

Christian Martyr as Homeric Hero: A Literary Allusion in Perpetua's *Passio*

In this paper I will argue that in the *Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis*, Saint Perpetua's autobiographical account of her own martyrdom in Carthage in 203 CE, the author uses a literary allusion to the *Iliad* to cast herself in the role of the Homeric hero Hector. In particular, the scene in which Perpetua's father supplicates her to recant for the sake of her relatives recalls scenes in the *Iliad* of Hector's family begging him to save himself by taking shelter within the walls of Troy. By constructing this parallel, Perpetua adds justification to her decision to sacrifice her own life, as well as highlighting the inevitability of her martyrdom as the fulfilment of her religious faith.

Although some scholars question whether Perpetua would have known Greek (Ameling 2012), others consider there to be good evidence that she did (Farina 2008: 22, Salisbury 2013: 41-49), making a deliberate allusion to the *Iliad* at least possible. In particular, Salisbury's argument that Perpetua's dream-combat with an Egyptian gladiator (10.6ff) is based on an episode from Heliodorus' Greek novel *Aethiopica* (Salisbury 2013: 110) serves as a precedent for Perpetua using Greek literary models in her work. Alternatively, Perpetua may have become familiar with the story of the *Iliad* through other sources, such as theater (cf. Augustine's *Confessions* 3.2 for theater in Carthage).

In the first part of the paper, I show how Perpetua's supplication by her father in the *Passio* contains a number of intertextual links with passages in *Iliad* 6 and 22 where Hector is supplicated by Priam, Hecuba, and Andromache. From the beginning, Perpetua is cast in a masculine role, with her father adopting a subservient position (Gold 2011). Like Priam, Perpetua's father begs his child to consider his fate if she will not consider her own, invoking his grey hairs (5.2) just as Priam famously does at *Il.* 22.74. Just as Hecuba holds out her bared breast to Hector (22.82-3), Perpetua's father supplicates his daughter by his hands, which he used to raise her up to adulthood (5.2). He also reminds Perpetua that he preferred

her to all her brothers (5.2), recalling Hector's status as Priam and Hecuba's favorite son (22.424-5, 24.746). Just as Hector's death will bring ruin to Troy, Perpetua's father insists that her death will bring ruin to her family (5.4). He also reminds her that her infant son will die without her milk (5.3), recalling Andromache's reproach to Hector in *Iliad* 6 that he has no pity on Astyanax (6.407-8).

In the second part of the paper, I show how Perpetua adopts a strategy similar to Hector's in responding to the pleas of her relatives: both characterize their deaths not as the outcomes of personal choice but as the inevitable fulfilment of their essential characters. Hector cannot retreat behind the walls of Troy because it would violate the code of the Homeric hero by which he has been taught to define himself (6.444-6, cf. Sarpedon at *Il.* 12.322-328). He cannot hang back from the battle because it would be against his nature. Perpetua also portrays her Christianity as an inherent and unchanging feature of her being. Just as it is not possible to call a pitcher anything other than a pitcher, she tells her father, so she is not able to call herself anything other than what she is: a Christian (3.2). By characterizing her faith in this way, Perpetua portrays her martyrdom not as a choice, but as a necessity. She is a Christian, therefore she must call herself a Christian, therefore she must die.

Hector is an ideal model for Perpetua to choose for herself because he, like her, is asked to weigh his desire for self-sacrifice against the harm it will cause the ones he loves. Since his choice to die was seen by posterity as noble and praiseworthy, it is an effective rhetorical strategy for Perpetua to adopt Hector as a pagan exemplum for her own behavior, appropriating the glory and the pathos of his story to serve her own autobiographical project. Through this Homeric allusion, Perpetua casts herself as a new kind of hero, one who wins not just eternal fame through her death, but the true immortality of Christian salvation.

Bibliography

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