

DC Roundtable Contribution
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Mercy, Power, and Women's Agency: A Feminist Theological Reflection on Tarantism

What can we learn about the power of the aesthetic, the body, and community in the practice of mercy? This essay seeks to spark discussion and discovery on these questions in conversation with ethnographic study of the phenomenon of tarantism in southern Italy and contemporary political theology. Tarantism is a historical phenomenon by which women resisted the powers that oppressed them by drawing on the power of embodiment, relationality, and the aesthetic.

My theological starting point is the political theology of Johann Baptist Metz, in particular his mysticism of "suffering unto God." With this concept, Metz describes our turning to God with our questions and our suffering in a cry to God ("*ein Schrei*," in German). It is a mysticism that demands the fulfillment of God's promises, is never satisfied on this side of the eschaton, and never rests easy or allows itself to be anesthetized, pacified, or muted by abstract theologies or sentimental tropes.

Metz's suffering unto God provides the basis of my theological reflection on the phenomenon of tarantism in southern Italy, specifically in the Apulia region. Chronicled in the magisterial work of ethnography by Italian sociologist and philosopher of religion, Ernesto de Martino, *The Land of Remorse: A Study of Southern Italian Tarantism*, tarantism involves a communal response to trauma using music and a ritualized form of dance. The trauma involved is open to interpretation. The traditional explanation is that a person, usually a woman, is bitten by the southern Italian tarantula spider, and is left lethargic, weak, and despondent. The remedy is a trancelike dance evoked by musicians playing a lively 6/8-time indigenous folk music called

pizzica. The music is played for the victim for a period of days until it brings about in her a dance that evokes a state of peace, calm, and healing. De Martino's title, *The Land of Remorse* (*La Terra del Rimorso*) contains a double *entendre* in Italian. *Rimorsa* means remorse, and it is also related to the Italian word *morso*, meaning a bite. So, the title of the book refers both to the land of remorse and the land of the "re-bitten," which alludes to the repeating nature of this malady – the *tarantata*¹ experiences a return of her symptoms periodically, usually each year near the anniversary of the first bite and again near the feast of St. Paul.² De Martino interprets the bite as a "crisis of presence," i.e., a "breakdown affecting the individual's sense of self in the world" among a people rendered subaltern by centuries of racial, class, and economic disempowerment, and he regards the ritual itself as way for those affected to reclaim subjectivity and agency.³

His treatment is compelling on several fronts, but it lacks a feminist analysis. Since the vast majority of the victims are women, and since their subaltern situation is determined by patriarchal power and the norms that flow from it, De Martino's exploration is sharpened by contemporary feminist interpretations of tarantism. Their work highlights embodiment, memory, and protest and, in conjunction with De Martino's, deepen and expand Metz's understanding of "suffering unto God" from a feminist perspective. Taken together, this constellation of ideas and practical phenomena speaks to the power of the aesthetic (in this case music and dance) and the community (in the form of family, neighbors, and musicians who work together in this healing endeavor) in this embodied form of suffering unto God (the "demand" inherent in the lethargy of the one "bitten" as well as in the insistent, energetic music and dance that bring healing).

I offer a disclaimer about attempting a theological reflection on tarantism. Since the early eighteenth century, tarantism in Apulia has been associated with veneration of St. Paul, patron

saint of venomous bites. De Martino and others have considered this an unfortunate cooptation of the ritual by the Catholic Church, although others have noted that this overlay of meaning which contextualized tarantism within an ecclesial framework had a role in preserving this ritual into the modern age.⁴ I want to acknowledge the identification of tarantism with devotion to St. Paul, because that is the way that *tarantate* themselves understood it for over 300 years.⁵ However, my primary focus is not on the cult of St. Paul. I focus on women's engagement with this ritual as a means of protest and healing. I will relate moments in tarantism that evoke aspects of a contemporary political theology. It is not the articulated theological viewpoint of the *tarantate* themselves. It is my theological viewpoint, as a North-American woman (albeit granddaughter of immigrants from southern Italy) participating in the discourse of a Euro-American feminist theology, engaging the ideas that emerge from this fascinating, haunting historical phenomenon – ideas that I think contribute to a feminist, political theological reflection on mercy and power. With the musicologists, anthropologists, literary critics, scholars of performance studies and others who have been drawn to tarantism as a subject of analysis, I offer my own interpretation, while hoping to honor the experience of the *tarantate* themselves.

This essay proceeds in four parts. I begin with an explanation of tarantism, informed largely by De Martino, and then survey contemporary feminist interpreters of tarantism Jerri Daboo, Celia Caputi, and Felicia Youngblood, from the fields of performance studies, literary criticism, and musicology, respectively. In the third part, I will survey briefly the main themes of the political theology of Johann Baptist Metz and, in the fourth part, with this as a theological starting point, offer a feminist theological reflection on the dynamics of tarantism and what they might reveal about mercy and power.

The Phenomenon of Tarantism:

Tarantism has been documented in Apulia since the middle ages. Some conjecture that it is a remnant of pre-Christian Dionysian orgiastic rituals in this area colonized by Greeks from the eighth century BCE. At around 1700 CE, the Roman Catholic Church grafted onto this ancient ritual the figure of St. Paul, venerated in this area as the patron saint of venomous bites.⁶ Since that time, a layer of meaning has been added to tarantism, whereby *tarantate* believe that St. Paul himself has caused their bite and is also the one who can cure them by offering them “grace.”

Historical accounts of the ritual are similar to the phenomenon as documented by De Martino in its waning days in the late 1950’s. It begins with the experience of a spider bite, resulting in an illness characterized by lethargy and immobility. The historical literature as well as modern and contemporary treatments of tarantism disagree on the precise cause of this malady. The *tarantate* themselves frequently insisted that they had been bitten by a spider, or sometimes a scorpion or snake. Historical and contemporary physicians, including psychiatrists, have tended to discount this explanation, noting there is often no evidence of an actual animal bite. De Martino interprets the “bite” as a “crisis of presence,” or a sense of lack of agency.⁷ He describes it as a “moral languor or a desperate, horizonless agitation.”⁸ It is clear from the literature that, whatever the cause, the *tarantata* suffers and that the ritual offers for most *tarantate* a return to a sense of peace and a resumption of normal daily activities.

While men also become *tarantati*, the vast majority of the victims are women. De Martino does not specifically elaborate on the conditions of peasant women in Apulia at the time of his research. He notes the generally understood problems of the south, the *Mezzogiorno*, in Italian scholarship of the time: “the centralizing state, the economic oppression exercised by the North upon the South, and the semi-feudal structure of society. . . .”⁹ He does not elaborate on

the specific status of women within this society, but he does vaguely refer to “woman’s condition of dependence,” “family conflict,” the onset of puberty, and “unfortunate marriages.”¹⁰

The cure or therapy for this illness involves a home ritual, in which musicians are hired by the family to come to the home to play *pizzica* music for the *tarantata*. The musicians try different rhythms at different points in the ritual, seeking which ones will excite the *tarantata* to dance.¹¹ Friends and family also provide stimulation by showing the *tarantata* various colors, for instance, colored scarves. Because it is believed that different spiders would be stimulated by different colors, those gathered try out various colors until they find one or more that evoke a response from the *tarantata*.¹² As the music continues over hours or days, the *tarantata* begins to react to the music with movement. It begins with the *tarantata* rolling around on the ground on a white cloth set on the floor to demarcate the space of the dance. As the music progresses, the *tarantata* gets up on her feet and dances upright in a combination of running around the perimeter of the cloth, hopping, and skipping, responding to the energetic music. Typically, she then collapses – and the process begins again.¹³ Several cycles of this may be necessary until the *tarantata* experiences a sense of peace, which she interprets as St. Paul giving her a grace. After this, the *tarantata* goes to the chapel of St. Paul in the town of Galatina and repeats the ritual there, but this time without the *pizzica* music. De Martino considered this phase of the ritual to be a corruption brought about by the cooptation of tarantism by the Catholic Church, separating out the dancing of the *tarantate* from the essential stimulation of the *pizzica*, divorcing the movements of the dance from their communal context amidst family, friends, and the hired musicians.¹⁴ Here their only accompaniment were their own screams and sobs and those of the other *tarantate* gathered. In the chapel and in the square just outside it, the *tarantate* repeat the ritual of the movements of writhing on the ground, rising, skipping, running, hopping, as well as

perhaps climbing on the altar and plinths inside the chapel, and punching and/or screaming at the icon of St. Paul. Once the *tarantata* regains a sense of peace, she drinks water from the sacred well in the chapel and leaves a monetary offering to the saint.¹⁵ This process repeats itself each year at the anniversary of the first bite and/or around the feast of St. Paul in late June.

De Martino highlights the term *scazzicare*, a word in the Apulian dialect that expresses several aspects of tarantism. In general, this term refers to:

an action of lifting or removing a material weight or compact mass (for example, moving a straw mattress) and in the psychic and psychosomatic framework, it denotes an abnormal and irresistible stimulation of sentiments and bodily needs, their indomitable pricking and unleashing. Thus, for example, infants *si scazzicano* when they cry desperately; hunger which appears suddenly and without restraint *si scazzica*; and of someone compellingly taken by emotion, is it said *li scazzicano li passioni*. . . . One of the verb's most common meanings concerns the erotic impulse's uncontrolled bursting out against every discipline of civility and custom.¹⁶

According to De Martino, in the specific context of tarantism, *scazzicare* “denotes the psychomotor excitation which – together with and in opposition to a total inertia – makes up the behavior of the *tarantato*.”¹⁷ Moreover, *Scazzicare* can be used to describe the stimulation that comes from the music and the colors. *Scazzicare* can also describe the state of inertia experienced before the ritual.¹⁸ *Scazzicare* denotes each movement of the phenomenon of tarantism and evokes its essentially relational aspect. Suffering experienced as a great weight, the inertia suffered by the *tarantata*, the stimulation provided by the musicians and the gathered friends and family, and the movement of the dance itself, including its transgressive and erotic aspects, are all included in the meaning of *scazzicare*. Taking all of these shades of meaning together, *scazzicare* emerges as a desperate cry of suffering, sudden, forceful, and passionate, and it is embodied, not only in vocalization, but also in the ritualized movements of the *tarantata* and in the ritualized forms of stimulation provided by the community. The whole complex of

activities surrounding the event comprise this cry of suffering, and reveal its essentially embodied and psychomotor, as well as relational and communal aspects.

Feminist Analyses of Tarantism

“Siamo tutti tarantate. Le voci delle tarantate sono le voci delle donne del Sud”

Although the majority of *tarantate* are female, until recently major studies of this phenomenon have neglected gender as a category of analysis. In the past ten years, this has begun to change. Jerri Daboo has written a major study of tarantism from the standpoint of performance studies, *Ritual, Rapture and Remorse: A Study of Tarantism and Pizzica in Salento*. Her treatment of embodiment surfaces the sense in which tarantism enacts, not only the pain and desire for healing of the *tarantata* herself, but also, those who have come before her. Because they are enacting a ritual which has been repeated and witnessed for at least 1000 years, the *tarantata* evokes and re-presents the experience of past *tarantate*, in what I would call a sacramental sense: “The body, and the space in which it is moving, are both inscribing and being inscribed by the cultural forms from a memory of generations past, which through the liveness of the action of the dance in that moment create the sense of a ‘presence’ that contains that past within it.”¹⁹ When the *tarantate* is “re-bitten” and re-enacts periodically the process of tarantism, she is “not just . . . repeating the experience of the first bite, but also of all those other ‘moments’ of prior *tarantate* which are made present in the space-time of the performance.”²⁰ Daboo relates a study by Mariella Pandolfi on the suffering of peasant women in southern Italy to her own study of tarantism and the importance of embodiment. Regarding the women she studied during her fieldwork, Pandolfi notes that they are “narrating [themselves] ‘through the body’ [which] is an attempt to manage emotionally the relationships between catastrophic external events and the

catastrophic internal event in corporeal terms. A new sense of reality is taken on when this is enclosed in the body.”²¹

Another recent contribution to feminist interpretations of tarantism comes from literary critic Celia Caputi, who sees tarantism as “a popular, rural form of feminist protest.”²² For Caputi, the phenomenon of tarantism offered women in Apulia a way to resist poverty and patriarchy. She reads against the grain one particular older study of tarantism which portrays it as a way for women to “make a special virtue of adversity and affliction,” to call attention to themselves and “manipulate their husbands and menfolk.” Caputi suggests substituting that final phrase with “subvert patriarchal authority” to illuminate tarantism as a feminist strategy.²³ She valorizes tarantism as a way that Apulian women historically dealt with the psychic pains of living in abject poverty and unyielding patriarchy: “[t]hese women suffered the harshest poverty (the very poverty my grandparents had fled) on top of gender oppression, and yet the *tarantate* enjoyed periodic relief from their psychic ills in a manner unimaginable to my depressed suburbanite mother.”²⁴

Musicologist Felicia Youngblood’s 2019 study of the voices of the *tarantata* as essential to the cultural heritage of Apulia also explicitly addresses the gendered nature of tarantism. Youngblood highlights the cries, screams, and sobs of the women as a central part of the dynamic of tarantism, inseparable from the bite, illness, *pizzica*, movement, dance, etc. Her fieldwork is on the contemporary reenactments of tarantism that are part of the *neo-tarantismo* revival in Apulia today. She offers the following vivid description of one such reenactment:

Simona’s mouth was wide, her tense arms pressing her expanding chest and diaphragm forward as she thrust herself and her intonation towards the mirror. Her cry was high in pitch, with a shrill yet gritty timbre, and a dynamic so loud that it cut through the *pizzica* music and extinguished the whispers of the crowd. These screams continued to perforate the soundscape at various points throughout the reenactment, reverberating from the dusty mortar walls so characteristic of southern Italian architecture.²⁵

For Youngblood, the voices of the tarantate are a living, ephemeral artefact of Apulian culture. One of her informants, an elderly Apulian woman who lives close to the square in front of St. Paul's chapel in Galatina and therefore has witnessed many actual *tarantata* in the past as well as the reenactments of the present, makes this case clearly. She brings together the sense of tarantism as an expression of specifically women's suffering and identity, as well as its capacity to re-present the history of Apulian women: "*Siamo tutti tarantate. Le voci delle tarenatate sono le voci delle donne del Sud, i suoni delle Pugliese* [We are all *tarantate*. The voices of the *tarantate* are the voices of the women of the South, the sounds of the people of Apulia.]"²⁶

Political Theology and "Suffering unto God"

"... the intention of our political theology is undoubtedly to make people who are the humiliated objects of the power and violence of others the free determining subjects of their own lives."
Jürgen Moltmann²⁷

For the "New Political Theology" begun in the 1960's in Germany, theology should "interrupt" the status quo. It should allow disasters like genocide and patriarchal oppression to interrupt how theology is done and make a difference in what we say about God, the future, suffering, hope, etc. Political theology seeks to be a praxis which brings about solidarity among people in the struggle against all oppression. It does this through the narration of memories, particularly the memories of the defeated, of those who did not "make it." Through the narration of such memories, political theology hopes to call into question the "business as usual" of contemporary "first world" life and values. It strives to nurture the hope that justice will be done for all and, as the quote above makes clear, that all people will become the subjects, agents of their own lives.²⁸

Johann Baptist Metz, one of the founders of the New Political Theology, argues that theology itself, in the face of this radical suffering, should be crying out to God the cry of theodicy, demanding “why this suffering?” Metz calls this a questioning back to God, or a re-questioning of God (*Rückfragen an Gott*). He terms this persistent questioning of God *Leiden an Gott*, suffering unto God.²⁹ This focus on the role of the theodicy question provides a way for Metz to address unjust suffering while avoiding giving explanations or rationalizations for it (as traditional forms of theodicy attempt to do), or recommending the passive acceptance of suffering on the part of Christians. The stance of the Christian in the face of radical suffering remains a question, a demand for God and for the fulfillment of God’s promises. For Metz, this is a form of mysticism, by which he means a way of being in relation to God. It is a prayer in the form of a desperate cry reminiscent of the psalms of lament and other literature of lamentation in the Hebrew Scriptures.³⁰

Feminist Theological Reflection on Tarantism

Maybe tarantism is a relic of ancient Dionysian cults, but it survived for centuries in a culture of deeply entrenched patriarchal norms. In a place that suffered for so long from abject poverty, economic stagnation and exploitation, and lack of education, the conditions typical of patriarchal cultures are particularly difficult to question, resist, or escape: male ownership of female sexuality and sexual violation *as the norm*, including the prevalence of enforced arranged marriage, wife-battery, and rape, as well as widespread illiteracy among women. In Apulian tarantism, the suffering of the *tarantata* takes the form of a *demand* of the community – the very community that is itself implicated in the woman’s suffering, itself cooperates in resisting it. The body makes the demand because it is the body that what De Martino calls “woman’s condition of dependence,” constrains, violates, attempts to own, to tame, to discipline.

Metz outlines the dynamics of his political theology as rescue of threatened subjectivity from this type of soul-destroying, radical suffering. He understands subjectivity as inherently inter-subjective – we achieve it with others, not as individuals. The word that he uses for this rescue, for this unwavering commitment to the subjectivity of all is solidarity.³¹ We could also name it mercy, for certainly mercy encompasses the critique of unjust structures and the alleviation of suffering to enable the becoming of persons as subjects, to enable human flourishing. Tarantism shows us a particular, concrete example of mercy, where the suffering of the subject herself bursts forth as her demand and claim to agency, by demanding and claiming healing, and demanding that her claim be witnessed and ministered to by her community. Tarantism shows us that mercy can use the whole body to keen and to heal and that mercy requires relationship and community.

Several aspects of Metz's political theology are recognizable in tarantism: 1) the attempt to rescue the subjectivity/agency of the oppressed, 2) by means of interruption of the status quo, 3) through the narration of memories of suffering, 4) culminating in a cry of "suffering unto God." In tarantism, this rhythm is circular, and it begins with the cry of suffering, which is that which interrupts with the narration of the memory of suffering. The cry, this demand, bursts forth, *scazzica*, first as illness and inertia, interrupting daily life, forcing the family to stop everything else to attend to the ritual, then as the music of the hired musicians and the colors provided by the family which together excite the response from the *tarantata*, then as the dance and the screams of the *tarantata* herself, her forceful, un-ignorable, expression of her suffering. She claims her own agency, but not without the help of the others – the family and hired musicians, as well as the past *tarantate* whom she makes present again through this ritual. She draws on the power of relationality and of the aesthetic. She interrupts her status quo, in which

her personal relationships are themselves implicated in her “malady,” by means of the patriarchal ordering of the family and society. She mobilizes that very network of relationships, recruiting them in the demand for her cure, and literally making them pay (for the services of the musicians). She enacts the challenge to economic exploitation and patriarchal norms by revealing the suffering they engender, by demanding that her web of relatedness, rooted in patriarchal power, face the woundedness it causes and participate in assuaging it in some degree. She uses the interplay of music and dance to narrate herself through her body, and at the same time narrates the selves (i.e. rescues the subjectivity) of the *tarantate* that came before her, mystically making them present again and not letting their sufferings be lost to obscurity.

In this context, tarantism emerges into sharp relief as a form of feminist resistance, which says, “I am going to claim back agency using my body in this transgressive way, and I am going to draw into this resistance my family, my neighbors, and the church who will witness, assist, and make sacrifices of time, talent, and money at the service of this this act of resistance.”

And what of the aftermath of this cathartic performance of resistance? What is the result? How has this mercy as agentive praxis affected the life of the *tarantata*? It does not end in some kind of ultimate change in the circumstances of the woman’s life. The woman calms down, derives some measure of peace, resumes daily life in family and community. It is a community in which she remains illiterate and relatively powerless over the wider cultural, political, and economic powers that constrain her life. I am haunted by the unresolved and ambiguous nature of all of this. Demand, community, and the aesthetic function toward restoration to a certain extent, but do not break free of the norms and constraints that engender the crisis in the first place. Like Metz’s *Schrei*, that may receive consolation for a time, it does not receive definitive

fulfillment. It remains a cry, a demand for a hoped-for future that gives shape to our present resistance.

The woman is known from then on as a *tarantata*, and her malady returns in a cyclical pattern every year when she is “re-bitten.” In this sense the performance is a reminder to herself and to all that she can and will claim this space again, do this thing with her own body that disrupts and transgresses the patriarchal confines of her life. It does not bring about a revolution that changes everything. But it does say “back off” at least for a time and in a way that returns, that says “I can do this again. I can say ‘no’ in a way that demands attention, witness, and some measure of collaboration with this resistance.” Tarantism, while it was “tamed” by its cooptation by the Catholic Church, retains a transgressive kernel. It disrupts, disturbs, and resists. It does not abolish the oppressive structures that give rise to the suffering of women, but it becomes a thread of resistance running through individual women’s lives and through women’s history in the community. Mercy emerges here, in this rescue of women’s subjectivity, as a dynamic, agentive praxis, employing the power of an embodied, relational, aesthetic praxis to disrupt the power of apparently all-consuming oppressive structures.³²

¹ In Apulian tarantism, *taranta* is the term for the spider. The person bitten who engages in this ritual form of suffering and healing is called a *tarantato* (male) or *tarantata* (female), *tarantati/e* in the plural. Since most of the victims of are female, I will use the terms *tarantata/tarantate* to refer to them, except in direct quotations where the male form is used.

² Ernest De Martino, *The Land of Remorse: A Study of Southern Italian Tarantism* (London: Free Association Books) vii.

³ *Ibid*, 3, note 4.

⁴ Felicia K. Youngblood, “On Un-Silencing Voices: *Tarantismo* and the Gendered Heritage of Apulia,” *Folk Life* 2019, vol. 57, no. 1, 51.

⁵ Tarantism was already in its dying days when De Martino undertook his study in the last 1950’s. In the 1960’s the local Catholic Church deconsecrated the Chapel of St. Paul in Galatina that had for centuries been the site of the public phase of this ritual, and it closed off the well at the chapel that *tarantata* used to drink from at the end of the ritual. These measures were undertaken to curb what the Church at the time considered unhealthy excesses of the ritual. See Youngblood, 51.

⁶ De Martino points out the irony of designating St. Paul as patron saint of a phenomenon involving a trance-like state and ecstatic ritual dance, when describing the scene of tarantate/i in the chapel of St. Paul in Galatina: “The young women jumping on the corbel of the altar, the supine old man yelling with raised arms, the other young woman and the mystic bride did not have much in common with the Apostle to the Gentiles who had so authoritatively anathematized the disorders of the Church in Corinth.” De Martino, 11.

⁷ De Martino, 3, note 4.

⁸ Ibid, 11.

⁹ Ibid, 8.

¹⁰ Ibid, 29.

¹¹ Ibid, 37.

¹² Ibid, 106.

¹³ Ibid, 29-30.

¹⁴ Ibid, 155-156.

¹⁵ Ibid, 43-44.

¹⁶ Ibid, 37.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Jerri Daboo, *Ritual, Rapture, and Remorse: A Study of Tarantism and Pizzica in Salento* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010), 177.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Mariella Pandolfi, “Boundaries Inside the Body: Women’s Sufferings in Southern Peasant Italy,” *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry*, 14 (1990), 267, quoted in Daboo, 179.

²² Celia R. Caputi, “A U.S. Feminist in “the Land of Remorse”: Re-considering the Southern Italian Cult of Tarantism,” *Italian Americana*, Summer 2020, 129.

²³ Ibid, 131.

²⁴ Ibid, 132.

²⁵ Youngblood, 49.

²⁶ Ibid, 53.

²⁷ Jürgen Moltmann, *God for a Secular Society* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press), 58.

²⁸ Johann Baptist Metz, "Communicating a Dangerous Memory," in *Communicating a Dangerous Memory - Soundings in Political Theology*, ed. Fred Lawrence, (Atlanta: Scholar's Press, 1987), 41.

²⁹ Johann Baptist Metz, “Suffering unto God,” trans. J. Matthew Ashley, *Critical Inquiry* 20:4 (Summer 1994): 619.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, (Seabury Press, 1980), 61.