

Pity, *Pietas*, and Roman Forensic Oratory in the *Passion of Sts. Perpetua and Felicity*

The *Passion of Sts. Perpetua and Felicity* (henceforth the *Passio*), a Christian martyrdom narrative from the early third century, has attracted a great deal of scholarship in recent times, including from classicists (Bremmer and Formisano 2012). At the same time, the work of contextualizing this important document in its Roman setting is not yet complete. This paper seeks to contribute to this project by focusing on two related episodes from the *Passio*: the trial, at which Perpetua's father and the judicial magistrate press her to recant her Christian profession, and an earlier episode during which her father privately urges Perpetua to recant in anticipation of her trial. In both of these episodes Perpetua's father tries to avert his daughter's death by entreating Perpetua to pity her family members with the imperative *miserere*. As noted by David Konstan among others, the argument *ad misericordiam* was a staple of forensic oratory that was typically issued by the defendant in order to secure an acquittal from the judge (Konstan 2001, Walton, 1997). The plea often included a reference to those family members who would be adversely impacted by a verdict of condemnation. In the *Passio*, however, we observe a curious role reversal: a family member begs the Christian defendant to pity those family members who would be adversely impacted by her martyrdom. The upshot is that Perpetua's father ends up assuming the role of defendant. In support of this claim, we will show how he utilizes arguments typically employed by defendants in the Roman courtroom, by referencing the works of Cicero, Quintilian, Pseudo-Quintilian, and Seneca the Elder. We will also make the case that his pleas for pity ultimately boil down to a plea for *pietas*, the Roman virtue entailing loyalty to the family, the gods, and the state. At the same time, however, his pleas inadvertently place Perpetua into the role of judge, since she alone decides whether she will accede to his request. In her capacity as judge, Perpetua refuses her father's pleas, because she operates under a different

understanding of *pietas*, which entailed the subordination of the family to the will of God. What her refusal ultimately points to is a clash between pagans and Christians over the meaning of *pietas*, which is why the martyrs and their unbelieving family members never saw eye to eye.

This investigation of Roman piety and *pietas* shows how the early Christians inverted Roman concepts and categories in order to express their own ideals. By exploring how the Roman oratorical tradition informed the interaction between Perpetua and her non-Christian interlocutors, we come closer to understanding the *Passion of Sts. Perpetua and Felicity* within its peculiarly Roman context.

Bibliography

Bremmer, Jan and Marco Formisano, eds. *Perpetua's Passions: Multidisciplinary Approaches to the Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Konstan, David. *Pity Transformed*. London: Duckworth, 2001.

Walton, Douglas. *Appeal to Pity: Argumentum ad Misericordiam*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997.