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THINKING OF THECLA

Issues in Feminist Historiography

Shelly Matthews

The elite heroine in the Acts of Thecla listens day and night to the ascetic teachings spoken by the apostle Paul.[1] She is transfixed, "like a spider at the window bound by his words" (9). Converted by this teaching, Thecla spurns her betrothed, pursues Paul on his journeys, endures the torments put upon her by the city's nobility whose welfare is threatened by her ascetic choice, performs a rite of self-baptism, and ultimately receives the commission from Paul to "go and teach the word of God" (41).

The focus on the highborn woman who courageously defies the social order by opting for ascetic Christianity is a common motif in the Apocryphal Acts of the second and third centuries C.E. The crystallization of resistance in female form is particularly stark in the Acts of Thecla, where even the female lion in the arena sides with the ascetic and against the city, reverencing Thecla rather than devouring her. As stories of women's resistance in the early centuries of Christianity, the Apocryphal Acts in general and the Thecla text in particular provide vehicles for illustrating some of the contentions among feminist and other historians of women and gender in the discipline of early Christian studies. In this article I discuss three "women-centered" monographs on the Acts of Thecla written in the 1980s. I then move to examine two types of responses to this women-centered work that diverge quite a lot in terms of theoretical sophistication but nevertheless converge in arguing against the legiti-

I thank the two anonymous readers for the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* for their valuable criticism. I also thank Elizabeth Castelli for inviting me to deliver the earliest version of this article in the Ideological Criticism section of the Society of Biblical Literature annual meeting in Boston, November 1999, and for encouraging me to revise it for publication.

[1] The Acts of Thecla is embedded in the larger Acts of Paul. For the Greek text, see Ricardus Adelbertus Lipsius, ed., *Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha* (Darmstadt, Germany: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1959), 235–72. The English translation is available in Edgar Hennecke and Wilhelm Schneemelcher, eds., *The New Testament Apocrypha* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964), 2:352–90.

macy of positing any link between the Thecla text and second-century Christian women. I close with an argument for the importance of attempting to reconstruct the history of women in early Christianity while acknowledging the growing consensus among feminist historians that such reconstructions cannot presume mimetic relationships between text and reality.

Women's History

In the 1980s, three authors working independently on monograph-length treatments of the Apocryphal Acts—Steven Davies, Dennis Ronald MacDonald, and Virginia Burrus—each proposed that the Acts in some way represented women-centered communities that resisted the ruling patriarchal order. MacDonald and Burrus posited that these stories are best understood as folktales and were originally oral stories told by women; Davies posited that the written texts themselves were penned by women.[2] Each author identified the point of resistance in the stories in the person of the elite female heroine who defied household and city by refusing to marry and opting for an ascetic lifestyle.

Burrus, in arguing for links between the Apocryphal Acts and folktales, departed from traditional discussion of the Acts as a subgenre of the Hellenistic romance, and hence shifted the focus of study away from male authors and toward female storytellers. On the basis of cross-cultural evidence about women and the transmission of folklore, she argued for the likelihood of women as primary transmitters of these chastity tales. While conceding that Thecla and other protagonists, such as Maximilla (Acts of Andrew) and Agrippina, Nicaria, Euphemia, and Doris (Acts of Peter) were fictional figures, she argued that from these figures a social world of storytellers and their audience could be reconstructed.

The thesis that the Apocryphal Acts bear witness to communities resisting patriarchalizing ecclesiastical tendencies is elaborated most completely in D. R. MacDonald's work juxtaposing the extracanonical Acts of Thecla and the

[2] Steven L. Davies, *The Revolt of the Widows: The Social World of the Apocryphal Acts* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980); Dennis Ronald MacDonald, *The Legend and the Apostle: The Battle for Paul in Story and Canon* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983); Virginia Burrus, *Chastity as Autonomy: Women in the Stories of Apocryphal Acts* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1987). Other discussions of the social world of the Apocryphal Acts from the 1980s include Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 173–75; Ross S. Kraemer, "The Conversion of Women to Ascetic Forms of Christianity," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 6, no. 2 (1980): 298–307; and Ruth Albrecht, *Das Leben der heiligen Makrina auf dem Hintergrund der Thekla-Traditionen: Studien zu dem Ursprungen des weiblichen Monchtums im 4. Jahrhundert in Kleinasien* (Göttingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986).

canonical letters 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, commonly referred to as the Pastoral Epistles. Although the pseudonymous Pastoral Epistles were written earlier than the Thecla text, MacDonald argued that oral versions of the Thecla tales influenced the Pastorals. Each document appropriates the authority of Paul to shore up its vision of social and ecclesiastical organization, but in radically different ways. For instance, "Paul," the author of 1 Timothy, exhorts women to be silent, urges widows to remarry, requires marriage of male church officials, and sets forth a model of ecclesiastical leadership in conformity with traditional Greco-Roman civic ideals. On the other hand, "Paul," the hero of the Acts of Thecla, preaches celibacy, models an itinerant charismatic ministry, threatens civic order, and exhorts Thecla to travel and to teach.[3]

These arguments for women storytellers, women authors, and women's communities of resistance placed the work of Davies, D. R. MacDonald, and Burrus squarely within the discipline of "women's history" as it has been traditionally conceived. Their projects were acts of retrieval, of writing women into mainstream narratives of early Christian history that had previously ignored them. These writers posited historical women as subjects with "experiences" and "agency."[4] All relied on a relatively straightforward reading of the relationship between textual representation and social reality. The sympathetic portraits of women characters were held up almost as prima facie evidence that the authors and receivers of the tales were women.[5] Disciplinary boundaries were stretched, most notably by MacDonald's and Burrus's use of folklore theory, and each work contains indications that the authors were cognizant of the relevance of their work to contemporary feminist struggles. Yet these monographs remained by and large within the rubrics of traditional historical-critical scholarship.[6]

[3] D. R. MacDonald, *Legend and the Apostle*, 54–77.

[4] For traditional frameworks and categories of analysis used in women's history, as distinct from gender history, see, for example, the discussion of Catherine Hall, *White, Male, and Middle-Class: Explorations in Feminism and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 1–40; and Louise M. Newman, "Critical Theory and the History of Women: What's at Stake in Deconstructing Women's History," *Journal of Women's History* 2, no. 3 (1991): 58–68. For a discussion specific to early Christianity, see Elizabeth A. Castelli, "Heteroglossia, Hermeneutics, and History: A Review Essay of Recent Feminist Studies of Early Christianity," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 10, no. 2 (1994): 73–98.

[5] For example, D. R. MacDonald says of the Acts of Thecla, "The story reveals the perspective of someone deeply resentful of the male sex and highly sensitive to the difficulties of women. . . . If the contents of any early Christian story suggest that its tellers were women, it is this one" (*Legend and the Apostle*, 36). See also Davies, *Revolt of the Widows*, 61, 63, 69, 106–9; and Burrus, *Chastity as Autonomy*, 77.

[6] For recognition of relevance of work to contemporary social and theological struggles, see Burrus, *Chastity as Autonomy*, 118–19; D. R. MacDonald, *Legend and the Apostle*, 100–103; and Davies, *Revolt of the Widows*, 129. Of these three scholars, only Burrus has continued to engage

Backlash

In her work *Early Christian Women and Pagan Opinion,* Margaret MacDonald has identified a common rhetorical insult used against Christian women in the second and third century: their words and work were dismissed as owing to their "hysteria."[7] This same rhetorical trope finds its way into the work of three twentieth-century scholars responding to the studies of Davies, D. R. MacDonald, and Burrus. But, unlike the early pagan critics, who understood their attacks against Christian women as rhetorical arguments, these modern critics hurl their insults from their location within the scientistic fortress of value-neutrality and objectivity.[8] These three scholars, who are discussed in this section, set up a dichotomy between their own supposedly objective, scientific, detached research and that of Thecla scholars whom they dismiss as ideologically driven and/or irrational. Such a positioning is exemplified by Wilhelm Schneemelcher in his 1991 edition of *New Testament Apocrypha,* a standard reference work of the discipline. While noting that the Apocryphal Acts seem to reflect popular traditions, he calls into the question the usefulness of folklore studies to their elucidation. Speaking directly to the work of D. R. MacDonald and Burrus, he continues: "Above all we must be very cautious about any combination of these folk-lore hypotheses with the assumption of a liberated women's movement in the Church of the 2nd century as the *Sitz im Leben* for the Acts of Paul. On a *sober* treatment of the evidence, hypotheses of such a kind appear to be largely no more than the products of *modern fancy*, without any basis in the sources."[9] Because it is self-evident to

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with feminist methodologies in her scholarship. In addition to her most recent writing on Thecla, which I discuss in this article, see *"Begotten, Not Made": Conceiving Manhood in Late Antiquity* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000); and *The Making of a Heretic: Gender, Authority, and the Priscillianist Controversy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995).

[7] Margaret Y. MacDonald, *Early Christian Women and Pagan Opinion: The Power of the Hysterical Woman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). See especially MacDonald's introduction (1–4), which includes this quotation from Origen's *Against Celsus* 2.55 and 3.55: "But we must examine this question whether anyone who really died ever rose again with the same body. . . . But who saw this? A hysterical female, as you say, and perhaps some other one of those who were deluded by the same sorcery, who either dreamt in a certain state of mind and through wishful thinking had a hallucination due to some mistaken notion (an experience which has happened to thousands), or, which is more likely, wanted to impress others by telling this fantastic tale, and so by this cock-and-bull story to provide a chance for other beggars."

[8] I adopt the term *scientistic* from Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, who uses it "to signal the positivistic ideological framework of much that passes for 'science.' Inasmuch as scholarly and scientific inquiry and discourse function to legitimate overarching kyriarchal oppressions, invoking a false value-neutrality and objectivity, they are effectively positivist or scientistic, not genuinely scientific." See her *Rhetoric and Ethic: The Politics of Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), ix.

[9] Wilhelm Schneemelcher, ed., *New Testament Apocrypha,* English translation edited by R. McL. Wilson (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox, 1991), 2:220–22 (emphasis added).

Schneemelcher that a "sober" treatment of the evidence suggest no hint of women's liberation, he refutes the "modern fancy" of Davies, D. R. MacDonald, and Burrus in the most dismissive way possible. Rather than engaging with any of their arguments, he closes discussion with one sentence appended to the citation of their work that merely restates his previous assertion: "[U]nfortunately no evidence from the sources of the period . . . could be adduced for a 'women's liberation movement' in the Church of the 2nd century" (2:236 n. 19).

Schneemelcher's insistence that such theories are not "sober" but "modern fancy" is echoed in an article by Lynne Boughton written to dispute the claims of D. R. MacDonald and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza about the Acts of Thecla. The title of Boughton's article, "From Pious Legend to Feminist Fantasy," is indicative of her position.[10] She dismisses as "feminist fantasy" the argument that the Thecla story indicates resistance to patriarchal order. Boughton's pose as an objective historian disguises only thinly her confessional and apologetic approach to historical reconstruction. One of her main objections to the "fantasies" of MacDonald and Schüssler Fiorenza is this: these two scholars, by privileging the Thecla document as an indication of early church communities in which women's sacerdotal authority is accepted, are using "ecclesiastical terminology such as 'church' or 'canon' in a manner different from the way those terms were used during the first three Christian centuries" (370). When Boughton says "in a manner different from the way those terms were used during the first three Christian centuries," however, she means the way those terms were used exclusively by proto-orthodox church leaders. This is evident, for example, when she argues that women leaders among the Montanist movement should not be cited as evidence for women in the "early church," because second-century bishops of Rome explicitly stated that Montanism was outside the church (370).

Moreover, Boughton engages in the dubious methodological practice of faulting "unorthodox" second-century readers for having interpreted texts wrongly. This interpretive move occurs in her discussion of Tertullian's famed reference to the Acts of Paul/Acts of Thecla in chapter 17 of his *Baptism*. Tertullian writes:

> *But if the writings which wrongly go under Paul's name, claim Thecla's example as a license for women's teaching and baptizing,* let them know that, in Asia, the presbyter who composed that writing, as if he were augmenting Paul's fame from his own store, after being convicted, and

[10] Lynne C. Boughton, "From Pious Legend to Feminist Fantasy: Distinguishing Hagiographical License from Apostolic Practice in the *Acts of Paul/Acts of Thecla*," *Journal of Religion* 71, no. 3 (1991): 362–83. Boughton refers here to Schüssler Fiorenza's argument in *In Memory of Her*, 173–75.

> confessing that he had done it from love of Paul, was removed from his office.[11]

Here Tertullian polemicizes against those in the late second century who pointed to the Thecla story in order to claim apostolic authorization for women administering baptism and engaging in formal teaching.[12] That is (as Davies, D. R. MacDonald, Burrus, and others have pointed out), Tertullian provides indication that Christians in the second century used the example of Thecla as a means of resisting an all-male sacerdotal institution. Yet, after acknowledging that some early Christians read the Thecla story in this way, Boughton asserts that their readings are not valid. "Careful reading of the Thecla episode indicates that Thecla's involvement in teaching and in baptism was very limited," she notes. Thecla baptizes no one but herself, and she is not a formal teacher or spiritual director of a church community. Therefore, according to Boughton, second-century readers using the Thecla text to legitimize women's religious leadership roles engaged in a "distortion of the wording and content of the text."[13]

In this interpretive move, Boughton's confessional agenda is again unmasked, for she delivers the accusation of careless and distorted readings against only "unorthodox" second-century readers. It is tempting to note that if Boughton were to treat all early Christian readers equally, she would have to apply such judgments across the board to all early interpreters who addressed the issue of women's authority. This would then lead to the question, Was the Pauline disciple and author of the Pastoral Epistles, 1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus a "careful reader" of the authentic letters of Paul? As modern exegetes have long pointed out, the Pastoral Epistles depart at several points from Pauline thinking, including their directives concerning marriage, church organization, and women's leadership.[14]

But the prior question here is whether it is meaningful to subject any early Christian reader to the charge of careless and distorted interpretation. These readers, unlike traditional historical-critical exegetes, had no concern for historical situation or authorial intent of texts. Elizabeth A. Clark has carefully documented how patristic authors produced new meanings from biblical texts

[11] Tertullian, *Baptism*, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), 3:677 (emphasis added).

[12] For the view that Tertullian's reference here is to some version of the Acts of Thecla, see A. Hilhorst, "Tertullian on the Acts of Paul," in *The Apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla*, ed. Jan Bremmer (Kampen, Netherlands: Kok Pharos, 1996), 150–63.

[13] Boughton, "From Pious Legend," 376–77.

[14] See, for example, any standard New Testament introduction, such as Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, 2d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 354–62.

to speak to their own practical and theological concerns.[15] Likewise, both the Thecla community and the author of the Pastorals produced what were for them suitable readings of Paul, that is, readings that edified their own religious and social situations. Although a modern interpreter might fruitfully evaluate the *effects* of various early Christian readings, one cannot weigh them on some objective scale of interpretive accuracy. Such a procedure wrongly presumes the existence of a singular originary meaning that a subsequent interpreter could faithfully preserve.

Schneemelcher and Boughton are joined by another scholar, Peter Dunn, who derides Davies, D. R. MacDonald, Burrus, and other like-minded interpreters, for having an agenda.[16] After arguing against any indication of women's liberation in the Apocryphal Acts, Dunn concludes: "The desire to relate the *APl* [Acts of Paul] and other AAA [Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles] to concerns relevant to twentieth century feminism leads the authors to their consensus. This is also the bane of the consensus, since the authors impose on the text contemporary feminist thinking. The documents need to be researched on their own terms, without the unwarranted imposition of contemporary ideology" (258). Dunn's critique of this work is coupled with his own reading of Thecla and the Pastorals, in which he argues that early Christians embraced chastity not primarily as a means of resisting patriarchy but as a way to seek freedom from the present age in general. He immediately qualifies early Christian freedom as having included freedom from the "snare of female sexuality," thereby pegging feminine allure as at least as troublesome for early Christians as male domination.[17] One could argue, of course, that such a conclusion, with its peculiar and derogatory focus on female sexuality, reveals much about the ideological commitments of this supposedly objective critic.

To be sure, both Boughton and Dunn (unlike Schneemelcher) do at least engage with the women-centered work of Davies, D. R. MacDonald, Burrus, and others, occasionally raising valid arguments and pushing legitimately for more careful consideration of the ancient texts at the base of this earlier work.

[15] Elizabeth A. Clark, *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999). In her introduction (1–13) Clark elaborates how Derrida's notion of supplementarity and Foucault's analysis of commentary inform her own understanding of patristic reading practices. In view of the divergent uses to which the authentic letters of Paul are put in the Acts of Thecla and the Pastoral Epistles, Clark's chapter on how ascetically inclined fathers appropriated the Pastorals to support their ascetic agenda (330–70) is particularly fascinating.

[16] Peter W. Dunn, "Women's Liberation, the *Acts of Paul*, and Other Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles," *Apocrypha* 4 (1993): 245–61.

[17] Ibid., 258: "The chaste Christian sought freedom not only from male-dominated structures, but from the present age in general, which includes the snare of female sexuality, as the chaste lion demonstrates by fleeing the lioness in the *APl*'s Ephesian episode."

I do not mean to suggest that the women-centered work of the 1980s is beyond critique or should not be refined. But Schneemelcher, Boughton, and Dunn, even in the context of the 1990s and even in the mainstream journals and reference works of the profession, all employ the interpretive strategy of positing their own scholarly research into the world of early Christianity as objective, scientific, and agenda-free. All three remain convinced—not coincidentally, I would argue—that it is merely the nature of the data that leads them to conclude that (1) there was no legitimate resistance by early Christian women to the patriarchal structures beginning to solidify in the second century and (2) women could not be legitimate agents and authors of early Christian literature. It is also, ostensibly, only the results of their objective, scientific research that drive them to dismissive name-calling when they approach the work of scholars who have attempted to reconstruct women as agents and authors in history. Schneemelcher, Boughton, and Dunn call us to return to our senses, to embrace "soberness" and "science," "objectivity" and "orthodoxy," while fleeing from "fantasy," "fancy," and "feminist ideology."

Erasure?

The responses of Schneemelcher, Boughton, and Dunn to Thecla scholarship of the 1980s are unambiguously antifeminist. I move now to a second type of response that is much more textured and interesting but that still has, in my view, potentially troubling effects for the project of feminist historiography. I consider here historical scholarship influenced by structuralist and poststructuralist thought. In the work discussed in this section, the focus shifts from retrieving "real women," their historical "experiences," and their "agency," to issues of textual representation. The Thecla text here is studied not for signs of a women's community nor for signs of women's resistance, but for what this fictional female heroine suggests about the struggles and ideology of the text's male author.[18]

This reading is elaborated most fully in the work of Kate Cooper, to which I shall soon attend, but it was intimated earlier in the work of Peter Brown, which Cooper acknowledges as influencing her own. In his magisterial writing on early Christian asceticism, *The Body and Society,* Brown makes passing reference to the Apocryphal Acts, cautioning against attempts to adduce anything about the lives of actual historical women on the basis of the Acts' female pro-

[18] For discussion of both the benefits of and the dilemmas posed by poststructuralism for feminist historiography, see Elizabeth A. Clark, "The Lady Vanishes: Dilemmas of a Feminist Historian after the 'Linguistic Turn,'" *Church History* 67, no. 1 (1998): 1–31. See also her earlier essay "Ideology, History, and the Construction of 'Woman' in Late Ancient Christianity," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 2 (1994): 155–84.

tagonists. For Brown, these fictional women are more appropriately spoken of as signs in a complexly coded imaginative economy:

> Continent women play a central role in the Apocryphal Acts. Yet these narratives should not be read as evidence for the actual role of women in Christianity. Rather, they reflect the manner in which Christian males of that period partook in the deeply ingrained tendency of all men in the ancient world, to use women "to think with." There is no doubt that women played an important role in the imaginative economy of the Church. Their presence condensed the deep preoccupations of male Christians with their own relations with the "world," with the ever present reality of a tainted and seductive pagan society that pressed up against the doors of their houses and abutted the closed spaces of their new meeting places. Throughout this period, Christian men used women "to think with" in order to verbalize their own nagging concern with the stance that the Church should take to the world.[19]

This invitation of Brown to read the women characters in the Apocryphal Acts as metaphors or signs in conversations that men are having is taken up by Kate Cooper in a series of writings culminating in her 1996 monograph *The Virgin and the Bride.*[20] In these writings Cooper argues compellingly that women characters in Greek and Latin prose frequently function as rhetorical markers of the character of the men under whose control they stand. As signs of men's character, she argues, women protagonists in fiction were particularly well-suited rhetorical vehicles for supporting or undermining the sacrosanct Greco-Roman institutions of marriage, the family, and the city. Speaking in general about Greco-Roman literature, Cooper notes that utilizing the rhetoric of womanly influence made it possible for an author to dismiss his opponent:

> To characterize the nature of womanly influence in a man's private life, and his response to it, was to admit or disallow him as a speaker in rational discourse. Merely by invoking either figure of the topos, the lu-

[19] Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 153. Note the similar assessment of women protagonists in early Christian literature by Averil Cameron in her essay "Virginity as Metaphor: Women and the Rhetoric of Early Christianity," in *History as Text: The Writing of Ancient History,* ed. Averil Cameron (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 181–205, esp. 191.

[20] See the following sources, all written by Kate Cooper: "Apostles, Ascetic Women, and Questions of Audience: New Reflections on the Rhetoric of Gender in the Apocryphal Acts," Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers, no. 31 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 147–53; "Insinuations of Womanly Influence: An Aspect of the Christianization of the Roman Aristocracy," *Journal of Roman Studies* 82 (1992): 150–64; and *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

> minous wife acting on behalf of the common good or the lurid temptress bent on its betrayal, a speaker could disingenuously imply that it went without saying whether or not a man's conduct was reasonable, and indeed how reasonable men would define the common good in a given instance.[21]

Because of the rhetorical function these women serve, Cooper questions the possibility of using stories about them for purposes of historical reconstruction. In her article addressing the Apocryphal Acts specifically, she notes, "The choice of a female protagonist for a given narrative was often governed by rhetorical rather than mimetic necessity," and she raises a question: "Can these stories serve as evidence for the historical role of women, or are they not more properly evidence for the history of apologetics?"[22] The answer to her question, both in this article and in her later monograph, is that it is misguided to search for "real women" behind these early Christian fictions. By contrasting two related genres—the Hellenistic romance, in which the social order is celebrated through the marriage of nubile hero and heroine, and the Apocryphal Acts, in which the social order is subverted through focus on the ascetic heroine and the denigration of sexuality—Cooper sheds light on an early Christian contest of authority. But in her view, this contest takes place solely between male protagonists: "The challenge by the apostle to the household is the urgent message of these narratives, and it is essentially a conflict *between men*. The challenge posed here by Christianity is not really about women, or even about sexual continence, but about authority and the social order."[23]

Cooper's conclusion that the Apocryphal Acts are "not really about women" places her work within a growing body of feminist historiography influenced by poststructuralism that makes similar claims. This work problematizes in general the relationship of text to reality,[24] and specifically the relation-

[21] Cooper, "Insinuations of Womanly Influence," 163.

[22] Cooper, "Apostles, Ascetic Women," 148.

[23] Cooper, *Virgin and the Bride,* 55 (Cooper's emphasis).

[24] See here, for example, the discussion of Clark, "The Lady Vanishes," 19–23, drawing on Roland Barthes, "The Reality Effect," in *The Rustle of Language,* trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill & Wang, 1986; French original, 1984), 141–42; Hayden White, "The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory," *History and Theory* 23, no. 1 (1984), reprinted in White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 26–57; and Sande Cohen, *Historical Culture: On the Recoding of an Academic Discipline* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986). Clark notes with these authors that narrative history serves as a carrier of ideology, reproducing "a culture of common language, common society, or common reality in the face of uncommon language (codes), class society, and uncommon realities" (21). Speaking of those seemingly reliable details in early Christian vitae, once viewed by social historians as legitimate grist for reconstructing history, she argues that these are better understood as "a creative artist's attempt to create an illusory reality in the minds of readers" (20).

ship of women in texts to actual women in history. In this work, texts once celebrated as indications of women as agents in their own right, moving outside the rule of husband or father and defying patriarchal structures, receive new and sobering assessments as representations of androcentric, and sometimes even pornographic, fantasies about women. To cite but a few instances of this type of reassessment, I note the following work: The feminist medievalist Roberta Krueger has charted this movement in the study of medieval courtly love literature; where once the women's strong role in these love poems was cited as evidence of the power and erotic independence of courtly women, feminist literary critics now see not courtly women's independence but "masculine desire" of the male poetic authors.[25] New Testament scholar Lawrence Wills makes a similar assessment of the book of Judith; whereas Judith has been hailed as an exemplar of a strong, independent woman in antiquity, Wills argues that, through slaying Holofernes, Judith blends sex and violence in a way that is not "antimale" but typical of male visions of the exhilaration of sexual violence.[26] The classicist Sandra Joshel notes how the sexualized Roman empress Messalina functions metonymically to represent empire in Tacitus's *Histories*, and argues for the impossibility of disentangling anything of Messalina's "lived reality" from Tacitus's rhetoric.[27] Howard Eilberg-Schwartz focuses not on historical women per se but on a feminine image for the deity, yet his argument follows a similar vein; against feminist scholars who have viewed the feminine image of Wisdom/Sophia as reflecting positively on women, Eilberg-Schwartz suggests that the feminine Sophia functions as a cover for what would otherwise be a homoerotic association between Israelite men and their masculine deity.[28]

The importance of the work of these historians, Cooper included, lies in the questions they raise regarding the straightforward and unproblematic retrieval of women from historical texts about them. Whatever reluctance femi-

[25] Roberta L. Krueger, "Double Jeopardy: The Appropriation of Woman in Four Old French Romances of the 'Cycle de la Gageure,'" in *Seeking the Woman in Late Medieval and Renaissance Writings*, ed. Sheila Fisher and Janet E. Halley (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989), 21–50.

[26] Lawrence M. Wills, *The Jewish Novel in the Ancient World* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 132–57.

[27] Sandra R. Joshel, "Female Desire and the Discourse of Empire: Tacitus's Messalina," *Signs* 21, no. 1 (1995): 50–82. See also Joshel's "The Body Female and the Body Politic: Livy's Lucretia and Verginia," in *Pornography and Representation in Greece and Rome*, ed. Amy Richlin (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 112–30.

[28] Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, "The Nakedness of a Woman's Voice, the Pleasure in a Man's Mouth: An Oral History of Ancient Judaism," in *Off with Her Head! The Denial of Women's Identity in Myth, Religion, and Culture*, ed. Howard Eilberg-Schwartz and Wendy Doniger (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), 165–84.

nist historians have regarding the use of critical theory in historiography,[29] it is no longer feasible to pluck women from ancient texts and restore them to historical narratives without paying attention to issues of textual representation.

Yet my concern about this approach, at least as it has been applied to the Apocryphal Acts, lies in its reductionism—each woman in the text becomes a sign, a means of communication between men, but serves no other possible function. This insistence that the Apocryphal Acts are not about women seems especially overdrawn in Cooper's summation: "[T]he challenge posed by Christianity in the Apocryphal Acts is not really about women . . . but about authority and the social order." Such an assertion prompts the question, How is it conceivable that in the early church, which was never an exclusively male sect, questions about authority and the social order could have *nothing to do with women?* Even if the authority question was being raised by men and answered by men, in early Christianity these questions and answers were intimately connected to the status and role of women.

In this insistence that the Apocryphal Acts have nothing really to do with women, Cooper's work shares a bit of common space with the dismissive work of Schneemelcher, Boughton, and Dunn. Both types of responses have the dual effect of shifting the focus away from women as historical subjects and of calling into question the possibility of inquiry into the history of women in the ancient world. Moreover, because of the important place of the scholarship of Cooper (and Brown) on early Christianity, the effects of this response within the academy may be much more wide-ranging.

Lévi-Strauss and Women Speaking

Much has been made of Peter Brown's assessment in *The Body and Society* that in the Apocryphal Acts, men are using women "to think with." In addition to being the kernel around which Cooper builds her arguments regarding the Apocryphal Acts, this phrase is cited more generally as signaling the impasse for historians trying to write of real women in antiquity. Brown acknowledges in a footnote that he has adopted the phrase from Lévi-Strauss's *Structural Anthropology* and notes that it "implies considerably more than the

[29] Clark summarizes some of the concerns of feminist historians concerning some forms of poststructuralism: "[T]he post-structuralist version of the critique of objectivity seemed to nullify historians' weighing of evidence according to agreed-on disciplinary standards; representation was deemed so problematic that any connection between people of the past and the description of them by historians was abrogated; categories were so fractured that historians could not even speak of 'women' anymore; the decentering of the male subject eventually annihilated the female subject as well. As many feminists have queried, why were we told to abandon 'subjectivity' just at the historical moment when women had begun to claim it? Why, Nancy Miller asks, was the 'end of woman' authorized without consulting her?" ("The Lady Vanishes," 3).

creation and manipulation of stereotypes."[30] It is important to note, however, that, as Lévi-Strauss uses the phrase, it implies considerably more than woman as a sign in the text. In Lévi-Strauss's argument that women are used "to think with," he speaks of a patriarchal system of communication in which women, through marriage regulations operative in human societies, are circulated among clans, lineages, or families in the same way that words are circulated between individuals. But his argument also includes the following infamous parenthesis:

> Of course, it may be disturbing to some to have women conceived as mere parts of a meaningful system. However, one should keep in mind that the processes by which phonemes and words have been reduced to pure sign, will never lead to the same results in matters concerning women. For words do not speak, while women do; as producers of signs, women can never be reduced to the status of symbols or tokens.[31]

Brown adopts the phrase "us[ing] women 'to think with'" from Lévi-Strauss to make his argument that women in the texts of the Apocryphal Acts are signs used by men to communicate. But he has made no allowance for Lévi-Strauss's all-important caveat, "For words do not speak, while women do; as producers of signs, women can never be reduced to the status of symbols of tokens." However problematic Lévi-Strauss's formulation may be,[32] he signals here a complexity that needs to be reckoned with. Women may function in texts like phonemes and words, but they did more than that in history, because they also spoke.

Women, Text, and Reality

Lévi-Strauss's acknowledgment of the "two-foldedness" of women, that is, that they are both signs and producers of signs, dovetails with the work of feminist historians who argue first for the importance of interrogating texts for the ways women function as signs within them, and second for further work reconstructing historical women speakers who existed beyond these texts. Rather than formulating the question of textual representation and historical reality as an either/or question, these historians argue *both* for the study of gender in textual representation *and* for reconstructive historical projects.[33]

[30] Brown, *Body and Society,* 153.

[31] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1963), 61.

[32] See Alice Jardine, *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 88–102.

[33] See, for example, Newman, "Critical Theory"; Castelli, "Heteroglossia, Hermeneutics, and History," 92–98; and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon, 1992), 79–101. This argument for both working at the level of the text

The textual base for reconstructions of women's history in antiquity is not as thick as we would like, and work such as Cooper's brings us to the sobering awareness of its many limitations. Yet indications that women helped to produce and shape early Christianity occur commonly enough that something of a history of women in early Christianity can be told. In this reconstructive work, feminist historians join forces with other ideological critics, reading texts against the grain and reading for what a text both does and does not say.[34] This acknowledgment of a reality beyond the text has made it possible for New Testament scholar Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza to argue that, in spite of what a text may or may not say about them, women were essential shapers of early Christian practice. Or, in her negative formulation of the argument, it is not that women were marginal in early Christianity; "rather, biblical texts and historical sources produce the marginality of women."[35] The possibility of such reconstructions against the grain is also noted by the classicist Barbara K. Gold in her reflection on writing the history of marginalized persons from the ancient Greek and Latin master narratives. Gold acknowledges that these master narratives have, by and large, naturalized and normalized ideals according to a particular masculine and aristocratic ideology, thereby reinforcing stereotyped representations of women. Yet she continues thus:

> In certain authors, however, we can see a "space" in the fabric, where there is an uneasiness in the representation of gender for both the author and the reader, where the language seems to have more potentiality to be interpreted from many different perspectives, where the mar-

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and presuming something beyond it specifically in order to reconstruct women's history is affirmed as a more general principle of historiography "after the linguistic turn" by the medievalist Gabrielle M. Spiegel, in "History, Historicism, and the Social Logic of the Text in the Middle Ages," *Speculum* 65 (1990): 59–86, esp. 77: "What is needed is the elaboration of a theoretical position capable of satisfying the demands of both literary criticism and history as separate yet interdependent disciplinary domains with a common concern for the social dimensions of textual production in past times. Just as we rightly reject the reduction of literature to a reflection of the world, so also we must reject the absorption of history by textuality. We need to rethink the issue of text and context in terms of a critical posture that does justice equally to textual, historicist, and *historical* principles of analysis and explanation" (Spiegel's emphasis).

[34] For a discussion of the intersection between ideological and biblical criticism, see Gale Yee, "Ideological Criticism," in *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. John H. Hayes (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 1:534–37.

[35] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, 10th anniversary ed. (New York: Crossroad, 1994), xx. For further discussion of the distinction between the kyriocentric texts of antiquity and the possible texts one could reconstruct bearing a different sociohistorical reality, see also Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Rhetoricity of Historical Knowledge: Pauline Discourse and Its Contextualizations," in *Religious Propaganda and Missionary Competition in the New Testament World: Essays Honoring Dieter Georgi*, ed. Lukas Bormann, Kelly Del Tredici, and Angela Standhartinger (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1994), 443–69.

> ginalized characters seem to be trying to "speak," and where there are border challengings (voices speaking against the text). Not only Sappho's explicit rereadings of Homer, or Sulpicia's of elegy, but such figures as the women of Aristophanes's *Lysistrata*, *Thesmophoriazousai*, and *Ekklesiazousai* . . . the freed slaves of Petronius's *Satyricon;* Vergil's Dido and Statius's Hysopyle; the native leader of Calgacus who speaks against Rome in Tacitus's *Agricola*—all these have been seen, or could be seen, as places where the mute are pushing through the fabric of the text.[36]

The Thecla legend and its reception history, I argue, is another place where we can see the mute "pushing through the fabric of the text." To support this argument, my point of departure is Tertullian's Baptism, chapter 17: "But if the writings which wrongly go under Paul's name, claim Thecla's example as a license for women's teaching and baptizing . . ." If they did, then one can posit that in the late second and early third centuries, women resisted the exhortations of 1 Timothy and pointed to the example of Thecla to authorize their public speech and leadership of initiation rituals in the church. That is, not only is the Thecla text about "authority and the social order," as Cooper recognizes, but also, at least in its reception history, it had quite a lot to do with women.

The enduring popularity of the Thecla legend among women suggests that women looked to Thecla's example not just in the late second century but in subsequent centuries as well.[37] Although extant historical sources suggest that the Thecla legend was embraced by later Christian women chiefly for Thecla's asceticism rather than her public teaching and baptizing, this may still be understood as an indication of some early Christian women's resistance to patriarchal control.[38] Because of Thecla's popularity among women, it is possible to

[36] See Barbara K. Gold, "'But Ariadne Was Never There in the First Place': Finding the Female in Roman Poetry," in *Feminist Theory and the Classics*, ed. Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz and Amy Richlin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 75–101, esp. 84.

[37] For sources, see D. R. MacDonald, *Legend and the Apostle,* 90–96; and Albrecht, *Das Leben der heiligen Makrina.*

[38] On the embrace of the ascetic lifestyle as an act of resistance by early Christian women, see Virginia Burrus, "Word and Flesh: The Bodies and Sexuality of Ascetic Women in Christian Antiquity," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 10, no. 1 (1994): 26–51, esp. 32: "[I]t is the problem of resistance to male control which most concerns ascetic women. And once they have escaped the social and sexual domination of men and constructed an alternative ascetic culture, ancient women are free to seek new expressions of their sexuality. . . . Within the texts of the ancient Christian ascetic movement we can, then, detect signs of women gaining control over their bodies and sexuality. We discern the faint traces of the ongoing history of women struggling to free their flesh from imprisonment in the male word and gaze." See also Elizabeth A. Clark, *Ascetic Piety and Women's Faith: Essays on Late Ancient Christianity* (Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 1986), 175–208; and Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her,* 90, 220–26, 315.

imagine stories about her being generated, elaborated, and retold among them.[39]

Having an Agenda

I have argued that the best feminist historiography pays close attention to representation in texts while still attempting to reconstruct a history of women. In the words of Gabrielle Spiegel, one needs both to "reject the reduction of literature to a reflection of the world" and to "reject the absorption of history by textuality." I close by arguing for the importance of acknowledging repeatedly and unapologetically the political nature of historiography.[40] History is written not in a vacuum but in a sociopolitical context. What is said, or not said, about women in early Christian history necessarily affects this contemporary context. To illustrate this point, again the Thecla text and the historical texts that surround it serve as a vehicle. I finish this article one year after the largest Protestant denomination in the United States, the Southern Baptist Convention, passed a resolution that women should no longer serve as pastors in

[39] The theories of women as oral generators and/or textual authors of the Acts of Thecla, first posited by D. R. MacDonald, Burris, and Davies in the 1980s, have been called into question. See, for example, Jean Kaestli, "Les Actes apocryphes et la reconstitution de l'historie des femmes dans le christianisme ancien,' *Cahiers bibliques de Foi et Vie* 28 (1989): 71–79; and Jean Kaestli, "Fiction littéraire et réalité sociale: Que peut-on savoir de las place des femmes dans le milieu de production des actes apocryphes des apôtres?" *Apocrypha* 1 (1990): 279–302. Like Burrus in her 1994 assessment of the Thecla document ("Word and Flesh," 45 n. 29), I will not argue here for a particular gender of the author of any of the extant Thecla manuscripts. The freedom and autonomy with which copyists of the Apocryphal Acts approached these texts suggest the futility of positing "authorship" in a singular, originary sense. See Christine Marie Thomas, "The Acts of Peter, the Ancient Novel, and Early Christian History" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1995).

[40] The need for feminists to eschew the scientistic pose of Enlightenment discourse and the "ludic" interpretive forms of postmodern discourse in order to take up "a critical feminist rhetoric of inquiry" is compellingly argued in Schüssler Fiorenza's *Rhetoric and Ethic*, esp. 17–102. For the importance of women's history to feminist movements, compare also this statement of Elizabeth Castelli: "The project of women's history involves a dual goal: to restore women to history and to restore our history of women. This process of double restoration is, of course, crucial to the political project of feminism and women's movements because it provides substance, texture, and depth to our knowledge of the past, and therefore, of ourselves in relation to the past. Moreover, insofar as the masculinist dominant culture is grounded in part in a refusal to recognize, record, and valorize the rich diversities of women's contributions to the (re)production of society and their strategies of survival and resistance, the writing of women's history calls the adequacy of the dominant order's explanations of the past into question. Women's history contradicts the idea of 'woman' as it has been promulgated by male thinkers. Politically, women's history offers women foremothers and foresisters; feminist historical reconstruction offers all of us a new, more adequate version of the story" ("Heteroglossia, Hermeneutics, and History," 92).

churches.[41] This resolution fell on the heels of an earlier declaration that wives should "submit graciously" to their husbands. The key biblical proof text offered in this most recent decision was 1 Timothy 2:11–12: "Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent" (NRSV). Such a view draws on the Pastoral Epistles as if they were the only speech about women in the early church. A feminist reconstruction of early Christian history that foregrounds the Thecla text as a countervoice calls into question the univocity of the Pastorals. Thecla serves as a resource for those who resist the hegemony of the "Pastor's" directives. Because of the value of this resistance, both then and now, I acknowledge and concur with the observation of Peter Dunn regarding those who seek evidence of such resistance in the Acts of Thecla—yes, indeed, I have an agenda.

[41] See Jennifer Kehler, "Southern Baptists Vote to Ban Female Pastors," *Ms.*, June 20, 2000, NewsPro archive <http://www.msmagazine.com/newspro/arc5-2000.html>.