

Familial Relationships in Early Christian Martyrdom Texts

As Perpetua, a martyr from Carthage in the early third century CE, stood up to her pagan father, he attempted to convince her to forsake the faith and "with tears he named [her], not daughter, but lady." Disownment and abandonment by family members occurs prominently in early martyrdom literature. Agathonike, Perpetua, and Felicity all abandoned their infant children in order to attain martyrdom, often exclaiming that their God would take care of their children. Along with relationships that involve mothers and children, martyrs such as Adrian and Natalia in Nicomedia, as well as Cecilia and Valerian in Rome, evidence spousal relations. Cecilia and Natalia, the wives, strongly supported their husbands in attaining martyrdom, often through means that were considered to be less than "feminine"—such as Natalia offering to hold down the limbs of Adrian so that his persecutors could sever his limbs.

Many scholars have attributed these actions of prominent Christian women to gender-bending—the reversal of traditional gender roles—a topic that scholars have written about extensively. Authors of these martyrdoms portray women as masculine by showing their own volition towards martyrdom, exhibiting strength in the arena, withstanding torture to the point of exhausting their torturers, and, in the case of Perpetua, even transforming into a man in a vision. The importance of gender-bending varies in the opinion of historians. In his article, Petersen claims that the use of gender transformation in martyrdoms proves that the Christian idea of gender is similar to the conception of gender in the ancient Greco-Roman world (Petersen-2011). Marjanen points out the use of gender transformation language to illustrate how gender-bending signifies a woman's endurance and success in martyrdom rather than symbolizing a female's spiritual progress (Marjanen-2009). Cobb's *Dying to be Men* argues that these martyrdoms were written to educate the Christians during times of persecution, as shown in

the martyrdoms of Polycarp, Pionius, Perpetua and Felicity, and Marian and James (Cobb-2008). However, while many scholars have written about gender-bending and its importance in martyrdom literature, extremely little has been written regarding early Christian familial relationships within a martyrdom context.

The purpose of this presentation is to compare and contrast families in the Roman world with those of the Christian world. Much of the emphasis will be on women, as Cobb states that "persuasion by and in reference to family poses the most significant risk for Christian women" (Cobb-2008). This risk stands in contrast to the exhortation to Polycarp, who was told to remember not his loved ones, but his age. Further research will illustrate what motivated these women, along with why these portrayals of women and their actions with their individual families, and how these are important aspects for both martyrdom literature and the early Christian world. Through analyzing martyrdom texts such as that of Perpetua and Felicity, Adrian and Natalia, and many more, we will be able to shed further light not only on the ancient world's view of families, but also how Christians viewed their familial relations in relation to achieving the eternal crown.

References

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