Claremont Colleges
Scholarship @ Claremont

Scripps Senior Theses | Scripps Student Scholarship

4-20-2012

Can't Be Tamed: A Feminist Analysis of Apocrypha and Other Scripture

Catherine Alison Ballard
Scripps College

Recommended Citation
Ballard, Catherine Alison, "Can't Be Tamed: A Feminist Analysis of Apocrypha and Other Scripture" (2012). *Scripps Senior Theses.* Paper 104.
http://scholarship.claremont.edu/scripps_theses/104

This Open Access Senior Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Scripps Student Scholarship at Scholarship @ Claremont. It has been accepted for inclusion in Scripps Senior Theses by an authorized administrator of Scholarship @ Claremont. For more information, please contact scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu.

CAN'T BE TAMED: A FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF THE APOCRYPHA AND OTHER SCRIPTURE

By

CATHERINE ALISON BALLARD

SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

PROFESSOR JACOBS
PROFESSOR RUNIONS
PROFESSOR EISENSTADT

APRIL 26, 2012

Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have been possible without help.

I wish to express my gratitude to my advisor, Professor Jacobs, who was abundantly helpful and offered invaluable assistance, support and guidance, and without whom I would never have gained an interest in Early Christian Studies. My deepest gratitude is also given to Professors Runions and Eisenstadt, without whom this would not be possible.

To the Religious Studies faculty, staff, and students who stood in solidarity and good humor with we the seniors, you have my endless gratitude.

I thank my a cappella group, the Ninth Street Hooligans, for their understanding, insanity, and endless love through the entirety of this process. Pigeons are not required to succeed.

I would also like to thank my family, who encouraged me most of all.

To all my friends, comrades, and countrymen, here and abroad, whose skype conversations, text messages, presences, and well-wishes made this year, and my entire college experience, the most memorable years of my life so far.

And finally, to the holy women who are the subjects of this thesis.

Shine on, you crazy diamonds.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION……....4

CHAPTER 1: THE VIRGIN..……..11

CHAPTER 2: THE MOTHER…….....29

CHAPTER 3: THE HARLOT……..45

CONCLUSION…….....57

BIBLIOGRAPHY…….61

Introduction: Can't Be Tamed

"One is not born, but rather, becomes a woman." —Simone de Beauvoir

When one thinks of the word "woman," a myriad of categories comes to mind. However, this presumably catchall word is not catchall at all. Boundless discoveries about gender, sexuality, autonomy, and modes of existence have created a slow, steady paradigmatic shift in the way people think, speak, and perform discourse. In particular, the discourse of women and gender has become inexhaustible, with the theory surrounding it becoming complex and sometimes confusing. The near universal aspect—like almost everything tangible one experiences in this world—remains that the word "woman", and more broadly, the system of gender is a social construct, produced by people to stratify and enforce systems of power.

The same complicated concepts apply to what we call "religion." Just as when examining gender as a construct, one must take into account religion's history, doctrine, ritual, philosophy, and many other aspects. The texts I will be examining are from the Western religious tradition (focusing mainly on Judaism and Christianity) and deal with similar themes. A focus on women in religion narrows the topic but it remains fraught with many distinct interpretations, scholarships, and specific discourses. Given the multiple ways in which these constructed terms circulate, it is worth specifying how I will individually define them.

Though the texts I use have common themes, they are divided into what I consider the three most societally important aspects of an ancient woman's identity: virgin, mother, and whore. *The Acts of Thecla* and *The Acts of Xanthippe and Polyxena* deal with virginity. *II Maccabees*, *The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas*, and select chapters of Augustine's *Confessions* represent motherhood. Finally, the hagiographies *Life of Pelagia* and *Life of Mary* navigate through the mire of sexualities that deviate from norms.

When I say the word "woman," I am using the Greco-Roman social construction. Almost all of the time, "woman" means "of the female sex." It is interesting that the writers of some of these texts explore the act of "gendering"—that is, to thrust upon individuals certain expectations of a specific gender role. They deal with this gendering in surprising ways, from removing femininity to enforcing it, from praising eunuchs to condemning them, even questioning, and sometimes overcoming, the Roman gender system. Gender, sex, and orientation are three different (but related) systems. Physical, biological sex is inborn, gender is socially constructed, and orientation is wholly dependent on the physical person and their attractions. However, in the Roman world, they were mixed together. Patriarchy, as I will define, creates a hierarchy of these three categories. More often than not, this force is harmful.

Sylvia Walby's definition of patriarchy identifies it as "a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women" (Walby 215). Ancient Roman history is rife with societal constructs that fit this definition. In essence, the Roman system of culture has an obviously sexist bent from a modern feminist perspective. The texts I will be examining are directly counter-cultural, as these particular texts paint Christianity in antiquity. However, while the texts' themes (such as gender ambiguity, autonomy, and agency) suggest an attempt to escape patriarchy, they encounter major problems. As an example, some things that seem oppressive in the modern day, like starving oneself to fit a societal ideal, were in fact emancipating for the protagonists of these texts. I will be analyzing them possessing the knowledge that they come from antiquity. This acknowledgment of Greco-Roman culture will inform my analysis.

Bodies in these texts are informed by a patriarchal understanding. The popular imagination that constructed bodies in Greco-Roman society can be seen through medical and philosophical texts of the time. For instance, Aristotle writes,

> Now the opposite of the male is the female, and it is opposite in respect of that whereby one is male and the other female. And since it differs in the ability it possesses, so also it differs in the instrument which it possesses…The reason for this is that some of the body's parts are 'principles', and once a principle has been 'moved'…many of the parts which cohere with it must of necessity change as well … (Aristotle)

A woman's body, he says, is "half-cooked." Many other philosophers, thinkers, and practitioners of ancient medicine also possessed these ideals, creating a hierarchy of bodies that one could not, and most often did not, question.

Aristotle states,

> For that which can foresee by the exercise of mind is by nature intended to be lord and master, and that which can with its body give effect to such foresight is a subject, and by nature a slave; hence master and slave have the same interest. (*Politics*)

Although his text distinguishes between females and slaves, both bodies were popularly regarded as lesser than those of free males. Foucault writes in *Discipline and Punish*, "This hierarchal societal system is echoed in the Early Christian understanding, but the foundational texts of the apocrypha directly challenge these ideas." (40)

Previous Scholarship

Foucault defines contemporary sexuality as something that the West highly regulates. According to Foucault, the West's view on sexuality is almost fully based on Victorian ideals. However, he points out in *History of Sexuality* that advances in science, the penal system, cultural shifts, and the increasing medicalization of sexuality created this Victorian, modern construction. Prior to Christianity, society and sexuality came from a different source. "Moral conceptions in Greek and Greco-Roman antiquity…were much more oriented toward practices of the self and the question of *askesis* than toward codifications of conducts and the strict

definition of what is permitted and what is forbidden" (Foucault 2.30). This code of sexuality is directly related to the gender roles both built and transgressed in the texts I analyze.

Foucault's discourse on the body says that it is directly related to political power and, therefore, must be socially managed. This concept was especially true in the ancient world. In a culture that valued a hierarchy of gender, class, and education, all bodies that deviated from the standard (male) were considered, as classical philosophers would say, "half baked" or unfinished. In *The Generation of Animals*, Aristotle states:

> Now the opposite of the male is the female...since it differs in the ability it possesses, so also it differs in the instrument which it possesses. Hence this is the condition into which the material changes over. And when one vital part changes, the whole make-up of the animal differs greatly in appearance and form.

These values of privileging one kind of body over the other are found deeply entrenched in these texts. By putting so much focus on bodies—Thecla's nakedness, Pelagia's shrunken limbs—the authors of these texts are saying exactly what Foucault is trying to convey: bodies are an important, if not the most important, tool of marking one's place in this particular system of power. Most of the secondary sources identified herein cite Foucault, and he remains one of the most influential philosophers and producers of discourse on gender, sexuality, and ancient ways of being.

Gender, in simplest terms, is and has always been a system of power. In my analysis of these heroines' transgressions of ancient gender roles, I will be using Judith Butler's system of gender-as-performance. Butler states, "Gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (Butler 520). The

nature of this performative gender is especially prevalent in the apocrypha, wherein the heroines give away their feminine, submissive traits as easily as they would give away jewelry.

Judith Butler writes, "The tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of its own production" (Butler 522). In the ancient world, this seemed to be a rule. In *Women, Gender, and Religion: A Reader*, Elizabeth Castelli states that as soon as one ascribes this particular definition to religion, discourse becomes far more complicated. "As soon as the divine is analogized to the human realm, gender emerges as a problem of both difference and power" (Castelli 4). This statement is particularly interesting when thinking of the particular Greco-Roman context in which God was (mostly) male. Different understandings of gender are central to the main ideas of this thesis.

Different forms of sexuality, especially hagiographical sexualities, are a main focus in my thesis. Virginia Burrus serves as inspiration, in large part due to her text *Sex Lives of Saints*. In her introduction, Burrus writes, "In the stories of saints who steadfastly reject both comforts and the confinements of conventional roles and relationships…we may discover not only evidence of the historic transformation of desire but also testimony to the transformative power of eros" (Burrus x). Early Christian women were in a special position in society and the greater Greco-Roman vision of the world. Because women remain one of the most vulnerable groups of people, stories of their defiance against societal, sexual, and gender roles continue to resonate today.

All of these texts were written in a larger context of Empire. The Roman Empire, in particular, valued a very specific kind of male machismo, automatically excluding those who in any way deviated from it. Christianity, as a mode of resistance, proved fruitful when redefining gender. “Pre-imperial Christianity thus provides an elegant example of the knowledge of gender that powerlessness makes available.” (Boyarin 23)

The role of hagiography, or the way saints' lives were documented and shared among laypeople, is an important aspect to how these women are portrayed. Hagiographies of women, in particular, have a very clear message. "The message of such texts is simple: if the daughters of Eve can remake their bodies into spiritual vessels, so too can all other sinners" (Coon xviii). Although I am using more than one type of hagiography in my analysis, it is easy to see that women's stories and experiences were often regarded as "teachable moments."

My analysis of these texts is explicitly feminist. Therefore, these analyses of the texts depend wholly on my definition of feminism. Many types of feminism exist, especially in academia; as such, I will use my understanding that has developed from many different sources. Mostly, though, I will depend on Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake's definition of third wave feminism in *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism*: "We define feminism's third wave critique of beauty culture, sexual abuse, and power structures" (Heywood and Drake 3). In my particular brand of feminism, knowledge of these issues is essential. The ability to choose where you fit in these issues, or agency in the face of adversity, is a central tenet of my feminism. I refer to this type of feminism (perhaps prematurely) as "contemporary feminism."

I will be performing a contemporary feminist analysis of works of apocrypha, the bible, and writings of various church fathers. By performing this analysis, I hope to determine if the women in these texts come close to contemporary feminists, or if they are bending to yet another patriarchal system. As I am focused mainly on Early Christianity and Gender Studies, I will use my understanding of these varying discourses to analyze these texts. By doing so, I hope to create a new, feminist interpretation of these famous stories.

Chapter 1: The Virgin

"But the fish (sea-calves,) when they saw the lighting and fire, were killed, and swam dead upon the surface of the water, and a cloud of fire surrounded Thecla, so that as the beasts could not come near her, so the people could not see her nakedness." (*The Acts of Paul and Thecla*)

In the words of Michel Foucault, "The fetish of virginity for both men and women becomes through the course of later antiquity a key sign of the relationship between the body and the self, between the self and the world … virginity was a hot topic" (2). This understanding grows out of the new focus on the body, viewed through a uniquely Early Christian lens. This responsibility is particularly articulated in the writings of Paul. He saw the suppression of "carnal desire" as a war between the soul, which would join God in heaven, and the earthly body, which would be resurrected to a more perfect form. "The destruction of the flesh that endangers the whole church and the preservation of the spirit … constitute the battleground" (Martin 173). Breaking away from bodily desire, as well as the socio-political implications of existing in Greco-Roman antiquity, would cause one to become the master of one's body, and thus, one step closer to achieving the ultimate holiness, to be "like the angels" (Matthew 22:30).

This focus on renunciation was nothing new, as this kind of attitude often grew into a series of ascetic beliefs, but it was especially apparent in the Greco-Roman values it transgressed. A pre-Christian group called the Cynics, which included Musonius Rufus, was one such ascetical group. “Long before the emergence of Christian asceticism, however, many Roman philosophers of a wide variety lay out their own system of asceticism.” (Valentasis 550)

Nobody in the ancient world was free from societal expectations, but virgins were monitored particularly closely by society. With Augustan laws mandating the reproduction of the Roman elite, women who fit into that socioeconomic status had few choices when it came to

marriage and children. In the great governing hierarchy of ancient sexuality, free women were placed in a passive role. "The distinction between active and passive shaped roman period definitions of natural and unnatural: free, adult male citizens ought never to be passive, and women should never be active" (Brooten 2). In the Apocryphal Acts, particularly the two I will examine, an inversion of the expected social roles of women that comes with this new Christian understanding both complicates and simplifies the true roles of virgins in antiquity and whether they are feminist in the contemporary sense.

In the *Acts of Thecla*, a young Iconian woman named Thecla tries to shed her passive role as a woman by embodying a more masculine persona. She ultimately fails. Meanwhile, Xanthippe and Polyxena (from the *Acts of Xanthippe, Polyxena, and Rebecca*) reach for autonomy through their romantic desire for one another, thus transforming Xanthippe into the active half of the passive/active couple. Throughout both stories, glimmers of a type of feminist independence shine through. However, this conception of true, individual liberation ultimately fails for both sets of women.

Contexts

While the Romans maintained strict hierarchies of body and soul, Christianity possessed very different, yet just as complex, values when it came to embodiment. Before we explore the Christian understanding, we look to the Jews for what may have inspired Paul, who was a devout Pharisee pre-Christ.

In most Jewish households, like in Roman households, men were in charge of protecting their daughter's virginity. "A daughter is a hidden source of sleeplessness for her father … while she's a virgin, that she not be seduced and become pregnant…" (Sirach 42: 9-10). As the passage continues, it proposes that if a daughter does not align perfectly with the social norms, the father will be ridiculed and shamed on the streets. J. Duncan Derrett's "The Disposal of Virgins" states,

"Irrespective of *law* it can never be a norm that the male head of the family should not select an alternative which involves him … in shame and corresponding loss of honor" (26). An out-of-wedlock pregnancy, and the resulting child, would threaten a father's social status. Therefore, "Fathers were greatly agitated by their daughters reaching puberty unmarried … pious Jews in Paul's day gave their daughters in marriage in puberty or little before" (Derrett 26). According to medieval Torah scholar and physician Maimonides, women were expected to marry at "twelve years and a day" or "as soon as two pubic hairs were put forth." It was crucial to start marriage negotiations before puberty because after six months the woman could put her marriage into the hands of any other family member. This allowed women, who were no longer prepubescent and in the hands of their fathers, to have a say over who would arrange their marriage.

Jewish men were subjected to similar cultural norms, but their betrothals often happened much later in life. Most Jewish men wed after sixteen. However, the types of women they could marry were dictated by specific societal rules. There remains record of Christian girls marrying later than their Jewish or pagan counterparts do. However, "while the general age at marriage was higher for Christians. A considerable number of them still married very young" (Hopkins 320). Whether this had to do with a general shift in ideas of when it was appropriate to marry or had a more far-reaching solution, like asceticism and changing norms, marriage was never fully renounced.

Renouncing marriage for the sake of God(s) was not unusual in ancient Rome and its territories. While virginity per se was not particularly valued in this society, specific groups of women, such as the Vestal Virgins, were part of a system that privileged virginity over the state of marriage. "A single lapse of a single priestess threatened the very existence of the state" (Staples 135). However, the maintenance of a priestess' virginity said very little about her purity in the Christian sense. These virgins were not guarding their respective virginity for fear of sin or

pollution, and they were not locked away, as some schools of asceticism would have preferred. Vestals could (and did) socialize with members of the outside world; little was done to protect their chastity. This tangential fact is quasi-feminist. Although vestals, too, were under the rule of Roman society, the fact that they were expected to guard their own virginity and were not micromanaged by men provided them a kind of autonomy.

Marriage, for both the Jews and Romans, represented the microcosm of the empire in which they lived. The structure of the family unit—with a paterfamilias ruling over his wife, children, and slaves—was integral to the maintenance of the Empire. This social construction of marriage "…distinguished itself from the barbarians who hovered on its borders..." (Hughes 1) and "demarcated Greco-Roman society not only from contemporary Indo-European peoples … but also from most of the ancient and historic peoples of the Mediterranean" (Hughes 263). All things that came with marriage, such as bearing children and creating stable relationships among (mostly aristocratic) families, were important in maintaining the status quo. The women in these stories challenge this notion.

Thecla hailed from Iconium (now Koyna, Turkey). Polyxena and Xanthippe were from Spain. Both places were Roman territories, and both had accepted the basic tenets of Roman culture and Roman law. In Ramsay's *Historical Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians*, he states, "Asia Minor…being suited to Selucid rule, passed into Roman possession…in Asia Minor, where some traces of succession in the female line persisted, it is highly probable that the same marriage custom [daughters marrying adopted sons] prevailed…" (17). Spain followed Roman guidelines on marriage more strictly; the institution was identified with "the attainment of political power or the pursuit of financial gain" (Bush and McHugh 26). It was customary for Roman fathers to watch over marriages of their virgin daughters. This control was nothing new, but Christianity added another layer of value to what would be known as "spiritual purity."

Virginity is such an important concept in Christianity that two gospels in the New Testament, Matthew and Luke, open with a virgin girl. Any misgivings that Mary was not a virgin before, during, and after Jesus were blasphemy in most circles. "The Word himself, coming into the Blessed Virgin herself…He was the true God. Therefore he kept his Mother a virgin even after her child-bearing" (Cyril of Alexandria 4). The Virgin Birth was not the first time the church formed a narrative around sexuality, but it remains one of the main tenets of all Christianity. This serves both to prove the power of the Christian God and to privilege virgins (at least partially) over married women and mothers. Because of Mary's purity, tradition indicates that she was blessed with no pain in childbirth. The "curse of Eve" was lifted for Mary because of her piety and faith in God. We will see more about the “curse of Eve" later.

In the remaining books of the New Testament, virginity becomes even more esteemed. Maud Burnett McInerney writes in *Eloquent Virgins: Thecla to Joan of Arc* that this focus begins in the Gospel of Luke. Mary, upon hearing that she is going to give birth to the Savior and God's Son, claims ecstatically, "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior… From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me— holy is his name" (Luke 1:46-49). McInerney states that "… virginity and the gift of prophecy are closely linked … virgin girls appear as prophets" (67). While this is not the case in texts like *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*, where both women are mothers, the virgin-prophet phenomenon boomed in popularity in the centuries following, persisting into the medieval period.

One of the most famous works in favor of virginity comes from the Epistles of Paul. Put together from 50-60 AD, they contain the apostles' advice and instruction for the daily life of the ancient Christian, including sexual relations, the center of society. "Now for the matters you wrote about: 'It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.' But since sexual

immorality is occurring, each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and each woman with her own husband" (1 Cor 7: 1-2). The suggestion does not see sex as negative in the context of a God sanctioned union.

Paul frames the question of marriage as something that happens to men, and sees women as a means to an end. For example, in the same passage, he states

> If anyone is worried that he might not be acting honorably toward the virgin he is engaged to, and if his passions are too strong and he feels he ought to marry, he should do as he wants. He is not sinning. (1 Cor 7: 1-2)

In other words, sexual immorality, or *porneia*, was frowned upon. In Paul's context, that could mean visiting a male prostitute, embodying the passive role, or being penetrated. "Whoever enjoyed being penetrated was considered weak, unnatural, or at least suspect—or (to sum up all three terms into one body) a woman" (Martin 177).

Continuing this trend, the church fathers in the prevailing centuries viewed marriage mostly as negative. Jerome, who translated the bible into Latin, says, "'Flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God, neither doth corruption inherit incorruption.' If corruption attaches to all intercourse, and incorruption is characteristic of chastity, the rewards of chastity cannot belong to marriage…" (*Against Jovinian* Book 1 §37). Jerome came later than the Acts of Paul and Thecla, which describe an earlier period in history. The continuing emphasis on virginity proves that this ideal did not fade into obscurity.

While this new doctrine of chastity was quite negative for men, who were expected to carry on the family line, it was an interesting prospect for women. Along with not being married, the concept would also not require that they submit to intercourse and pregnancy. "To women, generally excluded from the construction of late antique and medieval society from the exercise of power, she could promise independence and a very particular kind of authority" (McInerney

30). The narratives of these saved virgins can be examined as archetypes. "The virgin is always beautiful, always of a good family, her chastity always somehow threatened. She undergoes a series of tortures and confrontations, and inevitably dies, usually decapitated" (McInerney 30). While this description misses Thecla, we see it in other "theological romances" of the time period. I will define these now.

Theological Romances

Herein, the words "theological romance" refer to a very specific type of writing. "In substance the Apocryphal Acts are a religious novel, similar in form, and to some extent in matter, to the Greek romances by Achilles Tatius, Heliodorus, and others…" (Ghaly 1). We see the striking similarity to these texts in a description of the novels themselves, given by B.P. Reardon. "Hero and heroine are always young, wellborn, and handsome; their marriage is disrupted or prevented by separation…Virginity or chastity, at least in the female, is of crucial importance, and fidelity to one's partner…is of crucial importance" (Cooper 20). Romances like *Chareas and Callirhoe* and *Leukippe and Kleitophon* follow this model exactly. They see each other across a public place, and their love and desire go unfulfilled until they are married.

The writers of the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles mirrored this style, but to a very different end. Where the classical Greco-Roman romance novel has two lovers pining for each other, the heroines in these Acts are pining for the salvation of God. "[T]he emphasis on sexual renunciation—in contrast to the romance's stress on fertility—was the product of literary and rhetorical sophistication … the inversion of romance is intentional, not coincidental" (Cooper, 56). Where fidelity to one's lover was the ultimate show of devotion, in these texts, it is the willingness to lose one's life, and preserve one's virginity, for Christ.

Nevertheless, the writers of the Acts caused controversy, especially among Church Fathers, because of their breakdown of gender. A high-class woman is forcibly knocked down

among the most hated members of society, and through her force of will, she finds her place with God, as follows the template. However, with the women in these stories embodying the active role in their own destiny, they are subverting the expected passive roles that the romantic novel affords them. According to Foucault, Aurelia Armstrong writes,

> The regulatory power of the norms that govern our performances of gender is both disguised and strengthened by the assumption that gendered identities are natural and essential… [feminists] should be to challenge dominant gender norms by exposing the contingent acts that produce the appearance of an underlying 'natural' gender identity. (Encyclopedia of Philosophy)

Particularly in early Christianity, the natural gender norms, passive/active, that appeared in the classic novel were challenged as a part of the Acts' inversion. Whether meaning to or not, the Acts put forward a new idea of what a woman should be.

Acts of Thecla

Written in the 2nd Century, *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* was an increasingly popular narrative involving the controversial status of women. Tertullian, an early commenter on the story, dismissed it, citing the absurdity of a woman baptizing herself, a main point of contention in the ancient world. Tertullian said this in his *De Baptismo*, or his authority of the rite of baptism. "As for women who appeal to the falsely written acts of Paul in order to defend the rights of women to teach and to baptize … the presbyter of Asia who produced this document … was removed" (Tertullian). While Tertullian would not give *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* any authority, other church fathers were more accepting. "Cyprian, Eusebius, Epiphanius, Augustine, Gregory Nazianzen, Chrysostom, and Severus Sulpitius … mention Thecla, or refer to her history. Basil of Seleucia wrote her acts, sufferings, and victories…" (Hone 3) Thecla's cult,

which began shortly after the story was published "…in both Egypt and Asia Minor … remained closely linked with communities of women" (Davis iv). Thecla is still celebrated as a saint.

Unlike most other woman saints of this period, Thecla is not martyred. She is almost killed on multiple occasions, but through the grace of God, she survives to preach the gospels. She is a proto-martyr and a symbol of Christian determination and of God's miracles. Later texts describe her as a wise woman, holding her in as high esteem as Paul, her teacher. Scholars of *AOT* state that "…references in the Thecla story to a woman's self-baptism, missionary activity, and commissioning by Paul … to reveal women in apostolic times shared in the sacerdotal and teaching offices of apostles" (Boughton 367). However, this statement presents several problems with the concept of passive/active genders and gender performance.

If examining Thecla for actual historical ideas of gender, all signs point to Thecla recognizing that she, as a woman, has no real power. Thus, she offers to cut her hair, she dresses in men's clothing, and she "becomes" a man. As the story opens, it focuses on Paul's arrival in Iconium. His friends have sinned with hypocrisy, but he loves them anyway. Paul is invited into Onesiphorus' home, but Demas and Hermogenes "through a show of great religion" complain that they are not. This passage of the Acts of Thecla is basically a reframing of Matthew 5-6, complete with beatitudes. Paul changes the text of the beatitudes and adds commandments to keep rituals of the church pure. These rituals include baptism, bible study, and, of course, virginity.

> Blessed are the bodies and souls of virgins; for they are acceptable to God, and shall not lose the reward of their virginity; for the word of their (heavenly) Father shall prove effectual to their salvation in the day of his Son, and they shall enjoy rest forevermore. (AOT 1:22)

Thecla, who sits passively at the window in the house next door, is moved by these words and, therefore, refuses to marry her otherwise loving fiancé, Thamyris; she even refuses to move. This represents one of the first fledgling traces of Thecla's independence. Even though she remains passive, she is actively resisting the norms of her society already. The reaction of everyone in the household, upon hearing that Thecla wants to keep chaste, is little less than apocalyptic. Thamyris goes to the same friends we saw in the beginning and asks about Paul. They say they do not know who he is, but that he teaches. "There can be no future resurrection, unless you continue in chastity and do not defile your flesh" (AOT 2:9). Both Thamyris and Thecla's mother Theoclia weep openly as if Thecla had died. Thamyris finds Paul and turns him in for preaching that marriage is unlawful. They say nothing about the fact that he wanted virginity.

We see here that Paul is not the hero of the classic novel; rather, he is a preacher who disrupts the social order. The wandering ascetic plus the settled householder would represent "…an exploration of not asceticism but of Christianity's claim to moral superiority … the ascetic teacher representing a disinterested challenge to the status quo" (Cooper 58). In the grand picture of Greco-Roman society, it is Paul's preaching, and not Paul himself, that Thecla aspires to follow.

The next part of the story seems to be directed toward a very specific kind of upper class woman. Thecla hears about Paul's imprisonment, sneaks into the prison in the dead of night, and gives her jewelry to the guards for the chance to see Paul. She is so overwhelmed with emotion that she kisses his chains. "And as she perceived Paul not to be afraid of suffering, but that by divine assistance he behaved himself with courage, her faith so far increased that she kissed his chains" (AOT 4:4). The implication of this passage is that Thecla is dismissing barriers of class and gender. The kissing of Paul's chains before she leaves represents that she is determined to become Christian, and she sheds her social status in the hierarchy as a high-class woman. As in

his recitation of the new Beatitudes, Paul is once again a placeholder for Jesus, and Thecla would do anything to defend her faith.

When Paul is judged, Thecla rolls around in the dirt where he lay. This shows both Paul's holiness and Thecla's desperation to be with him. When the prison guard says she is summoned as well, she rejoices. We see an interesting power dynamic between Paul and Thecla, which solidifies right before she sits in judgment. "Just as a lamb in the wilderness looks every way to see his shepherd, [she] looked around for Paul … she saw the Lord Jesus in the likeness of Paul, and said to herself, Paul is come to see me in my distressed circumstances" (AOT 5:6). Thecla is acting as a disciple of Christ, and Paul is His placeholder.

When she is questioned about marrying Thamyris, as it is the law of Iconium, she becomes silent. Thecla's mother yells "Let the unjust creature be burned; let her be burned in the midst of the theatre for refusing Thamyris, so all women may learn from her to avoid such practices" (AOT 5:5). Thecla's mother, the pagan, would rather kill her daughter than see her not be married. The situation elevates to legal status in which not marrying your promised husband is punishable by death. This is portraying a certain Christian societal value, as well as heightening the drama. "There is little sympathy for a mother's sense of betrayal…it is because of [her] craven, seemingly endless need to harness the bodies of its youth to replenish his numbers—that she emerges as one of the story's minor villains" (Cooper 54). Instead of having the issue remain a family matter, it becomes city wide, drawing the attention of the governor, who bends to Theoclia's whim and orders Thecla to be burned. This establishes a Christian/non-Christian dichotomy—the non-Christians would burn their own flesh and blood for civic duty, the Christians would not.

God sends a storm down and extinguishes the flames. Thecla then goes to Paul, who was waiting for her, and they break bread. Images of the Eucharist are often used as symbols of a shared understanding. In this case, this shared experience is devoid of gender.

Later in the AOT, "a certain Syrian, named Alexander, a magistrate, in the city, who had done many considerable services for the city during his magistracy," sees Thecla and tries to sexually assault her. After realizing that Paul has denied his knowledge of her,

> she laid hold on him … and made him appear ridiculous before all the people. But Alexander, partly as he loved her, and partly being ashamed of what had been done, led her to the governor, and upon her confession of what she had done, he condemned her to be thrown among the beasts. (AOT 7:4)

In the arena, a she-lion is sent to kill her, but like Daniel in the lion's den, the lion licks her feet and proceeds to defend her.

She sees a pool of water that contains murderous seals, and she says to herself, "Now it is a proper time for me to be baptized" (AOT 9:2). She then dives into the pool, baptizing herself. This action is one of the most radical statements coming from a Pauline text. Because Thecla baptized herself, she is building an identity that does not depend on anyone but her and God, without a qualified bishop. A bolt of lightning kills the seals and a cloud of fire surrounds Thecla and her nakedness.

This detail brings to our attention the way bodies are treated in the text. The first person described, Paul, is not beautiful: "Of a low stature, bald (or shaved) on the head, crooked thighs, handsome legs, hollow-eyed; had a crooked nose; full of grace; for sometimes he appeared as a man, sometimes he had the countenance of an angel" (AOT 1:4). As the ancient world depended on appearance to categorize and produce a hierarchy, it is telling to note that Paul is described in this way. However, in the new Christian understanding, where Jesus' body is, among other

descriptions, described as an intimate part of the Holy Spirit, appearance does not matter, what the soul produces matters. Paul, as Jesus' literal double, has words that precede his body.

We can see this happening with Thecla. Because God covers her nakedness from the crowd, the male gaze no longer affects her. The gaze is defined by Jacques Lacan, as a state in which "the subject loses some sense of autonomy upon realizing that he or she is a visible object" (Lacan 127). This shows that she is blessed, and because she is free from the gaze, she can gain full autonomy. Because she is described as "beautiful" pre-baptism, we assume that, once truly Christian, she is no longer beautiful, or at least, not under any gaze but God's. Rather, the allusions to her appearance disappear altogether. "Beautiful," therefore, acts as a qualifier of weakness and gender. We will see this in Polyxena as well. Directly after her self-baptism, Thecla "dons a man's cloak" and effectively has transformed into a man. She follows Paul, who tells her to go and teach after her miraculous salvation.

Thecla is thus liberated from the constructs of the ideals of Greco-Roman gender, but she falls into another type of oppression. Because she lives for Paul and only references how important it is to follow the words of Paul, it seems that she isn't liberated in the least. In her context, however, the fact that she could resist the status quo and live life as a Christian makes her a very independent woman indeed. The fact that Paul sends her away is not purely a way to get Thecla away from Paul, but as a way of implying that Thecla is capable of realizing her own idenity in Christ.

The Acts of Xanthippe, Polyxena, and Rebecca

The Acts of Xanthippe, Polyxena, and Rebecca (hereafter "AXP") was written around the same time as *The Acts of Thecla*, but in a very different location and context. While they can both be counted as romances, Xanthippe and Polyxena subvert the traditional classical romance in a wholly different way. For Thecla, keeping her virginity meant independence, for Polyxena, it

means something else. Polyxena's story is told in two parts, the *Acts of Xanthippe* and the *Acts of Polyxena*. The full text is called *The Acts of Xanthippe, Polyxena, and Rebecca*, but Rebecca is mentioned only once and never comes up again. It can be taken that she serves as the token Jew (Gorman 1). Xanthippe and Polyxena eventually intersect in a grandiose manner.

Set in Spain, the story starts once again with Paul, whom the author calls "the truly golden and beautiful nightingale" (AXP I). A servant who has fallen ill explains that he has heard the words of Paul and that only Paul can cure the darkness that surrounds him. The mistress of the house, Xanthippe, hears this and speaks to the servant in private, causing all the household gods to fall. She then fasts and becomes celibate, groaning at her misfortune. Paul receives a vision that he should go to her, but he is thrown out of the house by her husband, Probus, who locks her up.

Here we see similarities to the Acts of Thecla. Like in AOT, Xanthippe bribes the porter with her jewelry (shedding her femininity) and goes to see Paul. She is attacked by demons that pursue her with "fiery torches and lightnings, and she, turning, saw behind her this terrible sight, and being possessed with great fear said, 'What has happened to thee now, wretched soul?'" (AXP I). She is, again, saved by a vision of Jesus as a beautiful youth. Paul takes her in and baptizes her, and they share the Eucharist. She returns home and convinces her husband to convert by collapsing and having a vision of Satan versus Christ. Paul single-handedly saving and converting upper class women is a theme in these Acts.

Meanwhile, Xanthippe's friend, Polyxena, "younger than herself, and beautiful in appearance" (AXP XXII), has a vision that she is swallowed by a dragon but rescued by a beautiful youth. Soon after an enemy of her intended husband abducts her, and she is put on a ship that is brought to the attention of the apostle Philip, who saves her. Polyxena flees after Philip, and his thirty people, armed with a cross, slay 5,000 of 8,000 people. She wanders into

the den of a lioness, prays that it will not eat her, and wanders out alive after thanking it profusely. She runs into the Apostle Andrew, who baptizes her and a Jewish slave, Rebecca (who is never mentioned again—except to convert).

After Andrew departs, Polyxena is kidnapped, again, by a prefect, who she begs:

> I know clearly how the devil hates virginity, but O Lord Jesus Christ, God of all, since I dare not beseech thee of myself, I bring to thee the prayers of thy holy preacher Paul, that thou mayst not suffer my virginity to be destroyed by anyone. (AXP, XXXV)

This speech serves both a social and moral purpose: the moral is her new Christianity, and the social is to maintain her standing as a virginal, unmarried woman. She is fulfilling both sets of standards. The prefect's son, who had converted because of Paul's effect on Thecla, attempts to disguise Polyxena, but fails. Polyxena is sent to the arena, where she meets the same lioness that had spared her earlier, and the whole city converts to Christianity because of the miracle.

The slaying of thousands of people and the tame lioness hyperbolize Christian influences on the status quo of the Greco-Roman city. Even though this likely did not happen, the impossibility of it hearkens back to the classical romance where *deux ex machina* ran rampant and the readers would be more familiar with stories of this type. Xanthippe and Polyxena eventually unite:

> And she made haste and came to us, and seeing Polyxena, was overcome by an unspeakable joy and fell to the ground; but Polyxena, embracing her and caressing her for a long time, brought her back to life. Then Xanthippe said to her, I, my true sister Polyxena, went not forth at all for forty days, praying much for thee to the loving God, that thy virginity might not be taken away. (AXP, XLI)

Xanthippe eventually dies in Polyxena's arms, and the story ends.

The focus on virginity in this story, surprisingly, is not the crux. While Thecla was about a woman empowering herself, AXP is about women expressing love toward one another. Polyxena, as nearly Thecla's doppelganger, would eventually find independence if following Thecla's model. However, as Xanthippe takes the male role in the story, Polyxena is submissively passed around, assuming the passive role. While Thecla actively pursues her virginity, "the AXP emphasizes the absolute inability of Polyxena to protect her own body. While the AXP constructs its female protagonists like the committed male-female couple of the novel, it simultaneously places the protection of the virgin's sexuality in the hands of men." (Gorman 425). And "Finally, when Xanthippe dies, Polyxena declares that she will live by Paul's side in order best to protect herself." (Gorman, 426) This is because the love of her life, Xanthippe, has passed away. She is now free to tour the countryside by Paul's side.

In other words, *The Acts of Xanthippe and Polyxena* is a text that deals with same-sex desire. In an essay in the volume *Immaculate and Powerful: The Female in Sacred Image and Social Reality*, Brooten writes that women like Xanthippe and Polyxena may have been "women who found their primary identification in other women and who may or may not have expressed that [identification] sexually" (63). This definition relates to the general definition of this specific type of lesbianism, as seen in *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire* by Teresa De Lauretis. "The seduction of the homosexual-maternal metaphor derives from the erotic charge of a desire for women … unlike masculine desire, represents her possibility of access to a sexuality autonomous from the male" (Lauretis xvii).

Elizabeth Castelli writes that what Paul says in Romans applies here: trading natural acts for unnatural acts. "Paul condemns sexual relationships between women as 'unnatural' because he believes … women are passive" (Castelli 128). Xanthippe can definitely be seen as a maternal figure to Polyxena, and this definition of sexuality makes sense to the context of Early

Christianity. Xanthippe is a maternal figure to Polyxena, not her partner. Two passive people, or two women, would not make a successful sexual or socially dynamic couple in the ancient world in which they lived.

However, while Thecla's true romance is with God (played by Paul), Polyxena's romance is with Xanthippe. The couple's virginities are used as devices to gain (or regain) their autonomy in a world that pressured them both to fall neatly into the limited roles society provided them. Ergo, both identities crafted are astonishingly equal for late antiquity. At the beginning of Christianity, the body, and its differing characteristics, did not matter. Women and men were expected to remain virgins forever. It is not until later that we begin to see virginity used as a weapon against women, rather than having it serve their purposes. As Christianity became more hierarchical, what once was an act of passionate rebellion (and of loving God, according to Christ) became a mandatory, policing force.

Chapter 2: The Mother

"But, like all mothers—though even more than others—she loved to have me with her, and knew not what joy Thou wert preparing for her by my absence." – Confessions, St. Augustine

As we depart from the subject of virginity, we move to the opposite of virginity: motherhood. One would be hard pressed to find a system more varied and more judged than that of motherhood. In the Greco-Roman world, barring a few class distinctions, mothering children had one central goal: to make sure a child lives through childhood. A woman did not receive the title of mother easily. With children, there arose extreme risk for the person carrying the child. Childbirth was—and still is—a bloody, frantic process. Often, the mother, the baby, or both died due to severe complications. Even in Genesis, God's punishment of Eve's disobedience is the ability to bear a child in the first place. "To the woman he said, 'I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children'" (Genesis 3:16). The biological and social imperative to be the next generation's portal to existence was made even more difficult.

In this chapter, I will explore three conceptualizations of motherhood, each put forward by a different text. As the belief system of the Roman Empire shifted, the definition of "mother" stayed roughly the same. However, new ideas of God and piety that came with the rise and domination of Christianity above all other belief systems changed slightly what it meant to be a mother and what were the best means to that end.

I will analyze these new systems of belief through a contemporary feminist perspective. While there are theories in scholarship that extensively analyze the role of mother, most of them deal directly with the ways mothers interact with their children. Feminism itself has a spotty track record with motherhood. Motherhood, as a social role, was and still is a rare ground for feminist scholarship to cover. "One reason for this low visibility is that the early feminist

writings on mothers and mothering, although often thoughtful, were intensely gloomy and painfully critical of women's choices" (Gross 269). The type of feminism I am using to analyze these sources, however, stresses not which choice is right for a woman, but the woman's ability, and right, to make that choice for herself. Thus, I will examine these texts' ideas of bodily autonomy as well as what it meant to be a successful mother in ancient times.

The form of motherhood I examine is not purely biological, but socially constructed. As a construction of the patriarchy, motherhood stands as one of the most important things a woman can do with her body and with her choices. There are major differences between the biological facts of motherhood and the cultural emphasis placed on it. "Under patriarchy mothers are continually defined in terms of their biological functions … this perspective romanticizes mother-child relationships…" (O'Reilly 970) In this chapter, in particular, the relationships between children and mother also include another complex concept. Although mothers are supposed to be "caring, emotional, and dependent beings who are expected to be life-giving, self-sacrificing, and forgiving…" (O'Reilly 970), when faith in God enters the picture, this definition changes. Christianity changed this maternal conceptualization. However, it remains heavily influenced by patriarchal norms.

Although most forms of Judaism have been historically matrilineal, Jewish mothers were respected in a different way.

> With all the emphasis on the importance of motherhood in Jewish tradition, it is rather surprising to find little in the way of liturgy that addresses motherhood…the Torah is not concerned with the stories of women apart from their motherly or wifely roles. (Gottlieb 88)

While many mothers are mentioned in the Old and New Testaments, the definition of motherhood in the grander picture of the society where these tales take place was similar to the Greco-Roman ideal.

Meanwhile, in the pagan world of ancient Rome, women of childbearing age were categorized in much simpler ways than men were. "[A] discussion on Roman youth automatically precludes females because they were either married and therefore adult or not and, therefore, children" (Harlow 194). Isidore of Seville, late sixth-century archbishop, did not add complexity in organizing women's lives. "[He] also defined a number of terms for life stages relating specifically to females…*puella* (girl), *virgo* (virgin), and *femina* (woman)" (Harlow 194). The last step in a very simple chain of events, to be a mother, in antiquity was to have completed growth and to have transitioned fully into adulthood.

At the dawn and spread of Christianity, we begin to see a shift in the way mothers (particularly mothers of important prophets) were regarded by popular culture. I have already mentioned Mary, mother of God, many times in this particular thesis. She was the paragon of good motherhood. Familiar maternal attributes—such as warmth, kindness, and compassion—were valued. With these traits, she represented a new form of motherhood. "For He hath regarded the lowliness of his handmaiden … all generations shall call me blessed" (Luke 1:48). She goes from lowly young woman—as all women were in some way lowly, be it the virtue of their sex or class—to God's most trusted, and blessed, womb.

While the scripture spells out a very clear fate for women who bear children, societal and cultural norms added to the myriad of processes of childrearing. Similar to the woman's role as virgin in antiquity, the woman's role as mother came with certain expectations. Especially in antiquity, a mother's definition and identity were cultivated through her ability to bear children. This pattern of thought continues today, although it has been hidden insidiously by mother

messages delivered by our culture. However, the realities of antiquity and what is saved for the historical and canonical records can be very different.

In the three texts I will be examining, the main purpose of these women's lives is not to bring up their children in the classical way. Rather, loving and obeying God is their main purpose, their physical children not taking up the forefront of their minds. Perpetua (and Felicitas), the mother of the seven sons in II Maccabees, and Monica, mother of St. Augustine, all rear their broods in different ways, but for a common purpose. That purpose is to extend their love of God and to follow His commandments.

The narratives presented in each story are very different for a clear purpose. The first, Maccabees, was written from an outside perspective, anonymously, centuries before Christianity was an established religion. This text influenced the attitudes towards martyrdom in Early Christianity and was also one of the first stories of a "manly woman." Interestingly, God does not play a direct part in this story. It is understood that He acted through the subjects in their bravery and faith.

The second, The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas, is a combined first and third person account. The narrator of the story believes Perpetua wrote the first large section of the martyrology herself and presents it as excerpts from her prison diary. Saturus, another prisoner-turned-martyr, takes over the story at one point, and scholars believe that Tertullian may have edited and written a portion. The third narrative that I will examine is straight from the mouth of Augustine. This is very different from the others, as we learn about the woman arguably closest to Augustine's life, his mother Monica. Because Perpetua may be the only woman who had any input on any of these stories, it will be interesting to see the kinds of definitions put forward by these texts and to see if the protagonists are indeed feminist.

II Maccabees

All of these texts take place in a time of resistance against the crushing weight of the status quo. The Greco-Roman authority was decidedly polytheistic, and the governments were extremely civic minded, ensuring peace and order. Here we have opposite value systems at work. Jews and Christians immediately separated themselves from their civic duty as citizens, and their faith protects them spiritually from any chance of conversion or abandonment. II Maccabees, the first of three written texts, sets an example that is not only important to the Jewish faith at a time of war, but also very important to the martyr-minded early church. In *Christian Memories of the Maccabean Martyrs*, Siemiatkoski says, "The account of the Maccabean martyrs found in 2 Maccabees is an example of resistance culture in which the violence of imperial domination was reinscribed into internal communal narratives" (13). This notion also applies to the other texts I will examine.

II Maccabees takes place in Hellenized Israel, hundreds of years before the birth of Christ. The tone is not like I Maccabees, with some historicity, but this tale is told with "a baroque rhetorical style (the florid Asianic style as distinct from a more restrained Attic style)" (Moore 251). The Books of Maccabees are a special group of canonical texts simply because of their context. In brief, a mother and her seven sons are told to convert to the worship of Zeus. To do that, they have to eat pork, an act forbidden by Leviticus 11:7–8. All of them refuse "for they were contemptuous of the emotions [that come with being tortured] and sovereign over agonies" (2 Maccabees 8:28). After refusal, the seven brothers are subjected to horrible tortures in front of their mother, most of them dying with the name of God on their lips. Their last words are shouted in their native Hebrew; they resist even as they are put to death. They are some of the first martyrs for God.

Throughout the murders of her sons, the mother encourages them, saying, "The Lord God is looking on and understands our suffering. Moses made this clear when he wrote a song condemning those who had abandoned the Lord" (2 Maccabees 7:6). She even comforts her last son, who appears to be a child.

> My son, have pity on me. Remember that I carried you in my womb... look at the sky and the earth... God made it all from nothing, just as he made the human race. Don't be afraid of this butcher. Give up your life willingly and prove yourself worthy of your brothers, so that by God's mercy I may receive you back with them at the resurrection. (2 Maccabees 7:29-32)

The mother of the seven sons comforts her son by saying that they will eventually reunite, that death is only a stepping stone to God and familial unity. She accepts that her children have perished in front of her. To the patriarchal system of motherhood, she should have given everything to help her children survive. However, given the situation of II Maccabees, she is doing right.

While this is a story of martyrdom in the face of an oppressive conqueror, this text is decidedly stoic in its composition. The psychological torture of witnessing the murder of each of her sons might have been enough to make the mother suffer sufficiently, but she remains strong in the face of her family's death. "She combined womanly emotion with manly courage and spoke words of encouragement to each of her sons in their native language" (II Maccabees 7:21). The stoic bent to the text can be found in the construction of the combination of each sex's best attribute. According to the philosophical tradition of that particular point in Greco-Roman culture, "in order to be deemed worthy of dominating others, one first had to be able to dominate oneself" (Anderson 253).

Antiochus, the king in charge of systematically eliminating each of the law-breakers, contrasts the mother and her sons. One son mocks Antiochus for his offer of prestige and power, and "[t]hese words of ridicule made Antiochus so furious that he had the boy tortured even more cruelly than his brothers" (II Maccabees 7: 39). Antiochus loses control of his passion (in this case, his rage at being mocked) and orders the son be thrown in the fire.

> Thus, the author presents the women's heroic actions in terms of a philosophical division between the emotional feminine element of the human constitution and the rational masculine element. The mother-martyr is thus portrayed as a woman who possesses masculine virtues. (Haber 6)

If we are building distinctly stoic constructions of masculinity, those who are victimized are the manliest: those in power are emasculated by the sheer, manly courage of the mother.

Earlier in Maccabees, an account describes a group of women who break the law against Jewish custom and circumcise their sons. The authorities find out, and thus, the women and their babies are executed. "For example, two women were brought in for having circumcised their children. They publicly paraded them around the city, with their babies hanging at their breasts, and then hurled them down headlong from the wall" (II Maccabees 6:10). This passage appears one chapter before the mother-martyr with the seven sons and is another way in which Jewish women are beholden to the Law above all other things. Because they circumcised their sons, the women are keeping to the basic covenant that started Judaism and their status as a chosen people.

> These anonymous women are portrayed exclusively as mothers as they take on religious roles: they circumcise their sons, instruct their children in ancestral law and ultimately give up the lives of both their children and themselves for the sake of the Law. (Haber 5)

It is a political protest as much as a spiritual one.

These mothers' main focus is not nurturing or protection, but the Word of God. Because these women obey the Law above all other things—including their lives and the lives of their children—they are liberated from the Greek imperialism that would have them assimilate. The stress on their obedience to God also entails eternal life. This gives the mother, who has a natural love of her children, the opportunity to both be a freedom fighter and experience solidarity with her sons. Her religion allows her to redefine motherhood in a counter cultural-way.

Perpetua and Felicitas

Similar to Maccabees, *The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas* places mothers in a similar position—that is, giving up their children permanently through death. Taking place in Carthage in 202 CE, Perpetua is a 22-year-old new mother, who has been thrown in jail for being a Christian. She finds herself imprisoned with Felicitas, a pregnant slave. Their status as mothers to infant children both heightens the drama of the martyrdom (for example, not only are they female, but they are both pregnant, and one is a slave) and challenges gender roles and the roles of motherhood.

As Perpetua allegedly wrote the first section of the text, the text itself lines up very nicely with the principles of Montanism—a second-century prophetic movement that stressed knowledge as coming directly from the Holy Spirit. In Montanism, anyone, regardless of sex, could communicate with God. When Perpetua is seized by visions, those in jail take her very seriously. This already establishes a dichotomy between the Christians in this text and the Romans. Immediately trusting, the Christians in the prison do not question her visions, nor do they question her place as the de facto leader. Tertullian, the possible editor, once reverently quoted Prisca, prophetess of Montanism: "For so, too, does the apostle say, that 'to savor according to the flesh is death, but to savor according to the spirit is life eternal in Jesus Christ our Lord.'" (*On Fasting* 10.5). This understanding of the Montanists helps us appreciate the text

itself. Because the passion story is told from a Montanist Christian angle, the principles reflected in her mothering become more clear.

In the Roman world of the second century, Perpetua had already fulfilled her expected societal role as a *matrona* of a Roman household. Her husband either is dead or unnamed, so she, by all rights of the Greco-Roman tradition, should be under the control of her father. However, when Perpetua's father is finally introduced, he is cast as a bumbling fool. This intentionally contrasts with the Paterfamilias ideal, in which the man is spiritually and physically the leader of the family. Perpetua "…felt sorry for him in his old age" (Geary 63). Perpetua's situation has already transcended social norms. When she is begged by her father to think of her son, she refuses, but not without making sure her son's needs are met.

At first, Perpetua worries about her baby. "I got permission for my baby to stay with me in prison. At once I recovered my health, relieved as I was of my worry and anxiety over the child. My prison had suddenly become a palace…" (Geary 63). Perpetua is fulfilling the classical definition of motherhood: her worry for her child cements her as a *matrona*. However, this soon changes when her calm towards being separate from her child is apparent. "The baby had no further desire for the breast … and so I was relieved of anxiety for my child" (Geary 63). The baby does not have a name, nor does she care for it after it is no longer physically dependent on her. While this could be seen as Perpetua rejecting motherhood entirely because of Christianity, Eric Poche provides another explanation in his master's thesis *The Passion over Perpetua: A New Approach to the Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis*. As soon as her child outgrows his need for her physical body, she is allowed to pursue the spiritual life of a Christian martyr. " [The visions] may exhibit in image form her transformation for her relation with her living infant son: his weaning from her breast-feeding. If so, her motherhood is thereby spiritualized"(Poche 4). She cares for a child, but it is a spiritual one.

Understanding this spiritualized motherhood is very important to comprehending the rest of the story. In one of her visions, Perpetua states that she sees "… an Egyptian against me…to fight against me. My clothes were stripped off, and suddenly I was a man" (Geary 66). Physically, as a man, she is empowered to fight against the Egyptian and his seconds. In Perpetua's mind, she had gone through a male transformation and could defeat Satan. However, this is not a rebellion against her sexual role. She is more empowered as a man than she ever was as a woman, but that empowerment represents something more than sexual roles. Her newfound manliness (she wrestles, she scratches, she kicks—very much like a contest between gladiators) represents a spiritual battle between pagan tyranny and Christian resistance. This also represents personal resistance and liberation. Because she has transcended gender, she is able to liberate herself from her strict Carthaginian society. Looking at the story from this point of view, or erasing gender as achieving true liberation, Perpetua would fit in with modern feminists as well as many early Christians.

Physically, Perpetua remains female and still follows codes of modesty. "She pulled down her tunic that was ripped along the side so that it covered her thighs, thinking more of her modesty than her pain" and "she asked for a pin to fasten her untidy hair: for it was not right that a martyr should die with her hair in disorder." (Geary 67). She controls the circumstances of her death, and she chooses the rules that suit her. However, she does not reject the concept of motherhood at all, as mentioned in her vision about her little brother, who died of a facial tumor when he was young. Her concern for him causes her to worry and postpone fate until that situation is resolved, showing that she has strong maternal instincts. Instead of a Roman *matrona*, she becomes, as Poche writes, "a *matrona* Christi." Because she is a mother of Christ, her role is twofold. She both worships and reveres Christ, and she has the attributes and vehemence of a mother protecting her children.

Perpetua is not gendered in the same way as the Maccabeean mother, with her "womanly feelings" but instead defies what Rome would call proper behavior for a woman and a mother. The baby's place in the story is transitory: it leads Perpetua to a better motherhood, a more stable motherhood in Christ. While this story at first seems feminist by having Perpetua fight back against her oppressors and eventual murderers, it is only deferring Perpetua into one of the predestined molds early Christians had for women. Perpetua ultimately decides what to do with her individual self, but as a *Matrona Christi*, she is building her identity on her motherhood.

Monica

At the legalization of Christianity in the fourth century, Christians no longer had to worry about martyring themselves for God. Culturally, however, not much changed in the realm of mothers and children. Depictions of "the good Christian mother" materialized. One of the best examples of lead-by-example is the mother of Augustine, Monica.

St. Augustine is credited with successfully merging Greek philosophy and Judeo-Christian moral ideals. While his rhetoric is not exactly feminist friendly, there are positive aspects. "Given an increased awareness of Augustine's intellectual milieu… Augustine's theology supports a positive comparison to both his predecessors and his contemporaries with respect to his views about women" (Stark 70). This view could have grown out of his respect for his mother, which grows exponentially as *Confessions* progresses.

Augustine credits his mother with his conversion to Catholicism. Throughout *Confessions*, he heaps praise upon her. He writes, "O my God who made us, how can that honor I paid her be compared with her service to me?" (*Confessions* 12.30). The author of this text is the son of the subject, so there is a natural bias. Monica, by all accounts, probably was not as virtuous and pious as Augustine indicates. Instead, she perseveres as "a model of Christian Motherhood" (Stark 73). As with almost everything in *Confessions*, Augustine uses Monica as a

symbolic device. He takes the picture of Monica painted in his *Confessions* and embellishes it with comparisons to the Church, the general Christian community, and even uses her as a *figura Christi*.

As opposed to the two mother-martyrs, Monica did not die for God, but she suffers a considerable amount when interacting with her son. Monica uses her motherhood to bring Augustine to Christianity, and the way Augustine describes her is just short of idolization. We see a parallel to the general Christian community of the time: humble, strict, and always praying to God. "The communal nature of their relationship symbolizes the inexorably communal nature of Christian experience" (Stark 71). The way Augustine relates to Monica, particularly after the garden talk at Ostia, represents the way Christians are supposed to relate to one another, in Augustine's view. In the garden, Augustine and Monica share a divine experience. "..Sighing and unsatisfied, we left the first fruits of our spirit captivated there and returned… where 'words' have a beginning and end, the world so different from the land of the Eternal Word" (*Confessions* 9.10.24). Augustine has proven that both men and women can have a divine experience. "Augustine's portrait of Monica allows us to reframe the masculine image of divinity that lies at the heart of the Christian doctrine" (Stark 70). Perhaps without meaning to, this private experience between mother and son unfolds to show the core of feminism: equality between the sexes.

Monica personally saw to Augustine's education, but some scholars find her lacking. Gerald Bonner writes, "Monica, though a saint, was not an educated woman…she was certainly unqualified to deal with the problems…to perplex her brilliant son" (Stark 71). While it is probable that Monica did not receive the classical education that was popular for women of her status at the time, this says little about her drive. Many times in *Confessions*, Augustine mentions his mother's involvement. "Temptation appeared to me… these were foreseen by my mother; and

she preferred that the unformed clay should be exposed to them rather than the image itself" (Confessions 1.11.21). We see this even more in Augustine's later life. When Augustine converted to Manichaeism, a religion that horrified Monica, she did everything in her power to stop him.

> And now thou didst 'stretch forth thy hand from above and didst draw up my soul out of that profound darkness [of Manichaeism] because my mother, thy faithful one, wept to thee on my behalf more than mothers are accustomed to weep for the bodily deaths of their children.' (*Confessions* 6.19)

If Augustine had lost his faith, Monica would have considered him dead. This favoring of God over a family member is nothing new in the world of fourth century literature, but the fact that Monica would refuse to acknowledge the existence of her son means that she is extremely pious. However, this does not remove the love she has for her son. By praying for him, as she does many times throughout *Confessions*, she is proving her love through an appeal to the divine.

Where the mother martyrs lost their lives on behalf of God, Monica sacrifices almost everything else for the sake of Augustine. In most of *Confessions*, she is the perfect maternal figure, rivaling Mary in her love and support, and remaining extremely devout while doing so.

> Had my mother's heart been pierced with this wound, it never could have been cured, for I cannot adequately tell of the love she had for me, or how she still travailed for me in the spirit with a far keener anguish than when she bore me in the flesh. (*Confessions* 9.16)

She lives for the sake of her child, putting him on the path that led to God and salvation.

With all of this sacrifice, Augustine sings her praises many times in his *Confessions*. However, he also condescends somewhat. "He assures her that if she participates in the 'sacred mysteries'…the lower path will be good enough for her—and for God. There is no need to

trouble her brain with the problems of theodicy, the origin of evil, or the eternity of the world…" (Drijvers, 17)

The description of Monica's death leads one to believe that it shook Augustine to the core. "Therefore, let her rest in peace with her husband, before and after whom she was married to no other man; whom she obeyed with patience, bringing fruit to thee that she might also win him for thee" (*Confessions* 9.13.37). Here, she is praised not only as a mother, but also as a wife. Although she does not show love towards her husband at any point in the text, she obeys him as a good Christian woman should. She is the complete package for a mother of the fourth century—religious, faithful, and sacrificing. This is exactly why we should look at *Confessions* as an example of ideal motherhood, and not the precise truth.

Many times in *Confessions*, Augustine mentions Monica's abuse at the hands of her husband, Patricius. "Though he was earnest in friendship, he was also violent in anger; but she had learned that an angry husband should not be resisted, either in deed or in word" (Confessions 4.19). She even warns other women, to avoid domestic abuse: "…they ought not to set themselves up in opposition to their lords" (Confessions, 4.19). Through the feminist lens, this is rather unsettling. However, Monica remains a complex character. Earlier in *Confessions*, Augustine portrays her "love of wine" and her sneaking cupfuls as a part of "her buoyancy of life."

Monica, in other words, is not the “perfect” mother. Though idealized, facts that detriment her status as mother, like her alcoholism, are readily apparent. However, as this is a feminist analysis of these texts, it is important to remember that we are looking at Monica not only as a mother, but also as a woman. Through her struggles, she overcame abuse and handled a son who, in her mind, was going to Hell. Not a feminist hero by any means, she still manages to control her own destiny.

Conclusion

In these religious texts, instructions for how mothers should raise their children are strongly, if not obviously, implied. Different times in history combined with different narrative strategies and different cultures make it more difficult to see a commonality. The message, though, remains the same. II Maccabees, *The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas*, and *Confessions* all construct motherhood as giving priority to a concept of the divine, rather than to the children they were mothering. Loving God—be it giving one's life or making sure one's legacy is in His service—is the main objective message sent.

When viewed through a feminist lens, all three sources more strongly favor an individual autonomy than the virginal texts do. Women in these stories make their own decisions about what to do with their physical and emotional selves. Although these decisions may conform to a specific standard of what motherhood should be, these texts show physical motherhood as a secondary duty. Mothers should transition the energies they put into rearing and caring for their children to God. This, too, is a social standard to which women should apply themselves. The pressures on mothers to conform to a standard—be it of spiritual or actual motherhood—are still present in these texts. True autonomy, then, is ultimately denied them.

Chapter 3: The Harlot

"How many hours did this woman spend in her dressing room, washing herself and dressing herself and decorating herself …simply so that she would not disappoint all her various admirers, who are here today and gone tomorrow?" — Life of Pelagia

Hagiographies of women are equally formed by the ideas of sin and the ideas of redemption. No hagiographies are quite so stark in their moral standing as the tales of holy harlots. The two that I will be examining in this chapter, St. Pelagia and St. Mary of Egypt, are especially clear as to what sin is and what salvation is. While the two stories end with both women triumphing over their formerly sinful status, the ideas put forward concerning those vulnerable people's autonomy, or the central tenet of the feminism I am using in my analysis, is refreshing in their feminist truth. Mary and Pelagia are controversial figures in any reading. However, I will prove that Mary and Pelagia embody the kind of feminism that Thecla reached for.

Prostitution was incredibly common as Christianity swept over the Roman Empire. "Prostitution permeated many aspects of the Roman service sector and leisure economy…" (McGinn 77). In many aspects of Roman life, someone like Pelagia, a prostitute/actress, was common. However, in order to understand fully what this loaded status meant to Christian antiquity, we must revisit conceptions of the body, particularly those put forward by Paul. His idea, put simply, was one must treat one's body with the proper amount of discipline, eating the right foods and only performing intercourse if one had to, and with a fellow Christian. This grew out of a fear that an individual Christian body represented "the member of Christ" (I Corinthians), and that any unsanctioned intercourse—or porneia—would pollute all of Christendom. "Will I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a

prostitute? Absolutely not!" (I Corinthians 6:15). In other words, "sexual intercourse between the Christian man and the prostitute enacted sexual intercourse between Christ and the prostitute—in which case, Christ is penetrating the evil cosmos…" (Martin 178). This formation not only would shame men who visited prostitutes, but the prostitutes themselves are shameful, as they represent "the evil cosmos."

The ire towards prostitutes was directed toward male prostitutes as well. The antique idea of sexuality, especially when dealing with prostitutes, was easily grasped. "Greek language constructed sexual intercourse as a one way street; the pleasure was assumed to belong naturally to the penetrator, and the penetrated was expected to submit without enjoyment" (Martin 177). This idea shined an especially negative light on male prostitutes, who were both the superior half of the hierarchy and "denigrating" themselves to the status of the passive. "Certain men… give up the traditional position of male honor and allow themselves to be sexually penetrated for profit. They are sinning "against" their bodies by allowing entry "into" their bodies" (Martin 178). To female prostitutes, no such prohibition was put forward by society concerning their "honor." In fact, "there [was] something close to paradigmatic about the Roman economy of prostitution … factors converged here to assert the primacy of male privilege" (McGinn 77).

In the two texts I examine, we see that a few problems exist regarding the location and chronological accuracy of these texts. "These vitae of loose women are themselves 'promiscuous,' so to speak, because they are difficult to locate historically, geographically, textually, and in terms of authorship…." (Miller 420) Most of these stories were so widely circulated that it is impossible to know where they came from. However, Early Christians still saw these texts as tools of morality, even if we do not know where they originated from.

With these tales in particular, the authors of both are playing into a very common genre of hagiography: the repentant harlot. As Benedicta Ward states, "The stories of the harlots

belong to the literature of conversion … and conform to the pattern of the great penitent of the New Testament, Mary Magdalene" (Martin 90). Mary Magdalene, therefore, acts as a base for these stories. By serving and evangelizing with Christ, she received repentance for her past sins. While this paradigm worked well in the New Testament, this new understanding of asceticism added new categories for holiness. Having a Magdalene-like figure repent by completely uprooting her current life projects the author's ideas of what is holy. Namely, for these women, the transformation from female to male through heavy ascetic practice appears to be, at first glance, what saves them. Through my analysis of their asceticism, however, we will see that they do not just switch the sexes they are coded as, but they step outside the gender binary as a whole.

Life of Pelagia

The Life of Pelagia (LOP) is a text that comes out of the fourth or fifth century. It was translated into many versions, including versions in Syriac and Latin. Supposedly authored by the deacon Jacob, under the bishop Nonnos, it is the tale of an actress/prostitute, Pelagia, and her subsequent conversion to Christianity. It starts with an ecumenical meeting in Antioch, when an 'unbeliever' passes by the door of the church. "She was very haughty and was adorned in costly robes and gold … accompanied by a multitude of youths and maidens, splendidly clad, who wore necklaces of gold" (LOP). She is very beautiful, and all men who see her passing by fall to the ground and weep.

This echoes the whore of Babylon, who is described as "…clad in purple and scarlet color, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and filthiness of her fornication" (Revelations 17:4). While interpretations of Revelations indicate that this particular whore represents the pagan Roman Empire, the similarities between Pelagia and the whore of Babylon exist on purpose. This particular part of the Life of Pelagia is also supposed to bring to mind Jesus' return to Jerusalem on an ass,

mentioned with great prominence in all four gospels. This draws a parallel not only to the Whore of Babylon but with Jesus as well. The dualistic nature of this holy woman adds to the complicated messages about gender she portrays.

Nonnos stared at Pelagia "long and intently until she passed out of sight," and then he asks his fellow bishops if they found her to be beautiful. At their silence, he questions them about her routine and how much time it must have taken her to appear so beautiful. He then postulates that he has not put as much effort into supplication, prayer, and following God's commandments as Pelagia (yet unnamed) has put into her makeup. After praying for Pelagia's soul, he begins to weep, saying "'O Lord… not such beauty to remain in subjection to the demons. But do Thou turn her to Thyself, that Thy holy name may be glorified in her, for all things are possible for Thee'" (LOP).

The next night, he has a dream in which a filthy, smelly dove flies around a church. He grabs it and plunges it in holy water, where it emerges "pure and white as snow." As he is preaching to the bishops in the real church, Pelagia passes by and hears him. As she listened, "the fear of God came upon her, and she pondered her sins and the eternal torments they merited, which Saint Nonnus described" (LOP). After writing him a letter, calling herself "the devil's disciple, a sinful woman," she receives a reply that encourages her to see the bishop Nonnos and the other bishops. When she sees them, she repents, saying, "'Show mercy to me and make me a Christian. Wash me clean through Holy Baptism, for I am a sea of sins, my lord, and an abyss of iniquity'" (LOP). Thus, she is baptized and lives with a holy woman and her spiritual mother, Romana.

Pelagia takes the central narrative from this point on. After being pursued by the devil in the form of an old man (likely, her pimp), she prays and then accumulates all her jewelry, clothing, and perfumes and gives them away, saying, "'This is the wealth with which Satan has

enriched me: I give it up into your holy hands. Do with it as you wish, for now I seek only the riches of my Lord Jesus Christ'" (LOP).

The wealth she had accumulated goes to widows, orphans, and other needy people. Removing her baptismal robe and borrowing white clothes from Nonnos, she lives out the rest of her life as Pelagius, an ascetic who lives a solitary, monastic life. Particularly interesting is when Jacob, who now has the full narrative helm, visits her. "I did not know her, for how could she be recognized when her exquisite beauty had withered like a flower? Her eyes were deeply sunken … the bones in her face protruded because of her great and boundless fasting" (LOP).

When Pelagius dies, the monks in charge of burying her (although she is now viewed as "him"), "saw that the saint was a woman … they said, 'God, Who art wondrous in the saints, glory to Thee! For many are the hidden saints whom Thou hast on earth; not men alone but women as well!'" After trying (and failing) to keep it a secret, they take "Pelagia's precious and holy body" and bury it in the cell where Pelagius lived out the rest of *his* life.

Life of Mary

St. Sophronius, the Patriarch of Jerusalem, wrote *The Life of Mary* (LOM) in the fifth century AD. Once again, the tale begins from the point of view of a monk, Zosimas, as he is wandering through the desert to find an ascetic father who can teach him so that he may go one step further than his brothers at the monastery. He came across "the semblance of a human body. At first he was confused thinking he beheld a vision of the devil, and even started with fear" (LOM). However, when the apparition calls his name, he wishes to get closer, as in his isolation he "was so overjoyed at beholding a human form" (LOM). It is Mary, "a sinful woman," and he provides his cloak to her upon her request. He asks for a blessing, to which she replies, "'Abba Zosimas, it is you who must give blessing and pray. You are dignified by the order of priesthood and for many years you have been standing before the holy altar..." (LOM).

He throws himself to the ground and asks for her blessing. She replies, "'Why have you come, man of God, to me who am so sinful? Why do you wish to see a woman naked and devoid of every virtue?'" At his persistence, and after many more self-abasements, she tells the story of her life. She grew up in Alexandria, where she "at first ruined [her] maidenhood and then unrestrainedly and insatiably gave [her]self up to sensuality…" (LOM). She did this for seventeen years. When she saw a ship headed to Jerusalem, she used her body to pay for her passage. "'I was suddenly filled with a desire to go, Abba, to have more lovers who could satisfy my passion. I told you, Abba Zosimas, not to force me to tell you of my disgrace'" (LOM).

Once there, she sees a throng of people entering a church. Trying to elbow her way in, she finds that she cannot enter. "'It was as if there was a detachment of soldiers standing there to oppose my entrance. Once again, I was excluded by the same mighty force and again I stood in the porch'" (LOM). She realizes that she cannot enter the church because "'the word of salvation gently touched the eyes of my heart and revealed to me that it was my unclean life which barred the entrance to me'" (LOM). Seeing an icon of the Virgin Mary, she vows to "'never again defile my body by the impurity of fornication'" (LOM). Miraculously, after making that vow, she is able to enter the church and worship the cross. She hears a disembodied voice telling her to cross the Jordan, and she does.

At the end of her story, she quotes from Hebrews and Job,

> "I am fed and clothed by the all-powerful Word of God, the Lord of all. For it is not by bread alone that man lives. And those who have stripped off the rags of sin have no refuge, hiding themselves in the clefts of the rocks." (LOM)

Zosimas asks if she had heard or read these texts before. Upon hearing that she is illiterate and that she knew those words only by the grace of God, Zosimas praises God. Mary asks that Zosimas return to the monastery and bring her the Eucharist on the day of Passover, as she has

not taken it in nearly five decades. She also warns him not to cross the Jordan, as is customary in his monastery the first Sunday of the Great Fast. She warns him that he would not be able to cross it even if he tried.

After she vanishes into the desert, he returns to his monastery, telling nobody of his encounter. A year passes, and during the Great Fast, he is immobilized with a fever. During the time of the Last Supper, when he had promised to come back, he takes the Eucharist and various food items and waits on the banks of the Jordan. After seeing her and momentarily wondering how she will cross the river, she signs the cross over the water and walks on top of it. She receives the Eucharist while Zosimas praises her, and once again, they depart. Yet another year later, he comes back to the river, only to see her lying dead on the other side.

Near her head, he sees a request for burial and he decides to do so, but he is too old to dig a sizable hole. A large lion passes by. After Zosimas crosses himself, he asks the lion if he could help him dig her grave. The lion digs a sizable hole, and once the saint is buried, the lion disappears as quickly as he came. Zosimas returns to the monastery and tells the brothers everything he has seen. Zosimas lives to be one hundred years old.

Both Mary and Pelagia have committed the sin of fornication. However, while sex provides Pelagia livelihood, Mary outright refuses money for her services. This is an interesting dynamic and affects how this particular culture saw both women.

Analysis

These two texts are fundamentally different from the other apocryphal tales discussed in previous chapters. The main difference is that, when these texts were written, an ascetic movement was sweeping the Christian way of living. Ascetics would often fast, would renounce all material possessions not needed to live, and would spend their time either alone in cells or living communally with likeminded men and women. Overall, "Asceticism occurs either in the

search for or in response to a believed in sacred reality—whether found 'above' us or through the depths of our own being—in relation to which, or in unity to which, is thought to be the highest good" (Valantasis 2). Early Christian ascetics, in particular, believed that fasting brought one closer to God, and through asceticism, one could reach salvation.

Through references in both texts, we can see that the degree to which one was ascetic proved one's level of godliness. When the monks first see Pelagius after months of fasting, "he" is unrecognizable. He has starved himself down to almost nothing but bones. Similarly, Mary is described as follows: "…the skin dark as if burned up by the heat of the sun; the hair on its head was white as a fleece, and not long, falling just below its neck" (LOM). The fact that these women were so sexualized draws attention to their physical descriptions. Because they were so in the grip of sin, when they are saved (both by the Virgin Mary), their physical attributes devolve.

Asceticism, in particular, gave the two women a way to perform penance for their sins. However, as Patricia Miller points out, it was more difficult for women to be accepted into ascetic communities.

> Recent scholarly work on gender and asceticism has clarified the ideological difficulties, both physical and theological, that were involved in attempts of early Christian men to conceptualize how women might occupy the status of holy person… women's bodies and sexuality were so closely allied as to be virtually synonymous… (Miller 424)

In other words, because most members of ascetic communities saw women as the purveyors of something they were trying to overcome—namely, the natural urges that come with any kind of sexuality—they were hesitant to accept them in their community.

While these stories speak of redemption, they also provide ways for the men to reach further enlightenment.

> Holy harlots are images of repentance whose basic function is symbolic: either they are construed as images of human salvation, or they are seen as a product of the male monastic imaginary that uses the figure of a courtesan to bring home to the monk his state as a sinner. (Castelli 416)

This is especially apparent in both tales by virtue of the men narrating them. Particularly, in the tale of Mary, Zosimas narrates at least as much as Mary does. Through Mary's story, Zosimas is able to repent even further to God. As he states, "take the unworthy petition of an old man and pray for the whole world and for me who am a sinner, so that my wanderings in the desert may not be fruitless" (LOM). Similarly, in Pelagia, the main focus is on improving the men's lives. They use Pelagia as an example of what not to do with their time, as opposed to changing the direction of Pelagia's life.

Like the AOT, parallels to popular Greco-Roman romance novels can be seen. Pelagia hears Nonnos delivering a sermon, and she is instantly smitten with ascetic Christianity, which will save her sinful soul. However, this common circumstance has a twist. Pelagia writes Nonnos fervent letters about her future baptism, akin to how a romantic hero would talk about his love interest. If we remember theological romances, the language that describes her in the beginning of the story—going about "with a scarf about her shoulders, like a man"—places her in the position of the protagonist. However, this focus on Pelagia is not overwhelmingly positive.

Once again, Lacan's theory of the male gaze ultimately wins out in *The Life of Pelagia*. The male gaze first draws the bishop Nonnos to question her piety; however, because Pelagia is the subject of this gaze, she is able to control it. She transforms herself from a harlot, possessing a body constructed for the pleasure of others, to an ascetic eunuch monk, effectively removing the subjugation that comes with her femininity by removing all traces of her gender.

Pelagia is not only a woman in man's clothing, but she assumes a male-sounding identity, Pelagios. As Patricia Miller writes, "'gender-bending' was a feature of Christian portrayals of ascetic heroes from early on, Thecla being a notable example, still the gender that was 'bent' was typically female rather than male." This trope is common in stories of repentant harlots, which presents an interesting dynamic, especially if you look at the result of this masculinization.

> In their hagiographies, Mary and Pelagia both approach the holy, but their full embodiment of it is undermined by the gendered contradictions that cluster around them. Elevated and debased at once, they are paradoxes whose allure is the truth of female holiness. (Miller 430)

Nonnos plays into the gender-bending nature of the Act. He openly weeps, wears soft clothing (although with a hair shirt underneath), and nearly swoons at Pelagia's beauty. These actions would befit a woman, at least by ancient literature standards. Like Xanthippe, Nonnos takes on characteristics of the opposite gender, destabilizing the hierarchy.

Pelagia does not grow a beard nor does she show other signs of masculinity. Instead, she enters what can be seen as the third gender, the eunuch. "As eunuchs, they were able to embody not only the 'no more male or female' in Christ, but also—because most ancient eunuchs were slaves … they also embodied 'no more slave or free' and 'no more Jew nor Greek" (Kuefler 263). She calls herself a eunuch because that identity would be recognizable to the new, insular society she enters; it would also explain her inability to grow facial hair. Because she entered the world as a eunuch, it is arguable that Pelagia needed to shed any trace of femininity before becoming truly holy. That theory notwithstanding, eunuchs, although once being "intact men," have transcended gender.

Pelagia achieves gender transcendence first by dressing in male clothing.

> This tendency to erase the third term, to appropriate the cross dresser as one of the two sexes, is emblematic of a fairly consistent critical desire to look away from transvestite as transvestite, not to see cross dressing except as male or female manqué whether motivated by social, cultural, or aesthetic designs. (Garber 20)

In other words, even in the contemporary world, an impulse to label Pelagios as male is only natural. However, she shows more "male" characteristics—taking control of various situations, demanding to be baptized, and echoing Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem on a donkey—when she is coded as female.

Cross-dressing, in this context, does not show a wish to become male. Pelagia has stepped outside the strict binary. "Pelagia's femaleness is 'castrated' in her depiction as a eunuch, even as her virility is perversely enhanced; the layered depiction of Pelagia as both female transvestite and eunuch doubles the ambiguity of her gender" (Burrus 126). Eunuchs exist not as men or women, but as saints who have shed all human difference. Existing as a eunuch symbolized "not only the dangers of Roman masculinity but also of its Christian transformation" (Kuefler 245). *The Life of Pelagia* plays with both ascetic norms and the dominant society's reaction to them.

The Life of Mary, on the other hand, does not give Mary a named male role, as *The Life of Pelagia* gives Pelagios. Mary's enjoyment of sex, however, paints her as the active part of the passive/active dichotomy. It is interesting to note, then, the fact that she repents so earnestly to Zosimas. If we were to look at Mary as someone controlled by lust, her transformation is that much more incredible. She has overcome her desire that brings her pain and sorrow. By taking control of her life, she can be painted feminist.

Both of these women perform contemporary feminist actions throughout their stories. Pelagia is an independent woman, taking on a questionable profession, but she retains autonomy

over her body. Mary simply enjoys having sex. As the stories progress, we see that the bound-together Christian ideals of chastity and asceticism, or the opposite of sex and decadence, take hold. Both of these women make their own decisions to cease their current lifestyles to be closer to God. Viewing feminism as defined through choice, I can safely say that their ability to choose makes them feminists.

Conclusion

“

Throughout this thesis, I have examined the feminism available in these texts through the lens of Greco-Roman society. To modern eyes, these women only submit to ideals of another form of oppression in the form of the Church. Nevertheless, in an ancient context, these women were trailblazers, paving the way for future women to question their place in the world. The texts examined are mostly apocryphal acts from the ancient near east. The effects on women in those regions are not particularly documented, but there are traces of influence found in the archaeological and literary record.

For instance, the cult of St. Thecla spread all the way from Asia Minor, where it was created, to southern Egypt. Thecla's popularity especially resonated with women who were portrayed positively in the Act itself.

> Several scholars have suggested that the favorable characterization of women in the [Acts of Thecla] would have especially resonated with female readers or listeners… Thecla becomes sympathetically linked with other women—a chorus of female spectators, the patroness Tryphaena along with the women in her household, and even a lioness in the arena. (Davis 10)

The cult steadily grew, fueled by a neophyte feminism found in the text, and Thecla eventually gained fame comparable to that experienced by Mary, mother of God. It is easy to see why. "The characterization of Thecla in the story indeed seems to have inspired women who read or heard it to embrace new roles of leadership in the early Christian mission" (Davis 13). The Christianity portrayed in *The Acts of Thecla* was extremely inclusive to women.

The Acts of Xanthippe, Polyxena, and Rebecca took place when Christianity was only beginning to form its ascetic tradition. "However, as in any ideological system, this Christianity

found itself in heated contestations over competing claims about what constituted 'proper' asceticism" (Gorman 1). Because this text takes place in Spain in the time of Nero, the asceticism portrayed is slightly different from other forms that have appeared. The women whom this story targets were, as usual, upper class women. Perpetua reached an audience of second-century woman believers, and the story of Monica, as part of Augustine's *Confessions*, was extremely famous. Similar to AXP, *The Life of Mary* of Egypt and *The Life of Pelagia* were aimed at a very specific audience of ascetic women. By overcoming gender roles through asceticism, once can guess these texts served not as something to imitate but as hyperbolic inspiration for anyone embarking on the ascetic lifestyle.

I have analyzed very specific acts of the apocrypha because the women contained within them perform resistance. Through their experiences, we see that they resist the notion of Greco-Roman femininity. In the case of Thecla, bracelets and a mirror represent her femininity; for Perpetua, it was her newly maternal body. For Pelagia, even more striking, her femininity is the very profession of prostitution (and the debauchery of the theater). Because each of these heroines renounces her femininity, that very femininity can be viewed as being somehow lesser than masculinity. In the Greco-Roman tradition, this was true. Differing values were ascribed to both masculinity and femininity. However, such social concepts were based on a paradigm of domination and submission. Women, as a lower rung in the hierarchy, were expected to be culturally and sexually submissive. Under the familiar hand of the paterfamilias, women were expected to live their lives exactly as society told them to do so.

By renouncing femininity, the women in these specific stories are challenging the very makeup of Greco-Roman society. By fighting in an arena, sacrificing oneself for God, and dying at the sword, they defy and challenge the common perception of "woman." There is agency in martyrdom; through their choice, they gained strength. Without doubt, people existed, and

continue to exist, who would choose to restrict women's choices. Women's choices are—and in many cases, have always been—scrutinized by patriarchal culture.

In 2012, women's agency and autonomy continue to be attacked. Restrictions on women's healthcare, contraception, and the perpetual ideal of woman as gatekeeper undermine a woman's right to exist peacefully in this particular cultural space. Women's bodies, too, are under constant watch.

In *The Beauty Myth*, Naomi Wolf suggests that the standards placed on modern women come from a place of fear. "The more legal and material hindrances women have broken through, the more strictly and heavily and cruelly images of female beauty have come to weigh upon us" (Wolf 5). Beauty, like the ideals of the perfect virgin and mother, is a means of social control. These Early Christian women transcended these social norms.

> Society really doesn't care about women's appearance per se. What genuinely matters is that women remain willing to let others tell them what they can and cannot have. Women are watched … to make sure that they will know they are being watched. (Wolf 99)

The penetration of the male gaze ensures that women stay in their place: as objects to be viewed and policed. Women find themselves in Foucault's *Panopticon*, "The gaze is alert everywhere" (196).

Although the social systems at play have improved infinitely, women continue to reach for equality in all spheres. While not championing for true women's equality, these texts are a foundation for progressive discourse.

Bibliographies

Introduction

Burrus, Virginia. *The Sex Lives of Saints: An Erotics of Ancient Hagiography*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004.

Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal* 40.4 (1988): 519-31.

Castelli, Elizabeth A., and Rosamond C. Rodman. *Women, Gender, Religion: A Reader*. New York: Palgrave, 2001.

Coon, Lynda L. "Introduction." *Sacred Fictions: Holy Women and Hagiography in Late Antiquity*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997.

Foucault, Michel. *The Use of Pleasure: Volume 2 of The History of Sexuality*. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage, 1990.

Heywood, Leslie, and Jennifer Drake. *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

Chapter 1

A.C. Bush, and J.J. McHugh. "Patterns of Roman marriage." *Ethnology* xiv (1975) 25-45

"Acts of Thecla." *Internet History Sourcebooks*. Trans. Jeremiah Jones. Fordham University. 13 December 2011. <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/thecla.asp>.

"The Acts of Xanthippe and Polyxena." *Internet History Sourcebooks*. Ed. Antet Nicene Fathers. Fordham University. 13 December 2011. <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/xanthippe.asp>.

Athanasius. *Orations Against the Arians*, 1.42

Brooten, Bernadette. *Love between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996

Burrus, Virginia. *Chastity as Autonomy: Women in Stories of Apocryphal Acts.* Lewiston & Queenston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1987.

Castelli. "Gender, Theory, and The Rise of Christianity: A Response to Rodney Stark". *Journal of early Christian studies (1067-6341)*. 6.2 (1998): 227.

"Church Fathers: Against Jovinianus, Book I (Jerome)." *New Advent: Home*. Web. 13 December 2011. <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/30091.htm>.

Cooper, Kate. "'The Bride That Is No Bride.'" *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996: 45-67.

Cyril of Alexandria. *Against Those Who Do Not Wish to Confess That the Holy Virgin is the Mother of God*.

De Lauretis, Teresa. *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994.

"Foucault and Feminism [Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy]." *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Web. 13 December 2011. <http://www.iep.utm.edu/foucfem/>.

Hone, William, Jeremiah Jones, and William Wake. *The Apocryphal New Testament: Being All the Gospels, Epistles, and Other Pieces Now Extant, Attributed in the First Four Centuries to Jesus Christ, His Apostles and Their Companions and Not Included in the New Testament by Its Compilers. Translated and Now First Collected into One Volume, with Prefaces and Tables and Various Notes and References*. San Diego, CA: Book Tree, 2004.

Hughes, D. O. "From Brideprice to Dowry in Mediterranean Europe." *Journal of Family History* 3.3 (1978): 262-96.

Goldhill, Simon. *Foucault's Virginity: Ancient Erotic Fiction and the History of Sexuality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Gorman, Jill. "Thinking with and about "Same-Sex Desire": Producing and Policing Female Sexuality in the "Acts of Xanthippe and Polyxena" *Journal of the History of Sexuality, Special Issue: Sexuality in Late Antiquity*. 10.3/4 (July-October, 2001): 416-441.

Hayne, Léonie. *Thecla and the Church Fathers*. Vigiliae Christianae. 48.3 (September, 1994): 209-218

Martin, Dale B. "Sex, Food, and the Pollution of the Corinthian Body." *The Corinthian Body*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995: 163-97.

Lacan, Jacques. *Seminar One: Freud's Papers On Technique*, 1988.

"Paul." *The Journal of Theological Studies*. Oxford Journals. 5: 295.

Pearse, Roger. "Tertullian: De Baptismo." *The Tertullian Project*. 13 December 2011. <http://www.tertullian.org/works/de_baptismo.htm>.

Roberts, Alexander, James Donaldson, A. Cleveland Coxe, Allan Menzies, Ernest Cushing Richardson, and Bernhard Pick. *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325/Volume II: Fathers of the Second Century*. New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1896.

Streete, G.C. "Of martyrs and men: Perpetua, Thecla, and the Ambiguity of Female Heroism in early Christianity." In *Subjective Eye*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Pubs, 2006: 254.

Valantasis, Richard. "Demons, Adversaries, Devils, Fishermen: The Asceticism of "Authoritative Teaching" (NHL, VI, 3) in the Context of Roman Asceticism." *The Journal of Religion* 81.4 (2001): 549.

Wallace, M.I. "Early Christian contempt for the flesh and the woman who loved too much in the gospel of Luke." In *Embrace of Eros*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010, 33.

Chapter 2

Alberici, Lisa A., and Mary Harlow. "Age and Innocence: Female Transitions to Adulthood in Antiquity." In *Constructions of Childhood in Ancient Greece and Italy*. Eds., Ada Cohen and Jeremy B. Rutter. Princeton, NJ: American School of Classical Studies at Athens, 2007: 193-203.

Augustine, E. B. Pusey, Marcus Dods, and J. J. Shaw. *The Confessions.* Chicago, IL: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1955.

Bowery, Anne-Marie. "Monica: The Feminine Face of Christ." In *Feminist Interpretations of Augustine*. Ed., Judith Chelius Stark. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007.

Drijvers, Jan Willem., and J. W. Watt. *Portraits of Spiritual Authority: Religious Power in Early Christianity, Byzantium, and the Christian Orient*. Boston, MA: Brill, 1999.

Geary, Patrick J. *Readings in Medieval History*. Peterborough: Broadview, 1989.

Gross, E. "Motherhood in Feminist Theory." *Affilia* 13.3 (1998): 269-72.

"Living and Dying for the Law: The Mother-martyrs of 2 Maccabees. Goliath Business News." *Goliath: Business Knowledge on Demand*. Women in Judaism, 01 Jan. 2006. Web. <http://goliath.ecnext.com/coms2/gi_0199-5698156/Living-and-dying-for-the.html>.

Lynn, Erica. "Judaism and Feminism." *Center for Digital Discourse and Culture at Virginia Tech*. <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/feminism/jud.html>.

The New American Bible. New York: Catholic Book Pub., 1970.

Poché, Eric J. *The Passion over Perpetua a New Approach to the Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis*. Thesis. Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, 2009.

Roberts, Alexander, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe. "On Chastity." *Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994.

Chapter 3

Andrew of Crete. "The Life of Our Holy Mother Mary of Egypt." *Medieval Internet Sourcebook*. Fordham University

Elizabeth A. Clark, "Holy Women, Holy Words: Early Christian Women, Social History, and the 'Linguistic Turn,' " Journal of Early Christian Studies 6 (1998): 416.

Ehrman, Bart D., and Andrew S. Jacobs. "Life of Pelagia." *Christianity in Late Antiquity: 300-450 C.E.: A Reader*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Garber, Marjorie B. "Introduction: Clothes Make the Man." *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing & Cultural Anxiety*. New York: Routledge, 1992: 1-17.

Miller, Patricia C. "Is There a Harlot in This Text? Hagiography and the Grotesque." *Project Muse*.

Upson-Saia, Kristi. *Making an Appearance: Sexual Renunciation and Gender Revision in the Attire of Early Christian Female Ascetics*. Dissertation. Duke University, 2006.

Conclusion

Davis, Stephen J. *The Cult of Saint Thecla: A Tradition of Women's Piety in Late Antiquity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Pantheon, 1977.

Levine, Amy-Jill, and Marianne Blickenstaff. *A Feminist Companion to the New Testament Apocrypha*. London: T & T Clark International, 2006.

Wolf, Naomi. *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used against Women*. New York: W. Morrow, 1991.