



BOOK REVIEW

Adam Ployd, *Augustine, Martyrdom, and Classical Rhetoric*

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Over the past number of years, there has been an emerging trend within Augustinian scholarship in which Augustine's rhetorical background has come to be seen as more than merely the means by which he articulated his theological views; it is becoming increasingly recognised that his rhetoric also has a constructive role in shaping his theological vision. Michael Cameron, Mark Clavier, Rafal Toczko, Brian Gronewoller and this reviewer have all published monographs in recent years that at least gesture in this direction. Adam Ployd has identified a particularly fruitful avenue in which to push this research further and explore the far-reaching theological implications of Augustine's rhetorical techniques: his martyr accounts. Augustine's martyr accounts are especially well-suited for an investigation of the interplay between rhetoric and theology because they are, by their very nature, highly rhetorical, especially by the standards of modern historians. But they are also theologically and socially constructive. Thus, the question that drives this short book: 'if martyr discourse is rhetorical, what does that mean for its construction by someone like Augustine who is an expert in the techniques of classical rhetoric?' (p. 135).

Ployd structures his book around three levels of analysis. According to the first level, which Ployd treats in chapter 1, he observes that we must keep in mind the particular rhetorical contexts in which Augustine composed his martyr accounts. Following standard treatments, Ployd notes that many of Augustine's martyr accounts must be understood in the context of the Donatist controversy, in which both parties appealed to their martyrs as important witnesses to their legitimacy. However, Ployd argues that the Manichaean and Pelagian contexts, which are commonly overlooked in this regard, must also be borne in mind as shaping the rhetorical orientation of the martyr accounts. The second dimension in Ployd's analysis, which remains the focus of chapters 2–4, treats Augustine's use of classical rhetorical techniques (in particular, those techniques associated with *inventio* and *dispositio*) in his martyr accounts. Chapter 2 makes use of the category of *exempla* to explore how Augustine rhetorically presents the martyrs as models for imitation; chapter 3 makes the case that Augustine's deployment of *exempla* in this way amounts to the construction of Christian historiography which, with its emphasis on the beauty present in suffering and the providential ordering of history, deliberately stands in stark contrast to the Roman preference for historiographical narratives of decline; chapter 4, which is the most innovative in the book, argues that Augustine's often quoted slogan that 'it is not the punishment but the cause' (*non poena sed causa*) which makes a martyr ought to be interpreted in terms

of issues of definition and quality within the framework of legal issue theory. The third and final dimension in Ployd's analysis moves beyond the conventional confines of classical rhetoric to include the lives of the martyrs themselves. Ployd argues that Augustine presents the lives of the martyrs in terms that resemble the ideal rhetor as it was understood within the Graeco-Roman rhetorical tradition. Thus, in the hands of Augustine, Ployd argues, the martyrs become Christ's ideal 'rhetor-statesmen', calling all who bear witness to their lives to pursue the eternal realities of heaven while forsaking the comforts of this world (p. 6). Through these three dimensions of analysis, Ployd argues, it becomes apparent that Augustine uses the martyrs for particular theological ends – namely, to 'reorient the spiritual vision of his readers and hearers' (p. 6).

Having clearly shown how Augustine's martyr accounts were carefully crafted persuasive texts, this book is a welcomed contribution to the growing body of literature that takes seriously the theologically constitutive elements of the tools in Augustine's rhetorical toolbox. The three dimensions Ployd employs prove to be a particularly helpful way to frame his analysis. However, I wonder if a fourth dimension could be added – namely, the rhetorical quality of the traditions which the martyrs inspire. Many of these traditions were, no doubt, positive for Augustine. But many, he argued, veered into the realm of superstition. Considering the veneration traditions themselves as rhetorical would provide an opportunity to observe how Augustine navigated conflicting practices in his own embodied rhetoric in order to replace the embodied rhetoric of veneration with the embodied rhetoric of imitation. However, the fact that Ployd's book generates possibilities for further studies should not be seen as a drawback, but rather as one of its chief strengths. As Ployd himself notes in his conclusion, 'It has never been my goal to say all that could or should be said about Augustine and martyrdom, nor even about Augustine, martyrdom, and rhetoric' (p. 135). To be sure, this book will not be the last word on the topic. But it will prove to be an important scholarly contribution that future studies will benefit from. Moving forward, it will be an essential resource for those who want to explore the rhetorical quality of Augustine's theology, as well as for those interested in early Christian martyr accounts.

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