Dressing and Undressing Thecla: The Making of a Virgin Martyr

by

Vex Maxwell-Therwhanger

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Thesis Committee:

Malcolm Wilson, Chair

Lily C. Vuong, Member

Kevin Dicus, Member

University of Oregon

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THESIS ABSTRACT

Vex Maxwell-Therwhanger

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Title: Dressing and Undressing Thecla: The Making of a Virgin Martyr

The following thesis explores the ways in which the *Acts of Thecla*— an apocryphal Christian martyr narrative following an aspiring Christian virgin— proposes the most appropriate ways for wealthy Christian women, particularly those pursuing a life of ascetic chastity, to utilize their elite resources and privilege to support the Christian church. I argue that an aristocratic Christian woman who wishes to become a holy virgin must use her wealth and high social status to pursue and protect her virginity, rather than indulge in the temptations inherent to the life of an upper-class Roman woman. Chapter One explores how Thecla uses symbols of wealthy Roman womanhood to gain privileged access to Paul in prison and her subsequent expulsion from her home city. Chapter Two discusses Thecla's desire to cut her hair and be baptized, then explores the ways in which Thecla and the wealthy women of Antioch use their elite privileges to protect Thecla from harm and help her attain the manly virtues of endurance and self-control. Chapter Three examines Thecla's conversation with the governor of Antioch and her reunion with Paul, demonstrating that Thecla has attained the masculine qualities required in an ascetic teacher.

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DEDICATION

For my wife, Alexis Maxwell-Therwhanger, whom I love more than words can say. Alex, this thesis would not exist without your love, encouragement, advice, and support; from the bottom of my heart, thank you for everything.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Among myriad eccentric early Christian martyrs, few have captivated academic audiences more than Thecla, a virgin from Iconium whose thrilling tale of lust, torture, and crossdressing is recounted in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* (*APTh*). While the exact date of composition is unclear, Jan Bremmer has proposed that *APTh* was written sometime between 160 and 200 CE, during the peak of popularity for Greek romance novels— a major influence for *APTh*— and in the midst of the formation of numerous Christian sects, including the Marcionites, Valentinians, and so-called "Gnostic" and "orthodox" groups.[1] For the early Christians, the second century was a particularly turbulent time, full of theological discourse, controversial teachers, social upheaval, and numerous (often contradictory) accounts of the life and teachings of Jesus, Paul, Peter, and other prominent Christian leaders. Thus, it is difficult to determine who wrote the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* and to which Christian sect they belonged; while many have argued that it was originally transmitted orally by and within a community of ascetic women, this claim has not gone uncontested.[2] Although we can draw few conclusions about *APTh*'s authorship, modern scholars have used contemporaneous sources to determine that the *Acts of Thecla* had a diverse audience, consisting of "male and female readers, including

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[1] From Bremmer: "Tertullian comments on the *AP* [*Acts of Paul*] around A D 200, and the mention of Falconilla, the daughter of Queen Tryphaena in the *AP*, supplies a *terminus post quem* of about A D 160. This rare name is most likely derived from Pompeia Sosia Falconilla, the wife of the Roman consul of A D 169 (M. Pontius Laelianus), who is known from various contemporary inscriptions". Jan N. Bremmer, "The Five Major Apocryphal Acts: Authors, Place, Time, and Readership," in *The Apocryphal Acts of Thomas*, ed. Jan N. Bremmer (Peeters Publishers, 2001), 156; David Brakke, *The Gnostics: Myths, Ritual, and Diversity in Early Christianity* (Harvard University Press, 2010), 96–105.

[2] Jeremy Barrier, *The Acts of Paul and Thecla: A Critical Introduction and Commentary* (Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 21-22; Virginia Burrus, *Chastity as Autonomy: Women in the Stories of Apocryphal Acts* (Edwin Mellen Press, 1987), 67–68; Stevan L. Davies, *The Revolt of the Widows: The Social World of the Apocryphal Acts* (Southern Illinois University Press, 1980); Peter W. Dunn, "Women's Liberation, the Acts of Paul, and Other Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles: A Review of Some Recent Interpreters," *Apocrypha* 4, no. 1 (1993): 245–61. https://doi.org/10.1484/J.APOCRA.2.301234; Jean–Daniel Kaestli, "Fiction littéraire et réalité sociale: que peut–on savoir de la place des femmes dans le milieu de production des Actes apocryphes des Apôtres?" *Apocrypha* 1, no. 1 (1990), 279–302. https://doi.org/10.1484/J.APOCRA.2.301311.

within wealthy, elite, and educated circles, in Asia Minor, Africa, Egypt, and possibly Syria within the first 50-75 years of the compilation [of *AP*]".[3] The text's focus on women in particular may imply that they are its primary intended target, although its presence in the larger corpus of the *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, and the numerous references to Thecla and the *Acts of Paul* in writings from other Christian theologians, illustrates that men were not excluded from the audience.

The *Acts of Thecla* is one out of three sections that compose the apocryphal *Acts of Paul* (*AP*), a text recounting some of Paul's adventures during his travels as a Christian missionary. *AP* first appeared in the second half of the second century, perhaps between 170-175 CE.[4] Although the text was eventually condemned by church officials, it was popular among many Christian sects until the late Middle Ages, and was cited by numerous prominent theologians, including Hippolytus, Origen, Commodian, and Methodius.[5] Around 400 CE, Leucius Charinus, a Manichaean Christian living in Egypt, reportedly compiled the *Acts of Paul, Acts of John, Acts of Andrew, Acts of Peter,* and *Acts of Thomas* into one anthology, titled *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles* (*AAApos*).[6] Among the entire *AAApos*, the *Acts of Thecla* is one of the most— if not *the* most— popular texts in both Classical and Religious Studies, motivating many talented scholars to produce a staggering amount of material on the text.

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[3] Barrier, *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, 17.

[4] Richard I. Pervo, *The Acts of Paul: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Cascade Books, 2014), 41.

[5] Hippolytus, *In Danielem* 29.3; Methodius, *Symposium*; Origen, *De Principiis* 1.2.3, *Commentarii in evangelium Joannis* 20.12. See also, Pervo, *The Acts of Paul*, 42–59.

[6] Photius, *Bibliotheca* 114. See also Barrier, *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, 1, 21–30; Jan N. Bremmer, "The Apocryphal Acts", 156.

I.I. Previous Scholarship and the Present Thesis

A plethora of talented scholars have published a wealth of diverse research on the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* since the text was first discovered. Stephen Davis provides masterful cross-cultural and intertextual analyses of *APTh*, its multiple manuscripts, the cult of Saint Thecla, and *APTh*'s relationship with other martyr narratives, such as the *Passion of the Martyr Saints Protus and Hyacinth*.[7] Virginia Burrus, Elizabeth Castelli, Elizabeth Clark, Ross Shepard Kraemer, and Gail Corrington Streete have all discussed the *Acts*' portrayal of gender, sexuality, and women's leadership alongside similar narratives, drawing attention to *APTh*'s complex views on women's authority and sexuality.[8] Drawing on these scholars' explorations of *APTh*'s portrayal of sexuality and sexual abstinence, Melissa Aubin, Susan A. Calef, Kate Cooper, Matthew Jackson-McCabe, David Konstan, and Maia Kotrosits have explored the *Acts*' relationship with Greek novels, particularly Greek romances, and Graeco-Roman conceptions of *eros* and eroticism.[9] Lynn Cohink, Cornelia Horn, Elif Hilal Karaman, and Lily C. Vuong have

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[7] Stephen Davis, *The Cult of Saint Thecla: A Tradition of Women's Piety in Late Antiquity* (Oxford University Press, 2002).

[8] Virginia Burrus, "Word and Flesh: The Bodies and Sexuality of Ascetic Women in Christian Antiquity", *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 10, no. 1 (1994): 27–51. https://www.jstor.org/stable/25002220; Burrus, *The Sex Lives of Saints: An Erotics of Ancient Hagiography* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Burrus, *Saving Shame: Martyrs, Saints, and Other Abject Subjects* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); Elizabeth A. Castelli, "Virginity and Its Meaning for Women's Sexuality in Early Christianity". *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 2, no. 1 (1986): 61–88. https://www.jstor.org/stable/25002030; Elizabeth A. Clark, *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity* (Princeton University Press, 2009); Ross Shepard Kraemer, "The Conversion of Women to Ascetic Forms of Christianity", *Signs* 6, no. 2 (1986): 298–307. https://www.jstor.org/stable/3173928; Kraemer, *Unreliable Witnesses: Religion, Gender, and History in the Ancient Mediterranean* (Oxford University Press, 2011); Gail P. Corrington Streete, *Redeemed Bodies: Women Martyrs in Early Christianity* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2009).

[9] Melissa Aubin, "Reversing Romance? The Acts of Thecla and the Ancient Novel", in *Ancient Fiction and Early Christian Narrative,* ed. R.F. Hock (Society of Biblical Literature, 1998), 257–272; Susan A. Calef, "Thecla 'Tried and True' and the Inversion of Romance", in *A Feminist Companion to the New Testament Apocrypha,* ed. Amy-Jill Levine with Maria Mayo Robbins (The Pilgrim Press, 2006), 163–185; Kate Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity* (Harvard University Press, 1999); Matthew Jackson-McCabe, "Women and Eros in Greek Magic and the Acts of Paul and Thecla", in *Women and Gender in Ancient Religions: Interdisciplinary Approaches*, ed. Stephen P. Ahearne-Kroll, Paul A. Holloway, and James A. Kelhoffer (Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 267–278; David Konstan, "Acts of Love: A Narrative Pattern in the Apocryphal Acts", *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6, no. 1 (1998): 15–36. https://doi.org/10.1353/earl.1998.0013; David Konstan, "The Novel and Christian Narrative", in *A Companion to the Ancient Novel*, ed. Shannon N. Byrne and Edmund P. Cueva (Wiley

discussed *APTh*'s significance among other apocryphal acts and martyr narratives.[10] While these academics explore the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*'s broader themes and context within Graeco-Roman history and culture, others analyze individual scenes or episodes that catch their attention. Many scholars— including the aforementioned Stephen Davis— have been intrigued by Thecla's crossdressing and analyzed that episode from multiple perspectives.[11] Others— such as Jan N. Bremmer, Callie Callon, Carly Daniel-Hughes, and Bruce J. Malina and Jerome H. Neyrey— have been captivated by the only description of Paul in Christian literature and have analyzed the *Acts*' portrayal of the apostle, his appearance, teachings, and relationship with Thecla.[12] The *Acts of Paul and Thecla* also presents several unique challenges, as it exists in

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Blackwell, 2014), 180–197. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118350416.ch11; Maia Kotrosits, "Penetration and its Discontents: Greco-Roman Sexuality, the Acts of Paul and Thecla, and Theorizing Eros without the Wound", *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 27, no. 3 (2018): 343–366. https://www.jstor.org/stable/44862275.

[10] Lynn H. Cohick, "Mothers, Martyrs, and Manly Courage: The Female Martyr in 2 Maccabees, 4 Maccabees, and the Acts of Paul and Thecla", in *A Most Reliable Witness: Essays in Honor of Ross Shepard Kraemer*, ed. Susan Ashbrook Harvey et al. (Society of Biblical Literature and Brown Judaic Studies, 2015), 123–132; Cornelia Horn, "Suffering Children, Parental Authority and the Quest for Liberation?: A Tale of Three Girls in the *Acts of Paul (and Thecla)*, *the Act(s) of Peter*, the *Acts of Nerseus* and *Achilleus and the Epistle of Pseudo-Titus*", in *A Feminist Companion to the New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine with Maria Mayo Robbins (The Pilgrim Press, 2006), 118–145; Elif Hilal Karaman, "A Woman Abandoned by her Apostle: Thecla's Uniqueness among the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles", *Dinbilimleri Akademik Araştırma Dergisi* 21, no. 2 (2021): 963–986. https://doi.org/10.33415/daad.960012; Lily C. Vuong, "The Ideal Feminine: Gender, Regendering, and Competition in the *Acts of Thecla* and the *Acts of Xanthippe and Polyxena*", *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 32, no. 1 (2024): 101–131. https://doi.org/10.1353/earl.2024.a923170.

[11] Stephen Davis, "Crossed Texts, Crossed Sex: Intertextuality and Gender in Early Christian Legends of Holy Women Disguised as Men", *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 10, no. 1 (2002): 1–36. https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/earl.2002.0003; Davis, "From Women's Piety to Male Devotion: Gender Studies, the 'Acts of Paul and Thecla', and the Evidence of an Arabic Manuscript", *The Harvard Theological Review* 108, no. 4 (2015): 579–593. https://www.jstor.org/stable/43948540. See also Margaret R. Miles, *Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West* (Beacon Press, 1992); J.C.B. Petropoulos, "Transvestite Virgin with a Cause: The Acta Pauli and Theclae and Late Antique Proto-'Feminism'", in *Greece and Gender,* ed. Brit Berggreen and Nanno Marinatos (Norwegian Institute at Athens, 1995), 125–139.

[12] Bremmer, "The Portrait of the Apostle Paul in the Apocryphal Acts of Paul", in *Figurationen des Porträts*, ed. Thierry Grueb and Martin Roussel (Brill, 2018), 415–434; Callie Callon, "The Unibrow That Never Was: Paul's Appearance in the Acts of Paul and Thecla", in *Dressing Judaeans and Christians in Antiquity*, ed. Kristi Upson-Saia, Carly Daniel-Hughes, and Alicia J. Batten (Routledge, 2020), 99–116; Carly Daniel-Hughes, "The Apostle of Failure: Queer Refusal, the Corinthian Letters, and Paul's Unflattering Characterization in the Acts of Thecla", *Biblical Interpretation* 31, no. 4 (2023): 473–495. https://doi.org/10.1163/15685152-20221688; Bruce J. Malina and Jerome H. Neyrey, "Physiognomics and Personality: Looking at Paul in the Acts of Paul", in *Portraits of Paul: an Archeology of Ancient Personality* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 100–152.

several different manuscripts, many of which are written in different languages and regional dialects. Many academics have attempted to compile all extant manuscripts of *APTh* and produce an edited version of the Arabic, Armenian, Coptic, Ethiopic, Greek, Latin, Church Slavic, and Syriac versions of the text.[13] Many others have also produced modern translations of the *Acts* in English, French, German, Italian, and Spanish, making *APTh.* more accessible to the general public.[14] Some scholars have turned their attention to the archaeological record, providing detailed analyses of depictions of Thecla on tomb paintings, pilgrimage flasks, caskets, and roundels.[15] In spite of the abundance of scholarship on *APTh*, one area is surprisingly lacking; to the best of my knowledge, there is little in-depth analysis of the *Acts*' portrayal of wealth, and its relationship with Christian asceticism, martyrdom, and Roman femininity. While many previous academics have mentioned Thecla's initial identity as a wealthy woman and discussed its significance in the greater scheme of Christian apocryphal writings and theology, I have yet to find an extensive discussion of the issue that examines *APTh* on its own terms. Because, as

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[13] These include, but are not limited to: Barrier, *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*; Valentina Calzolari, *Apocrypha Armeniaca: Acta Pauli et Theclae, Prodigia Theclae, Martyrium Pauli*, Vol. 1 (Turnhout, Brepols: 2017); Davis, "From Women's Piety to Male Devotion" (2015); Amber Ivanov, "On the Hypothesis of a (Second) Greek Exemplar in the Translation Process to Old Church Slavonic of the Miracula Theclae", *Starobulgarska Literatura – Journal for Medievé Bulgarian Literature and Culture* 69–70 (2024): 86–128. https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=1280859.

[14] These include, but are not limited to: Luigi Moraldi, *Apocrifi del Nuovo Testamento* Vol. 2 (Turin, Unione Tipografico-Editrice Torinese: 1971); Ángel Narro, "Hechos de Pablo y Tecla (BHG 1710)", in *Martirios de santas del primer cristianismo*, ed. Álvaro Ibáñez Chacón and Ángel Narro (Madrid, Editorial Rhemata: 2024), 37–94; Richard I. Pervo, *The Acts of Paul: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Eugene, Cascade Books: 2014).

[15] Hala Kamal Abd El-Motagally, "Saint Thecla on Coptic Wall Paintings", *International Journal of Advanced Studies in World Archaeology* 3, no. 1 (2020): 46–60. https://doi.org/10.21608/ijaswa.2020.187657; Sabrina C. Higgins, "St. Thecla and the Art of Her Pilgrims: Towards an Autonomous Feminine Aesthetic Praxis", *Journal of the Canadian Society for Coptic Studies* 11 (2019): 65–80. http://dx.doi.org/10.5913/jcscs.2019.85674464; Matthew Martin, "Observations on the Paintings of the Exodus Chapel, Bagawat Necropolis, Kharga Oasis, Egypt", in *Byzantine Narrative: Papers in Honour of Roger Scott*, edited by John Burke (Brill, 2006): 233–257; Ruth Ohm Wright, "Rendezvous with Thekla and Paul in Ephesos: Excavating the Evidence", in *Distant Voices Drawing Near: Essays in Honor of Antoinette Clark Wire*, ed. Holly E. Hearon (Liturgical Press, 2004): 227–242.

several scholars would argue, the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* is a key text in the formation of virgin martyr narratives, it seems prudent to investigate what the text implies about wealth, femininity, and ascetic Christianity, so that we might better understand how *APTh* laid the foundation for later texts which examine similar themes.

I propose that the *Acts of Thecla* is particularly interested in *wealthy* women, and the most appropriate ways for upper-class women to utilize their status and resources to express their Christian faith and support a community of other believers. The *Acts* argues that a wealthy Christian woman who wishes to commit herself to a chaste lifestyle must utilize her elite status and privileges to pursue and protect her virginity, rather than indulge in the temptations inherent to upper-class life— even if her dedication to the faith means that she must leave her aristocratic family and community behind. Christian ascetic women may also receive support from older peers with means and privilege, who can use their own resources to defend their comrades from harm, particularly sexual assault. If a Christian virgin exploits her elite status to become a Christian and protect her virginity from outside violation, resisting its temptation in all other circumstances, then she can attain the masculine virtues of endurance, self-control, and wisdom. Upon gaining and honing these qualities, she may become a masculine ascetic, a Christian who voluntarily abstains from "food and drink, sleep, wealth, or sexual activity" in order to attain self-control by which she may become "a pure vessel of the divine will" who can communicate "with the divine through some form of *unio mystica*".[16] Martyr narratives "invite readers to identify with the martyrs, to adopt their ideals, and to value suffering as an expression of the Christian faith", and stories about valiant virgins sacrificing their elite status to protect their

[16] Susanna Elm, *"Virgins of God": The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Clarendon Press, 1996), 13–14; Richard Finn Op, *Asceticism in the Graeco-Roman World* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1.

moral purity encourage wealthy, unmarried Christian women to follow their heroines' example.[17] Even those women who did not face physical or political persecution could still "find in the trials of daily life an opportunity to reenact the passion of the martyrs".[18] Thus, by depicting its heroine willingly severing her connection to her elite status and community, *APTh* encourages its audience— particularly members who were unmarried, wealthy, women— to do the same, and valiantly endure any suffering they may experience as a result of their devotion to the Christian faith.

I.II. Approach and Methodology

Throughout this thesis, I will utilize Jeremy Barrier's Greek text and numeration, which largely relies on the system proposed by Willy Rordorf (in collaboration with Pierre Cherix and Rudophe Kasser) in volume 1 of *Écrits apocryphes chrétiens* (*ÉAC*).[19] The *ÉAC* edition that Barrier used in his monograph "is the work of the text critical team that is producing the most current critical edition of the *AP* that includes all available manuscripts and papyri of the *AP*… [and] makes a distinction between the accounts of Iconium and Antioch, which follows the text of Cop^{1}, therefore representing the earliest known account of the chapter divisions in the *AP*".[20] I have elected to use Barrier's commentary over Rordorf's because it provides more extensive commentary on *APTh*'s grammar and historical context, and Barrier provides numerous emendations which attempt to recreate the original language of Cop^{1}, the earliest manuscript of *APTh* that is currently available. Throughout this thesis, I will use socio-historical analysis of

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17 Nicole Kelley, "Philosophy as Training for Death: Reading the Ancient Christian Martyr Acts as Spiritual Exercises", *Church History* 75, no. 4 (2006): 745. https://www.jstor.org/stable/27644869.

18 Kate Cooper, "'Only Virgins Can Give Birth to Christ': The Virgin Mary and the Problem of Female Authority in Late Antiquity", in *Virginity Revisited: Configurations of the Unpossessed Body*, ed. Judith Fletcher and Bonnie MacLachlan (University of Toronto Press, 2007), 108.

19 Barrier, *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, XX.

20 Barrier, *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, XX.

APTh's larger context in conjunction with a close-reading of the text. I will also employ modern theoretical criticisms and theory— including feminist criticism, queer criticism, punishment theory, and anthropological theories of the body— when I believe that both the original text and its cultural context support such readings. I have also incorporated material culture and elements of art historical analysis, so that, like the audience of *APTh*, my audience can also visualize the symbols of wealth, femininity, and masculinity that Thecla dons and removes. From this point onwards, I shall also refer to the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* as the *Acts of Thecla*, since Paul's involvement in the story is largely limited to the first few chapters, and Thecla is both the protagonist of *APTh*. and the subject of the present thesis. Throughout the thesis, I avoid using terms like "male" and "female" to describe men and women, or masculinity and femininity. I eschew these terms in part because, even in the second century, possessing a male body (or, to use a modern term, being assigned male at birth, or AMAB) did not inherently make an individual a full, proper Roman man; the same principle applies to those with female bodies (or, assigned female at birth (AFAB)). Furthermore, because Thecla is an AFAB individual who moves between feminine and masculine means of self-presentation— and, to some degree, even between the identities of "woman" and "man"— employing biological terms risks perpetuating a simplified view of gender identity and expression that I do not believe the text supports. Throughout the thesis, I will instead precisely define and contextualize what it means to be a "woman", "man", "masculine"-presenting person, and "feminine"-presenting person within *APTh* itself and within its socio-historical environment.

Chapter One, "Taking Off" Paganism, will examine Thecla's gradual surrender of the resources and social standing associated with her status as a wealthy Roman woman. I will argue that the *Acts of Thecla* depicts its heroine beginning to voluntarily sever her ties to her elite status

by surrendering symbols of her wealth and femininity to visit Paul in prison. However, while Thecla initiates her separation from her elite community, her family and city are the ones who complete it when they attempt to kill her as an example for other virgins who may wish to embrace Paul's message. Chapter Two, Naked and Reborn, will discuss Thecla's first— and failed— attempt to initiate herself into the Christian church, explain how Thecla's self-presentation as a wealthy Roman woman makes Paul hesitant to baptize her, and demonstrate how Thecla proves her commitment to the Christian faith by enduring further persecutions in Antioch, transforming her naked body from a symbol of humiliation to one of courage and virtue. Chapter Three, "Putting On" Christianity, will discuss the ways in which Thecla re-takes control over her self-presentation in order to assert her status as an ascetic Christian teacher by defending her faith before the governor of Antioch and converting the women of the city, willingly leaving Tryphaena's elite household and the social support it provides, and finally by donning a man's outer garment and appearing before Paul as a masculine woman who has proven her commitment to the faith. By the end of the *Acts of Thecla*, the titular heroine has completely divested herself from wealthy femininity, embraced a masculine and ascetic lifestyle, and completely removed the slimmest possibility of succumbing to the temptations inherent to her sinful flesh.

II. CHAPTER ONE: "Taking Off" Paganism

The *Acts of Thecla* does not begin with its titular heroine, but with her mentor, Paul, arriving in Iconium so that he might spread his ascetic teachings throughout the city. Taking up residence in another Christian's home, Paul preaches for three days and three nights, captivating the women of the city, particularly those who were virgins.[21] As a result of his preachings, the wealthy elites see Paul as a trouble-maker, a strange man from afar who came to their city to corrupt and steal away their wives and daughters.[22] While this concern reflects a larger anxiety among Greek and Roman men— one might recall Paris' abduction of Helen or Pentheus' disdain for Dionysus, two instances wherein "foreign" men entered Greek cities and seduced or otherwise "corrupted" their women— Paul did not come to Iconium to kidnap or sexually proposition the women of the city; rather, the apostle came to exhort them to holy chastity, so that they might attain eternal salvation.[23]

Although the men of Iconium condemned Paul for seducing their wives and daughters, Paul's message emphasized virginity and self-control above all else; Paul may have enticed the Iconian women towards an alternative lifestyle, but he has no sexual intentions towards them. During his sermon, Paul provides his own beatitudes, which endows chastity and those who commit to it with particular importance. Out of Paul's twelve teachings, four bestow blessings upon virgins specifically, granting them the highest honor among the Church:

> *Μακάρια τὰ σώματα τῶν παρθένων, ὅτι αὐτὰ εὐαρεστήσουσιν τῷ θεῷ καὶ οὐκ ἀπολέσουσιν τὸν μισθὸν τῆς ἁγνείας αὐτῶν· ὅτι ὁ λόγος τοῦ πατρὸς ἔργον αὐτοῖς*

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[21] *APTh.* 3.5–9. All translations of the *Acts of Thecla,* based on the Greek text provided in Jeremy Barrier, *The Acts of Paul and Thecla: A Critical Introduction and Commentary* (Mohr Siebeck, 2009), are my own.

[22] *APTh.* 3.8–9, 3.11–16.

[23] Eur. *Bacc.* 215–263.

> *γενήσεται σωτηρίας εἰς ἡμέραν τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ, καὶ ἀνάπαυσιν ἕξουσιν εἰς αἰῶνα αἰῶνος.*
>
> Blessed are the bodies of virgins, because they will be well pleasing to God and they will not lose the reward for their purity; because the word of the Father will become a work of salvation for them in the day of his Son, and they will have rest in the ages of eternity.[24]

For a woman such as Thecla— whose own mother praised her devotion to maintaining her virginity— Paul's message of self-control and chastity was greatly appealing, and she sat at her window for three days and nights, neither moving nor sleeping nor eating.[25] When her fiance, a local official named Thamyris, visits her home, Thecla's mother begs him to draw her daughter's attention away from the window, lest Thecla's attachment to Paul compromise her chastity, and thus her social and monetary value as a young bride.[26] Although she has never seen Paul's face, Thecla has "fallen in love" with his message and will do anything to learn more, even redirecting her wealth and privilege towards pursuing Christianity rather than maintaining her social standing.

II.I Leaving the *Mundus Muliebris*?

Among all of Paul's teachings, Thecla is most captivated by his exhortation to virginity, a lifestyle which necessitates a redirection of her elite privileges. Many early Christian thinkers associated women's sexual immorality with ostentatious displays of wealth, arguing that upstanding Christian women ought to abstain from elaborate hairstyles, fine clothing, expensive

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[24] *APTh* 3.5–6.

[25] *APTh* 3.7–10. For the image of Thecla bound to her window, see Jan N. Bremmer, "Magic, Martyrdom, and Women's Liberation in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*", in *The Apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla*, ed. Jan N. Bremmer, 36–59 (Pharos Publishing House, 1996) and Janet E. Spittler, *Animals in the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, 163–168 (Mohr Siebeck, 2008).

[26] *APTh* 3.8–10.

jewelry, and cosmetics.[27] Indeed, many first- and second-century theologians traced the origins of jewelry, cosmetics, and other displays of wealth to a particularly egregious sexual sin. First Enoch, a popular text in both Jewish and Christian circles in the second century, recounts how women first learned about jewelry and other forms of adornment from rebellious angels:

> And he [Azazel] showed them the things after these [weapons], and the art of making them: bracelets, and ornaments, and the art of making up the eyes and of beautifying the eyelids, and the most precious and choice stones, and (all kinds of) colored dyes.[28]

Jewelry, cosmetics, and dyed fabrics— all symbols of wealthy femininity in the Roman empire— are the results of Azazel's rebellion against God, improper knowledge imparted to humans, which will corrupt the earth itself.[29] Irenaeus' commentary on this passage indicates that some Christian groups likely drew similar conclusions:

> For unlawful unions came about on earth, as angels linked themselves with offspring of the daughters of men, who bore to them sons, who on account of their exceeding great size were called Giants. The angels, then, brought to their wives as gifts teachings of evil, for they taught them the virtues of roots and herbs, and dyeing and cosmetics and discoveries of precious materials, love-philtres, hatreds, amours, passions, constraints of love, the bonds of witchcraft, every sorcery and idolatry, hateful to God; and when this was come into the world, the affairs of

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[27] 1 Pet 3:1–6; 1 Tim 2:9–10; Clem. *Paed.* 3.2; Tert. *Cult. Fem*. 2.6, 11; Rev. 17–18.

[28] 1 En. 8.1. All translations of 1 Enoch by M.A. Knibb and edited by Mitchell G. Reddish, *Apocalyptic Literature: A Reader* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990).

[29] 1 Enoch 8.2.

wickedness were propagated to overflowing, and those of justice dwindled to very little.[30]

In the third century, when Christian theologians regarded *The Book of the Watchers* as authoritative scripture and the *Acts of Thecla* was gaining popularity in Christian communities, Tertullian explicitly stated that, because the "secret" of jewelry making was revealed to women by rebellious angels, jewelry itself must be diametrically opposed to virtue or godliness:

> *...proprie et quasi peculiariter feminis instrumentum istud muliebris gloriae contulerunt: lumina lapillorum quibus monilia uariantur, et circulos ex auro quibus brachia artantur, et medicamina ex fuco quibus lanae colorantur, et illum ipsum nigrum puluerem quo oculorum exordia producuntur. Haec qualia sunt, interim iam ex doctorum suorum qualitate et condicione pronuntiari potest, quod nihil ad integritatem peccatores, nihil ad castitatem adamatores, nihil ad timorem Dei desertores spiritus aut monstrare potuerunt aut praestare. Si doctrinae dicendae sunt, mali magistri male docuerint necesse est; si mercedes pro libidine, nullius rei turpis merces decora est.*
>
> … they had bestowed upon women, specifically and as it were peculiarly, that instrument of feminine vanity: the brightness of jewels with which necklaces are diversified, and hoops of gold with which the arms are compressed, and dyes from the orchil with which wools are colored, and that black powder itself by which the beginnings of the eyes are drawn out. These things are of such a kind that, in the meantime it is possible that they be made known with respect to the quality and condition of their teachers, because sinners were able to either instruct

[30] Irenaeus, *Proofs* 18. All translations of Irenaeus by Joseph P. Smith, *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching* (Westminster: The Newman Press, 1952).

> or assist nothing for blamelessness, lovers nothing for chastity, deserting spirits nothing for fear of God. If they were called teachings, then it is necessary that wicked teachers had taught wickedly; if as rewards of lust, the reward of no shameful thing is beautiful.[31]

Another contemporary theologian, Cyprian of Carthage, shares a similar view as Tertullian, stating:

> It was not the work of God, that sheep should be scarlet or purple; nor was it His teaching, to die and colour wool with the juice of herbs and with shell-fish; nor framed He necklaces of stones and pearls inlaid with gold, and arranged in chains or groups, wherewith to hide that neck…All which did sinning and apostate Angels put forth, according to their arts when degrading themselves to the contamination of earth they left their heavenly strength.[32]

For early Christian theologians, a woman's body is a battleground "between Christ and Belial, life and death, salvation and damnation…one cannot renounce the demons at baptism and then decorate oneself with the products of their arts".[33] Therefore, in order for an aspiring Christian virgin to fully embrace a chaste, ascetic lifestyle, she must first remove any and all symbols of wealthy, Roman femininity and instead adorn herself sparingly, with minimal decoration and

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[31] Tert., *Cult. Fem.* 1.2.1–2. All translations of Tertullian, *De Cultu Feminarum,* based on the Latin text in Marie Turcan, *La Toilette de Femmes (De Cultu Feminarum)* (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1971), are my own.

[32] Cyp., *Treat.* 4.9. All translations of Cyprian, *Treatise Four: On the Dress of Virgins,* from Charles Thornthon, *The Treatises of S. Caecilius Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, and Martyr: Translated, with Notes and Indices* (Oxford: J. H. Parker, 1840).

[33] Annette Yoshiko Reed, *Fallen Angels and the History of Judaism and Christianity: The Reception of Enochic Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005): 179–180. See also Carly Daniel-Hughes, *The Salvation of the Flesh in Tertullian of Carthage: Dressing for the Resurrection* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011): 64, 75–77.

modest attire.[34] If Thecla truly wishes to follow Paul's teachings and become a Christian virgin, then she must also make this sacrifice, utilizing these symbols of her station as a means to pursue Christianity, rather than as a public status symbol.

Thecla initially uses her wealth and privilege to gain elite access to Paul in prison, removing her bracelets and mirror and thus sacrificing outward symbols of her elite status in order to pursue Christian virginity. Although Thecla literally gives up visible indicators of her wealthy Roman identity, she nevertheless exploits the less conspicuous privileges that her station provides by bribing the prison guards with luxury items that only an upper-class woman could possess:

> *Ἡ δὲ Θέκλα νυκτὸς περιελομένη τὰ ψέλια ἔδωκεν τῷ Πυλωρῷ, καὶ ἀνοιγείσης αὐτῇ τῆς θύρας ἀπῆλθεν εἰς τὴν φυλακήν· καὶ δοῦσα τῷ δεσμοφύλακι κάτοπτρον ἀργυροῦν εἰσῆλθεν πρὸς τὸν Παῦλον, καὶ καθίσασα παρὰ τοὺς πόδας αὐτοῦ ἤκουσεν τὰ μεγαλεῖα τοῦ θεοῦ.*
>
> But at night, Thecla, having stripped off her small bracelets, gave [them] to the Gate-Keeper, and with the door having been opened for her, she departed into the prison. And having given a silver mirror to the prison guard, she entered towards Paul, and having sat down at his feet, she heard the great things of God.[35]

Both Thecla's *ψέλια* ("little bracelets", equivalent to the Latin *armilla*) and her *κάτοπτρον* ("mirror", equivalent to the Latin *speculum*) are uniquely associated with elite Roman femininity. For second- and third-century readers of the text, Thecla using her *ψέλια* to gain access to Paul's cell may have represented an aspiring Christian woman using her wealth to learn about the faith

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[34] 1 Pet 3:1–6; 1 Tim 2:9–10; Tert., *Cult. Fem.* 2.1.1, 2.5.1–5, 2.11.1–3.

[35] *APTh* 3.18.

by sacrificing a symbol of the destructive temptations inherent to it. Audiences familiar with this text may have made the connection between Thecla's bracelets and Azazel's, but even those who had not heard of First Enoch would still see Thecla's *ψέλια* as symbols of elite Roman womanhood. While wealthy Roman men could exhibit their elite status in multiple ways, Roman women had limited opportunities to display their wealth and character to the public. When Roman women went out in public, they would use their clothing, jewelry, makeup, and hairstyles to show off their *cultus*— their refinement, civilization, and elite status.[36] While Christian theologians like Tertullian derided this practice, other authors endorsed it.[37] For example, Livy records the tribune L. Valerius arguing in favor of repealing the *lex Oppia*— a Roman law which strictly regulated wealthy women's appearance— by arguing that jewelry, fine clothing, and other means of adornment were the only ways for wealthy women to attain honor:

> *Non magistratus nec sacerdotia nec triumphi nec insignia nec dona aut spolia bellica iis contingere possunt; munditiae et ornatus et cultus, haec feminarum insignia sunt, his gaudent et gloriantur, hunc mundum muliebrem appellarunt maiores nostri.*
>
> Neither the office of a magistrate, nor priesthoods, nor triumphs, nor badges of honor, nor the gifts or spoils of war are able to befall them [women]; elegance and fine apparel and refinement: these are the badges of honor for women, in these they rejoice and pride themselves, which our ancestors called the world of women.[38]

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[36] Elizabeth Bartman, "Hair and the Artifice of Roman Female Adornment," *American Journal of Archaeology* 105, no. 1 (2001): 4–6, https://doi.org/10.2307/507324.

[37] Tert., *Cult. Fem.* 2.11.1–3.

[38] Livy 34.7.8–9. All translations of Livy, *Ab Urbe Condita,* based on the Latin provided in *Livy: Books XXXI-XXXIV with an English Translation*, ed. William Heinemann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1935), are my own. See also Leslie Shumka, "Designing Women: The Representations of Women's Toiletries on Funerary

According to Valerius (via Livy), since Roman women cannot publicly display their honor or virtue in public offices, they ought to exhibit their good character through their clothing and adornments. As such, a Roman audience would have seen Thecla's bracelets as public displays of her wealth and elite status. Furthermore, sets of *ψέλια* and wrist bracelets, such as those shown in Figures 1.1 and 1.2, were vivid symbols of a woman's elite status; for the ancient Greeks, and later the Romans, *ψέλια* were specifically associated with Persian and Egyptian fashion.[39] Thus, a fine *ψέλιον* was not only a symbol of a Roman woman's high social status, but also her family's extreme wealth, since only an affluent family could afford to import such an item from Rome's foreign territories. *Ψέλια* were popular from the Hellenistic Era through the Roman Imperial Area, and as shown in Figure 1.3, many retained popular designs and motifs, making these adornments recognizable indicators of Roman women's virtue and opulence for centuries.

Monuments in Roman Italy," in *Roman Dress and the Fabrics of Roman Culture*, ed. Jonathan Edmonson and Alison Keith (University of Toronto Press, 2008), 172–191; Georgios Vassiliades, "The *lex Oppia* in Livy 34.1–7: Failed Persuasion and Decline", in *The Ancient Art of Persuasion across Genres and Topics*, ed. Kyriakos N. Demetriou et al. (Brill, 2019), 104—123. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004412552_008.

[39] Xen., *Cyrop*.1.3.2; BGU1101.8; POxy.259.11



Fig. 1.1. Pair of golden upper-arm ψέλια *in the form of coiled snakes (ca. 225-175 BCE).*[40]



Fig. 1.2. Pair of golden wrist bracelets in the form of coiled snakes (ca. 225-175 BCE).[41]

[40] 92.AM.8.6.1 and 92.AM.8.6.2. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Villa Collection, Malibu. https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/object/107W3P.

[41] 92.AM.8.7. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Villa Collection, Malibu. https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/object/103Z02.



Fig. 1.3. Pair of golden snake ψέλια *(ca. 1st century, CE). These* ψέλια *have a simpler design than those shown in Fig. 1.1 and 1.2, but snake-shaped* ψέλια *remained popular symbols of elite life during the Roman imperial age.*[42]

[42] VO.63 (57.528, 57.529), The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore. https://art.thewalters.org/object/vo.63/.

However, many Christian authors believed that, since Christian women ought to refrain from pagan ceremonies and other public spectacles, there was no reason for upstanding women of God to adorn themselves in the same manner as Roman women:

> *Quae autem uobis causa extructius prodeundi cum remotae sitis ab his quae talium indigent…Ac si necessitas amicitiarum officiorumque gentilium uos uocat, cur non uestris armis indutae proceditis, tanto magis quanto ad extraneas fidei ut sit inter diaboli ancillas et Dei discrimen, ut exemplo sitis illis, ut aedificentur in uobis, ut, quomodo ait apostolus, magnificetur Deus in corpore uestro. Magnificatur autem in corpore per pudicitiam utique et per habitum pudicitiae competentem.*
>
> Moreover, what reason do you have for showing yourselves more loftily, since you were removed from those (places) which require such things…And if the necessity of Gentile friendships or duties calls you, why not show yourselves, having been dressed in your arms, so that there might be distinction between the handmaidens of the devil and the handmaidens of God by so much more as to strangers of the faith, so that you might be an example for them, so that they might be built up in you, so that God may be glorified in your body, as the apostle said. However, (God) is especially magnified in the body through modesty and through attire agreeing with modesty.[43]

For a Christian audience, Thecla's surrender of her bracelets is not only a redirection of the wealth and privileges that her elite status bestows upon her, but also a voluntary rejection of the temptations inherent to it. By giving up her *ψέλια*, Thecla also surrenders symbols of temptation and sexual immorality. She chooses to go forth into the world as a servant of God, using her

[43] Tert., *Cult. Fem.* 2.11.1–2; See also Clem. *Paed.* 3.2.10

clothing as her weapons and armor to fight against the devil's minions.[44] Unlike the women of First Enoch or her wealthy Roman peers, Thecla refuses to possess symbols of wicked femininity, instead using her resources to pursue the path of Christian virtue and virginity.

Thecla also uses her elite privileges to commit to the path of Christian asceticism by surrendering her silver mirror (*κάτοπτρον ἀργυροῦν*), another symbol of upper-class Roman femininity and status.[45] In her discussion of wealthy Roman women's hairstyles, Elizabeth Bartman argues that the prevalence of hairdressing and mirror-gazing scenes in Roman funerary reliefs indicates that the mirror itself was a symbol of elite Roman womanhood:

> Hairdressing and its necessary accompaniment, mirror gazing, were regarded as distinctly feminine activities. In fact, hairdressing scenes appear so frequently in the context of women's tomb reliefs, an obvious site for emblematic imagery, that they may be said to represent the essence of female life itself…When combined with self-reflection in the mirror, hairdressing evoked a web of associations: leisure, artifice, female behavior, and, as we shall see, *cultus*.[46]

Women's and girls' burial assemblages frequently contain fine mirrors, and many funerary monuments depict their subjects gazing into mirrors as they style their hair and faces. Funerary monuments and assemblages often seek to depict an idealized version of the deceased; as such, elite women in the Roman world would be depicted with their mirrors and various accoutrements to symbolize how they embodied aristocratic womanhood during their lives. As Leslie Shumka writes in her examination of these funerary reliefs:

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[44] Reed, *Fallen Angels,* 179–180. See also Daniel-Hughes, *The Salvation of the Flesh,* 64, 75–77.

[45] *APTh* 3.18.

[46] Elizabeth Bartman, "Hair and the Artifice of Roman Female Adornment", 4. See also Leslie Shumka, "Designing Women", 175.

> Indeed, the emphasis placed on self-presentation in mortuary contexts, where Romans wished to leave some record for posterity of their earthly achievements, points strongly to dress and adornment as activities suited to honourable women and endorsed by them as well as their (often male) commemorators. Furthermore, representations of the *mundus muliebris* were not limited to a particular place and time, but formed part of the rich artistic repertoire of sculptors in Italy as well as other areas of the Roman Empire from the early imperial period through the late third century at least. The longevity of this imagery suggests that the link between gender success and a woman's appearance was firmly entrenched in Roman society. By mastering the delicate art of personal display women affirmed their status and achievements in the citizen community and expressed their own sense of individuality. *Ornatus* and *cultus* were not, therefore, trivial concerns. They were, as the *mundus muliebris* reliefs suggest, an important vehicle of self-expression.[47]

Thus, Thecla's *κάτοπτρον*, like her *ψέλια*, represents her identity as an elite Roman woman, along with all of the privileges that status provides for her. A wealthy Roman audience would have seen Thecla's *κάτοπτρον* as a symbol of her good moral character and her commitment to adorning herself in a manner befitting an upstanding Roman woman.[48] A Roman woman who was not "accustomed to ask the fanciful bronze mirror what sort of (woman) she is" (*rogare qualis sit solet aes imaginosum*) was derided for her unpleasant appearance, which reflected her

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[47] Shumka, "Designing Women", 186–187; For a catalogue of these funerary reliefs, see Natalie Kampen, *Image and Status: Roman Working Women in Ostia* (Mann, 1981), 149–152.

[48] Livy 34.7.8–9

lack of *cultus*.[49] The *speculum*, as a tool by which a woman could examine her physical appearance, also engendered moral and intellectual self-reflection; because many Roman authors viewed outward appearance as a reflection of one's internal character, viewing one's face could also prompt an individual to assess their mental and emotional state:

> *An non Socrates philosophus ultro etiam suasisse fertur discipulis suis, crebro ut semet in speculo contemplarentur, ut qui eorum foret pulchritudine sibi complacitus impendio procuraret, ne dignitatem corporis malis moribus dedecoraret, qui uero minus se commendabilem forma putaret sedulo operam daret, ut uirtutis laude turpitudinem tegeret? Adeo uir omnium sapientissimus speculo etiam ad disciplinam morum utebatur.*
>
> Moreover, is Socrates not the philosopher reported to have advised his students, so that they would often contemplate themselves in a mirror (*speculo*), so that the one among them who was pleased with his own beauty would greatly take care, lest he dishonor the dignity of his body with bad habits, (so that) truly the one who thought himself to be less praiseworthy with respect to his body would eagerly take care, so that he would conceal his ugliness with praise of his virtue? Thus the wisest man of all was making use of the mirror (*speculo*) for the teaching of habits.[50]

Just like Socrates' alleged students, a Roman woman who owned and made good use of her *speculum* not only dedicated herself to visibly displaying *cultus* to her community, but also

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[49] Catullus 41.7–8. All translations of Catullus, based on the Latin text in *Catullus, Tibullus, Pervigilium Veneris* (2nd ed.), ed. by F.W. Cornish, J. P. Postgate, and J. W. Mackail, revised by G.P. Goold (Harvard University Press, 1913), are my own.

[50] Apul. *Apol.* 15.8–15. All translations of Apuleius, *Apologia*, based on the Latin text in Rudelf Helm, *Apuleius: Apulei Platonici Madaurensis, Pro se de magia liber* (B.G. Teubneri, 1912), are my own.

fostered *cultus* within herself, utilizing her *speculum* as means of self-reflection and moral improvement.

While non-Christian Roman elites may have believed that Thecla's *κάτοπτρον* represented her status and good character, Christian audiences viewed mirrors as symbols of the unique temptations that wealthy young women faced; thus, by giving up her *κάτοπτρον*, Thecla also symbolically removes the possibility of surrendering to sin. Early Christian thinkers, such as Clement of Alexandria, believed that, like jewelry, mirrors represented women's desire for luxury and their vain obsession with their own beauty and sexual appeal:

> *Ὃ δὲ καὶ πέρα τῆς ἀτοπίας προβέβηκεν, τῆς ἐπιπλάστου μορφῆς τῆς ἑαυτῶν οἷον ἀνδραγαθήματός τινος ἢ ἐπανορθώματος κάτοπτρα ἐπινενοήκασιν, ἐφ ᾗς ἀπάτης μάλιστα κάλυμμα ἐπιτιθέναι ἐχρῆν· οὐδὲ γάρ, ὡς ὁ μῦθος Ἑλλήνων ἔχει, Ναρκίσσῳ προεχώρησεν τῷ καλῷ τῆς ἑαυτοῦ εἰκόνος γενέσθαι θεατήν.*
>
> And what has gone beyond absurdity, they have invented mirrors for their false forms, such as some brave deed or correction, it was quite necessary to lay a veil over it; for it did not, as the Greeks' myth says, go well for beautiful Narcissus to become a spectator of his own image.[51]

According to Clement, women, like Narcissus, were easily ensnared by the beauty of their own reflections; and, as with Narcissus before them, women's vanity could only lead to destruction. Although *APTh* never explicitly states that Thecla wore makeup or utilized any other forms of bodily adornment or modification besides jewelry, the very existence of her mirror may have implied as much to many Christian audiences. As an object primarily used to look at and modify oneself, the *κάτοπτρον* is representative of all the temptations unique to elite young womanhood:

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[51] Clem., *Paed.* 3.2.11. All translations of Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus*, based on the Greek text in Otto Stählin, *Clemens Alexandrinus, Volume 1: Protepticus und Paedagogus* (J.C. Hinrichs, 1905), are my own.

self-absorption and unrestrained sexuality. Therefore, by surrendering both her bracelets and her mirror, Thecla symbolically removes two key aspects of her status and femininity, gradually chipping away pieces of her sinful flesh. By giving up these ornaments, Thecla not only surrenders symbolic representations of her wealth and femininity, but does so in order to receive Paul's ascetic message, which she could not have heard if she had nothing valuable with which to bribe the prison guards. Therefore, while Thecla may be sacrificing symbols of elite femininity and sin, she utilizes these status symbols in order to gain proximity to Paul, repurposing her wealth and privilege for the sake of pursuing Christianity.

II.II. Stripped of Wealth

Thecla and Paul's rendezvous in prison is ultimately short-lived, and the Iconian officials separate the pair after Thecla's family calls for Paul's expulsion from the city.[52] Thecla faces her first trial after visiting the imprisoned Paul, having been brought before the governor of Iconium to explain her strange behavior. By ignoring Thamyris and her family's commands to leave her post at the window and subsequently sitting alone with Paul in his prison cell, Thecla has disrespected Thamyris and called her own virtue into question.[53] Thamyris and Thecla's mother, Theocleia, bring her before the governor so that they can publicly distance themselves from her and preserve their own social standing in the community. Despite her family's disapproval, Thecla goes "rejoicing before everyone" (*ἀγαλλιωμένη ἔμποσθεν (ἐνώπιον) πάντων*) and after she refuses to answer the governor's questions, the Iconians bring her to the arena to be burned alive as a cautionary tale for any women who might seek to follow her example.[54] Once Thecla enters the theatre, her persecutors strip her naked in order to humiliate and expose her before death. The

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[52] *APTh* 3.19–20.

[53] *APTh.* 3.10, 18–20; Barrier, *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, 116–117, note 6.

[54] *APTh.* 3.20.

removal of her clothes is a symbolic representation of Thecla's loss of status—by physically stripping her fine clothing off, the townspeople also strip Thecla of her wealth and standing, as well as the social and economic support that they provide for her. The message for other wealthy young women is clear: behave or you will also lose everything—your family, your community, your status, and all visible symbols of them. This message is especially potent for Thecla, since her own mother is the one who initially called for her execution:

> *Τῆς δὲ μὴ ἀποκρινομένης, Θεοκλεία ἡ μήτηρ αὐτῆς ἀνέκραγεν λέγουσα Κατάκαιε τὴν ἄνομον, κατάκαιε τὴν ἄνυμφον ἐν μέσῳ θεάτρου, ἵνα πᾶσαι αἱ ὑπὸ τούτου διδαχθεῖσαι γυναῖκες φοβηθῶσιν.*
>
> With [Thecla] having not given an answer, her mother, Theocleia, cried out, saying, "Burn the lawless woman, burn the unwedded woman in the middle of the theatre, so that all the women who learned by this [example] will be afraid".[55]

Thus, the removal of Thecla's clothing is a vivid and apparent symbol of the threat young, unmarried women faced when they considered converting to Christianity and were rejected by their communities. However, Thecla is unswayed throughout her interrogation and attempted execution, never denouncing Paul or Christ. For a Roman audience, this endurance demonstrated that, in spite of her literal and social exposure, Thecla retained her power and agency during her first persecution. Thus, in the eyes of both Christians and Roman pagans, Thecla's nudity becomes a representation of her strength and character in the face of extreme violence and violation, rather than a symbol of humiliation and exposure.

Although Thecla's silence in the face of the governor's interrogation may seem cowardly at first glance, when we consider her behavior in the context of Roman gladiatorial and athletic competitions—especially those that employed enslaved or incarcerated individuals—it becomes

[55] *APTh.* 3.20.

clear that Roman audiences would have seen Thecla's silence as a courageous display of endurance and autonomy. In his article, "Body/Power/Identity: Passions of the Martyrs", Brent Shaw discusses how, in first- and second-century Jewish and Christian martyr stories, a martyr is able to re-assert their power and agency in the face of suffering by maintaining strict control over her body.[56] Rather than bend the knee to her persecutors and surrender control over her body to them, the martyr could maintain her power through mental discipline and self-control. As such, a martyr's trial and subsequent tribulations are transformed from a legal dispute to a mental, spiritual, and physical contest of wills, from which the martyr *must* emerge victorious. If she is able to discipline her mind and use her mental faculties to overcome her pain and humiliation, then in the long term, a martyr will inevitably be victorious, even if her body is destroyed.[57] This noble endurance also forces the audience to fully confront the suffering that local officials are inflicting upon the martyr, and her perseverance and self-control evoked both the great athletic victors of the present and the aristocratic heroes of the past:

> The tortured can view the confrontation, however unequal, as a contest (*agon*) between their body and those of the torturers and spectators. The active agents of domination can be forced to be amazed, to wonder (*thaumazein*) at the ability of the tortured body to defeat all the punishments inflicted upon it…The victim of torture then acquires the greatest value attributed to persons of high social status in this world: they are ennobled, imbued with an aura of aristocratic demeanor—the type of inherent excellence reserved by nature for the ruling elite,

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[56] Brent D. Shaw, "Body/Power/Identity: Passions of the Martyrs", *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 4, no. 3 (1996): 269-312. https://doi.org/10.1353/earl.1996.0037.

[57] Shaw, "Body/Power/Identity", 278.

but one which could be acquired by a victorious athlete through the exercise of his body.[58]

Many Jewish and Christian martyr narratives used athletic and gladiatorial imagery to compare their subjects to competitors in the Roman arena. If the Jewish or Christian martyr can publicly endure her suffering then, like pagan athletes and gladiators, she can receive honor and fame from her religious communities and from anyone outside their groups who witnessed her suffering. Tertullian says as much in the final chapter of his *Apology*, in which he recounts the graphic deaths of several famous Christian martyrs:

> *Ea victoria habet et gloriam placendi deo et praedam vivendi in aeternum. Sed obducimur. Certe cum obtinuimus. Ergo vicimus, cum occidimur, denique evadimus, cum obducimur. Licet nunc sarmenticios et semaxios appelletis, quia ad stipitem dimidii axis revincti sarmentorum ambitu exurimur. Hic est habitus victoriae nostrae, haec palmata vestis, tali curru triumphamus. Merito itaque victis non placemus; propterea enim desperati et perditi existimamur. Sed haec desperatio et perditio penes vos in causa gloriae et famae vexillum virtutis extollunt.*
>
> This victory has both the glory of pleasing God and the reward of living for eternity. But we are overcome. Certainly, when we have prevailed. Thus we have won, when we are killed; indeed we escape, when we are overcome. Now although you address us as "brushwood people" and "half-plank people", because, having been bound to a stake of half a plank, we are burned in a circle of brushwood. This is the attire of our victory, this robe embroidered with palm

[58] Shaw, "Body/Power/Identity", 278.

> branches, we celebrate our triumph in such a great chariot. And so, suitably, we do not please conquered people; therefore we are considered as hopeless and destroyed. But this hopelessness and destruction—in your possession, for the cause of glory and fame—raise the banner of virtue.[59]

Like the Greek heroes and Roman gladiators before them, Christian martyrs like Thecla could attain fame, glory, and respect by enduring terrible suffering and allowing themselves to be tortured and killed. Furthermore, martyrs whose endurance granted them victory and whose battered bodies became symbols of their triumph over their persecutors emulated Jesus Christ himself, who allowed himself to be tortured and killed on behalf of humanity.[60] Ignatius of Antioch, a respected Christian theologian who was executed in Rome in the second century CE, expressed this sentiment multiple times in his *Epistle to the Romans*, in which he prohibits the Roman church from interfering with his martyrdom:

> *μηθέν με ζηλώσαι τῶν ὁρατῶν καὶ ἀοράτων, ἵνα Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐπιτύχω. πῦρ καὶ σταυρὸς θηρίων τε συστάσεις, † ἀνατομαί, διαιρέσεις †, σκορπισμοὶ ὀστέων, † συγκοπαὶ μελῶν, ἀλεσμοὶ ὅλου τοῦ σώματος, κακαὶ κολάσεις τοῦ διαβόλου ἐπ' ἐμὲ ἐρχέσθωσαν, μόνον ἵνα Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐπιτύχω.*
>
> May no seen or unseen things envy me, so that I may reach Jesus Christ. May fire and the cross and combats with wild beasts, mutilations, wounds, scatterings of

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[59] Tert. *Apol.* 50.2–4. All translations of Tertullian, *Apologeticus*, based on the Latin text in *Tertullian: Apology, De Spectaculis. Minucius Felix: Octavius*, T. R. Glover and Gerald H. Rendall (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931), are my own; for Roman triumphs, see Livy 10.7, 30.15.

[60] Lily C. Vuong, "Masculinity, Gender, and the New Testament World", in *The World of the New Testament: Encountering Texts in Context,* ed. David Cielontko et al. (Fortress Press, 2026), 187.

bones, cuttings of limbs, grindings of the entire body, the enemy's wicked punishments come upon me, so that I may only reach Jesus Christ.[61]

ἐπιτρέψατέ μοι μιμητὴν εἶναι τοῦ πάθους τοῦ θεοῦ μου. εἴ τις αὐτὸν ἐν ἑαυτῷ ἔχει, νοησάτω ὃ θέλω καὶ συμπαθείτω μοι, εἰδὼς τά συνέχοντά με.

Permit me to be an imitator of my God's suffering. If someone has Him within himself, let him notice what I wish for and sympathize with me, understanding the things compelling me.[62]

In Ignatius' view— and in the opinion of contemporary Christian authors— dying for Christ was the "supreme form of discipleship" and a means to win "perfect salvation through suffering", since it was the most radical sign of one's devotion to the faith and a public reenactment of their savior's sacrifice.[63] Like Christ before them, Christian martyrs believed that they could attain eternal victory by manly enduring the torments inflicted upon them.

While it is tempting to view passive endurance as inherently cowardly and unmanly—especially for ancient Roman audiences, who viewed penetration of any kind as a violation of one's manhood—several first- and second-century authors rebuke this idea, arguing that, when faced with unimaginable pain, passive endurance is actually the courageous and masculine choice. Seneca the Younger, a Roman contemporary of both Paul and Jesus, discussed endurance and perseverance at length in several of his *Epistles*, arguing that, while one ought to avoid situations wherein one would be faced with terrible suffering, if one must publicly tolerate

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[61] Ign. *Rom.* 5.3. All translations of Ignatius, *Romaiois*, based on the Greek text in *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations* (3rd edition), ed. Michael W. Holmes, 224–235 (Baker Academic, 2007), are my own.

[62] Ign. *Rom.* 6.3.

[63] Ign. *Rom.* 2.2, 3.2, 4.1–3, 5.3, 6.2–3; L. Stephanie Cobb, *Dying to Be Men: Gender and Language in Early Christian Martyr Texts* (Columbia University Press, 2008), 3.

athletic competitions, gladiatorial games, or torture, one must endure them willingly.[64] After all, athletes voluntarily endure incredible pain, which strengthens their bodies and allows them to win more fame, honor, and virtue in the long run:

> *Athletae quantum plagarum ore, quantum toto corpore excipiunt? Ferunt tamen omne tormentum gloriae cupiditate nec tantum quia pugnant, ista patiuntur, sed ut pugnent. Exercitatio ipsa tormentum est. Nos quoque evincamus omnia, quorum praemium non corona nec palma est nec tubicen praedicationi nominis nostri silentium faciens, sed virtus et firmitas animi et pax in ceterum parta, si semel in aliquo certamine debellata fortuna est.*
>
> What great strikes do athletes endure on their face, on their entire body? Nevertheless, because of their desire for glory, they bear every torment, they endure these things, not only because they fight, but in order that they might fight. Their training itself is torture. Likewise, let us overcome all things, the reward of which is neither a crown nor a palm nor a trumpeter making silence for the praise of our names, but virtue and strength of the mind, and peace having been won for the remainder, if fortune was once subdued in another struggle.[65]

In this context, silence in the face of extreme suffering is the manly and courageous response, especially when one can do nothing to prevent further pain. When suffering is inescapable, the only virtuous response is passive and cheerful endurance, whether the pain is inflicted by illness or by the whip:

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[64] Sen. *Ep.* 66, 67, 70; Shaw, "Body/Power/Identity", 291–295.

[65] Sen. *Ep.* 78.16. Translations of Seneca, *Epistulae*, based on the Latin text in *Seneca: Epistles Volume II*, ed. Richard M. Gummere (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1920), are my own.

Quicquid vis nunc licet dicas, destillationes et vim continuae tussis egerentem viscerum partes et febrem praecordia ipsa torrentem et sitim et artus in diversum articulis exeuntibus tortos; plus est flamma et eculeus et lammina et vulneribus ipsis intumescentibus quod illa renovaret et altius urgeret inpressum. Inter haec tamen aliquis non gemuit. "Parum est"; non rogavit. "Parum est"; non respondit. "Parum est"; risit et quidem ex animo. Vis tu post hoc dolorem deridere?

Although you may now say whatever you wish, bodily fluids and strong, unrelenting coughs discharging parts of one's organs and a fever burning one's very chest and thirst and twisted sinews with limbs diverging in the opposite (direction); worse is the flame and the wooden horse and the red-hot plate and that which restores those wounds while the wounds themselves are swelling and pushes to imprint (them) deeper. Nevertheless other people did not groan among these. "It is not enough"; he did not beg. "It is not enough"; he did not respond. "It is not enough"; he laughed and from the heart, in fact. Are you willing, after this, to laugh at pain?[66]

As such, while Thecla's silence during her first interrogation may seem cowardly, it is representative of her endurance and strength, through which she is able to overcome her persecutors and draw closer to Christ-like masculinity. Many early Christian martyrs were silent before their interrogators, refusing to defend themselves or turn in other believers; Tertullian recounts an incident where an Athenian sex-worker bit off her own tongue rather than betray other Christians:

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[66] Sen. *Ep.* 78.19.

Attica meretrix carnifice iam fatigato postremo linguam suam comesam in faciem tyranni saevientis exspuit, ut exspueret et vocem, ne coniuratos confiteri posset, si etiam victa voluisset.

The Athenian courtesan, when the executioner was fatigued, finally spits out her own tongue, having been chewed up, into the face of the raging tyrant, so that she also spit out her voice, lest she be able to reveal her conspirators, even if she, having been overcome, had wished (to do so).[67]

Furthermore, let us not forget that Jesus himself initially remained silent during his interrogations by Pilate and the Pharisees:

Ὁ δὲ Ἰησοῦς ἐστάθη ἔμπροσθεν τοῦ ἡγεμόνος· καὶ ἐπηρώτησεν αὐτὸν ὁ ἡγεμὼν λέγων, Σὺ εἶ ὁ Βασιλεὺς τῶν Ἰουδαίων; ὁ δὲ Ἰησοῦς ἔφη, Σὺ λέγεις. καὶ ἐν τῷ κατηγορεῖσθαι αὐτὸν ὑπὸ τῶν ἀρχιερέων καὶ πρεσβυτέρων οὐδὲν ἀπεκρίνατο. τότε λέγει αὐτῷ ὁ Πειλᾶτος, Οὐκ ἀκούεις πόσα σου καταμαρτυροῦσιν; καὶ οὐκ ἀπεκρίθη αὐτῷ πρὸς οὐδὲ ἓν ῥῆμα, ὥστε θαυμάζειν τὸν ἡγεμόνα λίαν.

And Jesus stood before the governor; and the governor interrogated him, saying, "Are you the King of the Jews?". But Jesus said, "You say so". And he did not answer in response to what he was accused of by the high priests and the elders. Pilate said the following to him, "Do you not hear how many things they are testifying against you?". And he did not answer him in response to even one statement, in order to exceedingly amaze the governor.[68]

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[67] Tert. *Apol.* 50.8.

[68] Matthew 27:11–14. All translations from the New Testament, based on the Greek provided in *The Greek New Testament: Fifth Revised Edition*, edited by Barbara Aland et. al. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2014), are my own.

> *Καὶ ἀναστὰς ὁ ἀρχιερεὺς εἰς μέσον ἐπηρώτησεντὸν τὸν Ἰησοῦν λέγων, Οὐκ ἀποκρίνῃ οὐδέν τί οὗτοί σου καταμαρτυροῦσιν; Ὁ δὲ ἐσιώπα καὶ οὐκ ἀπεκρίνατο οὐδέν…*
>
> And having stood up in their midst, the high priest was interrogating Jesus, saying, "Do you not defend yourself at all, why do these men testify against you?". But he kept silent and did not answer at all…[69]

Thus, Christians who refused to speak during their interrogations and trials were not only following the examples of martyrs who came before them, but also the example of Christ himself, the pinnacle of virtue and divinity. Jesus' "vicarious death and crucified body came to symbolize not a violated, penetrated, and emasculated body, but one which embodied ideal Christian masculinity", one founded upon self-control, endurance, and "willingness and embracing of [one's] suffering and death".[70] This form of masculinity did not exclude women, but rather offered them a means to obtain a degree of manhood through passive endurance, a virtue that many ancient authors already believed was inherent to women.[71] As Lily C. Vuong notes in her chapter on Christian masculinity:

> For Christians, the virtue of enduring pain and suffering and experiencing hardship became a virtue akin to endurance, conviction, and manliness. It is perhaps not surprising that in the transformation of Jesus's crucifixion from a humiliating to a vicarious and noble death that ideal Christian discipleship too transformed from a call to authority and power to a position of suffering and death as expressed both in the Gospels and the writings attributed to Paul. In this

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69 Mark 14:60–61a

70 Vuong, "Masculinity, Gender, and the New Testament World", 187.

71 Shaw, "Body/Power/Identity", 279, 287–291.

> reconstructed view of endurance, weakness and passivity are revised as possible sources of power—that is, mastery and power over oneself.[72]

Therefore, Thecla's silence is part of a larger Christian tradition, and like Pilate before him, the governor of Iconium sentences Thecla to death. And, like Christ before her, Thecla nobly accepts her sentence and is led to the city's arena in a public procession:

> *Καὶ ὁ ἡγεμὼν ἔπαθεν μεγάλως, καὶ τὸν μὲν Παῦλον φραγελλώσας ἔξω τῆς πόλεως ἐξέβαλεν, τὴν δὲ Θέκλαν ἔκρινεν κατακαῆναι. καὶ εὐθέως ὁ ἡγεμὼν ἀναστὰς ἀπίει εἰς τὸ θέατρον· καὶ πᾶς ὁ ὄχλος ἐξῆλθεν ἐπὶ τὴν ἀνάγκην τῆς θεωρίας.*
>
> And the governor suffered greatly, and on the one hand he threw Paul, having been flogged, out of the city, on the other hand he condemned Thecla to be burned. And having stood up, the governor immediately left to the theatre; and the entire crowd left on account of the necessity of being a spectator.[73]

The arena was a particularly loaded place in Roman life, the site of public competitions and athletic competitions. For a martyr, dying in the arena was an opportunity to publicly perform endurance and manly virtue, and Thecla is no different.

The Roman arena was a massive, imposing structure, a visible symbol of imperial domination in which enemies of the state met gruesome deaths. However, competing as an athlete and a gladiator in the arena also provided victims with an opportunity to display their virtue and endurance, presenting themselves as noble heroes who still maintained control over their bodies.[74] Therefore, a public execution in the public theatre provides Thecla with an

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72 Vuong, "Masculinity, Gender, and the New Testament World", 188.

73 *APTh.* 3.21.

74 Cobb, *Dying to Be Men*, 33–40.

opportunity to exhibit manly endurance before her entire community. For the imperial officials in Iconium, a public execution provided an opportunity to humiliate Thecla and re-assert the state's ownership over her body and identity.[75] As L. Stephanie Cobb points out, Roman athletic events and executions held in the arena were opportunities for the imperial state to simultaneously punish deviants and demonstrate its protection over citizens who stayed in line:

> The distinctions between civility and barbarity were also depicted in amphitheatrical events. Here in this space Rome demonstrated its justice. Those who acted against the benefit of the state were displayed in the arena and justly punished. In addition to displaying Roman justice, these events were also intended to deter others from similar actions. All threats to Roman civilization were extinguished in the arena; in this space, Rome displayed to spectators the consequences of civil disorder…the spectacles illustrated the protection Rome provided its inhabitants from criminals and from forces of nature such as beasts and fire. The activities in the amphitheater—barbarians fighting other barbarians or exotic beasts and criminals killed by beasts or fire—represented the dangers of the uncivilized world. By presenting these spectacles, Rome reminded the audience of its power to protect them from or abandon them to these lethal forces.[76]

Executing Thecla in the arena physically displaces her from her elite community in Iconium, and removing her clothing symbolically accomplishes the same purpose. By stripping Thecla of her clothes—and symbolically stripping her of her community and support system—the governor of Iconium seeks to show the other unmarried women in the city how powerless they are without

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[75] Cobb, *Dying to Be Men*, 45–46.

[76] Cobb, *Dying to Be Men*, 45–46.

their families to support them.[77] Humiliating Thecla also distances her from the other Iconians, removing their identification with her as a member of their community and re-assigning her to the status of "criminal deviant":

> The humiliation of the offender further validates the processes of the law by distancing the onlooker from the criminal and reducing the possibility of a sympathetic attitude towards him on the part of the spectators…the public nature of Roman execution shows that one purpose of humiliating the miscreant was to alienate him from his entire social context, so that the spectators, regardless of class, were united in a feeling of moral superiority as they ridiculed the miscreant.[78]

Thus, the onlookers are less likely to object to Thecla's brutal execution, since the governor has effectively removed her from her community of citizens in good standing. This tactic is a common means of punishment, particularly for individuals who do not conform to societal norms and whom societal authorities fear will inspire others to do the same:

> This marking-off of the offender as different in type to others is most clearly expressed by measures that confine him to a specific appearance or location within the community (the prison, with its uniform) or, even more clearly, by putting the offender outside the community altogether by ostracism. This latter term we can use to describe both the interposition of geographical distance between the offender and the community (…the medieval felon being obliged to "abjure the realm") or distance of other kinds, such as the withdrawal of

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[77] *APTh.* 21; Cobb, *Dying to Be Men*, 45.

[78] K.M. Coleman, "Fatal Charades: Roman Executions Staged as Mythological Enactments", *The Journal of Roman Studies* 80 (1990): 47. https://www.jstor.org/stable/300280.

> communal protection (outlawry or, in religious contexts, excommunication) or support (the refusal of other persons to have any dealings with the offender)…Stigma, then, reaffirms the rule, reaffirms the conformists as conformists, and separates off the wrongdoer who has broken the rule.[79]

Thus, Thecla's nudity and public execution in the arena is a clear attempt to dehumanize and alienate her from her community, thus discouraging other women from following her example. By previously using her wealth to pursue Christ rather than displaying proper Roman femininity, Thecla had begun to distance herself from her unsupportive family, but the governor forcibly exiles Thecla from her community when he removes her clothing and hauls her into the arena for her execution.

Thecla began redirecting her wealth and resources away from Roman aristocratic norms and towards Christian asceticism when she gave up her bracelets and mirrors in order to speak with Paul and learn about Christianity.[80] By valiantly enduring a noble death in the public arena, Thecla would complete her transition from wealthy woman to ascetic "man". However, unlike her fellow martyrs and athletes, Thecla does not immediately possess unwavering conviction:

> *Ἡ δὲ Θέκλα ὡς ἀμνὸς ἐν ἐρήμῳ περισκοπεῖ τὸν ποιμένα, οὕτως ἐκείνη τὸν Παῦλον ἐζήτει. καὶ ἐμβλέψασα εἰς τὸν ὄχλον εἶδεν τὸν κύριον καθήμενον ὡς Παῦλον, καὶ εἶπεν Ὡς ἀνυπομονήτου μου οὔσης ἦλθεν Παῦλος θεάσασθαί με. Καὶ προσεῖχεν αὐτῷ ἀτενίζουσα· ὁ δὲ εἰς οὐρανοὺς ἀπίει.*
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> But, just like a lamb in the wilderness looks around for its shepherd, so did Thecla search for Paul. And looking into the crowd, she saw the Lord, sitting like Paul,

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[79] Christopher Harding and Richard W. Ireland, *Punishment: Rhetoric, Rule, and Practice*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2022), 104–105 (see also 198–202).

[80] *APTh* 3.18

> and she said, "Because I am not enduring, Paul came to observe me as a spectator". And, fixing her eyes upon him, she was held fast by him; but he went away into the heavens.[81]

This moment is part of a larger pattern in the first part of Thecla's journey: while she remains dedicated to the Christian faith, her identity as a Christian is tied to Paul and his approval. Thecla must learn to stop looking for Paul in the crowd and rely on Christ alone to deliver her from her suffering and to give her strength in the face of future persecutions. Her wavering eyes are a vivid symbol of her dependence on Paul and her lack of total autonomy and manly virtue. Many Roman authors, including Plutarch, Livy, and Pliny the Elder, assert that maintaining eye contact with one's persecutors demonstrated virtue and endurance, denying one's tormentors the ability to force one into submission.[82] However, Thecla cannot maintain eye contact with her persecutors, subconsciously surrendering to their whims by failing to look them in the eye. She can only maintain eye contact with the Lord's illusion of Paul, demonstrating that her faith still depends on Paul's guidance and she cannot endure her tribulations without assistance. Thus, while Thecla does endure her first persecution, she has not fully acquired the masculine virtue that is required of an ascetic Christian. However, God still sends a mighty hailstorm to save Thecla, miraculous proof that she is under Christ's protection.[83] Although Thecla cannot yet withstand her persecutions without Paul's assistance, God still seems to accept her as his follower by saving her from the pyre. This initial salvation appears to strengthen Thecla's

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81 *APTh.* 3.21

82 Livy 2.12-13; *Passio Perpetuae* 18.2; Plin. *HN* 11.54.144; Plut. *Publ.* 17.3; Carlin A. Barton, "Savage Miracles: The Redemption of Lost Honor in Roman Society and the Sacrament of the Gladiator", *Representations* 45 (1994): 48-49. https://www.jstor.org/stable/2928602.

83 *APTh* 3.22

conviction, motivating her to seek out Paul once again and ask to be baptized as a Christian virgin.

II.III. Conclusions

In this chapter, I have demonstrated that, in order to fully embrace Paul's exhortation to Christian chastity and asceticism, Thecla must cease using her elite resources to uphold her own social standing and instead repurpose her wealth in service of the Christian faith. Thecla willingly initiates this redirection by surrendering her *ψέλια* and *κάτοπτρον ἀργυροῦν*, two prominent symbols of upper-class Roman femininity, to gain privileged access to Paul in prison. However, Thecla's community completes her severance from her elite status and the social support it provides by attempting to burn her alive in the arena. Executing Thecla in the arena physically detaches her from her community, but stripping her naked enhances this separation by making a visible distinction between Thecla and the other women in Iconium. Although Thecla does not initially choose to leave her family and community in Iconium, she accepts her fate and endures her attempted execution in valiant silence, though she still relies on the image of Paul to tolerate the persecution. In spite of Thecla's lingering dependence on her mentor, God saves her with a hailstorm, recognizing her as his follower and saving Thecla from the pyre. Once Thecla escapes Iconium, she reunites with Paul and seeks to seal her commitment to the Christian faith via baptism, stating that she is willing to cut her hair and forsake the last symbol of her elite status in order to become an ascetic Christian.

III. CHAPTER TWO: Naked and Reborn

In the previous chapter, I discussed how Thecla initially sacrificed a visible symbol of wealthy femininity in order to receive Paul's message of Christian virginity. After her first reunion with Paul outside Iconium, Thecla made a similar pledge, vowing to cut her hair and join Paul in his mission by requesting baptism. Thecla's promise to cut her hair demonstrates her willingness to distance herself from external symbols of elite womanhood so that she can properly embrace Christian asceticism. However, Paul advises that Thecla not cut her hair nor be baptized; I shall argue that Paul denies Thecla's request to cut her hair and receive baptism for a few reasons. Firstly, women with shaved heads were believed to be unusually lascivious and sexually aggressive, a reputation which would not only contradict Thecla's commitment to virginity but would also associate Paul and the church with "immoral" women. Secondly, Paul is concerned that Thecla's physical beauty will lure her or the men around her into sexual sin, thus violating her vow of chastity. I believe that Paul rejects Thecla in Antioch for this reason, fearing that the powerful Alexander will be able to subdue and assault Thecla, jeopardizing Christianity's legitimacy by "corrupting" one of the church's sacred virgins. However, Thecla manages to resist Alexander and he sentences her to fight wild beasts in the arena. Alexander strips Thecla naked before her fight, and while Thecla's nudity alienated her from her community in Iconium, I argue that it has the opposite effect in Antioch, binding Thecla to a community of women who help her endure her persecutions in the city. Furthermore, Thecla's defense against Alexander and the women of Antioch's support for her demonstrate the proper use of elite women's privilege in service of defending vulnerable Christian virgins, therefore protecting the church's social image and reputation as a whole.

III.I. A Baptismal Hairdo

After surviving her first brush with persecution, Thecla joyfully reunites with Paul and asks to join his mission. Notably, when Thecla pledges her loyalty to Paul, she explicitly links joining Paul on his travels with cutting her hair. As with her bracelets and mirror before, Thecla voluntarily offering to change her outward appearance corresponds with surrendering an outward symbol of her femininity and high social status for the sake of Paul's mission:

> *Καὶ εἶπεν Θέκλα τῷ Παύλῳ Περικαροῦμαι καὶ ἀκολουθήσω σοι ὅπου δἂν πορεύῃ.*
>
> And Thecla said to Paul, "I will cut my hair and I will follow you wherever you go."[84]

If Thecla were to cut off her hair, she would also intentionally destroy an outward symbol of her wealth and gender, demonstrating her commitment to Paul's ascetic teachings and lifestyle. Hair is an especially potent and complex symbol of both social and individual identity, as the sociologist Anthony Synnott has discussed:

> Hair is perhaps our most powerful symbol of individual and group identity— powerful first and foremost because it is physical and therefore extremely personal, and second because, although personal, it is also public rather than private. Furthermore, hair symbolism is usually voluntary rather than imposed or 'given'. Finally, hair is malleable, in various ways, and therefore singularly apt to symbolize both differentiations between, and changes in, individual and group identities.[85]

As a physical growth from one's body, hair is an embodiment of individual identity, and as one of the most visible and distinctive parts of one's person, it also represents how someone relates to

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[84] *APTh.* 3.25. All translations of the *Acts of Thecla*, based on the Greek text provided in Jeremy Barrier, *The Acts of Paul and Thecla: A Critical Introduction and Commentary* (Mohr Siebeck, 2009), are my own.

[85] Anthony Synnott, "Shame and glory: a sociology of hair", *The British Journal of Sociology* 38, no. 3 (1987): 381, https://doi.org/10.2307/590695.

societal standards and values.[86] Although Synnott's article examines hair and hairstyling in twentieth-century Britain and North America, his arguments hold true for second- and third-century Romans as well. Recall how both Elizabeth Bartman and Leslie Shumka drew attention to the prevalence of mirrors, hairstyling, and toiletries on elite Roman women's funerary monuments and in their burial assemblages. In the Roman world, a wealthy woman's hair was not only a symbol of her status and gender, but also of her *cultus*.[87] In the previous chapter, I discussed how the act of adornment was representative of the *mundus muliebris* and became a visual shorthand for an elite Roman woman's life. Keeping up with the latest hairstyling trends required a substantial supply of dyes, hairnets, beads, styling tools, wigs, and other accoutrements; Fig. 2.1 depicts a young woman wearing a "gem encrusted diadem", an ornate accessory which only affluent Romans could afford.[88] Furthermore, styling and maintaining one's hair throughout the day also required additional help from enslaved people or servants, and creating elaborate hairstyles was a time-consuming endeavor. Fig. 2.2 depicts a young woman whose hair has been divided into narrow sections and braided close to the scalp, a coiffure that— similar to modern cornrows, box braids, and other protective styles— would require a great deal of time, assistance, and labor to construct, a luxury only available to Roman elites. Thus, having and maintaining a stylish hairdo required a wealth of both resources and time, not to mention an absence of harsh labor that may disrupt the style. Thus, women's hair represented their *cultus*, their refinement and savvy knowledge of current trends, but also their

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86 Synnott, "Shame and glory", 404.

87 Bartman, "Hair and the Artifice", 5–6.

88 2002.11. The Art Institute of Chicago, Arts of Greece, Rome, and Byzantium, Chicago. https://www.artic.edu/artworks/159136/portrait-bust-of-a-woman.

otium, the leisure and freedom of activity that only the elite classes could possess.[89] A woman who possessed both *cultus* and *otium* was a true wealthy elite, and her hair's appearance and accessories provided both her inner social circle and the wider public with a visible and recognizable symbol of her high status.

[89] Bartman, "Hair and the Artifice", 8; Amy Place, "Reading dress and identity in the Roman mosaics of Carthage and Tabarka", in *Textiles in Ancient Mediterranean Iconography*, ed. Cecilie Brøns, Susanna Harris, and Marta Żuchowska (Oxbow Books, 2022), 182–183, 186–187. https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv2npq9bb.17.



Fig. 2.1 (Front) Portrait bust of a woman (ca. 140-150 CE). Note the woman's fine headband and manicured curls.[90]

[90] 2002.11. The Art Institute of Chicago, Arts of Greece, Rome, and Byzantium, Chicago. https://www.artic.edu/artworks/159136/portrait-bust-of-a-woman.



Fig. 2.1 (Back) Portrait bust of a woman (140-150 CE). Note the woman's neatly styled braids.[91]

[91] 2002.11. The Art Institute of Chicago, Arts of Greece, Rome, and Byzantium, Chicago. https://www.artic.edu/artworks/159136/portrait-bust-of-a-woman.

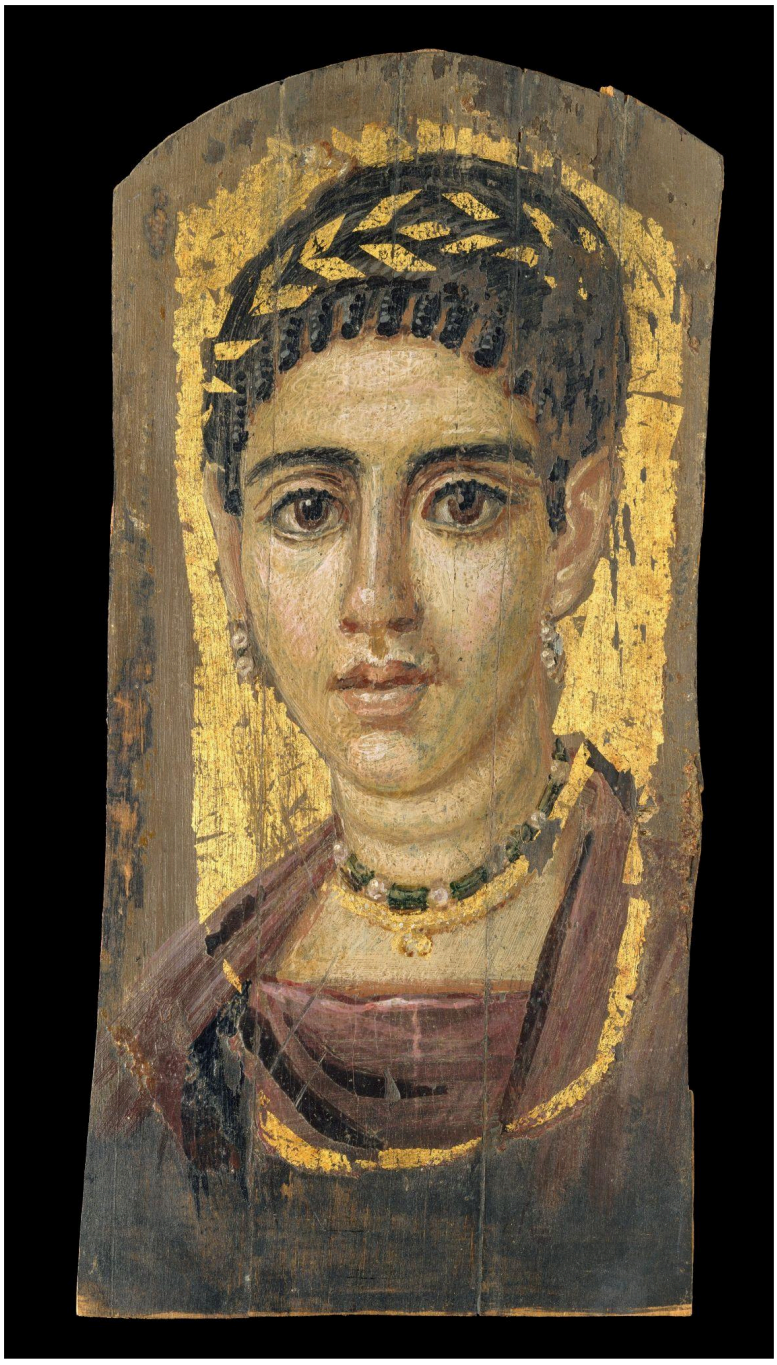


Fig. 2.2. Mummy portrait of a young woman with a gilded wreath (ca. 120-140 CE). Note the woman's elaborate braids at her hairline.[92]

[92] 09.181.7. Metropolitan Museum of Art, Egyptian Art, New York. https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/547861.

Although women's hairstyles were widely seen as representations of their *cultus* and *otium*, Christian theologians viewed elaborate, intricate hairstyles as symbols of women's sinful vanity. Throughout the first and second centuries, many prominent Christian teachers and authors urged the women in their communities to abstain from the *mundus muliebris*, regarding any form of elite adornment as a perversion of God's natural creation:

> *Κεκρύφαλοι μέν γε καὶ κεκρυφάλων διαφοραὶ καὶ περίεργοι πλοκαί, ἀλλὰ καὶ τῶν τριχῶν οἱ μυρίοι σχηματισμοὶ κατόπτρων τε πολυτίμητοι κατασκευαί, οἷς κατασχηματίζονται θηρῶσαι τοὺς δίκην παίδων ἀφρόνων περὶ τὰς μορφὰς ἐπτοημένους, τέλεον ἀπηρυθριακυιῶν ἐστι γυναικῶν, ἃς ἑταίρας καλῶν οὐκ ἄν τις ἀφαμάρτοι προσωπεῖα ποιούσας τὰ πρόσωπα.*
>
> Indeed, hair-nets and variations of hair nets and superfluous twistings, but also countless configurations of hair and very costly preparations of mirrors—in which they are modelled, hunting those passionately excited by their forms in the manner of senseless children—is the accomplishment of shameless women, the one calling them sex-workers would not be mistaken, them making their faces into masks.[93]

> *Video quasdam et capillum croco uertere. Pudet eas etiam nationis suae quod non Germaniae atque Galliae sint procreatae. Ita patriam capillo transferunt. Male ac pessime sibi auspicantur flammeo capite et decorum putant quod inquinant…Sed enim dominus ait: "Quis uestrum potest capillum atrum ex albo facere aut album ex atro?" Hae quae reuincunt Deum: "Ecce", inquiunt, "pro albo uel atro flauum facimus, gratiae faciliorem".*

[93] Clem., *Paed.* 3.2.11. All translations of Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus*, based on the Greek text in Otto Stählin, *Clemens Alexandrinus, Volume 1: Protepticus und Paedagogus* (J.C. Hinrichs, 1905), are my own.

> I see some women also change their hair with saffron. Their own nation is an object of shame for them because they were not begotten from Germany and Gaul. Thus they change their homeland by means of their hair. They wickedly and most wickedly take auspices for themselves with their fiery head and they think that what they defile is beautiful…But truly the Lord said: "Who among you is able to make dark hair from pale (hair) or pale from dark?" And these women refute God: "See," they say, "Instead of pale or dark, we make (the hair) golden yellow, more favorable in grace".[94]

Thus, by offering to cut her hair and commit herself to Paul's mission, Thecla also symbolically cuts off one of the most prominent and significant symbols of her elite womanhood. In addition, she also commits to living a more natural, ascetic lifestyle, without the wealth of time and resources to which she was accustomed. This commitment is paired with a visible change in appearance, one which resembles Christian manhood more closely than Roman womanhood. Notably, while second-century theologians encouraged Christian women to abandon visible symbols of elite femininity, they did not urge Christian men to take the same approach. Instead, they promoted the appropriation of masculine status symbols, such as the *pallium*, in order to re-define the true Roman man as an individual who embodied Christian values.[95] While the *mundus muliebris* possessed myriad temptations and ought to be approached with the utmost caution, the world of men must be reformed so that Christian masculinity, particularly as expressed by ascetics and martyrs, became the pinnacle of *virtus*.[96] However, this redefined manhood still aimed to exclude and subjugate women:

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[94] Tert., *Cult. Fem.* 2.6.1–3. All translations of Tertullian, *De Cultu Feminarum,* based on the Latin text in Marie Turcan, *La Toilette de Femmes (De Cultu Feminarum)* (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1971), are my own.

[95] Carly Daniel-Hughes, *The Salvation of the Flesh in Tertullian of Carthage: Dressing for the Resurrection* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 59–61.

[96] Daniel-Hughes, *The Salvation of the Flesh*, 52–61.

> Here we see notions of masculinity as the (acquired) manifestation of total self-control, and self-governance is made to stretch and incorporate within it subordination to God and the admirable act of enduring—rather than refusing—to submit the body to pain and suffering. It is, in the end, a notion of masculinity that manages to hold onto male privilege and female subordination, always relying on various mechanisms to do so to displace, subsume, or even keep at bay the femininity upon which this new Christian masculinity relied.[97]

Thus, while Christian theologians promoted an alternative vision of both elite masculinity and elite femininity, only wealthy women were required to surrender external symbols of their status in order to publicly prove their commitment to the faith. Furthermore, as I discussed in the previous chapter, women who valiantly endured persecution could attain some measure of *virtus*; however, these women were not encouraged to adopt men's hairstyles or attire to reflect their newly acquired manliness. Authors such as Tertullian commanded elite women to dress modestly, but never masculinely, maintaining visible distinction between men and women.[98] This desire to promote modest attire while preserving gendered appearances is one explanation for Paul's refusal to baptize Thecla. If Paul initiated Thecla into the church after she cut her hair, he would also endorse her public display of masculinity, which may jeopardize his reputation and message in the eyes of the wider public.

When Paul orders Thecla to refrain from cutting her hair and denies her request for baptism, he does not view these actions as isolated displays of faith, but appears to be concerned with how such rituals could be perceived by the wider, non-Christian public and how public perception could impact both his legitimacy as a teacher and the church's reputation as a respectable religious group. Paul notes

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97 Daniel-Hughes, *The Salvation of the Flesh*, 60.

98 Tert. *De Cult. Fem.* 2.9.1–8, 12.1–13.7.

that Thecla's outward beauty could potentially impede her ability to endure additional public humiliations or temptations:

> *Ὁ δε εἶπεν Ὁ καιρὸς αἰσχρός, καὶ σὺ εὔμορφος· μὴ ἄλλος σε πειρασμὸς λήψεται χείρων τοῦ πρώτου, καὶ οὐχ ὑπομείνῃς ἀλλὰ δειλανδρήσῃς.*
>
> But [Paul] said, "The season is shameful, and you are fair of form; lest another trial, worse than the first, take hold of you, and you may not endure but act like a cowardly man."[99]

Notably, this exchange is not the first instance wherein Paul attempts to regulate women's external appearance, particularly in regards to their hair. In 1 Corinthians, the first letter Paul wrote to the Corinthian church in the first century, Paul reasserts his authority as the church's spiritual leader and addresses internal conflicts within the Corinthian Christian community, particularly those that risk jeopardizing the Corinthian church's status as a distinct, but respectable, religious group.[100] The letter is one of Paul's most in-depth discussions regarding how the members of a particular church ought to publicly conduct themselves in their city.[101] As Gordon D. Fee argues, "If the gospel itself is at stake in the Corinthians' theology and behavior, so also is its visible expression in the local community of redeemed people".[102] As such, Paul is especially concerned with Corinthian Christians' public displays of faith, including those of its prophesying women:

> *Πᾶσα δὲ γυνὴ προσευχομένη ἢ προφητεύουσα ἀκατακαλύπτῳ τῇ κεφαλῇ καταισχύνει τὴν κεφαλὴν αὐτῆς· ἓν γάρ ἐστιν καὶ τὸ αὐτὸ τῇ ἐξυρημένῃ. Εἰ γὰρ οὐ κατακαλύπτεται γυνή, καὶ*

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99 *APTh.* 3.25.

100 Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 18–19; Joseph A. Marchal, *Appalling Bodies: Queer Figures Before and After Paul's Letters* (Oxford University Press, 2020), 32–33.

101 Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 18–19.

102 Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 18.

> *κειράσθω· εἰ δὲ αἰσχρὸν γυναικὶ τὸ κείρασθαι ἢ ξυρᾶσθαι, κατακαλυπτέσθω…Διὰ τοῦτο, ὀφείλει ἡ γυνὴ ἐξουσίαν ἔχειν ἐπὶ τῆς κεφαλῆς, διὰ τοὺς ἀγγέλους.*
>
> But any woman praying or prophesying with an uncovered head dishonors her head; for it is one and the same as the head having been shaven. For if a woman does not cover her (head), let her be shaven; but if it is shameful for a woman to be shaven or to be shaved, let her cover her (head)…Because of this a woman should have power over her head, because of the angels.[103]

Upon an initial reading of this passage, it appears that Paul commanded women who hold positions of authority in the Corinthian church to either cover or shave their heads, without denouncing either practice. However, many first-century Latin authors depict women with shaved heads as particularly lascivious, adopting manly qualities to such an extreme that they have neglected *virtus* and embraced the most improper forms of elite masculinity.[104] Joseph Marchal has proposed an alternative perspective on 1 Corinthians 11:1-16, assuming that Paul and his audience would have viewed short-haired women in a similar light:

> Those outside of the assembly community could associate the strange, gender variant practices within this community, even within this letter, with those practices they know from these negative figures in wider argumentation. On the one hand, Paul wants the Corinthian assembly members to depart and differentiate themselves from those around them in certain ways. On the other hand, this argument might just be one attempt to convince them not to stand out too much, or at least not in these particular ways.[105]

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[103] 1 Cor. 11:5-6, 10; Translations from the New Testament, based on the Greek provided in *The Greek New Testament: Fifth Revised Edition*, edited by Barbara Aland et. al. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2014), are my own.

[104] Marchal, *Appalling Bodies*, 41–44.

[105] Marchal, *Appalling Bodies*, 49.

Marchal notes that while Paul never explicitly condemns the fact that these women are prophecying, he does denounce the ways they have displayed themselves to the wider public. Paul's reproach may be a "defensive gesture", meant to protect the Corinthian church from the negative stereotypes associated with short-haired women while still allowing their women to publicly prophesy.[106] Thus, while Thecla views cutting her hair as a visible means to embody her extreme dedication to Christ, Paul's reticence may reflect his anxieties about condoning visible gender-bending in the church, particularly via a formal initiation ritual such as baptism.

In the second- and third- centuries, when, where and how to baptize a new convert was a matter of fierce debate, and I believe that the *Acts of Thecla* conforms to the view that the rite of baptism should only be bestowed upon those who exhibit exemplary virtue and commitment to Christ, particularly if they are women committing to a life of holy virginity. Thecla herself states that baptism is a "seal" (*σφραγῖδα*) that will prevent all temptation from corrupting her, and during his sermons in Iconium, Paul says that those who "preserve" their baptism are blessed (*μακάριοι οἱ τὸ βάπτισμα τηρήσαντες*), implying that one's baptism must be protected and maintained.[107] Lynne Boughton argues that this view of baptism was popular among Marcionite sects, who would only baptize those who "renounced marriage and gave evidence of a spiritual enlightenment that marked them for prophetic activity".[108] Esther Yue Ng and Carly Daniel-Hughes have expanded on Boughton's argument, demonstrating that this view of baptism was common among other first- and second-century Christian

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106 Marchal, *Appalling Bodies*, 49.

107 *APTh.* 3.6, 25

108 Lynne C. Boughton, "From Pious Legend to Feminist Fantasy: Distinguishing Hagiographical License from Apostolic Practice in the 'Acts of Paul/ Acts of Thecla'", *The Journal of Religion* 71, no. 3 (1991): 380. https://www.jstor.org/stable/1204561.

groups, as shown in Tertullian's *De Baptismo*.[109] In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul explicitly states that he only baptized a handful of Christians and that "Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the good news" (*οὐ γὰρ ἀπέστειλέν με Χριστὸς βαπτίζειν ἀλλ' εὐαγγελίζεσθαι*), implying that hearing Paul's teachings does not entitle one to baptism.[110] Tertullian goes even further, advocating that believers ought to delay their baptism until they are completely certain of their commitment to the faith:

> *…si qui pondus intellegant baptismi magis timebunt consecutionem quam dilationem. Fides integra secura est de salute*.
>
> …if any people understand the importance of baptism, they will be more afraid of its consequence than its delay. Sound faith is secure in its salvation.[111]

Paul and Tertullian's hesitation to baptize others derives from their anxiety about their disciples' dedication to Christianity and its teachings. If they were to initiate a new convert into the Christian community without being fully certain of their commitment, that convert may fall into temptation after their baptism, disgracing the entire Church. In this context, Paul's refusal to baptize Thecla makes sense; he is anxious about what temptations her beauty could entice her towards and is concerned that, if he were to initiate her into his ascetic, chaste lifestyle, she would later renege on that commitment and discredit his message. Paul expresses a similar concern in 1 Corinthians:

> *Διὰ δὲ τὰς πορνείας ἕκαστος τὴν ἑαυτοῦ γυναῖκα ἐχέτω καὶ ἑκάστη τὸν ἴδιον ἄνδρα ἐχέτω… Μὴ ἀποστερεῖτε ἀλλήλους, εἰ μήτι ἂν ἐκ συμφώνου πρὸς καιρὸν, ἵνα σχολάσητε τῇ προσευχῇ καὶ πάλιν ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτὸ ἦτε, ἵνα μὴ πειράζῃ ὑμᾶς ὁ Σατανᾶς διὰ τὴν ἀκρασίαν*

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[109] Carly Daniel-Hughes, "The Apostle of Failure: Queer Refusal, the Corinthian Letters, and Paul's Unflattering Characterization in the Acts of Thecla", *Biblical Interpretation* 31, no. 4 (2023): 489–490, https://doi.org/10.1163/15685152-20221688; Esther Yue Ng, "*Acts of Paul and Thecla*: Women's Stories and Precedent?", *The Journal of Theological Studies* 55, no. 1 (2004): 18–19, https://www.jstor.org/stable/23970601.

[110] 1 Cor. 1:17a

[111] Tert., *Baptism.* 18.6; Translations of Tertullian, *De Baptismo*, based on the Latin text in Ernest Evans' *Tertullian's Homily on Baptism: The Text edited with an Introduction, Translation and commentary* (London: S.P.C.K., 1964), are my own.

> *ὑμῶν…Λέγω δὲ τοῖς ἀγάμοις καὶ ταῖς χήραις, καλὸν αὐτοῖς ἐὰν μείνωσιν ὡς κἀγώ· εἰ δὲ οὐκ ἐγκρατεύονται, γαμησάτωσαν, κρεῖττον γάρ ἐστιν γαμῆσαι ἢ πυροῦσθαι.*
>
> But let each man have his own wife and let each woman have her own husband, on account of illicit sexual behavior…Do not cheat each other, unless by an agreement for a short period of time, you devote (yourselves) to prayer and become the same again, lest Satan tempts you because of your lack of self-control…But I say to unmarried (people) and widows, that if they remain as I also am, then it is good for them; but if they do not practice self-control, then let them be married, for it is better to be married than to be set aflame.[112]

For Paul, it is better that Thecla forgo her baptism until she either marries or adequately demonstrates her commitment to his ascetic cause. Like baptism, cutting one's hair was a common means of pledging one's dedication to a deity or individual, as it provided public, visible proof to one's social community.[113] Therefore, Thecla views her proclamation that she will cut her hair as a loyalty pledge to Paul and his ascetic teachings, demonstrating that she is willing to abandon any symbol of wealthy feminine sin in order to become a Christian. However, Paul interprets this gesture differently, perhaps fearing that Thecla's dedication to him eclipses her devotion to Christ, or that she aims to honor *him* as a holy figure, rather than God.[114] Paul likely does not wish for Thecla to directly mimic pagan practices while committing herself to Christianity, and so he refuses her request. Furthermore, Thecla's virginity makes

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[112] 1 Cor. 7:2, 5, 8–9

[113] E.g., Diod. Sic. 1.83.2; Hom. *Il*. 23.48–55, 159–161, 168–185; Paus. 2.11.6–7, 8.20.3. See also Jane Draycott, "Hair today, gone tomorrow: The use of real, false, and artificial hair as votive offerings", in *Bodies of Evidence: Ancient Anatomical Votives: Past, Present, and Future*, ed. Jane Draycott and Emma-Jayne Graham (Routledge, 2017), 77–94; Oliver Pilz, "Water, Moisture, Kourotrophic Deities and Ritual Hair-Cutting among the Greeks", *Les Études classiques* 87 (2019), 111–124. https://doi.org/10.2143/LEC.87.1.3290465.

[114] Acts 14:11–18 records an incident where the citizens of Lystra see Paul heal a disabled man and attempt to make sacrifices to him, believing that he is Hermes; the author of *APTh* may have this moment in mind while depicting Paul's rejection.

her a symbol of the Church itself, and if it were violated (either by choice or by force), the Christian faith's legitimacy would also be suspect.

As a young, Christian virgin, Thecla's chastity and sexually untouched body were representative of the entire Church's morality and legitimacy as a distinct religious group. Daniel Boyarin has demonstrated that Jewish Rabbis and Christian Fathers identified themselves with valiant virgin women in order to resist conforming to Roman religious norms, which they gendered as violent, masculine, and sexually promiscuous.[115] Boyarin argues that "Early Christian sainthood…is as much about sexuality and about the resistance to, critique of, and oppositional positioning with respect to a certain regime of power/knowledge about sex as it is about anything else".[116] In this framework, "the apocryphal Acts, including especially the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, were about parodying and resisting [Greek] romantic ideology", as expressed in the Greek romance novel, which "has at its core the transformation of displaced persons into householders, of young lovers into legitimately married forebears of generations to come".[117] *Acts of Thecla* inverts this convention, turning a "householder" into a "displaced person" and a "legitimately" engaged woman into a "young lover" of Christ.[118] This displacement from conventional social and familiar communities was a fundamental principle of early Christianity, as Jesus himself once stated:

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115 Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford, Stanford University Press: 1999), 67–92.

116 Boyarin, *Dying for God,* 87.

117 Boyarin, *Dying for God*, 88; Kate Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press: 1999), 43. See also Judith Perkins, *The Suffering Self: Pain and Narrative Representation in the Early Christian Era* (Milton Park, Routledge: 1995), 26 and David Konstan, "Acts of Love: A Narrative Pattern in the Apocryphal Acts", Journal of Early Christian Studies 6, no. 1 (1998), 15–36. https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/earl.1998.0013.

118 Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride*, 43; Judith Lieu, *Image and Reality: The Jews in the World of the Christians in the Second Century* (London, T&T Clark: 2003), 17.

> *Εἴ τις ἔρχεται πρός με, καὶ οὐ μισεῖ τὸν πατέρα ἑαυτοῦ καὶ τὴν τὴν μητέρα καὶ τὴν γυναῖκα καὶ τὰ τέκνα καὶ τοὺς ἀδελφοὺς καὶ τὰς ἀδελφάς, ἔτι τε καὶ τὴν ψυχὴν ἑαυτοῦ, οὐ δύναται εἶναί μου μαθητής.*
>
> If anyone comes to me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, and moreover even his own soul, he is not able to be my disciple.[119]

For Thecla and the virgins who followed her example, to have sex with or marry a man— especially a non-Christian, Roman elite— was to forsake their faith itself, to conform to temporary social norms at the expense of their eternal salvation. Furthermore, because literary virgins were also a means by which Church Fathers could identify themselves in contrast to pagan hedonism, these women *must* protect their chastity above all else; to lose their virginity was to call the Church's entire means of identification and self-definition into question.[120] The practice of hinging a community's security and identity on a small group of sacred virgins was not unique to the Christian church. Long before Thecla and her compatriots, the Vestal Virgins held a similar place in Roman society. As priestesses of Vesta, the divine embodiment of Rome's "hearth and home", the Vestals were "embodiment[s] of the city and citizenry of Rome".[121] Holt Parker has argued that,

> Just as the [Vestal] embodied the city of Rome, so her unpenetrated body was a metaphor for the unpenetrated walls of Rome… However, the Vestal's virginity was more than

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119 Luke 14:26.

120 Boyarin, *Dying for God,* 87–92.

121 Holt N. Parker, "Why Were the Vestals Virgins? Or the Chastity of Women and the Safety of the Roman State", in *Virginity Revisited: Configurations of the Unpossessed Body*, ed. Judith Fletcher and Bonnie MacLachlan (University of Toronto Press, 2007), 68–69. See also Mary Beard, "The Sexual Status of Vestal Virgins", *The Journal of Roman Studies* 70 (1980): 12–27. https://doi-org.uoregon.idm.oclc.org/10.2307/299553; Andrew B. Gallia, "Vestal Virgins and Their Families", *Classical Antiquity* 34, no. 1 (2015): 74-120. https://doi-org.uoregon.idm.oclc.org/10.1525/ca.2015.34.1.74; Inge Kroppenberg, "Law, Religion, and Constitution of the Vestal Virgins", *Law and Literature* 22, no. 3 (2010): 418-439. https://doi-org.uoregon.idm.oclc.org/10.1525/lal.2010.22.3.418; and Ariadne Staples, *From Good Goddess to Vestal Virgins: Sex and Category in Roman Religion* (Routledge, 1998), 129-156.

> merely the symbol of the inviolability of the Roman state. It was also the guarantee. The whole state depended on the state of being whole. The Vestals did not just hold the repositories of the state; they were the repositories of the state.[122]

If we, as Parker suggests, interpret the Vestals' virginity as a physical embodiment of the safety of the entire Roman state, then their virginity ought to be preserved at all costs. In the same vein, Christian theologians urged Christian virgins to protect their chastity, so that, as representatives of the Church and brides of Christ himself, they may avoid the slimmest possibility of sexual temptation or sin. Tertullian even urged aspiring virgins to veil their heads from puberty onwards, so that they could not tempt the men around them and succumb to sexual immorality:

> *Oro te, sive mater sive soror sive filia virgo, secundum annorum nomina dixerim, vela caput, si mater, propter filios, si soror, propter fratres, si filia, propter patres: omnes in te aetates periclitantur. Indue armaturam pudoris, circumduc vallum verecundiae, murum sexui tuo strue, qui nec tuos emittat oculos nec admittat alienos. Adimple habitum mulieris, ut statum virginis serves.*
>
> I beg you, whether (you are) a mother or a sister or a virgin daughter, let me speak according to the names of your years, veil your head; if (you are) a mother, for the sake of your sons, if (you are) a sister, for the sake of your brothers, if (you are) a daughter, for the sake of your fathers: all generations are endangered because of you. Put on the armor of modesty, draw the rampart of shame (around yourself), build a wall for your sex, which neither emits your eyes nor admits others' eyes. Perform the appearance of a woman, so that you may preserve the status of a virgin.[123]

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[122] Parker, "Why Were the Vestals Virgins?", 69.

[123] Tert., *De Virg.* 16.4b–5a. Translations of Tertullian, *De Velandis Virginibus*, based on the Latin text in *Quinti Septimi Florentis Tertulliani Opera, pars quarta: Ad martyras, Ad Scapulam, De fuga in persecutione, De monogamia, De virginibus velandis, De pallia, De paenitentia*, ed. Philipp Borleffs and Vinzenz Bulhart (Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesisticorum Latinorum, 1957), are my own.

Tertullian argues that a virgin's veil is her armor, protecting her virtue and her reputation from both temptation and rumors of sexual immorality:

> *Sed enim vera et tota et pura virginitas nihil magis timet quam semetipsam. Etiam feminarum oculos pati non vult: alios ipsa oculos habet. Confugit ad velamen capitis quasi ad galeam, quasi ad clipeum, qui bonum suum protegat adversus ictus temptationum, adversus iacula scandalorum, adversus suspiciones et susurros et aemulationem, ipsum quoque livorem… Sed et si cui innotuerit, sapit, si temptationibus gradum ob(s)truxerit. Quis enim audebit oculis suis premere faciem clausam, faciem non sentientem, faciem, ut dixerim, tristem?*
>
> But in fact true and total and pure virginity fears nothing more than itself. It is not even willing to tolerate women's eyes; it endures other eyes. It took refuge at a head's veil, as if at a helmet, as if at a shield, which defends its own goodness against the blows of temptations, against the darts of scandals, against suspicions and whispers and jealousy, and also ill-will itself… But even if she were known by someone, she is wise, if she were to barricade a position against temptations. For who will dare to threaten an inaccessible face, an unfeeling face, a sad face (as I say), with their eyes?[124]

As Carly Daniel-Hughes argues, Tertullian's strict limitations on women's, especially unmarried women's, dress are intended to support his theology of salvation, one which accepts no excuse for submitting to temptation:

> [Tertullian's] heated rhetoric aimed to shut down the possibility that women's toilette and ornamentation indicated their social respectability, honor, and positive values associated with their familial ties and station. In them, Tertullian attempts to limit the multiple and

[124] Tert. *De Virg.* 15.1, 3b–4.

> contested meanings that could be communicated by women's dress, to mark their raiment in ways that only shore up his theological project, his view of salvation.[125]

Within this framework, a baptized Christian virgin must be both sexually and morally "pure", and every aspect of her attire must reflect an unambiguously righteous character. The woman who falls short— or, God forbid, has sex with a man after her baptism— not only "violates" her own immaculacy, but that of her entire Christian community. And, if Thecla were to cut her hair and could not visibly "pass" as a man, she would resemble the sexually promiscuous women previously discussed, many of whom were particularly aggressive sex-workers.[126] This similarity could potentially increase the danger to Thecla's virginity and the church's reputation, since powerful men who noticed Thecla's beautiful body in conjunction with a "whorish" hairdo could believe that she was a sex-worker seeking new clientele. Thus, Paul may hesitate to formally induct Thecla as his disciple out of fear that she will not be able to resist sexual temptation, either from within herself or from men who wish to court her.[127] Furthermore, while Thecla believes that cutting her hair will demonstrate her commitment to the Christian faith and her desire to leave her elite lifestyle behind, Paul understands that the wider public would not see a woman with a shaved head as a virtuous virgin, but as an immoral and sexually aggressive sex-worker. For Paul, this form of gender-bending, especially for chaste women, is simply too risky for the Christian community's reputation, of which virgins like Thecla were typically a highly visible symbol. Therefore, while Paul does allow Thecla to accompany him to Antioch, he does not formally initiate her as a virginal disciple through hair-cutting or baptism, fearing that Thecla's beautiful body will cause her salvation to be "violated".

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125 Carly Daniel-Hughes, *The Salvation of the Flesh in Tertullian of Carthage: Dressing for the Resurrection* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 91.

126 Marchal, *Appalling Bodies*, 42-44.

127 Recall Paul's statement in *APTh* 3.25: *Ὁ καιρὸς αἰσχρός, καὶ σὺ εὔμορφος*.

III.II. A New *Mundus Muliebris*

When Paul and Thecla arrive in Antioch, Paul's fears about Thecla's body exposing her to sexual sin seem to be validated almost immediately. When Alexander, an official in Antioch, propositions Thecla, Paul immediately rejects and abandons her, perhaps fearing that Alexander would overpower and rape Thecla, "violating" her chastity:

> *ἅμα δὲ τῷ εἰσέρχεσθαι αὐτούς, συριάρχης τις Ἀλέξανδρος ὀνόματι Ἀντιοχέων πρῶτος πολλὰ ποιῶν ἐν τῇ πόλει ἐκείνῃ ἐν ὅλῃ τῇ ἀρχῇ αὐτοῦ ἰδὼν τὴν Θέκλαν ἠράσθη αὐτῆς, καὶ πείθειν τὸν Παῦλον χρήμασι καὶ δώροις. ὁ δὲ Παῦλος εἶπεν Οὐκ οἶδα τὴν γυναῖκα ἣν λέγεις, οὐδὲ ἔστιν ἐμή. ὁ δὲ πολὺ δυνάμενος, αὐτὸς αὐτῇ περιεπλάκη εἰς τὸ ἄμφοδον ἡ δὲ οὐκ ἠνέσχετο…*
>
> But at the same time that they entered that place, some ruler of Syria— Alexander by name, the first among the Antiochenes, doing many things in that city through his entire leadership— having seen Thecla, desired her, and (tried) to persuade Paul with riches and gifts. But Paul said, "I do not know the woman whom you are speaking (about), nor is she mine". And (Alexander), having much power, folded himself around her in the street, but she did not surrender…[128]

However, Thecla proves Paul, Tertullian, and their comrades wrong; she declares herself to be a Christian and publicly humiliates him:

> *…ἀλλὰ Παῦλον ἐζήτει. καὶ ἀνέκραγεν πικρῶς λέγουσα Μὴ βιάσῃ τὴν ξένην, μὴ βιάσῃ τὴν τοῦ θεοῦ δούλην. Ἰκονιέων εἰμὶ πρώτη, καὶ διὰ τὸ μὴ θέλειν με γαμηθῆναι Θαμύριδι, ἐκβέβλημαι τῆς πόλεως. καὶ λαβομένη τοῦ Ἀλεξάνδρου περιέσχισεν αὐτοῦ τὴν χλαμύδα καὶ περιεῖλεν αὐτοῦ τὸν στέφανον, καὶ ἔστησεν αὐτὸν θρίαμβον.*

[128] *APTh* 4.1; See Barrier, *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, 141 (note 10).

> …but she [Thecla] searched for Paul. And she angrily cried out, "Neither force a stranger, nor a servant of God. I am the first among the Iconians, and because I was not willing to be married to Thamyris, I was thrown out of the city". And having been seized by Alexander, she tore off his mantle and stripped off his wreath, and she stood near him in triumph.[129]

Removing Alexander's *χλαμύς* ("mantle" or "cloak", equivalent to the Latin *paludamentum*) and *στέφανος* ("wreath", equivalent to the Latin *corona*) also revokes his power and authority over Thecla. Just as the *ψέλια* and *κάτοπτρον* were symbols of wealthy Roman femininity, the *χλαμύς* and *στέφανος* were emblematic of elite Roman masculinity, and were particularly associated with military triumphs and athletic processions.[130] Although Alexander attempts to use his wealth and power to overpower Theca, thereby jeopardizing her salvation as a virgin, Thecla thwarts his efforts and takes his *στέφανος* for herself. This episode is a microcosm of their conflict in the arena and foreshadows that, despite Alexander's best efforts, Thecla will not allow him to violate her virtue and status as a Christian virgin. However, while Thecla resists Alexander's advances, she also declares herself to be the "first among the Iconians" (*Ἰκονιέων εἰμὶ πρώτη*), in a speech which parallels Alexander's introduction as the "first of the Antiochenes" (*Ἀντιοχέων πρῶτος*) a few sentences prior.[131] The *Acts* identifies both individuals as the "first" among their cities, as prominent elites who weaponize their privilege to gain power over each other. Furthermore, after Alexander condemned Thecla to fight the wild beasts, a wealthy queen named Tryphaena "took her into custody, and held (her) in comfort" (*ἔλαβεν αὐτὴν εἰς τήρησιν, καὶ εἶχεν εἰς*

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[129] *APTh* 4.1; See also *APTh* 4.12–13, 4.16 and Luke 1:38, 48.

[130] Livy 10.7, 30.15; Varro, *Ling.* 50.7.37; Barrier, *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, 142 (note 17); Donald G. Kyle, *Sport and Spectacle in the Ancient World*, vol. 2 (Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 249–253, 312–314; Kelly Olson, "Fringed clothing in Roman iconography and written sources", in *Textiles in Ancient Mediterranean Iconography*, 153. https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv2npq9bb.15.

[131] *APTh* 4.1; Thecla also declares herself to be "first among the Iconians" in one of *APTh*'s alternative endings, in which she escapes a group of men attempting to assault her. As is the case in her encounter with Alexander, Thecla weaponizes her elite background to rebuke and escape powerful men who threaten her chastity.

παραμυθίαν). Just as Thecla used her wealth to pursue Christianity in Iconium, she exploits her elite status in Antioch in order to protect her virginity; however, unlike in Iconium, Tryphaena and the other upper-class women of Antioch also use their privilege to defend and strengthen Thecla during her battle with the beasts.

Tryphaena's adoption of Thecla after Paul's abandonment motivates our heroine to find and foster her own community and support system, one made up entirely and exclusively of women.[132] During Thecla's first persecution in Iconium, she readily admits that she cannot endure her trials without Paul's assistance and her inability to maintain eye contact with anybody in the crowd is a vivid display of her fear.[133] However, Thecla remains steadfast and courageous during her trials in Antioch, largely thanks to the new community of women who support her. Having been abandoned by Paul for a second time and stripped of any support that her wealthy family could have provided, Thecla is forced to rely on the women (both humans and animals) of Antioch, who give her strength to endure the wild beasts in the arena. Although Thecla's nudity in the beast fight was meant to symbolize her lack of community or support, it marks her initiation into both the community of women in Antioch and the community of Christians throughout the Mediterranean. While Paul was concerned that men would see Thecla's desirable body as an invitation to sexually harass and assault her, he clearly did not consider that Thecla's beauty could also motivate women to identify with and protect her from those men. Like her elite status and resources, Thecla's attractiveness is also repurposed as a sign of her valor and inherent virtue.

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132 Carly Daniel-Hughes, "The Apostle of Failure: Queer Refusal, the Corinthian Letters, and Paul's Unflattering Characterization in the Acts of Thecla", *Biblical Interpretation* 31, no. 4 (2023): 473–495.

133 *APTh.* 3.21; Carlin A. Barton, "Savage Miracles: The Redemption of Lost Honor in Roman Society and the Sacrament of the Gladiator", *Representations* 45 (1994): 48. https://www.jstor.org/stable/2928602.

In the previous chapter, I discussed how, during Roman executions, nakedness was often a symbol of humiliation. However, it could also represent one's noble character, especially when a nude individual performed a heroic act; such is the case for Thecla when she faces the wild beasts. In both Antioch and Iconium, Thecla's beautiful body is indicative of her noble character, and the audiences in both cities mourn the destruction of such beauty:

> *Ὡς δὲ εἰσήχθη γυμνή, ἐδάκρυσεν ὁ ἡγεμὼν καὶ ἐθαύμασεν τὴν ἐν αὐτῇ δύναμιν.*
>
> As [Thecla] was brought in, naked, the governor wept and was amazed at the power within her.[134]

> *Καὶ ἀκούσασα ταῦτα Θέκλης ἐπένθει ἡ Τρύφαινα θεωροῦσα τοιοῦτον κάλλος εἰς θηρία βαλλόμενον.*
>
> And having heard these things from Thecla, Tryphaena mourned, seeing such beauty being thrown to the beasts.[135]

> *Καὶ ἰδοῦσαι αἱ γυναῖκες καὶ πᾶς ὁ ὄχλος ἔκλαυσαν… ὥστε καὶ τὸν ἡγεμόνα δακρῦσαι, ὅτι τοιοῦτον κάλλος φῶκαι ἔμελλον ἐσθίειν.*
>
> And, seeing (this), the women and the whole crowd cried out… so that the governor also wept, because seals were about to consume such beauty.[136]

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134 *APTh.* 3.22.

135 *APTh.* 4.4.

136 *APTh.* 4.9.

From the time of the ancient Greeks, people believed that one could ascertain an individual's inward character by carefully assessing their outward appearance. In his handbook on physiognomics, Pseudo-Aristotle discusses how one's physical form is indicative of one's internal disposition:

> *Δοκεῖ δέ μοι ἡ ψυχὴ καὶ τὸ σῶμα συμπαθεῖν ἀλλήλοις· καὶ ἡ τῆς ψυχῆς ἕξις ἀλλοιουμένη συναλλοιοῖ τὴν τοῦ σώματος μορφήν, πάλιν τε ἡ τοῦ σώματος μορφὴ ἀλλοιουμένη συναλλοιοῖ τὴν τῆς ψυχῆς ἕξιν…συμφανὲς δὲ καὶ ὅτι ταῖς δυνάμεσι τῆς ψυχῆς ὅμοιαι αἱ μορφαὶ τοῖς σώμασιν ἐπιγίνονται, ὥστ' ἐστὶν ἅπαντα ὅμοια ἐν τοῖς ζῴοις τοῦ αὐτοῦ τινὸς δηλωτικά.*
>
> It seems to me that the soul and the body experience the same sensations as one another; and the changing state of the soul also changes the form of the body, and again the changing form of the body also changes the state of the soul…And it is clear that forms similar to the powers of the soul come upon the bodies, so that all similarities among animals are indicative of some man.[137]

If the observer were to study an individual's entire body—taking note of peculiar features and analyzing their resemblance to certain animals—they could simultaneously provide an intensive assessment of the individual's inherent virtue.[138] Thus, exposing one's naked body to a crowd of astute onlookers also exposes one's character. A beautiful body is indicative of a beautiful soul, which ought not to be destroyed. Many ancient Jewish and Christian authors engaged in

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[137] Ps.-Arist., *Phgn.* 808b.12–15, 27–30. All translations of Pseudo-Aristotle, *Physiognomica*, based on the Greek text provided in *Aristotle: Minor Works*, translated by W. S. Hett (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936), are my own.

[138] Ps.-Arist., *Phgn.* 810a.13–814b.9; Jacqueline Arthur-Montagne, "Making Manimals: School Fables and Physiognomy in the Roman Empire", *Arethusa* 58 no. 2 (2015): 261–263 https://doi.org/10.1353/are.2025.a962491.

physiognomic thought, and the author of the *Acts of Thecla* seems to be particularly interested in the subject.[139] One of its most famous passages is an in-depth description of Paul:

> *Εἶδεν δὲ τὸν Παῦλον ἐρχόμενον, ἄνδρα μικρὸν τῷ μεγέθει, ψιλὸν τῇ κεφαλῇ, ἀγκύλον ταῖς κνήμαις, εὐεκτικόν, σύνοφρυν, μικρῶς ἐπίρρινον, χάριτος πλήρη· ποτὲ μὲν γὰρ ἐφαίνετο ὡς ἄνθρωπος, ποτὲ δὲ ἀγγέλου πρόσωπον εἶχεν.*
>
> (Onesiphorus) saw Paul approaching, a man small in stature, bald in his head, crooked in his shins, in good health, with a knitted brow, with a slightly long nose, filled with grace; for at some times he appeared like a man, at other times he had the face of an angel.[140]

This description depicts Paul as a wise old philosopher, in the same tradition as Socrates and other controversial teachers.[141] When Thecla first hears Paul speak, it is his message that captivates her, not his appearance. Within *APTh* and its Greco-Roman context, a man's appearance could reflect good internal character, even if it did not conform to idealized beauty standards. In contrast, women's physical features and their associated virtues were subject to much higher scrutiny; thus, any woman who was not conventionally attractive must have also possessed an ugly disposition. A woman's appearance and character must both be beyond reproach, so *APTh* takes great pains to remind the reader that Thecla is a very beautiful and desirable woman. It is her beauty that elicits such extreme sympathy from the women of Antioch, and her allure reflects her noble character. Note that, just before Tryphaena mourns the

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139 David Lincicum, "Philo and the Physiognomic Tradition", *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Period* 44, no. 1 (2013): 57–86. https://www.jstor.org/stable/24670521.

140 *APTh.* 3.3.

141 Callie Callon, "The Unibrow That Never Was: Paul's Appearance in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*" in *Dressing Judeans and Christians in Antiquity*, ed. Alicia J. Batton, Carly Daniel-Hughes, and Kristi Upson-Saia (Ashgate, 2014), 99–116; Paul Zanker, *The Mask of Socrates: The Image of the Intellectual in Antiquity*, trans. Alan Shapiro (University of California Press, 1995).

loss of Thecla's beauty in *APTh.* 4.4, Thecla prays for the queen and her deceased daughter, performing a great service for her kind patroness.[142] Thecla's kind gesture is immediately followed by a comment on her physical beauty, which ties the two together in the reader's mind, especially in the context of ancient physiognomics:

> *Ἡ δὲ Θέκλα μὴ μελλήσασα ἐπῆρεν τὴν φωνὴν αὐτῆς καὶ εἶπεν Ὁ θεός τῶν οὐρανῶν, ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ὑψίστου, δὸς αὐτῇ κατὰ τὸ θέλημα αὐτῆς, ἵνα ἡ θυγάτηρ αὐτῆς Φαλκονίλλα ζήσεται εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας. Καὶ ἀκούσασα ταῦτα Θέκλης ἐπένθει ἡ Τρύφαινα θεωροῦσα τοιοῦτον κάλλος εἰς θηρία βαλλόμενον.*
>
> And Thecla, not delaying, raised her voice and said, "Oh God of the heavens, the Son of the Most High, give to her according to her wish, so that her daughter, Falconilla, may live for eternity". And having heard these things from Thecla, Tryphaena mourned at seeing such beauty being thrown to the beasts.[143]

Thus, while Thecla's tormentors stripped her naked in order to humiliate and alienate her from her newfound community, Thecla's beautiful body became a symbol of her virtue, which the women of Antioch passionately protected.

When Thecla was stripped of her clothing in Iconium, she was also deprived of all societal support; however, when she is stripped in Antioch, Thecla still receives support from the women of Antioch, who have welcomed her into their community. Thecla's nudity does not alienate her from these women, but rather motivates them to protect her and help her preserve her virginity.[144] Tryphaena and the other women of Antioch embody the unique benefits that elite

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142 *APTh*. 4.4.

143 *APTh.* 4.4

144 Daniel-Hughes, "The Apostle of Failure", 490–491.

femininity can provide for prospective ascetic women. While a Christian virgin is commanded to utilize her wealth to pursue and promote the faith, other elite women can redirect their status and privilege towards protecting their peers' chastity. For Tryphaena and the women of Antioch, Thecla's naked body is not a source of shame, humiliation, or alienation, but a vivid display of her virtue and strength, which they must protect. This desire extends beyond human women, as a lioness dies to protect Thecla's virginity and preserve her virtue:

> *Ἡ δὲ Θέκλα ἐκ χειρὸς Τρυφαίνης ληφθεῖσα ἐξεδύθη καὶ ἔλαβεν διαζώστραν καὶ ἐβλήθη εἰς τὸ στάδιον. καὶ λέοντες καὶ ἄρκοι ἐβλήθησαν ἐπ' αὐτήν. καὶ πικρὰ λέαινα προσδραμοῦσα εἰς τοὺς πόδας αὐτῆς ἀνεκλίθη· ὁ δὲ ὄχλος τῶν γυναικῶν ἐβόησεν μέγα…μειζόνως δὲ ἐπένθησαν αἱ γυναῖκες, ἐπειδὴ καὶ ἡ βοηθὸς αὐτῇ λέαινα ἀπέθανεν.*
>
> But Thecla, having been taken from Tryphaena's hands, was stripped and took a girdle and was thrown into the amphitheatre. Both lions and bears were thrown upon her. And an angry lioness, having approached her, laid down at her feet; and the crowd of women cried out greatly… But the women wailed greatly, because even the lioness, a helper to her, was killed.[145]

The women's sympathy for both Thecla and the lioness was likely unexpected and unintentional. As I discussed in chapter one, Roman executions were intentionally staged to isolate so-called "criminals" from the larger community, but they were also meant to unify the audience in opposition to them and motivate spectators to side with the Roman state:

> All these spectators, from pullati to Princeps, were physically and ideologically separated from the criminals exposed to view in the arena beneath, and visibly bonded together in their rising tiers, which were so elevated that the gaze of every

[145] *APTh.* 4.8

> member of the audience was directed downwards to the clearly demarcated centre of display. In this context the emperor was seen to be the person who enabled the ultimate processes of the law to take their course, and at the same time provided thrilling and novel entertainment for his people…Yet the roles are reciprocal: the spectators by their presence endorsed the working of justice, and by their participation they help to fulfil its aims.[146]

However, while the Roman arena was a towering symbol of imperial might and a place where public officials could impose their will upon the public, the public did not always blindly embrace their policies.[147] L. Stephanie Cobb argues that the arena could be a site for the "negotiation of power", and Christian authors would exploit a crowd's potential scorn or sympathy for a martyr in order to propel the story.[148] Clearly, the author of *APTh* was aware of the power that the crowd could hold, as they depict the women of Antioch in constant dismay over Thecla's suffering. When these women looked upon Thecla's naked body in the arena, they did not see a condemned woman who ought to be isolated from the city; they saw a virtuous member of their community in imminent danger, whose torture and death was not only undeserved, but worthy of mourning and reproach.

As such, Thecla's nudity also represents her initiation into a new communal support system, one which empowers her to pursue Christ and initiate herself into his Christian fellowship. Although Alexander and the governor of Antioch meant to separate Thecla from Tryphaena and the other women of the city, they only succeeded in strengthening their sympathy

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146 K.M. Coleman, "Fatal Charades: Roman Executions Staged as Mythological Enactments", The Journal of Roman Studies 80 (1990): 72. https://www.jstor.org/stable/300280.

147 L. Stephanie Cobb, *Dying to Be Men: Gender and Language in Early Christian Martyr Texts* (Columbia University Press, 2008), 37–41.

148 Cobb, *Dying to Be Men*, 40–41.

for her and motivating Thecla to seal her own salvation. Having been forced to rely only on herself and the kind women who show her mercy, Thecla takes the initiative and baptizes herself as a fully-fledged Christian:

> *Ὡς δὲ ἐτέλεσεν τὴν προσευχήν, ἐστράφη καὶ εἶδεν ὄρυγμα μέγα πλῆρες ὕδατος, καὶ εἶπεν Νῦν καιρὸς λούσασθαί με. καὶ ἔβαλεν ἑαυτὴν λέγουσα Ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ὑστέρᾳ ἡμέρᾳ βαπτίζομαι… ἡ μὲν οὖν ἔβαλεν ἑαυτὴν εἰς τὸ ὕδωρ ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ· αἱ δὲ φῶκαι πυρὸς ἀστραπῆς φέγγος ἰδοῦσαι νεκραὶ ἐπέπλευσαν. καὶ ἦν περὶ αὐτὴν νεφέλη πυρός, ὥστε μήτε τὰ θηρία ἅπτεσθαι αὐτῆς, μήτε θεωρεῖσθαι αὐτὴν γυμνήν.*
>
> Once [Thecla] finished the prayer, she turned and saw a great trench full of water, and said, "Now is the proper time for me to bathe myself". And she threw herself (into the trench), saying, "On the final day, I am baptized in the name of Jesus Christ"… Then, on the one hand, she threw herself into the water in the name of Jesus Christ; on the other hand, the seals, having seen the light of lightning-fire, floated up as corpses. And there was a cloud of fire around her, so that neither did the beasts attack her, nor did they see her naked.[149]

Through her baptism, Thecla initiates herself into a new community, creating her own social support network to replace the one she lost in Iconium; this new family will be firmly sealed in Christ when Thecla converts most of Tryphaena's household, including the mistress herself.[150] And, by sending a great lightning bolt and cloud of fire to rescue Thecla, God confirms that Thecla is one of his followers who has his favor, and protects her modesty from prying eyes.

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149 *APTh.* 4.9

150 *APTh.* 4.14

Thecla's baptism also motivates the women of Antioch to take a more active role in protecting her virginity, using their perfumes to lull the other beasts into complacency:

> *Αἱ δὲ γυναῖκες ἄλλων θηρίων βαλλομένων φοβερωτέρων ὠλόλυξαν, καὶ αἱ μὲν ἔβαλλον φύλλον, αἱ δὲ νάρδον, αἱ δὲ κασίαν, αἱ δὲ ἄμωμον, ὡς εἶναι πλῆθος μύρων. πάντα δὲ τὰ βληθέντα θηρία ὥσπερ ὕπνῳ κατασχεθέντα οὐχ ἥψαντο αὐτῆς.*
>
> But when other terrifying beasts were thrown in, the women cried out, and some threw leaves, others threw spikenard, others threw cassia, others threw black cardamom, so that there was a multitude of perfumes. And all the beasts that were thrown in did not touch her, as if they were held back by sleep.[151]

By actively protecting Thecla, the women of Antioch demonstrate to the local officials that Thecla is a member of their community and they do not just disagree with her punishment, but are willing to fight against it with whatever means are available to them. Although Tryphaena could employ all the resources of a wealthy household to protect Thecla's chastity, the women of Antioch only have their perfumes. While some of the women can only throw leaves into the arena, others hurl imported herbs and unguents, which were significantly more expensive; for example, spikenard was known as a costly product that was imported to the Roman empire from India.[152] Furthermore, this cloud of perfumes serves as a "ritualistic anointing with ointments" a common motif in both the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, in which an individual favored by

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151 *APTh* 4.10.

152 Ernst Emmanuel Mayer, "Tanti non emo, Sexte, Piper: Pepper Prices, Roman Consumer Culture, and the Bulk of Indo-Roman Trade", *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 61 (4: 2018), 573–576. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26572315. For a survey of Indo-Roman trade in "luxury goods" and its significance in Roman economics, see Grant Parker, "*Ex Oriente Luxuria*: Indian Commodities and Roman Experience", *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 45 (1: 2002), 40–95. https://www.jstor.org/stable/3632707.

God is anointed with oil as a sign of their noble character and God's blessing over them.[153] In this context, the use of spikenard in particular is significant, as Jesus himself was anointed with that herb in the Gospel of John:

> *Ἡ οὖν Μαριὰμ λαβοῦσα λίτραν μύρου νάρδου πιστικῆς, πολυτίμου, ἤλειψεν τοὺς πόδας τοῦ Ἰησοῦ… ἡ δὲ οἰκία ἐπληρώθη ἐκ τῆς ὀσμῆς τοῦ μύρου.*
>
> Then Mary, having taken a libra of perfume of pure spikenard— something priceless— anointed Jesus' feet… and the house was filled by the scent of the perfume.[154]

Like Christ before her, Thecla is anointed with a luxurious perfume, and, just as Mary utilized an expensive commodity to bless Jesus, the women of Antioch use their resources and status to protect Thecla. The women's interference drives Alexander to frustration, and he proposes that Thecla be bound to two wild bulls:

> *Ὡς τὸν Ἀλέξανδρον εἰπεῖν τῷ ἡγεμόνι Ταύρους ἔχω λίαν φοβερούς, ἐκείνοις προσδήσωμεν τὴν αὐτήν. Καὶ στυγνάσας ἐπέτρεψεν λέγων Ποίει ὃ θέλεις. Καὶ ἔδησαν αὐτὴν ἐκ τῶν ποδῶν μέσον τῶν ταύρων, καὶ ὑπὸ τὰ ἀναγκαῖα αὐτῶν πεπυρωμένα σίδηρα ὑπέθηκαν, ἵνα πλείονα ταραχθέντες ἀποκτείνωσιν αὐτήν.*
>
> Thus Alexander said to the governor, "I have very terrifying bulls, let us bind her to them". And having been sullen, [the governor] allowed [it], saying, "Do what you wish". And he [Alexander][155] bound her by her feet to the middle of the bulls,

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153 1 Kings 1:39; 1 Samuel 10:1, 16:11–13; 2 Kings 9:1–6; Exodus 30:30, 40:13–15; Hebrews 1:9; John 12:1–8; James 5:14–15; Luke 7:36–50; Mark 14:3–9; Matt. 26:6–13; Psalm 133:1–3; Barrier, *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, 168.

154 John 12:3.

155 Per Barrier's conjecture, *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, 167 (note 11).

and placed inflamed iron beneath their genitals, so that, being more agitated, they would kill her.[156]

This manner of execution would be particularly brutal and sexually charged; the bulls are aroused to anger by hot iron being pressed to their genitals, and according to Martial, a bull once raped a condemned prisoner in a perverse recreation of the myth of Pasiphae.[157] While Alexander did not intend to reenact that particular tale, Thecla's final punishment still carries an undercurrent of sexual violence due to the heating of the bulls' genitals and Thecla's nude body. Thecla's punishment evokes the myth of another wicked woman in Roman mythology: Dirce, whose sons tied her to two bulls, which tore her into pieces, and whose death is memorably captured in the Farnese Bull.[158] According to Clement of Rome, such a punishment was not uncommon for Christian women:

> *διὰ ζῆλος διωχθεῖσαι γυναῖκες Δαναΐδες καὶ Δίρκαι, αἰκίσματα δεινὰ καὶ ἀνόσια παθοῦσαι, ἐπὶ τὸν τῆς πίστεως βέβαιον δρόμον κατήντησαν καὶ ἔλαβον γέρας γενναῖον αἱ ἀσθενεῖς τῷ σώματι.*
>
> Because of envy, women were persecuted as Dainads and Dircae, endured terrible and profane tortures; weak in body, they arrived at the steady course of their salvation and took a noble prize.[159]

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156 *APTh.* 4.10.

157 Mart. *Spec.* 5; Coleman, "Fatal Charades", 63–64. For a similar example, see Apul. *Met.* 10.29.34.

158 [Apollod.] *Bibl*. 3.5.5; [Hyg.] *Fab.* 7; David L. Balch, "Zeus, Vengeful Protector of the Political and Domestic Order: Frescoes in Dining Rooms N and P of the House of the Vettii in Pompeii, Mark 13.12–13, and 1 Clement 6.2", in *Picturing the New Testament: Studies in Ancient Visual Image*, ed. Petra von Gemünden, Annette Weissenrieder, and Friederike Wendt (Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 67–95; Coleman, "Fatal Charades", 65–66; Eleanor W. Leach, "The Punishment of Dirce: A Newly Discovered Painting in the Casa di Giulio Polibio and its Significance within the Visual Tradition," *MDAI* 93 (1986): 157–82.

159 1 Cor. 6.2; All translations of Clement of Rome's *Epistula 1 ad Corinthios,* based on the Greek text provided in *Clement of Rome. The Apostolic Fathers*, Vol. 1, ed. Kirsopp Lake, (William Heinemann Ltd, 1912), are my own.

Recreating Dirce's death in the arena, particularly to punish Christian women like Thecla, was a final, visceral attempt to reassert elite, masculine power over them. Like Dirce before them, Thecla and her contemporaries had rejected Roman social and familiar norms, and although Thecla's disavowal was more extreme than Dirce's, she would nevertheless suffer the same fate. However, Thecla managed to escape when the flame used to heat the bull's genitals also burned through the ropes tying her to them.[160] As with his other attempts, Alexander's final persecution failed, and Thecla was not bound by elite Roman masculinity; indeed, she even rallied support from the non-Christian masses, who marvel at her endurance and resolve. Alexander finally releases Thecla from the arena when he hears that Tryphaena has fainted and, fearing potential retribution from the imperial family, he brings Thecla before the governor of Antioch.[161] Although Tryphaena is technically a passive participant in this incident, her elite status is still a means by which she can protect Thecla from further harm, preserving Thecla's virtue and granting her an opportunity to preach directly to local officials.[162] Thanks to Tryphanea and the other women, her own resilience, and her God, Thecla has survived the worst of her trials and emerged from the arena as fully initiated Christian, prepared to face any additional torment for the sake of her faith.

III.III. Conclusions

In this chapter, I have shown that, despite Thecla's eagerness to convert to Christianity, Paul denies her request to cut her hair and be baptized out of fear that Thecla would resemble a sexually promiscuous woman rather than a holy virgin and that her physical beauty would lead her or the men in her vicinity into sexual temptation. If Thecla cut her hair, she would literally

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160 *APTh.* 4.10.

161 *APTh*. 4.11.

162 *APTh.* 4.11.

sever her final visible connection to her elite identity as a Roman woman, and her baptism would cement her place as a virgin in the Christian church. However, because virgins embodied the entire community in both Roman and Christian religious thought, any woman who visibly resembled a sexually aggressive individual or broke her vow of chastity (either by choice or by force) would jeopardize her community's legitimacy in the eyes of the wider public. Thus, if Thecla were to cut her hair or have sexual contact with a man after being baptized, she would break the seal of her baptism and delegitimize Paul's message. I assert that these theologies of baptism and virginity are the reasons why Paul both rejects Thecla's request for baptism and denies knowing her after Alexander accosts Thecla in Antioch. However, Thecla demonstrates that Paul's fears were misplaced when she publicly humiliates Alexander and valiantly endures her trials in the arena without Paul's assistance. Paul's abandonment forces Thecla to create her own community of women and baptize herself as a Christian virgin, resisting Alexander's final attempt to subjugate her when she escapes his fearsome bulls. While Thecla's naked body was a symbol of her isolation and her exile from her community in Iconium, in Antioch, it became a representation of her inner virtue and the local women's dedication to defending her. Furthermore, Tryphaena and the other women's support demonstrates that married elite women can also appropriate their privileges to protect Christian virgins from harm and preserve their comrades' virtue. Once Thecla survives Alexander's bulls, she is brought before the governor of Antioch to explain how she was able to withstand her torments so valiantly. Throughout her conversation with the governor, Thecla embodies masculine understanding of Paul's teachings and exerts full control over her body and the way it is perceived, demonstrating self-assuredness in her identity as a Christian virgin and teacher.

IV. CHAPTER THREE: “Putting On” Christianity

In the previous chapter, I discussed how Paul initially denied Thecla’s request to sacrifice a symbol of her elite femininity in order to convert to Christianity. However, Thecla takes the initiative in her own conversion, and also actively chooses to exploit her elite privileges in order to foster internal virtues of Christian masculinity and strength. This decision provides both Paul and the broader public with tangible proof that Thecla’s commitment to ascetic Christianity is ironclad and she cannot be swayed by the temptations of her sinful flesh. Before Thecla reunites with Paul, she must pass one final test: publicly defending herself before the governor of Antioch, who is absolutely baffled by her survival in the arena. Throughout her conversation with the governor, Thecla demonstrates intellectual understanding of Christian doctrine and rhetorical strategy, which only men— and women who become “like men”— are able to achieve. Thecla’s public defense legitimizes her identity as a masculine Christian teacher before she receives Paul’s blessing to preach the Gospel, demonstrating that, while Paul’s approval may lend her message more legitimacy, the masculine virgin does not require his consent to convert others to the faith.

IV.I. Clothed in Salvation

After surviving the ferocious beasts of Antioch, Thecla stands naked before the local governor, who asks her to explain her bizarre victory in the arena. Thecla, confident in her salvation and in Christ’s protection over her, stands firm in the face of his questions, maintaining control over the conversation and usurping the governor’s authority over her. Thecla’s endurance, confidence, and assertion of Christ’s supremacy legitimizes her as a Christian teacher and ascetic. Furthermore, once Thecla dons her clothing by her own volition, she visibly exerts control over her body, demonstrating that she has obtained self-control, the most important virtue

for an ascetic Christian to possess. Having proven herself to the governor and citizens of Antioch, Thecla can appropriate her elite patroness' support in order to pursue a life as an ascetic Christian apostle.

Although Thecla is naked and exposed before the governor of Antioch, she still possesses all of the agency in their encounter, displaying masculine, Christ-like understanding of Christian doctrine and theology. The governor initially summons Thecla because he believes that the sight of Thecla's suffering has killed Tryphaena, and he fears that tormenting her any further will bring destruction upon the city.[163] Confused and terrified, he asks Thecla who she is and why none of the animals harmed her. Thecla responds by providing a measured explanation of her faith:

> *Ἡ δὲ εἶπεν Ἐγὼ μέν εἰμι θεοῦ τοῦ ζῶντος δούλη· τὰ δὲ περὶ ἐμέ, εἰς ὃν εὐδόκησεν ὁ θεὸς υἱὸν αὐτοῦ ἐπίστευσα· δι' ὃν οὐδὲ ἓν τῶν θηρίων ἥψατό μου. οὗτος γὰρ μόνος σωτηρίας ὅρος καὶ ζωῆς ἀθανάτου ὑπόστασίς ἐστιν· χειμαζομένοις γὰρ γίνεται καταφυγή, θλιβομένοις ἄνεσις, ἀπηλπισμένοις σκέπη, καὶ ἁπαξαπλῶς ὃς ἐὰν μὴ πιστεύσῃ εἰς αὐτόν, οὐ ζήσεται ἀλλὰ ἀποθανεῖται εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας.*
>
> But [Thecla] said, "I am a slave of the living God; but as for the things concerning me, God is well pleased with his son, in whom I have put my faith; on account of him, not one of the beasts attacked me. For this is the only path of salvation and the only foundation of immortal life; for [God] becomes a refuge for those having been tossed in the storm, a rest for those having been oppressed, a shelter for those having been in despair, and most simply: if anyone does not have faith in him, (that person) will not live, but will die for eternity.[164]

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163 *APTh.* 4.11.

164 *APTh.* 4.12. All translations of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* by Vex Maxwell-Therwhanger, based on the Greek text in Jeremy W. Barrier, *The Acts of Paul and Thecla: A Critical Introduction and Commentary* (Mohr Siebeck, 2009).

While the governor is baffled and frightened, Thecla remains calm and rational, asserting her status as a loyal Christian, whom Christ protects from danger. This exchange is quite different from Thecla's first interrogation, during which she did not speak at all and could not stop searching for Paul; now, Thecla is confident in her salvation and does not require Paul's guidance in order to withstand her suffering or preach the gospel to others. Her rational defense and self-assured demeanor signify that she fully understands Christian doctrine, a feat that only men could achieve. Greek, Roman, Jewish, and Christian thinkers believed that men were inherently more logical and rational than women, and thus were more easily able to understand God and his teachings. Writing in the first century, BCE, the Jewish philosopher Philo stated:

> For progress is indeed nothing else than the giving up of the female gender by changing into the male, since the female gender is material, passive, corporeal, and sense-perceptible, while the male is active, rational, incorporeal, and more akin to mind and thought.[165]

A few centuries later, the Coptic Gospel of Thomas would echo this sentiment:

> Simon Peter said to them, "Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of life." Jesus said, "I myself shall lead her in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven".[166]

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[165] *QE* 1.8; Translations of Philo, *Questions and Answers on Exodus*, by Ralph Marcus in *Philo, Supplement II: Questions and Answers on Exodus: Translated from the Ancient Armenian Version of the Original Greek* (Harvard University Press, 1953).

[166] *Gospel of Thomas* 114; Translations of *The Coptic Gospel of Thomas* by Thomas O. Lambdin in James Robinson, *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, 3rd ed. (Brill, 1988).

Thus, if a woman wished to reach a fuller understanding of the Hebrew Bible or the gospel, she must somehow become more "male".[167] Martyrdom was one way in which Christian women could become more like men, and thus draw closer to Christ, enduring great suffering like their savior before them.[168] As I discussed in the previous chapters, endurance in the face of unavoidable torment was a key aspect of Roman masculinity, and if a virgin martyr could withstand persecution without submitting to her torturers, then she embodied masculine endurance and became more masculine through her suffering.[169] By enduring her ordeal in Antioch, Thecla demonstrates that she has attained masculine perseverance, and thus she is able to more fully understand Christian theology.

Thecla's comprehension of Christian doctrine allows her to persuasively defend her faith before the governor and exemplify another key tenet of both Christian and Roman masculinity: competence in persuasive rhetoric. Maud Gleason has argued that "the rhetorical performer embodied his civilization's ideal of cultivated manliness", and one must demonstrate self-control and rational understanding in both demeanor and speech.[170] As Quintilian argues in his manual on rhetoric, a good orator must also be a good *man* and exhibit masculine virtues:

> *Oratorem autem instituimus illum perfectum, qui esse nisi vir bonus non potest; ideoque non dicendi modo eximiam in eo facultatem sed omnes animi virtutes exigimus.*

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167 E.g. Chrys. *Hom. 9 in Tim.*; *Didascalia Apostolorum* 3.1.10; Tert. *De Virg.* 5.1-13. See also Margaret R. Miles, *Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West* (Beacon Press, 1992), 55-56.

168 Miles, *Carnal Knowing*, 56–63.

169 L. Stephanie Cobb, *Dying to Be Men: Gender and Language in Early Christian Martyr Texts* (Columbia University Press, 2008), 113–114.

170 Maud Gleason, *Making Men: Sophists and Self-Presentation in Ancient Rome* (Princeton University Press, 1995).

> Moreover, I will train up the perfect orator, who cannot be (the perfect orator) unless he is a good man; therefore I do not only require excellent ability for speaking within him, but also all the virtues of the mind.[171]

Erik Gunderson expands on Quintilian's argument, stating:

> When they [Roman orators] speak of rhetoric as the provenance of good men, they mean that rhetoric is the field of discourse in which good men are the speakers. In the context of this study, rhetoric is the field in which good men act and are enacted. Watching an orator, one ought to behold the performance of the dominant, masculine subject and one ought to hear the voice of legitimate authority. Where virility or social station is in doubt, a performance fails: the orator has not been a good man, and whatever experience he has in speaking has gone for naught. His authority evanesces and with it his claim to that authority.[172]

Throughout her conversation with the governor, Thecla never wavers in her convictions, nor does the text report any change in her body language throughout their interaction. In rhetorical thought, every miniscule movement— a twitch of the eye, shuffling the feet, the slightest slouch— could be interpreted as weakness or effeminacy.[173] According to *APTh*, Thecla does not move during her conversation with the governor, demonstrating that she has attained masculine self-control over her faculties since her interrogation in Iconium. Harnessing and maintaining the proper tone of voice were also key to presenting oneself as a *vir bonus* in rhetorical discussion;

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171 Quint. *Inst.* 1.9. All translations of Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria*, based on the Latin text provided in *The Institutio Oratio of Quintilian*, ed. Harold Edgeworth Butler (Harvard University Press, 1920), are my own.

172 Eric Gunderson, *Staging Masculinity: The Rhetoric of Performance in the Roman World* (University of Michigan Press, 2000), 8.

173 Cic. *Orat.* 18.59; Gleason, *Making Men*, 55-81.

the orator must strike a balance between a dull, lifeless drone and an overly emotional tirade, lest they compromise their own masculinity or lose the audience's attention.[174] When describing Thecla's speech, *APTh* primarily employs neutral, common vocabulary without any gendered connotations, thereby avoiding any of the loaded vocabulary associated with dramatic, effeminate rhetoric and allowing the audience to imagine Thecla as a rational, level-headed orator.[175] Throughout the Roman republican and imperial ages, women who publicly employed proper rhetorical methods were viewed as "androgynes" or orators so similar to their fathers that they could temporarily restore their spirits to life:

> *Maesia Sentinas rea causam suam, L. Titio praetore iudicium cogente, maximo populi concursu egit, modosque omnes ac numeros defensionis non solum diligenter sed etiam fortiter exsecuta, et prima actione et paene cunctis sententiis liberata est. quam, quia sub specie feminae virilem animum gerebat, Androgynen appellabant… Hortensia vero, Q. Hortensii filia, cum ordo matronarum gravi tributo a triumviris esset oneratus <nec> quisquam virorum patrocinium iis accommodare auderet, causam feminarum apud triumviros et constanter et feliciter egit: repraesentata enim patris facundia impetravit ut maior pars imperatae pecuniae iis remitteretur. revixit tum muliebri stirpe Q. Hortensius verbisque filiae aspiravit…*
>
> The defendant Maesia Sentina pleaded her own case before L. Titius, the praetor overseeing the trial, (and) a great assembly of people, having accomplished all manners and numbers of defense not only diligently but also powerfully, and she was acquitted at the first suit and by nearly all jury members. They called her

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174 Quin. *Inst.* 1.10.25–31; Gleason, *Making Men*, 82–130.

175 Gleason, *Making Men*, 103–130.

> "Androgyne", because she was revealing a manly spirit beneath a womanly appearance… When the class of matrons had been burdened with a heavy tax by the Triumvirs and not any of the men dared to provide a defense for them, truly Hortensia, the daughter of Q. Hortensius, pleaded the women's case both resolutely and successfully; with her father's eloquence having been displayed, she succeeded so that the greater part of the imposed payment was ceased by them. Then Q. Hortentius lived again through his womanly offspring and favored his daughter's words.[176]

Like Maesia and Hortensia, Thecla also personifies the masculine rhetorical ideal, using her interrogation in Antioch to publicly display her wisdom and *virtus*. Furthermore, Thecla's proficiency in Roman oratory allows her to preserve her power over her body, and thereby embody the aspect of Roman masculine identity which was most important for early Christian martyrs.

When the governor speaks with Thecla, he commands her to put her clothes back on, but Thecla initially refuses, maintaining control over the way her body is presented and perceived. By asserting that it is Christ who clothes her, not the governor of Antioch, Thecla refuses to acknowledge the governor's authority and symbolically revokes any power that he may have over her. While the governor could throw Thecla back to the beasts, he does not have the ultimate power over her life— Christ does:

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[176] Val. Max. 8.3.1, 3. Translations of Valerius Maximus, based on the Latin text provided in *Valerius Maximus: Memorable Doings and Sayings*, Volume 3, ed. D. R. Shackleton Bailey (Harvard University Press, 2020), are my own. See also Cic. *QFr*. 1.3.3; Val. Max. 4.6.5, 6.1.1; J.P. Hallett, "Women as 'Same' and 'Other' in the Classical Roman Elite", *Helios* 16, no. 1 (1989), 61–69.

Καὶ ταῦτα ἀκούσας ὁ ἡγεμὼν ἐκέλευσεν ἐνεχθῆναι ἱμάτια καὶ εἶπεν· Ἔνδυσαι τὰ ἱμάτια. Ἡ δὲ εἶπεν Ὁ ἐνδύσας με γυμνὴν ἐν τοῖς θηρίοις, οὗτος ἐν ἡμέρᾳ κρίσεως ἐνδύσει με σωτηρίαν. Καὶ λαβοῦσα τὰ ἱμάτια ἐνεδύσατο.

And having heard these things, the governor ordered that [Thecla's] clothes be brought and said, "Put the clothes on for yourself". But she said, "The one having clothed me while naked among the beasts, this same one will put salvation on me on the day of judgment". And having taken the clothes, she put [them] on herself.[177]

For Roman men, possessing absolute control over one's body and the way it was perceived by others was paramount to preserving one's masculinity. Seneca even advises death by suicide over doing anything against one's will, so that an individual's masculinity may be maintained:

Quicquid necesse futurum est repugnanti, volenti necessitas non est. Ita dico: qui imperia libens excipit, partem acerbissimam servitutis effugit, facere quod nolit. Non qui iussus aliquid facit, miser est, set qui invitus facit. Itaque sic animum conponamus, ut quicquid res exiget, id velimus et in primis ut finem nostri sine tristitia cogitemus.

Whatever must become a necessity for a resisting man, is not a necessity for a willing man. Accordingly, I say: he who willingly receives his orders, escapes the harshest part of slavery— to do what he does not wish. He who, having been ordered, does something, is not miserable; but the unwilling man who does something (is miserable). And thus let us arrange our minds, so that we will wish

177 *APTh.* 4.13

> it, whatever reason will demand, and so that we will especially think about our end without sadness.[178]

While Thecla neither surrenders to the beasts in the arena nor dies by suicide, she does refuse to clothe herself upon the governor's request, only donning her clothing once she has finished spreading her message.[179] Thecla's refusal to allow another man to clothe her demonstrates her control over her body and her immunity to outside influence, the aspect of Roman manliness most prized among early Christians:

> The martyrologies illustrate the superiority of Christian masculinity through the virtues discussed by the philosophers. The martyr's volition, imperviousness to persuasion, challenge to justice, or mastery of the passions are certainly behaviors that were valued in antiquity and would have served as models of Christian conduct.[180]

Furthermore, for readers familiar with other Christian texts, Thecla's remark about "putting on salvation" and the "day of judgment" evoke the multitude of martyrs in Revelation 7, who are clothed in white robes as a reward for their endurance:

> *Μετὰ ταῦτα εἶδον, καὶ ἰδοὺ ὄχλος πολύς, ὃν ἀριθμῆσαι αὐτὸν οὐδεὶς ἐδύνατο, ἐκ παντὸς ἔθνους καὶ φυλῶν καὶ λαῶν καὶ γλωσσῶν, ἑστῶτες ἐνώπιον τοῦ θρόνου καὶ ἐνώπιον τοῦ ἀρνίου περιβεβλημένους στολὰς λευκάς καὶ φοίνικες ἐν ταῖς χερσὶν αὐτῶν… καὶ εἶπέν μοι,*

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178 Sen. *Ep.* 61.3. Translations of Seneca, *Epistulae*, based on the Latin text in *Seneca: Epistles Volume I*, ed. Richard M. Gummere (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1917), are my own. On Seneca's views on suicide, see Arthur J. Droge and James Tabor, *A Noble Death: Suicide and Martyrdom Among Christians and Jews in Antiquity* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 34–37. On Christian suicide, see Cobb, *Dying to Be Men*, 66–70.

179 *APTh.* 4.13.

180 Cobb, *Dying to Be Men*, 62; See also Lily C. Vuong, "Masculinity, Gender, and the New Testament World", in *The World of the New Testament: Encountering Texts in Context,* ed. David Cielontko et al. (Fortress Press, 2026), 186–188.

Οὗτοί εἰσιν οἱ ἐρχόμενοι ἐκ τῆς θλίψεως τῆς μεγάλης, καὶ ἔπλυναν τὰς στολὰς αὐτῶν καὶ ἐλεύκαναν αὐτὰς ἐν τῷ αἵματι τοῦ ἀρνίου…

After these things, I looked, and behold (there was) a great crowd, which nobody was able to count, from every nation and tribes and people and languages, standing before the throne and before the lamb, having been clothed in white robes and (holding) palm branches in their hands… And [the elder] said to me, "These are the ones coming from the great oppression, and they washed their robes and became white in the blood of the lamb…"[181]

Thecla's comment that Christ will clothe her "on the day of judgment" and her statement's similarity to Revelation 7 reveal that Thecla's perspective on earthly authority is shaped by her confidence in Christ's eventual return. The governor and other men may torment her in this life, but Thecla will have the last laugh on Judgment Day; although her physical body may be naked, Christ still clothes her with his protection among the beasts and she will receive her reward upon his return.[182]

Thecla's confidence in Christ's protection and eventual reward for her endurance further legitimizes her authority as a teacher, and thus as a masculine Christian ascetic. Thecla's rationality and self-control in the face of the governor's interrogation help her convert nearly all the women in Antioch:

Καὶ ἐξέπεμψεν εὐθέως ὁ ἡγεμὼν ἄκτον λέγων Θέκλαν τὴν τοῦ θεοῦ δούλην τὴν θεοσεβῆ ἀπολύω ὑμῖν. Αἱ δὲ γυναῖκες πᾶσαι ἔκραξαν φωνῇ μεγάλῃ καὶ ὡς ἐξ ἑνὸς στόματος ἔδωκαν

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[181] Revelation 7:9, 14. All translations from the New Testament, based on the Greek provided in *The Greek New Testament: Fifth Revised Edition*, edited by Barbara Aland et. al. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2014), are my own.

[182] Cobb, *Dying to Be Men*, 57–58.

αἶνον τῷ θεῷ λέγουσαι Εἷς θεὸς ὁ Θέκλαν σώσας, ὥστε ἀπὸ τῆς φωνῆς σεισθῆναι πᾶσαν τὴν πόλιν.

And the governor immediately sent out a policy, saying, "I release Thecla, the God-fearing slave of God, to you". And all the women cried out with a great voice and they gave praise to God, as if out of one mouth, saying, "God, having saved Thecla, is One", so that the whole city shook because of the sound.[183]

At this point, Thecla has been fully initiated into the Christian community and Christ has clothed her to protect her modesty and demonstrate his favor for her. She is also confident in her salvation, believing that Christ will give her the reward that he promised to all of his martyrs: the white robes of salvation. Thecla may now confidently preach to others, especially other women, as a full-fledged Christian ascetic, clothed in salvation and righteousness. Thanks to Thecla's perseverance and declaration of faith, the entire city of Antioch hears that Thecla and her God have overcome imperial persecution. Both the governor and the women of the city have declared that she is a servant of God, accepting her as a Christian disciple and teacher. Overjoyed, Tryphaena embraces Thecla and welcomes her back into her home. While Thecla's battle with the beasts occurred on the outskirts of society, Tryphaena has brought her back into the community, not as a prisoner but as a teacher:

Καὶ τὴν Τρύφαιναν εὐαγγελισθεῖσαν ἀπαντῆσαι μετὰ ὄχλου καὶ περιπλακῆναι τῇ Θέκλῃ καὶ εἰπεῖν Νῦν πιστεύω ὅτι νεκροὶ ἐγείρονται· νῦν πιστεύω ὅτι τὸ τέκνον μου ζῇ· δεῦρο τέκνον μου ἔσω εἰς τὸν οἶκόν μου, καὶ τὰ ἐμὰ πάντα σοὶ καταγράψω. ἡ μὲν οὖν Θέκλα εἰσῆλθεν μετ' αὐτῆς καὶ ἀνεπαύσατο εἰς τὸν οἶκον αὐτῆς ἡμέρας ὀκτώ, κατηχήσασα αὐτὴν τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ, ὥστε πιστεῦσαι καὶ τῶν παιδισκῶν τὰς πλείονας, καὶ μεγάλην εἶναι χαρὰν ἐν τῷ οἴκῳ.

[183] *APTh.* 4.13; See also Acts 16:35–40.

> And when they brought the good news to Tryphaena, she met with [Thecla] in the middle of the crowd and embraced Thecla and said, "Now I believe that the dead are resurrected; now I believe that my child lives; come here inside my house, my child, and I will devote all my (property) to you. Then Thecla went inside with her and rested inside her house for eight days, having taught [Tryphaena] the word of God, so that she and many of her servants had faith, and there was great rejoicing in the house.[184]

By dedicating all of her property to Thecla, Tryphaena also repurposes her wealth and elite status in order to support Thecla's ascetic mission. Therefore, when Thecla departs to find Paul, she leaves behind a thriving community of Christian women, who may pass on her story and teachings to others and use their resources to bolster the church. After enduring her trials in Antioch, Thecla is confident that Christ has clothed her "with salvation", and this assurance empowers her to teach others.

IV.II. Loin-Girding and Displaying Masculinity

Once Thecla has successfully converted Tryphaena's household and many of the women in Antioch, she must leave Tryphaena's house and the protection it provides, since a true ascetic cannot reside in physical proximity to wealth. At this point, Thecla embodies the core tenets of Christian masculinity, but she must still remove herself from Tryphaena's household so that she can maintain her masculinity and avoid succumbing to the temptations inherent to being a young, unmarried woman in proximity to immense wealth and resources. As I discussed in chapter one, many Christian authors believed that women were uniquely susceptible to temptation, and so they required a man's leadership to guide them. This vulnerability was even more pronounced when a woman possessed a wealth of resources and elite social status, as she had the means to indulge her sinful desires. If a wealthy woman wished to remain unmarried and live outside of

[184] *APTh.* 4.14

her family's protection, then she must also repurpose her elite privileges in service of the Christian church rather than her own social standing. Thus, while Thecla cannot remain in Tryphaena's house if she aims to be an itinerant teacher, she can utilize Tryphaena's resources to support herself on her journey and provide additional assistance to Paul upon their reunion.

While Thecla uses Tryphaena's money and enslaved people to support herself on her journey, Thecla does not employ them to adorn herself with fine jewelry or an elaborate hairstyle. Rather, she dons a man's outer garment and donates Tryphaena's riches to the church, redirecting elite feminine wealth towards the Christian community rather than using those privileges to elevate her own social status. Hearing that Paul is now in Myra, Thecla resolves to visit him and tell him about everything she has endured, in the hopes of receiving his blessing to continue her work as a teacher. Thus,

> *Καὶ λαβοῦσα νεανίσκους καὶ παιδίσκας, ἀναζωσαμένη καὶ ῥάψασα τὸν χιτῶνα εἰς ἐπενδύτην σχήματι ἀνδρικῷ ἀπῆλθεν ἐν Μύροις, καὶ εὗρεν Παῦλον λαλοῦντα τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ ἐπέστη αὐτῷ.*
>
> And she took young men and girls, having girded up her loins and having stitched her tunic into a cloak with a manly appearance, she departed to Myra, and she found Paul speaking the word of God and she stood near him.[185]

The phrase "having girded up her loins" (*ἀναζωσαμένη*) is uncommon in Greek— it only appears once in the New Testament, in 1 Peter 1:13— but it is much more prevalent in the Hebrew Bible, where the phrase typically refers to "preparation for strenuous activity".[186] While both men and

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185 *APTh.* 4.15.

186 Katherine Low, "Implications Surrounding Girding the Loins in Light of Gender, Body, and Power". *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 36, no. 1 (2011), 4.

women can "loingird" in the Hebrew Bible, men typically gird their loins as an expression of power, while women usually gird their loins out of dismay or humiliation.[187] One exception to this rule is the wise woman in Proverbs 31, who "girds herself with strength/ and makes her arms strong".[188] This woman's loingirding is a symbol of her physical and moral strength, the masculine persona which she assumes in order to "further her son's political role".[189] Like the "Proverbs 31 wife", Thecla girds up her loins in order to visibly display her masculine virtue to the public, so that Paul might recognize her as an ascetic teacher.

Just as Thecla girded her loins as a demonstration of her physical and moral fortitude, she sews her "tunic into a cloak with a manly appearance" (*ῥάψασα τὸν χιτῶνα εἰς ἐπενδύτην σχήματι ἀνδρικῷ*) to accomplish the same purpose.[190] Although one reason Thecla wore a man's cloak was to avoid physical or sexual violence during her travels, I would also argue for an additional interpretation; while the man's cloak provided protection for Thecla and her retinue during their travels, Thecla also intended to use it to display her faith and wisdom to Paul upon their reunion in Myra.[191] After all, Thecla is only travelling to Myra to meet Paul and the sight of her and her followers astonishes him:

> *Ὁ δὲ ἐθαμβήθη βλέπων αὐτὴν καὶ τὸν ὄχλον τὸν μετ' αὐτῆς, λογισάμενος μή τις αὐτῇ πειρασμὸς πάρεστιν ἕτερος.*

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187 Low, "Implications Surrounding Girding", 10–30.

188 Prov. 3:17, New Revised Standard Version, Updated Edition.

189 Low, "Implications Surrounding Girding", 29.

190 *APTh.* 4.15

191 Miles, *Carnal Knowing*, 55.

> But, seeing her and the crowd with her, [Paul] was alarmed, considering whether some other trial was near her.[192]

While Thecla's masculine attire disturbs Paul, he is slightly reassured by Thecla's claim that she has "received [her] baptism" (*Ἔλαβον τὸ λουτρόν*).[193] Recall that two reasons why Paul may not have wanted Thecla to cut her hair or be baptized was because the wider public would view a woman with a shaved head as sexually promiscuous— an image diametrically opposed to Thecla's desire to remain a virgin— and he was concerned that Thecla's beauty would tempt men into "violating" her chastity. In both instances, Thecla would potentially embody a form of sexuality that contradicts Paul's ascetic message, delegitimizing his authority as a teacher. However, *APTh* does not depict Thecla cutting her hair when she departs for Myra; when Thecla attempts to "pass" as a man, she only adopts men's clothing, which can be easily exchanged for proper women's attire if she chooses. The *Acts* also do not explicitly state whether or not Thecla continues to wear masculine clothing after she leaves Myra, leaving her gender-presentation up to the reader's imagination. This ambiguity allows audience members to interpret Paul's blessing in two different ways. One could assume that Thecla continues to wear men's garments after arriving in Myra, and thus Paul's support is also implicit approval for this practice; however, this view does not seem viable in light of the larger Pauline tradition. Because Paul heavily emphasized social respectability among Christian communities, particularly for Christian women, it seems unlikely that he would approve of Thecla permanently wearing men's clothing and attempting to publicly "pass" as a man.[194] Alternatively, the audience could conclude that, because Paul previously opposed Thecla adopting a manlier appearance, Thecla may have

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192 *APTh.* 4.15.

193 *APTh.* 4.15.

194 E.g. 1 Cor. 7, 11.

removed her masculine clothing and donned modest, womanly attire before Paul blessed her endeavors. Although Paul may not have condoned of Thecla's outward display of masculinity, he *does* acknowledge that Thecla has attained the internal manliness required of a true Christian ascetic and bids her to "go and teach the word of God" (*Ὕπαγε καὶ δίδασκε τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ*), recognizing Thecla as a fellow Christian preacher.[195]

Thecla's endurance in the face of hardship and her continued dedication to the Christian faith demonstrate that she is worthy of her baptism and of Paul's blessing. Furthermore, Thecla has already been acting as a teacher independently of Paul, since she was able to convert many members of Tryphaena's household to Christianity, and the Queen herself even provides financial support for Paul and his ministry.[196] Thecla has not only brought new believers into the Christian community, but her teachings have also yielded great monetary support for both Paul and herself. Notably, Tryphaena's gift includes "clothing and gold" (*Τρύφαινα ἱματισμὸν καὶ χρυσὸν ἔπεμψεν αὐτῇ*) for the poor, demonstrating that the Queen is following Thecla's example, repurposing her own visible displays of wealth and femininity to support the Christian church.[197] By surviving her tribulations and creating her own Christian community in Antioch, Thecla has become more masculine and more like Christ. By coming to Paul in a man's cloak, Thecla provides a visible, external symbol of her recently acquired masculinity, completing her transition from elite woman to ascetic disciple.

IV.III. Conclusions

In this chapter, I have demonstrated the ways in which Thecla's conversation with the governor of Antioch and her crossdressing indicate that she has fully acquired the manly virtues

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195 *APTh.* 4.16.

196 *APTh.* 4.16.

197 *APTh.* 4.16.

necessary to become an ascetic Christian teacher. During her interrogation in Antioch, Thecla maintains a calm composure and the *Acts* do not provide any indications that her body language or tone change during the conversation. By maintaining self-control and persuasively defending her faith before the public, Thecla demonstrates that she has achieved full understanding of Christian doctrine and can adequately defend it in a rhetorical setting. In addition, Thecla refuses to don her clothing at the governor's command, exerting agency over her body and the way it is perceived by the masses. In these ways, she embodies masculine virtues which both Christians and Romans idealized in the second-century CE. Thecla then displays her masculine character by girding up her loins and donning a man's cloak, providing a visible sign that she has endured her trials and become a manly Christian teacher. In addition, when Tryphaena dedicates all of her resources to Thecla, our heroine does not use them to enrich herself, but rather to support both Paul and herself in their endeavors. Therefore, Thecla continues to appropriate symbols of aristocratic femininity to support the Christian church and its ascetic teachers. Although Thecla certainly does not *require* Paul's blessing to continue her work— she was already preaching in Antioch before reuniting with him— Paul's exhortation to "go and teach the word of God" (*Ὕπαγε καὶ δίδασκε τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ*) lends credence to her mission.[198] Paul's blessing further legitimizes Thecla's authority to the reader, who may be more inclined to follow her example after learning that she received Paul's approval to continue teaching. And indeed, Thecla's mission is widely successful; after leaving Paul and making a brief stop in Iconium to speak with her mother, Thecla travels to Seleucia, where she establishes her own community and converts

198 *APTh.* 4.16.

many citizens to Christianity before her death, after which she will be remembered as a loyal servant of Christ, like the other noble martyrs who preceded and succeeded her.[199]

[199] *APTh.* 4.18.

V. CONCLUSION: Why Thecla?

Throughout this thesis, I have shown that, throughout the *Acts of Thecla*, one of the most famous virgin martyrs in Christian history utilizes the unique privileges and symbols associated with elite Roman femininity to pursue an ascetic, virginal lifestyle, protect her chastity, elicit sympathy and support from other wealthy women, and acquire the masculine virtues necessary to become a Christian teacher. In Chapter One, I examined the ways in which Thecla's voluntary sacrifice of her bracelets and mirror was a symbolic redirection of her elite resources in service of learning more about the Christian faith. I also discussed how Thecla's family attempts to forcibly remove her from her community, using her nakedness as a means to alienate her from the clothed crowd in the arena. In Chapter Two, I argued that Thecla's desire to cut her hair demonstrated her willingness to continue severing her ties to wealthy Roman life, but Paul was hesitant to allow such a sacrifice, for fear that she would succumb to temptation and disgrace his message. I also explored how Thecla's nudity encouraged the women of Antioch to identify more closely with her and mobilize to protect her chastity in the arena, so that Thecla is able to survive Alexander's brutal persecutions, demonstrating the ways in which elite women can mobilize and use their privilege to protect Christian virgins from harm. In Chapter Three, I discussed how Thecla's conversation with the governor of Antioch demonstrated that Thecla had accrued masculine understanding of Christian doctrine and a mastery of rhetoric. I also analyzed Thecla's loingirdling and her adoption of a man's outer cloak, arguing that Thecla visibly presents herself as a man to Paul in order to show him that she has achieved the ascetic masculinity he endorsed while also appropriating Tryphaena's resources to support her own mission.

As I conclude my thesis, I feel compelled to ask one final question: Why has the *Acts of Thecla* resonated with so many believers, scholars, and casual audiences over the centuries? Her story may be incredibly entertaining, but so are the tales of Polyxena, Agnes, Eugenia, and countless other women who willingly endured terrible suffering to preserve their chastity. Perhaps the text's numerous critics unintentionally prompted increased interest in Thecla's story. Thecla's valiant resistance to sex and marriage may have illustrated an alternative path to marriage and childrearing, which some wealthy women may have found appealing. The text's resemblance to Greek romance novels and its odd fascination with Thecla's nude body may have intrigued avid romance readers. In truth, we can only speculate the reasons why ancient audiences found *APTh* so fascinating. Modern readers' interest in the text also originates from myriad sources. Much of the early scholarship on *APTh* was conducted in the 1980s and 1990s, when feminist criticism was becoming more widely accepted as a legitimate method of scholarship. Thecla is a compelling figure for feminist audiences; she rejects patriarchal social norms, creates her own community of Christian women, and takes an active role in her own baptism and eternal salvation. However, Thecla simultaneously reinforces other misogynistic ideals and norms; the chaste lifestyle she promotes could be almost as restrictive as the marriage she rejects, and one would be hard-pressed to make the argument that *APTh* promotes sexual liberation for Christian women. Both readings of the text are fruitful grounds for academic analysis. In recent years, queer criticism has also been accepted as a legitimate academic approach, and thus much scholarship concerning *APTh* points out and examines the queer themes underlying the text. Thecla's rejection of heterosexual marriage and her close relationships with other women lend themselves to a queer reading of her *Acts*. For example, many LGBTQ+ women have been threatened with or experienced corrective rape, which one could compare to

the predatory sexual advances that numerous men make against Thecla.[200] Thecla's (apparent) rejection of patriarchal society and sexual norms, as well as her ascetic lifestyle, resemble the Feminist and Lesbian Separatist Movements of the 1960s and 1970s.[201] Perhaps most obviously, Thecla's transition from a feminine elite to a masculine ascetic strongly resonates with some transgender men and AFAB nonbinary and genderqueer people. One could easily map a transgender, nonbinary, or genderqueer person's social transition onto Thecla's story. Furthermore, Paul's insistence that Thecla remain patient until she proves her dedication to the Christian faith resembles cisgender society's frequent response to a transgender, nonbinary, or genderqueer person coming out of the closet. Like Thecla, these individuals must continuously prove their legitimacy to cisgender society in order to receive the respect and support they require to survive. As a queer, genderfluid person, I see much of my own experience in the *Acts of Thecla*; Thecla's rejection of heterosexual marriage and family structures, her close relationships with others who have been similarly marginalized by her society, and her fluid self-presentation and gender expression resonate deeply with my personal journey towards self-acceptance.

However, I do believe that we, as a community of scholars, can push our readings of *APTh* even further. I have attempted to draw attention to the *Acts*' focus on elite women and determine what message the text wishes to impart on a wealthy audience in particular. I would be interested in reading an analysis that draws attention to the non-elites in *APTh* and examines whether the text wishes to impart a different message upon them. Furthermore, while I and most other scholars have primarily focused on *APTh*'s message to virgins, the text also takes a clear

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200 Sarah Doan-Minh, "Corrective Rape: An Extreme Manifestation of Discrimination and the State's Complicity in Sexual Violence". *UC Law SF Journal on Gender and Justice* 30, no. 1 (2019), 167–196. https://repository.uclawsf.edu/hwlj/vol30/iss1/8.

201 Dana R. Shugar, *Separatism and Women's Community* (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press: 1995).

interest in wealthy married women, and a comprehensive analysis of the married women in the text is long overdue, especially in light of the numerous wealthy women who oversaw "house-churches", many of whom are named in Paul's letters.[202] I also believe that there is room for a post-colonial reading of the *Acts*; as a woman living in a Roman-occupied territory who is persecuted and oppressed by symbols and agents of the Roman state (i.e., marriage and the arena), Thecla's resistance to Roman social norms could be seen as a form of anti-colonial resistance to both Roman religion and Roman imperialism. Despite over four decades of extensive scholarship, it is clear that the *Acts of Thecla* still has much more to reveal to modern audiences, and there is much room in the text for unique and challenging analysis. In the spirit of the second-century Christians, we scholars must continue to debate what this text could reveal to us today and how we might continue to plumb its depths.

[202] E.g. Chloe (1 Cor. 1:11), Euodia and Syntyche (Phil. 4:2-3), Phoebe (Rom. 16:1-2), and Prisca (Rom. 16:3-5a).

VI. APPENDIX: LIST OF FIGURES

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