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# Roman Family Structure and Early Christianity: Deconstructing familial and gender norms through the Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis

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# Roman Family Structure and Early Christianity

Deconstructing familial and gender norms through the *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis*

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## Abstract

This thesis will discuss the *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis* (*Passio*), or *The Passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas*, as an example of how ancient Roman familial structures can conflict with early Christian ideologies. Specifically, this thesis seeks to prove that the narrative of Perpetua complicates fatherhood, motherhood, and gender roles for both pagan Roman families and early Christians. To accomplish this, (i) the relationship between Perpetua and her father will be focused on to demonstrate that the Pagan father existed in opposition to the rise of Christianity, and (ii) Perpetua's relationship with the concept of motherhood, and the implications that her actions have on the perception of her gender will be considered. The father will be linked to legal, social, and cultural obligations that prevent his support of conversion to Christianity. Additionally, he will be cast as anti-Christian by Perpetua, who will use his existence as a means of materializing the Devil. This thesis will demonstrate that Perpetua must relinquish any ties to motherhood, acting against family and Christian norms, to fulfill the martyrial process.

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## Introduction

Ancient Roman notions of family were based on the legal and social construction of a prominent patriarch, that united personal, religious, and legal elements of family. The conceptualization of the pagan father figure in legal and cultural documents has constructed modern academic knowledge regarding not only the responsibilities of the patriarch, but the structure and dynamic of the family. This has led to a narrow characterization of the father as authoritarian, vindictive, and emotionally distant, and has overshadowed the importance of other members of the ancient Roman household.

Legal sources delineate that the *paterfamilias* of a household, the estate owner and oldest living male, had power over all other household members. The basic legal obligations of the *paterfamilias* established cultural significance with regard to the transfer of property, citizenship, and religion<sup>1</sup>. Through the prescribed power of *patria potestas*, a *paterfamilias* had nearly complete control over the private lives of his dependents. Taken broadly, the power of *patria potestas* gave the father the right to expose a newborn child, disown offspring at any moment for any reason, control the financial resources of his children, and ownership over any property possessed by his children<sup>2</sup>. Extreme scholarly interpretations of *patria potestas* equate the independence of children to that of slaves, with the distinction that children can obtain legal emancipation upon the death of the father. More liberal interpretations of the patriarchal power question the ability of the *paterfamilias* to fully enforce potestas, as well as the practicality in limiting the economic freedom of adult males in a society whose economy was dependent on personal business transactions. Regardless, the existence of *patria potestas* in Roman law

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Riggsby, *Roman Law and the Legal World of the Romans*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Saller, "Pater Familias, Mater Familias, and the Gendered Semantics of the Roman Household." *Classical Philology* 94.2 (1999): 182-97.

signified the cultural importance of an authoritarian father figure that was directly responsible for establishing social and political order.

In some historical accounts, the power of the father figure is presumably dramatized and inflated, so that it seems to supplant any emotional connection to children. In multiple accounts by Livy and Valerius Maximus, prominent Roman fathers order the executions of their sons<sup>3</sup>. The fathers act under the guise of doing what is best for Rome, specifically the founding characteristics on which the city is based. While the majority of historical examples that depict *patria potestas* are related to military or political infractions, they demonstrate that there is a cultural understanding that the Pagan Father is completely committed to the maintenance of traditional values and practices.

In popular culture, the basic traits and supposed mannerisms of the pagan father figure were simplified and caricatured so that it became a common archetype in ancient Roman comedy. ‘Pagan ideals’ were exaggerated and distorted, resulting in a humorous and oblivious character, that despite its ridiculousness, is the basis from which many scholarly interpretations of the father figure are based. A prominent example of this is seen in Terence’s *Adelphi*<sup>4</sup>, in which the Pagan Father is depicted as stubborn, ignorant, and authoritarian to the point of absurdity. The *Adelphi* establishes the Pagan Father as an obstacle to change, especially when the change in question could affect the cultural perception of the family. Although religion is not the point of conflict between the father and son in the *Adelphi*, the play’s depiction of the father is a

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<sup>3</sup> Livy, 2.41, “The Death of Spurius Cassius” and Livy, 8.7-8.8, “The Execution of a Military Hero” are particularly gruesome. In Livy 8.7-8, a military general executes his son for being disobedient as an example, even though the son is ultimately successful in his endeavor. Livy comments that this was beneficial to Rome.

<sup>4</sup> Terence, *Adelphi*. An ancient Roman comedy that takes place in Greece and revolves around the antics of two brothers and their fathers. Conflict with *paterfamilias* is centered around concerns of dishonorable marriages.

good indicator of how the Pagan Father was presumed to handle attempts at drastic change or variation in social standing.

Roman families, in addition to patriarchal power, were held together through the concept of *pietas*. It can be translated as ‘duty’ or ‘loyalty’, and is associated with the obligations that an individual has to others. From a Roman perspective, the ideal demonstration of *pietas* is depicted in the *Aeneid*, and is shown through the devotion that Aeneas has to his family and country<sup>5</sup>. Within the family, *pietas* mandated that parents would have an obligation to properly raise and care for their children, and that children would eventually be responsible for the care of their parents. To terminate the bond of *pietas* was to terminate connections to family, country, and the most basic conceptions of what it meant to be Roman.

While ancient Roman society was anchored by the responsibilities of the patriarch, the spread of Christianity was centered around women, children, and non-citizens<sup>6</sup>. Unlike Roman religion, early Christianity had no familial restrictions or social stratification. It was not a set of beliefs or practices that one was born into, and thus was dependent on the conversion of followers instead of the production of legitimate citizens. Conversion to Christianity usually began with the termination of pagan sacrifices and rituals. Considering that these proceedings were so ingrained to the public culture and implied success of Rome, public secession immediately highlighted potential converts. Since individuals qualified to perform the ritual of baptism were present in low concentration throughout the Empire, many ‘Christians’ were catechumens, or converts that had not received the rite of baptism, despite abstaining from pagan practices<sup>7</sup>. Becoming a convert of Christianity stripped individuals of access to many of Rome’s

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<sup>5</sup> Virgil, *Aeneid*. Aeneas departs Troy, carrying his father and symbolic imagery of country.

<sup>6</sup> Jean Laporte, *The Role of Women in Early Christianity*. New York: E. Mellen, 1982.

<sup>7</sup> Halvor Moxnes, *Constructing Early Christian Families: Family as Social Reality and Metaphor*. London: Routledge, 1997.

social and legal benefits, and could have ramifications on the family that reflected poorly on the *paterfamilias*.

This thesis will discuss the *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis* (*Passio*), or *The Passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas*, as an example of how ancient Roman familial structures can conflict with early Christian ideologies. Specifically, this thesis seeks to prove that the narrative of Perpetua complicates fatherhood, motherhood, and gender roles for both pagan Roman families and early Christians. To accomplish this, (i) the relationship between Perpetua and her father will be focused on to demonstrate that the Pagan father existed in opposition to the rise of Christianity, and (ii) Perpetua's relationship with the concept of motherhood, and the implications that her actions have on the perception of her gender will be considered.

## Chapter 1: The Pagan Father is Cast as anti-Christian

In addition to being the first preserved autobiographical account written by an ancient woman<sup>8</sup>, the *Passio* depicts the consequences that converting to Christianity had on the Roman family. It is one of the few written works to follow the persecution of a martyr through the various legal stages; illustrating Perpetua and Felicitas' journey from arrest, to trial, to prison, and finally, to execution. Three authors are thought to be responsible for the full account, but Perpetua's story is largely self-written, with only background and aftermath supplied by additional, unknown authors. The text is most often used within the context of studying the position of women in antiquity and in the Church. However, for the purposes of this thesis Perpetua's relationship to her family will be considered the most essential element of work, because it eloquently demonstrates the internal strain that can result from individuals converting to Christianity without the blessing of the father. All quotations that reference the father will be directly from the sections written by Perpetua, and will illustrate the dissonance that Christianity has created within the family. Notably, it is only in Perpetua's own sections that direct references to her father are made. This chapter will analyze three interactions between Perpetua and her father, both from the perspective of the father and of Perpetua, to show that the pagan father figure is depicted as anti-Christian in early Christian literature.

An unknown writer prefaces Perpetua's account of her martyrdom by establishing her social status, "well-born, well educated, honorably married, and who had a father, a mother, and two brothers, and an infant son at her breast" (*Passio* 2.2). In other words, the author makes it known that Perpetua satisfies many of the requirements that imperial Rome expects of its citizens, is in all other respects a model citizen, and sacrifices a great deal in converting to

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<sup>8</sup> Jan Bremmer, *Perpetua's Passions*. Oxford UP, New York, 2012.

Christianity. This preface is important for the scope of the argument, because it establishes Perpetua's societal location, and clearly specifies that she comes from a traditional household, that is presumably run in a traditional manner, with a father figure that embodies stereotypically Roman features.

This distinguishes her experience from that of Felicitas, who makes the same demonstration of devotion to Christianity, but is a slave-girl that lacks the influence of a strong Pagan father figure. For this reason, it will be Perpetua's account that will be primarily focused on. From Perpetua's perspective, the sacrifice of her privileged place in Roman society is not only a negligible cost that must be made, but a necessary demonstration of faith. She repeatedly shows no concern for any of the gruesome punishments she will eventually experience, most notably her violent martyrdom in the amphitheater. In fact, to say that she shows no concern would be a gross understatement. She yearns for martyrdom, and it is this desire that supersedes all other concerns, even the connection that she has to her biological family.

### The Pagan Father Opposes Christianity

Contrary to Perpetua's eagerness, her father fully realizes and is horrified by the sacrifice that she is making in the name of Christianity. His objection to her conversion is portrayed in a manner that is more complex than staunch pagan stereotypes allow, and can be seen through the examination of both the authoritarian and *pietas* aspects of his presumed role. The scenes between Perpetua and her father depict the internal tension of her conversion to Christianity, and are subtly responsible for elimination of familial order. The constructed social order and power of the family through the *paterfamilias* have to be reproached in order for the potential of

Perpetua's martyrdom to be manifested<sup>9</sup>. In this sense, her father is her biggest obstacle. Yet, in contrast to the harsh stereotype of the Pagan father figure in Roman literature; such as in Terence's *Adelphi*, the father in the *Passio* is not a family tyrant. Rather, he is an obstruction to Perpetua's desired conversion. Through his legal role, his affection, and the *pietas* that he has for his daughter, he is unabashedly anti-Christian.

While there is no doubt that both affection and *pietas* are important for understanding the relationship between Perpetua and her father, there is a subtle distinction between the two. Affection needs no ancient context; it can readily be understood by modern standards. It is simple, and emotionally apparent in the father's pleas to his daughter. When the authority of the father's command to abandon Christianity is undone by Perpetua's crafty wordplay, the visceral reaction that follows is an emotional one driven by affection:

So I said: 'Father, do you see this container here, for instance: this pitcher or whatever it is?' 'Yes,' he answered. I said, 'It can't be called anything other than what it is, right?' 'Right.' 'Well, that's the way it is with me. I can't call myself anything other than what I am: a Christian.' That word upset Father so much that he lunged at me as if to pluck out my eyes. But he only managed to shake me up (*Passio* 3.1-3.3).

While the argument could be made that the Father's physical reaction stems from anger over his daughter's disobedience rather than the love he has for her, this is never hinted at by Perpetua, who is by all accounts extremely cognizant of her father's behavior and feelings. She makes no reference to her disobedience being the cause of his anger, and never implies that he could simply use his *potestas* and order her to obey his command. Her lack of acknowledgement of the legal command of her father is sufficient evidence for positing that she is aware his reaction stems from personal affection<sup>10</sup>. While there is clearly an emotional relationship between the

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<sup>9</sup> Hartmut Bohme and Jeanne Riou, "The Conquest of the Real by the Imaginary." *Perpetua's Passions* (2012): 220-43. They argue that the authority of the father figure must be "snipped" so that martyrologic process can occur.

<sup>10</sup> Hanne Sigismund-Nielsen, "Vibia Perpetua: An Indecent Woman." *Perpetua's Passions* (2012): 108. Print. Posits that Perpetua is more cognizant than her father with regard to emotional intelligence, is able to perceive that he acts out of emotion and not power.

two, the explanation for *pietas*, however, is slightly more complex. Roman *pietas* was a way of conveying the mutual responsibilities that existed between parent and offspring. It was a set of duties that Perpetua, being from a legal and traditional family, would have likely been indoctrinated with and understood from a young age. It was the duty of the parents to take care of the children until they were old enough to take care of themselves, whether or not there was affection in the relationship. Likewise, it was the duty of the children to be respectful of this relationship, and to care for the parents in old age<sup>11</sup>. Perpetua's decision to convert to Christianity overtly severs this bond; her eventual martyrdom would extinguish both her ability to care for her parents and for her newborn child.

In the second interaction that occurs between Perpetua and her father there is a clear exaltation of the responsibility of *pietas*. Her father exclaims:

My daughter, have pity on me - look at my grey hair! Have pity on me - I am your father! Or don't I deserve that name anymore? Didn't I bring you up with these hands, so that you are now in the flower of your youth? Didn't I put you first, before all your brothers? Don't disgrace me in front of everyone. Think of your brothers. Think of your mother and your aunt. Think of your son - if you are no longer with us he won't be able to survive. Enough with your pride! You'll be the ruin of us all (*Passio* 5.1 -5.4).

Her father invokes the relationships of all the people that Perpetua is connected to through *pietas*, and the responsibilities that she has committed to them. Notably, the relationship between Perpetua and her son is appealed to. This relationship, along with the others, will have to be sacrificed if Perpetua completes her conversion to Christianity. She will cease to be a mother, and likewise will cease to be a daughter<sup>12</sup>. In some regard, the *pietas* between Christian converts and the Pagan father figure is the strongest and most ancient obstacle to the spread of

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 110. Perpetua demonstrates sufficient cultural understanding to be aware and traumatized about breaking *pietas*.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 112.

Christianity, and is a compelling reason for why the Pagan father figure is depicted as anti-Christian.

As the second interaction between Perpetua and her father proceeds, any connection to the staunch and authoritarian Pagan father stereotype is abandoned. Perpetua's father, clearly in distress over his daughter's conviction, begins to abdicate any remaining power he has over her. For reasons that are self-evident to those who sympathize with the loss of a child, the father is in visible distress, so much so that he throws himself at his daughter's feet:

Then he threw himself at my feet and wept, and now he called me not 'daughter' but 'my lady.' I felt dreadful for my father's misfortune: he was going to be the only one in my whole family that would not rejoice at my martyrdom. So I tried to comfort him with these words: 'Whatever happens up on that platform will be in accordance with God's will. You can be sure that we are not under our own control, but God's.' He went away heartbroken (*Passio* 5.5 - 5.6). Her stubbornness has dismantled his authority, cast the family into scandal<sup>13</sup>, and snipped at the remnants of his masculinity<sup>14</sup>. He appears before her, prostrated, seemingly castrated, and humbled, with no real expectations that his begging will be yielded to. Evident is a reclassification of their relationship in his mind, for he no longer calls her "daughter", but instead refers to her in the same manner as her brother did earlier, calling her *domina*, or "my lady" (*Passio* 5.5). With the dissolution of family ties, the authority of the father figure becomes undone.

In the third interaction between Perpetua and her father, the obligation of *pietas* is reiterated. Perpetua's father appears at her trial, with baby in hand, prepared to make one last attempt at dissuading her:

Just then Father showed up with my son. He pulled me down from the steps and said, 'Offer the sacrifice! Take pity on the baby!' The imperial agent Hilarianus had just been given the authority to try capital offences as successor of the late proconsul Minicius Opimianus. He said: 'Your father has grey hair; your body is just a baby. Don't put them through this!' (*Passio* 6.2 - 6.3).

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<sup>13</sup> Beryl Rawson and Weaver, *The Roman Family in Italy: Status, Sentiment, Space*. Canberra: Humanities Research Centre, 1997. Claim that religion is correlated with social prominence, such that Christianity is a social pariah.

<sup>14</sup> Hartmut Bohme and Jeanne Riou, "The Conquest of the Real by the Imaginary." *Perpetua's Passions* (2012): 220-43.

In this scene, the bond of *pietas* between father and daughter is invoked not only by Perpetua's father, but by the imperial official as well. This demonstrates how *pietas* is somewhat of a grey area between affection and legal responsibility. While there is definitely a component of familial nature, by converting to Christianity Perpetua is abandoning her social responsibility to her father and child. In this sense, there is overlap between the objectives of the father and of the imperial agent. Presumably, where they differ is in the intent behind Perpetua's actions. At this point, it appears as if the father cares little for what she actually believes, and simply desires her safety above all else. His lack of social regard is conveyed through his public humiliation: that will not change if she recuses herself at the trial by performing the sacrifice, his reputation and authority are permanently stained. However, the magistrate likely wishes to see the social contract upheld because he is a political agent, and perceives Christianity to be a threat to the sanctity of the Roman Empire. In this early Christian source, what makes the father figure the biggest obstacle to Christianity is his willingness to sacrifice his social standing to save the earthly life of his daughter. The magistrate, while he possesses no observed desire to sentence Perpetua to death, remains within the confines of his social role. He makes no serious effort to transgress it, and succumbs to the sentencing that Perpetua desires: martyrdom. Had he the impetus to act outside of his legal obligation, the official along with the Pagan father figure might be considered great obstacles to the spread of Christianity. However, this is not the case, and the father acts in a way that is unique to his position, making him the fundamental threat to his daughter's conversion.

The final interaction between Perpetua and her father solidifies the obligation that the father feels to protest Christianity. He visits her in the prison:

My father came to see me. He was worn out with grief. He started plucking out his beard and flinging the whiskers on the ground, prostrating himself before me, cursing his old age, and saying the kinds of things that would move the whole of creation (*Passio* 9.2).

In an unexpected and frenzied act of desperateness, the father performs the act of *proskynesis*, or “kissing towards” his daughter. In the Classical period, this form of greeting was attempted to be implemented by Alexander the Great, but was met with strong opposition because it could be used to demonstrate the inferiority of the one that prostrates himself (*Anabasis* 4.10.5). He is moved slightly, but retains his sense of authority throughout the passage, and could likely never be pushed to such lengths of desperation. The father figure in *Passio* is more nuanced than simplistic archetypes give credence to, and is motivated by an array of reasons to be against the Christian conversion of his daughter. He completely relinquished authority over her, in a sacrificial attempt to change her mind, ceding his own wellbeing for that of his daughter’s. While the Pagan father figure is often depicted as one of tyrannical authority, and indeed the initial intent of this paper was to show that it was this quality that made the father figure anti-Christian, the *Passio* demonstrates that the father was an affront to Christianity on multiple levels, and was willing to forgo social roles in acts of desperation.

### Perpetua Opposes Her Father

Certainly, the relationship between Perpetua and her father is important to consider from the father’s perspective, as to why losing his daughter and disgracing his family name makes him anti-Christian. However, it is not just his loss in family and reputation that casts the Pagan father figure as anti-Christian in this early Christian source. The manner in which Perpetua considers her father, and the role that he plays in defining her conviction, is essential to understanding how the father figure is cast as the biggest barrier in her conversion to Christianity.

Perpetua views her own father as anti-Christian, and projects this feeling by casting her father as an agent of the devil. Perpetua’s autobiography is framed within the context of multiple contests; she squares up against Rome, her father, and the Devil. While these start as legal,

personal, and spiritual battles, eventually Perpetua is unable to differentiate between them. Her father's love, innocent and sincere in appearance, is distorted into something sinister. Perpetua's narration begins with her father's interference:

'Cum adhuc' inquit 'cum prosecutoribus essemus et me pater verbis **evertere** cupiret et deicere pro sua affectione perseveraret

While we were still under surveillance, Father kept trying to talk me into renouncing my faith: because of his love for me, he wanted to lead me astray (*Passio* 3.1).

Initially, she acknowledges that it is out of love that her father objects to her public conversion to Christianity. Regardless, she views his caring as an attempt to lead her "astray", as if she is currently on the correct path, and her father is an obstacle. The Latin version of the text uses the verb *evertere*, "to overturn", to describe the father's desire regarding Perpetua's faith. The verb, and its connotations with destruction, indicates Perpetua's father's role as a 'tempter', and assists in transforming him into a mask of the Devil<sup>15</sup>. From the beginning, their perspectives are juxtaposed. Her father has failed to recognize that his pragmatic advice has been taken as a means of separating her from Christ, and Perpetua fails to see the logic in her father's actions<sup>16</sup>. Despite the depicted sincerity of the father, she misconstrues his love for vice; "Then he left, defeated, and the arguments of Satan along with him" (*Passio* 3.3). In their first recorded interaction, she has established her father as a vehicle for which the arguments of the devil can be transferred. Only in demonizing him can she justify severing connections to her biological family.

By disconnecting from her biological family, Perpetua is able to assimilate into the Christian family. Since her father is the main arbitrator of this bond, he must be subverted and

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<sup>15</sup> Hartmut Bohme and Jeanne Riou, "The Conquest of the Real by the Imaginary." *Perpetua's Passions* (2012): 238. Print. Posits that Perpetua sees father as a 'temper' and must be eliminated

<sup>16</sup> Giulia Sissa, "Socrates' Passion." *Perpetua's Passions* (2012): 252.

replaced. For Perpetua, Christianity and her father's presence in her life cannot coexist, and the absence of one allows for the advancement of the other:

Over the next few days I thanked the Lord for Father's absence and I was relieved that he was not there. It was during this period of a few days that we were baptized, and the Spirit told me to ask for only one thing from the water: bodily endurance (*Passio* 3.4).

In her father's absence, Perpetua is able to further her plight. The more she embraces Christianity, the more she relinquishes the ties to her father and thus her biological family. Gradually, her relationship with him becomes less personal and more symbolic, even as the father takes emotional leaps that reveal his personhood. Yet, while her father becomes a symbol, it is not the typical authoritarian archetype. Contrary to the perception in the *Adelphi*, in which the Pagan father figure is cast as simplistic and shallow, Perpetua's father is ascribed as a complex agent of the Devil. Familial bonds, love of the father, and love of the child are but evil temptations designed to interrupt Perpetua's path to eternal life<sup>17</sup>. For evidence of this phenomena one has to go no farther than Perpetua's own visions.

Perpetua's autobiographical account is complicated by her documentation of visions that she had while in prison. Presumably, the reader is supposed to prescribe the visions because of Perpetua's devotion to God. The text makes it clear that she is not a fortune teller or an oracle, and that she lacks control of what she will be shown<sup>18</sup>. These visions are vivid, symbolic, and have been the focus of academic analysis for centuries. I aim to build on standing scholarship to further the claim that the visions attest to the way Perpetua began to see her father. Namely, she increasingly saw him as the figurehead of satanic deterrence. Her first vision occurs after she has established her father's desire to lead her astray (*Passio* 3.1), she sees:

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<sup>17</sup> Hartmut Bohme and Jeanne Riou, "The Conquest of the Real by the Imaginary." *Perpetua's Passions* (2012): 243.

<sup>18</sup> Katharina Waldner, "Visions, Prophecy, and Authority in the *Passio Perpetuae*." *Perpetua's Passions* (2012): 218. Print. There is a thin line between Perpetua's visions and Roman connotations of magic. As an early Christian source, the visions are structured so that this divide is as stark as possible.

A ladder made of bronze, huge, reaching all the way up to the sky - but narrow, so that people could only go up one at a time. There were iron weapons of all kinds stuck in the rails on both sides... If anyone climbed the ladder carelessly or without looking up, he would be torn up by these weapons, and pieces of flesh would get caught in them. At the foot of the ladder there was a serpent lying there, huge, waiting in ambush for people who wanted to climb up and frightening them off from climbing up... 'In the name of Jesus Christ,' I said, 'he will not hurt me.' And down there at the foot of the ladder, as if he were afraid of me... , and I, as if stepping on the first rung of the ladder, stepped on his head (*Passio* 4.3-4.7).

Perpetua's vision concludes with her summiting the ladder and reaching her destination welcomed and unharmed (*Passio* 4.8). The narrow and dangerous ascent is representative of Perpetua's conversion to Christianity. The weapons and impending harm demonstrate that she is aware of the danger, but is not concerned with the physical harm associated with the journey. Despite its treacherous adornment, it is not the ladder that is most perilous. Rather it is the serpent, lurking at the base, that she views most threatening. The purpose of the serpent, if taken out of the context of her vision, seems nearly benevolent and utterly rational. It serves to frighten people from attempting to climb a ladder that is outrageously dangerous, and from which no obvious benefit can be gleaned. No physical harm is associated with the serpent, yet Perpetua uses the name of Christ to prevent it from harming her. To further complicate the narrative, the serpent is portrayed as being fearful of Perpetua, and unwillingly acquiesces to her will by bowing its head and allowing her to step on it. Conversely, she never expresses fear regarding the ladder itself, or assistance in overcoming the weapons. I posit that the serpent is a symbolic image of her father<sup>19</sup>. As a Pagan father, legal citizen, and authoritarian of the household, his mere existence, like the serpent, is enough to deter most people from attempting to fully convert to Christianity. Like the serpent, he acts as a guardian of physical well-being, and is unable to see the paradise that awaits Perpetua at the top of the ladder. While he considers his decision to be based in logic, he fails to see the bigger picture. However, once challenged, he is fearful and

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<sup>19</sup> Other scholars have commented that the serpent is likely symbolic of the father figure. Bohme posits that the serpent is one of the ways in which Perpetua sees her father as a mask for the Devil.

unable to resist the will of his daughter. He exudes no authority over her. It is his ritualistic destiny to not only be defeated, but to assist in the process of Perpetua's ascension.

Perpetua never explicitly links her father to the serpent in her vision, but her recorded mannerisms indicate that she has framed a connection between the two. Directly after the vision, she is confronted by her father, who makes a plea of pity and *pietas* (*Passio* 5.1-5.4). Before he even begins, she recognizes this as an attempt to lead her astray (*Passio* 5.1). Just as the purpose of the serpent, who presumably acts as an agent of the Devil, is to deter Perpetua from her journey; her father, who acts like "a dutiful father" (*Passio* 5.5), is predictably anti-Christian, even though he acts in what he considers to be her best interests. Yet, she is not completely without sympathy for her father's pleas. She states, "I felt dreadful for my father's misfortune: he was going to be the only one on my whole family who would not rejoice at my martyrdom" (*Passio* 5.6). While she states that she will feel dreadful, what aspect of her father's misfortune will she feel dreadful about? Taken without the second clause, it initially appears that she is sympathetic to the social and emotional consequences that her actions will have on her father. While this may be true, the conditional in the second clause links her father's misfortune to his lack of excitement of her martyrdom. If this is the case, she pities her father not because he will lose material standing, but because he doesn't understand that her actions transcend the material realm<sup>20</sup>. His lack of comprehension places him at odds with Perpetua, and cements him as an anti-Christian figurehead. Unlike the rest of her family there is not the possibility of exultation, much less understanding. Despite her sympathy, her view of her father has not changed. Still, she considers him an obstacle; when he appears at her trial she remarks, for the third time, that intent of her father's presence is to lead her astray (*Passio* 6.5).

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<sup>20</sup> Mieke Bal, "Perpetual Contest." *Perpetua's Passions* (2012): 138. Print.

Perpetua's visions clarify her ambitions and illuminate her journey. They incorporate elements of the past, and although they are not necessarily futuristic, the visions use symbolic context to appear prophetic. In her final vision, Perpetua witnesses an incident that prepares her for martyrdom:

I knew that I had been sentenced to combat animals, so I was surprised that none were being let loose on me. Instead an Egyptian came out as my opponent, hideous to look at, along with his assistants. He was the one who was going to fight me... We went up to each other and started throwing punches... Then I was floating in mid-air and started hitting him without really touching the ground... He fell down flat on his face and I stepped on his head. The crowd began to shout and sing with joy. I went over to the trainer and took the branch. He kissed me and said, 'Peace be with you, daughter.' And I headed out in glory, towards the Gate of Life and Health. Then I woke up. And I realized that I was going to be fighting not with animals but with Satan, But I also knew that victory was mine (*Passio* 10.5-10.15).

It is worth questioning Perpetua's mindset when the vision occurred. She has just dismissed her father, in what will be their final interaction. He has said "the kind of things that would move the whole of creation" (*Passio* 9.2), and she has remained unmoved, despite feeling "dreadful". Not only is it conceivable to imagine that she is in distress, but also that she is seeking a way to justify her actions in a manner that both affirms her beliefs and forgives her emancipation from her father. Then, by act of God, this vision seems to encapsulate the battle that she has had with her father, the Roman imperium, and her inner spirituality. The three battles have been transfigured into one, and the result is Perpetua's universal victory.

The final vision is filled with symbolic elements that hint at the theme of contest in Perpetua's narrative. Specifically, the contest that occurs between Perpetua and her father, who acts as an emblematic agent in other battles. Although she should be fighting against beasts in the amphitheater, one of the standard Roman punishments, it is a man who emerges instead. This is reminiscent of her first vision, in which the obstacle of the treacherous ladder was superimposed by the serpent. The physical harm and possibility of a gory death are downplayed, while the altercation with the one who intends to subvert her inner spiritual desires is focused on.

In this vision, the hideous Egyptian is Perpetua's illustration of the Devil, who had previously been identified with the serpent and with the father. Support for this assertion is seen in various components of the vision. Like the serpent, Perpetua steps on the head of the Egyptian; simultaneously signifying the defeat of her opponent and the legitimacy of her spiritual beliefs.

Perpetua confirms that the Egyptian is an agent of the Devil when she realizes that the fight had always been between her and Satan. Her relationship with her father has become undone, and in its place a spiritual battle has been superimposed; unbeknownst to the father. He naively succumbs to her visions through his caring, and unwittingly acts as confirmation for Perpetua's perception of the morality of her actions. He is anti-Christian both in his paternity and intrinsic existence, and is but a pawn in Perpetua's narrative.

## Chapter 2: Perpetua Refutes Motherhood and Obscures Gender Roles

Contrary to the pagan Father figure, early Christian sources do not overtly cast Roman mothers as being anti-Christian. Conversely, they are often revered by the Church, but not because of their steadfast dedication to the public enactment of Christian principles. Women are bound to the obligation of maternity, while maternity is culturally and biologically bound to female sexuality and its reproductive potential. It is worth questioning how early Christian views on sex impacted the ability of Christian mothers to be recognized within the Church. Except in the case of the Virgin Mary, motherhood demands the expression of female sexuality. Perhaps, this is partially why early Christian sources regard motherhood as necessary and yet simultaneously suspicious in relationship to personal sanctification<sup>21</sup>. Mothers are valued, but this recognition is confined to the domestic realm, and is almost always overshadowed by the actions of Christian men. In the early Christian sources, women are praised when they accede to the restraints of motherhood. They are not expected to be capable of greater sacrifice: “women will be saved by having children, if they continue to have faith, love, and holiness, along with good judgement” (1 Timothy 2.15). Jerome praised the mother of Chromatius and Eusebius; specifically, he eulogized her *venter aureus*, ‘golden womb’, which had brought forth such faithful sons<sup>22</sup>. Instead of female saints, or saints who dedicated their lives to the Church and happened to be mothers, the women that receive the most recognition in early Christian sources are acknowledged due to their role in procuring great men and directing them towards Christianity. These ‘holy mothers’, such as Monica the mother of Augustine, the mother of the

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<sup>21</sup> Julia Weitbrecht, "Maternity and Sainthood in the Medieval Perpetua Legend." *Perpetua's Passions* (2012): 154. Print.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

seven Maccabean brothers, Felicitas of Rome, and Julia of Tarsus, all acquired their holiness through their male children's religious success.

## The Guise of Motherhood

The *Passio* complicates this narrative of motherhood, as Perpetua relinquishes motherly responsibilities and is revered for it. In doing so, she calls into question perspectives of gender, and the ideal responsibility of the early Christian woman, specifically in relation to motherhood.

A near two millennia after her martyrdom, Perpetua is praised as one of the patron saints of motherhood in the Roman Catholic Church. But, what type of mother was Perpetua, and is it her motherly qualities that made her famous? I posit that, despite the Church's recollection of Perpetua's story, motherhood was an obstacle that Perpetua had to circumvent to join the Kingdom of God. While she was arrested as a mother, she was not executed as one, favoring instead to find family within Christianity. In this sense, she differs from prior 'holy mothers', who have obtained recognition through the actions of their sons.

There is little scholarly doubt about Perpetua's origins. She is introduced as "Vibia Perpetua, who was well born, well educated, honorably married, and who had a father, a mother, and two brothers, one a catechumen, and an infant son at her breast" (*Passio* 2.1-2.2). Since she is honorably married and from a family of notable social status, it would be highly irregular for her child to not be legitimate, yet the father is never in the picture. This leads scholars to conclude that either the child was not old enough to be transferred to the father's care, or the finer points of Perpetua's nuclear family are irrelevant to the larger scope of the story<sup>23</sup>. Although she has publicly declared herself a Christian, when Perpetua is arrested she has only

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<sup>23</sup> Jan Willem Van Henten, "The *Passio* Perpetua and Jewish Martyrdom." *Perpetua's Passions* (2012): 128.

just been baptized. So, despite her vocal desire, when she is arrested she has taken few actual steps towards Christianity. At the time of her arrest, she is still very close to her child:

Above all, I was tormented by anxiety for the baby... So we left the dungeon and everyone was on his own for a while. As for me, I nursed the baby, who by that point was starving to death. Anxious for him, I spoke to Mother and tried to comfort Brother, and I asked them to take care of my son (*Passio* 3.8).

Initially, Perpetua's behavior seems consistent with that of any other caring mother. She has not given her child up for good yet; just ensured the baby's safety for the foreseeable future. She still associates herself with the physical aspects of motherhood, such as nursing, and still considers the baby's health a priority. It is important to note that she is not eager to give up her child, at least at first:

This was the kind of anxiety I had to live with for quite a few days. But then I was able to arrange for the baby to stay with me in prison, which instantly made me feel better - no more pain and anxiety for the baby's sake. And so for me the prison suddenly became a palace, so that I didn't want to be anywhere else (*Passio* 3.9).

If one were to stop reading here, by all accounts Perpetua appears as a caring and compassionate mother, who thinks little of her own needs, choosing to prioritize the health of the baby. To understand the manner in which Christianity affects Perpetua as a mother, it must be stressed that at this point in the narrative she has not fully realized the totality of her declaration of faith.

Perhaps she does not realize that she will never be released, or she has not considered how far her commitment to Christianity will go. However, once she has her first vision, a personal connection is established with God that eats at all other material links; she "realized that we were facing martyrdom, and at that point we gave up our hopes for this world" (*Passio* 4.10). From this point onward, there is a decisive change in how Perpetua interacts with her child.

When Perpetua is placed on the platform to be interrogated and judged, her father acts and attempts to invoke Perpetua's motherhood: "Then it was my turn. Just then Father showed up with my son. He pulled me down from the steps and said, 'Offer the sacrifice! Take pity on

the baby””(Passio 6.2). His plea is echoed by the procurator, who also attempts to use the child as a means of swaying Perpetua: “spare the grey hairs of your father, spare the early youth of your child. Perform the sacrifice for the Emperor’s well-being” (Passio 6.3). And yet, she remains unmoved. Strikingly, the dialogues in chapters 5 and 6 refer to the emotions connected with paternal love, but somehow manage to never mention the emotions that Perpetua felt for her child. She remains stern, while her father succumbs to emotion. After her first vision, which affirmed her path to martyrdom, her affection to her child is effectively absent and their relationship is nearly terminated<sup>24</sup>.

By allowing herself to be sentenced to death, Perpetua decides to forsake her own son for the family of God. It seems as if she can not be both a mother and a martyr:

After that, he pronounced us guilty and sentenced us to combat with animals in the arena. Rejoicing, we went back down to the prison. After that, since the baby was used to being breast-fed and to living with me in the prison, I sent the deacon Pomponius to Father as soon as I could, asking for the baby. But Father refused. It was God’s will, though: not only did the baby stop wanting my breasts but they did not become inflamed (Passio 6.6-8).

When she calls for her child, she does not hint of doing so out of love, concern, or affection. Rather, she treats breast-feeding as a consequence of habit. Perpetua is not reported to feel any guilt or distress over losing her son. Instead of remorse, she is comforted with double miracles that reaffirm her decision. God handles the negative consequences; her child no longer needs breastfeeding and she is without discomfort. Further, her father takes possession of the child, so that it effectively disappears from both her physical presence and internal concern.

Perpetua’s account of martyrdom seriously challenges early Christianity’s notions of motherhood. Presumably, her actions are supported by the early Christian community. The other Christians that she is imprisoned with are never recorded expressing disdain for her choice to

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 130.

abandon her child. Further, in both the introduction and conclusion to the *Passio*, the editor expresses the hope that other Christians can participate in the martyr's experience and enter fellowship with Christ through them (*Passio* 1.6). The editor presents the martyrs as model figures of faith that ignore traditional family structures to acquire membership in the household of Christ. What does this mean for the role of women in early Christianity? While Perpetua is revered, it does not seem that Christianity is encouraging other women to follow in her footsteps, renounce their families, and leave their children to be raised by an anti-Christian father figure. Perpetua's situation is contrived as unique, and is not intended to be replicated<sup>25</sup>. I posit that while Perpetua may briefly fill the role of a mother, she increasingly acts within the confines of masculinity so that she cannot be categorized with other notable women of early Christianity. Unlike those women, she distances herself from her father, not to mature as a 'real' woman, but to detach from femininity.

### Alterations of Gender

The *Passio*, despite being one of the most remarkable early Christian texts, is a problematic narrative for many early Christian thinkers. The depiction of Perpetua, while an inspiration to future martyrs, is unable to be contained within the confines of early Christian gender norms. The manner in which the *Passio* consistently draws attention to aspects of sex and gender has puzzled scholars as early as Augustine, who attempt to develop explanations for how a woman was able to become the focus of a story of mass martyrdom. This conflict is especially present in examining Perpetua's relationship with her father, whose relationship is destroyed in part by a transfiguration of gender roles. The depiction of gender in the *Passio* calls into question

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<sup>25</sup> Augustine, *Sermon* 282. Augustine does not encourage women to be like Perpetua, chooses instead to emphasize strengths of her devotion to God.

the role of the family in early Christianity, and presents the fulfillment of traditional familial roles as an inherently anti-Christian characteristic.

There is little scholarly doubt that Perpetua's behavior is contrary to traditional Pagan and Christian notions about motherhood and womanhood. The distinction between how Perpetua acts and how she appears is repeatedly stressed in the *Passio*. There is observable tension between expectations for her behavior and her actions, especially when considered within the confines of the family. In the opening passages, the female sex of Perpetua is underscored by her comparison to prominent male figures and by vivid descriptions of her physical appearance. The femaleness of Perpetua, and the implications of her sex, is emphasized through interactions with her father (3.1-3.6, 5.1-5.6), her son (3.7-3.9), and her brother (4.1-4.10), while relationships with the presumed two most significant women in her life, her mother and Felicitas, receive little to no attention. The narratives of her encounters with men, most notably her interactions with her father, are consistently structured around power oppositions and reversals, such that there is an apparent gender inversion. Viewed through this lens, the *Passio* could be contrived as a narration that describes how a man was overpowered by the stubbornness of his indomitable daughter.

The *Passio* depicts familial relations in a manner that was never previously contrived by early Christian or Pagan writers<sup>26</sup>. The narrative attacks both existing patriarchal structures and suggests the means by which a woman can achieve martyrdom. In the *Passio*, martyrdom is accomplished in part by Perpetua's distancing from the family; a price of which appears to be her domination over her father, who is increasingly portrayed as feminine. Her father ceases to act with logic and instead appeals to emotion, while Perpetua is consistently calm and rational. Actions such as her father attempting to scratch her eyes out (3.3), and her father claiming

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<sup>26</sup> Speculation, but based on background reading is accurate.

possession of her child (6.7) hint at the father's possible development of femininity. It would seem as if there is a constant quota of necessary masculine and feminine characteristics, although the vehicle in which they are portrayed is constantly in flux. Such that, when Perpetua distances herself from feminine archetypes, her father responds with actions that are more feminine in nature. In the case of Perpetua's father's refusal to return with her baby, and subsequent miraculous absolution of her desire to breast-feed (6.8), the Father takes on the maternal role from which she has distanced herself. In this sense, the *Passio* suggests that Perpetua made a transfer from her actual family to a new group, and that this new Christian identity can partially be explained by her portrayal of gender and conformity, or lack thereof, to social roles.

As the resolve of Perpetua becomes more apparent, and her determination towards martyrdom begins to materialize, the father depicts progressively fewer masculine characteristics. In the final scene between Perpetua and her father, it is apparent that the father has relinquished any hold on traditional notions of masculinity. He appears before her:

He was worn out with grief. He started plucking out his beard and flinging the whiskers on the ground, prostrating himself before me, cursing his old age, and saying the kinds of things that would move the whole of creation (*Passio* 9.2).

In submitting himself to her, he transfers authority in their relationship. He is no longer dominant, and communicates this by supplanting himself at her feet. While personally degrading, this elevates the status of Perpetua, at least in relation to her father. What he has lost, she has gained. Her stoic composure is relatable to that of rulers and kings, and far separated from the bounds of femininity. Further, in corroboration with the father's prostration, it can be argued that the mention of how he tears at his beard indicates the feminization of the father figure<sup>27</sup>. In

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<sup>27</sup>Elizabeth Castelli, "I Will Make Mary Male: Pieties of the Body and Gender Transformation of Christian Women in Late Antiquity: 39. Castelli argues that there is 'further feminization' when Perpetua's father tears his beard out.

ancient Mediterranean cultures, the beard is symbolic of masculinity, and its abrupt removal could be indicative of unmanning of Perpetua's father.

Perpetua's increasing manliness is contrasted with repeated descriptions of her visual femininity, and how it relates to her overall image. Despite a lack of feminine depictions of personality, the way her physical appearance is portrayed cement her feminine sex, complicating the narrative of gender and sexuality in regard to early Christianity. Additionally, like her personal mannerisms, there is an apparent shift in how aspects of her physical appearance are conveyed. Earlier in this thesis it was established that Perpetua gradually distanced herself from the role of motherhood as her martyrdom became more certain, yet the *Passio*'s mention of the physical characteristics of motherhood was largely ignored. In the narrative, there is also a shift in the rendering of Perpetua's body, so that characteristics of female sex are highlighted while indicators of motherhood are dissolved. Initially, there is a specific focus on the physical symbols of motherhood<sup>28</sup>, such as Perpetua's breasts, which is gradually replaced with descriptors that deemphasize the fact that Perpetua is a mother, but highlight the notion that Perpetua is a woman. For instance, when Felicity and Perpetua are brought out together, despite both being mothers, there is a drastic disparity in how their physical appearance is conveyed by the narrator:

“And so, stripped naked and hobbled by nets, they were brought out. The people were aghast as they looked upon them, the one a beautiful girl, the other a woman fresh from giving birth with dripping breasts. So they were called back and dressed in loose robes (*Passio* 20.2-20.3).

In the narrator's opinion, Perpetua has transformed from a mother to a girl. She is described as a girl while Felicity is a woman, and the emphasis is on her physical femininity as opposed to her mental fortitude.

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<sup>28</sup> Craig Williams, “Perpetua's Gender. A Latinist Reads the *Passio*”. *Perpetua's Passion* (2012): 60. Perpetua is depicted nursing her baby, but undergoes physical transformation that quenches her ability to do so.

This passage is the first indicator of conflict surrounding the perception of Perpetua's sexuality and how it relates to early Christianity. The narrator, presumably a male observer<sup>29</sup>, comments on Perpetua in a way that solidifies her female sexuality, even if Perpetua's own account does not render similar tolerance towards female characteristics. Despite her animated objections to feminine gender norms, she is grounded in the depiction of her sex.

The dual depictions of Perpetua's physical appearance, in corroboration with her actions, complicate notions of sex and gender in the narrative. When framed around the concept of family, it seems that by juxtaposing femininity with motherhood the narrator seeks to relinquish Perpetua's material connections to family while retaining her female sexuality. This is evident in the account of her martyrdom:

Perpetua was the first to be thrown and she fell on her back. And when she sat up, she rearranged the tunic that had been torn from her body to cover her hips, thinking more of her modesty than of her pain. Then she asked for a hairpin and tied back her disheveled hair; for it was inappropriate for her to suffer martyrdom with her hair in that state, lest she seem to be mourning in her hour of glory (*Passio* 20.3-20.6).

In this passage, the emphasis is on Perpetua's ability to fulfill early Christian standards of femaleness, as if her strength as an early Christian resides in how she conducts herself as a woman. This view clashes with Perpetua's own account, in which it is her personal determination to rid herself from traditional notions of femininity, familial structure, and Roman imperialism that exemplify her personhood.

The disjunction of Perpetua's sexuality and how it relates to her martyrdom, initially targeted by the narrator, is a point of academic discourse for early Christian writers such as Augustine, who wrote on the event nearly 200 years after her death. There is a perceived struggle in his account since he cannot attack Perpetua for disobeying her father and dismantling the

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<sup>29</sup> Speculation, but likely given understandings of the *Passio* and access of writing.

traditional family structure, because the father is clearly anti-Christian and the structure of the family suffocates Perpetua's expression of faith. Yet, he is reluctant to praise her rebelliousness, as her ability to consistently undermine the father figure could be perceived as threatening because her actions do not confer with beliefs about how early Christian women should conduct themselves. Her heroism is socially framed by a confirmation of her sex, yet her narrative is only possible if she transcends her sex.

To combat the issue of Perpetua's sexuality, Augustine makes the account of Perpetua seem unique, and her behavior separate from what it means to be a woman. By his analysis, her actions, such as choosing Christ, abandoning her family, and defeating the Devil are considered her own. But, they are not linked to her sexuality. He constructs her in such a manner that she ceases to be woman, yet is not considered a man:

What, after all, could be more glorious than these women, whom men can more easily admire than imitate? But this rebounds supremely to the praise of Him in whom they believed, and in whose name they ran the race together with faithful zeal, so that according to the inner self they are found to be neither male nor female, so that even as regards the femininity of the body, the sex of the flesh is concealed by the virtue of the mind, and one is reluctant to think about a condition in their members that never showed in their deeds (Augustine, *Sermon* 280.2-.4).

Augustine exemplifies the unease with which the martyrdom of Perpetua was contrived in early Christianity. Not only was Perpetua subversive to her own familial and cultural structure, but her identity as a woman cast her in opposition to early Christian tenets. In contrast to Perpetua, who "realized that the fight would not be with animals but with Satan" (10.14), Augustine structures Perpetua's victory around her ability to conquer her sexuality. It is for this reason, and not the personal resolve of Perpetua, that her account is prioritized over her male counterparts:

In this company of outstanding glory there were also men who were martyrs, men who on the same day were victorious by means of their most strenuous passion; and yet they have not graced this day with their names. This has not happened because the women were preferred to men on the basis of the excellence of their morals, but because – and it was a greater miracle – female weakness defeated the most terrible enemy and male strength fought for perpetual felicity (Augustine, *Sermon* 282.3).

By detracting from the value of feminine qualities, Augustine is able to acknowledge the strength of Perpetua without giving credence to the role she serves as an icon for Christian women. His perspective is in direct contrast with Perpetua's own narrative<sup>30</sup>, and is indicative of a struggle to align early Church perceptions of women with the actions of strong and brave female characters.

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<sup>30</sup> Hanne Sigismund-Nielsen, "Vibia Perpetua – An Indecent Woman", *Perpetua's Passions* (2012): 104. Perpetua does not consider herself to be weak or overly frightened and is depicted as independent.

## Conclusion

Through the narrative of Perpetua, the *Passio* subtly deconstructs both pagan and Christian notions of family and gender. The relationship between Perpetua and her father is the basis for which fatherhood, motherhood, and gender can be disassembled and reshaped from an early Christian perspective. The pagan father figure in the *Passio* is more dynamic than legal archetypes, comedic representations, or historical generalizations account for, yet is firmly constructed as anti-Christian. The resolve and personal motivations of the father are the most prominent reasons for his vehement opposition to Christianity, but are not unaccompanied. Perpetua, herself, constructs her father as anti-Christian, by positing that he and his familial structure are tools of the Devil, that are intended to uproot her spiritual transcendence.

While Perpetua is remembered as a prominent Christian mother, in her own narrative she distances herself from motherhood. In order to fully dedicate herself to martyrdom, she must relinquish all material connections to family, including the relationship that she has with her father and with her son. This is problematic for both pagans and early Christians, as she subverts both societal expectations in favor of the pursuit of her faith. In doing so, she embodies personality traits that are more masculine than they are feminine, resulting in a shift in the power dynamic of her relationship with her father. Her actions shape her as an indecent woman, who is simultaneously praised for her strength and bravery. She becomes manly without becoming a man, and exemplifies her identity as a woman by relinquishing ties to womanhood; a problematic narrative for early Christianity.

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