

BOOK REVIEW

Thomas J. Heffernan, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. Pp. xxvii + 557. Hardcover, \$99.00/£60.00. ISBN: 978-0-19-977757-0.

In Early Christian Latin literature, many texts and authors remain the exclusive domain of specialists of patristics. There are, however, some exceptions to this rule. One of the most ardently studied texts is an early specimen in the genre of martyr acts, the so called *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity* (*Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis*; hence *PPF*).

This intriguing and complex document has attracted attention from scholars working in various fields. Many papers have been devoted in recent years to (e.g.) the structure of the assembled text, the authenticity of the passage ascribed to the female martyr Perpetua herself, and the language and style in the various sections of *PPF*. For historians too, the Latin text raises many interesting questions, e.g. about the personality and education of Perpetua (who remains a unique female character), city life in Roman Carthage around AD 200, legal aspects of the early persecution of Christians, and practical circumstances concerning executions in the arena. Wider topics, too, such as family relations, social relations, and male and female roles, dominate much of the scholarly work recently done on this text. Even details in Perpetua's personal account, such as her four visions, have become separate research subjects that have gained popularity among researchers with an interest in psychology or gender studies.

In spite of the keen interest by various scholars of ancient culture, the Latin text itself was somewhat neglected until comparatively recent times: the readily available and reliable edition with translation and notes of J. Amat, in the well known *Sources Chrétiennes*, dates from as late as 1996; a few years ago, M. Formisano added a useful and affordable bilingual pocket edition; and a text and English translation (by Joseph Farrell and Craig Williams) were included in an important collection of studies on *PPF* published by Jan N. Bremmer and Marco Formisano.¹ This last book shows

¹ J. Amat, *Passion de Perpétue et de Félicité; suivi des Actes* (Sources Chrétiennes 417; Paris, 1996); M. Formisano, *La passione di Perpetua e Felicità* (BUR; Milan, 2008); J. N. Bremmer and M. Formisano, edd. *Perpetua's Passions: Multidisciplinary Approaches to the Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis* (Oxford, 2012).

the breadth and depth of recent scholarship on the *PPF*, while also exploring new approaches to the text.

And now, as if to crown all this, Thomas Heffernan has published an elaborate, full-scale edition with translation, commentary, and supplementary material on the *PPF*. Thus for the first time, the *PPF* has truly been made accessible for an international, English readership.

Heffernan's impressive book is the fruit of many years of study and work. It covers nearly all basic material about the text one might wish, and conveniently bundles all relevant philological and textual information in one volume. The result is no less than breathtaking: this is a truly amazing achievement, which can make any classicist or historian feel proud of our field of studies.

The book opens with a personal preface, in which Heffernan explains his personal history with the text. Next he focuses on some central issues in current scholarship on the *PPF*. The first main chapter deals with the *personae* in the text, such as the redactor, Perpetua, her father, and all other persons mentioned in the text. Even minor characters that are mentioned only once or twice, such as Perpetua's mother, some prison attendants, or unknown fellow Christians, are given careful attention. This is a pleasure to read, and it will surely be of great use to historians with an interest in prosopography.

The second chapter discusses the date of the *Passio* in minute detail. The conclusion is, fortunately, anything but revolutionary: the date of the collective execution in the arena is suggested to be 'on or around the nones of March in the year 203', while the text of the document must have been completed 'before the fall of the year 209' (p. 78).

Next, the language of composition is discussed in a third chapter. The debate on the relation between the Latin and Greek versions of the *PPF* seemed to have been settled already in favour of the Latin one, but in the context of this fundamental study of the text, Heffernan's attention to this issue seems amply justified. His position is in accordance with the vast majority of modern scholarship: the Latin version is clearly primary, while the Greek version must have been made at a later stage for a different audience.

Next comes one of the most important elements in the book, the Latin text. Heffernan has made an entirely fresh collation of all relevant manuscripts (he travelled all over the world to collect his material), and has produced what may properly be called a new critical text. It may seem a small obstacle for comparative study of *PPF* editions that the editor has assigned new sigils to the various MSS, but for specialists this will be probably not be a major problem. I am happy to note that the general Latin reader will not be bothered here with large or unpleasantly surprising changes with respect to current editions such as Amat (1996), mentioned above. Heffernan's text

may be called ‘conservative’, much of his efforts having been invested in a careful description of relevant variants. The elaborate apparatus criticus, therefore, may rightly be called the most important part of the text edition.

The Latin text is supplemented with an English translation, which is given as a separate Chapter 5 (rather than facing the source text, which would have been more practical for the average reader).

Part 6 is the second main feat of this book: a very full and excellent commentary (pp. 136–368). It largely consists of larger lemmata, at most two or three per page, that zoom in on matters of content. As a rule, there are no discussions of the constitution of the text, nor notes on those all too well known philological favourites like figures of speech or lists of parallels. (Curiously, questions of grammar and basic interpretation of the Latin do come up in a number of notes.) In this sense, the commentary is not ‘complete’, but most readers will surely profit from Heffernan’s sensible choices.

Since the lemmata are not small, and always refer to both the English translation and the Latin original, they allow for reading rather than consulting. They often invite users to read rather more than what they were originally looking for.

Given the great amount of scholarly material, there is, of course, ample room for debate, but on the whole, Heffernan proves to be a fair, cautious, and reliable guide for anyone who studies the text. We may safely assume that his commentary, based as it is on sound research and thorough understanding of the Latin text, will be the inevitable starting point for scholars publishing on the *PPF* in the years to come.

After nearly 400 pages, this is still not all there is. Next come some large appendices. The first one offers a very full description of manuscripts and editions, which will be a source of pleasure for students of book history. Heffernan even adds such details on MSS as their size, provenance, date, binding, signatures, and other physical characteristics: really all one might possibly wish to know about the material backgrounds of our Latin critical text. This is ‘new philology’ at its best.

Appendix 2 presents us with a full Greek text. On a minor critical note, I would observe that the Greek font is too small to allow for pleasant reading. Furthermore, an English rendering of the Greek is not given, an omission which I find hard to explain. One may hope that Heffernan will correct this in a second edition of the book.

Some helpful material concludes the volume: an excellent select bibliography of just 14 pages; a helpful *Index Verborum* (compiled by James E. Shelton) of the Latin text, which includes a complete parsing of each form, as well as grammatical and lexicographical information, and so might also have been called a ‘concordance’ or ‘lexicon’; a short index of names of

protagonists; an index of biblical and patristical *loci*; and for those who still cannot get enough, finally a ‘general index’ (27 pages).

The conclusion may be short. Heffernan’s explicit ambition is to offer the reader ‘one-stop shopping’ (p. xii), including in his volume almost all basic material a reader might wish to help him or her approach the *PPF* in the best of all possible ways: by a careful study of the Latin source texts. As a ‘one-stop shopping’ this book is a great success indeed, although inevitably readers will continue ‘shopping’ elsewhere, because they are bound to become inspired by Heffernan’s book.

This edition of *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity* will undoubtedly be the standard tool for Perpetua scholars in the foreseeable future. It is a splendid achievement, which will greatly serve both the scholarly community and a larger readership. Professor Heffernan has earned deep gratitude and admiration of all those working in the field of Classics.

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