GENDER, STATUS AND IDENTITY IN A NORTH AFRICAN MARTYRDOM [1]

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The *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis*, the account of the martyrdom of Perpetua and five companions in the neighbourhood of Carthage[2] in 203 CE, was the work of three writers.[3] A narrator-editor incorporated Perpetua's prison journal (3-10) and Saturus' account of a dream (11-13), keeping both in the first person, and flanking them with an introduction (1-2) and conclusion, describing the martyrdom (14-21). The narrator linked the documents by, for example, connecting Saturus being first to die in the arena (21,8) with Perpetua's dream in which Saturus climbed the ladder ahead of her (4,5). He left it to Perpetua to add Saturus to the list of martyrs rather than intruding his explanation into her section of the narrative. As a result, the whole work has a feeling of unity.

Five of the martyrs were young, certainly under the age of thirty. Revocatus, Felicitas, Saturninus and Secundulus were *adolescentes* and Perpetua was about 22 (2,1 and 3).[4] Saturus, their instructor in the faith, was certainly older than the catechumens he was preparing for baptism. Revocatus and Felicitas were slaves, while Perpetua was from a high social stratum, *honeste nata*, *liberaliter instituta*, *matronaliter nupta* (2,2). There were additional complications for the women related to their gender: Perpetua had an infant son at the breast and Felicitas was pregnant when arrested and delivered while in prison. Among the six martyrs, then, were slave and free, male and female, learners and teacher and they or some of them interacted with church officials (deacons Tertius and Pomponius, bishop Optatus and pres-

[1] References to secondary material in the footnotes have the author's name and a page reference only. The full bibliographical reference can be found in the bibliography.

[2] The *Passio* exists in a Latin and a Greek version. This paper deals only with the Latin version. The Greek version (2,1) and *Acta* (1,1) make the martyrs native of the city of Tuburbitanorum, present-day Tebourba, 34 km from Tunis to the west, VAN BEEK, 1938, pp. 3-4.

[3] FRIDH concludes that the difference in prose rhythm of the various parts of the *Passio* is consonant with its being the work of three different writers.

[4] Secundulus died in prison, 14,2.

byter Aspasius), sundry state and prison officers, and members of Perpetua's family.[5]

Because of the composition of the martyrdom band and the three witnesses, the *Passio* offers a unique insight into gender, status and identity in an early third century North African Christian church. In particular because Perpetua's journal is that rare piece of evidence from the ancient world, a document by a woman[6], we are able to follow the transformation of Perpetua from a well-born young woman whose sphere of activity and influence was home and family into a Christian martyr in the public arena.

For all her life to the point of her imprisonment, Perpetua had occupied a private space; like all women of her class in the ancient world, her proper sphere was the interior of the house and the duties and privileges connected with it.[7] This did not mean that she was secluded, simply that she found her identity through relationships to family and household. We learn nothing from the *Passio* about her marriage, but it is safe to conclude from the narrator's phrase *matronaliter nupta* (2,1) that when she married, she had become mistress of her own household as well as wife to her husband.[8] By the time of her arrest she had become the mother of a son.

Perpetua's youth and close relationship with her birth family made them very important to her. When she was worried about her baby and not allowed to keep him with her in prison, she talked to her mother about him and she entrusted him to the care of her mother and brother (3,8). She was prompted by her brother, even though he was younger, to ask for a vision to learn the outcome of her imprisonment and trial (4,1-2) and she went to him first to recount her first dream and its meaning (5,10). Her brother, like her father at a later point in the journal, calls her *domina*, certainly a mark of respect, perhaps an acknowledgement that she was independent of them by virtue of her marriage.[9]

But her conversion and even more her persistence at the time of her arrest and during her imprisonment marked a move away from her birth family, especially from her father who, unlike the rest of the family, was not a Christian sympathizer (5,6). Her conversion has been seen as a rebellion against her family and upbringing and a rejection of family authority, but

[5] Perpetua met with her father (3,1-3; 5,1-6; 6,2; 9,2), her mother (3,8), and a brother who was also a catechumen (3,8; 4,1 and 10). We learn of a brother who had died (7 and 8) and an aunt (5,3). The reference to "all your brothers" (*omnibus fratribus*, 5,2) implies that she had more than two brothers.

[6] RADER, p. viii; ALEXANDRE, pp. 509-13.

[7] For the activities which went on in a large household, WALLACE-HADRILL, pp. 191-227.

[8] *Matronaliter* distinguishes her marriage from irregular unions and implies high social standing, LEWIS and SHORT, s.v. *matronalis*.

[9] For a discussion of the authority of a father even over his married children, cf. LACEY, pp. 121-144.

there are many signs that it was not easy for her to defy her father. At their first meeting, she acknowledged that he was acting out of love for her even while she refused to be persuaded (*pro affectione sua*, 3,1). In a later conversation he used his preferential treatment of her as grounds for asking her to change her mind and she tacitly accepted his analysis that he had favoured her above her brothers (*si te praeposui omnibus fratribus tuis*, 5,2). Like her brother, her father referred to her as mistress (*domina*).[10] Her expression of thanks to God at being separated from her father and her relief at his absence (*refrigeraui absentia illius*, 3,4) which followed their first conversation should be seen in the context of the pain she felt in disagreeing with the person to whom she owed much.[11]

Perpetua's imprisonment displaced her from her private sphere, not only by removing her physically from her home but by separating her from family members. When she was not able to have her nursing infant with her, she was denied her identity as a mother.[12] Her husband is never mentioned in her journal or any other part of the *Passio*.[13] As a result of his absence from the record, Perpetua's identity as wife is made irrelevant.

Two male church leaders, Tertius and Pomponius, negotiated a temporary transfer of the prisoners to a better part of the prison, but for Perpetua more significant than the brief respite from heat and crowding was the permission to keep her baby in prison with her. The prison suddenly became her *praetorium* because she could again function as a mother: *factus est mihi carcer subito praetorium, ut ibi mallem esse quam alicubi.* "The prison suddenly became my *praetorium* with the result that I preferred to be there rather than elsewhere" (3,9).

The choice of the term *praetorium* is interesting. The term had its roots in the army camp, in the general's headquarters. It became the term for the official residence of the provincial governor and, by extension, a large country house. One of the connotations of *praetorium* was certainly size and opulence.[14] But the prison did not become larger or better appointed because Perpetua had her baby with her; rather, the prison was now her residence or her headquarters. The use of *praetorium* is a signal that Perpetua, reunited with her baby and again able to function as a mother, now considers the prison her home.

[10] *Domina* implies that the speaker is of lower status or has less authority than the addressee, but one should not take this too literally. Cf. the playful use of the term by the Latin love elegists, TIBULLUS, 1,1,46; PROPERTIUS 1,4,2; OVID., *Trist.* 4,3,9. Cf. Horace Rumpole's code for his wife, "She who must be obeyed".

[11] HALLETT, pp. 3-34 explores the complex relationship of Roman women to their fathers. She does not comment specifically on Perpetua.

[12] Perpetua could have found a wet-nurse for her baby as many women of her social class did, cf. BRADLEY, p. 201.

[13] In *Acta*, 6 her husband is present at the trial.

[14] E.g. *ampla et operosa praetoria*, SUET., *Aug.*, 72.

But Perpetua could keep her baby with her only for a short time. It was taken for granted that her family would take him and in spite of the difference of opinion with her father, she did not make other arrangements. In contrast, her fellow martyr Felicitas gave birth in prison and gave her newborn to "a sister", i.e. a Christian woman in the community, to raise as her daughter (15,7 *ita enixa est puellam, quam sibi quaedam soror in filiam educauit*). Felicitas as a slave had no blood relatives to whom she could entrust her baby and she relied on her Christian family. We are not told the identity of the baby's father who is, in this respect, like Perpetua's absent husband - outside the story. Felicitas' owner, in law the owner of her baby too, was apparently willing to give up claim to the baby, perhaps because he or she did not wish the responsibility of finding a wet-nurse and investing several years of care in an infant.[15]

Perpetua did not depend only on male relatives; there were church leaders to intervene with the prison officials when they were first arrested (3,7). Saturus voluntarily surrendered himself to be in prison and to suffer martyrdom with those who had studied with him (4,5). Perpetua's reliance on him is illustrated in her first dream, when he went up the ladder ahead of her and called back both encouragement and caution.[16]

Her father in their second meeting tried to contain her identity within her birth family by appealing to her family relationships: think of your parents, your brothers, your baby (5,3). He took the position of a suppliant or a child in this appeal to her, kissing her hands, lying down at her feet and crying (5,5). Perpetua whom he addressed as *domina* became a comforting parent, telling him "know that we are not established in our own power but in God's" (*scito enim nos non in nostra esse potestate constitutos, sed in Dei*). Instead of being a daughter under her father's authority (*patria potestas*), Perpetua and the others were "under God's authority" (*in potestate Dei*), not "independent" (*in nostra potestate*),[17] With her loss of freedom, her independence had been surrendered but she and the others had placed themselves under God's power as children under a father, confident that state officials could not go further than God allowed.

After the hearing at which her father appealed to her for the third time, Perpetua separated herself further from her family and effectively ended her maternal relationship. Her father's third appeal to her to pity him in his old age and to pity her infant son (6,3) resulted in his public humiliation and a

[15] On the status of children born to slaves, cf. DIXON, pp. 53-55.

[16] On Perpetua's dream search for a father substitute, cf. DRONKE, pp. 5-6. LEFKOWITZ, 1976, p. 417 argues that Perpetua wanted relief from an intense relationship with her father.

[17] CORBIER, 49, describes the situation by which a married woman could remain under *patria potestas* and become independent (*sui iuris*) after the death of her paternal ascendants. Perpetua was speaking less of a legal relationship than a spiritual one.

beating which she observed with internal pain, feeling as if she herself was being beaten (6,5), but apparently without direct address to him. After sentence of death had been passed, her father refused to bring the baby back into prison; to her relief, weaning was accomplished without discomfort to her or unhappiness to the baby.

Her final interview with her father records no conversation between them, only that his words which would move any creature (*dicere tanta uerba quae mouerent uniuersam creaturam*, 9,2) did not change her mind. She is still more distanced and more an observer than in the previous scenes with him.

After two dreams in which she saw her brother Dinocrates who had died, she had a fourth and final dream (10), in which she passed through the prison doors, walking with the deacon Pomponius through rough and winding places, and finally reached the amphitheatre. There an Egyptian opponent waited for her, accompanied by his seconds, young men came forward to be her seconds and attendants, her clothing was removed and she realized that she was to fight with this formidable foe. It was the moment when her clothing was removed[18] that she realized that she had become a man: *expoliata sum et facta sum masculus*, 10,7).

There were several reasons for her to see herself as a man in her dream. Her cycle of pregnancy and lactation was completed and with the cessation of milk must have come a reduced awareness of her breasts; this change in sensation was translated in her dream into a change of body and a loss of breasts. But it is also true that she was moving into a man's world. She was to fight with a gladiator in hand to hand combat in public. Her transformation to a man was appropriate, one might say necessary, for a public space and a male role.

Her transformation into a man was temporary; she reverted to being female by the end of the dream and never really lost her female identity, as indicated by references to her in the feminine (*haec, hanc, illam, sublata sum*, 10,9 and 11). After the fight, the trainer (*lanista*) awarded her the victor's branch, pronouncing judgment as a God figure, and called her *filia* (10,13). As the use of the address *domina* had established her independence from her birth family, the use of the address *filia* here is significant in identifying Perpetua as a daughter of God. Similarly the shepherd of her first dream, a figure of God like the *lanista*, addressed her as *teknon* "child" (4,9).

Through her journal entries we have traced how Perpetua separated herself from her family and prepared herself for the arena. Her journal is followed by a shorter entry from Saturus describing his dream (12-13). As the

[18] *Oxford Latin Dictionary* s.v. *despolio* "strip (for flogging)", cf. SENECA, *Ep.*, 63,11, *despoliatus amissa unica tunica*. For the connotations of such a state of undress, cf. *despoliata = meretrix* "prostitute", SENECA, *Con.*, 9,2,21.

martyrs were carried to heaven by four angels, Perpetua was at his side. After their arrival in heaven and a joyous reunion with other martyrs, Saturus and Perpetua went outside the walled city and found the still living bishop Optatus and presbyter Aspasius in front of the gates. That their church was wracked by controversy and the two officials had taken opposite sides seems indicated by their request that the two martyrs "settle things between us" (*componite inter nos*, 13,2) and the fact that Optatus stands on the right and Aspasius on the left "apart and sad" (*separatos et tristes*, 13,1).

Saturus and Perpetua went with them into a garden and talked with them, Perpetua speaking to them in Greek and evidently taking a lead role. Perpetua is a liminal figure in Saturus' dream, as she emerges from the private space defined by her social position and her position as a catechumen to hold public discussion with these leaders and to instruct them. As a pupil of Saturus, she had learned from him her attitudes to the church controversy and would therefore carry the message which Saturus would like to say to the church leaders. She stands on the threshold between her former identity as a learner and this mediating and teaching stance between Optatus and Aspasius.

The Montanist controversy almost certainly lay behind this disagreement in the church. We know that women were prominent and influential in Montanism and functioned as prophets[19] while the martyrs' church apparently did not have any women church officials; at least all who are named were male. In putting forward Perpetua as mediator in the dream dispute, Saturus was arguing self-consciously for a greater role for women. But his own influence would also be enhanced by Perpetua's influence because of his identity as her catechist. Given that Perpetua is to be put to death in a few days and will not mediate in the flesh between these leaders, Saturus must be putting the case for a position with which he and his catechumens were already identified.

The ending contributed by the narrator takes the martyrs to the arena and their death and Perpetua from the private space she has claimed in prison to the public space of the arena (14-21). Perpetua's self-assurance which we observed in her journal continued to be displayed in the concluding narrative as she protested to the military tribune that the martyrs had not been well-treated in prison and argued that it was in his own interests to have them *pinguiores* "better nourished" for the emperor's birthday celebrations (16,3). As a result, the tribune permitted visits and treated them more humanely. Perpetua also argued successfully against the proposed procession of the martyrs into the amphitheatre in pagan priestly robes, appealing to an agreement which she said was made between prison officials and martyrs:

[19] On Montanism, cf. WITHERINGTON, pp. 192-199, esp. Perpetua "andronized", p. 198; KLAWITER, pp. 251-61.

we agreed to come voluntarily and you agreed not to take away our freedom (18,4-6). Perpetua's self-appointment in these incidents as spokesperson for the martyrs should be contrasted with her initial need of others to speak for them (3,7).

In the march from prison to amphitheatre, the narrator singled out the two women for comment: Perpetua was *matrona Christi ... Dei delicata* (18,2) "the wife of Christ and the favourite of God" and Felicitas went from blood to blood, from midwife to gladiator (*retiarius*). As the narrator matches the description of Felicitas to her recent childbirth, so he matches the description of Perpetua to her status as a matron and much loved daughter.[20] Perpetua's earthly marriage had been exchanged for marriage to Christ and her earthly privileged status for the love of God.

Once in the arena, Perpetua and Felicitas were stripped of their clothing, *dispoliatae*, the same word which Perpetua used of her dream experience (20,2). The crowd in the amphitheatre was horrified when they realized that one was *puellam delicatam*, and the other had just given birth (*a partu recentem stillantibus mammis*) and they were given loose tunics to cover their nakedness. *Delicatam* echoed *Dei delicata.* used earlier by the narrator; *puellam* emphasized her youth and virtually negated her status as a married woman and a mother.[21] Together they evoked Perpetua's vulnerability and need for protection. The concern of the crowd was hollow; these women whose nakedness they protested were nonetheless to be killed before their eyes. As *Dei delicata*, Perpetua would receive genuine tenderness.

The narrator describes the way Perpetua tried to cover her thigh in the amphitheatre when her clothing was torn (thinking more of *pudor* than *dolor*, 20,4) and how she asked for a pin to fasten up her hair, because it was not right for a martyr to have her hair in disorder at the moment of her triumph (20,5). This Perpetua with her concern for appropriate female behaviour may seem inconsistent with the Perpetua of the journal who wrote about discomfort in her breasts and nursed her baby in a crowded prison with little privacy. But there was a difference between the modesty required indoors in one's home and that required in a public space. Perpetua's adoption of the prison as her *praetorium* allowed her to do in prison what she would do in her own home. But the amphitheatre was a different matter; it was a public space. Women of Perpetua's class did not leave their home with clothes and hair in disarray. Even offering her hand to Felicitas to help her stand up was consonant with Perpetua's upbringing and status and a wish to be standing up and in control, not lying down as a woman would do

[20] LEWIS and SHORT s.v. *delicatus/a* for the use in inscriptions of both masculine and feminine forms for a favourite slave.

[21] *Puella* can be used of married women, HORACE, *Odes* 3,14,10 and of women in labour, HORACE, *Odes* 3,22,2.

only in the privacy of her home. Perpetua apparently did not realize what had happened in the amphitheatre, a circumstance which the narrator attributed to ecstacy (20,8-9) and it is all the more interesting and instructive that these actions of hers were automatic responses of her upbringing.

Before the martyrs reached the amphitheatre, the men had had frequent discussions about which wild beast each wished to be killed by and competed with one another in their desire for glory and gore (19,1-6). No such talk was attributed by the narrator to the two women. Instead, he distinguished the way the men faced danger from the way the women faced it, men being far more vocal and showing more bravado than women (19,1-5). Perpetua's determination for martyrdom was expressed through her dreams, especially the first and fourth, when she saw the ladder of martyrdom fixed with sharp implements or dreamed of being transformed into a man in order to defeat her opponent. Felicitas too had her moment of courage in the drama. She suffered a good deal in her labour because, as the narrator says, it was a premature birth, widely believed to be more painful than a full-term delivery. One of the prison guards taunted her: You are suffering so much now. What will you do when you are thrown to the wild animals? (15,5). Felicitas replied that her labour was borne alone but in the amphitheatre "another will be in me who will suffer for me because I also will suffer for him": *illic autem alius erit in me qui patietur pro me, quia et ego pro illo passura sum* (15,6) The pronouns are significant. The narrator attributed Felicitas' courage to the support of Christ who will be in her and suffer for her. The male martyrs expected to be brave and withstand physical pain because they were men, while this was not the expectation for women who were aware of their vulnerability and their need for divine help.

Though the *Passio* we have explored tensions between the expectations of society and the new values and relationships introduced by Christianity especially as they were reflected in Perpetua's experience. The identity as daughter, sister, wife and mother which was hers through her male relatives was renounced in favour of her relationship to Christ and God, though actualization came only gradually. She rejected her father's claims, having already apparently achieved independence through marriage and having further achieved independence from her husband by his absence. Members of her family who were Christian sympathizers maintained their relationship with her because of that sympathy, and for her child's sake, she did not cut herself off entirely from her family nor they from her. She clung longest to her identity as a mother. Only after breaking that last tie and weaning her baby could she fight the forces of evil manfully.

Perpetua's early dependence on male relatives and male church leaders was replaced by greater confidence in her own abilities as shown by her championing of her fellow prisoners. In this, I have argued that she behaved as if the prison were her headquarters and her home. But she maintained a

distinction between behaviour appropriate to private space and standards of public behaviour, her dazed responses in the amphitheatre reflecting the public behaviour expected of a woman of her class.

It is easy to forget the other five who provide a kind of setting for the shining jewel who was Perpetua.[22] But it is the fact that there were male and female, slave and free, learners and a teacher among the martyrs that allows us to appreciate the nuances of Perpetua's behaviour with respect to gender, status and identity and to see how a well-born woman changed on conversion and how she remained a product of her upbringing. Her own words which provide a window into her mind can be tested by the pride of Saturus in his pupil and details supplied by the narrator.[23]

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[22] SHAW, p. 45.

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MEMORIE BIBLICHE E SUGGESTIONI CLASSICHE NEI SOGNI DELLA *PASSIO PERPETUAE ET FELICITATIS*

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L'azione della *Passio* prende l'avvio nella cittadina africana di *Thuburbium* e si sviluppa a Cartagine, dove incontra la sua καταστροφή. Siamo nel 203 d.C.: un gruppo di catecumeni è stato arrestato per le sue convinzioni religiose: fra questi Vibia Perpetua, una giovane patrizia di ventidue anni, che aveva avuto da poco un figlio; sono con lei il fratello *Secundulus* e gli schiavi Revocato e Felicita. Del gruppo di accusati fa parte il catechista Saturo, che si era "costituito" spontaneamente. In un primo tempo i prigionieri vivono in regime di semilibertà, e il padre di Perpetua, pagano, ne approfitta per tentare di dissuadere la figlia dal perseverare nella sua "follia", ma ogni sforzo risulta inutile.

Dopo qualche giorno i neofiti, che nel frattempo avevano ricevuto il Battesimo, sono rinchiusi in una segreta buia e sovraffollata. A Perpetua è consentito, però, di allattare il figlio. In prossimità del martirio ella ha in sogno delle visioni (IV 1-9; VII 4-8; VIII 1-4), che interpreta come rivelazioni profetiche. Ulteriori sforzi del padre per indurla all'apostasia non hanno alcun esito.

Viene pronunziata la sentenza: *damnatio ad bestias.*[1] Lo "spettacolo", che avrà luogo nell'anfiteatro di Cartagine, è fissato per il sette marzo, giorno del compleanno del cesare Geta, figlio di Settimio Severo. Un'ultima visione (X 1-13) si offre frattanto a Perpetua e di una visione improntata a trionfalismo escatologico (XI 2-8) è gratificato Saturo.

[1] R. FREUDENBERGER, *Probleme römischer Religionspolitik in Nordafrika nach der Passio SS. Perpetuae et Felicitatis*, in Helikon 13-14, 1973, p. 181, parla di "Ritualmordes gegen die Christen in Karthago sehr lebendig". Per quanto riguarda Perpetua, la sua nobiltà di nascita non la esime dalla *damnatio ad bestias*, perché "il semble que les condamnés pour crime de christianisme n'avaient point le droit de revendiquer le privilège de la naissance et que pour eux tous les genres de mort étaient bons" (P. ALLARD, *Histoire des persécutions pendant les deux premiers siècles*, Paris 1892², p. 358).

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