

## Reading Perpetua's *Passions* through the Lens of Immersion

The early Christian martyrs were considered to have both a human and divine nature, since, while still living on earth, they were already in heaven (Moss 2010, 141). Many scholars have studied the early martyrdom stories by adopting the following different approaches: historical (e.g. Delehay 1921), theological (e.g. Moss 2010), cultural and literary. The latter approach has been underdeveloped until the recent rise of interest in the rhetorical quality of Perpetua's *Passions* (Bremmer 2012). This paper builds upon this recent trend, and offers a new narratological analysis of Perpetua's *Passions*, arguing that this text, through its frequent shifts between the redactor's third-person narrative and Perpetua's first-person account, provides the reader with an experience of martyrdom in both its human and divine natures.

My methodology is indebted to Grethlein's phenomenological narratology, which sees ancient narrative as capable of immersing readers within their narrated story-worlds (Grethlein 2010). In addition, I rely upon Frank's notion of 'spatial form' (1991), which examines narrative devices such as anticipations, repetitions and descriptions. On Frank's reading, these spatial devices may jolt readers out of the temporal sequence of a narrative, and allow them to gain a simultaneous, rather than a chronological, view of the narrated events. While this control over time in the case of narratives focused on human subjects mirrors that of the narrator, in texts which are focused on divine experiences, such as Perpetua's *Passions*, spatial form may additionally provide readers with a glimpse of divine timelessness.

In part one of the paper, I will analyze Perpetua's first-person account of her martyrdom (Chapters 3-10) and argue that this narrative has a strong immersive quality, through which readers are invited to identify with Perpetua and experience the human dimension of her martyrdom. Throughout this section, I will use Allan's inventory of immersive categories (Allan 2018), namely Verisimilitude, Perspective, Emotional

Involvement, Transparency of the Text, and Principle of Minimal Departure. I will start from Chapter 3, where the account is focalized by Perpetua, and which describes her emotions at the time of her imprisonment, such as anxiety (*sollicita pro eo*, 3.8, ‘anxious for him’) and devastation (*tabescebam*, 3.8, ‘I was devastated’); Allan’s categories of Perspective and Emotional Involvement are here highlighted. Then I will move to Chapter 5, where Perpetua’s account of her second encounter with her father displays Emotional Involvement and Verisimilitude, the latter of which is achieved by mention of the father’s frequent bodily movements (*basians mihi manus et se ad pedes meos iactans*, 5.5, ‘he kissed my hands and threw himself at my feet’). In light of these and other brief passages, I will conclude that Perpetua’s narrative allows her readers to immerse themselves in the account of her human life.

In part two of the paper, I will switch to the redactor’s third-person account, starting from the narration of the day of martyrdom (Chapter 18). Unlike Perpetua’s narrative, this chapter is filled with spatial devices. A case in point is the initial phrase *illuxit dies uictoriae illorum* (‘the day of their victory dawned’, 18.1); this is a prolepsis of Perpetua’s glorification through martyrdom, which, by being placed at the beginning of this section of the narrative, strongly removes suspense from the following account. Immediately afterwards, the amphitheater is compared to heaven (18.1), and this simile breaks the illusion of reality that this text had previously upheld. Then, Perpetua is introduced in the text by means of a long description followed by another simile: *lucido uultu et placido incessu ut matrona Christi* (‘with a shining face and a steady gait, like the bride of Christ’, 16.2). This other ‘spatial’ device downplays the chronology of the narrative further, and its final comparison presents Perpetua’s passion as an imitation of Christ’s own martyrdom. Overall, Chapter 18 invites the reader to look at Perpetua’s life no longer in her human development, but both in her closeness to the divine world and in her nature as parallel to Christ’s life. This creates a different experience of martyrdom through narrative, since immersion is replaced by a

simultaneous grasp of Christ's and Perpetua's lives, which recalls the typological view of Christian history.

In the conclusion of the paper, I will suggest that this model of narrativization of martyrdom may apply to the entire genre of martyr-literature as a whole, as some parallel examples from the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* (e.g. 5.1-2) also suggest.

#### Bibliography

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