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Perpetua Before the Crowd: Martyrdom and Memory in Roman North Africa

Gabrielle Friesen

University of Colorado Boulder

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**Perpetua Before the Crowd:
Martyrdom and Memory in Roman North Africa**

Gabrielle Friesen

Department of History
Undergraduate Honors Thesis

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Advisor:

Anne E. Lester, Department of History

Committee:

John Willis, Department of History

Noel Lenski, Department of Classics

Andy Cain, Department of Classics

ABSTRACT

Vibia Perpetua's prison diary is one of the first known Christian works by a woman. Her writing survived due to continued fascination with their power, their deeply personal nature and Perpetua's intimate descriptions of her life just before her death, as well as due to the controversies surrounding them. This thesis contextualizes the exemplary nature of Perpetua's work by examining its differences from prior martyrological accounts, namely the Acts of the Gallic martyrs (177 AD) and the Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs (180 AD). Following this, the thesis examines the modes of gendered violence employed against Perpetua during her life and her execution in 203 AD, both from the state and from family, and her resistances to these violences. The thesis will also examine the way that memory can entail a form of violence or erasure, and how specific narratives were posthumously used to simultaneously contain and celebrate Perpetua and fellow martyr Felicitas by the early Church Fathers, primarily Tertullian and Augustine of Hippo.

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter 1: On Martyrdom	7
<i>Blandina and the Scillitan Martyrs</i>	<i>11</i>
Chapter 2: Perpetua Before the Bull	21
<i>Understanding Perpetua’s Passio and the Violence of the Moment</i>	
<i>Format and Authorship of the Passio</i>	<i>22</i>
<i>Father and Familial Ties</i>	<i>25</i>
<i>Dreams and Internal Resistance</i>	<i>32</i>
<i>Death and the Beginnings of Reframing</i>	<i>37</i>
<i>Conclusion</i>	<i>46</i>
Chapter 3: Framing and the Violence of Remembrance	48
<i>Martyr Memorialization and the Appropriation of Suffering</i>	
<i>The First Redactor</i>	<i>50</i>
<i>The Commentarius</i>	<i>59</i>
<i>Augustine’s Sermons</i>	<i>63</i>
<i>Conclusion</i>	<i>71</i>
Conclusion	74
Bibliography	80

Introduction

On the 7th of March 203 A.D. Vibia Perpetua, a Christian woman of noble birth, was killed in the gladiatorial ring for her converting to Christianity and refusing to sacrifice to Emperor Geta for the good of the Empire. A gladiator in training was to be her executor, but missed when first attempting to deliver the killing blow to her neck, instead striking her collarbone, only to have Perpetua guide “the shaking hand of the trainee gladiator to her throat.”¹ While an extraordinary act in itself, Perpetua’s control of her own death in the final moments was not all that made her death atypical. Prior to her execution, Perpetua had been arrested along with several other Christians, including a slave girl named Felicitas,² and during this imprisonment kept a diary. She included details of the visions she had as she awaited execution, caring for her child in prison, and visits from her pagan father. After her death, she was made a martyr and a saint. Violence, however, continued to be enacted against her, even as she was celebrated. Her memory was twisted to fit into narratives the new church wished to tell about martyrdom and about women. Figures like the Bishop of Hippo took her story and refigured it into their own propaganda, using her as an example of women overcoming Eve’s folly, among other diatribes.

At the same time, Felicitas, who was converted, executed, and elevated to sainthood alongside Perpetua lagged behind Perpetua in remembrance. She was spoken about by the likes of the Bishop of Hippo, but always as an afterthought to Perpetua, attached to the noblewoman but never discussed on her own. Felicitas was remembered as befitted her social class, and in her placement as secondary, the class system of the Roman world was reinforced. Felicitas was a

¹ Brent D. Shaw, “The Passion of Perpetua,” *Past and Present* 139 (May, 1993): 10.

² From the existing sources, it is unclear whose slave Felicitas was.

martyr and saint, but more importantly she was a slave who had become martyr and saint, and the way Church officials remembered her reflected that distinction. Nevertheless, Felicitas as well as Perpetua remained popular martyr saints among the lay Christians of the Roman Empire.

Chapter 2 of this thesis will examine the interplay between gender, class, and familial ties present in Perpetua's account. Perpetua's diary arose in a personal context – she was writing as a woman recording her last experiences, her literal dreams, her familial ties, and her impending death. She was writing at a time when Christianity was being built into a coherent movement, debating what constituted canon, while different sects and groups were forming and sometimes fighting with one another. Constantine would not even be born until 272, and the Roman Empire was still hostile to Christians of all denominations. Her diary dealt with a series of resistances: her resistance to her father and normative kin ties, her resistance to the call to sacrifice to the Roman gods, and her dreams as a resistance to her impending death and her own powerlessness in the face of it. This chapter will largely be drawing from Perpetua's text itself, as well as Brent D. Shaw's article "The Passion of Perpetua" to help read the text. Shaw's text analyzes the modes of gendered violence employed against Perpetua and Felicitas in the gladiatorial ring, such as the use of a cow instead of a bull to trample them while also mocking their sex. Shaw's work will be the most helpful secondary source in analyzing Perpetua's text in Chapter 2, and I will build upon and extrapolate on many of his arguments.

As Christianity solidified into a coherent theology, and a dominant religion, Christian officials sought to gain control of local cults, including the cult of Perpetua and Felicitas, working to control how martyr narratives were taught and interpreted. In so doing, clergy worked to empower their own position, and solidify what it meant to be Christian. Perpetua and Felicitas were retold so that their act of devotion was not exemplary because of their courage and devotion

to Christ in the face of death, but because their devotion entailed overcoming their inherent weaknesses as women and the descendants of Eve, and that they only succeeded because they were somehow more like men than regular women. These were arguments that were refined over the course of numerous edits and reframings of Perpetua's original text. Augustine gave three sermons on Perpetua and Felicitas, all honing these ideas. In the third sermon on the two women, Augustine states that they

these two of such strength of character and merit were not only women, they were wives as well. And one of them was also a mother, so that to the weakness of her sex might be added feelings less capable of endurance...They, however, being watchfully and firmly on guard in the strength of the inner self, scotched all his [the enemies] crafty tricks, and broke the force of all his attacks.³

In an earlier sermon Augustine spoke of Perpetua stepping on the snake's head to achieve glory, overcoming her birthright of Eve's original sin. This rhetoric worked to position Perpetua as weaker than male martyrs, due to her sex and its relation to Eve, while simultaneously praising her for overcoming her female nature through her faith.

In Chapter 3, I will argue that these edits reframed Perpetua's words in order to forward a theological argument different from any that she may have herself forwarded in her diary. The edits revealed a tension in their authors, as they sought to both commemorate and contain Perpetua's memory. The majority of the new arguments sought to forward three main ideas: the necessity of male familial ties, the masculine nature of successful women martyrs, whose success hinged upon them being more like men than regular women, and the weakness of Eve and women as her descendants. The textual violence was an attempt at diminishing or controlling Perpetua's image, as well as her words by the Church fathers. I will also argue that the continued attempts at editing helped Perpetua's text survive. The continued attempts at reframing also

³ Augustine of Hippo, "Sermon 282," in *Sermons III/8 (273-305A) on the Saints*, edited by John E. Rotelle, translated by Edmund Hill, (New York: New City Press, 1994), 81-82.

entailed presenting Perpetua's text anew each time, keeping her memory present in the minds of current parishioners decades after her death, as well as preserving the text for later generations. Central to this will be the works of Tertullian (160-225 AD) and Augustine (354-430 AD), as well as Brent D. Shaw's analysis of their work surrounding Perpetua.

As Christianity came to dominate the landscape of the Mediterranean, opposing cults and ideals within Christianity came into conflict, leading men like Tertullian, and the Bishop of Hippo to seek to secure their positions and their set of beliefs, often by appealing to the memory of one group of saints, while disparaging or disregarding another. Now women like Perpetua and Felicitas no longer faced danger at the hands of pagans, but instead their memories faced erasure at the hands of men like Tertullian, who, in his work *De Cultu Feminarum*, decried Christian women leaders and intellectuals as:

You are the devil's gateway: *you* are the unsealer of that (forbidden) tree: *you* are the first deserter of the divine law: *you* are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not brave enough to attack. *You* so easily destroyed God's image, man. On account of *your* punishment – that is, death – even the Son of God had to die.⁴

It was in this shifting landscape, when Christianity was solidifying as a theology and way of thinking that Perpetua and Felicitas once more came under attack. Christian laymen as well as officials sought to control memory, in order to dictate what being a proper Christian entailed. As the cult of memory was fought over, and eventually controlled by powerful men, Felicitas and Perpetua's account was reframed, in order to tell a particular narrative of feminine weakness. Tertullian and the Bishop of Hippo both sought to create a unified front of Christian doctrine in part by controlling the narratives of martyrs and saints, leading to the retelling and reframing of Perpetua and Felicitas' martyrologies.

⁴ Nicola Denzey, *The Bone Gatherers: The Lost Worlds of Early Christian Women*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007), 182-183.

Perpetua and Felicitas underwent forms of violence that were specifically tailored to highlight and punish their various social identities along class and gender lines. This gendered, classed violence was meant to control other members of society, to send messages not only about what constituted a “correct” religious body, but also what constituted a “correct” gendered body. I will be analyzing the different modes of violence employed against Perpetua and Felicitas, and what the public nature of the policing enacted against them meant for their contemporary societies. This analysis of the rhetorics of violence will then be extended to the violence of remembrance, as a second component of my research will be looking at how both their lives and deaths were retold, refigured, and re-edited in order to fit into various agendas. Both the initial acts of violence and the violence in the remembrance of Perpetua and Felicitas are indicative of larger societal mores about gender, religion, and transgression of those norms in the ancient Mediterranean world.

This thesis will build upon the work of other historians who have examined the violence done against Perpetua, both from the Roman state and from within the Christian community. In particular, this thesis draws from and complements the work of historians Nicola Denzey Brent D. Shaw, Thomas J. Heffernan, Peter Kitzler, and Shannon Dunn. Nicola Denzey’s work on modes of remembrance, and the violence that ecclesiastical canon did to the memories of women provided a framework for thinking about the multiple reframings of Perpetua’s *Passio*. Shaw and Heffernan provide the most expansive analysis of Perpetua and her work. Shaw’s article “The Passion of Perpetua” provides a close reading of the text and analysis of both the violence enacted against Perpetua in prison and the arena, as well as the way Church Father’s did violence to her memory, in seeking to control her work. Thomas J. Heffernan also does a close reading of

the *Passio Perpetuae*, in both its Greek and Latin versions, and provides a deep linguistic analysis of the text and what it reveals about the larger context of Perpetua's life. Heffernan also analyzes the nature of Perpetua's relationship with her father, work that this thesis expands upon in Chapter 2. Kitzler examines the violence in the redactor's framing, while Dunn analyzes the liminal and transgressive nature of women martyr's and the containment mobilized against them. However, the historians dealing with Perpetua argue that the multiple instances of editing of her work all constituted violence, and do not discuss how the constant discussion of Perpetua's work helped enable its survival, or how the edits were often accompanied with a deep sense of admiration for Perpetua and her accomplishment. This thesis will be building upon previous analysis of physical and memorial violence done to Perpetua, but will attempt to nuance the arguments about resistance and memory. In order to do so, this thesis will also engage in close reading of primary texts, namely the *Passio Perpetuae*, and several of Augustine's sermons.

Chapter 1: On Martyrdom

Historian G. W. Bowerstock argues that martyrdom was a product of the specific setting and time-period of the ancient Mediterranean world. Bowerstock argues that although individuals had died for their faith before, particularly in the Jewish tradition, that they were not conceptualized as martyrs. Within the Books of the Maccabees, events similar to martyrdoms occur, but they are not referred to as martyrdoms within the text. When Christian martyrdom had become more developed as a concept, retrospective commentaries from the second, third, and fourth centuries then began to identify the events in the Books of Maccabees as having been martyrdoms.⁵ A new concept of death as resistance, and of heavenly reward for earthly suffering and piety emerged in the second through fourth centuries “something entirely new...never before had such courage been absorbed into a conceptual system of posthumous recognition and anticipate reward, nor had the very word martyrdom existed as the name for this system.”⁶ The term “martyr” came from a Greek word meaning “witness,” and had appeared before the second century in legal documents, “but, until the Christian literature of the mid-second century AD, it had never designated dying for a cause.”⁷ However, Lucy Grig finds Bowerstock’s argument about the origins of martyrdom, based on linguistics, to be limiting as “such an approach ignores the permeability of the categories ‘Christian’ and ‘Jewish’ in this period, a crucial point established by recent scholarship.”⁸ Grig holds that the same story in *4 Maccabees* that Bowerstock dismisses as a martyr narrative has similar themes that appear in later Christian

⁵ G.W. Bowerstock, *The Wiles Lectures Given at the Queen’s University of Belfast: Martyrdom and Rome*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 9.

⁶ Ibid, 5.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Lucy Grig, *Making Martyrs in Late Antiquity*, (London: Duckworth, 2004), 9.

martyr narratives, including “a theology of vicarious atonement achieved by the righteous who died for their faith,” and “clear acknowledgement of the special status of the righteous dead.”⁹ While Christians originally employed the term martyr with its religious meaning in the mid-second century, the manifestations of martyrdom, if in actions but not in name, were present in Jewish tradition from earlier. Dying for the faith, and gaining the prize of eternity for one’s faith was a tradition present before the first Christian martyrologies.

While linguistic arguments may overlook the feelings behind deaths for faith, it can still be said that Christian martyrdom as a concept was rooted to the landscape of the Roman Empire. Martyrdom arose out of specific situations starting in the second century Roman Empire, specifically the rise of Christianity in cities, the culture of public spectacle, and the role of the philosopher in Roman city life. The public punishment of Christians functioned as both a way for Roman officials to send a warning about conversion, and as a way for Christians to prove their faith and spread it to others in their steadfastness. The urban settings provided by the Roman Empire helped give rise to martyrdoms. Execution for conversion was a public event, as it was easier to scare citizens away from, or inspire them into conversion if the death was a public one.¹⁰ Bowerstock notes “The early martyrdoms in the period down to Constantine are a conspicuously urban affair,” taking place primarily in Rome’s largest, most important cities due to the fact that “from the Christian point of view, martyrdom in a city provided the greatest possible visibility for the cause of the nascent Church, and it simultaneously exposed the Roman administrative machinery to the greatest possible embarrassment.”¹¹

⁹ Grig, *Making Martyrs*, 10.

¹⁰ Bowerstock, *The Wiles Lectures*, 41, 42.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

Public executions also coincided with the social norms of the gladiatorial rings. Along with the function of punishing conversion, viewed as a crime against the stability of the Empire, martyrdoms also grew to fit into the paradigm of the spectacle of the arena. Gladiators and prisoners fought in the arena for the enjoyment of the empire's populace, and Christian martyrs' fearlessness in the face of death only added to the spectacle. The Christian martyr fit within recognizable modes of existing within the Roman Empire, "the life and death of a Christian martyr [being]...something the pagans could readily comprehend through the quasi-sophistic role of a martyr when living and his part in agonistic festivals when dying."¹² Christians themselves worked this rhetoric into their martyrdoms, as Grig notes, to the point that "emphasis on bodily and spiritual endurance (*hypomonē*), stemming from athletic self-training, comes to be an important feature in Christian texts."¹³ Ignatius of Antioch (c. 35 - around 107), identified by Bowerstock and Grig as being a protomartyr, "exhorts his fellow-bishop and martyr-to-be Polycarp: 'As god's athlete, be sober', and tells him 'It is like a great athlete to take blows and yet win the fight.'"¹⁴ The martyrs cast their trials as athletic, a sort of gladiatorial fight, backed up by the location of most martyr executions. In this way, they tapped into the existing culture of the Roman world, casting themselves as heroic athletes, rather than heretics or atheists, winning a crown of martyrdom, borrowing from the imagery of an athlete's laurels. Gladiators were laudable figures to the Roman people, and so martyrs themselves, thrown into the arena as prisoners, sought to elevate their own status and perhaps gain converts, or to stave off the fear of their own executions, in casting their faith as similarly athletic and heroic.

¹² Bowerstock, *The Wiles Lectures*, 66.

¹³ Grig, *Making Martyrs*, 17.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Women martyrs complicated this. Women were not athletes in the same way men were, but women martyrs were nonetheless thrown against similar arenas and violences as their male peers. They too, won the crown of martyrdom. However, the issue became how to memorialize these women as opposed to their male (idealized) peers. Speaking on martyrs, Shaw asserts, “females may well have been martyred just as frequently as males in the sporadic fits of persecution that erupted in various regions of the Roman empire, but their chances of being memorialized in literature was nowhere near as frequent. In fact, males were celebrated four times (or more) as frequently as females.”¹⁵ The problem posed by women martyrs – interceding into territory twice male (athlete and martyr), was frequently reconciled by paying them far less attention than their martyred brothers.

While later the issue of memorialization arose in a Christianized Roman world, during the persecutions, the difficulties posed by women martyrs may have been easier to reconcile for polytheist viewers. As Grig notes, “the relationship between the viewer and subject of violence in the Roman world was one of distance: *non*-identification was crucial.”¹⁶ The martyr was not to be pitied or sympathized with relatable by the incredible violence visited upon their body in the arena; the violence was used as a demarcation to figure their Otherness. A true Roman citizen, who sacrificed to the pagan gods for the good of Rome, would never have such violence visited upon them. The attempt at demarcation was ultimately unsuccessful, as Christian authorities began to decry and debate the amounts of martyrdoms occurring, and whether a true martyr could be made of someone who asked for death, rather than someone who was lead wrongly to it. Roman violence had not successfully demarcated the Other, as conversions and martyrdoms rose in number.

¹⁵ Shaw, “The Passion of Perpetua,” 13.

¹⁶ Grig, *Making Martyrs*, 66.

Blandina and the Scillitan Martyrs

Perpetua and Felicitas followed a line of martyrdoms, among the most famous the martyrs of Gaul in 177 and of Scilli in 180. Among the Galic martyrs was Blandina, whose martyrdom came to be more famous than those of her compatriots. Blandina was a slave-girl, much as Felicitas, who was to be martyred with her mistress. Whereas Perpetua eclipsed Felicitas in Perpetua's journal and later remembrance, Blandina is the martyr who achieves the most fame among her group. Blandina's faith allows her to supersede her mistress in fame, and she later is granted the image of a Roman matron by the framer of the text, and even physically embodies Christ's image in the amphitheatre. Blandina's faith and martyrdom, a gruesome affair, allows her to move past the earthly limitations of her class status not only in the afterlife, but even, according to the author of the account, in the physical world. The women of the Scillitan martyrs were noteworthy in articulating a group Christian identity, rather than the individualized heroics within group martyrdom that authors ascribed to Blandina and Perpetua. The accounts of the martyrdoms were written posthumously, focusing on a group, and in the genre of martyrologies. Perpetua's account differed in being written by one of the martyrs, focusing on the author within her group, and written as a diary outside of the conventions of a genre.

The martyrs of Lyons and Vienne in Gaul were killed in 177 CE. The text comes from a letter reported on by Eusebius, written by the Christian community of Lyons and Vienne to the churches in Asia and Phrygia, and details "a brutal portrait of an anti-Christian uprising in Gaul (perhaps in the summer) of the year 177 under Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus."¹⁷ Among the group, "some were manifestly ready for martyrdom, and fulfilled with all zeal the confession

¹⁷ Herbert Musurillo, introduction to *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, ed. Herbert Musurillo (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), xx.

wherein they gave witness; but others were manifestly unready and untrained and still weak, unable to bear the strain of a mighty conflict.”¹⁸ Among those ready was the slave-girl Blandina, who the “fury of the crowd, governor, and soldiers fell upon, as well as a deacon and two other men. The author of the *Letter of the Churches of Lyons and Vienne* in which the account is located notes that “Blandina, through whom Christ showed that things which appear mean and unsightly and despicable in the eyes of men are accounted worthy of great glory in the sight of God, through love towards Him, a love which showed itself in power and did not boast itself in appearance.”¹⁹ Her class sets her apart from the other martyrs. Sanctus, the deacon from Vienne, and Maturus, “a noble combatant though lately baptized,”²⁰ are either explicitly stated to be noble, or implicitly positioned as beautiful and worthy in the mortal realm by the conjunction made by explicitly listing Blandina’s faults. The combination of her class and gender status as a slave woman makes her a despicable thing in her earthly life, but through the grace of God, and her faith in Him, she elevates herself beyond her mortal class and gender. After disparaging her mortal body, the author goes on to praise her for her actions during the martyrdom, a model followed by editors of Perpetua’s text as well, commemorating and containing both women.

For when we were all afraid, and her mistress according to the flesh (who was herself also a combatant in the ranks of the martyrs) was in a state of agony, lest the weakness of her body should render her unable even to make a bold confession. Blandina was filled with such power that those who by turns kept torturing her in every way from dawn till evening were worn out and exhausted, and themselves confessed defeat from lack of aught else to do to her; they marveled that the breath still remained in a body all mangled and covered with gaping wounds, and they testified that a single form of torture was sufficient to render life extinct, let alone such and so many. But the blessed woman, like a noble champion, in confession regained her strength; and for her, to say, “I am a

¹⁸ “*Letters of the Church of Lyons and Vienne*, in Eusebius *History of the Church* 5.1.3-63,” in *Women’s Religions in the Greco-Roman World*, ed. Ross Shepard Kraemer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 348.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 350.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

Christian, and with us no evil finds a place” was refreshment and rest and insensibility to her lot.²¹

Blandina, in suffering for Christ and God, is portrayed as able to overcome her lowly, earthly status as a slave-woman, and is rendered “like a noble Champion,” making herself equal as a Christian, and then surpassing in her confession her mortal mistress who fears she cannot make a confession. Among Blandina’s fellow martyrs, a second woman, Biblis, also makes a named appearance. One of “those who had denied,” under punishment she “...awoke, so to speak, out of a deep sleep...and she directly contradicted the slanderers...And henceforth she confessed herself a Christian, and joined the inheritance of the martyrs.”²² Biblis is the only one among the deniers mentioned to have recanted and returned to Christ, without prompting, while the other deniers are still arrested, but charged as murderers and scoundrels. Blandina and the three men Maturus, Sanctus, and Attalus are “led to contend with wild beasts to the amphitheatre.”²³

Maturus and Sanctus are killed after a gamut of tortures, at which point Blandina,

...suspended on a stake, was exposed as food to wild beasts which were let loose against her. Even to look on her, as she hung cross-wise in earnest prayer, wrought great eagerness in those who were contending, for in their conflict they beheld with outward eyes in the form of their sister Him who was crucified for them, that He might persuade those who believe in Him that all who suffer for the glory of Christ have unbroken fellowship with the living God. And as none of the wild beasts then touched her, she was taken down from the stake and cast again into the prison, being kept for another conflict, that she might conquer in still further contests, and so both render irrevocable the sentence passed on *the crooked serpent*, and encourage the brethren—she the small, the weak, the despised, who had *put on Christ* the great and invincible Champions, and who in many rounds vanquished the adversary and through conflict was crowned with the *crown of incorruptibility*.²⁴

Blandina becomes Christ-like in her martyrdom. While emulation of Christ was a goal of martyrdom, it is Blandina among all of her fellow martyrs whose body is rendered literally in the image of Christ as she is hung on the stake. The other martyrs see in her physical form their

²¹ “*Letters of the Church of Lyons*,” ed. Kraemer, 350.

²² *Ibid*, 351.

²³ *Ibid*, 353.

²⁴ *Ibid*.

savior Christ, and recognize Him in her. While all those martyred achieved divine redemption and an emulation of Christ, it is in spirit only, whereas Blandina mimics Christ in spirit and physical form. Her physical form, which the author described as weak and unsightly and despicable become the image of Christ in the amphitheatre. Sanctus is said to die with the words “I am a Christian” on his lips, but Blandina dies with this phrase witnessed through her body. The martyr Alexander, who is brought in to the amphitheatre after prompting the remaining deniers to recant holds “converse with God in his heart,” whereas Blandina is seen by her brother Christians to mimic the physical form of Christ.²⁵

Alexander and Attalus are killed; Blandina is brought back into the amphitheatre on the last day of single combats, along with a fifteen-year-old boy named Ponticus, although they had been made to watch on all the previous days the deaths of the other Christians. They are told to swear “by their [the heathens’] idols,” and after refusing, “the multitude was so infuriated at them that it had neither compassion for the youth of the boy nor respect for the sex of the woman,” and are forced through a round of tortures, in an attempt to force the two to swear by the idols.²⁶

But this they were unable to accomplish; for Ponticus, encouraged by his sister (so that the heathen themselves saw that it was she who was urging him on and strengthening him), having nobly endured every kind of torture gave up his spirit. But the blessed Blandina last of all, having, like a highborn mother, exhorted her children and sent them forth victorious to the King, travelled herself along the same path of conflicts as they did, and hastened to them, rejoicing and exulting [sic] at her departure, like one bidden to a marriage supper, rather than cast to the wild beasts. And after the scourging, after the wild beasts, after the frying-pan, she was at last thrown into a basket and presented to a bull. For a time the animal tossed her, but she had now lost all perception of what was happening, thanks to the hope she cherished, her grasp of the objects of her faith, and her intercourse with Christ. Then she too was sacrificed, and even the heathen themselves acknowledged that never in their experience had a woman endured so many terrible sufferings.²⁷

²⁵ “*Letters of the Church of Lyons*,” ed. Kraemer, 355.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

In death, the author portrays Blandina as moving past the earthly limitations of her class and gender status. In life, she was a slave woman, one of the lowest tiers of Roman society. However, her social status made her the perfect character for an editor to graft a Christian parable onto. The author paints her as the epitome of Roman womanhood in death, a bride (given to Christ through the marriage supper) and a mother sheltering her children on their path to righteousness. Motherhood and marriage were the essential ideals for Roman women, and in death Blandina takes on the status of a Roman matron, “like a highborn mother,” and even cows the polytheists in the amphitheatre. Matron status was very important in Roman culture seen as the keepers and bearers of future generations and continuation of the Empire. In becoming this in death, Blandina is positioned as the ideal woman. Through martyrdom, and her strength of will, Blandina broke through divisions of class and gender, rendering herself, a slave-girl, as a highborn mother and bride of Christ in spirit, and in body an image of Christ.

The author then ends their letter saying that nevertheless, the “heathens” bloodlust was not abetted, “...since for them man’s gift of reason did not exist...”and decrying their unjust hatred of Christians.²⁸ The Christian community is then kept from the martyr’s bodies, so that they cannot be given proper funeral rites, and are later shown the heads and mangled trunks of the bodies after they have been exposed to fire and more animals. The bodies were displayed for six days before being burnt once more, and swept into the Rhone River.²⁹

Gruesome and horrifying, Blandina’s death was also exemplary of role reversal possible through martyrdom. Her account is given just as much, if not more detail and length as the men who were also martyred with her. The author degrades her for her class status, a “despicable” slave-girl, to later go on to praise her faith and death. In martyrdom she moved beyond her

²⁸ “*Letters of the Church of Lyons*,” ed. Kraemer, 355.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 356.

earthly class status, becoming a highborn mother and bride of Christ. This transformation was not unheard of – part of Christianity’s appeal at the time was to the downtrodden of society, who could find reward and redemption through faith. However, the treatment of Blandina by the author is in many ways exceptional, because Blandina surpassed in her salvation her mortal mistress, and in details, her fellow martyrs. Additionally her body itself, not just her spirit, is transfigured during martyrdom, surpassing her class and gender status to become literally the image of Christ.

At the same time, Blandina’s account is contained within *The Letters of the Church of Lyons and Vienne*. Her account was not reframed and rearticulated over the span of decades as Perpetua’s was. Shaw locates this in the nature of the two texts: other women martyrs “did not usually provoke the intensive reinterpretation and arguments in refutation” due to the primacy of the accounts: “their own words were not at the epicenter of their remembrance.”³⁰ Someone other than herself, a clergyman, wrote Blandina’s account, and thus she was “framed” correctly from the start, compliant and Christ-like, always in line with Church doctrine. There were no further accounts attempting to reframe Blandina’s martyrdom, as the first version was already written to forward Church teachings on social class and the transformative effects of faith and the afterlife. The account is notable in what appears to be a counter-discourse to normative class structures: Blandina surpasses her earthly mistress in importance. However, while this reversal of the class structure may have been odd in the Imperial Roman context, it makes sense as a Christian one. Blandina’s account was meant to forward the theological teaching that heavenly reward is more important than earthly wealth and that anyone of any status could achieve

³⁰ Shaw, “The Passion of Perpetua,” 37-38.

salvation through faith, in order to garner more converts for the new religion, often recruited from a disenfranchised underclass.

Blandina is important in relation to Perpetua and Felicitas in that she was in the generation of martyrs before them, and was one of the few women martyrs to receive widespread acclaim and remembrance after her death. Shaw lists Blandina as one of two celebrated women martyrs in the generation prior to Perpetua, and notes that her femaleness, and its mutilation in front of crowds was an important rhetoric of punishment in the Roman world. Shaw notes that the public punishment and killing of women was, for the viewing crowds, a

...spectacle of witnessing the public violation of norms of sexuality and the mutilation of otherwise protected and honored female bodies...In being compelled to play the female role in a drama of public punishment, the slave woman Blandina achieved the sort of glory doubly denied her in normal life, where honour was normally the preserve of males of free status.³¹

Martyrdoms were a public policing of social norms, meant to dissuade others from, as polytheists saw it, threatening the safety of the Empire by refusing to sacrifice, and to restore some sense of justice to the emperor and gods who had been wronged. To correct violations of the social norms, social norms were further overturned, as women's bodies were put up for consumptive gaze and destroyed in gendered, ways, to point out these women's non-normative status. However, among the Christian community, there were also normative values at play, concerning class and gender, and martyr narratives would be used to reinforce those norms. The account of the Gallic martyrs serves this purpose, reaffirming the normative earthly class structure of slave and master, but also presenting Christianity as a religion where these class structures could be overturned in Heaven for the faithful.

Three years after the martyrdom of Blandina and the other Christians in Gaul came the martyrs of Scilli. The *Acts of the Martyrs of Scilli* is the oldest dated Latin Christian document

³¹ Shaw, "The Passion of Perpetua," 18.

from North Africa, dated on July 17, 180 CE, and “belongs to the genre of Acts that have traditionally been considered court records, as opposed to *passiones* or *martyria*.”³² Six Christian men and women, Spertus, Nartzalus, Cittinus, Donata, Secunda, and Vestia are “brought to trial at Carthage in the council-chamber,” and asked by the proconsul Saturnius to “return to a right mind.”³³ Speratus and Saturnius argue over the cult of the Emperor before the other Christians begin to also speak. “Donata said: ‘Give honor to Caesar as unto Caesar, but fear to God.’ Vestia said ‘I am a Christian.’ Secunda said: ‘I wish to be none other than what I am.’”³⁴ These answers are, or become, fairly standard Christian responses, indeed even mirrors Blandina’s confession of “I am a Christian, and with us evil finds no place,” a cry also taken up by Blandina’s fellow martyr Sanctus, from three years prior. Nevertheless, the articulation of “I” is important to differentiate oneself as recognizable before God, and Speratus as well has used it throughout his argument. The phrase was volatile in creating a group identity, and the phrase could be taken up by women just as easily as by men. Saturnias continues to press Speratus, who borrows Vestia’s previous words saying: “‘I am a Christian.’ And all were of one mind with him.”³⁵ Spertaus appears to be the spokesman of the group, but he takes the words of one of the women converts, recognizing her self-articulation of Christianity as an important justification in the face of the hostile council. This phrase is repeated once more by Speratus, with all agreeing, immediately before Saturnius sentences them to “suffer by the sword.”³⁶ Here then, the Scillitan martyrs seem to be represented by the man Speratus, but nonetheless, all the martyrs speak at least once in the *Act*, and it is a woman’s words that are taken up by Speratus and the group and repeated, as a

³² “The Acts of the Martyrs of Scilli,” in *Women’s Religions in the Greco-Roman World*, ed. Ross Shepard Kraemer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 112.

³³ *Ibid.*, 346.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 347.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

defiant group articulation. Whereas Blandina stood out amongst the men she was martyred with, the Scillitan women blend in with their group, voicing their own articulations of their identity, but using words that had been uttered many times by Christians. Whatever their class status was, it is not mentioned, for the Scillitan martyrs are exemplary in their group identity and cohesion as martyrs, whereas Blandina was exemplary as an individual able to overcome her class in faith and martyrdom.

The account of the Scillitan martyrs followed standard martyrological form. They undergo a trial, and give the somewhat rote answers to the councilmen questioning them. Their answers, using an “I” articulation of faith in God, can also be found in Blandina’s statements, and in the statements of many other martyrs. The Acts of the Scillitan and Gallic martyrs were somewhat standard in the narratives they forwarded about Christian identity and salvation. These narratives, of martyrs always ready with an “I” rebuttal to questioning judges was essential in Christianity’s early stages for formulating a group identity. As Ramsay MacMullen holds, “in the opening century or two of their existence as a religious community, Christians lacked a distinctive poetry, rhetoric, drama, architecture, painting, sculpture, music, or dance...no special language of gestures or symbols... such as pagans had developed,” and so had to set forward with building and articulating a new Christian identity³⁷ The figure of the martyr was critical in developing a cultural rhetoric for the new Christian identity. From this need arose martyrological narratives, of repeated responses, symbols, and imagery, and of a definitive “I,” a true Christian identity. Visions like Perpetua’s placed meaning onto symbols and images, *Passios* provided a form of rhetoric for the new religion, and the re-reading and re-enactment of these *Passios*, absorbed into religious tradition helped form a special language of Christendom.

³⁷ Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianity and Paganism in the Fourth to Eighth Centuries*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 150

However, as Christianity coalesced into something approximating the historical Church, women's earlier autonomy within the movement was restricted.

“[Claims of Christians superiority] were particularly aided by a rhetoric of gender, in which the passivity and suffering widely thought to be the condition of being female are both masculinized (as in the case, say, of Perpetua), and shown to be far more powerful than the seeming but ultimately dales masculine power of the Roman authorities. Given such a rhetoric, stories of women martyrs were particularly valuable, for they began with the greatest example of weakness, a woman, and exalted her to the highest possible level, where, through God, she triumphs over the most powerful human male authorities.”³⁸

Perpetua's account complicated Christian views of gender, and did not fit into standard martyrological narrative. As Shaw says, “she was the first,” the first woman martyr to narrate her own account, to articulate “I” statements herself, and not have them placed in her mouth posthumously by an editor. She distinguished herself from among a group, unlike Blandina or the women of the Scillitan martyrs whose actions appear in the context of others. Before Perpetua, women had appeared in accounts of group martyrdoms, “...but as subordinate actors in a wider drama. In writing her account of her own experiences, therefore, Perpetua was (to the best of our knowledge) breaking new ground in asserting the primacy and legitimacy of her own experience.”³⁹

³⁸ Ross Shepard Kraemer, “Holy, Pious, and Exemplary Women,” in *Women's Religions in the Greco-Roman World*, ed. Ross Shepard Kraemer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 330.

³⁹ Shaw, “The Passion of Perpetua,” 15-16.

Chapter 2: Perpetua Before the Bull

Understanding Perpetua's Passio and the Violence of the Moment

Perpetua and Felicitas were part of a group of Christian converts arrested in 203 AD near Carthage. The group had been arrested “in the town of Thuburbo Minus, about thirty-six Roman miles (fifty-three kilometers or so) on the Bagrada River to the West of Carthage” some time before and was kept in prison, awaiting their execution on the 7th of March.⁴⁰ During their imprisonment, Perpetua kept a record of events and of her dreams, which would later make up the majority of the *Passio Perpetuae*. The diary was created in a personal context – she was writing as a woman recording her last experiences, her dreams, her familial ties, and her feelings on her impending death. She wrote in a time when Christianity was developing, struggling to develop its own canon. Her diary dealt with a series of resistances: her resistance to the call to sacrifice to the Roman gods, her resistance to her father and normative kin ties, and her dreams as a resistance to her impending death and her own powerlessness in the face of it.

The Roman State employed specific forms of violence against Christians to attempt to cease their conversion. While much of the violence employed against the Christian community was not new, such as destruction of places of worship, other forms of violence were specifically used to degrade Christians, many of which were different forms of torture and death in the arena tailored to mock Christians, such as being mauled to death by symbolic animals. The modes of death employed against Perpetua were not mobilized solely along lines of religious identity, but also along gendered lines. This chapter will argue that explicitly gendered modes of violence were also utilized against Perpetua and Felicitas, namely in the attempts to mock them just prior to their death, and in the choice of animal they were to face. However, this chapter will also

⁴⁰ Brent D. Shaw, “The Passion of Perpetua,” *Past and Present*, No. 139 (May, 1993): 10.

argue that Perpetua, through her debates with her father, her dreams, and her refusal to be mocked resisted both gendered physical violence, as well as Roman gender norms of what it meant to be a *matrona*.

Format and Authorship of the Passio

In order to discuss the *Passio* fully, the author and formation of the full text need to be contextualized. The *Passio* is comprised of Perpetua's prison diary; this account was later collected with an account of Saturus' death, another of the prisoners, and then framed with an introduction and conclusion by an anonymous redactor. The document created from this fusion, the *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis* became "a literary prototype for a specific genre of *Passiones* in Africa," and become a widely known text.⁴¹ Some historians have hypothesized the redactor may have been Tertullian. Tertullian was a prolific theologian, born in Carthage in 160 AD, who died around 230 AD, placing him temporally and geographically in the correct frame to have been the potential redactor.⁴² Patrick J. Geary notes that the unknown redactor's addition of the beginning and the end framing section places the whole document "in the tradition of Montanism, a Christian movement that emphasized female prophesy, strict asceticism, and encouraged Christians to seek martyrdom."⁴³ This lends further credence to the idea of Tertullian being the anonymous framer, as he converted to Montanism later in life.

Historical debate has also occurred over whether Perpetua was truly the author, or whether the account was created wholesale by the redactor, or by a third party. While "the majority of the Church historians who have discussed the *Passio* have accepted without question

⁴¹ Emanuela Prinzivalli, "Perpetua the Martyr," in *Roman Women*, ed. Augusto Fraschetti (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 119.

⁴² Arthur Frederick Ide, *Martyrdom of Women: A Study of Death Psychology in the Early Christian Church to 301 C.E.* (Garland: Tangelwüld Press, 1985), 3.

⁴³ Patrick J. Geary. "St. Perpetua: The Passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas," in *Readings in Medieval History*, ed. Patrick J. Geary (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2003), 61.

the veracity of the redactor and the authenticity of the incapsualted [sic] documents,” there has been some question over the genuineness of Perpetua’s *Passio*, whether she was the author or if the redactor composed her section as well.⁴⁴ Historians like Ross Shepard Kraemer doubt the authenticity of the *Passio Perpetuae*, and believe that someone else, most often the unnamed redactor, composed its entirety.⁴⁵

However most evidence points to Perpetua’s section being her own. Historian E.R. Dodds notes three important features of Perpetua’s segment that mark it as hers alone, and not the work of the redactor. Perpetua’s work uses a “simple style” of rhetoric, whereas the redactor is “clever” throughout, writing a “gory and edifying narrative,” that is at odds with the “bald and sober factual account” in the *Acta Perpetuae* itself.⁴⁶ Dodds also notes that the dreams in the *Acta* are dream-like, full of details that do not serve a forger to make-up. For instance, “the shepherd in the first dream milks *cheese*, or rather curds, direct from his sheep and gives it to her to eat – the sort of time-compression which is common in dreams.”⁴⁷ The last reason Dodds presents for the work being Perpetua’s own is that the dreams do not contain heavy-handed Christian symbolism, but even contain pagan elements – indicative of a real account of a pagan converted to Christianity, and not of the work of a redactor crafting a parable ready-made for sermons. Among these are her brother Dinocrates being thirsty in Purgatory, an element more common in pagan imaginings of Tartarus (much like King Tantalus chained in water and dying of thirst, only to have the water recede from his mouth each time he leans in to drink), as well as

⁴⁴ E. R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 48.

⁴⁵ Ross Shepard Kraemer, “A First Person Account of a Christian Woman’s Persecution: The Martyrdom of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas,” in *Women’s Religions in the Greco-Roman World*, ed. Ross Shepard Kraemer, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 357.

⁴⁶ Dodds, *Pagan and Christian*, 48 -49.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 51.

the Supreme Judge being a trainer of gladiators and not Christ, and offering her golden apples of the Hesperides and not a martyr's crown.⁴⁸

Along with containing polytheistic imagery combined with Christian imagery, many stylistic tropes of the martyrology genre are absent in the section supposed as Perpetua's diary. According to Nicola Denzey, a typical martyrology references "certain stock features: an arrest, a formal interrogation, imprisonment, torture, another interrogation before a tribunal, a death judgment duly handed down, and the final spasmodic (even vaguely pornographic...) spatter-fest of an execution," most of which are absent or only briefly mentioned in Perpetua's writing.⁴⁹ The diary skips over the arrest, although the redactor assures the reader it occurred, and interrogations and formal torture are absent. The execution is also by necessity only supplied in the redactor's added conclusion. But the diary itself is almost wholly absent of the stock features present in most martyrologies. It is instead a very personal account, detailing dreams, the heat of the prison, and the pain of swollen breasts. The evidence strongly suggests that Perpetua herself, and not the unnamed redactor who only framed Perpetua's original writing, wrote the *Passio Perpetua*. Dodds' evidence is also evocative of the mixture of paganism and Christianity that was occurring in the Roman Empire, with Perpetua's subconscious supplying her with pagan imagery in dreams of Heaven, even as she awaited her martyrdom for her refusal to recant Christianity and worship the pagan Gods. The remainder of this thesis will be working with the ideas that Perpetua did write the portion attributed to her, and that Tertullian is the likely redactor of the remainder of the text.

⁴⁸ Dodds, *Pagan and Christian*, 52.

⁴⁹ Denzey, *The Bone Gatherers*, 130.

Father and Familial Ties

Perpetua leveraged her faith to break with normative ties, asserting her new identity as a Christian and leaving behind familial constraints. Likewise, her husband, possibly unhappy with her conversion, is rendered wholly invisible in her text, and she refutes her father multiple times. Fraught with personal drama, these instances in her diary are also indicative of larger Roman societal structures and Perpetua's attempts to break with them, namely the idealization of the *matrona*. At the same time as she resisted familial expectations, she still sought to care for her child, until she was able to break from him safely. Perpetua's text reveals a deep ambivalence towards traditional gender roles: Perpetua distances herself from traditional Roman familial structures and norms, while worrying deeply about her son, and relying on other family members such as her brother and mother to care for him after her death.

The redactor begins the *Passio* by praising the glory of the Lord and then stating that several young catechumens, "candidates for baptism were arrested – Revocatus and his fellow-slave Felicitas, together with Saturninus and Secundulus; they were accompanied also by Vibia Perpetua, a married woman of good family who was well educated," and who was "probably from the decurial class of the town of Thuburbo Minus."⁵⁰ As the redactor notes, Perpetua's family was a semi-noble family; according to Thomas Heffernan, "the gens Vibia is present in Africa from the middle of the first century and is associated with military matters. Lucius Iunius Quintus Vibius Crispus served as proconsul of Africa in 71," meaning Perpetua's family line was established and known in North Africa.⁵¹ The redactor describes Perpetua as "being about

⁵⁰ Perpetua Vibia and Redactor, "The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas," in *Lives of Roman Christian Women*, ed. Carolinne White (London: Penguin Books, 2010), 6. Shaw, "The Passion of Perpetua," 11.

⁵¹ Thomas J. Heffernan, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 21.

twenty-two years old, had a father, a mother and two brothers – one of the a candidate for baptism like her – and a baby son at her breast.”⁵² After this brief introduction, Perpetua’s own account is presented.

The beginning of Perpetua’s account is her father visiting her while she is under arrest, begging her to renounce her Christianity. However, she refuses to stop calling herself a Christian as she “cannot call myself anything other than what I am, namely a Christian.”⁵³ Her father is enraged, and leaves, although he will reappear to repeat his appeals twice more before she is executed. The verbal exchange positions Perpetua as a sort of philosopher, and a woman cognizant of her own abilities. Emanuela Prinzivalli notes that Perpetua practices “Socratic dialogue with her father,” in the exchange, and her reasoning is reminiscent of “platonic theory concerning the essential relationship between name and thing,” demonstrating Perpetua’s status as an educated woman and her own sharp mind.⁵⁴ Her first encounter with her father, where she cares for him but also bests him, is demonstrative of a trend throughout Perpetua’s work, where she “does not define herself in relationship to men, rather she defines men in relationship to her.”⁵⁵ Here, at the very beginning of her account then is a subversion of normative gender roles. Perpetua not only defies her father, going against Roman norms of filial piety, but also takes on the persona of a philosopher. While it was not unheard of for women to be philosophers, it was rare, and the profession was coded as male. In order to argue with her father, Perpetua assumes a male role, and channels it to fulfill her own needs in breaking from her pagan father. The rejection of gender norms Perpetua displays in the opening of her writing continues throughout the remainder of her dairy.

⁵² Perpetua Vibia and Redactor, “The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas,” 6.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Prinzivalli, “Perpetua the Martyr,” 121.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 120.

A few days later Perpetua and her cohort are baptized and later transferred to prison, and Perpetua entrusts her baby to her mother and brother after she is executed. She gets permission for her baby to stay with her in prison and notes that "...as a result I immediately felt better, relieved as I was of my discomfort and of worry for the child. Suddenly the prison had become a palace, and I preferred to be there rather than anywhere else."⁵⁶ Her brother asks for her to seek a vision from the Lord about her fate, and Perpetua, knowing that "I could talk with the Lord, whose great blessings I had experienced," promises her brother that she will and is given a vision.⁵⁷

The first vision Perpetua experiences is of a ladder. The ladder is "made of bronze, reaching right up into heaven."⁵⁸ The sides of the ladder were covered with weapons such as spears, swords, and spikes, so that anyone climbing the ladder had to exercise caution or be gashed by the spikes. A dragon waiting at the bottom guarded the ladder. All the converts were gathered, and the first to ascend the ladder was Saturus, "...he who later surrendered voluntarily out of consideration for us (for it was he who had been our spiritual teacher), and so he had not been with us when we were arrested."⁵⁹ After reaching the top of the ladder, Saturus calls down to Perpetua that he will help her up, but to be careful of the dragon. As Perpetua advanced, the dragon, "as if it were afraid of me...stuck its head out from under the ladder and I trod on its head as if it were the first rung, and I began to climb up."⁶⁰ At the top Perpetua sees a man with grey hair, "dressed as a shepherd, milking his sheep," surrounded by "thousands of people dressed in

⁵⁶ Perpetua Vibia and Redactor, "The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas," 7.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 7, 8.

white.”⁶¹ The man greets her and gives her fresh milk, which she drinks before waking up, “...with the taste of something sweet still in my mouth.”⁶² She takes this as a sign that she will be condemned, and tells her brother.

After Perpetua’s first dream vision, the prisoners hear rumors that they will be given a hearing, and Perpetua’s father comes to her once more, begging her to recant at the hearing.

“Dear daughter, have pity on me in your old age. Have pity on your father – if I deserve to be called your father, if I have raised you to reach the prime of your life, if I have favoured [sic] you more than your brothers. Do not cause me disgrace. Think of your brothers, think of your mother and your aunt, think of your son who cannot live without you. Stop being so proud and stubborn! Do not destroy us all! For none of us will be able to speak freely again if anything happens to you.”⁶³

However, Perpetua refuses, acknowledging that her father “spoke out of love for me,” but remaining true to her faith.⁶⁴ Her father leaves, although he will attempt to get her to recant once more later on during her imprisonment.

Perpetua’s father’s second attempt is indicative of how serious her transgression is. Her decision stands to destroy the family, both emotionally, and in the eyes of the Roman state, erasing their high class standing. On some level this is surely a plea from father to daughter. He is asking Perpetua not to destroy her family with grief over her death, for her to choose life and her family’s happiness. He mentions favoring her over her brothers. But this plea is also a plea from one noble to another – begging her not to defile their good family name with her resistance to the old religion, the religion of the State. By going against the Roman gods, Perpetua was also going against the Roman state, as the well being of the state and the emperor was tied to sacrifice to the gods and the emperor himself (as a descendant of gods). Perpetua’s refusal to sacrifice was a transgression against not only Rome itself, but against her duty as a citizen and a noblewoman.

⁶¹ Perpetua Vibia and Redactor, “The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas,” 8.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

By converting to Christianity, Perpetua gave up her social class and standing, and also harmed her family's societal position. For her father, Perpetua's actions were not only throwing away her own social class, but her entire family's as well. This threat to the family by wayward children converting to Christianity was so great that "Pagan (or non-Christian) parents were therefore in the forefront of civil litigation against their Christian children, for by allowing their heirs freedom to choose their own philosophical destiny endangered the entire patrimony, the status and reputation of the *gens* and clan, and imperiled the safety of the state –not to mention their own physical well being and longevity."⁶⁵ From the text, it does not seem as if Perpetua's father himself brought charges against her, but his anger still likely stems in part from the damage she has done and will do to their family name. He begs her to consider the ramifications of her conversion on her family: they will lose a family member, but also their social standing. Perpetua's conversion was transgressive in that she was a member of an old family who converted, and in doing so risked her family's social standing and the safety of the empire. The violence meted out against her in the gladiatorial ring was meant to correct this grave trespass against the safety of the empire, and of class relations.

By converting to Christianity and refusing to recant in face of death, Perpetua was removing herself as a reproductive body from Roman society, which was a grievous trespass. Perpetua has done this second harm to the Empire, in removing herself as a reproductive body, and therefore harming the Empire's ability to propagate itself. Perpetua's husband is absent throughout the entirety of her account. He is not mentioned or named. He may have distanced himself from her upon her conversion, but nevertheless, he goes unseen throughout Perpetua's account. Shaw suspects that this was because he was actively hostile to Perpetua's conversion,

⁶⁵ Ide, *Martyrdom of Women: A Study of Death Psychology*, 35.

“and found no difficulty in accepting the harsh actions the Roman authorities were taking against her...”⁶⁶ Perpetua’s removal of him from her own narrative could be a reaction to his anger. If his disapproval was real, then Perpetua is so thoroughly dismissing it that it does not even appear in her text.

In addition to Perpetua’s rebuff of the Empire’s safety and its class hierarchies, Perpetua added further transgression in her abandonment of womanly duty to bear children. In Roman society, where children who could serve as soldiers and protect the Empire were vital, and in a society when many children would die at a young age, it was vital for women to have many children, and was “part of their duty to the maintenance of the Roman state.”⁶⁷ Perpetua, in converting, and later refusing to renounce Christianity, was heading towards her own death. Her family, and society at large, however, would also view this as a larger symbolic death of her family and of a part of the Empire. She left behind not five, or seven, or ten children, but one son, still drinking his mother’s milk. Her father appeals to this in his second attempt, begging her to think of her son, and reminding her that he has raised her “to reach the prime of her life,” when her childbearing abilities were at their peak.⁶⁸ As a Christian convert, Perpetua left her earthly societal role as a mother and propagator of the Empire to become a bride of Christ, as the redactor later frames her, not the wife of a Roman man or mother of Roman children.

Perpetua’s transgressions against state and family are so dire that her father returns a final time to attempt to dissuade her, even under the threat of violence. Perpetua once more refuses her father, and he leaves again. At the hearing, all the prisoners confess their guilt, but when Perpetua’s turn comes, her father appears with her baby son, and pulls her off the prisoner’s

⁶⁶ Shaw, “The Passion of Perpetua,” 25.

⁶⁷ Heffernan, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, 30.

⁶⁸ Perpetua Vibia and Redactor, “The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas,” 8.

dock. He beseeches her to ““Perform the sacrifice! Have pity on your baby!”” after which the governor Hilarianus says to Perpetua ““Have pity on your father’s grey hairs, have pity on your baby son. Make a sacrifice for the emperor’s welfare.””⁶⁹ The governor mirrors Perpetua’s father’s appeals to her Roman duty as a mother, and brings in her duty to the Empire as well. The cult of the Emperor as deity was important to the well being of Rome. Sacrifices to the emperors ensured the continuation of the empire and its legacy, and a refusal to do so was not only heresy, but essentially treason against Rome. Christians frequently refused to sacrifice to the emperor, as they only worshiped the one true God, and were given the option to recant by performing the required sacrifice. Perpetua turned away from her last option of recanting, refusing to sacrifice to Septimus Severus and his sons Geta and Caracalla, and again asserted that she was a Christian.⁷⁰ After Hilarianus tells her to listen to her father and she refuses, her father continues to try and dissuade her. At this, Hilarianus loses patience, and orders her father to be beaten, an act which shakes Perpetua: “I was upset by what was happening to my father, for it was as if I myself was being beaten; I felt really sorry for him, so pathetic was he in his old age.”⁷¹ Perpetua still feels for her father, but will not recant. Hilarianus has moved to punishing her father as well for her transgression of converting, as well as his own, for not controlling his daughter as a father should, and instead being beaten by her discourse. With this last instance of her father’s public beating, Perpetua has removed herself from filial norms, and the state meets out violence both against her father, and later her, for failing to uphold norms of family and state.

⁶⁹ Perpetua Vibia and Redactor, “The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas,” 9.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

Dreams and Internal Resistance

The majority of the remainder of Perpetua's diary discusses the prophetic dreams she has in prison. By this time, she has already had one, the dream of the ladder and dragon. As her death became a certainty, the dreams increased, and she has three more dreams before her execution. Perpetua's numerous dream visions are evocative of a woman struggling with the knowledge of her own death. Unable to fight her earthly situation, her dreams becoming a landscape of resistance, where she is triumphant in the face of great adversity, and makes her way to heaven. Her dreams also blended polytheist and Christian imagery, insights of the lived realities of a Christian convert in a still polytheist empire, and the internal resistance to a strict binarism and division not indicative of lived experiences. Perpetua's dreams are an internal resistance, both to the coming violence and to a binary world.

Perpetua's second and third dreams are a reaction to the impending violence, and the removal of her son. The dreams facilitate a role reversal, where Perpetua is in control, as well as reparation to some of her familial ties. The dreams come after she and the rest of the catechumens are sentenced to death by wild beasts. Perpetua has also sent for her baby, only to be refused by her father. However, according to Perpetua, by God's will her baby no longer desired her milk, and her breasts were no longer inflamed. Days pass with the group in prison, and while they are praying Perpetua "suddenly shouted out the name Dinocrates," her younger brother who died as a young boy.⁷² She decides to pray for him and undergoes two more dream premonitions on his behalf. Denzey notes that prior to the canonization of the intercessory

⁷² Perpetua Vibia and Redactor, "The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas," 9.

powers of saints, "...to benefit the living by standing as their witness and protectors before God, it fell to the ordinary dead, including women and children..."⁷³

Perpetua's dream is radical in that it reverses the role of interceder; it is Perpetua, still living, interceding in a dream for the dead. Her faith and her belief in her own faith were strong enough to allow for this role reversal. In her first vision about Dinocrates, she sees emerging from a hole, among a host of other dead individuals. "He was very hot and thirsty, pale and dirty. On his face he had a sore, the one he had when he died."⁷⁴ Dinocrates is very thirsty, but is unable to drink from a pool of water, because he is not tall enough to reach its rim. This imagery, although in a dream from a Christian woman, is evocative of pagan imagery. Namely, the Greek myth of Tantalus, one of the damned inhabitants of Tartarus, who Odysseus sees undergoing eternal punishment for his earthly crimes of cannibalism and infanticide. Tantalus' punishment is to be forever hungry and thirsty, standing beneath fruit trees in a pool of water. Anytime Tantalus reached for the fruit, "the wind under the dark sky tossed the bough beyond him," and if he stooped down to drink the water, "it vanished round his feet, gulped underground, and black mud baked there in a wind from hell."⁷⁵ The vision of Dinocrates that Perpetua receives is similar to the Classical punishment of Tantalus and reveals that although the divide between Christians and polytheists as often maintained and enforced by death, as in Perpetua's case, that the divisions were not so stark on an individual level. Perpetua spoke and could write in Greek, and as an upper class woman would likely have received education in the classics, such as the

⁷³ Denzey, *The Bone Gatherers*, 135.

⁷⁴ Perpetua Vibia and Redactor, "The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas," 9.

⁷⁵ Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fitzgerald. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), 204

Odyssey.⁷⁶ Pagan imagery was still present and borrowed from in the minds of Christians, as in the similar punishments of Dinocrates and Tantalus.

Dinocrates, however, unlike Tantalus, is not to be punished eternally. Perpetua understands from her vision that she is to intercede on her younger brother's behalf. After praying fervently for him every day, Perpetua receives another vision. In it, Dinocrates' face cancer has become a healed scar, and the rim of the pool of water is now only as high as his waist, allowing him to drink from it with a golden bowl that never becomes empty.⁷⁷ Perpetua, using her intercessory power as a soon-to-be martyr, has delivered her brother. While among Christian canon there was an ongoing debate over whether someone, especially someone who had not be baptized, could be saved after death, Perpetua's dream indicates that she believed that the prayers of the Christian living could still intervene on behalf of the dead, and on behalf of the unbaptized, as Dinocrates had presumably been raised a polytheist during his short life.

Perpetua has one final dream vision, on the day before she and her group are to be set before the wild beasts for execution. Perpetua is lead by the deacon Pomponius into the amphitheatre, where she is to face an Egyptian and his assistants in battle. She also has assistants to aid her, and when they come to strip her down and rub her with oil, she finds that she is a man. Augusto Frascchetti posits that this transformation as the fact that "Perpetua must overcome her inferiority as a woman, and thus she becomes a man...Only by becoming a man could she rise above the weakness of her sex."⁷⁸ Frascchetti makes no note as to whether this is the view of the Church or perhaps the framer of the *Passio*, or Perpetua's own internalization of her surrounding patriarchal society, (or his own view of women).

⁷⁶ Heffernan, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, 26.

⁷⁷ Perpetua Vibia and Redactor, "The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas," 10.

⁷⁸ Augusto Frascchetti, "Introduction," in *Roman Women*, ed. Augusto Frascchetti (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 18.

In the Roman social hierarchy, women, even noble women like Perpetua, were always beneath their men counterparts, thought to embody weakness, “*propter sexus infirmitatem*, indisputable and universally recognized,” a societal acknowledgement which “formed the basis of all relationships (including juridical ones) that every freeborn Roman woman established with the outer world.”⁷⁹ Shaw, however, believes that this reading is too simplistic, and that viewing the last dream as “...pragmatic and rooted in the hard realities of the Graeco-Roman world, is simply dismissive: if Perpetua wished to engage in a *pankration* in the arena she had to become a male, and that is that. But the latter position is surely mistaken.” The transformation to Shaw is instead an “empowering” experience in which “Perpetua is able to assert her powers to the full...”⁸⁰ Indeed, Perpetua remains herself, just in a different body. Much like Blandina’s fellow martyrs, or the Scillitan martyrs, Perpetua maintains the singular “I” throughout her narrative.

To ignore the realities of Perpetua’s world is also dismissive. The dream is as much a resistance as a fantasy about power. She lived in a society that constrained women. Women could wield power, but it was most frequently through the familial route: influencing a husband or brother. This is not to dismiss this very real route to power. Perpetua’s dream, however, can be read as a subconscious acknowledgment of her lived experiences and constraints, and a movement beyond them. Living in a misogynistic society, Perpetua, in order to wield the kind of power demanded in the arena, a power routed through masculinity, had to become a man to defeat a man. Perpetua lived in a world where virtue literally meant manliness (*Vir* - man, *virtue* - manliness), and was a masculine trait. Shaw’s view can be fused with the views of lived experience that he dismisses. Perpetua is empowered in her dream, she acknowledges societal constraints upon her feminine body, and then transcends them.

⁷⁹ Fraschetti, “Introduction,” in *Roman Women*, 3.

⁸⁰ Shaw, “The Passion of Perpetua,” 29.

In becoming a man, she also deconstructs what virtue is, and transcends both her earthly and bodily limitations, as well as society's. The role of the gladiator in Roman society was important – a very visible ideal of masculine strength, akin to a superhero. Denzey notes the gendered self-control gladiators displayed in fights, and compares them to the philosopher. “Both these modes of self-control and discipline – the philosopher and the gladiator—were gendered male. Resistance to sexual intercourse was the highest form of courage that a woman could exhibit, and to exhibit it was, literally, to be man-like.”⁸¹ Perpetua has already out-philosophized both her father and the judge in her self-naming, and now in her dream transforms into a male gladiator. She has subverted and resisted two of the highest masculine ideals by embodying them. Her own words and dreams take on the aspects of masculine courage and virtue, in the form of philosopher and gladiator. Through this reading, Perpetua can be seen as someone both cognizant of gendered social constraints against her, but also of her own power of self-actualization through her words and dreams. For Prinzivalli the importance of the “I” throughout Perpetua’s narrative, even when she becomes male-bodied, reflects the holistic experience of Perpetua’s life, “I” as a tool for self-naming as a Christian, but also as “the feminine identity maintained in the diary through her narrative ‘I.’”⁸²

Perpetua and the Egyptian do battle, and Perpetua wins after beating him about the face, and treading on his head, repeating the imagery from the first dream with the dragon. She then approaches the gladiatorial trainer and is presented with “a green branch on which hung golden apples,” again imagery evocative of Greek polytheistic myth, such as the golden apples tended by the Hesperides and stolen by Heracles in his eleventh labor.⁸³ Perpetua then begins to walk

⁸¹ Denzey, *The Bone Gatherers*, 166.

⁸² Prinzivalli, “Perpetua the Martyr,” 121.

⁸³ Perpetua Vibia and Redactor, “The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas,” 11.

towards the Gate of Life, and awakes; realizing that it is “was not beasts that I was going to fight against, but the devil, though I also knew that I would win.”⁸⁴ This last dream is the end of Perpetua’s account. It is followed by the dream of her fellow prisoner and convert Saturus, and after that the conclusion by the redactor.

Death and The Beginnings of Reframing

Perpetua did not write the final portion of the *Passio Perpetuae*. The conclusion was added in after her death by the redactor, to fill in how she died. This portion also adds in a brief account of Felicitas giving birth in prison, and the account of their fellow martyr Saturus. This portion is the start of the long string of attempted edits and containments of Perpetua’s work, as the author sought to control how she was remembered. Most of his additions work to edit in the “proper” behaviors of a *matrona*. However, even within the beginnings of the reframing process, the redactor still continues elements of Perpetua’s resistance, such as having her stare down the hostile audience and refusing the guards’ attempts to mock the martyr group. This tension between the edits and the strength of Perpetua’s own words would continue in later edits, where a deep ambivalence was at play. The redactor is deeply impressed by Perpetua, and wishes to portray her in a positive light, but is also threatened by her resistance to normative gender structures.

Perpetua’s section is followed by the dream account of her fellow convert Saturus. In Saturus’ dream, the soon-to-be-martyrs have died, and are being carried to the east by four angels. They reach a garden filled with rose trees and flowers. The group is taken to meet the Lord, “an old man seated, with snow-white hair. His face was youthful but [they] could not see

⁸⁴ Perpetua Vibia and Redactor, “The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas,” 11.

his feet.”⁸⁵ They kiss the old man and Satorus turns to Perpetua and says, “‘You have got what you want.’ And she replied, ‘Thanks be to God! Although I was happy while alive, now I am even happier.’”⁸⁶ Satorus and Perpetua meet the Bishop Optatus and their teacher Aspasius, and begin “to recognize many brothers there, including some martyrs.”⁸⁷ Satorus then wakes up, and ends his account. The remainder of the *Passion* is the redactor filling in the deaths of the martyrs.

Before the redactor describes the martyrdoms, however, he discusses one more of the martyrs, the slave-girl Felicitas. While Perpetua stands out the most in the account, she did not convert alone. She converted to the religion of a prophet who preached in poverty, and she converted alongside slaves and servants. Her presence is minimal in Perpetua’s account of their imprisonment, and it is up to the redactor to memorialize her. The redactor notes early in the *Passion* that she and Revocatus are both slaves, although their masters are not listed. It is possible that they belonged to the other members of the group as slaves were often made to convert with their masters, as in the case of Blandina and her mistress. Whether Felicitas’ conversion was merely due to her mistresses conversion, or was a conversion of her own volition is unclear from the given text. She is not named in Perpetua or Satorus’ visions, although she may have been included in the groups appearing in the dreams. Felicitas’ small role in the account is a reflection of her social class. Perpetua does not mention Felicitas, “perhaps understandable given [Perpetua’s] diary-like concentration on the self.”⁸⁸ Felicitas’ identity is subsumed in the recording into the identity of the high-class Perpetua, whose “... high social standing (despite her gender) makes the record and survival of her own account of her

⁸⁵ Perpetua Vibia and Redactor, “The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas,” 12.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid, 13.

⁸⁸ Shaw, “The Passion of Perpetua,” 25.

martyrdom more comprehensible.”⁸⁹ Perpetua’s class allowed for the survival of her own words, and also simultaneously erases and memorializes Felicitas, who is added in by the redactor by route of being executed alongside Perpetua, and who, as a slave girl, may well have disappeared to history otherwise. Perpetua’s writings drew so much attention from contemporaries in part because they were the writings of a high-class Roman woman, meaning her class served as a protection against the text being ignored. Felicitas is mentioned once by Perpetua, meaning her name would have survived but nothing else. The redactor’s need to contextualize Perpetua’s writings also included expanding Felicitas’ role from an off-hand mention of a slave into a more performative and traditional martyr narrative.

Felicitas’ largest appearance comes before the executions, as the group waits in prison. Felicitas, due to her approaching pregnancy, may be held back until she gives birth, executed afterwards and apart from her fellows, who will already have been executed.

As for Felicitas, the Lord’s grace touched her too in the following way. When she was eight months pregnant (for she had been pregnant when she was arrested) and the day of the games was approaching, she became very upset at the thought that her martyrdom would be postponed because of her pregnancy (for it was against the law for pregnant women to be executed) and that she would have to shed her holy and innocent blood afterwards in the company of people who were common criminals.⁹⁰

Her companions pray to the Lord, and as soon as they have finished their prayer, Felicitas goes into labor. The redactor’s addition of Felicitas’ birth in prison, while likely rooted in truth, also takes on a strong matyrological bent. Her desire to not miss the execution with her fellows may have arisen out of a real fear of being alone, but may also be theological propaganda added by the editor. Her responses about earthly pain and pain for Christ as well are suspect, and follow formula for matyrology and the Church’s teaching about suffering.⁹¹ One of the assistants to the

⁸⁹ Shaw, “The Passion of Perpetua,” 15.

⁹⁰ Perpetua Vibia and Redactor, “The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas,” 13.

⁹¹ Shaw, “The Passion of Perpetua,” 26.

prison guards comments on the pain of labor, asking ““you are in great pain now but what will you do when you are up against the beasts? Did you not think of them when you refused to sacrifice?” She replied, ‘Now it is I who suffer this, but there it will be someone else in me who will suffer for me, just as I will suffer for him.’”⁹² She gives birth to a daughter, who is raised by one of her sisters after Felicitas’ martyrdom. After finishing the account of Felicitas’ pregnancy, the redactor ends with an account of the deaths of the martyrs.

The execution is scheduled as a celebratory event on the birthday of the Emperor’s son Geta.⁹³ The Christians were led into the amphitheatre, and Perpetua proceeded “calmly, her countenance radiant, like a wife of Christ, like the beloved of God. The intensity of her gaze forced everyone who looked at her to avert their eyes.”⁹⁴ She is followed by Felicitas, who, having just given birth only to be thrown in front of beasts, “going as it were from one bloody event to another, from the midwife to the gladiator, preparing to wash after childbirth in a second baptism.”⁹⁵ The martyrs are forced to dress in the robes of polytheist priests, the men as the cult of Saturn, and the women as virgins of Ceres. This act too was a form of gendered violence, as “forcing Perpetua and Felicity to dress in Ceres’s...was a way of reminding them and the spectators of the appropriate cult for female worship and of using the robes of the goddess of fertility to mock their abdication of the procreative role of Roman wives as professed Christians.”⁹⁶ Perpetua and Felicity have, as discussed earlier, abandoned their duties to the Roman state by abandoning their roles as Roman mothers to become Christians. They refused to sacrifice for the benefit of the Empire, and have removed themselves as reproductive bodies.

⁹² Perpetua Vibia and Redactor, “The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas,” 13.

⁹³ Brent D. Shaw, “The Passion of Perpetua,” 4.

⁹⁴ Perpetua Vibia and Redactor, “The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas,” 14.

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, 15.

⁹⁶ Heffernan, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, 33.

Being forced to dress as Ceres' priestess is both a punishment for and reminder of their transgressions against Empire and family.

Shaw notes that Perpetua's rejection of her matronly duties as a mother and progenitor are compounded, by her gaze in the amphitheatre and her resistance to the martyrs being mocked in such a way. Perpetua's gaze is important, as "her ability to stare directly back into the faces of her persecutors, not with the elusive demeanor of a proper *matrona*, broke with the normative body language in a way that signaled an aggressiveness that was not one of conventional femininity."⁹⁷ Perpetua resists the public humiliation, saying, "We came to this of our own free will, to prevent our freedom being violated. We agreed to hand over our lives to you, on condition that we would not have to do this: you agreed to this."⁹⁸ Perpetua does not efface herself when being gazed upon by the crowd, but instead returns their gaze, and follows this act of resilience and aggression by challenging the authorities who attempt to dress her and her compatriots in the clothing of polytheist priests and priestess, becoming, in the author's framing, "the dignity of the great Roman ladies with Christian virtue," as a "matron of Christ."⁹⁹ The tribune relents, and the martyrs do not have to wear the robes. The men are set before the beasts, bears, leopards, and boars, but Perpetua and Felicitas are set before a heifer, "and unusual animal but one that had been chosen as appropriate for their sex."¹⁰⁰

The mode of death employed against the two women, according to Shaw, was not just an unusual animal, but also a symbolic act that in itself "signaled something unusual."¹⁰¹ Public games "pitted young, aggressive males against wild animals, highlighting active confrontation,

⁹⁷ Brent D. Shaw, "The Passion of Perpetua," 4.

⁹⁸ Perpetua Vibia and Redactor, "The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas," 15.

⁹⁹ Prinzivalli, "Perpetua the Martyr," 130.

¹⁰⁰ Perpetua Vibia and Redactor, "The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas," 16.

¹⁰¹ Shaw, "The Passion of Perpetua," 6.

rather than passive suffering... Since these attributes were normally male, by their actions female martyrs acquired a sort of virile honor.”¹⁰² In the society of Rome, where virtue stemmed from *vir* – man, women were, by the very construction of the word, locked out of virtue. Perpetua understands this of her society, becoming a man in her dream in order to win the games and virtue. Outside of the dreamscape as well, this coding was dangerously present by executing women in the arena, necessitating the mocking use of a heifer, instead of a virile, masculine animal, as a form of “symbolic degradation.”¹⁰³ According to Shaw, the use of the heifer signified degradation on multiple levels: it mocked “the sex of the condemned women by using one of their own, a wild cow, to destroy them,” and made reference to the typical usage of a bull to shame and execute women.¹⁰⁴ Normally, a bull was used to signal “utter sexual dishonor, usually the display of the woman as a known adulteress...” accompanied by stripping of the woman to increase her shame. The coding of the cow was then a twofold punishment for Perpetua and Felicitas. “By analogy with a bull, it was implied that they were sexually shameful; but since a cow was employed, the inference was that they were not ‘real women’ enough to be guilty of adultery.”¹⁰⁵

The two were stripped naked, and brought out into the arena, covered with nets. However, “the crowd was shocked to see a pretty young girl and another young woman with breasts swollen with milk after recently giving birth. So they were called back and dressed in loose tunics.”¹⁰⁶ Perpetua and Felicitas, although removing themselves as hypothetical mothers in the future, have, at least enacted some of their duty to Rome and its people, which the crowd

¹⁰² Shaw, “The Passion of Perpetua,” 7.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 7-8.

¹⁰⁶ Perpetua Vibia and Redactor, “The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas,” 16.

acknowledged. Their status as mothers granted them a small reprieve due to the symbolic shock that their naked bodies produce, marked as they are by motherhood. Both are new mothers, and while Perpetua's father may have viewed her as having abandoned her child, her and Felicitas' motherhood caused the gladiatorial crowd to grant her some small mercy.

As the heifer attacked, Perpetua was knocked onto her back by the heifer, at which point, according to the redactor, her

tunic had been ripped along the side and when she sat back down she pulled it down to cover her thigh, more concerned with her modesty than the pain. Then she asked for a pin to clip back her hair which had become disheveled; for it was not right for a martyr to die with her hair in a mess, lest she should seem to be mourning in her hour of glory.¹⁰⁷

This passage, not written by Perpetua, certainly contains the redactor projecting his own reading of her death, and reading what he wants into a movement that could have meant any number of things – perhaps it was Perpetua concerned with her modesty as she was killed, or perhaps the motion to fix her tunic was merely a simple repeated motion enacted by Perpetua throughout her life, that she defaulted to in a traumatic event, a moment of muscle memory. In any case, the framer is here presenting a vision of Perpetua still in-line with Roman class and gender values. She covers herself with modesty befitting a Roman noblewoman, and fixes her hair in a manner befitting a bride of Christ.

This subconscious act of Perpetua's, or its addition by the redactor, plays into conceptions of the Roman matron. The Roman foundational myth of Lucretia solidified the concept of the Roman ideal Roman matron. Lucretia's appearance to Tarquin the Proud as "a perfect matron, busy until late at night with household chores, in exclusively female company, thinking about her husband far away," all of which made Tarquin desire her more.¹⁰⁸ Tarquin rapes her, and Lucretia later tells her father and husband of the atrocity, before killing herself to

¹⁰⁷ Perpetua Vibia and Redactor, "The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas," 16.

¹⁰⁸ Frascchetti, "Introduction," in *Roman Women*, 12.

preserve what modesty she has left. Her father and husband then display her body in the forum, to mobilize the inhabitants to kill Tarquin and overthrow the monarchy in favor of a republic.¹⁰⁹ Similarly, Verginia, the daughter of the centurion Verginius, was aggressively pursued by the decimvir Appius Claudius in the second half of the fourth century BC. The decimvirs had become tyrants, and Appius Claudius gets one of *clienets* to allow him to claim Verginia as his slave, in order that he could gain possession of her. Verginius, who is away at the front, hears of the developments, immediately returns to Rome, and stabs Verginia to death to keep her from Appius Claudius. Similarly to the response to Lucretia's death, the populace rebelled against the decemvirs at the sight of Verginia's mutilated body.¹¹⁰

Modest women, upstanding *matronae*, were protectors and gatekeepers of Roman society. The crowd's earlier desire to see Perpetua and Felicitas clothed was in part because of the cultural narrative of the matron – mothers were not to be shamed by being seen naked. Similarly, Perpetua's attempt to protect her modesty would likely have been coded by the crowd as part of this cultural narrative, growing their sympathy or was indeed wholly fabricated by the redactor in order to place Perpetua in this history of Roman women, making her both more palatable, and keying into existing cultural currency. However, as Christians, for the crowd there is still a source of friction. They call for Perpetua and Felicitas's mother's bodies to be covered, but not for the violence against them to be stopped. Roman cultural norms were at odds over how to view the two women's bodies; they were mothers, and one of them a noblewoman, individuals to be afforded modesty, while at the same time both being Christians, bodies who threatened the stability and well-being of the Empire.

¹⁰⁹ Frascchetti, "Introduction," in *Roman Women*, 12.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*, 13.

Perpetua and Felicitas were both the source of threat to the Empire, as well as the source of continuing Empire itself in their role as mothers, a contradiction that the crowd and redactor sought to navigate in their reactions to the martyrdom. They are united as Christians, heretics, and as young mothers before the gladiatorial crowd. Before the heifer, before the gladiatorial audience, the two women are equal. But nonetheless Felicitas converted alongside her mistress, and both are equal before god in their faith and their suffering. Both Perpetua and Felicitas are killed in the same manner, their social class no longer a division between them and their legally inflicted pain. Perpetua has given up her much of her social standing in converting, placing her in a similar class position as Felicitas, a slave, but both women's status as mothers also influence their social status for the gladiatorial onlookers, who recognize mothers as important to Rome, and call for some measure of pity.

Both the crowd and the redactor of the *Passio* frequently read Perpetua, as well as Felicitas to a lesser extent, as reflecting at least parts of the ideal Roman woman. Earlier, when the crowd calls for the mothers to be allowed to cover themselves, and in this framing, where Perpetua supposedly still worries about her modesty as a noblewoman. This coding may have been present during the actual martyrdom, or may have been an attempt by the redactor to reframe Perpetua as the ideal Christian woman, softening the image of her gazing back at the crowd with images of her concerned for her modesty in order to make her tale more palatable and consumable to a wider audience and for the coalescing Church authorities.

Felicitas too, is knocked over by the heifer, and after Perpetua has finished fixing her own clothing goes to help Felicitas stand back up. The framer's ordering of these events, and perhaps wholesale concoction of them, simultaneously reaffirms Perpetua's status as the most noble of martyrs, as well as earthly class positions. Perpetua's modesty, her protection of her

own noble body from the spectator's gaze, is more important than the well-being of the lower-class slave Felicitas'. Perpetua is both modest and compassionate, by the redactor's writing, although in a specific order. Eventually, the crowd grows displeased with watching the women suffer, and they are called back to the Gate of Life. Perpetua asks when they will be sent out against the heifer, not believing that it has already happened until the marks on her body are pointed out to her.¹¹¹ Before being led out again, Perpetua summons her brother and tells him, "Keep firm in the faith and love each other, all of you. Do not let the sufferings we have been through cause you to stumble."¹¹²

At last, the martyrs are brought back out to be executed by the sword.

The others stood motionless and accepted the sword wound in silence, especially Saturus who had been the first to climb the stairs and was the first to die for he was also supporting Perpetua. But Perpetua shouted out with joy as the sword pierced her, for she wanted to taste some of the pain and she even guided the hesitant hand of the trainee gladiator towards her own throat. It was as if such an extraordinary woman, feared as she was by the unclean spirit, could not have died in any other way, except as she wished.¹¹³

The redactor then ends the account praising the martyrs, their faith in God, and the Lord father and Christ the Savior.

Conclusion

Perpetua's account is one of resistance. She details both intimate conflict and as well as a wider political one. Her diary reveals her personal confrontations with her father and normative familial ties, her subconscious struggle with the knowledge of her own impending death, and her defiance of an oppressive state structure. Perpetua triumphed over her father by employing the rhetoric of a philosopher and centering the importance of naming. She stood in resistance to the normative role of a submissive daughter. As her sentence was handed down, her dreamscapes

¹¹¹ Perpetua Vibia and Redactor, "The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas," 16.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid, 17.

allowed an escape and envisioning of a triumph over the state and of death, as she not only dreams of her own triumph, but also of her successful intercession on behalf of Dinocrates. If the redactor is to be believed, she continued to resist in her final moments. She returned the predatory gaze of the crowd, denied the guards attempts to mock her and her cohort, and controlled the method of her own death as much as possible in the circumstances.

The writing of the redactor and the issue of editorializing will be explored further in the next chapter. Perpetua's resistances in life against a hostile polytheist state were celebrated and remembered by the North African Christian community. However, Church leaders often viewed her popularity, and the resistances that launched her to fame as too potent. While celebrating her memory and accomplishments, clergymen often also sought to contain aspects of Perpetua's work that ran counter to Church doctrine.

Chapter 3: Framing and the Violence of Remembrance

Martyr Memorialization and the Appropriation of Suffering

In this section I will discuss later remembrances of Perpetua and Felicitas, and the way that these later remembrances reframed, often violently, the two women's real lives and deaths to better fit into parables and arguments made by the Church. I will argue that these reframings, often made to fit the narrative of women as the vehicle of original sin, were in themselves a violence acted against Perpetua and Felicity, replacing physical imprisonment with memorial diminishment. I will focus on three reframings in particular: the first framing made perhaps by Tertullian, an anonymous second set of edits to create a more standard hagiography, and Augustine of Hippo's sermons. These three framings are emblematic of concerns and responses on the part of the Church to the martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas: worries about familial ties, the absence of men, the masculinization of Perpetua, and the weakness of Eve and women as her descendants. Nicola Denzey reveals the way ecclesiastical memory is created and controlled in a way that is applicable to the Church's memorialization of Perpetua and Felicitas:

...as the Church grew in power and influence – women came to be most valued within specific, narrowly defined social roles and why for the most part, real women came not only to be marginalized but to be rendered virtually invisible. There is no simple tale here of the oppression of women. There is a tale to be told, but it is one of the church's creation and manipulation of collective memory and of subtly shifting perceptions of women and femaleness in the process of Christianization. It is about the process of recollection and remembrance and the role of seeing in the construction of institutional memory...real women were sometimes 'made male' in ecclesiastical and scholarly perception.¹¹⁴

This chapter will discuss the creation and molding of institutional memory, and the ways in which male fears and anxieties were codified in the ways Perpetua and Felicitas were remembered or forgotten. Memorialization of Perpetua by the early Church Fathers was

¹¹⁴ Denzey, *The Bone Gatherers*, xvii-xviii.

deeply ambivalent: they wanted to commemorate and laud a courageous Christian woman and her sacrifices, but at the same time also needed to police and constrain what they saw as transgressions against gender norms.

Although Perpetua and Felicitas were martyred in 203 AD, they remained salient, especially in North Africa, for centuries after. This was in part due to the primacy of Perpetua's words, and because of her geographic location; she had become part of the cultural background of North Africa. In the first few centuries after their death, Christians were struggling to define what "Christianity" entailed." In-fighting was common between different groups, and as the Church coalesced, it began to police both its followers and its opponents. The North African Church had to cope with the cult of martyrs, which "formed a background to much of the specifically North African understanding of Christian doctrine."¹¹⁵ Martyr worship often surged towards the heretical, with the acts of the martyrs sometimes surpassing even the Gospels in popularity among congregations. Church fathers like Tertullian and Augustine were tasked with determining how the cult of martyrs should operate: what should be remembered, and how.

Compounding this necessity to mediate congregations' understanding of the holy was the friction caused by the Donatists in North Africa, and the tradition of the "Church of the Martyrs" which they upheld.¹¹⁶ The North African church had split in 311/312 after the Great Persecution, when Emperor Diocletian had ordered the destruction of Christian Churches and the handing over of Christian scriptures in 303. Some Christian clergy complied, while others did not. At the end of the persecution in 305, there was debate among the North African Christian community

¹¹⁵ W. H. C. Frend, "From Donatist Opposition to Byzantine Loyalty: The Cult of Martyrs in North Africa 350-650," in *Vandals, Romans and Berbers*, ed. A. H. Merrills, (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2004), 259.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, 262.

over whether the ministrations of clergy who had submitted, *traditores*, were valid or not.¹¹⁷ In 311, the Bishop of Carthage died, and his replacement Caecilian, was rumored to have been consecrated by a *traditor*, rendering his appointment invalid. This resulted in Donatus being appointed in 313, only for Constantine to take Caecilian's side in 316.¹¹⁸ The schism in the North African church persisted however, and the Donatist movement "continued to dominate North Africa until the beginning of the fifth century."¹¹⁹ Their "strong arm group" the Circumcellions terrorized Catholics, going so far as to attack individual Catholics, plastering their eyes with lime and salt, and even attempting to ambush Augustine.¹²⁰ Augustine was perhaps the Donatist's most powerful opponent, who preached against their ways. The Donatists were "proscribed by Imperial decree in January 412," with Augustine as "the architect of their downfall."¹²¹ Augustine, however, retained the cult of the saints, but worked to fit them into a sanctioned Catholic doctrine, rather than a Donatist one. Perpetua and Felicitas' memory survived the discord in North Africa, but their memory as martyrs also became a point of contention, with Church Fathers attempting to control the ways they were remembered and revered, in the face of internal Church schism.

The First Redactor

After Perpetua's initial writing and death, a chain of male editors took up her text all seeking to frame the "correct" reading of her words. This fascination with her work in some ways enabled her text to survive, as it was widely copied and read, rearticulated continuously by

¹¹⁷ W. H. C. Frend, "Donatus and Christianity in North Africa," in *Saints and Sinners in the Early Church: Differing and Conflicting traditions in the First Six Centuries*, (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1985), 103.

¹¹⁸ Frend, "From Donatist Opposition to Byzantine Loyalty," 104-105.

¹¹⁹ Frend, "Donatus and Christianity in North Africa," 106.

¹²⁰ Warren Thomas Smith, *Augustine: His Life and Thought*. (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1980), 96-97.

¹²¹ Frend, "From Donatist Opposition to Byzantine Loyalty," 263.

bishops and powerful clergymen like Augustine. These multiple reframings, however, also entailed a kind of violence, as Perpetua's voice was controlled or talked-over. Denzey points out, that in the arbitration of Church texts, "not uncommonly, we find that women were simply obliterated through the process of male-centered remembering...."¹²² Perpetua's words did survive, but through a long process of editing, forgetting, and controlled remembrance. The first redactor's bracketing of Perpetua's text was merely the first in a history of editors and attempts at control. The first editor was the one who set out the bracketing and collection of the text, piecing it together with Saturus' account, and adding an introduction and conclusion, and, according to Shaw, "the terms of these bracketing pieces are those of the formal male-dominated church."¹²³

As stated earlier, there is some evidence to suggest that this redactor may have been Tertullian. This reading is important given Tertullian's history. Tertullian was a member of the Montanists, a group filled with women prophesiers, but he was also the author of *De Cultu Feminarum* (On Female Fashion), a text displaying some of the Orthodox Church's views on women. Most famous from *De Cultu* is Tertullian's discussion of women as the descendants of Eve:

And do you not know that you are (each) an Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age: the guilt must of necessity live too. *You* are the devil's gateway: *you* are the unsealer of that (forbidden) tree: *you* are the first deserter of the divine law: *you* are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. *You* destroyed so easily God's image, man. On account of *your* desert – that is, death – even the Son of God had to die.¹²⁴

¹²² Denzey, *The Bone Gatherers*, xviii.

¹²³ Shaw, "The Passion of Perpetua," 30.

¹²⁴ Tertullian, "On the Apparel of Women," in *University of Chicago Readings in Western Civilization: The Church in the Roman Empire*, ed. Karl F. Morrison, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 178.

While Tertullian is using this line of thinking to chastise women for not practicing modesty, in light of their inherited and potential sins, it also indicates a powerful line of thinking present in many sects of Christianity. It is a paradigm that requires the edits to Perpetua's work, edits meant to demonstrate that her bravery and power in the face of death was in spite of her female nature, and that her martyrdom was attained through more work than a man's martyrdom, because of the nature of women's original sin. Even if Tertullian was not the first redactor of Perpetua's diary, the masculine presentation of women as the root of sin, and as inherently sinful nevertheless was prevalent in most of the later reframing of Perpetua's work.

Control of memory was important for the Church. Martyr narratives were read every year, on the anniversary of their death, and these anniversary sermons served as "an education in how to resist threats and violence, of how to despise persecutors and to be rewarded with crowns of victory" for the Christian parishioner.¹²⁵ The narrative presented was all-important as it was to serve as a model for resistance and salvation. This meant that the "correct" forms of resistance had to be highlighted, while downplaying any aspects of the martyrdom that ran against Church needs. In the case of Perpetua, this meant highlighting her resistance of the polytheistic Roman Empire, while downplaying her resistance of gender norms, which would have destabilized Church teachings on the weakness and role of women. As Shannon Dunn pints out, female entailed women resisting male violence in the traditionally masculine arena of the amphitheatre, in roles like a philosopher or gladiator. "Female martyrdom destabilizes gender norms in a social

¹²⁵ Brent D. Shaw, "Athletes of Death," in *Sacred Violence; African Christians and Sectarian Violence in the Age of Augustine*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 604.

context defined by gender hierarchy, and it appears that the acts of writing narratives and making laws are attempts at re-instating strict gender roles.”¹²⁶

These reframings, in rewriting a real woman’s life and death into more palatable parables of Church doctrine was in itself a type of gendered violence. In recreating memory, and erasing aspects of a real woman, a form of gendered violence was being enacted through official Church pathways. Shaw’s intent in writing his article “The Passion of Perpetua” was to “demonstrate the modes by which this unmediated self-perception, her [Perpetua’s] reality, was subsequently appropriated by a male editor, and then greatly distorted by subsequent male interpreters.”¹²⁷ Perpetua’s account was “...only beginning its own life...destined to be reread and commented on by others, all of whom happened to be men... Indeed, the process of the male rethinking of her experience began almost immediately.”¹²⁸ Shaw does not count the first framing as “...a deliberate attempt to distort,” but instead merely the redactor framing the text in “the way in which he assumed this text ought naturally to be interpreted.”¹²⁹

Whether this was deliberate or not, it is still some sort of distortion, as the framing through the addition of an introduction and conclusion controlled the way a reader would approach Perpetua’s work in a way she did not intended. Her diary, initially an intimate document detailing her fears about death, her ambivalence towards her father, and her worry for her son instead becomes a parable for Church teaching, and so must be reformatted to follow Church doctrine. The redactor’s inclusion of the preface and conclusion, brackets the text in an attempt “to lay out the terms on which her [Perpetua’s] account is to be understood by reader and

¹²⁶ Shannon Dunn, “The Female Martyr and the Politics of Death: An Examination of the Martyr Discourses of Perpetua and Wafa Idris,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 78, no 1. (March, 2010), 206.

¹²⁷ Shaw, “The Passion of Perpetua,” 21.

¹²⁸ *Ibid*, 30.

¹²⁹ *Ibid*.

listener alike...” the terms of which are “...those of the formal male-dominant church.”¹³⁰

Among these terms are images such as Perpetua looking after her own modesty, preserving her status as a good Christian woman, even as a wild heifer tramples her. Shaw posits that so shortly after the death of the author, the editor found himself “...unable to rewrite Perpetua’s own account in any ‘better way,’” and so chose to instead bracket the work, leaving its core untouched.¹³¹ The redactor controls how one enters and leaves Perpetua’s text, but allows the middle portion of the *Passio*, Perpetua’s text itself to remain unedited. At the same time, the bracketing method allowed some form of editorial control of the Perpetua’s text as by necessity, “the reader enters it [Perpetua’s account], and exits from it, through his [the editors] interpretations, through his words...he can guide the reader into Perpetua’s words, can ‘set up’ the reader so that he or she will read Perpetua’s account with a certain meaning already placed in his or her mind.”¹³² The redactor then removes control from Perpetua of her own account, diluting any multiplicities of meaning that she may or may not have meant to instill in her own diary, and replacing it with his own set of meanings. One of these is theological. For Shaw, the redactor takes the “real-time,” lived experience of Perpetua, and works to move it into the framework of

...a heavily theologized text, a densely theoretical structure which is intended to deflect the reader’s attention away from the plane of immediate experience to transcendent levels of meaning. The ideology (as opposed to her [Perpetua’s] straightforward practice) hold that her experiences are to be interpreted in a cosmic framework where, as the editor quotes Holy Scripture to show, God will work in such a way that even daughters and female-slaves will be able to function as bearers of His Spirit in this world. That such low-status persons should be able to witness (*martyres*) was just another sign that the final stages of the current world order were at hand, and that everyone was now living “in the final days.”¹³³

¹³⁰ Shaw, “The Passion of Perpetua,” 30.

¹³¹ Ibid, 31.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid.

The redactor is, in his bracketing, struggling to contain and explain how two women, made low by their gender, and one made even lower by her class, could achieve such glory, and how it is the working of a higher power, not necessarily the strength of such lowly (due to their gender and class) beings. By his framing, childbirth and the pain of breasts swollen with milk are brought out of mortal realm of women and into the higher cosmic realm of god. Class is rendered moot, but only in service to and by the grace of God. The potential transgressive value of Perpetua and Felicity, of Perpetua's words, and of the two women's actions in the arena are, by the bracketing, rechanneled into a coherent and controlled theology and theoretical framework.

Part of the theoretical framework grafted onto Perpetua's diary also deals with Church teachings on the nature of physical bodies. Perpetua and Felicitas are earthly beings, and women, whose flesh bears a history of sin due to Eve. However, the flesh is also, as Tertullian states, "the axis point of salvation (*adeo caro salutis est cardo*)' (*Res.* 8.2). He envisions flesh not only as the indicator of one's inner disposition, but also specifically as the indicator of human sinfulness."¹³⁴ The addition of Perpetua re-arranging her clothing to cover her flesh after the initial heifer attack becomes a loaded movement with this knowledge of Tertullian. In moving to protect her modesty, her physical flesh, she is revealing her inner disposition as a pious and morally just woman. However, the flesh that she moves to protect is the flesh of a woman, one of the highest indicators of human sinfulness under Church construction as Eve as the originator of sin, and women as her progeny. The construction of Perpetua's modesty by the redactor is telling of the way Church father's interacted with her words. She was a just woman to be praised and remembered, but she was also a woman, and women's bodies had "come to exemplify human

¹³⁴ Carly Daniel-Hughes, "Wear the Armor of Your Shame!': Debating Veiling and the Salvation of Flesh in Tertullian of Carthage." *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 39, no. 2 (2010), 183.

sordidness.”¹³⁵ Her nature as a woman had to be reconciled with Church teaching, and so modesty was written into her account as a personality trait. Harkening back to Blandina’s mutilated body becoming Christ-like in her martyrdom, Perpetua in her modesty, overcomes the sinful nature of her flesh. As Daniel-Hughes asserts, “in the course of Tertullian’s writings, spirit and flesh are often gendered male and female so that woman comes more dramatically to exemplify the ambivalent status of human flesh as sacred and shameful.”¹³⁶ Perpetua too, came to embody this ambivalence for the early Church fathers, at once a sacred martyr whose actions were to be remembered, and a woman, whose shame must be contained by reframings.

For Tertullian, the unveiled or uncovered woman was a threat to Christian society, able to transmit the sin of her fleshly body to the male viewer. As Daniel-Hughes states “Ancient visual economies...conceived of seeing and being seen as intimate acts of touch and penetration,” making the redactor’s addition of Perpetua covering herself all the more potent.¹³⁷ Just as the redactor had her return the gaze of the crowd, rebuffing their act of visual penetration, in the addition of her adjusting her clothing to cover herself we see the redactor adding another instance of Perpetua mitigating both the sin of her flesh and the sin of others gazing upon her. Daniel-Hughes’ reading of Tertullian’s work reveals his belief that “...a Christian woman ought to be humble and mitigate, through a visible recitation of her shame, the erotic significance of her flesh.”¹³⁸ This belief is present in the redactor’s additions to Perpetua’s work, particularly in the instance of her rearranging her clothing after being thrown about by the heifer in order to retain her modesty. The addition reveals a redactor, who if not Tertullian himself, believed in Tertullian’s thoughts on women, veiling, and the transition of sin through women’s bodies. Their

¹³⁵ Daniel-Hughes, “Wear the Armor of Your Shame!,” 184.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Ibid, 185.

¹³⁸ Ibid, 186.

addition serves to reaffirm this belief, but also to position Perpetua as a good woman, one who is aware of the immodesty of her uncovered body, and seeks to preserve her modesty and mitigate sin by keeping herself covered even in the face of death. The addition of Perpetua facing the heifer is in one sense a containment and a violence against her, as it seeks to paint her as a woman whose flesh is inherently tainted and sinful, but also works as praise of Perpetua. The redactor wished to portray her as a good and modest woman, a woman worthy of praise, and so had her behaving to protect her modesty. The redactor contains the danger posed by flesh through the addition of modesty, and is able to keep Perpetua as a model martyr, while at the same time reaffirming Church teachings on the sin's of the flesh, and especially of women's flesh.

The redactor also moves to contain the threat Perpetua's prowess stands to pose to the power of the male martyr. In adding Saturus' dream to Perpetua's larger diary containing her own multiple prophetic dreams, the redactor, in Shaw's view, works "...to counter the implicit assertions of her words (that is, men can have visions too)..."¹³⁹ The redactor feels threatened by Perpetua's presence, and the lack of a man's, or worries that his audience will, and so must equalize what is essentially God's favor. Men's ability to interact with the Holy had to be made present. It was too threatening to a coalescing church and its officials in the period after Perpetua's death to allow a document to highlight women's prophetic powers without immediately including that men have similar abilities as well. As Denzey points out, in the classical world, "death itself becomes gendered male."¹⁴⁰ For men, a good death was related to ideals of virtue, a death on the battlefield proving masculinity. Women died at home, from sickness or age or childbirth, and did not die heroic, sacrificial, redemptive deaths like men

¹³⁹ Shaw, "The Passion of Perpetua," 31.

¹⁴⁰ Denzey, *The Bone Gatherers*, 24.

could.¹⁴¹ Perpetua undid this ideation, achieving a redemptive, heroic death, and memorializing her own heroism and redemption. To contain this, the redactor added in a model of redemptive masculine death, placing Saturus after Perpetua's account to demonstrate masculine death and virtue. The addition of Saturus's dream, when read in such a way, potentially undermines the hypothesis of Tertullian as redactor, as he was a Montanist, a member of a movement with a history of female prophecy, or it could strengthen it, as his writings in the *De Cultu Feminarum* betray a deep fear and anger directed towards woman. The man who wrote *De Cultu Feminarum* would also likely need "...to establish the equal legitimacy of Saturus' visions," and so re-establish the primacy of faithful men.¹⁴² The fears embodied by the addition of Saturus, of women superseding men in holy ability continued in multiple later reframings.

The bracketing conclusion is also in its own way a containment, as it moves the *Passio* away from Perpetua's real, in-the-body experiences and feelings, and ends instead in near parody. The end of the *Passio* is concerned with establishing a coherent theology, and so Perpetua is "...transformed into a 'shining countenance' and becomes the 'bride of Christ' and 'God's darling.'"¹⁴³ Her existing personhood is removed in order to make way for a formulaic character. Felicitas too, is remade according to the formulaic terms of Church martyr tales, where her "frightening ordeal of giving birth..." is "...reconfigured into a metaphorical symbol."¹⁴⁴ For both women, the bracketing of the text entails a reduction to character and caricature. However, for Felicitas this reduction is also the only way that she survives. She does not appear in Perpetua's diary, and as a slave who did not eclipse her mistress in suffering as Blandina did, would likely have been lost to history. Felicitas only survives in bracketing, and what remains of

¹⁴¹ Denzey, *The Bone Gatherers*, 22.

¹⁴² Shaw, "The Passion of Perpetua," 32.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

a real woman is wrapped up in the theological propaganda of the redactor, buried beneath martyrological convention.

This redactor's bracketing was only the first of many reframing that Perpetua's text would undergo. The threat posed by Perpetua's writing and actions was "...a permanent one," that "...in itself threw into relief those very problematic areas of sexual definition and power that much troubled the organized church."¹⁴⁵ She had left her mark, and her perceived challenge to orthodoxy could only be contained or destroyed. Every year Perpetua's *Passio* was reread and reenacted on the martyrdom's anniversary in churches throughout North Africa, a repeated, "...living tradition in which the audiences, male and female, would hear replayed for them the experiences of a woman put in a mode, and in a context of action, that surely (at least) threw doubt on the normative values of their society."¹⁴⁶ But "the very rarity of Perpetua's achievement" kept her work safe, as it was too much of an oddity to be destroyed, and could still be powerful if controlled correctly. To this end, the second framing of Perpetua's work was an attempt to place her unique voice in a more uniform format.

The Commentarius

The second attempt at containment enacted on the *Passio* was to transform it into a *commentarius* (trial transcript), a form found in many other martyrologies.¹⁴⁷ The second redactor rewrites Perpetua's prison account in an attempt to make it fit more in the style of a traditional martyrology, including a *commentarius*, or trial transcript. The new *commentarius* is stylistically more in keeping with the accounts of the martyrs of Gaul and Scilli, and similarly also removes the narration from the martyrs involved, in this case Perpetua, and places it into the

¹⁴⁵ Shaw, "The Passion of Perpetua," 33.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, 33-34.

hands of an anonymous author writing after the death's of the martyrs. Shaw places this new author "sometime in the fourth century," and their writing as part of a "general 'house cleaning' to make more manageable the marginal problematical areas of power, including sainthood and sexuality."¹⁴⁸ "In the aftermath of the formalization of ecclesiastical power," in this case sometime in the fourth century, there was attempts to "...make more manageable the marginal problematical areas of power, including sainthood and sexuality. For liturgical and ideological purposes, earlier experiences and documents had to be brought 'in line.'"¹⁴⁹ Shaw believes that the *commentarius* created is largely fabricated, as Perpetua's work largely skips the trial, and no other sources seem to exist recording the trial itself.¹⁵⁰ This management is made clear by what is added into this second framing. Besides adding in a formulaic trial scene, "for which there is no evidence," the new framer also centers much of the women's interrogation on questions about their husbands.¹⁵¹

In this new *Acta*, the men and women are segregated for the trial.¹⁵² As portrayed in Shaw's work, the proconsul almost immediately presses Felicitas on whether she has a husband, to which the new writer has her reply "I have one whom I have rejected" and that his rank is Plebian.¹⁵³ Perpetua's husband is also present among the listeners, along with her mother, father, and brothers. The new writer has then created not only a fictitious trial, but also a fictitious husband. Either his absence was so shocking in Perpetua's diary that the writer, likely also a man, needed to add him in, or, more likely the husband's new added presence contained Perpetua

¹⁴⁸ Shaw, "The Passion of Perpetua," 34.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Anonymous, "Acta Perpetuae," quoted in Brent D. Shaw, "The Passion of Perpetua," *Past and Present*, no. 139 (May, 1993), 35.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

slightly. She was no longer a woman largely invested and uninterested in her husband, but one who must now still cope with this masculine presence, even if it is to shove him and her parents away from her, saying “Get away from me you workers of evil, since I no longer know you.”¹⁵⁴ The “matter of gender” troubles the new writer, clear from his separation of the men and women and inclusion of Perpetua and Felicitas’ husbands.¹⁵⁵ The proconsul’s questioning about the whereabouts of Felicitas’ husband, and the presence of Perpetua’s family and husband “reflect a great concern...on the proper relationship of these women to their other relatives, above all their parents,” as well as their husbands.¹⁵⁶ These familial ties, and Perpetua and Felicitas’ navigation of them is troubling for the writer, who seeks to deal with (for himself and his audience), “the way in which these particular women feel free to move away from the normal constraints imposed by husbands, fathers and others.”¹⁵⁷ In editing in a present husband, the second editor attempted to contain Perpetua within normal familial ties, even as she rejected them for her faith. It was necessary for the second editor, and his audience, that even if Perpetua left her male kin, that her male kin at some point be present, mooring Perpetua in a normative social network. The new writer is deeply concerned with the lack of husbands present in Perpetua’s account, as for him and his imagined audience, “the troubling matter is the way in which these particular women feel free to move away from the normal constraints imposed by husbands, fathers, and others,” and has therefore reinserted the presence of men in Perpetua and Felicitas’ intimate lives.¹⁵⁸

Felicitas’ husband may be absent, as she has rejected him, but it is a present absence, one that is named, and therefore palatable, as opposed to an unnamed total absence, as in Perpetua’s

¹⁵⁴ Anonymous, “Acta Perpetuae,” quoted in Brent D. Shaw, “Passion of Perpetua,” 35.

¹⁵⁵ Shaw, “The Passion of Perpetua,” 35.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, 35-36.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, 36.

text. In this new version, Felicitas has rejected her husband solely along lines of religion: he is not a Christian, and so is rejected by a righteous martyr, a narrative more in keeping with Church (men's) desires, as opposed to the original narrative, where Perpetua and Felicitas' husbands may be absent due to the same lines of religion, but ultimately feel it is unimportant to state so. The proconsul also pushes both women to make the necessary sacrifices to save themselves, especially since they have children, to which Perpetua pushes away her infant and parents and gives the somewhat rote response of "Get away from me you workers of evil, since I no longer know you."¹⁵⁹ This addition is also in line with the new writer's goal of moving Perpetua's life into a more formulaic and controlled Church narrative. In Perpetua's own account, she does rebuff her father, but in a more nuanced way than in the new writer's version. Indeed, Perpetua is "sorry for [her] father because he was the only one of all [her] relatives who would not be happy for [her] in [her] suffering."¹⁶⁰ Perpetua's words here connote more of a sorrow that her father will not accept her status as a Christian, rather than a total rejection of him. One of Perpetua's brothers as well is a catechumen, who she never professes to know, but instead is visited by him while in prison. Perpetua's account expressed a much more nuanced, lived experience of the tensions between polytheism and Christianity, and the inner-workings of kin and family. The new writer however, expunges these nuances in favor of a stricter Church doctrine of absolute disavowal of polytheism, even of polytheist family members. This rewriting works to insert men's presence more formally into the women's lives, and to present a desired church narrative about conversion. The removal of Perpetua's lived experience and familial relations are once more a textual, editorial violence. However, it was not the most concerted violence that her account would face, although the new writer's anxiety over the relative absence of men and the

¹⁵⁹ Shaw, "The Passion of Perpetua," 34.

¹⁶⁰ Perpetua Vibia and Redactor, "The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas," 8.

strength of the two women is echoed in the far more textually violent edits that were later to occur at the hands of Augustine, Bishop of Hippo.

Augustine's Sermons

Augustine, born on November 13, 350 in the Roman North African town of Thagaste and made bishop of Hippo in 395, devoted three of his sermons to discussing Perpetua. Augustine's words, as one of the early church fathers, were widely listened to and accepted. His views on Perpetua were the end evolution of previous editorial ambivalence. Augustine sought to praise and commemorate Perpetua, devoting at least three sermons to her. At the same time, his sermons work to mark Perpetua as a woman who was like a man, and whose success stemmed from her being not like other women. For the early Church, "The female martyr is dangerous precisely because of the political power she exercises; this power is effectively restrained, however, by narrative techniques" employed in Augustine's sermons.¹⁶¹ Perpetua's *Passio* would be read to the congregation, followed by Augustine's sermon describing how the audience should interpret Perpetua's words, leaving no room for contradictions. Augustine's sermons swing between praise and attempts at containment, containing a largely mixed view of women in general. Augustine's framing of Perpetua are the most conflicted of the three editors discussed, as he praised and castigated her with equal diligence, seeking both to present her as a martyr to be revered, and a woman who transgressed.

There was a danger posed to the formal Church by the saliency of Perpetua's account, and its unmitigated nature, but especially in North Africa, where her nearness granted her memory and words a faithful following among the local populace. The North African Church was also a site of deep reverence for martyrs, to an almost blasphemous level, leading to

¹⁶¹ Dunn, "The Female Martyr and the Politics of Death," 218.

clergymen like Augustine “while celebrating the great merit of the martyrs, seek[ing] to redirect his listeners’ zeal from their worship of the martyrs as *dramatis personae* towards a greater theological understanding of their actions.”¹⁶² Each year, Perpetua’s words were re-read in parishes and churches throughout North Africa on the anniversary of her martyrdom, leading Augustine to feel it was necessary “to warn sternly that her words, her views, were not canonical scripture.”¹⁶³ Three different sermons on Perpetua by Augustine have survived, sermons 280, 281, and 282, although all three sermons are currently of unknown date.¹⁶⁴ Augustine, as demonstrated by the frequency with which he discussed them, held Perpetua and Felicitas in deep esteem, but, nevertheless, as Shaw frames it, responded in essentially the same way as the earliest redactor of Perpetua’s work: “he bracketed it with his comments which were intended to lead the listeners to rehear what they heard.”¹⁶⁵

Augustine wanted his followers to hear and remember Perpetua, but also to hear his interpretation of Perpetua’s life. He had a specific message to get across, and could better popularize it through the memory of Perpetua, who had cultural resonance with Augustine’s followers, but to do so he also had to contain her words, and the potential for interpretations other than his own. Perpetua’s martyrdom provoked “intensive reinterpretation and arguments in refutation” that could be capitalized on, but also necessitated containment and proper channeling.¹⁶⁶ For Perpetua words and actions were volatile; her actions outshone those of her male companions, a fact, which demonstrated by the first redactor’s additions of Saturus’ narrative, was deeply unsettling to the fathers of the Church. One of the most important views of

¹⁶² Thomas J. Heffernan, “Philology and Authorship in the ‘*Passio Sancatum Perpetuae et Felicitatis*,’” *Traditio*, vol. 50 (1995), 316.

¹⁶³ Shaw, “The Passion of Perpetua,” 37.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

Perpetua that Augustine felt he must contain was her view of the living as intercessors for the unbaptized dead. In her dreams of Dinocrates, Perpetua is able to intercede on his behalf, gifting him with what appears to be salvation: the healing of his facial wound and the ability to drink from an ever-full fountain. However, this miracle went against the teachings of Augustine and the Church. “Augustine maintained that baptism which brings forgiveness of original and personal sins is a necessity for salvation. Confirmation, that is, the strengthening of the soul by the gifts of the Holy Spirit, was, in Augustine’s time given at baptism. ‘The sacrament of chrism...in holy in the line of visible signs, like baptism itself’ (CLP II.104.239).”¹⁶⁷ Baptism was necessary for salvation in the teachings of the Church, and yet Perpetua’s had interceded successfully on her unbaptized brother’s behalf. Augustine cautioned his listeners as noted above, that while Perpetua should be lauded, in this case she was wrong.

In his sermons on Perpetua, Augustine is aware of and open about the nature of remembrance and his framing of it. Sermon 280 is the first of the three annual sermons on Perpetua and Felicitas. In the sermon’s opening, Augustine acknowledges his own limitations in discussing the two martyrs, “if what I can offer is quite unequal to the merits of these saints, I can still contribute my own enthusiastic feelings to the joy of this great feast. What, after all, could be more glorious than these women, whom men can more easily admire than imitate?”¹⁶⁸ Augustine, although reframing Perpetua and Felicitas to fit into his own viewpoint and narrative, was still paying homage to them, and in re-reading her words, no matter the reframing, was still calling her to memory. At the beginning of the sermon, he praises her and Felicitas, noting that his own skills cannot do their memory enough justice. However, near the end of the introduction

¹⁶⁷ Mary T. Clark, *Augustine*, (Washington: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 77.

¹⁶⁸ Augustine of Hippo, “Sermon 280,” In *Sermons III/8 (273-305A) on the Saints*, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Edmund Hill, (New York: New City Press, 1994), 72.

to Sermon 280, Augustine does reduce Perpetua to a martyrological caricature, noting that the dragon was trampled by “Perpetua’s chaste foot and victorious tread,” harkening back to the first redactor’s attempts at grafting a proposed modesty onto Perpetua.¹⁶⁹ Tension lay in the power of Perpetua’s words, and Augustine’s need to mold his congregation, and therefore control Perpetua’s words. Augustine calls his followers to imitate “those who are better than we,” meaning Perpetua and Felicitas, clearly seeking to celebrate the two martyrs, while still at times reducing them to parables and teaching tools for his congregation.¹⁷⁰ The tension found in just the beginning of Sermon 280, praising Perpetua and Felicitas while reducing them to theological caricature is a theme carried through the remainder of the Sermon, as well as Augustine’s remaining forays into the topic of Perpetua’s martyrdom.

In honoring her memory, Augustine also had to wrestle with conceptions of gender and Perpetua’s strength; there was always present the fear that she, as a woman and therefore complicit in the Fall, nevertheless outdid men. To contain this threat, Shaw proposes that Augustine had to “suggest to his listeners an essential fault in Perpetua’s gender,” and to place Perpetua’s achievements into “a different sort of moral order.”¹⁷¹ Augustine’s reinterpretation of the snake harkens back to Tertullian’s stance on women in the *De Cultu Feminarum*, positioning Perpetua as an inherently sinful being on account of womanhood, but a woman whose example should be followed, as she managed to overcome her own nature, stepping on the serpent’s head to propel herself to holiness. However, in an earlier sermon, 64A, given somewhere between 396-399, Augustine said of women martyrs:

But how were women able to imitate this cunning of the snake, in order to win the prize medal, the crown of martyrdom? Christ you see, is called the head of the man, while the man is the head of the woman. And these women didn’t die for their husbands, did they,

¹⁶⁹ Augustine of Hippo, “Sermon 280,” 72.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, 75.

¹⁷¹ Shaw, “The Passion of Perpetua,” 38-39.

seeing that in order to suffer they spurned the appeals even of their husbands trying to call them back from the brink. Well of course, they too through the same faith are members of the Church, and thus Christ, who is head of the whole Church, is the head of all his members.¹⁷²

Augustine here presents a hierarchy, where women are included, but still at the bottom, after men, who are after Christ. However, this hierarchy is presented by Augustine to show how women too, can achieve martyrdom and glory, and presents women who disobey their husbands for Christ as righteous. The hierarchy forwarded in sermon 64A supports Shaw's suggestion of Augustine suggesting a fault in Perpetua's gender, but this same sermon also suggests that women can still win the crown of martyrdom.

Augustine's treatment of Perpetua follows the same nearly contradictory logic: as a woman she is weaker, but surpassed her inherent weaknesses to surpass even some men.

Augustine's second sermon on Perpetua and Felicitas continues on the same theme of women's weakness and overcoming it for sainthood. Sermon 281 states "A more splendid crown, I mean, is owed those of a weaker sex, because a manly spirit has clearly done much more in women, when their feminine frailty has not been undone under such enormous pressure."¹⁷³ Here, Augustine is continuing to struggle with the dichotomy of Christianity's teaching on women, and the strength exhibited by Perpetua in her words and deeds. He has in some way reconciled the two for himself and his congregation in simultaneously acknowledging both Perpetua's supposed weakness as a woman, and the strength she displayed. By reframing her as "male-minded," Augustine could laud her success at the same time that he strengthens Church rhetoric on gender. By positioning Perpetua as somehow different from other women,

¹⁷² Augustine of Hippo, "Sermon 64A," In *Sermons III (51-94) on the New Testament*, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Edmund Hill, (New York: New City Press, 1990), 190.

¹⁷³ Augustine of Hippo, "Sermon 281," In *Sermons III/8 (273-305A) on the Saints*, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Edmund Hill, (New York: New City Press, 1994), 78.

more masculine than an Eve, Augustine edited her memory to fit his own needs, but at the same time, this cooptation allowed her words to both survive and be heard.

In this second sermon, Augustine also returned to the theme of absent husbands that had so worried the writer of the more traditional hagiography. Augustine, instead of adding in earthly husbands, presents God as Perpetua and Felicitas's husband. He praises them for their marital fidelity, that "They had done well, I say, to cling to that man [Christ], from whom they had drawn the strength to withstand the devil."¹⁷⁴ Augustine acknowledges the absence of an earthly husband, framing this as the Devil not troubling Perpetua with a husband, "And it was not her husband he [the Devil] introduced into the ring, because she was already, in her exaltation of spirit, living in heaven, and the slightest suspicion of carnal desire, would make her, for very shame, all the stronger."¹⁷⁵ Augustine differs from the second writer in acknowledging the absence of Perpetua's earthly husband, but also manages to forward an even stronger image of Perpetua as a dutiful bride. Augustine does this by presenting not only God as the husband of the two women, but also that this heavenly husband helped them overcome the Devil and their weakness as women, "with the result that women knocked out the enemy, who through women had knocked out man."¹⁷⁶ The image of the martyred woman succeeding without a husband was too radical, and so Augustine contained Perpetua's potential threat to societal norms by not only positioning Christ as her husband, but also making this new spiritual husband the source of her ability to atone for the sin of being a woman. Augustine has refined the Church worry of absent husbands to its extreme: not only were Perpetua and Felicitas rendered faithful wives, but also were wives of God (harkening back to the first redactor's framing of Perpetua as a "bride of

¹⁷⁴ Augustine of Hippo, "Sermon 281," 78.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 78-79.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 78.

Christ,”). This heavenly marriage allowed them to overcome their limitations as women and overcome the Devil on behalf of women as a group. Sermon 281 allowed Augustine to solve the Church’s problem of wayward women martyrs and their absent husbands, as well as to strengthen the rhetoric of women as responsible for the fall of man.

Augustine is also able to use Perpetua’s own words to create his own reinterpretation, for in her dream of the gladiatorial ring, she found herself transformed into a man.¹⁷⁷ However, Augustine did not stop here in his reframing, as though he had solved the problem of absent husbands, he still had to reckon with Perpetua’s relationship to her father. Instead of the complete rebuff of her father that the second writer adds, Augustine worked in the opposite direction, trying to soften Perpetua’s responses, to present the Church’s ideal of filial devotion, even if delivered to a polytheist parent. Augustine presents “holy Perpetua” as speaking to her father “...with such moderation that she would not violate the command by which we owe honour [sic] to the parents.” With this framing, Augustine had, in his view, restored all the necessary ties to male family members that Perpetua broke with, containing her as a holy woman who obeyed the limits of her feminine nature and correctly lived within familial systems, even as she rebelled against a polytheist governmental system.

Sermon 281 ends by discussing Felicitas’ childbirth, portraying the early birth as enabling the martyrs to achieve “perpetual felicity.”¹⁷⁸ Perpetua and Felicitas also dealt with Felicitas and her childbirth in prison. Felicitas is treated with the same arguments as Perpetua; she embodied the sin of Eve, but through faith was able to redeem herself. Augustine presents Felicitas’ pregnancy and childbirth as her giving “testified with her woman’s voice to her woman’s condition. The punishment of Eve was not missing, but the grace of Mary was at hand.

¹⁷⁷ Shaw, “The Passion of Perpetua,” 39.

¹⁷⁸ Augustine of Hippo, “Sermon 281,” 79.

The debt owed by the woman was exacted, but the one whom the virgin bore was there to give relief.”¹⁷⁹ Augustine’s discussion of Felicitas in Sermon 282 was a tremendous boon to the continuation of her memory. Felicitas’ “female voice” was absent in Perpetua’s account. Felicitas’ memory only survive due to the first redactor’s addendum to Perpetua’s work. However, there is tension even in this rescue, as being written in by the male redactor, her “feminine condition” was remolded into a parable about the strength of faith, an irony lost on Augustine. In his treatment of Felicitas, Augustine takes a different route than his discussions of Perpetua – Felicitas is not made into a woman with a “male mind,” but is instead, due to giving birth, afforded the care of Mary, the ideal woman and antithesis to Eve. Felicitas’ success was not explained away as much as Perpetua’s was, she was not as frequently rendered as “male minded” or “male spirited,” likely due to the absence of her own potentially disruptive voice.

Augustine delivered one last sermon on Perpetua and Felicitas, reaffirming once more, that they were inherently weak due to their womanhood, but had overcome this condition due to an innate maleness. Augustine, after reading Perpetua’s account to the congregation explained that Perpetua and Felicitas

...these two of such strength of character and merit were not only women, they were wives as well. And one of them was also a mother, so that to the weakness of her sex might be added feelings less capable of endurance; thus the enemy would assail them from every quarter, and fondly suppose that as they would not be able to endure the hard, cruel burdens of persecution, they would give in to him straightaway and very soon be his to gloat over. They, however, being watchfully and firmly on guard in the strength of the inner self, scotched all his crafty tricks, and broke the force of all his attacks.¹⁸⁰

Augustine once more seemingly forgets or ignores Perpetua’s own status as a mother here, marking Felicitas as the weaker of the two due to her maternity. At the same time, Augustine is praising them for overcoming what might have been the flaws of their sex, which the enemy

¹⁷⁹ Augustine of Hippo, “Sermon 281,” 79.

¹⁸⁰ Augustine of Hippo, “Sermon 282,” In *Sermons III/8 (273-305A) on the Saints*, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. by Edmund Hill, (New York: New City Press, 1994), 81-82.

sought to exploit. They had “strength of the inner self,” in Augustine’s words, even though their fleshly bodies had the weakness of women. In this final sermon, then, echoes of Tertullian’s discourse on the flesh and the soul can still be found, as Augustine works to simultaneously reaffirm Church teachings on a gendered hierarchy, while still praising Perpetua and Felicitas as martyrs. Augustine followed up this simultaneous containment and celebration with another attempt at policing. The fear of women outdoing men, or being over-remembered at the expense of men is still present for Augustine. He tells his parishioners not to forget that men were killed along with Perpetua and Felicitas, and that the reason they are absent in celebration is not “that the women were ranked higher than the men in the quality of their conduct, but that it was a greater miracle for women in their weakness to overcome their ancient enemy, and that the men in their strength engaged in the contest for the sake of perpetual felicity.”¹⁸¹ Starting with the first redaction insertion of Saturus’ account, an insistence that Perpetua had not outdone her male peers, and continuing into Augustine’s third sermon, the fear of women’s sacrifice and holiness superseding men’s was ever-present. Perpetua and Felicitas are remembered because their sacrifice enabled them to make up for the sins of the gender and of Eve’s, and because their spirit was like a man’s. In addition to replaying this fear of women surpassing men in holiness and remembrance, Augustine once more reasserts Perpetua and Felicitas’ difference from other women, marking them as exemplary women who were exemplary because they were not like women.

Conclusion

The themes forwarded by the first redactor and the second writer were sharpened by Augustine. All three authors sought to both praise and contain Perpetua’s memory. This at times

¹⁸¹ Augustine of Hippo, “Sermon 282,” 82.

meant protecting and continuing Perpetua's memory, and at other times meant downplaying or erasing her words. The textual violence that was incurred by the fathers of the Church in their sermons, writings, and lectures was repetitious, attempting to contain the same sets of fears with rote answers relating to Eve and the fragility of women. As Shaw points out, these responses entail "a monotonous sameness...their predictability stems...from a sameness in their perception of the problem."¹⁸² However, repetitions of praise also occurred, discussing Perpetua's bravery and strength of spirit. The annual sermons delivered by Augustine helped keep her memory alive and present for the people of Roman North Africa. Perpetua's own words had and have a primacy to them, and the problems posed by her gender, and her narration of her own account to the coalescing Church were constantly being mulled over by Church officials. At times Church men attempted to explain Perpetua and Felicitas' gendered experiences as being a fluke, being demonstrative of masculinity, or of being payment for Eve's folly. Sometimes, in the same sermon, however, Perpetua and Felicitas were lauded and held up as examples to the parishioners for how to comport themselves. This tension between celebration and containment helped ensure Perpetua's account survived, as it meant her words were read and reread, even as men like Augustine were attempting to control how and why she was remembered. Felicitas' too, only survived in memory because of the first redactor's additions. While her presence is frequently reduced to a parable or caricature, some sense of her last moments, of her social position, and even of her fears can be gleaned from the additions to Perpetua's dairy. The textual edits and reframing, although not wholly successful, were a form of violence, but were tempered by a simultaneous celebration of Perpetua's accomplishments. Roman proconsuls had attempted to make Perpetua abandon her new faith and perform a sacrifice that she did not believe in. The

¹⁸² Shaw, "The Passion of Perpetua," 45.

Church fathers attempted to take her words and use them to support arguments about the frailty and deviance of women, while also demonstrating how women could achieve the crown of martyrdom, and “perpetual felicity” in the words of Augustine.¹⁸³

¹⁸³ Augustine of Hippo, “Sermon 281,” 79. Augustine of Hippo, “Sermon 282,” 81, 82.

CONCLUSION

Perpetua's *Passio* is a stunning work. It stands as one of the first written accounts by a Christian woman and details a political and religious struggle, along with intimate quotidian details. Concern for the well-being of a child is presented alongside spiritual experiences concerning the nature of the afterlife, and political resistance to the dominant state theology. Perpetua's words resonated deeply with the North African Christian community, and remain resonant today.

Perpetua's account details a woman resisting in small, lived ways to her impending death. Faced with a hostile father, she took up the mantle of a philosopher, and successfully defended her identity and choice to convert three times. Even as she stood against her father's attempts to have her recant, she still loved and pitied the man, as she mentions after he is publically beaten. Her rich dreamscapes also amounted to a resistance of the impending reality of her own death. In her dreams, she emerged triumphant against earthly evils, climbing a ladder of torture devices to emerge triumphant in paradise. She also subconsciously transforms herself into a powerful figure, able to intercede on behalf of the dead and to help them towards salvation. Her dreams of her brother Dinocrates, and of having saved him from a proto Hell-Tartarus hybrid demonstrate not only the mind of a converted polytheist navigating Christian symbols, but also a deep sense of her own power. She saw herself not as powerless in the face of execution but as able to intercede to save others in the afterlife. Her dreams were a mode of resisting the incredible violence of her waking life, and revealed how she saw herself as a powerful agent of faith.

Perpetua's final resistances, taking place in the arena, are those supplied by the redactor. Here Perpetua's autonomy becomes blurred; it is even more unsure how much of the account

occurred at this point than in her diary prior. The redactor is supplying the details at the end of the account to support his own theological paradigm, presenting Perpetua's narrative not as merely the personal writings of an imprisoned woman, but as a parable on how to comport oneself in faith, and of the strength of martyrs. Details like Perpetua moving first to cover herself after being trampled by a mad heifer are somewhat suspect, as the detail could have occurred, or been an attempt by the redactor to position Perpetua as a "good" woman, one worthy of praise. Her prior resistances to familial roles, and to the identity of a proper *matrona*, were threatening even to members of her own community. However, other instances of resistance, such as her defiance of the guards' attempting to dress her and Felicitas in the robes of Ceres' have more weight. Such a punishment was a method of mocking converts, and reminding them of what their correct roles were before executing them.

The tension between the redactor's creation of events to forward a martyrological agenda was continued in later retellings of Perpetua's account. Christian communities in Roman North Africa lauded her actions, and her narrative was frequently retold by clergy and lay person alike. At the same time, her resistances against the polytheist Roman state often entailed a resistance against normative gender roles that the Church still held. Some of her own religious experiences, perhaps most important of which was her intercession on behalf of unbaptized Dinocrates' soul, ran counter to Church teachings. Fathers of the Church, like Tertullian and Augustine, then had to wrestle with commemorating Perpetua, and containing her. The containment began with the first redactor, framing her narrative with an introduction and conclusion to control how an audience approached Perpetua's words. Dunn argues that "the very people crafting the martyr narrative may have an investment in depriving women of political power....Perhaps it is not coincidental that the final narrated image of Perpetua, a woman with reportedly remarkable gifts

for visions and healing, is with a sword plunged in her throat—by her own hand.”¹⁸⁴ Later redactors and framers against Perpetua’s account carried out textual violence. The last image of Perpetua as the perfect martyr, guiding her own death is a particularly violent one. However, it can also be interpreted as the redactor attempting to restore some agency to Perpetua, allowing her to control her own death as much as possible in the circumstances.

Augustine’s repeated sermons on Perpetua and Felicitas belie the notion of a complete textual attack on Perpetua’s memory. His sermons work to praise Perpetua and Felicitas and to keep their memory alive. At the same time, Dunn’s statement is not wholly false. Augustine, even as he works to praise Perpetua and Felicitas, also denigrates them as inherently weaker due to their sex, or as successful solely because they were “male minded,” and so not like other women. The strength of Perpetua’s own words, and the uniqueness of their creation – a woman’s unfiltered voice, written by herself before she died helped enable their survival in the Christian public imagination. So too, did the modes of violence employed against her and Felicitas, violence meant to play on stereotypes and norms of gender, class, and religion. The two women’s small resistances, especially Perpetua’s – her refusal to dress in costume, her gaze returned to a voyeuristic audience, if the redactor is to be believed – also helped ensure their survival. The resistances shown by Perpetua, her refutation of her father, and her dreams pushing back and making sense of a hostile reality all made sense in Christian cosmology. However, unlike martyrologies written after the death of their subject, Perpetua’s account was written by herself, and while using Christian themes, was free from the rote tropes present in other martyrologies.

¹⁸⁴ Dunn, “The Female Martyr and the Politics of Death,” 217-218.

The nuances in Perpetua's account, the absence of male figures, the blending of Christian and Pagan dream images, and her status as a mother and a martyr presented an issue for male Church officials. She was a martyr for the faith, but had dictated her own account, one that was more nuanced, and less controllable than a standard posthumous martyrological account. Perpetua's inclusion in the Christian pantheon even as she defined herself and defied Roman Imperial norms was threatening to the fathers of the Church, and her work incurred their textual violence, in a process Shaw likens to "antibodies surrounding a foreign viral infection," seeking to contain and redirect the unadulterated feminine voice contained in Perpetua's diary, even as they celebrated it. The first redactor set the process of trying to control group memory, and of rewriting Perpetua's account and life and death. In bracketing her text he sought to control how a reader interacted with Perpetua, instead of leaving Perpetua to define how a hypothetical reader would approach her text. The first redactor also demonstrated the beginnings of male fears of women martyrs overshadowing men, in adding Saturus' account to the end of Perpetua's.

Felicitas' presence is another matter. She does not appear by name in Perpetua's account. Her survival in memory is solely due to the first redactor's addition of an introduction, in which he names some of Perpetua's fellow converts and prisoners. Although Felicitas' presence is somewhat of a caricature, reciting standard Christian martyr rebuttals even as she gave birth, it is nonetheless a presence where she would otherwise have had none.

The second editor enacted the most textual violence. The new *Acta* completely removed Perpetua's own words, replacing them with a standard format, and with a noted male presence. For the author of the *Acta*, the absence of husbands was too great a transgression, and so Perpetua and Felicitas were given present husbands. Their separation and autonomy from masculine familial ties in the original *Passio* was a threat that the author of the *Acta* moved to

contain. Augustine, who, even though he also enacted instances of textual violence against Perpetua's account, also repeated Perpetua's words annually, ironically mitigated the *Acta*'s attempt containment.

Augustine appropriated Perpetua and Felicitas' experiences, writings, and memories in order to further his own arguments about the weakness and sin of woman, the strength of male martyrs, and the status of motherhood. Augustine's sermons wrestled with castigating the two women for their sex, and its attached sin, while simultaneously praising them for rising above it, and even rising above men in how much they struggled. Augustine's continued attempts to explain Perpetua's memory to his congregation also helped enable her memory at all to survive, and repeated the words she wrote.

Through all these violences, physical and textual, Perpetua the woman, as she saw herself, still survives in memorial. Felicitas too survived, largely through the intervention of editors, although her own self was replaced with a standard martyrological character. In Shaw's moving conclusion to the article "The Passion of Perpetua" he reckons with the survival, and ultimate fragility of Perpetua's voice. In her work, "there is something, perhaps ineffable, that marks her words as different in kind from any comparable piece of literature from antiquity."¹⁸⁵ Her work is deeply personal, uncompromising, philosophical and intimately connected with quotidian life. She was a woman condemned to die, who refused to submit, and parted with her father on her own terms, although they may have been hostile. She sought safety for her child, even as she went forward, almost sometimes gladly, with leaving behind the earthly world. And she wrote her words as a woman, a rare feat for the times. And this fact, as Shaw points out, means that her work and her memory "...was, even in its own day, a small and fragile thing. Yet

¹⁸⁵ Shaw, "The Passion of Perpetua," 45.

even this exiguous voice could not be left alone. From the very start it was buried under an avalanche of male interpretations, rereadings and distortions.”¹⁸⁶ These distortions were also a type of violence, while simultaneously working as praise and to ensure Perpetua’s remembrance. Perpetua’s work was in ways a fragile thing, one of the few remaining documents of its type and constantly under threat of being edited away, but it was also an incredibly strong text that survived long past its original writing. Perpetua and Felicitas were popular folk saints, and her account was well known, discussed and remembered not only by Augustine but by laypeople as well. The multiple attempts at containment meant that Perpetua’s writings were circulated more than normal, and fitful discussion on how she had succeeded in spite of her nature as a woman meant that her writings, the writings of a woman and mother, survived.

¹⁸⁶ Shaw, “The Passion of Perpetua,” 45.

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