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Gender Instability in Early Christian Accounts

Introduction

The presentation of women's bodies in early Christian martyr literature often demonstrates their capacity to be made "less female" in some way- physically or through dress or behavior. The connections between their gender, power, and their role within their families and ecclesiastical communities are inescapable, but at times also quite unstable. The persistence of these texts and writings about these women in manuscripts, sermons, and later iterations show that such texts and figures held an important role in the imaginative minds of many early Christian communities. While the idea of being "less female" cannot be interpreted as having been "liberating" for these women or of other early Christian women, the occasional resistance of male writers to this notion suggests that this hold was for some indeed quite powerful and perhaps even threatening to their positions of power. Women "being made less female" in these texts often reveals the discomfort male Christian leaders have with women's bodies, what to do with them, and subsequently to their having prominent public roles or positions of leadership in the church, but it is often coming from the appearance of powerful women who do, in fact, take up important prominent roles. By examining several early female martyr stories, their contexts, and the responses to them, I will investigate particularly this idea of "becoming male", and how it expands, and sometimes confines, the roles of the women in these stories.

In recent years, several scholars have raised questions over whether and how women claim authority over their bodies, how their bodies are viewed, gazed upon, and

described by male writers in early Christian texts about them.¹ A major question in this conversation is to what degree the depictions of them transgressing and blurring gender lines makes them “male”. There are many different interpretations of texts which include women becoming “less womanly”, and of what, if anything, they say about the lives of actual women in their times. Also, we have texts with such implications from various times and locations in early Christian communities, all of which could have been meant and read differently. Especially in recent years, as interest in the field of feminist studies in historical Christianity has grown, many scholars have sought to better understand these texts and used them to make scholarly claims about the status of women and their bodies in early Christianity. Often, this attitude means trying to glean from martyr texts what we can learn about the actual lives of Christian women, although this “uncovering” is usually attempted with an awareness that the texts can tell us very little. All the texts and commentaries we have are, after all, sources written and preserved by elite religious men. There has been a wide range of attitudes and interpretations of what early Christian stories about women mean for “women’s history” in early Christianity. Many scholars do not think that we can glean very much about actual women. In her book *The Virgin and the Bride*, Kate Cooper, for example, discusses that women in ancient texts are often not to be read as historical figures but as rhetorical devices to boost male characters and hierarchies- that they often “speak” for men, and are used to critique male characters.² However even Cooper has made

¹ Matthews, Shelly. "Thinking of Thecla: Issues in Feminist Historiography." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 17.2 (2001): 39-55.

² Cooper, Kate. *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity*. Harvard Univ. Press, 1999. Cooper acknowledges her work also lends from that of Brown. See also Elizabeth Clark: "The lady vanishes: dilemmas of a feminist historian after the “linguistic turn”

attempts to piece together what she can about these women, or about women in the contexts they were written in. Others, such as Shelly Matthews, acknowledge that the sources we have are severely limited, but nonetheless argue that we can see in the material we have that women's work had a role in the shaping of early Christianity.³

Even if we were to assume that these writings do tell us something about women or their reception in early Christian male circles, the pool of Christians whose experiences are being told and read would be greatly limited by who is able to write and preserve such literature. What could be learned from "women's experience", were we to know of it, is hotly contested.⁴ Scholars such as Sharon Dunn look at texts about early Christian women in the context of the historical communities in which they lived. Dunn sees narratives of female martyrs as revealing that women violated prescribed norms and took on more masculine behaviors, but did so in state-sanctioned ways. While in the texts it might seem create confusion about the ecclesiastical and familial roles of women in their community, Dunn examines how these narratives are produced by communities who seek to create a specific message. She notes that men wrote these texts, and thus female characters, even when they were actually real living people, were "redefined" to suit the author's and community's purpose.⁵ Their actions are carefully molded to suit a certain theological understanding of baptism, for example, or virtues such as virginity or chastity are highlighted as a key part of the woman's example and leadership while her teaching itself is minimized. Additionally, especially in light of the emergence of

³ Matthews, Shelly. "Thinking of Thecla: Issues in Feminist Historiography." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 17.2 (2001): 39-55.

⁴ See Clark, Elizabeth A. "The lady vanishes: dilemmas of a feminist historian after the "linguistic turn"." *Church History* 67.1 (1998).

⁵ Dunn, Shannon. "The Female Martyr and the Politics of Death: An Examination of the Martyr Discourses of Vibia Perpetua and Wafa Idris." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 78, no. 1, 2010, pp. 202–225.

feminist scholarship on early Christianity, we can see many debates play out between those with different goals in approaching the texts. There are those who wish to see gender alterations in these texts as allowing greater freedom for women from patriarchal systems in the communities on the one hand, and on the other, those like Virginia Burrus, who argues that women in the apocryphal acts acquire greater autonomy within their Christian communities primarily through their choice to remain chaste and untied to a human male, (non-Christ) husband, and patriarchal control.⁶ However Wilhelm Schneemelcher and Lynn Boughton would be quick to point out that women's roles are still severely limited. They show how we cannot understand these texts to be propagating any kind of "feminist agenda" or real liberation, because even their independence and chastity still depend upon and preserve male power and reify patriarchal values and structures.⁷

Most people would agree it seems imprudent to equate the messages of texts about early Christian women with the sort of aims of modern feminism, and, indeed, they seem more often than not to reinforce or at least promote ways in which women are subjugated and their bodies regulated. This is true even, or perhaps especially, in cases when women's femininity is muted for them to become "more male" through deed, dress, or body. Yet while texts which include women are unlikely to reveal to us anything

⁶ Burrus, Virginia. *Chastity as Autonomy*. Edwin Mellen Pr, 1987. Over time, the idea of lifelong virginity as a pledge became tied to the idea of being a "bride of Christ" in many patristic sources and traditions which developed, reinforcing the idea of submission to a spouse but with different life implications. One place for evidence of this is: Shuve, Karl. *The Song of Songs and the fashioning of identity in early Latin Christianity*. Oxford University Press, 2016.

⁷ Lynne C. Boughton, Author. "From Pious Legend to Feminist Fantasy: Distinguishing Hagiographical License From Apostolic Practice In the 'Acts of Paul / Acts of Thecla'." *The Journal of Religion*, vol. 71, no. 3, (1991): 362 – 383. Boughton is particularly critical of this, as well as Schneemelcher in his comments on Thecla. Schneemelcher, Wilhelm, and R McL Wilson. *New Testament Apocrypha*. Rev. ed., pbk. ed. J. Clarke & Co, 2003.

about the lived experience of your “everyday 4th century Christian woman”, and do not give us the wished image of thoroughly inclusive early Church that some have imagined, we still need to view the inclusion of these female characters as important. Some of these texts, especially about Thecla, were often widespread on their own and with other texts in the ancient world, and were likely known to many. In addition they were a source of controversy, conversation, and inspiration for countless later sources, including prominent patristic writers, and thus cannot be discounted as trivial to our understanding of early Christian beliefs and perceptions of women.⁸

A challenge which undergirds any paper about gendered relationships and roles is that the notions of “sex”, “gender”, and “sexuality” are themselves tenuous at best, and socially constructed differently within different cultures and times. In light of this, care must be taken when speaking of them and understanding what is meant by early sources when speaking of concepts of “male” and “female”. When speaking of physical changes, I attempt to specify that they are bodily changes that differentiate one from the genitalia, body hair, and other characteristics with which one is born. In contrast, changes in “mentality” or “virtue”, are also at times associated with changes in perception of one’s social role and status to one that does not align with what has been conventionally understood as a “bodily gender”, and these less visibly tangible changes are often what occurs in early sources. Thus when the idea of “gender-bending” comes up, it may refer to either of these, which I try to specify what seems to be occurring, although it is not

⁸ Susan Hylen points to Tertullian’s *On Baptism*, Ambrose’s *On Virginity*, Methodius’ *Symposium*, and Pseudo-Basil’s *Life and Miracles of Saint Thecla*, as places where Thecla reappears, for example, but this is far from the extent of references to early female martyrs in later sources.

For more about the legacy of Thecla in textual sources and artistic representations in material culture, see: Castelli, Elizabeth Anne. *Martyrdom and memory: Early Christian culture making*. Columbia University Press, (2004): 134-171.

always clear in the texts themselves. At times, such changes are immutable after they have occurred, and often the principle of “male” and “female” is deeply rooted in the body, but not always. The idea of “homosexuality”, too, has been disputed and pointed to as a modern construct for some time, and when I use it I am specifically referring to sexual contact between two people of the same sex, but not attached to modern concepts of “homosexuals” as a noun, with “homoeroticism” as a preferred phrase in many contexts.⁹ Finally, the ideas of “masculinization” and “feminization”, are based in ideas of the virtues, quality, dress, and appearance of people who have been labeled by society as “male” or “female”, but ideas of class, status, marital situation, and race also all overlap and interfere with what is considered “manly”, or “womanly”, with those of lower standing often being given more “feminine” attributes, in contrast to elite, strong individuals with penises. This is perhaps most noticeable in the cases of enslaved people, whose lives and bodies are denied much of their own power and choice, but this gendering of power hierarchies appears in many other structures.

I will be looking at a variety of sources, focusing on the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* and the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*. I will also examine responses to them by patristic writers such as Ambrose and Tertullian, whose homilies shed light on how these writings were read, perceived, and used shortly after they were written. The two primary texts— which feature the female characters of Thecla and Perpetua, are from the late second and early third centuries, and were both known to writers in Carthage shortly thereafter. The *Acts*, in particular, was widely disseminated and recorded in

⁹ Foucault, Michel. "The history of sexuality: An introduction, volume I." *Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage* (1990).

many different languages. There were male Christians writing about Thecla who both used her story as an exemplar and who condemned her actions in the story.¹⁰ Perpetua, too, was known and written on, as well as having her story re-written much later, and has been taken up by many scholars, who are intrigued by the first person nature of her narrative, wondering if it is an example of a women's writing being preserved. Because I am concerned with how their gender itself is presented and could potentially be understood, I will look at other early writings from the surrounding or preceding culture, for, while Christianity created new approaches to sexuality, it was also ultimately steeped in Greco-Roman thought, and their approaches to gender also reflect this.¹¹ This will include the Greek romance *Leukippe and Klitophon* and medical writings, insofar as they shed light on gender and alterations or aberrations of gender that are known and acknowledged at the time. I am also standing on the shoulders of giants in the fields of early Christianity and classics, who have written extensively and skillfully on the texts at hand.

The first segment of my paper will look at the way gender is conceived of in several early sources, beginning with medical texts such as those of Soranus and Galen, and how they understand changes in and differences between sexes. Then I will examine other early non-Christian sources, such as Greek legends and novels, that address moments in which people's gender is less defined, and how this is often perceived as either a social aberration or medical anomaly that is not understood but viewed very negatively by onlookers. Then, turning to Christian sources such as epistles of Paul and

¹⁰ Ng, Esther Yue L. "Acts of Paul and Thecla: Women's Stories and Precedent?." *Journal of Theological Studies*, vol. 55, no. 1, (2004): 26.

¹¹ Foucault, Michel. *The history of sexuality, vol. 2: The use of pleasure*. Vintage, (2012): 15.

the *Acts of Thomas*, I will show how these, too, view breaking from gender norms to be potentially problematic, but themselves blur the lines between “male” and “female” in what seems to be a more metaphorical sense. Following this, I will turn to focus more specifically on two examples of martyr women in second-third century writings whose positions, behaviors, and abilities are often interpreted by scholars as not conforming to “conventional gender roles” or making their sex and gendered status less clear. As these sources are the subject of much scholarly discussion, I will look at how other scholars have presented and understood their bodies and gender and demonstrate how these sources uphold and align with typical interpretations of gender while also troubling the category in subtle and challenging ways.

Gender in Greek and Roman contexts

As the body, and our ideas about sex and gender, are all products of cultural constructions and perceptions, which hold meaning within particular cultural contexts, understanding the multifaceted ways in which they have been understood is a helpful step in examining more closely how these constructs function in early Christian writings. Many scholars in recent history have speculated about bodily gender, such as Thomas Laqueur, who, in his book, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, suggests that our ideas of a fixed bodily gender presiding in two sexed forms (male and female) emerged only in the 18th century. He argues that previously most societies understood gender as more fluid, largely due to the concept of women being

seen as “imperfect men”.¹² Many scholarly opinions today put this claim to the test, pointing out more counter-examples to this theory that show how gender is central in many medical texts and treatises on philosophy, (namely, Helen King’s *The One-Sex Body on Trial*). Sources which I explore, particularly Christian sources entrenched in “biblical” understandings of human creation, indeed impose two clear genders heavily on individual bodies. However, as he shows, we must acknowledge that gender as we see it in the 21st century is certainly not what medical knowledge of the ancient Greeks and Romans, ancient novels and artwork, or texts from early Christian communities, would suggest.

In many sources from these cultures, we find that people held a somewhat fluid understanding of gender— that men could be made more feminine and women more masculine— it would be misleading to suggest that these texts indicate a belief in actual bodily gender transitions or complete transformation of gender. For example Pinault posits that Soranus indicates a spectrum of women, who as they engaged in certain behavior and bodily stages, ranging from sex to childbirth to menopause, witnessed a change in their state of “womanhood” or “womanliness”.¹³ Soranus himself propagates the idea of Aristotle that women are “imperfect”, and in his *Gynecology* he indicates that while there are conditions particular to women, in more generic illnesses they are more similar to those of men.¹⁴ Many medical writers in this time also believed that women and men begin the same in the uterus, from the same material, and understood

¹² Laqueur, Thomas Walter. *Making sex: Body and gender from the Greeks to Freud*. Harvard University Press, 1990.

¹³ Pinault, JB. "The Medical Case For Virginitly In The Early 2nd-Century-Ce, Soranus-Of-Ephesus, 'Gynecology' 1.32." *Helios* 19.1-2 (1992): 123-139.

¹⁴ Soranus, of Ephesus.. *Soranus' gynecology*. Trns. By Oswei Tempkin. Baltimore : Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991. <http://hdl.handle.net/proxy01.its.virginia.edu/2027/heh.04290.0001.001>. 132

many parts of their development as being similar. Aristotle is often referenced, and believed that for various reasons women did not reach the level of becoming men, and were inferior, viewing men and women not to be entirely different beings, yet substantially different from one another.¹⁵ Galen of Pergamon, for example, believed that male and female genitalia were essentially the inverse of one another, and that men's came out as a result of greater heat.¹⁶ Nonetheless many, such as the Hippocratic text *Diseases of Women*, held that women are dramatically different even within their flesh, from being "spongier" to moister to colder, with women often being conveyed as "incomplete men" of sorts, who never had enough heat to overcome their femaleness in the womb, and who had to menstruate each month because of the excess blood that they could not dispel through semen.¹⁷ From these it seems that while women and men could very well have been on a spectrum and have points of overlap or even of being able to move along the spectrum, they also have distinctions that should not be crossed.

The idea of women being "unfinished", in a sense, emerges through mythological texts and stories of androgynous figures in other texts as well, most often through narratives of women becoming men suddenly and unexpectedly. William Hanson, in his work on second century CE Phlegon of Tralles' *Book of Marvels*, notes that these changes are almost exclusively of women becoming men. The *Book of Marvels* itself, which is a compilation drawing heavily on previous sources, contains six such tales.¹⁸ In cases where men become women, such as Teiresias, who is changed to a woman upon

¹⁵ Flemming, Rebecca. *Medicine and the Making of Roman Women: Gender, Nature, and Authority from Celsus to Galen*. Oxford University Press on Demand, (2000): 116.

¹⁶ Hansen, William, ed. *Phlegon of Tralles' Book of Marvels*. No. 39. Liverpool University Press, (1996): 125.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 119.

¹⁸ Hanson, 41

wounding copulating snakes, they are changed back in time, often by returning to the same location or repeating the action which first transformed them, an observation which extends more widely across Greek folklore and historical narratives.¹⁹ Anna McCullough observes how in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*, while men primarily cross-dress and become effeminate males, several women seem to “become men by taking on virtus to replace their inferior female natures”.²⁰ In this rendering, it seems, a character defined as a female at birth, Charite, can display both “maternal” traits of a devoted wife but also have courage and a “masculine spirit” that allows her to face the world as a man would if such a situation occurs in her life.²¹ According to McCullough, as may be important when looking at other sources, an ideal which allows for both masculine and feminine virtues to coexist appears in select married Roman women, so long as it is with the blessing and supervision of Roman men.²² Perhaps one path which thinking about women as “failed men” opens up, then, is a path for women to be “less female” in positive ways, especially in the cases of special or exceptional women.

Outside of medical and biological understanding of gender in Greek culture, males who were the “penetrated” partner in sexual intercourse with another male were often considered more effeminate, emasculated by the penetration. They are generally presumed to have been men of lower rank, young boys and slaves who did not have voice or power in the relationship. This gender blurring was not typically viewed in a positive light, and in many cases if power-holding men were suspected to have

¹⁹ Hanson, 114, 124.

²⁰ McCullough, Anna. “Gender Transformations in Apuleius *Metamorphoses*”. *Narrating desire: eros, sex, and gender in the ancient novel*. Berlin (2012): 235.

²¹ McCullough, 243

²² McCullough, 246

themselves been “penetrated”, their status and dignity too could be questioned, and insertion and reception were tied to ideas about domination in Athenian culture.²³ The idea of sex as being intimately tied to political and social meanings is one that emerges frequently in discussions of homoeroticism and sexual acts in the ancient world.²⁴ Yet Ancient Greek acceptance of “homosexual” relationships are of course more complicated than this might suggest, and homoerotic images and pederasty are prevalent in Classical vases and artwork, as well as intimate male friendships.²⁵ Additionally, there are still select tales of the “kinaidos” male, the penetrated partner in a homosexual act, giving birth, often treated as a miraculous and suspect anomaly.²⁶

One might ask, if being “penetrated” makes one more effeminate, what does this mean for unpenetrated, virginal women? Are they less female as well, is there something different about their “female-ness”? There are examples of Roman women who take a more “active” or “penetrative” role in sexual acts who are presented as “masculine”, abnormal, and a source of scorn or disapproval for this rejection of gender roles and passivity.²⁷ There are also women who engage in sexual acts with other women about whom there was much anxiety, and men whose masculinity is questioned because they allowed themselves to be “penetrated” by a less-powerful male.²⁸ Thus the ties between power, sex, and gender are still applied to situations without an actual male presence.

²³ Halperin, David M. “Is There a History of Sexuality?” *History and Theory*, vol. 28, no. 3, 1989, pp. 257–274.

²⁴ Halperin, 260.

²⁵ Armstrong Percy, William. “Reconsiderations About Greek Homosexualities.” *Journal of Homosexuality*, vol. 49, no. 3/4, (2005): pp. 13 – 61.

²⁶ Hanson, 159

²⁷ Pintabone, Diane. “Ovid’s Iphis and Ianthe: When Girls Won’t be Girls.” *Among Women: from the Homosocial to the Homoerotic in the Ancient World* (2002): 258.

²⁸ Hallett, Judith. “Female Homoeroticism and the Denial of Roman Reality in Latin Literature.” *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 3.1 (1989): 209.

However, many writings we have from elite groups and medical texts suggest or encourage girls being married quickly upon reaching menarche, and some medical writers even believed that being married and having sex was a biological necessity for women to prevent them from developing a strange bodily disease involving too much pent-up blood inside of them.²⁹ Thus, the examples we do have of women, as well as men, becoming less like their sex, are almost exclusively negative. For example, there are women who, upon losing their husband, grow beards and eventually die from a strange incurable disease.³⁰ Brooke Holmes observes that, while their bodies can change, they are still referred to as women and are not able to become fully male.³¹ Holmes also notes how gender language is employed in discussions of power in the ancient world, and is “always entangled in other categories such as age”, status, or race, and how Roman manhood, “vir”, is closely connected to being free versus enslaved.³² In understanding political and social dynamics in the ancient world, as in modernity, power, status, sexuality, and gender, while they are often spoken of separately, are all inescapably imbricated in one another. The association between sexual acts and their political and social meanings, as perceived as the engaging between a superior and a subordinate, emphasizes this connection between status and freedom and masculinity.³³ In Rome, as in most other societies, enslaved women’s bodies were regulated, restricted from marriage and bearing legitimate children, and were without clear access to virtues

²⁹ Hippocrates, Rebecca Flemming, and Ann Ellis Hanson. "Hippocrates'" Peri Partheniôn'(Diseases of Young Girls): Text and Translation." *Early Science and Medicine* (1998): 241-252. This very young marriage was not likely supremely common among everyone, however, and the view of sex as a bodily necessity for women has many detractors even then.

³⁰ Holmes, Brooke. *Gender: Antiquity and Its Legacy*. IB Tauris, (2012):15.

³¹ Holmes, 15.

³² Holmes, 24

³³ Halperin, 258.

associated with ideal Roman wifehood such as modesty, peacefulness, industry, and frugality; class and status of women, as with men, could not be separated from the perception of their gendering.³⁴ Additionally, Classical Greek literature, continuing into much later writings, convey women as without control, or controlled by their “appetites”, while men were understood to be able to, and expected to, “master their bodies”, and have more intrinsic restraint and control.³⁵ Thus, while the conception of gender was not of an immutable state, it still had roots in the body, and changes in one’s roles or “gendered” status to be less like the “biological” assumptions about men and women were generally understood as discomfiting and anomalous, never something to be praised or sought after. Instances of cross-dressing also appear in genres such as the Greek romance novels, and in some visual art as well. For instance, in a collection of Archaic Greek vases, there are paintings of bearded people bearing parasols, headdresses, and earrings, although it is unclear of whether these are meant to be bearded women or men wearing women’s attire.³⁶ Rabinowitz notes how in some very early examples of vase paintings, gender is not always supremely evident by the physical shape of women depicted.³⁷ Greek novels, too have examples of women crossdressing or disguising themselves as men, and vice versa, however usually it is not by choice, or is meant as a disguise to preserve chastity to one’s true lover.³⁸

³⁴ Skinner, Marilyn B. "Fortunata and the virtues of freedwomen." *Narrating desire: eros, sex, and gender in the ancient novel*. Berlin (2012): 199-210.

³⁵ Holmes, 33

³⁶ Rabinowitz, Nancy Sorkin. "Excavating Women’s Homoeroticism in Ancient Greece." *Among Women: from the Homosocial to the Homoerotic in the Ancient World* (2002): 108.

³⁷ Rabinowitz, 108.

³⁸ Burrus, Virginia. "Mimicking virgins: Colonial ambivalence and the ancient romance." *Arethusa* 38.1 (2005): 61.

Gender in Christian sources

Christian sources, too, take up questions of gender and what it means to be “female”, building from the ideas of the surrounding culture. They add to these discussions additional and exceptional praise and discussion of “virginity” as a lifelong vow, and of how women are to operate within church contexts, and how they might relate to the divine, particularly through Jesus. It is important to keep these texts in mind when looking at how gender is seen and understood in non-canonical literature, particularly as later writers would have been familiar with Pauline texts, and shared the views of at least some people on the role and status of women within church communities. Particularly prominent in discussions of gender in the New Testament are Paul’s writings about the creation of woman and how females relate to the divine. As scholars generally acknowledge today, Paul’s writings on women cover quite a range of different ideas, and people attempting to define or create a complete picture of his opinions will likely find themselves at a loss. For example, many people, seeking, and hoping to discover an inclusive and just version of early Christianity, call to mind Galatians 3:28, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus”.³⁹ Many take this passage as an indication that early Christian communities allowed for a degree of equality amongst people of different ranks, and that gender was no longer pertinent to these people. Perhaps it could be indicative of a revised understanding of how men and women fit into the community as followers of the person called Jesus, or what the potentials of Christian community have for lives today and for otherworldly life as well.

³⁹ *HarperCollins Study Bible: Fully Revised & Updated*. New Revised Standard Version. HarperCollins, 2017.

Another verse cited often is 1 Corinthians 7:3-4, concerning conjugal relations, as they take it to suggest that sex should be reciprocal and meet the desires of both husband and wife. Additionally, provisions for men and women who choose not to marry exist, such as 1 Corinthians 7:8, allowing women this space to, with men's endorsement and monitoring, reject the role of wife and mother in communities of Christ-followers.

Yet we know from the culture and context that gender hierarchy undoubtedly remained central to their understanding of the world, as Paul himself indicates. 1 Corinthians 11:7-9 reads, "For a man ought not to have his head veiled, since he is the image and reflection of God; but woman is the reflection of man. Indeed, man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for the sake of woman, but woman for the sake of man." This idea of women being created from man and a lesser, lower supplement to him is persistent and is often supported with scriptures in early Christian writings. It fits well into the presentation of gender the general surrounding cultural and medical representations of women, being born lesser and weaker, the result of a deficiency of sorts. Paul's writing, however, also makes it clear that women are further from the image of god, and the lack of female deity in Christianity furthers this. Later Christian writers would come to support this impression or deepen this separation between women and the divine, depicting women as a sort of aberration of what God intended creation to be perhaps, or as something sinful or inherently problematic, whose sexuality was in need of restraint and whose bodies are a site of potential sin in a way much greater than their male counterparts.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Burrus, Virginia. "Word and Flesh: The Bodies and Sexuality of Ascetic Women in Christian Antiquity." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, vol. 10, no. 1, (1994): 31

Many others, albeit oft-disputed, would trouble this notion that canonical works demand that women take a silent and submissive role in the church, which 1 Corinthians 14:34 is often assumed to suggest. Some ask that we look at these texts from a slightly broader perspective and see the possibility for them being more “compatible” with women’s leading roles than is often assumed. Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, for example, takes the stance that we can in fact find evidence of a radical understanding of women’s role even in Paul, that needs to be reclaimed, and Susan Hulen proposes that writings such as 1 Timothy 2 and *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* are in fact making a similar point about the virtues women should uphold.⁴¹ Hulen argues that the ideal that women show “modesty, industry, and loyalty to their families” in fact emerges in both texts with women’s leadership and in epistles which limit women’s leadership. She notes that in Roman society women did have spaces and ways in which they were allowed to work in the public sphere, so long as it was to the benefit and promotion of their family.⁴² From this hypothesis, one might see how a chaste and unmarried woman, still operating within patriarchal structures of community and government, could perhaps have access to certain positions of leadership, although the 1 Timothy 2 example introduces a harsher attack on women’s sin and need for submission, which many would highlight as evidence that, at least in proscriptive texts, women’s roles were meant to be censured.⁴³

⁴¹ Schüssler Fiorenza, Elisabeth. *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*. Crossroad, 1983.

Hulen, Susan. *A Modest Apostle: Thecla and the History of Women In the Early Church*. Oxford University Press, 2015.

⁴² Hulen, Susan E. "Modest, Industrious, and Loyal: Reinterpreting Conflicting Evidence for Women's Roles." *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 44.1 (2014): 3-12.

⁴³ Ebner notes that “proscriptive” and “descriptive” texts read differently. Ebner, Martin, “Gemeindestrukturen in Exempeln”. *Aus Liebe zu Paulus?: die Akte Thekla neu aufgerollt*. Vol. 206. Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2005.

Because of these, many accept that Paul and Pauline writings do, indeed, seek to control and limit the role of women, and resist what they deem “feminist excavations” or the push to find how women have had prominence in early Christian communities. Schuessler-Fiorenza, in particular, is criticized by people who view early Christian texts as being inherently oppressive to women for operating with a specific feminist theologian’s agenda of finding and highlighting the overlooked contributions of women in early Christianity. Nevertheless, perhaps it is helpful to acknowledge that even works which heavily censure women’s speaking and performing sacraments do not abolish all routes by which women could have voice and influence, even with their bodies and lives being viewed as lesser. They have prominence as leaders, followers of Christ, and even teachers in some contexts, and were popular enough to be shared, disputed, retold, and in some cases canonized. Even Paul, who such critics would cite as evidence of early Christianities treating women as inferior to men, does acknowledge the importance of women in churches and as patrons, and we can see glimpses of ways in which they likely did operate within Roman social strictures of family, home, and “ideal womanhood” to participate in early Christian communities. Romans 16, for example, is full of the names of women and men to whom Paul sends greetings and thanks, regardless of his supposed view of them as inferior and subservient.

Canonical scriptures are not the only early Christian texts to privilege the male body. In the *Gospel of Thomas*, an early gospel consisting largely of one hundred fourteen sayings of Jesus, line 114 is a prime example of an apocryphal text in which a female’s role in the body of Christ is questioned.⁴⁴ In this collection, Peter says to Jesus,

⁴⁴ DeConick, April D. “The Gospel of Thomas.” *The Expository Times* 118.10 (2007): 469-479.

“women are unworthy of life”, and requests that she leave and not hear Jesus’ teachings. Jesus, however, responds with “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,” a verse that has puzzled people for years.⁴⁵ While Peter here likely is not saying that Mary should lose her life, he is clearly saying that somehow she is not worthy of the kind of life which Jesus is calling the men in his inner circle to live. And while Jesus is likely not to be understood as literally transforming Mary into a human with “male” genitalia in this world, some change is clearly happening. That change then, if not changing her body, is changing something about her that allows her to be included in a male circle and be treated with a higher level of respect by those men, perhaps through physical change or perhaps through acquisition of new male virtues and social status, granting her access to new information and new relationship with the divine. Peter, in contrast, excludes her from this kind of relationship with Christ, and he is rebuked. Because it is the last line in this gospel, we do not get to hear any more about this transformation or see what it means for Mary or if other women can undergo such change, and while it is not an open door to their world, it is a crack in the patriarchal window to create a space for a female character.

With less severity, the *Gospel of Mary* shows Peter holding a similar attitude, seeming angry and disbelieving that Jesus should reveal anything special to a woman that he would not have revealed to his male followers. Although Philip and others come to Mary’s defense in this story, and Peter is not, in this case, questioning Mary’s ability

⁴⁵ Koester, Helmut, and Thomas O. Lambdin. "The Gospel of Thomas." *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (1978): 124-26.

to be a follower of Christ, he is dubious of and perturbed by the thought that Jesus should choose to form a similar, or even closer and stronger, relationship with a female than he did with the male apostles.⁴⁶ These texts do not reveal the sort of “one-gender” model that Lacquer proposed, as there is a stark gender line defined and reified by the idea that to be a true follower is to be male. Neither do they necessarily suggest that gender was understood to truly change within women’s bodies, as the change indicated could very easily be one of moral standing or an understanding of her strength and character and role in the community. Nevertheless, these texts make it clear that, for some people in the church, either women are not wanted as full, active members of the body of Christ, or that if they do participate equally they will not remain fully “female”, and that the question of how women fit into the church was something to be asked and debated time and again through both narrative and exegesis. In these texts, select women can adapt the characteristics of self-control and honor frequently associated with men in their world, which women were often understood to be lacking or have in lesser capacity. In some ways these women appear to be only rare exceptions, such as Mary (or Marys, as the case may be between these two texts), who is rarely rivalled or equaled by any other women, even when other women are present in the narrative. Often, when we look at this early literature, it is only very few women who are given credit of any kind, and it often takes second place to the roles of men. Yet the discussion around their existence in the texts operates as a sort of defense of their inclusion within a patriarchal hierarchy that does not include other women, and offers a new way to

⁴⁶ King, Karen L. *The gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the first woman apostle*. Polebridge Press Westar Inst, (2003): 13-19.

understand gender for followers of Christ. As we get into later centuries, with tales from early Christian communities and persecutions, we begin to see more women emerge as prominent figures, admittedly still only through the writings of men and with careful qualifications and measures of their character in place, as we will see.

Thecla in *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*

“Martyr literature” from the second and third centuries provides some of our most evident examples of what some scholars have called “gender bending” for Christian women who have achieved great sanctity. The literature places an extreme emphasis on the bodies of women, and highlights the problem that they often produced for male audiences, as both important figures who were part of the Christian community, but also as carnal objects that were a site of desire, and sin, and as factors which complicated theology surrounding the body and relationships with people and the divine. Two prominent and well-known examples which I will be looking at specifically are Thecla and Perpetua. These two characters capture well the eroticism that is often placed on women’s bodies in martyr literature while also troubling the concept of the female body itself. They are represented as “examples” of model women, who can achieve great sanctity and defeminization, while still being subordinated and objectified at times for being female.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Parkhouse, Sarah. "The Fetishization of Female Exempla: Mary, Thecla, Perpetua and Felicitas." *New Testament Studies*, vol. 63, no. 4, Oct. 2017, pp. 567-587. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1017/S0028688517000157.

For more on the eroticism of women in martyr stories see: Lefkowitz, Mary R. "The Motivations for St. Perpetua's Martyrdom." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 44, no. 3, (1976): 419.

Burrus, Virginia. "Reading Agnes: the rhetoric of gender in Ambrose and Prudentius." *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 3.1 (1995): 36

Frankfurter, David. "Martyrology and the prurient gaze." *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 17.2 (2009):

Few extra-Biblical Christian characters have been taken on by as many scholars and religious leaders as Thecla. She is described in *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, and was taken up by both early patristic writers as a model Christian virgin and martyr and scholars seeking to understand the role of women in early Christian communities in recent years. *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* is a second-century work and part of the *Acts of Paul*, although it circulated widely and separately from the larger work.⁴⁸ Perhaps the earliest known writings on it are those in Tertullian's second century *De Baptismo*, although we know from manuscripts and references to her in many patristic sources that she was known and read about apart from this⁴⁹. Despite, or perhaps because of, the widespread and diverse writings in which she is mentioned, her role and importance in early Christianity is frequently debated, with people from its earliest days using her as a prop in their arguments about what women in the church should, or could, do and be. She also appears in many later writings, hagiographic works, and dozens of extant manuscripts.⁵⁰

Scholarly discussion of the role of women in these pieces has taken many forms and viewpoints. Some have read it as an outright critique of gender relations in Pauline theology, (albeit not unqualified, as it certainly still subordinates women,) such as Wehn.⁵¹ Many people in recent years have responded in particular to the work of Virginia Burrus and Dennis Ronald McDonald. Burrus and McDonald argue for the role

⁴⁸ Ng, Esther Yue L. "Acts of Paul and Thecla: Women's Stories and Precedent?." *Journal of Theological Studies*, vol. 55, no. 1, (2004): 26.

⁴⁹ Léonie Hayne, Author. "Thecla and the Church Fathers." *Vigiliae Christianae*, vol. 48, no. 3, 1994, pp. 209.

⁵⁰ Elliott, J K. *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature In an English Translation*. Clarendon Press, (1993): 353.

⁵¹ Wehn, Beate. "'Blessed Are the Bodies of Those Who Are Virgins!': Reflections On the Image of Paul In the Acts of Thecla." *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, no. 79, (2000): 163.

of folklore, which would have been shared and told by women, in the emergence of Apocryphal literature about women. In a similar vein of understanding is the work of Stevan Davies, who suggested that the texts were written in female-centered communities.⁵² Several people have since disputed these claims, disagreeing on or dismissing the role of women in the creation of this literature. Jan Bremmer particularly notes Tertullian's response to the work and criticism of the "male presbyter" who wrote it as evidence against female authorship, despite moments which seem "liberating" for the women in the text.⁵³ Nonetheless, some scholars have read women in early texts as evidence for their roles and lives in reality. For example, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza saw Thecla as proof for women's participation in early Christianity, although this is now widely debated, as Thecla is merely one model and fictional example, and not a representative sample of early Christians.⁵⁴

In contrast, in her article, "From Modest Apostle to Feminist Fantasy", Boughton disparages the view that Thecla in *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* has any basis in historical fact, or that the texts apparent popularity is any indication that it was particularly widely or wholeheartedly accepted.⁵⁵ She maintains the argument that many scholars who see women's leadership being promoted by Thecla are "grounded in

⁵² Davies, Stevan L. *The Revolt of the Widows: The Social World of the Apocryphal Acts*. Southern Illinois University Press, 1980. MacDonald, Dennis Ronald. *The Legend and the Apostle: The Battle for Paul In Story and Canon*. Westminster, 1983. Burrus, Virginia. *Chastity As Autonomy: Women In the Stories of the Apocryphal Acts*. E. Mellen Press, 1987.

⁵³ Bremmer, Jan N. "Magic, Martyrdom, and Women's Liberation". *The Apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla*. Kok Pharos, (1996): 56.

⁵⁴ Schüssler Fiorenza, Elisabeth. *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*. Crossroad, 1983.

⁵⁵ Boughton, Lynn. "From Pious Legend to Feminist Fantasy: Distinguishing Hagiographical License From Apostolic Practice In the 'Acts of Paul / Acts of Thecla'." In her "Thinking of Thecla...", however, Matthews notes that Boughton's critiques of "unorthodox" writers are not evenly applied to all writers, creating a skew against those she chooses to read as "careless". Matthews, 44.

self-fulfilling hypotheses and questionable selection of evidence”, and that the text would have been read as a hagiography rather than as scripture, and thus had less significance or meaning for its readers. Because of some parallels it has to Greek novels in terms of plot structure and its fictitiousness too, it has been, at times, dismissed as a historically significant source, or undervalued for its theological implications.⁵⁶ However many have noted that just because a work is not “scripture” does not mean it does not have influence over how people think or expose aspects of their theology and communal life. It reveals certain attitudes towards Paul and Thecla and the relation between them, and Paul in this work speaks frequently of the role Thecla and other women can have and how they should behave.

Thecla herself, in the *Acts*, is a particularly interesting character. Susan Hulen notes how scholars have often accused Thecla of being overly “virile” for the Church, arguing that she needed to be tamed by later sources, and it is understandable how this interpretation could be found in the text.⁵⁷ After all, Thecla dresses as a man and teaches, roles which modern scholars often assume would be troubling to the patriarchy, and male commentators on her seem to reflect this. Monika Pesthy, looking specifically at responses of patristic writers to the figure of Thecla, suggests that most fit Thecla into one, or several, of four roles: “moral ideal”, “mouthpiece of orthodoxy”, “symbol of the church”, and “pagan goddess”, and Thecla is not the only chaste female to fall prey to such objectification.⁵⁸ For her this treatment makes her more than just a saint to the church fathers, but a significant, almost biblical figure used by them for many different

⁵⁶ Wehn, 150.

⁵⁷ Hulen, Susan. *A Modest Apostle*, 4.

⁵⁸ Pesthy, Monika. "Thecla among the Fathers of the Church." *The Apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla* (1996): 164-178.

personal ends.⁵⁹ In this case, as well, her “virilization” itself could supplement the idea of them being a means of criticizing other theologies and supporting patriarchy- after all, if even a woman can display such manly virtues and achieve such sanctity surely men’s failures could be implicated. Elizabeth Castelli has done much work specifically on the construction on women’s gender in early Christian texts and addresses instances, such as Thecla, in which it seems malleable or unclear. She notes how “losing the female mentality” can be a path towards greater closeness with Christ in the case of ascetic women, and how even in roles that seem to violate prescribed gender norms women’s actions and descriptions of them still bolster patriarchal assumptions and power.⁶⁰

Many church fathers, such as Ambrose, held Thecla up to be a model virgin, an example for women who should emulate her supreme chastity and preservation of her “pure” body. Some later scholars reading these patristic sources on Thecla perceive them to be “feminizing” or “domesticating” her, making her strength and virility safe by imposing boundaries on how “male” she can be, and limiting the power and leadership she has as a Christian.⁶¹ Hylan disputes this view, however, pointing to the amount of authority she does take on in the *Life and Miracles*, a fifth century work which was written based upon the Acts.⁶² Both are, after all, works that follow a female who teaches, stands up for herself, and perhaps even baptizes. She is not “tamed” in the latter, or made silent and subservient. However her role as a leader and teacher is, in many cases, subdued or ignored in patristic sources, as her female-ness troubled them

⁵⁹Pesthy, 177.

⁶⁰ Castelli, Elizabeth. "Virginity and its meaning for women's sexuality in early Christianity." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 2.1 (1986): 61-88.

⁶¹ Hylan, Susan E. "The "Domestication" of Saint Thecla: Characterization of Thecla in the *Life and Miracles* of Saint Thecla." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 30.2 (2014): 5-21.

⁶² Hylan, Susan. *A Modest Apostle*, 97.

as much as it troubled Paul in the text.⁶³ This containment and control of female femininity is aptly demonstrated in Tertullian's attitude towards Thecla, as he adamantly opposed the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, questioning its authority and authorship. His main objection does not rest in her choice to make herself appear more male, but in her taking on of male roles- particularly the authority to baptize, and be a Christian leader, a matter which he vehemently opposes in several writings.⁶⁴ While Ambrose uses Thecla as an example of virginity, he passes over any mention of the aspects of her story where she assumes leadership or behaves in an "unfeminine" manner.⁶⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, too, in his homily 14 on the Song of Songs, speaks of her as a "follower", as a vessel filled and a wonderful virgin, but ambiguously avoids praising her leadership or teaching.⁶⁶

Thecla, according to the text, does however make attempts to overcome her femininity by taking upon certain traits and roles that appear to belong more conventionally to males.⁶⁷ In section twenty five of *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, for instance, she says, "I will cut my hair off and follow you wherever you go," to which Paul objects, "Times are evil and you are beautiful. I am afraid lest another trial come upon you worse than the first, and that you do not withstand it but become mad after men".⁶⁸ The response of the Paul character in this text suggests that, according to the author, he

⁶³ As when he refuses to baptize her (25). Elliot, 369.

⁶⁴ Roberts, Alexander, James Donaldson, A. Cleveland Coxe, Allan Menzies, Ernest Cushing Richardson, and Bernhard Pick. "On Baptism." *The Ante-Nicene Fathers.: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D.* 325. Vol. 3. Buffalo: Christian Literature, 1885. N. pag. Print.

⁶⁵ Schaff, Philip, and Henry Wace. *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church.* Vol. X. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997. Print. II.

⁶⁶ Gregory of Nyssa and Richard A Norris. *Homilies On the Song of Songs.* Society of Biblical Literature, 2012.

⁶⁷ Elliot, 364-374

⁶⁸ Elliot, 369

believes there is a strict boundary on how “masculine” she can become, and that she will always be trapped in the “lesser” state of being female. This understanding of her physicality and problematizing of her female body, unaligned with any sense that “male and female” could be one or malleable constructs, fits firmly with the Pauline gendered hierarchies found in the New Testament, and the idea of the evils of carnality.

We also see her body as a point of intrusive male gaze in section twenty two at her first attempted martyrdom where “the boys and girls brought wood and straw in order that Thecla might be burned. And when she came in naked, the governor wept and admired the power that was in her” (22).⁶⁹ She then escapes the view of outsiders in the second attempt to martyr her (after she miraculously escaped the first) through a cloud of fire which appears when she throws herself into the water, and “the beasts could neither touch her, nor could she be seen naked” (34).⁷⁰ Here outsiders view her female body and understand it to be clearly female, but also it is obscured from male view at particularly miraculous moments, giving her an unexpected sense of protection contrary to Paul’s assumptions in the text about her potential trials and her state as a woman. Additionally, her relationship to the Lord is made clear and her relationship to any sense of “female weakness” or proclivity towards lust is made very unstable, and even the male governor is in awe not at her modesty or beauty but her power.⁷¹ Wehn notes that the idea of enkratism itself is rooted in a principle of self-control.⁷² Thus women who “choose chastity” in early Christian communities, following Paul’s prescription, are

⁶⁹ Elliot, 368.

⁷⁰ Elliot, 370

⁷¹ James, M.R. *The Apocryphal New Testament: Being the Apocryphal Gospels, Acts, Epistles, and Apocalypses, With Other Narratives and Fragments*. The Clarendon Press, 1924.

⁷² Wehn, Beate. "Blessed Are the Bodies of Those Who Are Virgins': Reflections On the Image of Paul In the Acts of Thecla." *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, no. 79, 2000, pp. 149 - 164.

choosing a different mode of existence from that of a conventional Roman household woman and claiming a different kind of power by doing so.

We can see from these examples that Thecla's virginal body is held in high regard, and, in many instances, subjected to outside gaze in intrusive ways. She is shown as embodying traditionally "masculine" virtues by practicing self-control, asserting herself in public, and teaching. The scene in which she is rescued from her second martyrdom and her nakedness is hidden is seemingly a self-baptism, with her taking on a role that is traditionally viewed to have been only allowed to men, and doing so to herself in an exceptional way. When she asks in section twenty seven that she be allowed to remain a virgin, her wish is granted. She is sent to live with Tryphaena, who becomes a female protector of sorts, enabling Thecla to retain control over her body. While these events are all episodes that preserve her virginal body and modesty, they nonetheless demonstrate her claiming to have some power for herself. She even maintains an air of defiance when the governor offers her clothing- although she puts them on she replies, "He who clothed me when I was naked among the beasts will in the day of judgement clothe me with salvation" (38).⁷³ She is not submissive or quiet, and she does view herself as having a powerful connection to the divine.

The idea of women becoming less womanly also appears in several Greek romance novels, and many compare Thecla particularly to *Leukippe and Kleitophon*, suggesting that the structure of the *Acts* is loosely tied to them. Leukippe, like Thecla, endures many trials to preserve her chastity, although in the case of Leukippe it is chastity to her lover Kleitophon and not virginity. Leukippe, unlike Thecla, is forced to

⁷³ Elliot, 371

have her head shaved and comes to look entirely unrecognizable by her lover in one of these travails. Burrus writes of both Thecla and Leukippe, that “her trials... have made her virtually virile”.⁷⁴ Thus this “virilization”, of women seeking to withhold themselves from male penetration is not a new theme even to early Christians, although in the case of Thecla masculinization serves a new end, as she has no ultimate desire for any human male, and it is also by personal choice- a very distinctive choice to renounce those traits which make her female and live a new life as a “manly” looking follower of Christ.

The text of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* shows us how in theory, or at least in myth, as Christian women’s role as Christians who are obedient to Christ, or perhaps Paul as the case may be, take prominence, their conformity and subjugation to male norms lessens. It would seem that for many early Christian writers, Thecla taking on male virtues and roles is unproblematic, as she is so popular and the story was relatively widespread for centuries. However, there are limitations placed on how masculine she becomes even in the story. Maud McInerney notices that masculinization is often suspect, even while it appears as a good thing in many early Christian works as a part of women’s efforts to defer the male gaze and is almost always in an effort to preserve chastity, which is certainly a mode of male control.⁷⁵ Kristi Upson-Saia offers a slightly different take, focusing in on the fact that cross-dressing is not so much of a threat, as it was understood to only be covering up a female interior, and was only a temporary guise in preservation of chastity.⁷⁶ While both of these scholars come to different conclusions, they both point to something similar- that in the writings we have preserved from early

⁷⁴ Burrus, Virginia. *Chastity as Autonomy*

⁷⁵ McInerney, Maud. *Eloquent Virgins from Thecla to Joan of Arc*. New York: Palgrave Press, 2003.

⁷⁶ Upson-Saia, Kristi. *Early Christian dress: Gender, virtue, and authority*. Vol. 3. Routledge, 2012.

Christian men, underneath their virtues and attire, women will always be women, and therefore subordinate to men. In fact, writers such as Jerome strictly opposed monastic virginal women who cut their hair or wore men's clothing. Despite being supported by many women, Jerome carefully subjugated them and contained them within a strict "female" category and metaphor as "brides". Ultimately, despite the great support Thecla is shown but patristic authors who claim to admire her, and the wide range of opinions on her, varying from utmost praise to disparagement, her femininity is stripped only enough that her sexuality is made less dangerous. Thus, in these sources, her value rarely exceeds her role as a specifically virginal woman outside of the stories in which she appears.

Perpetua and Felicitas

Another martyr story with an emphasis on a female body is the *Passion of Perpetua, Felicitas, and their companions*, in which the female body operates as a battleground for theology even while being physically and literally assaulted in the arena.⁷⁷ . The *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas (MPF)*, as it is also called, purportedly describes the experience of a group of catechumens somewhere near Carthage in the year 203 CE. It is written in the form of two memoirs, one from Perpetua and one from Saturus, and an outside framework of an editor or redactor. The legitimacy of this authorship is subject to much debate, and even if it was written by Perpetua herself, it went through editing before coming to us in its present form.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ White, Caroline, ed. *Lives of Roman Christian Women*. Penguin UK, 2010.

⁷⁸ Cooper, Kate. "A father, a daughter and a procurator: authority and resistance in the prison memoir of Perpetua of Carthage." *Gender & History* 23.3 (2011): 685-702.

Whether or not it was written by one, two, or three, or even four authors is a significant consideration, but in any of these cases, as Kate Cooper notes, the narrative invites readers to “share the thought-world of a narrator, Perpetua”, and to understand it as three segments with different voices.⁷⁹ It differs from the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, however, in many ways- notably that it claims and is granted more basis in historical events, and that it is an actual martyrdom in which the catechumens are killed, and not merely a grandiose escape from death at the hands of authorities.

The *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas* begins with the narrator explaining that they will tell the story a group of martyrs as a model for their own day, and follows the baptismal candidates as they approach their day of martyrdom, focusing on Perpetua and a pregnant woman who is a slave, Felicitas. Perpetua is described by the narrator as being married, educated, and of good family, and her brother describes her as “greatly privileged” in her relationship with god that she can ask for visions, so she clearly is given a position of social and spiritual power that is not dependent upon gender already, but it becomes more complicated.⁸⁰ The beginning of the account, from Perpetua’s perspective, tells of her experiences as a new mother in prison and of the visions she receives which reveal the fate of the group. What is perhaps most shocking about this particular tale, and relevant to the question of women “becoming” men, is the Perpetua’s

⁷⁹ Cooper, 685. Heidi Vierow suggests that it is even likely that it was written by a woman with a male redactor, given the tension between the masculine and feminine voices in the work, and Kate Cooper observes this tension, suggesting that Perpetua was more of a “subversive” and radical character than the editor acknowledges, but even “Perpetua’s” writings uphold gendered assumptions in many ways, and there is other evidence to the contrary. “Feminine and Masculine Voices in the ‘Passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas.’” *Latomus*, vol. 58, no. 3, (1999): 610.

⁸⁰ White, 7

Kate Cooper, in “A father, a daughter and a procurator...” also notes that while many scholars have taken for granted that Perpetua was a woman of means or of at least some status, she posits that this is not necessarily the case, as Perpetua’s family situation in the narrative itself might indicate that her family did not possess wealth or influence

final vision, in which she is led by a deacon Pomponius to the amphitheatre, where she anticipates facing the wild beasts.⁸¹ However, instead of being brought to wild beasts, she finds that she is to face a large Egyptian man. In preparation for the fight, she is stripped down and proclaims that she looked down and “found I was a man”. She is ultimately victorious over the Egyptian, and trods his head as well, realizing that this vision showed that she would actually be fighting the devil, and would triumph. While those around her throughout this vision still refer to her as a “woman”, and it seems almost incomprehensible that she is actually male in her vision, she functions in the battle as a man. She is stripped and equipped for a fight as a male would be in contest, and there is no controversy among the crowd over seeing her naked body or having the strength to take him out. Again, as in Thecla, the image of the female body is muted in this particular scene, seen as a male conqueror defeating another male. From her own voice, Perpetua’s “femaleness” is stripped with her clothing, and she stand before the devil as someone physically and spiritually strong, capable of victory over large men, and subsequently male(ish) “herself”.

The image of a male battling in the arena fits into a common narrative of the time. State-sponsored execution was a very public affair that involved primarily male actors and virtues (such as courage, strength, and control); however, women figure frequently in Christian martyr stories.⁸² As Castelli remarks, martyrdom is itself heavily gendered violence, and while martyrdom lends itself to ideals of “masculinity”, it also in many ways inverts the hierarchical power structures by glorifying becoming a victim,

⁸¹ White, 10.

⁸² Castelli, Elizabeth Anne. *Martyrdom and memory*, 60.

seemingly against the grain of typical virtue and male “strength”.⁸³ It places the characters in a masculine realm, yet ultimately the sign of their courage and strength is from their physical defeat in this world and death at the hands of others. The change in power dynamics, and “last becoming first” idea emerges strongly in the *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas*. For example, we see Perpetua repeatedly in visions defeating much greater foes, trodding them underfoot, a fierce conqueror in her visionary ideal. At the same time in the physical world of the story, we see male characters submitting to execution. There is also an apparent former slave, Felicitas, who not only is among the martyrs but acquires an important and exceptionally venerated role as she must give birth while imprisoned for her faith, and does so without giving in to the pain and mockery she endures. However the “female” values of “passivity and submission”, which Castelli notes are privileged by Christian theorists, are also challenged by Perpetua, who takes a very active role in facilitating her own death and maintaining her family and dignity through the ordeal, both shunning the social role demanded of her by her family and community and claiming a new one with her fellow Christians. Thus while she may become a victim of the persecutions, she does so while embodying many masculine virtues and asserting her own force and authority over her captors. She makes herself into a model of a male athletic competitor, drawing on the theological framework of conquering Satan, despite being conquered, through imprisonment and martyrdom, by the government.⁸⁴

⁸³ Castelli, 60

⁸⁴ White, 11

Yet again these roles, which seem to conflict, may not be so unusual in this literature, or as challenging to male authority as some might like. Shannon Dunn observes that women in martyr stories violate social norms for their gender through “authority sanctioned behavior that clearly defies those norms”.⁸⁵ She is not aligning her actions with social convention, yet her death and the meaning it is given afterwards is all tied to government and religious hierarchies. In many historical philosophical frameworks, virtues which the martyrs convey, such as self-control, were seen as “masculine” virtues. This aberration of proper female behavior simultaneously creates confusing roles but also makes the female martyr stand out as particularly exceptional in her community. She is thus not *necessarily* behaving in a way which would be the expectation for all women to follow and become less “female”, even when she is upheld as an exemplar person. Additionally, in the diary portion, Perpetua’s visions are often requested by men, and thus made more permissible or acceptable, with her brother telling her “you can surely ask for a vision to find out whether you will be condemned or free”.⁸⁶ Here, even while defying the wishes of her father and denying blood-family ties, she fits a mold of following the instructions of a brother. Although she ultimately denies her role as a mother to her child, for the first several days in the prison she is deeply worried about her child, only relieved when they allow her to have it with her.⁸⁷ Perhaps her change in her relationship and interdependence with her child symbolically aligns with her change to a Christian martyr, but it is not separated from her character. In the

⁸⁵ Dunn, Shannon. “The Female Martyr and the Politics of Death: An Examination of the Martyr Discourses of Vibia Perpetua and Wafa Idris.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 78, no. 1, (2010): 203.

⁸⁶ White, 7

⁸⁷ White, 7; Sarah Parkhouse (“The Fetishization...”) posits that Perpetua sees herself as a mother, while the narrator does not; however Parkhouse herself acknowledges Perpetua herself sacrifices her ability to be a mother to a child and loses her ability to mother her child even before the end of her diary

narrator's voice, too, we see ways in which not only is the Roman state putting these women in role-defying positions, but the men in their Christian group also seem to sanction and accept their "masculine" deeds and strength, so long as it is in service of the community and faith. We see this, for example, when Perpetua is forced to separate from her child upon giving birth and unable to be its mother, but she ultimately comes to peace with this and leaves the baby well cared for, physically changed himself and abruptly weaned.

"Martyrdom" within this early Christian context upholds masculine qualities and values, but it is still an option for everyone and does not discriminate by gender, class, or status, as Perpetua and Felicitas demonstrate. Yet perhaps because of the "masculine" characterization of martyrdom, female martyrs assume a less "feminine" role through the literature. This is largely through their actions, as we see Perpetua having a great deal of power in her relationships with men, insisting that the group of martyrs be treated better in prison. She also speaks out against the injustice of forcing them to wear the robes of Ceres, speaking with authority to those in the group, and intercedes through prayer on behalf of her brother. Much of her ability to assert herself is often tied to her privilege and ability, however, as when speaking to the tribune she is described as "that noble woman", and, whatever she may say in her diary, the narrator voice wants her to be viewed as a social elite.⁸⁸ Felicitas, in her position both as a pregnant woman and a slave, is asked by a prison guard while giving birth, "You are in great pain now, but what will you do when you are up against the beasts? Did you not think of that when you refused to sacrifice?" to which she responds, "Now it is I who suffer this, but there it will

⁸⁸ White, 13

be someone else in me who will suffer for me, just as I will suffer for him”.⁸⁹ He both mocks her pain of giving birth, drawing attention to her weakness and seemingly suggesting her stupidity as well. Yet her response turns the ideas of her weakness and pain around, depending on the male idea of their “Lord” as a source of strength but also indicating her own ability to endure suffering and recognizing her extreme devotion to her community, upsetting, to some extent, his gendered assumptions and ridicule.

This masculinization, however, occurs through their physical bodies as well. We see this pattern mapped onto the body of Perpetua, whose son conveniently stops needing to be breastfed and whose breasts immediately stop producing milk, stopping her from experiencing the pain and discomfort that she would have as a woman with female genitalia. Similarly, Felicitas giving birth prematurely to a child so that she can be executed with her fellow Christians is both miraculous and “biology-defying”. It is as if it is necessary for the physical traits and realities of their young female bodies to diminish in order for them to participate in Christianity equally with their male companions, and their bodies defy what “female” bodies biologically should do, as they await in prison their sentence.

Perhaps, then, what particularly differentiates the women in the martyrdom’s “masculinization” from the Roman ideal of a modest, industrious, but also occasionally flexible role, is not simply that they are permitted by their male companions to take on new roles exhibiting courage and strength. Rather, it is that they do so while consciously and very radically rejecting their devotion to family and their position in a proper Roman household. Clark wrote that Thecla most noticeably differs from Greek novels in

⁸⁹ White, 13

that, at the end, they do not end in sexual union with the sought after male lover.⁹⁰ Yet it is not merely a lack of sexual union but also a denial of many of the social entanglements that entails, and perhaps, one might speculate, what is appropriate for a woman to do. At times, this masculinization can even manifest itself physically and in ways that are honored or at least recognized as a positive in the texts.

These women, however, are not freed of their female bodies, as many would note. Their bodies and power are still a source of tension in the work, and it is speculated that Tertullian, who was notoriously concerned with controlling the roles of women in the church, could have authored the work, and he was certainly at least familiar.⁹¹ Thus it is likely safe to suppose that the physical limitations of gender are only broken within the one vision, and are in fact reified in the larger text. What we find in the “real” martyrdom scene is strikingly different-- the naked bodies of women are a scandal to the audience-- they are clothed in tunics, and she carefully preserves her modesty and female beauty even to death, anxious about her hair being in place and her legs being covered. They carefully watch their bodies, and a reader can see how this ties to their sense of dignity as women with certain social expectations associated. Perpetua and Felicitas even receive particularly vicious attacks in the arena by a cow specifically because of their gender.⁹² Looking at the “outside narrator” voice’s presentation of women in this work, we see Perpetua being portrayed as strictly female, following Christian moral conventions, throughout the entire path from the prison to death. It is

⁹⁰ Clark, Elizabeth A. "The lady vanishes: dilemmas of a feminist historian after the “linguistic turn”." *Church History* 67.1 (1998): 17.

⁹¹ Parkhouse, Sarah. "The Fetishization of Female Exempla: Mary, Thecla, Perpetua and Felicitas." *New Testament Studies*, vol. 63, no. 4, (2017): pp. 567 - 587.

⁹² White, 16

in the “outside narrator” portion of the text, too, that Felicitas is reintroduced, and her pregnant body and then post-partum body, her pain and childbirth highlighted through the narrative.

The depiction of these women on the path to the tribune, again, highlights just how female Perpetua and Felicitas both are. Perpetua, here, radiant and “like a wife of Christ”, seems incredibly pure, filling a role that is often fit with only virginal women despite her having borne a child.⁹³ Frankfurter particularly notes how in the martyrdom scene depicted by the narrator, Perpetua’s thigh being exposed, even as she covers it, draws attention to the her exposed female body. We see Perpetua striving to maintain her image and modesty, a perfect model of “appropriate” female behavior as male religious elites such as Tertullian would have envisioned. She is so clearly depicted as having the physical appearance of a female in the martyrdom half of this narrative that it is hard to understand how she could have been a man in her own vision of triumph. Even her ultimate death is not without a vague and violent image tied to heterosexual intercourse— the final act in her life is one of male penetration, as she guides the sword to her throat.⁹⁴ Thus, despite the power that Perpetua exhibits, she is apparently not a threat to male control, and instead, upholds male values and hierarchy. She does so even while glorifying women who might challenge these assumptions, precisely by conveying such women as exceptional and “unfeminine” in the ways in which their femininity would be a disadvantage.

⁹³ White, 14

⁹⁴ White, 224

Conclusions

This treatment of gender which appears in early Christian works is neither new to Christianity, nor does it cease altogether in later texts. In the Christian texts, while there is more theological rhetoric going into the evil and potentially “sinful” or easily tempted presentation of women as “feminine”, such as in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, and the relationship of male to divine, as in Pauline epistles, they fit within a cultural milieu of similar veins of understanding of female gender and sexuality and bodily existence. Additionally, later changes in Christianity made for different ways in which women’s gender was understood and what ecclesiastical and social roles they could hold. For example, as the tradition progressed and monastic traditions began to take firmer root, first women had access to ascetic lives in household monastic contexts, and eventually in more formalized group monasteries, in which we can see them trying to operate under patriarchal control.⁹⁵ The masculinization of Christian women’s appearances for the sake of chastity and faith also does not stop at Thecla or Perpetua, and there are many later hagiographies of women disguising themselves as men to escape marriage or society and become ascetics outside of their community, such as in the *Life of Saint Mary*, in which a girl, after being told “it is through the members of your sex that the devil wages war on the servants of God” responds with “I shall first cut off the hair of my head, and clothe myself like a man, and then enter the monastery with you.”⁹⁶ Stephen Davies sees some of these examples, particularly Eugenia, to be modeled on the

⁹⁵ For more see: McNamara, Jo Ann. *Sisters in arms: Catholic nuns through two millennia*. Harvard University Press, 1996.

⁹⁶ Davis, Stephen J. "Crossed Texts, Crossed Sex: Intertextuality and Gender in Early Christian Legends of Holy Women Disguised as Men." *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 10.1 (2002): 2.

Thecla narrative.⁹⁷ If it is true that the later stories of women disguising themselves as men were influenced by Thecla, it is evidence that the theme of disguising oneself as a male to escape societal pressures was not only recognized but celebrated. The idea that erasing or hiding one's femininity as a step in a path towards God becomes more substantial, but with roots in these earlier sources, as well as the idea that this "covering up" will never truly be completed or successful. Women in all these stories can join the ranks of women who have "transcended the limitations of their sex", without actually transcending sex.⁹⁸ Marie Delcourt saw the cross-dressing of these saints as a way of breaking from their past.⁹⁹ While the idea of breaking from one's past differs somewhat from the gender representations of the earlier martyrs somewhat, they all fit into this idea that female sexuality is something to be fled or shed (or perhaps disguised). Perpetua and Thecla, like these saints, cannot be "made male" physically, but in all cases there is a supposition that being male is the ideal way to be in relation to God.

Macrina, too, reveals this continued strain of thought in which ideal women are really something other than women. In the *Life of Macrina*, Gregory tells of his sister Macrina receiving the name "Thecla" to be used only in secret, which Gregory speculates was meant "to forecast the life of the young child, and to indicate by the name that she would follow her namesake's mode of life."¹⁰⁰ Macrina then lives out an ascetic life, entering a monastic life, learning only scripture, and teaching her younger brother Peter. Gregory goes so far as to say "In this case it was a woman who provided us with

⁹⁷ Davis, Stephen J. "Crossed Texts, Crossed Sex". 1-36.

⁹⁸ Davis, "Crossed Texts, Crossed Sex". 1

⁹⁹ Delcourt, Marie. *Hermaphrodite: Myths and rites of the bisexual figure in classical antiquity*. Studio Books, (1961): 99-101.

¹⁰⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, and W K Lowther Clarke. *St. Gregory of Nyssa: The Life of St. Macrina*. Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, (1916): 21.

our subject; if indeed she should be styled woman, for I do not know whether it is fitting to designate her by her sex, who so surpassed her sex”.¹⁰¹ In later cases, as in the martyrdoms, idealized women are used as an exemplar and pinnacle of “Christian life”, although also of Christian womanhood, rejecting aspects of the “female” viewed as evil without necessarily an implication that all women should or would be capable of reaching such a degree of greatness. Most real women, one must assume, would stay female, and subsequently subordinate and further from God.

When looking at these early sources together, it can be said without doubt that “feminism” or “liberation” were not the aim of stories of women “being made male”, and it seems that the theme of becoming male only reinforces patriarchal assumptions about gender inequality and the inferior status of women. Their conceptions of gender and liberation themselves would appear dramatically different from the way they are discussed today, often even in writings about the texts. These stories nonetheless shed some light on the conception of gender in early Christianity, and to what degree women could belong to and be promoted within Christian communities. Their belonging often is tied to their ability to properly perform their gender, while simultaneously rejecting aspects of it, and still often being imbued with a sense that their membership is heavily qualified.

At times, these stories of women taking on new roles that are less “feminine” pose a threat to male writers, suggesting that perhaps they do reflect some strand of early Christian thought that opened doors for women to see themselves as made more equal through their faith. They certainly do find new ways to change themselves, their lives,

¹⁰¹ Gregory of Nyssa and W K Lowther Clarke, 21

and their values to belong more thoroughly in a religious group which prioritized “masculinity”. Additionally, even the “masculinization” which grants them slightly more regard or authority in these texts is severely limited in terms of *who* can achieve such masculinization. Those of lower status and with fewer resources available to them would make for different stories than those of Thecla and Perpetua, and the ones who are able to change are at constant risk of exposure and death. It seems more likely that being “made male”, in the eyes of the writers of these works, often only goes so far as to lessen the dangers of femininity and female sexuality. Female ascetics and “ideal women” become virginal, asexual, or modest, and are no longer a temptation to men, but are still denied the power granted men or truly change their status as inferior bodily creatures. They are desexualized without the privilege of being male, and the paths they choose seem ultimately to promise an equality that it will never grant, for to be fully included one must be male, but becoming male is ultimately unachievable.