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Mary Sunshine Porter April 9, 2019

‘Til Death Do Us Part: Exceptional Women in Classical Athens and the Roman Empire

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Abstract

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It is in moments of extremity and inversion of social norm that the boundaries of a society’s civic realities can best be understood, because it is then that the society is forced to react and reassert itself to settle once again in a state of equilibrium. This thesis seeks to identify two such extraordinary instances of social inversion in the historical record through which we might examine some of the boundaries that defined women and their public esteem or censure in classical antiquity. Euripides’ Alcestis and Vibia Perpetua in particular set themselves apart as apt for this comparative study due not only to their roles in larger stories about societal disruption, but also because of their remarkable similarities. The titular heroine of Euripides’ *Alcestis* and the Christian martyr Perpetua both represent high-born young women, wives, and mothers whose self-sacrifice defined them as truly great in their cultures. It is my hope in examining these women together to span a more than six-hundred-year gap and put their texts in context and conversation with one another.

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I. Introduction

"Laws and Principles are not for the times when there is no temptation: they are for such moments as this, when body and soul rise in mutiny against their rigour… If at my convenience I might break them, what would be their worth?"

- Charlotte Bronte, Jane Eyre

The frameworks of laws and customs that have defined the notion of a model, virtuous woman have not been static through time, but the notion that she is an honorable figure who exemplifies the values of her culture, most especially in the height of crisis and emotional extreme, can be traced to some of our earliest sources about women. This essay sets out to examine the stories of two historical figures who have come down to us as epitomizing their culture's feminine ideals because of their behavior in the worst of circumstances. Moreover, it is my hope that by setting two women who were bounded in by civic constructions that could scarcely be more different, some of the startling similarities in their stories and motivations might thus become illuminated. In this essay, therefore, I will bring these two moments together across their spatial, temporal, and civic separation, and put them in a productive conversation about the multifaceted female identity in the ancient world. In so many words: Alcestis and Perpetua walk into a bar….

To create this conversation I will employ three primary modes of evidence to set up a picture of how Alcestis and Perpetua were understood within their societies' regard. The first is an investigation of the civic and religious laws that dictated the proper place for women in classical Athens and a not-yet Christian Roman Empire. This is a critical first step in our examination, because it frames Alcestis' and Perpetua's stories in the basic notions of propriety that dictated Greek and Roman conceptions of what constituted an ideal. To put it simply, this will allow us to determine how their societies would have reacted to Alcestis and Perpetua.

The next key idea that this essay will seek to demonstrate is how we might understand Alcestis and Perpetua as themselves reacting to the civic boundaries of their societies. I will do this by investigating important moments in the text of Euripides *Alcestis* and Perpetua's *Passio* that act as representative of these women's own perception of their existence, gender, and intrinsic identity. Finally, I will round out this conversation by moving from Alcestis' and Perpetua's "reaction" to their societal norms to a discussion about how their stories were transmitted and understood in antiquity. Thus, each section will conclude with how each society ultimately "reacted" to these women.

At first glance, the stories of Euripides' Alcestis and the accounts of Perpetua demonstrate a number of important similarities that will offer some points of comparison as we investigate these texts.[1] First and foremost, Alcestis and Perpetua can both be read as upper-class women, wives, and mothers who performed remarkable acts of self-sacrifice for the purpose of upholding and maintaining cultural institutions through which they saw themselves as inextricably identified. Because of these defining features of the women in these stories, the texts that describe their actions are resplendent with themes of motherhood, death, and resurrection that will bracket both how this essay interprets certain moments and how we might understand the cultural value and significance of their circulation in antiquity.

I would also like to outline for the reader some of the pressing questions that define how modern scholarship approaches these texts. In Euripides' *Alcestis*, the exuberant praise of the chorus leaves no doubt that Alcestis was considered to be a noble woman. Nancy Rabinowitz perhaps put it best when she said that the "*Alcestis* must be crucial in any consideration of gender

[1] For this essay, I will be using my own English translation of the *Alcestis* based on the version of the text presented in L. P. E. Parker, *Euripides Alcestis* (Oxford: Oxford Univeristy Press, 2007). Any exceptions will be noted.

or women's roles in classical Athens, for its main character is used to establish a model for female behavior."[2] When scholars read this text, however, they are forced to grapple with the fact that the genre of the play is not clear-cut in a way that allows it to be defined as either a tragedy, a satyr play, or a comedy. This has led to various interpretations, but they share their preoccupations in revolving around Alcestis' motivations for her sacrifice and the meaning of her ultimate resurrection.

A reading of Perpetua's *Passio* is similarly complicated by its existence as one of three versions of the story that we know were in circulation in antiquity.[3] Moreover, the featured accounts of Perpetua's anticipated martyrdom in the *Passio*, if truly penned by her hand, are enclosed by an insertion of another martyr's words and an overall editorial that modifies our understanding of the document's intent and its reception by the Christian community. Finally, our reading of her acclaim as a Christian figure is necessarily shaded by an understanding that the actions that highlighted her as most noble among women in the early Christianity are the same actions that set her apart as a civic outsider in the eyes of the Roman Empire.

Finally, with the motivations of this essay having been set forth, and its three modes of investigation having been described, let us move forward to our discussion of these extraordinary women. I ask that the reader remain conscious of the major themes and interpretive issues that I have set forth in this question. It is within these nuances, ultimately, that we might piece together the most critical similarities and themes of these texts.

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[2] Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz, "Alcestis," In *Women on the Edge: Four Plays by Euripides*, edited by Ruby Blondell, Bella Zweig, Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz, Mary-Kay Gamel, 93.

[3] For the purposes of this essay, I will be using my own English translations of the *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis* based on Thomas J. Heffernan's Latin edition. Any exceptions will be otherwise noted. Heffernan, Thomas J. *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.

II. Alcestis as a Classical Greek Woman

Chapter I
Introducing Alcestis and the Stage

To reach the punchline of this thesis that asks what might happen when "Alcestis and Perpetua walk into a bar," this essay imagines displacing the two from their social and cultural contexts. That, however, can only be done if we proceed with an established understanding of those institutions that informed these women's actions, motivations, and passions. The first of the women that I have chosen to examine is the mythological figure of Alcestis as she was represented in Euripides' version of her story. It is an unfortunate reality that in all of the evidence and text that has come down to us from antiquity, there is but an absolute minimum in the way of actual, narrative records written by women about their own lives.[4] Because of this, Euripides *Alcestis* offers us the best female figure, a supposed paragon of women, to investigate the dialogue surrounding the proper place and actions of a woman within fifth century Athens.

In 438 BCE, when Euripides' *Alcestis* was performed on the stage of the City Dionysia, its audience was met with an emotionally vivid performance that described the noblest of women as she suffered the worst of fates. The story that Euripides constructed makes no pretensions about its subject matter. It is the legend of its titular heroine. It is not, however, a story that details her actions. Alcestis herself is only physically present on the stage during her death and resurrection, but it is the ramifications of her self-sacrifice as "a cherished wife" and "by far the best woman under the sun" that dictate the events of the play and the behaviors of its other

[4] Although a number of examples of ancient female authors exist such as Aesara of Lucania, Phintys, and Sappho, the first example of genuine female autobiography is found in Vibia Perpetua's martyr accounts. Jan N. Bremmer and Marco Formisano, ed., *Perpetua's Passions: Multidisciplinary Approaches to the Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 1.

characters (97, 151). The *Alcestis*, in a sense, is a conversation about a woman in the guise of a theatrical performance. Within this conversation, Alcestis is examined as exemplum of feminine excellence and wifely virtue on the classical Athenian stage, making the play a particularly productive case study for this essay.

The story begins as Apollo describes the events that lead to him serving in the house of Admetus. As he delivers this prologue, Apollo stands before the beloved palace, free from servitude, but keeping watch over its inhabitants. The figure of Death then appears and speaks with Apollo, accusing him of guarding the house to an extent that is improper. After a terse exchange, Apollo denies this and urges Death to collect Alcestis, but warns him that a hero will return the woman to the land of the living. At their parting, Death proceeds into the house, asserting himself as the priestly officiant of Alcestis' sacrifice. The following sequence of the play describes the grief of the household as a servant woman tells the chorus how Alcestis had prepared herself for her inevitable death. Soon after, the characters of Alcestis, Admetus, and their children enter, and the audience observes as Alcestis dies in the arms of her husband. Admetus, stricken with grief, then swears that he will lead a life without celebration.

The resolution of this play begins with conflict, as Heracles comes to Admetus as a guest on his journey. Admetus, torn between his roles of mourning and hosting, allows the hero, ignorant of Alcestis' death and the community's grief, to enter his house. There is incredible tension in the text as Heracles celebrates his host's hospitality and Admetus separately prepares for the burial of his beloved wife. This friction of propriety is pushed yet further during the funerary procession when Admetus refuses to allow his father, Pheres, to participate. He even goes so far as to divorce himself from any relationship with his father in a passionate declaration that he considers his deceased wife, by virtue of her sacrifice, to be his truest family: his

symbolic mother and father. Eventually, Heracles is made aware of Alcestis' death, and he ventures off with a plan to restore life and joy to the house. He later reappears to Admetus with a veiled woman in tow, supposedly won in a contest. After much resistance on the part of Admetus, this "stranger" is handed over only to be revealed as Alcestis, returned from Hades to the land of the living. Admetus is rapturous as he gazes upon his wife and thanks the hero, but in this final moment Alcestis remains silent, apparently in observation of three days of necessary ritual purification. Physically she is present, but the audience hears no more from the heroine.

Euripides, as a playwright, constructed this story from an existing conception of its mythological characters and the individual threads of their legends. Scholars have been able to piece together a number of earlier versions of these myths by looking to what we have in the way of literary evidence. The first known reference to Alcestis herself can be found in Book Two of the *Iliad*, where she is described as "queenly among women*"* as mother to her son, Eumelus, and the "finest in nature of the daughters of Pelias*.*"[5] Her marriage to Admetus supposedly took place during Apollo's year of servitude when the god helped Admetus to complete the impossible task that Pelias had prescribed to win her hand. This is, of course, the same Pelias that Medea murdered through the violence of his daughters. Notably, in the story of Medea, Alcestis is depicted as the "virtuous" daughter that refuses to participate.[6]

The events that lead Apollo to serve in the house of Admetus are also represented in ancient texts. We know from Pindar that Apollo begat a son, Asclepius, and went on to raise him. However, when Asclepius became known as a healer who extended the natural lives of mortals for the right price, he was struck down by Zeus for his impertinence.[7] In a fit of rage and

[5] Homer, *Iliad* 2.714.
[6] Rabinowitz, "Alcestis" 95.
[7] Pindar, *Pythian* 3. See also the *Homeric Hymn to Asclepius* for more evidence of his life.

grief, Apollo slew the Cyclopes who created the bolt with which his son was killed. As punishment for this, Zeus sends him to serve in a mortal house.[8] This story makes an explicit appearance in Euripides' *Alcestis*. However, the machinations that Apollo employed in the exchange of Admetus' fate and the moment in which Alcestis agreed, when no one else would, to exchange her life for his are no more described than as some devices that Apollo used to "protect him from dying by tricking the Fates" (11-12). Ultimately, the fact that Euripides' *Alcestis* does not address what necessitated Alcestis' sacrifice on behalf of her husband should inform the reader that this is not a detail critical to the themes of the play.[9] In this vein of thought, the question of how Asclepius' death functions in the story will be returned to in the following chapters.

In light of this greater mythological tradition with which the *Alcestis* is largely in agreement, there is little doubt that Euripides constructed his play from these larger moments in the mythologies of Alcestis and Admetus. The important question, however, is *why* he chose these characters and this moment and what thematic preoccupations prompted him to tell the story in the way that he did. This is a question best answered through genre. Moreover, the question (delightfully) is not *easily* answered through genre. In her survey of scholarship on the play, Kiki Gounaridou accuses the *Alcestis* of being a play in which "indeterminancy is inherent,"[10] and it is by means of this indefinite nature that we can seek to understand the greatest degree of nuance in Alcestis' representation.

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[8] D. J. Conacher *Euripidean Drama: Myth, Theme and Structure* (Canada: University of Toronto Press), 328. Here, Conacher references Homeric and Hesiodic accounts for Apollo's servitude to Admetus: *Il.* 2. 673-66, Hesiod fragments 122-127. He also references 'a scholium to Euripides *Alc* 1' to indicate that Euripides' description of these events followed the traditional narrative at the time.

[9] A number of other ancient sources referencing the characters in this play include a mention of Alcestis' daughter 'Perimele,' wife or mother of Argus (Hesiod *Catalogue of Women*), and her sons as they attend the Trojan war in Book Two of the Iliad.

[10] Kiki Gounaridou, *Euripides and Alcestis: Speculations, Simulations, and Stories of Love in the Athenian Culture* (New York: University Press of America, 1998), x.

The *Alcestis* was performed in the fourth position following the traditional three tragedies at the City Dionysia and was awarded second place in the overall competition. In this order, the audience would have expected a ribald satyr play, but that is certainly not what they were presented with. Moreover, because the *Alcestis* lacked a satyr chorus, the audience's interpretation and reaction to the play would have been colored by this expectation as they watched the play.[11] Some scholars have attempted to identify moments in the text that are indicative of satyric elements, pointing to a drunken Heracles as prime evidence.[12] Others have turned to the only known theatrical production of the story that predates Euripides'. Only two lines of this work have survived,[13] and virtually nothing is known about the performance; however, it has been postulated that this original was a satyr play.[14] Euripides himself would have been aware of these expectations, and as we will explore in the third chapter, it is likely that he made use of the genre's tendency of bringing the "lewd and playful" into collision with the "ancient and wise" in an exploration of propriety in gender, family, and social relationships.[15]

The comedic elements of the play, however, exist in a somber context that articulates social discomfort and grief in powerful ways. It should also be noted that this play is the first to have featured the death of a woman openly on the Athenian stage. This tension between genres, reflective of the tension within the play itself, seems impossible to resolve, and scholars have

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[11] Rabinowitz, "Alcestis," 94.
[12] C. W. Marshall, "Alcestis and the Problem of Prosatyric Drama," *The Classical Journal* 95, no. 3 (Feb.-Mar., 2000), 229-238.
[13] Augustus Nauck, *TGF* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1889), 720, Internet Archive. This poet, Phrynicus was active a generation prior to Euripides and the lines, in translation, say "He constrains the fearless, limb-driven body…" I will return to this discussion of the fragment in chapter four.
[14] Conacher, *Euripidean Drama*, 328. Conacher specifically assumes this because he believes that the surviving lines describe a drinking scene, a satyrical element. Other scholars include Murray, 1915; ix, cf. B. Gauly, *Musa Tragica: die Griechische Tragodie von Thespis bis Ezechiel* (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1991): 42-5.
[15] For notes on the interaction of comedy, tragedy, and satire, see Gregory W. Dobrov, "Comedy and the Satyr-Chorus," *The Classical World* 100, no. 3 (Spring 2007): 251-256.

turned to hybridized terms, calling it an anti-tragedy, a pro-satyr drama, a tragicomedy, and more of the same.[16] Thus the debate on the genre of the *Alcestis* is ongoing. For the purposes of this thesis, however, the most important aspect of this play's genre is its ambiguity. I argue that the audience was not meant to walk away from this play satisfied, because the performance is only half of a conversation that the individual must to respond to. This fact, moreover, allows our conversation to extend beyond the insight that the *Alcestis* offers into the classical Athenian woman and study the legacy of the play as it spoke to cultures throughout antiquity.

Euripides, despite his posthumous successes and acclaim in the fourth century,[17] is considered to have been a somewhat controversial playwright during his lifetime. Arguments against his poetic style include excessive emotionalization, characterization, and (most importantly for this essay) his treatment and representation of women.[18] In his personal life too, Satyros informs us that 'Everybody disliked him, the men on account of his "unsociableness, the women because of his treatment of them in his plays."[19] Whatever this tells us about Euripides' personal manner, the importance of his work and his authorial reputation should not be forgotten. In modern scholarship he is recognized as being, "after Sophocles, the most distinguished

[16] Rabinowitz, "Alcestis," 94.
[17] P. T. Stevens, "Euripides and the Athenians," *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 76, (1956): 93-94. He reports that Euripides won five times, was awarded second three times, and was third a handful of times. Blondell 84 reports that his eventual acclaim lead to transcripts of his work becoming integrated into the education of children, and we see artistic representations of his version of the myth on vases, paintings, and burial monuments. This question of the impact of *Alcestis* in antiquity will be explored later in this chapter.
[18] Ruby Blondell, Mary-Kay Gamel, Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz, and Bella Zweig, *Women on the Edge: Four Plays by Euripides* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 72. As an addendum to this, it should be noted that a large part of criticisms of Euripides come to us through comic poets such as Aristophanes. This recognition by other playwrights is itself evidence of his acclaim and popularity in Athens.
[19] Satyros, *Euripides Fr.* 39, col. X. Trans. Stefan Schorn, "Satyros aus Kallatis. Sammlung der Fragmente mit Kommentar," *L'Antiquite Classique* 75, (2006), S. *Satyros aus Kallatis: Sammlung der Fragmente mit Kommentar* (Basel 2004): 315-316.

dramatist of the day."[20] It is this distinguished voice that crafted the story of Alcestis that survives as its most famously known rendition.

The story itself has a definitive beginning during its performance in the 438 BCE City Dionysia, the only planned production of the *Alcestis*. Here, Euripides was competing in a part of a larger ritual celebration, and although not an act of worship itself, the competition was nonetheless inextricable from its religious context.[21] On this stage, the voices of the actors competed with celebratory shouts, and the pleasures of food and wine would have been no small part of the audience's enjoyment of the performance. In some productions, the gods themselves would stride across the roof of the *skene*, taking an active role in the affairs of the actors and citizens below. This was a moment that brought the city and its inhabitants together in cult practice, competition, and celebration, and it is into this communion that Euripides brought the *Alcestis*.

In these few pages I have attempted to summarize a body of knowledge and scholarly discourse that stretches back nearly to the festival itself. The questions of this story's mythical origins, thematic messages, and initial performance are far greater than a single essay could hope to encapsulate. In acknowledgement of this, it is my goal to specifically explore how the representation of the character of Alcestis in Euripides' play can provide a modern reader with some insight into the cultural commentary on women in classical Athens. In the second chapter I will explore the social institutions that defined the existence of women in classical Athens: their representation in law and their roles in religious practices. In particular, this conversation will revolve about ideas of marriage, death, and female agency, as is appropriate for a study of this

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[20] Stevens, "Euripides and the Athenians," 93-94.
[21] R. P. Winnington-Ingram, John Gould, P. E. Easterling, B. M. W. Knox, "Tragedy," in *The Cambridge History of Classical Literature*, ed. P. E. Easterling and Bernard M. W. Knox (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 265.

play. The third chapter will detail the representation of Alcestis' gender on the Athenian stage as I articulate how the image of Alcestis as the ideal woman functioned to "reflect and reinforce [contemporary] ideology."[22] Finally, I will move beyond the initial 438 BCE performance and explore how cultures and individuals engaged with the story of Alcestis into antiquity.

Chapter II
Alcestis in Conversation with Athens

It is an inescapable reality that the *Alcestis* was a fantasy, and I will make no pretense otherwise in the course of my investigation. The story is markedly separate from the reality of fifth century Athens, taking place in a construction of Pherae, a Thessalian city, with characters that would have inspired notions of a hazy heroic past for their audience. Nonetheless, it was a fantasy written by an Athenian playwright for an Athenian audience and presented on a democratic stage. This chapter aims to understand how Euripides put the female figure of Alcestis within the framework of Athenian law and customs and thus displayed a conception of wifely virtues that was in dialogue with contemporary thought.[23]

I will begin by contextualizing the language and events of the play within our understanding of the extant political landscape, including the uniquely democratic lens of the performance, and the ways in which Alcestis' marital relationship reflected the experiences of women in fifth century law. Moreover, the themes of the play that revolve around death, marriage, and resurrection extend beyond what legal institutions are able to articulate. Thus, where the story engages the metaphysical, so will our conversation explore the religious

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[22] Daniel Ogden, *A Companion to Greek Religion* (Malden, MA.: Blackwell Pub., 2007), 298.
[23] Andreas Markantonatos and Heinz-Gunther Nesselrath. *Euripides' "Alcestis" Narrative, Myth, and Religion* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 8. Here they present the argument that Greek tragedy should necessarily be read through "the prism of fifth-century history." This idea is the conceptual foundation of this chapter, and it presupposes that the audience would encounter the events on the stage within their "contemporary knowledge and experience."

traditions that reveal how individuals in this society confronted their own mortality. As we move forward, therefore, let us again return to the idea of the stage and scrutinize its place in the political landscape of the city.

In my introduction to the *Alcestis*, I alluded to the question of its genre, and how employment of such theatrical devices allowed Greek playwrights to examine cultural norms by means of inversion and exaggeration. This was a practice visible in the variant modes of tragic, comedic, and satyric representation, and it brought the city and its practices into confrontation with itself in the context of the City Dionysia, an occasion that otherwise celebrated the civic norm.[24] Because of this natural discourse, scholars have often been tempted to understand the representation of monarchy in Greek tragedy (the *Alcestis,* notably, is about a royal couple) as a way of asserting the superiority of Athenian democracy.[25] P. J. Rhodes, however, modifies this understanding of the tradition. In his survey of Greek drama and its scholarship, he decisively concludes that, while the tragic stage was often employed to convey civic commentary, this was not unique to Athens as a πόλις. Ultimately, the city's democratic ideals made themselves known through the Athenian stage's remarkable tolerance for "uncomfortable" and largely reflexive questions as compared to contemporary city states.[26] Within this context, therefore, while there might be some implicit criticism of kings and tyrants, we should look to understand Euripides' *Alcestis* as it describes the elements of marriage and family that defined an Athenian's life.

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[24] Niall W. Slater, *Euripides "Alcestis."* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 51.
[25] For this argument see Richard Seaford, *Reciprocity and Ritual. Homer and Tragedy in the Developing City-State* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994). Mark Griffith, "Brilliant Dynasts: Power and Politics in the "Oresteia," *Classical Antiquity* 14, no. 1 (April 1995): 62-129.
[26] P. J. Rhodes, "Nothing to Do with Democracy: Athenian Drama and the Polis," *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 123 (2003): 119. Rhodes' literature review includes a survey of Athenian dramatic performances alongside Alcman's Sparta and early performances at Rhegium.

Reading the play in this way presents a study of fifth century law as the natural next step to understanding how an Athenian audience member might have appreciated the representation of Alcestis as a woman and a wife. Raphael Sealey said it best when he described legal studies as rendering its student "somewhat immune to the disease of imposing assumptions drawn from their own society."[27] It was the laws of Athens that dictated the lives of the audience, and it was the life experiences of the audience that dictated how they reacted to the play. Moreover, as we develop an understanding of Greek women in legal texts and the text of the *Alcestis*, four dominant questions begin to emerge. The first revolves around how Alcestis, a foreigner entering Admetus' house through her marriage, was integrated into the fabric of the community. This of course necessitates a discussion of her marriage and how a woman represented both a participant and a tradable good in the Athenian conception of such a union, and how that objectification defined her role as a part of Admetus' household. Finally, in recognition of the fact of women's integral role in Greek society, I will begin to touch on how Alcestis, as a woman, was an essential part of the public religious landscape in her community.

Our first question, asking how Athenians reconciled their wives as both foreign and integral to society, takes center stage as one of the primary motifs and literary devices in the play. When Heracles first greets Admetus and recognizes the signs of mourning in the household, the two engage in a discussion about the deceased (530-35):

> HER: Why, then, are you lamenting? Who of those dear to you has died?
> ADM: A woman; we had newly recalled a woman.
> HER: A foreigner (ὀθνεῖος) or one who is related (συγγενής) to you?
> ADM: An outsider, but otherwise necessary (ἀναγκαία) to the house.
> HER: How then did she come to perish in your house?
> ADM: When her father died, she was cared for here.

[27] Raphael Sealey, *Women and Law in Classical Greece* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 14.

This moment in the text highlights the peculiar existence and identity of a woman in Athenian society. After marriage, new wives progressed from their natal home and the guardianship of their fathers to that of their husband.[28] This physical and symbolic shift was a far more monumental transition than a modern reader might conceive, and it represented a metamorphosis of the woman's identity.

The magnitude of this shift was reflective of the fact that women, in Greek thought, were identified by their relationship to a male authority.[29] It was a married woman's ultimate duty to produce legitimate offspring for her husband's line, and this role defined her function in her marital relationship and ultimately defined her identity.[30] It is through this sort of marriage that Euripides' audience would have understood the events of the play. Although the *Alcestis* does not detail the events and agreements that preceded their marriage, the praise of the chorus leaves no doubt that Alcestis was a noble and legitimate wife for Admetus. In addition, she had fulfilled the primary objective of a Greek marriage by providing her husband with children.[31]

Alcestis, in a demonstration of her wifely excellence, identified herself so thoroughly by her marriage that she was willing to sacrifice her life for the protection of her husband and the

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[28] Alberto Maffi, "Family and Property Law," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Greek Law*, ed. M. Gagarin, D. Cohen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 254. This type of society is called "virilocal."

[29] Maffi, "Family and Property Law," 258. Athenian women were under the guardianship of their nearest male relation, usually their father or husband, called a *kyrios*. Sealey, *Women and Law in Classical Greece,* 14, tells us that only men existed as legitimate members of a deme or phratry, and their daughters and wives were simply adjacent to this inclusion. Thus, Sealey traces a woman's membership in a society as dependent upon first her father, then her marriage to, and production of legitimate male citizens.

[30] Sealey, *Women and Law in Classical Greece,* 12. Sealey describes a law passed in 450 BCE that stated that children could only hold legitimate citizenship if both parents were citizens, however, this is a tenuous line of investigation when the play itself was set in Pherae. Moreover, Maffi, "Family and Property Law," 255, defines legitimate children in Athenian law as born from a legitimate marriage, without qualifying the necessity of the woman's citizenship status.

[31] Euripides describes a son and daughter borne by Alcestis, but two sons of Alcestis and Admetus are referenced in *Iliad* 2.714. This can either be understood to be a second son born after her resurrection, or evidence that Euripides chose to insert a daughter to emphasize the anxieties of Alcestis.

bond that they had created. This noble act brings us back to the text of the play. Although Admetus' assertion that Alcestis was ὀθνεῖος but ἀναγκαία can be observed as technically correct within Athenian law, Heracles displays massive distress at the news that he has violated the mourning of the mistress of the house (1012-14):

> HER: … You did not reveal that the corpse laid out was your wife, but you received me into your house as if your grief was a concern outside of your house.

This reaction is evidence to a modern reader that a Greek wife, even if technically foreign upon her induction into the home, existed as a fundamental and emotionally cherished aspect of the household. Legally, Alcestis was both insider and outsider, but a dismissal of her status as simply "foreign" was inappropriate and offensive in the Greek conception, and this is something that would have been clear to the play's original audience.

Prefacing a fifth century marriage was its existence as a means of creating "lawful children."[32] Legitimate children ensured the continuation of the family's traditions and memory and functioned as caretakers for their parents in old age.[33] Because of this, marriage agreements were necessarily public, and their announcement and visibility ensured both the legitimacy of the union and the legitimacy of any children that the pair would produce. The initial contract, called ἐγγυήσις, was always moderated by the woman's nearest male relative and the intended husband,[34] and the language of the marriage oath referred to the woman as a "passive object."[35]

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[32] Menander, *Perikeiromene*; 894-895: "I offer her to thee to wife, to get thee lawful children."
[33] Euripides, *Alcestis*, 290-295. Here, Alcestis describes that Admetus' parents would have lost a beloved son as well as a caretaker for their old age and property had she not sacrificed herself for him. Eventually, Admetus goes on to denounce his relationship to his parents as the ultimate punishment for their refusal to take his place.
[34] Maffi, "Family and Property Law," 354. Maffi also notes that the terms (*engye, engyesis*) were commonly used in legal speeches, indicating that the proper steps of the engagement had proceeded to authorize a marriage. The woman was not typically involved or active in this arrangement.
[35] Sealey, *Women and Law in Classical Greece,* 25.

This separation and objectification of women as a sort of tradable good was a central aspect in the classical Greek conception of marriage, and it makes a vital appearance in two parts of the play that deepen our modern reading. First, if we proceed with the version of the myth that describes Admetus winning Alcestis' hand in a competition, we can understand Alcestis as a literal prize-object that was traded from Pelias to Admetus. In this marriage, Alcestis was an especially valuable prize. Alcestis' agreement to trade her life for her husband's was not only a noble act, but it was an act that stretched the Athenian idea of women as a material possession to its furthest extent and magnified an accepted cultural practice for the play's audience. To a modern audience, Alcestis' sacrifice might be distressing, but to the original audience, this act would have been an assertion of a preexisting cultural idea.

A second key moment is Heracles' return with Alcestis after he had retrieved her from the underworld. In an notable parallel, he describes to Admetus how he won this "stranger" as a prize, and as such, he holds domain over her (supposedly as κύριος).[36] He then insists that Admetus take the her "to serve in [his] house," and refuses all but for Admetus to take her with his "right hand alone," (1024, 1115). This staging would likely have been a blatant evocation of the traditional engagement ceremony where Alcestis' new κύριος passes her into the hand of an unwed and compliant Admetus.[37] This is emphasized by Alcestis' silence in this moment, like to a new bride. Here again an understanding of the audience's cultural context allows us to

[36] Apollodorus, *Against Neaera*. This text clarifies that if a woman has no father or grandfather on her father's side, she should be betrothed by the hand of her guardian. In this sequence of events, the audience is perhaps left to interpret Heracles as having instituted himself as her guardian.

[37] John Howard Oakley, Rebecca H. Sinos, *The Wedding in Ancient Athens.* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), 7. Here the authors note that the majority of the information that we have for the engagement and marriage rituals are primarily derived from theater and representation in art. This, they note, was because the rituals were so common in Greek life that they were not commonly described in depth. However, see Davies (1985) for multiple examples of marriage rituals depicted as featuring the husband grasping the woman by either her right hand or wrist.

understand how the language of the play establishes Alcestis within a second marriage as Admetus' prize: silent and passive, an image of the Greek ideal.

This objectification of women in Greek law extended further in its consideration of wives and daughters as among a man's estate. If a man in ancient Greece died and left only a female heiress, that woman was understood to be ἐπίκληρος or "upon the estate."[38] She would then be presented to her father's male relatives for marriage, and when one claimed her as a bride he was said to legally take her in ἐπιδικασία, a word that is literally described as claiming inheritance.[39] This notion of Greek women as an inseparable part of household property opens the door for a more nuanced conversation about women and how they were understood in the home. In particular, it is crucial that we understand how a woman was tied to her house in Greek imagination as we piece together our reading of the death of Alcestis and its ramifications.

On a most basic legal level, the home functioned as the domain and boundary for a wife because of her role in producing legitimate offspring.[40] Just as she was defined by her role in the home, however, a wife functioned as a critical and defining aspect of that home. In Greek texts, many terms could describe the household (the *Alcestis* is, in fact, a notable example of this in classical literature),[41] and the concept of the home described more than a changeable physical locale. Legally and emotionally in this sense, we can understand that the notion of a Greek

[38] Sealey, *Women and Law in Classical Greece,* 29.
[39] Maffi, "Family and Property Law," 256. Maffi describes the logic behind this as an attempt to keep the possessions of the father within the family and prevent the splitting of the estate should the woman have legitimate children with a man outside of the family. This was also the case if a woman's husband died and she did not return to her father's house.
[40] Ogden, *A Companion to Greek Religion,* 299. This isolation is thought to have been the result of male anxieties regarding improper public behavior and the possibility of a wife begetting an illegitimate son.
[41] Virginia Phelan, *Two Ways of Life and Death* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1990), 43 notes five separate words describing the house in *Alcestis*, appearing a total of ninety-three times.

household was a changeable "ideology" in which a wife played a "vital role."[42] This idea is especially critical in our examination of the cataclysmic effect that Alcestis' death had in the house of Admetus and on its occupants, an idea that will be discussed thoroughly in the third chapter.

Fifth century norms offered a woman one outstanding mode of cultural responsibility and visibility in her practice of ritual worship. It was during religious rites, as celebrants and priestesses, that women became most visible as participants of their community. One of the moments in which the typical woman would interact with the realm outside of her home was as she engaged in "harmony-restoring rites" that involved the most disruptive moments in civic life: "birth, marriage, and death."[43] It was in these moments that a woman came nearest to existing as a true participant member in the affairs of her husband's deme,[44] and this idea of legal female visibility in marriage and burial is critical to keep in mind as we move into how the audience of the play would have conceptualized Alcestis as she was presented on the stage.

This chapter has thus far surveyed how Alcestis would have been understood as a wife on a fifth century stage. In its remaining pages I will detail how the *Alcestis* articulated religious ideas about marriage and mortality within the contemporary religious institutions of Athens. This play is a story about hope and resurrection, and our evidence for Greek religious practices is an important element to understanding what the audience would have identified as particularly important or meaningful in the play's staging and language.

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[42] Ogden, *A Companion to Greek Religion,* 301. Ogden makes explicit the idea that the conceptual and physical presence of the woman defines the state of the family, and therefore defines the greater idea of the household.
[43] Ogden, *A Companion to Greek Religion,* 13.
[44] Sealey, *Women and Law in Classical Greece,* 29. It should be noted for clarification that women did not become 'recorded' members of a deme during these festivals.

Our conversation about Athenian law has already touched both upon how a woman was a kind of participant-object within her household and how she held an explicitly public role in certain religious activities. This discussion becomes yet more productive in a religious context. In the home, women were most closely associated with Hestia and the hearth.[45] It is no accident that Alcestis, as she prepares herself for her death and funeral, is described as invoking Hestia after attending to other religious rites within the home (162-174):

> Standing before Hestia, she prayed fervently: "Mistress, since I am going beneath the earth, I beg you, falling before you one final time, to care for my orphaned children: that you unite with my son a dear wife, with my daughter a noble husband; lest, like I who bore them perish, my children die an untimely death. But let them, blessed, fulfill a joyous life in their fatherland." She applied herself to all of the altars of Admetus' house and crowned them with garlands and prayed before them, cutting sprigs from myrtle branches, tearless and without groaning, nor did the coming evil alter the loveliness of her skin.

Intriguingly, this passage serves not only to describe Alcestis' relationship to the hearth and its goddess, but it also highlights some of the key moments of life in which women are known to have been "central" in the mediation of transitory rites.[46] In particular, Alcestis pleads that Hestia care for her children in marriage and death. Here, the audience might have inferred that, had she not sacrificed herself, it would have been Alcestis' duty as woman and wife to assist in these transitory moments of the lives of those in her household and to train her children for their eventual roles in society. Her poignant invocation parallels Hestia and Alcestis in a way that highlights her exceptional virtue and value to Admetus' house.

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[45] Ogden, *A Companion to Greek Religion,* 302. Here, Ogden notes the importance of worship of a female divinity by a female within the home as signifying the central role of women in their families. In addition to this, it should be noted that a marriage ceremony typically involved a procession that brought a torch from a woman's natal house into her new home. In this sense, women are creators and participants in the home beyond their objectification. This should also be understood alongside our earlier discussion of women's importance in childbearing and the ideology of the family unit.

[46] Robert Garland, *Daily Life of the Ancient Greeks* (New York: Hackett Pub. Co., 1990), 61.

Beyond her status within the house, we must establish how Euripides' play more explicitly handled the dominant motifs of life and death on the stage. A notable feature of the *Alcestis* is its presentation of the death of a woman onstage (to be thoroughly explored in chapter three). In the first stasimon, a servant describes how, when Alcestis understood that her fated day had come, she washed her skin, dressed herself in lovely and "fitting" garments, and prayed to Hestia and the altars of the house before throwing herself passionately upon her marriage bed where she was met by her grieving children and servants. This emotional moment is all the more powerful in its explicit listing, in order, of the steps of the funerary ritual that was largely the responsibility of the women in the house and that the audience would have been intimately familiar with.[47] By preparing herself in this way, Alcestis stoically confronts her own death. In anticipation of her departure she completes a perfect fulfillment of her wifely duties in the household and performs the role of her own mourner.

Let us consider for a moment, in the wake of this powerful scene, where the audience understood Alcestis to be going in death. We know that by the sixth century "the realm of Hades" was considered to be underground, and this idea was cemented through the fifth century along with other popular elements of the underworld that we think of today.[48] In her final moments, Euripides, through the *Alcestis*, references this established idea in an apparent vision where she describes her departure from "Helios and light of day" and the bleak figures of Charon and Death as they lead her to a waiting Hades (244, 252-57, 260-61). There is no doubt that this bleak vision mirrored the Athenian conception of a distressing reality of the human condition.

[47] Ogden, *A Companion to Greek Religion,* 87. In preparation for burial, a course was bathed, anointed in oil, dressed and wrapped in cloth, and laid out so that the family might mourn and "pay their respects."
[48] Ogden, *A Companion to Greek Religion,* 93.

In this moment Admetus pleads to her, clasping her hand,[49] to wait for him and anticipate their life together after death. Alcestis' death is the central element of the play and its interpretation has been discussed endlessly by scholars. In particular, I find the postulation of Kiki Gounaridou, that "the palace of Hades is for Alcestis a substitute for the palace of Admetus,"[50] to be especially intriguing. Critical to this argument is what she considers to be an established relationship between marriage and "sacrificial death" in Greek thought.[51] In my reading of the *Alcestis* I find Apollo's monologue to be especially evocative of this image of a marriage in death (24-26):

> I already see Death himself nearby, the sacrificial priest of the dead, who is about to lead her down *into the house of Hades*.

Here Death comes to the house as a representative of the underworld, preparing to lead Alcestis away in a procession that not only implies a funeral procession but also a marriage procession. Make note, especially, that Apollo describes Death as leading Alcestis to the *house* of Hades. Other scholars have fallen into a similar mode of interpretation, and an intriguing but tenuous relationship might be apparent between Hades and Admetus as he is described in the play. In line 569 Admetus is referred to as "πολύξεινος" or "one who hosts many guests." This may be evocative of Hades' common epithet of "πολυδέκτης."[52] Ultimately, this question of a mythical marriage as implicit in the text will remain inconclusive, but I believe that these

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[49] Glenys Davies, "The Significance of the Handshake Motif in Classical Funerary Art," *American Journal of Archaeology* 89, no. 4 (Oct. 1985): 627-28, tells us that the Athenian Grave stelai featured the best-known and most common use of the handshake motif (*dexiosis*). Davies also notes a red-figure loutrophoros (440-420 B.C.) in the British Museum that features a handshake between a man and a woman during a marriage ceremony.

[50] Gounaridou, *Euripides and Alcestis,* 53.

[51] Here she cites James Redfield, "Notes on the Greek Wedding," *Arethusa* 15 (1982): 188-92 and Helene Foley, "Marriage and Sacrifice in Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis*," *Arethusa* 15 (1982): 169.

[52] Irene Chalkia, *Lieux et espace dans la tragedie d' Euripide* (Thessaloniki: University of Thessaloniki, 1986), 237.

parallels of marriage and funeral, so prevalent in the play, would have found a receptive audience for whom it would have been no great leap to recall just such a pattern in religious contexts.

This nebulous question of the parallels of death and posthumous marriage segue easily into other moments in the text that more explicitly invoke these rituals. First and foremost, we must consider the conclusion of the play where Heracles returns Alcestis to the hand and home of Admetus. In his insistence that Admetus take Alcestis with his right hand, Heracles oversees a moment of "χειρί δεξιοί," an action that is a clear reference to marriage.[53] This powerful moment signifies a resolution of Alcestis' sacrifice and a rectification of the unnatural and wretched state that the house had entered with her death.

In an interesting note that emphasizes this apparent blending of marriage and burial that would have been so apparent to the *Alcestis'* fifth century audience, Niall Slater observes another invocation of marriage when Admetus refuses association with his parents during his confrontation with Pheres. Slater notes that this outburst isolates Admetus from his parents, "just as a new bride is cut off from her birth home."[54] Moreover, this idea of silence is repeated in Alcestis when she refuses to speak after her resurrection (and apparent re-marriage) in observation of her need for "lawful… purification" (1144-45). This inversion of gender and the marriage ritual will be further discussed in the following chapter as it relates to the interplay of Alcestis' and Admetus' identities during the events of the play.

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[53] S. Montiglio, *Silence in the Land of Logos* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 187; Davies, "The Significance of the Handshake Motif," 628. Here, Davies notes that the gesture was commonly depicted in both funerary and marriage contexts. This symbol will be revisited in detail in the final chapter of this section.

[54] Slater, *Euripides "Alcestis,"* 61.

Finally, this chapter will conclude as the *Alcestis* did: with resurrection. As a brief note I would like to introduce a minor aside in this vein. Some scholars, when reading Euripides' play, have drawn connections between Alcestis' actions and mystery rites and beliefs involved in the Orphic and Eleusinian cults. Markantonatos addresses this idea, explaining that the *Alcestis* functions to reference "a number of features from Orphic and Eleusinian lore" in its representation of "Alcestis' valiant wifely virtue" as it is compared to "epic heroism and poetic *kleos*."[55] He goes on to describe how Alcestis represented the actions of an initiate in her funerary preparations.[56] While certainly intriguing, Markantonatos' argument is scarcely sourced and hinges on broad comparisons rather than specific pieces of evidence. I do, however, think it very likely that the fifth century audience would be familiar with these cults and their emphasis on *katabasis* and resurrection to an extent that the language and themes of the play would not discourage a relationship.[57] In particular, I believe that there are especially notable connections to the Eleusinian mysteries.

In the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter,* the rape of Persephone to the realm of Hades, Demeter's grief and journey to Eleusis, and the establishment of the goddess' cult there are described.[58] This hymn has been an instrumental part in historians' and archaeologists' understanding of the Eleusinian cult and its practices. It is well understood that the cult had

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[55] Markantonatos, *Euripides' "Alcestis,"* 17-18. In this argument, Markanotos supposes an 'intellectual illumination' and 'psychological ripening' of Heracles and Admetus in the course of the play as an important parallel here. However, I would argue that this is not apparent in the language or ambiguous genre of the *Alcestis.*

[56] Markantonatos, *Euripides' "Alcestis,"* 18. In particular, he describes that the initiate would "put on a funerary dress to attend the initiation ceremony" in a sort of "ritual death leading up to a new life."

[57] Cecil Smith, "Orphic Myths on Attic Vases," *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 11 (1890): 343-351. Here, Smith provides his reader with a broad overview of the evidence for the Orphic cult as it was depicted on vases. His article allows us to proceed with the knowledge that there was tangible evidence of the cult's worship in Attic Greece by the fifth century.

[58] Helene P. Foley, *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter: Translation, Commentary, and Interpretative Essays,* Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999.

become a pan-Hellenic phenomenon by the Classical period, and it was during the fifth and fourth centuries BCE that it became "the most important and widely-attended mystery cult in the Greek-speaking world."[59] Mystery cults are commonly understood to have imparted some form of special wisdom or understanding upon the initiated, and it has been postulated that initiates at Eleusis were especially invested in the separation of loved ones (as in the case of Demeter and Persephone) and possibly in ideas about death and hope for their own afterlife.[60] It is therefore, I believe, the cult at Eleusis that would have most resonated with a fifth century Athenian audience observing the death and resurrection of Alcestis on the stage.

Inarguably, the play ends with the theme of resurrection and judgement of the gods. Less apparent than the ending, however, are two other critical references to this motif. In the prologue, Apollo describes how the entire conflict of the play, the exchange of Admetus' life for another, stems from a quarrel between himself and his father: the murder of Asclepius. In the Greek tradition, Asclepius was a healer with preternatural abilities inherent to his status as the son of Apollo. These remarkable skills, however, created a disruption of the natural order of life and death that was offensive to Zeus as ultimate lord of life and establisher of order. It was Asclepius' acts of improper resurrection that earned him his death and set the events of the play in motion.[61] In Greek religion the concept of boundaries "both real and imagined, between the sacred and the secular, between purity and normality" is a critical and unavoidable institution.

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[59] Nancy A. Evans, "Sanctuaries, Sacrifices, and the Eleusinian Mysteries," *Numen* 49, no. 3 (2002): 230.
[60] Evans, "Sanctuaries, Sacrifices, and the Eleusinian Mysteries," 249. C. Sourvinou-Inwood, "Reconstructing Change: Ideology and Ritual at Eleusis," in M. Golden and P. Toohey, eds., *Inventing Ancient Culture: Historicism, Periodization, and the Ancient World*. (London: Routledge, 1997): 132-64.
[61] Markantonatos, *Euripides' "Alcestis,"* 94. Here Markantonatos refers to Asclepius' healing as without regard for 'ethical integrity,' and describes Zeus as establishing a 'new, ethically informed dispensation through his own son.'

This idea is further reinforced by another interaction between a father and his son when Pheres admonishes Admetus' presumption in expecting his parents to die in his place (681-99):

> I brought you to life and reared you as master of this household. I am not obliged to die for you. I did not receive this custom from my father, that fathers should die for their children, nor is it the Greek custom. You were born either lucky or unlucky on your own; you have what you were owed from us... How indeed have I wronged you? Of what have I robbed you? Don't *you* die on behalf of *this* man, and I won't die for you. You rejoice in looking on the light; do you think your father does not? Truly I consider our time beneath the earth to be long, and our time to live is short, but all the same it is sweet. You fought shamelessly not to die, and you live on exceeding your allotted fortune because you killed that woman; then you talk about my lack of spirit, you lowest of the low, you, weaker than the woman who died for you, such a fine youth?

With these words, the *Alcestis* addresses the root issue of the play and illuminates the havoc that Admetus' desire to live beyond his natural days has wrought. The realities of life and death are harsh, Pheres admits, but life is all the sweeter for it. Ultimately, in a dispensing of wisdom from a father, the idea of resurrection is again encountered, but it is presented as an unnatural grotesque in the hands of a selfish man. To read the play in this manner it would appear that Euripides' representation of Admetus is admonishing.

The aim of the preceding pages has been to integrate the fifth century's audience presumed ritual background in interpretation of this play. Although not necessarily featured in the language, the cult at Eleusis was a contemporary religious institution that the audience would have associated with the dominant themes of death, marriage and resurrection. Moreover, it must not be forgotten that the *Alcestis* was produced for and during the City Dionysia, a celebration of the cult of Dionysus and an integral part of its celebration.[62] Wohl suggests an even deeper connection to the religious festival when she suggests that the three days of Alcestis' silence

[62] Winnington-Ingram, "Tragedy," 261. Here, Easterling emphasizes that individually, tragedy, comedy, and the satyr play were each a part of the cult of Dionysus.

might correspond to the "three days of tragic performance" at the festival.[63] Ultimately, through the lens of religion, this story about a noble woman and her rescue by a hero gains new dimensions as a religious conversation that imparted on its audience a sense of hope and faith in the generosity of the gods.

This chapter did not seek to present a comprehensive survey of Athenian law and religion (an impossible task). Rather, I have sought to present some of the key boundaries in civic and metaphysical understanding that defined Athenian women within their society and how they made appearances in Euripides' *Alcestis*. This conversation must be carefully read through the qualifier that while the *Alcestis* was not a story set in fifth century Athens, it was a story written to exist in conversation with a fifth century audience and invoke an emotional response by referencing realities of that audience's everyday lives. In conclusion, I hope that the reader might come away with an understanding of how the character of Alcestis operated within the classical Athenian legal concept of women to exemplify a figure of shining virtue in her devotion to Admetus and the household that she played such a key role in. Furthermore, in my discussion of Athenian religious fixations, it has been my intention to provide a background to the play's confrontation with classical Greek conceptions of marriage, death and resurrection so that the *Alcestis* might be most productively studied in the following chapters.

Chapter III
Gender and Genre: Defining *Alcestis*

In our exploration of how Alcestis functioned as a model woman on the classical Greek stage, we must turn to the ways in which Euripides utilized specific words and actions in the

[63] Victoria Wohl, *Intimate Commerce: Exchange, Gender, and Subjectivity in Greek Tragedy* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), 151.

context of representing her (and other characters') gender in the *Alcestis*. Some of the questions about the *Alcestis* that are relevant to this discussion include the motivation that inspired Alcestis' self-sacrifice and the representation of gender in the dynamics between Alcestis and Admetus. To answer these questions, this chapter will begin by examining the identity of Alcestis as a woman and as a fictional tool. Upon establishing some key features of Alcestis' representation, I will then discuss how her function as wife and idealized woman is highlighted by her relationship with her husband before the conflict in the story is resolved and their upturned roles are rectified. As I have indicated in the preceding chapters, Euripides told the story of Alcestis in a way that was neither entirely tragic nor comic. Here I will attempt to continue this idea of indeterminate genre into a conversation of indeterminate gender.

As we begin to look at Alcestis, it is important to be reminded that she is not a woman, but a construct written by a man, portrayed by a man, and performed for an audience of, primarily, men. Despite this complete separation from the authentic female voice, Kiki Gounaridou reminds the reader of the *Alcestis* that the fictional nature of the characters and their manipulation within the male gaze serves to highlight "the philosophical, cultural, and social background of 5th century Athens,"[64] a critical observation for this essay. Ultimately the reader should remember that Alcestis would have been portrayed by a man wearing a mask, and this representation further emphasizes that the character served the male agenda of representation.[65]

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[64] Gounaridou, *Euripides and Alcestis, x*. In addition to the representation of various characters, Gounaridou mentions that the employment of specific myths and the arrangement of the story also serve to inform the modern reader of the cultural context that Euripides's plays were a part of.

[65] Claude Calame, "Facing Otherness: The Tragic Mask in Ancient Greece," *History of Religions* 26 (1986): 128-29, 135. Here, Calame compares the tragic mask to those used in ritual worship and discusses the development of theater masks from processions of Dionysus. He also emphasizes the idea that a male actor wearing a female mask would naturally invoke questions about the blurring of gender on the stage.

If the heroine of the *Alcestis* is a construction, what can be said about "her" identity? Gounaridou argues that, just as the statue that Admetus intends to cling to after her death, Alcestis is an empty image.[66] Citing Karen Bassi's argument, Gounaridou depicts the figure of Alcestis as a sort of mirror through which Admetus comes into conversation with himself. Where she is noble,[67] he is pathetic, but even in her representation of an ideal she primarily serves to illuminate Admetus' shortcomings.[68] I consider this conceptualization of Alcestis to be particularly useful as we, as readers, attempt to reconcile the character on the stage with the structural understanding of women in 5th century Athens that "she" represents. I do, however, believe that this metaphor could be modified to understand Alcestis as a sort of blank canvas of a woman upon which Euripides, as playwright, depicts a representation of a feminine ideal that functions to highlight Admetus' shortcomings.

Despite the ultimate absence of reality in Alcestis' character, within the context of the play she still expresses motivation and awareness of self through her actions and words. Her basic motive in sacrifice is simple to determine. When she throws herself upon her marriage bed and laments her death, it is explicit that she dies to preserve the marriage bond that she has created alongside Admetus (175-182):

> But later, in her chamber, she fell on her marriage bed, and *then* she wept and spoke thus: "Oh marriage bed, where I gave up my girlish Maidenhood by this man, on whose account I am now dying, Farewell; I do not hate you; you alone destroyed me; shrinking from betraying you and my husband, I die. Some other woman will be had by you, No more virtuous than I, but perhaps luckier."

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[66] Gounaridou, *Euripides and Alcestis,* 28-30, 49.

[67] Leonora Olivia, "The Presence of the Absent," *Pacific Coast Philology* 26, no. 1/2 (July 1991): 51. Olivia also argues for an objectification of the figure of Alcestis, comparing her to a "blank canvas" upon which her husband can project his needs and fantasies. Therefore, her exceptional nobility, because of her marital relation to Admetus, is an entirely male-centric device.

[68] Gounaridou, *Euripides and Alcestis,* 31-32. Karen Bassi, " Euripides and the Poetics of Deception," (Diss. Brown University, 1987): 70. In her argument, Gounaridou compares Alcestis to Pandora. She is the perfect woman, but she isn't organic and her identity necessarily falls into conversation with the character of Admetus.

Alcestis exists as the perfect wife, and her identity revolves around the institution of the marriage that she has committed herself to.[69] Moreover, the text points to another symbol that she identifies herself with. After her death, her son mourns that the household has been destroyed.[70] Scholars have noted the importance of the house, noting that it is an idea that is returned to again and again following Apollo's initial addresses to the home of Admetus in the prologue of the play.[71] As master of the house, it is necessary that Admetus continue living for its continued existence. Although it exists in a wretched state after her death, Alcestis' sacrifice ensures that the household endures for the benefit of her children and husband. This preservation above all else is another example of Alcestis carrying out her wifely duties, but it also calls other questions about the household to mind.[72]

It is not simply the continued existence of the house that concerns Alcestis. She also acts to assure the protection and status of her children. In acknowledgement of her service to him, Alcestis demands that Admetus remain a widower: unmarried.[73] Interpretation of this oath is ultimately tied into questions of the original language employed in the play. Niall Slater argues that the received text that has Alcestis refer to the house with a possessive adjective (ἐμῶν δόμων) indicates a sense of ownership that Alcestis exerts over the house. That claim, evidently,

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[69] Parker, *Euripides Alcestis*, *xiii*. He argues that Alcestis could not have sacrificed herself for the preservation of her children's status because she apparently agreed to exchange her life before she bore them. However, he does not argue against a motivation inspired by preservation of the marital bond that she held with Admetus.

[70] Euripides, *Alcestis* 415.

[71] Phelan, *Two Ways of Life and Death,* 43 notes five words used to reference the house appearing ninety-three times. Slater, 2003; 32. Slater references more than eighty individual references to different terms for "house" in the course of the play as well as the understood "physical presence" of the front of the house as actors operate before it.

[72] Gounaridou, *Euripides and Alcestis,* 41. Gounaridou models the ascension of Alcestis' son to the head of household is modeled after Admetus' and Pheres. By preserving Admetus, Alcestis gives her son a father to inherit from.

[73] Euripides, *Alcestis* 299-310. Alcestis is represented as demanding this because she fears that another woman will harm or hinder her children and their rights in the home.

would be maintained until the point that Admetus should take another wife and assert that woman's power within the household.[74] Alcestis, as Greek wife, is thus an influential and necessary force within her own household.

The function of Alcestis in the house continues to arise thematically throughout the play. When Admetus greets Heracles and discusses the mourning of his household, he describes Alcestis as "An outsider, but otherwise necessary (ἀναγκαία) to the house," (533). This recalls our discussion in the previous chapter about women as foreigners in the home, but the context of the play urges the reader to understand that Alcestis' "necessary" functions go beyond raising the children. When she dies, the audience realizes that a terrible change is wrought upon the fabric of the house: the children weep, the servants grieve, and Admetus pledges himself to eternal isolation and sorrow. As a wife, Alcestis' attendance of her husband extends to a metaphorical support of his household. Gounaridou takes this emotional support further and compares her figure to a caryatid- a statue that functions to "support and adorn" a house, and furthermore exists "both inside and outside the house."[75] Although I will refrain from committing myself to any singular interpretation, I argue that the lamentations of the son, the oath that Alcestis demands, and the changes in the house after her death all serve as evidence that Alcestis' wifely identity is closely tied into the idea of the physical household and that the characters of the play and the Athenian audience are aware of this relationship.

Moving forward from this understanding of Alcestis' motivations, which are in and of themselves representative of her status as an ideal wife, let us look at the aspects of her sacrifice

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[74] Slater, *Euripides "Alcestis,"* 33-34. This reading makes use of the received text that makes *'toutous*' the object of "*anasxou*." Parker, *Euripides Alcestis,* 117-118, argues for a usage of Tournier's text that substitutes '*trephwn*', which creates an image of Alcestis tolerating his children within his household. Ultimately, I find Slater's argument to be persuasive.

[75] Gounaridou, *Euripides and Alcestis,* 56-57. Within this idea, she argues that the name of Alcestis, meaning "support" or "strength" serves to emphasize the ideal wife, Alcestis, as a figure that strengthens and serves both her husband and their household.

that further set the character apart as the "ἀρίστη" of women. Prior to the events of the play, the reader should understand that Alcestis existed as a lovely and noble wife to Admetus;[76] however, because of the way that Euripides chose to structure the story, the praise rained continually on Alcestis should be understood as primarily due to her willingness to die on her husband's behalf. This idea of glory conferred as a prize of her sacrifice is described by various scholars. Furthermore, implicit in this motif is the understanding that "Alcestis earns a "glorious death" only through male qualities of courage and endurance."[77]

Slater argues that because Alcestis alone "was willing to make this sacrifice" she is naturally owed the promises that she demands from Admetus (181-182).[78] Karen Bassi takes this idea yet further, explaining that Alcestis' demands are reminiscent of "a masculine" presumption and "expectation of reward."[79] The very language of the play promotes this reading through Euripides' employment of the term "ἀρίστη" to describe Alcestis and her actions. This adjective is consistently applied in a masculine sense to reference male heroes in Homer, but only ever appears in the feminine to praise "the external beauty of a woman and not her deeds."[80] Here, Euripides sets Alcestis apart as an exception. In summation, Alcestis is an icon of women, but it is her impossibly unflinching bravery that confers upon her this honor. As Niall Slater so succinctly puts it: "Alcestis is noble *because* she dies."[81]

Ultimately, any interpretation of the sacrifice and message of the *Alcestis* is complicated by her resurrection at the end of the play. The return of Alcestis restores order to the household

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[76] See Conacher, *Euripidean Drama,* 328, 330 for further evidence of other versions of the myth and its characters.
[77] Nicole Loraux, *Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman,* Trans. By A. Foster (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 29.
[78] Slater, *Euripides "Alcestis,"* 20-21.
[79] Bassi, "Euripides and the Poetics of Deception," 26-27.
[80] Gounaridou, *Euripides and Alcestis,* 32.
[81] Slater, *Euripides "Alcestis,"* 50.

and the marriage, but (as I will explore more fully in a moment) also reinstates Alcestis within the silent "glory of the Athenian wife" according to the classical Greek conception.[82] Scholars have tried to clarify whether the audience is meant to interpret the resurrection and Alcestis' silence as either tragic or comic, but the consensus is an ending that is neither entirely one or the other. The restoration of social order is naturally comic, but it comes to us as embedded within tragic elements that make the comic "uncomic."[83] The answer to this question is hidden in the silence of Alcestis and might never be pieced together. However, I believe that, despite the ambiguity of genre which neither fulfills the comic or tragic definitions, the inversion of societal norms that the play carries out reveals nuances of the Greek conception of women and gender that are uniquely useful to the conversation of this essay.

I have thus far made a few references to instances of manipulated gender in the play, but now that I have established how we can understand the ways that Alcestis, as a construct, navigated and understood "her" sacrifice, I will now attempt to explore the representation of gender in the *Alcestis* more thoroughly. Specifically, how, by inserting Alcestis into a traditional role and representing Admetus as feminized in contrast to her masculine spirit, Euripides was able to describe that natural place of women in the social hierarchy (perhaps comically) by highlighting behaviors of men and women that would have been inherently unnatural.

As I discussed above, two examples of inverted gender arise within Euripides' usage of "ἀρίστη" in reference to Alcestis' actions and her masculine demand of reward for her sacrifice.

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[82] Slater, *Euripides "Alcestis,"* 65. Here, the argument observes that the praise of her apparently masculine '*kleos*' has ceased and that, in conjunction with her silence, is evidence that the conflict that necessitated the extraordinary nature attributed to Alcestis ceases to be of value to Admetus. Thus, she returns to a proper womanly role.

[83] Charles Segal, "Admetus' Divided House: Spatial Dichotomies and Gender Roles in Euripides' Alcestis," *Materiali e discussioni per l'analisi dei testi classici* 28 (1992): 25. Segal also cites examples of "happy endings" in tragedies such as *Eumenides, Philoctetes,* etc. in his argument for the indefinite nature of the ending. See also Foley, "Marriage and Sacrifice," 159-180 for her idea of the "comedy of remarriage."

Beyond the language, however, our understanding of the play indicates that the physical staging of the action disrupted the typical role of women as cloistered within the home and the male dominion as over public spaces. Moreover, the extraordinary fact that Alcestis was the only tragic woman to have her death depicted on stage (in full view of the audience) can provide us with further context in support of this idea.

Niall Slater provides his reader with a picture of this scene as it might have been portrayed on the classical stage, describing as she was led out before the house and rested on a couch for her final conversation with Admetus.[84] In particular, the fact that Alcestis' death is in front of her house and in view of the community is an example of her displacement from the house into the realm of masculine honor and visibility.[85] This, of course, does not postulate that Alcestis should herself be considered a man. Ultimately, the context of the play takes "Alcestis'" goodness as manifestation of heroic excellence on the part of a wife and a mother to its furthest extent in the interest of representing a construct that exhibits a useful demonstration of womanly virtue.[86] It is Alcestis' sacrifice on behalf of Admetus, an honorable wifely duty, that forces her to operate in the public eye and thus become masculinized to the furthest extent of the Greek conception.

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[84] Slater, *Euripides "Alcestis,"* 37, 20. To evidence his argument that this staging was conceptually before Admetus' house and not within an *eccyclema*, Slater refers to Alcestis' reference to the "light of the sun" in this moment.

[85] Slater, *Euripides "Alcestis,"* 51. Here, Professor Slater refers to the argument that Alcestis' death was modeled on the heroic deaths of Patroclus and Hector to clarify this idea of that she is equated to a male hero. He also directs his reader to Emily Vermeule's hypothesis that a penetrative death (by sword) feminizes the male body, and argues that the peaceful passing of Alcestis is evidence of continued heroic masculinity in death. Loraux, *Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman,* also references the masculinity of Alcestis' death in contrast to the trope of women hanging themselves offstage. Loraux emphasizes the running theme of this chapter that putting a woman on stage was "a chance to state the difference between the sexes.. And then to find it again."

[86] Mark Ringer, *Euripides and the Boundaries of the Human* (Boulder: Lexington Books, 2016), 39.

I have briefly outlined an argument that places Alcestis as a construct that highlights the deficiencies of her male counterpart. In light of this it is therefore productive to put these transformative moments in conversation with Euripides' representation of Admetus and his gender. In a convenience of circumstance, this conversation becomes explicit within an actual conversation between Alcestis and Admetus. In the final moments before her death, Alcestis demands that he "not remarry, never give the children a stepmother…" and Admetus replies that "It will be… just as I held you in life, so in death you alone will be called my wife, and no one but you, no Thessalian bride, will address this man as husband." They continue this oath later in their conversation, when Alcestis prompts Admetus to "receive the children from [her] hand," and clarifies that "[He] will now be the mother to these children instead of me" (306, 328-331, 375-377).

Slater, one among a majority of scholars, reads this as Admetus agreeing to take on the role of mother for his children, in addition to his natural status as father.[87] Inherent in this transition of his identity, Admetus finds himself functioning within both the female and male spheres of his household accordingly. He even goes so far as to confine himself to the house. This act is motivated by a desire to hide from a critical public eye, but its result is a further establishment of the feminine nature that Admetus has taken on.[88] This, of course, is a mirror opposite of the change that Alcestis underwent.

Our understanding of Admetus becomes yet more nuanced during his confrontation with his father, Pheres. In his grief at his wife's death and his sense of betrayal at his parents' refusal

[87] Slater, *Euripides "Alcestis,"* 55. He also suggests that there may be evidence of this functioning as a pseudo-adoption ceremony for the children in which Alcestis would be further masculinized as an actor in a legal contract; however, he acknowledges that the evidence for this ritual simply does not yet exist.
[88] Foley, "Marriage and Sacrifice," 142.

to sacrifice themselves for him, Admetus declares a passionate speech to his father (636-47, 667-669):

> Surely you were not the father of this body, nor did she, who says she bore me and calls herself my mother, give birth to me; rather, born from slave's blood, I was thrown in secret to the breast of your wife. Being put to the test you showed who you are, and I do not consider myself to be your child… you let this woman from outside the family do it, she who alone justly counts as mother and father to me… I count myself child of that one and dear nurse of her old age.

This powerful and emotional speech signifies a number of key aspects of Admetus' identity in the wake of his wife's death. In his rage, he divorces himself from relation with his parents and institutes Alcestis in their place. Gounaridou, here, provides the helpful insight that this "adoption" of Admetus casts Alcestis as both his mother and father. She exists as his mother because she gifted him life through her sacrifice, and she is his father because she gave him a sense of identity: both by naming him as caregiver to her children and by presiding over this mockery of an adoption.[89] What I believe is the most important takeaway in this passage is that Alcestis ultimately retains a female aspect even in this most extreme example of transformed identity. Furthermore, her fatherly aspect is ultimately derived from her feminine preservation of his life.

In its conclusion, the play features a symbolic marriage of Admetus and Alcestis that reinstates the natural social order of the Greek family. In a moment fraught with ambiguity of emotion, Alcestis is resurrected, the household is restored, and the family realigned.[90] This is a scene that is popularly argued to be a comic element of the play: where there was inversion there

[89] Gounaridou, *Euripides and Alcestis,* 36. Another of her arguments, that understands Alcestis as providing Admetus with a sense of identity in her function as a reflection of his flaws, is also key here to understanding a further nuance of Alcestis as father to Admetus. Slater, *Euripides "Alcestis,"* 39 also points to a particular moment in the text that refers to Admetus as the child of a [masculine] Alcestis. This is yet another striking example of the fluidity of gender and identity in this speech.
[90] Slater, *Euripides "Alcestis,"* 65-66.

is now resolution. In this chapter, it has been my goal to demonstrate to my reader a few of the specific examples that Euripides' used to represent gender in the *Alcestis*. My arguments have sprung from the basic consideration of Alcestis as a male construct to thus explore "her" motivations and the masculine aspects that she takes on in the course of the drama, to an examination of the reflective gender dynamics that come into play between Alcestis and Admetus.

This discussion of gender manipulation is key in our broader conversation about model women and their representation because it provides the reader with a further refined understanding of the boundaries of the female identity in classical Athens. In *my* conclusion, therefore, I thus harken back to Nicole Loraux who described the employment of women on the stage as "a chance to state the difference" of a Greek man and woman "before obscuring it, and then finding it again, all the richer."[91]

Chapter IV
Alcestis in Antiquity: A Comparative Study

Thus far in my investigation of Alcestis as a woman, I have explored the story of the *Alcestis*, the world for which it was written, and the specific mechanisms that Euripides employed to demonstrate and highlight the ways in which Alcestis functioned to exemplify an idealized model of a classical Athenian woman. However, this play and the conception of women that it grappled with did not simply fall out of existence after its initial performance in the City Dionysia of 438. In the following chapter, it is my intention to document the major instances in antiquity where Alcestis, and Euripides' presentation of the myth in particular, reappears in the literary and archaeological records. Ultimately, I aim to further refine our final

[91] Loraux, *Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman,* x.

understanding of the classical Athenian *Alcestis* at the same moment as I provide a telescopic view of how the presentation of Alcestis' nobility and sacrifice shifted within the framework of new societal priorities and beliefs.

I will first touch on the immediate reaction that the *Alcestis* received in Athens and some of the major motifs of the performance that tend to dominate the conversation around the myth beyond that point. This, I hope, will provide a foundation upon which I can begin to discuss later versions of the story, both recreations of the Euripidean drama and later artistic versions, and a more general conversation about Alcestis' appearance in the dialogue of Greek thought. This track will continue into the Roman understanding of the myth and how the figure of Alcestis can be seen to represent a sort of womanly virtue in a different society. Finally, I will conclude with a summary of the appearance of Alcestis in Roman funerary art and early Christian monuments and how we might understand her appearance as relating to, and differing from, her representation in Euripides' *Alcestis.*

Prior to jumping into this conversation on early reception and response, I would like to first draw the reader back to two ideas that have already been touched on in this essay: genre and success. Scholars today puzzle over the elements of the *Alcestis* that defy the mold of one genre or another, and coincidentally, the scholars of antiquity acknowledged the same question. Our best evidence for this, perhaps, is an ancient *hypothesis* attributed to Aristophanes the Grammarian. In this brief description, the play is described as being "the satyric kind in that it turns to pleasure at the end, contrary to the tragic kind," and the author notes its "change of fortune rather of the comic kind."[92] In regard to the play's success, we have already discussed its

[92] D. J. Conacher, *Euripides Alcestis* (Wiltshire: Aris & Phillips Ltd, 1988), 63. My description of the *hypothesis* is derived from Conacher's translation. He notes that this passage has been commonly attributed to Aristophanes the Grammarian and would date from the mid-third to early-second century BCE

second place victory in the competition of 438 BCE, but in the interest of highlighting Euripides' (and the *Alcestis*') place among his contemporaries, I would like to turn to LPE Parker's argument that the particular visibility of Euripides in the later works of the comic poets is evidence of the playwright's great success and visibility in Athens.[93]

There are a number of themes in the play that crystallize and resonate with its audience regardless of their cultural background. Predominant among these is a sort of eternal hope. Death is a reality that each individual must come to terms with, but the *Alcestis*, within its fantastical dialogue, offers its audience a chance to engage with the daunting realities of life and death as they are kaleidoscoped through generous gods and religious salvation on the stage.[94] Ringer frames this idea within its role on the stage in a rather moving summation, reasoning that "if it is the nature of great art to help reconcile human beings to life and death, *Alcestis* is one of the greatest artworks we possess."[95] However, as was established in the first chapter of this section, Euripides' play was popular, but it was not the only version of the myth that was known in antiquity.[96] In light of this, our conversation must take place with the understanding that although the mechanics of Euripides' playwriting are complex and meaningful, it is ultimately the story of Alcestis (a noble and pious woman) that has resonated through the millenia.

That is not to say, of course, that our discussion and the legacy of Euripides' *Alcestis* stops there. Because the performances put on at the Athenian Dionysia were written for their singular performance in competition, it is further testament to the popularity of Euripides that his plays continued to be circulated and produced after that initial performance. Within

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[93] Parker, *Euripides Alcestis,* xix. Parker further emphasizes Euripides' success by adding that "Satirists do not waste their efforts on the unpopular and unsuccessful."
[94] Markantonatos, *Euripides' "Alcestis",* 23, 29.
[95] Ringer, *Euripides and the Boundaries of the Human,* 3.
[96] Slater, *Euripides "Alcestis,"* 67.

Aristophanes' *Frogs* (52-3), a reference is made to Dionysus reading Euripides' work. While this supports the prior idea that inclusion in the comedy was a sign of a poet's popularity, it is also evidence that the text of the play was in circulation by 405 BCE.

Furthermore a rather unique discovery by C.W. Marshall provides us with an extraordinary insight into the *Alcestis*' legacy on the stage.[97] In his essay, Marshall refers to a papyrus dating between the first century BCE and the early first century CE that lists the lines of Admetus without the responses of the other characters. Citing the readability of the lines and their isolation from the larger dialogue of the scene, he argues, quite convincingly, that this is a script sheet used for a Roman era performance of Euripides' *Alcestis* in the original Greek.[98] With this evidence that depicts an antique audience continuing to engage with the play on new stages it is undeniable that the *Alcestis* had a lasting impact that would have doubtless gone on to influence conceptions of the broader myth, even for those who had been exposed to alternative versions. In the realm of theater, specifically, this array of evidence is the best known set of examples that illuminate the successes and legacy of the *Alcestis.*

In order to frame my discussion of the figure of Alcestis in different settings and media I have attempted to establish the empirical evidence for the specifically theatrical circulation of Euripides' *Alcestis* in opposition to the other examples of the myth that I introduced in the first chapter of this section. Now, as I proceed to later references to the myth of Alcestis, I invite my reader to consider this a comparative study. Even if the Euripidean text acted as explicit inspiration for a number of the Alcestis-centric conversations in antiquity, it must be remembered that the temporal distance alone would result in an altogether separate cultural

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[97] Slater, *Euripides "Alcestis,"* 69-70.

[98] C. W. Marshall, "Alcestis and the Ancient Rehearsal Process ("P. Oxy." 4546)," *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 11, no. 3 (Winter 2004): 27-45. This papyrus was found in Oxyrhynchus, Egypt and dates to the Roman era.

mindset that necessarily plays a role in their reaction to the text and its themes. Therefore, the following pages do not assume an abandonment of Euripides, but rather a conversation between his *Alcestis*, other extant versions of the story, and the reader's own experiences.

A particularly interesting reference to Alcestis occurs in Plato's *Symposium* during a discussion following the proper love among men, when Phaedrus describes her in regard to her sacrifice (179bc):

> Of this, Alcestis, the daughter of Pelias, is a monument to all Hellas; for she was willing to lay down her life on behalf of her husband, when no one else would, although he had a father and mother; but the tenderness of her love so far exceeded theirs… and so noble did this action of hers appear to the gods, as well as to men, that among the many who have done virtuously she is one of the very few to whom, in admiration of her noble action, they have granted the privilege of returning alive to earth; such exceeding honour is paid by the gods to the devotion of virtue and love.[99]

On its surface, this might seem a simple restatement of a number of the themes that have already been described in this essay; however, there are a handful of defining features that make this reference particularly valuable to our understanding of the praise that is delivered.

Most importantly, this text indicates that Alcestis' resurrection was engineered by the gods in acknowledgement of her sacrifice. Slater, although he acknowledges that the *Symposium* takes place after the performance in Athens, argues against reference to the Euripidean *Alcestis*. He refers, in particular, to the alternative version of the myth in which Persephone returns Alcestis to Admetus as an explanation for this description of the gods actively awarding her life in recognition of her nobility. While the logic of this interpretation is sound, I believe that the text of Euripides' play does not exclude a reading of the resurrection as machinated by the gods in recognition of Alcestis' excellence.[100]

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[99] Plato, *Symposium* 179bc, trans. B. Jowett.

[100] Given this reference, the apparent timeline, the reference to Admetus' argument with Pheres, and my own Markanotonatian-reading of this passage, I believe that a reading of this text as referencing Euripides may well-founded.

In his book on the religious and mythological readings of *Alcestis*, Andreas Markantonatos draws his reader's attention to the recurring theme of natural hierarchies and the necessity of death. In particular, he references Euripides' prologue in which Apollo describes how he came into service of Admetus' house after he, enraged at his father for killing his son Asclepius, slaughtered the Cyclopes and was punished for his insolence (1-7). Markantonatos describes the employment of this myth as a larger metaphor for inversions of natural order and its reestablishment throughout the play. In particular, in this scene we see Zeus, the ultimate power and king of the gods, as re-aligning his domain by killing Asclepius for his transgressions, and instituting a transformation of Apollo into a servant that is then corrected prior to the events of the play. In this context we can therefore read Heracles, the son of Zeus and an extension of his authority, carrying out Alcestis' resurrection as the gods permitting her to live her life in its natural course.[101] This reading would, of course, support an argument that the *Symposium* made specific reference to Euripides' *Alcestis.*

In addition, Gounaridou reminds her reader that this "elevation" comes only after a discussion of specifically masculine love.[102] Because we have established that both Euripides' manipulation of traditional gender roles and the ambiguous genre of the play were topics understood and discussed in antiquity, we cannot imagine that this placement of Alcestis in the *Symposium* was random. Thus, if we read Plato as referencing the *Alcestis,* we can understand a continued dialogue on the nature of Alcestis' *kleos* and the type of nobility that her actions represented. Ultimately, a reference to the *Alcestis* in Plato, a play bracketed within a traditional argument about the natural order of life and death, seems to me to evoke philosophical questions

[101] Markantonatos, *Euripides Alcestis,* 94. This argument is, of course, firmly grounded in the arguments between Pheres and Admetus as well.
[102] Gounaridou, *Euripides and Alcestis,* 36-37.

of hope that support our understanding that this "hope" is one of the primary themes and attractions inherent to Euripides' story that attracted an ancient audience and that continues to enchant readers today.

I have encouraged an understanding, I hope, that the myth of Alcestis endured in Greek thought not only as the tale of a noble woman, but as a dialogue actively engaged in questions of gender, *kleos,* and resurrection. As I have previously indicated, this dialogue continues enthusiastically into the Roman context. A two-line fragment has come down to us from Accius, a Roman tragedian whom we know to have died in 101 BC. Parker acknowledges this fragment that describes Alcestis "when she had shrieked as she was drawn back from the world below,"[103] arguing that this seems to be a rendering of the myth that differs from Euripides'.[104] Here, we have explicit evidence of a new stage production of the myth that appears to be a very different handling of the same events in Alcestis' story.

Ovid, ever eager to talk about relationships, refers to Alcestis as a "model of conjugal fidelity,"[105] and is followed by Valerius Maximus who delivers a reproach to the character of Admetus.[106] However, the most intriguing evidence that we have for the story of Alcestis on the Roman stage comes from Juvenal who scorns by comparison the ignoble Roman wives who "watch Alcestis taking on the fate of her husband."[107] Regardless of whether this reference refers to a performance of Euripides' *Alcestis* or another version of the story, it is notable that this

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[103] Fr. 20, E. H. Wormington (1940).
[104] Parker, *Euripides Alcestis,* xxiv. Parker reasons his assignment of a different story as due to the description of Alcestis' resurrection and its apparently violent nature. However, Slater, *Euripides "Alcestis,"* 69, argues that the play was motivated by Euripides *Alcestis*.
[105] Parker, *Euripides Alcestis,* xxv. Here Parker notes that Alcestis was listed alongside other notable examples of excellent women such as Penelope, Andromache, Laodamia, and Ovid's own wife (*Pont.* 3.1.105, *Trist*. 5.14.37).
[106] Parker, *Euripides Alcestis,* xxv references Valerius Maximus, *Factorum et Dictorum Memoralibium* (4.6.1)
[107] Juvenal *Sixth Satire*, 6.652-3. Recall here the performance of Euripides' play evidenced by the papyrus as evidence for the possibility of a Greek performance of his *Alcestis* in Roman Egypt.

describes a production that, while still performed by men, was observed by women. Even if this remains a faithful reproduction of Euripides' *Alcestis,* the conversation between the actors and their audience has undergone an undeniable transformation by means of the presence of women in the Roman theater.

Statius, interestingly, also chose to focus on Admetus, only briefly describing Alcestis' sacrifice. He, however, indicates that "because Admetus grieved passionately for her, it is said that she was brought back from below by the efforts of Heracles,"[108] a reading that seems to emphasize the affection between the pair. Moreover, in our overview of antique receptions thus far, Statius stands as an outlier in this discussion by describing the grief of Admetus, instead of the nobility of Alcestis, as warranting godly intervention. It is entirely possible that Statius was referring to a different version of the myth,[109] but taken together, these Roman authors of the late Republic and early Empire demonstrate a marked fixation on the connubial aspects of the story: wifely virtue, a husband's failure to protect his wife, and the mourning of a beloved wife. There are a multitude of factors that this apparent pattern could be ascribed to, but I believe that it is productive to view them as snapshots of the marital preoccupations of a Roman man during this period.

Finally, I would like to discuss just one more example of the modalities through which the societies of Greece and Rome interacted with the legacy of Alcestis: the funerary monument. To recall our conversation about the religious aspects of Euripides' *Alcestis*, we can now see that the symbol of clasped hands in Alcestis' marriage and lamentation makes an appearance on

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[108] Parker, *Euripides Alcestis,* xxv here refers to Statius *Silvae* 3.3.192-4, 5.3.272, *Theb* 5.435, 6.389-549. These poems of Statius largely discuss the propriety of mourners. Slater, *Euripides "Alcestis,"* 68-69. Slater, importantly, notes that Juvenal's reference to Sophocles in this poem would naturally make allusions to Euripides' version of the *Alcestis*.

[109] I believe that an understood reference to another version of the Alcestis myth is appropriate here. Importantly, in Euripides' *Alcestis*, Heracles acknowledges a debt that he owed Admetus for his *xenia*, but this very act of hosting Heracles violates Admetus' observation of mourning.

Roman funerary iconography as a particularly moving means of demonstrating the affection of a loving marriage. In general, this idea is far more visible in the Roman tradition, and Slater argues that this can be attributed to the particular ritual of *dextrarum junctio* that was prevalent in depictions of an idealized marriage in the Roman Empire.[110] Because this idea can be seen to stand in contrast to the Greek tradition of a marriage as equated to an exchange of property, namely the wife, we can understand that the Roman tradition has received the Greek story and adapted it to align with its own conception of marital relationships.

A particularly marvelous depiction of the story of Alcestis can be found on the second century sarcophagus of C. Junius Euhodus and Metilia Acte (Fig. 1). This sarcophagus, originally found in Ostia, features the death of Alcestis centrally, bracketed on one side by grieving onlookers, and on the other by her own resurrection and reception by Admetus as it is mediated by Heracles. In interpreting this depiction, Susan Wood points to the motif of hope and resurrection inherent to the myth.[111] Niall Slater, however, argues for an interpretation drawn from the text of the *Alcestis* and describes the imagery as evidence that they "hoped their marriage might last beyond the grave."[112] I am personally inclined to agree with Slater as this reading would evoke a very specific moment in Euripides' play (357-364):

> If only the tongue and limbs of Orpheus were mine, so that in charming either Demeter's daughter or that one's husband with my songs and I could take you from Hades, I would go down there, and neither Pluto's hound nor Charon, the conductor of the dead, with his oar would stop me until I had set your life up again in the light. But at least expect me there when I die and make ready a house so that you can live together with me.

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[110] Slater, *Euripides "Alcestis,"* 63.
[111] Susan Wood, "Alcestis on Roman Sarcophagi," *American Journal of Archaeology* 82, no. 4 (Autumn 1978): 499-510.
[112] Slater, *Euripides "Alcestis,"* 73, supports his argument by referencing the inscription that describes the pair as "devotees of the cult of the Magna Mater."

Not only does this text reference Orpheus, a mythical man whose story was known in both Greek and Roman contexts for its discourse on resurrection and the afterlife, but the very order of the images on the sarcophagus appear to mirror Admetus' description of the afterlife. It is not uncommon for images in Roman monuments to be read from left to right, the natural direction for most modern western societies as well, and if the figures are read in this order, one encounters first a crowd of grieving companions, and then the central death of Alcestis. Notably, the orientation of the figures does not call the eye to this image, but the two look ahead to their union. Ultimately, I believe it critical that this unification, directly before the lord and mistress of Hades, is the central focal point of the monument.

A further examination reveals that there are figures to the right of the central image that face back to the depiction of the death on the center of the monument, but they are relegated to the background and parallel their counterparts on the opposite side, rounding out the overall composition. Note also the remarkable representation of the deceased individuals, and the veristic representation that they embody at the scene of the death. The moment that they look forward to depicts them as they are young and restored, joined in eternal, divinely mediated union before the gods of the underworld. This sarcophagus, undoubtedly, invokes the story of the *Alcestis*, but in a self-conscious manner. This pair is aged and mortal. They are aware of their limited time on Earth; however, they find hope in the myth's reunion of loving husband and wife after the catastrophe of death. If we read the images in this way, we can thus understand a specific, second century fixation on the cultic elements of the myth that go beyond the earlier associations of the myth with the nobility of the woman and the love of the married pair. Therefore, this is yet another example of a representation of the Alcestis myth, specifically

Euripides' version, that demonstrates the remarkable flexibility of the story as it encounters new contexts and cultural concerns.

Alcestis' legacy continued to endure. In the fourth century hypogeum of Vicentius and Vibia, we find a fascinating moment of overlap of the ancient myth of Alcestis as it is depicted in a wall-painting found within a Christian catacomb (Fig. 2). In this representation, Alcestis takes on a new role alongside Mercury as she leads Vibia, the deceased Roman wife, to the rulers of the underworld (here named in inscription as Dispater and Aeracura). Niall Slater references the similarity of this tomb to another along the Via Flaminia, the Tomb of the Nasones, that depicts this same motif.[113] This pair, yet again, is an example of the evolution of Alcestis (rendered here as a female figure helpful in the navigation of death) as her story traverses through societies and time.

Furthermore, the Vibia and Nasones tombs must be taken as part of a larger conversation in funerary art that takes place in another, predominantly Christian catacomb on the Via Latina. In the early fourth century, the Edict of Milan granted Romans the freedom to openly practice, and depict in the landscape of the city's art, their religion.[114] This initial persecution and eventual freedom of Christian iconography brought about a blended interaction between traditionally pagan imagery within Christian themes of death and the afterlife in funerary monuments. The Via Latina catacomb exemplifies this collision of ideologies through the lens of the Alcestis myth.

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[113] *LIMC* s.v. Alkestis no. 25. Slater, *Euripides "Alcestis,"* 73. Here, he notes that the Nasones likely dates to the second century CE. This reappearance of motif could indicate a particular pattern of the community's continued fixations, but most importantly is an example of a continued employment of Alcestis as a figure in this manner.

[114] Kevin W. Kaatz, *Voices of Early Christianity: Documents from the Origins of Christianity* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2013), 228.

Various treatments of Alcestis include a possible depiction of Alcestis' moment of sacrifice where she swears her life in exchange of an ailing Admetus,[115] and Heracles leading Alcestis from the depths of the underworld to her waiting husband (Fig. 4). These images are clearly evocative of general themes such as love and the afterlife that track across both the (traditionally Greek) myth of Alcestis and Christianity. However, because of their placement in a Christian catacomb, and their depiction of the hero as benevolent guide to the deceased, it seems appropriate that these images (as a group) hint at a representation of Heracles as Christ in the early Christian context. With respect to Euripides' *Alcestis*, a Christian representation would indicate a particular blending of traditional and Christian ideas within the figure of Heracles, the son of a god who becomes himself immortal after a death mediated by his father Zeus, as the savior and guide of Alcestis and the deceased.

Throughout this section I have examined the varying ways in which Alcestis functioned as a model woman in Euripides' *Alcestis.* To further develop this understanding of Alcestis' conceptualization as a noble figure, in this chapter I have assembled the evidence for instances within antiquity of encounters with Alcestis in the dialogue of later cultural perceptions of the myth. This evidence has progressed from the immediate representation of Euripides' *Alcestis* in performance, the Greek conceptualization of this representation, the Roman conversation of Alcestis and her marriage and broader examples of her depiction in funerary art. It has been my intent to highlight these moments in antiquity, in the interest of achieving a more nuanced understanding of the *Alcestis* and its representation of the classical Athenian ideal for women through comparative study.

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[115] Slater, *Euripides "Alcestis,"* 73-74. Here, Slater refers his reader to Beverly Berg and her interpretation of this depiction as a wife invoking 'her devotion to the husband who predeceased her.'

Taken together in this way, it is clear that the broad themes of the story such as hope and marital devotion endure in perpetuity. However, the subtle differences in representation within individual employments of the story not only validate our reading of Euripides' version as representative of his classical Greek conception of women, but further allow for a broad understanding of shifting cultural priorities in antiquity through space and time. In particular, it has been my goal to highlight the ways in which Euripides made use of genre and gender as devices that allowed him to host a conversation with his contemporary audience. Critically, this conversation was grounded in the fact that, although there were moments of inversion of gender roles and social norms, each noble action that Alcestis carried out was motivated by her traditional identity as a woman, and the disruptions of death and resurrection were neatly restored by the hand of the divine at the end of the play.

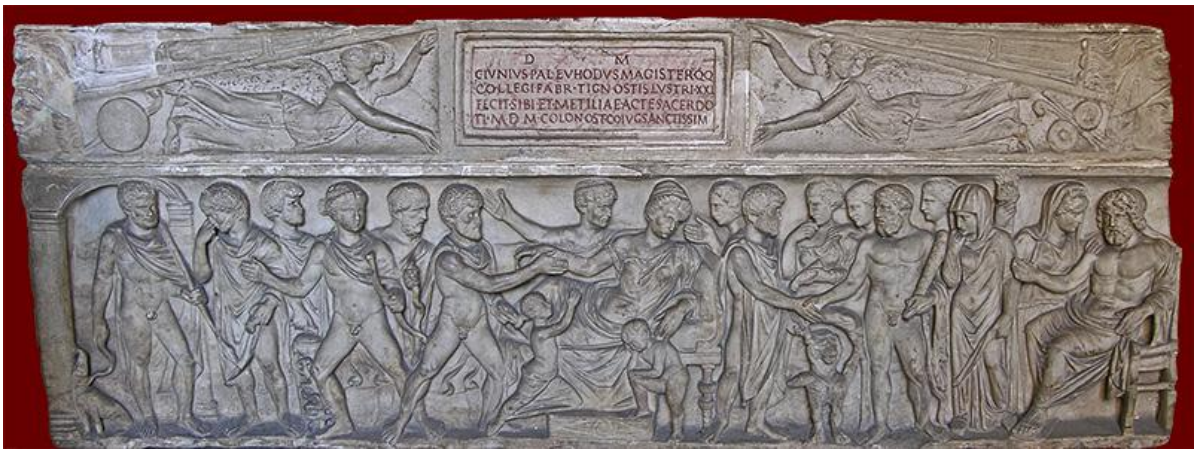

Figure 1: Marble Sarcophagus of Metilia Acte
Rome, Chiaramonti corridor, Vatican Museum.
(Credits: Barbara McManus, 2007. http://www.vroma.org/. Open source for non-commercial use.)

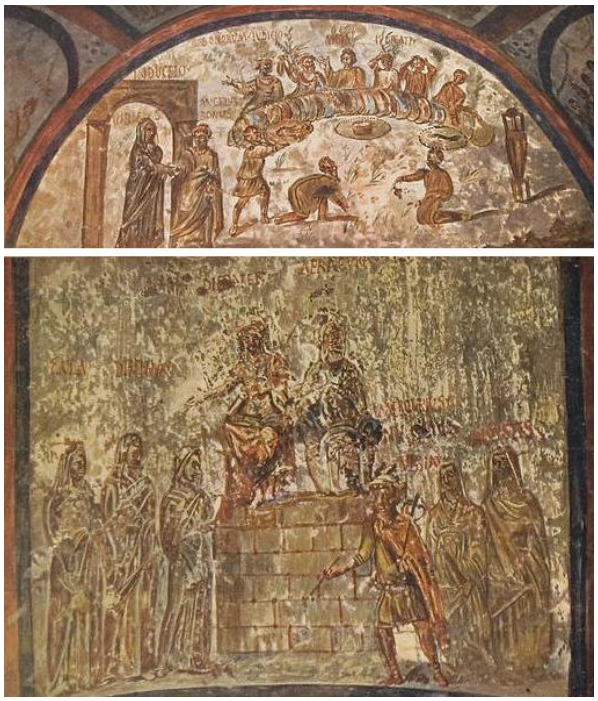

Figure 2: Hypogeum of Vibia. Via Sacra, Rome.
(Source: Joseph Wilpert, 1902.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hypogeum_of_Vibia#/media/File:Vibia_Wilpert.jpg)

Fig. 4: Christian Catacomb of the Via Latina, 4th century.
(Credits: A. Grabar, The Beginnings of Christian Art, p. 228, ps. 251.
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Alcestis-Catacomb.jpg)

III. Perpetua: A Roman and a Christian

Chapter V
The *Acta* and the *Passio*

In 203 CE, a small group of Christian catechumens were accused and convicted in the town of Thuburbo Minus, just outside of Carthage.[116] Among them was a young woman, Vibia Perpetua, who has been especially key in historical and scholarly dialogue because she recorded the details of her imprisonment very nearly to the point of her own death. In antiquity, Perpetua and her companions were celebrated as martyrs, but Perpetua's written account left a particular mark on her contemporaries that established her as an influential figure in the early Christian community.[117] This came about after the swift incorporation of her narrative into a document called the *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis* by a separate editor.[118] That document and Perpetua's story became a point of discussion in influential sermons and was disseminated among Christians throughout the empire. Vibia Perpetua left behind an remarkable legacy, and, in the following chapters, I will seek to explore an understanding of her existence as both a noble woman within Christianity and as a civic outsider in opposition to traditional Roman civic values.

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[116] For questions of date, see T. D. Barnes, *Early Christianity and the Roman Empire* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1984), 522-524. See C.I.M.I. van Beek, *Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis* (Nijmegan, 1936), 162-63 for evidence. See also Walter Ameling, "*Femina Liberaliter Instituta*- Some Thoughts on a Martyr's Liberal Education," in *Perpetua's Passions: Multidisciplinary Approaches to the Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis,* ed. Jan N. Bremmer and Marco Formisano (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[117] Evidence for and discussion of the annual celebration of Perpetua and Felicitas is detailed in the eighth chapter of this thesis. This discussion includes her influence on the early church.

[118] Although it has been argued that this editor was Tertullian, this has been thoroughly dismissed in Heffernan, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, Bremmer, ed., *Perpetua's Passions*, and by other scholars.

The *Passio* is not a text that is straightforward in its nature. The reports of Perpetua herself feel almost like diary entries, but unlike a diary, they were written to be read. They also exhibit a stylistic self-awareness and a specific religious expression that stands apart from what a modern reader would consider to be typical for a diary entry.[119] This intent of communicating religious ideas is emphasized by the introduction and conclusion of the editor. Because of this, the *Passio* is primarily read as it is described in the first chapter, and we can understand its creation as a set of "*nova documenta*" among "*vetera fidei exempla*" that aim to make God "*honoretur*" and its readers "*confortetur*." Ultimately, the fact that the greatest portion of this remarkable text is supposed, and currently considered,[120] to have been "*conscriptum manu sua*" by Perpetua herself plays a key role in its examination. The specific evidence that indicates the *Passio*'s authorship and legitimacy will be described throughout this conversation, but to put it simply, this text cannot be read transparently as distinctively a diary or a religious document. However, it exists as a fascinating example of the "*ipsissima verba"* of an ancient woman that, through the filters of her male counterparts, has come down to us as venerable and deserving of acclaim and celebration.

A study of the *Passio* must be modified by the understanding that it was not the only version of Perpetua's martyrdom that was distributed in antiquity. Another, shorter, version called the *Acta SS. Perpetua et Felicitatis* existed as well.[121] Furthermore, a version of Perpetua's account existed in Greek translation in antiquity.[122] A great deal of ink has been spilled in

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[119] Heffernan, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity,* 4.

[120] Evidence and arguments regarding the authorship of the *Passio* are discussed in the seventh chapter of this thesis.

[121] For evidence and information on the existence of the *Acta*, Bremmer and Formisano direct readers to *His accedunt Acta Sanctorum Martyrum Tarachi, Probi, et Andronici. Ex codici MS. S. Victoris Parisiensis* (Paris, 1664), 1-37 (*Passio*), 78-87 (*Acta*).

[122] Bremmer, *Perpetua's Passions*, 3-4. For more information on the discovery and initial documentation of this Greek text, see J.R. Harris and S.K. Gifford, *The Acts of the Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas* (London, 1890). This Greek text is a full version of Perpetua's *Acta*.

determining which was the original document and understanding the function and transmission of the others,[123] but it is broadly accepted that the *Passio* was the original document, and that the others, discussed below, were written with knowledge of it.

The creation timeline for these multiple versions begins in 203 CE with the documentation of Perpetua's experiences, in Latin, during the procuratorship of Hilarianus and the celebration of Geta Caesar's birthday.[124] After her death, it appears that the full text of the *Passio* was in circulation before 209 CE, as evidenced by Tertullian's *De Anima* 40.4, which contains specific reference to the *Passio*.[125] Evidence was found as recently as 2007 that indicates that the *Acta* was known to Augustine, and Bremmer and Formisano argue for a creation of this document in the mid-to-late third century.[126] Although the text's history after the death of Perpetua is not straightforward, the originality of the *Passio* and the consequent creation of the *Acta* and the Greek translation is widely accepted. Thus, my investigation of Perpetua as a Roman woman and Christian will proceed with the presumption that the *Passio* is the most authentic account.

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[123] Bremmer, *Perpetua's Passions*, notes the immediate dismissal of the possibility of an original composition in Greek, referencing J.A. Robinson, *The Passion of St. Perpetua* (Cambridge, 1891) and P. Franchi de' Cavalieri, *Scritti agiografici*, (1962). For a thorough discussion of the arguments surrounding the evidence for Latin composition, see Heffernan, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity,* 79-100.

[124] Heffernan, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity,* 61-64 provides detailed evidence for the dates of the procuratorship of Hilarianus in Carthage, citing DNP, 8:218 and Leclercq, "Perpetue et Felicite", col. 420. For allusions to the celebratory games at which the martyrs were killed, see Heffernan, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity,* 68-75. See also Farrell (2012) p. 305.

[125] See Heffernan, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity,* 66 and Tertullian, *De Anim.* 40.4: "*Quomodo Perpetuae, fortissima martyr, sub die passionis…"* Here, the argument revolves around the idea that this must have been written after the widespread circulation of the *Passio*, but before Tertullian's adoption of Montanism which is dated by Osborn, *Tertullian* to be 207.

[126] Brent Shaw, "The Passion of Perpetua," *Past & Present* 139, no. 1 (1993), 25, tells us that the *Acta* was a document characteristic of the mid-fourth century CE. Bremmer, *Perpeuta's Passions,* 35-39 takes this further, detailing evidence that reference to the *Acta* can be seen in Augustine *Sermo* 282 auct. 6.2: *in uteri oneri* in reference to *Acta* (II) 9.2.

Scholars have historically had a tendency to fumble when it comes to assigning a category to the *Passio.* It is neither a diary nor a sermon,[127] nor was it entirely composed by a Christian woman as opposed to a male editor. Further, its circulation shortly after the year 203 C.E., during the high empire, places it among Roman literature, but its status as a Christian document has resulted in its consideration among the large body of texts associated with the period of late antiquity and imperial decline.[128] Because of these questions of category, it is appropriate to consider the document's nature through the lenses of law, religion, gender, and antique reception within this essay. The flexibility of the *Passio*'s genre also serves to heighten Perpetua as a particularly interesting case-study for this essay's examination of women and how they were perceived within their societal institutions in classical antiquity. Now, having described for the reader some of the major questions about this text, I will briefly outline the primary events of the story.

The *Passio* begins with an editorial introduction in the first and second chapters that invites the subsequent sections to be read as a "*nova documenta*" for the study and celebration of Christian faith. It also introduces the figures of the martyrs (*Passio* II):

> *Revocatus et Felicitas, conserva eius, Saturninus et Secundulus; inter hos et Vibia Perpetua, honeste nata, liberaliter instituta, matonaliter nupta.'*

Thus far in my discussion of the text I have glossed over the stories of Perpetua's companions. Although their stories are remarkable and worthy of study in their own right, especially those of Felicitas (after whom the *Passio* is also named) and Saturus (who, within the text, records his own vision and is thus named as a third author of this document), this essay will feature them

[127] Evidence that Perpetua's *Passio* played a role in influencing later Martyrologies is explored in the eighth chapter of this essay.
[128] Joseph Farrell, "The Canonization of Perpetua," in *Perpetua's Passions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) delivers arguments for the *Passio*'s flexible place among various genres.

only in tangent to conversation about Perpetua. Above all, explicit analysis of the personage of Perpetua is the priority of this section.[129]

The account of Perpetua begins in the third chapter where she describes her father visiting her while she waited among her persecutors, anticipating imprisonment. After a brief argument about Perpetua's identity as a Christian (thoroughly explored later in this essay), her father leaves in distress. Over the course of a few days the catechumens are baptized and Perpetua is taken into a dark prison cell alongside her companions. They are rescued from this terrible place by their deacons and companions who purchase, by bribe (*praemio*), short visits to better quarters. For the majority of their imprisonment the martyrs, in fact, were allowed to see visitors, and Perpetua is delighted to encounter her mother, brother, and young child here. In the fourth chapter, Perpetua's (Christian) brother encourages her to seek prayer and visions. This results in her first prophetic dream where she describes a magnificent bronze ladder that is being climbed by Saturus, a martyr who joined the group after their initial arrest, and guarded by weapons and a "*draco cubans mirae magnitudinis*." Perpetua follows the example of Saturus and ascends the ladder, stepping upon the head of the great serpent. A heavenly field awaits her, and she wakes to report this vision of hope and salvation to her brother.

The fifth chapter documents another distressing visit from Perpetua's father. He begs her to renounce her faith and "*miserere… ne universos nos extermines*." The sixth chapter takes place at their trial, where Perpetua's companions confess their faith. As Perpetua approaches the procurator, her father reappears, pleading with her once again. Hilarianus, the procurator, encourages her to take heed and escape punishment, but Perpetua refuses again. When her father

[129] For a particularly detailed reading of the character of Felicitas, see Jan N. Bremmer, "Felicitas: The Martyrdom of a Young African Woman" in *Perpetua's Passions*, ed. Jan N. Bremmer and Marco Formisano (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

persists in disrupting her trial she is forced to watch him be thrown to the ground and beaten for his doggedness. After this condemnation, her father refuses her permission to see her child. However, she is able to find joy in her discovery that she no is longer physiologically compelled to breastfeed, and she understands this as a sign of God's love and approval.

Chapter seven details another example of Perpetua's divine inspiration and religious power when she sees her brother Dinocrates, who died young, suffering in a sort of purgatory. After this vision she begins to pray for his salvation, and his salvation is apparently granted in chapter eight, where she again sees Dinocrates, but finds him clean and free from "*poena.*" In a final visit in chapter nine, her father grieves her religious adamance, but Perpetua's faith is reaffirmed in the tenth chapter, when she envisions Pomponius, her deacon, leading her to an amphitheater. She undergoes a transformation (*facta sum masculus*), and defeats her opponent by once again treading on his head. She reports that this vision signals that her death will signify victory over the devil, and that she will ultimately be triumphant.

The eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth chapters are an insertion of the voice of Saturus as he details a vision in which he ascends to the garden of heaven alongside Perpetua. Ultimately, these are the final words from the martyrs themselves, and it is the original editor that completes the *Passio* and describes their deaths. He notes the passing of Secundulus, one of the martyrs, in prison as well as the birth of Felicitas' child, given to another Christian woman to be raised amongst Christians. The day of the games is described, and the martyrs undergo their torture and humiliation with noble spirits, Perpetua most markedly of all. They are thrown to beasts, gored, and finally guided to the middle of the arena where gladiators deliver the final blow. Saturus, in fulfillment of Perpetua's first vision, is the first to be killed. Perpetua herself, however, is

reverently described as leading the blade to her own throat after a failed strike. The *Passio* ends in panegyric, celebrating the "*fortissimi ac beatissimi martyres*" for their faith and their deeds.

This story is radiant in intensity, complexity, and emotional weight, and there is a multitude of evidence that it was considered inspiring although, perhaps, slightly controversial in antiquity.[130] Questions about Perpetua's identity within this story have captured the minds of scholars for hundreds of years, and there is no shortage of literature on this subject. She comes down to us as a young Roman woman, a wife, a mother, and a daughter, but she was also a Christian and a revered martyr with remarkable visionary abilities. It is not my aim not to provide the reader with a comprehensive study of each important moment in the *Passio,* but to examine current understanding of the text and its position within Roman society so that I might put her identity and motivations in conversation with the figure of Alcestis and the reader.

In my investigation of how this woman, Vibia Perpetua, existed in relation to her society and was conceived of by her contemporaries, I will again take a three-tiered approach to examine questions of her identity and how her legacy became well-known and celebrated among Christians. Within the context of Roman social institutions, I will primarily focus on her legal status as a Christian woman within her family, marriage, and the Roman state, and my discussion of religion will continue this conversation and detail the collision of traditional Roman practices and Christian doctrine. In looking at questions of her gender and femininity, I will then turn to modern scholarly consensus to answer questions about Perpetua's authorship and internal identity. Ultimately, this discussion will conclude with Perpetua's impact and the careful handling of her account by early Christian fathers to provide her as a model for Christian women that was worthy of celebration.

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[130] The manipulation and molding of Perpetua's account is addressed in the eighth chapter of this essay.

Chapter VI
Roman Law and Christianity in Confrontation

There have been a number of studies that detail the persecution and legal affairs implicit in Christian martyrdom, and Perpetua's accounts are featured in many of these.[131] Working within modern conceptions of how law codes functioned in text and in reality, it is my goal to investigate Perpetua's paradoxical existence as a woman who was a societal outsider and a disobedient citizen who also embodied the pinnacle of Christian morality and disposition. To do this, I will discuss the disorder that she caused in the traditional hierarchies of family and social authority. Embedded within this conversation is the reality of genuine familial affection and how it operated both within and outside of written law. I will briefly touch upon the roles that Roman law and Christian religion played in determining Perpetua's identity as a mother. Finally, I will attempt to outline how traditional Roman religiosity encountered and rejected the cult of Christ. This question is key in our discussion of martyrdom because it clarifies the moral perceptions, on either side, of a Christian's trial and punishment.

To begin, let us understand Perpetua's persecution to be an example of Roman society reacting to her status as a social outcast. In the Roman Empire, celebration of Christianity was intolerable within traditional ideals as they existed in the early third century under the reign of Septimius Severus. T.D. Barnes establishes the timeline of persecution in which Perpetua's martyrdom took place. Prior to the the third century, the policy of the emperors was generally to permit Christians a quiet existence as long as they were not the source of political discord;

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[131] For Perpetua's trial, see James Rives, "The Piety of a Persecutor," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1996). For general Christian persecution, see Barnes, *Early Christianity and the Roman Empire*. In addition, Judith Evans-Grubbs, *Women and the Law in the Roman Empire: A Sourcebook on Marriage, Divorce, and Widowhood* (London: Routledge, 2002), is an excellent sourcebook for the general status of Roman women in law.

however, execution was the solution to occasions of Christians acting disruptively.[132] In addition to this precedent, Septimius Severus published an edict during his reign that appears to have outlawed the conversion from Judaism to Christianity, and another that generally punished new converts (*catechumens*), but proper interpretation of these edicts is controversial.[133] If we turn to historical evidence, however, it is clear that a general persecution of Christians was carried out under Severus in Northern Africa from approximately 201 CE until at least 206 CE.[134]

If persecution was a reaction, then what was the moral evil that Romans were reacting to? Fundamentally, Christians were a danger to Roman traditions because of their inversion of the typical social hierarchy. A source for their perceived crimes is found in Celsus, a second century writer who wrote invective literature on the troubles caused by Christians and was quoted by Origen, in *Contra Celsus*, below (3.55):

> But whenever [Christians] get hold of children in private and some stupid women with them, they let out some astounding statements as, for example, that they must not pay any attention to their father and schoolteachers, but must obey [the Christians]; they say that these talk nonsense and have no understanding, and that in reality they neither know nor are able to do anything good, but are taken up with mere empty chatter. But they alone, they say, know the right way to live, and if the children would believe them, they would become happy and make their home happy as well… But, if they like, [the children] should leave father and schoolmasters, and go along with the women and little children who are playfellows... that they may learn perfection. And by saying this they persuade them.[135]

Here, Celsus attributes the spread of Christianity to the foolishness of children and women, lured in by the Christians' promises of happiness. Margaret MacDonald pinpoints the Roman

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[132] Barnes, *Early Christianity and the Roman Empire,* 32-40. Barnes cites historical sources such as Tacitus *Annales* xv, 44ff the description of the Christian persecution after the fire of 64, Pliny's exchanges with Trajan on the proper punishment of Christians (*Epistles* 10.95-96), and Eusebius, *HE* v, 21, 3ff where he describes the violent treatment of a slave who accused his master of Christianity without due cause. The master was eventually condemned to death.

[133] Barnes, *Early Christianity and the Roman Empire,* argues that Jewish and Christians peoples were not persecuted to the same degree, citing *Elag*. 3, 4/5 ; *Alex.* 22,4.

[134] Barnes, *Early Christianity and the Roman Empire,* 41. Here, he cites J. Rea, "The Prefecture of Claudius Julianus", *La Parola del Passato* xxii (1967), 48.

[135] Translated by Margaret Y. MacDonald, 2002.

discomfort with Christianity to be the result of "insubordination within the family group,"[136] and further argues that Celsus was correct in asserting that women played a large part in this inversion of hierarchy by means of their roles in the household and the community.[137] Roman persecution was therefore, at least in part, an attempt to maintain proper social order among families and citizens.

The Roman family was a highly valued institution. This idea is evident in both the legends of the empire and the laws that maintained each family's hierarchical structure. Augustus emphasized this idea when he laid out regulations for families in his *Leges Iuliae*, but his legislation harkened back to the idealization of Lucretia as the ideal wife and the supposedly superior morals of Roman ancestors.[138] Moreover, family traditions and relationships could carry great emotional value as well. Within the *Passio,* there is overwhelming evidence of the love that Perpetua's father had for her and their family as a whole. One demonstration of fatherly affection and familial responsibility is her father's exceptional degree of investment in Perpetua's education. Suzanne Dixon referred to the act of a parent teaching, or arranging for the tutelage, of their child as an example of "intense parental involvement."[139] In the next chapter, the evidence that Perpetua's father provided her with the utmost educational opportunity is examined.

Within the language of Roman law, it could be possible to misinterpret a woman's marriage as a dissolution of her relationships with her natal family. However, Dixon argues that

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[136] Margaret Y. MacDonald, "Was Celsus Right? The Role of Women in the Expansion of Early Christianity," in *Early Christian Families in Context*, ed. David L. Balch and Carolyn Osiek (Grand Rapids, Mich: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), 157.
[137] MacDonald, "Was Celsus Right?," 158, 184.
[138] Suzanne Dixon, *The Roman Family* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 21.
[139] Dixon, *The Roman Family,* 116-117.

women maintained close affiliation with their relatives despite their legal change in status.[140] This remained true in early Christianity throughout the reign of Justinian, with women remaining in the *potestas* of their fathers despite their marriage.[141] All of this evidence serves to illuminate the fact that the emotional dynamics of Roman family relationships cannot be perfectly understood in the language of legal texts alone. We can thus sympathize with Perpetua's father and his passionate appeals and disruption of her trial. As Luca Bagetto understood it, "the law of [her] father's love exceeded the *lex imperii*."[142] This idea sparks a wry irony, because the father's very desire for Perpetua to realign herself as a citizen impels him to act out in his own moment of civic disorder.

In the Roman Empire, the *paterfamilias* was the supreme head of their household and maintained responsibility and control over those beneath him.[143] By steadfastly adhering to her Christian identity, Perpetua scorned her father's social authority and took part in the very inversion of Roman family structure that Celsus found so abhorrent.[144] However, Perpetua, despite any ideas of her as a "foolish woman," did maintain the right to represent herself on trial.[145] When her father initially interrupted her confession, he was encouraged by Hilarianus. The proconsul supported his pleas and promised Perpetua forgiveness should she renounce

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[140] Dixon, *The Roman Family,* 5.
[141] Dixon, *The Roman Family,* 48, 81.
[142] Luca Bagetto, "*Nova Exempla*: The New Testament of the *Passio Perpetuae*," ed. Jan N. Bremmer and Marco Formisano (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 264.
[143] Dixon, *The Roman Family,* 40. Evans-Grubbs, *Women and the Law,* 17. Evans-Grubbs refers to Gaius, *Institutes* 1.55: "Likewise in our power are our children whom we have begotten in legitimate marriage. This law belongs to Roman citizens."
[144] Keith Bradley, "Sacrificing the Family: Christian Martyrs and their Kin," *Ancient Narrative* 3 (2003), 2, describes how Christianity "undermined the conventional relationships between father and child in Roman society." In regard to Perpetua's accounts specifically he notes that Perpetua's identity as a Christian permitted her to loose herself from her natal family relations. This idea will be discussed in further detail in the seventh chapter.
[145] Evans-Grubbs, *Women and the Law,* refers readers to *Sent. Pauli* I.II.2: "A woman is not prohibited from undertaking the work of a legal representative in regard to her own affair."

Christ. Within Roman law, this intervention on the part of the judge was not entirely unheard of. Judgement often observed familial affection and operated with a degree of flexibility in matters of *pietas* and the ruling official's execution of law.[146] Despite this leniency, her father's continued pleas were eventually deemed obstructive to the trial, and he was beaten.[147]

Perpetua's husband is a difficult figure to maneuver about conceptually, simply because there is no reference to him in any version of Perpetua's martyrdom. In general, we know that an upper-class Roman woman entered an arranged marriage in her mid-to-late teens,[148] and that her primary function as a wife was continuation of the family and its traditions.[149] In the second chapter of the *Passio* Perpetua is described as "*matronaliter nupta*," but this idea is no further modified. Brent Shaw argues that the absence of the husband is an indication of the couple's estrangement.[150] MacDonald lays out support for this reading, and she references Rodney Stark to support her postulation that Christian wives disrupted the social order by challenging the religious authority of their pagan husbands.[151] This question will likely never be resolved as it is impossible to discern the status of Perpetua's marriage. However, I argue that to attribute her

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[146] See Dixon, *The Roman Family,* 38; for the flexibility of a praetor's judgements and 107 for the courts' observation of familial ties.

[147] Evans-Grubbs, *Women and the Law,* 8-9, provides evidence for the social hierarchy of the *honestiores*. However, this violence against Perpetua's father, a member of the decurion class, by order of Hilarianus (an equestrian) was not common in antiquity. Ultimately, Ameling, "*Feminal Liberaliter Instituta,*" 83-84; argues that Hilarianus' superior rank made this possible, if uncommon. In addition, Peter Garnsey, *Social Status and Legal Privilege in the Roman Empire*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), provides evidence that such exceptional punishments were especially common in cases of Christian persecution.

[148] Brent Shaw, "The Age of Roman Girls at Marriage: Some Reconsiderations," *Journal of Roman Studies* 77 (1987): 17-57, has made the convincing argument that Roman women likely married later in their teens than earlier supposed. This aligns with Perpetua's reality as a 22 year old married woman with a young, nursing child.

[149] Dixon, *The Roman Family*, 25, 67; Dixon states that women and families were modes of "both physical and cultural" reproduction.

[150] Brent Shaw, "The Passion of Perpetua," 25. This idea may be supported by reality of easy divorce at this time, Plut *Aem* P 5.1 offers an anecdote about marital strife and disagreement as grounds for divorce.

[151] MacDonald, "Was Celsus Right?" 177-178, cites Rodney Stark and W.S. Bainbridge. "Networks of Faith: Interpersonal Bonds and Recruitment in Cults and Sects." *American Journal of Sociology* 85 (1980).

husband's absence to marital distress is not an unlikely leap to make. In particular, I see Perpetua's hardheadedness and defiance of her father as a line of evidence that would support this reading.

With these lingering uncertainties about her husband, we are again at somewhat of a loss to describe the guardianship of Perpetua's child within legal procedures. When she signed away her life and confessed her Christian identity, Perpetua ceased to exist as a mother in respect to caregiving and, as I will discuss in the following section, identity. Nevertheless, her child did not cease to exist. In the management of Perpetua and Felicitas' children we are able to identify the threads of two overlapping conceptions of proper guardianship after the death of a parent.

The Roman tradition granted dominion over care to the *paterfamilias* in recognition of his ultimate power within the family. However, this would place the child in the *potestas* of Perpetua's husband who appears nowhere in her concerns with her child's wellbeing.[152] Within the *Passio*, it appears that Perpetua's father has taken responsibility for his grandchild. Like other questions about her husband, this one is likely doomed to remain unanswered, but the reader is left to assume that her child remained with her natal family. In opposition, the care of Felicitas' child is evidence for a Christian trend that opposed family custody. There was a trend in early churches that celebrated orphans raised in the Christian community, and MacDonald references the tendency of orphans to be paired in traditional thought alongside Christian widows. This specifically Christian practice encouraged the growth of Christianity by exploiting the fact that children had a tendency to fall into the religious community by means of their following the

[152] See Dixon, *The Roman Family*, 41; Evans-Grubbs, *Women and the Law,* 21; Here, Evans-Grubbs cites Gaius *Institutes* I.111 for evidence.

example of their parent (or guardian).[153] In this aspect of the *Passio*, the reader can begin to see an example of the change wrought on Roman institutions by Christianity.

This discussion has thus far attempted to read between the lines of Roman law to understand the social and emotional impact that Perpetua's Christian faith had on traditional civic hierarchies within Roman North Africa. To continue this investigation, I follow an understanding that the emotional chaos particular to an act of martyrdom is part of a phenomenon that exists as so contrary to the norm that it ultimately exists outside of what the written laws of men can articulate. As Luca Bagetto put it, when we are forced to reconcile human law with an "exceptional event," it is only biblical law that can "keep pace" with emotional reality.[154]

Rome was not a monotheistic state, and Christianity was just one among a multitude of cults that its citizens participated in. Nevertheless, it became outstanding among other cults in a few particular ways. Again, we should consider the Romans as "reacting" to Christianity. Legally, the final response was condemnation and death, but what did they observe about the cult that made it so objectionable? The answer lies in what non-Christians popularly understood about the religion.

Christian stories featured no shortage of miracles, and Celsus argued that Christ himself was an unruly foreigner who practiced magic to entice his followers.[155] However, Judith Perkins argues that it was not the visionaries or "wonder-workers" of Christianity that were recognized among traditional Romans, but their peculiar approach to the realities of pain, suffering, and

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[153] MacDonald, "Was Celsus Right?" 173-74. She cites, in particular, 1 Corinthians, 7:12-16 in making her argument about children following the example of their parent.
[154] Bagetto, "*Nova Exempla*," 255.
[155] Matthew W. Dickie, *Magic and Magicians in the Greco-Roman World* (London: Routledge, 2001), 221. Origen, *Cels.* 1.38.

death.[156] Nor was this etic perspective on Christianity entirely wrong. Perkins explicitly references Perpetua's conceptualization of her own suffering, explaining that her vision of the ladder, encrusted with weapons, represents her belief that confronting physical suffering was her only means of achieving salvation.[157]

Perkins takes this idea further within the account of the *Passio*, describing how Perpetua's suffering in prison and her heart-wrenching separation from her family and child are examples of emotional suffering that are "powerful and redemptive" in her path to Christ.[158] Proceeding from this argument, we can then understand that Perpetua, through the tenets of Christianity, was able to create her own image. By operating under public scrutiny while undergoing extraordinary acts of suffering, pain, and fear, she employed her audience to magnify her own anguish and to present herself as a powerful and noble figure within the Christian conception.

As a Christian, Perpetua's pain was therefore a tool in her religious identity, but what explicitly was she utilizing that tool to achieve? David Konstan references earthly suffering in his discussion of the New Testament idea that "belief in Jesus Christ gives eternal life, in comparison with which this present life is like death."[159] Tying this belief into our understanding of suffering as a tool, we can understand that early Christians conceived pain as a constant and unforgiving reality, but a conscious embrace of this pain provided early Christians the power to achieve eternal life and glorious deliverance from earthly squallor. This antipathy towards the

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[156] Judith Perkins, *The Suffering Self: Pain and Narrative Representation in the Early Christian Church* (London: Routledge, 1995),18.
[157] Perkins, *The Suffering Self,* 107.
[158] Perkins, *The Suffering Self,*109.
[159] David Konstan, "Perpetua's Martyrdom and the Metamorphosis of Narrative," in *Perpetua's Passions,* ed. Jan N. Bremmer and Marco Formisano, 295. For the Christian text, Konstan cites John 3.14-16, 5.24; 1.

realities of earthly life, however, did not encourage early Christians to align neatly within the rigid social structures of the Roman Empire.

This cult inverted natural laws in its praise of suffering, and its proliferation eventually brought Christians into conflict with the traditional social order. A passion for death created new priorities for the cult of Christ that encouraged dismissal of custom in favor of achieving public clout through a new avenue. This dismissal brought into question the established order of the empire, and it was necessary for civic leaders to set this inversion straight. In Perpetua's case, they chose to do this through torture and violence.[160] Hopkins reminds his reader that torture, although an example of bodily pain and suffering that the Christians endured in this context, should be interpreted as the assertion of power.[161] Ultimately, this attempt to reinstate order was not successful. The martyrs understood their torture as "testimony… to a new understanding of the social body."[162]

Perpetua's visions support this conclusion. When she is transformed into a man and strengthened by the power that she has achieved in her faith, she is able to defeat her opponent: in this instance, a gladiator. After she treads on his face (just as she had tread upon the head of the serpent at the base of the ladder), she realizes that her physical struggles and wretched civic reality represent her greater struggle against evil. Her death, she understands, is her victory.[163] In

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[160] Rives, "The Piety of a Persecutor," 21-22, notes that Perpetua's execution in the arena was unusual for a high-born citizen. This is particularly notable as this point is embedded within a broader conversation about Hilarianus' apparent religious affiliations and his conflict with Christianity and its practitioners specifically.

[161] K. Hopkins, *Death and Renewal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983): 10-11.

[162] Perkins, *The Suffering Self*, 119. Shannon Dunn, "The Female Martyr and the Politics of Death: An Examination of the Martyr Discourses of Vibia Perpetua and Wafa Idris," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78, no. 1 (March 2010), emphasizes that the public nature of a martyr's torture offered a platform for the victim to communicate the greatness of a deity and convey a specific, religious message to the audience of their suffering.

[163] Perpetua *Passio*, X. Perpetua's personal conception of her death as a victory over earthly evils is explicit in the text.

the eighth chapter of this essay that explores how Christians celebrated Perpetua and her companions, I will elaborate on the biblical allusions apparent in Perpetua's overcoming the serpent, but for the remainder of this chapter I shall attempt to clarify specific instances where Christian belief came into conflict with Roman tradition.

I have already discussed the idea that Perpetua's Christian identity made her unfit as a wife whose duty it was to carry on the lineage and traditions of her husband's family. While this idea was implicit in legal texts, it is explicit in Roman ritual practices. The religious landscape of the Roman Empire was lively, and individuals acknowledged many deities such as the Capitoline Triad alongside "foreign" gods such as Ceres, Isis, and Liber.[164] On a personal level, family members and ancestors were celebrated after their death, both by means of visitation and worship at their site and by care of the *Lares* and *Penates* of their family shrine.[165] Because Christianity enforced monotheism so strictly, its practitioners were unable to integrate themselves into the religious landscape of the empire; moreover, this clarifies the emotional distress and anger of Perpetua's non-Christian father. By solely acknowledging Christ, she scorned her ancestors alongside her husband and father. This scorn, in fact, is a tool that allows Perpetua to more fully act according to her Christian identity. In the New Testament, Jesus emphasizes that he has "come to bring dissension. From now on, a family… will be divided… father against son and son against father" (Luke 14:25-27).[166] By separating herself from her natal relations, Perpetua is perfectly following Jesus' message of renunciation.

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[164] Eric M. Orlin, "Foreign Cults in Republican Rome: Rethinking the Pomerial Rule," *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome* 47 (2002): 1-18. There is abundant evidence for worship of 'foreign' gods in the Roman religious landscape.

[165] Page Dubois, *A Million and One Gods* (New York: Harvard University Press, 2014).

[166] For the purposes of this thesis, all New Testament quotations will be taken from *The Oxford Study Bible: Revised English Bible with the Apocrypha.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.

Beyond her father's negative emotional response to this phenomenon of strict disavowment of other religions, the *Passio* features a moment where the discord between traditional polytheism and Christian monotheism is explicit (*Passio* VI):

> And my father appeared there with my son and dragged me from the step saying: "Offer the sacrifice. Have pity on your baby." And Hilarianus, the procurator, who at the time had received the right of the sword on the discharge of proconsul Minucius Timinianus, said: "Spare the gray hair of your father, spare your infant son. Make the sacrifice for the health of the emperors." And I responded "I will not," Hilarianus then asked: "Are you a Christian?" and I responded,"I am a Christian."

This passage refers to the act of making a sacrifice on behalf of the emperor as a symbol of not only a religious rite, but a social declaration of integration into the broader community.[167] In regard to the language of the *Passio*, it is necessary to note that the imperial cult was independently organized within communities, and that individuals did not often consider the emperor to be a true "god" in the sense of Jupiter or otherwise.[168] Therefore, the fact that Perpetua is asked to sacrifice to "the health" of the emperors indicates that, within her province, worship of the imperial cult was a public act rather than a religious act, and Perpetua's refusal to participate in this worship was a declaration of her refusal to follow the established social order of the local state. In this moment, Perpetua seals the necessity of her condemnation by displaying her status as a disruptive force in the city.

The aim of this chapter was not to provide an exhaustive reading of legal or religious themes in the *Passio*, but to explore how Perpetua's actions operated to establish her both as a disruptive criminal, hateful to the institutions of the Roman Empire, and as a powerful example

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[167] Eric M. Orlin, "Augustan Religion: From Locative to Utopian." in *Rome and Religion: A Cross-Disciplinary Dialogue on the Imperial Cult*. ed. Jeffrey Brodd (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 50. Orlin refers especially to the participation in Roman religion as an indication of community and its hierarchy of social power.

[168] See Karl Galinsky, "The Cult of the Roman Emperor: Uniter or Divider?" *Rome and Religion: A Cross-Disciplinary Dialogue on the Imperial Cult*. Ed. Jeffrey Brodd (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011): 4, 6, 16.

of female faith and excellence within the early Christian community. Because of her unique position as a Christian martyr at the height of the empire, Vibia Perpetua is a magnificent case-study of the tensions between contrary social structures that both motivated and restrained women in the ancient world.

Chapter VII
Perpetua's Voice and Gender

There can perhaps be no better text through which to study the conception of women and gender in the Roman Empire than the *Passio*. D. Shanzer makes an explicit point about this particularly "extraordinary and moving text" that comes down to us as "the first preserved autobiographical account written by an ancient woman."[169] It is a text that carries massive emotional weight, charged with questions of death, family, and religion. However, it is not a purely autobiographical work, and its interpretation is tied up in questions of genre and authorship.[170] The question of authorship is particularly critical because of the clear voices of three separate authors and the likelihood that Perpetua's original accounts were modified.[171]

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[169] D. Shanzer, "Literature, History, Periodization, and the Pleasures of the Latin Literary History of Late Antiquity," *History Compass* 7 (2009), 934. This point is reiterated in Ameling, Walter. "*Femina Liberaliter Instituta*- Some Thoughts on a Martyr's Liberal Education, *Perpetua's Passions*. (2012), 79. This work is especially remarkable because it was written during the "High Empire" and doubles as a piece of Christian literature.

[170] The *Passion of Perpetua* holds a unique place in Latin literature because of its autobiographical status, its function in influencing later church documents, and its classification as a dual piece of Roman and Christian literature. For further information, see J. Farrell, *Latin Language and Latin Culture from Ancient to Modern Times* (Cambridge, 2001), 74f. and Bremmer, *Perpetua's Passions*.

[171] Bremmer, *Perpetua's Passions*, 6. The authors discuss here the separate voices of the editor, Perpetua herself and her *ipsissima verba* and the third figure, likely Saturus. Beyond this question of separate voices, Jacqueline Amat, *Passion de Perpetue et de Felicite suivi des Actes*, (France: Editions du Cerf, 1996), 417, argues that the text is a male construction that functions to create a fantasy of 'an exemplary female martyr.' Vincent Hunink, "Did Perpetua Write her Prison Account?" *Listy filologicke* 133 no. 1/2 (2010): 147-155 argues that the text itself is adamant on the authorship by the martyrs themselves, and that there is no solid evidence to the contrary.

This text has inspired its readers to ask questions about its implications on identity, gender, and authorship. Books can, and have, been written on these topics. Therefore, I will attempt only to outline the major arguments as they appear in scholarship. First I will ground the reader in the current understanding of Perpetua's authorial voice and educational background. Progressing further into questions of her identity, I will examine how Perpetua demonstrates her relationship with her family as an elite woman in Roman society. I will then move from her interpersonal relationships to a conversation about her intrapersonal understanding of herself and her body that she outlines in the text of the *Passio* and how it is modified by the third contributor to the work. Finally, I will begin to discuss the current understanding of the language used to discuss her gender as glorified, modified, and criticized. Many of these themes are best understood as they have come to us through Christian documents after the death of Perpetua, and these arguments will largely be addressed in the eighth chapter in my discussion of the various receptions and reactions to the *Passio* in antiquity.

The authenticity of the work has been examined from all angles and perspectives, but scholars appear to agree that a very real Perpetua did write down her experiences in prison before her death.[172] In addition, it is clear that these passages were written with the intent that they would be read by others after her passing.[173] The most often cited argument for authorship by a male hand is the question of the educational opportunities made available to her that would enable a woman in her position to compose this prose text. The text of the *Passio* itself has been described as artful, and it follows narrative structures and arguments that indicate the author's

[172] Arguments for authenticity stretch to Augustine, but critical literature on the question agrees on the authorship of Perpetua for the central section of the Passions. For more information on this discussion and lines of evidence, see Bremmer, *Perpetua's Passions*, 1-24.
[173] This is a popularly understood idea, for more information see Paul Mckechnie, "Perpetua and Roman Education," *L'Antiquite Classique* no. 63 (1994): 170.

robust education in extant literature and composition.[174] In his essay on *Femina Liberaliter Instituta*, Walter Ameling collects the evidence of the education that she might have received as a woman "*honeste nata, liberaliter instituta, matronaliter nupta."*[175]

In regard to the resources available for her schooling, scholars have come to an agreement about her familial status by means of historical and textual analysis, and it is believed that her father was among the decurial class in the North African town of Thuburbo Minus.[176] However, even if we accept this as fact, we are still left with questions as to the extent of the financial investment and teachers available in her locale. Ameling, pulling from Gerhard Worth, makes the reality of so few sources clear, calling women "a silent majority" that we must operate on inference to understand.[177] Roman education is not entirely a mystery, however. Young children learned the basics of literacy with a *ludi magister*, and it is understood that Perpetua, *liberaliter instituta,* would have continued this education with a *grammaticus*.[178] An episode in the *Passio* reveals that she spoke Greek, and it is often supposed that she was educated in both Greek and Latin literature.[179]

A complication to our understanding of her education is her status as a Christian. Despite her father's distress at her adherence to Christianity, we are told that other members of her family were also practicing members, and we can understand that she was integrated into a larger

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[174] In particular, see the discussion of allusions to Plato's *Cratylus* in the third chapter of the *Passio.* For more information, see Heffernan, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, 38. For the quality of the composition see Mckechnie, "Perpetua and Roman Education," 281.

[175] For arguments about issues surrounding previous editions, see Heffernan, Thomas J. *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

[176] Arguments for this case primarily revolve around the editor's description of Perpetua as *honeste nata*, the rights afforded to Perpetua in prison, and the treatment of her father during her trial. For more information regarding the specific evidence, see Shaw, "The Passion of Perpetua," 11.

[177] Ameling, "*Femina Liberaliter Instituta,"* 78-103.

[178] Mckechnie, "Perpetua and Roman Education," 280.

[179] Mckechnie, "Perpetua and Roman Education," argues that her prose and style indicates familiarity with Greek and Latin literature, while Ameling, "*Femina Liberaliter Instituta,"* sees this as overstepping the evidence.

Christian community within her family, her fellow catechumen, and her teachers in the faith, Optatus and Aspasius (III, XIII). It is therefore natural that she should demonstrate familiarity with biblical stories that she was educated in during her immersion into the Christian community of Carthage. However, whatever we understand about her education in literature, we must assume some familiarity with the text of the bible as part of her education as a catechumen.[180] In fact, Christianity and diffusion of its religious documents has been argued to have been a tool of increasing literacy in the ancient world. Thus, despite the absence of direct quotation, Perpetua demonstrates familiarity with the language of Christian stories that she would have familiarized herself with prior to her baptism.[181]

In summation, modern opinion tends to agree that Perpetua was a Roman woman who was educated to a degree that enabled her to satisfactorily articulate the complex realities of her experiences as a Christian, a martyr, and a member of her family. Therefore, we can proceed with the understanding that we are privy to an example of an authentic female voice within Christian Rome. The language of the central narrative in the *Passio* then, except for questions of later edits that took place after her death that will be discussed in the following section, will be understood within these brackets of her education as they have been described here.

To begin with the most glaring example of her identity, her name "*Vibia Perpetua"* provides us with some insight into her family history. The *nomen* "Vibia" is the feminine form of the name of the "Vibii" family, distinguished in North Africa from 71 CE.[182] In discussing the question of educational opportunity available to Perpetua, we have established that her father

[180] Mckechnie, *Perpetua and Roman Education* .
[181] Ameling, "*Femina Liberaliter Instituta."*
[182] Heffernan, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, 150.

was a member of the decurial class. Certain episodes in the *Passio* offers further insight to this question (*Passio* VI):

> We climbed the platform. The rest, having been questioned, confessed. Then it came to me. And my father appeared there with my son and dragged me from the step saying: "Offer the sacrifice. Have pity on your baby…." And when my father stood firm in his efforts to change my mind, Hilarianus ordered that he be thrown to the ground and beaten with a rod. My father's suffering saddened me, as though I had been beaten. I grieved for his wretched old age.

It is again Ameling that provides historical context for this passage. When Hilarianus, as proconsul and a member of the *ordo equester*, ordered Perpetua's father to be beaten, we understand that this places the father, although still of some rank, below the equestrian class in the *ordo decurionum.*[183]

Beyond clarifying the rank of her family, this passage demonstrates the extraordinary love that Perpetua's father felt for his daughter and details the emotional response that this elicits in Perpetua herself. Luca Bagetto employs an interesting perspective on Perpetua's relationships to her father and her society in this passage. He notes that with her declaration of "*Christiana sum,*" Perpetua "ceases to exist as a citizen of Rome, but continues to exist as a beloved daughter by her father (*Passio* VI).[184] Indeed her family relationships appear to be overwhelmingly loving, and the few moments of passionate outburst by her father present themselves as reactions to grief and worry rather than hate (*Passio* III, V, VI).

How then could Vibia Perpetua, a young Roman woman and new mother, have reconciled abandoning the loving and privileged relationships of her family for the cult of

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[183] Ameling, *Femina Liberaliter Instituta,* 83-84. P. D. A. Garnsey, *Social Status and Legal Privilege in the Roman Empire*, 136-141 notes that this type of public beating was a punishment typically reserved for slaves. This makes it all the more shocking and notable that Perpetua's father, a member of the *honestior* class was punished this way.

[184] Bagetto, "*Nova Exempla*," 263-64. This argument emphasizes the social rebellion exhibited by Perpetua in refusing to sacrifice to the emperors. This act, although technically ritual, was a public demonstration of civic duty and obedience to the state. Furthermore, her father addresses her as "*domina."*

Christianity and her own martyrdom? Harmut Bohme provides a commentary on the psychology of this question. He argues that Perpetua's only course of resolving her social grief and her religious passion was to transform her father and familial love into tools of the devil to tempt her away from Christianity.[185] His primary lines of evidence include Perpetua's usage of the verbe "*evertere"* which means "*to destroy"*. We can again return to the text in the Seventh Passage where Perpetua is urged to "Have pity on [her] baby" and save her father "gray hairs" and "spare her infant son." For Perpetua to identify absolutely as Christian, she must observe these heartfelt appeals to her love for her earthly family as "satanic temptation."[186] In terms of identity, therefore, we can understand that in becoming a Christian woman, Perpetua has stripped herself of both her civic identity as a Roman citizen and her emotional identity as a daughter and mother within her family. It is with this understanding that we may begin to more fully understand the motivations and conceptualization of self that drove her actions.

To take this understanding yet further, we may turn to the New Testament, where we can read the teachings of Christ as explicitly urging his followers to cast aside their earthly relations and give up "home, brothers… mother, father, or children for [Christ's] sake and for the gospel," so that they might find salvation after their death (Mark 10:29-31). It is by suffering this loss of family that Christians are able to "carry [their] cross" as a disciple of Jesus (Luke 14:25-27). As I discussed in Chapter VI, Perpetua's bodily and emotional suffering are tools that allow her to achieve glory and achieve deliverance in the afterlife. Thus, Perpetua's abandonment of her loving family serves not only to provide her with psychological comfort, but also to establishes her yet more firmly as a devout follower of Christ and model of Christian virtue.

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[185] Harmut Bohm, trans. By Jeanne Riou, "The Conquest of the Real by the Imaginary: On the *Passio Perpetuae,*" in *Perpetua's Passions: Multidisciplinary Approaches to the Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).
[186] Bohme, "The Conquest of the Real by the Imaginary," 238.

I have argued that a critical aspect of Perpetua's Christian actions and identity was her separation from her earthly family, but it is important to note that she didn't cut those ties only to float adrift and alone. Through this abandonment of her relations, Perpetua was able to most fully embrace the family of the local Christian community. Doubtlessly she developed intense and personal relationships with her fellow catechumens and "brothers and sisters" in faith during her time in prison, and she also envisioned herself as joining with them for eternity after their martyrdoms. This idea, that Perpetua severed herself from a family unit only to subsume her identity into a *new* kind of family, is perhaps supported in the editor's remarks as he describes Perpetua walking into the arena as "a wife of Christ and a darling of God" (*Passio* XVIII). Here the editor acknowledges that Perpetua's Christian virtue has earned her a place among the most beloved of Christians. Thus, despite the religious disruption of the traditional Roman family, the female figure continues to be defined by a sort of familiar relation even after her martyrdom and death.

This essay seeks to conceptualize women in the ancient world through the lens of extraordinary inversions of the norm, and Perpetua's *Passio* provides us with yet further insight on her place in the shifting of interpersonal relationships that resulted from her persecution. The text also provides context to how Perpetua conceptualized herself as a Christian and understood her identity emotionally and physically. This, by virtue of the *Passio*'s status as autobiographical literature is especially emphasized in contrast to the panegyric genre of the introductory sections. Perpetua writes "of the self" and the realities of her body and her gender.[187] This authentic female perspective is critical to the overall question of feminine identity that this thesis seeks to explore.

[187] Bremmer, *Perpetua's Passions,* 13.

Perpetua's debate with her father about the unarguable status of a pitcher of water resonates with layers of meaning, emotional and philosophical (*Passio* III):

> "While," she said, "we were still with the prosecutors, my father desired to persuade me with his words and destroy me that he per because he persisted in his love for me, wanted to change my mind and shake my resolve with his affection for me. "Father," I said, "do you see this vase lying here, for example, this small water pitcher or whatever?" "I see it," he said. And I said to him: "Is it possible to calle it by any other name than what it is?" And he said: "No." "This I also am not able to call myself any other thing save what I am: Christian." Then my father, pushed by this word set himself upon me, in order to gouge out my eyes. But he only alarmed me and he left defeated, along with the arguments of the devil."

The noun used for vessel is "*urceolum*", a term that lacks specificity beyond describing a general household vessel. However, Perpetua's employment of this metaphor should not be taken as if she gestured to an object at random. This argument employs biblical language that is reminiscent of reference to Christians as a "vessel" in religious texts.[188] This reference reinforces a belief in Perpetua's education in Christian themes. In addition, it emphasizes the notion that, with her baptism, Perpetua considered her identity, body and soul, to be an instrument for the service of Christ.

This passage is incredibly dense in themes of familial love and religiosity, but the most fruitful investigation for our discussion of Perpetua's identity is the philosophical argument that she makes in referencing the absolute nature of the pitcher's being and her own. Both Mckechnie and Heffernan are in agreement about the Platonic references that the discussion implies.[189] The two authors emphasize the idea that Perpetua is saying that any descriptor aside from "Christian" would be fundamentally incorrect to characterize her.[190] Here, Perpetua is making her divorce of

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[188] Heffernan, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*,156. Heffernan cites the Greek employment of *"skeus"* in Acts 9.15 where Paul is referred to in this manner.
[189] See Mckechnie, *St. Perpetua and Roman Education,* 282. And Heffernan, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*,156.
[190] The Platonic argument referenced is *Cratylus* and its discussion on the nature of names. For further reading, see Heffernan, *The Passion of Perpetua*, 156. Here again, there is reference to the likelihood of

familial relation explicit by telling her father that she can no longer be defined as a daughter, mother, or citizen. Heffernan, in fact, takes this idea further and argues that Perpetua's defeat of her father in debate signals a rejection of his ability to name her, and his passionate reaction degrades him into a state of subjugation to her authority as it has been "conferred by membership in this religious cult."[191]

If Perpetua identified herself as existing as a tool for Christ in life, then how does she understand herself in death? Here, we must depart from the autobiographical text of Perpetua and lean upon the authorial voice of the editor who, it is believed, also composed the introduction of the *Passio* (*Passio* XX).[192]

> But for the young women the devil prepared a most ferocious heffer, in that way exceptional from tradition, matching their sex with that of the beast. And so stripped naked and covered only with nets, they were brought out again. The crowd trembled, seeing that one was a delicate young girl and that the other had recently given birth, as her breasts still dripping with milk. So they were called back and dressed in ungirt robes. Perpetua was thrown down first and fell on her loins. Then sitting up, she noticed that her tunic had been rent on its side, and so she returned it up to cover her thigh, more mindful of her modesty than her pain. Then she requested a pin and she tied up her disordered hair; for it was not fitting for a martyr to suffer with tangled hair, lest it should appear that she was grieving in her glory.

In this passage, Perpetua demonstrates an adherence to feminine modesty that is, in no small part, comparable to depictions of noble figures in Greek literature such as Iphigenia, Polyxena, and other Greek maidens, many of whom were specifically remembered in Euripidean texts.[193]

Perpetua's exposure to such literary education, and Heffernan makes the argument that education in philosophy increased the value of women as spouses. Thus, it is not out of the realm of plausible for Perpetua to exert some familiarity with such arguments.

[191] For further information, see Heffernan, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, 37. This argument is valuable as it emphasizes the changing relationships of father and daughter as they exist in the legal and religious spheres, but Heffernan cites no other scholarship on this idea.

[192] Perpetua, of course, could not narrate her own death, and therefore we turn to the final passage written by another hand. There is a some scholarly debate about the identity of this third author, but it is largely believed to be the editor who composed the introduction. For more information on this question of identity, see Heffernan, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity,* 3.

[193] Heffernan, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, 346-47.

This allusion to traditional Roman and Greek motifs of the idealized woman almost seems counterproductive in the panegyric of Perpetua, and there is no clear agreement in scholarship of the proper interpretation of this passage.[194] Regardless of the reality of these events, Perpetua ensured that her death would operate in honor of Christ. In the same fashion, the editor ultimately represented her death in a manner that, in his perspective as an educated Roman male, elevated her to heroic status in the interest of carrying out this glorification of Christianity.

The redactor appears to insert another reference to the tradition of the heroic female in the final sequence of Perpetua's death (*Passio* XXI):

> The rest received the blade indeed in stillness and silence: most especially Saturus, who had earlier climbed up the ladder, and whose spirit returned earliest. For then he stayed in wait for Perpetua. Perpetua, however, so that she might taste something of pain, screamed out in agony as she was pierced between the bones, and when the right hand of the newling gladiator wavered, she herself brought it to her throat.

Proceeding with our understanding of the editor's desire to place Perpetua, as a Christian martyr, among the ranks of the mythically noble women, we can see here a reference to the Roman idealization of noble sacrifice. In one sense this may recall the story of Lucretia, a Roman model of excellence.[195] Lucretia was also described as maintaining her physical modesty in distress, and this example of unshakeable strength of spirit is especially praised by Roman conceptions, as evidenced in Quintilian.[196] Sigrid Weigel expounds on this reference to Lucretia by referencing her designation as "*matrona Christi, ut Dei delicata,"* (XVIII) and understanding a parallel between Lucretia's sacrifice to preserve her status as wife, and Perpetua's sacrifice to preserve

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[194] For the arguments regarding the insertion of this description, see Heffernan, *Passions of Perpetua and Felicity*, 347, P. Habermehl, "Perpetua und der Agypter oder Bilder des Bosen im Fruhen Afrikanischen Christentum," Reviewed by Jan M. Bremmer, *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* 1 (2006): 34. He notes the tradition of this practice in Christianity, and Brent Shaw, "Women and the Early Church," *History Today* 44, no. 2 (February 1994): 21-28, notes the long history of female resistance to the "sexual dimensions of punishment."

[195] Lucretia is described as *exemplum* in Tertullian *Ad martyres* 4.4.

[196] Quint. *Inst.* 5.11.10: *laudabilior in femina quam in viro virtus.* Tertullian, as another example of the Roman male gaze, exemplified Lucretia as *exemplum*. Tertullian *Ad martyres*. 4.3-4.

her status as a Christian.[197] There are, implicit in this comparison, questions about gender and sex that arise in the terrific spirit displayed by martyrs in their sacrifice.

There is another important example of a woman who underwent a noble self sacrifice who was celebrated in Roman thought: Arria the Elder. Pliny the Younger praises her especially, recounting how she both maintained a state of sober calmness while she endured the death of her son, and how she was able to encourage her husband (then a political prisoner) to maintain his dignity in death by herself taking a dagger to her own chest.[198] A number of scholars have noted the similarities in the praise of Perpetua's and Arria's sacrifices,[199] but largely they compare the two women to indicate the differences in the women's relation to their husbands and families. What we might, perhaps, understand is that an ancient reader of the *Passio* who had heard the story of Arria (perhaps through Pliny the Younger's accounts) would have drawn immediate parallels to autonomy that each woman took in her own sacrifice. Furthermore, a Christian reader would have understood even deeper connections, knowing that Perpetua's sacrifice was in preservation of her Christian identity and her religious community.

Understanding the handling of Perpetua's gender in the *Passio* is, of course, critical to our understanding of Perpetua's status as a woman and how she was perceived to function within the limits of her female identity. As we have explored above, her strength of spirit and the description of her death puts her in the same category as heroic Roman women. In the Roman Empire, it was not uncommon to describe extraordinarily brave women as achieving the honor of

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[197] Weigel, Sigrid. "Exemplum and Sacrifice, Blood Testimony and Written Testimony: Lucretia and Perpetua as Transitional Figures in the Cultural History of Martyrdom" *Perpetua's Passions.* Ed. Bremmer, Formisano. Trans. Joel Golb. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. 180-200.
[198] Pliny the Younger, *Letters* 170.
[199] Two scholars who have made this comparison include Mary R. Lefkowitz, "The Motivations for St. Perpetua's Martyrdom," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 44, no. 3 (Sep. 1976): 418, and Celsiana Warwick, "Christian Martyr as Homeric Hero: A Literary Allusion in Perpetua's Passio," *The Classical Journal* 114, no. 1 (2018): 86-109.

a "victorious male."[200] Our discussion of Perpetua's analogy to the water pitcher is perhaps expounded upon by Brent Shaw when he describes Perpetua's closeness to the divine spirit while in the arena. If we understand the martyrs to be vessels of Christ, this notion of the "vessel" would indicate that their bravery was outside of that of a mortal female.[201] This idea is supported by the constant assertion that Felicitas will be with "Him" during her "sufferings in the arena."

In this vein, Bohme points to the instance in her vision where Perpetua undergoes a metamorphosis of identity into a masculine warrior as a point of examining her own conception of her gender. He explains that her visions, especially her imagined transformation of gender, operate to soothe her spirit in the wake of her loss of relation to her father and child, and affirm her status as martyr. In other words, her shifting gender is a means through which Perpetua articulates her transformation of spirit to "strengthen her will towards martyrdom."[202] In the same way that her ascension to Christianity allowed her to defeat her father philosophically, her religious vision describing her being oiled as a male gladiator and its explicit metamorphosis of spirit and identity allows her to "disempower" her father and "wipe out" her position within her natural family hierarchy by affirming her identity as irrevocably changed.[203] This shift of gender is therefore subordinate to her identity as a Christian and her self-perception as a tool of Christ that is malleable to the demands of circumstance.[204]

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[200] Shaw, *The Passion of Perpetua*, 19. For more information on a masculine reading of Lucretia's suicide, see Eleanor Glendinning, "Redemption from Classical Antiquity to the Medieval Era," International Journal of the Classical Tradition 20 (June 2013): 65. Specific evidence of masculine action is described as her use of the sword to penetrate her own body, which is mirrored by Perpetua guiding the gladiator's hand.

[201] Shaw, *The Passion of Perpetua,* 26.

[202] Bohme, "The Conquest of the Real by the imaginary," 239.

[203] Bohme, "The Conquest of the Real by the Imaginary," 239.

[204] See Paul's letter to the Romans: *Igitur ego ipse mente servio legi Dei, carne autem legi peccati*. Paul, 7:22-25. This passage provides context for Perpetua's apparent disassociation from her gender in her vision.

If the language and textual references hint at Perpetua demonstrating a masculine spirit, those instances are nothing in the face of the reality of her womanhood. She is remarkable because she is a woman and because she carries herself with the dignity of the most honorable of women.[205] Her father, upon recognizing her steadfast adherence to the Christian cult, appealed to her to "have pity" and revoke her declaration of Christianity (*Passio* V):

> Have pity, daughter, on my gray hair; have pity for your father, if I am worthy to be called your father… Look upon your brothers, your mother and your mother's sister. Look upon your son, who will not be able to live after your passing. Put down your spirit; lest you destroy us all… Weeping, he no longer called me daughter, but *domina*.

We have established that her father approached her out of familial love, and that Perpetua was able to resist his pleading because of her attribution of his actions to the hand of evil. It must be remembered that, at this point, Perpetua has already defeated her father in philosophical debate, and in the understanding of some scholars, has overthrown his authority over her as *pater familias*. In this passage, her father addresses her in terms of loving endearment, but his addresses shift from "daughter" (*filia*) to "lady" (*domina*).[206] However, I would argue in favor of Craig Williams' opinion, that this is simply further emphasis of the inversion of the common social order.[207] Therefore, Perpetua is not regarded by him as holy by virtue of religious practice, but was deemed to be a formidable and respectable figure within her gender.

Within the sections of the *Passio* written by Perpetua we are able to examine, to a degree, her own understanding of her status and gender. Even within the text, however, we are also able

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[205] See above passages on the glorification of the capable woman by Quintilian.
[206] Heffernan, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity,* 191, notes the possibility of religious connotations to Perpetua's father's usage of the term *domina*, citing the arguments of den Boeft and Bremmer here.
[207] Craig Williams, "Perpetua's Gender. A Latinist Reads the *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis*". In *The Passion of Perpetua*. ed. Jan M. Bremmer and Marco Formisano (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 60. Williams also refers to Perkins, *The Suffering Self,* 107.

to see the male reaction to her nobility and strength of spirit that further complicates this discussion (*Passio* XVIII):

> Perpetua followed, with a shining face and a calm step, as a wife of Christ and darling of God, felling all those watching with the intensity of her stare.

In his commentary, Heffernan notes that the two instances of "darling" (*delicata*) emphasize Perpetua's identity as a woman and servant of God.[208] However, Hanne Sigismund-Nielsen takes his argument further, concluding that the editor manipulates the representation, from Perpetua's vision of a servant and hand of Christ to that of God's "slave" or "pet."[209] This idea of a masculine transformation and manipulation of Perpetua's presentation after her death becomes appealing in respect to the evidence of male modification of this work. Therefore, with this understanding of Perpetua's gender seen in the perspective of her authorial voice, her familial relationships, her own conceptions of body and gender, and the reaction that her actions incited, let us proceed into questions of the impact of the *Passio* as we understand it in antiquity and the development of early Christian standards.

Chapter VIII
Perceptions of and Reactions to Perpetua in Antiquity

Perpetua, in spite of, or perhaps because of, her gender, was celebrated as a Christian and a martyr by other early Christians. The record of her *Passio* became an influential document that exerted a marked influence on early church fathers and conceptions of martyrologies.[210]

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[208] Heffernan, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, 345.

[209] Hanne Sigismund-Nielsen, "Vibia Perpetua- An Indecent Woman," in *The Passion of Perpetua*. Ed. Jan N. Bremmer and Marco Formisano (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012): 114-115. This argument stands somewhat alone in the scholarship on this topic, but there is general agreement that the term *delicata* diminishes the greatness and strength of Perpetua's description. This will be a point for further discussion in this essay.

[210] Herbert Musurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), xxv, calls the *Passio* the "archetype of all later Acts of the Christian martyrs." In his description of the Martyrdom of

Ultimately, however, the '*ipsissima verba'* of Perpetua were used as tools of others who interacted with her documents after her death, and a productive conversation about the reactions to Perpetua's *Passio* must include discussion of this question of exploitation and modification. Therefore, in this chapter, I will attempt to address the major discussions regarding the evidence for the identity and motivations of the editor, adaptations by Augustine and other church fathers in developing a canon, and finally, our evidence for the general celebration of Perpetua's life and deeds.

To understand the initial transformation of the text by its editor, we first must dig somewhat deeper into who that editor was. It has been argued that this figure was Tertullian himself,[211] but den Boeft and Ameling argue that it was not Tertullian, but someone intimately aware of him and his beliefs.[212] Importantly, den Boeft argues that the editor's intent in putting together the *Passio* revolves around his wish that it be studied and read as part of official worship.[213] In his introduction and conclusion, the editor expresses his wish that the text be integrated alongside the traditional Christian documents.[214] Given the evidence cited in modern scholarship, therefore, let us proceed with an understanding that this editor was a figure in

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Marian and James and the Martyrdom of Montanus and Lucius (xxxiii, xxxv), Musurillo notes that the *Passio* is deliberately emulated.

[211] R. Braun, *Approaches de Tertullien* (Paris, 1992), 287-99.

[212] See Bremmer, *Perpetua's Passions,* 5. They cite the arguments of den Boeft and Ameling: Jan den Boeft, "The Editor's Prime Objective: *Haec in Aedificationem Ecclesiae Legere,*" in *Perpetua's Passions.* ed. Jan N. Bremmer and Marco Formisano (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). Den Boeft cites, in particular, the stylistic differences in composition of the editor and Tertullian in his *Apologeticum*. Ameling, "*Femina Liberaliter Instituta*."

[213] den Boeft, "The Editor's Prime Objective," 178. Here, den Boeft cites the editor's phrasing: *Haec non minora veteribus exempla in aedificationem Ecclesiae legere debet.*

[214] Katharina Waldner, "Visions, Prophecy, and Authority in the *Passio Perpetuae,*" in *Perpetua's Passions, Multidisciplinary Approaches to the Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis,* edited by Jan M. Bremmer and Marco Formisano, 209. Here, Waldner argues that there is ambiguity in the author's motivation, whether he wished to emphasize the authenticity of the faith of Perpetua and Felicity or establish his own text as part of the church tradition. See also Farrell, "The Canonization of Perpetua," 304, where he references the existing tradition of *documentum fidei* and *vetera exempla* in the early Christian canon. Additional argument in favor of this idea can be found in Heffernan, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity,* 8-9.

Christian community near Carthage, familiar with Perpetua or her records, who wished to integrate her words into the existing tradition of martyrologies and therefore further develop the establishment of that body of literature and worship. Understanding his motivations this way thus forces us to investigate how he might have employed the *Passio* to his own interests of integration into church canon.

In the previous chapter, we explored the various ways in which Perpetua understood her own identity and how the editor represented her. It can be said with some confidence that Perpetua's femininity wavers between masculine and feminine and *virtus* and *delicata*. Shannon Dunn offers insight into this phenomenon in martyrology, arguing that the exceptional factor of gender in female martyrdom "grants her access to a privileged place among saints" at the same time that it instills "confusion and fear about her role in public life."[215] Dunn also offers a sharp lens for reading the editor's manipulation of Perpetua's gender by emphasizing the tendency of martyrologies to "refashion" martyrs lives "to fit a particular role."[216] I argue that this appropriation of Perpetua's identity to insert her into the Christian canon, present in the very text of the *Passio*, is our first example of understanding how early Christians reacted to the reality of Perpetua as a woman.

It is fruitful here to briefly return to the existence and broad dissemination of the *Acta*, or the alternative version of the martyrs of Perpetua and her companions. In chronological order, scholars agree that Perpetua and Saturus documented their experiences in prison,[217] the editor of the text bracketed these accounts and put them forward into the church documents, and then an unknown author composed the *Acta* which became the primary source for Perpetua's martyrdom

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[215] Dunn, "The Female Martyr and the Politics of Death," 203-04.
[216] Dunn, "The Female Martyr and the Politics of Death, 203.
[217] Bremmer, *Perpetua's Passions,* 6 acknowledges Saturus' hand in the composition of his own vision in prison in 203 CE.

until the 17th century.[218] However, there is evidence that the details of both the *Passio* and the *Acta* were known to Augustine.[219] Ultimately, the existence of these dual versions supports the idea that the editor(s) of Perpetua's martyrdom were seeking to modify the account in such a way that it approached "closer conformity" to the extant body of martyrologic texts in the church.[220]

Thus, with this understanding of the motivations that shaped the production and dissemination of Perpetua's accounts, we can begin to explore how early Christians reacted to their contents. In a broad sense, but a true one, Perpetua was celebrated enthusiastically. In fact, much of our documentation about how early church fathers such as Augustine and Quodvultdeus discussed and "confronted" the *Acta* and the *Passio* comes to us from their sermons given at the yearly celebration of the cult of Perpetua and Felicity.[221] Within the celebration of Perpetua, it is the subtle technicalities of adaptation of Perpetua's identity to religious ideals that are most valuable to this discussion.

On the surface, Christian leaders appear to embrace Perpetua as the ideal Christian, martyr, and woman. Tertullian describes her as the "*fortissima martyr*" in his description of honorable female Christians.[222] In addition, Milco comments that Augustine "commended [her]

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[218] Bremmer, *Perpetua's Passions,* 2-3. Here, the discovery and publication of the text of the *Passio* by Lucas Holstenius in 1663.
[219] *Sermo* 282 auct. 6.2.
[220] Farrell, "The Canonization of Perpetua," 308.
[221] Farrell, "The Canonization of Perpetua," 308 discusses the necessity of these sermons, while in Katherine I. Milco, "Mulieres viriliter vincentes: Masculine and Feminine Imagery in Augustine's Sermons on Sts. Perpetua and Felicity," *Vigiliae Christianae* 69, no. 3 (2015): 277, she directs her readers to the Chronology of 354: *Chronica Minora* Vol 1 Ed. Theodore Mommsen. Shaw, *The Passion of Perpetua*, 36-7.
[222] Tertullian *De anima* 55; van Beek, *Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis,* 149. For more information on this comment, see Julia Weitbrecht, "Maternity and Sainthood in the Medieval Perpetua Legend," in *Perpetua's Passions.* Edited by Jan M. Bremmer and Marco Formisano (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 157.

to his congregation."[223] However, this praise is not, of course, as clear-cut as it might seem. In his philosophical work, *De natura et origine animae* (1.10.12), Augustine notes that:

> The story of Dinocrates, the brother of Perpetua, is not part of the canonical scripture. [Nor did she- or whoever did write it- mean to say that the child, who had died at the age of seven, did so without being baptized…][224]

Within the *Passio*, Perpetua had described her own salvation of Dinocrates in a sort of pseudo-baptism that she believed was possible because of her status as a confessor. Here, Augustine rejects this idea. It was necessary for him to modify a contemporary reading of Perpetua's life and redact the idea that confessors could "save" the unbaptized deceased in his efforts to establish the understanding that only ordained men of the church could perform baptisms.

It seems exceptional that Augustine, participant of the yearly festivals celebrating her death, would so blatantly question the authenticity of Perpetua's account, but Farrell re-stabilizes an understanding of Augustine's public celebration of Perpetua and Felicity, arguing that Augustine's awareness of both the *Acta* and the *Passio* provided a flexibility of accounts and authorship that permitted him to discredit questions about her salvation of Dinocrates while maintaining her accounts as those of an honorable and blessed martyr.[225] Augustine's careful moderation here is further evidence of the broad popularity of Perpetua's account. This example of deliberate manipulation of the accounts of Perpetua is a prime example of how they were encountered in antiquity and used as a tool of the early church fathers.

Modern scholarship is generally in agreement that Perpetua, as a Christian martyr, embodied "feminine virtue" in the perspective of early Roman Christians. Dunn, in particular, argues that their multi-leveled presentation of her gender encouraged the influence that she held

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[223] Milco, "Mulieres viriliter vincentes," 277.
[224] Augustine *De natura et origine animae* (1.10.12). Trans. Farrell.
[225] Farrell, "The Canonization of Perpetua," 311.

over the development of early Christianity while maintaining her excellence as a woman.[226] This dual representation that Milco describes as "the martyr as combatant" and "the martyr as mother" necessitates a complex study to unravel.[227] An example of Augustine clarifying the existence of the female martyr can be found in his *Sermons*:

> Therefore, they are found neither male nor female in their *interior homo*, so that even those who are female in the body, the *virtus* of mind hides the sex of the flesh…[228]

This conversation loops neatly back into our previous discussion of feminist scholarship and the classical tradition of referencing the *virtus* of noble women. However, in this discussion of how Perpetua's contemporaries and followers of her tradition received and integrated her actions, we should look to understand how they struggled to make her exceptional defiance and passion palatable within their social context.

A simple example of Augustine modifying Perpetua's actions to increase her "palatability" among early Christians is his description of her inversion and rejection of her relationship with her father. Milco describes the issues that scholars have faced in defining Augustine's conversation about Perpetua's authority in the *Passio*,[229] and her argument is augmented by Cobb, who notes that Augustine was forced to "radically rewrite the narrative" to "transform" Perpetua into a figure that more closely aligns with Christian norms.[230] However, Milco counters that, as a Christian, Perpetua cannot maintain a subordinate and dutiful respect for her father in the face of his refusal of Christianity, and therefore she calmly and gently

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[226] Dunn, "The Female Martyr and the Politics of Death, 202-225.
[227] Milco, "Mulieres viriliter vincentes," 279. Here, Milco emphasizes the "constructive use" that Augustine makes of Perpetua's figure.
[228] Augustine *Serm* 280.1 Trans. Van Beek.
[229] Milco, "Mulieres viriliter vincentes," 278. Milco argues that Augustine counters Perpetua's "subversion" by redefining her within traditional social stereotypes.
[230] Stephanie L. Cobb, *Dying to be Men: Gender and Language in Early Christian Martyr Texts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 109.

affirms her faith.[231] She is, therefore, presented by Augustine to represent the ultimately virtuous Christian woman in her inversion because of her dismissal of Roman values.

A question among scholars of somewhat grander scale is Augustine's reference to Perpetua's status as a mother in reference to the biblical figures of Mary and Eve. A considerable portion of experts argue that the parallels drawn between Perpetua and Eve create a damaging conversation about the female identity.[232] Milco, in contrast, draws attention to Augustine's *Sermons* 280.1:

> Therefore, the dragon was trodden on with a chaste foot and victorious footstep, when the upright ladder through which blessed Perpetua might go to God was revealed. Thus the head of the ancient serpent, which was a precipice to the woman when she fell, became a step to the woman when she ascended.[233]

If we, like Milco, read this to be in agreement with Perpetua's *Passio*, we can understand that Augustine was publicly announcing Perpetua's feminine excellence.[234] In light of this scholarly history, it is perhaps best to take a middle ground. Augustine demonstrates a fascination with the dynamic of Perpetua's femininity, and this speech encourages its listeners to recall the faults of the female gender. He also, however, maintains that through baptism, Christian virtue, salvation and glory is achievable. Therefore, I argue that Augustine did not intend to simply deride or celebrate Perpetua as a woman, but established a careful middle-ground that affirmed her status as celebrated martyr while reminding his assembly of the danger of a woman who does not embody those holy ideals. This subtle reference, therefore, permits Augustine to exert control over the dialogue around Perpetua and monitor how the *Passio* was transmitted and received.

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[231] Milco, "Mulieres viriliter vincentes," 287-88.
[232] One example of these arguments may be found in Dorothy Elm Von Der Osten, "Perpetual Felicity" *Studia Patristica* 49 (2010): 208, where she argues that this reference is a reaction to Pelagianism.
[233] Augustine *Sermons* 280.1. Trans. Van Beek.
[234] Milco, "Mulieres viriliter vincentes," 290, references the third chapter of the Book of Genesis, where God addresses the serpent: I will put enmity between you and the woman, between your seed and her seed; she will be on watch for your head, and you for her heel." This allusion would put Perpetua in alignment with Mary, rather than Eve.

Thus far in the course of this chapter, I have attempted to lay out the careful conversation that surrounded the text and informed the public that received it. For all of the nuance that was involved in creating a dialogue about the *Acta* and *Passio*, the final product appears to have struck Christians with inspiration and ardor. We know that Augustine delivered his sermons at the annual celebration of Perpetua and Felicitas in Carthage, and that they were celebrated in Rome itself alongside the Roman Mass by the 6th century. It is also in the 6th century that we see representations of Perpetua and Felicity appearing in Roman era churches (Fig. 4). This remarkable integration into canon came after the arrival of their cult in Rome, evidenced by their mention in the *Depositio martyrum* in 354.[235] In addition, Perpetua's legacy is also notable for its influence on church documents.

Weitbrecht informs us that the figures of Perpetua and Felicitas first begin to appear in "liturgy and early martyrologies" in the 4th century within the *Martyrologium Romanum*,[236] but their influence was not limited to mere reference. In his discussion about the education and compositional abilities of Perpetua, Ameling notes the scholarly discussion of Perpetua's simplicity of style that attributes her creation of the genre of *sermo humilis* in Christian literature.[237] Ultimately, he dismisses these arguments, noting that this influence would have been exerted "unwittingly."[238] Regardless, this conversation allows us to understand that, conscious or not, the very literary style in which Perpetua recorded her accounts was esteemed

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[235] Jonathan P. Conant, "Europe and the African Cult of Saints, circa 350-900: An Essay in Mediterranean Communications," *Speculum* 85, no. 1 (January 2010): 6. Conant notes the lack of information we have about the celebration of their cult in Rome.
[236] Weitbrecht, "Maternity and Sainthood in the Medieval Perpetua Legend," 156. Herbert Musurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, xxv, xxxiii, cxxxv.
[237] See E. Auerbach, *Literary Language and its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965).
[238] Ameling, "*Femina Liberaliter Instituta,"* 93.

and imitated. To emphasize how remarkable this is, I'd like to recall a tired but true maxim: "Imitation is the highest form of flattery."

In this chapter it has been established that Perpetua was integrated into the institution of Christianity within the context of the editor's and early church fathers' manipulation of the *Passio*. This conversation, however, has revolved about the stiff formalities of motive and pronouncement. What can be said of the emotional response of individuals who encountered Perpetua's story? Our first line of evidence is the physical and temporal landscape of Christian Carthage. An inscription provides evidence that Perpetua and her companions were celebrated and buried in the Basilica Maiorum of Carthage.[239] The centrality of this locale is yet further evidence of the popularity of her (and the other martyrs') remembrance.

A detailed reading and description of the *Chronica minora* or the Chronography of 354 CE is presented by Michele Salzman, who describes the list of the Christian bishops and martyrs as "attempts… to organize internally and to construct an official, uniform view of its past."[240] Salzman goes on to note that the calendar's inclusion of the North African saints was remarkable and indicated their popular worship within the city of Rome.[241] These examples demonstrate that the worship of Perpetua was integrated into the very fabric of Carthage, but there are yet more examples of Perpetua's influence in the material record.

Stephen Potthoff documents an example of an individual utilizing Perpetua's vision of the ladder and her ascension to heaven in the context of a burial monument. He explains that the appeal of this imagery was its promise of escape by virtue of Christianity from mortal toil and

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[239] Susan Raven, *Rome in Africa* (London: Routledge, 1993), 153. The inscription reads "Here are the Martyrs Saturus, Saturnius, Revocatus, Secundulus, Felicitas, Perpetua, who suffered on the Nones Of March."
[240] Michele Renee Salzman, *On Roman Time: The Codex-Calendar of 354 and the Rhythms of Urban Life in Late Antiquity*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 43.
[241] Salzman, *On Roman Time,* 45.

suffering by paralleling the reality of a catacomb to the bleak prison experience of the martyrs.[242] Despite an apparent scarcity of representation with respect to Perpetua's death as a martyr, there are images that seem to reference the language of her accounts, and Potthoff turns to Helmut Schlunk to explain that the representation of acts of martyrdom was frowned upon.[243] Ultimately, the clearest representation of Perpetua's legacy in personal funerary art is found on a Sarcophagus from Quintana Bureba that depicts the events of Perpetua's vision involving the ladder and the serpent (Fig. 5).[244] This representation ultimately signifies hope, refreshment, and ascension in Christianity.

In this chapter I have attempted to provide an overview of the ways in which Perpetua's narrative was subtly adapted and incorporated into the tradition of church literature and the greater Christian conversation of ideas of women, virtue, and martyrdom. Progressing from the prior conversation of the complexity of Perpetua's motivations and actions as they were shaped by her interpretation of her socio-religious education to the both careful and enthusiastic response of her contemporaries, I hope that I have impressed upon the reader some notion of Perpetua as a phenomenon and extraordinary woman.

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[242] Potthoff, Stephen E. *The Afterlife in Early Christian Carthage: Near-Death Experience, Ancestor Cult, and the Archaeology of Paradise. Routledge Studies in the Early Christian World.* London: Routledge, 2017. 76.
[243] Potthoff (2017) 82.
[244] Potthoff (2017) 83. The author details the features of the scene that reference Perpetua's vision, including the serpent, the ladder, and a woman stepping on the serpent's head. The sarcophagus dates to the mid-fourth century CE and was found as part of a larger group of sarcophagi near Virobesca, Spain.

Figure 4: Mosaics of Sts. Perpetua and Felicity
Archiepiscopal Chapel, Ravenna, Italy. 6th century Mosaic
(Credit: Photographed by Richard Stracke, shared under Creative Commons License)

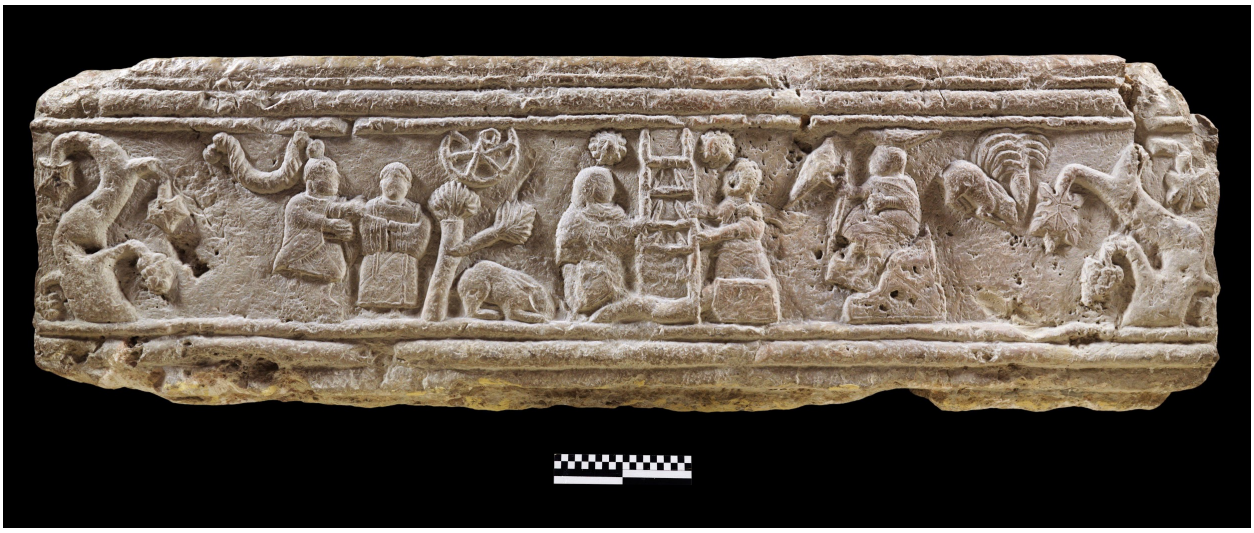

Figure 5: Quintana Bureba Sarcophagus
Provincial Museum of Burgos, Spain
(Credit: Album/Alamy Stock Photo, Image ID: P7RG5N)

IV: Conclusion

Two Women Walk into a Bar

In an attempt to understand the cultural boundaries that defined women in classical Athens and the high Roman Empire, this essay has exploited the idea that occasions of civic disruption are snapshots in which cultural ideals are forced to react and make themselves apparent through the actions of individuals and institutions. Specifically, I have used Euripides' *Alcestis* and Perpetua's *Passio* as striking moments in the historical record to attempt to create a broader picture of two examples of ancient women and how they were perceived. In other words, by understanding how these women confronted the social fabric that they were a part of, we can now better understand why and how their cultures reacted to them. Moreover, with these studies of Alcestis and Perpetua side-by-side and studied within the same modes of evidence I have demonstrated some of the striking differences and similarities that the are apparent in these stories. Finally, the experiences of Alcestis and Perpetua, having been put upon the same stage over the course of this essay, will now come into conversation with one another.

These texts naturally fall together in their handling of family, death, and hope for the afterlife as central themes. As we have seen, Alcestis was a noble wife because of how thoroughly she defined herself through her marriage. In the face of this classical Greek ideal, must we then understand the *Passio*'s dismissal of Perpetua's husband as so monumental a shift that marriage ceased to even play a role in a woman's life? In chapter VI, we saw how Perpetua's status as a Christian facing her own martyrdom made it necessary for her to emotionally distance herself from her earthly family. However, this distance only brought her closer to God. In the final moments before her death, Perpetua is described as a *matrona Christi*,

and it is here that we must understand that she has undergone a transformation of identity and spirit that allowed herself to find comfort in her religious family (*Passio* XVII). In her devotion and martyrdom she sacrificed herself not for an earthly family, like Alcestis, but for an institution that nevertheless defined her utterly. Thus, the value of a woman as she exists in marriage has stayed the same from the *Alcestis* to the *Passio*, but the marriage itself has shifted.

There is no doubt that both of these stories ultimately represent hope in the afterlife and benevolence from higher powers as a result of virtue. The differences between Christianity and traditional Greek cult worship are vast and should not be considered lightly. There are, however, a few key parallels that make the *Alcestis* a text that is easy to put in conversation with early Christian ideas. In the prologue of the play, Apollo stands before Admetus' house. He had worked there as a lowly shepherd but in the play he is divine protector, observing Alcestis' day of suffering from afar. Moreover, it is Heracles, the son of the highest god and a figure that himself becomes divine, that retrieves Alcestis from the grave. Within the archaeological record there are many examples of Apollo and Heracles being used in early Christian iconography to symbolize a pseudo-Christ figure, and I have already touched on how Alcestis was depicted in the care of Heracles in a Christian catacomb. What is imperative that we understand is that the *Alcestis* and the *Passio* both signify examples of divine involvement and benevolence in earthly affairs to their audience. These noble women lived and died for the institutions that they honored, and in their culture they became exempla of salvation as rewarding piety.

These similarities, however, exist alongside drastic differences in the Greek and Roman conceptions of women. Most importantly to our discussion is the identity and domain of a classical Athenian woman as revolving around and within the house. Ogden tells us that Athenian women "were ideally to be kept sequestered from public view" where they are able to

"achieve the greatest renown when they are least talked about."[245] This is very different from the Roman context, where the wife is the "mistress of the household" and "the center of its entertaining." Moreover, we know that these differences between Greek and Roman norms existed at the same time, not as one developing from the other because Cornelius Nepos, a Roman, describes how "in Greece," a woman remains "separated from the rest of the house."[246]

Despite this difference, the home does not cease to be an important part of a woman's identity in the Roman context. Nor does it disappear from Christianity, where the role of women was critical in expanding the growing cult because of their efforts in the household."[247] As we have seen, this trend is visible in the texts of the *Alcestis* and the *Passio*. Alcestis' actions outside of her household are seen as extreme inversions of cultural norm and her presence in the public sphere was critically tied to the inversion of her gender in a pseudo-satyric context that ultimately reaffirmed her primary role of "serving in the house." Perpetua likely first encountered Christianity in her home, where both her mother and natal brother are described as Christians. While this cross-cultural disconnect is intriguing, what remains constant is the spiritual and emotional importance of women in the home and their necessity in that role.

These women, as has been noted again and again, were remembered through their stories as the best and noblest of their kind. More than that, however, they were *powerful* in their nobility. Because she sacrificed herself for her husband, Alcestis finds herself at liberty to demand and receive promises from her husband. She is a master of her own fate, and she even describes religious visions of the underworld in the moments before her death. Perpetua also

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[245] Ogden, *Companion to Greek Religion,* 291. Here he cites Pericles in Thucydides 2.45.2.
[246] Cornelius Nepos, Preface, *de Vit. III.*
[247] MacDonald, "The Role of Women in the Expansion of Christianity," 184. MacDonald also cites specific Christian sources where women were described as necessary to the Christianity's expansion through their roles in the home: Rom. 16.5; Cor. 16:19; Philem. 2.

experienced visions. As her brother put it, she was "greatly esteemed, so much that [she] might ask for a vision." [248] In the Greek conception, this phenomenon occurred when a "dying person, when his soul is definitively separated from the body, becomes infallible."[249] Through their sacrifice these women gain ritual power, but they also gain social power. Just as Alcestis had earned the authority to demand wishes of her husband, Perpetua's father becomes supplicant at her feet in the face of her religious obstinance. These women, epicenters of societal disruption that existed separately in space and time, were powerful. For these mothers, wives, and daughters, their noble actions of sacrifice and their status as excellent women were understood as firmly motivated by and rooted in feminine qualities.

These powerful women, however, in both the *Alcestis* and the *Passio* were ultimately tamed and reformed: remodeled in the male gaze not only to make them palatable but also useful to the cultural institutions that shaped them and extended beyond their legacies to define the women that came after them. It is this idea that both definitively draws our conversation closed and draws together the stories of Alcestis and Perpetua as this essay has come to understand them. Ultimately, this modification serves only to highlight the reactionary evidence of social norms in contemporary male philosophies and values that this thesis set out to understand.

[248] Perpetua *Passio* IV

[249] Ogden, *A Companion to Greek Religion,* 153. He alludes here to evocation of the dead as well, as evidence that those about to die have a special communicative and visionary ability.

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