

Gender Fluidity and Closure in Perpetua's Prison Diary

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Perpetua's prison diary, her *Passio*, has been much studied and analyzed. My own particular interest in this remarkable narrative lies in the gender ambiguities and fluctuations that we see throughout the *Passio*, both in Perpetua's sections and in the framing narrative, written by a narrator whom I assume to be male. This gender ambiguity is apparent not only in language, action and behavior, but also in the way in which the narrative itself is structured.

Before I discuss this particular aspect of Perpetua's story, I will give some general background on her text, and discuss its historical and cultural framework. The *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis* contains the narrative of the martyrdom of Perpetua, a young Roman woman from Carthage and catechumen (Christian in training), and a group of her fellow Christians, all of whom were arrested in Carthage in the year 203 CE and martyred there in the reign of Septimius Severus. This text, said to have been written in Perpetua's own hand (*manu sua et suo sensu*, "in her own hand and reflecting her own feelings", *Passio* 2.3) while she was in prison awaiting execution, is remarkable for a number of reasons. It is the earliest prose piece in Latin that we have by a Christian woman (or by any woman), and

it becomes an important model for many later martyr texts. It gives us an insight into a formative period of Christianity, and also into the dynamics of the life of a provincial Roman family in the 3rd century CE. And it focuses on a figure who is – though not strictly speaking a virgin herself – nonetheless the precursor to the later ascetic, virginal figures such as the two Macrinus, Olympias and Melania in the 3rd-5th centuries, women who were “more like men than nature would seem to allow” (as Palladius says in his *Lausiatic History*)¹ and who gave up marriage and children to lead a celibate life devoted to God².

Pretty much everything we know about Perpetua is found in the *Passio*, a text that is partly by her (sec. 3-10), and partly by two other hands: a narrator/editor (sec. 1-2, 11.1, 14-21) and one of her fellow martyrs and perhaps teacher, Saturus (11.2-13). She was in her early twenties, a nursing mother, and a Christian but not yet baptized when she was arrested. The arrest took place either in Carthage or in a town near Carthage, Thuburbo Minus. Perpetua was arrested along with four others: Felicitas (another woman, perhaps a slave), Revocatus (perhaps also a slave), Secundulus, and Saturninus; a sixth person, Saturus, turned himself in later.

Vibia Perpetua was, it seems, from a Roman family of good standing living in Carthage or a small town southeast of Carthage. Her family must have been thoroughly Romanized, having probably received citizenship under Tiberius³. She is described as *honeste nata, liberaliter instituta, matronaliter nupta* (“well-born, brought up in a manner befitting a free person, and married in the fashion of a respectable Roman woman”, *Passio* 2.1). She has a family consisting of a father (with whom she has a difficult relationship), mother, maternal aunt, two brothers (one of whom is also a Christian), and a son, who is an infant still at the breast. Another brother had died at the age of seven of a terrible facial cancer. There is no mention at all of her husband, and this presents us with a difficult problem. There have been many reasons offered for his absence. He may have been dead, been on an extended trip, or been estranged from Perpetua and her family if he was not a Christian (Bremmer 2002, 87-8). Or, it may be that Perpetua took the path of many women after her, who, in the process of becoming Christians, divested themselves of

1 — Palladius, *Lausiatic History*, *Prol.* 5, trans. W.K. Lowther Clarke (London 1918), 37. See Castelli 1991, 44-45. John Chrysostom reportedly claimed about the abbess Olympias: “Don’t say ‘woman’ but ‘what a man!’ because this is a man, despite her physical appearance” (Palladius, *Dialogus de vita S. Ioannis Chrysostomi* in Migne, *PG* 47, 56, cited by Castelli 1991, 45 and n. 22). Such women both received accolades for their manly piety but were also condemned and feared for their gender ambiguity and their casting off of traditional roles.

2 — See on this Cooper, Forthcoming 2011.

3 — See Bremmer 2002, 87 for discussion of the name Vibius and its probable provenance.

their prior familial relationships, including husbands and children, so that they might become virginal and dedicate themselves to God⁴. Cooper has even suggested that Perpetua might have been a concubine, whose child was born out of wedlock and therefore was cared for during her imprisonment and after her death by her own family and not by her husband and his family (Cooper 2011)⁵.

Nearly all of the (few) biographical details we have are told to us not by Perpetua in her part of the narrative but by the editor of the narrative. Perpetua gives us no biographical information (although she does mention her dead brother), but rather presents an account of several meetings with her father after her arrest, a few details of her trial and her time in prison, and four visions that she had while in prison.

We can surmise from Perpetua's account that she had strong connections with her family, and in particular with her father. Perpetua describes four tense visits from her father, who comes to dissuade her from her ill-considered and (to him) inexplicable march toward martyrdom, an act that will, he feels, have dire consequences not only for her but also for her family. In his first visit, Perpetua puts her father through a Socratic question and answer sequence (one in which the answer is obvious all along to her):

"Father, do you see, for example, the pitcher or whatever is lying there?' 'Yes', he said, 'I do'. And I said, 'Can you call it by any other name than what it is?' 'No'. 'And so then I cannot call myself anything other than what I am: a Christian' (*Christiana*)". At this semantic game-playing, her father was so angry that he threw himself at her as if he wanted to pluck her eyes out, but then left angrily in defeat, conquered, along with his devil's arguments (*Passio* 3.1-3). On his next visit, between her second and third visions, he says to her: "My daughter, have pity on me and my grey hair! (*miserere, filia, canis meis*). Have pity on me – I am your father, if I am worthy to be called father by you. Didn't I bring you up with these hands, so that now you are in the prime of life? Didn't I put you first, before all your brothers? Don't disgrace me in the eyes of everyone. Think of your brothers. Think of your mother and aunt. Think of your own son, who won't be able to survive after your death. Give up your pride or you'll be the ruin of us all. If something terrible should happen to you, none

4 — See Castelli 1991, 44-7. See too Heffernan 1988, 233-4, who gives as one possible reason for Perpetua's missing husband "the idea that following baptism the renunciation of the marriage debt was an achievement of the highest good".

5 — Cooper's thesis is that an editor, writing at a later time, may have rewritten parts of her story in his framing narrative and assigned to her a "high-born status characteristic of ancient heroines" that may be false. She may not have been *matronaliter nupta* (*Passio* 2.1) but rather of humbler origins and not respectably married. This could explain why Perpetua's baby was given not to the father's family but rather to Perpetua's family.

of us will be able to speak freely'. This is what he kept saying just like a devoted father, kissing my hands and throwing himself at my feet, and weeping, now he called me not 'daughter' but 'my lady'" ("haec dicebat quasi pater pro sua pietate basians mihi manus et se ad pedes meos iactans et lacrimans me iam non filiam nominabat sed dominam", *Passio* 5.2-5; passage quoted in Latin is 5.5). Thus, reversing gender roles, he supplicates her, calling her *domina* ("my lady"), no longer *filia* ("daughter")⁶.

A third visit comes during her interrogation by the governor, Hilarianus. The governor asks Perpetua to show mercy to her father and baby and to sacrifice *pro salute imperatorum* ("for the health of the emperors", *Passio* 6.3). She refuses to do so, reiterating that she is a Christian. Perpetua's father tries again to dissuade her and to get her to sacrifice. Hilarianus orders her father to be knocked down and beaten with a rod (6.5), and Perpetua grieves for his old age (*dolui pro senecta eius misera*, *Passio* 6.5). Hilarianus' motivation for his harsh actions is unclear: he may have been trying to put pressure on Perpetua to recant by physically abusing her father in front of her; he may have been trying to get Perpetua's father to take control of the situation and to exert his *patria potestas*, acting in his traditional role as Roman citizen and father; or he may have been venting his fury on this unrepentant woman and her father, who is acting in a subservient manner and displaying feminized behavior unbecoming for a Roman male. Finally, on the day before her scheduled execution, Perpetua's father appears one final time; here he exhibits mourning behavior (tearing out his beard, prostrating himself), and again Perpetua grieves for his *infelix* old age (*Passio* 9.2-3).

Perpetua's father is slowly reduced to a role of subservience: far from the self-contained *paterfamilias* who has absolute control over every member of his *domus* and in particular the women, this father now calls his daughter *domina*; kisses her hands, weeps, and prostrates himself at her feet. This posture of her father is shocking – so desperate is he to convince Perpetua to renounce her Christianity that he is willing to take on the feminine position and to allow her to take the dominant role⁷. Although he seems throughout the *Passio* to be genuinely affectionate toward his daughter (so he says "Didn't I put you first, before all your brothers?"),

6 — My translations are in some places influenced by the translation of J. Farrell and C. Williams (in Bremmer and Formisano, Forthcoming 2011); I thank them for letting me see this in advance of its publication.

7 — This reversal of roles between Perpetua and her father is accented by her choice of words in several places. For example, when Perpetua is repudiating her father's attempts to change her mind during his second visit (*Passio* 5), she says to him "Scito enim nos non in nostra esse potestate constitutos, sed in Dei" ("Know that we are not created in our own power but in God's power"). The use of the commanding future imperative *scito* here is noteworthy; Perpetua is taking over the dominant role.

5.2), he is also clearly worried about his own reputation and that of his household ("you'll be the ruin of us all. If something terrible should happen to you, none of us will be able to speak freely", 5.4).

Perpetua's main account of her imprisonment is comprised of four visions that came to her before her execution: the first, in which she steps on the head of a serpent, climbs a ladder, and sees in an immense garden a god-like figure; two visions concerning her dead brother, Dinocrates; and a final and fourth vision the day before her execution. Her dreams are vivid and self-revelatory; while they contain a number of images found in other late antique and medieval writers, they also give a clear sense of an individual and idiosyncratic personality that shines through the work. So Shaw refers to an "immanent 'presence' of the author that exudes from her own account" (Shaw 1993, 27). It is the fourth vision (*Passio* 10) that has aroused the most interest.

In this vision, the most famous part of her narrative, Perpetua's transgressive behavior is foregrounded in a startling way. Here, Pomponius, a deacon who had visited her in prison, comes to that prison to get Perpetua⁸. He leads her to the amphitheater, pledges that he will assist her (using the term *conlaboro tecum*, "I am suffering along with you", *Passio* 10.4)⁹, and then departs (just as Saturus does in the first vision). Perpetua sees a huge and boisterous crowd in the arena (10.5) and is surprised to find no wild beasts attacking her. Instead she beholds an Egyptian "hideous to look at" (10.6: *Aegyptius foedus specie*) with his seconds. Perpetua had her own assistants as well (10.6). And then, she says, "I was disrobed, and I became male" (10.7: *expoliata sum et facta sum masculus*). Standing opposite her is her opponent rolling in the arena covered in yellow sand (*afa*, 10.7). The Egyptian here presumably stands for the Devil, who was, she claimed, to be her true opponent the next day in her actual contest or *agôn*¹⁰. Then another man appears, a paternal figure as in her first vision, so tall that he stood above the highest point of the amphitheater. He was clothed in purple robes and carrying a rod (*virga*) like an owner and trainer of gladiators (*lanista*, *Passio* 10.8). This man is a Christ figure, there to present her to die in the amphitheater just as an *agônotherêtês* might present gladiators for their own form of combat in the

8 — Pomponius is often compared to the pagan dignitary who brings the participants to the contest, but, as Bremmer points out, his dress, especially the absence of a belt, marks him as a Christian, not a pagan (2002, 114-15).

9 — This is a Christian term; see Bremmer 2002, 114.

10 — The Egyptian may also be used to signify the paradigm of a strong athlete. Bremmer (2002, 116) cites L. Robert here for Robert's influential interpretation of the athletic contest in the fourth vision. Bremmer points out that the Egyptians were the "athletes par excellence of the Roman Empire", and therefore it is not surprising that an Egyptian would be Perpetua's opponent here. But also the Devil was often represented as black, and this may have affected the choice of the Egyptian in Perpetua's contest.

pagan games. This *lanista* is holding a green branch with golden apples. If Perpetua wins, she will get this branch; if not, she will be dispatched by the Egyptian.

Then ensues a brutally physical battle between Perpetua and the Egyptian, a pankration with wrestling, punching and kicking. Perpetua knocks the Egyptian down, trampling on his head (as she did the serpent in vision one, and as Eve is promised she will do in Genesis 3:15) and winning the prize. The *lanista* kisses Perpetua and says to her “Peace be with you, daughter” (*Passio* 10.13), while the crowd cheers and her seconds sing psalms. Perpetua then walks in honor and glory to the Porta Sanavivaria (the Gate of Life, through which victims and gladiators who were spared exited the arena).

This is the end of the vision and very nearly the end of Perpetua’s portion of the narrative. It only remains for her to interpret her dream, saying that at this point she awoke and understood that she would fight on the next day, not *ad bestias*¹¹, but against the Devil (*diabolum*, *Passio* 10.14). She also understood that victory was in her hands (*sciebam mihi esse victoriam*, *Passio* 10.14).

This dream contains a number of standard images common to other visions and accounts of martyrdom, found in texts from the New Testament on, and containing agonistic institutions of the day. But in the particular context of Perpetua’s life and narrative, the images and modes of expression take on a deeper and extraordinary meaning. First, in general, we can infer from the language here that the death of martyrs is viewed as a *munus*, a public entertainment (a combination here of athletic event and gladiatorial games, which were kept separate in Rome), a *munus* offered by God to the communities where they were held as a different variety of the *munera* that they were accustomed to see. In these *munera* (or *agônes*), it is God or Christ who is the agent of their martyrdom, and not the officials who in fact presided over the trials and executions. It is a “performance orchestrated by God” (Bowersock 1995, 52) with Roman officials acting as his unwilling assistants. These executions or performances were held in the most conspicuous places in the city, as both the martyrs and (sometimes) the local magistrates desired.

Second, there is the disturbing figure of the “hideous to look at Egyptian”, a figure who has occasioned much spirited debate. While Shaw sees this choice of word and image as a “simple reflection of racism” (Shaw 1993, 28), pointing out that 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 (Shaw 1993, 28, n. 62;

11 — This penalty, death in the arena at the hands of wild beasts, was one of the most extreme penalties levied by the Romans and was most often given to convicted criminals.

cf. Tilley 1994, 846), many see the Egyptian as representing more than just racist tendencies. The Egyptian nationality may have been chosen to represent the various mystic and pagan cults that originated in the east (and the reigning emperor, Septimius Severus, was a special worshipper of Serapis, an Egyptian god; cf. Dronke 1984, 14), cults that competed with Christianity as possible choices for the Romans. Egypt was thought to contain a "forbidden knowledge, a threat to the wisdom of the true God" (Dronke 1984, 14). Or, the Egyptian might symbolize a large and impressive athletic opponent, perhaps parallel to a representative of another threatening ethnic group, the gigantic Ethiopian whom Heliodorus' protagonist fought against in his novel the *Aethiopica* (Salisbury 1997, 110).

Finally, Perpetua's fourth vision is imbued with the imagery and ideology of an athletic contest and the important cultural embodiments associated with them: spectacles and spectators, the body, the gaze, moral virtues, philosophical discourse, and civic institutions. Martyrs were, from the time of the New Testament, cast as athletes. So Paul in I Corinthians compared the Christian life to the restraint in all things exercised by every athlete (I Cor. 9:24-7); according to Tertullian, Christians were considered spiritual athletes and they were supposed to discipline their bodies (*ad mart.* 3). And Tertullian says that prison is the perfect proving ground for the kinds of visionary experiences that Perpetua had (*ad mart.* 2-3).

In this fourth and final vision, we see the logical development of the theme of the fearless woman who refuses to be subordinated to the role of daughter. As Castelli says, Perpetua's victory "is described *as* and *by* the stripping off of feminine gender" (Castelli 1991, 42; her emphasis). Perpetua's sudden and brief transformation in *Passio* 10.7 into a *masculus* is both necessary in order to explain her victory over the large Egyptian man and a sign of confidence in her ability to win. She *must* prevail because she is fighting for God. Her victory is marked by her signifying male body; her transformation might be seen as a "culturally conditioned affirmation of Perpetua's ultimate victory" (Tilley 1994, 844). In antiquity the male body was considered the cultural and physical norm. Biblical metaphors were full of masculine images that "reinforced prejudice for male superiority" (Tilley 1994, 844; Eph. 4:13, 6:11-17; Rom. 13:12). "Male" and "female" became metaphors for moral categories, with male standing for strong, superior and female standing for weak, inferior. In order, then, to be strong and to fight against beasts or demons or to bear up bravely under duress, one had to be "male" or "virile" in one way or another. The designations "male" and "female" became over time terms that could indicate either sex. Sex was then transcended, sexuality became fluid and temporary, and it could refer to a common human

nature. The terms came to describe less a static state or a sexual category than a moral category: to “become female” was to become morally weak or degenerate; to “become male” was to attain “a higher state or moral and spiritual perfection” (Vogt 1985, 72-80)¹². Perpetua’s male body would, by this reading, indicate that she has been strengthened, turned into an athlete, and that she could prevail over her Egyptian opponent.

For women, courage, conscious choice and self-possession constituted gender transgression when viewed through men’s eyes (Miles 1989, 55). Parents, mothers and fathers alike, were horrified by this behavior. We know that Perpetua’s father was infuriated by her stubbornness and independence (*Passio* 3.3), and Thecla’s mother, on hearing Thecla reject marriage, cried out “Burn the lawless woman” (*Acts of Paul and Thecla* 20). It was not, of course, the male characteristics that critics despised, but rather women who tried to act like men and against their nature. Philo, the first-century CE philosopher, tries to mediate this contradiction when he says: “Progress is nothing else than the giving up of the female gender by changing into the male, since the female gender is material, passive, corporeal, and sense-perceptible; while the male is active, rational, incorporeal and more akin to mind and thought” (Philo, *Questiones et solutiones in Genesis* 1.8, quoted in MacDonald 1987, 99)¹³.

One means for women to “become male” was to follow the path of asceticism. If women accepted voluntary celibacy and discarded their former world of property, husband and children (as Perpetua finally did after terrible anxiety over her baby, who was with her for a time in the prison; *Passio* 3.6-9), they took on “a new status that elevated them beyond the deficiencies of the female condition” (Clark 1986, 43). So Jerome says that once a woman prefers Jesus Christ to a husband and babies, “she will cease to be a woman and will be called a man” (Jerome, *Comment. on Ep. to the Ephesians* III [Eph. 5:28]). She would now be considered man’s equal, not his inferior; here Jerome quotes Paul that “in Christ Jesus there is no male and female” (Jerome *Ep.* 71,2,2; 75,2,2). Thus with sexuality and family relations removed, all that remains, says Jerome, is for women to “transcend their femaleness”.

12 — Metaphors of woman turning into man and woman becoming male were commonly used in Gnosticism. See Clement of Alexandria, who says “the woman ... when she has freed herself of the cravings of the flesh, achieves perfection in this life as the man does ... for souls are ... neither masculine nor feminine, when they no longer marry nor are married. Perhaps *she* is thus turned into a man, the woman who is no more feminine than he, *the perfect, manly, woman*” (cf. Vogt 1985, 73, her emphasis; see Clement, *Stromates* VI.100.6).

13 — Cf. Castelli 1991, 44-5, who points out that there are many encomia to women who “become male” and yet also condemnation and mistrust. For example, cutting one’s hair, as Thecla did, to try to disguise oneself as a man or as a rejection of self-beautification, was seen as negative since “women’s hair stands for their subjugation” (p. 44).

The transformation into a male body such as Perpetua underwent became later, for, in particular, holy women, a common trope: "the mark of true holiness is that the women become men" (Castelli 1991, 42-47; quote on p. 42). This transformation can take many forms (cutting one's hair, acting in a masculine way, transvestism), but it does not often take the form of a complete, physical metamorphosis (even if in a dream or briefly) into a male body¹⁴. And the transformation is not usually described in a narration, as here; it is more often presented as a state that one has attained (Castelli 1991, 42). We should look closely, then, at both the language used in the *Passio* and at Perpetua's fluid gendering throughout her narrative.

There is some disagreement among scholars over whether the casting off of the female refers to female appearance or female sexuality. In Perpetua's narrative, she does not regard the change in her appearance or body as enduring; as soon as the contest with the Egyptian is over, she returns to her original form as she approaches the *lanista* who gives her the branch with the golden apples, kisses her, and says to her *filia, pax tecum* ("daughter, peace be with you", *Passio* 10.13). We should also take note here that when Perpetua says "I became male" (*Passio* 10.7), she says *facta sum masculus*, using the feminine form of the participle *facta*. Thus in this moment she was both male and female. In addition to complicating her transition to a male form by the use of this participle, Perpetua chooses to use for "male" not the word *vir* or *mas* but the less common word *masculus*. This word, with its diminutive ending, might indicate by its very form an ambiguity in the text about the strength and duration of the transformation. There are two interesting uses of this word in classical Latin authors that might be instructive. Livy (31.12.6), in describing a strange portent accompanying the violation of a temple, says that among the Sabines was born a child of uncertain sex: "*incertus infans natus, masculus an femina esset*; another was found, age sixteen, whose sex could not be determined (*ambiguo sexu*)". Although *masculus* is used in opposition to *femina* here, it appears in a context of sexual ambiguity. Horace, in *Ep.* 1.19.28, speaking of the poet Sappho, says that "masculine Sappho shapes her Muse with the meter of Archilochus" (*temperat Archilochi Musam pede mascula Sappho*). It is not clear whether *mascula* here is a term of praise or blame¹⁵, but certainly Sappho was a figure whose sexuality was often

14 — We have many examples of such women, most of them after Perpetua's time but a few before her, for example, Thecla. There are certainly parallels between the stories of Perpetua and Thecla, and it is tempting to think that Perpetua must have read her story. See on this Bremmer 1998, 176ff. and 2002, 107ff.; he asks whether Perpetua had read the *Acts of Paul* and knew enough Greek to do so.

15 — A.S. Wilkins, in his commentary on Horace's *Epistles*, says that "*mascula* is a term of praise, not of blame, as the Scholiasts strangely suppose" (Wilkins, ed., *The Epistles of Horace*,

thought ambiguous¹⁶. The word *masculus* seems to signal, then, both by its form and its semantic connotation and associations, a sexual ambiguity in Perpetua's transformation into a male body.

Thus in the all but final part of Perpetua's narrative, only two short sections before the end, Perpetua is a *filia*, and it is as a woman that she receives her reward. From her point of view, there has been no enduring change to her body¹⁷. Apart from the fact that Perpetua "became male" in her fourth vision, her *sex* remains unchanged in the other parts of the narrative¹⁸. But Perpetua's *gender* qualities vary widely throughout. In addition to the gendered terms discussed above, earlier in her narrative we see the same fluctuations of gender in Latin forms that Perpetua uses which prepare us for this sexual ambiguity. In the first section of the narrative (*Passio* 3.5), she says – referring to her whole group of four men and two women – *baptizati sumus* ("we were baptized"), using the masculine plural of the group. It would be normal in Latin for a woman to subsume her identity under the masculine plural if the group is mixed, but it is still noteworthy that she refers to herself here in the masculine plural, especially given the quick shift to feminine endings immediately afterwards. Later in the same section, she says *numquam experta eram tales tenebras* ("I had never experienced such a dark place before", *Passio* 3.5), using the feminine singular. Similarly in the same section (sec. 3), she says *benedicti diaconi ... constituerunt praemio uti paucis horis emissi in meliorem locum carceris refrigeraremus* ("those saintly deacons arranged our transfer for a few hours – and for a price – into the better part of the prison, where we could have some relief", 3.7), again using the generalizing masculine plural of the group; this is followed by *sollicita pro eo adloquebar matrem* ("Anxious for him [the baby], I spoke to Mother", 3.8)¹⁹.

London, 1958, 233 ad loc). Both Wilkins and the scholiasts seem to have been caught off guard by Horace's lovely ambiguity in this word.

16 — Brooten suggests that the background to *mascula Sappho* in Horace *Ep.* 1.19.28, as well as the *mascula libido* in Hor. *Epodes* 5.41, might be the "masculine desires" attributed to *tribades*, or females who love other females, by writers in antiquity (especially Christian writers such as Paul; see Brooten 1996, 34ff.).

17 — A further point, raised by Judith Perkins, is that the representation of Perpetua in her narrative (as a nursing mother) and of her companion Felicitas (as pregnant and giving birth while in prison) highlights the maternal body, which is featured in "contemporary debates about Christ's real flesh and his real birth" (Perkins 2009, 167-9). Although Perkins uses this to argue against the authenticity of Perpetua's authorship and for this narrative being a rhetorical construction of Perpetua and Felicitas (by a male narrator?) in order to "valorize the male body", I am interested in this observation here only insofar as it highlights the bodily aspect of Perpetua and her femaleness.

18 — M. Bal disagrees; she sees Perpetua as moving away from femininity and toward masculinity throughout. Perpetua is, she says, a "proto-feminist heroine" in her victory over gender limitations and a "proto-post-modern" in her victory over narration (Bal, 1991, 227-41; quotes from p. 241).

19 — See Williams, Forthcoming 2011 for these references and for a good discussion of

So Perpetua tends to subsume her identity under the masculinizing plural when she identifies as a part of the group, but when she extracts herself and becomes an individual writing her own story, the descriptive adjectives and participles all take feminine endings. The main point at which this grammatical gendering is called into question is her statement *facta sum masculus* (10.7).

Perpetua's actions in her own part of the narrative, however, cast her in a dominant and controlling male role. She is independent, courageous, and brave, a leader of her group. She dominates her father, who is cast into an increasingly feminized position as the narrative progresses²⁰. She willingly gives up her baby to her family, divesting herself of her maternal role. When the Roman prison guards try to dress her for the "games" in the pagan role of Ceres (and the men as Saturn), she refuses, and she wins that verbal contest (*Passio* 18.4-6). She is portrayed as a fierce combatant in her fourth vision, fighting in a pankration against her Egyptian opponent. It has even been argued, from a Freudian standpoint, that when she claims that her father wanted to attack her "as if he was going to pluck my eyes out", (*Passio* 3.5), there is a relationship between the reference to blinding and castration anxiety, evidence for "Perpetua's tendency to self-identification as male" (Bal 1991, 232, n. 14).

This masculinizing of Perpetua becomes even more pointed if we examine her own autobiographical recounting of her story against the framing narrative, which treats Perpetua as a character in the drama. The external narrator, or editor, who both introduces Perpetua in section 2 and then tells the story of her death in sections 14-21, highlights her feminine side in several ways. So in section 20, we find out that the animal chosen for Perpetua and her one other companion female martyr, Felicitas, to fight was an extremely fierce heifer ("in order to mimic (*aemulatus*) their sex even as regards the beast", 20.1). The authorities (or, as the text says, the Devil, *diabolus*), according to the narrator, chose the heifer as a cruel joke – to remind these women, who had the boldness to renounce their conventional social and familial roles, in the most savage and ironic way, that their proper role was as women²¹.

In this same section, Perpetua is cast by the editor/narrator in a demure, feminine role after her fight with the beast. After she was thrown by the heifer, she "fell onto her side". And when she sat up, she rearranged the tunic that had been torn away from her body to cover her thigh, being more concerned with her modesty than her pain. Then she asked for a

the issue of gender in the *Passio*. I thank him for sharing with me his manuscript in advance of its publication.

20 — On the increasing feminizing of Perpetua's father, see Castelli 1991, 37ff.

21 — See on this Shaw 1993, 7-9.

hairpin and pinned up her disheveled hair; for it was not fitting to suffer martyrdom with her hair loose since she might seem to be mourning in her hour of glory" (*Passio* 20.3-5). This Perpetua, so concerned with the typical feminine preoccupations of modesty and keeping a proper demeanor, hardly seems to accord with the Perpetua we see in sections 3-10, the autobiographical part of the *Passio*. There we are presented with a far more aggressive, confident woman concerned with winning her contest, even at the cost of losing her family, rather than with covering up her exposed thigh and pinning up her loose hair.

Mieke Bal, in her narratological critique of the *Passio*, also calls attention to the gendering of Perpetua, but sees her development as one that is unambiguously away from femininity. According to Bal, Perpetua's father takes on the feminized role when he cries, kisses her hands and receives her baby, an act that Bal describes as "appealing to shared parenthood"²². As Perpetua then takes on the role of the patriarch, she is relieved of the maternal role and her anxiety for her child, and "all that emphasized her femininity" (Bal 1991, 235). The emphasis on gender and on Perpetua's move toward masculinity dovetails with Bal's narratological analysis of the *Passio*; the contest that is at the heart of the story is a structuring device in several ways, the most interesting of which is the main contest in the work between narration and description (Bal 1991, 227). Perpetua is telling (or purports to be telling) her story in real time, in a self-referential and autobiographical narration²³. She is not able, of course, to write the end of her story since that end is death. So "the story contains its own unnarratable ending – it entails the death of its narrator" (literally: Bal 1991, 231)²⁴. When Perpetua finishes telling her fourth vision, she says "Then I woke up. And I understood that I was going to fight not against animals but against the Devil. But I also knew that victory was to be mine. This is what I did up to the day before the games. As for what happened during the games themselves: anyone who wants to write about that may do so" (*Passio* 10.14-15).

Thus she defers and loses control both of her voice and of the ending, her death, and hands it over to the narrator/editor. The editor then describes Perpetua from an outside point of view (or focal point), treating her as a character in a closely controlled narrative, molding her into the figure he wishes her to be (a woman who, in the midst of her passion, covers up

22 — Bal 1991, 234. Bal describes the framework of her analysis as deconstructionist-psychoanalytic (234) and as psychonarration (234, n. 18).

23 — See Bremmer 2002, 83-4; he points out that one stylistic feature unique to Perpetua's part of the diary is that she regularly uses expressions indicating the passage of time ("after a few days").

24 — See Castelli 1991, 34ff. on the open-endedness of Perpetua's narrative and of autobiography in general: "by its nature, no autobiography can come to closure" (34).

her exposed flesh and pins up her *dispersos capillos* [20.5]) and writing her death (*Passio* 21). The narrator/editor both achieves narrative closure and attempts to fix more firmly Perpetua's gender identity.

The narrator's attempts to fix Perpetua's gender and to finish her narrative fail in the end. Two rich veins of scholarship on Perpetua underline, in different ways, the functioning of gender ambiguity in the *Passio*. Bal sees "a trace, a *writing* of sexual difference" (1991, 238, her emphasis) in various places in the narrative where male and female are intertwined, although she ultimately describes a sexuality that is transcended in Perpetua's "victory over gender-limitations" (241). A somewhat different approach, to which I would subscribe, calls Perpetua's fixed gender identity into question, revealing a woman who often behaves in a determinedly masculine way and yet firmly identifies with her corporeality, her female relationships, and her sexuality throughout her story. Even at her end, Perpetua, who has only been wounded by the heifer and must now be dispatched by an inexperienced gladiator, has to help him bring about her final moment: "Perpetua, however, so that she might taste some pain, screamed when she was stabbed to the bone; and then she herself guided the trembling hand of the inexperienced gladiator to her throat. Perhaps so great a woman, feared as she was by the unclean spirit, could not have been killed unless she herself had willed it" (*Passio* 21.9-10). So Perpetua is the master of her own fate even in the editor's account of her death, defying his attempts to fix her gender firmly as female.

This gender ambiguity in the text of Perpetua persists until the end, both in its narrative structure, and in the characterization of Perpetua and the language used to describe her and her behavior. Perpetua's narrative, or description of her trial, imprisonment and impending martyrdom, is open-ended, deferring endlessly to another writer who may or may not finish her story²⁵. Perpetua's behavior (as it is described by herself and by the editor) and the language of the text reinforce the impossibility of fixing Perpetua in one gender role. As one of the critics currently engaged with the rhetoric of gender and martyrdom, Elizabeth Castelli, says, "just as her narrative remains open-ended and therefore ambiguous, it also narrates an ambiguity toward gendered imagery and gendered identity on the part of its main character; whereas Perpetua's own story calls narrative closure and fixed gender identity into question, the framing narrative finishes the story and puts Perpetua back into the conventions of gender, as a woman [*femina*]" (*Passio* 21.10; Castelli 1991, 35)²⁶. This ambiguity

25 — Bal distinguishes between a true narrative mode, which depends upon an unfolding temporality, and Perpetua's descriptive mode, which "takes Perpetua out of time ... into an atemporal realm" (1991, 239).

26 — Many feminist critics are now contributing to the lively debate on the intersections of

in gender identification and in transformations of the human body lay at the heart of the spiritual progress that many Christians made in the early Church, both men and women; but for women, the transformations were more evident, more problematic, and more controversial. Perpetua's narrative is a striking early example of such a fraught journey.

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gender, rhetoric and the female martyr. Prominent among these are Burrus (1995, 2004, 2008), Castelli (1991, 2004), Cooper (1998, 2007, forthcoming), Grig (2002, 2004, 2005), Perkins (2009), Scourfield (forthcoming) and Shaw (1993, 1996).

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