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**Dragons and Breastmilk:
Reading Perpetua's Passion in the
21st Century**

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Dragons and Breastmilk: Reading Perpetua's Passion in the 21st Century

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Abstract

On 7 March 203, a young Roman noblewoman, Vibia Perpetua, experienced a series of visions while she and her slave, Felicitas, awaited execution in a Carthaginian prison. In the first of these revelations, Perpetua witnesses the opening of the heavens and the appearance of an ethereal ladder, stretching from the earth to the sky. Loitering at the bottom rung lies a dragon waiting to attack anyone attempting to ascend. On the ladder itself are a series of impalement instruments--a dagger, sword, and hook--familiar objects to Roman citizens who witnessed the massacre of victims in the arena. In the "autobiographical account" of her martyrdom, recorded in the *Passio SS Perpetuae et Felicitatis*, the mystic navigates through the weapons and enters the gates of paradise where she is fed a Eucharistic meal of sweet ewe-milk. Her other visions include both a reference to purgatory and also spiritual transvestitism--baptized in an aura of dripping breast milk.

It is the contention of this essay that "Perpetua" was a constructed image, drawn from a variety of heroic figures from Greco/Roman, Hebrew, and Christian sacred texts. The most likely purpose of the *Passio* was to use the ecstatic journey of Perpetua as a guide for the liturgical and theological instruction of Christian catechumens. In this paper I will use the exegetical and rhetorical techniques of historians Patricia Cox Miller and Elizabeth Castelli, to reconstruct the original setting of liturgical tradition (as far as possible), and will grapple with the question of why the author(s) deemed it necessary to append the dream accounts of such a powerful female with the vision of her male teacher: Saturus. Scholars uniformly ignore the role of male leadership in the *Passio*, as it detracts for Perpetua's potent image, and I will address the question of his function in the narrative.

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On 7 March 203 CE, a young Roman noblewoman, Vibia Perpetua, experienced a series of disturbing visions while she and her slave Felicitas, awaited execution in a Carthaginian prison.¹ In the first of these revelations, Perpetua witnesses the opening of the heavens and the miraculous appearance of an ethereal ladder, stretching from the earth to the sky. Loitering at the bottom rung is an enormous dragon waiting to attack anyone attempting to ascend. On the ladder itself, are a series of impalement instruments—a dagger, sword, and hook—familiar objects to Roman citizens who witnessed the massacre of helpless victims in the local arena. In the “autobiographical account” of her martyrdom, recorded in the *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitas*, the female mystic gingerly navigates through the multitude of barbed weapons and enters the gates of paradise where the “Good Shepherd” symbolically feeds her a Eucharistic meal consisting of sweet ewe-milk. Her other visions include one of the first non-scriptural references to purgatory as well as spiritual transvestism—baptized in an aura of dripping breast milk.

The details of the incarceration are known, because Vibia Perpetua may have written an account of her confinement. The *Passio* of Perpetua begins with a brief male narrator’s account of her life up to the point of her arrest. She was twenty-two years old, a newly married woman of good family and upbringing, who wrote in Latin and spoke in Greek.² Her family consisted of a mother and father, two brothers (one a catechumen like herself), an absent husband, and an infant son at the breast.³ The saga continues with the recording of the arrest of several young catechumens: Revocatus and Felicitas (slaves), Saturninus and Secundulus, and Vibia Perpetua.⁴ Upon learning of Perpetua’s incarceration, her father, a non-Christian, attempted to persuade her to give up her faith and free herself. She refused, and was sentenced to die in the arena at Carthage. While in prison, she was given permission to have her baby son with her so that she would be able to nurse him. After his arrival, Perpetua was granted a series of remarkable dreams, including the ladder described above. The second and third revelations offer the reader (or listener), a celestial glimpse of her purgatory-dwelling brother, Dinocrates. Perpetua’s next and final prophecy relates a startling personal transfiguration: “my clothes were stripped off and suddenly I was a man.”⁵ Thus transgendered, she participated in an ensuing victorious battle with an Egyptian gladiator.

¹ We can only surmise the actual date, and most scholarship points to the time period on or around 7 March 203 CE. For a discussion of possible dates, see: Brent Shaw, “The Passion of Perpetua.” *Past & Present* 139 (May 1993): 32. For a discussion of the dates and textual issues, see Thomas Heffernan, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2012) p. 65-67.

² Shaw, “Perpetua,” 32.

³The identity of the husband is discussed in an article by Carolyn Osiek called “Perpetua’s Husband.” *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, Volume 10, Number 2, Summer 2002, pp. 287-290. She surmises that Saturus was actually Perpetua’s husband.

⁴The single names like Secundulus and Felicitas in the *Passio* suggest freeman status. The background of Secundulus is not known. His name implies ‘second,’ and might be a diminutive of *secundus*. It could be the case that he is “second to Saturninus,” or perhaps “second to Saturus.”

⁵ *Passio*, 10. Et expoliata sum et facta sum masculus.

At the conclusion of these visions, Perpetua knew that she would “win the victory” and through martyrdom, become Christ’s new gladiator. There was still something troubling the mystic, however, her slave Felicitas had not yet given birth, and it was against the law for pregnant women to be executed. As the result of prayer “in one torrent of common grief,” the birth pains came upon Felicitas, and she gave birth to a baby girl.¹ After the childbirth scene, the martyrs entered the amphitheater. The horrified crowd protested at the sight of the two young, milk-dripping women and they insisted that the women be allowed to dress in tunics. The fate of the martyrs was to be gored but not killed by a wild heifer. After being insured by the heifer, the women gave each other the “kiss of peace” and approached the spot of execution. Perpetua had to climb the stairway to receive the sword, and ultimately ended up having to guide the young and trembling gladiator’s hand to her own throat.²

Historians and theologians approach the *Passio* to illuminate the real context behind the lives of Roman matrons and women martyrs. Feminist scholars too, underscore the *Passio* as it gives us the first example of a medieval woman writer. Indeed, as historians continue to attempt to recreate some sort of a literate past for women in general, they look to the *Passio* as the birth of a uniquely feminine literary genre. As Peter Dronke, the renowned scholar of the *Passio* asserts in the classic work on the subject, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages*, we have a “real Perpetua.” According to Dronke, there is a Perpetua who “concentrates unswervingly on what was unique in her experience,” and we can “still marvel at the magnitude of what Perpetua can communicate to us.”³ Peter Brown, luminous historian of Late Antiquity presents Perpetua as “the most clear and disturbing voice that has come down to us from the Roman world.”⁴ Both of these authors have attempted to locate a “real person” in the *Passio* of Perpetua. More traditional women’s history has sought to reclaim the “secret history” of women and to add this history to an already well-established male canon of Christian sources. Yet, the *Passio* offers the contemporary gender-theorist a unique opportunity to explore the deeply ambiguous nature of sacred gender in late antique Christendom.

¹ *Passio* 15. Coniuncto itaque unito gemitu ad Dominum orationem fuderunt ante tertium diem muneris.

² *Passio* 21. Other useful versions of the text, are those as cited by Brent Shaw and Patricia Cox Miller: C.I.M.I. van Beek, *Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis*, vol. 1, *Textum Graecum et Latinum ad fidem codicum MSS* (Nijmegen, 1936; repr. 1956). Shaw also cites J. Armitage Robinson, *The Passion of S. Perpetua* (Texts and Studies, Contributions to Biblical and Patristic Literature, 1.2, Cambridge, 1891; repr. Nendeln, 1967. Shaw cites too, Pio Franchi de’ Cavalieri, *La Passio SS Perpetuae et Felicitatis* (*Römische Quartalschrift für christlich Alterhumskunde und für Kirchengeschichte*, V, Supplementheft, Rome, 1896); *Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis*, ed. James W. Halporn (Bryn Mawr: Bryn Mawr, 1984). For the most recent critical edition, see Thomas J. Heffernan, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2012).

³ Peter Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) 17.

⁴ Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988) 141.

It is the contention of this paper that “Perpetua” is a constructed image, drawn from a variety of heroic figures from Greco/Roman, Hebrew, and Christian sacred texts. The compilers of the edition of the *Passio* that has come down to us use the ecstatic journey of Perpetua as a guide for the liturgical and theological instruction of Christian catechumens. My purpose here is twofold: first, to reconsider the gendered meaning of the famous third vision—that of the miraculous sex-change, and second, to grapple with the question of why the author(s) deemed it necessary to append the narrative voice of a male martyr to the dream-sequences of a potent female. Scholars generally ignore the role of the male martyr Saturus in the *Passio*, for his authoritative stance detracts from Perpetua’s potent image. Yet, the narrator underscores Saturus’ primacy in the text, as Saturus is the disseminator of wisdom and charisma, while Perpetua is the passive receptacle of his knowledge and actions.

Perpetua’s final dream before her death begins with a vision of the upcoming arena battle.¹ The narrative describes how Pomponius the deacon comes and violently beats on her door.² Perpetua opens the door and sees the deacon dressed in an unbelted white tunic, and he says to her, “Perpetua, we are expecting you.” She takes his hand and goes with him, walking over the harsh and winding path to the huge amphitheater. Pomponius leads her into the arena, admonishing her to not be afraid. He then departs, and Perpetua looks around at the enormous crowd. Then a filthy Egyptian and his attendants walk out to meet her, ready for a fight. Perpetua’s own helpers, who were handsome young men, assist her. They remove her clothing and she looks down and notices that she was no longer female, but has miraculously transformed into a male (*facta sum masculus*).³ Then, her helpers began to rub her with oil, just like the Greeks did before athletic contests. She views the Egyptian opposite her, rolling around in the yellow sand.

At this point she glimpses an enormous male figure dressed in an unbelted purple tunic, carrying a rod as if he were a trainer of gladiators (*lanestra*) and a green branch on which there are golden apples. The *lanestra* asks the crowd to be silent and says that if the Egyptian defeats her, then the Egyptian will kill her with a sword, and if she conquers him, she will receive his golden branch. Perpetua and the Egyptian approach one another and begin to fight with their fists. The Egyptian makes a grab for Perpetua’s ankles, and she kicks his face with her heels. Then, she levitates in the air and stomps on him. Moreover, she has her fingers interlaced so that she can take hold of his head. Finally he falls on his face, and she tramples his head! The audience begins to sing songs of praise for her, as she accepts the branch from the *lanestra*. He kisses her and proclaims: “Daughter, peace be with you.” She then exits through the gate of the victorious ones and awakens from the dream.

Perpetua’s third vision speaks to the purposeful and symbolic use of the human body in Christian texts, originating from the very earliest Christian

¹ *Passio* 10.

² *Passio* 10.

³ *Passio* 10.

practices. The body of a naked, bleeding martyr, living, yet not alive, standing isolated in the arena, is meant to be a disturbing image.¹ It was a polemic that sought to challenge the authority of the imperial civilization, by the empowering of those that the state deemed powerless. Therefore, the revelation of a male Perpetua anointed with oil and attacking an Egyptian gladiator is a most striking image to a Roman audience.

In a similar vein, when Perpetua's seconds began to "rub her down with oil," it is a clear reference to the pre-baptismal rituals and a biblical *topos*, easily recognized by the catechumens: the anointing of both kings² and Jesus.³ These activities highlight the *Passio*'s purpose as a didactic text. But what of the characters themselves? Why does the "editor" focus on catechumens—Christians of quite lowly status? Why not choose bishops or famous priests? The answer here is that the "editor" is focusing on the individuals in the church who are in a liminal status—not quite baptized, not quite "pagan." All of the liminal symbols in the text point to such an image: ladders, pregnancy, purgatory, even the dreamlike state itself. The story takes Perpetua and the catechumens through the physical rituals of another liminal activity, that of baptism: stripping, anointing, exorcism, rebirth and victory—simply by the way the narrative is structured. We know the baptismal procedure of third-century Carthage from the writings of Tertullian, and it is through stories such as this that the catechumens are led through a complex maze of "activities" on their journey to adult Christian status. Those catechumens who are eager to study the Torah lessons could identify with the transformative image of Perpetua, herself. Indeed, the *Passio* actually furthers the process of baptism, as the "hearer" or "reader" of the text becomes a "virtual catechumen" who is preparing to undergo the ritual process of moving from liminality to a more sacred status.

Perpetua's famous third vision, recounted above, has typically been used by feminist historians as an example of female empowerment—for Perpetua assumes a male body and vanquishes a terrible enemy. Yet, there is "gender trouble" here, too.⁴ Specifically, the grammatical constructions of the verb sequences in this section of the *Passio* speak to gender ambiguities inherent in this vision. The author makes sure that Perpetua uses female perfect passive participles when referring to herself, before, during and after the vision where she becomes a man (*facta sum masuculus*), even while exclaiming in surprise as she gazes at her transitional body. Is it the case that a female voice works better for the uninitiated? I mean, she is clearly below "the leader of the catechumens" and therefore as an individual lower on the power hierarchy in the church—doubly intensified by her female status. Does she not serve better

¹Heffernan, *Sacred Biography*, p. 217.

²2 Samuel 2.4

³John 12.3

⁴I am alluding to Judith Butler's groundbreaking work entitled *Gender Trouble* (London: Routledge, 1999).

as a trope for those who are in the initial stages of their conversion? ¹ Therefore, the feminist scholarship on this vision, which privileges that Perpetua sees herself as male-gendered, is flawed. The gendered nature of Latin grammar itself serves to soften an otherwise radical case of ecstatic transgending. The symbolism of Perpetua's body, which is so effectively used by Christians in a positive light (as a powerful teaching tool for anything from baptism to liturgy), is not necessarily the empowering act that feminist historians have in mind. Drawing from the multi-cultural societal notions of the time to present, invert, and redefine influence to suit their purposes, the Christians are able to reveal their notion of power, symbolically through the body of a woman.

This theme of "softening" the authoritative voice of a female martyr is further reflected in the inclusion of the *Passio* of the dream sequence of the male-martyr, Saturus. The very fact that there is a male martyr's visionary experience included at all in the *Passio*, points to the anxiety that may have been caused by the authoritative stance of the female martyr. Furthermore, the *Passio* ends with the Saturus vision, and, in so doing, the narrative structure itself points to the overall importance of his story. Past scholarship has downplayed this portion of the *Passio* for a variety of reasons. Feminist historians have overlooked it altogether. First, it does not fit the feminist-historian agenda of potent transgenderism and feminism, because, after all, it tells the story of a man who dominates Perpetua. And, since these historians are interested in recovering powerful women's voices, its inclusion would detract from the feminist enterprise. Classical historian Robin Lane Fox does briefly comment on the inclusion of this text in the *Passio*. He notes that the vision of Saturus is much more "mature" than that of Perpetua, because it includes visions of Revelation.² Fox clearly believes that all of these visions stem from martyr-narratives and not from a later redactor. Reading such a narrative as merely an autobiography injures the unique connotation of the text.

Saturus appears in the *Passio* as the principle character in numerous places. His leadership is hinted at throughout the text, first with his introduction as "the blessed deacon who was ministering to us," and as the initial ladder-climber. Saturus whose name means "to sow, or plant" apparently taught the liturgy to Perpetua and the other catechumens. Significantly, Saturus is the first to ascend the ladder to the initial vision, "as he who was later to give himself up as his own accord."³ The author tells us that Saturus had been the "builder of our strength," a comment which would equally describe Christ here, allegorically re-written as the Saturus figure. Furthermore, the authoritative stance of Saturus in the *Passio* counterbalances Perpetua's own dismissal of Roman and familial authority in the earlier sections of the narrative. Specifically: she rejects the authority of the Roman state when she

¹ The liturgical *locos* of the text would underscore even more the facta—ie, an audience of "hearers" not "readers".

² Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (New York: Knopf, 1987) pp. 401-402.

³ *Passio* chap. 4.5: "Ascendit autem Saturus prior, qui postea se propter nos ultro tradiderat (quia ipse nos aedificuerat)."

refuses to recant her position. Similarly, she discards the authority of “daddy”, when she remains steadfast in her beliefs. These actions underscore more gender trouble—as the unclean power of the Roman State and the unconverted patriarch figure (who is also evocative of the paternal authority of Empire) are hierarchical structures that the female martyr can reject, for they are in Mary Douglas’s words, “unclean powers.”¹

Modern historians have attempted, through years of intense scholarship, to recover the voice of the first Christian feminist woman writer, Perpetua. The pitfall here is that it is much less problematic simply to downplay the Satorus text. When Satorus is disregarded, Perpetua turns into a militant feminist leader of the third-century. But Satorus has other jobs besides merely leading Perpetua up and down ladders. He is also a priest, who is busily sowing metaphorical seeds. The character of Satorus is able to contribute spiritually to these activities, while leading the catechumens toward baptism and/or eternal life. In this revised reading of the *Passio Sanctae Perpetuae*, the crucial message intended for a late antique, Carthaginian audience is clear: the female body (Perpetua)—characterized by passivity and receptivity—serves as a perfect symbol for neophyte Christians preparing for baptism. In contrast, the male body (Satorus)—associated with productivity and the power of penetration—works perfectly as a trope for the role of the male hierarchy in leading uninitiated catechumens to the baptismal font and subsequently inseminating their ears with the *logos*. This then is the central teaching of the *Passio*—a text that was never designed to be a biography of Perpetua in jail. The *Passio* is a brilliant example of how—at times—contemporary scholarly agendas can prevail over the original integrity of hagiographical texts.

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¹ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge, 2002, 1966).

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