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THECLA PENETRATES THE POPULAR PERCEPTION

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Thecla Penetrates the Popular Perception

In Roman antiquity, anatomical sex did not designate one's gender. Gender amounted to one's behavior, that is, activity versus passivity. As Aristotle describes in *Politics*, "...the temperance of a woman and that of a man are not the same...one is the courage of command, and the other that of subordination (*Politics* 1:8). Women should by nature be passive and under the male's control, while men are active and control the women. Moreover, "Silence gives grace [read: honor] to women"—though that is not the case likewise with a man" (*Politics* 1:8). Here, silence is added to the characterization of women as passive, while men are active speakers. As such, gender was not polarized with the categories of male and female. Instead, there was a fluid scale of male and "not male". Female was subsumed under "not male." As Penner and Vander Stichele describe in their book, *Contextualizing Gender in Early Christian Discourse*, male was considered active, virtuous, and superior, while "not male" included all things passive, unvirtuous, and inferior. These differences were indelibly linked to sexuality; males were dominant penetrators and "not males" submitted themselves to penetration (Penner and Vander Stichele 61). To be penetrated equated "not male" to passivity, while to penetrate was considered manly activity. In *The Manly Eunuch*, Mathew Kuefler, quoting the historian Ammianus Marcellinus, introduces the four cardinal virtues of masculinity which ancient philosophers delineated: self-control, wisdom, justice, and courage (Kuefler 19). These virtues underlie all that is considered masculine in the antique Roman world.

To complicate gender more, several types of masculinity, of which two are particularly important for this study, existed in antique Rome: martial and Stoic. Martial masculinity was associated with domination, as seen in Roman militarism. According to Mathew Kuefler, in the early Roman Empire, the domination of the Roman army served as a representation of Roman masculinity. By serving in the army Roman, males proved their manliness as they dominated the

enemy, demonstrating courage in the face of death (Kuefler 44). Conversely, Stoic masculinity, which predates Christianity, complicated the mainstream Roman martial psyche through the Christian attempt at forming Roman martial masculinity into a concept which fit into Christian ideals (6). Stoics relied on the virtue of self-control, or dominating the self through self-mastery. Kuefler outlines the foundation of Stoicism while quoting Eva Cantarella: “Stoic teaching...exhorted individuals to control their passions, dominate their impulses, and channel their sexuality towards procreation” (335). By controlling their passions and sexual activity, Stoic males demonstrated their ability to master themselves.

In both discussions of masculinity, attaining masculinity requires a performance of gender. Erik Gunderson discusses this in his book, *Staging Masculinity*. He writes, “Good manliness and performative authority are a mutually reinforcing dyad. They require practice and iteration. Neither is given: they are performed and lived” (8). In order to be a good man, a male must perform authority, but to perform authority a male must be a good man. Gunderson argues that “good” means on top of society (7). Essentially, manliness depends on the ability to perform and performance depends on manliness. Here, the focus will be on oration as a performance of masculinity, specifically, Stoic masculinity.

Later in the book, Gunderson outlines the process of successful oratory—manly oratory. In antiquity, oration was not only an ability, but a virtue (87). If a man was to be a manly, he must be able to master himself in the form of public speaking with the goal of convincing the audience. Gunderson describes the method through which the orator should convince his audience. The process begins with a feeling in the soul of the orator. The emotion is then transmitted to the voice and body, which is manifested in the speech of the orator. The physical performance (i.e. gesture and postures) then grasps onto the senses of the listener, producing the same feeling which

originated in the orator's soul. This feeling is then transmitted into the listener's soul, thus uniting the orator and listener into the same experience, essentially convincing the listener of the orator's perspective (91). All of this requires mastery of the orator's emotions in order to transmit them to the audience, pointing directly to Stoic masculinity.

In many early Christian writings, gender is a salient component of characterization. One such text is the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. With the story's setting in patriarchal Rome, the author uses oratory, among other traits, as a means to construct masculinity. However, before examining gender, one must first grasp the events of the story in order to uncover the gender constructions. The main action of the story begins with Paul preaching the word of God regarding celibacy in the house of Onesiphorus. Thecla, a virgin engaged to marry a man named Thamyris, sits incessantly at her window, enthralled by Paul's words. Thecla's mother, Theocleia, is disturbed by her daughter's attention to Paul's message and sends for Thamyris so that he may rid her mind of such thoughts. Thamyris arrives and both he and Theocleia attempt to shame Thecla into diverting her attention, but their efforts fail, ending Thamyris and Thecla's impending marriage. Out of rage, Thamyris brings the matter before the governor, Castelius, demanding that Paul confess his actions. Castelius asks Paul about his identity and teachings, and ultimately sends Paul to prison until he can hear more of Paul's side. Thecla visits Paul in prison, but when they are discovered Paul is questioned once more. Castelius sends Paul out of the city, but, upon her mother's request, sentences Thecla to death by burning. Thecla survives the punishment because of God's compassion and reunites with Paul. The two leave for Antioch, but encounter Alexander, who tries to rape Thecla. Thecla disrobes him, causing him public shame. Alexander then takes her before the governor, who punishes her with multiple rounds of fighting beasts in the stadium, but God protects Thecla. During the stadium fights, a certain queen, Tryphaena, mourns Thecla as if her dying child. Thecla, foreseeing her death, baptizes herself in a tank of deadly seals, and God protects her. One last fight ensues, which causes

Tryphaena to faint, ultimately stopping the games. Thecla is released, reunites with Paul, and then sends herself out to preach the word of God first to her mother and then to others. The story ends with Thecla's peaceful death ("The Acts of Paul").

With the plot outlined, let us now turn to an analysis of gender performances in the story. There are three prominent male figures: Thamyris, Paul, and Castelius. Strangely, none of them are said to have children. In ancient Rome, procreation was a key indicator of manliness because it demonstrated the ability to dominate a household (Penner and Vander Stichele 72). If a male did not have children, dominating his slaves would suffice as proof of masculinity; however, none of the men are said to have slaves. Without children or slaves, males had to find other means to perform masculinity. As previously mentioned, oratory was a prime method for manly performance, and this becomes the prime method for manliness in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. Although there are no fathers or slave owners mentioned directly, mothers are distinctly highlighted in the story. The author presents Theocleia as Thecla's biological mother. Later, we will see how the author crafts a surrogate mother for Thecla while Theocleia is absent. For now, we will examine oratorical skills as seen in Paul, Thamyris, Castelius, and Thecla.

Paul is portrayed as a master orator: he is able to persuade Thecla into celibacy without even using his physical appearance. The evidence of Thecla's persuasion is apparent in Theocleia's description of Thecla: "And my daughter, too, like a spider at the window, bound by his words...for she hangeth upon the things that he speaketh, and the maiden is captured" ("The Acts of Paul" 9). According to her mother, Thecla is trapped inside of every syllable Paul's produces—it's difficult to imagine any greater evidence of persuasion. Not only does Paul convince Thecla of his ideals of celibacy, he does so using solely his voice and words: "for [Thecla] had not yet seen the appearance of Paul, but only heard his speech" (7). The author presents Paul as having masculine oratory

proWess: he can persuade people without even utilizing gestures, a key element of self-mastered oratory (Gunderson 91).

This is in stark contrast to Thamyris' attempt at proving his manliness via public speaking. Thamyris tries to get rid of Paul by declaring to Castelius Paul's corruption of his fiancée and the wives of his cohorts. The narrator describes Castelius' response: "But the governor kept his mind steadfast" ("The Acts of Paul" 16). This simple narration demonstrates the failure of Thamyris to persuade Castelius. Thamyris did not adequately present himself in a manner which would stir the passions in the governor's soul into persuasion. Thamyris fails the litmus test for a reputation as manly—public speaking—therefore, characterizing him as effeminate. In comparing Paul and Thamyris' speeches, we see that Paul wins the battle for manliness with Thamyris walking away defeated, wifeless, and feminine.

The next contender for manliness is by far the most highlighted in the story: Thecla. She will be the focus of the rest of this argument. The author crafts Thecla's gender in deeply intricate ways using the traits of oration and autonomy in a radical transformation from a passive female to an active male. Thecla's gender is constructed as a performance of oration and autonomy. Throughout the beginning of the text, Thecla is described using feminine language. According to Ross Shepard Kraemer, Thecla's fixation on Paul's words demonstrates her passivity. Thecla simply sits at her window, glued to Paul's speech of celibacy. She does not run out of the house to meet Paul, nor does she respond to her mother and fiancé when they inquire as to "what passion is it that holdeth thee in amaze?" ("The Acts of Paul" 10). Although some may interpret Thecla's lack of response as a silent rebellion which reverses Thamyris' control over her, Kraemer interprets this as the author highlighting Thecla's feminine passivity, especially since the mother describes Thecla as "bound by [Paul's] words...held by a new desire and a fearful passion" (9). The words "bound," "desire," and

“passion” are all key markers of femininity in antiquity (Kraemer 139). Another clear sign of Thecla’s femininity involves the scene in which she visits Paul in prison. Thecla uses bracelets and a silver mirror to bribe the jailor into allowing her into the prison. These objects are “stereotypically female” for antique women (140). Once in Paul’s presence, Thecla “went in to Paul and sat by his feet and heard the wonderful works of God” (“The Acts of Paul” 18). Thecla is entirely passive as she looks to Paul to teach her more of his liberating counter-cultural virtues. According to Kraemer, Thecla does not begin the transition into an assertive masculine figure until she proclaims to Paul that she will cut her hair in order to appear more masculine and requests that he baptize her so that temptation will not seize her (25). Thecla’s actualization into a masculine figure comes at the end of the story when she baptizes herself, proclaims her salvation in an oration to the governor, dresses in male attire, and sends herself out to proclaim the oracles of God. All of these are distinctly active performances which shift Thecla’s gender from a passive female to an autonomous, self-mastered male.

As we saw with Thamyris and Paul, oration is a virtue of self-mastered masculinity. In her speech to the governor, Thecla explains that she was saved from the beasts because of her belief in Christ as the son of God. While this proclamation was risky in itself (compare to Thamyris’ attempt as Paul’s demise through labeling him as a Christian), the responses of both the governor and the crowd solidify Thecla’s masculine oratory prowess: “I release unto you Thecla the godly, the servant of God. And all the women cried out with a loud voice and as with one mouth gave praise to God” (“The Acts of Paul” 38). Unlike Thamyris’ failure to persuade Castelius at the beginning of the story, Thecla was able to use her words and body to reach into the soul of Castelius in order to convince him that Thecla’s survival came through God. Therefore, oratory proves to be a tool to perform masculinity for Thecla, while for Thamyris it displays femininity.

The second component of Thecla's masculinity is autonomy. For Thecla, autonomy meant baptizing herself without the need for Paul's physical presence or approval, in direct contrast to her previous request for Paul to baptize her. Not only does Thecla baptize herself, but she does so in a tank of deadly seals, displaying that she can master her fear of pain for the sake of salvation before imminent death, given that she was preparing to battle the beasts. According to Stoic masculinity, Thecla's ability to master her fear demonstrates a high level of masculinity—which would be esteemed by Christians of that day. After the baptismal scene, Thecla “sewed her mantle into a cloak after the fashion of a man” (40). Thecla transforms her physical appearance into that of a man. Thecla's final display of autonomy occurs here: “Thecla arose and said to Paul: I go to Iconium” (41). She is both active and autonomous in this scene. As mentioned previously, activity was a prime male virtue. Thecla actively raises her body and declares her plans to Paul. Note the two contrasts when comparing the earlier and later versions of Thecla: she rises in his presence versus kneeling at his feet in prison and directly states her plan versus making requests of Paul to baptize her. In sum, Thecla transforms from a passive female to an active masculine figure through the self-mastered traits of oration and autonomy.

To push Thecla's masculinity further, the author constructs her as the ideal male of the story. In her transformation, she masters the intense passion of fear, eloquently and persuasively proclaims her salvation to the person in control of her death, changes her physical appearance to that of a male, and claims her autonomy from Paul. The prominent men in the story—Thamyris, Paul, and Castelius—are either unmanned by Thecla or are totally absent during the events in which they could have proven their masculinity in competition with Thecla. Thamyris and Castelius are unmanned by Thecla but in different ways. Thecla diminishes Thamyris' manliness by rejecting his hand in marriage, thus guarding herself from impending penetration as his fiancé. She robs him of his opportunity to dominate her by removing his marital right to sexual activity; therefore,

unmanning him. In regard to Castelius, Thecla performs Stoic masculinity by persuading him of her salvation. According to Gunderson's model, in order to persuade Castelius, Thecla had to use her words and gestures to stir the passions inside of Castelius' soul. By verbally demonstrating his persuaded state, "I release unto you Thecla the godly, the servant of God," (38) Castelius demonstrates the status of his soul; he has allowed Thecla's oratical skills to loosen his control over his passions, thus rendering him effeminate.

Paul is an entirely different character. Unlike Thamyris, who was not present during Thecla's trials because of her rejection, Paul was not even present both during and leading up to the most intensely masculine moments of the story: the culmination of Thecla's transformation. When Thecla fought against the beasts, Paul could have shown his Stoic mastery of fear by showing up to the stadium in support of Thecla. Paul was completely absent at, arguably, the most vital portion of the story: Thecla's baptism. Her baptism signified her official conversion to Christianity. Not only is she officially a Christian, but she mastered her fear of pain in order to convert— an action every Stoic Christian would venerate—making the event more important for Paul to witness. Earlier, Paul refused to baptize Thecla because she was not nearing death. Baptism was normally performed as the person neared death because of the belief that the person would be damned if he or she sinned post-baptism ("2 Clement." Clement of Rome. [Lightfoot Translation] 6.9). Paul does not baptize Thecla, but instead, Thecla baptizes herself, a ritual typically performed by a male. When Thecla is in the face of imminent, painful death, Paul does not come riding in to secure her salvation. Paul's absence lends masculinity to Thecla because he is not there to defend her, which would have displayed a mastery of fear. Nowhere in the story does Paul demonstrate that he is able to master himself in the face of fear. While Paul does prove himself as a successful orator, Thecla also does this post-baptism. Unlike Paul, Thecla ultimately demonstrates the most masculinity because she is both a successful orator, *and* she masters her fear. Paul's masculinity pales in comparison. Thecla is

the ultimate masculine character in the story because she is able to unman other males, speak publicly and persuasively, and master her fear.

In terms of Thecla's transformation, Paul appears at the beginning of the story and introduces the idea of breaking away from social norms by means of celibacy to Thecla. However, as previously discussed, Paul is not present during the transformation. He only reappears after Thecla has completed the most dangerous parts of her transformation: when she faces the deadly seals and publicly announces her conversion to Christianity. Recall the danger the narrator described when Thamyris' cohorts advise him to destroy Paul by announcing his association with Christianity. By announcing her own conversion to Christianity, Thecla places herself in danger of public "destruction" ("The Acts of Paul" 14). What the narrator means by the term "destruction" is not outlined in the narrative; however, it is implied that the public announcement of conversion to Christianity is dangerous—demonstrating Thecla's masculinity, and the lack of Paul's defense of her, even more so. After the public part of her transformation, Thecla then asserts her autonomous masculinity by telling Paul that she is departing, rather than making a request of him. Paul initiates the reformation of Thecla's thoughts which lead to her transformed gender and appears after she transforms; he is not present for the transformation. However, a little-recognized character appears in Paul's absence.

The author introduces Tryphaena as "a certain rich queen...whose daughter had died, and took [Thecla] into her keeping, and had her for consolation" (27). At the onset of her characterization, the author labels Tryphaena as passionate, and therefore effeminate. She has lost her daughter and is so full of grief that she requires support from a complete stranger. A mere paragraph after her introduction, Tryphaena is said to "bewail" Thecla because the next day Thecla was facing impending death from beasts in the stadium after dishonoring a man in defense of her

Christian chastity (29). Not only is Thecla Tryphaena's grief support, but Tryphaena calls Thecla her second child (29). The author crafts Tryphaena as not only a mother in the past, but a new mother in the present who is about to lose her new child. Tryphaena is continually portrayed as an emotional woman, constantly crying over the death of her daughter and the imminent death of her surrogate daughter for the sake of Christian chastity. Tryphaena is weeping the tears of a mother who is losing that which she holds most dear: her children.

In another early Christian text, *4 Maccabees*, one finds a foil of Tryphaena—the Maccabean mother. This mother watches all seven of her sons become martyrs as they defend their religion. The author gruesomely describes her witness of their deaths: “When you saw the flesh of children burned upon the flesh of other children, severed hands upon hands, scalped heads upon heads, and corpses fallen on other corpses and when you saw the place filled with many spectators of the torturings, you did not shed tears” (“4 Maccabees” 15.20). The mother controls her emotions while watching the most horrific event possible for a mother. Because she controls her emotions by relying on reason, the author praises her as manly: “But devout reason, giving her a man’s courage in the very midst of her emotions, strengthened her to disregard her temporal love for her children” (“4 Maccabees” 15. 23). The Maccabean mother is portrayed as ideally masculine because she is able to master her emotions by relying on religion, here labeled as reason, as she takes in the heinous scene of her children’s deaths. These mothers respond in opposite ways to the death of their children, and their genders are constructed as a direct result of their responses. The Maccabean mother is a self-mastered man, while Tryphaena is an emotion-controlled woman.

Not coincidentally, Tryphaena is both characterized as emotional and is the subtle driving force behind Thecla’s pursuit of manliness. The author demonstrates this after Thecla baptizes herself, producing fire around her which then burns through the ropes attaching her to enraged

bulls, freeing her from death by the bulls. This was another attempt from the governor and Alexander to kill her. Alexander is the man whom Thecla dishonored by disrobing him after he attempted to rape her. As Tryphaena witnesses her second daughter's coming death, she faints at the entrance to the stadium, causing her maids to think she is dead. The governor then stops the game and Alexander begs him to free Thecla for fear that Caesar will kill everyone involved in the death of Tryphaena, Caesar's "kinswoman" ("The Acts of Paul 36). Upon hearing Alexander's request, the governor inquires with Thecla to determine who she is and what she possesses that has saved her from death. The governor's questions allow Thecla the chance to proclaim her salvation to the governor and the crowd around her. As noted previously, this proclamation serves as a major element in Thecla's gender transformation. However, without Tryphaena's emotionally-charged fainting, there would have been no reason to stop the games and give Thecla the chance to convince the governor of her salvation, thus publicly displaying her masculinity.

Tryphaena, the opposite of the self-mastered Maccabean mother, indirectly provides Thecla with the chance to perform her masculinity through persuasive oratory. Paul, who provoked Thecla into thinking about social rebellion in the beginning, does not create this opportunity for Thecla. He is nowhere to be found. Ultimately, it is the crying mother whose passion is the catalyst for the transformation of Thecla into a self-mastered man. In comparison to the Maccabean mother, Tryphaena could be credited with keeping Thecla alive, while the Maccabean mother is childless in the end.

After this crucial step in her journey to manliness, Thecla reunites with Paul, but then quickly claims her autonomy and leaves to return home, where she finds Thamyris dead and her mother alive. She speaks to her mother about her salvation and prompts her mother to believe in salvation through God. The author provides no response from the mother, leaving the reader with

ambiguity as to whether Thecla has convinced her mother, who initially described Thecla in remarkably feminine language, that she is now a self-mastered, Christian, celibate, man.

The author overtly characterizes Thecla's gender as dynamic, and skillfully places the other prominent characters in locations specified location in relation to Thecla transformation. The character with the most authoritative status in the story, Castelius, is present during her official transformation and is the character who officially acknowledges Thecla's masculinity. The other male characters, Thamyris and Paul, are absent from her transformation; however, Paul acknowledges Thecla's newfound masculinity by encouraging her autonomy: "Go, and teach the word of God" (41).¹ Paul could have insisted that he accompany her, thus denying her autonomy and masculinity. The most passionate female character, Tryphaena, is the catalyst of Thecla's public transformation and also acknowledges her masculinity.² She, similar to Castelius, proclaims that salvation through God is possible because she has witnessed God's protection in Thecla: "Now do I believe that the dead are raised up: now do I believe that my child [who died] liveth" (39). Unlike all of the other prominent characters, Theocleia, Thecla's mother does not confirm Thecla's manliness. In fact, the author provides no reaction whatsoever from Theocleia after Thecla tells her of God's salvation. Significantly, Theocleia is the only character who does not acknowledge Thecla's manliness. From the beginning of the narrative, Theocleia describes Thecla as profoundly feminine; she is the originator of Thecla's feminine characterization, and she does not acknowledge Thecla's changed gender. Because gendered is determined by public performance, and therefore must be acknowledged, it is necessary for Theocleia to confirm Thecla's official transformation; however,

¹ Thamyris could not acknowledge Thecla's masculinity since, as we discover at the end of the story, he is dead.

² Since Thecla transforms into a man.

Theocleia halts Thecla's actualization into a male-figure. Although the story ends with Thecla teaching others about God's word, Theocleia's confirmation still remains ambiguous.

The author subtly includes this by providing no reaction whatsoever from the mother. Therefore, while the author overtly constructs the transformation of a starkly feminine character into an ideal man, he or she covertly undermines Thecla's transformation with the absence of confirmation from the originator of Thecla's femininity. Given this text's most likely production in 1st century Rome, this demonstrates the author's caution towards breaking early antique Roman gender norms by creating a transformative female figure who breaks all of the gender boundaries, but fails in attaining acknowledgement from all of the characters in the story, especially the one who characterizes her as feminine to begin with ("The Acts of Paul").

In the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, we see two very important elements: 1) how groundbreaking the story is in creating a gender-dynamic female character and 2) how dangerous and complex it is to break gender norms in antiquity. The fact that the author is said to be an orthodox Christian speaks to the first element ("The Acts of Paul"). Since, according to Mathew Kuefler, Christians did not begin attempting to form Roman martial masculinity into the Christianity identity found in Stoic masculinity until approximately the 3rd and 4th century (7), in creating an obviously Stoic Christian female-turned-male character, the author crafts a literary figure which readers could view as a gender revolutionist or a dangerous demonstration of the possible future of Christian females. With the second element, the author's construction of Theocleia as the missing final piece of Thecla's masculinity highlights the incredible complexity of gender norms and the 1st century audience which the author writes to. While Thecla may be seen as a female who is able to claim her status as male with all of the other characters, her mother disrupts this manly triumph by invisibly ignoring Thecla's masculine prowess. While some may say the coming analysis reads too far into authorial

intent, the author may have felt the pressure of the steadfast 1st century gender norms as he or she painted the picture of a female ideal man. In sum, the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* speaks to the bravery which the author exuded in penning this revolutionary narrative and the courage it takes to break through oppressive barriers, such as female inferiority, which society constructs as natural.

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