

The Martyrdom of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas: Study Questions

Hum 110, Reed College
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1. Cultural Studies: In this text we hear a woman speaking in her own words. What sort of persona does she present? What sorts of roles did Garnsey and Saller suggest women were told to conform to during the reign of the Roman empire (e.g. father-daughter relations, mother-child, etc.)? Does Perpetua acknowledge or subvert these standards of behavior? If so, for what purpose?
2. Genre: Compare this brief autobiographical fragment to Augustus' *Res Gestae*. What is the focus of Perpetua's identity? What is the narrative of her life? What sorts of information would you expect her to have in an autobiography? What does she leave out and why do you think she does so?
3. Theology: Compare Perpetua's visions to those of the other saints and prophets we have read. What elements do you notice in common? Are these elements also present in the pagan descriptions of encounters with the divine that we have read in works such as the *Aeneid*, the *Metamorphoses*, and *The Golden Ass*?
4. Imagery: pick one of Perpetua's visions or amphitheater encounters and analyze it as a metaphor for her struggles. For example, what do you make of the fight with the mad heifer, the encounter with the dragon, or her transformation into a man in an athletic contest?
5. Read Brown's *The World of Late Antiquity* pp. 1-48. What is Brown's thesis? To what discipline does his world belong? How does this shape the questions he seeks to answer and the type of evidence that he uses? How does his argument help contextualize Perpetua's narrative?

Characters to keep track of:

- * Narrator/editor
- * Perpetua
- * Perpetua's father
- * Felicitas
- * Saturus

Some Reading Questions Suggested by Minott Kerr:

1. What is the purpose of the text? For the editor/narrator? For Perpetua? Does Perpetua ever tell us why she is writing her story?
2. Why is this text important enough to have been saved? (Nathalia will give some very good reasons in her lecture, but you might want to consider if there are others.)
3. Does the editor of the Perpetua text view Perpetua's life and actions the same way that Perpetua does herself?
4. Consider P's actions and visions. How are they formed or informed by texts such as Revelation, the Gospels, the prophets of the Hebrew Bible?
5. What are the bonds, social or otherwise, that Perpetua thinks important? Which ones does she break in this text and which ones does she form?
6. Some readers of this text treat her visions and her commentary on her visions as a sequence (i.e. that each subsequent one builds on the previous ones). In your reading of the text does this make sense? What is gained or lost in reading the text in this way?
7. **Why is Perpetua so dangerous that she needs to be put to death, and put to death in so gruesome a manner? (Please give time to this question: this would be a great place to begin discussion.)**