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Dominae Perpetua et Cassandra: Two female seers in their Mediterranean (literary) context

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Citation

Bergh, C. van den. (2023). *Dominae Perpetua et Cassandra: Two female seers in their Mediterranean (literary) context*.

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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Dominae Perpetua et Cassandra

Two female seers in their Mediterranean (literary) context

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MA Thesis Classics and Ancient Civilizations (classics track)

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Date: 14-08-2023

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Introduction

March 7, 203 BC. On the grandstand of the theatre in Carthage, the public celebrates the birthday of Geta, the son of emperor Caracalla, by watching several games and death sentences of Christians. We know exactly who these martyrs were because one of them, Perpetua, left us a diary of the period she spent in prison. The story is edited and completed by another member of the Christian community, which resulted in the text of the *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis* (from now on: *Passio*). The main character of this story is Perpetua. She writes about the imprisonment of the small group of martyrs, the feelings this evokes in her, the reactions of her family, her encounters with the governmental powers and most importantly the visions she requests and receives from God.

Perpetua has intrigued Christians from the day of her death until today. First of all, her text is preserved and complemented by an anonymous editor.¹ He introduces Perpetua before her diary begins, recounts the story of Felicitas, who was a fellow prisoner of Perpetua and describes their deaths dramatically. His goal is to spread the glory of the Lord by telling the story of these martyrs (I.1, I.7).² He succeeded thanks to Augustine who a century later preached about Perpetua and Felicitas³ and March 7 is still an official holiday of the Catholic Church.

Academics are interested in the *Passio* for several reasons as well. Firstly, the work provides authentic information about the Christian community in the early church. Secondly, it is exceptional that the diary is autobiographical and written in Latin by a

¹ Some scholars argue that the editor is Tertullian but Amat convincingly argues there is not sufficient evidence to identify the editor (1996: 67-70).

² Many scholars argue that the editor uses the diary for his own purposes or interpretation of the story. Waldner (2012) argues that the editor uses Perpetua's text to advocate the truth in Montanism, a movement in the early church which was obsessed with prophecy, while Perpetua knew nothing of this movement. Kraemer (2004: 5-6, 356-357) even argues that Perpetua did not read anything of the text at all. For this view, see also Lander and Kraemer (2017: 982, 983). As this thesis focuses on Perpetua as a literary figure in the entire *Passio* and the affect she has on the audience, the distinction between the purpose of the historical Perpetua and the editor is not relevant.

³ Augustine, *Sermons* 280-282.

wealthy, educated, young, Christian and Roman woman in Africa.⁴ Therefore, the work gives us a first-hand experience of the events from a female perspective, which is rare. Lastly, Perpetua herself has an interesting role in this text and the community she lives in. She is not only a Christian martyr, who is highly esteemed, but also a seer and can, therefore, provide information about the future, which is given to her by God himself. The *Passio* gives a detailed sketch of the complicated situation of Perpetua. She is imprisoned because of her faith and is afraid for the darkness and heat in the dungeon and she is concerned about her little child (III.5-6). These circumstances are horrible for the only twenty-two-year-old woman, who comes from a wealthy family which consists of a father and a mother and two brothers. Furthermore, her father is a cause of concern for her. He repeatedly tries to convince her to deny her faith in God. Her persistent refusal to obey him frustrates him which in turn makes Perpetua sad (e.g. V.1-6). In the meantime, Perpetua receives various visions regarding her future as a martyress, which give her information about the upcoming martyrdom and afterlife.

Despite the fact of the detailed information about her family and inner life, it is difficult to get a reliable portrait of the historical Perpetua. In the words of Barbara Gold it is impossible to write 'a biography because we simply do not have enough factual information to write the story of her life and family.'⁵ However, several scholars have tried to sketch Perpetua's life and role in society. Salisbury has sketched her intellectual and cultural background and stressed the fact that she is influenced by Roman education and African culture.⁶ She has also described Perpetua's role as a leader of the Christian community of Carthage as 'typical of charismatic leadership in the early church, [which] points to the close

⁴ As the text is transmitted in Latin and Greek it is unclear in what language the original text is written. Perpetua could speak Greek, which is known from the vision of Saturus, in which she speaks Greek with the priests in heaven (13.4). In my opinion, it is more convincing that the original text was written in Latin. It would not make sense to mention that a conversation is in Greek when the text is in the same language. Furthermore, I agree with Bastiaensen (1988: 130-136) that the Greek text is less intense and more difficult than the Latin version. An example of this can be found in IV.3, when Perpetua experiences her first vision. In the Latin version, the historical present *video* is used, while the Greek has the aorist εἶδον. According to the *lectio difficilior*-rule, it would be more plausible that the Greek text is a translation of the Latin text. For a more extensive overview of the debate and the most important arguments, see Amat (1996: 51-66).

⁵ Gold (2018: vii).

⁶ Salisbury (1997: 41).

relationship between spiritual gifts and community.⁷ Barbara Gold describes Perpetua's background to create her picture as complete as possible. She examines the portrayal of Perpetua as an athlete in the text. The comparison between a martyr and an athlete is found in the New Testament as well, because both the martyr and the athlete should have mental and physical discipline and had, therefore, to be austere. At the time of the New Testament, the metaphor was only used for men. In the *Passio*, nonetheless, it is also applied to women. That provides interesting perspectives on gender and sexuality, which Gold extendedly argues.⁸ Bremmer emphasizes the Roman elements in the story of a Christian martyr.⁹ Shaw researches how the editor deals with the 'unmediated self-perception' of Perpetua's diary and how this in later times was distorted by the authors of the Acta.¹⁰

Dronke writes that he will read Perpetua's diary without any hagiographical and theological approaches, as was done in the centuries before. He tries to get to know her by reading her diary as an authentic text in which her feelings are pure and unmixed with other meanings than telling her own story. He is the first one who wants to research 'inner and outer parts' of Perpetua's story to see her 'self-awareness' in the text. He notes for example that she calls herself a 'Christian', which is an utterance of awareness of her essence. He concludes that she is an intellectual woman and that the visions are not only a result of her contact with God but that their descriptions are also influenced by her intellectual background; that what she had read and heard in classical education.¹¹ According to Dronke, Perpetua is not writing a hagiography, but describing her own way of thinking in connection with the world around her in a fashion that he calls 'harrowing and untarnished, with shining immediacy'.¹² He also notes that the editor puts the traditional emphasis of Perpetua being female on the story, while Perpetua does not seem to consider this important.¹³

Cox Miller takes Dronke's work as starting point and argues that the visions of Perpetua are very important for her 'self-awareness'. She leaves the perspective on Perpetua

⁷ Salisbury (1997: 66).

⁸ Gold (2018: 27ff).

⁹ Bremmer (2017).

¹⁰ Shaw (1993: 20-21).

¹¹ Dronke (1984: 7).

¹² Dronke (1984: 16).

¹³ Dronke (1984: 15). See for more arguments about the differences between Perpetua and the editor footnote 2.

as a martyr and emphasizes her as a female visionary. Perpetua's dreams are not described 'to construct spiritual allegories for the benefit of later Christians' but to strengthen her 'self-awareness'.¹⁴ The dreams are very personal and focus on the future of Perpetua, or on her helping her brother.¹⁵ They are, therefore, expressions of a Christian woman and contribute to the diaries criticism of the patriarchal culture of Perpetua's time, in which men have power and women are powerless.¹⁶ Hence, Cox Miller, opposite to Dronke, reads the diary as the powerful expression of a rebellious Christian woman who wants to fight the engendered structures of power in the society of her time.

Until now, almost every scholar has approached Perpetua in her Christian context. Salisbury writes about her being a Roman woman converting to Christianity and her leading role in the community, given to her by her visionary gifts; Gold explains her pagan background in the Christian context; Bremmer points out how Roman she is as a Christian martyr; Dronke and Cox Miller argue that she as a Christian woman gains self-awareness by her visions, and almost every scholar touches on the subject of her gender and visions. These are also extendedly researched by for example Habermehl.¹⁷ However, not much attention has been paid to how Perpetua as a Christian female seer relates to other female seers from Mediterranean literature. Insight into this relationship could improve our understanding how Perpetua gained her authority in the Christian context. In the past, Perpetua's authority has been ascribed to her communication with God himself, or to the fact that she has written the text herself and in this way can express her criticism of a patriarchic system.¹⁸ However, it has not yet been investigated whether Perpetua has also gained part of her authority from her likeness to historical and mythological figures from the past. This is striking, since similarities between Perpetua and ancient seers are clearly present. As Vincent Hunink has noted: 'One might also read Perpetua as a tragic heroine standing in marked contrast to her father and other male figures, as an imposing character recalling powerful, mythological

¹⁴ Dronke (1984: 7) and Cox Miller (2020: 151).

¹⁵ Cox Miller (2020: 158).

¹⁶ Cox Miller (2020: 166).

¹⁷ Habermehl (2004) writes especially about the fourth vision and the meaning of the Egyptian gladiator being a symbol of the devil in this vision. He argues that from the Old Testament onwards Egypt was the symbolic place of the devil. On the first vision, see for example Klein (2020), who interprets Perpetua's receiving of the cheese in the first vision as a liturgical act and argues that this is exemplary for the whole *Passio*.

¹⁸ Cooper (2011: 687), Salisbury (1997: 66-67), Cox Miller (2020: 167).

women like (...) the prophetic Cassandra.¹⁹ The Trojan princess Cassandra could be the most famous female seer of antiquity, which makes her interesting for a comparison.

Perpetua's writing demonstrates that she had classical education, and most likely her audience would have been educated too.²⁰ So they would have a notion of the ancient traditional female seers and what their usual behavior and power would be. The most important feature an ancient seer has is contact with the divine. Moreover, seers could sometimes also have contact with the already dead. Ancient prophets had more knowledge than common people and could choose to share that. That made them powerful. Therefore, it seems promising to follow up this path and systematically compare Perpetua and Cassandra. Their historical personages are not relevant here, but their literary 'types' are. Their special prophetic talents both lie at the base of their respective authority. At the same time are both women closely connected to their tragic ends.

The similarities between Perpetua and Cassandra may also have made Perpetua a relevant figure in the eyes of non-Christians who are not primarily interested in Perpetua's Christian faith and relationship to God. Therefore, this thesis will experimentally explore to what extent a figure like the Christian Perpetua might appeal to non-Christian audiences. How plausible is Perpetua as a literary character for a Late-Roman audience? How 'unique' is her character beyond Christian theology, or to put it the other way round: How 'Mediterranean' does Perpetua remain despite her notably Christian context? Would a Late-Roman audience recognize a seer in Perpetua as a person who possesses a connection to supernatural knowledge and consequent power?

In this thesis, these questions will be addressed by means of a case study. Taking up Hunink's hint, I will bring the literary figures of Perpetua in the *Passio* and Cassandra in the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus into a comparative dialogue. The choice for Cassandra is based on the fact that she, like Perpetua, is a woman with a strong literary character. Can we identify relations between the traditional seer Cassandra and the Christian seer Perpetua? And if so,

¹⁹ Hunink (2012: 90). In contrast, Bremmer) states that 'we have here the case of a newly converted Christian trying to connect her new faith with received pagan eschatological notions' (2017: 376). However, this is not the same as the perspective I use, to examine Perpetua as a woman in her Greco-Roman context and to compare her with another woman in a similar situation.

²⁰ McKechnie (1994). See also 1.1.2.

how did the similarities between those female seers influence the interpretations of Perpetua's story?

For my comparison of the two women, I use an intertextual approach. Nonetheless, I do not intend to search for direct textual or semantical links between those two texts.²¹ The *Passio* interacts with a lot of pagan and Christian texts, but there is no evidence that Perpetua had the *Agamemnon* in mind while writing her own experiences. However, Aeschylus was an important author in the ancient world and Perpetua was educated, so she might have been familiar with Aeschylus. Cassandra was widely known in the Mediterranean culture (see section 2.1.1 for an extended discussion). According to Allen, authors always are influenced by their surroundings and pre-existent texts. It does not matter if the pre-text is not known by the author of the intertextual text. The *Passio* could have been affected by the figure of Cassandra, consciously or unconsciously.²² However, it is more important that texts are read by the audience and 'readers extract (...) meaning from them'. Reading provides a 'network of textual relations'.²³ It is this network that would cause the fact that the audience of the *Passio* is able to recognize shared motifs in the stories of Cassandra and Perpetua.

Hence, in this thesis, I perform a close reading of the *Passio* and the *Agamemnon* and discuss the motifs shared between the depictions of these women. Thereby, I focus on the relation of Perpetua and Cassandra to the other characters in their stories, their gods, and the audience. I compare these relations and evaluate them to answer the question which effects we see on the interpretation of Perpetua's story when she is compared to a traditional female seer like Cassandra.

In the first chapter, I discuss the literary figure of Perpetua in the *Passio*. In the second chapter, I analyze the portrait of Cassandra in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*. In the concluding chapter, I compare the literary figures of Perpetua and Cassandra to discuss their similarities.

²¹ Allen (2005: 256) gives this explanation as the first interpretation of intertextuality.

²² Allen (2022: 35).

²³ Allen (2022: 1).

Chapter 1 – Domina Perpetua

In this chapter, I discuss the figure of Perpetua in the *Passio*. How is she depicted throughout the work? Her story and character are framed to meet the specific purpose of the text.

According to the anonymous editor of her diary, the text gives the reader reason to praise the Lord (*ad gloriam Dei lectione celebramus* I.5). The reader knows from the beginning that the story will end in the glory of the Lord. We will see that Perpetua is shaped as a figure in this glorious story. She herself contributes to this glory because she shows us a virtue of the Holy Spirit (*virtus Spiritus unius Sancti* I.3,5) which gives her from the beginning a high status. This chapter concludes that she becomes a *domina* by this *virtus*.

1.1 Domina Romana

1.1.1 *Vibia Perpetua*

The description of Perpetua clearly indicates that Perpetua should be respected because of her *virtus Spiritus Sancti*. When the group of catechumens is introduced, Perpetua receives special attention (II.1-3):

Apprehensi sunt adolescentes catechumeni: Revocatus et Felicitas, conserva eius, Saturninus et Secundulus; inter hos et Vibia Perpetua, honeste nata, liberaliter instituta, matronaliter nupta, habens patrem et matrem et fratres duos, alterum aequae catechumenum, et filium infantem ad ubera. Erat autem ipsa circiter annorum viginti duo. Haec ordinem totum martyrii sui iam hinc ipsa narravit, sicut conscriptum manu sua et suo sensu reliquit.

The group consisted of young catechumens: Revocatus and Felicitas, his fellow-slave, Saturninus and Secundulus; and among them was also Vibia Perpetua, a highborn woman, well-educated in liberal arts, legally married. She had a father, mother, and

two brothers, one of them was also a catechumen, and she was also nursing her baby. She was around twenty-two years old. The total story of her martyrdom, she has told us herself in this text, as it has been written with her own hand and departs from her own experience.²⁴

The editor's introduction mainly focuses on Perpetua. In the rest of the work, Saturninus and Secundulus are never mentioned again. Felicitas receives attention in the editor's part of the story, but not in Perpetua's diary itself, which describes her encounters with her father and the experiences of her visions. Perpetua is clearly the most interesting martyr in the eyes of the editor.²⁵ Perpetua has not only written part of the text herself but she is also the person who has experienced most of the described visions. Furthermore, from the group of catechumens she is the only one who has a *nomen*: Vibia. Her *cognomen* is Perpetua. Heffernan argues that Perpetua was a member of an important family because the Vibii were an influential family in Africa and Italy.²⁶ However, Bremmer suggests that Perpetua's father could also have been a freedman who named himself after his formal master. Despite the fact that he would have had Roman citizenship, he would then not have been of any importance in the Carthage.²⁷ In any case, the name of the Vibii was a name with a high reputation that certainly would have appealed to the contemporary reader. The historical factuality of Perpetua's descent is probably did not bother her contemporary Christian audience. The mention of this name and the esteem with which it came would be sufficient to make her honorable in their eyes. Her good reputation is further enhanced by the statements that she is *honeste nata*, *liberaliter instituta* and *matronaliter nupta*. These statements I will now discuss in more detail.

1.1.2 *Honeste nata*

In the first place, the author wants to emphasize the nobility of Perpetua by saying she is *honeste nata*: well-born.²⁸ Amat notes here in her commentary that the society was divided into *honestiores* and *humiliores*. Perpetua likely belonged to the *honestiores*, but was from a

²⁴ Unless stated otherwise, all translations are my own.

²⁵ Heffernan (2012: 150).

²⁶ Heffernan (2012: 150).

²⁷ Bremmer (2017: 357). See section 1.1.2.

²⁸ OLD 1b.

provincial elite family, not a Roman family.²⁹ However, Heffernan points out that Perpetua and her father got punishments for the *humiliores*. *Honestiores* were not thrown to the beasts or beaten by a rod, the punishments Perpetua and her father have to suffer.³⁰ Again, the historical factuality is not the main point here. On the contrary, the reader's response is relevant. We can imagine that the audience, while reading that Perpetua was *honeste nata*, would have been impressed by her honorable birth and status.

1.1.3 *Liberaliter instituta*

The phrase that Perpetua is *liberaliter instituta* raises many questions. How was Perpetua educated? What does a *liberaliter* education mean? What kind of education could a woman in Roman Carthage receive in the first place? Was this education different from the education of men? These questions are addressed by McKechnie.³¹ From Perpetua's diary, he distils skills that she would have learned from her teachers.. He argues that the use of grammar, rhetoric and poetic prose in the diary must have been taught by a *grammaticus*, who was a teacher for 12-16 years old. The allusions to other Latin and Greek texts in the diary itself and the visions, show the audience that Perpetua knew her classics and was an enlightened woman. On top of that, Perpetua did not only speak her mother tongue Punic, but was also fluent in Greek and Latin. Her second language Latin she writes in an easy, but elegant style. The conversations with her father and the proconsul are rhetorical (III.2, VI.4-5).³² Throughout the text, she appears to be impressively accomplished in languages, writing style and rhetoric. That is why McKechnie suggests that the historical Perpetua was from a rich, Punic family and had a Roman upbringing with a private tutor. Although the commentators agree that Perpetua had enjoyed this type of education, they think that her upbringing still differed from that of boys in the city of Rome. Amat explicitly notes that lessons for girls were not the same as for boys.³³ In contrast to Amat, Heffernan argues both genders were educated in the

²⁹ Amat (1996: 193).

³⁰ Heffernan (2012: 150) and Cooper (2012: 694). About punishments and the distinction between *humiliores* and *honestiores*, see Garnsey (1970: 104).

³¹ See: McKechnie (1994).

³² McKechnie (1994: 282) for example points to Perpetua's first defence of Christianity to her father. Perpetua first asks the obvious question of whether a vase could be named other than a vase and then states that likewise she is a *Christiana* and could not be named otherwise. This argument gives him 'a Platonic feel'.

³³ Amat (1996: 193).

same way, but that the education variform province to province.³⁴ Whether she was educated in the same way as boys or not, the mere fact that the text demonstrates her education was highly esteemed by her audience.

1.1.4 *Matronaliter nupta*

The editor explicitly mentions her marriage and describes it as *matronaliter*. According to the OLD, this word has the connotation of a 'respectable married woman' but the word *matrona* could also 'familiarily' be used for 'young girls of superior rank'. The Latin Dictionary states that the words *matronaliter nupta* are generally used to describe a 'lawful wife, opposite to a concubine'. With this third characteristic of Perpetua, the reader should be totally convinced that Perpetua was an aristocratic, educated and authoritative woman. Hence, also this designation contributes to the power and credibility of her story.

However, this statement about her marital status, is problematic for several reasons. Although Perpetua is the mother of a son, her husband is never mentioned in the diary. Why does the editor stress that this child is from a legal marriage, if the husband himself is not mentioned? What impression would this have made on the ancient readers? I will summarize a few scholarly solutions to these problems and apply their views to our question of how Perpetua is portrayed as a *domina*.

Shaw suggests that her husband herself did not want to see her again, because she rejected him and his beliefs by becoming a *Christiana*.³⁵ This view is problematic because the husband would in that case have required the custody of his own child during the time Perpetua was in prison. The fact that not he but Perpetua's father takes care of the child when he is not allowed to stay with her in prison, demonstrates that the husband is no longer plays a role in the life of the family (VI.8). Cooper proposes the solution that Perpetua was a concubine and, therefore, had no husband. In her opinion, Perpetua was from a low-class family, because she and her father did not receive a treatment appropriate for a high-class family (see section 1.2).³⁶ These points of view give Perpetua not much agency in her relation to her husband, while this was most likely the case. Gold, for example, thinks that

³⁴ Heffernan (2012: 150).

³⁵ Shaw (1993: 25).

³⁶ Cooper (2011: 689, 694).

Perpetua rejected her husband herself as a consequence of her conversion to ascetic Christianity.³⁷ Although it seems not very reliable that a woman in the third-century had such rights, we will see at the end of this chapter that Perpetua had indeed some power over men like her father and the proconsul. Hence, it would not be unthinkable that she also had power over her husband.

Perpetua is called a *matrona* (II.1), and a later in the text and in this thesis we will see that she is also called *domina* (IV.1). We have seen that she is a highly esteemed *domina romana* because she has impressive Roman characteristics. In her relation to her husband, she is less Roman but proves herself all the more a *domina*, because she has the strength to choose for her God instead of her husband. This choice makes her an example for the Christian community. They also consider her a *domina*, but for different reasons, which I will discuss in the next section.

1.2 Domina soror

1.2.1 Virtus Spiritus Sancti: *reason for imprisonment*

The *Passio* clearly indicates that not every Christian was imprisoned, because Felicitas' child is given to a fellow Christian. This means that free Christians were allowed to visit the prisoners (XV.7). So why was Perpetua imprisoned? She was not even baptized yet. However, she certainly was a serious catechumen, and the catechumen period of two or three years was usually followed by baptism.³⁸

Furthermore, Perpetua had an important role in the community, especially because she could communicate directly with God. A first indication of this divine communication is given in the passage about the baptism of Perpetua: *mihi Spiritus dictavit non aliud petendum ab aqua nisi sufferentiam carnis* ('The Spirit told me to demand of the water nothing but the endurance of the flesh' III.5). In this passage, the Spirit speaks directly to her. This is a finger

³⁷ Gold (2018: 110).

³⁸ McKechnie (1994: 290-291) argues that Perpetua could have been a catechumen for no longer than a year, because Tertullian writes that you should be married before being baptized. Thus, if she started the catechumen period after her marriage and had a child, his conclusion is that she would have been a catechumen for only one year.

pointing to the supernatural relation with God and stimulates the audience to take her serious. Heffernan states that this remark supports her claim that ‘the Spirit of God speaks to her and, thus, underscores her role as prophetess’.³⁹ This gives her power in her social environment: she receives knowledge that other people cannot obtain. She shows her knowledge to the community and is, therefore a typical example of ‘charismatic leadership in the early church’.⁴⁰ It was probably because of this charisma, this *virtus*, that Perpetua was noticed by the local authorities and sent to prison. They could have considered this dangerous.⁴¹ The fact that she is seen as an importante authority regarding visions, is seen in the story (IV.1):

Tunc dixit mihi frater meus: ‘Domina soror, iam in magna dignatione es, tanta es ut postules visionem et ostendatur tibi an passio sit an commeatus.’

Then my brother said to me: ‘Lady Sister, you already have an excellent reputation), so great, that you could demand a vision and that it is shown to you if you will suffer martyrdom or will be released.’

There are a few things to pay attention to here. First of all, her brother, who is also in prison, calls her *domina soror*.⁴² The combination of the word *soror* (sister), which gives the impression of equality, and the word *domina* (mistress), which is used as a hierarchical form of speech, is awkward. Why is Perpetua called *domina*? Perhaps this question can be answered by the next comment of the *frater*, who calls her *in magna dignatione*: in a high reputation, full of worthiness. Words like *dignatio*, *dignus* and *dignitas*, which have the meaning of ‘worthy’, ‘worthiness’ or ‘esteem’, appear in other references to Perpetua as a seer other as well. This clearly shows that the gift of prophecy caused a high status in the Christian community.

³⁹ Heffernan (2012: 159).

⁴⁰ Salisbury (2010: 66-67).

⁴¹ Heffernan (2012: 167).

⁴² Who the *frater* in this text is, has been debated: Heffernan (2012: 170) states confidently that this brother is a member of the Christian community and should not ‘be confused with her biological brother’. I think it is more convincing to state that this *frater* is the biological brother of Perpetua, because the introduction makes clear that one of her brothers is a catechumen. Hence he could have been imprisoned as well (II.2).

1.2.2 *Domina digna*

In the introduction, the editor emphasizes that reading examples of martyr stories is important to build the faith of the community and to praise the Lord (I.1,5). Furthermore, he states that it is good to read the new stories next to the old ones, so that everyone who is weak in faith, should listen to these stories because otherwise, people who are weak in their faith would think that only the people of the past could have *gratiam divinitatis conversatam, sive in martyrum sive in revelationum dignatione* ('received divine grace, either in the favor of martyrdom or of revelations' I.5).⁴³ Amat explains this as a 'grâce divine conférant une dignité'.⁴⁴ So *dignatio/digna/dignitas* means that a person receives special worthiness and honor by a divine gift. In the present case, the *dignatio* is given by the ability to communicate with God. This gift of prophecy and the *dignatio* which flows therefrom, stimulates Perpetua to help her fellow Christians and her family. After Perpetua has seen the vision of her dead brother, who has a face full of wounds and filth, she feels that she should try to help him by prayer. She knows she can do so, because she is *digna*: *Et cognovi me statim dignam esse et pro eo petere debere* (And I immediately knew that I was worthy and that I had to pray for him VII.2). So she uses the word *digna* to state that she has permission and power to talk to the divine about her brother. Thus, the fact that she is said to be *in magna dignatione* tells us that she had seen visions before.⁴⁵ She herself confirms this in her answer to her brother (IV.2):

Et ego quae me sciebam fabulari cum Domino, cuius beneficia tanta experta eram, fidenter repromisi ei dicens: 'Crastina die tibi renuntiabo'. Et postulavi, et ostensum est mihi hoc.

And I knew that I talked about these things with the Lord, who blessed me many times, so I promised him, confidently saying: "Tomorrow, I will have an answer for you." And I asked [for a vision] and this was shown to me.

⁴³ Translation by Heffernan (2012: 125).

⁴⁴ Amat (1996: 191). In her commentary on I.5, she mentions that the word *dignatio* appears in the same meaning in the works of the contemporary authors Tertullian and Cyprian.

⁴⁵ Amat (1996: 39) writes that visions most of the time were reserved for martyrs. She states that *dignatio* is a honoring title for martyrs who get visions. However, at the beginning of Perpetua's diary, she does not know if she is going to be a martyr or not but is still described as *in magna dignatione*. To me, this seems to suggest that she received her visions earlier in the community. This is also supported by the fact that the community asked Perpetua about her visions, which indicates that the community had heard about previous experiences of visions

Perpetua talks informally (*fabulari*) with the Lord and she is confident about it.⁴⁶ Even more striking is the fact that she can ask for a vision and promptly receives what she had asked for. Though Perpetua still is a *soror* in her family and in the Christian community, her special *dignatio* of the ability of divine communication, she absolutely deserves the title *domina*.

1.2.3 *Perpetua and Felicitas*

It is striking that *dignatio* is only ascribed to Perpetua and not to the other women. Why is Felicitas, for example, not a *digna* woman as well? She is not even mentioned in the piece of Perpetua's diary. When she is mentioned by the editor, she is also described as a *conserva*, a slave of the group. Furthermore, Felicitas is not mentioned to be a *soror*.⁴⁷ Until recently, scholars have considered her the slave of Perpetua. However, this view was only based on this description of *conserva*. Poirier, however, argues that we cannot be certain that *conserva* means 'slave'. The word is rarely used in this meaning by contemporary Christian authors. Tertullian for example, calls his wife his *conserva*.⁴⁸ However, the spiritual status of Perpetua is higher than that of Felicitas or the other members of the group. Although they show that they have partly received the spirit by praying for early delivery of the child of Felicitas, the real supernatural, divine power of conversing with God is reserved for Perpetua.⁴⁹

We have seen that Perpetua is called *domina soror* because of her special *dignatio*, provided by her experiences of visions. Through this *dignatio*, the Christian community esteems Perpetua. On the other hand, she is stimulated to help her fellow Christians and her own family. That is why she is called a *domina soror*.

⁴⁶ Heffernan states that *fabulari* has a 'domestic ring' (2012: 71).

⁴⁷ Shaw (1993: 25) is also surprised that Felicitas is not mentioned.

⁴⁸ Poirier (2016: 134).

⁴⁹ See also Lander and Kraemer (2017: 984).

1.3 Domina martyr

1.3.1 *Perpetua's anxiety*

We have seen that Perpetua is presented as a strong woman. In the beginning of the story, however, she is afraid in prison because she had never experienced such darkness before (*et expavi, quia numquam experta eram tales tenebras* III.5). She worries about her little child as well. At first, she seems to be somewhat nervous about these circumstances, but at the end of the story, she is not afraid to fight wild beasts in the arena. At the end of this chapter, we will see that the visions she receives have an important function in the development of her literary character of being a *domina romana*. Her visions give her the strength to endure the discomforts in prison, to stand up against earthly authorities like her father and the proconsul, to distance herself from her child and most importantly, to stay steadfast in her faith. These visions empower her to do such things and to abandon her fear.

1.3.2 *Visions: the way to virtus, power and death*

In the diary, four visions are described. In the first vision, Perpetua sees a ladder which leads to heaven. Under the ladder lies a nasty serpent. Saturus, the teacher, joins Perpetua on this ladder and encourages her to climb it. At first, she is afraid of the snake, but in Christ's name, she can do it (IV.6). Once arrived in heaven, she meets an old man who is milking sheep. He gives her some cheese-like food and when she eats it, she awakes from the vision (IV.10). She still has the taste of cheese in her mouth and this leads to the conclusion that she is going to suffer (or celebrate, depending on how one perceives this) the death of a martyr (IV.10). Then, her father arrives for the second time and tries to persuade her to deny her faith, while he shows her child and begs her not to leave the child without a mother (see for this section 1.4).

A few days after this father-daughter moment, the group of prisoners is praying and something in Perpetua calls suddenly the name of Dinocrates, her younger brother (*subito media oratione profecta est mihi vox et nominavi Dinocraten* VII.1). He died at the age of 7, years before, and Perpetua worries now about him. She asks the Lord to see him. On the same night, she sees him in a dark place, his face covered with wounds and filth (VII.4). He is very unlucky and Perpetua, awakened, prays for his health. A short time afterwards, she receives

another vision in which Dinocrates is happy and his face is recovered (VIII.1-2). The prayer of Perpetua has helped her brother to recover. Meanwhile, Perpetua and her fellow prisoners are convicted to death. Their sentence is to be eaten by the wild beasts in the arena (VI.6).

The last vision is specifically about her death. She is sent to the arena but is confused when she does not see any of the wild beasts. She has to fight an Egyptian gladiator instead. Even more striking is that she is undressed and becomes masculine before the fight (*facta sum masculus* X.7). The conditions are clear: if she wins, she earns a branch, if the Egyptian wins, he is permitted to let her die. They start the fight, and Perpetua kicks his face with her feet and after he is lying down, she tramples his head under her feet (mark that she also stepped on the head of the snake in the first vision). She receives her branch and awakes (X.14). Her interpretation of this visions is that she has to fight not only the wild beasts but also the devil.⁵⁰

These visions are key to understanding the behavior of Perpetua towards other characters in the story and towards her own feelings. The dreams do have an important function as becomes clear from the way they are presented. Heffernan does not believe in the truthfulness of the dreams: 'The dreams do not exist. What exists is the narrative recreation of those past experiences, shaped in light of present circumstances'.⁵¹ Ronsse argues that Perpetua uses her education to present her dreams rhetorically, hoping to convince the reader that she is a right prophetess and not a false one.⁵² Habermehl argues that not only the Bible is present in these visions, but many pagan elements as well: 'In ihnen (Perpetua's Visionen) verschmelzen die pagane und christliche Vorstellungswelt und zeigen, wie in dem neuen Glauben beide Traditionen einander befruchten können.'⁵³

⁵⁰ See Habermehl (2004: 145-188) for an explanation about the Egyptian being a personification of the devil. He argues that Egypt often has a negative connotation in Christian texts. Egypt is considered condemned, because it has suppressed Israel in Biblical times, had an idolatry cult and it is therefore an allegory of the 'world' which is not living according to the rules of the Bible (148-149). Gold (2018: 27) suggests that Septimius Severus, the contemporary emperor, was a worshipper of the Egyptian god Serapis, which could also be a background to the fact that Perpetua has to fight the Egyptian idolatry. After all, she has to die in the arena at a feast of the son of this emperor.

⁵¹ Heffernan (2012: 168).

⁵² Ronsse (2006: 307, 312) claims that Perpetua's language is easy to connect with the book of Revelation or other books in the Bible and other prophecies and that, therefore, her visions are 'evidence of early Christian rhetorical sophistication'.

⁵³ Habermehl (2000: 175).

How is the 'verschmelzung' of pagan and Christian literature visible in the text? Firstly, the first vision evokes strong associations with the destroying of the serpent by the Seed of Eve (Gen. 3.15). Like this Son of Eve, Perpetua tramples the head of the serpent. Furthermore, it alludes to the story of Jacob and the ladder, who sees angels climbing to heaven (Gen. 28.12). However, the framing of the vision may not only be based on this story from the Old Testament but could also be influenced by other stories about ladders from Perpetua's broad cultural background. Artemidoros, for example, describes in his dream manual the ladder as a symbol of progress, travel and danger (Art. 2.42).⁵⁴ In other contexts, the ladder 'evoked the challenge of crossing into the beyond'.⁵⁵

Thus, in this vision, traditional and biblical literature 'verschmelzen'. The audience of the *Passio* would recognize these themes and link them to prophecy and knowledge, so that she becomes appreciated even more. Perpetua herself is presented as powerful: She can trample the head of the serpent (a symbol for the devil) in the name of Christ. This gives her trustworthiness which allows her to share this vision with the community.

However, this vision does not have importance for Perpetua as an individual alone: its message concerns the entire group of catechumens, because the other group members most likely will suffer martyrdom with her. Furthermore, the vision gives information for the entire Christian community, because it mentions conditions for personal salvation. It answers questions like what Christians have to do to attain such salvation, and who will be allowed into heaven. These were important questions in the Early Christian church and 'Perpetua's dream provides a partial answer to them'.⁵⁶ The relevancy of the answers to the community, establishes Perpetua's role as a *domina soror*, a *domina* in the Christian community. It is only her, by the *virtus* of the Holy Spirit, who can provide such knowledge.

Notwithstanding the relevance of the visions for the community as a whole, they also contribute to the development of her character in the story. This first vision and the guarantee of her upcoming death, gives her the strength to acknowledge God in the presence of the proconsul and to accept her death sentence (VI.3-6). We elaborate on that in section 1.4.

⁵⁴ Salisbury (2010: 100-101).

⁵⁵ Dronke (1984: 7).

⁵⁶ Heffernan (2012: 168).

When subsequently the visions about Dinocrates appear in the story, their meaning is not immediately clear. What is at this moment the relevance of her long-dead brother for Perpetua' visionary experiences? In contrast to the first vision, which she requested herself, she had at first no clear motivation to ask for a second vision. Therefore, she only prays for a vision to see Dinocrates after a voice has called his name (VII.1).

On a superficial level, this vision shows Perpetua's ability to help other people recover from pain and discomfort, even beyond the limits of life and death. This takes away her grief and anxiety to leave her family and beloved child for the good act of martyrdom. She functions as a medium between the supernatural and the natural world and this status as mediator will enhance her good reputation even more.⁵⁷ However, Von Franz has noted that these visions could also be interpreted on a deeper level. The visions also provide information about her position in the afterlife. The first vision, in which she showed fear of the serpent, clearly shows that although she was a Christian, she was still afraid of the devil. In the second vision, her brother has a wound on his face and is unbaptized, which should be interpreted as a reflection of her own youth when she was unbaptized. Perpetua does not know if her sins that she had committed before her baptism are forgiven. Now, after she has prayed for recovery and has seen in the third vision that Dinocrates is healthy and clean, Perpetua finally can believe that her sins are forgiven.⁵⁸ This vision gives her confidence because 'she is convinced that her prayer has been effective and successful.'⁵⁹ We thus see again that these visions have a twofold function. They strengthen again Perpetua's power in the Christian community where she belongs and give her confidence because she knows she is also cleaned from her sin.

Perpetua's fourth vision has been debated most. This vision is about Perpetua alone and her conclusion is a very personal one: she has to fight the devil on her own. The vision is 'a climax in several ways.'⁶⁰ There has been much discussion about the fact that Perpetua becomes male. Some say that Perpetua needs to gain masculine features to receive the

⁵⁷ Dronke (1984: 11)

⁵⁸ Von Franz (2014: 110).

⁵⁹ Hunink (2012: 85).

⁶⁰ Hunink (2012: 86).

strength to endure the future sufferings.⁶¹ Cox Miller interprets all Perpetua's visions as a critique of the patriarchal system and explains this episode in the story as the moment that what was formerly available for men only is no longer important to Perpetua. She now embraces the masculine, because 'it has become the site for otherness'.⁶² Cooper states that becoming male in a dream fits as a 'marker of the surreal quality of the vision world'.⁶³ Williams, on the other hand, sees no double meaning in Perpetua becoming a man. Athletes are always men, so her transformation could have been for practical reasons alone.⁶⁴

Despite Williams practical explanation, it is remarkable that we see throughout the story that Perpetua becomes more confident and sometimes even more masculine. In the first dream, she first needs to gather courage because she is afraid of the snake, but in the end still manages to trample the beast. In the Dinocrates' visions, Perpetua is strengthened in her self-control. In the last vision, she becomes *masculus* and is not afraid of trampling the head of the Egyptian (alias the devil). This fourth vision is the climax of the story. The last bits of her fear and anxiety are gone. She has become so strong that she even can fight the devil. She has received masculine courage for martyrdom.⁶⁵

The dreams are not the only elements of the *Passio* which present Perpetua in a masculine way. According to Nasrallah, her visions also give her charisma, and charisma is the most 'divine element of authority'.⁶⁶ It helps her to receive the *virtus* about which the editor writes in I.3 and XXI.11. Remarkably, *virtus* is a typical male feature, especially in early Latin.⁶⁷ In the time of Cicero, it is used as synonym for *fortitudo*, which can be used for both men and women. The meaning of 'courage' predominates in the imperial period, and is most associated with men, although it is also applied to women. For a non-Christian audience, *virtus* would still have a masculine connotation.

⁶¹ See for example Dronke (1984: 14): 'Perpetua wants to strip herself of all that is weak, or womanish, in her nature.'

⁶² Cox Miller (2020: 166, 181-188).

⁶³ Cooper (2011: 698).

⁶⁴ Williams (2012: 64) points out that for similar practical reasons, men are sometimes also pregnant in dreams and that we should thus not pay too much attention to this element of the vision.

⁶⁵ Williams (2012: 75).

⁶⁶ Nasrallah (2003: 13).

⁶⁷ McDonnell (2006: 161).

In the Christian Era, the Greek New-Testament value of ἀρετή is translated with *virtus* only regarding God of someone who acts in the power of God.⁶⁸ In the *Passio*, *virtus* is used in the Christian meaning and is thus another argument for the trustworthiness of Perpetua's visions.⁶⁹ The *virtus* she obtains throughout the visions in the story helps her to be confident, steadfast and powerful in a masculine manner, as we will see in the next section.

1.4 Domina Filia

The relationship with Perpetua's father and her reactions to him and the other main authority in the *Passio*, the consul, give us much information about her character. As Sigismund states, she could be considered an 'indecent woman' because of her disobedience.⁷⁰ In this paragraph, we will see how Perpetua changes from this recalcitrant *filia* in a *domina filia*, while her father's masculinity is diminished.

1.4.1 Meetings between father, daughter and the proconsul

The diary of Perpetua begins in *medias res* with an encounter with her father. Out of his love (*pro sua affectione*), has come to the place where she is guarded and tries to convince her to recall her faith (III.1). She asks rhetorically if he could name a vase otherwise than a vase, which he of course cannot, and then explains that she can't call herself otherwise than a Christian: *Sic et ego aliud me dicere non possum nisi quod sum, Christiana* ('In the same way, I can't call myself other than what I am: a Christian!' III.2). She, as a Roman daughter, dared to do something she should not do: in front of her father, she refuses to behave how he wants her to behave.⁷¹ His reaction is, for that reason, completely understandable: he became mad and it was as if he 'wanted to tear her eyes out, but he only threatened me and went away, defeated by the arguments of the devil' (*ut oculos mihi erueret, sed vexavit tantum, et profectus est victus cum argumentis diaboli*, III.3). She is relieved that he stays away for a few days.

⁶⁸ McDonnell (2006: 98-99, 161-164).

⁶⁹ Lucretia also is called *virtus* by Quintilian *Inst.* 5.11.10. Williams explains that in this text, the *virtus* of a woman should be considered even more praiseworthy than that of a man (Williams 2012: 71).

⁷⁰ Sigismund (2012: 108).

⁷¹ Cooper (2011: 691), Sigismund (2012: 108), Shaw (1993: 22).

However, he reappears just after her baptism and the first vision. Again, her father wants her to recall her faith and asks her for pity on him and her child, mother and brothers. After all, her choice to be convicted as a Christian will be fatal for her family as well. This becomes visible when her father begs her to deny faith, because *nemo enim nostrum libere loquetur, si tu aliquid fueris passa* ('No one of us will be free to speak, if you have suffered something like this' V.4). At this moment, he kneels down for her and calls her while he is crying *domina* instead of *filia* (V.5). Here, the hierarchical relationship seems to be changed: a father would never call his daughter *domina* in daily life.⁷² However, Perpetua is now the one who determinates the destiny of her family, not her father, as would be usual. In her reaction to the actions of her father, Perpetua makes clear that it is God's will that she suffers (V.6):

Et ego dolebam casum patris mei, quod solus de passione mea gavisurus non esset de toto genere meo, et confortavi eum dicens: Hoc fiet in illa castata quod Deus voluerit.

And I was sad because of the misfortune my father, because he was the only one of my entire family who could not be happy about my passion, and I comforted him with the words: What God wants, will happen on this prisoner's platform.

Of course, the last argument is a non-sensical one, because she knows her father does not believe in the God who wants her to suffer. This comment seems, therefore, to explain her unusual behavior to the audience of the text. Perpetua pities her father because he cannot be happy for her. Although her own behavior is controversial, she uses this remark to flip the script and to make her father the one who does not do what is expected. The Christian reader would have respected this reason and have thought of her as a perfect Christian who brings in practice what Jesus says in Luke 14:26:

⁷² Sigismund (2012: 110) remarks that *dominus/domina* is also used on the graves of children and other non-influential people. The antique thought about the dead is that they 'have the power of intercession' and therefore should be regarded as *dominus*. Sigismund is not convinced that the use of the word *domina* here gives Perpetua extra hierarchical influence. On the other hand, Perpetua is not dead yet and it is clear that her father does not believe in her upcoming death: he still thinks she can recall and listen to him. Therefore, the audience could still have considered the use of *domina* an indication of Perpetua's power.

Εἴ τις ἔρχεται πρὸς με καὶ οὐ μισεῖ τὸν πατέρα ἑαυτοῦ καὶ τὴν μητέρα καὶ τὴν γυναῖκα καὶ τὰ τέκνα καὶ τοὺς ἀδελφούς καὶ τὰς ἀδελφάς, ἔτι τε καὶ τὴν ψυχὴν ἑαυτοῦ, οὐ δύναται εἶναί μου μαθητής.

If anyone comes to me, who does not hate his own father, mother, wife, children, siblings, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.

God's will and the denial of earthly relationships play an even more important role in the interrogation that follows by proconsul Hilarianus. Perpetua's father is present with her child. They both try to weaken her determination by begging to offer for the sake of her child. Perpetua resists the requirement of offering a sacrifice to the emperor and confesses that she is *Christiana* (VI.4). From this moment onwards, her destiny is clear: she will be thrown for the beasts in the arena (VI.5). Her father becomes mad and wants to take her down and convince her. The proconsul commands his soldiers to beat him. Again Perpetua deplors this, but she does not reconsider her decisions. When she has to go back to prison, her father takes her child and does not want to bring it to her. Perpetua is not sad about this, because *Deus voluit, neque ille amplius mammas desideravit, neque mihi fervorum fecerunt, ne sollicitudine infantis et dolore mammaram macerarer* (And as God willed, the baby no longer desired my breasts, nor did they ache and become inflamed, so that I might not be tormented by worry for my child or by the pain in my breasts, VI.8).⁷³

In all encounters with authorities like her father and the proconsul, Perpetua appears to be self-confident. At the first meeting with her father alone, she confesses to him to be a *Christiana*. Afterwards, she suffers because of the heat and the darkness in the dungeon and misses her child (III.1-8). When her baby is with her, she immediately feels stronger (III.9). She is still bound to earthly feelings. That is why the first vision is important to her. She now knows that it is God's will to suffer martyrdom. This comforts her during the interrogation. Subsequently, she receives the visions about Dinocrates. Her father comes again and is now overwhelmed by sorrow, so much that he tears hair from his beard, and curses his life (IX.2). Perpetua is still sad because of his misfortune but is not afraid of him anymore (IX.3). Her visions have shown her that she is going to die and that her sin is forgiven. She does not

⁷³ Translation by Heffernan (2012: 128).

have to care about the threats of her father anymore. She is self-confident and strong. Her father, on the other hand, has become a pathetic old man.

1.4.2 *A masculine daughter – a feminine father*

We see that the role of Perpetua's father changes throughout the story. In the beginning, he is furious that she would not listen to him. He tries to use his authority to let her behave normally but fails. In the second meeting, he is not tyrannical, but begs with tears and tries to convince her with reason. He even calls her *domina* and thereby, he gives her more control than the first time. Bal writes about this encounter: 'He behaves as a suffering spouse rather than as a tyrannical parent. And as a spouse; the role he takes on is less that of a husband than that of a wife. He becomes quite feminine himself, crying, kissing her hands, and shedding tears.'⁷⁴ The next time Perpetua's father comes to prison, his humiliation reaches its climax: he is beaten by the soldiers of the proconsul and his greatest fear becomes true: Perpetua now is condemned to wild beasts, so he does not have the right to speak anymore (V.4, VI.5).⁷⁵

That Perpetua's father becomes more feminine throughout the story while she becomes more masculine, is also argued by Barbara Gold: 'Thus the figure of the father is increasingly demasculinized over the course of his four visits to Perpetua, with an emphasis on his loss of control, his inability to shake Perpetua's resolve, and his act of prostration before his daughter, and a focus on his pathetic and feeble old age. Meanwhile, Perpetua becomes ever stronger, taking on masculine characteristics that her father has lost.'⁷⁶ In the last meeting, her father is mad with anxiety and tears his hair out. 'Perpetua has reduced him to a state of helplessness.'⁷⁷ This was only possible through the strength that she received from her communication with God and the visions she could interpret.

⁷⁴ Bal (2012: 141).

⁷⁵ See also Cooper (2011: 694).

⁷⁶ Gold (2018: 108).

⁷⁷ Cooper (2011: 695).

1.5 Conclusion

We have seen that Perpetua is presented as a *domina* in various ways. She is a *domina romana* because she is a well-educated, aristocratic woman in the Roman society. She is a *domina soror* because she is a member of the Christian community and has at the same time the special gift of prophecy, which gives her *dignatio* and *virtus*. This *virtus* is enhanced through the fact that she is a *domina martyr*. We also saw that her visions have a twofold function. Firstly, they support Perpetua in her imprisonment. They help her to stay steadfast in her faith. Perpetua herself turns into a strong woman by these visions. Secondly, these visions that give her supernatural knowledge provide Perpetua with *virtus*. The godly communication gives her authority as a female prophet among both Christian and non-Christian audiences, which justifies her behavior towards her father and the consul. This outrageous behavior which is normally disapproved of now becomes the feature of a true and heroine seer.

In my analysis of the visions we have already encountered some traditional Roman elements. Therefore, it is interesting to see if there would be female equivalents of Perpetua in the ancient Mediterranean world and to study how this access to *virtus* and power works. Do traditional female prophets have such authority as well? Does a non-Christian audience recognize Perpetua's behavior as justified and correct for a prophet? I will answer these questions in the next chapter by discussing the portrayal of Cassandra in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*.

Chapter 2 – Domina Cassandra

We have seen that Perpetua was able to withstand authorities like the proconsul and her own father because she obtained *virtus* by her visions. She was honored and esteemed by later generations for her loyalty to God, despite her disobedience to the earthly authorities. Is this unique for Perpetua as a Christian female seer? Or would a classically educated audience recognize the characteristics of pagan female seers in the picture of the assertive Perpetua? I limit my search for parallels to one of the most well-known female seers in antiquity: Cassandra. I examine her literary portrayal in the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus and I particularly focus on how she as a female seer gained authority in her relation to earthly powers, the chorus and Apollo. Thereby I will also discuss what implications this has for our interpretation of the portrayal of Perpetua.

2.1 Cassandra in the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus

2.1.1 *Aeschylus in Roman times*

Comparing Aeschylus' Cassandra and the *Passio's* Perpetua may seem somewhat strange. Because of the fact that the *Agamemnon* was written in 458 BC, it is necessary to explain why this text should be compared with the *Passio*, which is dated 600 years later. Moreover, the familiarity of the *Passio's* audience with the *Agamemnon* could be questioned. The opinions about the popularity of Aeschylus in Roman times were divided and according to Nervegna, Aeschylus did not have an important influence on imperial Roman tragedy.⁷⁸ Furthermore, she downplays the *Agamemnon* as 'a static play' and uses this to explain that 'later actors and audiences had no interest in this tragedy'.⁷⁹ However, there should be a reason why Aeschylus' tragedies survived the centuries. Harrison points to parallels between Roman

⁷⁸ Nervegna (2014: 177).

⁷⁹ Nervegna (2014: 175).

Republican and Imperial tragedies and the plays of Aeschylus. Greek tragedies were read and used by the Late-Roman writers and teachers. Hence, Nervegna is not entirely right in stating that there was 'no interest'. Easterling supports Harrison's statement with various examples from later times. She points amongst others to Dio Chrysostom, who states that Aeschylus has a great style.⁸⁰ Furthermore, she shows that the third-century writer Philostratus wrote an ekphrasis of a painting of Agamemnon with clearly Aeschylean accents.⁸¹ Although the *Agamemnon* was not read in school in late antiquity, 'it was clearly used' because it was an object for ancient commentary and contained unusual vocabulary.⁸²

Although the popularity of Aeschylus is disputable, the general knowledge of the late Mediterranean audience about Cassandra is a fact. The story of the *Agamemnon* was spread



Fig. 1. Cassandra flees from the Trojan horse. Found in Pompeii, now located in the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli (Inv. No. 120176).

so widely that it became 'part of a shared cultural currency.'⁸³ This means that Cassandra was well-known and we find evidence on several frescoes in Pompeii. These paintings proof that the figure of Cassandra was quite lively in the memory of the Roman people, in the age before Perpetua lived (see fig. 1,2). She definitely would have seen this kind of images in Carthage as well. According to Neblung, the Cassandra of Aeschylus is 'neben der Cassandra des Euripides zur wichtigsten Quelle fast aller späteren Darstellungen geworden.'⁸⁴ So there is sufficient proof that the figure of Cassandra was well-known and there is reason to assume

⁸⁰ Dio Chrysostom 52.4. See also Easterling (2005: 29).

⁸¹ Easterling (2005: 36)

⁸² Easterling (2005: 25).

⁸³ Harrison (2017: 169).

⁸⁴ Neblung (1997: 35).



Fig. 2. Cassandra predicts the fall of Troy. Found in Pompeii, now located in the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli (Inv. No. 111476).

that this specific tragedy of Aeschylus played a significant role in the Mediterranean perception of Cassandra.

Knowledge of Cassandra and tragedy in general, is part of the cultural code to demonstrate one's education. The educated audience who read Perpetua's text, would have been familiar with this literary figure and this specific text of Aeschylus. One of the reasons why they would recognize Cassandra is because she has a strong voice in the *Agamemnon*, just as Perpetua has in the *Passio*. The other reasons, I provide in the rest of this chapter.

2.1.2 Summary of the plot

In the *Agamemnon*, Cassandra is degraded from a Trojan princess to a slave of Agamemnon, the king who destroyed her city after fighting it for ten years. She has lost everything except for one thing: the power of divinity. In the past, she foretold the destruction of Troy to the Trojans, and now she is the all-knowing character in the play. She has a role in the fourth act.

The play starts with the Watchman who is waiting for Agamemnon to come back home. Meanwhile, Clytemnestra is dreaming that the Greeks have destroyed Troy and Agamemnon is returning home. The next day, he arrives in a chariot with booty and introduces Cassandra, who is also on the chariot (954-955):

αὐτὰ δὲ πολλῶν χρημάτων ἐξάιρετον
ἄνθος, στρατοῦ δώρημ', ἐμοὶ ξυνέσπετο.

And she [Cassandra] is an elected flower from many treasures,

and came here with me as a gift from the army.

Cassandra is presented as an elected flower, which demonstrates her special meaning to Agamemnon and contributes to her character in the play. Clytemnestra chooses to ignore her for a moment and invites Agamemnon to walk to the house on purple robes. First, he hesitates, because this trampling of purple would be *hubris*, but in the end, Agamemnon is persuaded and does what Clytemnestra wants him to do.

The scene relevant for this research begins right after Agamemnon's entering of the house. Clytemnestra now commands Cassandra to step out of the chariot. After several fruitless attempts to persuade her, Clytemnestra goes inside, because she does not 'have time for this nonsense' and the sheep which will be offered for the arrival of Agamemnon, are waiting inside to be slaughtered (1055-1058). The situation is precarious for her because she plans to murder Agamemnon inside and this should not leak out.⁸⁵ Cassandra remains silent during the time that Clytemnestra is on the scene, but after she has left, Cassandra begins to invoke Apollo loudly. She complains to him, but according to the chorus, he is not the right god to complain to. At the same time, the chorus, which consists of the elders of the city, understands that Cassandra has divinity in her (1083).

A conversation between the chorus and Cassandra follows. It starts with Cassandra calling out and seeing the children of Thyestes being slaughtered by his brother Atreus and eaten by their father. This is an important part of the city's history. Atreus is the father of Agamemnon and Thyestes is the father of Aegisthus, who will later appear to be Clytemnestra's lover. The chorus recognizes the past she is seeing and concludes that she is a prophetess. However, they do not need a prophetess (1098-1099) and although they believe her while she is telling the history, they do not understand the future she subsequently foretells. When Cassandra sees that Agamemnon is to be murdered in the bath by Clytemnestra, she cannot find the words to say what is going on in the vision. Therefore, the chorus understands that something gruesome is happening but does not know what exactly it is. In the end, Cassandra says plainly that Agamemnon is being murdered (1246). However, it is too late to act, because at the same time, they hear Agamemnon's voice crying and then he is no longer alive. Cassandra walks to the house, because she has also seen that

⁸⁵ Knox (1979: 43).

her fate is to die in the house. She also prophesies that Agamemnon will be revenged by his son Orestes and that she herself will also be revenged. However, this prophecy is not fulfilled in the *Agamemnon* or in other parts of the *Oresteia*, When Orestes takes revenge on his mother for the murder of his father, he does not mention that he revenges Cassandra as well.⁸⁶

2.1.3 *Cassandra's function in the Agamemnon*

The Cassandra scene is important for the play. Her 'vision adds the final link to that chain of causes which can only end in Agamemnon's death', as Lebeck points out.⁸⁷ Neblung states that Cassandra in this scene becomes 'zum ersten Mal als komplex durchgestaltete Figur faßbar'.⁸⁸ Knox says that Cassandra as the third actor in the scene, gives the dialogue an 'extra dimension' by her prophecy.⁸⁹ In the plays of Aeschylus' time, the third actor was not frequently used, so the fact that Cassandra is silent for a long time, brings tension to the scene. Transcendental elements are considered dangerous (1132-1133), so the fact that her first words are utterances of the visions she receives works is ominous. Furthermore, the tension in the play is built up because the Cassandra scene postpones the main act: the murder of Agamemnon.

Although scholars now appreciate Cassandra's function in the play, she has been undervalued for a long time, because her scene is not necessary for the plot and could be 'omitted with no effect on the movement of the story', according to Schein.⁹⁰ Leahy argues instead that Cassandra is needed to understand the plot of the story.⁹¹ Because of her supernatural knowledge, she has the power to communicate the event she sees in visions. This is only partly successful. Her audience understands her, but the other characters of the play do not. Consequently, her appearance, is dramatic and ironical, because the audience directly comprehends the implications of her prophecy, while the chorus only understands it only after Cassandra herself is dead. Because Cassandra is the key to understand the plot,

⁸⁶ Leahy (1969: 157).

⁸⁷ Lebeck (1971: 53).

⁸⁸ Neblung (1997: 4, 21) in her investigation of 'the literary development of the Cassandra figure'.

⁸⁹ Knox in his discussion of the introduction of the third actor in a scene in Greek tragedy (1979: 45).

⁹⁰ Schein (1982: 11-16).

⁹¹ Leahy (1969: 145).

she is one of the most important characters in the play and a worthy object of study. Furthermore, the visions of Cassandra retell the past, by which this play is brought in the context of the tragic family of Agamemnon. This gives the story an even more threatening ambiance and gives the audience a broader perspective on and a better understanding of the theme of necessity and free will in the play. We will come back to that in section 2.2.3.

2.2 Domina serva

‘Kassandras Recht- und Hilflosigkeit werden durch die Betonung ihres Standes als Sklavin mehrfach hervorgehoben; dadurch verdeutlicht Aischylos den tiefen Sturz der Königstochter aus Troja.’⁹² This is what Neblung writes about Cassandra and she is not the only scholar to state that she is pitiful and powerless.⁹³ However, we could question Cassandra’s supposedly powerless state. The fact that she is a slave does not necessarily mean that she does not have any power. She compensates for her low status with the divine gift of prophecy⁹⁴ – which is a burden and a danger for her own life at the same time. I will now demonstrate this by discussing the interaction between Cassandra and other characters in the play.

First of all, Cassandra’s behavior in the presence of Agamemnon’s is interesting. Cassandra arrives together with Agamemnon, which is remarkable.⁹⁵ According to Taplin, it is in Greek tragedy not common to introduce two new actors together. Hence, Aeschylus seems to emphasize the fact that they are together. Cassandra is a visible element in the horrible homecoming of Agamemnon; it is a warning for the audience of the bad character of the welcome which awaits him.⁹⁶ After their arrival, Cassandra is on stage, but only Agamemnon and Clytemnestra are speaking. After Agamemnon is convinced by Clytemnestra to enter the house, Clytemnestra tries to convince Cassandra to follow him.

⁹² Neblung (1997: 31).

⁹³ Knox (1979: 46) writes that she is pitiful in her silence and Leahy (1969: 144) points to the pitiful elements in her language.

⁹⁴ Grabbe (2013: 23) argues that in most cultures, female prophets use their gift of prophecy to attain status.

⁹⁵ This is not mentioned in the text, but it should be, because Agamemnon refers to Cassandra, who is in his surroundings (950-951).

⁹⁶ Taplin (1977: 306).

Cassandra however, gives no reaction when Clytemnestra asks her friendly and tries to flatter her and seems to offer her the 'special favor' of being a slave in a rich household (1035-1039).⁹⁷ She does not even react when Clytemnestra thinks she cannot speak in the Greek language. After several attempts Clytemnestra leaves the scene, impatient and insulted. The chorus now takes over to persuade Cassandra to go inside (1068-1071):

ΚΛ οὐ μὴν πλέω ῥίψασ' ἀτιμασθήσομαι.
ΧΟ ἐγὼ δ', ἐποικτίρω γάρ, οὐ θυμώσομαι.
ἴθ', ὦ τάλαινα, τόνδ' ἐρημώσασ' ὄχον,
εἴκουσ' ἀνάγκη τῆδε καίνισον ζυγόν.

Kl: Not shall I longer waste my words and let dishonor myself.

Cho: Out of pity, I shall not be angry.

Come on, miserable thing, step off the chariot

and take the new yoke voluntarily, forced by this necessity.

There are a few conspicuous things in this passage. The first is that Clytemnestra, being a queen, complains about the fact that she is ἀτιμάομαι (dishonored). Afterwards, she leaves the scene. So we see here a queen who is dishonored by a slave and does nothing to punish her! This lack of dignity may be due to Clytemnestra's concerns about the fact that Agamemnon is already inside the house, where the murder will take place, while she is still outside. Furthermore, the reaction of the chorus to such impolite and unlikely behavior of a slave is surprising. The chorus feels pity for her and is not angry. They compassionately call her τάλαινα, and ask her friendly to come downstairs and take the new yoke she has to bear. Apparently, Cassandra can disobey the queen of the land which has conquered her city without being punished. For the audience, her resistance signals trouble ahead for Clytemnestra; she is the first person who by her behavior suggest that Clytemnestra's power may also be undermined in the future.⁹⁸ Despite the fact that Clytemnestra emphasizes the status of Cassandra as a slave (1035-1039), Cassandra is more powerful than Agamemnon,

⁹⁷ Fraenkel (1950: 469).

⁹⁸ Roisman (2021: 50), Debnar (2010: 136).

because he could not resist Clytemnestra, while Cassandra could, and she is more powerful than Clytemnestra herself in humiliating her by her disobedience.⁹⁹

Hence, Cassandra is powerful just by her silence. Her silence is mysterious and ‘prepares of the unveiling of the truth that in turn cannot be silenced’.¹⁰⁰ After Cassandra has stepped off the chariot, she still does not do what Clytemnestra and the chorus want. She even begins to shout to Apollo. Here, she appears to be able to talk, which sets the earlier scene with Clytemnestra in another light for the audience and the chorus. Until now they could have thought that she was not able to understand the language. However, now it appears that she did not *want* to obey Clytemnestra and that she has fought down her power with her silence.¹⁰¹

The disobedience is a pattern throughout the scene, in which Cassandra converses with the chorus as equals. After their first advise to do what Clytemnestra asks, the chorus does not insist on it and never mentions it again. The only way the audience can notice that she is a slave, is when this is made explicit by the other characters in the play and because she is a war victim of Agamemnon. As Taplin writes: ‘Cassandra is not to be ordered around; although she is a foreigner, a woman, and a slave, she will be her own mistress’.¹⁰² In other words, Cassandra appears to be a *domina*.

However, she is still bound to the commands of the gods. At the end of the scene, Cassandra goes inside the house, not because Clytemnestra commands her to do so, but because Apollo sends her to her death (1275-1276):

Καὶ νῦν ὁ μάντις μάντιν ἐκπράξας ἐμέ
ἀπήγαγ' ἐς τοιάσδε θανασίμους τύχας.

And now the Prophet, having finished my prophet's life,
led me to such a deadly fate.

So we see here that Clytemnestra does not have any influence on Cassandra's action. She is only the instrument by which Cassandra is punished. Although Cassandra has the social

⁹⁹ Neblung (1997: 23, 34).

¹⁰⁰ Montiglio (2000: 215).

¹⁰¹ Mazzoldi (2001: 184).

¹⁰² Taplin (1977: 318).

status of a *serva*, in her disobedience towards earthly authorities like Clytemnestra and the chorus, she behaves like a *domina*. Thus, Cassandra resembles Perpetua in her resistance against authority. The only one who can have an influence on both women is the god they serve, as we shall see in the next section as well.

2.3 Domina Martyr?

2.3.1 *Cassandra's painful and incomprehensible prophesy*

We have seen that Cassandra gains predominance in the scene. This is caused by her silence and prophecy afterwards, which results brings tension in the play. However, the same gift of prophecy is also a cause of suffering for her, because the other characters of the play are not seriously about her being a prophetess. The chorus does not want her to tell what is going to happen (1098-1099):

καὶ μὴν κλέος σου μαντικὸν πεπυσμένοι
ἤμεν· προφήτας δ' οὐτινας μαστεύομεν.

We have heard of your famous prophecy,
but we do seek no prophets.

The chorus acknowledges that her gift of prophecy is famous (κλέος μαντικόν) but does not want to make use of it. Their negative reaction is understandable, because Cassandra's utterances begin in an uncontrolled way with shouting to Apollo. When she retells the history about the children of Thyestes, which are eaten by their father, the chorus recognizes the scene because they know the story. They now know she is a prophetess, because she knows the truth about the past of the city, which she could not have known otherwise, because she was not from Greece. However, when Cassandra tries to inform them about the horrifying upcoming events, the chorus does not understand her foretelling of the future (1105-1106):

τούτων αἰδοῖς εἰμι τῶν μαντευμάτων.
ἐκεῖνα δ' ἔγνω: πᾶσα γὰρ πόλις βοᾷ.

I'm ignorant of these prophecies.

But I know the things she said first, because the entire city is buzzing with it.

One of the reasons that the chorus does not (want to) understand Cassandra's prophecy is that they believe that prophecy has negative consequences (1132-1135):

ἀπὸ δὲ θεσφάτων τίς ἀγαθὰ φάτις
βροτοῖς τέλλεται; κακῶν γὰρ διαὶ
πολυεπιεῖς τέχναι θεσπιωδὸν
φόβον φέρουσιν μαθεῖν.

What kind of good message has ever
come from oracles? With pure misfortunes,
the word-rich skills of the prophets causes
fear for the people who listen to it.

Prophecy causes φόβος (fear) to the listeners. Besides, Cassandra's words are incomprehensible, which makes her even more dangerous and terrifying in the eyes of the chorus.

The topos of unpopular and unintelligible prophecy is not new, as Knox has noticed. In Old Testament literature, prophets are despised as well because people do not understand and do not want to hear their words.¹⁰³ Therefore, being a prophet was dangerous. Jeremiah, for example, was threatened with death after he prophesied about the punishment of the Lord against the people of Israel (Jer. 1-10). His message is clear, but the Israelites did not want to hear him. Another prophet, Daniel, complains that he does not understand his prophecy himself. The Lord answers him that it is not necessary yet to understand (Dan. 12:8-9). It is important to note a difference here. Although Daniel does not understand what he sees himself, Cassandra comprehends everything but is not able to communicate.

Her own understanding becomes problematic when Cassandra is speaking about the murder of Agamemnon. She does not know how to say the terrible things she sees (1107-1111):

¹⁰³ Knox (1979: 46).

ὠὖ τάλαινα, τόδε γὰρ τελεῖς,
τὸν ὁμοδέμνιον πόσιν
λουτροῖσι φαιδρύνασα— πῶς φράσω τέλος;
τάχος γὰρ τόδ' ἔσται: προτείνει δὲ χεῖρ ἐκ
χερὸς ὀρέγομενα.

Oh you wretch, is this your plan?
The man who you share your bed with,
While you wash him in a bath – oh how would I say the end!
Because that will be soon: one hand is stretched out
after the other.

The chorus logically does not understand these words, because Cassandra does not know how to say the plain truth (1109, 1112-1113). Until now, Cassandra has not communicated directly with the chorus but only invoked Apollo and talked to herself.¹⁰⁴ The chorus was not her addressee. Hence, the chorus did not have any chance to ask for clarity and Cassandra in turn was not able to reach them. This changes, however, when Cassandra's monologue becomes a dialogue. She seems to be back in the real world again, instead of captured in her world of visions. The conversation with the chorus begins.

Because, at first, the chorus did not understand Cassandra, she now tells plain and simple what is going to happen. However, their interaction is still problematic as the chorus does not want to hear and understand her (1246-1247):

Κα Ἀγαμέμνονός σέ φημ' ἐπόψεσθαι μόρον.
Χο εὐφημον, ὦ τάλαινα, κοίμησον στόμα.

Ca: I say that you will see the blood of Agamemnon.
Cho: Oh miserable woman, say only good things.

So, the communication between Cassandra and the other characters of the play remains problematic from the beginning to the end. However, there is an interesting development in

¹⁰⁴ Fraenkel (1950: 624).

the communication about Cassandra's visions. Mazzoldi distinguishes four phases. Phase A is the uncontrollable shouting at the beginning. Phase B is the non-mediated clairvoyance, in which Cassandra utters what she sees in an inarticulated way. Phase C is mediated clairvoyance, in which she explains what she sees. This is recognized as the transition of clairvoyance to 'rational' prophecy. And phase D is the rational prophecy itself, where Cassandra literally says that Agamemnon is to be murdered soon (1246). In phase C and D, Cassandra tries to win the trust of the chorus. She has to convince them of her prophetic skills because they have to act on preventing the murder of Agamemnon.¹⁰⁵ We have seen, however, that she fails to convince them at the time they need to act.

Although the prophecy does not affect the events of the play, because it does not prevent the death of Agamemnon and Cassandra, Cassandra's words influence the chorus after her death. According to Knox, the chorus 'learns from Cassandra to face reality, to see things as they actually are and must and will be.'¹⁰⁶ Similarly, Lebeck states: 'The chorus is led to the brink of awareness by intuition and prophesy. Then, having experienced Agamemnon's death, they finally attain true insight into its causes.'¹⁰⁷ Cassandra, who is not considered a true prophetess during her life, teaches the chorus after death to see the truth and receives posthumously the respect she deserves as a prophetess.

As mentioned before, Cassandra does not lead the chorus to the truth only, but is from the beginning the informant of the audience. They know she is never believed by her direct addressees, although she is always speaking truth. The audience, in this way, recognizes Cassandra as a true prophetess. Thanks to her supernatural power, she is the hermeneutic key to understand the plot of the play. This makes her a true prophetess in the eyes of the audience.

2.3.2 *Cassandra and Apollo*

In the previous section, I argued that the chorus did not want to believe Cassandra. However, this was not entirely their own choice. The main reason why the words of Cassandra are incomprehensible is Apollo's curse on Cassandra. She tells the chorus about

¹⁰⁵ Mazzoldi (2001: 201-215).

¹⁰⁶ Knox (1979: 52).

¹⁰⁷ Lebeck (1971: 58).

this herself when they ask how she achieved the gift of prophecy. Apollo gave this gift to her but later regretted this because she lied to him. Out of revenge, he punished her by making that nobody would ever believe her before it was too late (1202-14). What exactly happened between Apollo and Cassandra, is not told in the play. It is nonetheless clear that Cassandra had come into the trouble of prophesying because Apollo desired her body.¹⁰⁸ The same body gives her more distress, because she is from that time on, ‘bound up’ in her body because of her prophecies. She knows that people want to know the future, but she also knows that it makes no sense for her to tell what she sees. In the case of the prophecy she tells before the chorus, this gives her even more ‘terrible stresses’, because she sees her own death coming.¹⁰⁹

In the play, Cassandra is rebelling against the idea to die and to leave her body behind. She knows that she has to die because she is with Agamemnon. She also knows it is her own fault, because if she did not had lied to Apollo, the Trojans would have believed her warnings for the war and she would not have ended as a slave of Agamemnon. Because the gift of prophecy has not brought her any good, she now rejects the gift of prophecy: she tears off the ribbons and throws away her staff (1264-1274):

τί δῆτ' ἐμαυτῆς καταγέλωτ' ἔχω τάδε,
 1265 καὶ σκῆπτρα καὶ μαντεῖα περὶ δέρη στέφη;
 σὲ μὲν πρὸ μοίρας τῆς ἐμῆς διαφθερῶ.
 ἴτ' ἐς φθόρον: πεσόντα γ' ᾧδ' ἀμείβομαι.
 ἄλλην τιν' ἄτης ἀντ' ἐμοῦ πλουτίζετε.
 ἰδοὺ δ' Ἀπόλλων αὐτὸς ἐκδύων ἐμὲ
 1270 χρηστηρίαν ἐσθῆτ', ἐποπτεύσας δέ με
 κὰν τοῖσδε κόσμοις καταγελωμένην μέγα
 φίλων ὑπ' ἐχθρῶν οὐ διχορρόπως, μάτην—
 καλουμένη δὲ φοιτὰς ὡς ἀγύρτρια
 πτωχὸς τάλαινα λιμοθνῆς ἠνεσχόμην—

¹⁰⁸ Pillinger (2019: 15-16) argues that her body is ‘central in the story’.

¹⁰⁹ Pillinger (2019: 15-16).

Why do I keep these things to mock myself,
The staff, and the prophet's bands around my neck?
Before I will die, I will destroy you
Go to the Hades: I answer you who lay there in this way.
You can make another rich by madness, instead of me.
Look, Apollo himself takes of my prophet clothes.
He watched me when I, wearing these attributes,
was made ridiculous as a seer by friends and enemies.
I endured that I was called a beggar,
a wandering beggar, miserable and starving.

Cassandra not only throws away her prophetic attributes, but also curses and blasphemes Apollo. Thereby she throws away her agency as a prophetess, the same as she did when she refused the god Apollo, years ago.¹¹⁰ However, she still is believed after the fulfillment of the prophecy. Neither Apollo nor Cassandra can take away the gift of prophecy, and this she knows very well. Hence, her act is not meant to get rid of her gift of prophecy, but to revolting against Apollo as an authority. As Pillinger notes, 'Cassandra's rejection of the symbols of Apollo reflects Apollo's initial attack – as she throws them off, she describes Apollo as stripping her of them – but it also replays her initial rejection of the god'.¹¹¹ She tries to cut all ties with the god. At the same time, she is not sure if his punishment of her will even end in the afterlife (1060-1061):

νῦν δ' ἀμφὶ Κωκυτόν τε κάχερουσίους
ὄχθας ἔοικα θεσπιωδήσειν τάχα.

But now, it seems that I will prophesize soon
on the shores of the Kokytos and the Acheron.

According to the text, she *seems* to be a prophetess in the afterlife but is not entirely sure about this. She is certainly afraid of being ridiculed 'on the shores of the Kokytos and the Acheron' and perhaps hopes to be free of the curse there. If Cassandra in these verses only

¹¹⁰ Roisman (2021: 53).

¹¹¹ Pillinger (2019: 68).

speculates about her afterlife, she may reject Apollo's gift to demonstrate that she will not submit to his punishment after her death and to deny his power beyond the limits of life. However, if Cassandra's words are a vision, they are another pitiful demonstration of Cassandra's horrible fate to be pained by horrible visions and be lonely because her addressees do not take her seriously.¹¹² In any case, it is sure that in the earthly life, the final punishment of Apollo is that Clytemnestra will murder her. She does not want to die, but she is brought to death because of the wrath of Apollo.¹¹³ He, a god, is the only one with power over her.

2.3.3 *Ἀνάγκη versus virtus: the genre of tragedy*

The genres of the *Passio* and the *Agamemnon* differ greatly. We have seen that the literary figure of Perpetua is shaped by her own diary and her description by the editor. The main purpose for spreading the *Passio* was to glorify God because of the *virtus Spiritus Sancti*. We have seen that Perpetua obtained her own *virtus* by obeying God more than humans, which encourages other Christians to live a devout life as well.

The *Agamemnon* as tragedy had an entirely different purpose and, therefore, the function of Cassandra's prophecy also differs from that of Perpetua's visions. Where Perpetua is sure about her God being an agent in her life for her own good, Cassandra acts in an context where *ἀνάγκη* (necessity) is the 'theological principle in the place of direct divine involvement'.¹¹⁴ Necessity and probability are two main concepts which offer perspectives on actions in tragedy, according to Aristotle.¹¹⁵ Hence, in tragedy, not the actions of gods are central, but how humans deal with problematic events in life and how they can influence the outcome.¹¹⁶ The characters in the play 'are the prime causative force in the action; (...) it is they who direct, or through the failures of action for which *hamartia* stands, *misdirect*, the

¹¹² For an extensive discussion of these verses, see Shilo (2022: 88-89).

¹¹³ Debnar (2010: 136), in contrast, analyses the motives of marriage in the *Agamemnon*. Her conclusion is that Cassandra arrived as a bride of Apollo, but subsequently takes her clothes off and enters voluntarily the house of Agamemnon to die with him as his new bride (1269-1270). However, Debnar does not take into consideration that Cassandra is subject to *ἀνάγκη* (see 2.2.3).

¹¹⁴ Rader (2009: 444). Rader responds to Sewell-Rutter (2007: xi), who thinks tragedy is the genre wherein 'the curious coexistence and parallelism of human and divine modes of causation' are a 'defining characteristic'.

¹¹⁵ For an overview of Aristotle's thought about action and necessity in tragedy, see Halliwell (1998).

¹¹⁶ Rader (2009: 443).

development of events which gives the plot its structure and unity.¹¹⁷ Thus, tragedy explores in the first place the necessity of events and in the second place how humans deal with these and which influence this has on the human-divine relationship. This puts the visions of Cassandra in a different perspective. Because of her gift of divine prophecy, she is held in high esteem, as it indicates that she has an important and relevant relation with Apollo. However, we have also seen that the chorus draws her attention to the fact that it is ἀνάγκη for her to step out of the chariot (1071, see section 2.2). In the end, it is ἀνάγκη for her to die in the house of Agamemnon. We have seen that Cassandra knows her ἀνάγκη by foretelling her own death. We also saw that she became mad at Apollo and tore off her prophet attributes, which becomes in this way more tragic. After all, even Apollo would not have been able to change her fate, because ‘curses cannot be made undone’.¹¹⁸

2.4. Conclusion

Thus, we have seen that Cassandra’s visions are complicated by the fact that her words are incomprehensible at first and are subsequently not taken seriously by the chorus when they become understandable. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, the chorus believes prophecy is dangerous. Secondly, Cassandra has been cursed by Apollo. Lastly and most importantly, Cassandra is subject to ἀνάγκη. Her curse cannot be undone, and she knows her awful way of death. She resists to this death and blasphemes Apollo for it, which makes her not a *martyr*. She only is a prophetess who knows she is going to die. She remains a *domina* in her resistance against earthly powers, but is certainly no *domina martyr* like Perpetua. In the next chapter, I will further compare the portraits of Cassandra and Perpetua.

¹¹⁷ Halliwell (1998: 146).

¹¹⁸ Rader (2009: 448).

Chapter 3 – Domina Perpetua et Domina Cassandra

The main research questions of this thesis were how ‘Mediterranean’ Perpetua remains despite her appearance in a Christian context. How would Late-Roman audiences recognize her as a seer? To answer these questions in this chapter, I compare Perpetua with Cassandra on the basis of my findings in the previous chapters.

3.1 Learning by suffering - Relation to other characters in their stories

We have seen that both Perpetua and Cassandra have a special relation to the other characters in the story. Perpetua is presented as an highly esteemed, aristocratic, Roman *domina*. Furthermore, the visions she receives are the main cause of her prominent role in the Christian community. Finally, these visions help her to resist the prayers and orders of her father and the proconsul. Hence, Perpetua could be called a *domina* in every sense of the word. Cassandra’s relationships with the other characters in the story are more complex. She arrives together with Agamemnon, which presents her as an important figure but later on, she appears to be a slave. However, nobody is able to command her, which is demonstrated in the scene with Clytemnestra. Her silence in front of Clytemnestra and her conversation with the chorus show that she has power to humiliate the queen of the city and to disobey the elders. In this respect, she can be called a *domina serva*.

The gift of prophecy gives both women authority, but in different ways. Perpetua’s authority as a seer is acknowledged by the Christian community, which benefits from her supernatural knowledge. The visions of Perpetua give them information about the afterlife. Because of her martyrdom and upcoming suffering, the community learns about this supernatural truth. She brings them good news. Cassandra, however, receives her authority as a prophetess in a less positive way. During her life, the chorus wants that she stops prophesying, because prophecy brings bad omens. Only after her tragic death, the chorus

learns the truth. She is, with hindsight, the only source about the actual fate of Agamemnon (and herself).

In the *Agamemnon*, Cassandra's predominance is not questioned by the chorus or Clytemnestra. They only once try to convince her, but they do not insist. Perpetua, however, has to fight the earthly powers. Her father tries to break her faith four times. However, the more he tries to persuade her, the more confident, masculine and powerful she becomes. In short, both women show us that there is a way for women to obtain authority and to counter earthly powers: in antiquity, prophecy and communication with the divine served as a means for women to have a personal and powerful voice. The characters in the stories respect the women for their ability to communicate with the divine and thereby encourage the audience to follow them in honoring the prophetesses.

3.2 *Virtus* versus ἀνάγκη - Relation to their gods

In the previous section, I mentioned shortly the contrast between the positive reactions to Perpetua's visions and the negative reactions to those of Cassandra. We have seen that the difference in reaction is a consequence of the relationships with the gods they serve.

Perpetua has a good relationship with God. She could have revoked her beliefs to avoid her death and be free again.¹¹⁹ However, she chooses to persist and not to give up her faith. Her visions establish her faith and make her eager to die for her God. She chooses willingly to die, because she is part of the *virtus Spiritus Sancti*. Her death brings freedom to her.

Cassandra, on the other hand, has a bad relationship with Apollo. She is subjected to the god and his revenge. Like Cassandra, also Apollo himself is bound to the principle of ἀνάγκη, so that he would not even be able to change Cassandra's fate if he had wished. In fact, Cassandra has made herself miserable by rejecting him in the past. She does not die willingly and is, therefore, no *domina martyr* like Perpetua. Cassandra rebels against her death and by her rebellion *against* the inevitable she emerges free.

¹¹⁹ See Maldonado-Perez (1999: 10). She states that a martyr could live if he wanted, but chooses to die.

3.3 Relation to their audience

Cassandra is an essential figure in the *Agamemnon*. Through her, the audience learns the truth about the death of both Agamemnon and herself. Furthermore, we learn through Cassandra's suffering as she 'evokes in us feelings of sympathy, in the literal sense of 'shared suffering' as well as enlightenment.¹²⁰ The Late-Roman audience probably learned by taking pity on her and they learned because they knew she could be trusted as a prophetess and would give them truthful information. At the same time, they will also have sympathized with the chorus who does not understand her in the first place. The behavior of the chorus at the end of the play should be taken as an example by them: the chorus admits Cassandra is telling the truth.

The Late-Roman audience most likely also learned from Perpetua's suffering. In her story, she becomes a stronger lady. In the beginning, she is anxious about the dark in prison, she has concerns because of her child and complains about the heat. Even in her first vision, she is afraid of the serpent under the ladder. In the second vision, she learns that she should not be afraid of her earlier sin and guilt in life. These are washed away, just as the unbaptized Dinocrates is cleaned and happy in the next vision. In the fourth vision, she sees that she wins the fight with the Egyptian gladiator. Perpetua's visions are the reason why she gains strength and these visions make her character grow to a martyr saint without doubts. This teaches the Christian audience about the afterlife and even more, to trust in God. He is the one who saves Perpetua, contrary to Apollo, who only makes Cassandra miserable.

3.4 Conclusion

How would Late-Roman audiences recognize Perpetua as a Mediterranean seer? We found remarkable similarities between both women. They could both be considered imprisoned: Cassandra is a slave of Agamemnon, and Perpetua is locked up in a real prison in Carthage. Furthermore, they are both of noble birth. Both actually know that they are going to die, and

¹²⁰ Schein (1982: 15).

have visions about their death. The greatest difference between the literary figures is their worldview and their image of the divine. At first, Perpetua is anxious about being in prison, but by the *virtus Spiritus Sancti*, she receives visions which strengthen her. She is supported by her God. For her and her audience, faith in God is comforting and joyful. This results in Perpetua's voluntary death. Cassandra, however, is frustrated and bound to ἀνάγκη. Nothing she does is voluntarily. Cassandra's fate is tragic because her actions are fruitless during her life. However, she does have a great influence after her death, because it is through her that the chorus and the audience learns the truth.

In both cases, the characters in the texts may initially have had their doubts about the reliability of the women. However, after they have learned that the visions of both women make them powerful, they are convinced that they are telling the truth. In that way, the behavior of the characters serves as an example for the audience. Both stories encourage the audience to listen carefully and believe the prophetic figures in the play.

Perpetua could be recognized as a Mediterranean seer by her audience, because she has more power than ordinary women (and men!) in the natural world. She can oppose the earthly authorities, just as Cassandra does. Furthermore, despite the fact that her visions are full of allusions to biblical literature, their contents are still understandable for the traditional Roman audience. There is however one significant difference between Perpetua's prophecy and traditional Mediterranean prophecy. In prophetic literature before Christianity, even Old Testament literature, prophecy is often dangerous and not appreciated by the people concerned. In contrast, Perpetua's prophecy comforts her Christian community. Therefore, Perpetua can be seen as a prophet in a new era.

The starting point of this thesis was Hunink's suggestion that Perpetua could be viewed as a tragic prophetess. I have investigated this in an experimental way by analyzing the relations of Perpetua with the other characters, her God and the audience and comparing this to Cassandra's relations in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*. My conclusion should be that Perpetua's prophecy surely has Mediterranean elements. However, the positivity of Perpetua's prophecy, opposed to the negative view on prophecy in the story of Cassandra, leads to the conclusion that Perpetua resembles a Mediterranean seer, but not a tragic one, as was suggested by Hunink. The tragic Cassandra acts out of despair, the blessed Perpetua acts out of hope.

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Images

Figure 1

Buzz Ferebee. 'Painting of the Trojan Horse.' Pompei, Casa IX.7.16. Now in the Museo Archeologico à Napoli. Inv. No. 120176. (no date, online image)
<<https://www.pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/R9/9%2007%2016.htm>> 01-08-2023.

Figure 2

No Photographer. 'Cassandra (centre) predicting the downfall of Troy.' Pompei, Casa I.2.28. Now in the Museo Archeologico à Napoli. Inv. No. 111476. (no date, online image)
<<https://www.pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/R1/1%2002%2028%20p6.htm>> 01-08-2023.