

## Perpetua and Felicitas: A Queer Reading

By Jason Cook

A queer analysis of “The Martyrdom of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas” paints a portrait of a same-sex pair who have a strong commitment to their faith identity and each other; this multi-layered commitment has deep emotional resonance for queer readers. While there is little textual evidence to support queer culture’s commonly understood interpretation of the women as romantically linked, certainly, the influence of Perpetua and Felicitas as queer and lesbian icons cannot be denied. St. George Hare’s 1890 painting, “The Victory of Faith,” depicts the two women as “an inter-racial couple sleeping together nude in prison.”<sup>1</sup> Over one hundred years later, in his show “Transcendent Faith: Gay, Lesbian and Transgendered (sic) Saints,” artist Jim Ru depicts the two women simultaneously kissing and praying. Moreover, Perpetua and Felicitas are almost always found on lists of gay church saints and martyrs.<sup>2</sup> Rather than answering heteronormative criticisms in addressing this phenomenon, and thus adopting a defensive posture attempting to prove the validity of identifying the women as a queer couple, I will instead assume a wholly queer perspective. My concern will not be then whether the queering of these women is a legitimate interpretation of the narrative; instead, my focus will be on what a close analysis of the text conveys about their relationship and the nature of their faith that is meaningful for queer readers. In examining the dignity and constancy with which the two women maintain their identities as Christians, the absence of heteronormative relationships within the narrative, the defiance of gender norms throughout

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<sup>1</sup> “Friends to the End: Saints Perpetua and Felicity,” Jesus in Love, Accessed April 3, 2013, <http://jesusinlove.blogspot.com/2011/03/friends-to-end-saints-perpetua-and.html>.

<sup>2</sup> “Queer Saints & Martyrs,” Queering the Church, Accessed April 2, 2013, <http://queeringthechurch.com/queer-saints-martyrs-and-others/>.

the text, and the interaction of the two women at their moment of execution, it becomes clear why this story has been so meaningful to the queer community.

First, the text is full of examples of the danger that Perpetua and Felicitas are willing to endure for their sense of integrity. While the queer reader may not precisely identify as a religious martyr, martyrdom still has parallels with the queer experience, both of which have historically required risk, danger, and punishment in being true to one's identity. Early on, Perpetua asks her father if an object such as a pitcher "could. . . be called by any other name than what it is?" And he said, 'No.' 'Well, so too I cannot be called anything other than what I am, a Christian.'"<sup>3</sup> For the queer reader, who has likely struggled with concerns around both the immutability and the labeling of sexual orientation, this metaphor has emotional parallels. The willingness to stand up to a patriarchal influence (the father figure) and announce a controversial aspect of her identity is an element rife with meaning from the queer perspective. Certainly, her father's reaction of throwing himself on her "as though he would pluck my eyes out" illustrates the well-founded fears of a queer individual in coming out to a parent.<sup>4</sup> More broadly, Perpetua's father's response can be viewed as indicative of the hostile reaction of larger patriarchal forces. Later, in a vision, Perpetua ascends heavenward and encounters a divine figure who says to her, "I am glad you have come, my child," wording which is suggestive of a parental relationship and thus recalls Perpetua's father.<sup>5</sup> The Roberts-Donaldson translation even uses the word "daughter" here, instead of child.<sup>6</sup> For the queer reader, the longing to find paternal acceptance from a divine figure after rejection by a human

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<sup>3</sup> Herbert Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, (Oxford: At the Clarendon, 1972), 109.

<sup>4</sup> Musurillo, *Acts*, 109.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>6</sup> "The Passion of the Holy Martyrs: Perpetua and Felicitas," Early Christian Writings, Accessed April 1, 2013, <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/tertullian24.html>.

parent is a familiar yearning, a confluence of faith, queerness, and identity issues. Like Perpetua, Felicitas exhibits an astounding level of commitment to her identity as a Christian. Because she is pregnant when apprehended, it is possible that her punishment will be delayed. The idea that “she might have to shed her holy, innocent blood along with others who were common criminals” makes her “very distressed,” rather than relieved at the possibility she might postpone or even escape a gruesome death.<sup>7</sup> Intriguingly, historian John Boswell notes that the social inequity between Perpetua, the noblewoman, and Felicitas, the slave, is essential to historical same-sex pairings.<sup>8</sup> It further enriches the bond between the women, for they are able, across social and economic differences, to come together in a deeply intimate union. Coupled with the depth of their commitment to their faith identity, this transgression of social norms is both familiar and provocative from the queer perspective.

Similarly, the narrative absence of traditionally functioning heteronormative relationships is key to a queer reading of this text. While Perpetua expresses great concern for her infant child, at no time is there mention of the child’s father. Whether Perpetua remains married or widowed is unknown. During the bleak periods of her imprisonment, it would have been natural for her to mention this man, as when she writes, “A few days later we were lodged in the prison; and I was terrified, as I had never before been in such a dark hole.”<sup>9</sup> Here, in this moment of great fear and distress, it is notable that Perpetua neither longs for her husband, laments his loss, or even curses his absence. In fact, “one might certainly have expected a tender scene with her husband, possibly even his commanding her under wifely

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<sup>7</sup> Musurillo, *Acts*, 123.

<sup>8</sup> John Boswell, *Same-sex Unions in Premodern Europe*, (New York: Villard, 1994), 158.

<sup>9</sup> Musurillo, *Acts*, 109.

obedience to desist.”<sup>10</sup> Instead, relief comes not from a spouse, but in the form of two deacons, Terius and Pomponius, who orchestrate a move to a more comfortable section of the prison where Perpetua is visited by her mother and brother, but not the father who had so angrily departed from her earlier. (In fact, the narrative never positions both father and mother—the center of heteronormative familial understanding-- “on stage” at the same time.) Later, when Felicitas’ pregnancy will potentially separate her from her fellow prisoners, the group is “saddened; for they were afraid that they would have to leave behind so fine a companion.”<sup>11</sup> For the queer reader, these scenarios have resonance in two ways. First, they reflect the queer experience of choosing one’s own family, finding friends and supporters like Terius and Pomponius who can offer solace and protection when issues of identity prevent traditional familial support figures (fathers, spouses, etc.) from being willing or able to. Both amongst the martyrs and within the queer community, amidst adversity and oppression, familial type bonds are created and maintained in non-traditional configurations. Secondly, these scenarios invert depictions of the traditional family. The father is not seen as the steadying figure of strength and support here; instead, it is the mother alone who serves that purpose, while Perpetua’s brother requires comforting, rather than being presented as a typical figure of male strength. The narrative queering of Perpetua’s family further positions her as an outsider: widowed, or at least fiercely independent from a male spouse, Perpetua exists in a self-created family and friend network quite familiar to gay people. Familial roles are similarly fluid in Perpetua’s visions of her brother Dinocrates. Rather than the more likely figures of a mother and father being the ones who save their son’s soul, it is Perpetua whose faith and commitment to prayer releases her brother from spiritual torment. Likewise, when

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<sup>10</sup> Boswell, *Same-sex*, 140.

<sup>11</sup> Musurillo, *Acts*, 123.

Felicitas finally gives birth to her child, it is stated that her sister will bring her up as her own daughter, again suggesting a fluidity within familial relationships that defies traditional heteronormative constriction. Like Perpetua, there is no reference to Felicitas' husband, and Boswell argues that even had there been mention of either husband, "a young woman's marriage in second- or third-century Rome did not necessarily indicate anything about the direction of her affections."<sup>12</sup> While this is no doubt true, there is not enough textual evidence to suggest anything overtly romantic in the nature of either woman's affections toward each other, though the distinct absence of heteronormative relationships is enough to make this story provocative for queer readers.

Another facet of queerness, the defiance of gender expectations, is evident in the depiction of the emotional and spiritual lives of the characters themselves. For instance, dragons have long been a symbol of evil, an obstacle for a male hero to overcome to avoid an impending apocalypse. In Perpetua's initial vision, it is she as a female hero who steps upon the head of a crouching dragon in order to make her way upward to a heavenly reward, inverting the traditional gender roles of hero/monster mythology. Likewise, when Perpetua's father begs her to renounce her faith, he throws himself at her feet and "with tears in his eyes he no longer addressed me as his daughter but as a woman."<sup>13</sup> For a father at this time to prostrate himself before his daughter and acknowledge her independence and identity as a human being is quite startling and not in keeping with gender expectations. When judgment of death by wild beasts is at last delivered, Perpetua describes that "we returned to prison in

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<sup>12</sup> Boswell, *Same-sex*, 139.

<sup>13</sup> Musurillo, *Acts*, 112.

high spirits.”<sup>14</sup> This further highlights that while her father is anxious, frightened, and sorrowful, Perpetua’s courage never wavers, even in the face of a horrifying death. Yet, despite all these traits that are traditionally perceived as masculine, Perpetua remains thoroughly biologically female in the realistic portions of the narrative; when she is separated from her child, she notably says, “But as God willed, the baby had no further desire for the breast, nor did I suffer any inflammation.”<sup>15</sup> This direct reference to explicitly female biological concerns affirms that the narrative, whether actual diary or work of fiction, is concerned with affirming Perpetua’s femaleness, despite the many ways her experience and actions subvert gender norms. Conversely, in her spiritual life, Perpetua’s actual biological gender exhibits remarkable fluidity. In one startling vision, for instance, Perpetua says she is taken to the arena where “my clothes were stripped off, and suddenly I was a man.”<sup>16</sup> A trainer of gladiators announces there will be a fight between Perpetua and an Egyptian male. Intriguingly, the trainer refers to Perpetua as a woman, despite her having just acknowledged that she had transformed into a man. This is the most overt instance of gender fluidity seen in the narrative. Moreover, Perpetua is further positioned in the story as a traditionally male heroic figure when she is able to physically overpower the male gladiator. In response to her victory, the trainer tells Perpetua, “Peace be with you, my daughter,”<sup>17</sup> the use of “daughter” now evoking both Perpetua’s father and the God-like figure from her first vision. Perpetua then awakes from this dream with certainty that victory awaits her, further evidence of the strength of purpose and courage that is indicative of male heroes. At the end of the narrative,

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Musurillo, *Acts*, 119.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

Perpetua and Felicitas are both even “lauded. . .as the ‘most manly’ of ‘soldiers.’”<sup>18</sup> From a queer perspective, this fluidity around gender expression resonates deeply, as does the positioning of a woman in a heroic role normally reserved for men, which is indicative of both feminist and lesbian literature.

The execution of Perpetua and Felicitas provides the queer reader with a look at the deep bond between them, one that is deeply intimate in both spiritual and corporeal ways. The bodies of the martyrs are acknowledged when Perpetua chastises their captor, scolding him for not allowing the prisoners to have a reasonable amount of food. In response, “the officer became disturbed and grew red.”<sup>19</sup> Thus, the text acknowledges the importance of the body (indicated earlier by the mention of lactation) even as so much of the text deals with spiritual concerns. The morning of their execution is hailed as “the day of their victory,”<sup>20</sup> and Perpetua and Felicitas are described as having joyful demeanors, with no evidence of fear, further gesturing toward them as heroic figures. After her earlier concerns of not being included in the martyrdom because of her pregnancy, Felicitas finds particular reason to rejoice in being able to accompany her friends to their death. The two women are “stripped naked, placed in nets and thus brought out into the arena,” positioning them in their nakedness as figures who are intimately linked in an obvious bodily way but also in a spiritual connection, solidified by their deep, mutual commitment to their faith.<sup>21</sup> The crowd is surprisingly chastened by seeing the two naked women, and so they are immediately dressed in tunics, illustrating that the dignity of their bearing and the force of this female pairing is

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<sup>18</sup> Boswell, *Same-sex*, 141.

<sup>19</sup> Musurillo, *Acts*, 125.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

exceptional enough to momentarily sway even the brutality of this audience. After the women are separated and each is attacked by the animal, Perpetua rises up from where she has fallen, and, in an act demonstrative of the union between the women, approaches Felicitas and helps her rise. This moment of physical and spiritual solidarity has multiple effects. Perpetua experiences a form of amnesia as the two women stand together; she forgets the initial attack and has to be convinced it has happened at all by the “marks of the rough experience on her person and her dress.”<sup>22</sup> Upon seeing the dignified women standing in solidarity, the Roman crowd’s appetite for violence is unexpectedly appeased, as if by divine inspiration. Similarly, the queer perspective has found much inspiration in this pairing: from the unshakable bond between two people of the same sex, the nudity that is not sexual but indicative of both bodily and spiritual intimacy, and the power of this same-sex union to erase pain and inspire an end to violence. The female martyrs then share a final kiss of peace, a traditional early Christian greeting and thus suggestive of the spiritual connection between them. It is also a corporeal act, however, one indicative of physical intimacy, and thus a suggestive one from the queer perspective, inspiring “the imagination of subsequent centuries.”<sup>23</sup>

In the end, then, there is little, if any, textual evidence to suggest an overtly lesbian relationship between Perpetua and Felicitas, despite their legacy in the queer community as a same-sex couple. Yet, it is important to note that “Christians in many times and places forswore sexual relations altogether, even with their spouses;” this union of spirits was called, naturally, a spiritual marriage.<sup>24</sup> It is no wonder then that the two women in this narrative, linked by their deep spiritual commitment to each other and to God, have captured the

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<sup>22</sup> Musurillo, *Acts*, 129.

<sup>23</sup> Boswell, *Same-sex*, 139.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.



fascination of queer readers for centuries, symbolizing the power and depth of same-sex unions. Moreover, the fluidity of gender shown within the narrative and the highlighting of non-traditional familial structures all point to a queer perspective, whether or not intended by the author(s). Consequently, regarding Perpetua and Felicitas through a queer lens ultimately serves three purposes. First, it allows us to recognize that some of the early Christian martyrs and saints transcended gender norms in ways that are still controversial and powerfully provocative. Second, it expands the possibilities for understanding within a narrative the relationships and concerns that might, for purposes of safety, have been masked and hidden. And finally, it allows us to recognize that early Christian texts can have meaning--and often very different meaning--to queer readers than heterosexual ones. This meaning, while inspirational to queer readers, is by no means limited to them. For the non-queer reader, the queer perspective can yield new interpretive possibilities rife with the potential for exploration of perspectives of the Christian faith that transcend oppressive and narrow patriarchal concerns. These possibilities offer us nuanced, multi-faceted ways of understanding the past that also speak to new interpretive scope for Christianity today.

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