

THE PASSION OF PERPETUA

Men surrender them their souls, women their bodies . . . and for the same reason for which the spectators glorify them, they also degrade and belittle them . . . What perversity. They love whom they punish. They depreciate whom they value . . .

There was . . . that woman who came out of the theatre and returned possessed by a demon. When the unclean spirit was being exorcized, and was pressed with the accusation that he had entered a woman who believed, he replied 'And quite justly too, since I found her in my place'.¹

On the morning of 7 March 203² a small group of young women and men were led from the prison where they had been incarcerated to the arena of the amphitheatre at Carthage.³ They were

¹ Tertullian, *De spectaculis*, 22, 26.

² The dates must remain conjectural. They are the best that can be derived from a range of possible alternatives; the day and month are probable, the year is a reasonable conjecture. For the arguments, see H. Leclercq, "Perpétue et Félicité", *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie*, xiv (1939), cols. 393-444, at col. 420; P. Monceaux, *Histoire littéraire de l'Afrique chrétienne depuis les origines jusqu'à l'invasion arabe*, 7 vols. (Paris, 1901-23; repr. Brussels, 1966), i, *Tertullian et les origines*, pp. 71-2. The texts I have used are those as edited by C. I. M. I. van Beek, *Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis*, vol. i, *Textum Graecum et Latinum ad fidem codicum MSS* (Nijmegen, 1936; repr. 1956). I have also benefited from the text and commentary provided by J. Armitage Robinson, *The Passion of S. Perpetua* (Texts and Studies, Contributions to Biblical and Patristic Literature, 1.2, Cambridge, 1891; repr. Nendeln, 1967), and especially that by Pio Franchi de' Cavalieri, *La Passio SS. Perpetuae et Felicitatis* (*Römische Quartalschrift für christliche Alterthumskunde und für Kirchengeschichte*, v, Supplementheft, Rome, 1896). The *Passio* exists in a Latin (L) and a Greek (G) version. The relationship between the two has been intensely debated since the discovery of the latter in the spring of 1889 by Rendel Harris in the Library of the Convent of the Holy Sepulchre at Jerusalem: J. R. Harris and S. K. Gifford, *The Acts of the Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas: The Original Greek Text* (London, 1890). The matter cannot be discussed at length here. My position is that the Latin version is manifestly the original. The Greek version is a "translation" of this ("translation", that is, in the sense current at the time the version was made: not a word-for-word translation, but rather what we might call a "close version" with additions and glosses made by the translator).

³ On the problem of the location, see H. Slim, "Recherches préliminaires sur les amphithéâtres romains de Tunisie", in A. Mastino (ed.), *L'Africa romana: Atti del I convegno di studio Sassari, 16-17 dicembre 1983* (Sassari, 1984), pp. 129-65. There are cases of cities having double amphitheatres (p. 135 n. 15) but there is, as yet, only one amphitheatre attested for Carthage: see D. I. Borgardner, "The Carthage Amphitheater: A Reappraisal", *Amer. Jl. Archaeology*, xciii (1989), pp. 85-103. The problem stems partly from the account in the *Passio* itself which nowhere explicitly states where the trial and executions took place. From circumstantial detail, historians have argued that the locale *must* be Carthage, though the only place attested (in the Greek version) is Thurburbo Minus.

destined for execution in a spectacular entertainment that was simultaneously intended as an instrument of public terror.⁴ The celebratory occasion for their deaths was the birthday anniversary of Geta, the reigning emperor's younger son. Amongst the intended victims were a young woman called Vibia Perpetua, and her companion in prison, a young female slave named Felicitas. There were three men, Revocatus, Saturninus and Saturus, who were also part of the group. According to the author who reported the subsequent events, the prisoners maintained their composure, walking to their fates "with calm faces, hardly trembling, if at all". Perpetua herself was able to refute the intrusive stares of the spectators "with her own intense gaze". Her ability to stare directly back into the faces of her persecutors, not with the elusive demeanour of a proper *matrona*, broke with the normative body language in a way that signalled an aggressiveness that was not one of conventional femininity.⁵ Her contemporary, Tertullian, was well aware of the problem. When speaking of the need for young women to cover their heads, he remarks that such veiling is necessary because "a young woman must necessarily be endangered by the public exhibition of herself, while she is penetrated by the gaze of untrustworthy and multitudinous eyes, is fondled by pointed fingers, and is too well loved by far".⁶ Her intense return gaze was therefore a sign of Perpetua's rejection of the legitimacy of the onlookers' voyeurism. Her look was a refutation of the spectators' natural assumption that they should be able to engage in "the innocent enjoyment of their national pornography".⁷

When the prisoners were first led out to their execution, the local authorities had attempted to add shame to their suffering by trying to compel the condemned to don the formal attire of

⁴ K. M. Coleman, "Fatal Charades: Roman Executions Staged as Mythological Enactments", *Jl. Roman Studies*, lxxx (1990), pp. 44-73, "Humiliation", pp. 46-7; C. A. Barton, "The Scandal of the Arena", *Representations*, xxvii (1989), pp. 1-36.

⁵ M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, trans. R. Hurley, 3 vols. (New York, 1978-88), iii, *The Care of the Self*, p. 138; E. M. Schur, *Labeling Women Deviant: Gender, Stigma and Social Control* (Philadelphia, 1984), pp. 55-7, drawing on the work of Erving Goffman.

⁶ Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis*, 14.

⁷ See T. Mitchell, *Blood Sport: A Social History of Spanish Bullfighting* (Philadelphia, 1991), ch. 5, "Psychosexual Aspects of the Bullfight", pp. 154-75, at pp. 167-71, for "transgressive looking" as an essential part of the "erotico-violent degradation" and "arousal" that "necessarily accompanies any spectacle of killing and gratuitous risk of life"; the quoted phrase is his (p. 173).

the priestesses and priests of the great non-Christian religious cults of north Africa: the women were to be dressed as priestesses of the goddess Ceres, the men as priests of the god Saturn.⁸ The point was perhaps not just one of symbolic inversion, but also a way in which an element of human sacrifice, which had traditionally been part of the rites of Saturn, could be maintained in another form.⁹ Because of the resolute resistance of Vibia Perpetua, however, the military tribune in charge of the executions relented, and the prisoners were sent off to their execution clothed as they were. Her ability to confront authority, and to reject its terms, no doubt marked her out as a woman who, like her later African compatriot, the martyr Crispina, could be labelled “a hard and contemptuous woman”.¹⁰ When the three men who were with Perpetua entered the arena, by their gestures and expressions they indicated to the governor Hilarianus on his tribunal that, although he might be able to condemn them, their God was going to judge him. This behaviour, taken as a calculated insult to established authority by the large crowds in the arena, provoked them to a furious demand for the infliction of additional corporal punishment on the insolent prisoners. The crowd demanded that the men be severely beaten by being forced to run a gauntlet of “beast-hunting” gladiators or *venatores*. They were the main operational personnel in this public execution since at their trial the group of Christians had been condemned to death by one of the three most savage judicial penalties that the Roman state reserved for its most hardened and dangerous criminals: “throwing to the beasts”.¹¹ The spectacular context was

⁸ M. Leglay, *Saturne africain: histoire* (Paris, 1966), pp. 10, 236-7; cf. Tertullian, *De testimonio animae*, 2, and *De Pallio*, 4.10.

⁹ Leglay, *Saturne africain*, pp. 340-1; cf. G. Ch.-Picard, “Les sacerdotesses de Saturne et les sacrifices humains dans l’Afrique romaine”, *Recueil des notices et mémoires de la Société Archéologique de Constantine*, lxxvi (1948), pp. 117-23, who pointed out that Lactantius, *Institutiones divinae*, 6.26 (“animal hunts, the games devoted to Saturn are called”) refers to this African reality; cf. Ausonius, *De feriis romanis*, 33-7. Coleman, “Fatal Charades”, p. 44, notes parallel cases, and the connection with scapegoat rituals.

¹⁰ H. Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford, 1972), no. 24, 1.5: “dura es et contemptrix!” (by the exasperated governor trying her).

¹¹ H. Leclercq, “Ad bestias”, *Dictionnaire d’archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie*, i (1907), cols. 449-62; G. Ville, *La gladiature en occident* (Rome, 1981), pp. 52-225 (*venationes* and *munera*), 235-40 (*damnatio ad bestias*); cf. the *Passio SS. Maximae, Secundae et Donatillae*, 6 (ed. C. de Smedt, n. 40 below) for Fortunatus the *venator* as the director of the punishment of the women condemned *ad bestias* in the amphitheatre at Thuburbo (Minus?).

therefore provided by a *munus*, or public games, involving the hunting of wild animals. It is interesting to note that a contemporary jurist, Ulpian, thought that "it is customary to condemn young men to this punishment".¹² Customary, perhaps, because the punishment pitted young, aggressive males against wild animals, highlighting active confrontation, rather than passive suffering. The involvement of female "criminals" in this sort of public punishment therefore signalled something unusual.

As a ritual of empowerment, the *munus* or public game was paradoxical in its effects. The intention was that the public humiliation and execution of labelled miscreants would further empower the powerful, the existing social and political order. But the opposite of this process, whether intentional or not, also happened:

the audience could give a man (or woman) honor where fortune had denied it . . . While it was not a pretty picture, it was one that offered a pattern of glorification to the powerless. If the price paid for this empowerment was debasement, one paid that price anyway.¹³

Perpetua was therefore to acquire honour with a double vicariousness, since she would gain it despite the will of the crowd itself. Through her actions memory of her would lay claim to that power, the *potentia*, which befell those sacrificed to the instruments of state and popular punishment.¹⁴ It was only logical that those who were martyred came to assume special powers, to take over the position of "lordliness" normally reserved for the most potent in earthly wealth and prestige. They were granted the titles of *Dominus* ("Lord") and *Domina* ("Lady") which bore strong overtones of mastery, ownership and domination.¹⁵ Since

¹² Coleman, "Fatal Charades", p. 20, citing *Digest*, 48.19.8.11; little is known about the linkage between social status, type of crime, and the specific punishment of "throwing to the beasts": see P. Garnsey, *Social Status and Legal Privilege in the Roman Empire* (Oxford, 1970), pp. 129-31. It is difficult to see any consistent pattern in the application of the penalty, apart from the fact that there is a special element of public expiation in it and so it was particularly applied in crimes of sacrilege, and, later, for *sacra impia nocturnave* ("impious and unholy acts committed in darkness").

¹³ Barton, "Scandal of the Arena", p. 15.

¹⁴ One can add very little to the masterful analysis of Peter Brown in his *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago, 1981), ch. 6, "Potentia", pp. 106-27.

¹⁵ H. Delehaye, *Sanctus: essai sur le culte des saints dans l'Antiquité* (Brussels, 1927), pp. 59-64; Y. Duval, *Loca sanctorum Africae: le culte des martyrs en Afrique du IV^e au VII^e siècle*, 2 vols. (Rome, 1982), ii, p. 776; cf. B. D. Shaw, "The Family in Antiquity: The Experience of Augustine", *Past and Present*, no. 115 (May 1987), pp. 3-51, at pp. 48 ff.

these attributes were normally male, by their actions female martyrs acquired a sort of virile honour.¹⁶ It is no accident that Perpetua's brother, who came to address her as *Domina soror* ("Lady sister") while she was in prison, believed that she had been raised to a special "great status" (*magna dignatio*) and that she had extraordinary powers to command connections with the Lord. Even her otherwise hostile father was forced to this recognition of her status, to see her not as daughter, but as *domina*. It was not surprising, then, that Perpetua herself believed that she had acquired power, having come into a special patronal relationship with her Lord who bestowed his favours (*beneficia*) on her (4.1-2).

The young women, Perpetua and Felicitas, were carefully reserved as a finale to the public executions. Symbolic degradation was added to their punishment. They were to face a wild and savage cow (*ferocissima vacca*). The choice of the animal was unusual, but was a deliberate one on the part of the authorities: they wished to mock the sex of the condemned women by using one of their own, a wild cow, to destroy them. The significance of the choice is made clear only if we understand the normal message imparted to crowds and to the condemned by the use of the usual wild beast, the bull, in this type of punishment: it signalled utter sexual dishonour, usually the display of the woman as a known adulteress.¹⁷ Full exposure of the female to the bull by entirely stripping her of all clothing was merely part of the process of shaming. Crowds were well acquainted with the symbolic significance of the punishment, and could cry out for its imposition, knowing full well what they would be implying about the character of the condemned woman. These two aspects, sexual shaming and physical punishment, were integrally interrelated.¹⁸ The point is, of course, that females could be accused of being adulteresses regardless of actual guilt. In the case of Perpetua and Felicitas, however, the authorities were playing a small variation on the theme. It was a "wild cow" to which the condemned women were exposed. What was the significance? To mock their sex. By analogy with a bull, it was implied that they were sexually

¹⁶ E. A. Clark, "Devil's Gateway and Bride of Christ: Women in the Early Christian World", in her *Ascetic Piety and Women's Faith: Essays on Late Antique Christianity* (Lewiston, N.Y., 1986), pp. 23-60, at p. 44.

¹⁷ Petronius, *Satyricon*, 45.

¹⁸ Mitchell, *Blood Sport*, ch. 5.

shameful; but since a cow was employed, the inference was that they were not “real women” enough to be guilty of adultery. There was the problem that, being Christians, Perpetua and Felicitas were not readily susceptible to credible accusations of adultery. Were the authorities and the crowd attempting to shame the two women with the imputation of a different sort of sexuality? After all, as was later to be said, where were their husbands?

Not only in their exposure to bulls, but more generally in public punishment, we find that women were exposed in the nude, often with their hands tied behind their backs and with their bodies secured to vertical stakes.¹⁹ Their public denuding was a calculated move further to strip them of dignity and power.²⁰ This specific degradation of nudity in the punishment of females is illustrated by the actions of a later Roman governor who sentenced a Christian woman, one Irenê, to be sent, under the authority of the local market-inspectors of Thessaloniki, to a public whorehouse where she was to be exposed in the nude.²¹ That Irenê did not surrender to this immense shame, but rather held out to be burnt alive, was credited by the narrator of her martyrdom to the power of God. So Perpetua and Felicitas were further degraded by having all their clothing removed and being driven into the arena, into the public sight of all, intentionally clad only in diaphanous nets.²² Their particular degradation, including, as it did, a public affront to manifest motherhood, was too much for the crowd. When the “covers of modesty” had been removed from the women, the spectators were horrified to see that “one was a delicate young girl and the other was a woman fresh from childbirth, with milk still dripping from her breasts”

¹⁹ See the illustrations in Leclercq, “Ad bestias”, nos. 89, 90, 92; contrast the treatment of males, figs. 88, 91, 92.

²⁰ M. Perniola, “Between Clothing and Nudity”, in M. Feher, R. Naddaff and N. Tazi (eds.), *Fragments for a History of the Human Body* (New York, 1989), pp. 237–65, at p. 237; M. Miles, *Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West* (New York, 1989), introduction and ch. 2, “‘Becoming Male’: Women Martyrs and Ascetics”, pp. 53–77.

²¹ Martyrdom of Agapê, Irenê and Chionê (A.D. 304): Musurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, no. 22, 5.8–6.

²² This seems to be a typical form of shaming; it is also reported in the case of Blandina at Lyons in 177, and in the *Acts of Saints Paul and Thecla*, 33 (W. Schneemelcher, “Acts of Paul”, in E. Hennecke, *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. W. Schneemelcher, trans. R. McL. Wilson, 2 vols., Philadelphia, 1963–5, ii, pp. 324–64, at p. 362) the young girl Thekla is stripped of all her clothing, covered with a see-through net, and sent into the amphitheatre.

(20.1-2).²³ The sexual dimensions of punishment, and the female resolve to resist such manipulation of their bodies, had a long “pre-Christian” history. That much is reflected, for example, in the “popular literature” of the period, like novels, to which a literate woman like Perpetua would have had access. In these one could read of episodes such as the one retold in the novel *Leukippê and Kleitophon*. In it, the attempted rape of a “slave woman” named Leukippê (in fact a woman of free birth) by her “master” Thersandros, and his threats to use torture to enforce his will on her, is resisted by her with the following words:

Bring on the instruments of torture: the wheel — here, take my arms and stretch them; the whips — here is my back, lash away; the hot irons — here is my body for burning; bring the axe as well — here is my neck, slice through! Watch a new contest: a single woman competes with all the engines of torture and wins every round.²⁴

Female opposition was nothing new — nor therefore the possibilities of Perpetua’s resistance.

In answer to the crowd’s affronted sensibilities, Perpetua and Felicitas were removed from the arena and clothed in plain loose garments. They were then returned to the arena to be hit and trampled by the wild animal. Though concussed and knocked senseless by the initial assault of the beast, Perpetua survived and was taken back, for a brief respite, through the Gate of Life. In the meantime, Saturus, who had survived earlier attempts to kill him, was thrown back into the arena and suffered a savage mauling by a leopard. So much blood gushed out of his body that the great crowd in the amphitheatre reacted to the attack with rhythmic chanting: *Salvum lotum! Salvum lotum!* (“Had a great bath! Had a great bath!”).²⁵ Saturus, still not dead after all this, had his unconscious body tossed “in the usual place” to have his throat cut. But the crowd greatly wished to see his death, as well

²³ Leclercq, “Ad bestias”, col. 458; L. Robert, *Comptes rendus de l’Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* (1982), p. 249 and fig. 9 (p. 248), men exposed nude, except for a brief loincloth.

²⁴ Achilles Tatius, *Leukippê and Kleitophon*, 6.20-22 (precisely contemporary with Perpetua’s youth), trans. J. J. Winkler, in *Collected Ancient Greek Novels*, ed. B. P. Reardon (Berkeley, 1989).

²⁵ For the background to the shout (it was usually a greeting to those coming out of the baths), see F. J. Dölger, “Gladiatorenblut und Martyrerblut: eine Szene der *Passio Perpetuae* in kultur- und religionsgeschichtlicher Beleuchtung”, *Vorträge der Bibliothek Warburg, 1922-1923* (1926), pp. 196-214; F. J. Dolger, “Tertullian über die Blutaufer: Tertullian *De baptismo* 16”, *Antike und Christentum*, ii (1930), pp. 117-41, esp. pp. 129-37; cf. Leclercq, “Ad bestias”, cols. 429-31.

as those of his fellow prisoners. So Saturus was revived and forced to mount the steps of a platform in the arena where his throat was cut by a sword-wielding executioner. Perpetua, reserved as the finale, likewise was forced to climb the steps of the stage. Prepared for execution, she received the errant blow of a nervous and rattled young gladiator on her collar bone. She screamed in agony. Regaining her composure, she guided the shaking hand of the trainee gladiator to her throat.

This public blood bath is a difficult document to read on many levels. The systematic cruelty, the levels and types of violence vented on the bodies of the prisoners, all part of a planned public celebration of imperial power, were neither unusual nor particularly extraordinary.²⁶ But the passion of Perpetua is less remarkable for all of these facts than it is for something quite different: Perpetua's account of her arrest, detainment in prison, and experiences leading up to her execution. Given that all the information we have concerning her is derived from this singular document, not much can be said about her social background that might explain her unusual actions. We know that she was part of a group of persons who were arrested on the charge of being a Christian, perhaps in the aftermath of the Roman emperor Septimius Severus' decrees of 202 that forbade conversion to Judaism and to Christianity.²⁷ As the Greek text of her martyrdom makes clear, she and her companions were arrested in the town of Thuburbo Minus about thirty-six Roman miles (fifty-three kilometres or so) on the Bagrada River to the west of Carthage.²⁸ In the midst of one of the wealthiest and most highly developed agricultural regions of all of north Africa, and in close proximity to one of the great cities of the empire, Thuburbo Minus would have to be ranked as a local centre of some consequence. Its local ruling class was, no doubt, relatively well-off by contemporary standards.

The "family" name of Vibia Perpetua ("Vibius") indicates a family that had held Roman citizenship for many generations

²⁶ In addition to Barton, "Scandal of the Arena" and Coleman, "Fatal Charades", see K. Hopkins, *Death and Renewal* (Cambridge, 1983), ch. 1, "The Murderous Games", pp. 1-30.

²⁷ Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiae*, 6.1.1; Scriptor(es) *Historiae Augustae, Vita Septimii Severi*, 17.1.

²⁸ *Passio*, 2.1 (G). The identification is rejected by T. D. Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study* (Oxford, 1971; revised edn., 1985), p. 72, on the basis of H. Delehaye, *Les passions des martyrs et les genres littéraires*, 2nd edn. (Brussels, 1966), p. 53, but I can see no firm grounds for the rejection; cf. Monceaux, *Histoire littéraire de l'Afrique chrétienne*, i, p. 73.

before the time of her arrest.²⁹ She is described as “of high birth, educated in a manner befitting her status and formally and properly married”, all terms normally used to describe a woman of higher social standing.³⁰ The descriptors are brief, but would suggest that she was from a family that was from the “more honest” ranks of Roman society — probably from the decurial class of the town of Thuburbo Minus.³¹ She came, therefore, from a solid municipal family, no doubt of some local wealth and prestige. She was arrested along with other young catechumens, two of whom, Revocatus and Felicitas, are specified as being slaves (Felicitas specifically as the *conserva*, or fellow female-slave, of Revocatus³²). Two other men arrested, Saturninus and Secundulus, were of unspecified social status (the latter was to die in prison, and therefore was not part of the group executed in the arena: 14.2). The introduction to the account of her martyrdom also provides a few basic facts about Vibia Perpetua’s family background: she had a father and a mother still living, as well as two living brothers, one of whom was a Christian catechumen. From a report in one of her visions we know that at some previous time a younger brother, named Dinocrates, had died when he was only six years old, apparently from a terrible cancer of the face (7.4-5). Her own family situation is rather unclear. She was married, though her husband is never referred to once, either by herself (most importantly) or by any of the contextual material in the larger account that brackets her own words. His absence is something to be noted, and to be explained. Perpetua herself is described as being near the end of her twenty-first year in age, that is to say, twenty years old in our terms. At the time of her arrest, she had a baby boy whom she was still breast-feeding.

²⁹ Vibii are frequently found among the military elements of north African society: see J. M. Lassère, *Ubique populus: peuplement et mouvements de population dans l’Afrique romaine* (Paris, 1977), pp. 254, 266, 287, 443, 445. If they received citizenship from a Vibius who was governor, then it must date from the first half of the first century (Barnes, *Tertullian*, p. 70); but there is no necessary connection with a gubernatorial grant — it is a common name in Italy and well attested among the Caesarean and Augustan Italian soldier-settlers who were located around Thuburbo Minus: see Lassère, *Ubique populus*, pp. 121, 149-50, 157, 192, and his comments at p. 242.

³⁰ *Passio*, 2.1 (L): “honeste nata, liberaliter instituta, matronaliter nupta”.

³¹ That would match the rank of similar descriptions of social rank from Africa; I find it difficult to accept Barnes’s suggestion (*Tertullian*, p. 70) that she might be of senatorial rank; nothing overtly indicates this, and other matters, such as the nature of the punishments and indignities heaped on her, and even more so, her father, would seem to argue against such a high social status.

³² In the *Acta* Felicitas refers to Revocatus as her cousin (*congermanus*).

There are no indications of any other children. The boy was presumably her first child, and would therefore indicate that she was married at about age eighteen or nineteen — a paradigm of matrimonial normality.³³

Perpetua was privileged not just in her inherited social rank, but also because of her acquired skills, notably her literary education. This is evident not just from her ability in composition and her use of common literary allusions from “high culture”, but from the simple fact that she was literate — at least in Latin, perhaps also in Greek.³⁴ If so, she was unusual not only in her literacy, but also because, in the self-laudatory pronouncements of proud north Africans, she was educated in both Greek and Latin (*utraque lingua erudita*).³⁵ It is precisely this fact that draws our attention to her case. For, after having briefly repeated the main facts regarding the arrest of the group around Perpetua, the editor of the martyrdom announces: “The whole series of events concerning her own death she herself narrated, just as she wrote it down with her own hand, and according to her own feelings on the matter” (2.3). The achievement was significant enough for the editor to emphasize the fact yet again at the conclusion of Perpetua’s account: “These were the remarkable visions of those most blessed martyrs Saturus and Perpetua, which they themselves wrote down” (14.1). But it was the extraordinary existence of an account in her own words of a woman’s personal experiences which was seen, even then, as something of great rarity.

First, a few elementary facts. The actual number of surviving pieces of literature from all of antiquity that were written by females is, of course, exiguously small. If one excepts the writing of letters (of which relatively few survive) and operational documents to which they were signatories (wills, bills of sale and such) there is not much left at all in terms of writing, much less

³³ B. D. Shaw, “The Age of Roman Girls at Marriage: Some Reconsiderations”, *Jl. Roman Studies*, lxxvii (1987), pp. 30-46.

³⁴ W. V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), s.v. “women’s literacy”. For some of her literary allusions, see P. Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages: A Critical Study of Texts from Perpetua († 203) to Marguerite Porete († 1310)* (Cambridge, 1984), pp. 107-11. I am, however, very suspicious of the one piece of evidence for her knowledge of Greek.

³⁵ T. Kotula, “*Utraque lingua eruditi*: une page relative à l’histoire de l’éducation dans l’Afrique romaine”, in J. Bibauw (ed.), *Hommages à Marcel Renard*, 3 vols. (Collection Latomus, nos. 101-3, Brussels, 1969), ii, pp. 386-92.

reflective literature. To have any one such document, therefore, is to be presented with unusual opportunities both in terms of the simple content of the document, and for a quality of interpretation that is otherwise systematically denied us. We have the hope, however fleeting, of being able to seize for a moment in time the perceptions shared by an individual whose entire class of persons was systematically denied this sort of expression. Beyond this, of course, also lies the simple fact of Perpetua's martyrdom. Given the various factors that clearly indicate to most historians that many more females than males were converting to Christianity in its first centuries, one would tend to expect them to be in the front line of persecution.³⁶ Females may well have been martyred just as frequently as males in the sporadic fits of persecution that erupted in various regions of the Roman empire, but their chances of being memorialized in literature was nowhere near as frequent. In fact, males were celebrated four times (or more) as frequently as females. A useful point of view on that imbalance is provided by a study of medieval and early modern sainthood. As its authors remark: "The ideal type we discussed in answering the question 'Who was a saint?' might well have been separated into males and females, for nothing so clearly divided the ranks of the saints as gender".³⁷ In their whole survey, only about one out of six of all the "saints" (*sancti*) whom they counted as part of their study were females, a proportion which rose in the "era of female saints" in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries to about one in five, but which fell as low as about one-tenth of all saints in the eleventh and twelfth centuries — a male preference which the authors see as closely linked to the deep-seated male prejudices of medieval society.³⁸ Although the criteria for saints and martyrs are not the same, the two categories demand personal characteristics that are broadly similar, and it therefore

³⁶ Averil Cameron, "Neither Male nor Female", *Greece & Rome*, xxvii (1980), pp. 60-8, noting that the claim goes back at least as far as A. Harnack, *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity during the First Three Centuries*, English trans., 2nd edn., 2 vols. (London, 1908), ii, ch. 2.4, "On the Inward Spread of Christianity: Among Women", pp. 64-84; R. Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (New York, 1987), pp. 308 ff.; though the received view is currently being questioned: M. R. Salzman, "Aristocratic Women: Conductors of Christianity in the Fourth Century", *Helios*, xvi (1989), pp. 207-20.

³⁷ D. Weinstein and R. M. Bell, *Saints & Society: The Two Worlds of Western Christendom, 1000-1700* (Chicago, 1982), ch. 8, "Men and Women", pp. 220-38, at p. 220.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 220-21.

cannot be purely accidental that the proportion of “female entry” to these highly privileged religious statuses is much the same.

Perpetua’s accession to the rank, therefore, was in itself somewhat unusual. But exactly how unusual? A statistical analysis of all known pre-Constantinian martyrs reveals that, compared to general Mediterranean trends, African women represented a markedly higher proportion of all female saints. This pattern is unusual because it involves an extraordinarily strong inversion of gender valuation in the western Mediterranean world. Of all the major regional zones and social groups of the western empire, it is north Africa that reveals by far the greatest bias towards a higher public valuation of men (and, combined with this, an unusual emphasis on seniority).³⁹ Even if we take into account her higher social status, therefore, there is still a large problem to be explained. The only important conclusion that can be noted at this point is that north African females were reacting to martyrdom in almost exactly the opposite proportion to their actual devaluation in their own society. They were doing this with sufficient frequency to upset the normal expectation of female roles in martyrdom in the Mediterranean world (and hence a certain type of empowerment in Christian circles). A reasonable deduction that flows from this observation is that, whether consciously or not, they were doing this in reaction to their actual position in their secular relationships. Therefore, Perpetua’s behaviour must have been part of this tendency in African society. On the other hand, her actions, and those of Felicitas, must have contributed to, and reinforced, this behaviour — must, in part, have set a model for later women. Later female martyrs who came to play such a dominant role at Carthage, could hardly have been unaware of her action. Others outside Carthage as, for example, the three females, Maxima, Donatilla and Secunda, whose martyrdom bore resemblances to hers, could hardly have been ignorant of her example⁴⁰ — especially so since the governor Anullinus sentenced them to die, precisely as Perpetua, by throwing them to the beasts in the amphitheatre at Thuburbo.

³⁹ B. D. Shaw, “The Cultural Meaning of Death: Age and Gender in the Roman Family”, in D. Kurtzer and R. Saller (eds.), *The Family in Italy from Antiquity to the Present* (New Haven, 1991), ch. 4, pp. 66-90, where some of the evidence is presented.

⁴⁰ C. de Smedt, “Passio SS. Maximae, Secundae et Donatillae”, *Analecta Bollandiana*, ix (1890), pp. 110-16; C. Annius Anullinus, *proconsul Africae*, was governor A.D. 303-4. Monceaux tried to make the case for Thuburbo Minus but, alas, there is nothing in the martyrology to clinch the identification.

Of course, occupational and social status were also determinants of access to celebrated martyrdom. The measurable patterns clearly show high-ranking imperial and ecclesiastical officials, and persons of high social standing, absolutely dominating the calendar. Set against these patterns, Perpetua's high social standing (despite her gender) makes the record and survival of her own account of her martyrdom more comprehensible. At the same time, it brings to our attention the extraordinary nature of the memorialization of Felicitas, the slave. Finally, there is the dimension of chronological context. Perpetua's death occurs in an early phase of recorded and remembered Christian martyrdoms. Most martyrdoms, including most female ones, were to be recollected for periods much closer to the final Constantinian victory of the Christian church. The Decian persecution of the mid-third century is clearly a watershed, but most of the formally remembered martyrdoms come from one period — the immediate run-up to Constantine, the so-called "Great Persecution" beginning with Diocletian and his successors. This period, close in time to the Constantinian "revolution" that was finally to legalize and officially empower the church, accounts for well nigh half of all recorded and memorialized martyrdoms. Perpetua, therefore, is to be placed in a very early phase of the production of narrative memoirs that were to feed into the later reinterpretation of the historical significance of martyrdom in the church.

Perpetua's account is also unusual in another way — a way which might well account for the relative freedom she had in her narration and in the fixing of her own account as authoritative in a way that was not possible for later women. She was the first. That is to say, if we were to make a crude division amongst the narrative martyrologies and formal martyr *Acta* (*Acta martyrum*) we might say that there is a division between those that portray the fates of collective groups of Christians as opposed to those which relate the fates of "solitaries". The latter tend to emphasize the heroic achievements of great individuals — all of them male and ordinarily holding some special status in the church (usually that of bishop). In this respect the martyr *Acta* only reflect the general male preferences and power networks of the time — power relationships that are even more clearly drawn in the general run of all martyrs where ecclesiastical and imperial officials (and soldiers) dominate the field. Female figures do appear in "collective" accounts of martyrdoms before Perpetua — but as

subordinate actors in a wider drama. In writing her account of her own experiences, therefore, Perpetua was (to the best of our knowledge) breaking new ground in asserting the primacy and legitimacy of her own experiences.⁴¹ But her words did not just record this personal experience. They had such persuasiveness that her narrative had a great influence on the way subsequent autobiographical accounts of "martyrdoms" were composed, provoking mimicry of her words and style, especially in north Africa.⁴²

To make the point clearer, we might consider the roles of females in the accounts that precede hers in date. A very early reference to a female martyrdom comes from the time of the emperor Marcus Aurelius, from Pergamum in Asia Minor.⁴³ The narrative is primarily of the "solitary" type, with the main emphasis being on the heroic resistance of two males, Karpos and Papylos. The account also includes the actions of one Agathonikè, one of the first female martyrs so celebrated. Although she is executed along with the two men, her actions are represented as

⁴¹ I would therefore like to make three critical distinctions in my approach from others that have been commonly used to analyse Perpetua's significance:

(1) One is to claim her as a "late antique" or even a "medieval" writer. Unless we are willing completely to ignore the normal meanings of historical periodization, such a categorization does violence to her experience. She cannot properly be understood as "late antique"; and even less as "medieval" (as the female writers from those periods summoned in comparison clearly show), but must be placed in a late second- and early third-century social milieu, at the height of "classical" Roman power in the Mediterranean.

(2) Another is to claim her as an example of a great, but lost, tradition of female writers. This position I also reject. There is, alas, no sign of any such "lost tradition" and the few surviving female writers who can be placed with her are utterly incomparable in every way with her achievement. Though of small scale, her narrative is an incandescent jewel of writing; to place beside it, for example, Egeria's travelogue would be somewhat like claiming the regionaries of Rome, or extracts from geographers, as paradigms of high literature, which they are not. Historians, alas, must face the facts. There is very little surviving female writing, and few indications of any "lost tradition": it is the relative absence of any such tradition that demands explanation, and we are not likely to get an honest answer by pre-empting the solution by false ideological claims. Typical of the latter is P. Wilson-Kastner *et al.* (eds.), *A Lost Tradition: Women Writers of the Early Church* (Washington, 1981).

(3) Finally, there are movements to theologize her whole experience (an interpretation that is manifestly rejected by the whole of this article) or to reread it through the modern ideology of Freudianism.

⁴² The accounts of Marianus and Jacobus (A.D. 259) (Musurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, no. 14, pp. 194-213) and that of Montanus and Lucius (A.D. 259) (*ibid.*, no. 15, pp. 214-39) show clear signs of mimicry of certain aspects of the diction, themes, concepts and structure of Perpetua's narrative.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, no. 2, pp. 22-37: "possible" because there is a dispute over the dating, with some placing the acts under the emperor Decius (A.D. 249-51).

the sudden, impulsive actions of an onlooker: "There was a certain Agathonikê who happened to be standing there and who saw the glory of the Lord which Karpos said he had seen, and, knowing that this was a heavenly call, immediately shouted out". It is this sudden, unpremeditated act which leads to her execution along with the two men. She ends life not as a saint herself, but "with the holy men".⁴⁴ The only other females so celebrated before Perpetua appear in "collective" martyrdoms where the principal emphasis is on the male actors. The account that would have set the stage directly for Perpetua's own experience was the "trial transcript" (*commentarius*) version of the deaths of the Scillitan martyrs, persons from Scillium, a village located near her home town, in north Africa.⁴⁵ Their trial and executions took place on 17 July 180 — therefore in the generation just before Perpetua's. The five females who were executed, along with seven men, are listed in second place in the account. Only three are directly questioned by the governor, and they offer only the standard perfunctory answers. Not much in the way of an inspirational literary model.

The only other celebrated female martyrdom in the generation before Perpetua is that of a female slave, one Blandina, who died in the brutal massacre, public degradation and theatrical executions of Christians in the Gallic city of Lyons in 177.⁴⁶ The ancient editor of the document was compelled to admit that Blandina's achievements proved the opposite of male assumptions — the worth of someone who was both a slave and a woman. Indeed, it was through her that "Christ proved that things that men think cheap, ugly and contemptible are deemed worthy of glory before God, by reason of her love for him which was not merely vaunted in appearance, but demonstrated in deeds". She proved herself superior precisely with respect to her body:

⁴⁴ That is to say, in the Greek recension. In the later Latin version *Agathonica* is not moved by a sudden fit of emotion, but is put through the same inquisitorial process as the men, facing much the same questions, and offering her own rational defences of her beliefs. The crowd of spectators shout out to her to have pity on herself and her children, a sentiment that is then echoed by the proconsul. When she does not relent, they have pity on her *because of her beauty*, which they could judge since she had been stripped of her clothing (6.4-5 [L]).

⁴⁵ The precise location of the town is not known; it was in the general area of north Africa close to Carthage, and Thuburbo Minus: see P. Mesnage, *L'Afrique chrétienne: évêchés et ruines antiques* (Paris, 1912), p. 219.

⁴⁶ Musurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, no. 5, pp. 62-85; Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiae*, 5.1 (1-51).

Blandina's earthly mistress [that is, her female slave owner], who was herself amongst the martyrs in this conflict, was in agony lest, because of her bodily weakness, she would not be able to make a bold confession of her faith. Yet Blandina was filled with such power that even those who were taking turns to torture her in every way from dawn to dusk were wearied and exhausted. They admitted that they were beaten, that there was nothing further they could do to her. They were surprised she was still breathing, for her entire body had been broken and torn.

On the day she was taken into the amphitheatre at Lyons, along with three male companions, to be exposed to wild beasts — “to offer a public spectacle”. The men were made to “run the gauntlet” and were exposed to other calculated tortures, finally to expire. Blandina, on the other hand, was tied to a post and exposed to wild animals that were let loose on her: “She seemed to hang there in the form of a cross”. But none of the animals would touch her, so she was taken down, and returned to prison.

On the last day of the gladiatorial games Blandina was brought back, saved for the culminating point of the tortures. That was the usual female place in such entertainments.⁴⁷ In public punishments, therefore, the special value of rarity attached to females, when coupled with the dangerous and yet alluring spectacle of witnessing the public violation of norms of sexuality and the mutilation of otherwise protected and honoured female bodies, gave a special edge, a sharper culmination to the display. In being compelled to play the female role in a drama of public punishment, the slave woman Blandina achieved the sort of glory doubly denied to her in normal life, where honour was normally the preserve of males of free status.⁴⁸ Given these known ways in which females were punished, where else would women like Blandina and Perpetua expect to be in that process, except last? As the culminating point of the display, however, Blandina's death could bring her honour. After the ritual gauntlet of whipping and clubbing, being burned on glowing red irons, she was stripped naked, covered with see-through netting, and exposed to the attack of a bull. Her nudity and exposure to the quintessential male beast, as must now be clear, were simply part of the

⁴⁷ M. Cèbeillac-Gervasoni and F. Zevi, “Révisions et nouveautés pour trois inscriptions d'Ostie: des femmes gladiateurs dans une inscription d'Ostie”, *Mélanges d'archéologie et d'histoire de l'Ecole Française de Rome*, lxxxviii (1976), pp. 602-20; in general, see Ville, *Gladiature en occident*, pp. 263-4; on the parallel attraction and marginality of the Spanish *señoritas toreras*, see Mitchell, *Blood Sport*, pp. 157-8.

⁴⁸ J. Davis, *People of the Mediterranean: An Essay in Comparative Social Anthropology* (London, 1977), pp. 89-100, remains the most convincing treatment.

Roman language of punishment. Blandina was gored and thrown about until she was senseless, until “she no longer perceived what was happening”. She died. The spectators, it is said, were compelled to admit that in their experience “no woman had ever suffered so much”. Her fortitude and endurance were compared to those of a victorious male athlete who triumphed against all odds “to win” and so to achieve great honour.

These earlier public executions provide a minimal context for the understanding of what happened to Perpetua and Felicitas: the order in which they were placed (because of gender), the types of humiliation to which they were to be exposed, the dishonour of public nudity and the shame of netting (because of gender), the sort of wild beasts to which they were to be exposed, bulls or cows (because of gender), the bodily reactions (being thrown until rendered insensate), and the types of attitudes in which these were to be interpreted (by male writers). Although the account of Perpetua’s demise can be better understood against this background, it is the uniqueness of her narrative that stands out against the earlier comparative materials. Perpetua’s words are of such unusual literary and historical qualities that it is difficult to convey how their power of communication, style and content differ so much in the fundamental aspect of simple reportage from all other so-called “martyr acts”. Her words are:

colloquial . . . no emotion, no fantasy of Perpetua’s appears disguised by stylistic ornaments . . . [she] records her thoughts in an informal, graphic way, which is moving partly because she is not striving to be literary. There are no rhetorical flourishes, no attempts at didacticism or edification. The dialogue . . . retains the imprecisions of living conversation . . . The heroines in Greek tragedy have moments of comparable intensity, but the intimate and unselfconscious quality of Perpetua’s utterance stands alone.⁴⁹

Perpetua’s composition also shares characteristics typical of other female writing in comparable genres, amongst them a penchant for a repetitive paratactical style which emphasizes the concrete and is more directly tied to the realities of actual face-to-face

⁴⁹ Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages*, ch. 1, “From Perpetua to the Eighth Century”, pp. 1-35, at pp. 1, 6; he sees this not so much as a literary artifice, as something welling up out of given social conditions: “While there is — as Auerbach saw — a profound connection between *sermo humilis* and the new realism found in certain Christian writers, this concept is particularly problematic in the case of Perpetua. Her diary can scarcely be discussed in terms of a ‘new realism’ — any more than can the diary of Anne Frank, or the Indian memoir of Mary Tyler, or the prison letters of Angela Davis, in our time”; cf. E. Auerbach, *Literary Language and*

(cont. on p. 20)

relationships than the abstractions and complexities of male literary production. It has been argued, convincingly, that her style, and that of women writers from late antique and early medieval contexts, flows directly out of a world of oral communication, to which we otherwise have little, or no, access.⁵⁰ But if Perpetua was the first to so write, she was, in many ways, the last. There were to be few repetitions of her singular achievement. Her position is therefore like that of a Sappho or a Corinna — females who broke into the world of literary production at a fortuitous conjuncture when new genres were opening and before male control and domination over literary production led to a complete exclusion of women from public writing. That is surely why she “speaks of things that do not occur elsewhere . . . Ancient literature had its Antigone, but there is nothing like [Perpetua], nor could there be; there was no literary genre capable of presenting reality with so much dignity and elevation”.⁵¹

The whole document that is today labelled the “Passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicity” (*Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis*) is much more than just Perpetua’s bare account. (See Table). It also includes substantial additions by an editor which both precede and follow her words. My investigation of the entire document has two primary purposes. First, I wish to establish an understanding of the core of the document shorn of the male editor’s additions. The great importance of this aim should not have to be emphasized. Establishing the primacy of what Perpetua experienced, thought, saw and felt is not only a rare possibility granted to the historian, but also demands that we reproduce a faithful version of how she saw herself and the ways in which she interpreted what was happening to her. This task is all the more pressing because of the second aim of this investigation: to demon-

(n. 49 cont.)

its *Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages*, trans. R. Manheim (New York, 1965), ch. 1, “Sermo humilis”, pp. 27-66, at pp. 60-65.

⁵⁰ E. A. Petroff (ed.), *Medieval Women’s Visionary Literature* (Oxford, 1986), introduction, “The Visionary Tradition in Women’s Writings: Dialogue and Autobiography”, pp. 28-9, noting the effect of oral communication on female reportage. Perpetua’s style has thus been frequently misinterpreted, leading to typical misjudgements such as that of Leclercq — “this heroic woman uses childish language”: Leclercq, “Perpétue et Félicité”, col. 422. I am only claiming that this sort of rhetoric is “characteristic”, not determined. It could well be the result of conscious or semi-conscious “rhetorical” strategies as much as anything else: see A. Weber, *Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity* (Princeton, 1990), esp. pp. 5-15, for a cogent analysis.

⁵¹ Auerbach, *Literary Language and its Public*, p. 63.

TABLE
STRUCTURE OF THE
"PASSIONS OF SAINTS PERPETUA AND FELICITY"

—	<p>Editor's Introduction to the document (1-2)</p> <p>(a) Statement concerning the theological status of the document (1)</p> <p>(b) Introduction to the principal characters of the drama (2)</p>
—	<p>Perpetua's account of her arrest, imprisonment, and life in prison to the point of her execution "written in her own hand" (3-10)</p> <p>(a) Arrest and first encounter with her father (3)</p> <p>(b) First vision (4)</p> <p>(c) Second encounter with her father (5)</p> <p>(d) Trial scene and third encounter with her father (6)</p> <p>(e) Visions of Dinocrates (7-8)</p> <p>(f) Life in prison and final encounter with her father (9)</p> <p>(g) Vision of personal combat in the arena (10)</p>
—	<p>Vision of Saturus: One of Perpetua's fellow prisoners "written in his own hand" (11-13)</p>
—	<p>Editor's account of the fate of Perpetua and her fellow prisoners (14-21)</p> <p>(a) General statement on the fidelity of the documents (14)</p> <p>(b) Report of the fate of Felicitas (15)</p> <p>(c) Report on the execution of the prisoners in the amphitheatre (16-21.10)</p> <p>(d) Peroration on the significance of the martyrdoms (21.11)</p>

strate the modes by which this unmediated self-perception, her reality, was subsequently appropriated by a male editor, and then greatly distorted by subsequent male interpreters.⁵² There is, of course, the related, and larger, problem of reconstituting her experiences, free from the mass of subsequent theological interpretation. Both problems are provoked by the nature of her own

⁵² That is to say, it is a simple attempt to test the utility of a category of historical analysis: Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis", *Amer. Hist. Rev.*, xci (1986), pp. 1053-75, revised as ch. 2 in her *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York, 1988), pp. 28-50, on which see the cogent remarks by W. H. Sewell, *History and Theory*, xxix (1990), pp. 71-82. I would abjure the literary-critical elements of Scott's theory in favour of more traditional historical methods — so Linda Gordon in *Signs*, xv (1990), pp. 853-8.

narrative. The startling and incandescent words penned by this young woman facing death produce an account that derives its power from the simplicity and directness of its communication. Hers is a direct account of actual human experience, a piece of reportage stripped of the illusory rhetorical qualities of other martyr *Acta*.

What then are the significant elements in her own story, as told in her own words? First of all, her decision to act on her own, in such a way as deliberately to risk her own life, brought into question all her family connections, the closest relationships of power into which she had been bound on a day-to-day basis up to that point. There can be no doubt that the most powerful link in this familial network so far as she was concerned (and the one which is constantly brought to the fore as the most problematic) was that with her father.⁵³ In the course of her imprisonment, trial, and the events leading up to her execution, she had no fewer than four traumatic meetings with her father, each told in a straightforward manner that reveals both the tensions and the problems in this relationship. The first confrontation took place while she was still under house arrest. She reports it in the form of a dialogue (3.1-4):

When we were still with our arresting officers, my father wished to make me change my mind with words of persuasion. He persevered in his attempts to defeat me, all because of his love for me.

'Father', I said, 'for the sake of argument, do you see this vase, or whatever you want to call it, lying here?'

And he said, 'Yes, I see it'.

And I said to him, 'Can you call it by any other name than what it is?'

And he said, 'No, you can't'.

'So', I said, 'I cannot call myself anything other than what I am — a Christian'.

Merely hearing this word upset my father greatly. He threw himself at me with such violence that it seemed he wanted to tear my eyes out . . . but in the end he just harassed me and then left, beaten, along with his devilish arguments. For the next few days during which my father was away, I gave thanks to the Lord, and was able to refresh myself in his absence.

The second confrontation with her father occurred after she had already been in prison for a few days. Suddenly news came that the prisoners were to be taken to trial (5.1-6):

A few days later a rumour began to circulate that we were to be taken to our court hearing. My father, consumed with worry, hurried from the

⁵³ Cf. C. Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life* (New York, 1988), pp. 64-8.

city. He came up to me in order to dissuade me, and said: 'My daughter, have pity on my grey hair. Have pity on your father, if I am still worthy to be called "Father" by you. With these hands of mine I raised you to the flower of your present age. I placed you before all your brothers in honour. Please don't shame me before other men. Consider your brothers. Consider your mother and your mother's sister. Think of your baby son, who will not be able to live without you. Change your mind before you destroy us all. If anything should happen to you, none of us will be able to speak freely again'.

My father spoke these words to me, as a father would, with paternal affection, kissing my hands. Then, throwing himself at my feet, he wept. He no longer addressed me as 'Daughter' but rather as 'Lady'. For my part, I grieved for my father's misfortune, because he alone of all my relations took no joy in my suffering. I tried to comfort him, and said, 'What happens tomorrow on the prisoners' platform will be what God wishes. You must know that we are no longer in our own power, but in that of God'. He went away from me deeply saddened.

Next day there follows the trial scene in which the defendants are arraigned before the proconsul's tribunal in front of a large crowd in the town forum. One by one they climb the stairs to the platform to be interrogated. Here again, Perpetua's father is the principal figure in her account, as he attempted, yet again, to get her to change her mind (6.2):

My turn came. My father appeared right there carrying my baby boy. He pulled me down off the stairs and said to me, 'Sacrifice . . . please . . . have pity on your baby'.

In which pleas her father was supported by the governor Hilarianus, who added (6.3-5):

'Spare the white hair of your father, spare your infant son. Make a sacrifice on behalf of the Health of our Lord Emperors.'

And I said, 'I will not'.

Hilarianus said, 'Are you a Christian?'

And I replied, 'Yes, I am a Christian'.

And when my father rushed up to try to dissuade me, Hilarianus ordered him to be struck down. He was beaten with rods. I was in pain over my father's treatment — as if I myself were being beaten. I grieved for his old age.

Perpetua's final encounter with her father came in the final day before she was to be led out for execution in the amphitheatre (9.2-5):

Then the day of the games was upon us. My father, absolutely exhausted by the ordeal, came to see me. He began to tear at his beard. He prostrated himself, falling face down on the ground. He cursed the number of his years, and uttered such words as would have moved all creation. I grieved for his unhappy old age.

It was the last time they met before she died. Her father is the single dominant person in her diary. Her husband is nowhere to be found in her account (and there is no presumption of divorce or death).

Perpetua's other constant concern was her new-born child, whom she was still breast-feeding at the time of her arrest and imprisonment. It is the first thing that occurs to her after she adjusts, as much as she can, to the terrors of being transferred to the prison (3.5-8):

A few days later [after our arrest] we were thrown into prison. I was really frightened. I'd never experienced such darkness. It was a hard time. The overcrowded conditions. The heat was overpowering. The constant 'shake-downs' and demands by the prison guards and soldiers. On top of everything, I was tortured with worry for my baby. Then the blessed deacons Tertius and Pomponius, who brought help to us, paid out the necessary bribes — and within a few hours we were sent to a better part of the prison where we were able to refresh ourselves. When we left our prison quarters, we were all able to get some freedom for ourselves. I breast-fed my baby. He was already faint from hunger. In my worry, I spoke about the baby to my mother, and tried to comfort my brother. I handed my baby boy over to their care. I was exhausted when I saw how worn out they were with concern for me. These worries tortured me for many days. Finally I got permission to keep my baby with me in prison. Once I had been relieved of my tortures and worries about my child, I immediately got better. The prison suddenly became a palace — I would have preferred to be there rather than anywhere else in the world.

This permission, however, must have been temporary. The baby must have been given back to her parents' care since he appears with her father at her trial before the governor. Following her sentencing *ad bestias* and return to prison quarters, Perpetua was once again distressed by this separation from her child (6.7-8):

But because my baby had become used to being breast-fed and to staying with me in prison, I immediately sent the deacon Pomponius to my father to ask him to return my baby to me. My father refused. It was as God willed. The baby no longer desired my breasts. They were no longer to be so sore and inflamed. I was no longer tortured with concern for my baby, or by the pain in my breasts.⁵⁴

The persons who figure most prominently in her account are therefore her father and her baby son; after that appear her brothers then, as a shadowy figure, her mother. Her husband is absent. That absence demands some explanation. A hint might be found in Perpetua's perplexing statement that her father "alone of all her relations" took no joy in her suffering. On the

⁵⁴ Shaw, "Family in Antiquity", pp. 41-2, for further context on Perpetua's experiences here.

face of it, this claim is false if one takes the "family line" (*genus*) concerned to be her own natal family, since there is no indication whatever that her mother or her brothers got any particular joy out of her suffering. Indeed, at least one of her brothers was a Christian catechumen like herself. A reasonable solution is that the "family line" concerned is that on her father's side, to which her husband was related. In that case, only her father out of all of the relatives on his side of the family sympathized with her plight. It seems most probable, then, that her own husband was frankly hostile to her decision to become a Christian and found no difficulty in accepting the harsh actions the Roman authorities were taking against her and her companions. In that case, his absence from her account is easily explicable. She had, in effect, rejected him and his views.⁵⁵ Such husbandly hostility to the involvement of wives with the newfangled cult of Christianity and its organizations outside the home (directed by "outsider" males) is well attested.⁵⁶

Perhaps just as puzzling, given the joint attribution of the martyrology, is the absence of any mention of Felicitas by Perpetua. Although arrested, imprisoned and executed with Perpetua, Felicitas' story has to be told by the editor (15). The lack of any reference to Felicitas in Perpetua's own words is perhaps understandable given her diary-like concentration on the self. But since Felicitas was apparently closely connected with her in the small group of Christians receiving instruction at Thuburbo Minus, was pregnant, and gave birth when she was in prison with Perpetua, the absence of any hint of her existence is worth noting. Precisely because Felicitas' experiences have to be reported by the male editor, they lack the immediacy of Perpetua's sentiments. We know that she was eight months pregnant when

⁵⁵ For her husband to be part of her father's line presents no great difficulty; it would involve a cross or parallel cousin marriage (i.e., a marriage to her father's brother's or father's sister's son), a not-infrequent occurrence among the social class from which Perpetua came. The word Perpetua used for that segment of her "family" that was so hostile to her (*genus*) can certainly be taken to have precisely this meaning — i.e., the "family" of the male ascendants (see *Thesaurus linguae Latinae*, vi.2, 1925-54, s.v. "genus", #I.1, cols. 1886-8).

⁵⁶ To take but one example from the martyrologies themselves, there is the martyrdom of Ptolemaios (Musurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, no. 3, pp. 38-41, from the A.D. 150s-160s; Justin Martyr, *Apologia*, 2.2). It concerns the case of a woman (unnamed) who joined a Christian group and whose husband is reported (from the Christian viewpoint) to have been "depraved"; in fact, she wished to divorce him. The angry husband then turned on her Christian teacher and informed on them to the authorities — as a result of which both of them were executed.

arrested and thrown into prison. Two days before the *munus* at which the catechumens were to die, she suddenly went into labour. According to the editor's account, she suffered greatly in this birth (according to his explanation "because of the natural difficulty of giving birth in the eighth month"). The baby was a girl, and was handed over to "a certain sister" to raise (almost certainly a Christian woman, not one of Felicitas' siblings). Then there are the editor's reactions — first, to the premature birth. For him this is entirely a theological matter. Felicitas is distressed because she will have to die alone, thus devaluing the impact of her martyrdom. Her execution would have been postponed by the Roman authorities because of a law forbidding the execution of pregnant women.⁵⁷ It was therefore because of the ardent prayers of her fellow prisoners to "the Lord" that the birth pains immediately came on. Secondly, the "suffering" of childbirth. The ordeal was so difficult to witness that one of the prison guards' assistants was moved to remark that if she could not tolerate this degree of pain, how would she be able to face being torn to pieces by beasts in the arena? Felicitas' (reported) reply categorizes the suffering of childbirth as something wholly her concern. Her sufferings in the arena, on the other hand, she is made to assert, will be shared with "Him" and so will be more bearable. "His" absence from, and lack of concern with, the process of childbirth is taken for granted, at least, one must be careful to add, by the editor.

Finally, there are Perpetua's visions. They are truly extraordinary in the quality of their reportage. Whatever the traditional and stereotypical images contained in them, there is no reasonable question of their authenticity.⁵⁸ Moreover, her visions share a number of characteristics that have been found to be characteristic

⁵⁷ *Digest*, 48.19.3 (Ulpian).

⁵⁸ E. R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in the Age of Anxiety* (Cambridge, 1965; repr. New York, 1970), pp. 47-53, at p. 52: "I conclude, then, that in the prison diary we have an authentic first-hand narrative of the last days of a gallant martyr. It is a touching record of humanity and courage, quite free from the pathological self-importance of an Ignatius or an Aristides. Perpetua has been instructively compared with another Christian martyr, Sophie Scholl, who at about the same age was put to death by the Nazis. Miss Scholl also had a dream as she lay in prison on the last night of her life: she thought that she was climbing a steep mountain, carrying in her arms a child to be baptised . . ." A further item: Perpetua's visions have been interpreted almost solely in the light of Greek or Roman models; but there was a deeply rooted indigenous north African tradition of receiving dream messages from the god, especially via incubation; for the evidence, see Leglay, *Saturne africain*, pp. 342 ff.

of similar female visionary accounts: a strong drive towards an autobiographical presentation of the self (with the necessary rhetorical stratagems thereby involved), a marked impact of oral communication in the written presentation, and an immanent "presence" of the author that exudes from her own account.⁵⁹ Perpetua's first vision came in response to a request from her brother who believed that she could easily ask for a vision since she stood in such "high dignity". She, in turn, feels she can easily make a promise to her brother to have such a vision because "I knew that I could speak with the Lord, whose favours I had already experienced" (4.1-2). In her dream she does not get a direct answer to her brother's request, but instead climbs a ladder of great height, at the base of which is coiled an enormous snake. At the top she enters into an immense garden (*hortus* = garden = paradise) where she sees a white-haired man (like her own father) in shepherd's dress milking his sheep. Around him are many thousands of people clad in shining white garments. He gives her some cheese to eat. Upon hearing the surrounding multitudes chant "Amen", she suddenly awakes with the taste of "something sweet" in her mouth. She offers no further interpretation of the meaning of the dream. Her second and third dreams came to her as the result of an unpremeditated reaction when she was at prayer. Quite involuntarily Perpetua uttered the name of her deceased brother Dinocrates. The sudden recollection of her dead brother provokes a second vision in which she sees Dinocrates in a dark place (along with many other people) where he is hot and very thirsty, but deprived of access to a pool of water that was located close at hand.⁶⁰ She decides to intervene on his behalf by praying for him. Her third dream confirms the success of her efforts. Dinocrates is not only able to drink from the nearby pool of water, but also has been cured of the disfiguring facial cancer that had killed him as a young child. He drinks and proceeds "to play joyfully as young children do". She attributes no more meaning to her second and third visions than the communication of a certain type of knowledge, and the efficacy of her own actions in dealing with the problem once she had become aware of it.

⁵⁹ Petroff (ed.), *Medieval Women's Visionary Literature*, introduction, p. 21 f.; one must note that the characteristics Petroff assigns to her medieval female writers (e.g., celibacy) are not shared by Perpetua. In her actual social position, she cannot be grouped with them.

⁶⁰ The standard images which lay behind parts of the vision are outlined by F. J. Dölger, "Antike Parallelen zum leidenden Dinocrates in der *Passio Perpetuae*",

(cont. on p. 28)

Of these visions, however, it is the fourth — the one seen on the day before her execution — that has occasioned the greatest comment.⁶¹ In it she is taken from her prison by the deacon Pomponius and led to an arena. A huge roaring crowd awaits her. Even in her dream state Perpetua is confused. She knows that she has been condemned to the beasts; yet this is not what is happening to her. Rather, it is clear that she is to engage in a physical combat with a male opponent. The rest is best continued in her own words (10.6-7):

There came out against me an Egyptian, disgusting in appearance, along with his assistants, to fight me. And there came to me some handsome young men as my assistants and supporters. I was undressed and became a man. And my assistants began to rub me all over with olive oil, as is customary in such athletic contests.⁶²

Overshadowing the arena she sees an enormous figure clad in the resplendent festival garments and holding the symbols of a patron (*editor*) of the games, holding the staff of a gladiatorial trainer (*lanista*) and a branch with golden apples that is to be the reward for the victor. A brutal, grinding hand-to-hand fight ensues that is a combination of the Greek-style “no-holds-barred” martial arts contest known as the *pankration* and elements of gladiatorial combat.⁶³ Perpetua defeats the Egyptian and goes up to the *lanista* to accept her reward. He kisses her and says: “My daughter, peace be with you”. To Perpetua, the vision had the clear meaning that in the games on the next day she was not going to battle with mere beasts, but against the Devil himself (represented by

(n. 0 cont.)

Antike und Christentum, ii (1930), pp. 1-40, though it must be said that the parallels are not all that strong in substance.

⁶¹ Though it too is dreamt in conventional images: F. J. Dölger, “Der Kampf mit dem Ägypter in der Perpetua-Vision: das Martyrium als Kampf mit dem Teufel”, *Antike und Christentum*, iii (1932), pp. 177-88.

⁶² The choice of the “foul Egyptian” is almost always misinterpreted. It is a simple reflection of racism. The Egyptians were the most despised, hated and reviled ethnic group in the Roman world — therefore an appropriate choice for a dark and satanic thing.

⁶³ Louis Robert, “Une vision de Perpétue, martyre à Carthage en 203”, *Comptes rendus de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* (1982), pp. 228-76, who observed that the Greek text has a better command of the technical terms of the contest. This does not argue, however, for any priority of this version. The reason for the Greek author's mastery of the technical vocabulary was understood long ago by Franchi de' Cavalieri, *Passio SS. Perpetuae et Felicitatis*, p. 35 f. It is simply that Perpetua was not conversant with the jargon of the arena or amphitheatre, whereas her Greek translator was. Further, *contra* Robert, the contest is not just a *pankration* or athletic contest; as with many Christian texts (see *ibid.*, p. 37 f.) elements of both gladiatorial and athletic contests are merged into a single mixed literary type.

the disgusting Egyptian in her dream). But the manner in which it is represented has its troubling aspects. There are two radically opposed standard interpretations. The first, committed to Freudian or Jungian psychoanalysis, sees deep and troubling psychological dimensions in her dream.⁶⁴ The other, more pragmatic and rooted in the hard realities of the Graeco-Roman world, is simply dismissive: if Perpetua wished to engage in a *pankration* in the arena she had to become a male, and that is that.⁶⁵ But the latter position is surely mistaken — there was no need for her to have seen matters this way, much less to go out of her way to dream the details and feel constrained to describe them in words. A closer reading of the text suggests otherwise. Being rubbed down with oil was not only a simple athletic procedure.⁶⁶ The words suggest an undertow of recognition subliminally released for Perpetua in her dream state, a confessional reality which she does not consciously face in “the waking world”, but which she faithfully reports as part of her confrontation with a threatening and evil male.⁶⁷ That is to say, this incident in her dream seems to be coherent with the import of her visions in general — they are empowering experiences. In them Perpetua is able to assert her powers to the full: to be able to intervene on behalf of the

⁶⁴ Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in the Age of Anxiety*; M. L. von Franz, an acolyte of Jung, in her “Die *Passio Perpetuae*: Versuch einer psychologischen Deutung”, in C. G. Jung (ed.), *Aion* (Zurich, 1951), pp. 389-496; on which type of interpretation consider the salutary warnings of S. R. F. Price, “The Future of Dreams: From Freud to Artemidorus”, *Past and Present*, no. 113 (Nov. 1986), pp. 3-37. For an example of the excesses of the genre, see R. Rousselle, “The Dreams of Vibia Perpetua: Analysis of a Female Christian Martyr”, *Jl. Psychohistory*, xiv (1987), pp. 193-206.

⁶⁵ So Robert, “Vision de Perpétue”, pp. 256-8.

⁶⁶ See, for example, Apuleius, *Metamorphoses*, 10.21, paralleled in the earlier Pseudo-Lucian, *Ass*, 51. The latter novel includes a striking passage (9-11) where oil rub-downs are used extensively in a sexual encounter between the hero and a slave girl named, appropriately, Palaestra (“Ms. Wrestler”), which is an extensive parody of a *pankration* match of the type in which Perpetua engages here; cf. Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages*, p. 14: “Here we might see not so much a sexual fantasy as a willed identification At the same time, the detail of her naked body being rubbed with oil by handsome young men who are her seconds cannot help carrying erotic suggestion, notwithstanding her disclaimer that this is customary before an *agôn*”.

⁶⁷ Therefore, a rather more conscious social thing (cf. Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life*, pp. 96-8), for which there are many parallels in early Christian communities: see Miles, *Carnal Knowing*, ch. 2. This is not to deny the distinct possibility of an “unconscious” absorption of the dominant ideology that to be good and to succeed one had to be male: see K. Aspegren, *The Male Woman: A Feminine Ideal in the Early Church*, ed. R. Kieffer (Uppsala, 1990), esp. chs. 6-8, where the impact of this “ideal” is studied.

betterment of the condition of the dead, to deal directly with figures of authority in the church on an equal basis, and to fight successfully in the arena in a quintessentially male contest.⁶⁸

With this final dream ends the sequence of Perpetua's words as we now have them. This simple and bare record of a human experience, however, was only beginning its own life, so to speak, one in which it was destined to be reread and commented on by others, all of whom happened to be men. Their interest in her words was, to say the least, hardly disinterested. Indeed, the process of the male rethinking of her experience began almost immediately. The first editor knew of, and emphasized, the fact that the executions were timed to coincide with the birthday of Geta, the younger son of Septimius Severus, the reigning emperor of Rome. As has been convincingly argued, that would seem to indicate an editing process that took place in the years immediately following the deaths in the arena in 203.⁶⁹ This first editorial response was, so to speak, unpremeditated. There are few signs that the editing was a deliberate attempt to distort. Rather, the resulting text seems to mirror the way in which he assumed this text ought naturally to be interpreted. 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 reader and listener alike, and by a tailpiece that is meant to conclude her story (again to produce the desired effect on reader and listener). (See Table.) The terms of these bracketing pieces are those of the formal male-dominated church. There has been much speculation, some convincing, some not, that the editor was none other than Tertullian.⁷⁰ If he was the editor, the case for the degree and type of male reinterpretation is thereby strengthened; if not, the case still stands. The identification is not necessary. Given both the overwhelming probabilities of the case, and the types of ideas and verbiage and modes of expression of

⁶⁸ That is to say, although some female athletes are known, they were rare, rarer still in the gladiatorial arena (I know of no female pankrationists).

⁶⁹ T. D. Barnes, "Pre-Decian *Acta Martyrum*", *Jl. Theol. Studies*, xix (1968), pp. 509-31, at pp. 522 ff., repr. in his *Early Christianity and the Roman Empire* (London, 1984), ch. 1; Barnes, *Tertullian*, appendix 17, p. 265; since the date must be well before 211, there is no reason to delay the editing process to long after the event; simple logic argues otherwise.

⁷⁰ On the much-debated subject of Tertullian's authorship, see Robert, "Vision de Perpétue", p. 235 n. 35, who opts for Tertullian, but adds "but I wouldn't insist on it", which is perhaps the point of caution where the whole matter ought to be left.

the “editor”, there can be little doubt that the hand is a male one, and, for the purposes of the problem at hand, that is all that matters.

This first stage in the appropriation of Perpetua’s experiences therefore left her own account fundamentally intact and unaltered. That already argues for a certain “untouchability” of the basic text, for which the most likely explanation (to me) would lie in its inherent power, its resistance to tampering. Something of this inability of the editor to touch the original is hinted at when he remarks on how “unworthy” he might be to add anything to the description of her glory (16.1). Being unable to rewrite Perpetua’s own account in any “better way” the editor chose instead to surround her document with his own materials — that is to say, with a preface (1-2) and an epilogue (16-21), and by the insertion of the dream of Saturus immediately after the conclusion of Perpetua’s own words that report her final vision (11-13). That is to say, the editor brackets or surrounds the original work in such a way that the reader enters it, and exits from it, through his interpretations, through his words. In this way he can guide the reader into Perpetua’s words, can “set up” the reader so that he or she will read Perpetua’s account with a certain meaning already placed in his or her mind. First of all, in direct contrast to the simple, factual real-time replay of what was happening to her, the editor counterpoises a heavily theologized text, a densely theoretical structure which is intended to deflect the reader’s attention away from the plane of immediate experience to transcendent levels of meaning. The ideology (as opposed to her straightforward practice) holds that her experiences are to be interpreted in a cosmic framework where, as the editor quotes Holy Scripture to show, God will work in such a way that even daughters and female-slaves will be able to function as bearers of His Spirit in this world. That such low-status persons should be able to be witnesses (*martyres*) was just another sign that the final stages of the current world order were at hand, and that everyone was now living “in the final days”.

Much the same themes can be found in the “tailpiece” attached to the end of the passion. The editor neatly works his way from the last of Perpetua’s own words (her fourth dream) by adding to the account at that very place the dream of Saturus. This vision has been deliberately inserted to counter the implicit assertions of her words (that is, men can have visions too) and to serve as

a bridge to the closing comments of the editor. In attempting to establish the equal legitimacy of Saturus' visions, the editor makes the same claims of primacy for it as for Perpetua's: "But the blessed Saturus also published this vision of his, which he himself wrote down in his own hand" (11.1). But this vision is unlike Perpetua's not only in its language and construction, but in its impersonal bent, its concern with theological interpretation and ecclesiastical hierarchy (underwritten as a template of divine order), a cast of new male characters, and a "reread" Perpetua (now speaking, quite properly, in ecclesiastical Greek) who declares: "Praise to God, as I was once happy in the flesh, so I am now much happier here in this existence" (12.7). If the vision was truly Saturus' own, then it would already attest to distinct perceptual differences between those who were to be martyred (based partly on gender, it would seem). But there must be strong doubts that the account, as it stands, is indeed "by him and in his own hand".

The editor can also assert the highest authority for his intervention in Perpetua's story: it is the Holy Spirit that finally permits his recounting of the final events of the games (16.1). He can also appeal to the strongest secular legitimation for his actions; in a parody of the Roman law, he claims both a contract of mandate (*mandatum*) and a "trust" (*fideicommissum*) granted to him by Perpetua herself. In his version of their deaths, the editor's martyrs hardly experience the real terrors of jail and prison. Instead they walk from prison to the amphitheatre "in joy, as if they were going to heaven". Perpetua is transformed into a "shining countenance" and becomes the "bride of Christ" and "God's darling" (*Dei delicata*) (18.1). Similarly, the experiences of Felicitas (one who had endured the frightening ordeal of giving birth in prison) are reconfigured into a metaphorical symbol: "she goes from one blood bath to another, from the midwife to the gladiator, ready to wash after childbirth in a second baptism" (18.3). The reinterpretation simultaneously bears a simple theological image and a manifestly degrading message. The terrifying experiences of the arena itself are themselves reread. Instead of the real fear evinced in Perpetua's words, one gets divine certainties. "But He who said, 'Ask and you shall receive', answered their prayers by giving each one the death he asked for" (19.1). So too, Perpetua herself, in behaviour and image, is transformed into the model of a Roman *matrona*. When shaken by the charge of the

wild cow, she is more concerned about personal shame and style than anything else (20.3-5):

First the wild cow charged Perpetua and threw her on her back. Then, sitting up, she pulled down the garment that had been ripped along one side, so that it uncovered her thighs, thinking more of her modesty than of pain. Next she asked for a pin to put her messed-up hair back in place. It was not right that a [female] martyr should die with her hair out of order.

With these words, and a heavy theological *envoi*, the editor has finished his task of “framing” Perpetua.

The first editor’s response to Perpetua’s words was neither unusual nor solitary. It was to be repeated again and again. The specific problem that faced a male-dominated social order was the very rarity of Perpetua’s achievement. That a female had done such things in itself threw into relief those very problematic areas of sexual definition and power that much troubled the organized church.⁷¹ Her challenge was therefore a permanent one. She had narrated her own account of her experiences, and these were told in such a way, with such a power and simplicity of rhetoric that the very words she wrote contained an irrefutable self-empowerment. They could not be ignored. They assert specific actions that placed her experience at the centre — and she was achieving in roles that had been overwhelmingly restricted to males. That was only part of the problem. Every year, on the anniversary of her martyrdom, Perpetua’s words were read aloud to the assembled parishioners in the various Christian churches in north Africa. Her particular vision was re-enacted annually, and thus replayed was continually to return to haunt those who had to confront it. In this sense, therefore, hers was a living tradition in which the audiences, male and female, would hear replayed for them the experiences of a woman put in a mode, and in a context of action, that surely (at least) threw doubt on the normative values of their society.

One way in which the problem posed by her record could be met was by its redaction from her largely descriptive and narrative account into another form, that of a *commentarius* (trial transcript).⁷² That is to say, a later author took the basic facts known about Perpetua’s death and recast them into the classic mould of

⁷¹ S. Leuchli, *Power and Sexuality: The Emergence of Canon Law at the Synod of Elvira* (Philadelphia, 1972), ch. 4, “The Sexual Dilemma”, pp. 88-113.

⁷² For the conventions of the form, see G. A. Bisbee, *Pre-Decian Acts of Martyrs and Commentarii* (Philadelphia, 1988).

the trial-transcript form often found in other martyrologies. The author was probably writing sometime in the fourth century; his perhaps pretended ignorance is suggested by his placing the deaths of the two women in the consulships of Valerian and Gallienus (A.D. 255/7).⁷³ This sort of later reaction to earlier Christian history also seems to have been typical of the mid-fourth century. In the aftermath of the formalization of ecclesiastical power, there was a general “house cleaning” to make more manageable the marginal problematical areas of power, including sainthood and sexuality. For liturgical and ideological purposes, earlier experiences and documents had to be brought “into line”. The first big problem of composition faced by the re-compositor of Perpetua’s experience — of merely providing a neat court document — was that there was no surviving trial transcript: the original martyrology of Perpetua and Felicitas had very little to say about the trial proceedings at which they were condemned. Unless we can suppose that the author had independent access to such information (for which there is no evidence), then the only reasonable supposition is that his mode of working was to use what information he had (in the Greek and Latin accounts produced in the first decades of the third century) and to use his imagination to reconstruct what he thought must have been said on the occasion of the trial. This does indeed seem to have been his *modus scribendi*. The interesting questions to ask are: What did he think was worth adding to the account that was not in the original (either in word, or by implication)? And what would be suggested to him as normal inquisitorial questioning and typical dialogue from other such trial scenes (questions such as: “Will you not sacrifice?”, followed by the appropriate defences and retorts regarding adherence to Christian belief)? Other than these “typical elements” there are notable inventions that have struck more than one reader of the *Acta*. First of all, the proconsul-judge separates the men from the women so as to deal with them separately.⁷⁴ After this sexual segregation, he proceeds first to ask the men the normal questions about sacrifice and belief. He removes them, and then turns to the females. Here the questions are of a wholly different order:

⁷³ The *Acta* are preserved in two variant Latin recensions (A and B); for the texts, see Van Beek, *Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis*, pp. 58–73; the evidence in my text is drawn principally from the fuller (A) version.

⁷⁴ *Acta*, 4.5 (A).

The proconsul ordered the men to be removed (from his tribunal) and ordered Felicitas and Perpetua to be brought in.

He then spoke to Felicitas: 'What name do you go by?' She replied, 'Felicitas'.

The proconsul said: 'Do you have a husband?'

Felicitas replied: 'I have one whom I have rejected'.

The proconsul said: 'Where is he?' Felicitas replied, 'He's not here'.

The proconsul said: 'What's his rank?' Felicitas replied, 'Plebeian'.

The proconsul said: 'Do you have any parents?' Felicitas replied: 'I don't.

Revocatus is my cousin. The truth is that I am not able to have more important relatives than these persons with me here'.

The proconsul said: 'Girl, have pity on your own and make the sacrifice so that you can continue to live. Especially since I see that you have an unborn child in your womb'.

The proconsul then turned to Perpetua and said: 'Do you have any parents?' Perpetua replied: 'I do'.

[Indeed her parents, her mother and father, as well as her brothers and husband, were listening and present, along with her new-born child, who was still being breast-fed.]

The proconsul said to her: 'The tears of your parents should move you and rouse your sense of pity, and especially the cries of your little one'.

[Her father makes a final protest, and asks her to pity them.]

Shoving away her infant and pushing her parents away, she said: 'Get away from me you workers of evil, since I no longer know you'.⁷⁵

The writer of the *Acts* then quickly ends the court proceeding with the final sentencing and deaths of Perpetua and Felicitas. The question must be, why had the author fashioned his account in the way he did by adding the new creative material he has? Clearly it is a matter of gender that troubles him. He imposes a clear separation of males and females in the trial scene in order that the issue can be made distinct and clear in the minds of those who read or heard his version. The proconsul faces the women alone (though second in order) and the questions he puts to them are obviously ones of the type that the redactor thinks must most concern his potential audience. The first matter that arises, oddly enough with respect to Felicitas (has the author made another one of his characteristic confusions?) and which we must also understand to apply to Perpetua, is "Where are the husbands in all of this?" To this question Felicitas is able to offer no satisfactory answer. The author does not put this obvious question in the case of Perpetua. He merely asserts, rather lamely, that her husband was amongst the relatives who came to the court to hear the proceedings (for which there is no supporting evidence from any other account). The proconsul's words reflect a great concern not only with "Where are the husbands?", but also on the proper

⁷⁵ *Acta*, 5.1-6.6 (A).

relationship of these women to their other relatives, above all their parents. The troubling matter is the way in which these particular women feel free to move away from the normal constraints imposed by husbands, fathers and others.

In his rewriting of Perpetua's experiences, the redactor of the *Acta* seems to be pushed mentally first this way and that. He is constrained to end contradictorily, in a rather schizoid manner: the women are to be praised — after all they *were* martyrs to the Christian faith. On the other hand, their actions are so unnatural, from the standpoint of male cultural expectations, that they are portrayed in an extreme and rather unlikeable manner. Perpetua is shown to reject her own baby, and harshly to dismiss her own parents in a way that would be bound to elicit a negative reaction from (at least) the male listeners to the *Acta*. Perpetua's experience is totally "reread" in a manner that simultaneously concedes the technical value of her martyrdom, but removes any sense that these actions were innately good or could be made to coincide with "natural" passions (as, for example, a mother's concern for her new-born infant). Of course, it hardly needs pointing out that all of this wholly contradicts Perpetua's own view of her relationship to her baby (as expressed in her own words) and to her father (the fine nuances of her own contradictory emotions are wholly absent from the *Acta*) or her own views of her relations with her mother or brothers. The purpose of producing the *Acta* version must have been twofold: to provide a shorter abbreviated "passion" account that would be more readily usable for liturgical purposes, but in the very process of abbreviation to excise its dangerous content — Perpetua's own words — which, as we shall see, bishops were coming to fear greatly since such narratives were coming to be regarded by ordinary parishioners as "canonical scripture".

Yet another way in which the challenge of the annual verbal re-enactment of Perpetua's actions was met, was not by embedding the written document itself in another one, nor by rewriting it, but by challenging it orally — by meeting it, so to speak, on its own ground. In this context, one might consider the sermons delivered by the great African preachers of the fourth and fifth century, amongst them the bishops Augustine of Hippo and Quodvultdeus of Carthage. Male church leaders, like Augustine, could hardly ignore the potential in the message, and they dealt with it, if Augustine's words are to be taken as a normal type of

response, by reinterpreting the message — by accompanying the direct message of Perpetua's words (and their not-too-covert subtext) with another oral presentation, a sermon, which would interpret the meaning of Perpetua's experience in a "correct" way. Indeed, some sort of response was demanded because of the authority Perpetua's words, listened to each year by parishioners throughout north Africa, had with the common people. Augustine himself had to warn sternly that her words, her views, were not canonical scripture.⁷⁶ Three of these sermons of Augustine have survived, each delivered on a different anniversary of Perpetua's martyrdom. That as many as three of these have been preserved is some indication of the importance of the subject to Augustine — he may well have delivered such control pieces on an annual basis.⁷⁷ That is to say, faced with a living challenge (the way in which Perpetua's experience was relived each year) he responded in much the same way as the original male editor of her written work: he bracketed it with his comments which were intended to lead the listeners to rehear what they had heard. Augustine, and other north African bishops, frequently delivered sermons on the *natalitia*, celebrations of the martyrs' "birth" into eternal life. But there are two distinct planes on which his response (and that of Quodvultdeus) to Perpetua can easily be seen to be different in kind. First of all, his response to the problem of male martyrdoms never confronts the specific challenges that Perpetua presents.⁷⁸ His principal concern in the former case was to restrain what he saw as unacceptable forms of popular belief and empowerment attributed to martyrs. More significant even than this, however, is the simple fact that other female martyrdoms, such as that of Crispina, an African woman executed at Theveste in A.D. 304, did not usually provoke the intensive reinterpretation and arguments in refutation that Perpetua's did.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Augustine, *De natura et origine animae*, 1.10.12: "nec scriptura ipsa canonica est", in specific reference to her dream sequence on her deceased brother Dinocrates.

⁷⁷ For context, see a list of all sermons delivered by Augustine on the occasion of the anniversaries of martyrs collated in V. Saxer, *Morts, martyrs, reliques en Afrique chrétienne aux premiers siècles* (Paris, 1980), pp. 315-21.

⁷⁸ C. Lambot, "Les sermons de saint Augustin pour les fêtes de martyrs", *Analecta Bollandiana*, lxxvii (1949), pp. 249-66; A. M. La Bonnardière, "Les *Enarrationes in Psalmos* prêchées par saint Augustin à l'occasion de fêtes de martyrs", *Recherches Augustiniennes*, vii (1971), pp. 73-104.

⁷⁹ On Crispina, an interesting parallel, see *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, 120, 137. Indeed her anniversary provokes no comment at all. Augustine felt quite at liberty, as he did on the anniversary days of most male martyrs, to use the occasion to deliver a sermon

The reason is clear. Their own words were not at the epicentre of their remembrance. As Augustine makes clear, his replies were intended to reflect back on the lived experience created by the re-creation of Perpetua's world in the reading of her account:

Today is the anniversary day on which, by a sort of repetition, there is called back to our memory, and in some way actually re-presented, the day on which Perpetua and Felicitas, holy slave-women of God, were rewarded with the crown of martyrdom which [words] . . . we have heard as they were read aloud . . . those words, so shining and luminescent, we have taken in by ear, we have considered in our minds, and honoured in our belief.⁸⁰

Beginning with a concession — that his talents might not be equal to the praise they merit — Augustine launches into his interpretation of her words for his listeners: “For what could be more glorious than these women, whom men admire much more readily than they imitate?” He then gives expression to a normal male judgement: measured against the standards set for excellence, the actions of these women have outdone those of men. But he is then left with the task of explaining their unusual “virility”. He appeals first to Pauline scripture, where, in the millennial scheme of things, actual gender differences are to be abolished: according to Paul “there will be found inside men neither male nor female”.⁸¹ Then he goes on to make the connection:

even in the case of these women — although female in body, the virtue of their mind/soul (*anima*) concealed the sexuality of their flesh, and what is considered so shameful in the physical limbs of their bodies does not appear in their simple actions.

To Augustine, Perpetua's sexual chastity becomes the key to her being able to tread on the snake's head in her vision — from which claim he is then able to make a connection never apparent in Perpetua's own words: “Thus the head of that old snake, which was the cause of the fall of woman, was made into a step by which she [Perpetua] could ascend [to Paradise]”. That is to say, Augustine is able to suggest to his listeners an essential fault in Perpetua's gender, to which he can then attach the imagery of the snake — a not overly subtle way of bringing to the mind of

(n. 79 cont.)

on another theme entirely, simply noting for the congregation that the day happened to be this or that saint's birthday.

⁸⁰ Augustine, *Sermo*, 280.1.1; also directly alluded to in the last sermon, *Sermo*, 282.2.2.

⁸¹ For the male-dominant context in which Paul's comments must be understood, see Cameron, “Neither Male nor Female”.

his parishioners a different sort of moral order in which Perpetua's achievements can be placed.⁸² He can then appropriate her gaze and transfer it to his auditors who, with the "gaze of faith", can witness the martyr's crown, and who can now understand that, in facing the charge of "that savage cow", Perpetua was merely shedding her own body in this world.

The second of Augustine's sermons replays many of these same themes, only with greater force. "For the [martyr's] crown is more glorious", he begins:

in the case where the sex is weaker. Because, it goes without saying, a male mind in a female body is able to achieve greater things [relatively speaking, that is] so long as feminine fragility does not give out beneath such an onerous burden.⁸³

He then once again specifically attaches what Perpetua and Felicitas did to domination by men, by husbands, and from there to the traditional "Eve theme":

It was good for them that they clung to one husband, He to whom the Church, being one, is presented as a pure virgin. It was a good thing, I say, that they clung to that man from whom they drew the strength they needed to defeat the Devil — that women were able to lay low that old enemy, who, through woman, utterly defeated man.

Augustine goes on at some length to play on this theme of role reversal, explaining how the Devil, who made women weak to defeat men, is in turn defeated by these selfsame weak creatures: "He [God] made these women able to face death like men, to die on behalf of those who were destined to be born so sorrowfully from women". As proof of this interpretation Augustine is able to appeal "to what the blessed Perpetua herself narrated in her own words concerning her vision: that she struggled with the Devil after she had been changed into a man". He is then able to close this first circle of his argument: it was a good thing that the Devil "who had defeated man through woman should not be able to escape these ambushes — good that he was able to feel that a woman was fighting with him like a man".

⁸² R. R. Ruether, "Misogynism and Virginal Feminism in the Fathers of the Church", in R. R. Ruether (ed.), *Religion and Sexism: Images of Woman in the Jewish and Christian Traditions* (New York, 1974), pp. 150-83, offers a good general context, shorn of her final conclusions, against which, I think, all of the evidence she analyses speaks; see, rather, Averil Cameron, "Virginity as Metaphor: Women and the Rhetoric of Early Christianity", in Averil Cameron (ed.), *History as Text: The Writing of Ancient History* (London, 1989), ch. 8, pp. 181-205, who catches the reasons for both the misogyny and the fascination with virginity, and then systematically links the two.

⁸³ Augustine, *Sermo*, 281.

This logically leads Augustine into a consideration of another highly problematic area of Perpetua's account (remembering that his parishioners, and others, would have heard her own words) and one which is the burden of his sermonizing. This was the problem of her unorthodox ("unorthodox" that is from the perspective of current ideology) relationships with persons who should have been dominant males: her husband and her father. As already stated, there is nothing in her own words that gives any hint of the existence of her husband. Augustine explains:

He [the Devil] did not trouble her with a husband, so that she, who was already dwelling on heaven in her higher thoughts, would remain strong, not being drawn aside, blushing even at the merest suspicion of desires of the flesh. But he inculcated in her father words of deceit so that her godly mind, which could not be softened by the instincts of sexual desire, might be broken by the bonds of parental piety.

Likewise, in her relationship with her father, Augustine has to tone down the nature of her replies to him: "When holy Perpetua replied to her father, she did it with such moderation that she would not violate the command by which we owe honour to our parents". He then turns his attention to the other female, Felicitas:

Felicitas was indeed pregnant when she was in jail. In giving birth she gave witness to her feminine condition with her female voice. The penalty of Eve was not absent, but the grace of Mary was also present. She had to pay the dues which women owe.

He goes on to explain that all she did and happened to her (that is, the premature birth of her child) was due to the "plan of God". In thus addressing his congregation, Augustine was being more specific about the context in which Perpetua was to be understood. Her actions, as well as those of Felicitas, were to be seen within a theodicy rooted in the creation of all existing conditions. Her powers could then be "explained" as an overcoming of inherent faults and weaknesses through "the grace of God".

In his final (surviving) sermon on the matter, Augustine refers once again to the reading of her account which everyone has just heard, and then remarks:

those women of such great virtue and achievement were not just female, but fully grown women. One of them was a mother, so that softer (maternal) affections were added to the weakness of her sex . . . But they were able to hold out against attacks on them, and to break these assaults

by a hidden and very great strength because inside themselves they were like men.⁸⁴

After all, says Augustine, “even very brave and strong men were overcome by violence on the same day, but they did not give their name to the celebration of this day”. The fact that the day is remembered for Perpetua and Felicitas is not “because females outshone men in the worth of their actions, but since womanly weakness was able to conquer the old enemy because of a greater miracle, and a male virtue struggled on behalf of perpetual felicity”. The sermon reinforces existing interpretations and adds little (except a banal pun, with which Augustine seems rather taken, given the number of times he repeats it). But there were other contexts, apart from sermons preached, in which Augustine felt he had to respond to other problems posed by these women, as, for example, the validity of Perpetua’s visions, and the legitimacy of her experience. Quite apart from the theological implications of her vision (of which more, later) he felt called upon, once again, to explain the extraordinary nature of her martyrdom. How could she have done it? The key, he says, lies within the vision where, in her struggle with the Egyptian, she saw herself change into the body of a man. “How can one doubt”, he says:

that her mind was not also changed like her body? But not so much in fact her body, because, when she was asleep on her bed she remained in her feminine sex while her mind fought [with the Egyptian] in the likeness of a male body. Is it not likely that this was merely the likeness of a man’s body, and not a real body? . . . if indeed it was an actual body, why did it not keep the shape of its vagina? For in that female flesh no male genitalia were to be found.⁸⁵

Perhaps Augustine’s interpretations might have the merit of some “theoretical content”, some overall general justifications that can be drawn from his world of thought. He is interested in making her experiences concordant not with traditional practices, but also with present and future thinking. Blunter, but perhaps more revealing of general male attitudes of the time, are a series of tracts and sermons composed by Quodvultdeus, who wrote and delivered them as bishop of Carthage in the A.D. 430s.⁸⁶ He too was responding to the public reading and celebration of the martyrdom of the two women. His problem in this regard, how-

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 282; cf. the similar themes enunciated in the Pseudo-Augustine, *Sermo*, 394.

⁸⁵ Augustine, *De natura et origine animae*, 4.18.26.

⁸⁶ I have used the text as edited by R. Braun, *Opera Quodvultdeus Carthaginensi episcopo tributa* (Corpus Christianorum, series latina, no. 60, Turnhout, 1976).

ever, was rather more pressing than that of Augustine in distant Hippo Regius. The bodies of the two women had been interred at Carthage in the great funerary church, the massive Basilica Maiorum, located on the plateau of Mcidfa that overlooked the whole city to the north.⁸⁷ If Père Delattre's excavations and identifications are to be trusted, the tombs of Perpetua and Felicitas have actually been discovered, located in the great apsidal end of the basilica in conjoined sacrophagi beneath one large *mensa martyrurum*.⁸⁸ A place, therefore, of quintessential public and religious importance — a location in hierarchy of space and display that would be regularly witnessed by African Christians. The place was marked by memorial inscriptions that made clear the sanctity of the location.⁸⁹ Perpetua and Felicitas had died on the *dies natalis* of Geta Caesar, but their own true "birthday", the anniversary of their martyrdom, was celebrated with much greater popular feeling and intensity, and for far longer than that of the temporal emperor. The celebrations of the "birthdays" of martyrs were great festive public occasions involving much popular participation, wild merriment, the staging of spectacles, and the replaying of the stories of the martyrs.⁹⁰ Such festivals, especially those at the decorative banquet "tables" that covered the graves of the martyrs (the so-called *mensa martyrurum*), were celeb-

⁸⁷ Known by the witness of Victor Vitensis, *Historia persecutionis Africanae provinciae*, 1.3.9.

⁸⁸ The problems of identification persist. For commentary and discussion, see N. Duval, *Les églises africaines à deux absides* (Paris, 1973), no. 10, pp. 69-73, esp. p. 72; Duval, *Loca sanctorum Africae*, ii, p. 682 f.; Saxer, *Morts, martyrs, reliques en Afrique chrétienne*, pp. 182-3, "basiliques martyriales de Carthage" (dubious). The basic problem is the great "faith" that informed Père Delattre's discovery of the tombs of the two saints, and his readiness to identify the site as the Basilica Maiorum. H. Leclercq, "Carthage", *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie*, ii (1910), cols. 2233-52, gives clear reportage of Delattre's excavations at the site. They convinced no less an authority than Gsell that Delattre had indeed discovered the tombs of the women; on the whole I too am convinced, despite the ambiguities of the evidence.

⁸⁹ R. P. Delattre, "Sur l'inscription des martyrs de Carthage, sainte Perpétue, sainte Félicité et leurs compagnons", *Comptes rendus de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* (1907), pp. 193-5 (*CIL*, viii, 25038) (cf. Duval, *Eglises africaines à deux absides*, no. 6, pp. 13-16). The inscription was heavily restored by Delattre and his workers: see the reports in Leclercq, "Perpétue et Félicité", cols. 433-5, and the two photographs in Leclercq, "Carthage", col. 2241, figs. 2123-4, and *Inscriptiones Latinae Christianae veteres*, ed. E. Diehl et al., 4 vols. (Berlin, 1924-67), i, no. 2040 (cf. Duval, *Eglises africaines à deux absides*, no. 3, pp. 7-10).

⁹⁰ S. Poque, "Spectacles et festins offerts par Augustin d'Hippone pour les fêtes de martyrs", *Pallas*, xv (1968), pp. 103-25.

rated with great zeal by the Africans.⁹¹ It was on the anniversary of Perpetua and Felicitas, and in their great basilica at Carthage, in the midst of an immensely popular fanfare, that the bishop of Carthage would be constrained to comment on their deaths.⁹²

On the anniversary replay of Perpetua's words, therefore, Quodvultdeus faced problems of a peculiar density. He phrases part of this problem rather bluntly: since there were so many men who were martyred at that time, how is it that the names of these two women are placed before those of men? Why does the day celebrate their deaths? Could it be because "the weaker sex" actually equalled, or even superseded, the bravery of males? But one of the women was pregnant, and the other was breast-feeding. Felicitas was giving birth and Perpetua was producing milk for her infant. Quodvultdeus cannot get over these overpowering images of womanly infirmity. He grasps at images. First, the milk. Since Perpetua accepted a cup of milk from the "Good Shepherd" in her vision, it is *this* milk that enables her to reject her child and her father on behalf of Christ. That neatly and symbolically counters, and trumps, the "weakness" of motherhood.⁹³ Still the bishop cannot quite accept the facts. He breaks into exclamations:

What virtue in females! What sort of grace is this, which, when one is filled with it, judges *no* sex to be unworthy! Praise be to this grace! It even restores the female sex! Woman, of course, remains in great disgrace — from the beginning there was the womanish sin because of which we all die. The Devil conquered one Eve. But Christ, born from a virgin, raises up many women. Perpetua and Felicitas were able to tread on the head of the snake, because Eve had not been admitted into the core of their hearts.⁹⁴

Finally, unable to do much more, Quodvultdeus, like his predecessors, lapses into Pauline doctrine: "For in Christ Jesus there will be no slave or free, no masculine or feminine, but all will be run together into one perfected man".

⁹¹ Augustine, *Contra epistolam Parmeniani libri tres*, 3.6.29; cf. W. H. C. Frend, *The Donatist Church: A Movement of Protest in Roman North Africa* (Oxford, 1952; repr. 1971), pp. 54-5.

⁹² The bishop would normally preach in the basilica located further to the south called the Basilica Restituta, which was the great episcopal cathedral of the city. But on this particular occasion, when the *natalitia* would be celebrated at the site of the *mensa martyrum*, it is difficult to believe that his location did not also shift to the locus of popular activity.

⁹³ Quodvultdeus, *Sermo de tempore barbarico*, 1.5.1-9, emphasizing the same factors in this feminine fragility.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

In another tract, also written in response to a current celebration of Perpetua, either Quodvultdeus or, perhaps more likely, a near contemporary, shows that he cannot quite come to terms with Perpetua, or her behaviour (in this case her attitude towards her father).⁹⁵ He wonders why on earth she acted in this peculiar manner. After all, he says, she was a young woman:

She was an adolescent, in the most fecund years, in that age most prone to love (*amor*). She was only twenty-one, an age when the fevers of the flesh are commonly thought to be greater than any divine charity. But, because of God's grace, she spurned her new body, her new strength, and so was able to exercise the powers of a young man.

That is to say, the divine grace of God plus the submission of the woman overcame otherwise permanent feminine fragilities. Even so, Quodvultdeus once again returns to the "womanly weaknesses" — given this fundamental fault, how on earth were their deeds possible. After all, "a baby son clung to the breasts of this young woman: indeed a heavy burden of maternal care attached to her breasts". This leads him to dilate on the feminine problems that Felicitas suffered: "Felicitas was seriously weighed down by her pregnancy: her womb was in its eighth month . . . nevertheless, aided by her own prayers and those of her companions, she gave birth safely, since it would not be possible to abort without dying". He goes on to remark that Christ can hasten births, or delay them to the ninth or tenth month, if necessary. Felicitas, in his eyes, only suffers as she should: "Felicitas in giving birth paid off the age-long debt in suffering and pain which Eve had incurred".

His final judgement to his parishioners is accordingly grudging and mean-spirited:

Let us then celebrate this festival day of the holy martyrs, famous for the deaths of men, and made more illustrious by the names of women. Women who, inflamed with the love of Christ, overcame not only the harshness of their everyday life, and all the allurements and terrors of the world . . . but also the affection of a father, the trust of children, the weakness of their sex, the impediments of the womb and the terrible dangers of giving birth.

Such reflections, from the first editor and redactor, to Augustine, Quodvultdeus and beyond, surely do not have to be multiplied

⁹⁵ Morin thought this sermon had once been part of Quodvultdeus' work; Dom Franes thought not and his views are reflected in the standard editions. See Braun, *Opera Quodvultdeo Carthaginensi episcopo tributa*, who does not include it among Quodvultdeus' genuine works.

in number, or analysed in any greater detail, to draw the obvious conclusion. There is a monotonous sameness to their reactions. Their predictability stems not from any mechanical copying, but rather from a sameness in their perception of the problem. In that precise sense their writings, sermons and comments are not particularly forced or artificial. Given the irreducible feminine *duritia* of Perpetua's record, their reactions 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.

A final word. In rereading all these materials one is left, I think, with two dominant impressions. The first, shared by almost all those who have read or heard Perpetua's story, is of the overpowering singularity of her achievement. There is something so unusual, so direct and uncompromising about her reportage that it has evoked a wholly unusual order of responses from a very wide range of modern readers. They know that there is something, perhaps ineffable, that marks her words as different in kind from any comparable piece of literature from antiquity.⁹⁶ Realities are reflected directly in the rhetoric. Then there is the second. When all the complex apparatus of scholarship has been set aside, it is a deeply depressing feeling. This is one of the very rare pieces written by a female hand that is known from antiquity. It was, even in its own day, a small and fragile thing. Yet even this exiguous voice could not be left alone. From the very start it was buried under an avalanche of male interpretations, rereadings, and distortions. What chance, one must wonder, was there for any Perpetua to tell her story? Despite all this, there is that other demon — hope. Perpetua's words are still with us. Her experiences, her thoughts and her visions have, after all, survived.

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⁹⁶ Typical judgements, like those of Pio Franchi de' Cavalieri ("this priceless gem of ancient literature") and Paul Monceaux ("one of the jewels of early Christian literature"), have been reiterated by many others.