

TRANSVESTITE VIRGIN WITH A CAUSE

THE ACTA PAULI ET THECLA AND LATE ANTIQUE

PROTO-“FEMINISM”

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*Piece by piece, I fed my wardrobe
to the night wind, and flutteringly,
like a loved one's ashes, the grey scraps
were ferried off.*

Sylvia Plath, *The bell jar* (1972)

I

In this essay I wish to engage in some cross-dressing - of an academic kind. A classicist arguably has a few things to note in connection with certain Apocryphal “novellas” like the *Acta Pauli et Theclae* preserved in the *Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha*. There is nothing presumptuous in this, for the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* are one of the earliest specimens of the hagiographical novel, a genre that imitated and vied with the ancient novel, and subsequently surpassed it as a form of reading entertainment (Hägg 1983. esp. 160-162; *CHCL*, pp. 123-139; Bowie and Harrison 1993. 159-178).

These *Acts* seem to have been the first section of a three part work - the so-called *Acts of Paul* (*Praxeis Paulou*) - which also comprised, in probable order of appearance, the Apostle's pastoral correspondence with the Corinthians (the purported “Third Epistle”) and the narration of his martyrdom.

Theologically, the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, my subject, are difficult to “pigeonhole”. They are neither orthodox (in the doctrinal sense) not

heterodox; nor, *a fortiori*, are they overtly Gnostic or, with the exception of a single detail (which will be cited) Encratite in their orientation. Indeed it would be misleading and anachronistic to term the text heretical or heterodox precisely because it belongs to the inchoate Church's phase of doctrinal "fuzziness" and uncertainty. If anything, the text stresses continence (*enkrateia*) in what was soon to be its conventional ascetic mode, and in several passages (cc. 11, 12, 16) the ideal of chastity is more to do with the pre-baptismal rigours which early Christians observed in the late second century.

For reasons which will rapidly become obvious, Tertullian blacklisted the work in his *de baptismo* c. 17 (composed *ca.* 200); this explicit reference in fact both serves as a *terminus ante quem* and confirms the work's Asia Minor origins. Yet this Church Father also implies that the work was composed in order to fortify the faith of the community. Tertullian was not the only early church figure to cite the text. Jerome it was who first dismissed the so-called *periodi Pauli et Theclae* specifically as apocryphal (*de vir. ill.* 7); his negative position was soon followed by the Church. Even so, no-one (save Tertullian) really doubted Thecla's existence and the fact that she was a holy woman.

Thecla probably was a historical person, as Henri Leclercq has shown (MacDonald 1983, 107n.21). Moreover, she proved through her trials and transvestism to be more influential in the early church than the Virgin Mary. Athanasius (in the mid-fourth century) and pseudo-Chrysostom (in the fifth) both composed a life of Thecla. Even Jerome (in the fourth century) accepted her as a saint although, as has already been said, he regarded the tale of her travels as apocryphal. At roughly the same period, Methodius' *Symposium*, a work in praise of virginity, featured her as an exemplar. Her cult, based in Seleucia, was still in full flower by the late fourth century, when the nun Egeria took communion in the church in the precinct after reading the *Acta* (Wilkinson 1971. 29, 121-122, 288-292; also see Dagron 1978. 33 n.l. on literary evidence of the cult). The cult continued to appeal to women, especially virgins and apotactics, until well into the sixth century (on the archaeology of the cult's site, see Dagron 1978. 59-73; MacDonald 1983. 108 n. 28). Despite occasional disparaging references in certain Church Fathers to the uncanonical *Acta*, Thecla has remained a paragon of female chastity and asceticism in the Orthodox Church, which commemorates her on September 24th. The apocryphal version of her legend was progressively shorn of its more obvious (feminist) elements from the fifth century on; in the tenth century the *Great Menologion* incorporated a radically expurgated version of her *vita* (Dagron 1978. 34). Her feast and cult were officially suppressed by the Roman Catholic Church in 1969, though her cult continues in countries like Spain.

Before launching into the more literary aspects of the *Acta Pauli et Theclae*, I should like to hazard a few thoughts by way of cursory (and necessarily crude) anthropological analysis of the phenomenon of the transvestite saint: i) Female chastity, and especially virginity, removes the assumption that a woman is operatively female and therefore de-sexualises her. Furthermore, it assigns her to a “liminal”, or intermediate, state between masculine and feminine, with a pronounced bias towards the masculine (Galatarriotou 1984/85. 82-83) Thus de-sexualised, a virgin can in certain societies adopt the attire and manners of men and preserve this interstitial identity with impunity. M.E. Durham (cited *ibid.* 83-84n. 104) reported in 1928 that Albanian girls who renounced marriage in favour of perpetual virginity dressed as men, consorted with them as equals and even carried guns. ii) It is as well to remember what Lévi-Strauss, Leach and Mary Douglas have taught us about the “holy”: that whatever simultaneously partakes of two contradictory categories - the third, “betwixt-and-between” category-is abnormal because non-natural and rationally unintelligible, and in many societies is identified with the “holy”. This principle may explain why a transvestite androgyne like Thecla promised allure to early Christians, mainstream and non-mainstream alike: her membership of a third, anomalous category brought her very near to the holy angelic state - a sexless and bodiless condition which however remained closely aligned to the male sex, as may be inferred from the names and military interests of angels.

As for the composition of the *Acta* themselves, this will remain a mystery, like much else in ancient literary history. Tertullian identified the author as a priest from Asia Minor who was tried and defrocked for penning this *pia fraus*. The work may be classified as a short novel or perhaps more accurately as a *feuilleton à épisodes*, possibly emanating from the literary and religious fringe. Indeed, as will be noted, the *Acta* may well betray a number of conventional literary elements; conceivably, too, they incorporate much sub-literary and even popular (oral) material, notably local legends from Iconium or, as seems likelier, Seleucia, where Thecla’s cult was located. A few words, then, on the literary affinities of the “Apostolic” novels and the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* in particular:

E. von Dobschütz, following in the wake of the second edition of Rohde’s *Der Griechische Roman und seine Vorläufer*, was the first to propose, in 1902, that the *Apocryphal Acts* as a genre were close adaptations of the Greek novel (Dobschütz 1902. 87-106). E.L. Bowie well summarises the ancient novel’s story-line: “Boy and girl of aristocratic birth fall in love, are separated before or shortly after marriage and subjected to melodramatic adventures which threaten their life and chastity and carry them around much of the eastern Mediterranean. Eventually love and fortune prove stronger than

storms, pirates and tyrants and the couple is reunited in marital bliss” (*CHCL*, p. 124). Dobschütz’s thesis has since been modified and even challenged. In a survey article published in 1981, Kaestli concluded that far from being wholesale adaptations of the ancient novel, the *Apocryphal Acts* and more particularly those featuring thinly disguised *erotica* were nonetheless indebted to the pagan genre, especially during its formative, pre-sophistic phase. (Typical products of this phase are the Ninus romance [i c. B.C.?], Chariton’s *Chaereas and Callirhoe* [i c. B.C./mid-ii c. A.D.] and Xenophon’s *Ephesiaka* [mid/late ii c. A.D.].) The *Acts*’ debt to the novel can, in Kaestli’s view, be surmised from consideration of the common ground between the two genres: (i) the simplicity of the plot, its melodramatic character and especially the predilection for high-ranking personalities (this last being a sign that both types of fiction self-consciously catered for a popular audience); and (ii) the focus on a heroine who maintains her chastity and in general evinces high-mindedness and fidelity. Apart from the novel, Christian miracle-tales are a prime ingredient of the *Apocryphal Acts*. This rather eclectic recipe—a novelistic substrate on which are superimposed various *thaumata* - serves to show the *sui generis* and composite nature of the *Acts*. Our narrative can be neatly divided into three episodes, as follows:

II

Episode I: Fair, recalcitrant virgin

The story begins in Iconium (in south-central Asia Minor), a city which St. Paul actually visited (*Acts* 13.51): it is clear from the start that the story, exactly like the typical novel, has historical and biographical pretensions. Thecla, a gorgeous and well-born maiden, is engaged to the leading local noble, Thamyris. (Her beauty, along with her aggressively guarded virginity, are the two remarkable features which define her from the start. Of course her virginity carried a host of connotations unfamiliar to pagans: see Brown 1988. esp. 8-9, 29-30.) But when Paul visits her town and she *hears* (but does not actually see) him preach a lengthy sermon on sexual renunciation and the resurrection, she is at once drawn to him:

“Blessed are the chaste (*enkrateis*), for God will speak to them... Blessed are those who have wives as though they have them not, for they will inherit God” (c.5).

The meaning of Paul's sermon is plain: for Christians, the aim of *enkrateia* was the elimination of desire, for pagans it was simply the subservience of the body to rational goals, and there never was such a thing as life-long chastity, whether among males or females (Brown 1988. 31-32). The Encratites, in particular, opposed *any* form of sex on the grounds that it severed men and women from the Spirit of God and linked them to animals; and in a radical move, they extended to women as well the responsibility of containing their sexual urges (Tissot, in Bovon 1981. esp. 118 n. 82). The continence preached in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* is generally not of the Encratite type (see, e.g., cc. 11, 12, 16). But Paul's culminating *makarismoi* of the body of virgins (c. 5) arguably refer to the non-physical marriage which Tatian preached (*ibid*).

Transfixed in the web of his words, Thecla neither eats nor drinks for three days. Her lack of appetite, intense staring, "shamelessness", speechlessness and immobility are quite the correct symptoms, at least from a literary perspective, of instantaneous passion. Thamyris decries what he recognises as a *pathos ekplekton* ("insane passion") and complains that Paul has displaced him as the centre of his fiancée's attention: she so much loves the newcomer that I am now denied her hand in marriage (c. 13). Thamyris' jealousy is a novelistic motif (see also Morard, in Bovon 1981. 99). The *xenos* is soon arrested on charges of being *magos* (a colloquial term for "quack, wizard"), tried and gaoled. *Magos* as used here is almost an honorific title, which still preserved some of its sacerdotal associations; it connoted potentially deadly powers and in relation to Paul implied that the newcomer was regarded with great fear. This was an accusation frequently levelled at the Apostles in the *Apocryphal Acts*, especially in the earlier ones, and is a veritable *topos* in the canonical *Acts of Martyrs* (see Poupon, in Bovon 1981, 71f.). It correlates with the fact that from the 1st c. A.D. onwards official prosecution of magicians increased. There is at least one good reason why Paul should have been suspected of being a wizard. It should be remarked that in consequence of his sermon Thecla and other women at once renounced marriage: Thecla sat in a near-hypnotic state by the window, with nothing on her mind but Paul and his message. In actual life such a "wayward" reaction would easily have been interpreted as the result of an aphrodisiac spell (a *katadesmos*). The denunciation, moreover, of the Apostle as a *xenos* is not to be put down to the xenophobia of a pagan community but instead to the common supposition that magic was a foreign import - an exotic, unsettling evil force brought in perforce from the "outside" (see also Poupon above).

Thecla bribes her way into Paul's cell by offering the guard a silver mirror (a typical female accessory, c. 18). The Apostle preaches to her while - in a rare, exquisite gesture - she kisses his chains (c. 18). A

prisoner of love, the heroine is discovered by her family and fiancé in the Apostle's cell, bound not in chains but (a moving pun, this) in affection: c. 19 *heuron auten tropon tina syndedemenen te storge*. (Poupon reads this line as a subtle allusion to the near-magical effect which Paul exerted on her; cf. the technical term *katadesmos* and the magical *topos* of "tying down" the victim.) What is striking here is the fact that Thecla's passion, though described initially by her mother and fiancé in terms more appropriate to obsessional physical passion, by now emerges more clearly, but not exclusively, as a spiritual infatuation. Equally impressive is the fact that the girl assumes the initiative of going to Paul herself: upper-class women in Greek (and presumably Near Eastern) society rarely ventured outdoors, far less approached a man in whom they were interested.

Paul is dragged out of his cell. The girl rolls in the spot where he had sat. At length she and Paul are tried jointly. Litigation is in fact an ingredient of the ancient novel: cf., for instance, the legal battle over the custody of Callirhoe in Chariton. (The trial-motif, however, also had a firm basis in the New Testament and the subsequent prosecution of early Christians.) The *hegemon* asks Thecla, "Why do you not marry Thamyris according to the custom of the city?" (c. 20). When the girl simply stares in silence, her mother Theocleia, losing her patience, shouts: "Utterly burn the lawless one (*anomos*), burn utterly the unwed maiden (*anympfos*) in the middle of the arena ... so that all women might be frightened" (c. 20). In the name of marriage and maternity Theocleia alienates her own maternal instincts: her daughter, she declared, is *a-nomos* (lit., "against custom, norms or law", hence "abnormal") because she is *a-nymphos*; her chastity, one might say, is anti-social it leads the girl to reject the two major agents of socialisation for a woman, marriage and mothering. The appalling civic impact of Thecla's conduct can also be inferred from Thamyris' and the crowd's reaction to Paul: see c. 15. Long-term renunciation was not only unprecedented but in practical terms threatening to the fabric of pagan society, which, it was feared, would "crumble like a sand castle" if *enkrateia* became the norm (Brown 1988, 32, 38, 84, 89-90; cf. 54-57, *et passim*). The crowd, which includes young boys and virgins (c. 27), are Thecla's collective adversaries, opposing the compulsory ideal of marriage to her self-imposed anomic celibacy.

Paul is finally scourged and expelled from Iconium (c. 20). As might be expected of a "sacred soap opera", the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* are chary of admitting explicit erotic details. But here and in another four passages the maiden's nudity or semi-nudity is forthrightly mentioned. Compare cc. 22, 23 (Paul removes his upper garment); cc. 33, 34, 38. The *Life* of the Syrian saint Febronia (sources and bibliography in Ashbrook Harvey 1983, 296f.) shows a similar preoccupation with clothing and nudity. Febronia's clothing is torn to

tatters before she is stripped, a humiliation which she defiantly accepts since it will better allow her to endure torture, like an Olympic athlete who strips in order to compete better (23 A-B, 24B). The contrast between outward exposure and inner integrity which Thecla and Febronia uphold also occurs in Achilles Tatius (VI. 22.5 f.): “I am a defenceless woman, stripped naked and tortured, but I shall not surrender my soul”.

Thecla is now stripped naked and taken away to be burnt (c. 22). Her eyes search for Paul “like a lamb in the desert looking about for its shepherd” (c. 21); she sees Christ in the guise of Paul among the crowd and takes courage. Is it the Christian message that inflames her? Or is she “in love” with Paul or Christ? The author is again deliberately coy on these questions; but clearly he is playing with amatory associations familiar from the novel. This beautiful convert, like the typical heroine of the novel, is unswervingly faithful to her absent “beloved” Paul (cf. Heliodorus *Aethiopika* 7. 10-28, 8. 1-15, also cited by Morard, in Bovon 1981.98) Like Charikleia in the *Aethiopika* Thecla proves her love through her suffering. The pyre is prepared by *paides kai parthenoi* and lighted - but torrential rain and hail sent by God quench it and presumably cover the nude maiden. The motif of steadfast suffering and the associated folk motif of miraculous escape from mortal danger occur in the novels: in Xenophon’s *Ephesiaka* Habrocomes is sentenced to both crucifixion and burning but is wondrously saved on each occasion. (In the *Aethiopika* Charicleia is likewise condemned to be burnt alive-but endures to the end[8.6-9].) It is possible that in the novels two pagan ingredients have coalesced, and the tale of Thecla simply drew on these: first, the Stoic and generally philosophical motif of willing, almost triumphant acceptance of death (see Morard, in Bovon 1981.104f.); second, the well-worn motif of rescue *in extremis*, which may originally have been a folk-tale motif (e.g., Croesus at the pyre in Herodotus 1).

Paul, meanwhile, is hiding with others in a tomb outside Iconium and mourns Thecla as dead (c. 23). He is afraid to venture to the city. (From the moment of his public humiliation and expulsion the saint progressively becomes a passive and impuissant figure. By contrast, as Dagron also notes, the glory of martyrdom and the simultaneous mastery over the elements are reserved for the heroine.) Thecla meets Paul at his rural hide-out (could this detail be modelled on the reunion of the *Liebespaar* as featured later in the *Aethiopika*?); after a celebratory meal she offers to “shave her hair all round and follow him” (c. 25). He demurs on the grounds that “the moment is inopportune and you are beautiful (*eumorphos*) and you might fall into a temptation before which you may prove cowardly (*deilandreses*)”. When she asks him specifically to baptise her, again he demurs leaving this for the vague future. He enjoins her to be

patient (c. 25): “Thecla, be longsuffering and you will receive the water”.

Paul’s words may imply a degree of anxiety over Thecla’s overt sexuality. It is notable that he does not however actually object to her joining him (because she joins him), or to her cutting off her hair, but rather to her premature, as he sees it, baptism. (The fifth-century *vita* of Thecla states even more clearly that the saint cut most of her hair at this point; cf. *vita*, c. 14 [Dagron].) His hesitancy is *prima facie* “doctrinal”. In certain groups in the early Christian era deferment of baptism was standard; the faithful were not baptised until they could furnish signs of grace (*charismata*), and in some cases they received the sacrament only at the hour of death (Anson 1974; Lane Fox 1986. 337-339). Among Syrian sects celibacy, male and female, was the precondition of baptism (Ashbrook Harvey 1983. 295). The *Acta* seem to reflect the typical expectation that a man or woman should remain chaste before baptism (as a catechumen): “*makarioi hoi to baptisma teresantes* (c.6)”.

Thecla offers to cut her hair - and the narrative’s logic requires her to do so - because she can only travel with Paul disguised as a man; in the later *vita*, c. 14 (Dagron) this is stated outright. But her newly acquired mobility presupposes something more than physical disguise: she must also renounce her bonds to family and society and, above all, her sexuality if she is to travel with the Apostle. She achieves this “de-familiarisation” at a single symbolic stroke by cropping her hair (Brown 1988. esp. 89).

This gesture may appropriately be interpreted as another sign of the maiden’s step-by-step surrender of the outward trappings of her obvious and highly vulnerable femininity. She gave away her jewels to her house guard and her goaler; now she cuts her hair. (From the action immediately ensuing it may be securely gathered that she has also donned male clothing.) Edmund Leach has viewed head hair as a ritual symbol with genital and anal connotations: precisely because of these associations, it plays a vital part in initiation rituals (Leach 1958. esp. 154). Short hair in a nubile woman may on this hypothesis even be symbolically equated with restricted sexuality; and Thecla’s act makes excellent sense as an attempt at sexual renunciation. Paul’s words are not only helpful on this score, but may bear out the nature of her incipient “initiation”. He has warned her, we may recall, that her beauty may lead her to temptations worse than the trials of martyrdom, as a result of which she may (literally?) “prove to be a cowardly man” (*deilandreses*), a crucial compound. In other words, if she succumbs to her own sexuality she will be less of a “man”. So long as she camouflages and combats her sexuality by remaining a virgin, Thecla will conform to an implied model of manly behaviour.

Episode II: Beauty and the beasts

Like a rather odd couple - he is short, bald, hook-nosed and bow-legged (c. 3), she is stunningly beautiful but has shaved her hair and donned male attire - Paul and Thecla travel to Antioch. Within moments of her arrival she is none the less betrayed by her female beauty. An influential Syrian named Alexander immediately falls in love with her; when he tries to bribe Paul to hand over his charge the Apostle pretends not to know the girl, nor even (according to the *vita*) whether she is male or female - an ambiguity which arouses the Syrian even more (c. 26; cf. *vita*, c. 15 [Dagron]). Then, when Alexander makes an attempt on Thecla, Paul runs away, leaving her alone - but undeterred. (*Ibid.* In Xenophon the beauty of the *Liebespaar* provokes approaches to both during their stay in Phoenicia. Alexander recalls the figure of the socially prominent, powerful rival to the hero's affections: cf. e.g., Chariton, Achilles Tatius.) She rips Alexander's cloak and knocks off his crown, so preserving her virginity and turning her antagonist into a laughing-stock (c. 26 *estesēn auton thriambon*). To feminists Alexander may exemplify the cultural "ideology of rape" according to which a woman needs a protector (here it *should* be Paul) who will also control her actions in society. By defending herself, Thecla subverts and demystifies the rape culture (on which cf. Brownmiller 1975. esp. 12-15, 32-33). The motif, incidentally, of the proud, chaste woman is also common in New Comedy and the ancient romance: cf., e.g. Timocleia, who killed her rapist (further, Trenkner 1958, 108-109).

Alexander retaliates by bringing her to trial, at which she is condemned to be thrown to the beasts. This is a plausible reaction for a frustrated male with lofty connections in late antiquity: see Achilles Tatius VI. 22. 4f. (cf. *ibid.* 20. 3f.). Also consider *Aethiopika* 5: a lecherous queen tortures the couple when they insist on remaining chaste (cf. the Freudian theory of displacement). Thecla's only request is that she be allowed to die a virgin. What would happen, it may be asked, if our heroine were to lose her virginity now? At a guess she would lose her sacred (interstitial) potency; compare *Acta*, p. 271 (G version): Thecla settled in a cave outside Seleucia, and in time attracted a following of female apotactics and patients whom she unfailingly healed. The local doctors as a consequence suffered huge financial losses and decided to hire a gang of men to rape her because they assumed that "she was a virgin holy to the great goddess Artemis and that if defiled she would lose her healing powers".

At her trial the women in the courtroom had denounced the verdict, shouting: "An evil judgement, an ungodly judgement" (c. 27). So great was the surge of female sympathy that Tryphaena, a wealthy widow distantly related to the Claudians, adopted Thecla as a daughter and took her under her wing until the appointed day (c. 28). (Tryphaena,

like Thecla, may too have been a historical person in origin; a queen of Pontus, who was contemporary of Paul, bore that name.). Presently Alexander tries to take the maiden by force, but Tryphaena prevents him. She personally conducts the girl to the arena, thus ensuring that her chastity is preserved (c. 31). Among the spectators the men (*demos*) curse her whilst the women again decry her sentence and now offer themselves to be executed with her: (c. 32) “Kill all of us... this is a bitter sight, an evil judgement”.

A beauty soon to brave the beasts (c. 29 *toiouton kallos eis theria ballomenon*), Thecla is undressed but this time she grabs a loin cloth which serves as a girdle (c. 33). As the narrator is once more making play with the sensual and symbolic potentialities of dress and undress, it might be as well to enquire into the possible meaning of the girdle here. This article of clothing is more than a “sop” to the Acta’s prudish readers; it surely must connote Thecla’s aggressive retention of her virginity and her status as a warrior pitted against the male legacy of cruelty. Atalanta, another militant virgin, had no intention of losing her girdle, for it shielded her virginity and concomitantly worked as (talisman(sacred to Ares. Their girdles intact, Atalanta - and the Amazons - were assured of victory in combat and competition against men - at least temporarily. (Of course, a female figure with only her torso revealed can in reality be as erotic as any nude - as, for instance, the second century B.C. Aphrodite from Melos; a fact which may have been appreciated by late antique readers of the *Acta*.)

Most of the animals are the would-be rapist’s substitutes; a lioness, however, merely rolls at her feet as women spectators for their approval. The narrative detail of rescue from the lion’s mouth is almost certainly a well-known popular ingredient and can be matched by similar motifs preserved, among other authors, in Apion’s *Aegyptiaka* (i.c. A.D.), 2 Timothy 4:16-17, Ignatius’ letter to the Romans (ca. 107), and in the mid-2nd century Aulus Gellius (the story of Androclus and the lion: see MacDonald 1983. 22-23). In the *Apocryphal Acts of Paul* the Apostle preaches to a ferocious lion and then baptises it! A lion belonging to Alexander is set loose but both it and the lioness grapple to their deaths. Animals, it should be noted, also appear in fairy tales as either friends or enemies. As friends they aid the hero or heroine in contrast to human society, which threatens him or her. Cinderella, for example, is forsaken by society but helped in one of her chores by birds. (A contrary example is the dragon, which always endangers the protagonist in fairy tales. Further in L(thi 1976 [1970]. 60-61, 78-80.) The women mourn the lioness, confirming that female solidarity now cuts across the human and animal kingdoms (Dagron 1978. 37). More beasts are set loose. Thecla prays and, noticing a pool nearby, cries out: “*Nun kairos lousasthai me* (“Now is

the right moment for me to bathe"). This is her answer to Paul's espousal of delay at Iconium. She takes the plunge, heedless of the ferocious (!) seals in the water and declares: "In the name of Jesus Christ I am being baptised on this my last day". The crowd shrieks in horror, even the governor weeps at the sight of such beauty among the hungry seals. But a flash of lightning strikes the pool, the seals are killed and a cloud of fire (conveniently but also symbolically) envelopes the near-naked maiden.

More animals, still more vicious now, are set upon Thecla (c. 35). The women - a veritable "support group" - cry out and toss various perfumes and unguents in order to mesmerise the beasts. At length Thecla's feet are tied to two bulls, which belong to the frustrated Alexander; their testicles inflamed by hot iron, they are apt symbols of male violence. But lo! the cloud of fire clothing her scorches the ropes (c. 35): Could this fire symbolise female or rather androgynous potency as distinct from male impotence? (so also Dagron 1978. 37-38) The governor undergoes a change of heart and summons Thecla. He asks: (Who are you? What are those things about you, for not even a single beast injured you? (c. 37). She replies that she is "the female slave (*doule*) of the living God on Whose account not even a single animal touched me (*hepsato mou*)". In early Christian sources *haptomai* in the sense of "injure" refers to evil or original sin as the agent. It is quite possible that the fire and beasts - both instruments of death in our story - represent the evil forces of sexual temptation, as has been remarked.

Thecla is dressed (at last!) and released. The women exult, emitting in unison a shout which shakes the entire city of Antioch (c. 38). The girl preaches the word of God to Tryphaena and her maidservants and soon departs - but only after effecting a sartorial change (c. 39; cf. c. 40).

Episode III: Thecla the gender blender

The heroine hears that Paul is in Myra on the south coast and duly sets out to find him. She no longer really needs him to define her values or goals. He had originally fired her religious passion but quickly proved to be a feckless, almost craven figure. (Like Chariton's Chaereas Paul cuts an anti-heroic figure, especially in relation to the heroine.) Thecla simply wishes now to register the change in her spiritual, social and conceivably psychosexual status.

At Antioch she showed herself to be dominant in the face of mounting male or male-sponsored aggression. For a brief spell she figured as the stereotypical passive and passionless object of male lust and violence; but she soon put Alexander to shame single-handed, braved the beasts (the sadistic Alexander's proxies), christened

herself and even preached, albeit in an all-woman environment. Such assertiveness surely hints at her transformation. At Iconium, it will be recalled, she was a maiden who placed herself outside the patriarchal control of her society while still deriving much psychological and spiritual security from Paul. (She even respected his hesitation to baptise her.) Her latent androgyny was already noticeable at Iconium, particularly in her hair style; it was confirmed at Antioch through her inverted role as a virgin warrior and preacher. Full-fledged androgyny will presently permit her to break the external and emotional barrier between the sexes.

She arrives in Myra accompanied with a troupe of boys and girls - a highly apposite peer group, for Thecla has refused all along to make the transition from the bisexual state of childhood to womanly puberty and has chosen instead to remain affectively a pre-adolescent male/female (*androgynos*). She takes Paul by surprise; she has refashioned her tunic (*khiton*) into a shorter one worn by men (*ependytes*, c. 40) and tells him *tout court*, "*elabon to loutron*" ("I have received the sacramental bath"), adding that she will return to her native Iconium to preach on her own - a decision which Paul approves at once: (Go forth and teach the word of God (c. 40)). Thecla will henceforth not only preach but also baptise.

In her new "combative" garb she can conduct her ministry without being ogled at as a female. Having vigorously repudiated the compulsory conjugal model and now treading a terrain where her image as boy or girl, man or woman is blurred or even blended, Thecla is an androgyne untrammelled by gender stereotyping. She has moved through what almost appear to be successive rites of passage, from (tonsure) at Iconium to physical ordeals, nudity and immersion in water at Antioch, and finally to a definite change of garb and the assumption of a new un-feminine role at Myra. The *Acta*, then, may on one level be read as a tale of a virgin's progress or initiation into a (sacred) androgyne. Such an interpretation does not in the least suggest that the narrative is a mystery text, a theory which Merkelbach advanced in relation to four of the ancient love romances. It none the less remains difficult to deny that chiefly by means of baptism, which is an initiatory rite *par excellence*, Thecla achieved a sweeping change of status and that the key characteristic of her new sacred status is precisely her androgyny. To the extent, moreover, that she has been transformed in a positive sense, our heroine's story resembles a fairy tale. Many specialists have argued that the discrete transitions and dangers which fairy tales feature customarily culminate in the protagonist's achievement of greater maturity and self-realisation (Lüthi 1976 [1970], 112-113, 138-140).

At the same time the tale may resemble a proto-"feminist" fantasy because of its woman-centred standpoint and especially because the

network of inversions enacted unmask (and upset), if only temporarily, the obvious sexual stereotypes of female inferiority and subordination. It is patent that Thecla's inverted role as a preacher is highly abnormal given that, with some exceptions, women in antiquity were very probably denied basic literacy and certainly rhetorical training, which was the mainstay of higher education. (Plato, of course, was the first to question the exclusion of women from education; women, he argued in *Republic* 5, were not fundamentally different from men and were thus susceptible of intellectual training which would equip them to become guardians of his ideal city-state.) From the early Christian era, too, women were not allowed to read, far less preach; only Gnostic circles departed from the unconditional silence enjoined upon the female sex by allowing women to attend "classes" as equal partners (Brown 1988. 118-120). In this respect mainstream Christianity also owed a sure debt to Judaism, which considered that female study of the Torah amounted to immersion in immorality. I Cor. 14:34-35 laid down the rule unambiguously: "As in all congregations of God's people, *women should not address the meeting. They have no licence to speak ...* If there is something they want to know, they can ask their own husbands at home. *It is a shocking thing that a woman should address the congregation*". One woman who tried to defy cultural subordination was the fifth-century nun Theodosia. St. Neilus, the abbot of a monastery near Ancyra, admonished her as follows: "It happens that your body makes you a woman, whether you like it or not. *So stop teaching men in church.* For the Apostle made it clear that this is shameful, even though you may say ten thousand times that you have transcended the female condition, and that you are more steadfast than men ..." (PG 79, 429 D, cited in Topping 1983. 113, further, Lane Fox 1986. 741n. 77). Even before St. Neilus, Tertullian (*ca.* A.D. 200) had specifically denounced as deviants females who wished to emulate Thecla; this preacher was to be dismissed without question, he said, as the literary concoction of a defrocked priest.

At least two female figures in ancient literature bear close resemblance to our heroine, the first being Agnodike. According to "Hyginus" (A.D. ii c.?), this virgin shaved her hair and dressed as a man in order to be able to study medicine and afterwards work as a "healer of women's diseases". Another impressive pagan parallel is Hipparchia, whose unconventional career, dating to *ca.* 300 B.C., is related in Diogenes Laertius 6. 96 f. She reportedly fell in love with the Cynic philosopher Crates after hearing him lecture. In fact she so admired his discourse and way of life that she refused the hand of many eligible suitors and at length married him. Henceforth she adopted the same attire of rags and accompanied him to symposia and engaged in philosophical discussions herself!

To sum up: As regards literary form and content, *the Acts of Paul and Thecla* seem to derive directly from the ancient novel, although it is admittedly difficult to positively test this strong first impression in the absence of a relative chronology of the *Acts* and the novels. Even so, considerable coincidences in general outline and in points of narrative detail are discernible and can be put down to a combination of two possibilities: i) the author of Thecla's story drew upon early (pre-sophistic) novels of the same type as Chariton's *Chaereas and Callirhoe*; and ii) the *Acts* and the novels alike drew from the rich "underground" of popular tales. It is impossible to describe here at length the traits and devices which Thecla's story shares with those which seem likelier to be found in oral tales (on which see Mac Donald 1983. esp. 7f., 26-33; Burrus 1987. esp. 31f), but a brief list of the more obvious traits and motifs will do:

- 1) the story's resemblance in broad outline to the well-known tale type of the "innocent persecuted heroine"
- 2) the tale's emphasis on the protagonist's progress towards self-realisation
- 3) the detail of the fawning lioness and the role, positive and negative, of animals in general
- 4) the pervasive polarisation between individual characters and groups of characters e.g. Paul vs. Thamyris, Thecla vs. Theocleia, Thecla vs. mixed crowd at Iconium, Thecla vs. male crowd at Antioch etc.

Finally, as regards Thecla's conduct and career: Her permanent transvestism, together with her unstereotypical behaviour, argue for a physical and even affective homogenisation of the sexes in the direction of the male gender. Thecla's transgression of the gender code may suggest, in the ultimate analysis, an admiring, almost envious and, to men of late antiquity, a comforting version of maleness. Did her spectacular career as a "cross-dresser" and preacher signal an abolition of sexual difference? Or did it rather spell a confirmation and approval of such difference? These questions may especially interest feminist theologians.

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