

Introduction

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It is an old, yet powerful story. A beautiful young woman falls in love, and try as they might, her disapproving family and friends fail to dissuade her from that love or keep her from her beloved. Persistent and uncompromising, the young woman disrupts the social order of her world, be it that of high school or high society. And by tale's end, either the lover and her beloved are integrated back into society or a new world order arises (uneasily sometimes) out of the ashes.

Perusing through a list of popular young adult novels, teen movies, and ancient romances, one may be struck by the sheer number of stories that follow this arc. The same story line was also popular in the late antique and medieval periods. A subset of the latter, however, follow a slightly different track. They detail the lives and trials of women who have fallen deeply and irrevocably in love with the transcendental, namely, the word of God, and some, even on pain of torture and death, claim Christ as their eternal bridegroom.

One of, if not the earliest extant tale to carve out this particular track is the *Acts of Thecla*, also commonly known as the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* (henceforth *APT*). Composed in the second century, the *Acts of Thecla* is a short, yet engrossing and complex tale within the larger apocryphal *Acts of Paul*. It is the story of a persistent, young, beautiful woman named Thecla who comes to love the word of God as spoken by the apostle Paul. She leaves her home, mother, and fiancé to learn more about the eternal rewards accorded to virgins. In her pursuit of Paul's teachings, she survives violent rejection by her mother, denial of baptism and her personhood by her beloved teacher,¹ sexual assault, trifling governors, and, miraculously,

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¹ He claims to not know her when the nobleman, Alexander, makes clear his desire for Thecla.

two sadistic trials before finally emerging triumphant, having self-baptized with God's tacit approval to become an apostle in her own right.

Though the *Acts of Thecla* takes place in Iconium (modern-day Konya, Turkey),² Antioch (modern-day Antakya, Turkey), and, to a lesser extent, Seleucia (modern-day Siflike, Turkey), the tale spread like wildfire throughout Christendom. It sparked the imaginations of bishops, church fathers, saints, emperors, hagiographers, and ordinary readers alike from as far west as medieval Ireland, as far east through the late antique Iranian world via the Church of the East to the borders of China, and as far south as North and East Africa. Wherever Christians trekked, so too did Thecla's story. Greatly cherished, the heroine and her tale inspired numerous cults as well as shrines to be built in her name.³ Among the most important of the latter is the Hagia Thecla near Seleucia, which was a popular pilgrimage destination and a location where important personages such as Gregory of Nazianzus (d. 390), the Archbishop of Constantinople and one of the most influential Christian theologians, visited and for which the Byzantine emperor Zeno the Isaurian (d. 491) added a prominent church on a hillside nearby.⁴ The tale's many admirers (and even some of its detractors)⁵ heralded its heroine as Paul's disciple and as an apostle. They also celebrated her as a paradigmatic model of virginity, charismatic confessor, (proto-)martyr, leader, teacher, intercessor, and saint in a wide variety of literary and material productions.⁶ As Jeremy Barrier and Damien Labadie point out in their respective contributions to this volume (Chapters 1 and 2),

² As a matter of interest, Konya is currently a major site of pilgrimage for Muslims and Sufis. Konya is the place where, centuries after Thecla made her first stand, the magisterial poet and Sufi, Rumi (1207–1273), found safe harbor from the invading Mongol armies and set up the famous Mevlevi school. One of his major influences is Farīd al-Dīn 'Attār (d. c. 1222), whose version of the "Tale of the Virtuous Woman" demonstrates many strong parallels with the *APT* and is the subject of my contribution in this volume (Chapter 10).

³ For more on this, see the chapters in this volume; Davis, *The Cult of St. Thecla*, 2001; and the collected articles in Barrier et al. (eds.), *Thecla*, 2017.

⁴ Davis, *The Cult of St. Thecla*, 2001: 4–5 and 36–80.

⁵ On the shifting views of the tale throughout late antiquity, see Barrier, *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, 2009: 25–26; and Klazina Staat's contribution in this volume (Chapter 9). An important point worth mentioning here is that, generally speaking, the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles were accorded this status in large part because Christian groups deemed heretical made use of them in their teachings.

⁶ Literary, here, is used in the sense of the formal aspects of the discourse of a specific linguistic, regional, and/or confessional literature as we have them in extant texts – manuscripts and other material objects. On this, in terms of the Apocryphal Acts, see Valantasis, "The Nuptial Chamber Revisited," 1997: 261–264. This includes the discourse that testifies to orality and oral transmission as well. In consideration of this latter approach, it should be noted that literary is not meant to evoke the older view, appropriately laid to rest in the last half of the twentieth century, that the formal aspects of written literature are of a higher, thus better, art form than oral literature or folk tales.

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the *APT* might have been read as hagiography among women in North Africa (Barrier), who were claiming Thecla and her story as their justification for teaching and baptizing as soon as the late second and early third centuries, and, later, in East Africa (Labadie) as her story was transmitted along with other Martyr Acts. Moreover, as the chapters in this volume altogether highlight, she served as a preeminent model for later hagiographers of female and sometimes male saints in each of the aforementioned capacities and to varying degrees both directly and indirectly. Whether in their relationships, in moments of great peril, or in word, behavior, or deed, many female saints, as they are represented in hagiographies, are inspired to be like Thecla.

But who exactly was Thecla? According to the anonymous presbyter from Asia, who gathered and organized the stories of Paul and Thecla, she is a beautiful young woman from a prominent family who rises to prominence as a model of virginity and forbearance; she is someone who baptizes herself and is given a mandate to teach by Paul himself. More specifically, she is the daughter of Theocleia and, by the end of the first act, the ex-fiancée of Thamyris. Significantly, she was a “leading woman of the Iconians” (§ 4.1) before becoming the “handmaiden of God” (§ 4.12).⁷ Scholars have noted that besides Paul, two other figures in the tale, namely, Falconilla and Queen Tryphaena, did exist.⁸ However, there is little to support the historicity of Thecla herself or the events described in her tale, miracles aside.⁹ It has been suggested that Thecla’s legendary tale may be based on oral and written accounts of women or one woman, who may or may not have been named Thecla, who suffered through trials after encountering Paul and subscribing to his teachings. In any case, it is salient that throughout the pre-modern world, Thecla was widely considered a powerful and prominent symbol and model and that she was frequently evoked and invoked as such in a wide variety of cultural productions. It is quite likely, then, that she and her story were accepted as historical by those who heard or read her tale; made the long, arduous, and, especially for women, dangerous journey across the eastern and western Mediterranean world to visit her shrines; or evoked her as a model in their writings of later saints’ Lives. It certainly is the sense one gets reading later works that refer to her. Nevertheless, just as her historicity remains an

⁷ References to the *APT* are taken from Barrier, *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, 2009.

⁸ *Ibid.*: 11 and 23–24.

⁹ The inclusion of figures and sites suggests that the authors of the Apocryphal Acts were not interested in facts but rather in “a historical fiction” relating the events of the apostles toward various ideological aims: *ibid.*: 10–12. See also, Barrier, “*The Acts of Paul and Thecla*,” 2017.

open question, so too does the perception of her historicity throughout the pre-modern world.

The overarching aim of this volume, then, is to explore the extents to which late antique and medieval hagiographers evoked and/or invoked Thecla and her tale in constructing the lives and storyworlds of their chosen saints. Indeed, in the various hagiographical tales under study in this volume, Thecla is a model for saints who by turns are depicted as acts to follow for embodying various aspects of holiness – confessor, martyr, virgin, spiritual lover, leader, and teacher – of which, in circular fashion, Thecla is most emblematic.¹⁰ Thus, with this aim, we hope to add further depth and nuance to our understanding of Thecla’s popularity, the spread of her legend and cult, which studying female storytelling, shrines dedicated to her, and the shifting perspectives of the Church have afforded us heretofore. Here, then, it would behoove us to delve further into the *APT* before transitioning to an overview of the larger debates surrounding Thecla and her tale and the specifics of this volume.

The Acts of Thecla: A Tale of Reversals, Replacements, and Disruptions

According to the *Acts of Thecla*, Thecla’s apostolic career begins soon after Paul enters Iconium. He is invited by Onesiphorus and his family – Thecla’s neighbors – to teach in their home. Thecla, sitting by a window, hears Paul’s teaching and is immediately enthralled. She remains riveted to her chair for three days and nights listening to him. Theocleia, distraught, sends for Thamyris to see if he can persuade Thecla to speak, eat, or just simply move since she has failed to do so. When his pleas also fall on deaf ears, Thamyris seethes, and his very public display of anger instigates a mob to arrest Paul. Later that night, Thecla steals away from her home so she can continue to listen to Paul’s teaching. She bribes her own porter and the prison guards with her gold bracelets and some valuables she has taken

¹⁰ Generally, saints have two, often overlapping, functions, namely, intercessor and as exemplar of embodying holiness – functions that Thecla fulfills. While most of the chapters focus on Thecla’s holiness, the contributions by Caitríona Ó Dochartaigh (Chapter 3) and Klazina Staat (Chapter 9) in this volume illustrate how Thecla is invoked as an intercessor in Latin litanies for the dead and the bearing this may have had on later hagiographical works. On saints and sainthood, see, for instance, among many studies available, Brown, “The Rise and Function,” 1971; Brown, *The Cult*, 1981; Brown, *Society and the Holy*, 1982; Brown, “The Saint as Exemplar,” 1987; and the collected essays in Strickland (ed.), *Images of Medieval Sanctity*, 2007; Clarke and Claydon (eds.), *Saints and Sanctity*, 2011; and Meltzer and Elsner (eds.), *Saints*, 2011. See also the sources cited in the various chapters.

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from her house. She spends the night listening to Paul teach, kissing his shackles. In the morning, seeing that Thecla is not home, her mother and household mourn for her as for the dead. Later, they find her at the prison with Paul and alert the governor who orders Paul to be flogged and driven from the city. Theocleia, enflamed with fury, also demands that her daughter be burned at the stake.¹¹ Tied to the stake, Thecla searches for her teacher but sees the Lord who takes on Paul's image. When the fire is lit, a great blaze breaks out, and God sends rain and hail to protect Thecla while it destroys many nearby.

Amazed by the turn of events, the governor releases Thecla who then sets out to find Paul. After a touching reunion with Paul and Onesiphorus and his family in a cave near Antioch, Thecla offers to cut her hair, but Paul tells her that she is beautiful and that she may not endure a second trial. She then asks him to baptize her so that she may be fortified, but he defers. In Antioch, Alexander, a nobleman, sees Thecla and is captivated by her beauty. He turns to Paul and asks him to whom does she belong. Paul claims not to know her. Alexander then grabs Thecla, who, in defense of herself, declares herself to be a leading woman of the Iconians and so is not to be touched. She then rips Alexander's clothes and knocks his crown off his head. Enraged, Alexander arranges and pays for her trial with the proconsul. While awaiting trial, Thecla is taken under the protection of Queen Tryphaena, a relative of the emperor and whose daughter, Falconilla, had recently passed away. In mourning, Tryphaena asks Thecla to pray for her daughter's soul. After Thecla does, Tryphaena dreams of her daughter who is now in heaven. Later, at the trial, Alexander releases a series of wild animals among which a lioness emerges to protect Thecla from the other beasts. Then, a pool of savage seals is brought out, and Thecla sees it as her opportunity to be baptized. She jumps into the pool in the name of Jesus. Fiery lightning strikes. The seals are struck dead as a cloud covers Thecla's nude body. After miraculously surviving another onslaught, this time by bulls whose genitals are enflamed and which causes Queen Tryphaena to faint, the proconsul calls a halt to the trial in his fear that the queen may have passed away. Though she has not, the proconsul, nonetheless awed, asks who Thecla is. This time, she

¹¹ Thecla's mother Theocleia is apparently powerful enough to demand that her daughter be put to trial by the city's governor when she refuses to marry her fiancé. Kate Cooper and James Corke-Webster, "Conversion, Conflict," 2014, in a short, but all the same exquisite article address the detrimental effects that Thecla's actions (rejection of social status, financial security, and cultural values, especially reproductive choices) caused and that, thus, call for a more sympathetic reading of Thecla's mother.

declares that she is the handmaiden of God. She is released and, after fashioning a male cloak for herself, she sets out for Myra to find Paul with her new followers, which includes witnesses at her trial and Queen Tryphaena and her household, in tow. She informs Paul of her baptism, and when she also informs him of her intent to return to Iconium, he tells her to go and teach. In Iconium, she finds her mother and offers herself and wealth to her, both of which her mother, in her turn, silently refuses. Then, she sets out for Seleucia where she remains teaching until her dying day.

What emerges from even a summary of the events is that the tale is one of progression – a housebound, silent young woman from a leading family of Iconium becomes a vocal handmaiden of God who travels and teaches. Nevertheless, it is also clear that, intratextually, Thecla's story is one of continual "reversals and replacements."¹² It maintains a delicate equilibrium between opposing tensions. For instance, as much as it is about emotional and physical brutality, it is also about companionship and love: for the loss of her mother, her teacher, and family wealth, Thecla gains a benefactor, protector, and adoptive mother in the powerful Queen Tryphaena whom she turns into her disciple. In a symbolically charged moment, Thecla bribes her porter and Paul's prison guard with a silver mirror and her gold bracelets respectively, giving up the trappings of her status and familial wealth, to be able to sit at Paul's feet to listen to his teachings. By tale's end, however, Thecla is in the position to offer money and herself as a daughter to her mother, who may have lost her status with Thecla's dismissal of her engagement. And while Thecla was silent and unresponsive to her mother's pleas in the beginning, her mother at the end is silent and unresponsive to her daughter. Thecla also receives divine solace, which appears in the shape of Paul's face, when she searches for her teacher among the crowd at her first trial and cannot find him. Though tortured and denied baptism by her beloved teacher, she takes baptism for herself with God's tacit approval, and as a result Paul gives her permission to teach on her own. Meanwhile, though Paul and Thecla preach and adhere to sexual continence, the tale also promotes the Christian family in its depiction of Onesiphorus and the aid he and his family give to Paul at the risk of losing their own wealth and status.¹³ Moreover, Thecla is both

¹² Lipsett, *Desiring Conversion*, 2011: 78.

¹³ In *ibid.*: 64, B. Diane Lipsett makes the astute observation that inasmuch as the *APT* disrupts the social order (marriage and reproduction), it also affirms it by the tale's two frames – in the first frame, Onesiphorus and his family are Thecla's neighbors who invite Paul into their home where he preaches, and his words reach Thecla through her window. And in the second frame, when Thecla

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desiring (following Paul to learn more about the word of God) and its reverse, desired (the object of love – Thamyris – and lust – Alexander),¹⁴ as the tale illustrates the potential damages of being both the subject and object of desire.¹⁵ And, finally, if Alexander, at the beginning of the second act, asks Paul if he knows to whom Thecla belongs, and she responds with her social status, by the end of her trial, the awed proconsul directly asks Thecla who she is, and she declares that she belongs to (is a servant of) God.

The most significant reversal, however, is to be found at the level of the greater text; in a story dedicated to Paul's apostolic mission, for the duration of two acts, Thecla is the primary focus. Put in other terms, Thecla is the protagonist of her own tale, her own apostolic calling and mission, in a work that is otherwise centered around Paul. Just as remarkable is the fact that Paul is largely absent from Thecla's tale, albeit his presence is greatly felt throughout in Thecla's desire to be with and follow him and in her choice to follow his teaching even to (near) death. It should come as little surprise, then, that the tale, which, as noted above, is sometimes referred to as the *Acts of Thecla* by ancient, medieval, and modern authors and scholars alike, was detached from the larger *Acts of Paul* and circulated separately and widely. The situation was replicated in the last few decades of the twentieth century when the *Acts of Thecla* garnered much scholarly interest among feminist scholars who sought to reclaim the role women played in the development of early Christianity. From thence forward, the *Acts of Thecla* was catapulted into the limelight, nearly rivaling Thecla's popularity in the late antique and medieval periods.

Indeed, both the *APT* and the attention it received throughout the late antique and medieval periods have been the subjects of a vast trove of studies, with each scholar breaking new ground while building on the seminal works of their peers and predecessors. Thecla and her tale have been analyzed from multiple perspectives.¹⁶ On the historical front,

survives her first trial; she seeks out Paul, at which point Onesiphorus' son finds Thecla and brings her to the cave, in which Paul and the rest of Onesiphorus' family are breaking bread, to join them happily.

¹⁴ For more on Thecla as subject and object of desire and the ensuing gender ambiguities of the text, see *ibid.*: 54–85.

¹⁵ Though, it might be more precise to state that it is desire sought and thwarted that defines Thecla's relationships with Paul, Thamyris, and Alexander and that leads to her trials.

¹⁶ See Bremmer, "Bibliography," 2017. For a comprehensive overview of these studies, especially against the backdrop of the history of gender, religious, and cultural studies in the West, see Davis, "From Women's Piety," 2015.

Stephen Davis, in an impressive study, has looked at the establishment and spread of Thecla's cult across Eurasia and North Africa.¹⁷ Sever J. Voicu has traced the popularity of Thecla and her tale into the most eastern parts of the Iranian world.¹⁸ Valentina Calzolari similarly has dedicated multiple studies to the establishment of Christianity in relation to the cult of Thecla in Armenia.¹⁹ On the social front, scholars have read Thecla's tale to shed light on the lives of women. For instance, in their groundbreaking works, Stevan L. Davies, Dennis R. MacDonald, and Virginia Burrus have explored different aspects of women's autonomy in early Christianity – including virginity as a form of freedom from conservative social constraints – with the premise that women were not only the intended audiences but also the tellers of the *APT* and other Apocryphal Acts.²⁰ In this regard, these scholars have taken part, to varying degrees, in the debates surrounding the complex, overlapping roles oral and written transmission may have played in the compiling and composition of the Apocryphal Acts more broadly.²¹ On the other hand, Kate Cooper, in her seminal study, notes that the representation of the overlapping spheres of the private and public lives of men and women (a stable home makes for a stable society) were upended in the *APT* and other apocryphal tales.²² Accordingly, the *APT* was one of the many Christian texts to introduce a different moral language, one that through encouraging virginity challenged married Roman women's identity, both Christian and pagan, in various ways, including the promotion of the ideal chaste wife for men.²³ In contrast, noting the growing power and influence of the figure of Thecla in the Church, Susan E. Hylen argues that the *APT* offers a nuanced, highly complex representation of women in early Christianity whereby women achieved leadership by upholding the standards of modesty.²⁴ Meanwhile, Maud Burnett McNerney, taking her cue from earlier studies on virginity, argues that in medieval Europe, the virgin body staged and channeled aggressive masculine desire and reigned it in for the sake of “‘normal’ heterosexual communities” while, for women, virgin bodies

¹⁷ Davis, *The Cult of St. Thecla*, 2001.

¹⁸ Voicu, “Thecla,” 2017.

¹⁹ See the footnotes in her contribution to this volume (Chapter 4) for the relevant bibliography.

²⁰ Davies, *The Revolt*, 1980; MacDonald, *The Legend*, 1983; and Burrus, *Chastity as Autonomy*, 1987.

²¹ For an overview of the sources and main arguments, see Davis, *The Cult of St. Thecla*, 2001: 8–18. Barrier, *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, 2009: 30–47, sees a weaker link between the oral tradition and *APT*.

²² Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride*, 1996.

²³ *Ibid.*: 14.

²⁴ Hylen, *A Modest Apostle*, 2015.

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became “sites upon which female communities were founded in life and in texts” with the *APT* as a popular vehicle.²⁵

The *Acts of Paul* too has benefited from a wide array of studies in connection with other Apocryphal Acts. Though comparative studies between the Apocryphal Acts and the ancient novels (on which see below) had begun by the early twentieth century,²⁶ much of the initial studies on the Apocryphal Acts themselves centered on manuscript studies – putting the pieces of the texts together – and philological questions that eventually gave way to broader interests such as linguistic and literary dependence – which Apocryphal Act depended on the others and by how much and, thus, which of the Apocryphal Acts came first. With the rise of intertextual studies, the conversation shifted from questions regarding primacy and dependence toward the dynamic relationship between the apocryphal and canonical Acts, possible oral versions in circulation, and the synoptic gospels.²⁷ Simultaneous to intertextual studies, and largely driven by the efforts of François Bovon and Jan N. Bremmer, has been the study of the Apocryphal Acts as social documents that offer a window onto various aspects of late antique life and the ideological interests of their authors.²⁸

However, the discourse that has given the most shape to studies on the *Acts of Thecla* is the possible relationship that exists between it and the ancient Greek novels.²⁹ For indeed, the relationship between the *Acts of Thecla* and the ancient Greek novels is ultimately one of reversal at the intertextual level. As is well known, the heroines in the ancient Greek novels, like Thecla, are torn from their beloveds and families and face multiple obstacles to preserve their chastity, including sexual assault and forced marriages, as they travel about hoping to return home and be reunited with their loved ones. However, Thecla’s beloved is the word of God as spoken by Paul. In other words, even if, as many have argued, she desires to be with Paul and is torn from him, that desire is framed around learning (first act) and receiving baptism (second act). As such, though she

²⁵ McNerney, *Eloquent Virgins*, 2003.

²⁶ For an overview, see Aubin, “Reversing Romance?,” 1998.

²⁷ A prime example is the collection of essays in Stoops (ed.), *The Apocryphal Acts*, 1997.

²⁸ For a brief overview of the field, see Bovon, “Preface,” 1999. For a synopsis of Bovon’s various contributions to the field, see Bovon, “The Corpus Christianorum Series,” 2012. For illuminating studies on the social world of Christians represented by the Apocryphal Acts, see, for instance, the collected essays in Bremmer (ed.), *The Apocryphal Acts of John*, 1995; Bremmer (ed.), *The Apocryphal Acts*, 1996; Bovon (ed.), *The Apocryphal Acts*, 1999; and Bremmer (ed.), *The Apocryphal Acts of Andrew*, 2000.

²⁹ For the most recent example, see McLarty, *Thecla’s Devotion*, 2018. These sorts of analyses are not limited to the *APT* alone. The Acts of the Apostles and Jewish romances have also been studied in this way. See below.

is reunited with Paul (and twice no less) and her mother, she finally takes her leave of them as she does of her own fiancé. And, if we understand the cloak that she fashions for herself as that of the philosopher's as McNerney does, she also departs metaphorically cloaked in God's word, which she, in turn, imparts to others.³⁰

Though it is difficult to pin down exact dates for the ancient Greek novels, modern scholarship places them between the second and fourth century, which would make the earliest of them coeval with the *Acts of Thecla*. It is generally acknowledged, furthermore, that the *Acts of Thecla*, and much of Christian literary production from the first to the fourth centuries, were written, copied, or edited by authors who illustrate the same literary training (rhetoric, argumentation, imitation, and use of allusion) and belonged to the same cultural milieu as those of the ancient Greek novels. In other words, their authors not only read the same works and received similar training, they also likely competed for the same audiences.³¹ When viewed altogether, however, the reversals, the tension in opposition, exhibited in the *Acts of Thecla* and the growing number of hagiographical tales of female saints that follow a similar arc, on the one hand, and the ancient Greek novels, on the other, illustrate two different responses to the immense socio-religious upheavals underway that were sparked by the growth of Christianity. This is the conclusion to which both Judith Perkins and Kate Cooper have come in their own close readings of these texts; the relationship between them is an inverse one. In other words, while paying attention respectively to pain/suffering and constructions of gender, Perkins and Cooper have illustrated that the motifs of travel, adventure, love at first sight, displacement, chastity and fidelity, and threats to both work differently in the *APT* and Apocryphal Acts, on the one hand, and the romance novels, on the other. The latter affirm older social norms and the former work to disrupt them to create new, specifically Christian ones.³²

Taking a look at social disruption in the *Acts of Thecla*, two different trajectories are pursued by our two protagonists, which reverberate

³⁰ McNerney, *Eloquent Virgins*, 2003: 41–43.

³¹ For a concise overview, see Barrier, *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, 2009: 1–21. See also Perkins, “This World or Another?,” 1997; and Stoops, “The Acts of Peter,” 1997: 61–65.

³² Perkins, *The Suffering Self*, 1995. Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride*, 1996: 55, in her much-discussed line, reads the tensions in the *APT* and the other Apocryphal Acts thusly: “The challenge by the apostle to the householder is the urgent message of these narratives, and it is essentially a conflict *between men*.” Though she makes this observation against reading the Apocryphal Acts as being written by and for communities of continent women, her general point that these tales are about authority and the social order is pertinent.