Text, Textual Interpretation, and Historiography:

*The Apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla*

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*The Apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla* tells an ascetic tale that discusses a young woman’s journey to God through renunciation of wealth, matrimony, and worldly pleasures. Paul’s preaching greatly influences her conversion and instills a desire in her to serve God as a missionary and teacher. Thecla’s role rebels against the submissive, “penetrated” feminine stereotype but offers feminine agency and asceticism as a path to eternal salvation. Thecla, along with another important female martyr, Perpetua, aptly fit the mould of Christian heroines, who are typically portrayed as an erotic object for both the text’s characters and the reader. Some scholars argue that the texts of Thecla and Perpetua reinforce gender roles, but other scholars have seen that the texts offer more liberation to the women. This paper argues that in these texts, women want to transcend gender roles and aspire for holiness like any male, but that this aspiration is not fulfilled because of the prevalent male gaze and audience of the time. Although Thecla and Perpetua attempt to subvert classical, misogynist objectification of the female body through the heroines’ heroism and voluntary celibacy, they do not ultimately succeed. Thecla's and Perpetua's heroic lives go against the prevalent passive vision of the female body, yet the text and its literary structure dominates and follows the prevalent male vision.

In the text, Thecla becomes a representative example of female virginity and martyrdom, as her purity is never compromised. Early in the narrative, Thecla boldly baptises herself so that she may be in a state of grace with God. Her self-baptism denotes her favor with God and her unwavering faith through enduring beasts, molestation attempts, and burning at the stake and
being divinely saved each time. A clear example is when Thecla is “deliver[ed]” by God “from the hands of the “wicked... men,” who try to “debauch [her] chastity,” which she has always sealed as an act of “worship” for her love of the Trinity and to uphold God’s “honor.” Thecla is a clear feminine example of the spirit’s victory over the flesh, as her carnal desire was extinguished and this fervour to be a “servant of God” brought her increased virtue.

An intrinsic part of this heroic portrait is the way that gender is inverted. The emphasis on Thecla's physical beauty is significant because external beauty indicated virtue and purity. A focus on the external promotes a gendered feminine stereotype that all women are chaste and graceful, which beautifies virtue and sexualizes it to make piety attractive and appealing to other believers. The specific scenes of Thecla's nakedness and people's instant attraction to her appearance instead of her virtue are in stark contrast to Paul, an ordinary, physically imperfect man who is primarily attractive for his preaching and virtue. Paul is described as “full of grace, for sometimes he appeared as a man, sometimes he had the countenance of an angel.” While Paul’s virtue is given precedence over his mediocre, physical looks, the opposite is true for Thecla. In several sections, Thecla’s physical beauty is discussed as a source of distraction and temptation for men. This is denoted when Paul warns her: “Persons are now much given to fornication, and you being handsome, I am afraid you might meet with greater temptation than the former one, and would not withstand it, but be overcome.” Paul’s advice is taken to heart by Thecla because when she “longed to see Paul...dressing herself in the habit of a man, she went to him in Myra” which shows her willingness to mask her sexuality to avoid rape and to evade the

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2 *APT*, ch. 9.18.
3 *APT*, ch. 1.7.
4 *APT*, ch. 6.13.
5 *APT*, ch. 9.25.
wandering male gaze. Gender, like ideology, has been naturalized and appropriated to be a part of a person, and in this case, a hindrance to person.

These portrayals of Thecla’s gender are portrayed within a framework where gender is no longer a component that is questioned and has become intrinsic to one's value and identity. In his letters, the canonical Paul designates man as the "head" and woman as the "body" and further describes several binaries, such as the teacher and disciple, ruler and subject. According to many Patristic interpreters, this "natural" sex hierarchy was upset by original sin when the "body" (Eve) did not obey her "head" (Adam) but he was allured by the "body" and put himself in submission to her which brought the fall. Women are framed as morally dangerous predators whose “touch” makes men sin. The effects of normalizing this view of women has been harmful, since women are all depicted as “corruptive” temptresses that take their feminine tactics and “stamp them into the souls of men” to make them weak and vulnerable to moral corruption. In this framework, women are still weighed by their sexual appeal, their body and their fickleness while men are valued for their mind and their tenacity. Gender, like ideology, is socially constructed and Eve is the first woman to stamp an identity for women by her disobedience. Her role as the fallen woman has etched a prescribed set of virtues and vices that women have. Eve's fall not only justified the subordination of women, but it also created feminine limits. Furthermore, her fall also served as justification for submission to men and

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7 Ibid., 176.  
8 Ibid., 177.  
9 Ibid., 167, 181.  
10 Ibid., 166.  
11 Ibid., 168.
exclusion from priesthood or public office, which is why Thecla’s self-baptism was so controversial.¹²

Women were said to bring temptation and simultaneously succumb to it because of Eve, but Thecla conquers temptation and always strives for virtue. Thecla does not get tempted as she “underwent a great many grievous temptations of the devil, which she bore in a becoming manner, by the assistance which she had from Christ.”¹³ This specific example of the triumph of will over the flesh shows Thecla’s refusal to submit to the gendered hierarchy that deems her sex as “fickle.” She also stands against the gender norms embedded in marriage. Plutarch, for example, discussed hierarchy within marriage and states that it was the husband’s duty to lead his wife into a higher moral state by using marriage as an "ethical schoolhouse" as the groom teaches his bride about virtue.¹⁴ Thus, Thecla’s proposal of sexual abstinence can be interpreted as a countercultural Christian challenge to this social vision.¹⁵ When Thecla hands over her earrings and mirror, she forfeits her “gendered social status” and wealth for temporal poverty.¹⁶ A.S. Jacobs claims that Christian writers reconstructed their lowly position and claimed their moral superiority as their purity “remained whiter than the [marital], polluted bedclothes.”¹⁷ Jacobs’ point is supported in the Acts as “a cloud of fire surrounded Thecla so the beasts could not come near her, and the people could not see her nakedness” which denotes a divine protection of Thecla’s modesty and chastity.¹⁸ Thecla’s virginity brought her a crown of honour. Even though she gave up possessions and her elevated status, her Christian identity sealed her worthy reputation.

¹² Ibid.
¹³ Ibid., ch. 10.14.
¹⁵ Ibid., 124.
¹⁶ Ibid., 133. See also *APT*, ch.4.10-11.
¹⁸ *APT*, ch. 9.9.
However things were not so simple for Thecla as her liberated status and counter-cultural choices had a heavy price which enslaved her in ways that consequently tied to her gender. Thecla attempts to subvert gendered stereotypes through renouncing possessions and marriage norms as discussed above, but she also submits to these same stereotypes though her dependency on powerful males. For example, Thecla rejects this world of naturalized Greek romance and refuses to be rescued by any earthly “prince,” but she does this by seeking out the male, Paul, “just as a lamb in the wilderness looks every way to see his shepherd.”\textsuperscript{19} This signifies traditional female dependency for male guidance and solace. Barbara K. Gold addresses this point when she acknowledges that Greek and Latin master narratives have naturalized particular masculine and aristocratic ideology.\textsuperscript{20} These literary frameworks reinforce feminine stereotypical representations and behaviour towards men.

Thecla has also been studied for her suggestive acts and how they expose the ideology of the text's male author. When Thecla “threw herself into the water and said, In your name, O my Lord Jesus Christ, I am this last day baptized”, this act was interpreted as a clear depiction of feminine autonomy and liberation from a historical source.\textsuperscript{21} However, since Thecla was not a formal teacher and baptized only herself, Lynne Boughton argued that readers who use Thecla to legitimize women's leadership distort the text's content.\textsuperscript{22} Brown assessed the phrase that men used women "to think with" which echoed patriarchal communication as married women are dispersed among communities like words are circulated between people.\textsuperscript{23} Peter Brown states that women became "signs used by men to communicate.”\textsuperscript{24} Women textually function like

\textsuperscript{19} APT, ch. 5.11.
\textsuperscript{21} APT, ch. 9.7.
\textsuperscript{22} Matthews, “ Thinking of Thecla,” 44.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 50.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
words and speakers. Claude Levi-Strauss similarly recognizes that women are "both signs and producers of signs" as they can evoke symbols but their acts can also be symbolic.\textsuperscript{25} When reading the narrative, evidence of Thecla producing signs for her own empowerment are available, but there are many more signs of women being signs for men’s purposes. These historians argue for studying gender for textual representation and for reconstructing historical analysis.\textsuperscript{26}

However, feminist historians and ideological critics do reconstructive work and analyze texts both for its explicit content and its absent data.\textsuperscript{27} Elizabeth Schüessler Fiorenza acknowledges a reality beyond the text to argue that women essentially shaped early Christian practice. She also thinks that these women were not marginal in actual history, but that biblical and historical sources marginalized them based on their feminine nature.\textsuperscript{28} Thecla and Perpetua serve as the mute voice "pushing through the [text’s] fabric."\textsuperscript{29} Shelly Matthews thinks that those who seek evidence of feminine resistance have a valid agenda as Thecla represents a feminist "counter-voice" for those who resist patriarchal control.\textsuperscript{30} Having an agenda also justifies the value of this resistance as history is not written "in a vacuum but in a sociopolitical context" and the spoken and unspoken dialogue about women affects this context.\textsuperscript{31} The word "nature" has become "a synonym for God" as every bodily desire or necessity is classified underneath the term to mean bodily necessities and it also expresses women's weaknesses, delicacy, and sexual impulse.\textsuperscript{32} Gender is socially constructed but is also intrinsically tied with the biological sex or "nature" of a person. However, this is not the case as Thecla appears to transcend the limitations

\begin{footnotes}
\item[25] Ibid., 51.
\item[26] Ibid.
\item[27] Ibid., 52.
\item[28] Ibid.
\item[29] Ibid., 53.
\item[30] Ibid., 54.
\item[31] Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
ascribed to her gender when she declares to Paul her intention to return to Iconium, and he replies with the words which give these Acts their primary importance: "Go and teach the word of the Lord."33 With this commission, reminiscent of Matthew 28:16-20, Thecla is now equated with the other eleven male disciples and she returns and bears powerful testimony to her faith. Thecla’s narrative correlates in some ways with The Passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicity as both martyr narratives reveal a feminine tradition that has been overlaid with masculine interpretation.

These feminist interpretations are important to consider when examining the patriarchal roles that Thecla and Perpetua attempt to undermine. Nevertheless, the male gaze inevitably takes priority over the female gaze in these texts, thus denoting an underlying power dynamic of unequal control between the gazer (man) and the gazed (woman). One can see this by comparing the narrative of Thecla with that of Perpetua—both Christian heroines who subvert some gender roles, but are also typically portrayed as erotic objects for both the text’s characters and the reader. The woman stereotypically serves as a “passive” vessel to the “active” male’s fixation. This “dominant ideology” is subverted as Thecla takes on a male role, baptizing herself and exchanging marriage for asceticism.34 Moreover, Perpetua refuses the domestic life and guides the soldier’s “limp” sword to her throat when she is martyred, which also denotes masculine aggressiveness.35 These two saintly women do not welcome dehumanizing gazes as they fervently guard their chastity and avoid molestation which also signifies their refusal to play a part in gender inequality. Thecla and Perpetua attempt to reform the norms established to benefit men, thereby shifting the power of the gaze as the women choose how much men can see.

33 APT, ch. 10.4.
Finally, however, they cannot exercise this agency at certain points in their narratives—above all, in the arena, when they must succumb to being reduced to an object in their nakedness. The narrative scenes describing Thecla’s nakedness promote the notion that men are active, women are passive, and, as men look at women, the women are acutely aware of this voyeuristic gaze. These two female martyrs are constantly depicted as exposed and the narratives’ attention on the women’s bodies often “interrupts the text’s flow, requiring the audience to pause and visualize the spectacle of the female body.”\(^{36}\) Perpetua’s narrative describes lactating “breasts”, an exposed thigh, and fixing “dishevelled hair” which promote a vulnerable and femininely normative perspective that is concerned with chastity, fertility, and decorum.\(^{37}\) These female saints undermine some stereotypes ascribed to their gender, but are still trapped in these narrative walls by the prevalent male audience that views and undermines them. By eroticizing a religious female figure and ignoring the visual imagination in these narratives, the religion’s sanctity is promoted as a beautiful, intimate mystery that must be sought.

Thecla and Perpetua subvert stereotypes but still uphold the gendered notion that women need men for support and leadership. Thecla and Perpetua are both from good families and upbringing, and they both renounce their family in order to embrace a "new Christian identity."\(^{38}\) Both martyred women must also face public humiliation for their "disruptive adherence to Christian belief."\(^{39}\) Thecla abandons a potential husband to follow another man who has “captured” her in a “new desire and fearsome passion,” while Perpetua rejects her father’s pleas

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\(^{39}\) Ibid.
and instead "seeks the will of another [heavenly] father." There is a romantic literary undertone and male dependency that continues to prevail in both these texts. When considering Thecla, if the canonical Paul chooses to address one of his churches “like a father with his children, urging and encouraging you and pleading that you lead a life worthy of God, why should Thecla’s Paul take her away from her fiancé?.” Conjugal “happy endings” are naturalized in the narrative, in much the same way that Plutarch depicted marriage as the “natural site of philosophical progression.”

Many scholars have attempted to use the Acts of Paul and Thecla to show ‘real’ ancient Christian women abiding to their role in society, which includes having no authority and submitting to men. However, Thecla’s story is more complicated than this. Thecla does go against constructed societal roles and lives by her commitment to celibacy, fasting and prayer. Although this text and the characters are likely fictitious, amid the Apocryphal Acts’ heroic declarations of asceticism and advocacy for virginity, it serves as a genre that merges renunciation and martyrdom as literary channels to salvation. This genre flourished from an era when celibacy was spreading, when valiant martyrdom narratives were in demand, and when old men rhetorically served as sage characters and young women as virginal, doe-eyed maidens. The Acts of Paul and Thecla was a success because it offered feminine agency by advocating chastity and virtue. Purity is always attainable if pursued by the reader or viewer. At the same time, the text left the erotic, feminine image intact as an alluring incentive for the reader’s pleasure. When considering the artistic depictions of Thecla’s naked, voluptuous figure, sexualizing virtue made redemption physically attractive and spiritually accessible. This channel to holiness promoted this tale of the “devout virgin” that resonates with contemporary audiences, secular and religious.

40 Ibid.
41 Ibid., 108.
42 Ibid., 121.
alike. By upholding the primacy of the male “gaze”, the narrative’s supposedly modernized perspective of women as active agents in attaining holiness is denigrated by exposing the woman’s nakedness as a source of shame which, consequently, pacifies the woman. By expressing a heroine’s physical beauty as her primary winning feature, the text dehumanizes the woman and objectifies her as an empty vessel. The text exposes the exterior, feminine body to the reader’s imagination, and thus hides the interior contents of her soul and her mind.
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