



This is the first page of the item you requested.

[+ Show](#)

CARLIN A. BARTON

Savage Miracles: The Redemption of Lost Honor in Roman Society and the Sacrament of the Gladiator and the Martyr

The very nature of the odor coming from his burning flesh in diverse ways stirred both: a stench to some, a nectar to others. The same sensation is transformed differently, either an odor wounding the nose with dreadful vengeance or a sweet smell that caresses with delight.

—Prudentius *Peristephanon* 2.385–92¹

WE ARE WONT TO SEE the gladiator and the martyr operating in mutually exclusive emotional spheres. One is the epitome, for us, of Roman profane decadence and self-indulgent luxury, the other of inspired will and the most severe ascetic self-denial. A Roman audience would not have easily made this distinction. In a period of Roman history when the dominant heroic model was that of the failed hero, the Christian shared with the *inglorious* Roman a pattern of redemption that confounds *our* categories of “Christian” and “Pagan,” “sacred” and “profane,” “service” and “servitude.” Both the gladiator and the martyr operated within an ambivalent vocabulary of emotion and gesture—the vocabulary of the condemned, the defeated, the dishonored. I want to suggest, in this essay, parts of a close and complex discourse of honor and sacredness that the Birds of Prey shared with the Lambs.

The Glory of the Cheated Hand

Mucius gladly left his right hand in the altar flames. Oh the sublimity of his spirit!
—Tertullian *Apologeticus* 50.5

One of the set pieces in the Roman theater of cruelty was what, for want of better words, one might call the “snuff play.” A condemned criminal would be dressed and drilled—to be dismembered as Orpheus, gored as Prometheus, penetrated as Pasiphae, castrated as Attis, crucified as Laureolus, or burned as Scaevola.² The poet Martial in the late first century C.E. witnessed such a play in the grand new Flavian amphitheater. It translated into the language of the arena the popular stories of the legendary hero of the infant republic, Mucius

Savage Miracles: The Redemption of Lost Honor in Roman Society and the Sacrament of the Gladiator and the Martyr, by Carlin A. Barton © 1994 [University of California Press](#).

Want the full article?

[Login](#) to access JSTOR, or check our [access options](#). You may have access for free through an institution.

Publisher Sales Service for \$12.00 USD.

[Enter your token or email](#) if you've already purchased this article.



JSTOR is a not-for-profit organization that serves and is supported by the scholarly community.

||

©2000-2009 JSTOR All Rights Reserved. JSTOR® and the JSTOR logo are registered trademarks.