
Reviewed by Vincent Hunink, Radboud University Nijmegen (v.hunink@let.ru.nl)

One of the most fascinating documents of early Christian literature, and arguably of ancient literature as a whole, is the so called Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas. This account shows how a group of young Christians was executed in Carthage in the year 203. It is probably best known on account of sections III-X, which is a diary written in prison by Perpetua herself during her final days. It is not only highly interesting as an almost unique ancient prose text written by a woman, but also allows for various scholarly approaches to its style and content. Accordingly, many studies of the diary and of the whole document have been published in recent years. In 2007, a conference on the Passion of Perpetua was organized at the Humboldt University in Berlin (a volume with papers is in preparation). One of the organizers, Dr. Marco Formisano, has now published a new edition with Italian translation and notes in the convenient pocketbook series of BUR (Bibliotheca Universale Rizzoli).

It is an attractive little volume, which brings up-to-date information about Perpetua and her companions within the reach of all who can read Italian. Even undergraduate students will be able to purchase and use this low-priced book, which is well printed and easy to handle. Some questions, however, may be asked about the target audience of this publication and the general approach taken by the editor.

The volume opens with a short introductory essay (13 pages) by Eva Cantarella, who underscores the importance of Perpetua's diary. Notably, she points out that the text presents an authentic, feminine voice concerning a woman's personal life, to be compared only with the poems of Sulpicia. The text also provides many details about Perpetua's family life, where some elements remain mysterious. For example, Perpetua never mentions her husband, but does have her child with her in prison. Cantarella suggests that Perpetua was formally divorced. This would of course explain the silence about her husband, but not the presence of her baby. For as Cantarella notes, normally a Roman child of divorced parents would be cared for by the man's family. (One is tempted to think that the husband's whole family may have been dead.) A third item in Cantarella's interesting preface is devoted to 'female executions', a phenomenon which may be traced back to other Roman texts, such as Martial's Liber de spectaculis.

The introduction by the editor himself is much longer (67 pages) and hence makes rather less easy reading. First, it tackles the well known problem of the composition of the whole document (which involves at least three different authors: Perpetua, Saturus and an 'editor'), the authorship of the various sections, notably the Perpetua diary, and the question of whether the Latin or Greek versions of the texts should be considered as the originals. Formisano remains cautious but seems inclined to the common view that we have authentic documents written by Perpetua and Saturus, originally written in Latin and not substantially revised.

A second part of the introduction analyses the Acta Martyrum as a possible literary genre...
in its own right. It studies various other literary forms in antiquity, such as collections of ‘famous last words’. There is a clear tension in these Christian texts between historical accuracy and literary elements (p.34), but according to Formisano, this tension only adds to the fascination of the Passion of Perpetua. He also compares Perpetua to other heroines--even modern ones--‘who have sacrificed their lives for an idea’.

A third and final section focuses on three themes that allow an even more literary approach: the concepts of writing (‘scrittura’), the body, and death. In the course of this lengthy section, the Passion of Perpetua is compared to modern texts such as the writings of Primo Levi and Jorge Louis Borges, and to the modern genre of ‘prison literature’. There are some interesting ideas here (such as the notion that in the course of the text Perpetua’s body gradually seems to become more masculine), but one wonders if it is all truly relevant to the general reader, for whom the BUR volumes seem intended. The introduction is accompanied by 110 footnotes containing references and further discussion. This shows that the text is well documented, but in the end it is perhaps too much of a good thing.

Personally, I would have preferred a more modest introduction to the most important issues and questions concerning the text, its composition and function. Formisano’s predominantly literary study would seem better placed at the end of the volume as an essay for further reading, or as a separate publication in the form of a paper.

A similar remark may be made about the presentation of the Latin texts and Italian translations. Here too, the reader is presented with sound material and reliable texts, although one may wonder why the critical edition by Van Beek (Nijmegen 1936) has been adopted rather than the more recent critical texts by Bastiaensen (Milano 1982) or Amat (Sources Chrétienes, 1996). But no fewer than 204 footnotes have been added. These contain all due explanations of difficult points, but also much more which does not serve the reader’s immediate needs. The fact that the numerous footnotes on every page are directly connected to words in the Italian translation constantly invites users to interrupt their reading. Often, there are footnote marks at the end of a number of successive sentences. In the end, this makes undisturbed reading of the original text (surely one of the primary aims of the series) almost impossible.

Having said this, the notes do serve a scholarly readership. They also describe views by other scholars on a variety of issues including psychoanalytical and feminist approaches to Perpetua’s visions; notably Bastiaensen and Brenmer are often referred to. A useful bibliography (10 pages) records all relevant secondary literature that is discussed.

In short, this inexpensive pocketbook seems suitable for academic libraries rather than for the general readership which must have been the intended audience of the publisher. A reader who is unfamiliar with this fascinating text will probably be overwhelmed by the mass of information and literary analysis provided by Formisano, and as a result he or she can hardly come to a personal reading experience. However, for those who already know Perpetua, Severus, Felicitas and the others, this new publication is a welcome addition, if only because it shows that the Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas can also be appreciated and studied as a moving piece of literature.

Notes:

1. One can hardly blame Formisano for failing to mention a recent, bilingual edition in Latin and Dutch, but it may be relevant to add a reference here: Eeuwig geluk. De passie van de vroeg-christelijke martelaressen Perpetua en Felicitas & Drie preken van Augustinus, bezorgd en vertaald door Vincent Hunink, Elisabeth van Ketwich Verschuur en Arie Akkermans, ingeleid door Toon Bastiaensen, (Meinema) Zoetermeer 2004 (ISBN 90 211 4037 3).