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The passion over perpetua: a new approach to the Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis

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THE PASSION OVER PERPETUA: A NEW APPROACH TO THE PASSIO PERPETUAE ET
FELICITATIS

A Thesis

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Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
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Eric J. Poché
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ABSTRACT

Although the *Passio Santarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis* has received much scholarly attention in the past twenty years, it has been used primarily as a source of information on the martyr Perpetua. Other aspects of the account, such as its Montanist theology and its unique portrayal of women, have been largely ignored by scholars interested in tearing it apart for relevant information on Perpetua. The *Passio* contains three distinct portions, each produced by a member from the religious community of Carthage in the early third-century C.E. It therefore serves as a unique historical window into early Christian North Africa, displaying a community in many ways theologically distinct from its most well known member, the apologist Tertullian.

The author of the narrative portion of the account as well as the self-written account of the martyr Saturus have been marginalized due to the enormous stature of Perpetua, the first female martyr to write an account of her own persecution. In many cases, these two male figures are ignored due to a perceived relationship with Tertullian, who is looked upon with derision for his patriarchal attitudes toward women and their role in religious life. It is the purpose of this thesis to demonstrate that the *Passio* promotes a view of Christianity that is distinct from the one espoused by Tertullian's writing. It will also show that the *Passio* presents a consistent set of theological themes in all three of its parts and offers a more progressive understanding of women as they function in the church than the one offered by Tertullian.

INTRODUCTION

The martyr Perpetua was arrested in Carthage in 203 C.E. along with the slave Felicitas and several others. They were brought to prison to await trial and execution. They were not guilty of refusing to sacrifice to the Emperor. The act of baptism appeared to be their only crime. Another fellow Christian name Saturus surrendered himself to the authorities to await trial with them even though he was not present at the initial arrest. While in prison Perpetua experienced four visions. Each of which seemed to disconnect her from her worldly existence in some way. She grew distant from her father and infant son and eventually rejected both of them in favor of her uncoming martyrdom. Saturus experienced a similar vision in prison, which showed Perpetua and himself placed before the bishop of Carthage in heaven. They were then brought out for execution in March, during the birthday celebration of the Emperor Septimius Severus' son Geta. An unidentified narrator took the accounts of these visions and incorporated them into his own text relating the deaths of the martyrs. He stressed that all the martyrs achieved heroic ends, but focused his account on Perpetua, who is forced to finish her own execution at the hands of an untrained gladiator.

This early martyr account, known as the *Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis*, has received an enormous amount of scholarly attention over the past century and a half. The vivid dreams recorded by the martyrs Perpetua and Saturus continue to attract the attention of scholars from a diverse array of disciplines. Since the *Passio* contains two seemingly autobiographical dream records, each written in an unrheterical prose style, scholars have awarded a great deal of authority to it as a window into the psyche of the ancient world.¹ Implicit in these assessments

¹ E.R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in the Age of Anxiety: Some Aspects of the Religious Experience from Marcus Aurelius to Constantine* (Cambridge University Press, 1965); Marie Louise von Franz, *The Passion of Perpetua*

of the *Passio* is the belief that it contains truthful and unbiased records of dreams, unaffected by the theological writing which permeates the rest of the narrative. Scholars dedicated to women's studies also consider the account to be of paramount importance because the narrator of the *Passio* devotes nearly one-third of the entire work to the female martyr Perpetua's dream record.² The survival of a kernel of literature produced by a Roman woman of the third century proves to be far too enticing to ignore. Perpetua and her "diary" thus receive priority over all other aspects of the *Passio*.

The importance of the *Passio* becomes overshadowed by the magnitude of respect and reverence scholars have for Perpetua herself. The portion encompassing chapters three through ten of the *Passio*, said to be written "by her own hand and intention," *sua manu et suo sensu*, is often given an inordinate amount of attention due to its status as the first preserved writing of a Christian woman.³ The remaining chapters of the *Passio* consist of a small, two chapter account written by the martyr Saturus as well as a narrative covering more than half of the document which describes their execution. Scholars often ignore the narrative, containing the martyr's deaths due to its theological tinge, while they avoid the account of Saturus due to its loftier, rhetorical prose style.⁴ This scholarly fervor for Perpetua has skewed interpretations of the *Passio*. In some cases, Saturus' account is even labeled as a clever forgery produced by the narrator himself.⁵ Perpetua's account is the only part considered to be a truthful representation of

(Irving: spring Publications, 1979); Patricia Cox Miller, *Dreams in Late Antiquity: Studies in the Imagination of a Culture* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994)

²Giselle de Nie, "Consciousness Fecund Through God: From Male Fighter to Spiritual Bride-Mother in Late Antique Female Sanctity," in *Sanctity and Motherhood; Essays on Holy Mothers in the Middle Ages*. ed. Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker (New York: Garland Publishing, 1995): 101-161; Peter Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages*; Brent Shaw, "The Passion of Perpetua," *Past and Present*, No. 139 (May, 1993): 3-45.

³ *Passio S. Perpetuae*, Chapter II., 3.

⁴ Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in the Age of Anxiety*; Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages*; Miller, *Dreams in Late Antiquity: Studies in the Imagination of a Culture*; Shaw, "The Passion of Perpetua,"

⁵ Shaw, "The Passion of Perpetua," 31.

the events leading up to the martyrs' deaths. Implicit in this assessment is a rift between the theology of Perpetua's account and the surrounding narrative.

This thesis intends to argue that the accounts of Saturus and the narrator serve to bolster the main themes of the *Passio*, which are all present in Perpetua's segment of the document. All three portions of the *Passio* are instrumental parts in deciphering its message—a message which promotes the views of a unique Christian community that remains virtually unknown today. A reading which favors one portion of the *Passio* over another is not only untenable it is also irresponsible. As a historical document, the *Passio* deserves to be analyzed in its entirety. Not only is it a reliable depiction of the events surrounding the struggle of a particular group of martyrs, it is also one of the few surviving documents for early Montanism, a heretical branch of Christianity that is only imperfectly understood. Montanism, named after its founder Montanus, the Phrygian, began in Asia Minor in the mid to late second century and quickly spread to Rome and Africa. Perpetua's visions and intercessory powers; Saturus' attitude towards the clergy; the narrator's appeal to the Holy Spirit for new *documenta* of faith—all share in a uniform theological message extolling this unique branch of Christianity.

Although a complete Latin copy of the *Passio* was known to exist as far back as 1668, the discovery of a Greek text in 1889 provoked a heated debate on authorship which continues to surface in modern scholarship.⁶ The original contenders in this struggle were Rendel Harris and J.A. Robinson. Whereas Harris argued in favor of a Greek original, Robinson analyzed the Latin text in order to find numerous idiosyncrasies peculiar to the Latin author which failed to translate over into the Greek version. Robinson's exhaustive study led him to suggest the apologist Tertullian as a possible author. His claim was by no means definitive, which he admits in his 1891 publication of the *Passio*: “The investigation might doubtless be carried further by one who

⁶ J .A. Robinson, *The Passion of S. Perpetua* (New Jersey: Gorgias Press, 2004): 1-2.

had a more intimate acquaintance with the writings of Tertullian than my cursory reading allows me to claim.”⁷ Unfortunately, Robinson’s adherents failed to heed this disclaimer and chose to embrace Robinson’s choice of author with the same vigor as the rest of his work. Most scholars found Robinson’s evidence extremely convincing and the Latin edition is now unanimously accepted as the original. The debate on the authorship of the text, once intimately tied to the issue of priority, has remained a stumbling block to modern *Perpetua* scholarship. Although scholars have challenged Tertullian’s authorship on linguistic grounds, many have continued to argue in favor of Tertullian’s authorship up to the present day.⁸ Only a systematic analysis on the divergence between Tertullian’s theology and that of the *Passio* can bring this debate to its proper conclusion.

Although this thesis was written to argue a specific point about a specific Passion narrative, it will be necessary to look at a larger debate in martyrdom scholarship in order to see the importance of this particular *passio*. For an entire generation of scholars, W.H.C. Frend’s monumental *Martyrdom and Persecution* was the undisputed authority on the origins of Christian martyrdom. Frend gave particular attention to Jewish examples of self-sacrifice predating the martyrdom phenomenon which began in first-century imperial Rome. The accounts preserved in I and II Maccabees play a key role in Frend’s argument: “Recant or die. The Palestinian Jew faced the same alternatives as those that confronted the Christian two or three centuries later on virtually the same issue.”⁹ The elderly Eleazar’s refusal to violate the injunction against eating pork and the death of a mother and her seven children served as

⁷ Robinson, *The Passion of S. Perpetua*, 56.

⁸ For the most recent example, see Rex D. Butler, *The New Prophecy and New Visions: Evidence of Montanism in the Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2006).

⁹ W.H.C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church: A Study of a Conflict from the Maccabees to Donatus* (New York University Press: 1967): 33.

poignant examples of martyrdom under the tyranny of Antiochus IV.¹⁰ According to Frend, the Jewish traditions of sacrifice and suffering carried over to Christianity's first martyr, Jesus of Nazareth: "References to the sufferings of Elijah, the parable of the Wicked Husbandman, and perhaps to the presence of Moses and Elijah at the Transfiguration may have been designed to leave no doubt as to what was expected of the son of Man."¹¹ In Frend's mind, Jesus served as the turning point between earlier Jewish tradition and later Christian practice.

Frend sees martyrdom as a complex evolution taking place throughout the entire Judeo-Christian tradition. As powerful as this notion is, it tends to undermine the revolutionary role of Christianity itself. In his own fundamental work on martyrdom, G.W. Bowersock takes exception to Frend's theory:

Frend in 1965, and most recently Baumeister, have practiced a kind of crude and antiquated literary criticism to emphasize banal coincidences in various narratives of resistance to authority and heroic self-sacrifices as if every such episode constituted martyrdom.¹²

In Bowersock's opinion, the Jewish examples of self-sacrifice found in Maccabees had no more influence on Christianity than the Greco-Roman glorification of Socrates' death promoted by Plato.¹³ Neither of these cases can constitute true martyrdom, an experience intimately linked with the Greek word *martus* or "witness." In fact, Bowersock even passes over the death of Jesus as an example of martyrdom in the literal sense of the word. The first example of martyrdom which fits Bowersock's description is the death of Stephen in Acts: "Since he [Stephen] did suffer a violent death and the shedding of his blood is linked to his being called witness, his

¹⁰ Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution*, 36-7.

¹¹ Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution*, 61.

¹² G.W. Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome* (Cambridge University Press: 1995): 26-7.

¹³ Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, 7.

witnessing could obviously be construed as consisting in that death.”¹⁴ Bowersock’s examination of martyrdom leads him to limit the definition of martyrdom to those who actually “bear witness” to Christ. The limited scope of this definition helps explain the development of the term, but it fails to encompass later manifestations of the martyr tradition which began to substitute asceticism for death.

In spite of their differences, both Frend and Bowersock embrace a conception of martyrdom limited to the act of dying. The early works of Peter Brown broaden the spectrum to include more symbolic forms of self sacrifice. Brown puts little emphasis on the act of martyrdom. Instead, the importance lies in how martyrs, and later monks, acted as intercessors for the Christian community. Brown originally used “holy man,” a term which eventually came to encompass both martyrs and ascetics alike, to describe the desert hermits of fifth-century Syria:

It was in Egypt that the theory and practice of the ascetic life reached its highest pitch of articulateness and sophistication. Yet holy men who minted the ideal of the saint in society came from Syria, and, later, from Asia Minor and Palestine—not from Egypt.¹⁵

Brown credited the rise of this figure to the more isolated nature of Syrian asceticism. The Egyptian monk could not live off the desert and was, therefore, forced to reenter society at certain points in time; the Syrian ascetic however could struggle alone in the wilderness for years at a time, making himself a mysterious and charismatic figure for others to emulate.¹⁶ The fascinating career of Symeon Stylites serves as Brown’s first example of a holy man functioning as a rural *patronus*—an intercessor to God in the same way the *patronus* would traditionally act

¹⁴ Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, 15.

¹⁵ Peter Brown, “The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity,” *Journal of Roman Studies*, Vol. 61 (1971): 82.

¹⁶ Brown, “The Rise and Function of the Holy Man,” 83.

in a relation to his *clientes*.¹⁷ The honor and respect bestowed upon living ascetics like Symeon eventually led to a similar reverence for the deceased martyrs of the second and third century.

In *The Making of Late Antiquity*, Brown points out specific connections between his Syrian ascetic holy men and the Roman *patronus*. He offers Aurelius Isidore as a third-century precursor to the holy man in order to show how the *patroni* of the classical world evolved into the holy men of Late Antiquity. Isidore was an Egyptian farmer who withdrew from society in order to protest an attack made on his household.¹⁸ This process of “withdrawal” or *anachoresis* held special significance for Brown:

For the act of *anachoresis* itself, rather than any exceptional supernatural powers, was what the audience of the hermit saw in him. His powers and his prestige came from acting out, heroically, enmeshed in oppressive obligations and abrasive relationships, the role of the utterly self-dependant, autarkic man.¹⁹

Much like Bowersock’s martyrs, Brown’s holy men were inextricably linked to the Roman world. Nevertheless, Brown would not include the martyrs themselves among the ranks of his holy men until he published *The Cult of the Saints*. It is here that Brown first recognizes the “presence” or the *praesentia* of long deceased saints and martyrs through the passion literature which preserved their memory: “The *passio* abolished time. The deeds of the martyr or confessor had brought the mighty deeds of God in the Old Testament and the gospels into his own time.”²⁰ Through this new genre of literature, called *passio* or “suffering,” the anguish of the martyrs could become just as real—and would be just as respected by early Christians—as the ascetics in their midst.

¹⁷ Brown, “The Rise and Function of the Holy Man,” 90.

¹⁸ Peter Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978): 85.

¹⁹ Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity*, 86.

²⁰ Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints* (University of Chicago Press, 1981): 81.

Daniel Boyarin embraces an expanded concept of martyrdom similar to Brown's. Rather than tracing the origins of Christian martyrdom to Jewish or pagan antecedents, Boyarin considers the martyr tradition to have sprung from a collaboration of Rabbinic Jewish and Christian sources.²¹ This collaboration of these two "sister" religions should not be confused with the archaic Jewish influences discussed by Frensdorff. According to Boyarin, Frensdorff's work suffers from blatant historical anachronisms that cause him to conflate earlier forms of Judaism with the Rabbinic Judaism which formed alongside Christianity in Late Antiquity: "He [Frensdorff] clearly wants to have his Jews and supersede them, too."²² Boyarin is much less concerned with the acts of self-sacrifice and patriotism presented in apocryphal works like IV Maccabees than with the Latin Antique communities which produced such literature. It was "Rabbinic" Jews, writing around the same time as the early Christians, who produced the martyrs of IV Maccabees along with the earliest accounts of Rabbinic martyrdom to be found in the Babylonian Talmud. Rather than narrowly defining martyrdom in Christian terms, Boyarin sees it as a product of the cultural overlap of Judaism and Christianity in a first-century pagan world.

Boyarin does more than expand the definition of martyrdom to include rabbinic Jewish sources. He embraces a definition firmly rooted in the literary productions of martyrdom rather than the act itself:

Rather than taking it as a thing, 'something entirely new,' I propose that we think of martyrdom as a 'discourse' that changes and develops over time and undergoes particularly interesting transformations among rabbinic Jews and other Jews, including Christians, between the second and fourth centuries.²³

²¹ Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford University Press, 1999): 5.

²² Boyarin, *Dying for God*, 129.

²³ Boyarin, *Dying for God*, 94-5.

Boyarin’s emphasis on the “discourse” aspect of martyrdom is not unlike Brown’s explanation of the *praesentia* offered to Late Antique readers of the martyr’s *passio*. Boyarin makes it clear that his definition of martyrdom is a reaction to Bowersock’s “generic cliché” of a definition, “a notion of martyrdom as a single thing, an essence... that makes it effectively impossible to perceive the complexities and nuances of its history.”²⁴ Boyarin, like Brown before him, attempts to understand martyrdom as it presented itself to different sects, times and localities—in a dynamic way, not a static one.

Elizabeth Castelli’s observations on martyrdom have much in common with those of Boyarin and Brown. Although Boyarin emphasizes the plurality and diversity of martyr traditions in Late Antiquity, Castelli sees a striking degree of continuity and uniformity which transcends both temporal and geographical distances. It is the collective literary abilities of the Christian community which impress Castelli the most: “one might even go so far as to argue that they did not simply preserve the story of persecution and martyrdom, but, in fact, *created it*.”²⁵ Castelli’s understanding of martyrdom is linked to the literature more than that of any previous scholar. Ultimately, she solidifies a point which both Boyarin and Brown seem to be on the verge of making: “Martyrdom is not simply an action. Martyrdom requires audience (whether real or fictive), retelling, interpretation, and world—and meaning—making activity. Suffering and violence in and of itself is not enough.”²⁶

The previous examples indicate that a change has taken place in martyrdom scholarship. This change in the definition of martyrdom owes itself to the more holistic literary approaches of scholars like Castelli, Boyarin, and Brown. As intriguing as this new concept of martyrdom may

²⁴ Boyarin, *Dying for God*, 94.

²⁵ Elizabeth Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory: Gender, Theory, and Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004): 25.

²⁶ Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 34.

be, it is hardly applicable to the earliest surviving martyr accounts. Like any literary genre, the *passio* took time to evolve into its full literary form. Second-century martyr *Acta* offered the reader little more than a simple commentary on the affirmation of Christian martyrs in the face of tyranny. They hardly exemplified Brown's claims of the *praesentia* and *potentia* of the *passio* genre. The *Passio Perpetuae* was the first martyrdom account to exhibit examples of *praesentia* and *potentia* in the text. Paul Monceaux, author of the influential six-volume *Histoire Littéraire de l'Afrique Chrétienne*, best articulates the distinctions between this *passio* and other martyr accounts:

Plus belle encore, et d'ailleurs tout autre, est la Passion de sainte Perpétue et de sainte Félicité. Ce n'est plus seulement une pièce d'archives, un document presque liturgique, destiné à être lu publiquement au jour anniversaire du martyre. C'est déjà une oeuvre littéraire, non pas d'intention, mais de fait: oeuvre charmante, pleine de grâce et vérité, un des bijoux de la vieille littérature chrétienne.²⁷

Monceaux was by no means unique in lavishing praise on the literary qualities of this early work. Although the church letter of the martyrs of Lyons, preserved by Eusebius, also displayed some of these qualities, Thomas Heffernan passes over this account (temporally earlier than *Passio Perpetuae*) choosing the *Passio Perpetuae* as the true forerunner to medieval female saints' lives.²⁸ According to Heffernan, the *Passio Perpetuae* was the first in the genre to exemplify all the characteristics of the *uita sanctorum*.²⁹ The *Passio* is, therefore, pivotal to the arguments of Castelli, Boyarin, and Brown.

The *Passio* is a more important part of history than it has often been treated. It is more than just a source for information on one fascinating woman. It is also an influential, early

²⁷ Paul Monceaux, *Histoire Littéraire de L'Afrique Chrétienne: Depuis les origins jusqu'à l'invasion Arabe, Tome Premier* (Bruxelles: Culture et Civilisation, 1963): 70.

²⁸ Thomas Heffernan, *Sacred Biography: Saints and Their Biographers in the Middle Ages* (Oxford University Press, 1992): 192.

²⁹ Heffernan, *Sacred Biography*, 192.

representative of martyrdom literature as well as one of the main antecedents to medieval hagiography. A document which is this important to martyrdom scholarship needs to be examined thoroughly in all of its parts. Unfortunately, scholars who have examined the *Passio* to date favor a reading which focuses on the life of Perpetua, often denigrating the narrative portion of the document which describes the execution itself. Early attempts to identify the apologist Tertullian as the author of the *Passio*'s surrounding narrative have led to an association between the two, which many scholars find distasteful, due to this church father's patriarchal position on women and their role in the early church. According to Brent Shaw, the narrator "frames" Perpetua in his own "theological envoy."³⁰ He thus implies that the narrator's theology is different from Perpetua's own. It is unfortunate that scholars like Shaw have let their zeal for one portion of the *Passio* blind them to its consistent theological message and its value as a literary masterpiece.

In a more recent critical edition of the *Passio Perpetuae* than the one produced by Robinson, C.I.M.I. van Beek supports Robinson's earlier conclusion about Tertullian's authorship: "Vidimus sententiam quae tenet eundem scriptorem Passionem Latine et Graece litteris mandasse valde nobis arridere; iam addiderim: eum esse Tertullianum."³¹ This same critical edition would later be adopted for Musurillo's famous compilation of martyrdom accounts known as the *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*. Although other critical editions have been produced since 1936, virtually every scholar cites the van Beek edition used in Musurillo's collection. Pierre de Labriolle adopts this assumption on Tertullian's authorship, crediting van Beek's edition in a footnote: "Le cas du rédacteur est assez différent. Je crois qu'on peut hardiment l'identifier avec Tertullien, et cela pour des raisons d'ordre surtout philologique. C'est

³⁰ Shaw, "The Passion of Perpetua," 33.

³¹ Cornelius Ioannes Maria Ioseph van Beek, *Passio sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis Volumen I: Textum Graecum et Latinum ad Fidem Codicum Mss.* (Nijmegen: Dekker and De Vegt S.A., 1936.): 95.

son style, c'est sa langue, ce sont ses mots."³² Labriolle's high status among French classicists gave philological authority to Robinson's assumption.

Despite the clout of figures like van Beek and de Labriolle, French scholars began to challenge Tertullian's authorship on philological grounds almost immediately. Paul Monceaux struck the hypothesis down on the grounds that Tertullian cites the *Passio Perpetuae* only once in his entire corpus, and incorrectly at that: "S'il eût été l'auteur du récit, il n'eut point manqué de nous le dire: dans tous ses traités, il renvoie fréquemment à ses précédents ouvrages. Laissons donc cette vaine hypothèse."³³ Ake Fridh, continuing in the examination of metrical clausulae started by W. H. Shrewing, concluded that there was little evidence to support Tertullian's authorship: "Est-il possible que le rédacteur de la Passion soit identifiable à Tertullien? Comme nous l'avons vu, il y a de fortes raisons qui rendent une telle supposition peu vraisemblable."³⁴ Finally, René Braun attempted to bring the debate to a permanent conclusion by offering a comprehensive examination of single word usage, frequency of *iuncturae*, and syntactical analysis. All of these observations lead Braun to summarily conclude that Tertullian's style had nothing in common with the redactor of the *Passio Perpetuae*:

Les deux caractéristiques essentielles du grand Carthaginois, c'est-à-dire la densité de l'expression, avec ses brachylogies, ses raccourcis, ses ellipses, voire ses obscurités, et la nervosité du mouvement que traduisent les asyndètes, les accumulations anaphoriques le plus souvent en groupements ternaires ou quaternaires, ne se retrouvent à aucun degré ni à aucun moment dans les phrases du rédacteur...³⁵

And yet, the *Passio Perpetuae* continues to be associated with Tertullian. In *Pagan and Christian in the Age of Anxiety*, E.R. Dodds recognized that Tertullian's direct authorship was

³² Pierre de Labriolle, *Histoire de la littérature Latine Chrétienne* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1947): 158.

³³ Monceaux, *Histoire Littéraire de L'Afrique Chrétienne*, 84.

³⁴ Ake Fridh, *Le Probleme de la Passion des Saintes Perpetué et Félicité* (Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, 1968):28.

³⁵ Rene Braun, "Nouvelles observations linguistiques sur le rédacteur de la 'Passio Perpetuae,'" *Vigiliae Christianae*, Vol.33, No.2 (Jun., 1979): 113-14.

unlikely on the same grounds as Monceaux. Nevertheless, he conflates the “rhetorical cleverness” of the redactor with Tertullian, hinting that it was written by a follower close to the famous Apologist instead.³⁶ Since scholars outside of classical studies have avoided the lengthy philological debate on such grounds, Tertullian’s authorship can never be completely dismissed until the theological differences between his work and that of the *Passio Perpetuae* are properly assessed.

In the introduction to his new critical edition recently published on the *Passio*, Marco Formisano sums up the difficulties surrounding authorship quite succinctly. He takes a firm stance against Tertullian’s authorship on the same philological grounds offered above:

Per quanto riguarda la figura dell’autore, in passato è stata avanzata un’ altra ipotesi, ma alla quale nessuno oggi sembra più credere: la Passione sarebbe scaturita dalla penna di Tertulliano.³⁷

He does recognize however that the limited scope of the philological research which has been done on Tertullian makes a satisfactory comparison of style impossible. For Formisano, the question of authorship will always remain open: “Ma anche sulla valutazione del dettato stilistico del redattore gli interpreti non sono concordi.”³⁸ Since this debate seems to have no satisfactory ending, Formisano decides to leave the issue unresolved: “Ma anche il problema della *authorship* cioè della paternità o maternità dell’opera e sue parti, sembra destinato a restare aperto.”³⁹ By taking such a stance, Formisano no longer has any need to provide an answer. The issue of authorship can be ignored.

Although some have dismissed the importance of solving the problem of authorship, it is not an issue which should be overlooked completely. The position of the anonymous author’s

³⁶ Dodds, *Pagan and Christian*, 49-50.

³⁷ Marco Formisano, *La Passione di Perpetua e Felicità* (Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli, 2008): 19.

³⁸ Formisano, *La Passione di Perpetua*, 19.

³⁹ Formisano, *La Passione di Perpetua*, 19.

theology can have a profound impact on a scholar's interpretation of the text. Patricia Cox Miller's cultural study of dreams in late antiquity betrays a bias against the author simply because of his/her association with Tertullian:

There are even Paternalistic touches in this author's commentary: he calls Perpetua "a wife of Christ," and his description of Perpetua in the arena, tidying her hair and covering her thighs after having been tossed by the heifer, coheres more with Tertullian's view of female modesty than it does with the Perpetua of the diary.⁴⁰

Miller recognizes that the author is not the same person as Tertullian, but this makes little difference to her interpretation—he is still responsible for adding a "paternalistic touch" to Perpetua's story. In addition to this he is also guilty of imposing his own brand of theology on her account:

The anonymous author who wrote this *passio* incorporated the writings of Perpetua and Satyrus in a frame that is clearly Montanist in perspective, offering the vision of these two martyrs as proof that the Holy Spirit continues to speak and emphasizing the "grace" of martyrdom.⁴¹

These two statements call the integrity of the author into question. It is clear that Miller considers the narrative surrounding "Perpetua's diary" to be an unsatisfactory record and for that reason she chooses to ignore that part of the *Passio* and favor Perpetua's account.

There is no reason to believe that Perpetua's understanding of Christian theology would be any different from that of the author. Both were members of the same Christian community and both accounts show evidence of proto-Montanist theology. Why is it that Miller can conflate the author with Tertullian due to his/her Montanist leanings, but still disregard the theological connection between the author and Perpetua on the same grounds? Miller is by no means the

⁴⁰ Miller, *Dreams in Late Antiquity*, 174-75.

⁴¹ Miller, *Dreams in Late Antiquity*, 174.

only scholar to do this. Dodds even calls the “redactor” of the surrounding narrative an act of fiction:

The redactor’s gory and edifying narrative does not inspire me with confidence... it would seem that the Spirit must have supplied him with many of his details—incidents and conversations which could scarcely have come to the notice of the spectators.⁴²

Peter Dronke embraces a similar point of view on the veracity of the author’s account: “The redactor indeed adds many edifying details that are quite alien to the Perpetua of the diary, and are almost certainly fictitious.” In stark contrast to the fictitious account of the redactor, these scholars refer to Perpetua’s account as a “diary,” a simple day-to-day recording of events as they happened. One cannot get more accurate than that.

As if it were not enough to call the narrator’s account fictitious, Giselle de Nie accuses him martyrdom to indulge in male fantasy by reveling in Perpetua’s nude display at execution:

It is difficult not to get the impression that even this presumably sympathetic and religiously motivated author experienced some measure of pleasurable horror—or expected his audience to do so—in such an almost strip tease style of sadistic description.⁴³

De Nie does not seem to recognize that our heroic Perpetua’s account would not have been preserved in the first place if it were not for the respect this author held for her. His/her narrative clearly recognizes Perpetua as the leader of this group of martyrs, in function if not in name. Even Patricia Cox Miller begrudgingly recognizes this fact: “The author of the *passio* twice calls attention to Perpetua’s role as leader of the group of martyrs in prison.”⁴⁴ At one point the author even refers to the *Passio* “as if a mandate of the Holiest Perpetua,” *quasi mandatum*

⁴² Dodds, *Pagan and Christian*, 48-49.

⁴³ de Nie, “Consciousness Fecund through God.”; Miller, *Dreams in Late Antiquity: Studies in the Imagination of a Culture*: 122.

⁴⁴ Miller, *Dreams in Late Antiquity*, 174.

sanctissimae Perpetuae.⁴⁵ Why does Die Nie characterize this account as a “sadistic description” when the narrator is simply describing an embarrassing form of punishment that even the spectators thought distasteful?

Most of the negative feedback given to the narrator is centered on one obscure passage in which Perpetua gets charged by a frenzied cow as part of the public spectacle leading up her execution. Immediately after Perpetua is thrown by the animal, she is knocked down and her tunic is torn:

First Perpetua was thrown, and she fell on her back. And where she sat, she fixed her tunic torn from her side to veil her thighs more mindful of modesty than pain. Next she asked for a pin and fastened her scattered hair; for indeed it was not proper that a martyr suffer with scattered hair, in order that she not appear to lament in her glory.

*Prior Perpetua iactata est, et concidit in lumbos. Et ubi sedit, tunicam a latere discissam ad uelamentum femoris reduxit, pudoris potius memor quam doloris. Dehinc acu requisita et dispersos capillos infibulauit; non enim decebat martyram sparsis capillis pati, ne in sua Gloria plangere uideretur.*⁴⁶

It is Perpetua’s supposed “modesty” *pudoris* which aggravates the sensibilities of these modern critics. It brings to mind the ultra restrictive clothing policies promulgated by Tertullian in *De Virginibus Velandis*. Despite this superficial similarity between the author and Tertullian, it seems highly unlikely that Tertullian would have given a woman such a leading role in one of his own writings. His opinion of women was far from progressive even for his own time. Christine Trevett describes Tertullian’s view on women in the church: “Silence and the priesthood of chastity (*sacrodotes pudicitiae*) belonged to women, he had argued (*De cult. Fem. ii.12, I;ii. 13; De uirg. Vel. ix*), so did the possibility of prophecy, of course, (*Adv Marc. v.8, II cf. I Cor. II.5*)

⁴⁵ Passio S. Perpetuae, Chapter XVI, 1.

⁴⁶ All translations were produced by the author ; Passio S. Perpetuae, Chapter XX, 3-5.

but modesty was a must.”⁴⁷ Although Tertullian supported female prophecy under restrictive circumstances, it is unlikely he would have approved of Perpetua’s radical rejection of her traditional gender role. If women were not allowed to shed their veils in church, how could Perpetua be allowed to make such a public display?

The bias surrounding this passage has even fed into the work of a scholar attempting to provide a more even-handed account of the events surrounding Perpetua’s life. Joyce Salisbury’s *Perpetua’s Passion* is the first monograph produced solely on Perpetua. In addition to information provided in the *Passio*, Salisbury provides plenty of background material on Roman Carthage in order to put Perpetua’s story into its proper context. Nevertheless, Salisbury shares the misgivings of earlier scholarship when she approaches the modesty passage:

The careful details and the eyewitness’s interpretation of them probably reveal more about the narrator’s mind than about Perpetua’s. It is hard to imagine that Perpetua would have been thinking of modesty or of the appropriate hairstyle for triumphal death while being tossed by the wild beast.⁴⁸

There is no judgment passed on the narrator. In fact, her overall opinion of the narrator seems high. Yet this one scene is still considered untruthful or at least inauthentic. Salisbury attempts to defend the narrator on the grounds that he wrote this passage to glorify Perpetua: “These details show that the narrator wanted to make a point about Perpetua’s perfection (in his eyes modesty marked this) and about the joyful quality of a martyr’s death.”⁴⁹ In spite of the good intentions, Salisbury has managed to conflate the anonymous author’s opinion of feminine perfection with Tertullian’s own, a position which the text does not seem to support.

⁴⁷ Christine Trevett, *Montanism: Gender, Authority, and the New Prophecy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 173.

⁴⁸ Joyce Salisbury, *Perpetua’s Passion: The Death and Memory of a Young Roman Woman* (New York: Routledge, 1997): 143.

⁴⁹ Salisbury, *Perpetua’s Passion*, 143.

The perceived tensions between Perpetua's account and the surrounding narrative have also troubled Elizabeth Castelli. As mentioned above, Castelli favors a definition of martyrdom created by the literature which popularizes the martyr rather than the initial act of self-sacrifice. It therefore comes as a surprise to see Castelli totally disregard the author of the *Passio* in favor of a detailed analysis of Perpetua's account. Her reasons for doing so sound all too familiar:

Because the diary is contained within a framing narrative written by someone else, interpreters have sometimes sought to uncover points of tension between Perpetua's self-narration and the narrative of her redactor. Questions of authority trouble the writer of the framing narrative from the very start; for Perpetua herself these are not pressing questions.⁵⁰

The framing of Perpetua is an idea which Castelli owes to the work of Brent Shaw, who strongly castigates the narrator of the *Passio* for surrounding Perpetua's account with his own misinformed theology in order to suppress the radical nature of her message. In the eyes of Shaw the narrated account of the executions served as an editorial bracketing to the original accounts of Perpetua and Saturus:

The edited document as we have it, therefore, includes Vibia Perpetua's experiences, but systematically brackets them with a complicated preface which attempts to lay out the terms on which her account is to be understood by the reader and listener alike, and by a tailpiece that is meant to conclude her story.

Shaw is cautious enough to avoid directly attributing this "editing" of the *Passio* to Tertullian, but he makes it clear that the narrator was a paternalist who embraced Tertullian's traditionalist point of view on feminine modesty: "If he [Tertullian] was the editor, the case of the degree and type of male reinterpretation is strengthened; if not, the case still stands."⁵¹

A complete reading of the *Passio*, in which the self-narrated accounts of the martyr were analyzed in agreement with the surrounding narrative, would benefit scholars like Castelli. Those

⁵⁰ Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 86.

⁵¹ Shaw, "The Passion of Perpetua," 30.

scholars who have leaned towards more holistic reading of the *Passio Perpetuae* find that it stands out as a unique piece of early Christian literature, steeped in the sort of theatricality which would convince a community of a martyr's *praesantia* and *potentia*. In his introduction for the *Passio Perpetuae* in *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, Herbert Musurillo hails this *Passio* as “the archetype of all later Acts of Christian martyrs.”⁵² If it truly is an archetype, then it is time for more scholars to treat it like one.

Separating the *Passio Perpetuae* from the works of Tertullian can benefit the other areas of research as well. Christine Trevett, the author of the only English historical monograph on Montanism, admits that the emergence of Montanism is shrouded in mystery. The only intact Montanist writings were preserved in the corpus of Tertullian, a man whose theological status was too dynamic to characterize as being wholly Montanist or entirely orthodox. Trevett discusses the difficulties in using Tertullian as a source on early Montanism: “One could treat Tertullian’s Montanist writings as being maverick about Montanism or more generously see them as evidence only for the phenomenon in North Africa. One might disregard all he has to say.”⁵³ The fact that the narrative portion of the *Passio* is a Montanist document is not in dispute, but some still argue that only the surrounding narrative represents Montanist theology.⁵⁴ If the *Passio Perpetuae* can be dissociated from Tertullian once and for all, it would be the only intact proto-Montanist document known survive. Trevett uses the term “New Prophecy” to distinguish the Montanists of the second and third century from later forms of the heresy known only by the slanderous remarks of the orthodox opposition. If Trevett even finds Tertullian a poor imitation

⁵² Herbert Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford Clarendon Press, 1972): xxv.

⁵³ Trevett, *Montanism*, 13.

⁵⁴ For a detailed discussion of the Montanism of the *Passio Perpetuae*, see Frederick C. Klawiter, “The Role of Martyrdom and Persecution in the Development of the Priestly Authority of Women in Early Christianity: A Case Study,” *Church History*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (Sep., 1980): 251-261.

of this early branch of Christianity, then the *Passio* becomes infinitely more important to her study. Closer studies on the differences in theology between Tertullian and the *Passio* could yield some new information on early Montanism. It could even be used to argue that the “holy man” as Peter Brown envisioned him, had his roots in this Phrygian cult over three centuries before his emergence in Syria.

The central aim of this thesis is to treat the *Passio S. Perpetuae* as a text, uniform in its theological message once again. Scholars have drawn a sharp line between the narrator’s account and Perpetua’s. Scholars like Dodds and Dronke claim that the “Perpetua of the diary” would never act like the Perpetua of the surrounding narrative. They have characterized the surrounding narrative as a fictitious account bordering on sadism. This thesis contends that the narrator and the accounts of Perpetua and Saturus present a uniform theological message to the Montanist community for which they were written. It also contends that the text contains clear examples of Montanism in all of its sections. Moreover, the narrator preserves the events of the martyrdom with a degree of accuracy unparalleled in earlier martyrdom accounts that mainly consist of trial transcripts loaded with lofty, rhetorical speech. The *Passio* distinguishes itself for what it teaches about Montanism. It remains the only early Montanist work to survive besides the works of Tertullian. This makes it a document of immense historical value.

CHAPTER 1: MOTHERHOOD AND PROPHECY

The self-written accounts contained in the *Passio* become something greater than autobiographical prison journals when they are observed in conjunction with the surrounding narrative. Elizabeth Castelli notes that the accounts of Perpetua and Saturus, which look like simple records of daily events, also appear to address an audience: “The self-writing involved here turns increasingly inward, but it also continues to address an implied reader, an imagined audience.”⁵⁵ An author, whether his/her audience is real or imagined, writes to convey some overall message—something the writer of a diary would refrain from doing. Thomas Heffernan objects to the use of the term “prison diary,” which is often used to describe Perpetua’s account. He, instead, considers the account to be representative of a rhetorically subtle but nevertheless classically established genre: “The *Passio* is more properly a self-conscious *journal in time*, what Tertullian and other of his contemporaries would have classified as *hypomnemata* or, to use its Latin equivalent, *commentarius*.”⁵⁶ Scholars who have characterized these accounts as “diaries” fail to recognize their underlying messages. By dismissing these portions of the *Passio* in this way, the reader fails to recognize their connection to the surrounding narrative. This is not to say that the events which it records are untrue, but it does seem that the writers of the account wanted to convey a deeper message than previously attempted in martyr *Acta*.

Heffernan considers the *Passio Perpetuae* to be the main forerunner to the medieval genre of hagiography—particularly female hagiography. The *Passio Perpetuae* is not the oldest account of martyrdom; Perpetua is not even the first female martyr to receive detailed coverage in the literature. The Latin Recension of the *Acts of Carpus, Papyllus, and Agathonike* provides

⁵⁵ Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 84.

⁵⁶ Thomas Heffernan, “Philology and Authorship of the *Passio Santarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis*,” *Traditio*, vol. 50 (1995): 320-21.

an expanded discourse between the female martyr Agathonike and the proconsul Optimus.⁵⁷ The martyrdom of Blandina in the *Letter of the Church of Lyons* expanded the role of the female martyr further, by consciously manipulating the concept of *imitatio Christi* to suite a female character.⁵⁸ Despite these early examples, it was the *Passio* which firmly established the boundaries of female hagiography. Heffernan outlines four main qualities found in most female hagiography up into the medieval period: “They are: the redefinition of ideas of kinship; freedom from the Pauline notion of sexual ‘indebtedness’; the importance of prophetic visions; and the change from virgin, wife, or widow to *sponsa Christi*.”⁵⁹ The first three qualities become apparent in the visions of Perpetua’s account, the fourth manifests itself in the follow up account of her death by the narrator. Once the reader looks at the work as a unified piece of literature, the message becomes clear—by forsaking her earthly bonds, Perpetua has transformed herself from a Roman *matrona* into a spiritual *matrona* or, rather, a *matrona Christi*.

This shift in the genre of martyr accounts is due to the heavy Montanist theology present within the text. The introduction suggests a reverence for new examples of faith:

If old examples of faith, both testifying to the grace of God, and performing the edification of mankind, on that account are spread in the literature, so that by the reading of them as if by representing the events again, both God is honored and mankind is strengthened; why is new evidence not also spread, serving both causes equally?

*Si uetera fidei exempla et Dei gratiam testificantia et aedificationem hominis operantia, propterea in litteris sunt digesta, ut lectione eorum quasi repraesentatione rerum et Deus honoretur et homo confortetur; cur non et noua documenta aequae utriusque causae conuenientia et digerantur?*⁶⁰

⁵⁷ “Martyrum Carpi Episcopi et Pamfili Diaconi et Agathonicae,” in *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, Musurillo, ed., VI.

⁵⁸ “The Martyrs of Lyons,” in *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* Musurillo, ed., I, 54.

⁵⁹ Heffernan, *Sacred Biography*, 185.

⁶⁰ “Passio S. Perpetuae,” in *The Passion of S. Perpetua*, Robinson, ed. I, 1.

Montanists were known to accept “new prophecy” into the Christian canon along with the apostolic scriptures of an earlier day.⁶¹ The willingness of the narrator to accept *noua documenta* equally alongside *uetera exempla*, is an indication of this belief. The heavy emphasis placed on the visions of Perpetua and her ability to prophesize fits into this concept well. Prophetic visions were probably expected to have deeper levels of meaning and as a woman “liberally educated,” *liberaliter instituta*, Perpetua was well prepared for the task of interpreting those visions to the satisfaction of an audience.⁶²

Scholars have often failed to grasp the connection between Perpetua’s prophecy and the narrator’s Montanist prologue. Brent Shaw primarily divides the *Passio Perpetuae* along theological lines. Shaw considers the narrator’s heavy “theological envoy” to be in direct opposition to Perpetua’s account. This interpretation is in part due to the different writing styles employed by the narrator and by Perpetua. According to Shaw, Perpetua’s account exhibits all the innocence of a daily journal, completely devoid of religious proselytism. A close look at the *Passio* will disprove this point of view. Perpetua’s account bears a theological message equal to that of the narrator. Although the narrator is the one who identifies himself as the Montanist with his introduction, Perpetua shows all the signs of being one as well. Her ability to interpret divine prophecy, her authoritative status among fellow Christians, and her radical attitudes toward traditional family life all demonstrate a Montanist background.

Shaw considers Perpetua’s account to be a record of personal triumph against what he perceives as male tyranny. This romantic notion contrasts sharply with the narrator’s description of her as the “matron of Christ,” *matrona Christi*. Nevertheless, Perpetua’s radical attitude toward family life does not indicate a complete abandonment of the concept. Perpetua’s account

⁶¹ Trevett, *Montanism*, 133-35.

⁶² “Passio S. Perpetuae,” II, 1.

gives no indication of defeating male tyranny or male-dominated society; her real struggle is with pagan tyranny. Perpetua's transformation from mother to prophet is more like a completion or perfection of the typical female gender role, not the destruction of it. Her earthly motherhood translates itself into a spiritual motherhood. She becomes the intercessor of her Christian community, comparable to a *matrona* who acts as a moral instructor for a Roman household's children.⁶³ As a mother, as a daughter, even as a *matrona Christi*, Perpetua follows a Roman archetype which is designed to influence a Roman audience.

A close reading of Perpetua's account will make its connection with the surrounding narrative clear. The section of the *Passio* commonly attributed to Perpetua runs from chapters three to ten, comprising one hundred and sixty-six lines in Robinson's edition, nearly a third of the entire work. The emphasis on family ties can be felt immediately. As soon as the narrator introduces her with, "When hitherto, she said..." *Cum ad huc, inquit*, Perpetua starts to talk about her father.⁶⁴ She tells us that he had come to see her while she was "with her prosecutors," *cum prosecutoribus essem*, in order to "avert," *euertere*, her and "cast her out, for his own affection," *deiecere pro sua affectione*.⁶⁵ This sets the stage for a conflict which will last throughout her narrative and which will ultimately end with the dissolution from all her familial obligations. Her father's behavior in this first encounter is rather aggressive. Once she explains to him that she cannot be anything other than that which she is, "I am a Christian," *Christiana sum*, Perpetua's father "sent himself against me in order to tear out my eyes," *mittit se in me ut oculos erueret*.⁶⁶ This violent moment is important because it sets up a pattern of transition which culminates in his loss of authority over her as *paterfamilias*.

⁶³ Suzanne Dixon, *The Roman Mother*, (University of Oklahoma Press, 1988): 6-7.

⁶⁴ "Passio S. Perpetuae," III, 1.

⁶⁵ "Passio S. Perpetuae," III, 1.

⁶⁶ "Passio S. Perpetuae," III, 2-3.

Perpetua's baptism follows soon after this event. There is nothing stressed about the baptism itself, other than the fact that it leads to her arrest a few days later: "After a few days we were taken into prison; and I was terrified since I had never experienced such darkness. Oh bitter day," *post paucos dies recipimur in carcerem; et expaui, quia numquam experta eram tales tenebras. O diem asperum.*⁶⁷ Her exclamation on the condition of prison life is important, because her discomfort can only be set right by the presence of her infant son. Perpetua calls for the baby in order to feed him, and she learns that he will be allowed to remain with her for a time. This completely reverses the former condition of Perpetua's imprisonment: "And immediately I got well and was relieved of labor and uneasiness for my infant, and prison was suddenly made to me a palace," *et statim conualui et releuata sum a labore et sollicitudine infantis, et factus est mihi carcer subito praetorium.*⁶⁸ Two other members of Perpetua's family appear at this point in her account—her mother and her brother. Although they have a small role in the account, their presence in this opening chapter along with her father and infant son is significant. The entire (surviving) family would seem to be at the prison with her. Perpetua is never more bound to her earthly family than she is at the beginning of the account.

The next chapter begins with an encounter between Perpetua and her brother. He is not a literal brother, like the one mentioned earlier in the account. This brother is a fellow Christian who was imprisoned along with her. He informs her that she has achieved a special status: "Lady Sister you are now in great dignity, so great that you may request a vision and it might be shown to you whether this is a passion or a pardon" *Domina soror, iam in magna dignatione es, tanta ut postules uisionem et ostendatur tibi an passio sit an commeatus.*⁶⁹ This brother introduces Perpetua to her new role in this Christian family—a prophetic role which holds a great deal of

⁶⁷ "Passio S. Perpetuae," III, 6-7.

⁶⁸ "Passio S. Perpetuae," III, 9.

⁶⁹ "Passio S. Perpetuae," IV, 1.

authority. He greets Perpetua by calling attention to her noble rank, *Domina*, in order to inform her that she has, in fact, achieved a new spiritual rank as well. She now has the ability to commune with God through visions. The verbs which she uses to describe this gift are *fabulari* and *postulavi*, words of “speaking” and “asking.” It therefore must be stressed that Perpetua’s visions are different from regular dreams. They are established lines of communication to God. There is an understanding that Perpetua is actively engaging in prophecy. The prophetess could ask God for particular information and her prayers were undoubtedly heard. Montanism was known for its charismatic female prophets. From the very earliest days of the New Prophecy in Asia Minor, the group was associated with powerful female women. Maximilla, Prisca, and Quintilla were three in particular who would achieve a status equal with Montanus himself.⁷⁰ The recognition of Perpetua as *Domina* from the male catechumen can also be seen as a recognition of the authoritative role Perpetua will eventually hold over this prison community.

Perpetua’s first vision follows soon afterward. She immediately encounters a bronze ladder, “of remarkable magnitude,” *mirae magnitudine*.⁷¹ The ladder is “narrow,” *angustam*, and attached to its side was “every sort of iron weapon,” *omne genus ferramentorum*.⁷² Perpetua realizes that this dangerous arrangement prevents anyone from ascending alongside of her. This observation seems redundant until a few lines later, when we learn that Saturus, identified earlier as the leader of the group, is present as well. Since the ladder can only be climbed by one person at a time, it is now clear that Perpetua will not be able to rely on Saturus for help. She must make the ascent on her own. Saturus is the first to ascend the ladder. When Perpetua begins to follow after him, she encounters a huge “serpent,” *draco*, at the ladder’s foot.⁷³ She steps on its head,

⁷⁰ Trevett, *Montanism*, 159-60.

⁷¹ “Passio S. Perpetuae,” IV, 3.

⁷² “Passio S. Perpetuae,” IV, 3.

⁷³ “Passio S. Perpetuae,” IV, 6.

“as if I were treading on the first step,” *quasi primum gradum calcerem*.⁷⁴ The symbolic victory over the serpent from Genesis is an easy one to grasp, but it also constitutes the completion of one of the four criteria Heffernan established for female martyrdom, the “freedom of sexual indebtedness.”⁷⁵ Perpetua’s triumph in the first vision is an overturning of the fall of mankind brought about by Eve.

Once Perpetua has ascended the ladder, she finds herself in an “immense space of garden,” *spatium immensum horti*.⁷⁶ In the center of the field, a “grey-haired man,” *canum hominem*, sits in “the clothes of a shepherd,” *in habitu pastoris*.⁷⁷ He greets Perpetua, calling her “child,” *tegnon*, and offers her, “from the cheese which he was milking,” *de caseo quod mulgebat*.⁷⁸ Scholars have debated this complicated set of images a great deal. The general understanding is that this cheese has some kind of sacramental function.⁷⁹ This fact seems to be confirmed by the taste left in Perpetua’s mouth when she awakens from the vision. It is hard to pin down the exact meaning of the *caseo* in this context, but Perpetua’s reaction is more significant than a precise definition. She seems to react to the “sweetness,” *dulce* by predicting the group’s impending martyrdom.⁸⁰ The father-like shepherd will later be linked to a description of Perpetua’s real father by the word, “grey,” *canum hominem*. This heavenly figure has offered Perpetua something (paradise) in return for something else (earthly existence) and by accepting the cheese she has replaced her earthly father with a heavenly one.

It comes as no surprise to see Perpetua’s father return at the beginning of the next chapter. His situation in this encounter has become much more desperate. He now begs Perpetua

⁷⁴ “Passio S. Perpetuae,” IV, 7.

⁷⁵ Heffernan, *Sacred Biography*

⁷⁶ “Passio S. Perpetuae,” IV, 8.

⁷⁷ “Passio S. Perpetuae,” IV, 8.

⁷⁸ “Passio S. Perpetuae,” IV, 9.

⁷⁹ Heffernan, *Sacred Biography*, 206-9.

⁸⁰ “Passio S. Perpetuae,” IV, 10.

to reconsider for the sake of her family: “Look to your brothers, look to your mother, look to your mother’s sister, look to your son who will not be able to live without you,” *Aspice fratres tuos, aspice matrem tuam et materteram, aspice filium tuum qui post te uiuere non poterit.*⁸¹

Perpetua is no longer rejecting her father alone; she is now forced to reject her entire family. Her father now recognizes her enhanced status for he addresses her as *Domina*:

These things he was saying as if a father for the sake of his own piety kissing my hands and throwing himself to my feet and crying, calling me not daughter but Mistress.

*Haec dicebat quasi pater pro sua pietate basians mihi manus et se ad pedes meos iactans et lacrimans me iam non filiam nominabat, sed dominam.*⁸²

It is clear at this moment that the roles of father and daughter have been reversed. The term *Domina* is one which is intimately tied to the word for the extended Roman household of a wealthier citizen—a *domus*. The *dominus* or *domina* is one who manages that household. The term is not just in reference to the *patria potestas* of a Roman father, but also the authority over his household slaves, known as *famuli*.⁸³ By addressing Perpetua as *Domina*, her father is completely submitting to her in the hope that she will preserve their *domus*—not just his property, but also his family and status. Perpetua holds dominion over the family because her actions will now determine their fate. The father admits this when he asks her to “put aside her pride, so that you do not ruin all of us,” *Depone animos; ne uniuersos nos extermines.*⁸⁴ Perpetua recognizes that her father is saying these things, “for his own duty,” *pro sua pietate.*⁸⁵ *Pietas* in this context could be a reference to her father’s devotion to his own religion. It could also refer to his duty as a Roman father, or Roman as a citizen devoted to the emperor. It is, nevertheless, a

⁸¹ “Passio S. Perpetuae,” V, 3.

⁸² “Passio S. Perpetuae,” V, 5.

⁸³ *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae*, vol. IV, 1936-41.

⁸⁴ “Passio S. Perpetuae,” V, 4.

⁸⁵ “Passio S. Perpetuae,” V, 5.

selfish devotion and Perpetua is not swayed by his arguments, “arguments” which she has already associated with the devil, *cum argumentis diaboli*.⁸⁶

The next encounter which Perpetua has with her father takes place before the procurator Hilarianus. Perpetua and her comrades are called to answer to the charge of being Christian. Hilarianus begins by entreating Perpetua in the same way her father had done only days before: “Spare your father’s grey hairs, spare your small son. Make a sacrifice for the health of the emperors,” *Parce, inquit, canis patris tui, parce infantiae pueri. Fac sacrum pro salute imperatorum*.⁸⁷ This repetition of the father’s previous speech suggests that there is more at stake here than family. The emperor has now been included in the dialogue. The rejection of her own *paterfamilias* is now paralleled with her rejection of the quintessential Roman *paterfamilias*. Heffernan links this rejection of father with a rejection of tradition:

The terrible scenes of rending family ties between Perpetua and her father, who was not only the *paterfamilias* but also represented the old traditions, the Roman way, clearly illustrate this pattern of renunciation.⁸⁸

Perpetua’s father is then taken aside and beaten in sight of everyone. Perpetua continues to emphasize his old age: “Thus I grieved for his miserable old age,” *sic dolui pro senecta eius misera*.⁸⁹ In emphasizing his age, Perpetua is also emphasizing his weakness. The father’s failure to control his daughter is a very powerful sign of Roman society collapsing in on itself. The early Montanists were known for promoting a radical eschatology.⁹⁰ Perpetua’s account alludes to these beliefs by portraying a frail *paterfamilias* begging at the feet of his triumphant Christian daughter.

⁸⁶ “Passio S. Perpetuae,” III, 3.

⁸⁷ “Passio S. Perpetuae,” VI, 3.

⁸⁸ Heffernan, *Sacred Biography*, 214.

⁸⁹ “Passio S. Perpetuae,” VI, 5.

⁹⁰ Trevett, *Montanism*, 95.

Perpetua returns to the prison with her fellow companions: “Joyful we descended to the prison,” *et hilares descendimus ad carcerem*.⁹¹ She soon learns that the one thing which brought her joy in the prison has been taken away from her, when she sends the deacon Pomponius to bring her infant to her, “but her father did not wish to give him,” *sed pater dare noluit*.⁹² For some reason, Perpetua’s situation is not as desperate as it was when she first entered prison. She indicates that God gives her relief from the pangs of her breastfeeding, but as a mother Perpetua needs something more. After a few days she hears a voice from her childhood: “While we were praying, suddenly in the middle of speech a voice was sent forth by me and I called Dinocrates by name,” *subito media oratione profecta est mihi uox et nominaui Dinocratem*.⁹³ This recollection of a long dead sibling inspires Perpetua to pray on his behalf: “And I began to pray much and groan to the Lord concerning that same boy,” *et coepi de ipso orationem facere multum et ingemescere ad dominum*.⁹⁴ Once again, Perpetua is blessed with a vision, but this time it is not a pleasant one. She sees Dinocrates across a great “chasm,” *diastema*, which neither of them was able to cross.⁹⁵ He still suffered from the ailment which killed him and he appeared to suffer from a thirst which he could not satisfy. A basin of water (*piscina*) is nearby but he is not tall enough to draw water from it. The painful imagery of this vision has to be linked to the loss of her infant, who is also separated by an insurmountable distance.

Perpetua now feels an urgent need to relieve Dinocrates from his current state. She explains her need to struggle for the sake of her dead brother: “And I prayed for that brother day and night, groaning and weeping, so that he might be given to me,” *et feci pro illo orationem die*

⁹¹ “Passio S. Perpetuae,” VI, 7.

⁹² “Passio S. Perpetuae,” VI, 7.

⁹³ “Passio S. Perpetuae,” VII, 1.

⁹⁴ “Passio S. Perpetuae,” VII, 2.

⁹⁵ “Passio S. Perpetuae,” VII, 6.

*et nocte gemens et lacrimans ut mihi donaretur.*⁹⁶ Perpetua's use of the terms "groaning" and "crying" indicate that this is a very personal experience for her. She is clearly suffering on behalf of the dead child. Her efforts do not go unrewarded, as she is given another vision: "I saw that place which I had seen before and Dinocrates with a cleanbody, well dressed, and cooling off," *uideo locum illum quem retro uideram et Dinocraten mundo corpore bene uestitum refrigerantem.*⁹⁷ The most significant part of this vision comes at the very end when Perpetua observes Dinocrates "rejoicing to play in the manner of infants," *ludere more infantium gaudens.*⁹⁸ She has now made the connection to her own son through the word "infant."

Giselle de Nie points out the obvious connection between Dinocrates and Perpetua's infant son: "They [the visions] may exhibit in image form her transformation for her relation with her living infant son: his weaning from her breast-feeding. If so, her motherhood is thereby spiritualized."⁹⁹ Perpetua uses her new abilities as a prophet to replace her lost role as a mother. By acting as an intercessor for Dinocrates, she accepts a new spiritualized form of motherhood. This kind of motherhood is not limited to her own son or even other relatives. She demonstrates the ability of the Confessor. Montanists believed that a Christian confessing to their Christianity in the face of martyrdom held the power of the keys, which gave them the authority to forgive sin.¹⁰⁰ This power is essentially the same one claimed by the Pope through the Petrain Doctrine. It allows the Confessor to absolve sin, meaning that he or she literally holding the keys to heaven. Although Dinocrates is never described as a sinner, it is reasonable to assume that he was never baptized. He is, therefore, guilty of original sin from the Christian point of view. The *piscina* which Dinocrates cannot reach hints at the baptism which he was never able to receive in

⁹⁶ "Passio S. Perpetuae," VII, 10.

⁹⁷ "Passio S. Perpetuae," VIII, 1.

⁹⁸ "Passio S. Perpetuae," VIII, 4.

⁹⁹ de Nie, "Consciousness Fecund Through God," 119.

¹⁰⁰ Klawiter, "The Role of Martyrdom," 254.

life. In fact, the baptism motif repeats itself throughout Perpetua's entire account.¹⁰¹ In the first vision, Perpetua liberates herself from original sin; in the second and third visions she demonstrates an ability to do the same for others.

Other scholars have emphasized an inward connection with Perpetua's pagan self. Peter Dronke notes that Perpetua's conception of the afterlife in these visions is inspired by pagan tradition rather than Christian: "This particular torment that Dinocrates experiences is akin to the one by which the mythic Tantalus was punished—having the longed-for water was very near but always unattainable."¹⁰² Marie Louise von Franz considers Dinocrates to be the "pagan attitude" of Perpetua as embodied in an inner child due, "to the fact that pagan consciousness is relatively infantile when compared to the Christian attitude."¹⁰³ Perpetua's prayers for Dinocrates become a further rejection of the pagan self in favor of the Christian self. By seeking the Christian salvation of her inner child, Perpetua can finally put her pagan past to rest. Von Franz also notes a structural parallelism between the first vision and the second: "In both cases it is a matter of reaching something higher; the ascent of the ladder to an extra-mundane place, and Dinocrates reaching up to the *piscina* which is too high for him."¹⁰⁴ Although Dronke and von Franz are both guilty of anachronistically applying modern notions of the self and consciousness onto Perpetua's account, they do hit upon an interesting idea. By interceding to help a deceased pagan family member, Perpetua gains confidence and conviction in her new calling. This is something which she does not receive from her living relatives.

¹⁰¹ Alwyn Pettersen, "Perpetua: Prisoner of Conscience," *Vigiliae Christianae*, vol. 41, no. 2 (1987): 148.

¹⁰² Dronke, *Women Writer's of the Middle Ages*, 11.

¹⁰³ von Franz, *The Passion of Perpetua*, 38.

¹⁰⁴ von Franz, *The Passion of Perpetua*, 43.

A final brief encounter with her father ensues. It seems to be a recapitulation of their last encounter. The main purpose of repeating this scene at this point would probably be to reemphasize the prostration of the father before the daughter:

And he began to tear out his beard and send it to the ground and to prostrate himself on his face and to lament his years.

*Et coepit barbam suam euellere et in terram mittere, et prosternere se in faciem, et inproperare annis suis.*¹⁰⁵

All of the elements of the previous encounter are present, but with an added emphasis on the father's despair. His prostration before Perpetua is worth mentioning because it will have a bearing on her final vision.

In the fourth vision, Perpetua comes into contact with the deacon Pomponius who appears in brilliant attire: "He was dressed in an ungirt white tunic, having elaborate shoes," *qui erat uestitus discincta candida, habens multiplices galliculas.*¹⁰⁶ It comes as a surprise to learn that she will not be sent to the beasts, but will instead engage in gladiatorial combat. Pomponius leads her to the middle of the amphitheater where the *munus* or "public show" will be held. He then leaves her and she encounters her adversary, the Egyptian, whom she "sees rolling in the dust," *uideo in afa uolutantem.*¹⁰⁷ These serpentine undulations of the Egyptian link him to the serpent from the first vision. Young men approach her "as patrons and assistants," *adiutores et fautores.*¹⁰⁸ They strip her down and she "becomes masculine," *et expoliata sum et facta sum masculus.*¹⁰⁹ A man of enormous stature then appears to officiate over the event. He carries "the staff like a lanista," *uirgam quasi lanista*, in one hand and a "green branch" with "golden apples"

¹⁰⁵ "Passio S. Perpetuae," IX, 2.

¹⁰⁶ "Passio S. Perpetuae," X, 2.

¹⁰⁷ "Passio S. Perpetuae," X, 7.

¹⁰⁸ "Passio S. Perpetuae," X, 6.

¹⁰⁹ "Passio S. Perpetuae," X, 7.

et ramum uiridem in quo errant mala aurea, in the other.¹¹⁰ His extravagant appearance parallels the décor of Pomponius, both having “complex shoes,” *galliculas multiformes*.¹¹¹ This connection points to the fact that both figures hold authority over Perpetua. As a deacon Pomponius is a visible sign of the institution for which Perpetua is giving up her life. The *lanista*-like figure presides over the death-match in this vision in much the same way the real Pomponius will watch her die later on. There is perhaps a slight hint of criticism directed towards the clergy, who sit by while the martyrs take the real action. This stance against the clergy can also be seen in Saturus’s account, when the bishop Optatus and the presbyter Aspasius are cast into subordinate roles.¹¹²

Perpetua’s struggle with the Egyptian has some vivid qualities. She is miraculously raised up in the air in order to aid her fight: “And I was raised in the air and I began to strike him thus, as if not treading on earth,” *et sublata sum inaere et coepi eum sic caedebam quasi terram non calcans*.¹¹³ This image seems to be connected with an ongoing metaphor between feet and submission. The Egyptian misses his opportunity to grab her feet: “That Egyptian was wishing to grasp my feet,” *ille mihi pedes adprehendere uolebat*.¹¹⁴ Perpetua is somehow hoisted into the air making this impossible. She finally defeats him by “trampling upon his head,” *calcaui illi caput*, but not before, “he fell on his face,” *cecidit in faciem*.¹¹⁵ Mary Lefkowitz links the prostration of Perpetua’s father with this final battle: “The explanation of the repeated metaphor of trampling becomes apparent when we remember that her father, in their last interview, threw himself at her

¹¹⁰ “Passio S. Perpetuae,” X, 8.

¹¹¹ “Passio S. Perpetuae,” X, 8.

¹¹² “Passio S. Perpetuae,” XI-XIII.

¹¹³ “Passio S. Perpetuae,” X, 11.

¹¹⁴ “Passio S. Perpetuae,” X, 10.

¹¹⁵ “Passio S. Perpetuae,” X, 11.

feet.”¹¹⁶ Feet seem to be a reoccurring symbol of authority in the account: The *lanista* and Pomponius have elaborate shoes, Perpetua tramples the serpent and the Egyptian with her feet, her father grovels at her feet, and the Egyptian cannot reach her feet. The repeated imagery bolsters the growing authority of Perpetua throughout the course of her dream. Her victory in this vision signals a transcendence of her gender role. She no longer is subject to masculine signs of earthly authority. She now only recognizes a higher authority, symbolized by the *lanista*, whose role in the vision seems to suggest a connection with God.

The narrator follows with the smaller account of Saturus, who also wrote a self-written “diary” containing his own vision. Instead of ascending a ladder one before the other, Perpetua and Saturus are brought up to heaven, side by side, by the help of four angels. At one point in the vision Optatus the “bishop,” *episcopus* of Carthage, and the learned “priest,” *presbutos*, Aspasius approach Perpetua and Saturus with sad and dreary expressions:

And they set themselves at our feet and said: Make peace among us, because you have gone out and abandoned us thus. And we said to them: Are you not our father and our priest, how can you place yourselves at our feet?

*Et miserunt se ad pedes nobis et dixerunt: Componite inter nos, quia existis, et sic nos reliquistis. Et diximus illis: Non tu es papa noster et tu presbyter, ut uos ad pedes nobis mittatis?*¹¹⁷

This encounter seems to place Optatus and Aspasius in a position of subordination to both Perpetua and Saturus, who have achieved greater status as martyrs than mortal bishops can hope for. Granting prophets a higher degree of authority in respect to the clergy was a tenet of early Montanism.¹¹⁸ What is even more significant about Saturus’ account is the relative equality he

¹¹⁶ Mary Lefkowitz, “The Motivations of St. Perpetua’s Martyrdom,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 44, No. 3 (1976): 419.

¹¹⁷ “Passio Perpetuae,” XIII, 3.

¹¹⁸ Trevett, *Montanism*, 147.

shares with Perpetua throughout the vision. Equality between male and female prophets can be traced back to the founder Montanus and the prophetesses Priscilla and Maximilla.¹¹⁹

Saturus continues his vision with a description of paradise quite different from the one presented by Perpetua. Although the two foremost members of the Carthaginian church are featured in this vision, they are not allowed access to Saturus' paradise. The four angels, who brought Saturus and Perpetua to heaven, chastise the Optatus, who sorrowfully stands apart from everyone else:

Correct your people, because they approach you as if returning from the circus, arguing about different factions.

*Corrige plebem tuam, quia sic ad te conueniunt quasi de circo redeuntes et de factionibus certantes.*¹²⁰

Although Saturus and Perpetua are equal in his vision, Saturus recognizes Perpetua's unique role as an intercessor. It is Perpetua who speaks to the two clergymen: "And Perpetua began to speak to them in Greek, *et Perpetua graece cum illis loqui.*"¹²¹ Not only does this support the narrator's claim of a Perpetua *liberaliter instituta*, it also demonstrates her role as an intercessor. In this case, she is a spokesperson who is depicted conversing with their bishop. Unlike Perpetua's account, Saturus holds a critical view of the Carthaginian clergy, and the petty debates in which they are entangled. The fact that he includes this as part of his vision suggests that he felt his position as martyr gave him the right to offer Optatus his criticism, albeit in the form of a posthumous account of a vision from God. Church hierarchy holds no significance for Saturus.

Scholars who look unfavorably on the narrator of the *Passio* do so because of a perceived difference between the authoritative *Domina*-figure Perpetua's account and the more submissive

¹¹⁹ Trevett, *Montanism*, 162.

¹²⁰ "Passio Perpetuae," XIII, 6.

¹²¹ "Passio Perpetuae," XIII, 4.

matrona Christi offered by the narrator. Certain scholars consider the *matrona Christi* motif to be an attempt by the narrator to put her into a more appropriate role.¹²² A spiritualized *matrona* is still only a mother. If it is true that the *paterfamilias* held all legal authority over his family, it is also true that the *matrona* shared in the responsibility of exercising that authority over children and *famuli*. This authority was usually applied to moral education, but could easily be applied to more pragmatic aspects of development. Suzanne Dixon states that though the actual authority of a *matrona* may vary due to several factors, the ideal of the *matrona* was nonetheless powerful:

All of these elements combined to produce a formidable stereotype, strongest in the aristocratic echelons, of the unbending moral mentor, guardian of traditional virtue and object of a lifelong respect comparable with, though not equal to, that accorded to the *paterfamilias*.¹²³

Cornelia, the mother of the Gracchi, and Attia the mother of Octavius are two noteworthy examples of mothers who acted as authoritative figures over their famous sons. These women took very active roles in grooming their children for virtuous living. As a *matrona Christi*, Perpetua may be understood as being in some way subordinate to Christ, but she is also a moral paragon for the Christian community—one that exercises Christ’s authority as *paterfamilias* to encourage the moral development of her children.

The narrator continues to develop the theme of the *matrona Christi*, which began to take shape in Perpetua’s visions, and continued to manifest itself in the visions of Saturus. The narrator describes the fateful day as a victory procession:

The day of their victory dawned, and they proceeded from the prison into the amphitheater as if into heaven, joyful, with a pleasant countenance, as if, quaking with happiness, not with fear.

¹²² See Shaw, “The Passion of Perpetua”; Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages*.

¹²³ Dixon, *The Roman Mother*, 6-7.

*Illuxit dies uictoriae illorum, et processerunt de carcere in amphitheatrum quasi in caelum hilares, uultu decori, si forte gaudio pauentes non timore.*¹²⁴

Perpetua's entrance is singled out from all the rest: "Perpetua was following with a shining countenance and a bright gait, as a matron of Christ, a favorite of God," *sequebatur Perpetua lucido uultu et placido incessu ut matrona Christi, ut Dei delicata.*¹²⁵ This image is repeated when Perpetua and Felicitas are attacked by "the most savage cow," *ferocissimam uaccam*, which is sent against them.¹²⁶ In this scene, Perpetua is again linked to the Roman *matrona*, by her conscientious desire to tidy her appearance after having been struck by the cow. Perpetua fixes her clothes and pins her hair, "more mindful of modesty than pain," *pudoris potius memor quam doloris.*¹²⁷

This often misunderstood quotation was probably intended to show Perpetua's miraculous resilience from the cow's charge rather than act as social commentary on women's attire or behavior. Perpetua fixes her hair in order to assure the crowd that her appearance does not denote any sort of dissatisfaction with her fate: "So that she would not seem to lament in her glory," *ne in sua Gloria plangere uideretur.*¹²⁸ Not only is she uninjured by the animal, she is hardly phased by the event at all. In the very next line, the narrator casts Perpetua once again in a strong, active role: "Thus she rose and approached Felicitas, since she had seen her knocked out, and she offered her hand to that woman and made her rise," *ita surrexit et elisam Felicitatem cum uidisset, accessit et manum ei tradidit et suscitauit illam.*¹²⁹ It is not difficult to see the

¹²⁴ "Passio S. Perpetuae," XVIII, 1.

¹²⁵ "Passio S. Perpetuae," XVIII, 2.

¹²⁶ "Passio S. Perpetuae," XX, 1.

¹²⁷ "Passio S. Perpetuae," XX, 4.

¹²⁸ "Passio S. Perpetuae," XX, 5.

¹²⁹ "Passio S. Perpetuae," XX, 6.

author's admiration for a woman who can casually dismiss the charge of a wild beast and then offer her hand to a friend in distress.

But it is not mere admiration which motivates the narrator to record these events. The Holy Spirit is credited as an inspiring force in chapter sixteen, just as it was in the introduction: "Since, therefore, the Holy Spirit has permitted the developments of this event to be recorded and by permitting has willed that the order of this event be written," *Quoniam ergo permisit et permittendo uoluit Spiritus Sanctus ordinem ipsius muneris conscribi.*¹³⁰ Now the narrator recognizes Perpetua's authoritative role in the document's production as well:

Although unworthy to supplement the describing of such glory, nevertheless, I shall carry out as if a mandate of Holy Perpetua, nay rather as her *final will and testament*.

*Etsi indigni ad supplementum tantae gloriae describendae, tamen quasi mandatum sanctissimae Perpetuae, immo fideicommissum eius exequimur.*¹³¹

This statement makes it clear that the narrator considers his work to be an extension of Perpetua's martyrdom—a document which testifies to her spirit. In this way, he establishes himself as a subordinate to the work which she has started. This "final will and testament" or *fideicommissum* needs some elaboration, for a *fideicommissum* was more than a mere promise by the beginning of the Severan dynasty. Augustus was the first to recognize the legality of the *fideicommissum*, which allowed the dying party to bestow individual pieces of property to someone other than the heir.¹³² This *fideicommissum* does not refer to physical property, but recognizes the transfer of authority from one party to the other. If the narrator saw Perpetua as a woman with no authority, would he proudly write that he derived his authority from her? The

¹³⁰ "Passio S. Perpetuae," XVI, 1.

¹³¹ "Passio S. Perpetuae," XVI, 1.

¹³² W.W. Buckland, *A Text-Book of Roman Law from Augustus to Justinian* (Cambridge University Press, 1928): 357-58.

true author of the entire *Passio* has now been established—it was Perpetua. Our narrator simply put the finishing touches on her own grand work.

This is not the only evidence which the narrator gives us to indicate that Perpetua took a role of authority and leadership in this Christian community. The tribune supervising the prison had decided to handle the Christians with extra cruelty, “because from the admonitions of very base men, he feared that they might be drawn away in secret from the prison by certain incantations of magic,” *quia ex admonitionibus hominum uanissimorum uerebatur ne subtraherentur de carcere incantationibus aliquibus magicis.*¹³³ The narrator describes how Perpetua stands up for the group, addressing the tribune face-to-face: “To his face, Perpetua responded,” *In faciem ei, Perpetua respondit.*¹³⁴ This statement mirrors her character as it was established in her fourth vision. She is confident and she does not allow herself to show any submissive behavior to the tribune, who is a representative of Roman military authority: “Why do you not at least permit us to refresh ourselves, we most noble victims, namely Caesar’s, about to fight on his birthday,” *Quid utique non permittis nobis refrigerare noxiis nobilissimis, Caesaris scilicet, et natali eiusdem pugnaturis?*¹³⁵ There is pride in this statement. Perpetua shows her eagerness to struggle as a martyr—something which she just as eagerly shares with the tribune. Perpetua forces him to begrudgingly permit her request. Once again, she has shown her ability to intercede on the behalf of others.

Perpetua’s death is portrayed as the culmination of her authority over worldly matters. All of the martyrs display an eagerness for death, but Perpetua is the only one who is required to take her own life. Although Perpetua was spared from the pain brought on by the mad cow’s

¹³³ “Passio S. Perpetuae,” XVI, 2.

¹³⁴ “Passio S. Perpetuae,” XVI, 2.

¹³⁵ “Passio S. Perpetuae,” XVI, 3.

charge, the narrator assures the reader that her martyrdom did involve a legitimate degree of suffering:

Perpetua, however, so that she might taste something of pain, struck between the bones she cried out, and she herself bore the inexperienced gladiator's wandering hand to her own neck.

*Perpetua autem, ut aliquid doloris gustaret, inter ossa conpuncta exulauit, et errantem dexteram tirunculi gladiatoris ipsa in iugulum suum transtulit.*¹³⁶

Suicide was usually discouraged among Christians as a method for obtaining martyrdom. It was a radical solution, practiced only by the most radical groups of Christians. Its practice among Montanists is uncertain, but the earliest adherents of the New Prophecy were quite radical in most other respects. Trevett describes Montanist martyrdom as a “rigour” for death which often bordered on suicide.¹³⁷ The narrator does not mask his own admiration for Perpetua's self-inflicted sacrifice: “Perhaps so great a woman could not have been killed otherwise, who was feared by the unclean spirit, if she had not herself willed it,” *Fortasse tanta femina aliter non potuisset occidi, quae ab immundo spiritu timebatur, nisi ipsa uoluisset.*¹³⁸ The statement reminds the reader that Perpetua is no ordinary woman. She does not even appear to be subject to the most important earthly authority of all—death itself. Her spiritual authority supersedes worldly boundaries and limitations, whether in the form of a *pater, tribunus*, or even the “unclean spirit” itself.

¹³⁶ “Passio S. Perpetuae,” XXI, 9.

¹³⁷ Trevett, *Montanism*, 128

¹³⁸ “Passio S. Perpetuae,” XXI, 10.

CHAPTER 2: TERTULLIAN AND THE NARRATOR OF THE PASSIO

The erroneous association of the *Passio Perpetuae* with the writings of Tertullian stems from difficulties in understanding Tertullian more than from difficulties in interpreting *Perpetua*. Despite a vast body of surviving literature, Tertullian remains an elusive figure to scholars. The only biographical material existing outside of his own *corpus* comes from Jerome's *De Viris Illustribus*, a scant twenty lines of information in all. Even Jerome's information is problematic due primarily to false assumptions and faulty information about the man who was separated from him by almost two centuries. Jerome assumes that a rift with a particular rival at Rome led the middle aged Tertullian to embrace Montanism, a theological shift from which he never recanted: "Because of the envy and insults of the clergy of the church of Rome, he lapsed into Montanism and refers to the New Prophecy in many treatises," *Invidia postea et contumeliis clericorum Romanae Ecclesiae, ad Montani dogma delapsus, in multis libris Nouae Prophetiae meminit.*¹³⁹ T. D. Barnes, the modern scholar most responsible for the currently accepted chronology on Tertullian's work, concludes that the evidence present in the texts of Tertullian presents difficulties in substantiating Jerome's hypothesis. According to Barnes, the assumption of Jerome "rested upon an erroneous belief that in 202 Septimius Severus instigated a universal and systematic but brief persecution."¹⁴⁰ There were actually three separate persecutions, instigated by the governing proconsul in Carthage rather than an empire-wide persecution as Jerome thought.

Barnes instead opts for an explanation involving two major shifts in Tertullian's writing, from "catholic" to Montanist, and then from Montanist to Tertullianist (a mix of Montanist and

¹³⁹ S. Hieronymus, "De Viris Illustribus", LIII, in *Patrologiae Cursus Completus: Omnium SS. Patrum, doctorum Scriptorumque Ecclesiasticorum, Tomus XXIII*, ed. J. P. Migne (Paris: Vrayet, 1845): 662.

¹⁴⁰ Timothy David Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study* (Oxford Clarendon Press: 1971): 31.

proto-orthodox theology suiting his own particular tastes).¹⁴¹ Barnes uses four main criteria for distributing Tertullian's work along this chronology: "historical allusions, references to other works, doctrinal progression, and style."¹⁴² The early period of Tertullian's career, extending from 196 or early 197 to 206/207 differs drastically from his later career, referring to works produced after 210/211. His Montanist phase lies somewhere in the middle, but theological points which can be interpreted as essentially Montanist can be found in works both before and after this period. Barnes freely admits that this chronology is conjectural:

An element of conjecture has deliberately been admitted in order to pose a choice between reasoning and psittacism: should Tertullian's writings be dated by rational speculation or by the mindless repetition of received views? The historian cannot hesitate: rational speculation provides the foundation of his craft.¹⁴³

Barnes believes that rational speculation can divulge a rough understanding of Tertullian's development, but it must never be forgotten that this is only a *rough* understanding; a perfect chronology cannot be established without more information.

Chronology affects any understanding of Tertullian's theology. It must be remembered that the New Prophecy never claimed to be anything other than Christianity, just as all heresies are only perceived as heretical by those that do not subscribe to their doctrines. Tertullian's "Montanist" works are identified as such by specific criteria, such as the use of the term Paraclete to describe the Spirit, or reference to contemporary prophets alongside scriptural ones. Some works are almost irrefutably Montanist, while others only agree in specific qualities. But what *is* Montanist? Christine Trevett struggles to answer this question in her work on Montanism. Trevett's comprehensive study on Montanism separates its earliest phase, which she call the New Prophecy, from the heresy known to later church fathers. She makes this break

¹⁴¹ Barnes, *Tertullian*, 54-56.

¹⁴² Barnes, *Tertullian*, 54.

¹⁴³ Barnes, *Tertullian*, 56.

because Montanism lacks any sources of substance in the first half century of its development. A small anti-Montanist section of Epiphanius' *Panarion* and an anonymous source used by Eusebius in the *Historia Ecclesia* are the only sources attributed to the late second or early third century. The remaining sources consist of the anti-Montanist sources stemming from the fourth and fifth century and should therefore only be trusted as sources of information for fourth or fifth-century Montanism.¹⁴⁴ The only Montanist writings in existence from this early period are the Montanist writings of Tertullian and the *Passio Perpetuae*. This in part explains the conflation of the two.

Trevett recognizes the importance of Tertullian in her work on early Montanism, but does so with a degree of trepidation. She points out the crudity of the criteria used by scholars for distinguishing Montanist from proto-orthodox: "These would include references to Prophetic concerns – viz. mention of any of the Three, citation of the oracles, concern for the revelations of the *Paraclete* (rather than the Holy Spirit) are assumed to belong to Tertullian's Montanist period...."¹⁴⁵ This evidence allows her to recognize the connection between Tertullian and "sympathizers for the Prophecy," but she refrains from labeling Tertullian as being completely Montanist in any period of his life.¹⁴⁶ Trevett does not believe that Tertullian ever considered himself a Montanist: "Tertullian, catholic by persuasion and enthusiastic, ascetic Christian by nature, in Carthage did not have to abandon the one in order to be the other."¹⁴⁷ Nor does Trevett see anything overly heretical or even radical about Tertullian's writings: "Eccentric though Tertullian was, difficult and uncompromising though he was, I think that in his day he neither regarded himself, nor was branded formally by the catholics, as anything as harsh as

¹⁴⁴ Trevett, *Montanism*, 3.

¹⁴⁵ Trevett, *Montanism*, 73.

¹⁴⁶ Trevett, *Montanism*, 73.

¹⁴⁷ Trevett, *Montanism*, 74.

‘heretic.’”¹⁴⁸ Tertullian ultimately remains Tertullian, whether taking a Montanist stance or a proto-orthodox one:

Tertullian’s unquestionably Montanist treatises, albeit recognizable by allusions to the revelations of the Paraclete, still tell of doctrines and practices essentially the same as those in his undeniably catholic writings. Tertullian the Montanist was Tertullian the Montanist catholic.¹⁴⁹

The problematic nature of Tertullian’s theology is often overlooked by scholars who quote his works. Scholars have often used works from distinct periods in Tertullian’s life to link him to the *Passio Perpetuae. Ad Martyras* is used to demonstrate similarities with Perpetua’s vision of gladiatorial combat. Scholars also draw parallels between notions of feminine modesty in Tertullian’s *De Virginibus Velandis* and the narrated portion of the *Passio*.¹⁵⁰ Each of these works represents a different phase of Tertullian’s theological development. *Ad Martyras* predates Tertullian’s Montanist phase slightly, while the first book of *De Cultu Feminarum* (I) and *De Virginibus Velandis* postdate it.¹⁵¹ The other portion of *De Cultu Feminarum* (II) fits into the chronological timeframe, but each of these works expresses a slightly different understanding of feminine modesty from the other. A close look at these documents in relation to the *Passio Perpetuae* will demonstrate that the comparisons made between Tertullian’s works on feminine modesty and the narrator’s account are superficial. Tertullian’s general attitude towards women and their place in Christian society, is very different from the narrator of the *Passio*.

Ad Martyras is an ideal place to begin. Not only is it the earliest work considered Montanist, but it is also the most similar to the *Passio Perpetuae*—particularly in regards to its

¹⁴⁸ Trevett, *Montanism*, 74.

¹⁴⁹ Trevett, *Montanism*, 69.

¹⁵⁰ See Miller, *Dreams in Late Antiquity*; Shaw, “The Passion of Perpetua,” 3-45; Trevett, *Montanism*.

¹⁵¹ Barnes, *Tertullian*, 55.

depiction of female martyrs. In the second chapter of the work, Tertullian describes the role of prison life in the martyr's struggle:

Furthermore, you have been separated from this world, how much more from the current age and its affairs? Nor should this alarm you that you have been separated from the world. For if we recognize that the world is itself rather a prison, we shall see that you have exited a prison rather than entered one.

*Exinde segregati estis ab ipso mundo, quanto magis a saeculo rebusque eius? Nec hoc uos consternet, quod segregati estis a mundo. Si enim recognitemus ipsum magis mundum carcerem esse, exisse uos e carcere, quam in carcerem introisse, intellegemus.*¹⁵²

This statement parallels Perpetua's personal transformation in prison. A place which, at first, seems like a place of "such shadows," *tales tenebras*, becomes a place of refuge for her and her new Christian family in the days leading up to her martyrdom: "And prison suddenly became a palace for me, so that I wanted to be there rather than anywhere else," *et factus est mihi carcer subito praetorium, ut ibi mallem esse quam alicubi*.¹⁵³ When Perpetua awakens from her first vision, "still tasting something sweet," *commanducans adhuc dulce nescio quid*, it echoes a particular comment about prison life found in *Ad Martyras*: "Sadness breathes out at that place, but you are an odor of sweetness." *Triste illic expirat, sed uos odor estis suauitatis*.¹⁵⁴ The prison references in Tertullian naturally relate more to Perpetua's section of the *Passio*, since this is section which details her life in prison, but other comparisons with *Ad Martyras* may be made as well.

Throughout the four chapters of *Ad Martyras*, Tertullian makes numerous references to martyrs as soldiers—a common theme in early Christian literature. He also makes several comparisons to gladiators, an important similarity, not only with Perpetua's fourth vision, but

¹⁵² S. Tertullianus. "Ad Martyras," Chapter II, 1 in *Corpus Christianorum: Opera Q. S. Fl. Tertulliani de Monogamia*, Volume XXVIII.

¹⁵³ "Passio S. Perpetuae," III, 5; 9.

¹⁵⁴ "Passio S. Perpetuae," IV, 10; Tertullianus, *Ad Martyras*, II, 4.

also for the surrounding narrative. One such reference appears at the end of chapter three, when the prison is compared to a training ground: “We, about to strive for the eternal, interpret our prison as a training ground, so that at the goal of final judgment we may be produced well-disciplined by every trial.” *Nos, aeternam consecuturi, carcerem nobis pro palaestra interpretamur, ut ad stadium tribunalis bene exercitati incommodis omnibus producatur.*¹⁵⁵ In addition to the obvious connection with Perpetua’s fourth vision, the narrator also revels in the gladiator metaphor. Felicitas is described as going, “from the midwife to the gladiator,” *ab obstetrice ad retiarium.*¹⁵⁶ The term *retiarum* is specifically playing on the netting which she is forced to wear in the arena. The gladiator motif reaches its culmination at the conclusion of the *Passio Perpetuae*, when Perpetua herself assumes the role of a gladiator by delivering the finishing stroke of the inexperienced gladiator’s sword to her own neck: “and she led the erring hand of the young gladiator to her own throat,” *et errantem dexteram tirunculi gladiatoris ipsa in iugulum suum transtulit.*¹⁵⁷

Tertullian concludes *Ad Martyras* with an exhortation to women as well as to men, not to fear martyrdom:

But let the spirit place against itself and the flesh, granted that these bitter tortures have nevertheless been endured by many with equal mind, on the contrary have even been willingly sought after, for the sake of fame and glory, and that, not only by men, also by women, so that you, blessed ladies, may answer for your own sex,”

*Sed spiritus contra ponat sibi et carni: acerba licet ista, a multis tamen aequo animo excepta, immo et ultro appetita, famae et gloriae causa, nec a uiris tantum, sed etiam a feminis, ut uos quoque, benedictae, sexui uestro respondeatis.*¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁵ Tertullianus, “Ad Martyras,” III, 5.

¹⁵⁶ “Passio S. Perpetuae,” XVIII, 4.

¹⁵⁷ “Passio S. Perpetuae,” XXII, 9.

¹⁵⁸ Tertullianus, “Ad Martyras,” IV, 3.

He follows with a list of martyrs, known from Antiquity, who have participated in the proud female tradition of self sacrifice. Dido of Carthage, Cleopatra of Egypt, and the wife of Hasdrubal are all mentioned by Tertullian.¹⁵⁹ All of these are interesting choices, not only because they represent pagan examples of self-sacrifice, but are also notorious enemies of Rome, respected not for their lives, but for their memorable deaths. Tertullian's attitude towards female martyrdom is presented here as a progressive one, in which men and women are equally invited to participate. For, as he says, "women have also despised the flames," *cum feminae quoque contempserint ignes*.¹⁶⁰

The similarities between *Ad Martyras* and the *Passio* leave the reader believing that there is a connection between the two. Such a connection is possible. According to Barnes, *Ad Martyras* predates the *Passio* by only a few years.¹⁶¹ Since Tertullian was an influential member of the Carthaginian church and since *Ad Martyras* was written to instruct future martyrs about their virtuous role as Christian soldiers and gladiators, it comes as no surprise that this particular work would be mirrored by not only the narrator of the *Passio*, but even by Perpetua herself. However, this association begins to dissipate when other works are considered.

Clothing was an exceptionally important topic in third-century Carthage. Tertullian wrote several works specifically regarding proper attire, including *De Corona Militis*, *De Pallio*, *De Cultu Feminarum* I and II, and *De Virginibus Velandis*. In addition to this, he mentions the importance of proper dress in many other works. The *Passio* also places a degree of importance on attire. Perpetua refuses to wear the vestments of the pagan priests: "They were forced to put on the clothes, the men, those of the priests of Saturn, the women, the clothing of women consecrated to Ceres but that most noble woman consistently resisted this to the end." *Et*

¹⁵⁹ Tertullianus, "Ad Martyras," IV, 5-6.

¹⁶⁰ Tertullianus, "Ad Martyras," IV, 5.

¹⁶¹ Barnes, *Tertullian*, 55.

*cogerentur habitum induere, uiri quidem sacerdotum Saturni, feminae uero sacratarum Cereri, generosa illa in finem usque constantia repugnauit.*¹⁶² The women are then led out to be executed, with only “netting put on,” *reticulis indutae*.¹⁶³ The crowd is outraged by this forced immodesty and the women are brought back and redressed in “ungirt tunics,” *discinctis indutae*.¹⁶⁴ Finally, the scene where Perpetua attempts to cover her thighs and pin her hair, after being knocked over by the cow, causes many to declare Tertullian the author. What is the significance of this emphasis on modesty and clothing? Perhaps Tertullian’s writings hold the key to understanding this problem.

Tertullian dedicates a significant amount of his *De Idololatria* to the connection between pagan office and the outward signs of that office (such as the robes of a particular priesthood or the *fascēs* borne by the lictors of a magistrate). He refrains from completely labeling these signs as idolatrous because there is clear evidence that holy men of the Old Testament wore the white vestments of the pagan priests, or even the purple robes of the noble classes. At that point in time, these articles of clothing served merely as marks of distinction and were, therefore, not idolatrous: “For if that were so, certainly men of such holiness and constancy would have refused the polluted garments immediately,” *Nam si ita esset, utique tantae sanctitatis et constantiae uiri statim habitus inquinatos recusassent*.¹⁶⁵ Tertullian delineates a difference in the symbolism of such garments for the current age. For him, the humble nature of Jesus of Nazareth, in both appearance and demeanor, requires the Christian to reject attire reserved for dignified pagan offices:

For who would have rather used them than the son of God? Of what sort and how great the *fascēs* which would precede him? What sort of purple would flourish from his

¹⁶² “Passio S. Perpetuae,” Chapter XVIII, 4.

¹⁶³ “Passio S. Perpetuae,” Chapter XX, 2.

¹⁶⁴ “Passio S. Perpetuae,” XX, 3.

¹⁶⁵ Tertullianus, “De Idololatria,” XVIII, 3.

shoulders? What kind of gold would radiate from his head, if he had not judged the glory of the world to be alien to him and his own followers? Therefore, the glory he did not want, he has rejected; what he has rejected, he has damned; what he has damned, he has counted as part of the devil's pomp.

*Quis enim magis iis usus fuisset, quam dei filius? Quales et quanti eum fasces producerent, qualis purpura de umeris eius floreret, quale aurum de capite radiaret, nisi gloriam saeculi alienam et sibi et suis iudicasset? Igitur quam noluit, reiecit quam reiecit, damnauit, quam damnauit, in pompa diaboli deputauit.*¹⁶⁶

It is the Christian's duty to reject the signs of the pagan office along with the office itself. This was probably not an idea which originated with Tertullian. The argument seems to be set up to defend Old Testament figures who did not practice the same restraints as the Christians of Tertullian's day. It is apologetic in nature, as so much of his work is.

In *De Corona Militis*, Tertullian observes the connection between a particular station and the symbol of that station. It was a common practice for soldiers to wear a crown of flowers—an outward sign of their status as soldiers. Tertullian does not approve of Christians who wear such a garland because he does not consider soldiery to be an appropriate profession for Christians: “For indeed, so that I might approach the purpose of the military crown itself, I think it must first be inquired whether warfare is proper at all for Christians,” *Etenim, ut ipsam causam coronae militaris aggrediar, puto prius conquirendum an in totum Christianis militia conueniat.*¹⁶⁷ He then explains how such a display is in itself idolatrous in nature. He connects the crown to the act of idolatry by describing it as if it were physical representation of the act itself: “Much less may the Christian put the service of idolatry on his own head...” *Tanto abest ut capiti suo munus inferat idololatriae...*¹⁶⁸ He concludes by reminding his audience that God has a more glorious crown in store for them—the crown of the martyr.

¹⁶⁶ Tertullianus, “De Idololatria,” XVIII, 7.

¹⁶⁷ Tertullianus, “De Corona Militis,” XI, 1.

¹⁶⁸ Tertullianus, “De Corona Militis,” XIV, 1.

If the *Passio Perpetuae* agrees with Tertullian's *De Idololatria* in its stance on pagan dress, it does so due to a common understanding about dress and social status. People of noble rank wore purple, soldiers wore garlands, priests wore white robes and the lictors of a politician carried the *fasces*. Many of these symbols had religious connotations and would naturally be avoided by early Christians. In a small but poignant work called *De Pallio*, Tertullian asks Christians to reject the Roman toga in favor of the Punic tunic: "Rejoice *pallium* and exalt! A better philosophy has deigned you worthy, the moment from which you began to dress those of the Christian faith." *Gaude pallium et exulta! Melior iam te philosophia dignata est ex quo Christianum uestire coepisti.*¹⁶⁹ The desire to distinguish the Christian from the Roman was important to Tertullian and dress was a natural way of doing so.

Clothing also gets tied to notions of masculinity and femininity. For the authors of the *Passio*, the boundaries imposed by gender were not insurmountable. In her fourth vision, Perpetua sees herself participate in a male competition, but in order to do so she needs to be undressed: "I was stripped down and I became masculine," *expoliata sum et facta sum masculus.*¹⁷⁰ Perpetua nevertheless retains her feminine identity in the account in spite of this transformation. The *lanista* continues to identify her by the feminine words *illam* and *filiam*. Her disrobing could be an indication that she is participating in pankration, an exclusively male sport. Louis Robert considers the Pythia of Carthage in 203 to be the most likely source of inspiration for Perpetua's final vision: "Péripétue, dans son rêve du combat contre Egyptien, fut inspirée par le souvenir du spectacle des Pythia de Carthage en leur première célébration recent: le pancrace, -l'agonothète en son costume,-- la magnifique recompense: pommes en bronze doré."¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁹ Tertullianus, "De Pallio," VI, 4.

¹⁷⁰ "Passio S. Perpetuae," X, 7.

¹⁷¹ Louis Robert, "Une Vision de Péripétue Martyre," *Comptes-Rendu des séances de l'Académie des Inscriptions et belles lettres* (1982): 271.

Although the vision does not resemble pankration perfectly, it has been argued that Perpetua's understanding of the sport would have been imperfect as well. Whether or not her final vision describes pankration or some other form of gladiatorial combat, it is clear that clothing and public display are major concerns for Perpetua. The disrobing and oiling are part of the process which transform her into the male gladiator. This is an office which she freely accepts in the vision. Her reluctance to wear the clothing sacred to Ceres in the narrator's account also indicates a similar concern with garments.

Although Perpetua and the narrator agree with Tertullian's understanding of clothing as being representative of particular role or office, they do not see dress as a way to restrict or limit a person to a given role. Unlike Tertullian, who encourages man and woman, pagan and Christian to wear a specific type of dress in order to define themselves, Perpetua puts on a masculine garb when it suits her purposes. At no point is she required to dress in a certain way (one more appropriate to women) or behave in a certain way for that matter. Perpetua is a commanding presence until the very end of the *Passio*: "Perhaps so great a woman could not otherwise have been killed, who was feared by the unclean spirit, if she had not herself willed it," *Fortasse tanta femina aliter non potuisset occidi, quae ab immundo spiritu timebatur, nisi ipsa uoluisset.*¹⁷² No matter how Perpetua views the transformation which takes place in her final vision, the narrator sees her as an authoritative female figure more than worthy of her martyr's crown.

Does Tertullian's understanding of the Christian woman agree with the narrator's *matrona Christi*? There are several works dedicated to women and their role in society. Two works, in particular, are completely dedicated to their appropriate attire. *De Virginibus Velandis* deals with a specific issue: whether or not a virgin should be veiled during church services. In

¹⁷² "Passio S. Perpetuae," XXI, 10.

order to make his point, Tertullian must first make sure that his audience is clear on his understanding of virginity as it comes down from the apostle Paul in Corinthians:

‘Divided,’ he said, ‘is woman and virgin.’ Why? Inasmuch as ‘the unmarried,’ that is the virgin, ‘is anxious about that which is the Lord’s, so that she may be holy with regard to body and spirit; but the married,’ that is the non-virgin, ‘thinks about how she may please her husband.’

*Diuisa est, inquit, mulier et virgo. Quare? quoniam innupta, id est uirgo, cogitat ea, quae sunt domini, ut sit sancta et corpore et spiritu, nupta autem, id est non uirgo, cogitat quomodo placeat uiro.*¹⁷³

The bulk of this text deals with the veiling of virgins not of non-virgins, so the notions of virginal modesty can hardly be applied to mothers like Perpetua and Felicitas. This fact is often neglected by those who use this specific work to make points about Tertullian’s notions of modesty. This work indicates that Tertullian places women in two very traditional roles, that of the virgin (belonging to God) or the wife (belonging to man).

De Virginibus Velandis concludes with an appeal to married women, which shows that the veil was by no means limited to the unmarried:

But we also admonish you, women of the second type of modesty, who have fallen into wedlock, not to outgrow so far the discipline of the veil, not even in the moment of an hour, so that you do not dismantle it in any way, indeed you cannot refuse it, by going neither covered nor bare.

*Sed et uos admonemus, alterius pudicitiae mulieres, quae nuptias incidistis, ne sic a disciplina uelaminis exsolescatis, ne quidem in momento horae, ut, quia reicere illam non potestis, alio modo destruat is neque tectae neque nuda e incedentes.*¹⁷⁴

Tertullian, a man whose opposition to Idolatry required soldiers to refuse the garland in *De Corona Militis* and whose personal zeal for a type of clothing neutral to the pagan religions

¹⁷³ Tertullianus, “De Virginibus Velandis,” IV, 4.

¹⁷⁴ Tertullianus, “De Virginibus Velandis,” XVII, 1.

forced him to reject the toga in favor of the *pallium* in *De Pallio*, saw nothing wrong with citing “heathen” examples of modesty in *De Viriginibus Velandis*:

Arabia’s heathen females will judge you, who so entirely cover not only the head, but also the face, that they are content, with one eye free, to enjoy half the light rather than to prostitute the face.

*Iudicabunt uos Arabiae feminae ethnicae, quae non caput, sed faciem quoque ita totam tegunt, ut uno oculo liberato contentae sint dimidiam frui lucem quam totam faciem prostituere.*¹⁷⁵

Such a sentiment is quite different from that of Perpetua’s narrator, who relishes in the imposing presence of Perpetua:

Perpetua approached with a shining countenance and a bright gait, as a matron of Christ, an extravagant woman of God, putting down everyone’s stare by her own intense gaze.

*Sequebatur Perpetua lucido uultu et placido incessu ut matrona Christi, ut Dei delicata, uigore oculorum deiciens omnium conspectum.*¹⁷⁶

The extreme point of view expressed in *De Viriginibus Velandis* is the culmination of an idea which Tertullian has developed in two earlier works on feminine modesty. According to Barnes, this work was produced after Tertullian’s Montanist phase. The second book of *De Cultu Feminarum* falls into this timeframe, and is therefore a more suitable choice for comparisons with the *Passio*.

Unlike *De Viriginibus Velandis*, which deals mainly with virgin modesty, *De Cultu Feminarum II* is a treatise aimed at women from every social background. *De Cultu Feminarum II* was probably produced before *De Cultu Feminarum I*, which was added later to amend some of the views expressed in the first work. A large part of the argument attacks the use of cosmetics, such as the use of saffron hair dye or rouge. He also attacks the decorative use of gold

¹⁷⁵ Tertullianus, “De Viriginibus Velandis,” XVII, 4.

¹⁷⁶ “Passio S. Perpetuae,” XVIII, 2.

and gems in jewelry. According to Tertullian, none of these products, which originate from God's creation, are inherently sinful. Tertullian's first task is to explain how these things came to be used maliciously by sinful women:

Moreover, [the arts of metallurgy] demonstrated by sinful angels, who were the revealers of material substances themselves, both joined with their rarity, excited the costliness and thus a lust on the part of women to possess that costliness.

*Per angelos autem peccatores demonstrata sunt, qui et ipsas materias prodiderunt, et operositas cum raritate commissa pretiositatem et ex ea libidinem possidendae pretiositatis feminarum excitavit.*¹⁷⁷

This strange statement is derived from the apocryphal book of Enoch, which expands upon a brief story in Genesis in which the sons of angels and daughters of men sinfully bring a race of giants into existence. The lust of the daughters of Adam combined with the sinfully tainted, but nevertheless divine skills of metallurgy create a desire in women for cosmetic apparel which even affects the Christian women of Tertullian's era.

As sinful as Tertullian considers decorative ornamentation, his main argument for confronting it revolves around the practicality of its use among Christian women. Jewelry and cosmetics were important for women who appeared at public gatherings. Such activity did not benefit a Christian woman anyway: "You, however, have no cause for appearing in public not gloomy: either some sick brother is visited, or sacrifice is offered, or the word of God is administered," *Vobis autem nulla procedendi causa non tetrica: [2] aut imbecillus aliquis ex fratribus uisitatur, aut sacrificium offertur, aut Dei sermo administratur.*¹⁷⁸ If women were already cloistered from all but their immediate family, why make use of these meaningless luxuries?

¹⁷⁷ Tertullianus, "De Cultu Feminarum II," X, 2.

¹⁷⁸ Tertullianus, "De Cultu Feminarum II," XI, 2-3.

The conclusion of *De Cultu Feminarum II* is particularly significant to women aspiring to martyrdom. Tertullian explains that Christians should not value “gold” but “iron,” that is to say the iron fetters of the martyr:

Go forth (to confront your persecutors) already arrayed in cosmetics and ornaments of prophets and apostles, drawing your whiteness from simplicity, your ruddy hue from modesty, your eyes having been painted with bashfulness, and your mouth with silence.

*Prodite uos iam medicamentis et ornamentis extractae prophetarum et apostolorum, sumentes de simplicitate eandorem, de pudicitia ruborem, depictae oculos uerecundia et os taciturnitate.*¹⁷⁹

This quotation emphasizes “the modesty,” “the bashfulness,” even “the silence,” of Tertullian’s ideal female martyr. An even more interesting statement follows it:

Submit your head to your husbands, and you will be enough adorned. Occupy your hands with spinning; fix your feet at home, and you will please more than [dressing] in gold.

*Caput maritis subicite et satis ornatae eritis; manus lanis occupate, pedes domi figite et plus quam in auro placebitis.*¹⁸⁰

Sitting at home and working the loom is a more preferable use of a woman’s time than seeking the martyr’s crown. He may recognize and respect women who become martyrs, but he does not think they should actively seek martyrdom.

De Cultu Feminarum I, which is actually dated later than the second (well after the Montanist phase of his writing), hardens Tertullian’s viewpoints on women. Although he still cites *Enoch* for the corruption of precious items, the fall of man at the hands of Eve adds a more jaundiced view to work:

You are the devil’s door, you are the unsealer of that tree; you are the first deserter of the divine law; you are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not strong enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God’s image—Man. On account of your reward, which is

¹⁷⁹ Tertullianus, “De Cultu Feminarum II,” XIII, 7.

¹⁸⁰ Tertullianus, “De Cultu Feminarum II,” XIII, 7.

death, even the son of God had to die. And do you think about adorning yourself over and above your tunics of skins?

*Tu es diaboli ianua; tu es arboris illius resignatrix; tu es diuinae legis prima desertrix; tu es quae eum suasisti, quem diabolus aggredi non ualuit; tu imaginem Dei, hominem, tam facile elisisti; propter tuum meritum, id est mortem, etiam filius Dei mori habuit: et adornari tibi in mente est super pelliceas tuas tunicas?*¹⁸¹

Tertullian shifts the blame, which he originally claims to have been shared with “the sons of angels,” solely to the original sin of Eve. The rest of the text serves to reiterate the points he already stated in the earlier version, *De Cultu Feminarum II*. It thus appears that Tertullian’s single purpose in writing this work was to revise his view on women, which had softened during the Montanist phase of his development.

A brief glance back to *De Pallio*, will best capture Tertullian’s opinion of women and gender roles. Tertullian turns his attention to the myth of Hercules and Omphale. Hercules was instructed to complete one of his Herculean tasks, after he exchanges clothing with Omphale. Tertullian finds this particular myth detestable if not ridiculous: “Hercules was prostituted in Omphale, and Omphale was prostituted in Hercules,” *Hercules in Omphale et Omphale in Hercule prostituetur*.¹⁸² The notion of Omphale bearing the rough lionskin of Heracles is a transformation, which Tertullian sees as unnatural. He doubts that Omphale would have ever have submitted to it:

Not even the shoulders of a sober woman or any heroine, would be able to enter into the hide of such a beast, unless after long softening and smoothening down and deodorization, which in Omphale's house, I suppose, was effected by balsam and salve.

*Ne sobriae mulieris quidem aut uiraginis alicuius scapulae sub exuuias bestiae tantae introire potuissent, nisi diu mollitas et euigoratas et exodoratas, quod apud Omphalem balsamo aut telino spero factum.*¹⁸³

¹⁸¹ Tertullianus, “De Cultu Feminarum I,” I, 2.

¹⁸² Tertullianus, “De Pallio,” IV, 3.

¹⁸³ Tertullianus, “De Pallio,” IV, 3.

This lion skin is a perfect example of the conflation of dress and status. It is a visible sign of Hercules' victory over the Nemean Lion. Tertullian does not understand why a woman would even want to take up so manly a mantle.

In his biography of Tertullian, Barnes follows Paul Monceaux' conclusion on Tertullian's authorship. Monceaux rules out Tertullian's authorship because the Apologist hardly mentions the *Passio Perpetuae* in all his work: "En fait, Tertullien n'a mentionné qu'une fois les visions de Perpétue. S'il eût été l'auteur du récit, il n'eût point manqué de nous le dire: dans tous ses traités, il renvoie fréquemment à ses précédents ouvrages."¹⁸⁴ Adding to this, Barnes concludes that Tertullian misquotes Perpetua's first vision in his only quotation from the work:

In what manner had Perpetua, most brave martyr, seen close to the day of her martyrdom, in a revelation of paradise, only martyrs in that place, if not indeed the sword, door-keeper of paradise, yields to no one unless those who will have followed in Christ, not in Adam.

*Quomodo Perpetua, fortissima martyr, sub die passionis in reuelatione paradisi solos illic martyras uidit, nisi quia nullis romphaea paradise ianitrix cedit nisi qui Christo decesserint, non in Adam?*¹⁸⁵

Although he uses the term "martyrs," Perpetua does not refer to the figures in her first vision as "martyrs" but "many thousands, white-clad," *candidati milia multa*.¹⁸⁶ According to Barnes, it is telling that Tertullian mentions the work he supposedly authored only once, and improperly at that.¹⁸⁷ Butler rejects this hypothesis on the grounds that Tertullian rarely quotes, even his own works, with precision: "Tertullian, never an exact man easily forgot, especially since the diaries were written by Perpetua and Saturus."¹⁸⁸ It matters little to Butler, who considers the two men, "spiritually akin," if Tertullian was actually the narrator. This particular detail can be argued

¹⁸⁴ Monceaux, *Histoire littéraire de L'Afrique Chrétienne*, 84.

¹⁸⁵ Tertullianus, "De Anima," LV, 4; Barnes, *Tertullian*, 80.

¹⁸⁶ "Passio S. Perpetuae," IV, 8.

¹⁸⁷ Barnes, *Tertullian*, 80.

¹⁸⁸ Butler, *The New Prophecy*, 54.

back and forth endlessly.¹⁸⁹ It is not the imprecision of the quotation, but the fact that it is the *only* one, which is most revealing. Monceaux was right to draw attention to it.

Perhaps Tertullian's silence can be explained in another way. Tertullian would never have ignored so positive an example of feminine virtue if he had truly considered Perpetua a virtuous woman. He praises her bravery, but does not seek to emulate her example. Since her story is well known to the Christians whom he addresses, he uses her example in passing to make a point about the nature of martyrdom, but her example fails to conform to his own extensive collection of works on feminine virtue. She is respected for her role as a martyr, but not for her role as a woman. Whether or not Tertullian adopted some Montanist beliefs for a period of time, seems trivial next to this point. The differences between Tertullian and the *Passio* are simply too great to be ignored. To dismiss the narrator of the *Passio* as nothing more than a follower of Tertullian does little justice to an author who faithfully preserves the memory of a very important woman when even Tertullian himself failed to do so.

¹⁸⁹ Butler, *The New Prophecy*, 56.

CHAPTER 3: REACTIONS TO THE PASSIO

Tertullian was not the only Christian theologian to object who appears uncomfortable with the *Passio*'s depiction of women. Augustine, along with a contemporary Carthaginian bishop named Quodvultdeus, wrote sermons dealing specifically with this issue. It seems that the *Passio Perpetuae* had grown so much in popularity by the fifth century that these men felt the need to offer an explanation for Perpetua's exceptional behavior. Traces of a proto-orthodox response to the *Passio* are even seen as early as the mid-third century. Rex Butler has examined the Greek edition of the *Passio* along with an abridged version of the account written in a similar style to the earlier trial commentary of the Scillitan Martyrs. According to Butler, both this smaller *Acta* and the Greek recension of the *Passio* make significant alterations to the original:

The *Acts* not only was shortened but was also sterilized, prepared for liturgical purposes and orthodox consumption. The amendments and the omitted passages revealed that the redactor, like the Greek translator, assumed that the original *Passio* was a Montanist document which needed significant correction.¹⁹⁰

In addition to these later versions, two new martyr accounts, which employ several of the conventions used in the *Passio Perpetuae* were also produced in the mid-third century during the Valerian persecutions. A closer look at all of these documents will prove that efforts were made to transform the *Passio* into a more acceptable form.

The *Passio Sanctorum Mariani et Iacobi* was the first of *passio* to exhibit several of the same qualities found in the *Passio Perpetuae*. This account contains a recording purported to be written by the martyrs' themselves. Among these self-written records is a vision similar to Perpetua's dreams of the shepherd and Dinocrates. The account begins with Marian falling into an unusually deep sleep similar to the one Perpetua experiences. He begins to prophesize

¹⁹⁰ Butler, *The New Prophecy*, 103.

immediately upon waking. His vision begins with “the towering front of a lofty and brilliant tribunal,” *tribunalis excelsi et candidi nimium, sublime fastigium*.¹⁹¹ The judge in this vision parallels the shepherd from Perpetua’s first vision and his lofty tribunal can only be reached by “climbing a great height arranged with many steps,” *multis ordinata gradibus et longe sublimis ascensu*.¹⁹² Fortunately for Marian, the bishop Cyprian is around to lend a helping hand: “Cyprian appeared and stretched out his hand and lifted me onto a higher place of the stage,” *Cyprianus apparuit et porrexit manum et leuauit me in alteriorem catastae locum*.¹⁹³ This is a notable contrast from Perpetua’s vision where the perilous bronze ladder requires her to journey alone. The symbolism is obvious—the clergy is now the vehicle for the individual’s salvation. Marian is then taken into a field with a fountain of water in the center. A “vial,” *fialam* is used for drawing water, just as it was in the Dinocrates vision. In this vision, it is Cyprian, a well known member of the Carthaginian clergy, who offers this vial to Marian: “and filling the vial again, he handed it to me, and I drank freely,” *et inplens iterum mihi porrexit, et libenter bibi*.¹⁹⁴ Cyprian has replaced the martyr as the holy intercessor who grants the forgiveness of sins. He was the perfect choice because not only was he a well respected bishop in Carthage but he also underwent martyrdom.

The *Passio Mariani* also addresses Christian mothers and their role in the martyr tradition. The beginning of the final chapter describes the overwhelming joy that Marian’s mother gets from giving birth to such a magnificent martyr:

After these things had been finished, the mother of Marian was exulting in Maccabean joy and with the passion finished she, now feeling secure concerning her son, began to give thanks not only for him but also for herself, who had raised such a pledge.

¹⁹¹ “Passio Marioni et Iacobi,” VI, 6, in *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* ed. Musurillo, 194-213.

¹⁹² “Passio Marioni et Iacobi,” VI, 7.

¹⁹³ “Passio Marioni et Iacobi,” VI, 10.

¹⁹⁴ “Passio Marioni et Iacobi,” VI, 14.

*His peractis Machabaico gaudio Mariani mater exultans et passione perfecta iam secura de filio, non illi tantum coeperat, sed et sibi, quae tale pignus ediderat, gratulari.*¹⁹⁵

This impassioned ending presents a view of motherhood quite different from the *matrona Christi* found in the *Passio Perpetuae*, whose role as a spiritual mother supersedes and replaces earthly obligations. This *Passio* conforms more with Tertullian's *De Cultu Feminarum II*, in which women are asked to submit their head to their husbands, "*Caput maritis subicite.*"¹⁹⁶ It is not surprising to see a more conservative notion of motherhood being promoted; the *Passio Perpetuae* was exceptional after all. The role played by the mother in this account coupled with the eerily familiar vision and the self-written martyr accounts seem to indicate the desire to recreate the *Passio Perpetuae* in a form with more acceptable gender roles.

The *Passio Sanctorum Montani et Lucii* contains an even more overt statement about martyrdom and motherhood. It also follows the style of the *Passio Perpetuae*, coupling self-written prison accounts with a surrounding passion narrative. In this *passio*, several figures report prophetic visions, including a Christian woman named Quartillosa. The narrator introduces Quartillosa by describing her family:

For this vision he showed to our sister Quartillosa who was here with us, a woman whose husband and son had suffered martyrdom three days before.

*De hoc enim sorori nostrae Quartillosae hic nobiscum positae ostendit, cuius mulieris et maritus et filius ante triduum passi erant.*¹⁹⁷

The author gives no more information on Quartillosa than this. She is a woman who is completely defined by her role in a traditional family setting. Although she is preparing for martyrdom, the author sees no reason to describe her in any other terms. Her vision, which is

¹⁹⁵ "Passio Marioni et Iacobi," XIII, 1.

¹⁹⁶ Tertullianus, *De Cultu Feminarum II*, XIII, 7.

¹⁹⁷ "Passio Montani et Lucii," VIII, 1, in *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* ed. Musurillo, 194-213.

reminiscent of Perpetua's third vision, takes place with a dead relative around a water trough. Whereas Perpetua acted as a direct intercessor for her lost brother Dinocrates, Quartilosa's encounter with her martyred son is the exact opposite. He is the one who informs her of her coming salvation:

I saw my son, she said, who suffered to come here to the prison, who sitting above a trough of water said: God sees your pressure and labor.

*Vidi, inquit, filium meum qui passus est uenisse huc ad carcerem qui sedens super labrum aquarum ait: Vidit Deus pressuram uestram et laborem.*¹⁹⁸

Perpetua brought about Dinocrates' salvation through her own abilities as a Confessor, but Quartilosa is told of upcoming salvation by a relative who is already her spiritual superior. It is significant that Quartilosa finds salvation through her child. Since Perpetua had to reject her child in order to obtain salvation, Quartilosa's experience is a perfect opposite to Perpetua's. Quartilosa obtains her martyr's crown by respecting her place in society—not by rejecting it.

Butler takes note of these two *Passiones* but simply dismisses them as an attempt by the third-century clergy to establish ecclesiastical authority over the martyr tradition: "The *Martyrdom of Marian*, the *Martyrdom of Montanus*, and even the *Life* and the *Acts of Cyprian* represented the expropriation of spiritual activities by the ecclesiastical establishment."¹⁹⁹ This is partially true, but a closer look at the visions which exhibit similarities to Perpetua's account suggests that this ecclesiastical establishment was concerned with a deeper problem. As Christianity gained wider acceptance in the Roman world, it began to take on a more traditional form. It was probably necessary to offer new examples of martyrdom with female role models whose behavior was more socially acceptable. The fourth-century *Acta Perpetuae et Felicitatis* and the fifth-century sermons of Augustine and Quodvultdeus make this even more apparent.

¹⁹⁸ "Passio Montani et Lucii," VIII, 3.

¹⁹⁹ Butler, *The New Prophecy*, 125.

The *Acta Perpetuae* is an abridged version of the *Passio* which was produced around the same time as the *Passio Mariani* and the *Passio Montani*. The fact that the author of the *Acta* anachronistically refers to the persecution of Valerian and Gallienus suggests that he was writing sometime after this persecution, which took place fifty three years after the *Passio Perpetuae* in 258 C.E. Although the account is much smaller, certain details are added which do not appear in the original. The city of Tuburbitanus is identified as the hometown of the martyrs, a fact which does not appear in the original. Perpetua's husband is also present at her trial before the proconsul Minutius—a noteworthy addition to the story because no information about Perpetua's husband is ever presented in the original *Passio*.²⁰⁰ It is inappropriate to infer too much from this simple addition. The husband is a voiceless character who adds nothing to the story. It is nevertheless important to point out his presence because it demonstrates that placing Perpetua into a family context was important to the author. The original *Passio* left the issue open to question and it was a question which the readers probably wanted to have answered.

The author makes a more concerted effort to impose male authority on Perpetua and Felicitas by altering the role of the martyr Saturus. In the original *Passio*, Saturus was an inspirational figure to Perpetua. He is not a deacon or a bishop, but it is clear that he has had tremendous influence on the group, particularly on Perpetua. The only indication of subordination on the part of Perpetua comes from her first vision, when she ascends to heaven on a ladder:

Saturus, however, ascended first, he who afterwards handed himself over voluntarily on account of us, indeed he had built us up, and at the time of our arrest had not been present.

*Ascendit autem Saturus prior, qui postea se propter nos ultro tradiderat, quia ipse nos aedificauerat, et tunc cum adducti sumus praesans non fuerat.*²⁰¹

²⁰⁰“Acta Perpetuae et Felicitatis,” in *The Passion of S. Perpetua*, ed. Musurillo, 100-103.

²⁰¹“Passio Perpetuae,” IV, 5.

It is probable that the author of the *Acta* used this as evidence for establishing Saturus as a spiritual leader of the group. Perpetua looks at him as a positive influence because he bolsters her resolve to ascend the menacing ladder. She connects the vision to his voluntary surrender after he had been spared the initial arrest. Saturus and his commitment to martyrdom help Perpetua carry out her own act of self-sacrifice at the end of the account. This informal relationship does not imply that Saturus was the leader of the group. The deacons Pomponius and Tertius are the church members who minister to the martyrs in prison.²⁰²

The Saturus of the *Acta*, however, is clearly portrayed as the leader of the group. At the trial, Minutius asks the martyrs to turn away from Christianity for the sake of their lives. Before anyone else has a chance to respond, Saturus steps forward and speaks for the whole group: “For all, indeed, there is one will among us,” *pro omnibus, una enim est in nobis uoluntas*.²⁰³ Minutius then proceeds to ask each individual martyr if he or she agrees with this statement. Saturus becomes the rallying cry for the others. He is the first to profess his status as Christian and he is thus recognized as the authoritative voice for all the others. Originally, Saturus had not even been present at the arrest, but now he has become the primary architect of their martyrdom.

As the popularity of the Perpetua and Felicitas increased, the need to explain and justify their seemingly radical actions increased as well. In a series of sermons intended to commemorate the martyrs’ feast day, Augustine, the Bishop of Hippo, assigns himself the task of explaining the martyrs to his audience. When introducing the martyrs, he makes it clear that Perpetua and Felicitas have enjoyed more popularity than their fellow male martyrs: “Both the merit and name of Perpetua and Felicitas shine forth brightly pre-eminently among their fellow

²⁰² “Passio Perpetuae,” III, 7.

²⁰³ “Acta Perpetuae.”

martyrs, holy servants of God,” *Refulget et praeminet inter comites Martyres et meritum et nomen Perpetuae et Felicitatis, sanctarum Dei famularum.*²⁰⁴ The next line of this sermon has earned Augustine the condemnation of many contemporary scholars, for it dismisses this popularity in seemingly misogynistic way: “For the crown is more glorious in that place, where the sex is weaker,” *Nam ibi est corona gloriosior, ubi sexus infirmior.*²⁰⁵ It is not appropriate to label Augustine misogynist for reacting to the *Passio* in this way. His understanding of the nature of man and woman is rooted in the ancient world’s perception of the female body being an incomplete or rather a “failed” version of the male body.²⁰⁶ It impresses him to see this “weaker” sex act in such a commanding and virile manner.

Augustine distinguishes himself from other authors of his time in his ability to see this triumph of the “weaker” sex as a triumph of a strong mind over a seemingly weak body:

According to their inner person, they are found neither masculine of feminine, so that even those who are feminine in regards to body, the virtue of the mind absconds the sex of the flesh, and it causes regret to consider in the flesh, what could not appear in deeds.

*Secundum interiorem hominem, Nec masculus, nec femina inueniuntur, ut etiam in his quae sunt feminae corpore, uirtus mentis sexum carnis abscondat, et in membris pigeat cogitare, quod in factis non potuit apparere.*²⁰⁷

If Augustine recognizes the female body to be weaker than the male, he does not carry this over into the realm of the “mind,” or *mens*. In this statement, thought is directly correlated to “actions,” *factis*; therefore, it is not just the character of the martyrs which makes them popular but the actions carried out by them. By describing them in this way, Augustine is helping his audience come to terms with an anomaly. How can two women surpass several men in respect to

²⁰⁴ Aurelius Augustus, Sermo CCLXXXI, 1, in *Patrologiae Cursus Completus: Omnium SS. Patrum, doctorum Scriptorumque Ecclesiasticorum, Tomus X* (Paris: Vrayet, 1845).

²⁰⁵ Aurelius Augustus, Sermo CCLXXXI, 1.

²⁰⁶ Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia university Press, 1998): 10.

²⁰⁷ Aurelius Augustus, Sermo CCLXXX, 1.

their deeds? Augustine sees these deeds tied to a spirit which cannot be described as masculine or feminine—a spirit which transcends the physical.

In the first and longest of the three sermons which he produced, Augustine spends a great deal of time lambasting his audience for concentrating too much on worldly concerns. He likens those who fail to see past the corporeal nature of these martyrs to the pagans who executed them:

Those people saw with eyes of flesh, those sights which they surfeited the savageness of their hearts: we looked upon with eyes of the heart, those sights which escaped them that they might not see. They rejoiced over the dead bodies of the Martyrs, we mourn their dead minds.

*Illi uiderunt oculis carnis, quod cordis immanitati refunderent: nos adspicimus oculis cordis, quod illis ereptum est, ne uiderent. Illi mortua laetati sunt corpora Martyrum, nos mentes mortuas dolemus illorum.*²⁰⁸

By setting up a contrast between the spiritually mindful Christians and the corporally oriented pagans, Augustine effectively draws a boundary around this sensitive issue. Perpetua and Felicitas may be women, but if one should fail to comprehend their martyrdom in spiritual terms, he would not be thinking in a Christian manner.

The second sermon deals with the femininity of the martyrs more directly than before. The weakness of their sex and the popularity of their deeds become tools for demonstrating the paradox of Christ's grace, which is usually exercised best through the weakest host. The sinful nature of Eve is also brought into the discussion for the first time:

They cling well to that man, I say, from whom they had drawn the virtue with which to resist the devil: so that women might prostrate the enemy who by a woman prostrated man.

*Bene, inquam, inhaeserant illi uiro, a quo uirtutem traxerant, qua resisterent diabolo: ut feminae prosternerent inimicum, qui per feminam prostraverat uirum.*²⁰⁹

²⁰⁸ Aurelius Augustus, Sermo CCLXXX, 2.

²⁰⁹ Aurelius Augustus, Sermo CCLXXXI, 1.

It is easy to judge Augustine for his patriarchal attitudes toward the fall of man at the hands of woman. But he is only responding to a Judeo-Christian tradition which extended back more than millennium before him. He draws attention to the fall of man in order to emphasize the irony of the Devil's fall at the hands of a woman.

In the final sermon, Augustine engages in a bit of harmless word play which has been taken far too seriously by modern scholars.²¹⁰ He appears to credit the popularity of these martyrs to their names rather than their actions. Their courageous deaths are only more popular than their male counterparts due to the convenience of their names: "Perpetua, of course, and Felicitas are the names of these two women, but the reward is for all of them," *Perpetua quippe et Felicitas nomina quidem duarum, sed merces est omnium.*²¹¹ This assessment of the sermon seems unfair now that a more complete form of it has been discovered. Included among the discovery of six the new Augustinian sermons at the Erfurt Monastery in 2008 was an extended version of this sermon. Its conclusion seems to poignantly sum up the position which Augustine takes on Perpetua and Felicitas in all three sermons:

But not on that account did it happen, because the women were placed before the men in worthiness, but because the infirmity of woman conquered the most bitter enemy through a greater miracle and because their virile virtue struggled for perpetual felicity.

*Quod non ideo factum est, quia feminae maribus dignitate praelatae sunt, sed quia et muliebris infirmitas inimicum acerrimum miraculo maiore deuicit et uirilis uirtus pro perpetua felicitate certauit.*²¹²

Augustine addresses something that he feels needs to be set clear for his audience. These women have achieved fame, not because they were placed before men, but because their gender made their victory seem more miraculous and their "virile virtue," something which is subject to the

²¹⁰ See Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages*; Shaw, "The Passion of Perpetua," 16.

²¹¹ Aurelius Augustus, Sermo CCLXXIII in Isabella Schiller, Dorothea Weber, Clemens Weidmann, "Sechs neue Augustinuspredigten, *Werner Studien*, vol. 121 (2009): 264.

²¹² Augustus, Sermo CCLXXIII, 264.

mens not the *corpus*, earned them their martyrdom. Why would Augustine mention this at all, if it had not been something which provoked the curiosity of his audience? In the other sermons, he mainly focuses on the women in relation to their fellow martyrs. In this sermon, he concludes with a powerful statement about these women who achieved martyrdom in spite of their gender, not because of it.

Quodvultdeus produced a speech so similar to the third Augustinian sermon that some scholars see it as little more than a counterfeit of Augustine.²¹³ It is actually only part of a much larger work called *De Tempore Barbarico* which attempts to explain the uncertain events happening in Christian North Africa. It is probable that Quodvultdeus assimilated Augustine into his own work to make a specific point about female martyrdom. Regardless of the Augustinian influences on the Quodvultdeus sermon, Quodvultdeus adds his own interpretation to the *Passio*. He exalts the female martyrs not out of necessity, but due to a genuine appreciation of their unique accomplishment:

You have great examples of brave men. These martyrs have conquered the world: among these martyrs even the females have been shown to be stronger than the males.

*Habetis uirorum fortium magna exempla. Vicerunt martyres mundum: inter quos martyres maribus etiam feminae reptaetae sunt fortiores.*²¹⁴

Quodvultdeus finds the success of these two martyrs intriguing, specifically because of the infirmity of their roles: Perpetua is the mother of a small child and Felicitas is pregnant. He considers these weaknesses to be the true strength of these women:

But for as long as this Perpetua breastfed, just as long she accepted from the shepherd and, simultaneously, father a small mouthful of milk.

²¹³ Schiller, Weber, Weidmann, "Sechs neue Augustinuspredigten," 255.

²¹⁴ Quodvultdeus, "De Tempore Barbarico I," in *Corpus Christianorum: Opera Quodvultdeo Carthaginensi Episcopo Tributa*, ed. R. Braun. Volume LX (Turnolti Typographi Brepols Editores Pontificii, 1976). V, 1.

*Sed tandiu haec Perpetua lactauit, quamdiu acciperet ab illo pastore simul et patre buccellam lactis.*²¹⁵

According to Quodvultdeus, these women manage to reject worldliness, even though they are bound to the world in the strongest way possible. It takes the strongest resolve for a mother like Perpetua “to spurn her father, not to cling to the world, and to lose her life for Christ,” *spernare patrem, non inhaerere mundo, perdere animam pro Christo*.²¹⁶ Quodvultdeus is an astute observer of the *Passio* because he realizes the subtle shift from worldly motherhood to heavenly *matrona* which the account presents. He fails to see the triumph of these martyrs as a transcendence of gender. He permanently casts them in their roles as mothers and daughters simply because he does not know how to see them any differently.

No one reacts more negatively to the sermons of Augustine and Quodvultdeus than Brent Shaw. Although his observations on these works are perceptive, there is also a one-sidedness to his argument. Augustine and Quodvultdeus become miserly architects, who surround the innocent prison diary of Perpetua with their own bastions of paternalism. He fails to see the sermons as a dialogue, intended to address questions and clarify confusing points about the *Passio*. Neither of these writers attempts to suppress the *Passio*; each merely offers a commentary on it. This commentary may seem distasteful to the modern reader, but it was the inevitable reaction of a church which was becoming less radical and more conformist by the early fifth century. In Shaw’s mind, Augustine views the popularity of Perpetua as a problem that needs solving:

Faced with a living challenge (the way in which Perpetua’s experience was relived every year) he responded in much the same way as the original editor of her written work: he

²¹⁵ Quodvultdeus, “De Tempore Barbarico I,” V, 3.

²¹⁶ Quodvultdeus, “De Tempore Barbarico I,” V, 3.

bracketed it with his comments which were intended to lead to listeners to rehear what they had heard.²¹⁷

A commentary does not force the listener to change his or her opinion on the original work; it simply offers an interpretation of it. Another “problem,” as Shaw sees it, is Augustine’s need to explain the dominant nature of Perpetua in her account: “This is the problem of her unorthodox (‘unorthodox’ that is from the perspective of the current ideology) relationships with persons who should have been dominant males.”²¹⁸ Augustine did not create the need to explain this phenomenon, it is clear from the third-century *Passio*’s and the *Acta* that the need for an explanation was already there.

Quodvultdeus receives even greater castigation for his emphasis on feminine weakness and its role in their triumph. He dismisses the Quodvultdeus sermon as a “blunt” and “revealing” example “of general male attitudes of the time.”²¹⁹ Since he censures Augustine simply for pointing out the uniqueness of this martyrdom, he finds Quodvultdeus’ continuous emphasis on “feminine fragility” doubly distasteful: “Quodvultdeus once again returns to ‘womanly weaknesses,’ given this fundamental fault, how on earth were their deeds possible.”²²⁰ Although Quodvultdeus does not invent the notion of womanly weakness, he is blamed for it. Shaw paints the picture of an authoritative male hierarchy that deliberately suppresses the *Passio*:

Such reflections from the first editor or redactor, to Augustine, Quodvultdeus and beyond, surely do not have to be multiplied in number, or analyzed in any greater detail, to draw the obvious conclusion. There is a monotonous sameness to their reactions.²²¹

²¹⁷ Shaw, “The Passion of Perpetua,” 37.

²¹⁸ Shaw, “The Passion of Perpetua,” 40.

²¹⁹ Shaw, “The Passion of Perpetua,” 41.

²²⁰ Shaw, “The Passion of Perpetua,” 44.

²²¹ Shaw, “The Passion of Perpetua,” 44-45.

This is a harsh criticism that is not entirely founded in reality. If Shaw's conspiracy of suppression is correct, why does the *Passio* stay unrepressed well beyond the fifth century? If the narrator (or "editor" as Shaw so callously calls him) of the *Passio* were part of this conspiracy, how could this account have stood out to these church fathers as unique and unsettling in the first place? It is perhaps better to view Augustine, Quodvultdeus, and the unknown authors of the third-century *Passiones* as contemporary reactions to an earlier, more radical interpretation of female martyrdom.

CONCLUSION

Shaw's article on the *Passio* stands out as one of the most influential works on Perpetua. Since its publication, it has found its way into the bibliographies of anthropologists, literary critics, psychologists, sociologists, classicists, and of course, historians. Perpetua has always attracted the interests of a wide variety of fields. Cultural anthropologists see the self-written narrative of her visions as one of the infinitely rare instances in ancient literature of successfully recorded dreams. However, this is only a continuation of the work started by historical psychoanalysts, like Marie Louise von Franz and E.R. Dodds. Scholars such as these have a vested interest in keeping Perpetua's account a "prison diary" because labeling it in such a way adds force to interpreting these visions as her actual dreams. Such biases are forgivable in studies of this kind.

Shaw's reputation as a historian of Roman North Africa makes him an authority to whom scholars from other disciplines rally. It is the duty of the historian to remain as objective as possible, though any good historian knows that perfect objectivity is impossible. As a closing statement, Shaw reminds his readers that even he is subject to the biases of male tradition:

Given the irreductable feminine *duritia* of Perpetua's record, their reactions [Augustine and Quodvultdeus] seem as logical and natural as antibodies surrounding a foreign viral infection. It is, alas, a feature of this record too, and perhaps not without its own ironies, that the present writer has not acted much differently.²²²

Shaw is a reaction, just like everyone's work is in some way a reaction to the works of other scholars, who came before him. As the *Acta*, and the sermons of Augustine and Quodvultdeus came under scrutiny for their own reactions to the *Passio*, the only writer left to react against was the narrator of the *Passio* himself. The association with Tertullian made it easy to read every

²²² Shaw, "The Passion of Perpetua," 45.

word of his narrative as a veiled corrective to Perpetua's own account. In doing so, the *Passio* ceased to be the *Passio* and became Perpetua's account, Saturus' account, and the Redactor's account. By emphasizing the differences, the unity of its message has become obscured.

Perhaps two examples from recent scholarship, which do not appear to share in this bias, will illustrate the damage done more clearly than a barrage of scholars who malign the narrator as Shaw does. Christine Trevett's *Montanism* and Elizabeth Castelli's *Martyrdom and Memory* are both monographs intended to address larger concerns in scholarship than those of a single martyrdom account. Trevett's *Montanism* is an attempt to uncover the earliest roots of the New Prophecy and highlight the differences between it and later manifestations of Montanism. Castelli's *Martyrdom and Memory* attempts to redefine martyrdom as the product of collective memory rather than the actual act of sacrifice. In both cases, the *Passio Perpetuae* represents a crucial piece of evidence. However, its use in these works falls short of its intended effect specifically because the authors fail to offer a holistic view of the *Passio*, instead favoring a breaking down of the account into its constituent parts.

If Trevett's work succeeds overwhelmingly in one degree, it is in its ability to prove that early Montanism was almost indistinguishable from other forms of Christianity. Virtually every distinctive characteristic attributed by later bishops to Montanism (the power of the keys, *glossolalia*, prophetic ability, female participation) was practiced by other radical "sects" of Christianity as well as by certain proto-orthodox groups.²²³ Identifying the New Prophecy is identifying the magnitude of its beliefs and practices. It is a task of identifying emphasis more than difference. It is even more difficult to identify the New Prophecy in North Africa because of the problematic nature of Tertullian's *corpus*—its main source. Trevett argues against a number

²²³ Trevett, *Montanism*, 77-150.

of scholars who see the New Prophecy in North Africa as a watered down version, handed down from Rome rather than from its radical Phrygian roots:

We must be cautious about assuming a high degree of apocalyptic frenzy or asceticism in the Asia Minor Prophecy, and cautious about asserting that the western kind was so much gentler in its asceticism and prophetism as to be capable even of being received formally in Rome.²²⁴

Since Tertullian, even in his Montanist phase, tends to appear less radical than other sources on early Montanism indicate, Trevett is forced to compromise her view of North African Montanism: “Tertullian did not greatly distort the picture of the Prophecy. Its discipline was more demanding where it was innovatory.”²²⁵ In other words, the birthplace of the Prophecy would naturally produce a more radical form than the places where it was exported to. By relying on Tertullian alone to define the Prophecy in North Africa, Trevett allows here interpretation of it to suffer. It ceases to be as radical as the other sources claim, simply because Tertullian appears to be less radical.

The *Passio Perpetuae* is more radical than Tertullian in a number of areas. Whereas Perpetua’s visions and the narrator’s introduction suggest a belief in millenarianism, Tertullian does not let eschatological points of view seep into his writing.²²⁶ The more obvious example of the major contrast in view points on female involvement in the Prophecy has already been dealt with extensively. The zeal for death which Perpetua, Saturus, and the narrator display is further proof of a notable contrast between Tertullian’s brand of Christianity and that of the *Passio*. Trevett sees Tertullian’s view on voluntary martyrdom as ambivalent at best.²²⁷

²²⁴ Trevett, *Montanism*, 120.

²²⁵ Trevett, *Montanism*, 120.

²²⁶ Trevett, *Montanism*, 100; 103.

²²⁷ Trevett, *Montanism*, 124; 127.

Trevett stresses the problematic nature of Tertullian's writings again and again, but he remains a crutch on which she must rely. Her use of the *Passio* is primarily relegated to a discussion of women and their involvement of the Prophecy. Although she makes no overt claim about the redactor's identity, she does closely link him to Tertullian both temporally and theologically.²²⁸ If Trevett had dismissed this association, she would have an entirely new, more radical source, which could refine her views on North African Christianity and help prove her point above.

As mentioned earlier, Elizabeth Castelli's *Martyrdom and Memory* strives for a definition of martyrdom which incorporates the development of the martyr's story, rather than simply focusing on the martyr's death. She finds herself heavily indebted to the works of Foucault, whose works focus heavily on the definition of self: "The discussion begins with a detour through some of the later writings of Foucault, whose explorations of 'the technologies of the self' sparked my thinking about these Christian sources in terms of self-writing."²²⁹ She, therefore, decides to look at Perpetua's "prison diary" as a distinct account which stands apart from the rest of the narrative. Unlike many who see the diary as an unaltered account of her day to day life, Castelli recognizes that Perpetua is writing a piece of literature in order to address an audience and influence their opinion of her actions.²³⁰

Castelli fails to see the rest of the narrative in the same way. The narrator's account, which is given far less coverage than the individual visions of Perpetua's account, is seen as little more than the reaction of a spectator.²³¹ She is correct in viewing Perpetua as the main architect of the martyrdom. It is her words and actions which are the basis of the story, after all. Castelli's

²²⁸ Trevett, *Montanism*, 178; 184.

²²⁹ Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 71.

²³⁰ Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 86.

²³¹ Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 123.

main shortcoming is her inability to view the *Passio* as a collaborative effort between the narrator and Perpetua. Recognizing the existence of this collaboration is paramount to understanding the *Passio* because the narrator's account of her death is specifically designed to reinforce the events and actions taken in her visions. He provides the proof of her martyrdom; therefore, he is just as much a part of the creative process as she is. Since the main theme of Castelli's work is to emphasize the literary (as opposed to the literal) creation of the martyr, it is surprising to see her gloss over such a vital part of the *Passio*.

Neither Castelli nor Trevett makes any harmful accusations against the narrator. They do not consider him a representative of an oppressive male authority; they do not associate him specifically with Tertullian. They are nevertheless products of a body of scholarship which tends to divide the *Passio* into little pieces rather than give credence to it as a whole. In both cases, a holistic interpretation would have better served their purposes. It is time for historians to embrace this kind of interpretation. Perpetua's story does not end with Perpetua, it involves other martyrs and Christians who place their trust in her, give her their support and, above all, preserve her memory. It is time for them to receive the respect they deserve, for without them, Perpetua would have been forgotten long ago.

Perpetua, Saturus, Felicitas—and of course the narrator himself—practiced a unique type of Christianity that was quickly erased from the written record. Only a few shreds of evidence preserved by the pens of vitriolic orthodox church fathers are left to provide a background on the heretical sect that came to be called Montanism. Tertullian's works were preserved because even his Montanist writings did not present a point of view completely unacceptable to orthodox society. He praised noble examples of self-sacrifice, but also chastised those whose zeal for martyrdom led to suicide. He could accept the idea of a female martyr but he did not see any

reason why women should actively seek martyrdom. With Tertullian everything was a fine line. He was an Apologist before all else; it was his job to explain Christian actions. It did not serve his purposes to support overly fanatical acts. For this reason, the *Passio* is the only completely Montanist document in existence. It demonstrates that early Christians practiced voluntary martyrdom, granted special status to the martyr before execution, and practiced a degree of egalitarianism in regard to the sexes that was unparalleled in the later church. Perpetua was more than just a brave woman and a writer; she was a prophetess and Confessor. By observing the subtle themes running throughout the entire work, this interpretation of Perpetua becomes clear.

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