Maternity and Mortality: A Matricentric Reading of the Prison Diary of Perpetua

Alexandra Lembke-Ross (alexlembke@gmail.com)
Lund University

Abstract:
Perpetua's prison diary records one of the very few female voices that can still speak to us from Antiquity. This article undertakes a matricentric literary reading of Perpetua's text in order to examine the interwoven strands of maternity and mortality that are threaded throughout her narrative. Drawing on contemporary motherhood studies and matricentric theory, the reading explores how Perpetua's writing reflects the maternal body as a liminal space between life and death. Against the backdrop of high infant and maternal mortality rates, it becomes clear that Perpetua's martyrdom is rooted in her maternal suffering. Ultimately, in finding that Perpetua became a martyr through, rather than despite, her maternal body, the paper explores how the text subverts the dichotomy between the virgin martyr and the married mother. To conclude, the paper advocates for the use of matricentric theory and method in historical analysis, and emphasizes the important role that patristic studies might play in the ongoing scholarly conversation about motherhood, the body, and sacrifice.

Key Words:
Motherhood, matricentric, feminism, Passion of Perpetua and Felicity

Assume the moment of childbirth is at hand; it is not the birth of the child, but the presence of death that is thought of, and the death of the mother anticipated. Often, the sad prophecy is fulfilled and before the birth is celebrated, before any of the anticipated goods are tasted, joy is exchanged for lamentation.

–Gregory of Nyssa

Introduction

In the opening account of her prison diary, Perpetua stands before the Roman prosecutors, awaiting her sentence of death in the gladiatorial arena. As a mother in Late Antiquity, this was not the first time Perpetua faced death. In a time of high maternal and infant mortality rates, the pregnant body occupied a liminal space between life and death. Perpetua's prison diary is the story of her preparation for death. The narrative opens with her trial and ends with her acceptance of death; in the interim, her story is reminiscent of Gregory of Nyssa's fourth-century description of impending childbirth. Throughout Perpetua's story, the presence of death is thought of and the death of the mother is anticipated.

Though the Virgin Martyr was portrayed as the highest ideal, most ordinary Christians in Late Antiquity did not experience their faith through an ascetic, monastic practice. As both miscarriage and infant mortality rates were high, however, many Christians would have recognized the pregnant body as a space where the battle between life and death was waged in secrecy. A matricentric reading of Perpetua's diary foregrounds the fact that she became a martyr through, rather than despite, her maternal body. Perpetua's sacrifice is not antithetical to her role as a mother but birth-giving in late antiquity might actually have been an embodiment of that sacrifice. If we foreground these themes – of maternal mortality, liminality, and suffering – through a matricentric reading of Perpetua's story, we can better imagine how ordinary women in early Christianity might have conceived of martyrdom as a natural extension of the maternal body.

Matricentric literary theory and method were born of Motherhood studies as a discipline. The field is new. In 2006, Andrea O'Reilly coined the term 'motherhood studies' to acknowledge and demarcate a new scholarship on motherhood as an autonomous discipline – one grounded in a tradition of maternal theory.[1] Within this theory, Motherhood is understood as socially and culturally constructed, rather than being defined as a biological function. In her seminal work on the topic, Adrienne Rich framed motherhood as a cultural institution that is continually redesigned in response to changing societal factors.[2]

Though matricentric feminism is centered on the idea that motherhood is historically constructed, as the field is so new, there has been very little study of ancient texts. A matricentric literary reading thus presents a new methodology through which to approach texts such as Perpetua's Diary. According to Andrea O'Reilly a matrifocal (or matricentric) reading, 'attends to and accentuates the maternal thematic in any given text'[3]. Matricentric literary scholars pay particularly close attention to embodied experience and maternal embodiment to understand maternal bodies as both lived and culturally encoded[4] Thus, this reading attends to the maternal thematic and the maternal body in Perpetua's Diary in order to foreground themes of maternity and mortality and demonstrate the usefulness of matricentric theory and method as a tool for patristic studies.[5] As matricentric feminism emerged from the field of academic feminism, this reading will also expand on feminist theory including French literary theorist Helene Cixous.

Perpetua's Diary records one of the very few female voices that still speaks to us from Antiquity and is thus one of the very few matrifocal

---

[1] Andrea O'Reilly, 'Maternal Theory: Patriachal Motherhood and Empowered Mothering', in: L. O'Brien Hallstein, A. O'Reilly & M. V. Giles (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Motherhood*, London: Routledge 2021, 20.

[2] Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company 2021.

[3] Andrea O'Reilly, 'Matricentric Feminism: A Feminism for Mothers', in: in: L. O'Brien Hallstein, A. O'Reilly & M. V. Giles (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Motherhood*, London: Routledge 2021, 54.

[4] Margaretha Fahlgren, Helena Wahlström Henriksson and Anna Williams, 'Ambivalent Narratives of Motherhood and Mothering', in: M. Fahlgren, H. W. Henriksson and A. Williams (eds.), *Narratives of Motherhood and Mothering in Fiction and Life Writing*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan 2023, 1–15 (4).

[5] Fahlgren, Henriksson and Williams, 'Ambivalent Narratives', 4.

narratives that have survived millennia.[6] The narrative itself is written in the first person in the form of the prison diary of Perpetua, a young mother, and catechumen who was martyred in March of the year 202 or 203 AD in Carthage. The diary is an account of her imprisonment and visions. The text, as it comes down to us in medieval manuscripts in both Latin and Greek, is known as *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity* (*The Passio*). In its entirety, the diary is accompanied by the visions of her brother Saturnus, and a framing narrative. This framing narrative, written by one or multiple editors, begins with a prologue that attributes the following diary to the martyr Vibia Perpetua. The framing narrative ends in an epilogue that details in the third person the story of Felicity giving birth in prison and the martyrs's deaths in the arena. Issues of authorship and authenticity, and their relationship to these distinct voices, have been well studied with respect to the passion of Perpetua and Felicity. Though fascinating, these questions are not the focus of this study. Here I take my cue from Kate Cooper, in focusing on Perpetua as a narrator[7]. Perpetua's narrative voice, as translated by Thomas J. Heffernan from Latin[8], will be the object of our reading. It is important to note the general lack of both female narrators and authors in the genre of hagiography and thus the historical and literary significance of Perpetua's narrative voice.

I am likewise persuaded by the argument put forward by Cooper that there are distinct tensions between the framing narrative and the prison diary and that, from a narratological point of view, you can see these as different voices that have different commitments.[9] As the textual tradition of Perpetua's story, in both Greek and Latin manuscripts, is complex and the question of authorship is ultimately unresolved, it is possible that Perpetua's Diary and the framing narrative were written at different times.

---

[6] Stavroula Constantinou and Aspasia Skouroumouni-Stavrinou, *Breastfeeding and Mothering in Antiquity and Early Byzantium*, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge 2024, 37.

[7] Kate Cooper, 'A Father, a Daughter and a Procurator: Authority and Resistance in the Prison Memoir of Perpetua of Carthage', *Gender & History*, 23:3 (2011), 685–702.

[8] Thomas J. Heffernan, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, New York: Oxford University Press 2012.

[9] Cooper, 'A Father, a Daughter and a Procurator'.

The Maternal Body as Liminal Space

In the early Christian church, particularly in North African theology and iconography, the womb had a significant status.[10] Imagery of the mother church and her fertile womb pervades writing and art from that context. In a matricentic reading, pregnancy more generally and the womb specifically can be seen as a physical embodiment of the liminal space between life and death. A womb is a place where life and death hang in a balance. Just as the womb can contain new life it can also contain death. Miscarriage is equally a function of the maternal body and is intrinsic to the embodied experience of motherhood. As one in four pregnancies end in miscarriage, many women experience the death of the body many times over within their own lifetime.

The experience of pregnancy as a liminal space is echoed in the structure of the narrative. The narrative opens in medias res, as Perpetua is being held in custody awaiting her trial. The narrative ends in a kind of authorial passing of the baton, as Perpetua accepts her imminent death and leaves her story to another author to finish. The plot exists in the liminal space between Perpetua's life pre-custody and her death in the amphitheater. This liminal space is represented in the physical space of the prison. In Perpetua's description, the setting is reflective of the womb. She describes it as dark, cramped, and warm[11]. This setting has the narrative function of pregnancy – it operates as a locus of transformation. Within this warm, dark, cramped space, Perpetua undergoes her transformation from Catechumen to Martyr and traverses the threshold between life and death.

As well as the space between life and death, pregnancy embodies a liminal sense of time – like advent, pregnancy is a season of waiting. 'Some say that Christian life is understood as a series of deaths and resurrections,' writes Theologian Carrie Fredrick Frost in her mono-graph *Maternal Body*, 'It can also be understood as a series of births and returns,

[10] Robin M. Jensen 'Mater Ecclesia and Fons Aeterna: The Church and Her Womb in Ancient Christian Tradition', in: A.-J. Levine (ed.) *A Feminist Companion to Patristic Literature,* Cleveland: Pilgrim Press 2008, 137–155 (140).

[11] *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis* III.5–6; trans. Heffernan, *The Passion*.

and the maternal body reveals this sense of ever renewal.'[12] Frost highlights the ways in which the maternal body challenges the myth of linear time. She explains that the cyclical nature of the maternal body reflects a different sense of time, one reflected in the cycles of the liturgical calendar. 'Yes, chronological time keeps marching on,' explains Frost, 'but there is a deeper sense of time lived out in the maternal body.'[13] The maternal body is intrinsically cyclical, from the menstrual cycle to the female sexual response cycle. A matricentric reading of Perpetua's diary likewise poses a challenge to linear time.

Though written chronologically, Perpetua's diary exists outside of time. The readers do not know how long she was held in custody. In this sense, Perpetua's writing departs from the conventions of a typical diary, which usually foregrounds important dates and time markers. Instead, the pacing of Perpetua's narrative takes on a disjointed, almost hallucinatory quality. Perpetua's diary opens with this cryptic sentence: '"While", she said, "we were still with the prosecutors, my father, because of his love for me, wanted to change my mind and shake my resolve."'[14] The word 'still' gives the impression that Perpetua had been with the prosecutors for some time already. When was she arrested and for how long has she been held? The circumstances remain a mystery and such mystery pervades the narrative. When any time markers are given, they are given very loosely. For instance, 'For a few days'[15] Perpetua is freed from the protestations of her father. Then, Perpetua writes, 'In the space of a few days we were baptized.'[16] The prisoners are given 'a few hours'[17] to revive themselves in a better part of the prison. Perpetua then worries for her child and 'endures such worry for many days.'[18] Perpetua writes of her vision and 'a few days later'[19] receives a visit from her father. The prisoners finally receive a hearing 'on

[12] Carrie Fredrick Frost, *Maternal Body: A Theology of Incarnation from the Christian East*, Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press 2019, 108.

[13] Frost, *Maternal Body*, 108.

[14] *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis*, III.1.

[15] *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis*, III.4.

[16] *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis*, III.5.

[17] *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis*, III.7.

[18] *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis*, V.9.

[19] *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis*, V.1.

another day'.[20] This strange sense of time continues throughout the narrative. It is further complicated by the pacing of the story. Some key scenes are recounted in a single sentence, such as when Perpetua laconically mentions their baptism, surely a significant event in the lives of those choosing to die for their Christian identity. Likewise, Perpetua recalls the moment that the prisoners were sentenced to death, writing simply, 'Then Hilarianus pronounced sentence on us all and condemned us to the beasts. And we descended the platform and returned cheerfully to prison.'[21] In contrast to this, Perpetua's visions are written with vivid details and rich, figurative language. Her dreams are the longest passages of the text. This can have the disorientating effect of making Perpetua's dreams feel more real than her reality. The sense of chronological time is warped by the pacing of the narrative.

When embedded within the framing narrative, *The Passio* follows a traditional narrative arc, with an exposition, climax, resolution, and denouement. It is only when it is studied on its own that Perpetua's diary breaks with narrative convention; Perpetua's story begins in the middle – the Latin term 'in medias res' translates to 'into the middle of things.' The first line drops the reader straight into Perpetua's conflict with her father: 'While we were still with the prosecutors, my father, because of his love for me, wanted to change my mind and shake my resolve.'[22] The last line offers up her ending for another author: 'This is the story of what I did the day before the final conflict. But concerning the outcome of that contest, let whoever wishes to write about it, do so.'[23] Kate Cooper points to this final line as Perpetua's greatest act of bravery. Cooper explains that 'her willingness to die for her faith shows physical and moral courage, her last words are brave in a different way… Her voice will endure in a future beyond her death, but in a form chosen by others, to serve the needs of later communities unknown to her and beyond her imagining.'[24] In leaving her story in the hands of other writers, Perpetua cedes narrative control and defies narrative convention.

---

[20] *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis*, VI.1.

[21] *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis*, VI. 6.

[22] *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis*, III.1.

[23] *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis*, X.15.

[24] Cooper, 'A Father, a Daughter and a Procurator', 700.

This contrast between the narrative structure of the *Passio* as a whole and Perpetua's diary is interesting to examine through the prism of *écriture féminine*. Écriture féminine, literally 'women's writing', is a concept developed by the French literary theorist Helene Cixous in the 1970s. In this theory, Cixous posed that female writing could reflect the female body.[25] Cixous posited that non-linear, cyclical writing mirrored the embodied female experience.[26] In Cixous's eyes, the linear narrative arc was a convention of patriarchy, and by choosing to write outside its confines women posed a challenge to patriarchal grand narratives. Whilst Perpetua, of course, wrote almost two millennia before Cixous posited her theory, it is an interesting lens through which to view the narrative structure. From this point of view, the redactor's prologue and epilogue can be seen as patriarchal attempts to wrangle Perpetua's story into a conventional narrative structure. When Perpetua's story is allowed to speak for itself, the structure, like the maternal body, expresses a more cyclical sense of time.

Perpetua replaces the traditional narrative structure with, to appropriate Frost's phrasing, a sense of ever renewal. Her dreams are layered with imagery of new life, baptism, the Eucharist, and the paradise awaiting her in martyrdom – a series of births and returns. Her account of prison life is woven through with details of her maternal grief and anxiety, and the relief she finds when she can care for her baby – small deaths and resurrections.[27] Her character development from catechumen to martyr is punctuated by multiple baptisms and sacrifices. Her performance of martyrdom is non-linear. When viewed through a matricentric lens, Perpetua's narrative reflects the thin veil between life and death that women experience whilst pregnant. Perpetua's diary considers the maternal body an embodiment of the liminal space between life and death and a conduit for martyrdom.

---

[25] Hélène Cixous, Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', *Signs* 1:4 (1976), 875–893.

[26] Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', 881.

[27] Maria Doerfler, *Jephthah's Daughter, Sarah's Son: The Death of Children in Late Antiquity*, Oakland: University of California Press 2019, 29.

Maternal Suffering as a Worthy Martyrdom

Perpetua's maternal suffering is illustrated most clearly in her description of the prison conditions. Perpetua laments the day that she and the other catechumens are sent to the prison, exclaiming 'Oh cruel day!'[28] She describes the conditions of their material suffering, including the darkness – 'I was terrified because I had never before known such darkness – and the heat – "the crowding of the mob made the heat stifling'.[29] Moreover, they are harassed by their captors, as she writes 'and there was the extortion of the soldiers.'[30] To sum it all up, she explains that 'last of all, I was consumed with worry for my infant in that dungeon.'[31] Perpetua, at this point in the narrative, is separated from her baby. At the earliest opportunity, she tries to arrange for his care with her mother, writing, 'In my worry for him, I spoke to my mother concerning the baby.'[32] Finally, she writes 'I endured such worry for many days, and I arranged for my baby to stay in prison with me.'[33] Here follows one of the most intriguing passages of the entire diary: 'Immediately I grew stronger, and I was relieved of the anxiety and worry I had for my baby. Suddenly the prison became my palace, so I wanted to be there rather than anywhere else.'[34] This rumination on Perpetua's worry for her baby, and the resolution of her anxiety as expressed in the prison/palace metaphor, gives readers an extraordinary insight into her mental state at that moment. What becomes clear is the fact that, in her suffering, Perpetua does not reject motherhood. Instead, her maternal grief is the center of her suffering. Perpetua's worry for her infant magnifies her material suffering, in this case, the heat, darkness and harassment of the prison.

The theme of maternal suffering is echoed later in the text, in Perpetua's second vision. She recounts that, whilst praying, she sees her brother Dinocrates who died of cancer in childhood. She writes 'I cried out the name of Dinocrates. I was shocked because never before then

[28] *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis* III.6.
[29] *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis* III.6.
[30] *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis* III.6.
[31] *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis* III.6.
[32] *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis* III.8.
[33] *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis* III.9.
[34] *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis* III.9.

had his name entered my mind, and I grieved as I remembered his fate.'[35] Later, whilst asleep, she sees Dinocrates in her dream. He appears to be thirsty and though he stands by a pool Perpetua writes 'I was saddened because, although the pool had water in it, he was not able to drink because of the height of the rim. And I awakened, and I knew that my brother was suffering.'[36] On another day, as she is put in the stocks, she has a third vision. In this vision, Dinocrates appears and the pool has been lowered. He drinks from the pool and Perpetua recounts that 'when his thirst was quenched, he began to play in the water, rejoicing in the manner of children. And I woke up. I knew then that he was freed from his suffering.'[37] Throughout this entire sequence, Perpetua's grief is woven through both her reality, as it is recorded in her prison diary and her dream journal. The two modes of writing, which until this point were kept somewhat separate, begin to merge, as the pace of the narrative quickens, the paragraphs become shorter and the story begins to more quickly oscillate between dreams and reality. Perpetua's worry for her brother, who she sees in her dreams, becomes a reflection of her worry for her baby, who she holds in her arms. Both modes – her prison diary and her dream journals – allow space for Perpetua to negotiate, then re-negotiate – her maternal grief. Throughout her time in prison, Perpetua is preoccupied with worry for her infant child and then her maternal-like empathy for her deceased young brother. This worry is at the heart of her suffering. The nature of her suffering, and its relationship to her motherhood, subverts the idea that Perpetua rejected her motherhood in order to sacrifice herself as a martyr. Instead, her maternal grief is at the heart of her sacrifice.

This specific relationship – between the suffering of motherhood and the sacrifices of martyrdom – was a dynamic that the early Christian community grappled with. When one in three infants didn't live to their first birthday, and as many as half died before age the age of ten, infant mortality and parental bereavement posed a challenge, to Christian theology. Maria Doerfler's book *Jephthah's Daughter Sarah's Son: The Death of Children in Late Antiquity* explores how early Christian writers confronted this challenge. Her work offers a new window through which

[35] *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis* VII.1.

[36] *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis* VII.9.

[37] *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis* VIII.4.

to look upon the relationship between maternal suffering and martyrdom and thus might offer up new answers to the questions put forward by Perpetua's story.

Throughout the rise of the ascetic movement, the archetypes of the virgin martyr and the married mother were positioned as diametrically opposed. However, at the same time, we can see in Christian exegesis on the story of the Maccabean Mother, the emergence of an alternative point-of-view. Doerfler explores how the Maccabean Mother was held up as an exemplar 'exhorting even married women to the kind of spiritual aspirations that might otherwise be reserved for virgins and widows.'[38] In 2 Maccabees, the story tells of the arrest of seven sons, who, when they refuse to eat pork and therefore show their deference to the emperor, are killed one by one in front of their unflinching mother, who is then, in turn, martyred herself. In Doerfler's account, the story became an opportunity for Christian writers in Late Antiquity to meditate on the sacrifices required of ordinary Roman women.[39] Doerfler explains that 'the story spoke to more private matters … the shape of virtue amongst that overwhelming majority of Christians who embraced family life rather than asceticism and how the mundane trials of life and death in the late Roman family could become worthy martyrdoms in their own life.'[40] The mundanity of this sacrifice, the weight of maternal suffering in a period of history with high rates of both maternal and infant mortality, is thus recognized by these patristic writers as a form of martyrdom in their own right.

This prism casts new light on Perpetua's suffering. When Doerfler writes 'ancient discourses ascribe to women both a peculiar capacity for grief and the task of its performance. Yet the display of maternal suffering in the patristic expositions of the Maccabean Mother also served to enhance her holiness'[41], her words are reflective of Perpetua's account of life inside the prison. Once she is no longer experiencing maternal grief, the material conditions of her suffering no longer press on her,

[38] Doerfler, *Jephthah's Daughter, Sarah's Son,* 142.
[39] Doerfler, *Jephthah's Daughter, Sarah's Son,* 98.
[40] Doerfler, *Jephthah's Daughter, Sarah's Son,* 126.
[41] Doerfler, *Jephthah's Daughter, Sarah's Son*, 132.

instead her 'prison becomes a palace.'[42] Conversely, Perpetua's suffering is heightened because it is experienced through her maternal body - which, in turn, enhances her holiness. Her maternal suffering is therefore central to her performance of martyrdom.

Conclusion

In Late Antiquity, the relationship between motherhood and martyrdom was complex. Against the backdrop of the ascetic movement, the archetypes of the virgin martyr and the married mother were positioned in opposition to one another. Perpetua's writing paints a different picture: an intimate portrait of the maternal body that blurs the lines between the mother and the martyr. Thus, Perpetua's transformation into a martyr did not happen solely in the arena. Just as pregnancy pulls a woman into her skin, Perpetua's diary pulls us towards an understanding of the maternal body as a site of martyrdom.

A matricentric reading allows us to reflect on how Perpetua might have developed a new awareness of her body through the physicality of pregnancy, birth, and motherhood and how this awareness might be reflected in the text. By attending to and accentuating the maternal thematic within the text, we can understand Perpetua's diary as an expression of the liminal space between life and death. By placing our reading within the context of high maternal and infant mortality rates, it becomes clear that the suffering of motherhood and the suffering of martyrdom are in relationship.

Perpetua concluded her diary by offering up her story to another writer. This paper will likewise conclude by inviting other voices into the conversation. There is more research to be done on the topic of motherhood and martyrdom. Matricentic literary theory and motherhood studies offer patristics scholars new insight into ancient texts. As the subject of motherhood becomes a topic of serious consideration in both academia and the wider cultural sphere, there is a place for patristic studies to be an important voice in that conversation.

[42] *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis* III.9.