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SUM CHRISTIANA: PERPETUA'S PATRIARCHY-DEFEATING AGENCY

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INTRODUCTION OF THE TEXT

It can be argued that texts are the foundation of a religion. The words that are canonized shape the rituals and the practitioners. While the stories deemed worthy during the Christian canonization years and years ago, which often were transmitted by white men, affect modern society, they also impacted the societies in which they were written. The early Christian text, *Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis*, outlines the martyrdom of catechumens, new converts to Christianity still waiting for baptism, in the North African Roman province of Carthage in the year 203 C.E.. The *Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis* (hereby referred to as the *Passio*) is a story that critiques the pagan and patriarchal aspects of the Roman Empire through the voice of a woman.

Authorship of the *Passio* cannot be pinpointed. Some like Barbara K. Gold, believe that there are three authors: an editor, Perpetua¹, and Saturus.² Arguments as to who the editor could be are fairly convincing that it was Perpetua's contemporary, the famous Christian apologist Tertullian; and others believe that Tertullian is the sole author.³ While the scholarly debate around authorship of the *Passio* is compelling, authorship, and historical reliability,⁴ are not the focus of this paper. Rather, an analysis of the words used is the focus, as that is the text that circulated.

Christian texts, especially martyrdom narratives such as the *Passio*, were instrumental documents in shaping early Christianity. They actively attempted to change

¹ This is an exciting thought, because if Perpetua is the author, the *Passio* is the earliest Latin prose by any woman; Gold, "And I Became a Man' Gender Fluidity and Closure in Perpetua's Prison Narrative," 153.

² Gold, 153.

³ Raven, "The New Religion," 155.

⁴ King, "Willing to Die for God: Individualization and Instrumental Agency in Ancient Christian Martyr Literature," 351.

the minds of the readers and listeners and challenged the Roman Empire.⁵ Christian literature under Roman rule was often utilized as a way to address persecution by the Romans. It encouraged Christians to hold to their faith and stay in their Christian community.⁶ Some Christians, like the third century intellectual Origen of Alexandria, viewed martyrdom as a rational choice and urged followers to prepare themselves for martyrdom, similar to the *Passio*.⁷ Martyrs were, and are, a symbol of resistance against imperialism. In the context of the *Passio*, this resistance against authority was also directed against the social structure, specifically against elites, as some upper class individuals weaponized religion to minimize those below them and gain favor of their superiors.⁸ While the *Passio* was written by Christians for Christians, it still existed within its contemporary public discourse.⁹ Public discourse and demonstrations are at the heart of martyrdom narratives. Martyrdom narratives aim to highlight the joy of martyrs as a way to educate the public on the Christian way of life.¹⁰

This highlighting of joy is ever present in the *Passio*. It is a text that has been heavily discussed since its ‘rediscovery’ in 1663.¹¹ With this discussion comes translations. I was first introduced to the *Passio* in a college class on Martyrdom. When writing a paper for that class, I sought out multiple translations to make sure I was confident in my arguments. Consistently through each translation, I was in awe that it

⁵ Perkins, “Suffering and Power,” 104.

⁶ King, “Willing to Die for God: Individualization and Instrumental Agency in Ancient Christian Martyr Literature,” 355.

⁷ King, 354.

⁸ Cooper, “A Father, a Daughter and a Procurator: Authority and Resistance in the Prison Memoir of Perpetua of Carthage,” 687.

⁹ Sowers, “Pudor et Dedecus: Rhetoric of Honor and Shame in Perpetua’s Passion,” 383.

¹⁰ King, “Willing to Die for God: Individualization and Instrumental Agency in Ancient Christian Martyr Literature,” 369; This is especially in The Epistle of Ignatius to the Romans and the Martyrdom of Polycarp.

¹¹ Cobb, “Suicide by Gladiator? The Acts of Perpetua and Felicitas in Its North African Context,” 600.

was a surviving early Christian text that centered on women – something I had not seen much growing up. I was intrigued by the first person woman narrative, but I was disgusted by the editor¹² who compiled the work. The editor fetishized the women martyrs. They explicitly state how Perpetua seeks modesty during her martyrdom, but then goes on to heavily describe her in a sexualized manner. In this example, the editor shows Perpetua wanting to exhibit modesty over her own body, in the arena; Perpetua actively covers herself when her leg is exposed. In the same section, the editor describes Perpetua’s breasts in an, in my opinion, unnecessarily sexual way. To me, this screams ‘male gaze.’

Not alone in this thought,¹³ I decided to conduct my honors project on something also tied to the patriarchy, the *paterfamilias*. Through this paper, I will dig into the original language surrounding Perpetua’s recorded encounters with her *paterfamilias* and place these interactions in their cultural and religious contexts. In doing so, I center Perpetua’s own execution of agency in third century North Africa. In order to accomplish this I will follow Elizabeth Castelli’s scholarship that affirms Perpetua as an author.¹⁴

In the third century, Imperial Rome was in the midst of figuring out how to control its vast Empire. The empire had outbursts of plagues and great migrations of peoples. A very small portion of what Roman Governors were dealing with also included trying to understand how to respond to the new movement of Christianity. Roman Emperors disliked how Christian leaders discouraged their followers from taking oaths

¹² The editor/narrator who contextualizes Perpetua and Saturus’ tales, not the translator. Although I do believe some translations do play into the fetishizing too strongly. But that’s a topic for another paper.

¹³ Parkhouse, “The Fetishization of Female Exempla: Mary, Thecla, Perpetua and Felicitas,” 586.

¹⁴ Castelli, “The Martyr’s Memory: Autobiography and Self-Writing in Ignatius, Perpetua, and Pionius,” 85.

and making sacrifices, which were pillars of Roman society. Sacrifices and oaths were traditional, at times required, Roman avenues of honoring the Emperor and Roman gods. Most, if not all, Christian leaders would have considered this idolatry and thus did not want their followers to participate. In an attempt to unite the Empire during this transitional period, Emperor Septimus Severus, who reigned from 193 C.E. - 211 C.E., outlawed the Christian movement.¹⁵ In theory, Christians were to be punished for their refusal to venerate the Emperor and Roman gods, but in practice were not actively sought out. Because of this, persecution was sporadic and rather inconsistent across the Empire.

Septimus Severus was hopeful that by enforcing loyalty, he would gain social control in the Roman colonies. Social control was achieved in the Roman colonies, like Carthage, due to something that resembles a modern day pyramid scheme; in order to keep control, the government relied on the elite class to expose those who disobeyed the government, often those below them in social order. Some scholars like Sara Parvis believe that the social control targeted catechumens—those who were most unsure about themselves and their loyalty, and therefore potentially the easiest to elicit a recant out of.¹⁶

With this hope for manipulation, the faith of six near converts were reported to the Carthaginian Governor, Hilarianus, under rule of Roman Emperor Septimius Severus. While Septimus Severus was in Africa during the trial, it is unknown if he was involved in this trial in any way.¹⁷ Roman officials possibly could have guessed that this group of catechumens would be eager for martyrdom, as they would not be the first Christian

¹⁵ Eusebius, “Origen and Atrocities at Alexandria,” 188.

¹⁶ Parvis, “Perpetua,” 367.

¹⁷ Raven, “The New Religion,” 152.

martyrs.¹⁸ Even more, joyful death in religion was not unknown at the time and place. In Punic religions of North Africa, sacrificial victims were deified.¹⁹ With a similar sense of glory, the martyrdom of early Christians relied on the Roman backdrop to make their professions of faith public and powerful.²⁰ This group of catechumens knew that a public hearing and public martyrdom awaited them, and they were eager to share their faith in such a public manner. The group of catechumens, consisting of Perpetua, Felicitas, Revocatus, Secundulus, Saturnius, and Saturus, were presented for a public trial before Hilarianus. In this trial, Septimus Severus' ban on Christianity was strongly enforced. With their unanimous confession of their faith, Hilarianus condemned them to death by beast in the public arena. Perpetua stood out from this group, and the *Passio* narrates her tale.

WHO WAS PERPETUA?

To start, we must discuss who Perpetua was. The following is my own translation²¹ of section two of the *Passio*:

The maturing catechumens had been apprehended, Revocatus and Felicitas, his fellow slave, Saturninus and Secundulus. And among these, Vibia Perpetua, distinguished in birth, liberally prepared, a matronly wife, having a father and mother and two brothers, one a catechumen in the same manner, and a son newborn to the breasts: Also she herself was around the age of twenty-two. From

¹⁸ To read about a group of earlier Christian martyrs in North Africa, look at "The Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs."

¹⁹ Raven, "The New Religion," 154.

²⁰ King, "Willing to Die for God: Individualization and Instrumental Agency in Ancient Christian Martyr Literature," 368.

²¹ I translated from J. Armitage Robinson's compilation of the original Latin text.

this now she herself narrates the whole order of her martyrdom, as she left behind, having been written down by her hand and I join with understanding.

Vibia Perpetua was a young woman around the age of 22. Perpetua was a daughter, niece, sister, and mother. Scholarly discourse around her family varies. Some, like Barbara K. Gold, argue that her family was heavily Romanized having most likely gained citizenship under Emperor Tiberius²² almost 200 years prior. Others, like Sara Parvis, acknowledge that in the *Passio* Perpetua speaks Greek²³ and her brother has a Greek name, Dinocrates, so it is possible her mother was Greek.²⁴ As it is uncertain how long Perpetua's parents had been Roman citizens, or if they were Roman citizens at all, the religious status of her parents is also uncertain.²⁵ They could have identified as pagans who were disappointed at the fact that their daughter was a Christian; or they could have been Christians who didn't want to see their daughter die. Regardless of their faith, Perpetua's family appears to have had an established life in Roman ruled North Africa. An untraced tradition claims that Perpetua came from the town of Thurburbo Minus, about 45 kilometers west of Carthage.²⁶ While Thurburbo Minus was a relatively large town, large enough to have its own Roman amphitheater,²⁷ because Carthage was the Roman Governor's capital, the arrested catechumens were taken to Hilarianus in Carthage.

While arrested, Perpetua's family came to visit her. She mentions conversations with her mother and brother, and highlights interactions with her *paterfamilias*. A

²² Gold, "And I Became a Man' Gender Fluidity and Closure in Perpetua's Prison Narrative," 154.

²³ Although that could have been an illusion tied to Saturus' vision.

²⁴ Parvis, "Perpetua," 366.

²⁵ Cooper, "A Father, a Daughter and a Procurator: Authority and Resistance in the Prison Memoir of Perpetua of Carthage," 691.

²⁶ Cooper, 685.

²⁷ Cooper, 698.

paterfamilias was the head of a Roman household. As such, he had the responsibility of taking care of everything related to the family; overseeing everything from finances to marital relations of children and everything in between. In return, the family, especially women and particularly daughters, were expected to obey their father.²⁸ Roman society emphasized patriarchy through familial order and expected maternity from its women. Women had the domestic obligation to obey their fathers and take care of their sons. In third century Roman society, women were prescribed to exist primarily within the domestic sphere.²⁹ Societal order was dependent on the familiar order. In this way, patriarchy was ever present in the household, in the city, and in the Empire.

Moreover, this expectation of obedience was not solely a Roman societal function. In fact, Household Codes are professed throughout the New Testament.³⁰ In Colossians 3:18-4:21, the roles of the Christian family align with a family under rule of the *paterfamilias*:

Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them. Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged.

Women were not permitted to teach or take on leadership roles, but expected to become mothers in order to be saved.³¹ In the Christian family, just as the Roman family, fathers were at the top, with wives and children below. There was a deep requirement of obedience upwards and love downwards. This is not to say that every Christian agreed

²⁸ Sowers, "Pudor et Dedecus: Rhetoric of Honor and Shame in Perpetua's Passion," 374.

²⁹ Sowers, 373-374.

³⁰ Col 3:18-4:1 (New Revised Standard Version); Eph 5:22-6:9; Ti 2:1-10; 1 Pt 2:13-3:7.

³¹ 1 Tm 2:12-15.

with the Christian hierarchy, as we can clearly see in the *Passio*. However, there is a definite mimicking of Roman household structures within the Church. There is a notion that Christians should still exist within the typical Roman family structure.

Perpetua disrupted both Roman hierarchy, by talking back to her *paterfamilias* and gaining authority, and also the Christian hierarchy, by becoming leader of the group of catechumens. Perpetua did not conform to what her societies expect of her.

It is with this understanding that I began to focus on the four sections of the *Passio* in which Perpetua and her father crossed paths. While the following textual analysis highlights four sections, understanding the whole of the *Passio* is critical to understanding the sections. I have compiled a brief summary, not translation, of the entire document to either inform you, the reader, of the *Passio* or to refresh your memory.³² Each section is denoted by a Roman numeral.

SUMMARY

- I. Each generation can learn from the past. God pours out his spirit on his people. This story of martyrs is told that you might have communion with the sacred martyrs, and that also to remember the glories of the Lord.
Amen.
- II. Catechumens nearing their baptism were arrested: Revocatus, Felicity, Saturnius, Secundulus, and Perpetua. Perpatua was distinguished in her birth and came from a family with a father, mother, two brothers, one of

³² I referred to Thomas J. Heffernan's translation to make sure my summary was accurate.

whom was a catechumen, and a newborn son. She was twenty two and wrote down her own martyrdom.

- III. Perpetua, Revocatus, Felicity, Saturnius, and Secundulus were being kept in domestic custody. Perpetua's father came to visit her in an attempt to convince her to recant her faith. She in turn attempted to convince him as to why she could not, and he left angrily after almost assaulting her. After her father left, Perpetua felt better and closer to the Lord. The catechumens were baptized. However, she was moved into the prison, which frightened her. Two deacons, Tertius and Pomponius, bribed the guards so the catechumens could be transferred to a better part of the prison. There, Perpetua was able to breastfeed her son. She was able to converse with her mother and brother and gave custody of her son over to them. Perpetua was greatly afflicted by the pain she could see in her family. After a few days, when her son was able to return to her, the prison became a place like a palace to her.
- IV. She conversed with her brother later, and he convinced her to ask the Lord for a vision so she could know if she would be martyred or if she would remain alive after suffering. She did, and saw a vision of a bronze ladder. In the vision fellow Christina Saturus guided her, she stepped on a serpent's head, and a man with a white-beard (presumably the Lord) called her his child. After the vision, she told her brother and they knew that it would be a martyrdom.

- V. When news of the trial spread, Perpetua's father came back for another visit. He begged her to have pity and consider her family. He said that her confession would destroy the entire family and physically showed subservience by kissing her hands. He acknowledged her independence, and Perpetua responded by saying that everything was in God's hands now.
- VI. At breakfast on a later day, the catechumens were sent to their trial. On the scaffold, all the other catechumens confessed. When it was Perpetua's turn, her father once again begged her to recant, and this time brought her son with. Perpetua remained steadfast in her faith, which caused the Governor proceeding over the trial to command that her father be beaten up. This deeply affected Perpetua, but she did not recant and all the catechumens were condemned to the beasts. Perpetua's son no longer needed to be breastfed and her breasts no longer lactated.
- VII. Awaiting the beasts, while praying, Perpetua said her deceased brother's name: Dinocrates. Remembering that he died without faith, she asked God to grant him salvation. She had another vision where Dinocrates appeared. He died from facial lesions when he was seven, and he remained seven years old and still had facial wounds in the vision. He also appeared distressed, so when she woke up, she knew that he was not yet saved.
- VIII. She continued to pray for him for multiple days and then received another vision. In this vision, her brother Dinocrates no longer had his facial scar

and was comfortable. When she awoke from this vision, Perpetua knew that Dinocrates had been saved.

- IX. Still in prison, the guard let guests visit the catechumens. When the condemnation day was near, Perpetua's father visited her again. He emasculated himself by ripping out his beard and prostrating himself, but again Perpetua remained strong in her faith.
- X. The day before the beasts, Perpetua had another vision that Pomponius the deacon led her to the arena where she was to fight the next day. Once they arrived, he left but there was a crowd there to watch her fight an Egyptian gladiator. Perpetua was stripped and made a man. She was being prepared for the fight when a large man entered the arena. He announced that Perpetua and the gladiator should fight and they did. The fight ended with Perpetua stepping on the gladiator's head and she won. The large man called her his daughter and called her to the Gate of Life. When Perpetua awoke she knew she would be successful in her Martyrdom. This was the end of Perpetua's account.
- XI. Fellow catechumen Saturus wrote down his vision: The souls of the group of catechumens left their bodies and were headed towards the sky. His soul was next to Perpetua and he announced to her that they had received God's promise. The vision was filled with numerous flowers and angels. They found some martyrs who had been burned alive and one who had died in jail. The angel invited the large group to greet the Lord.

- XII. They arrived at a building built of light where angels were singing. Inside, a man with white hair was sitting and they sat at his feet. He was surrounded by elders and they greeted the elders and the angels with kisses. Perpetua told him that she was more happy now than she had ever been.
- XIII. Leaving the building, they saw a bishop and a priest who bowed down to them and praised their martyrdom. Confused, the group said that they should be bowing down to their teachers. Perpetua began to talk to them in Greek and soon the entire group was in conversation. The angels told them to let the bishop and the priest go and the group got to know other martyrs. Saturnus awoke from the dream with a happy demeanor.
- XIV. These were the visions and the words of the martyrs Saturus and Perpetua themselves. Secundulus passed away in prison.
- XV. Felicity was eight months pregnant when condemned, and this would have prevented her from dying with the group, but the lord blessed her and she gave birth early, three days before the beasts. She gave birth to a daughter who was sent to be raised by a sister.
- XVI. The narrator is unworthy to finish Perpetua's story, but knows it is her will for the story to be finished, so the narrator does. When the catechumens were being transferred, Perpetua spoke back to the tribune and advocated for better treatment, which they were granted.

- XVII. On the day before the beasts, the prisoners were granted a last meal, and decided to celebrate the Christian Love Feast. They were heckled by nonbelievers and Saturus talked back to them, and some converted.
- XVIII. On the day of the martyrdom, the catechumens were full of immense joy. The catechumens were told they must don pagan garb: the men the robes of the priests of Saturn, and the women the robes of the priestesses of Ceres. Perpetua commanded that they would not and convinced the tribune that they could enter the arena as they were; she sang a hymn as if she had already won. While entering, as the catechumens spotted the governor, they told him that God would judge him. When the crowd saw this, they demanded the catechumens be whipped.
- XIX. But God granted each catechumen what they wanted. Saturnius wanted to fight every kind of beast and he and Revocatus fought a leopard and were killed by a bear. Saturus was afraid of a bear and twice God prevented him from being killed in the way he didn't want.
- XX. In a mock of their gender, the women catechumens were made to fight a cow. The women were stripped and the crowd shuddered at their nudity; the women were able to put on clothes. When fighting, Perpetua's robe showed her thigh, and she, despite being in pain, made sure to be modest and recover her thigh. She wanted to look put together as a martyr, so she fixed her hair. Perpetua found Felicity on the ground of the arena and picked her up. They stood together and they were called to the Gate of Life. A fellow catechumen Rusticus woke Perpetua from her trance, and

she had no recollection of the earlier beast fights. Perpetua encouraged the catechumens to stand strong in their faith.

XXI. Saturus proclaimed that he was unhurt, but would die by one bite of a leopard, and shortly after was brutally bit by a leopard. He was near the soldier Pudens, and took his ring, dipped it in his own blood, and gave it back to him as an heirloom. It was then that the beast fighting was done and the catechumens were to be killed by the sword. The remaining catechumens kissed one another to seal their martyrdom. Slowly they were silently cut at the throat. In attempts of a spectacle, Perpetua was stabbed between her bones. The gladiator was a novice and when he seemed uncertain, Perpetua guided the sword to her throat herself. Blessed martyrs! Glord to our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS

As discussed earlier, the following sections were translated following Elizabeth Castelli's argument that Perpetua is the narrator. This means that all first person aspects refer back to Perpetua. When translating, I aimed to follow the Latin as closely as possible. I did not attempt to colloquialize or modernize the language. Instead I wanted to highlight the original message the author was trying to convey.

These sections are situated in the early to mid parts of Perpetua's first person narrative and are the only four recorded instances of Perpetua interacting with her father.

These words come from the first part of III

Original Latin³³

Cum adhuc, inquit, cum prosecutoribus essem, et me pater uerbis euertere cupiret et deicere pro sua affectione perseueraret: Pater, inquam, uides, uerbi gratia, uas hoc iacens, urceolum siue aliquid? et dixit: Video. et ego dixi ei: Numquid alio nomine uocari potest, quam quod est? et ait: Non. Sic et ego aliud me dicere non possum, nisi quod sum, Christiana. tunc pater motus hoc uerbo mittit se in me, ut oculos mihi erueret: sed uexauit tantum, et profecto est uictus cum argumentis diaboli. tunc paucis diebus quod caruissem patrem, Domino gratias egi, et refrigeraui absentia illius. in ipso spatio paucorum dierum baptizati sumus: et mihi Spiritus dictauit non aliud petendum ab aqua, nisi sufferentiam carnis. post paucos dies recipimur in carcerem: et expaui, quia numquam experta eram tales tenebras. o diem asperum! aestus ualidus turbarum beneficio, concussurae militum. nouissime macerabar sollicitudine infantis ibi.

Translation³⁴

She said, while I was still with the prosecutors, my father desired to both overturn my words and he persevered to strike me down, for the sake of his affection: “Father,” I say, “see, for the sake of a word, this vessel lying, a pitcher or other?” And he said: “I see” And I said to him: “Is it possible for it to be called another name than that it is?” And he said “No.” “And thus I am unable to call myself another, if not what I am, a Christian.” Then father, having been agitated by this word, threw himself on me, to dig my eyes out: But he only shook me and having been defeated, he departed with the arguments of the devil. Then because I had been free from my

³³ All Latin references are taken from J. Armitage Robinson’s compilation of the original Latin text.

³⁴ All subsequent Latin translations are my own.

father for a few days, I gave thanks to God, and I cooled off with the absence of that one. Injust the space of the few days we had been baptized: and the spirit said repeatedly to me that not another should be desired from the water if not the tolerance of the flesh. After a few days we were accepted in the prison: and I became frightened because I had never experienced such darkness. O cruel day! The powerful heat of the mobs with favor, was about to brandish the soldiers. In that place I was wearing down with concern for my very new infant.

Analysis

When Perpetua's father first comes to visit her, he attempts to employ the strategy of rhetoric in the hopes of convincing her to recant her faith.³⁵ Instead of being completely obedient to her *paterfamilias* and following the societal norms for a daughter, Perpetua challenges her father and meets his strategy by responding in a Socratic fashion.³⁶ She tries to explain to her father how this word is what she is. She uses the passive word *vocari* to talk about how a pitcher is called a pitcher, but switches to an active word *dicere* to talk about how she calls herself a Christian. She could have reused the passive *vocari* to reason that she could only be called a Christian. But instead she uses the active voice to show that she has power in the naming of what she is. In this first recorded encounter, the singular use of the word *Christiana* offends her father. Perpetua calls herself Christiana, a Christian. "Although we might say she is making a choice, Perpetua portrays herself as without a choice—she cannot be other than what she is."³⁷

The original text says that her father was agitated by, *hoc verbo*, this word, the word Christiana. This signifies that it is not so much that entire conversation, involving socratic reasoning, that offends the father, but rather the specific use of the word Christiana. He seems to

³⁵ Sowers, "Pudor et Dedecus: Rhetoric of Honor and Shame in Perpetua's Passion," 383.

³⁶ Sowers, 384.

³⁷ King, "Willing to Die for God: Individualization and Instrumental Agency in Ancient Christian Martyr Literature," 349.

tolerate that his daughter is speaking back, but the use of the specific word Christian is not tolerable. This word pushed her father over to the edge, to the point where he sent himself on her. The use of the *ut* clause shows that her father had the purpose of digging her eyes out. The root of the verb of digging, *eruere*, can also mean to pluck, overthrow, or destroy. Regardless of the choice of word each individual translator uses, there is malintent behind her father's actions. He wishes to cause her harm, specifically the harm that would cause blindness.³⁸ Regardless of the reasoning behind the harm, this frightened Perpetua. She admitted she was shaken to her core, but still the only person who left defeated was her father. He departs no longer with Socratic rhetoric, but *cum argumentis diaboli*, with the arguments of the devil. This inspired Perpetua to move forward through her process of faith and become baptized, by which she is overjoyed.

In fact, even as Perpetua is transferred to the prison, she is still overjoyed. She uses the word *recipimur* to describe how she is moved to the prison. This word, from *recipere*, can mean a variety of things: to guarantee, to accept, to keep back, and to rescue. By using the passive voice, we know that the action is happening to Perpetua, but the positive connotation of the word implies that she is accepting. There are many Latin words with the same meaning and a negative connotation, like *capere*, to seize, or *apprehendo*, to apprehend, but the use of the more positive *recipere* was very intentional. Perpetua understands the necessary steps in her martyrdom and is not fighting it, but rather she is being accepted and she is accepting it. The positivity Perpetua feels by progressing through the next stage of her martyrdom is met with genuine trepidation. The mob is *aestus*, boiling hot, in contrast to the coolness she felt after her father left her, *refrigeraui absentia illius*. The brightness of joy is contrasted with the *tenebras*, darkness.

³⁸ While this could have been related to Perpetua's deceased brother Dinocrates who had facial lesions, not much can be proven here.

These words come from V

Original Latin

Post paucos dies rumor cucurrit ut audiremur. superuenit autem et de ciuitate pater meus, consumptus taedio: et ascendit ad me, ut me deiceret, dicens: Miserere, filia, canis meis; miserere patri, si dignus sum a te pater uocari; si his te manibus ad hunc florem aetatis prouexi; si te praeposui omnibus fratribus tuis: ne me dederis in dedecus hominum. aspice fratres tuos: aspice matrem tuam et materteram: aspice filium tuum, qui post te uiuere non poterit. depone animos; ne uniuersos nos extermines: nemo enim nostrum libere loquetur, si tu aliquid fueris passa. haec dicebat pater pro sua pietate, basians mihi manus, et se ad pedes meos iactans: et lacrymis me non filiam nominabat, sed dominam. et ego dolebam causam patris mei, quod solus de passione mea gauisurus non esset de toto genere meo; et confortauit eum, dicens: Hoc fiet in illa catasta quod Deus uoluerit: scito enim nos non in nostra esse potestate constitutos, sed in Dei. et recessit a me contristatus.

Translation

After a few days, a rumor traveled that we were to be heard. However, my father arrived from the town, consumed by weariness: and he rose to me, so that he might bring me down, saying: daughter, pity my gray hairs; pity your father, if I am deserving to be called a father by you; if by these hands I carried you to this flower of youth; if I placed you in front of all your brothers; lest you yield me to the disgrace of men. Consider your brothers: consider your mother and your aunt: consider your son, who will not be able to live after you. Lay to rest your spirit; lest you destroy us entirely: For no one of us will speak freely if you are to be punished to some extent.

This my father said according to his responsibility, kissing my hands, and throwing himself on my feet: and weeping he was naming me not daughter but lady. And I was grieving for my father's plea because he alone from my entire family would not be glad for my suffering; and I consoled him, saying: this which God may want, will happen at that scaffold: indeed know that we are not arranged in our authority, but in God's. And afflicted, he receded from me.

Analysis

The conversation starts with a clear physical display of superiority. Perpetua's father *ascendit ad me, ut me deiceret*, rose to her to bring her down, physically placing himself above her to lower her. He was already above her in social rank, but we can tell that the stress of his daughter's impending hearing was getting to him, he was not just tired, but rather *consumptus taedio*, consumed by weariness.

When analyzing how Perpetua's *paterfamilias* speaks to her, the tone is very demanding. He opens his speech with the use of imperatives. *Misere*, pity me, he repeats. His exhausted physical state augmented his call for pity. He physically looks old not just by the overall demeanor of fatigue, but also he describes himself with his *canis*, gray hairs. Here he uses not an adjective for old age, like *vetus*, *senex*, *antiquus*, but rather the noun to describe his features. Records of both Roman and North African traditions at this time show that gray hair was not desirable and it was often dyed a darker color.³⁹ While this desire to dye gray hair may not have been the case for Perpetua's father, as we are not given much information about his cultural context, it can be inferred that his society acknowledged gray hair was different from dyed hair. This calling on his gray hair matches the tone of his plea for pity and echoes the age and gender authority of the *paterfamilias*.

³⁹ Sherrow, "Hair Colorants," 154.

Within his plea, Perpetua's father calls Perpetua's attention back to their first conversation; Perpetua uses the verb *vocari* when referring to how a pitcher can only be called a pitcher. Here, Perpetua's father uses *vocari* to say "if I am deserving to be called a father by you." By eliciting the same verb, Perpetua's father acknowledges her argument and uses it in attempts to elicit an emotional response from her.

Perpetua's father uses conjunctions to break up his large speech into smaller demands and rhetorical questions. He employs repetition of the conditional marker *si*, if. This manner of speaking reflects his desire to make her feel shame. Then he jumps back into the commanding use of imperatives. Thrice he commands with *aspice*, consider, to ask Perpetua to consider her family. While this is seen in the description, it can also be analyzed in the dialogue.

This entire speech is filled with Perpetua's father's desire for Perpetua to remember the past. He hopes she will recant her confession of faith if she remembers where she came from. He takes parts of her argument and attempts to use them to debunk it. He implores her to pity him, and when he knows that doesn't work, he begs her to think of the rest of the family. Additionally, an overarching theme of his plea is guilt. He attempts to guilt and shame Perpetua into recanting by commanding – *aspice filium tuum, qui post te uiuere non poterit*, consider your son, who will not be able to live after you. He also tries to guilt and cause shame to Perpetua by saying her entire family will be oppressed because of her action – *nemo enim nostrum libere loquetur, si tu aliquid fueris passa*, for no one of us will speak freely if you are to be punished to some extent. Perpetua's father seeks to remind Perpetua of the repercussions her actions would have on the rest of the family if she disobeys her paterfamilias.

Something worth noting is the use of *lacrymis*. The typical Latin word for weeping with this same sort of structure would be *lacrimans* or *lacrimosus*. In Latin, *y* was just used as a

transliteration of the Greek letter upsilon.⁴⁰ Here, the use of the y in a word that calls back the debate about the potential Greek heritage of Perpetua's mother.

Perpetua's fathers' word changes here, reflecting how his view of Perpetua changes from a daughter to an independent woman. Perpetua, not invoking the use of *vocari* as both she and her father have done before, uses *nominabat* to describe her father's word change. He does not *vocavit filiam*, call her daughter, but rather he *nominavit domina*, names her Lady. The use of the word *domina* implies a certain ability to possess power. The term as a noun can be translated as lady, mistress of a family. It denotes that the woman is in charge of the household slaves.⁴¹ While Perpetua does not have a typical Roman household to preside over as *domina*, she does preside as the dominant leader of the catechumens. Perhaps Perpetua's father sees this change in family and thus uses a less familial, and familiar, term to distance himself from his daughter.⁴² Additionally, when the noun *domina* is made into a verb, *dominare*, it can be translated as to rule over, or to exercise sovereignty. This specific word change shows that Perpetua is no longer her father's little girl, but rather an individual who has sovereignty over herself.

In addition to the verbal alteration, this scene presents, as Judith Perkins dubs it, a "radically reversed hierarchy."⁴³ The fact that Perpetua's father was playing into the reversal of hierarchy would have been damaging for his social wellbeing, as his daughter, in his protection, was willingly acknowledging something corresponding to political treason.⁴⁴ However, he leans into swapping the traditional gender roles of the Roman patriarchy as he kisses Perpetua's hands and throws himself at her feet.⁴⁵ Perpetua's father slowly loses his authority; even as

⁴⁰ McArthur, "Y."

⁴¹ Keith, "The Domina in Roman Elegy," 289.

⁴² Sowers, "Pudor et Dedecus: Rhetoric of Honor and Shame in Perpetua's Passion," 376.

⁴³ Perkins, "Suffering and Power," 107.

⁴⁴ Cooper, "A Father, a Daughter and a Procurator: Authority and Resistance in the Prison Memoir of Perpetua of Carthage," 692.

⁴⁵ Parkhouse, "The Fetishization of Female Exempla: Mary, Thecla, Perpetua and Felicitas," 582.

paterfamilias he no longer has control over his entire household. This fact is so troubling for him, that he desperately and willingly takes on the feminine role and encourages, quite literally calls, on Perpetua to take the dominant role.⁴⁶

Within the realm of a reversed hierarchy, Perpetua *confortuavi*, comforted, her father. This can also be seen as maternal. While Perpetua is a mother, she is not her father's mother. The *paterfamilias* is supposed to be the one above the daughter, and thus supposed to provide security and comfort to the daughter. Here the daughter acts as a mother. She shares words of faith in an attempt to console. Perpetua wants to let her father know that the responsibility does not fall on him. For, *hoc fiet in illa catasta quod Deus voluerit*, what will happen at that scaffold is that which God wants. *Catasta*, the scaffold where subjects were interrogated and tortured was a strong part of the martyrdom narrative.⁴⁷ The reminder of the scaffold and what happens there could have triggered Perpetua's father. Her comforting words did not land the way Perpetua intended it to, and *recessit a me constrictatus*, afflicted, her father receded from her.

Despite acknowledging Perpetua's independence, her father grieves the eventual loss of his daughter and probably feels guilt, as it was his responsibility as the *paterfamilias* to keep her safe. With the potential for his responsibility to be unfulfilled, it is understandable that he could also be grieving the impending social endangerment. Additionally, the later analysis will touch on how he could possibly be grieving the loss of financial support and the addition of a larger financial load.

⁴⁶ Gold, "And I Became a Man' Gender Fluidity and Closure in Perpetua's Prison Narrative," 155.

⁴⁷ Bremmer, "Contextualizing Heaven in Third-Century North Africa," 257.

These words come from VI

Original Latin

Alio die cum pranderemus, subito rapti sumus ut audiremur: et peruenimus ad forum. rumor statim per uicinas fori partes cucurrit, et factus est populus immensus. ascendimus in catastam. interrogati ceteri confessi sunt. uentum est et ad me. et apparuit pater ilico cum filio meo, et extraxit me de gradu, supplicans: Miserere infanti. et Hilarianus procurator, qui tunc loco proconsulis Minuci Timiniani defuncti ius gladii acceperat: Parce, inquit, canis patris tui: parce infantiae pueri. fac sacrum pro salute Imperatorum. et ego respondi: Non facio. Hilarianus, Christiana es? inquit. et ego respondi: Christiana sum. et cum staret pater ad me deiciendam, iussus est ab Hilariano deici. et uirga percussit. et doluit mihi casus patris mei, quasi ego fuissem percussa: sic dolui pro senecta eius misera. tunc nos uniuersos pronuntiat, et damnat ad bestias: et hilares descendimus ad carcerem. tunc quia consueuerat a me infans mammas accipere, et mecum in carcere manere, statim mitto ad patrem Pomponium diaconum, postulans infantem. sed pater dare noluit. et quomodo Deus uoluit, neque ille amplius mammas desiderat, neque mihi feruorem fecerunt: ne sollicitudine infantis et dolore mammarum macerarer.

Translation

Another day while we were eating breakfast, suddenly we were seized in order to be heard: and we arrived at the forum. At once a rumor traveled through nearby parts of the forum, and an immense crowd came about. We ascended on the scaffold. The others being interrogated confessed, and it came to me. And my father appeared immediately with my son, and he dragged

me down the steps, praying: Pity your infant. And the Governor Hilarianus, who accepted the law of the sword from the death of Governor Minucius Timinianus: he said, Spare your father's gray hairs: Spare the infancy of the boy. Make the sacrifice for the health of the emperors. And I responded: I refuse. Hilarianus said, are you a Christian? And I responded: I am a Christian. And when my father stood by me to strike me down, he was ordered by Hilarianus to be struck down. And he was beaten with a rod. And the fall of my father grieved me, as if I had been beaten: thus I grieved for his miserable old age. Then Hilarianus announced to us all, and he condemned to the beasts: and cheerfully we descended to the prison. Then because my infant became accustomed to accepting my breasts, to staying with me in the prison, at once I sent Pomponius the deacon to my father, demanding my infant. But my father did not want to give him up. And just as God wanted, and he no longer required breasts, and they did not make me heat: lest I should be exhausted with anxiety of my infant and pain of my breasts.

Analysis

This section opens in the same way as section five. *Audiremur...rumor cucurrit*, they were being heard in their trial and a rumor traveled. This repetitive set rhetoric continues to move along the story line and emphasize the progression towards martyrdom.

The Governor Hilarianus, presiding over the hearing, uses the same rhetoric and imperatives that Perpetua's father used with her earlier. He uses the same word in the same tense, *misere*, to command her to have pity. Hilarianus continues with the imperatives as he implores Perpetua to think of the old and the young men in her life. He does not make any mention of the female figures in her life, like her mother, or those that don't exist outside the *paterfamilias*, like her brother. Instead, he situates her importance to the men directly above and below her and

emphasizes their ages. *parce canis patris tui*, spare your father's gray hairs, *parce infantiae pueri*, spare the infancy of the boy.

Hilarius' interrogation of Perpetua must have lasted less than a minute, he asked two questions, before Perpetua and her fellow Christians were condemned to the beasts. Perpetua confessed her faith by saying the two powerful words *sum christiana*, I am a Christian. Sara Parvis writes:

There is no other name by which she can now be called, so that when she finally says the fatal words '*Christiana sum*' to Hilarius the procurator, they are now no more than a simple statement of fact, a confession not only of the name of Christ, but of her own nature.⁴⁸

In the hearing, Perpetua thinks her father had intent *deiciendam*, to strike her down, a call back to their initial conversation in the prison. In fact, the same word that was used to describe how Perpetua feared her father would treat her, he would *deciere*, strike her down, is used again.

But just as quickly as the word is brought up to describe her father's actions, it is used to describe what is being acted upon the father. He is *iussus est ab Hilario deici*, ordered by Hilarius to be struck down. Not only is he struck down, but he is struck when he is down. Despite Hilarius just moments before asking Perpetua to have pity on her father, his order makes her father *uirga percussit*, be beaten with a rod. Possibly Hilarius was hoping that upon seeing her father beaten, Perpetua would recant. Or maybe he was making an example of what happens when a *paterfamilias* acts in a subversive manner and lets his family have power over him.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Parvis, "Perpetua," 370.

⁴⁹ Gold, "'And I Became a Man' Gender Fluidity and Closure in Perpetua's Prison Narrative," 155.

However, Perpetua does not feel sad for her father in the same light as she did before. She was asked to have pity on her father's gray hairs, but now she grieves for *seneca eius misera*, his miserable old age. While the description used to portray her father's state changes, the intent behind old age is the same as gray hairs. However, it is a conscious change in word choice. This could possibly show Perpetua's last connection with her father being severed—after he begged her to recant he was no longer a man who grew gray hairs while raising her, but was rather just a grown man.

Boldly enough, the word *hilaris* is used to describe how the catechumens returned to the prison, cheerfully; this is the same root word that the Governor Hilarianus' name comes from. In this martyrdom narrative, Hilarianus' role is to produce *hilaris*, joy.⁵⁰ For what one would deem a condemnation of grief is a sentencing of joy.⁵¹

Through the rest of this section Perpetua misses her infant. However, she no longer both mentally and physically feels responsible for her boy. He has weaned off breastfeeding and her breasts have also ceased the need to breastfeed.⁵² She no longer experiences engorgement or pain. A weight is off her shoulders as she names that the anxiety and pain of that situation have left her.

⁵⁰If you wish to read more about name puns in the *Passio*, check out work by Erin Ronsse. Specifically "Rhetoric of Martyrs: Listening to Saints Perpetua and Felicitas" from *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 14, no. 3 (2006), pages 301-306.

⁵¹ Although, it is worth noting that Perpetua uses the word *damnat* when describing the ruling. *Damnat* carries the connotation of finding someone guilty and also finding fault with someone. The catechumens were found guilty of being Christians, something they were very proud of, and would most likely have not considered a fault.

⁵² Bodily fluids is an interesting concept in martyrology, something I do not have time for in this paper, but if you would like further discussion, I'd recommend starting with Lara Deeb's work about Lebanese Ashura.

These words come from IX

Original Latin

Deinde post dies paucos Pudens, miles optio praepositus carceris, qui nos magnificare coepit intellegens magnam uirtutem esse in nobis, multos ad nos admittebat, ut et nos et illi inuicem refrigeraremus. ut autem proximauit dies muneris, intrat ad me pater meus consumptus taedio, et coepit barbam suam euellere et in terram mittere, et prosternere se in faciem, et inproperare annis suis, et dicere tanta uerba quae mouerent uniuersam creaturam. ego dolebam pro infelici senecta eius.

Translation

Then after just a few days, Pudens, the military junior officer and overseer of the prison, who began to praise us understanding there was intense power in us, admitted many to us so that in turn both we and they were made cool. Also when the day of the offering came near, my father entered toward me, consumed by weariness, and began to tear out his beard and to throw it on the ground, and to prostrate on his face, and to blame his age, and to say so many words in order to move the entire creation. I was grieving for his unlucky old age.

Analysis

Again, section IX starts in the same style; the narrative opens with a passing of time: *post dies paucos*, after just a few days. With her father absent another time, Perpetua, and the other catechumens and their visitors, *refrigeraremus*, were made cool despite the date of their match with the beasts fast approaching. However, when talking about the event that was coming up, the game, the word *muneris* is used. If the author wanted to use a word with the connotation of a game, *ludus* would have been used. That is the word most commonly seen when discussing

gladiatorial games. However, the word *muneris* carries the connotation of a service. While it can mean a spectacle, the spectacle is often in the form of an offering. It can also be translated as a duty. This shows how Perpetua was preparing her mindset for martyrdom and was ready to meet her fate.

When Perpetua's father visits this last time, he is described in the exact same way: *consumption taedio*, consumed by weariness. Additionally, the initial fear Perpetua had that her father may blind her used the word *euellere*, which is turned back on the father. Here, he is tearing out his own beard. The typical Roman family and gender norms are completely altered in this scene. Through ripping of the elder masculine identifier, the beard, the *paterfamilias* not only emasculates himself,⁵³ but also tears down his authority through his age and weariness. This, combined with his begging at his daughter's feet, is a reversal of the familial hierarchy and the traditional gender roles.

And with his beard ripped out, his hair is again not used to describe his age. His age is *annis*, just his age. Not his old age, not his gray hairs, just his age. And similarly to before where Perpetua previously grieved for his miserable old age, now she grieves for his *infelici senecta*, unlucky old age. His age is no longer a source of misery, it is just called unfortunate.

CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS

SOCIAL CLASS

When considering the familial roles Perpetua carried, daughter and mother, social class dictates the expectations those roles carried. While some translators and scholars like Sara Parvis and Brian Sowers believe that Perpetua was of the upper class⁵⁴ Kate Cooper argues that

⁵³ Parkhouse, "The Fetishization of Female Exempla: Mary, Thecla, Perpetua and Felicitas," 582-583.

⁵⁴ Parvis, "Perpetua," 366; Sowers, "Pudor et Dedecus: Rhetoric of Honor and Shame in Perpetua's Passion," 387.

Perpetua was of the lower class. Cooper brings out three main arguments to support this claim. She explains that Roman law protected the *honestiores*, the upper class, from corporal punishment, so the fact that the Governor ordered Perpetua's father to be beaten during a public legal trial shows that he was a member of the *humiliores*, a lower social class who could receive corporal punishment from superiors.⁵⁵ Additionally, Perpetua was initially held in domestic custody until she was moved to prison. As she remained in domestic custody, most likely in the home of an upper class family, her father had the opportunity to visit her. If visitors were allowed under domestic custody, this was most likely at the discretion of the household slaves and a slave would be more likely to help a fellow low class member.⁵⁶ Finally, Cooper explains that most upper class families had wet nurses for their babies. Because Perpetua's child was breastfeeding from Perpetua herself, it is most likely that she was of a lower class and unable to afford a wet nurse. This is strengthened by the fact that her father said the baby would not survive after her death, implying they could not hire a wet nurse.⁵⁷ With this evidence, I believe it is safe to say that Perpetua was of a lower social class.

As a daughter and mother carry a weight of responsibility to consider how her actions would impact the rest of her family. Perpetua's father, in section five, even mentions that no one in their family would be able to speak publicly if Perpetua was punished for being a Christian. However, by considering Perpetua as a member of the *humiliores*, we can see that she was also expected to carry part of the financial responsibility of her family. Perpetua's additional income, tied to her marital status, was something her father was afraid to lose.

⁵⁵ Cooper, "A Father, a Daughter and a Procurator: Authority and Resistance in the Prison Memoir of Perpetua of Carthage," 694.

⁵⁶ Cooper, 690.

⁵⁷ Cooper, 688.

MARITAL STATUS

In addition to understanding Perpetua's social status, her marital status is important. Throughout the entire *Passio*, there is no mention of who her child's father is. Scholarly discussions propose various explanations as to how Perpetua became the sole caregiver of her child. Perpetua could have been married to her child's father and then divorced, a theory Kate Cooper acknowledges. Divorce was something that Christian women contemporary to Perpetua were able and willing to do.⁵⁸ However, it seems unlikely that the divorced husband would not attempt to take custody of the child.⁵⁹ Another thought, discussed by Sara Parvis, is that Perpetua and her son's father were married, but he was a Christian himself and was martyred too.⁶⁰ Barbara K. Gold offers up the notion that he could have been on an extended trip.⁶¹ Most compelling to me is the argument that the child was born to parents who were not married. Kate Cooper succinctly explains the Roman marriage and custody laws:

In a union between free unmarried partners, the maternal grandfather would have undisputed control and undisputed custody, should the two parents cease to live together. If a man wished his own father to have control – or if a legally independent man wished to have control over his own child – he was required to contract a *iustum matrimonium* with the woman whom he wished to act as mother. In Roman law, the wife or her family could never against his will gain custody of a man's child born from marriage, and at the same time the biological father or his family could not acquire custody against the will of the mother or her family if the child was born from an unmarried union.⁶²

⁵⁸ Cooper, 690.

⁵⁹ Parvis, "Perpetua," 367.

⁶⁰ See note 58 above.

⁶¹ Gold, "And I Became a Man' Gender Fluidity and Closure in Perpetua's Prison Narrative," 154.

⁶² Cooper, "A Father, a Daughter and a Procurator: Authority and Resistance in the Prison Memoir of Perpetua of Carthage," 688.

These legal precedents can be extrapolated to assume that if Perpetua was married or widowed she would not have her custody of child, and thus she was never married to the father of her son. Cooper goes one step further to conjecture that the father of Perpetua's son was a man who had no need for heirs and did not want to get married, but did want one sexual partner, in order to stay out of sexual trouble—in this context, Cooper calls Perpetua a concubine.⁶³ It was socially acceptable for a woman of a lower social status to be a concubine as long as she did not attempt to enter a higher class.⁶⁴ As a concubine, she could have received economic benefits from their partner, and it is possible that Perpetua and her family relied on the generosity of her son's father. This could also explain why Perpetua's father urged her so strongly to recant her faith and return to society; he too needed financial support from his grandson's father.⁶⁵ By putting Perpetua's social and marital statuses in conversion, I agree with Cooper that Perpetua was an unmarried woman from the lower class. It is with this conclusion that the dynamic between Perpetua and her father is best analyzed.

FAMILY

In section three, Perpetua's mother and brother accepted her faith. This can be seen by the fact that they accepted custody of her child, and also can be inferred by the fact that her brother was also a catechumen, according to the editor of the *Passio*. As stated before, they were saddened by the eventual loss of her, but as her brother was also a catechumen, they understood. However, Perpetua's father did not; Perpetua wrote that *solus de passione mea gauisurus non esset de toto genere meo*, he alone from my entire family would not be glad for her suffering. He

⁶³ Cooper, 689.

⁶⁴ Augustine in fact had, as Kate Cooper would categorize, a concubine for fifteen years. See James Boyce's "Don't Blame the Devil: St. Augustine and Original Sin," published by Counterpoint Press in 2015 for more.

⁶⁵ Cooper, "A Father, a Daughter and a Procurator: Authority and Resistance in the Prison Memoir of Perpetua of Carthage," 689.

put immense pressure on his daughter to recant her confession of faith. Because the rest of Perpetua's family accepted her confession, her father's sole disapproval, and the way he physically and verbally harassed her, is what caused her to distance herself from her born family.

Interwoven in the *Passio* is the theme of family, both Perpetua's born family and her chosen family. The farther Perpetua moves away from her born family and the head of her family, the more natural it is for her to become the head of the Christian family.⁶⁶ Each time she takes a step back from her family and rejects domestic norms, it comes with great sorrow and grief,⁶⁷ both from Perpetua and her family members. She loses her connection to her father and to her son. She faces the choice between identifying a mother, identifying a daughter and identifying a Christian. It is the identity of Christian in the North African context that prevents her from identifying as a mother and a daughter, and the identities of a mother and a daughter that her father believes prevent her from identifying as a Christian.⁶⁸ By ultimately choosing Christian, she places her relationship with God above all else, including her born family.⁶⁹

Early Christians, including Perpetua, knew that becoming a Christian could mean that they had to leave their born family, but knew that it also required their involvement and participation in a Christian community, a new family.⁷⁰ Perpetua's new family of catechumens strengthens her new identity. By remaining in community with fellow believers, she transcends the other identities she held and clings to the Christian way of life.⁷¹ Throughout the *Passio*, as Karen King puts it, "the Christian way of life was demonstrated most vividly by believers who

⁶⁶ Tilley, "The Passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicity," 387.

⁶⁷ MacHaffie, "Women and the Early Churches," 35.

⁶⁸ It is worth noting that identities are highly contextual and are shaped by cultural norms that evolve over time.

⁶⁹ King, "Willing to Die for God: Individualization and Instrumental Agency in Ancient Christian Martyr Literature," 377.

⁷⁰ King, 360.

⁷¹ MacHaffie, "Women and the Early Churches," 34.

publicly confessed their identity as Christians and died willingly and fearlessly, even in the face of physical torture, humiliation, and the loss of social standing, wealth, and family.”⁷²

Perpetua withstands social implications and alters imperial and familial hierarchy and places God at the top.⁷³ Barbara J. MacHaffie states that “Perpetua believed that she was liberated from the law of the Romans and the expectations of her culture by God who was the highest authority.”⁷⁴ Her individualism ties together Christian conversion with resistance to Roman imperialism.⁷⁵ Some, like Sarah Parkhouse, conclude that while Perpetua successfully frees herself from the patriarchal roles of daughter and mother, she remains stuck in a world of male control and lacks total agency: “Perpetua might liberate herself from her role as daughter and mother but she remains entrapped in a world of male control.”⁷⁶ Considering the need for contextualization of stories, I push back on this argument. I view Perpetua as disruptive in a way that shows her power and voice.

PERPETUA’S AGENCY AND VOICE

While contemporary theories of identity did not always exist, they can still be applied to the third century. In the *Passio*, gender is actively played with to show power and social relation. Through my translating and analyzing of power relations, I held to Karen King’s definition of agency:

By understanding agency not as the property of individuals but as a function of the production of power and the shaping of social relations in specific situations, it is

⁷² King, “Willing to Die for God: Individualization and Instrumental Agency in Ancient Christian Martyr Literature,” 360.

⁷³ King, 373.

⁷⁴ MacHaffie, “Women and the Early Churches,” 34.

⁷⁵ King, “Willing to Die for God: Individualization and Instrumental Agency in Ancient Christian Martyr Literature,” 354.

⁷⁶ Parkhouse, “The Fetishization of Female Exempla: Mary, Thecla, Perpetua and Felicitas,” 587.

possible to reconsider how we might talk about the representations of Perpetua and other Christians as martyrs.⁷⁷

There is not one catch-all definition for agency; agency belongs to situations.⁷⁸ Power relations are at the forefront in the *Passio*. My close translation shows the production of power and the social relations in the specific situation of Perpetua's recorded interactions with her father. Throughout the analysis of the original language, Perpetua's agency, her voice, is deeply connected to and at odds with the imperial and patriarchal structures of Roman Carthage.

According to Judith Perkins, "what Perpetua's "own ideas" offer is a self representation of a woman subverting and transcending her society's strictures, buttressed by a growing sense of her empowerment through suffering."⁷⁹ Perpetua, eager for her death, is able to place her concern for her child aside and sees her suffering as redemptive and practical individuality.⁸⁰ In this individuality, Perpetua disrupts societal norms and "convinces, reproves, corrects, and shames."⁸¹ Perpetua reverses the physical hierarchy with her *paterfamilias*, which was dictated by the social hierarchy. As explained in my earlier analysis, Perpetua's father initially is dominant physically above her, but as she is recognized as *domina*, he begs at her feet.⁸² Through her agency and voice, Perpetua becomes the dominating *domina* over her domineering *paterfamilias*.

⁷⁷ King, "Willing to Die for God: Individualization and Instrumental Agency in Ancient Christian Martyr Literature," 369.

⁷⁸ King, 379.

⁷⁹ Perkins, "Suffering and Power," 104-105.

⁸⁰ Perkins, 109; King, "Willing to Die for God: Individualization and Instrumental Agency in Ancient Christian Martyr Literature," 377.

⁸¹ Sowers, "Pudor et Dedecus: Rhetoric of Honor and Shame in Perpetua's Passion," 387.

⁸² The imagery of Perpetua on top can also be seen in her visions. While her visions are not within the scope of this paper, it is important to acknowledge the vertical power in her own writings. In one of Perpetua's visions, she is ascending a ladder and stepping down on the serpent's head.

The *Passio* concludes with Perpetua highlighting the active role of the martyrs in not just accepting, but allowing their death, revealing their martyrdom. Perpetua views her impending death in such a light that the vernacular used is a language filled with choice and volition.⁸³ Perpetua must have known martyrdom was a possibility when becoming a Christian, and still became a catechumen and was baptized. When the possibility of martyrdom became a reality and she was condemned to the beasts, Perpetua was overjoyed; martyrs “hold that to die *is* to win; the wreath *is* death.”⁸⁴ This acceptance turned willingness turned want to die for her faith was strongly present in Perpetua’s final scene. With sword to her throat, Perpetua guided the gladiator’s hand to deliver the fatal blow, securing eternal life through martyrdom.

The *Passio* proves that “novice Christians can die an exemplary death.”⁸⁵ A constant disruptor of Roman patriarchal norms, even through her death Perpetua completes one last reversal. Society’s power no longer has a grip on her, as Perpetua’s final fate is drastically different from the one society told her she could have.⁸⁶ The only way Perpetua was able to die in the arena was through her own doing.⁸⁷ Seen through the original language and contextual support, Perpetua exercises agency through distancing herself from her *paterfamilias* and disrupting her patriarchal society.

⁸³ Cobb, “Suicide by Gladiator? The Acts of Perpetua and Felicitas in Its North African Context,” 621.

⁸⁴ Perkins, “Suffering and Power,” 111.

⁸⁵ Parvis, “Perpetua,” 367.

⁸⁶ Perkins, “Suffering and Power,” 105.

⁸⁷ Sowers, “Pudor et Dedecus: Rhetoric of Honor and Shame in Perpetua’s Passion,” 387.

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