Tragedy and Martyrdom: Greek Drama and the Passion of Ss. Perpetua and Felicitas

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TRAGEDY AND MARTYRDOM:
GREEK DRAMA AND THE PASSION OF SS. PERPETUA AND FELICITAS

by
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SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

PROFESSOR TAZZARA
PROFESSOR WOLF

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Abstract

A religion of the late ancient Mediterranean, Christianity evolved at the cross-sections of the Hellenic and Hebrew legacies as it gradually gained followers across the Roman Empire. Between attracting converts and resisting prosecution from imperial authorities, the Jesus movement was compelled to juggle the pagan world with its monotheistic convictions. This paper contributes to the growing scholarship that identifies how Christianity competed with the Greco-Roman world and its enduring pagan culture. Namely, it identifies characteristic similarities between early Christian martyrdom narratives and Classical Greek tragedy. Examining one of the oldest Christian martyrdom hagiographies, the Passion of Ss. Perpetua and Felicitas (c. 203 CE) from Roman Carthage, my thesis demonstrates how the martyrdom account features allusions to the plays of Euripides, works that remained highly esteemed and popular in late antiquity. By including references to the treasured Classical works of Greco-Roman audiences, this early Christian text competed with Euripidean heroes in an era of gradual socio-religious transition.

Key Words: Perpetua, martyrdom, Euripides, Greek tragedy
Introduction

As a faith that emerged in the Roman Empire, Christianity developed within a cradle of paganism with which it found itself frequently at odds. Nonetheless, Greco-Roman culture became well-integrated within the fledgling faith, whether in terms of philosophy, worship practices, or literature. As shall be showcased, while some of the most radical leaders of early Christianity sought to depart from the idolatrous habits of the pagan world, many practitioners struggled to abandon the Greco-Roman tradition, which remained firmly ingrained in their cultural consciousness. Still others became increasingly creative in the progressive effort to garner pagan sympathy in an era of imperial suspicion, competing with Greco-Roman cultural discourses to demonstrate Christian superiority; in other words, “beat the Romans at their own game.”¹ One example of this cultural overlap includes tragic allusions in the martyrdom narrative of the Passion of Ss. Perpetua and Felicitas. I argue that the authors of this early text invoke parallels to two Classical tragedies, constructing the main protagonist, Perpetua, as a rival heroine. Repurposing moments from Hecuba and Iphigenia at Aulis, plays of the esteemed Euripides that are each about the noble suicides of mythic princesses, the Passion strove to present itself as a story by which pagan audiences themselves would be moved.

One of the oldest surviving martyrdom accounts of early Christianity, the Passion of Ss. Perpetua and Felicitas rightly remains one of the most well-studied hagiographies in academia. Though there are several different manuscript traditions that record the martyrdoms, this study will concentrate on the Latin Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis that has largely been accepted

as the earliest, and I will hereafter refer to the text as the *Passio*.

Detailing the imprisonment and deaths of five young catechumens in North Africa, the text impresses both by its content and literary nature, alleging to combine second-hand storytelling with autobiography. Framed by the omniscient words of an anonymous editor who introduces and concludes the forthcoming narrative, the *Passio* claims to include the first-hand accounts of two of the martyrs themselves, preserved as each had written it in their own hand during their incarceration. Exceptional for a work of late antiquity, one of these is credited to a woman. Following these testimonies, the editor completes the narrative in recounting the executions and offering some final praise of the martyrs. Despite the lack of specified dates and locations, the events of the *Passio* have been situated near Roman Carthage by narrative details and later traditions, being estimated to have taken place in the year 203 CE. The document’s expected composition follows shortly afterwards, being most likely completed by 209 at the latest.

Circulation of the martyrdoms (by oral if not textual means) must have quickly become widespread in the region for their earliest outside mention is made by Carthaginian theologian Tertullian around the years 210/211 in his work *De anima* (*On the Soul*). The martyrs themselves were a diverse group reflecting the varied popularity of Christianity at this time. Two are identified as slaves, Revocatus and Felicitas, while another pair are reasoned to be freedmen, Saturninus/Saturus and Secundulus. The last member, however, is given the most prominence in the narrative; named Vibia Perpetua, she is described as a newly married

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2 The several traditions of the Passion include a shorter Latin account known as the *Acta brevia sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis* that are preserved in two (2) versions. However, these are reckoned to have been compiled much later, likely during the fifth century. Additionally, there is a Greek text of the Passion that, following strenuous scholarly debate, has been dated shortly after the Latin *Passio*. L. Stephanie Cobb, ed., *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas in Late Antiquity*, trans. Andrew S. Jacobs and L. Stephanie Cobb (Oakland: University of California Press, 2021), 43-44, 67.


noblewoman of upstanding background, aged nearly twenty-two years old, and nursing an infant son at the time of arrest (Passio 2.1-2). It is she and Saturus who are cited to have written their own testimonies while incarcerated, with hers being the lengthier of the two and her personage being the most celebrated in the account. The editor ascribes the most biographical details to her and even states that it was at the “command or, indeed, the commission of the most saintly Perpetua” (Passio 16.1) that the martyrdoms were recorded and transmitted. Her authorship has long been scrutinized by scholars, not least because of her gender and the pressures of incarceration, but also due to several unanswered questions in the text. For the purposes of this thesis, it suffices to say that many scholars believe that Perpetua generated at least some of the Passio that has been preserved. In any case, the final impression of the literary Perpetua according to Classical inspiration is the subject of this study, and I will demonstrate how Perpetua could have been capable of invoking Euripides like her anonymous editor.

Regarding the general writing process, it is not beyond possibility that the Carthaginian martyrs received writing materials or, despite the editor’s claim that both Perpetua and Sarturus wrote their testimonies themselves, engaged with a scribe to dictate their experience. By the turn of the third century, prison writing held a rich legacy in early Christian literature from the epistles of Paul the Apostle to Ignatius of Antioch, perhaps inspiring the Carthaginian martyrs to similarly connect with their Christian community. In any case, Roman prisons were less closed off than by today’s standards, compelling inmates to rely on outside visitors for sustenance. These dynamics of the Roman prison are showcased in the Passio, for both Perpetua and the editor describe the

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7 Heffernan, The Passion, 83.
prison accommodations received by the martyrs, including visitations and improved care. Early on in her portion of the text, Perpetua attests that two deacons well-known to the group had bribed the soldiers to move them to “a better part of the prison to refresh [them]selves for a few hours,” (3.7). In addition, both she and the editor portray the compassion and gradual conversion of the jailkeeper Pudens. Where Perpetua describes that he permitted them many visitors, stating that he “began to show us great honor” when he reckoned “that we possessed some great power within us,” (9.1) the editor confirms that Pudens granted her numerous visitations and permitted the prisoners to dine with their outside company (16.4). This anonymous voice is also sure to add that it had been Perpetua who succinctly argued with the jailkeeper for more humane treatment, embarrassing Pudens for by that time he had become a Christian himself (16.4). This dynamic of the jailkeeper’s alleged conversion and care for the martyrs suggests that the exchange of writing materials is not unlikely.

What remains to be examined of the Passio is the narrative patchwork within it. As such an early martyrdom hagiography, the text was at the fore front of Christian martyrdom storytelling, greatly influencing how subsequent accounts were drafted. As a result, Herbert Musurillo has labelled it the “archetype of all later Acts of the Christian martyrs.”9 In North Africa, Perpetua’s testimony became the model for future autobiographical works of martyred saints.10 The text was also a watershed piece of literature when it came to the representation of female protagonists. By the early third century, female martyrs were not nearly as celebrated as their male counterparts despite the likelihood that women endured execution just as often.11 Though they were sometimes featured in group or “collective” martyrdom accounts (narratives in which multiple individuals

9 Musurillo, Acts, xxv.
11 Ibid, 13.
were celebrated as one unit), women martyrs remained minor characters in these stories that emphasized the male participants.\textsuperscript{12} Perpetua, however, in reportedly putting forth her own account and commanding attention in this text that makes her the title hero, was among the first women to take up greater space in this male-favored literary category.\textsuperscript{13} At the same time, her legacy was not above posthumous refashioning. The first to cast his lot in the male reception of Perpetua’s story is the \textit{Passio}’s editor, crafting theological interpretations that embellish the story’s significance, labelling her as a “bride of Christ” (\textit{matrona Christi}) or “God’s beloved” (\textit{Dei delicata}) to give the account greater weight (18.2). Keen to reframe this woman’s execution into a transcendent story of martyrdom, the editor endeavored to forge her testimony into a more engrossing work.

The literary ambition of the Passion remains clear from the anonymous editor’s advanced rhetorical skills and framing of the narrative. Scholars have routinely noted his stylistic flourishes, including assonance and alliteration, that demonstrate a “high rhetoric” and advanced education.\textsuperscript{14} The complexity of his Latin has also been highlighted in contrast to Perpetua’s simpler syntax. Where the martyr’s sentences are short, often beginning with a coordinating conjunction, and featuring colloquial speech, the editor’s sentences are longer and include multiple subordinating clauses.\textsuperscript{15} Evidently a member of the well-educated elite with greater rhetorical capacities than Perpetua, the editor affirms both his skill and ambition with an overarching argument about the \textit{Passio}’s significance. In the beginning section of the text, he claims that not only will witnesses of the martyrdoms “recall the glory of the Lord,” but those now learning of it will “have fellowship

\begin{footnotes}
\item[12] Ibid, 15-17.
\item[13] Ibid, 15.
\item[15] Heffernan, \textit{The Passion}, 82.
\end{footnotes}
with the holy martyrs and, through them, with the Lord Christ Jesus,” (1.6). From this introductory prologue, readers are immediately fronted with a heavily theological appraisal of the forthcoming accounts, namely, contentions of vicarious spiritual fortification. In other words, the editor asserts that members of the faithful will find connection with Christ and his emulators, the glorious martyrs, from reading this account. This introductory claim is reiterated in the conclusion, with the editor stating that any follower of Christ “should read for the consolation of the Church these new deeds of heroism which are no less significant than the tales of old,” (21.11). These theological bookends of the Passio compel readers to view the martyrdoms according to the editor’s interpretations, leading them to consider the martyrs as he elevates them. As Brent Shaw has noted, this “densely theoretical structure” necessarily brings the audience to “transcendent levels of meaning” that go beyond a mere recounting of events, investing in a more moving literary reception. From this careful narrative construction that demonstrates both the editor’s Classical education and commitment to captivating his audiences, an investigation into Classical intertextuality follows. Given the editor’s clear skill and literary ambitions, it remains to be evaluated to what extent he built upon or competed with pagan antecedents of heroism.

Scholarship has long recognized the impact of pagan culture on early Christianity since the early twentieth century, from Hellenic philosophy’s influence of logos Christianity to narrative comparisons of Greek romances and early hagiographies, aspects that will each be further examined in this thesis. In addition to identifying legacies of cross-confessional inspiration, scholars have also debated the extent by which to consider these connections as reflex/unselfconscious appropriation or deliberate subversion. For example, when it comes to studying the first two centuries of the Common Era, many have pointed out that “Jewish,” “Greek,”

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“Roman,” and “Christian” were “hardly distinct categories” that could easily be separated from each other, suggesting the flimsy utility of reception studies when these traditions remained so ingrained within one another.\(^\text{17}\) Indeed, when writing of the rich diversity of indigenous, Roman, and eastern influences in Perpetua’s Carthage, Barbara Gold agrees that the overlay of cultures “was so complete that it was difficult to define what tradition a man or woman or ritual or literary text arose from.”\(^\text{18}\) Consequently, many have articulated that for the purposes of even gaining popularity in the Roman Empire, Christianity had to converge with longstanding ways of thinking.\(^\text{19}\) In any case, these traditions would have remained difficult for any Christian to immediately abandon or forget. As Robert Markus has articulated, there was a “vast shared territory” between Christians and pagans, as they were far from separated from Roman ways of thinking and cultural practices, including the theatre.\(^\text{20}\) Thus, while scholarship has long acknowledged evident traces of the Greco-Roman heritage within the earliest Christian texts, many have remained careful of naming these nascent overlaps as steadfast competition with the pagan tradition when it was so thoroughly entrenched across the Mediterranean.

On the other hand, other scholars have more readily received Christianity as deliberate or hostile in its emulation of pagan culture, more often so when studying its later years, when it had grown substantially in followers and bureaucratic organization. Judith Perkins, in studying early martyr Acts and comparing them against the popular Greek romances of the time, writes that the Christian narratives strove not only to craft compelling stories but displace the “surrounding

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\(^\text{19}\) Riley, “Words and Deeds,” 433.

ideology of the early Roman Empire.”21 In their narratives that valorized the persecuted martyrs and apostles for the entertainment and edification of Christian audiences, early Christian writers were in pursuit of forging a “new system for understanding human existence” that was necessarily in opposition to the Roman world view.22 In other words, within Christianity’s emerging tales of sanctity and persecution, their narrative goals were not only concerned with plot and character development, but also the undermining of Greco-Roman hegemony. This, then, raises the question of the extent to which Christian subversion was a rejection of Greco-Roman values, for while scholarship has evidently recognized a Christian hostility to the pagan world, Christian supremacy was simultaneously drawn according to pagan standards. As previously shown, Christians inevitably occupied the same cultural spaces as pagans and remained all too familiar with their longstanding virtues and philosophies. What resulted was a competition of cultural discourse on Greco-Roman terms. As L. Stephanie Cobb has argued in her monograph Dying to Be Men, it was hardly true that Christians “completely rejected Roman culture and values,” but sought instead to “appropriate Roman constructions of power.”23 For Cobb, whose thesis holds that Christianity’s main competition was with Roman discourses of masculinity, martyrologies did not present Christianity “in wholly new terms,” but instead appropriated enduring “cultural indicators” of virtue and power to outdo the Romans as they would understand.24 According to this view, as much as Christians sought to outperform their pagan prosecutors and replace their cultural

22 Ibid.
24 Ibid, 125.
hegemony, their means of doing so was done according to shared values. Thus, this cultural competition was about subverting the Roman Empire on its own terms.

It is along this line of reasoning that much of the scholarship on the *Passio vis-à-vis* the pagan mainstream has been understood. Many scholars have read the narrative as subversive of the Greco-Roman tradition, most prominently for the narrative’s inappropriate gender performances of Perpetua and her father. While the martyr always displays a manly fortitude, her disquieted pagan father often pleads with her in overly emotional appeals that would not have been proper for a Roman man. Many have read this as a purposeful mockery of all pagan Romans, an insult made more offensive by the fact that the Christian foil is none other than a woman. The intentional subversiveness of the *Passio* has remained evident from the many competitions throughout the narrative; the reader encounters countless contests, or to use the ancient Greek theatre term for any debate between characters, ἄγων. From Perpetua’s disagreements with her father to her arguments with Roman guards, the *Passio* progresses from ἄγων to ἄγων. This inherent narrative combativeness more readily suggests a subversion of Greco-Roman culture. As Perkins has written, the literary Perpetua that resists traditional authorities and “fashions herself into an icon of the ‘unruly woman,’” builds a narrative upheaval that sought to turn “the social and political body of the Roman empire upside down.”25 Put differently, Perpetua’s struggle has become understood not only as a battle against her local Roman prosecutors, but a competition against Roman culture as a whole.

This longstanding scholarship about the competitiveness of *Passio* is where this thesis joins in with a contribution about intertextuality. While many have interpreted a hostility to the pagan

world in the narrative gender-swapping attributed to Perpetua and her father, nearly as many have identified hints of Greek and Roman heroines within the characterization of the martyr. Plenty agree that Perpetua’s gesture of covering her thighs after her tunic is torn in the arena is a direct mimicry of Euripides’ Polyxena in his *Hecuba*. Upon being stabbed by the Greeks as a sacrifice to Achilles’ ghost, the captive Trojan princess covers her body as she falls to the ground. In addition, Perpetua’s efforts to correct her hair amid her martyrdom have also been identified as being generally evocative of Greek drama, if not a deliberate “one-upping” of Polyxena, as Candida Moss has suggested. Finally, the moment when Perpetua stabs herself because the Roman guard before her is suddenly too shy to kill her remains reminiscent of the legendary noblewoman Lucretia, who in Roman tradition stabbed herself to death following her rape. I contend that there are additional parallels in the hagiography that not only conjure Euripides’ Polyxena but also his characterization of Iphigenia in his *Iphigenia at Aulis* (c. 407 BCE). Well-known figures of Greek mythology, both are young princesses that find themselves trapped as human sacrifices in their respective Trojan War storylines. In Euripides’ tragedies, both are extolled for transforming their death sentences into self-willed death; striding into their executions with pride, the princesses refuse to be helpless victims but heroines who choose to take on their fate. I argue that the *Passio* weaves in these narratives in more places than those noted so far in scholarship, including within Perpetua’s own testimony of her ordeal. From Perpetua’s description of her interactions with her pagan father to the editor’s recounting of her execution, the *Passio* evokes the characters of Polyxena and Iphigenia.

In terms of methodology and framework, this study builds on the enduring contributions of Judith Perkins’ *Suffering Self: Pain and Narrative Representation in the Early Christian Era*

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(1995). The monograph has already been introduced for its narrative comparison of Greek romances and Christian *Acta*. Perkins’ approach of comparing literary genres and contending a competition of culture within literary appropriations is the same focus of this project. For example, among Perkins’ observations of how early Christian hagiography took advantage of the narrative templates of Greek romances, she demonstrates how the endings of Christian *Acta* had an “anti-social bias” that inverted the typical conclusions of Greek romances. Where the romance novel would finalize with the couple achieving marriage, a plot point that affirmed their social roles, Christian hagiography placed the martyr’s death as the narrative “happy ending,” forging instead a “rejection of the surrounding social world.” In other words, Perkins contends a literary reversal between the structures of Greek romance and Christian hagiography that showcases a larger cultural competition between Christian and pagan. Such an analysis of how Christian literary genres sought to “eclipse” Greco-Roman ones through “far-reaching ideological rearrangements” is the same methodological framework of this study. However, rather than the category of romance, I have identified that the *Passio* has greater resonance with the canon of Greek tragedy.

**Part I: Perpetua and the Passion**

**Christian Beginnings: Roman Carthage**

First, a more thorough understanding of the emergence and spread of early Christianity remains critical to better place the *Passio* within its literary and religious heritage. For the first two centuries of the Common Era, many followers of Christ were yet to perceive of themselves as “Christians” in the way Perpetua that did in the early third century, instead viewing themselves as

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adherents of a diverging sect of Judaism. As a result, many scholars often employ the term “Jewish-Christian” or “Jesus movement” to describe the earliest stages of the developing religion. It remains useful to call the first generations of Christianity by these terms given the movement’s increasing diversity and lack of unification. From its humble roots in Judea to its various installations across the Roman Empire, the cult of Christ maintained only a handful of common beliefs and practices that made it an “identifiable phenomenon” among the many religious groups of the late ancient Mediterranean.\textsuperscript{30} This section will address the beginnings of the Jesus movement, including its spread to Carthage and the practices and beliefs that Perpetua would have likely been familiar with by the time of her martyrdom.

In the first two centuries of its spread, the Jesus movement remained diverse and rather unorganized as it strove to configure its key tenets and standards of community. It first mobilized across the Mediterranean with the evangelical missions of the apostles, not least of which included Paul of Tarsus, whose epistles attest to the rapid spread of Christian sentiment. From Asia Minor to Corinth, Rome, and Alexandria, small Christian groups took root mainly in the urban areas of the Roman Empire, where apostles and other itinerant ministers established church communities.\textsuperscript{31} During this time, these budding Christian networks took to gathering as what Keith Hopkins has called “house cult-groups,” or meeting in private homes for their liturgical and spiritual practices.\textsuperscript{32} Rather than build churches or synagogues, the growing movement took to relying on its members for assemblage and ritual as it gradually departed from Judaism and remained unrecognized as a


protected religion under Roman law. At the same time, there was hardly a sense of theological “orthodoxy” or standardized doctrine for the scattered religion. Instead, there was a general index of core claims, namely, the belief in Jesus Christ as a savior figure and the idea of resurrection.\(^{33}\) Otherwise, various strands of Christianity consistently held differing interpretations of these precepts and often argued about the philosophical details.

Similarly, the earliest Christian practices remained as diverse as these beliefs, though it becomes clear from the New Testament and the epistles of lead Christian thinkers that there emerged at least two key institutions that defined Christian ritual from the mid-first century onward: baptism and the eucharist.\(^{34}\) While it remains difficult to judge the way any given Christian community celebrated either practice, early writings emphasize the communal observance of these rituals that confirmed membership in the following of Christ. The New Testament well-documents the early importance of water-baptisms to signal not only conversion but fellowship within the extended Christian community.\(^{35}\) Where the Gospel of John describes baptism as a “rebirth,” (3:3) Paul defined it as “putting on Christ,” (Gal. 3:27) expressing how the rite was both a necessary initiation step and a public demonstration of faith in Jesus. Likewise, the eucharist, or imitation of the Lord’s Supper, retained an evidently esteemed role in that only the baptized were permitted to receive it.\(^{36}\) Catechumens, or those in the process of learning the faith before baptism, were kept only from this ritual when their Christian community met together to worship. The regularity of such meetings themselves is another practice that retained diversity across the Mediterranean. While some communities struggled to gather at even a weekly standard

\(^{33}\) Norris, “Articulating Identity,” 80.
\(^{34}\) Ibid, 81.
\(^{35}\) Ibid.
to read Scripture and other Christian writings, some leaders such as the Carthaginian clergyman Tertullian promoted daily morning meetings.\textsuperscript{37} Evidently, within the first two centuries or so of its spread, the Jesus movement remained a collection of loosely related belief systems and practices that agreed to only a handful of characteristic tenets.

This diversity can be attributed not only to the fact that the religion remained in its infancy and was still in the process of deciding its principles, but also to the fact that Christianity lacked greater systematic leadership until the second century. Among the earliest testaments to when the Jesus movement began its transition to improved organization is the Didache, also known as The Teachings of the Apostles. A treatise dated roughly the start of the second century, the Didache features several chapters on both ritual and service roles within the church. While four chapters address baptism, fasting, and the eucharist, another five discuss ministry, including instructions for receiving itinerant preachers and identifying false prophets (Did. 11-13).\textsuperscript{38} In addition, the text establishes bishops and deacons as permanent local ministers (Did. 15.1)\textsuperscript{39} The epistles of Ignatius of Antioch, a Christian patriarch who was martyred in Rome near mid first century, further affirms the increasing dependence on the bishopric as the key authority in any Christian community. According to Ignatius’ vision of church unity, the bishopric would be the center of church membership and activities, including facilitating liturgical services, supervising (if not teaching) catechesis, and presiding over baptisms.\textsuperscript{40} This leadership model became prominent early in the second century and was standard by 200 CE in locations as far as Alexandria.\textsuperscript{41} An appreciation

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{38} Behr, “Social and Historical Setting,” 66.
\item \textsuperscript{39} Ibid, 67.
\item \textsuperscript{40} Norris, “Articulating Identity,” 83.
\item \textsuperscript{41} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
of this diversity and developing church organization is important for understanding the continuously evolving Christian tradition that Perpetua inherited.

Given that the Carthaginian martyrs were merely one branch of an increasingly changing religious cult spread across the Mediterranean, it is important to identify the specific traditions of their Christian community and the surrounding culture that they belonged to in North Africa. By the early third century, Carthage was thoroughly a culturally mixed place by virtue of its Roman colonization and status as a trade crossroads in the Mediterranean. First conquered by Rome in 146 BCE, it was not until the first century CE that Carthage was politically incorporated into the empire. Early in the reign of Augustus, Rome’s African properties were consolidated into the one large province of Africa Proconsularis, with Carthage as its administrative center and home of the provincial governor. A long and gradual process of Romanization ensued as the indigenous Libyan and Punic cultures of North Africa continued to blend with the increasing presence of Roman, Greek, and eastern influences. By the time of Perpetua’s martyrdom in 203, anyone living in Carthage likely occupied a “hybridized identity” that struggled to segregate the traditions of one culture from another.  

For example, while speaking Latin and wearing Roman clothes, any inhabitant of Carthage worshipped hybrid deities that combined characteristics of indigenous and Roman gods. At the same time, Carthage was a critical trade port connected not only to Rome but also the leading centers of the east, including Ephesus, Alexandria, and Antioch, serving as one of the most important maritime routes in the Mediterranean. As a result, Carthage remained a diverse mixing pot of cultures when it witnessed the Christian martyrs of the early third century.

42 Gold, Perpetua, 67.
43 Ibid, 67.
This extensive diversity raises the following question of Christianity’s arrival in North Africa and its consequent history and belief system. There remains no clear answer as to how and when the Jesus movement first evangelized *Africa Proconsularis*, nor from where. With no traditions attributing the founding of North African Christianity to the apostolic period, it remains a mystery as to whether Christian sympathy first arrived from the church of Rome or any of those established in the east. Given its prominent position in late antique maritime trade, scholars remain confident that Carthage was the location where Christianity made its debut in Roman Africa.\(^{45}\) For this same reason of the city’s booming economic ties to both east and west, it is suspected that word of the Gospel likely arrived from both regions at roughly the same time.\(^{46}\) François Decret also finds the Jewish Diaspora worth noting as a likely contributor to the dissemination of Christian sentiment. In the Roman period, many Jews (mainly of Palestinian origin) migrated to Africa such that by the end of the second century, there were considerable Jewish settlements in the coastal cities of the Roman province, not least of which included Carthage.\(^{47}\) Jewish Christians could certainly have been party to these migrations west and may have introduced the emerging cult to Africa.\(^{48}\) In any case, there is archaeological evidence that Christianity reached Carthage by the mid-second century. Beneath the city of Hadrumetum, 150 kilometers south of Carthage, there are five kilometers worth of catacombs, or underground caves containing about fifteen thousand graves dating from 150 CE to the fourth century. Many of the catacombs feature images and inscriptions that strongly identify with the Christian movement, including depictions of doves, fish, or the Good shepherd.\(^{49}\) By the mid-second century, Christianity had arrived in Carthage,

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\(^{45}\) Ibid, 12.  
\(^{46}\) Ibid.  
\(^{47}\) Ibid, 13-14.  
\(^{48}\) Ibid, 14.  
\(^{49}\) Ibid, 11.
spread about the region, and witnessed the growth of a church community that began to bury its members with Christian motifs laid about them.

Literary evidence also attests to the presence and traditions of early Christianity in North Africa in the second half of the second century. The earliest documented evidence of Christians and their prosecution in Roman Africa is the record of the twelve martyrs of Scilli. Although the location of “Scilli” is unknown, the text remains useful for identifying the only other known time that there was a prosecution of Christians in the province before Perpetua, as well as providing details that hint to their practices and beliefs. Dated to about 180 CE, the *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs* is a summary of the court trial of twelve Christians, including their reported testimony. Although the short account lacks the spectacle and narrative complexity of the *Passio*, the statements attributed to the martyrs reveal a strong identification with the Pauline tradition. The martyr Speratus, the most prominent member of the group, announces to the tribunal that he has “books and letters of a just man Paul” (*libri et epistulae Pauli uiri justi*) (Ac. Scilli. 12). The unapologetic mention of Paul attests to his important status in the churches of Roman Africa in that the Scillitan martyrs considered themselves adherents of the Pauline scriptural tradition. The homage paid to Paul reveals a small window to the Christian literary heritage of the North African churches. By the time of the Carthaginian martyrdoms some twenty years later, this scriptural reading practice likely remained, and perhaps the memory of the Scillitan martyrs weighed just as heavily on the minds of Perpetua and her peers.

Within the bustling city of Carthage itself, Christianity found a host for its diverse communities and emergent African leaders. Just as it was the capital of *Africa Proconsularis*,

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Carthage swiftly became the province’s chief Christian center. From the third to the fifth centuries, Carthage was host to many synods convened to address church practices and membership conventions. At the same time, it was home to important Christian thinkers such as the apologist Tertullian and the bishop Cyprian. However, little is known about Christian organization before the leadership of the latter. When Tertullian was the most prominent clergyman in Carthage from the late first to the mid-second centuries, there was most likely a variety of Christian organizations in the city, each remaining independent though they shared a “common sense of belonging to the church.” These would have included the Christian network that Perpetua and her fellow martyrs belonged to. Both the accounts of Perpetua and Saturus mention leading figures in their church community, whether appearing in person at their prison or in a vision. First, Perpetua states that there were two deacons (diaconi) named Tertius and Pomponius who strove to provide for the prisoners, bribing the soldiers for accommodations (3.7). Sarturus adds that they also knew a bishop (episcopum) named Optatus, and a presbyter and teacher (presbyterum doctorem) named Aspasius, who appeared together in a vision of his (13.1). From these details emerges an image of what must have been a tightknit church community that had at least one bishop, a catechist, and two deacons who visited imprisoned confessors. Hence, Carthage was home to a strong Christian tradition maintained by a network of leaders at the time of Perpetua’s martyrdom. Now that the history of early Christianity’s spread and its installment in Carthage has been addressed, it remains to be examined how the Passio could be in competition with the pagan culture of the Roman Empire, specifically the heritage of the theatre.

Beyond these narrative parallels and the historical context of appropriation and competition, what else is to say the writers of the *Passio* had the faculties or motives to construe these allusions in the first place? As addressed in the introduction, the editor reveals plenty about his agenda to present a compelling narrative. Between the *Passio*’s introduction and conclusion that frame the martyrs’ testimonies, he reiterates the text’s capacity to furnish vicarious satisfaction for Christian readers. Further, his heavily theologized writing compels audiences to consider the martyrdoms as glorious events equal to those of antiquity. Yet, what is to say that Perpetua had in mind the same prerogative of religious persuasion and pursued this in her own written testimony? Though we can never know for sure her goals or completely understand her mindset, there is substantial information to glean from the *Passio* as to what could have compelled her to write like her hagiographer. More specifically, there are several details that shed light on the possibility that she was familiar with Euripides and could construct her account as a more literary work.

Primary among the reasons she could have been able to reference ancient tragedy is evidence that she was a well-educated member of the elite (though evidently not as well trained as the editor). Her family name, Vibius, is well recorded in Roman North Africa, being associated with the military since the mid-first century. In fact, her father likely held some high position in the municipal province, which would have given her family considerable influence in being a prominent Roman line. As a noblewoman, Perpetua had the resources and opportunities to cultivate her intellectual faculties and become well-read. Despite the persistent misogyny in the Empire, a good education for elite Roman women was not completely frowned upon, and sometimes valued in the role of motherhood. The first-century rhetorician Quintilian praised

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educated upper class mothers such as Cornelia of the Gracchi brothers, crediting her “highly cultivated style” (*Orator’s Education*, 1.1.6) for inspiring her sons’ own eloquence. Following this example, some Romans may have valued the ability for both parents to effectively raise their children with the empire’s values, an ambition which included an education for elite women. In addition, given that boys were more likely to have tutors, fathers likely became the most involved in the education of their daughters, a dynamic that features prominently in the relations between Perpetua and her father. In a striking exchange a few days before her hearing, he pled with her, “Daughter…have pity on my grey head- have pity on me your father, if I deserve to be called your father, if I have favored you above all your brothers, if I have raised you to reach this prime of your life. Do not abandon me to the reproach of men,” (5.2). In these words of desperation, Perpetua’s father hints at how she has been exceptionally cared for as a daughter, elevated above her male counterparts even in a society as patriarchal as Rome. This revealing petition, paired with the father’s many other attempts to preserve Perpetua’s life that demonstrate his deep love for her, suggest that she would have enjoyed a decent education in her father’s care. A Roman noblewoman with a doting father, Perpetua would have had an upbringing that may have excelled that of her female peers.

Additional clues remain about the nature of Perpetua’s upbringing, including the smallest of details that suggest she could have been acquainted with the Greek canon. The first exhibit of evidence is in yet another compelling exchange with her father, this one taking place at the very start of her account. Speaking with him while “still under arrest” but not yet incarcerated, Perpetua

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58 Ibid.
engages in a Socratic-like conversation with her father about her identity as a Christian (3.1). Questioning him if it would be possible to refer a nearby water vase “by any other name than what it is,” Perpetua leads her father into a discussion inspired by Plato’s *Cratylus* (c. 390 BCE), a discourse on the nature of language that inquires if labels are arbitrary or intrinsically related to their subjects (3.1-2). After her father responds “no,” agreeing that the pot cannot be called by anything but its name, Perpetua reasons with him, “Well, so too I cannot be called anything other than what I am, a Christian” (3.2). In this discussion modelled after Socratic dialogue, Perpetua demonstrates her wit and argumentative skills, evidently cultivated in a good Roman education. It also showcases that she and her father are both familiar with Greek literature, perhaps having indulged in such philosophical exchanges in the past. Her engagement with the *Cratylus* suggests that she may have also encountered other Greek works, including tragedy. A fragment of supporting evidence is Perpetua’s later mention of a deceased baby brother named Dinocrates, a Greek name. A common enough practice among Roman households, especially elite families, attributing Hellenic names to children denoted a particular appreciation of Greek culture. If Perpetua’s father named one of his sons Dinocrates, one can see how much more likely he would have been to introduce her to tragedy alongside Plato in his enthusiasm for Hellenic culture. Considering the father’s concession of treating Perpetua above her brothers and exceptionally caring for her, these allusions to Greek literature further suggest she would have been familiar with the still-popular canon of tragedy.

Yet, there remains the question of why Perpetua might have been compelled to compare herself to the heroines of Polyxena and Iphigenia. What could have inspired her to draft her account

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60 Ibid, 23.
as a more literary work? One possibility is her evident leadership within her Christian community. Sharing four different visions she had while incarcerated, Perpetua frequently reflects upon her spiritual gift of prophecy and hints at how it earned her esteem in the church community at Carthage. For example, in one conversation with her brother, who the editor reports was also a catechumen like Perpetua (2.2), he urged her, “Dear sister, you are greatly privileged; surely you might ask for a vision to discover whether you are to be condemned or freed,” (4.1). This reverence towards prophecy and the respect given to Perpetua, as a result, could suggest the prominence of Montanism, or the New Prophecy movement, in the Carthaginian Church. Emerging in the second century, Montanism was a Christian sect that valued such divination and was most popularized by the prophetesses Priscilla and Maximilla. By the time of Perpetua’s martyrdom, the allure of this “ecstatic female prophetic ministry” may have acquired a following in Carthage if Perpetua so proudly beheld this gift and was likewise esteemed by her fellow Christians. In any case, clairvoyance was evidently valued in the Carthaginian Christian community from the statements of the editor, who writes in his opening remarks that, just as visions and prophecy were valued in the ancient Hebrew tradition, “so too we hold in honor and acknowledge not only new prophecies but new visions as well,” (1.5). Given that the Carthaginian Church held these faculties in high esteem, it follows that Perpetua likely gathered significant respect and fulfilled charismatic leadership as a prophetess. As an educated noblewoman well-regarded by her fellow Christians for her spiritual gift, Perpetua held a stake in promoting the faith. Perhaps this leadership investment and her own confidence as a prophetess led her to defend her community in crafting the Passio.

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61 Ibid, 42.
62 Salisbury, Perpetua’s Passion, 66.
To fully appreciate this reception study, one must first understand the historical context that both enabled and compelled early Christianity to negotiate with pagan culture. At first glance, it seems intuitive to imagine that the two camps, monotheistic versus polytheistic, would find themselves unapologetically opposed to each other and tightlipped about common ground. Where the Roman Empire greatly prided itself in dutifully pleasing its extensive pantheon, the Hebrew-rooted Jesus movement was steadfast in worshipping its one God. Yet, as this section will highlight, there were many key figures of early Christianity who were heavily committed to rendering their belief system to the appeal of their pagan counterparts, creatively minimizing the differences between the new religion and its cultural milieu. The schema becomes much more understandable when considered against the history that preceded the mobilization of the Jesus movement. Early Christianity’s cultural synthesis was indebted to Hellenized Judaism, the provider of a rich heritage of converging a monotheistic faith with its pagan host culture.

Following Alexander the Great’s expansion into the Levant, the Hellenistic Period endured a watershed reckoning between Greek culture and Judaism. Apart from the second century Maccabean revolts that expressed resistance to Roman expansion, degrees of cultural reconciliation had been accomplished by several Jewish intellectuals. Figures such as the second-century BCE dramatist Ezekiel the Tragedian and first century philosopher Philo of Alexandria were active agents of synthesizing the Greco-Roman paideia, or educational canon, with their Jewish heritage, both electing to reimagine the patriarch of Moses. An example immediately relevant to this study, Ezekiel composed a biography of Moses in the form of a five-act Greek tragedy. In fact, the iambic trimeters of his Greek have been connected by some scholars to
Euripidean tragedy. Already in Hellenized Judaism, Greek drama was not above appropriation by Abrahamic believers, including the meter of Euripides. Ezekiel recast the judicial forefather in a format popular to the Greeks, making Israelite history available for pagan consumption through a medium used for their own heroes. In a different example, Philo’s *On the Life of Moses* emphasized the ancient leader’s similarities to the philosopher kings of Plato’s *Republic*, daring to appraise this founder of Jewish custom according to a leading Hellenic thinker. Philo’s work is the earliest systematic synthesis of Greek philosophy and an Abrahamic religion. Both authors gave Moses a cultural redress that would be recognizable and respectable to their pagan counterparts, sewing their Jewish heritage within the folds of their adopted Hellenized identity. Driven to reconcile their dual cultural subscriptions of Judaism and Hellenism, these intellectuals passed on a critical legacy of how to live creatively at the cross-sections of two different cultures.

The Jesus movement first turned to this strategy of reconciliation when it decidedly became an evangelical religion. As many Levantine Jews persisted to hold skepticism that Jesus was the prophesied Messiah, the first century leaders of the Jesus movement were desperate to preserve their following with other believers. In response, missionaries such as Paul the Apostle and the Gospel writer John eagerly transitioned the movement towards Gentile populations. This decision shaped the course of Christianity’s reconciliation with Greco-Roman culture now that it prioritized its appeal to non-Jews. For example, in the many epistles he composed during his missionary work across the Mediterranean (c. 51-66 CE), Paul minimized many aspects of Mosaic law, including circumcision and dietary restrictions. Further, the words of Galatians 3:28 radically proclaimed that in Christ there was “neither Jew nor Greek,” ushering in a demographic mixing with Gentiles.

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as the Jesus movement turned its attention to attracting pagan sympathizers. The Gospel according to John was no different in appealing to Hellenism, appropriating the paideia by explicitly identifying Jesus as the *logos*, a dense conceptualization of universal rationality in Greek philosophy. For Plato, who agreed with pre-Socratic philosophers that the world (*kosmos*) was organized according to a rational structure, the *logos* described all the “rational activity” that emanated across the universe, though it was not the source of the world’s intelligible organization.\(^{64}\) On the other hand, the Stoics did hold that the logos was the “active principle” that acted on the world and created its orderly structure, being an omnipresent source of all rational activity.\(^{65}\) The Gospel of John expressly connects this fixture of Greek philosophy to the incarnation of Jesus, stating, “In the beginning was the Word (*logos*), and the Word was with God, and the Word was God,” (John 1:1). In relating an enduring hallmark of ancient Greek cosmology to the Abrahamic God and his human incarnation, the Johannine appropriation of *logos* was no small intellectual fusion with the pagan academy. Following in the footsteps of Hellenized Judaism, Jesus’ first followers likewise reckoned with their Greco-Roman milieu in appropriating a key tenet of Greek thought.

The Acts of the Apostles likewise applied this approach of synthesis with Greek philosophy. This strategy of minimizing the distance between Hellenic knowledge and Christian theology soon became the model approach for appealing to pagans and was reliant upon the tool of allegory. Repurposed from the Socratic ideal that there exists a single truth, such that all mythic traditions are reflections of a single higher reality, allegory became the key device to relate


\(^{65}\) Ibid.
Hellenic thought to Christian belief and compel pagan sympathy. In the segment where Paul’s mission to Athens is recounted, his speech at the Areopagus emphasizes that the Greeks were yet to grasp knowledge of the one true deity. Upon pointing out an Athenian altar addressed “to an unknown god,” Paul takes the liberty to inform the Greek crowd that that which they have yet to identify is the Lord, adding that although God “has overlooked the times of human ignorance, He now commands all people everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:22-31). As a result, in the same breath that he emphasizes the universal character of Christian salvation, proclaiming that all peoples are now called before God, his apocalyptic message to the Athenians indulges their approximate understanding of truth. Insisting that they have almost discovered the real God in their own tradition, Paul invites pagan audiences to complete this gap in their belief and convert to the fellowship of Christ. Thus, Christianity’s campaign to negotiate with Greek culture became an immediate priority among Jesus’ first disciples.

However, the purposes of this cultural blending did not remain limited to the maintenance of a following. Social isolation and prejudice soon became a lead compulsion to forge the religion’s compatibility with its pagan milieu. As the missionary work of Paul and the apostles successfully established numerous church communities about the Greco-Roman world, the growing cult of Christ quickly became an object of hostility and endured its first prosecution at the hands of the emperor Nero. The mystery of their private gatherings as well as their refusal to offer the ritual sacrifices promptly spawned rampant speculation and fear about this impious secret society, constituting what Eric Robertson Dodds termed an “age of anxiety” for the Roman Empire. Given that religious devotion to the pantheon was an utmost priority for the Romans, believing the

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67 Ibid.
proper *pietas* ensured the state’s prosperity with the gods’ appeasement, the rejection of this civic duty disturbed the very fabric of the religious society and endangered the Empire’s preservation.\(^{68}\) As a result, the emergence of this unfamiliar monotheistic sect was often met with despite and disapproval. In the words of magistrate Pliny the Younger writing to Emperor Trajan, Christianity was a “degenerate sort of cult carried to extravagant lengths” (*Letters*, 10.96.8) and an ubiquitous “infection,” overwhelming towns, villages, and countryside alike (*Letters*, 10.96.9-10).\(^{69}\) Additionally, their “stubbornness and unshakeable obstinacy” (*Letters*, 10.96.4) to cling to their faith despite capital punishment was even more distasteful.\(^{70}\) The unreasonable denial of allegiance to the Empire in favor of an uncertain superstition remained offensive to the Romans. Often in the sentencing process, officials were wont to charge Christians with various terms for madness, such as *insania* or *mania*, and urged inmates to find clarity of thought (become *sobrius*).\(^{71}\) In other words, Christians were looked down upon for escaping comprehensible behavior and renouncing the pantheon, directly threatening Rome’s future as crazed and irreverent troublemakers.

Yet the imperial authorities were not the only party active in this persecution, the Roman masses likewise indulged in ostracizing the social outliers. Popular disgust with the Christians was mainly rooted in misconceptions about their beliefs and practices; ignorance led to scandalous rumors of crime and degeneracy. For instance, whispers of “brothers and sisters (in Christ)” who exchanged kisses transformed into shocking allegations of incest; such kisses were, in fact, greetings during routine worship gatherings.\(^{72}\) Similarly, the Eucharist, or the ritual consumption

\(^{70}\) Ibid.  
\(^{72}\) Salisbury, *Perpetua’s Passion*, 78.
of the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ in the form of bread and wine, was promptly the spawn of cannibalism claims. To these salacious rumors were born even more accusations that sullied the Christian reputation, from reports of orgies to the notion that they relished in world destruction (yet another misunderstanding that pertained to the Jesus movement’s eschatological messages).

During the reign of Nero, Christians had swiftly become, per the witness of historian and senator Tacitus, a “class hated for their abominations” and attributed a “hatred against mankind,” (Annals, 15.44). Taken all together, the allegations and vehement distrust of this unfamiliar group frequently led to violent outbursts. If a community knew the location of local Christian worship, the building could expect to be swarmed and its participants assaulted. These occurrences led to Christianity’s identification with disturbing the peace, another disadvantage to their increasingly negative reception.

In desperate hopes to combat this violent trend, the cult of Christ had to further indulge their Greco-Roman surroundings and serve a more attractive image of itself, negotiating again with the pagan mainstream for its members and traditions to survive. Immediately responding to these widespread challenges, early Christian literature transitioned into a new approach known as the apology movement. In works addressed explicitly to Greco-Roman audiences, the apologists from the second century onward were authors committed to defending Christianity and improving its presentation, clarifying its tenets and articulating its virtue. For example, Justin Martyr (c.

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73 Ibid.
74 Ibid.
76 Salisbury, Perpetua’s Passion, 78.
77 Ibid.
78 Dodds, Pagan and Christian, 105.
100-165), the earliest of this genre, wrote his First Apology addressed to the Emperor. In an evident retort to the violence and prejudice endured by Christians, he urged, “We [Christians], more than all other men, are truly your helpers and allies in fostering peace,” pointing to the Christian fear of Judgement Day and earning one’s due (either “eternal punishment or salvation”) according to their conduct on earth (12). Justin proved eager to defend the good citizenship of his fellow Christians and correct the popular judgment that they sought public disruption. Another argument within his Apology was a direct revival of Hellenized Judaism and New Testament writing, that of joining Christianity with Greco-Roman thought. He likened Christian theology to Hellenic philosophy, writing, “When we say that God created and arranged all things in this world, we seem to repeat the teaching of Plato; when we announce a final conflagration [of the world], we utter the doctrine of the Stoics,” (20). This renewed application of allegory aimed to demonstrate that the Greco-Roman Mediterranean need not retain its pagan loyalties; Christians were observers of stipulated truths only made clearer in their Abrahamic faith.

The allegorical approach was again utilized by the Alexandrian-based apologists Clement (c. 150-215) and Origen (c. 185-253). However, these two not only further reflected the apology movement’s agenda to reduce prejudice, but also showcased a new insecurity that the religion’s lead intellectuals would continue to struggle with for several generations, namely, elitism. Christianity had always held the greatest appeal towards the less privileged. With maxims such as, “The last will be first, and the first will be last,” (Matt. 20:16) and “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God,” (Luke 6:20) the literary Jesus was a champion of society’s underdogs. Well into the third century, the lower ranks of society, including the poor and the

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enslaved, continued to dominate congregation numbers. However, with pagan charges that Christianity relied on its appeal to the lowest classes, the few Christians who were wealthy and educated took offense at the association with a déclassé movement.\textsuperscript{81} The reaction was to emphasize Christianity’s correspondence with the *paideia*. Clement, for instance, eager to have Christianity compel elites and intellectuals, mandated that the religion reckon with Hellenic philosophy and science; he issued that simpler Christians should not “fear philosophy as children fear a scarecrow,” (Strom. 6.80).\textsuperscript{82} Similarly, Origen labeled Christianity a Platonic curriculum for the masses; when writing of the preparation of philosophy for audiences, he claimed that Christian orators “cook for the multitude” where Plato reserved himself for the upper crust (c. Celsus. 6.1-2).\textsuperscript{83} Here, Origen’s concession of Christianity’s appeal for the lower classes strove to become a source of pride. Thus, the works of these two apologists began to nuance the religion’s longstanding interest in appealing to pagan culture, aiming to assuage insecurities about its demographic composition.

At the same time, Christianity’s reconciliation with the pagan tradition can be attributed to an impetus even simpler than these socio-political strategies of alluring converts, dissuading persecution, or upgrading the movement’s class appeal. It was for the comfort of an easier cultural transition. As Averil Cameron notes, “translating from one cultural system into another is not a straight-forward process,” prompting a spectrum of responses from “outright conflict to near-total accommodation.”\textsuperscript{84} Christianity’s endeavor to convert the pagan Mediterranean to its unique belief system was no less complex; it dared to persuade an imperial society of many gods to accept its

\textsuperscript{81} Averil Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire: The Development of Christian Discourse* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), 33, 111.
\textsuperscript{83} Origen of Alexandria, *Against Celsus*, quoted in Dodds, *Pagan and Christian*, 120.
\textsuperscript{84} Cameron, *Christianity and Rhetoric*, 122.
monotheistic faith of humility and Hebrew roots. Truly, it was too tall a task to demand that pagans not only embrace Christianity but completely turn away from their Hellenic heritage and traditions. The Jesus movement had to negotiate with what its target audiences were familiar with, convincing them that they were not departing far from their pagan normal or joining too radical a religion. In fact, abandoning the pagan tradition remained a difficult task even for those Christian authors who were unapologetically hostile towards Greco-Roman civilization. The apologists of Tatian (c. 120-180) and Tertullian (c. 155-220), the latter being known for his famous retort, “What hath Athens to do with Jerusalem?”, were such writers. Despite their convictions to resist the idolatrous culture of the Romans, their years of classical training shone through in their various apologies; the literary tradition of the loathed pagans remained instinctive to them as they failed to escape Greco-Roman writing conventions and style. Ultimately, the Classical legacy was so well-woven within Mediterranean society that to do without it was an unrealistic goal for Christianity.

From the generations of Hellenized Jews before Christ to the Christian apology movement, the message of Jesus was repeatedly designed for its pagan surroundings. Reliant on allegory, first century New Testament writers and second century apologists each strove to bring Christianity closer to Greco-Roman intellectual culture. Even apologists who forsook this campaign of synthesis nonetheless participated, engaging the Classical literary tradition by reflex. The cultural synthesis further diversified in the department of martyrdom. When it came to forging compelling heroes for this misjudged religion, the narrative construction of Christian martyrs became yet another avenue to appeal to pagan audiences and substitute pagan culture.

85 Hudson, Crucified Man, 198.
86 Ibid.
Part II: Drama and Death

Tragedy and Martyrdom

The prosecution of Christianity persisted sporadically across the Empire until the year 313, when the first Christian emperor Constantine legally recognized it as a legitimate religious group. Until then, the budding Church remained an object of suspicion to the Empire. The most notable of the persecutions was during the early fourth century, when Emperor Diocletian began the Great Persecution that is traditionally held as the “last and most brutal assault on Christians” by the Empire.87 Beginning in 303, imperial edict mandated the destruction of churches, burning of Scriptures, removal of Christians from government office, and the loss of civil rights for Christians.88 Amid this era of unreliable stability as a religious group, Christianity engaged more creative means than the largely philosophical negotiations of the apology movement to placate its pagan opponents. Christian writers capitalized on the field of storytelling for a means of cultural persuasion, skillfully transforming the era of prosecution into a cult of heroism. Early clergy and hagiographers recast Christianity’s criminal charges into commissions of intrepid piety, insisting that an imperial death sentence was not merely an earthly punishment, but a challenge to imitate Christ’s suffering and death (imitatio Christi), affirming one’s loyalty to the faith in resisting Roman idolatry. ‘Prosecution’ by Rome quickly became more swiftly understood as ‘persecution’ by the Devil, and those that suffered death became celebrated martyrs, honored for having proven themselves as dutiful followers of Christ. In this endeavor that repurposed the hostility of pagan culture into a source of pride and heroism, the task to compose inspiring stories became yet another

88 Ibid.
avenue for early Christianity to integrate and compete with the Classical tradition. Christian narrative-writing learned from the successes of the pagan canon to construct its own library, imitating popular tropes and genres to captivate audiences. In the task of forging martyrs as champions of the Jesus movement, tragedy would prove the most fitting genre that Christian writers could draw from.

Early in the history of Christian literature, narrative storytelling swiftly became a critical arm for the promotion of the faith. Where the apology movement had delved more into philosophical argument to allure pagan sympathy, early hagiographers were committed to creating compelling role models and storylines that rivalled the Hellenic literary tradition. Truly, the campaign sought to not only meet the merits of pagan fiction but completely replace the canon. In what Frances Young terms a “cultural take-over bid,” Christianity’s mobilization across the Roman Empire became a “battle of the literatures” in which the Abrahamic religion strove to outshine and replace the Greco-Roman classics; the faith’s evangelical mission held in its sights the substitution of pagan literature, entirely. In constructing its own “symbolic universe” of heroes and irresistible tales, Christianity aimed to eclipse the works of the polytheistic Mediterranean. At the same time, this storytelling branch was ambitious to nourish the spiritual needs of its congregations since good stories facilitated and affirmed belief. According to Averil Cameron, “the better these stories were constructed, the better they functioned as structure-maintaining narratives and the more their audiences were disposed to accept them as true.”

90 Ibid, 57.
91 Ibid, 69.
92 Cameron, *Christianity and Rhetoric*, 92.
93 Ibid, 92-93.
differently, compelling narratives matured religious convictions in supplementing belief with engaging storylines touting the faith. This commitment to create the most effective literature bred another pathway for Christianity’s longstanding appropriation of Greco-Roman culture; while they strove to replace the pagan canon, hagiographers were not above taking advantage of its popular genres and narrative techniques, emulating the kinds of stories audiences were eager to consume.94

Apocryphal Acta of the apostles and other saints, some as early as the second century, were the first of this storytelling campaign, and they actively took cues from the Greek romance novel.95 Many early hagiographies have long been noted for both plot and thematic similarities to the Greek romances of the era, demonstrating how early Christian writers took inspiration from the apt storytelling formulas of their pagan counterparts.96 A prime example is the legend of St. Thekla, an alleged missionary companion of St. Paul whose affection for him bordered on romantic love and infatuation.97 Between an eager longing to spend time with the Apostle to clandestine rendezvous with him, Thekla’s relationship with Paul in her second-century Acta resembled a romance novel. A later iteration of her story, the fifth-century Life and Miracles of Thekla, is argued to contain more concrete parallels to Achilles Tatius’ romance, Adventures of Leukippe and Clitophon.98 Promptly within Christianity’s endeavor to eclipse the Greco-Roman fiction department, its early hagiographies participated in the ongoing appropriation game already exemplified in the apology movement. Eager to write good narratives and excel the pagan tradition, these writers made templates of the incumbent storytelling techniques. However, the

94 Ibid., 92.
95 Perkins, Suffering Self.
96 Ibid.
98 Ibid.
romance genre was likely a poor choice for the challenge of martyrdom narration. Stories of persecution concentrated on suffering and “the more wretched aspects of human existence” than the optimism of romance. Of the Greco-Roman canon, tragedy was a category prime for adaptation.

Originally an Athenian tradition that reached its “classic flowering” in the fifth century BCE, Greek tragedy served its audiences the most traumatizing and disturbing storylines. A genre that tackled violence head-on, tragic plays often featured murder, incest, death, and other unsettling plots that emphasized trauma and moral conflict. In fact, Aristotle’s fourth-century BCE Poetics stressed that a story was not tragic if no suffering was involved (1453b), further stating that it had to be the imitation of some “serious” action “possessing magnitude,” (1449b). In other words, Aristotle identified tragedy as necessarily heavy content that dealt with the more painful side of the human experience. Immediately, one may recognize how this morbid category could match the inherently intense nature of martyrdom hagiography. Additionally, Aristotle memorably attributed tragedy with the “katharsis” of fear and pity, an ambiguous claim that has since been understood to mean either the purgation or purification of those emotions. For Aristotle, this cultural consumption of staged suffering influenced audiences in a positive way by compelling a healthy emotional cleansing. Several centuries later, Christianity’s storytelling traditions of martyrdom mirrored these qualities identified by Aristotle, from their gruesome content to their expected impact on audiences.

102 Ibid, 45-46.
Succinctly labelled “the drama of persecution” by L. Stephanie Cobb, martyrdom hagiography aptly fit Aristotelian tragedy in terms of its transmission and narrative goals. As average Christians endured the anxiety of skirting imperial prosecution, the gloried tales of martyrdom were not only meant to inspire and support belief but effectively bring these audiences into the fold of the violence, just like a tragic play. Indeed, the primary means that martyrdom stories circulated among Christian communities was as an oral tradition. Spoken with passion and rhetorical flourish by clergy or other church leaders, these stories were so vividly recounted in homilies or saint celebrations that they essentially had the effect of a theatrical production. Attendees were not only expected to respond to the spoken narratives visibly and audibly by crying, beating their chest, or applauding, they were expected to fully imagine themselves in the place of the martyrs. This invested narrative transmission recalls tragic theatre and its attributed purpose of evoking pity and fear. This is further reflected in how these martyrdoms were expected to serve congregations. Given that most Christians gave in to pagan sacrifice and avoided displeasing local authorities, many later felt guilt for failing to meet the example of the martyrs. Instead, learning about these stories facilitated a sort of vicarious satisfaction in which, by indulging in the detailed accounts of the more ambitious virtuoso Christians, these civic-obedient counterparts indirectly enjoyed the triumph of their religious heroes, relishing in the eternal rewards promised to the martyrs as onlookers. Similar to classical tragedy, this pattern of reception involved a deep emotional investment in the stories presented; the very plots were carefully constructed to maximize the emotional response. Thus, in composing gripping tales for the

104 Ibid.
105 Ibid, 6-9.
106 Ibid, 33.
faithful, the developing Christian tradition could not only turn to romance as a resource, but more reasonably, tragedy.

By the turn of the early third century CE, the genre remained alive and well in Greco-Roman culture via multiple mediums, including theatrical performance, textual reception, and visual art. Immediately within its heyday of the fifth century BCE, tragedy had spread about the Greek world from its creative origins at Athens to the corners of Sicily and Asia Minor, firmly installing tragic theatre across the Mediterranean by the time of Latin conquest.107 Archaeological evidence of theatrical buildings and related findings dated to the Hellenistic era have been uncovered as far east as Afghanistan and Armenia.108 The impressive spread of Greek drama is due largely to the spread of Dionysiac festivals (Dionysia), other tragic competitions, and of professional acting guilds.109 Throughout the Greek world, the expanding popularity of celebrations of Dionysus, the god of wine and theatre whose early worship rituals are often credited with the emergence of Greek drama, simultaneously spread theatrical competitions for both actors and poets. Further, different tragic competitions in celebration of other gods also became popular, whether they were conducted independently or paired with Dionysia.110 Last, the third century BCE witnessed the establishment of acting guilds that were both professional and religious in nature. Created in response to the increasing occurrence of tragic contests and festivals that required acting talent, these guilds were known as the Artists of Dionysus and performed across Magna Graecia, or the greater Greek world that included Sicily.111 As a result, by the time that the

107 Taplin, Pots & Plays, 6-8.
110 Ibid.
111 Ibid, 158, 165.
Romans became the most prominent power in the Mediterranean, tragedy was a widespread phenomenon from east to west, and would soon be incorporated into their own cultural index.

Inherited and maintained by the Romans, tragedy persisted across the Mediterranean in a new Latin tradition. After they had conquered all of Italy (by the third century BCE), absorbed all of Greece, defeated their longtime enemy of Carthage, and dominated the entire Hellenistic East, the Romans eventually crafted their own “distinctively ‘Roman’” theatrical tradition that was a combination of the practices in their newly subjected territories.\textsuperscript{112} While it was formerly believed that the works of Roman tragedians were largely translations of Greek originals, it is now appreciated that Roman plays were meaningful adaptations of the Greek canon if not completely new compositions; Roman poets adjusted Greek plays to be more relatable and intelligible to Roman audiences by adding elements that resonated more with their culture.\textsuperscript{113} In the realm of literary criticism, the Romans viewed themselves as pursuing “emulation,” (\textit{aemulatio}) rather than imitation (\textit{imitatio}), or improving upon an original work as opposed to merely copying it without nuance.\textsuperscript{114} Among the leading generation of Roman dramatists who would have their plays performed for the remainder of the Roman period were Ennius, Pacuvius, and Accius. Their works comprised a canon of Roman classics that continued to steal the spotlight when new compositions increasingly declined into the first century CE.\textsuperscript{115} In turn, Euripides’ preservation within this Roman tradition becomes an ensuing inquiry. In fact, two of the “classic” Roman tragedians, Naevius and Ennius, wrote plays about the fates of Iphigenia and Polyxena that were modelled on

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\item[\textsuperscript{113}] Mario Erasmo, \textit{Roman Tragedy: Theatre to Theatricality} (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2021), 2.
\item[\textsuperscript{114}] Ibid.
\item[\textsuperscript{115}] Griffith, “‘Telling the Tale’”, 31.
\end{itemize}
those of Euripides. The former wrote on *Iphigenia* while the latter wrote both an *Iphigenia in Aulis* and *Hecuba*, with all three taking inspiration from the Athenian tragedian.\footnote{Erasmo, *Roman Tragedy*, 141-142.} Thus, the Roman theatrical tradition kept Euripides’ characterizations of these princesses alive. Carthage itself was an entertainment center of a variety of Roman spectacles, featuring the amphitheater where Perpetua and her peers were martyred. Estimated to have seated nearly 30,000 attendees, the oval theatre was highly popular as a host of mimes, comic actors, circus performers, and of course, tragic actors.\footnote{Hoyos, *Carthage*, 95-97.} Thus, by the time of Perpetua’s martyrdom, theatre and tragedy remained an important aspect of cultural and civic life in the Roman Empire.\footnote{Pat Easterling and Richard Miles, “Dramatic Identities: Tragedy in Late Antiquity,” in *Constructing Identities in Late Antiquity*, ed. Richard Miles (New York: Routledge, 1999), 65.}

Beyond its original form as a performance, tragedy also endured in literature. It was during the Hellenistic Period that Greek drama became increasingly committed to text for a greater literary reception, becoming integrated into the *paideia* that endured in Roman times.\footnote{Miles, “Greek Drama.”} Among the tragedies that became popular school texts lasting into the Byzantine period was Euripides’ *Hecuba*, inspiring many late antique and medieval works about the Trojan queen’s sufferings and the sacrifice of Polyxena.\footnote{Eric Digdale, “Hecuba,” in *Brill’s Companion to the Reception of Euripides* 3, ed. Rosanna Lauriola and Kyriakos Demetriou (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 106, 110-111.} Among these works included Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* of the early first century. The Roman poet’s characterization of Polyxena is a thorough imitation of Euripides’. For example, where Euripides’ Polyxena bears her chest to her executor and insists, “Let no one touch my person, for I shall offer you my neck bravely! In the god’s name, leave me free when you kill me, so that I may die a free woman!” (*Hec.* 549-50), Ovid’s Polyxena performs the same motions.

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\footnote{116 Erasmo, *Roman Tragedy*, 141-142.}
\footnote{117 Hoyos, *Carthage*, 95-97.}
\footnote{118 Pat Easterling and Richard Miles, “Dramatic Identities: Tragedy in Late Antiquity,” in *Constructing Identities in Late Antiquity*, ed. Richard Miles (New York: Routledge, 1999), 65.}
\footnote{119 Miles, “Greek Drama.”}
\end{flushleft}
and proclaims the same sentiments.\footnote{Euripides, Children of Heracles. Hippolytus. Andromache. Hecuba, ed. and trans. David Kovacs, Loeb Classical Library 484 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).} Bearing her breasts, she both declares her refusal to live a conquered fate, “Polyxena, be sure has no desire to live in slavery!” (\textit{Met.} 13:460) and her eagerness to remain untouched, “stand back, if my request is just, and let no rude hand of man touch my virgin body,” (\textit{Met.} 13:466-67).\footnote{Ovid, \textit{Metamorphoses, Volume II: Books 9-15}, trans. Frank Justus Miller, rev. G. P. Goold, Loeb Classical Library 43 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1916).} In addition to Polyxena’s indignant countenance and testaments about her bodily and noble integrity, Ovid echoes Euripides’ moment of gestural modesty. Where the Greek play describes that, after being stabbed, the princess “took great care to fall in seemly fashion to the ground, concealing from male eyes what should be concealed,” (\textit{Hec.} 568-70) Ovid similarly writes that, “as she was falling, she took care to cover her body and to guard the honor of her modesty,” (\textit{Met.} 13.479-80). Thus, Euripides’ characterization of a bold Polyxena remained preserved not only in the theatre and Greek texts, but also in Latin adaptations that included those of the prominent poet Ovid.

Finally, the Classical tragedian’s work persisted in various mediums of visual art. After all, identified as the most tragic poet in Aristotle’s \textit{Poetics}, Euripides remained one of the most esteemed Classical writers into late antiquity (1453a). A “noble” poet par excellence, his tragic content dominated the visual culture of the Mediterranean for centuries, from domestic floor and wall art in elite homes to common vases and other pottery.\footnote{Eric Csapo, \textit{Actors and Icons of the Ancient Theatre} (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).} Immediately within the Classical and Hellenistic eras, Euripides rose to prominence as the leading tragic inspiration for pottery art. As Oliver Taplin has noted, “compared with Aeschylus and Sophocles, Euripides made a far greater impact on mythological pictures,” identifying the poet’s greater popularity among audiences for his swift emergence as “the outstanding tragedian in the eyes of fourth century Greeks,” (original
emphasis). This prized status continued well into Roman times. From the Late Republic to Imperial periods, theatrical themes in domestic art remained circumscribed about the Classical genres of tragedy, comedy, and sartyrplay, even when the contemporary forms of mime and pantomime continued to grow in prominence in Roman territories. During this time, the vast majority of Classical plays illustrated in domestic art were written by either Euripides or the comic poet Menander, each the most revered authors of their respective canons. Indeed, Eric Csapo argues that during the late first and second centuries CE, the Roman elite grew increasingly obsessed with showcasing domestic art informed by these Classic authors, attributing a “double snob-appeal” to tragedy and comedy as “standards of taste and a cultural attainment high above the common level.” In other words, the elite Roman reception of Greek tragedy prized it above many other dramatic or artistic forms, especially Euripides, whose works were most widely perpetuated in the mosaics and pottery of elite homes. Hence, tragic art and storylines remained celebrated in Greco-Roman culture, surviving by many means as a renowned canon that featured Euripides on a pedestal.

Promptly within Christian history, the developing Church challenged this vibrant part of pagan society in its ongoing competition with the Greco-Roman tradition. Hostility towards the theatre by figures like Tertullian displayed a concern about the allure of pagan drama, and early Christianity’s prerogative to outdo the cultural attraction. Providing an outspoken denunciation of the theatre in De Spectaculis (c. 197-202), Tertullian demonstrated the religion’s desperate competition with the entertainment form in writing to congregations, “If the literary

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125 Csapo, Actors and Icons, 149.
126 Ibid, 150.
127 Ibid, 153.
accomplishments of the stage delight you, we have sufficient literature of our own, enough verses and maxims, also enough songs and melodies; and ours are not fables, but truths, not artful devices but plain realities.”

By the eve of Perpetua’s martyrdom, the theatre was well on the radar of early Christian leadership as a rival of popular attention. Other Christian authorities likewise responded in ambitiously likening Scripture and Christian belief to classical drama, namely, tragedy. Clement of Alexandria, for instance, issued an allegorical approach to rereading Euripides’ *Bacchae* as a revelation of Christianity. Addressing the character Pentheus in his *Exhortation to the Greeks* (c. 195), Clement proclaimed that he would reveal “the Word (*logos*), and the Word’s mysteries, describing them according to thine own semblance of them,” (12.91).

This included a mountain not roamed by the tragic Maenads, but “the daughters of God, the beautiful lambs, who declare the solemn rites of the Word,” (12.92). In this early treatise, Clement refashions Dionysiac imagery to fit Christian terms, relating the ancient genre to his superior belief system. Similarly, later preachers such as Ambrose of Milan (c. 338-397), John Chrysostom (c. 347-407), and Peter Chrysologus (c. 400-450) persisted in this appropriation of Greek drama by frequently comparing Scripture to tragedy. All three often associated biblical stories to the tragic canon in homilies that iterated how Christian literature matched the merits of these esteemed dramas.

Swiftly, there emerged a rich heritage of Christian leaders and orators who endeavored to raise Christianity to the level of tragedy, perpetuating the legacy of competing with Greco-Roman culture in this branch that addressed the theatre.

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From shared narrative qualities to tragic-themed homilies, Christianity duly sparred with the lasting allure of classical drama and tragedy. At a time when the Jesus movement was eager to produce its own canon of engrossing tales and inspiring heroes, vying to outdo the pagan tradition, tragedy presented itself as a viable candidate for adaptation. Between characteristic similarities such as grim storylines and the evocation of pity and fear, tragedy and martyrdom were two categories ideal to be paired together in the age of persecution. While martyrdom hagiography dabbled in the romance genre, the morbidity and suffering of Aristotle’s favorite art proves more fitting. Already appropriated by Christian writers and preachers to draw in audiences and assure the religion’s superiority over the theatre, tragedy was a tradition prime to be integrated within the developing movement in terms of narrative storytelling.

Echoes of Euripides

As discussed in the Introduction, many scholars have already identified at least one reference to Euripides in the Passio. In this section, I will present other parallels in the hagiography that conjure the images of Polyxena and Iphigenia. These parallels not only occur within the tactful embellishments of the male editor, but also the testimony provided by Perpetua herself. Although her work has been seen as “not striving to be literary” and more informal like a conversation, such that “the heroines in Greek tragedy have moments of comparable intensity, but the intimate and unselfconscious quality of Perpetua’s utterance stands alone,” I contend her words are nonetheless suggestive of Euripidean storylines. From Perpetua’s account of her interactions with family to

the editor's gloried depiction of the martyrdom, both writers evoke the plots and character
dynamics in the *Hecuba* and *Iphigenia at Aulis*.

In her own words, Perpetua’s interactions with her distressed pagan father and her infant
son compare to the familial ties held by the Euripidean princesses. From the desperate petitions of
her aged father to Perpetua’s tenderness towards her baby, the traumatized relations of the martyr
are reminiscent of the similarly strained final moments attributed to Iphigenia and Polyxena. First,
I will address the case of the father. The most prominent feature of her testimony, Perpetua’s
passionate disputes with her father take center stage as she repeatedly defends her Christian
convictions against his pleas that she comply with Roman sacrifices. Four times he appeals to her
in prison, repeatedly imploring her to take pity on him and their other family members, especially
her child. Repeatedly, he desperately begs her to surrender her pride and sacrifice for the emperors,
insisting that she think of her family’s reputation if not her baby’s survival (5.1-3). What is most
striking about the father’s characterization and his supplications is how far he strays from his
expected Roman gender performance. Abandoning the stoicism of a proper Roman *pater familias*,
Perpetua’s father significantly diminishes his authority and masculinity with dramatic displays of
emotion before his daughter.\(^{132}\) Between angrily losing his composure to the point that Perpetua
felt he might “pluck [her] eyes out,” (3.3) to desperately kissing her hands and “throwing himself
before [her],” (5.5) the father departs from the firm authority of a Roman man and becomes
womanly. His deeply inappropriate behavior even earns him a public beating at the command of
the offended procurator Hilarianus (6.5), an appalling humiliation for a nobleman.\(^{133}\) Truly, the

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\(^{133}\) Ibid.
extreme passion of Perpetua’s father recalls the tragic mother figures of Clytemnestra and Hecuba, the grieving parents of their sacrificed daughters Iphigenia and Polyxena.

Where Perpetua’s father is dramatically emasculated in her account, sans poise and positing himself as her subordinate, the mothers in Hecuba and Iphigenia at Aulis behave themselves the same way. Driven mad with grief and anxiety for the wellbeing of their children, the parents in these narratives eagerly resist the death sentences of their daughters and render themselves helpless to emotion. They are only ever placated by their calm-minded heroines who march bravely to their deaths, assuming the authority and composure lacked by their mothers. For instance, in the same episode that Perpetua’s father drops before her feet in the hopes of persuading her to renounce Christianity, she writes of the substantial pity she felt for him and the relaxed advice she offered her father, “It will all happen in the prisoner’s dock as God wills; for you may be sure that we are not left to ourselves but are all in his power,” (5.6). This conversation recalls the manner of Iphigenia when she says that she, too, should not resist the will of the gods, as her sacrifice is claimed to be an appeasement of Artemis. Attempting to soothe her anxious mother Clytemnestra, the young girl retorts that if she has been claimed by the goddess, it is not her place as a mere mortal to deny the deity (1395-6). The unbridled worries of the concerned parent are countered with the tranquility of the daughter. Perpetua’s father’s heart-wrenching petitions are likewise comparable to Hecuba’s. Struggling to accept Polyxena’s fate, she, too, throws herself to the ground and bemoans that her life is over, just as the father moved himself before his daughter (Hec. 486-7). These scenes mirror the mother-daughter relations in these Euripidean plays. However, this dynamic of reversed sensibility is not just expressed in the daughters’ provision of

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comforting words towards extreme emotion, but also their authoritative speech that affirms their mastery over their parents.

In all three texts, both Perpetua and her tragic rivals engage a disordering of authority and status as they approach their death sentences. In the *Hecuba*, Polyxena strives to protect her mother from abuse if she attempts to fight the impending sacrifice. Urging the elderly queen to comply with their new Greek masters after the fall of Troy, Polyxena compels obedience with the statement, “Mother, be ruled by me,” insisting her mother not compromise her dignity in risking being shoved aside or thrown to the ground (402-411). Perpetua reflects a similar association with her aged father. While she relishes in defeating his “diabolical arguments” (3.3) against her faith early in the *Passio*, indulging in an intellectual supremacy, she does not neglect concern for his health. When he is beaten by soldiers for belittling himself as her supplicant, she evokes Polyxena’s worries in writing that she “felt sorry for father, just as if I myself had been beaten. I felt sorry for his pathetic old age,” (6.5). Her deep empathy for her assaulted father, matched with her supremacy that he himself forges for her in public, further evokes the sentiments between Polyxena and Hecuba. Additionally, Iphigenia engages in an analogous discourse of authority with her mother. When arguing for the queen to not mourn her death, nor resent her father Agamemnon for arranging the sacrifice, Iphigenia echoes Polyxena when she halts Clytemnestra’s sorrowful protests, “Do not make me a coward: rather, do as I say,” (*IA*, 1435). She then goes on to comfort her mother with the assertion she will enjoy fame as the champion of her homeland, insisting, “I enjoy good fortune and am Hellas’ benefactor,” (1446). All three daughters assume authority following the despair of their mother figures, positing themselves as sources of stability and calm for their overwhelmed parents; Perpetua’s father is made a matching figure to the despairing characters of Hecuba and Clytemnestra.
Beyond this strenuous attachment with her father, Perpetua’s complex maternal loyalties also provide an avenue for tragic allusion; although she leaves behind her baby in pursuit of martyrdom, Perpetua does concede deep affection for the infant in moments that recall Iphigenia’s final hour with her baby brother, Orestes. In the first few days of her incarceration, Perpetua explains that the most excruciating part of the experience was her separation from her son, citing that above all else, she was “tortured with worry for my baby,” (3.6). When she finally received permission to keep the infant in her company, she gleefully relayed how she rapidly recovered in health because of her relief (3.9). These mother-child exchanges evoke the affections that Iphigenia gives her brother when reflecting on her death sentence. The young princess relishes in her last moments with the baby boy, first calling upon him to petition their father against her sacrifice (1241-5), and later embracing him with “dearest brother” (1452) in her last scene. This outpouring of love towards an infant in the hours before execution is a narrative template shared between Iphigenia at Aulis and the Passion; each female protagonist holds a baby family member close as they prepare themselves for their impending death, emphasizing a maternal exchange for both heroines. Indeed, matching with the observation that Iphigenia asserts herself over her mother Clytemnestra, so she evokes a motherly nature in her death-bed affections towards her brother when she instructs the queen to raise him to manhood, assuming a parent-like authority in this faux exchange of duties (1450). Thus, the Passion’s moments of tenderness between mother and infant echo the final affections between Iphigenia and Orestes as both women arrive closer to their deaths.

At the same time, the Passion’s narrative role of the infant further conjures Iphigenia at Aulis in how both Orestes and Perpetua’s son are used as pawns in supplication, each time to prevent the heroine’s execution. For example, though Iphigenia eventually comes to terms with her death sentence as a destiny for eternal glory, early in the play, she first resists it the best she
can. Among her strategies to dissuade her father Agamemnon from committing the sacrifice, she brings herself and her infant brother before him in eager petition, urging, “See, father, he supplicates you by his silence. So have a care for me and take pity on my life,” (1243-46). Begging her father with his young son at her side, Iphigenia resorts to a desperate appeal to his paternal sympathies to cancel her sacrifice to Artemis. Perpetua’s father performs a similar entreaty to his daughter on the day that she had her public hearing. Having somehow acquired his grandson from the prison, Perpetua’s father arrived with the baby to petition her at the arraignment; when Perpetua’s opportunity came to renounce her faith before the governor, she relates how “my father appeared with my son, dragged me from the step, and said: ‘Perform the sacrifice- have pity on your baby!’” (6.2) Like Euripides’ Iphigenia, the father in the Passio eagerly calls upon parental instinct and attachment to avoid an execution. Bringing the child to Perpetua at her chance of exoneration, he launches a last-minute appeal with the infant boy in an emotional scene reminiscent of how Orestes is used in Iphigenia at Aulis, begging for pity. Together with Perpetua’s tenderness towards the infant, this supplication tactic constitutes an additional narrative parallel to Euripides.

Beyond these character dynamics and plot points that Perpetua’s own testimony shares with these ancient tragedies, the editor’s contributions to the Passio likewise indulge in tragic allusions. As previously mentioned, scholars have acknowledged one moment in Perpetua’s final hour that imitates how Polyxena conducted herself during her execution. Sentenced to face the beasts in a public amphitheater, Perpetua and Felicitas are paired with a violent heifer that tosses about the former and tramples the latter. Upon sitting up from being launched onto her back by the cow, Perpetua pulls down her torn tunic that had since exposed her thighs, having been ripped along the side. As highlighted by the editor, she covered herself, “thinking more of her modesty
than of her pain,” (20.4). However, more than a simple commendation of Perpetua’s chaste decorum, this gesture underscored by the editor resembles the similarly prudent behavior of Polyxena during her execution, a moment addressed previously within Ovid. Struck down by the sword of a young soldier, the brazen princess sought to preserve her integrity even as “her life was ebbing out,” taking care to fall “in seemly fashion to the ground, concealing from male eyes what should be concealed,” (568-70). Euripides attributes to the princess a commitment to modesty that persists even in her last breath, a performance alluded to in Perpetua’s own action of tugging down her torn tunic. The two are sure to properly cover themselves even in their most dire moments, maintaining a respectability in these gestural parallels conducted in times of such utter vulnerability.

Additional echoes of Euripides emanate in how Perpetua takes pride in her martyrdom and is ascribed an outspoken agency in her suffering. For instance, immediately following the above moment of modesty that addressed her tattered garments, the editor describes how Perpetua then took note of her similarly disheveled hair. Compelled to correct her appearance for the sake of her victory, the narrative posits that she requested a pin to “fasten her untidy hair: for it was not right that a martyr should die with her hair in disorder, lest she might seem to be mourning in her hour of triumph,” (20.5). Perpetua is attributed a mindfulness for the proper celebratory dress for her martyrdom, including the prerogative to maintain her hair. The significance placed on women’s hair is attested by the second century North African writer Apuleius in his novel, *Metamorphoses*, better known as *The Golden Ass*. According to the Roman author, no matter how well a woman has adorned herself with fine clothes and jewelry, “unless she has embellished her hair she cannot
be called well-dressed,” (2.9). While the evident Roman expectations of women’s appearances may have pressed on Perpetua’s mind, and inevitably on her audiences, the gesture to care for her hair is also reminiscent of tragedy. Iphigenia, as she steeled herself to walk out to her sacrifice, energetically bid her chorus of young women to bring garlands for her hair (1477-79). The princess demonstrates the same priority of having a proper appearance at her execution. In addition, in a promise to her mother Clytemnestra that she will not cry at the ceremony, Iphigenia stipulates that tears “are not proper at a sacred rite,” (1490). Together with the shared commitment to appropriately garment one’s hair for the occasion of execution, Iphigenia’s attitude of being proper to the routines of holy services further aligns with the mindset of Perpetua to not appear saddened or unkempt in victory; both value their appearance for their monumental executions. Gathering their composure as well as their hair, Perpetua and Iphigenia each hold themselves to certain standards of appearance in their final hour.

Finally, all three heroines voice their independent agency in their mandated executions; responding to either forced sacrifice or imperial death sentence, all three surrender themselves on their own accord with an indignant bravery and righteousness. Princesses and martyr each assert how they bring themselves to die of their own volition, unafraid and prideful. Regarding the young royalty, both Polyxena and Iphigenia adamantly demand their bodies not be touched by anyone, fearlessly bearing their bodies for their sacrifice. The former, bitter and traumatized at her status as a prisoner of fallen Troy, addresses her Greek capturers with the following, “You Argives who have sacked my city, I die of my own accord! Let no one touch my person, for I shall offer you my neck bravely! In the god’s name, leave me free when you kill me, so that I may die a free

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woman!” (547-550) Motivated to maintain as much of her dignity and nobility as possible, Polyxena underscores this command to be untouched by baring her neck and breasts for a convenient strike, sinking to her knees and tearing her robe to expose her chest (558-561). This display of autonomy showcases the tragic heroine’s commitment to asserting as much of her own power over the sacrifice, denying her captors complete control in stipulating the weight of her own choice in facilitating the execution. Iphigenia pursues a similar course of action and dialogue, first announcing to Agamemnon and the onlooking army, “Father, I have come to you. I willingly grant that your men may bring me to the goddess’ altar and sacrifice me,” (1552-5) before concluding, “in view of this, let no Greek take hold of me. I will bravely submit my neck to the knife,” (1559-61). Thus, both Polyxena and Iphigenia prioritize asserting their own agency during their execution.

Perpetua’s martyrdom evokes this same prerogative of the tragic heroines. The first parallel occurs at the start of the martyrs’ public tortures, when they are all compelled by officials to dress like pagan clergy. Where the men were ordered to put on the robes of priests of Saturn, and the women the dress of priestesses of Ceres, Perpetua is described as having strongly spoken out against the ridicule. Boldly addressing the military tribunal, she issues, “We came to this of our own free will, that our freedom should not be violated. We agreed to pledge our lives provided that we do no such thing. You agreed with us to do this,” (18.5). Just as the tragic princesses earnestly defended their independence to their last breath, Perpetua articulated the volition of the martyrs in petitioning for greater respect in their final hour. Emphasizing the value of their freedom and the demand to recognize that they were participating of their own accord, Perpetua’s activism in martyrdom iterates the same virtues as the speeches of Polyxena and Iphigenia. Further, her dying moment is also constructed with an eye to preserving her agency. Struck on the bone when
the martyrs were finally lined up to be slain by the sword, Perpetua herself “took the trembling hand of the young gladiator and guided it to her throat. It was as though so great a woman…could not be dispatched unless she herself were willing,” (21.10). In this scene, too, the editor demonstrates the narrative importance of attributing autonomy to the martyr, constructing her as such a powerful figure that she herself determines the success of her execution. Perpetua outperforms Polyxena and Iphigenia in effectively killing herself while the others more passively awaited the sword. Agency in death proves itself another segue between Euripides’ heroines and this martyr.

From Perpetua’s own prison-cell testimony to the editor’s dramatic recounting of the Carthaginian martyrdoms, the Passion shares several narrative features with the tragedies of Euripides. In Perpetua’s own words, the family portrait she paints of her distraught pagan father and her infant son remind the reader of the family dynamics in Hecuba and Iphigenia at Aulis. Where the father behaves himself like the grieving mothers Hecuba and Clytemnestra, and the baby boy evokes the role of Orestes in Euripides’ latter play, the autobiographical segment of the hagiography seems to draw upon the character dynamics of these plays about female sacrifice. At the same time, the editor’s account of Perpetua’s martyrdom alludes to the conduct and sentiments of Polyxena and Iphigenia. All three voice the point that they are agents of their own suffering, claiming an autonomy that posits them as independent and heroic for dying on their own terms.

Conclusion

The early years of Christianity were rich and complex in cultural negotiations. Surrounded by the pagan tradition, the developing faith was forced to carefully fashion its tenets and beliefs to survive the longstanding paganism of the Mediterranean. Misunderstood and despised by both the
masses and the imperial authorities, Christianity endured centuries of prosecution as a mysterious religion that both challenged the prosperity of the Empire, and upset the fabric of Greco-Roman society. As a result, the faith quickly geared itself towards pagan appeal as early as the apostolic generation of Paul and the gospel writers. Urging that Christianity was not so disturbingly radical from the pagan tradition, many early authorities that included Justin Martyr, Clement, and Origen of Alexandria eagerly argued how Christian virtues and beliefs were not too different from, or irreconcilable, with pagan culture. From syntheses with Greek philosophy to the insistence that Christians were not the incestuous cannibals that many Romans believed them to be, these writers ushered in the apology movement that sought to improve Christianity’s image and reduce persecution. Yet, more than simply cast a more agreeable perception of the faith, early Christian authorities aimed to construct the religion as a superior alternative to Greco-Roman culture; the pagan tradition had to be understood as not merely similar to Christian belief, but inferior. These apologists urged that Christianity offered greater truth than any school of Hellenic thought or branch of pagan mythology. In other words, while the Greeks and Romans had been close to understanding the nature of the universe, their ideas did not compare to the revelation offered in Christ. Christianity continued to be advertised as a better choice in the religious market, simultaneously retaining the best parts of the pagan norm.

Promptly, this cultural competition and appropriation endured in other avenues beyond the more intellectual works of the apology movement. Storytelling quickly became the next step in outshining the pagan canon. Early hagiographers held on to their elite training (for these writers were mostly from the upper classes) and took note of the successful narrative techniques and formulae of Greco-Roman literature. The romance genre quickly became one source of inspiration. As a popular category of reading material, the Greek romance novel was repurposed as a template
for crafting compelling tales for any audience. Christianity was on a mission to conquer the audiences of pagan literature and posit its own world of heroes to win over the Mediterranean. Yet, in the face of gruesome and unforgiving persecution, romance was not the most fitting framework to adapt dying Christians into role models. Instead, Greek tragedy, in its consistent prestige, popularity in theatre and books, and somber content, was the category prime for the transformation of persecution into irresistible narrative. In fact, by the time that Christian clergy had successfully reimagined imperial execution as honorable martyrdom, other Christian authorities like Clement of Alexandria and John Chrysostom indulged in tragic themes or allusions in their writings and sermons. In other words, while persecuted Christians were understood as heroes in storylines that were doubtless tragic-like, Christian writers and speakers actively sparred the ancient canon. Often comparing Biblical stories to eminent tragedies, these leaders articulated how Christian tales were more impressive than those popularized at the theatre. When it came to martyrdom, the Church was both capable and inclined to consider tragedy as a source of inspiration.

As one of the earliest martyrdom hagiographies in Christian literature, the Passion of Ss. Perpetua and Felicitas was on the frontline of Christianity’s narrative struggle against the pagan tradition. It swiftly became a model for later martyrdom accounts and remained incredibly popular among Christian audiences for centuries. Building off past scholarship that has identified hints of Greco-Roman literary convention and heroism within the Passio, this paper illuminates additional parallels that invoke Euripides, namely, his characterizations of Iphigenia and Polyxena that are models prime for the adaptation of female martyrdom. Princesses sentenced to human sacrifice and unable to escape their fates, each transformed their mandated executions into self-willed death, enduring their suffering with grace and courage like a martyr. From the father who behaves himself like Hecuba and Clytemnestra, to Perpetua’s careful maintenance of her hair like Iphigenia, the
Passio includes many scenes that mirror these tragedies. The remaining inquiry is the feasibility that both the editor and Perpetua would invoke these characters. While it is evident that the former is an educated hagiographer masterfully fashioning the text’s events into a wondrous martyrdom, Perpetua’s faculties must be further investigated to appreciate her narrative work. Taking into consideration her class status, her father’s affections, details that denote a familiarity with the Hellenic canon, and her likelihood of being a lead prophetess in her local church community, fragments of her persona fall into place. In the deadly struggle between Christian and pagan, the elite prophetess Perpetua may well have waged her own battle against Roman hostility in these final words she offered to the world, painting herself in comparison to the tragic heroines she may have learned of as a girl.
Bibliography

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