do.

The Muscular Mother

The muscular Hollywood cinema of the 1980s and 1990s, characterized by male stars such as Bruce Willis, Sylvester Stallone, and Arnold Schwarzenegger, is the focus of Yvonne Tasker's study, *Spectacular Bodies*. Aware of the emergence of the female action hero as the center of the action narrative, Tasker decides to focus on the representation of masculinity and femininity in the genre. She focuses on representations that exceed the traditional representations of women in film. The advent of the female action hero, not unlike the female martyr, opens up and broadens traditional imagery. An important parallel between the values of the classical martyr and the contemporary action film hero must immediately be asserted. Both the martyrological and the cinematic discourse emphasize courage, steadfastness, determination, and physical strength as indispensable for its respective heroes. My readings of Jericho Cane in *END OF DAYS* and Harry Stamper in *ARMAGEDDON* position the act of martyrdom as congruous within a larger discourse

on masculinity. The case of Ripley, the prototypical female action hero, signals a transgression, or intrusion, of this domain of masculinity.

Yvonne Tasker's reading of *ALIEN* and *ALIENS* focuses on the masculine, what she calls "musculine" nature of the heroine Ripley. The term "musculinity" Tasker argues, suggests the "extent to which a physical definition of masculinity in terms of a developed musculature is not limited to the male body within representation" (3). In certain cases, Tasker argues, female action heroes can be just as physically and mentally strong as their male counterparts. She concludes, "musculinity indicates the way in which the signifiers of strength are not limited to male characters" (149). This, I argue, enables the comparison between female martyrs and female action heroes. Tasker's concept of musculinity is indispensable for my discussion of female martyrs. It signifies the sliding scale between male and female aspects, as well the attendant notions of femininity and masculinity. As I have argued above, the classical female martyr transgresses and modifies gender categories. The contemporary female action hero does the same.

The musculine character of Ripley can be seen as a contemporary representation of the earlier paradigm set by Thecla and Perpetua. Ripley mirrors Thecla in the transformation of her outward appearance and her position within a group dominated by males and masculine values. She resembles Perpetua in her exceptional courage and the problematic function as a mother. Yet, despite the representation of a strong, gun-wielding woman in the film, Tasker rightfully, with a tinge of disappointment, remarks that these types of heroines are always at a certain point connected to configurations of motherhood. As she puts it, "[T]he ways in which image-makers have dealt with the 'problem' of the action heroine, [mobilizes] configurations of motherhood" (15). The maternal is again a crucial element in the restriction of a femininity that attempts to go

beyond its set limits. As a masculine heroine, Ripley transgresses the limitations of her gender, Tasker argues, but only to a certain point. In due course, the “maternal bond” is invoked and Ripley is as much maternal as she is masculine (152).¹⁴ Tasker perceives Ripley’s maternal characteristics as negative, whereas I argue that Ripley’s transgressive potential resides in particular in the combination of the maternal and the masculine.

Maternity constitutes the outer boundary of the masculinity of female heroines such as Ripley. Consequently, the three concepts that I bring into play are masculinity, maternity, and martyrdom. If martyrdom in the classical estimation was open to women, it could only be achieved by letting go of typical feminine traits, most importantly motherhood. In the case of Ripley, the reverse picture seems to emerge: motherhood and martyrdom are knotted together. She embraces her motherhood at the very moment of her sacrificial death. This analysis points to a reconsideration of the martyrological discourse discussed so far, which construes maternity and martyrdom as mutually exclusive.

Joan Scott’s seminal article on the concept of gender can be useful for the analysis of the ambivalent Ripley character. Scott provides a working definition of gender as an essential element of social relationships. Gender, according to Scott, consists of four interrelated elements. I focus on two of the elements she distinguishes. First, gender is represented in culturally available symbols. These symbols induce “multiple (and often contradictory) representations” (94). Second, the analysis of these symbols is based on normative concepts that take the form of rigid binary thinking, grounded in notions of femininity and masculinity. As a

¹⁴ Tasker mentions the publicity shot for *ALIENS* of Weaver “clutching a child in one arm, weapon in another” (151). This image perfectly encapsulates the ambiguity of the masculine action heroine. Unfortunately, Tasker does not expand on this. Instead, she emphasizes the vulnerability of the heroine and focuses on the threat of rape.

result, the potentially open interpretation of a symbol is foreclosed and its possibilities constrained. Scott argues that adherence to this type of analysis results in “the perpetual restoration of women’s supposedly more authentic, traditional role” (94). Instead, Scott insists on the disruption of binary thinking “to discover the nature of the debate or repression that leads to the appearance of timeless permanence in binary gender representation” (94).

In line with Scott’s analysis, the pop culture icon Ripley offers a manifold image of gender and femininity. She has unmistakable transgressive qualities. This is what Tasker calls a symbolic and iconographic transgression, a physically and mentally strong woman at the narrative center of the action-adventure film (15, 143). However, according to Tasker’s analysis, Ripley’s character balances her masculine side with a maternal one. Thus, this woman exhibits heroic qualities; she does so, however, without sacrificing her nurturing ones. By pitting the two qualities against each other, the normative one, the maternal, functions to reinforce the binary opposition, which was threatened with disruption. This line of argumentation effectively forecloses a deviant interpretation. The emphasis on Ripley’s nurturing qualities at the end of *ALIENS* restores her to the traditional female role of mother. When subjected to Scott’s conception of gender, Tasker’s final analysis of Ripley is a disappointing one. In *ALIEN3*, the femininity of Ripley takes center stage. More so than in the previous two films, it is represented as a dangerous aberration and her previously established maternal valor is tested.

De-sexing the Martyr’s Body

In *ALIEN3*, the rejection and derision of femininity is strongly motivated by the film’s plot. After her narrow escape at the end of *ALIENS*, Ripley finds herself stranded on the planet Fiorina 161. The planet is an exclusively male prison colony for convicted rapists and murderers.

With shaved heads and dressed in sackcloth, the men have taken a vow to have no contact with women. In addition, the prisoners have adopted an apocalyptic philosophy advocated by their spiritual leader, Dillon. The arrival of Ripley poses a threat to this closed and celibate community. The female outsider is viewed with a mixture of disgust and lust: she is repellent yet dangerously attractive to this group of rapists. Ripley's most visible sign of her femininity, her hair, is shaved off after her arrival, the prison complex is infested with lice, and the underwear she wore during her hypersleep is replaced by the standard sackcloth couture.¹⁵ As Thomas Doherty argues in his essay on the ALIEN trilogy, despite these efforts to de-feminize Ripley, her presence in this all-male environment "discombobulates the monastic social order" (193).

The forced assimilation of Ripley into this community echoes the rituals of conversion to Christian life and, in particular, echoes the story of Thecla. Ripley, like Thecla, is rid of the external markers of her femininity in order to endure in an exclusively male environment. According to Castelli, conversion is "constituted primarily as the practice of sexual renunciation" ("I Will Make Mary Male" 43). The fact that Ripley's hair is cut is no random act, but profoundly symbolic. As Castelli observes, the cutting of one's hair "continues to this day as the bodily signifier for women taking religious orders" (44). Furthermore, wearing men's clothing, which Castelli classifies as transvestism, is the more controversial sign of female piety and was regarded as "a resistance to the proper order of nature/society"

¹⁵ The spectacle of a woman with a shaved head should not be underestimated: the publicity material of ALIEN3 strongly capitalizes on the actress's baldhead. A large portion of the publicity shots show Sigourney Weaver lit from behind, thus placing extra emphasis on her baldness. The act of shaving her hair is, surprisingly enough, not shown in the film. In contrast, in a recent film, V FOR VENDETTA (USA: James McTeigue, 2005), the actual act of shaving is prominently featured. The actress Nathalie Portman, as the character Evey Hammond, is shaved in real time, in a long take that lasts several minutes.

(44). To travel freely and preach the gospel, Thecla renounced the common laws and practices of her society. Ripley's transformation echoes Thecla's; yet, a difference between the two women is apparent. In *ALIEN3*, the "de-sexing" of Ripley is not a resistance to an established order. It is a forced act of submission to the status quo.

The gender ambiguity as a result of these practices is, Castelli argues, generally taken as a sign of "special holiness" (43). The film certainly telegraphs, makes visually palpable the singularity of Ripley in practically every scene of the film. Yet, her nascent holiness is not enacted until the very end. Until her martyr's death, the de-sexualized, masculine and masculine Ripley is singular in an erotic way. In spite of her curbed femininity, she is alluring: a group of prisoners attempts to rape her.¹⁶ An enraged Dillon manages to save her in the nick of time. Later in the film, the lethality of Ripley's deviant femininity is articulated in a love scene between Ripley and Clemens, the prison doctor who is also a prisoner (a slightly more privileged transgressor among transgressors). After they have made love, Clemens is punished for his offense and killed by an alien. Ripley's sexual ambiguity is coupled with the literal "killing off" of the romantic subplot.¹⁷ Perhaps the word "romantic" is an ill-fitting adjective. As Doherty argues, "in the only interhuman sex act of the series, she [Ripley] coolly propositions and mates with Clemens" (196). These two instances of male sexual intrusion unto the female body, with its lethal consequences, indicate the increasingly "untouchable" nature of the Ripley character.¹⁸

¹⁶ This scene provides an interesting parallel with the Joan of Arc story: like Ripley, Joan was harassed and supposedly raped by her male guards while awaiting her final sentence. Again, Tasker's argument on the masculine woman's greater risk of being raped, as a punishment for her (tress)passing, reverberates in this scene of the film.

Ripley's physical transformation, with its markers of untouchable holiness, is completed with the act that concludes her conversion. Her death in the flames of the furnace is represented as a holy sacrifice, finishing the process of her becoming a holy woman or even a saint. The de-sexualized, masculine, masculine, holy body, still holds the physical allure of the female body. The second reading of the ALIEN series upon which I elaborate stresses the monstrously maternal side of Ripley.

The Monstrous Mother

In her book entitled *The Monstrous-Feminine*, Barbara Creed discusses various representations of women as abject in horror film. Vampires, witches, and the possessed woman, among others, constitute the appearance of the female monster or, as Creed calls it, the monstrous-feminine. The monstrous-feminine is not just a persistent character in horror films. It has a long history ranging from classic mythology and the Bible to Freud. The recurring trait of the manifestations of the female monster, as of stereotypes of the feminine in general, Creed argues, is that woman is defined

¹⁷ In her book *Female Masculinity*, Judith Halberstam offers an interesting reading of Ripley's masculinity. Halberstam argues that the transgressive potential of Ripley is undercut by her "resolute heterosexuality" (1998: 28). Even though Halberstam discusses ALIENS, her analysis is also very well applicable to ALIEN3. It is only when female masculinity is coupled with lesbian desire, which can be observed in ALIEN: RESURRECTION, that female masculinity is perceived as "threatening and indeed 'alien'" (28).

¹⁸ The lethality of sex led several critics to the conclusion that the film can also be understood as a metaphor for AIDS. *Rolling Stone* film critic Peter Travers called it "the first \$50 million thriller that also functions as an AIDS allegory" (quoted in Swallow, 59). Amy Taubin remarks that "neither gay nor feminist press realized immediately that the film is all about the AIDS crisis" (1993: 96). Taubin argues that AIDS is everywhere in the film, mostly in its central "metaphor of a deadly organism attacking an all-male community" (98).

in terms of her sexuality. Creed's main point is that "when woman is represented as monstrous it is almost always in relation to her mothering and reproductive functions" (*Monstrous-Feminine* 7). The abject in *ALIEN3* is connected with the monstrous act of childbearing. Ripley's act of voluntary death and the monstrous act of giving birth to the alien collide in the final scene of *ALIEN3*. The scene is a prime example of the tension between the female as strong and masculine, and the female reduced to a particular bodily function and typified as abject. Tasker's reading of Ripley stresses maternity as the outer border of female musculinity, the boundary that a heroic femininity may not cross. Motherhood saves Ripley from becoming too masculine, and restores her to the traditional maternal function. In Creed's reading, however, it is not so much gender transgression or ambivalence that is threatening, but the maternal itself that is disgusting or abject. As Creed asserts, "woman's birth-giving function has provided the horror film with an important source of its most horrific images" (50). Creed is influenced by Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject and the maternal.

In her book *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Kristeva formulates the concept of the abject as that which does not "respect borders, positions, rules" and "disturbs identity, system, order" (Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine* 8, Kristeva, *Powers* 4). The abject body, as opposed to the clean and proper body, is a body that has lost form and integrity. In Kristeva's view, the image of woman's body, because of its maternal functions, acknowledges its "debt to nature" and consequently is more likely to signify the abject (Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine* 11). "The maternal womb," she argues, "represents the utmost in abjection for it contains a new life form which will pass from inside to outside bringing with it traces of its contamination—blood, afterbirth, faeces" (quoted in Tasker 49).¹⁹ This capacity to transgress the border between the body's inside and outside is what makes the maternal womb the site of the abject.

The ALIEN films effectively use the associations of birth giving with the uncanny, the iconography of the intra-uterine, and the alien. The first two films explored the parallels between Ripley and the alien, yet ALIEN3 takes the similarities between woman and monster to its logical conclusion. As I have mentioned, Ripley turns out to be impregnated by the alien.²⁰ She is carrying an alien queen, capable of giving birth to thousands of aliens, in her chest. The birth of the queen means the certain end of humanity. Ripley has no other option than to abort the alien fetus, the “foreign tissue,” which has invaded her body. The contours of Ripley’s martyrdom are clear: she must sacrifice her life to kill the alien.²¹

As Creed remarks with regard to the final scene of ALIEN3:

In possibly the most stunning sequence in the ALIEN trilogy, Ripley throws herself backwards into the fiery furnace. A close-up shot reveals an expression of ecstasy on her face as she plummets backwards into the void. At the same time, the alien bursts

¹⁹ For a critique of the concept of abjection, and particularly its misogynistic connotations, see “The Destiny of the Informe” by Rosalind Krauss (1997). The genealogy of the concept is traced back to the work of Georges Bataille, whose understanding of abjection is devoid of its later misogyny. As Krauss argues, it is through Kristeva’s indebtedness to Jean-Paul Sartre’s conceptualization of the visqueux (slimy) that her conception of the abject has become infused with the stereotype of “female as degenerate.”

²⁰ The act of impregnation is not shown, only suggested. In the opening sequence of ALIEN3, short shots of the escape pod which, besides Ripley, Newt, Hicks, and Bishop, also contains an alien, are interspersed with the credit roll. In the first scene of the film, it becomes clear that Ripley is the only survivor and that her fellow travelers all have fallen victim to the alien. The body of Hicks looks as though it was ripped open by a chestbuster. Ripley’s body is apparently unscarred. Yet, on the basis of the opening sequence, which contains x-ray shots depicting the strangulation mechanism of the so-called face hugger of one (or several) unidentified members of the crew, we can assume that Ripley was indeed attacked by an alien.

²¹ The sacrificial aspect of Ripley’s death is abundantly clear; Creed even ventures to compare the scene with the death scene in Carl Dreyer’s THE PASSION OF JOAN OF ARC (USA: Carl Theodore Dreyer, 1928). Indeed, ALIEN3 offers several instances of intertextuality, both on the level of the narrative as well as on the level of iconography.

forth. Ripley brings her arms forward, enclosing the *infant* queen in an embrace both *maternal* and murderous—an embrace that ensures the alien will die alongside its surrogate *mother*. (*Monstrous-Feminine* 52, emphasis added)

Notice Creed's choice of words: "infant," "maternal," and "mother." In the context of Creed's analysis of this scene, with its emphasis on Ripley's maternal relationship to the alien, an important feature is finally integrated in the martyrdom discourse. The mutually exclusive concepts of martyrdom and maternity are forged together in Ripley's final act. The close, physical bond between Ripley and her monstrous offspring necessarily leads to the sacrificial ending of ALIEN3. The alien, emerging from Ripley's inmost parts, violently given birth to, is an irrevocable part of Ripley herself. The demarcation between human and monster is transgressed to the extent that killing, aborting, the monstrous infant does not suffice. Ripley's martyrdom resides in the perverse negation of the border between human and not-human/monster, reinforcing Kristeva's reading of the maternal as abject. Ripley has served as a fertile womb for a monstrous other.²² The possibility that she may give birth to the alien, and thus become the "mother" of a new breed of aliens, leaves her no other option than to kill the thing that is most intimate to her while also most radically different.

On the basis of Tasker and Creed's analysis of the ALIEN series, it seems to me that Ripley's transgressive potential resides in the permutation of two opposing elements, masculinity and femininity, here consistently figured as the monstrous maternal. On one hand, Ripley moves away from maternity in favor of a

²² The horrendous scene of Ripley giving birth is certainly not unique in the ALIEN trilogy. The primal scene in this respect occurs in ALIEN. One of the male members of the crew, Kane, is orally raped. The tail of the alien penetrates his mouth in order to fertilize itself inside his stomach. After this rape, during which Kane is in a coma-like state and the alien grows inside him, the birth scene occurs quite unexpectedly when

reconfigured masculinity, musculinity. Yet, as Tasker argues, maternity comes back to claim her as female. On the other, Ripley is too maternal. Or, as Creed would say, she is dangerous because of her maternal, reproductive potential. In a sense, both positions come down to the problematic, inevitable relationship between femininity and maternity. This relationship is essential as well as excessive. In her battle against the excessive manifestation of the maternal function, the alien fetus growing inside her, Ripley counters it by her own variety of equally lethal maternity. Her plunge into the lead, together with her monstrous offspring, locked in a deadly embrace, solidifies the connection between maternity and martyrdom. Unlike her previous encounters with the alien(s), where Ripley was simply trying to annihilate them and make sure she herself got away safely, the fact that she has given birth to one of them makes her involvement in its total destruction a matter of life and death. Her maternal and reproductive connection with this breed of aliens leaves her no option other than the chosen death of herself and her monstrous child. Thus, the significance of *ALIEN3* is located in the coupling of the mother and the martyr.

If the analysis of Ripley as a contemporary martyr were to end here, one could contend that the preposterous turn has been rewarding: the earlier discourse of the classical martyr stories serves as the template for the later cinematic discourse of the *ALIEN* series. The juxtaposition alters the secular as well as the religious discourse: Ripley is imbued with intertextual and iconographical characteristics of Perpetua, Thecla, and Blandina, placing her in a

an apparently normal Kane and the rest of the crew are having dinner. In *ALIENS*, the android Bishop becomes the host to the alien. In one of the final scenes of the film, he is literally ripped apart by the violent emergence of the monster. In this sense, it comes as no surprise that Ripley has to experience the same horror. Even more so, this death, a recurring trademark of the entire trilogy, seems a fitting way of dying for its heroine. The crucial difference between Kane and Bishop on one hand, and Ripley on the other is that Ripley is able to destroy the alien.

line of female martyrs. The constellation of concepts that govern the construction of the female martyr; femininity, masculinity, and maternity are reconfigured in the Ripley character and her final act. In turn, the classical martyrs can be preposterously read as representations of gender crossing and, more specifically, displaying signs of masculinity. The maternal aspect of these classical martyrs, whether it is explicitly absent, as is the case with Thecla, or explicitly present, as is the case with Perpetua, is similar to Ripley's maternity and equally ambiguous. The classical conception of the coupling of martyrdom and maternity deemed the two mutually exclusive. The contemporary conception of the strong, masculine, yet maternal woman as hero and martyr, exemplified in the work of Tasker and Creed, turns out to be just as problematic. Either the masculine or masculine is eventually kept at bay through the maternal, as Tasker argues, or the maternal turned monstrous simply overshadows all other characteristics a woman may have, as Creed maintains.

My analysis of Ripley is positioned between the classical and the contemporary conceptions. Arguing against Tasker, I suggest that the maternal does not merely function as a device to curb too much masculinity, or put the transgressive woman back in her "natural," nurturing position. Rather, the maternal enforces the masculine traits of Ripley. This is obvious in the masculine aspect of physical pain, the violent birth of the alien, which she has to endure. This ability to undergo pain resonates with the classical martyrdom stories, and with their secular counterparts too, as my analysis of Jericho's crucifixion in *END OF DAYS* showed, which placed emphasis on the martyr's capacity to withstand pain. Arguing against Creed, I disagree with her emphasis of the monstrous maternal as all encompassing. This, to me, takes away the courageous nature of Ripley's humanitarian act. This act is performed to counter directly the lethal fertility principle of the alien. Ripley's martyrdom supersedes the one-sidedness of Tasker's and Creed's readings.

She is positioned neither on the side of the masculine nor on the reductive side of the maternal. In the end, Ripley's act fuses the two opposing positions. My analysis, nevertheless, does not stop with this ending of ALIEN3. One more analytical turn must be made.

Preposterous Technology and Alternative Endings

The digital technology of the DVD has a major effect on the viewing and analysis of film. Films in a digital format, in contrast to celluloid, are capable of reversing the flow of spectatorship and academic analysis. This reversal of a flow is in itself preposterous. It challenges the common perception that films and analyses have a clear-cut beginning, middle, and end. Likewise, it undercuts the idea that films have stable endings and academic articles have logical conclusions. Endings, both in film as well as in academic writing, signal a definite stop to the processes of viewing and analyzing. The advent of digital film opens up the possibility of slowing down, speeding up, repeating, skipping, and viewing again the separate images that constitute the medium. Hence, a clear ending is never fully reached and can be postponed perpetually. The digital format not only allows for the interruption and the reversal of the flow of images, but also adds new textual streams to the already existing film text. With regard to ALIEN3, these two possibilities of the digital format, the reversal of the flow and the addition of new text, lead to a new analysis of the film. As I hope to show, the addition of an alternative ending to the existing film text fundamentally challenges previous analyses of the film, including my own.

At the time of the film's release in 1992, it was widely reported that the studio Twentieth Century Fox had taken ALIEN3 out of director David Fincher's hands before its theatrical release, and re-edited the film without his consent. In 2003, the "Alien Quadrilogy" DVD box set and special edition was released. This special edition contains the theatrical release as well as an alternative "work print"

cut of *ALIEN3*. This work print, previously unavailable, is the closest approximation of Fincher's original vision of the film.

The ending of the film was much discussed during production. The most important difference between the 1992 theatrical version (111 minutes long) and the 2003 special edition/work print (139 minutes) is the sacrificial ending. In the special edition version, the scene where Ripley falls into the molten lead—and this is the crucial difference—contains no shot of the alien (in *ALIEN* terminology called a “chestburster”) emerging from her body. The focus of the discussion was precisely whether the alien in Ripley's body should emerge at the end of the film. James Swallow, whose book on David Fincher charts the troubled production process of *ALIEN3*, claims there were no less than four different versions of the ending. In the first version, the alien emerges first, and then Ripley dives into the molten metal. In the second version, the alien does not emerge. Instead, a stigmata effect of blood blooming on Ripley's chest is shown, while she is falling down. This ending was discarded as being “too religious [...] and vulgar” (54-55). This second version appears to have been shot by Fincher but, so far, these outtakes are not available. The fact that these outtakes are not included in this particular special edition does not exclude the possibility of them surfacing in a later and “improved” special edition of the film. As a result, the flow of analysis is extended, and a definitive, conclusive reading of the film is deferred once more. For now, my reading of the two endings of the film is based on the original, theatrical version and the alternative, work print version, available on the special edition DVD.

Before I compare the two endings in detail, I sketch the major difference between the versions. In the theatrical version (TV), the alien emerges during Ripley's fall. In contrast, the work print ending available on the special edition release of the film (SE), refrains from showing the alien altogether. In the SE version,

the scene in which Ripley makes her final decision to drop into the lead is longer: she needs more time to build up her courage. The significance of this is addressed in detail below. The subsequent SE death scene consists of an alternate take: the alien does not burst forth from her body, Ripley seems more lifelike (in contrast to the obvious puppet used in the original shot), the fall is much shorter and takes place in slow motion, and Ripley's body can be seen to burn up just before it hits the lead.

Theatrical Version

The sequence lasts one minute and 32 seconds (92 seconds). Number of shots counted: 29. Average shot length: 3.1 seconds.

1. Pan right to Ripley lifting herself onto the platform
2. Close up of Ripley, looking over her right shoulder
3. Wide shot, establishing shot, of Ripley and helper on the platform
4. Bishop calls to Ripley
5. Re-establishing shot of Ripley on platform
6. Medium close-up of Bishop
7. Tilt of Ripley, walking toward the edge of the platform
8. Ripley positioned at the ledge of the platform, standing with her back toward the boiling lead
9. Close up of Ripley, she nods to Morse, her helper
10. Reverse shot of helper, moving the platform in the direction directly above the cauldron of lead
11. Close-up of Ripley
12. Pan of gathered scientists, looking at Ripley from a distance
13. Crane shot toward Ripley standing on the edge of the platform, she lets go of the railing
14. Close-up of Bishop, looking at Ripley and looking down

at the lead

15. Point-of-view shot of Bishop on the lead
16. Sideways medium close-up of Ripley, positioned at the left of the frame
17. Crane shot (moving down) on Bishop saying to Ripley: "What are you doing?"
18. Pulling focus shot through wired fence. [Possible point of view shot of Bishop]. Ripley, arms outstretched, falls backward
19. Crane shot (moving down) on Bishop, screaming: "No!"
20. Continuation of shot 18, Ripley falling down
21. Medium close up of scientists, grabbing the fence to get a better look at the spectacle
22. Continuation of shots 18 and 20, Ripley continues to drop
23. Medium close-up of Ripley against the background of the hot lead. She opens her eyes and, at that moment, the alien bursts out of her chest **[Alien1] + [Alien2]**
24. Close up of the screaming and squirming alien, Ripley's hands grab the creature and hold it tight to her chest **[Alien3]**
25. Close up of Ripley's face, eyes closed. [Soundtrack: the screaming alien]
26. Repeat of shot 24: Ripley's hand holding on to the alien **[Alien4]**
27. Wide shot, which serves as a re-establishing shot, of Ripley falling and then finally hitting and instantly disappearing (without a trace) into the lead **[Alien5]**
28. Wide shot of the prison complex industrial heat exhausts. The emerging heat changes color from



[Alien1]



[Alien2]



[Alien3]

bright yellow to orange,
before it fades out and effectively
stops

29. Shot of the planet Fiorina 161 which, up to that moment, was a dark planet, eclipsed by the sun. Now, the sun emerges, bringing (sun)light to the planet

Special Edition Version

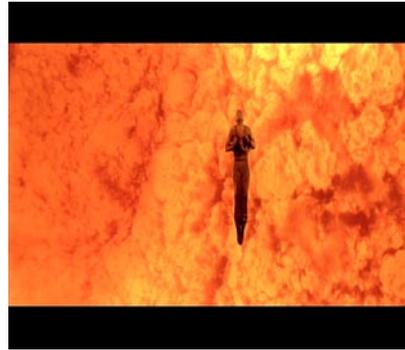
The sequence lasts one minute and 51 seconds (111 seconds). Number of shots counted: 32. Average shot length: 3.4 seconds

1. The opening shot is identical to the one in the theatrical version (TV)
2. This shot corresponds to shot 3 in the TV
3. Medium close-up of Bishop
4. Close-up of Ripley, identical to shot 2 in TV
5. Wide shot of Bishop
6. Pan left of Ripley on platform, which serves as a re-establishing shot
7. Medium close-up of Bishop, imploring to Ripley: "You must let me have it [the alien]"
8. Tilt of Ripley, reaching the end of the platform
9. Medium close-up of Bishop
10. High angle shot of member of scientist crew, equipped with video camera

11. Low angle of Bishop, shouting to scientist: "No pictures!"
12. High angle reverse shot of scientist, who puts the camera away
13. Identical to shot 8 in TV
14. Identical to shot 9 in TV
15. Identical to shot 10 in TV
16. Identical to shot 11 in TV
17. Identical to shot 12 in TV
18. Identical to shot 13 in TV
19. Identical to shot 14 in TV
20. Identical to shot 15 in TV
21. Identical to shot 16 in TV
22. Close-up of Ripley, positioned at the right of frame. She swallows visibly, opens and closes her eyes and breathes hard. She whispers: "You're crazy," which could be directed to Bishop or maybe she is talking to herself
[Alien6]
23. Identical to shot 17 in TV
24. Close-up of Ripley, positioned at the right of the frame. She is still struggling, and pulls her head backward
[Alien7]
25. Identical to shot 18 in TV
26. Identical to shot 19 in TV
27. Identical to shot 20 in TV



[Alien4]



[Alien5]



[Alien6]



[Alien7]



[Alien8]

- 28. Identical to shot 21 in TV
- 29. Identical to shot 22 in TV
- 30. Ripley falls from the platform, with arms outstretched. She disappears into the lead **[Alien8]**
- 31. Identical to shot 28 in TV
- 32. Identical to shot 29 in TV

The comparison between these two endings demonstrates that the SE version is largely based on material from the theatrical version. Roughly speaking, over three-quarters of the footage from the theatrical version is used in the SE version. Apart from my earlier remarks about the presence or absence of the alien, to which I will

return, on the basis of these shot lists two other observations can be made. Since there is such a large overlap in separate shots and sequences of shots

between these versions, the crucial differences are to be found in relatively small, singular shots.

The first difference resides in the dialogue between Ripley and Bishop. In the theatrical version, the halting conversation in which Bishop begs Ripley not to kill the alien is unfocused, that is to say, the dialogue is chopped up and dispersed. The importance of the Bishop character and his plea to Ripley is de-emphasized. By contrast, the SE version keeps the dialogue focused in the beginning of the sequence. The key shot here is shot seven. Bishop begs Ripley to let him and his crew take the alien out of her body alive. His final exclamation, “you must let me have it,” and Ripley’s disregard of his plea signal her resolve. Rather than hand herself, and the alien inside her, over to Bishop, Ripley chooses to kill the alien and

herself.

The remainder of the sequence in the SE version is also more balanced in the number of shots it assigns to Ripley's struggle of gathering courage for the drop. Shot 22 and shot 24 linger on this mental process for several seconds. Its equivalent in the theatrical version is shot 16, which fleetingly shows her face in medium close-up instead of the close-up in the SE. The difference between the use of a medium close-up and a close-up may seem insignificant, but it is not. The use of a close-up triggers a profoundly different effect. As Mulvey argues, the close-up provides "a mechanism of delay," in the sense that the flow of narration is momentarily halted, and the spectator's attention is drawn to the human face, more specifically to the face of the film star (163-164).

The use of two close-ups in the SE version magnifies the importance of Ripley's decision to commit suicide. It is not just the difficulty of her decision that is emphasized; Ripley's death means a definite end to the ALIEN saga. As such, the close-up foreshadows the impending end of Ripley's story. At the same time, since the close-up also highlights the star's face, the spectator takes a long, final look at Ripley/Sigourney Weaver. On this level, the close-up of the star also functions as a device to terminate the story, the film, and the ALIEN franchise as a whole. In hindsight, it is easy to assert that ALIEN3, as a planned ending to the film series, was never really the ultimate conclusion. Even though this ending did not leave future screenplay writers much space to maneuver, more improbable resurrections have taken place in Hollywood cinema.²³

The second difference between these two versions is, again, tied to the decisive choice between showing and not showing the alien. Before I turn to that discussion, though, an iconographic consequence of this presence and absence must be noted. The fact that the alien bursts out in the theatrical version forces Ripley to struggle with it as she falls. She clutches the creature to her breast

to prevent it from jumping away from her. This struggle is given prominence in shots 24 to 26. However, if we remember Creed's analysis of this particular part of the climax of *ALIEN3*, a different reading can be proposed. Creed perceives what I label a struggle not so much as a struggle, but instead reads this act in terms of maternal love, lethal love, but maternal love nonetheless.

In the SE version, Ripley neither wrestles nor cradles the alien, as it is absent altogether. This absence, however, produces a postural, physical difference in Ripley's death dive. She plummets into the fire with her arms outstretched. This signifies and underscores two connotations. First, the stretching of the arms is associated with the joy of deliberately jumping from great heights, such as in bungee jumping. The person jumping stretches out in order to experience the sensation of flight fully. As such, this gesture emphasizes the voluntary and conscious dimension of Ripley's act.²⁴ Second, the extending of both arms instantaneously triggers the iconographical association with Christ's crucifixion posture. Moreover, the combination of this pose and Ripley's demise in the fire activates the martyr text of Thecla, who struck the same pose while she was burnt at the stake (even though she survived miraculously).²⁵ Thus, in the SE version, the voluntary and martyr-like nature of Ripley's choice is accentuated because of the nonappearance of the alien. This absence causes the entire mother/maternal association to

²³ If the return of Ripley in itself was not improbable enough, Hollywood knowingly and unashamedly marketed this improbability. The tagline to *ALIEN: RESURRECTION* reads: "Witness the Resurrection." This tagline, almost casually, underscores and reiterates the Christ-like dimension of the Ripley character and the sacrificial nature of her death in *ALIEN3*.

²⁴ As Taubin remarks with regard to this scene, Ripley's backward swan dive signifies her "ecstatic abandonment to the inevitable" (1993: 100).

²⁵ The parallels between Ripley and Thecla do not end here. Similarly to Thecla, Ripley, or at least a part of her, also survives the fire. In *ALIEN: RESURRECTION*, genetic material in the form of a blood sample taken from Ripley on Fiorina 161 is used to clone several versions of Ripley. Furthermore, the martyrdom of Blandina mentions Blandina striking a similar, Christ-like pose while being erected on the stake.

remain absent. In this version, Ripley is more martyr than mother. Moreover, the SE ending reaffirms and reiterates the classical discourse on female martyrdom, precisely because the maternal aspect to Ripley's martyrdom is totally absent. Instead, she is depicted as the strong, conscious, determined and, above all, active creator of her own destiny.

Now, I want to look in more detail at the consequence the presence or absence of the alien has for the reading of the martyrdom of Ripley. The first choice is whether or not the alien should burst out of Ripley's chest at all, thus giving the audience the paradigmatic thrill and satisfaction of the horror film's gory finale or not. The second decision is whether Ripley should dive *before* the manifestation of the beast or *after* it has revealed itself.

The chain of events is open to several variations and, accordingly, Ripley's act of martyrdom takes on different implications. Fincher was strongly in favor of not showing the alien, simply because he thought it was not necessary. Additionally, Fincher was in support of Ripley's willfully, proactively, taking her life *before* the creature bursts out: "If she gets ripped apart before she falls into the fire, that's not sacrifice, that's janitorial service. To knowingly step into the void carrying this thing inside her seemed to me to be more regal" (Swallow 55).

The essential word Fincher uses in his description of the significance and purpose of the final scene is "sacrifice." Ripley's death should be self-chosen and actively pursued. Her act of deliberately falling, arms outstretched, into the fire bestows her with the noble status of the martyr, instead of being a passive victim of a monster that is stronger than she. Thus, Ripley should demonstrate agency and self-mastery in destroying her body. The theatrical ending adheres to this scenario, yet at the same time grants the audience the spectacle of the chestbuster: the creature emerges from Ripley's chest during her fall. This ending seems a perfect

Hollywood compromise. However, as a result—and this can be observed in Creed’s analysis of this scene—the theatrical ending activates the seemingly inevitable return to the archetype of the mother and child.²⁶ By comparing Ripley with the unfortunate mother of the monstrous child, the alien, Creed and the film effectively restore Ripley to the maternal function. In Creed’s analysis, Ripley’s monstrous maternity thus ultimately eclipses the sacrificial nature of her act.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have read three examples of classical, Christian female martyrs in tandem with a contemporary, secular representation of female martyrdom. The classical discourse shows that women who wished to become martyrs had to renounce their femininity to some extent. The masculine role of martyr is available to women, but only when they renounce the most evident symbol of their femininity, maternity. Classical martyrs, I argued, lay bare a gendered continuum between masculinity and femininity. Nevertheless, in the end, I concluded that these martyrs are restored to their traditional, maternal role.

Subsequently, I read the action heroine Ripley as a contemporary example of a woman who accepts the role of martyr. Similar to her classical predecessors, Ripley is ambivalent in her expression of gender. Yvonne Tasker’s concept of musculinity demonstrates Ripley’s transgression of typical feminine qualities in favor of masculine ones. Similar to the classical martyrs, Ripley, in Tasker’s appraisal, takes on the maternal role. The inescapability of maternity takes on monstrous dimensions in Barbara Creed’s analysis of Ripley. The monstrous mother, woman predetermined

²⁶ Creed was not the only critic who observes the maternal connotations of Ripley’s death dive. *Rolling Stone*’s Peter Travers describes the final scene as “a war between her maternal and killer instincts.”

by her reproductive function, overshadows all other qualities. In the case of Ripley, Creed reads her sacrificial death as a derivative of her reproductive function. In my analysis, I positioned Ripley neither on the side of masculinity nor on the reductive side of the monstrous maternal.

Finally, I compared two versions of *ALIEN3*, the theatrical version and the special edition version. The difference between the two is the presence of the alien in the ending of the former, and the absence of it in the latter. This, I argued, has implications for Ripley's martyrdom. To conclude this chapter, I want to put forward a more ambivalent reading of the theatrical ending of the film. Contrary to the Special Edition ending, which reaffirms a classical martyr discourse, the maternity evoked in the theatrical version signals a preposterous vacillation between past and present representations of martyrdom. On one hand, this ending reconnects Ripley as a female heroine to motherliness which, according to both Tasker and Creed, is ideologically cumbersome. But on the other, and this is the point I wish to stress, Ripley's maternal aspects reconceive classical martyrdom discourse which presupposes that mothers cannot become martyrs, only women made male can. In this sense, a motherly martyr critically reconceives that older discourse: the mother and the martyr become newly related in distinction to the classical examples. Critically, Ripley's maternity does not take away from her martyr's act of self-sacrifice for humanity. As a consequence, the potential reduction of Ripley to her assigned gender position of the archetypal mother is effectively dislocated. In her sacrificial death, mother and martyr are not parted but imparted.