

1 Introduction: Lady Philosophy and Real Female Philosophers

Women were prizes men competed for in the ancient world, both in life and in literature. Greco-Roman writers constructed a tradition that cast the goal of the good life as a desirable woman. Prodicus' "Choice of Heracles" (Xenophon *Memorabilia* 2.1) narrates an allegorical encounter between Heracles and two women: Virtue (*Arete*) and Vice (*Kakia*). The anonymous *Tabula of Cebe*s imagines Happiness (*Eudaimonia*) surrounded by her daughters the Virtues as the true goal of education, in contrast with false learning (*Tabula of Cebe*s II.20). Lucian's *The Teacher of Rhetoric* presents two contrasting routes up the mountain to join Lady Rhetoric.¹ This tradition was to flower in Boethius' sixth-century encounter with Lady Philosophy in the *Consolation of Philosophy*, a gendered allegorization that echoed down through the ages (Courcelle 1970; Helleman 2009; Tervahauta et al. 2017).

The personification of philosophy as a woman assumes that philosophers, her erotic desirers, are symbolically masculine. The binary of male lover–female beloved imagines that the target of such pleas are men who were inspired by the idea of choosing wisely between competing types of women. Yet in the third century CE, the Christian dialogue writer Methodius of Olympus reimagined the gendered relationships of allegorical females in educational ascent myths. Virtue, daughter of Philosophy, still dwelt on top of a mountain that was steep and dangerous. But instead of questing men who attempted to enter her secluded garden, educated women were invited to her garden party (LaValle Norman 2019b, 188–92).

Simultaneously, other Christian groups were writing narratives about a fall of Sophia (Wisdom) into the world of the material. The story of her return through the dangers posed at different levels of her cosmic ascent inspired Christians in their own struggles.² Wisdom herself in such narratives is required to return up the mountain, with humans invited to join imaginatively in Wisdom's salvific drama. In such narratives, the journey itself is feminized, and humans are united with the female Wisdom figure in her ascent rather than the female Wisdom being placed as the goal of that ascent.

In addition to the erotic pursuit of a feminized Wisdom, there were deeper connections between the life of virtue and manliness in the ancient world, many of them recurrent and etymological. The Latin word for virtue, *virtus*, stems from the word for man, *vir*, as does the Greek word for courage, *andreia*/

¹ Douglas Whalin has recently written on the role of the mountain of ascent in such narratives (Whalin 2021).

² "Sophia's act of hybris and subsequent fall lie at the very heart of the Gnostic's understanding of his own existential predicament" (Goehring 1981, 16).

ἀνδρεία (anēr/άνήρ = man). The etymological links assured the perennial connection between virtue, courage, and manliness in the ancient world (Rosen and Sluiter 2003). As a result, many studies have focused on how female philosophers and holy women “become male” to achieve the ideal life (e.g. Miles 1989; Castelli 1991; Cloke 1994; Aspegren 1995). I would like to look at another side of the story, at those moments when women were permitted to be models of the philosophical life in their femininity, inviting their auditors and readers to “become female” in a certain sense.

If women were allowed to become philosophical models *in their femininity*, could the life of philosophy continue to be one thing? Or were there different expectations for what a “female philosopher” would look like instead of a “male philosopher”? Or does gender have nothing to do with it at all and is just a distraction from the real issues of philosophy and the good life?

A helpful instantiation of some of the complexities around this set of questions can be found in Clement of Alexandria’s introduction to his book on correct Christian behavior, the *Paedagogus*. Clement, writing in the second century CE, insists on the equality of women and men in the Christian life, and even the eschatological unimportance of gender, building on Paul’s assertion in Galatians 3:38. Yet, he also admits that “in this world” gender shapes almost every aspect of experience:³

for this world is the only place in which the female is distinguished from the male, “but in that other world, no longer.” There, the rewards of this life, lived in the holy union of wedlock, await not man or woman as such, but the human person, freed from the lust that in this life had made them either male or female. (Clement of Alexandria *Paedagogus* 1.4.10, trans. Wood pp. 11–12)

ἐν ᾧ δὴ μόνῳ τὸ θῆλυ τοῦ ἄρρενος διακρίνεται, “ἐν ἐκείνῳ δὲ οὐκέτι,” ἔνθα τοῦ κοινωνικοῦ καὶ ἀγίου τούτου βίου τοῦ ἐκ συζυγίας τὰ ἔπαθλα οὐκ ἄρρени καὶ θηλεία, ἀνθρώπῳ δὲ ἀπόκειται ἐπιθυμίας διχαζούσης αὐτὸν κερχωρισμένῳ.

Clement asserts the ideological unity of humanity, beyond gender. Yet at the same time, he admits that “in this world” gender persists. In line with this understanding, the content of his advice in the rest of the book is frequently gender-specific and draws repeatedly on social attitudes about appropriate deportment rather than theological concepts (Leyerle 1995).

In this Element, I will investigate the tension between the Christian belief in a unity of humanity beyond gender and gender-specific expectations of a philosophical life. Is there a way that women were believed to “do”

³ For an outline of some lines of interpretation of Galatians 3:38, see chapter 6, “Neither Male Nor Female” in Fiorenza 1994, 205–41.

philosophy distinct from how men did it? And if so, then why were men interested in portraying them as philosophers? I will look at three examples of early Christian women who are presented as models of ideal philosophers and analyze them in chronological order. We do not have any texts written by these three women, nor, in fact, do their biographers claim that they wrote any. Like Socrates, their teaching is purely oral. As a result, men moderate our access to these women and their philosophy, and, in two of the three instances, the women are intimately connected through family ties with the male authors who depict them, as sister and mother respectively.

Thecla, whose story was written earliest, started as a companion of St. Paul before she began her own journey as an itinerant teacher. Works about her abound from the second to the fifth centuries, but it was especially in Methodius of Olympus' *Symposium* (c. 290 CE) where she was presented and characterized as a philosopher surrounded by other philosophical women. My second example, Macrina the Younger, was memorialized as a philosopher and teacher in two texts written by her brother Gregory of Nyssa in the mid-fourth century, one a biography and one a philosophical dialogue. Finally, Augustine's mother Monica is written as an active participant in Augustine's Cassiciacum dialogues, where Augustine praises her excellent grasp of philosophy, in addition to the influential role in his life he ascribes to her in his autobiographical *Confessions*.

Each of these three women is presented as wise across genres. In their biographies, the issue of the relationship between gender and wisdom is narrated and displayed by drawing upon tropes and exempla from previous traditions. The authors reveal how the holiness of these women's lives, rather than their academic accomplishments, gives them direct access to wisdom. The content of their wisdom is not discursively shown but rather implied. In philosophical dialogues, on the other hand, the reader reads what men imagine women to be capable of thinking and saying. Dialogues focus on the speech of wise women rather than their actions, showing a particular type of knowledge through dialectic and verbal display. In each of the three examples I will look at, the biographical texts do not reproduce the women in verbal mode at length. This in and of itself is interesting, since there were well-established ways to embed the verbal philosopher into narrative texts. To name two from either side of the religious divide of late antiquity, Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* and Athanasius' *Life of Anthony* both reproduce and not just report debates between their subjects and other philosophers. Yet, the writer of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, Gregory of Nyssa, and Augustine do not include lengthy speeches of the women in their biographical texts. They separate the example of the philosophical lives lived by these women from their verbal engagement with ideas.

But they style them as philosophers in both. The life of philosophy can be wielded in different contexts with a range of associations.

I have intentionally chosen examples of women in early Christianity who are not only described as living philosophically but also shown speaking philosophically. Within the philosophical tradition, there was a long-standing definition of philosophy that focused on the way that a philosopher lived, rather than on their discursive knowledge or verbal agility. The moral emphasis intensified in Christianity, where many writers delighted in showing people who led a “philosophical life,” by which they meant an ascetical life that resulted in correctly ordered desires, often coupled with a lack of formal education.

Pierre Hadot made famous this idea, popularizing the concept that ancient philosophy was “a way of life.” He meant by this that all the different philosophical sects shared the conviction that to pursue wisdom was to learn to see reality correctly and then to live according to that vision (Hadot 1995, 58). Chief among the witnesses to one’s correct vision of reality was the ability to approach death well (Hadot 1995, 59). Such a vision- and practice-oriented view of philosophy could embrace a range of uneducated individuals, and many hagiographical texts tapped into this broader understanding of the philosophical life. Relationships between teachers and students were not of primary importance in such narratives, where the philosopher in question might have access to wisdom through alternative channels such as direct divine inspiration. Anne-Marie Malingrey has provided corroborating evidence of this thesis by collating the changing valences of the “philosophy” word group from antiquity into early Christianity, revealing just how varied the interpretations could be. What persisted, she argues, is the idea of philosophy as the “intelligence moved by love” (Malingrey 1961, 290), which functions under different modalities through time.

But there was a narrower understanding of philosophy active in this period, which can be labeled “professional philosophy” (Dillon 2004), namely the life of teachers and students working within philosophical traditions. Such educational networks were certainly concerned with the ethical life, like the broader group of “philosophers,” but approached it via a course of study that typically involved reading certain texts and coming to understand specific doctrines. Iamblichus’ Neopythagorean course of study is an excellent example of this (O’Meara 1990, 33–34). This narrower definition of the “philosophical life” will be a primary lens through which I look at the three women covered in this Element.⁴ I will pursue questions surrounding narratives about the education of

⁴ Other scholars have pursued this question for different ancient philosophical traditions, e.g. Pythagoreanism (Dutsch 2020; Pellò 2022), the Platonic Academy (Dorandi 1989; Addey 2017), and the Aristotelian tradition (Deslauriers 2022; Connell 2016).

women and their verbal display of textual knowledge. This type of philosophy is more important to writers when they script their women into dialogues, where actions are often missing entirely, or underplayed, and the philosophical status of the speaker must instead be shown through educated discourse.

Marguerite Deslauriers has laid down the gauntlet about this narrower type of philosophy and its relationship to women in the ancient world.

Philosophy, then as now, was a social practice, engagement with which was predicated on education and on certain social freedoms, neither of which women enjoyed. (Deslauriers 2012, 345)

I would like to challenge this stark view, suggesting that room was made for a certain amount of social philosophical life for women in the ancient world. My three examples all present different versions of this social philosophical life and, in particular, different relationships between the genders of the teacher–student relationships. The *Acts of Paul and Thecla* and Methodius’ *Symposium* present Thecla solely as a teacher of other women; *On the Soul and Resurrection* presents Macrina as a female teacher of her male brother; Augustine’s Cassiciacum dialogues paradoxically present Monica as the female student of her male child. Female–female teaching circles, female–male and male–female educative modes all find expression. All configurations are covered, the homosocial as well as the heterosocial, the familial and the pseudofamilial.

In terms of the relationship between the literary depictions of social philosophical life and history, my analysis in this Element broadly follows in the tradition of Elizabeth Clark’s work on the “Macrina-function” and “Monica-function” in those writings of Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine that are also analyzed in this Element (E. A. Clark 1998; E. Clark 1999). I agree with Clark that the question that is most interesting, and most answerable, when analyzing women in these texts is how they are being wielded in male-centric debates, whether philosophical or theological. However, I think that Clark missed out an important, even fundamental, element in her analysis of Macrina in Gregory of Nyssa’s work: genre. Clark underdescribes the *Life of Macrina* and *On the Soul and Resurrection* as “two treatises that focus on his sister Macrina.”⁵ Much work on Macrina has done the same, tying together her depictions in the two works by Gregory of Nyssa (Krueger 2000; Frank 2000; J. W. Smith 2004; Champion 2014). I believe that paying attention to the difference in how women are used when they are in dialogic mode rather than biographical mode can

⁵ She is more careful to distinguish the Cassiciacum dialogues from the *Confessions* in her companion piece on the “Monica-function” in Augustine’s work but still does not investigate the problem of genre, instead speaking about the different theological purposes of the works (E. Clark 1999, 15).

bring us closer to the heart of the question of what it meant to be depicted as a female philosopher in Christian writing during the first four centuries.

Do these literary depictions, or “women-functions,” in a text have anything to do with historical female philosophers? A helpful intervention was made by Virginia Burrus, when talking about “strategically” attempting to get behind male texts portraying verbal women to “historical” women (as a presumed nod to the “strategic essentialism” of Gayatri Spivak).

What I am getting at is the possibility that the discursive space occupied earlier by Plato’s Diotima and flute girl, or here by Gregory’s Macrina, might also correlate, however inexactly, with the social roles and influence of women: that the textual production of an articulable feminine positionality via the interaction of the female as “object” and the female as the excluded transgressive, may at least indirectly point toward actual subject positions and social roles available to and occupiable by women historically “as women.” The representations of women in male-centered texts may stand in for, without exactly reproducing, the intrusive presence of women in the always incomplete formation of male homosocial communities. (Burrus 2005, 259)

Another way of saying this is that, despite being constrained by the always-constructed literary representations that are (by and large) our only witnesses to these women, bounded by genre and a range of theological intentions of their authors, nevertheless there are some connections between the philosophical lives of early Christian women and the discourse around such women that will form the heart of my analysis. Elizabeth Clark herself, in her treatment of the Monica-function, admits that we are still left with “traces” of Monica, textualized and historicized (E. Clark 1999, 21). Methodius, Gregory, and Augustine were presenting their written women within the realm of the possible for their readers.

In addition, their stories both reflect and enact change. Gregory says in his biography of Macrina that their mother had a dream where an angel called her unborn child Thecla. Gregory says that this was to foretell that Macrina and Thecla would share the same choices in life (τὴν τῆς προαιρέσεως ὁμοιότητα, Greg. Nyss. *Vit. Macr.* 3.3 Silvas/2 Maraval). Thecla’s “choices” were real to Macrina’s mother, at least according to Gregory. Thecla’s story acts in later generations even if Thecla never existed as a person. The turn to “reception studies” is one way of getting beyond the difficult relationship between the literary portrayal of female roles and the historical reality of women (Davis 2015).

I argue two related theses in this Element, with different vibrancies for each of the three examples, and will treat both theses at the conclusion of each section. First, I argue that an important impetus for women being described as philosophers in this period was a change in the definition of philosophy that no

longer required education along traditional channels. This was a complicated process, and each author came up with a different version of the balance of value. A liberal arts education was valuable enough for Methodius to invent one for Thecla. Yet it was not important for Augustine's version of Monica's philosophy, which had its source elsewhere.

Second, many studies have focused on how female philosophers and holy women "become male" to achieve the ideal life, a point I have already touched upon. I will argue an alternative story in this Element that male readers of these texts are invited to "become female" in their imaginations, to take on some of the characteristics traditionally gendered feminine in the ancient world, which have been reimagined as acceptable parts of the virtuous man and ideal citizen.⁶ This is a true revolution, even if it has more to do with male constructions of the female than with women themselves.

Other Elements in this series, *Women in the History of Philosophy*, especially Crystal Addey's *Platonist and Neoplatonist Women*, cover women living in the same centuries as those covered in this one and even some, like Hypatia of Alexandria, who lived after all of the three women I will analyze. Strong bonds connect such philosophical women across religious conviction: the fact that this Element covers only Christian women is not meant to argue that they belong to a separate genealogy from women such as Porphyry's wife Marcella or the mystical philosopher Sosipatra.⁷ Nevertheless, Christianity provided some distinct scripts for female philosophers, reflecting and building community expectations about what was possible. And these distinct scripts were constrained by the expectations of the genre, whether narrative or dialogic.

2 Thecla, "Second to None in Philosophy and the Liberal Arts" (Meth. *Symp.* 8.170)

Thecla did not start her literary life as a philosopher, but she became one as her legend developed. While her philosopher status was something that was only added later in the tradition, she was honored from her entrance onto the literary stage in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* as a teacher. In this section, I will analyze how her teaching career is depicted in this hagiographical work, before turning to the way in which her story was taken up and modified in the following century by moving her into a philosophical dialogue.

⁶ Ellen Muehlberger and I have made such arguments in two recent articles (Muehlberger 2015; LaValle Norman 2019a). This is a different argument to that propounded by Kate Cooper, who argues that ancient narratives of female ascetics are not about female liberation but about male concerns. Cooper does not push this argument to suggest that the women in these stories might be objects of identification for their male readers (Cooper 1996).

⁷ For example, it has been recently argued that Eunapius' characterization of Sosipatra is a direct response to the rise of female intellectual saints in Christianity (Marx 2021, 14).

Thecla is characterized as a disciple and evangelist in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, fitting under the rubric of “wandering charismatic” (Davis 2008, 26–35). Just as strongly, as I will argue, she is characterized as a daughter, both biologically and allegorically. Although she is not characterized as a philosopher, there were enough clues in this direction to allow Methodius of Olympus approximately one hundred years later to develop her characterization from preacher and teacher to philosopher. And Thecla’s feminine characterization made both moves surprising in parallel ways. The surprise of the female wandering teacher paved the way for the surprise of the female philosopher to emerge in a different setting.

Thecla is unique among my examples not only because I will trace her character’s development across two different authors’ representations but also because most scholars agree that she was not a historical person. While my inclinations always lean toward inclusivity where proof of nonexistence is impossible,⁸ the historicity of Thecla does not affect the argument that I will make here. Thecla became a model of the female philosopher in the development of her story over time, both in Methodius of Olympus’ *Symposium* and in Gregory of Nyssa’s *Life of Macrina*.

The treatment of Thecla first as an itinerant teacher and then as a philosopher in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* and Methodius’ *Symposium* sets the groundwork for how the dynamic of female philosophical characterization plays out in the narrative and dialogic texts written by Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine. The narrative texts consistently resist giving philosophical speeches to wise females, who instead display their philosophy through actions, especially their relationship to the prospect of death, rather than words. Only when the characters are inserted into dialogues do they take on discursive functions that often show evidence, or make claims, of a formal philosophical education, or need to be explicit in their rejection of that claim, as in the case of Monica.

2.1 The *Acts of Paul and Thecla*

The *Acts of Paul and Thecla* portrays Thecla’s growth from new convert to teacher.⁹ But for a story arc focused on the assumption of teaching duties, there is precious little in the text about the content of the teaching that Thecla dedicates her life to preaching. In fact, rather than focusing on listening and speaking, which would seem to be the normal mode of education, the focus of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*

⁸ “It is conceivable that behind the tradition of Thecla lies a historical woman, who ultimately came to be linked with the figure of Paul, but we have no way to determine this” (Kraemer 1992, 154).

⁹ For all of the citations of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, I will use the numeration of Jeremy Barrier (Barrier 2009).

remains decidedly on seeing and being visible.¹⁰ This goes hand in hand with the author's primary concern to prove Thecla's status through her displays of endurance rather than verbally evidenced wisdom.

The *Acts of Paul and Thecla* is the earliest witness to the story of Thecla as a disciple of Paul. It was most likely written between 150 and 200 CE, and Tertullian's condemnation of Thecla's self-baptism in *De Baptismo* 17 provides the widely accepted *terminus ante quem* (Rordorf 1986).¹¹ Dennis MacDonald has influentially argued that the oral legends behind the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* originated in circles of ascetic female Christians in Asia Minor, citing the sympathy toward female characters (human and animal) and negativity toward male characters as evidence (MacDonald 1983, 34–37). While I am not as convinced as MacDonald that a pro-woman text is most likely to be *composed* by a woman, imagining the *reception* of this work in female circles is a natural response to the content of a work so focused on female sociality (Kraemer 2019: 498–499).

Tertullian, when he comes to condemn the *Acts of Paul*, points to two things in particular that are egregious in the text: female teaching and baptizing.

Certain Acts of Paul, which are falsely so named, claim the example of Thecla for allowing women to teach and to baptize (*docendi tinguendique*) . . . How could we believe that Paul should give a female power to teach and to baptize (*docendi et tinguendi*), when he did not allow a woman even to learn by her own right? Let them keep silence, he says, and ask their husbands at home.

(Tertullian *de baptismo* 17, trans. Evans 1964, 37)

quae Acta Pauli, quae perperam scripta sunt, exemplum Theclae ad licentiam mulierum docendi tinguendique defendant . . . quam enim fidei proximum videtur ut is docendi et tinguendi daret feminae potestatem qui ne discere quidem constanter mulieri permisit? Taceant, inquit, et domi viros suos consulant.

Tertullian makes an a fortiori argument: if Paul did not allow women to *learn* in public (1 Corinthians 14:34) then certainly he would not allow them to *teach*. Familial questioning was an option but nothing that brought that

¹⁰ While concerned with the same nexus of issues, my argument is in direct contradiction to the conclusion of Jennifer Eyl: “The net result of this excision [of *erōs*], for our author, is a privileging of the voice and ears over the appearance and eyes” (Eyl 2013, 15).

¹¹ Although I note the objection of Stevan L. Davies to the identification of Tertullian's Thecla source with the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* (Davies 1986). There is debate about the relationship between the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* and the longer *Acts of Paul* which contain it. Most scholars think that the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* is the older material that is absorbed into the *Acts of Paul*, especially those who emphasize the orality behind the legends of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* (MacDonald 1983). For our purposes, we can leave aside the larger *Acts of Paul* to focus only on the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, which had a separate transmission history and a separate editing process in the modern period.

questioning into public, thereby necessitating a relationship with an external teacher.¹² Since Tertullian's criticism of Thecla is her public preaching, it is all the more surprising that the text under fire included so little of the *content* of that teaching. Neither is it straightforwardly concerned with outlining a Pauline succession: Thecla does not begin a line of teachers (D. E. Smith 2002, 112).

2.1.1 *Thecla as Student in the Acts of Paul and Thecla*

A question we must address is whether Thecla's assumption of teaching authority is aligned with the life of philosophy. Leslie Hayes argues that the portrayal of Paul in this story shifts from wonder-worker to philosopher when the narrative enters the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* from the surrounding *Acts of Paul* material. When it does so, Thecla takes over the wonder-working abilities from Paul's character in the story. The author of the Thecla material makes this intentional move, Hayes argues, in order to focus on succession itself rather than on teaching content: authority structures interest the author of the text more than the content of the teaching (Hayes 2016, 25–26, 208). I agree that the focus of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* is on authority. But one difficulty with Hayes' suggestion is that Thecla does not in turn hand on the teaching to others at the end of her life but rather becomes a stable geographical source of inspiration at her shrine, even after her death. If the story is about succession, it is only about one link in a succession chain. A second difficulty is that the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* never uses the words philosophy, philosopher, or philosophize, either for Thecla or for Paul.

As scholars such as Stevan L. Davies, Dennis MacDonald, Virginia Burrus, and Ross Shepard Kraemer, among others, have emphasized, female power structures are important in this text (Davies 1980; MacDonald 1983; Davies 1986; Burrus 1987; Kraemer 1992 and 2019). While Thecla pursues Paul in order to gain the bestowal of teaching authority, her desire is continually frustrated. Instead, the text shifts the focus onto multiple mother–daughter relationships and their concomitant social responsibilities.

Thecla's entrance into the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* is situated within the social bonds of family, and her family structure is emphatically feminine. She is described as “Thecla, the virgin daughter of her mother Theocleia” (Θέκλα τις παρθένος Θεοκλείας μητρός, *Ath* 3.7). She is only given a matronymic. Since her father is not mentioned in the entire text one is left to presume that he is

¹² Domestic philosophical education, however, was a well-respected avenue for female philosophers (G. Clark 2007).