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Emulating Thecla: Mygdonia, Xanthippe, and Polyxena

Different Conceptions of Conversion and Religious Life

1 Introduction

As a figure symbolizing the most appreciated virtues among early Christian writers, Thecla represented an example to be imitated by Christian women in general and, from a narrative point of view, by those female characters in hagiography who were portrayed as leading an ascetic life far from earthly goods.[1] From early Christianity onwards, Thecla would become a recurrent saintly model,[2] as she was not only an example of conversion and the first female martyr, but was also cast as a pioneer among ascetic women and a charismatic leader, and sometimes even as an apostle.[3] The eschatological purpose of Thecla's way of life in the second-century *Acts of Paul and Thecla* (= *APTh*) is reproduced by other female characters playing important roles in later apocryphal Acts. This literary genre, along with the Acts of martyrs, can be seen as a first attempt at creating a hagiographical discourse focused on a particular model of sainthood for both men and women. For the latter, there is a special emphasis on chastity and self-control, regarding which Thecla provided an extraordinary precedent for further development.

This paper examines the initial reception of this ideal of female sainthood already in the literary tradition of the apocryphal Acts. For this reason, I am going to analyze the cases of Mygdonia, the wife of Charisios, a general of the Indian king Misdeos in the third-century *Acts of Thomas* (= *AThom*), and Xanthippe and Polyxena, the two sisters featuring in the Acts that bear their names and are dated by

1 Ángel Narro, *Tecla de Iconio: La santa ideal, un ideal de santa* (Reus: Rhemata, 2021), 237–320.
2 Léonie Hayne, "Thecla and the Church Fathers," *Vigiliae Christianae* 48 (1994): 209–18; Monika Pesthy, "Thecla among the Fathers of the Church," in *The Apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla*, ed. Jan N. Bremmer (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1996): 164–78.
3 Peter Ben-Smit, "St. Thecla: Remembering Paul and Being Remembered Through Paul," *Vigiliae Christianae* 68 (2014): 555–60; Susan E. Hylen, *A Modest Apostle: Thecla and the History of Women in the Early Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 73–87; Ángel Narro, "The Cloud of Thecla and the Construction of Her Character as a Virgin (παρθένος), Martyr (μάρτυς) and Apostle (ἀπόστολος)," *Collectanea Christiana Orientalia* 16 (2019): 99–129.

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most of scholars to the sixth century (*Acts of Xanthippe and Polyxena* = *AXP*). The chronological aspect of these works is important, as it shows different perceptions of chastity, baptism, temporality, and eschatology, the four axes around which this study revolves, according to the religious trends that were current at the time of the composition of these texts.[4] This diachronic approach can provide a glimpse into the large literary production on women saints of the early Christian and late antique periods in which Thecla served as a model for shaping new female portraits.[5] The comparison of the three texts is justified, since Thecla represents the most widespread example of a virtuous woman in early Christianity. More specifically, both the section devoted to Mygdonia in the *AThom* and the entire *AXP* in its two main sections imitate the plotline and scenes of the *APTh.* In the *AThom* much attention is given to the marital tensions between Mygdonia and her husband Charisios compared to the *APTh*, but the narrative sequence remains roughly the same. As for the *AXP*, the division of the narrative into two parts, one devoted to Xanthippe and her conversion, the other to her younger sister Polyxena, consciously imitates that of the *APTh.* Indeed, the circumstances around the conversion of Xanthippe have a clear parallel in Thecla, even if some important changes are introduced, such as the conversion of Xanthippe's husband. Likewise, the young Polyxena embodies the bravery of the young Christian martyr among the lions in Antioch in her part of the story.

These choices also have implications for the Christian novelistic genre with which these stories have traditionally been associated. The influence of the Greek novel on the apocryphal Acts seems to be one of the few points of agreement among scholars.[6] The overview of the three works might therefore throw light not

4 For the need of treating each text belonging to the so-called apocryphal Acts of the apostles, see Kaestli's opinion in response to the books by Davies, MacDonald and Burrus published in the early 80s: Jean-Daniel Kaestli, "Fiction littéraire et réalité sociale: Que peut-on savoir de la place des femmes dans le milieu de production des Actes apocryphes des apôtres?" *Apocrypha* 1 (1990): 279–302, 283–84.

5 The influence of Thecla's portrait on Macrina's description or on Syncletica's ascetic way of life are two well-known examples. See, respectively: Kate Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge – London: Harvard University Press, 1996), 70–72; Fabrizio Petorella, "'The True Disciple of the Blessed Thecla': Saint Syncletica and the Construction of Female Asceticism," *Adamantius* 25 (2019): 418–26.

6 I am only citing here some of the most complete studies on this matter: Tomas Hägg, *The Novel in Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); Richard Pervo, "Early Christian Fiction," in *Greek Fiction: The Greek Novel in Context*, eds. John R. Morgan and Richard Stoneman (London: Routledge, 1994): 239–54; Melissa Aubin, "Reversing Romance? The Acts of Thecla and the Ancient Novel," in *Ancient Fiction and Early Christian Narrative*, eds. Ronald F. Hock, J. Bradley Chance, and Judith Perkins (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1998): 257–72; Richard Pervo, "The Ancient

only to the development of certain motifs and episodes related to the concepts of chastity, baptism, temporality, and eschatology, but also to the use of repetitive motifs due to their relation to the novel. It is noteworthy that the apocryphal Acts were probably conceived for a heterogeneous audience,[7] both for those initiated in the Christian faith and for non-Christian readers and listeners. The former might have possessed the keys for interpreting and decoding properly the message behind the texts, the latter probably found bizarre some plot developments, but were able to discover and learn more about the Christian principles thanks to the use of a format akin to the Greek novel of the time. Thus, one can see how concrete models of women were praised through the examples of Thecla, Mygdonia, Xanthippe, and Polyxena and how certain motifs were repeated within a narrative context such as that of the Christian fiction novel, having different connotations and meanings in each text.

2 Thecla: Virginity, Resurrection, and the Place of the Righteous

The academic discussion about the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* is extensive. The text has been analyzed from many different points of view focusing primarily on theological and literary aspects. Most scholars agree that this second-century apocryphal text suggests a close connection between virginity and resurrection,[8] which is repeated in various points of the narrative, such as in the blessings pronounced by Paul in the house of Onesiphorus in *APTh* 5–6 or in the story of Falconilla, which ends happily in chapter 39. In the former, the apostle insists on the link between chastity and eternal life, which is especially explicit in the last of his blessings, addressed directly to the virgins: "Blessed are the bodies of the virgins, for they shall be well pleasing to God and they will not lose the rewards of their purity,

Novel Becomes Christian," in *The Novel in the Ancient World*, ed. Gareth Schmeling (Leiden: Brill, 2003): 685–712.

7 Jan N. Bremmer, "The Apocryphal Acts: Authors, Place, Time and Readership," in *The Apocryphal Acts of Thomas*, ed. Jan N. Bremmer (Leuven: Peeters, 2001): 160–70.

8 Giulia Sfameni Gasparro, Enkrateia *e antropologia: Le motivazioni protologiche della continenza e della verginità nel cristianesimo dei primi secoli e nello gnosticismo* (Roma: Istituto Patristico Augustinianum, 1984), 87–96; Pieter J. Lalleman, "The Resurrection in the Acts of Paul," in Bremmer, ed, *The Apocryphal Acts of Paul*, 126–41, 130–33; Esther Yue L. Ng, "Acts of Paul and Thecla: Women's stories and precedent?," *Journal of Theological Studies* 55 (2004): 1–29, 10–11; Jane D. McLarty, *Thecla's Devotion: Narrative, Emotion and Identity in the Acts of Paul and Thecla* (Cambridge: James & Clark, 2018), 200.

because the word of the father shall be for them a work of salvation in the day of his son, and they shall have rest forever."[9]

This last blessing has a symbolic place and structure among the blessings pronounced by Paul at Onseiphorus' place, since it is the one closing the discourse and the only one not addressed to a specific group of people, but to something material such as the bodies of the virgins (τὰ σώματα τῶν παρθένων), by modifying the repeated structure μακάριοι οἱ of the rest of the blessings. Here there is a clear intention to underline the superiority of virginity and the rewards of opting for such a way of life. In short, the text stresses the abovementioned relationship between virginity and resurrection. The latter should be interpreted as an inclination towards understanding afterlife as an eternal life organized in, at least, two sections: the so-called place of the righteous and a traditional Hades, as was commonplace among early Christians.[10] Thus, the *APTh* do not deal with the resurrection of the flesh, but of the soul in the place of the righteous (ὁ τῶν δικαίων τόπος) evoked in *APTh* 28, when Falconilla, Tryphaena's dead daughter, uses the verb μετατίθημι during an oneiric vision to ask her mother to host Thecla and pleads for the young woman to pray for her soul.

Falconilla's story is of great significance for understanding the conception of death, conversion, and afterlife in the context of the conflict between Graeco-Roman and Christian religious beliefs underlying the creation of the *APTh*. The entire episode of Falconilla takes place during the second martyrdom of Thecla in Antioch, where she had previously arrived accompanying Paul in his evangelizing mission. Both Tryphaena and her daughter Falconilla are non-Christians, and so are Alexander and the governor, to mention the other two main characters in the second part of the text. The patronage relationship between Thecla and Tryphaena starts in *APTh* 28, when the latter sees her dead daughter in a dream. Here Falconilla must be considered as a non-Christian, as she needs Thecla to pray for her translation to paradise. This fact has important implications for the conversion of Tryphaena, which is conditioned by the oneiric vision of her own daughter, who is a firsthand witness of the organization, at least bipartite, of the

9 *APTh* 6: μακάρια τὰ σώματα τῶν παρθένων, ὅτι αὐτὰ εὐαρεστήσουσιν τῷ θεῷ καὶ οὐκ ἀπολέσουσιν τὸν μισθὸν τῆς ἁγνείας αὐτῶν· ὅτι ὁ λόγος τοῦ πατρὸς ἔργον αὐτοῖς γενήσεται σωτηρίας εἰς ἡμέραν τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ, καὶ ἀνάπαυσιν ἕξουσιν εἰς αἰῶνα αἰῶνος. I reproduce Barrier's translation of the last of these blessings: Jeremy W. Barrier, *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 82.

10 The best example of bipartite cosmogony can be found in the *Gospel of Nicodem* and the *Gospel of Bartholomew*. The former narrates how Jesus descended to Hades to redeem the souls of all those who inhabited there starting from Adam, whereas the latter describes the opposition between hell and paradise and the equilibrium of souls that must be preserved between both places.

afterlife. The relationship between Thecla and Tryphaena has traditionally been interpreted within the social context of patronage as a sort of particular *do ut des*, in which Thecla receives physical protection and material goods in exchange for spiritual benefits for Tryphaena and her daughter Falconilla.[11]

The reader has little information about the life of Falconilla. The text does not mention whether she was a virgin or a married woman, but one can notice the implicit resemblance between Falconilla and Thecla, who is considered by Tryphaena as equal to her own child in *APTh* 30, when she affirms that "a second mourning of Falconilla has come upon my house" (Φαλκονίλλης μου δεύτερον πένθος ἐπὶ τὴν οἰκίαν γίνεται). The vertical relationship between both women and the identification of Thecla with Falconilla perhaps suggests that both were young virgins. This might make sense if one takes into account the relationship between chastity and eternal life praised by the text. The exposition of the theoretical framework in which the text is inserted has been already shown in the blessings pronounced by Paul at Onesiphorus' house.

As Falconilla is perfectly aware of the existence of the only God, even if dead, asks for prayers for her soul. Though she uses the verb μετατίθημι, which may suggest, as I have pointed out, a transfer from one place (Hades) to another (paradise / place of the righteous), Tryphaena asks Thecla to pray on behalf of her child, "in order that she may live" (ἵνα ζήσεται). It is interesting to note that some manuscripts of the *APTh* add the phrase εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας, which matches Thecla's prayer in the same chapter (*APTh* 29).[12] The first reading put in Tryphaena's mouth (ἵνα ζήσεται) implies that she was asking for a resurrection of the flesh, whereas the second (ἵνα ζήσεται εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας) suggests a resurrection of the soul, a transfer from hell to paradise, as Falconilla requested in her oneiric apparition. The former would be a more truthful statement for a non-initiated Christian and corresponds to Tryphaena's words in *APTh* 39, when she confirms her faith and conversion and declares: "Now I believe that the dead are raised. Now I believe that my child lives" (νῦν πιστεύω ὅτι νεκροὶ ἐγείρονται· νῦν πιστεύω ὅτι τὸ τέκνον μου ζῇ). Thecla's triumph in the trials with the beasts makes Tryphaena believe in her God and prayers, which suggests how the second martyrdom of Thecla is seen as an ordeal

11 Magda Misset-Van de Weg, "A Wealthy Woman Named Tryphaena: Patroness of Thecla of Iconium," in Bremmer, ed., *The Apocryphal Acts of Paul*, 16–35; Magda Misset-Van de Weg, "Answers to the Plights of an Ascetic Woman Named Thecla," in *A Feminist Companion to the New Testament Apocrypha*, eds. Amy Jill Levine and Maria Mayo Robbins (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2006): 146–62, 157–61.

12 On the discussion and details of the manuscripts including this reading, see: Barrier, *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, 150, footnote 5.

in Tryphaena's mind.[13] As she has survived, she must be right about preaching the real God. From this point of view, Falconilla's double dream vision and the supernatural assistance of Thecla granted by God in the episodes of the lions, the marine beasts, or the bulls depict a superstitious interpretation of all these signs by Tryphaena, which is in line with her condition as a non-Christian and the remarks of the author of the *APTh* on how Thecla spent eight days in her house teaching her and her household the word of God, "so that she believed in God" (*APTh* 39: ὥστε πιστεῦσαι τῷ θεῷ). Thus, Tryphaena's previous words about the dead who are raised and her daughter who was still living, reflect her belief that her child will live forever in heaven.[14]

The entire narrative of the *APTh* must be inserted into this general framework in order to achieve an enhanced understanding of its several parts which are connected like a puzzle. I have started from the end, from the Christian conception of an eschatological purpose which impels Thecla to renounce marriage and embrace an ascetic behavior in this life. Indeed, in the interplay between chastity and eschatology, the text suggests a bipartite Christian cosmological and temporal model (terrestrial life [temporary], heavenly life [eternal]), as, for example, in the *AThom* discussed later in this essay. In both texts, the opposition between the finite temporality of this life and the infinite life in heaven is stressed, and it is claimed that the actions in this life have consequences in the afterlife, in the eternal life evoked regarding Falconilla a few lines above. To explore the implications of this change of habits and the function of baptism in this puzzle in which chastity, temporality and eschatology represent the other important pieces, it is important to recall some of the main features of Thecla, bearing always in mind these four elements.

Firstly, one must consider that Thecla represents a model of conversion. She is introduced as a non-Christian virgin betrothed to an Iconian nobleman, suffers martyrdom twice, and becomes an important spiritual leader, a kind of apostle at a time when the main topic of Christian literature was doctrine. Virginity, linked to her conversion to Christianity, is Thecla's main virtue since it is preserved throughout the narrative and plays a central role in the development of the plot. Thecla is an archetype, the model of a potential convert, a common Graeco-Roman noblewoman whose future expectations are marriage and procreation, but her social role remains unaccomplished when she embraces the new ascetic

13 Jan N. Bremmer, "Magic, Martyrdom and Women's Liberation in the Acts of Paul and Thecla," in Bremmer, ed., *The Apocryphal Acts of Paul*, 36–59, 55; McLarty, *Thecla's Devotion*, 84–85.
14 Lalleman, "The Resurrection in the Acts of Paul," 133.

way of life preached by the apostle.[15] Even if the social implications of Thecla's renunciation of marriage are significant,[16] I am more interested in describing the spiritual and religious consequences. The rejection of marriage is only one of the many made by Thecla, who adopts an ascetic lifestyle after hearing the words of Paul on chastity and eternal life. She leaves her family, her betrothed, her female adornments and manifests her intention to cut her hair off. All these attitudes denote a firm renunciation of earthly life, which is considered as a passage, a way to reach eternal life by means of strict ascetic practice based primarily on the preservation of virginity.

Nonetheless, the apparent lack of concern for materiality in general has its exception precisely in the body of Thecla, which highlights the importance of the last of the blessings pronounced by Paul at the beginning of the *APTh.* Thecla becomes, in fact, a no-martyr, as she is martyred but does not die, which represents a rare case in early Christian literature. Thecla's conversion, which is accompanied by the adoption of an ascetic way of life, provides her with a corporeal protection on earth. The cloud full of hail and the earthquake appearing during her first trial in Iconium or the diverse divine interventions on her behalf in Antioch protect her body from the fire or the beasts, but also from the unrestrained gaze of the spectators.[17] This divine protection must be seen as a reward for her virginal way of life and her refusal to marry, as if it were a sign of the holy status achieved by Thecla. In these passages, baptism plays a symbolic role, but it is not regarded as strictly necessary for obtaining this providential aid.

The episode of her self-baptism is unique in early Christian sources, although it employs the usual vocabulary and imitates the procedure of the baptismal prac-

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15 Ross S. Kraemer, "The Conversion of Women to Ascetic Forms of Christianity," *Signs* 6/2 (1980): 298–307.

16 Here mention should be made of the most representative contributions to this topic: Stevan L. Davies, *The Revolt of the Widows* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980); Virginia Burrus, *Chastity as Autonomy: Women in the Stories of the Apocryphal Acts* (Lewiston - Queenston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1987); Andrew S. Jacobs, "A Family Affair: Marriage, Class, and Ethics in the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 7 (1999): 105–38, 105–7; Gonzalo del Cerro, *Las mujeres en los Hechos apócrifos de los Apóstoles* (Madrid: Ediciones Clásicas, 2003), 23–26; Cornelia B. Horn, "Suffering Children, Parental Authority and the Quest for Liberation? A Tale of Three Girls in the *Acts of Paul* (*and Thecla*), the *Act*(*s*) *of Peter*, the *Acts of Nereus and Achilleus* and the *Epistle of Pseudo-Titus*," in Levine and Robbins, eds., *A Feminist Companion*, 118–45, 121–30; Andrew S. Jacobs, "'Her Own Proper Kinship': Marriage, Class and Women in the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles," in Levine and Robbins, eds, *A Feminist Companion*, 19–46.

17 See the analysis by Constantinou regarding this scene in the fifth-century *Life and Miracles of Saint Thecla*, where the hagiographer insists further on this aspect: Stavroula Constantinou, *Female Corporeal Performances: Reading the Body in Byzantine Passions and Lives of Holy Women* (Uppsala: Uppsala University Press, 2005), 37.

tice of this period.[18] From a narrative point of view, this moment is the most dramatic in the entire narration, since Thecla confesses that she baptizes herself on her very last day (ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ὑστέρᾳ ἡμέρᾳ βαπτίζομαι). She had previously asked Paul to baptize her by appealing to the power of the seal of God (τὴν σφραγίδα ἐν τῷ κυρίῳ), but he had refused. This seems a narrative strategy to justify the symbolic baptism of Thecla, where she seems to be reborn from the water of the pool of beasts as a new woman. Dunn has interpreted the verb βαπτίζομαι as a passive form instead of middle, so Thecla would be baptized by God,[19] but his arguments do not seem very convincing to me. Much more plausible is Lincicum's hypothesis on the relationship between Thecla and Falconilla in this episode,[20] but in my opinion this part of the narration is exclusively focused on Thecla, whereas Falconilla will only be mentioned by her own mother, convinced precisely by the effectiveness of the example of Thecla to convert people through the wonders performed by God to protect her.

Many significant elements appear in this scene. The most important is the cloud of light blinding and killing the marine beasts and hiding the naked body of the martyr from the sight of the spectators.[21] As I already argue elsewhere, the cloud is a symbol of God's protection, appearing in the most representative moments of Thecla's life in the *APTh*,[22] since it is present in different shapes in the martyrdoms of both Iconium and Antioch. In addition, it also appears guiding Thecla to Seleukeia in the alternative ending of codex G and has an interesting parallel in the episode with Salome in the *Protogospel of James* (19), where a luminous cloud (νεφέλη φωτεινή) covers the entrance of the cave in which Mary is giving birth to Jesus. The expression indicates the occurrence of a theophany in the Old and New Testaments (Exod 16:10; Dan 7:13; Matt 17:5; Mark 9:7; Acts 1:9), but in the passages with Mary and Thecla there is a clear link with virginity, as if

18 Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 229–30.

19 Peter W. Dunn, "The Acts of Paul and the Pauline Legacy in the Second Century" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Cambridge, 1996), 64–67.

20 David Lincicum, "Thecla's Auto-Immersion (*APTh* 4.2–14 [3.27–39]): A Baptism for the Dead?," *Apocrypha* 21 (2010): 203–13, 209–12.

21 On the problematic identification of these marine beasts as seals one can find extensive literature: Bruno Lavagnini, "S. Tecla nella vasca delle foche e gli spettacoli in acqua," *Byzantion* 33 (1963): 185–90; Horst Schneider, "Thekla und die Robben," *Vigiliae Christianae* 55 (2001): 45–57; Ingvild S. Gilhus, *Animals, Gods and Humans: Changing Attitudes to Animals in Greek, Roman, and Early Christian Ideas* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 191–95; Janet E. Spittler, *Animals in the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 181–83.

22 Narro, "The Cloud of Thecla," 119–21. Ferguson points out that it symbolizes the illumination of the baptism: Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 252.

the cloud were hiding and protecting the integrity of both women. From this perspective, baptism is less important compared to the preservation of Thecla's virginal status, which has traditionally been interpreted as a sign of the encratite philosophy of the *APTh.* Here baptism has more of a narrative fiction. Regarding the question of temporality, it is interesting to note that it represents an inflection point in Thecla's life. Her words before her self-baptism denote that for Thecla being baptized meant her *de facto* entrance into the Christian community, since from this moment onwards she was going to live a new life as a true Christian woman.

Tissot pointed out that the only apocryphal Acts featuring extreme encratism were those of Thomas, whereas in the Thecla story we see a less radical encratite position,[23] close to that of most of the fathers of the Church. Tissot's opinion is based on the attitude of the apostle Paul towards Onesiphorus and his family, since he was married and had two children, but his arguments seem weak in light of the *AThom*, where the apostle displays a similar stance towards the general Siphor, his wife and daughter. The moral, social and even religious superiority of virginity is commonplace in early Christian literature, but here the text focuses on how the choice of a virginal life is rewarded with two specific benefits: corporeal protection in this life and a place in heaven after death. In the *APTh* virginity is also highly recommended for young women within the context of early Christianity, since, as the feminist school pointed out back in the 1980s, Thecla's conversion to the Christian doctrine represented an alternative to traditional Graeco-Roman conceptions of female social functions. In conclusion, the message is radical, the interplay between virginity and the corporeal and spiritual rewards is also very clear, but in this narrative context everything seems symbolic and idealized. It is difficult to determine the level of encratism in these texts, especially if one compares their ideas with other testimonies unsuspected of belonging to encratite trends in which a similar preference for virginity or, at least sexual abstinence,[24] can be found, especially in relation to young women. More interesting to me seems the comparison with the *AThom* and the possible influence of the *APTh* on them, which allows us to track the adaptation and evolution of the ideas about virginity, eschatology, baptism, and temporality.

23 Yves Tissot, "Encratisme et Actes Apocryphes," in *Les Actes apocryphes des Apôtres: Christianisme et monde païen*, eds. François Bovon, Éric Junod, and Jean-Daniel Kaestli (Genève: Labor et fides, 1981): 109–19, 115–16.

24 Elizabeth A. Clark, *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 3–4.

3 Mygdonia in the *Acts of Thomas*

The influence of Thecla on the configuration of certain female ideals related to holiness and ascetic lifestyle is remarkable. Her model is the basis for the narration of Mygdonia inserted towards the end of the *AThom*,[25] the third-century apocryphon describing the preaching activity of the apostle in India. The text of Thomas shows a clear dichotomy between earthly and heavenly life, which is explicitly expressed through the story of the heavenly palace built by Thomas for the Indian king Goundaphor at the beginning of the Acts.[26] Thomas is sold by Jesus as a slave to Abban the merchant,[27] sent by Goundaphor to Jerusalem to hire an architect for the new palace. Once Thomas arrived at his kingdom, he and the king met and discuss the construction of the palace (the location, the distribution, the main characteristics of the building). Thomas did not build the palace, but he divided all the money and goods provided by the king for its construction among the needy of the region. When Goundaphor realized that Thomas was not working in his palace but was wasting his fortune, he was infuriated and imprisoned the apostle until he decided an appropriate punishment. Suddenly, Goundaphor's brother, Gad, died. He went to heaven and discovered a great palace built for his brother by the intercession of Thomas before God. As he wanted to live in it, he asked the angels to resurrect him to change his brother's mind and buy the palace. When Gad related everything that he saw in heaven, the king understood the cryptic words of Thomas who assured him that he had indeed built a palace, but it could not be seen in this world.

This story was the most popular part of the *AThom*, as can be observed from the Greek manuscript tradition of the text, in which the first two Acts (in their original form or paraphrased) appear individually in almost half of the manuscripts.[28]

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25 Narro, *Tecla de Iconio*, 242–52.

26 On this episode, considered as a pious fraud, see Anton Hilhorst, "The Heavenly Palace in the *Acts of Thomas*", in Bremmer, ed., *The Apocryphal Acts of Thomas*, 53–64, esp. 57–58.

27 Thomas becomes both a metaphorical and a real slave of Jesus, which has been traditionally interpreted as *mise en scène* of the concept of the "slave of God" (δοῦλος τοῦ Θεοῦ), quite popular in early Christian writings. For a deeper discussion, see Monika Pesthy, "Thomas, the Slave of Lord," in Bremmer, ed., *The Apocryphal Acts of Thomas*, 65–73; Jennifer A. Glancy, "Slavery in the *Acts of Thomas*," *Journal of Early Christian History* 2 (2012): 3–21; Marianne Bjelland Kartzow, *The Slave Metaphor and Gendered Enslavement in Early Christian Discourse* (London: Routledge, 2018), 125–44.

28 Israel Muñoz Gallarte and Ángel Narro, "The Abridged Version(s) of the So-Called Family Γ of the Apocryphal Acts of Thomas," in *The Apostles Peter, Paul, John, Thomas and Philip with their Companions in Late Antiquity*, eds. Tobias Nicklas, Janet E. Spittler, and Jan N. Bremmer (Leuven: Peeters, 2021): 254–69.

The story of the heavenly palace shows in a didactic and descriptive manner the contrast between the material earthly life and the eternal heavenly one, and how the actions accomplished in this life have consequences in the other, so that Christians should abandon perishable goods for charitable deeds and ascetic behavior to receive their reward in the afterlife. This is the key to understanding the general framework in which the *Acts of Thomas* were composed, which matches Mygdonia's attitude and the function of her story in the context of the narrative.

The story of Mygdonia begins in chapter 82, where she is described escorted by a group of slaves going to see the multitude gathering around the apostle. Thomas delivers a discourse resembling that of Paul in *APTh* 5–6. Here, in *AThom* 84–86, the apostle establishes a dichotomy between vices and virtues. He encourages Christians to refrain from adultery, robbery, greed, vainglory and from every shameful action, especially corporeal, as he considers this kind of actions the "metropolis of all evil" (ἔστιν γὰρ αὕτη ἡ μητρόπολις τῶν κακῶν ἁπάντων).

On the other hand, he insists on some virtues such as mildness (πραότης), spiritual tranquility (ἡσυχία), equity (ἐπιείκεια) and, above all, holiness (ἁγιωσύνη). In this discourse Thomas is clearly proclaiming an ascetic way of life based on the encratite ideal of the attainment of heavenly goods according to one's behavior in this life, where all the aforementioned virtues, but especially holiness, must be displayed. It is interesting to note that the text does not use the term ἐγκράτεια or any of its derived forms, as might be expected. By contrast, the word appears twice in the *APTh*, for example, in the blessings pronounced by Paul in the house of Onesiphorus. In my opinion, the concept of ἁγιωσύνη, which can be translated as "holiness" or "sanctity" should be understood as a synonym for ἐγκράτεια, since being "holy" (ἅγιος) must be interpreted as following the main premises highlighted by the apostle throughout the texts in his discourses and actions.

The reaction of Mygdonia follows closely the steps of Thecla's conversion. She falls on the ground before the feet of Thomas and asks him to receive the seal of the Lord and become a holy temple (ναὸς ἅγιος), as Thecla did before Paul in the prison. This shows the connection with the previous discourse by Thomas and the concept of ἁγιωσύνη, and how Mygdonia had perfectly understood the meaning of this term despite being unfamiliar with Christian doctrine. To become a holy temple, Mygdonia has to renounce marriage and perishable goods and adopt an ascetic way of life. Thomas insists in his private conversation with Mygdonia in chapter 88 on the opposition between material and eternal goods, as in the story of the heavenly palace of King Goundaphor.

Mygdonia's sudden conversion directly affects her relationship with Charisios. Thecla refuses to marry. Mygdonia refuses to be a wife. What one can see in this section is a clear *imitatio Theclae*, an adaptation of the Thecla-model to the story of Mygdonia, in which the main difference is that the latter was already married. The

Indian woman abruptly changes her attitude towards her husband. She tries to keep her distance from Charisios. In chapters 89–90, she avoids dining with him, as she does not feel well, which is interpreted by Charisios as a clear sign of the evil effect of the apostle's magical power over his wife.[29] The narration progresses by describing the constant arguments between Mygdonia and Charisios, the former avoiding every physical contact, the latter insisting on having sexual intercourse with her. The plot of the *APTh* is evoked again in *AThom* 94, where Thomas delivers a speech in which one may find eleven blessings, which shows how closely the author of the text was following the narrative sequence of the first part of the *APTh* to shape his own story. Thomas' discourse focuses on the importance of sanctity (ἁγιωσύνη), which is used in one way or another in four sentences, mildness (πραότης), which is used three times, and spiritual tranquility (ἡσυχία), used once. There is a direct connection between this part of the text and the passage where Mygdonia asks to become a holy temple, as Thomas literally blesses "the bodies of the holy ones, because they are worthy to become temples of God, in which Christ shall dwell" (μακάρια τὰ σώματα τῶν ἁγίων, ὅτι κατηξιώθησαν ναοὶ θεοῦ γενέσθαι, ἵνα Χριστὸς ἐνοικήσῃ ἐν αὐτοῖς). The reminiscence of Paul's last blessing in *APTh* 6, in which the bodies of the virgins (μακάρια τὰ σώματα τῶν παρθένων) are praised, is evident and stresses the interpretation of the term ἁγιωσύνη (and its derived forms) in the *AThom* as a synonym for chastity or self-control. It is interesting to note the implications of the choice of the term ἅγιος here in comparison with the more specific παρθένος of the *APTh* and the target of the blessing in one case and in another. Firstly, the moral content of the blessings pronounced by Thomas should be interpreted as a general message addressed to all Christian believers or potential converts, as suggested by the presence of the multitude hearing the words of the apostle. The narrative sequence, however, focuses on Mygdonia, who is married to Charisios and, consequently, is not a virgin. This is probably the reason why the author of the *AThom* consciously employs a term such as ἅγιος, which could evoke an ascetic behavior with no reference to a specific audience, even if the reader is clearly observing the materialization of Thomas' message in Mygdonia's actions. Secondly, the second part of the blessing in this interplay between the *APTh* and the *AThom* has significant implications within the general framework and goals of both texts. I have already ar-

29 Accusations of this sort are proverbial in the apocryphal Acts of the apostles, where the sudden conversions and miracles performed by the apostles are interpreted as magical actions. As Poupon pointed out, in most ancient texts, as that of Thomas, the accusation of being a magician is normally related to the preaching of the benefits of a chaste way of life: Gérard Poupon, "L'accusation de magie dans les actes apocryphes," in Bovon, Junod, and Kaestli, eds., *Les Actes apocryphes*, 71–93, 73.

gued that the last blessing of Paul in *APTh* 6 explicitly mentions the eschatological rewards of keeping virginity forever and emphasizes the connection between one's behavior in this life and the consequences after death. In this second blessing of Thomas, however, the apostle insists only on the ascetic behavior in this life, where the holy ones become temples of God and host Christ. The author uses the verb ἐνοικέω to express this intimate relation of Christ with the Christian believer. This is particularly relevant when the text deals with the concept of marriage and describes the spiritual union between the human being and Christ as a metaphorical bridal chamber in which both dwell, which has traditionally been interpreted as a gnostic allegory for the union of a human being with the divinity represented by Christ.[30]

Thus, the renunciation of sex and material life transcends the binary temporal opposition between life and the afterlife in the *APTh* and provokes an eternal spiritual union from the moment an individual is converted, decides to keep their purity, becomes a temple of God (ναὸς ἅγιος) and renounces sexual pleasures and material goods. This idea, however, is not incompatible with the belief in an eschatological reward but adds a spiritual tie between the individual and Christ during this life. This metaphorical and atemporal relationship has no gender implications *a priori*, since the union with Christ remains the same in the case of Thomas or Mygdonia, but seems to develop the idea of the bride of Christ already present in early Christian writings.[31]

In *AThom* 95 Charisios is enraged when he wakes up in the morning and cannot find his wife, an evident parallel to *APTh* 19. The text describes a rising tension between the spouses. This tension reaches its climax in *AThom* 98, where Chari-

30 The theology of the bridal chamber, associated with the gnostic nature of the *Acts of Thomas* can be observed in the first act of the apostle, during the episode of the wedding celebration in Andrapolis. Here Thomas and Jesus, who appears in the scene as well, convert the newlywed couple to the Christian doctrine inside the bridal chamber prepared to consummate marriage. As they embrace an ascetic way of life and refuse to have sex here, they consummate, as Thomas did, a union with the eternal bridegroom Christ there. For further discussion, see Charles M. Stang, *Our Divine Double* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 129–34. For further discussion, see Richard Valantasis, "The Nuptial Chamber Revisited: The Acts of Thomas and Cultural Intertextuality," *Semeia* 80 (1997): 261–76. The relationship with the Mygdonia-episode and the first act of the apostle has been stressed by Susan E. Myers, *Spirit Epicleses in the Acts of Thomas* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 77–80.

31 On the features and development of this concept in early Christian texts, see Elizabeth A. Clark, "The Celibate Bridegroom and His Virginal Brides: Metaphor and the Marriage of Jesus in Early Christian Ascetic Exegesis," *Church History* 77 (2008): 1–25, 3–8; Norbert Schnell, *The Bride of Christ – A Metaphor for the Church: Systematical Exegetical Analysis* (Zürich: Lit Verlag, 2021), 45–151.

sios' sexual assault on his wife is narrated. Mygdonia has kept an ascetic way of life and has avoided any private encounter with her husband, including sexual intercourse. This seems to be the straw that breaks the camel's back. Charisios approaches his wife after dinner, but she shouts: "From now there is no place for you beside me, because my Lord Jesus, with whom I am and rests in me, is better than you."[32] Mygdonia's words make her husband so much angrier that he tries to rape her. The text describes a clear sexual assault and represents a valuable narrative witness of the violence against women in Graeco-Roman society. By embracing a new life of chastity, Mygdonia acts against the traditional social roles assigned to women and breaks the horizontal relationship with her husband in which he is the dominant figure and she the dominated. Mygdonia finally manages to escape from the hands of her lustful husband by wrapping herself in the curtain which covered the door of the chamber before going to her nurse to sleep beside her. The comparison between Charisios and Jesus, which causes the jealousy of the former, is particularly indicative of the framework in which the episode with Mygdonia should be read. Mygdonia clearly states that Jesus is better than her husband. Obviously, Jesus is eternal, Charisios is only a man. Jesus wins. Furthermore, she repeats the idea that Jesus is somehow inside her (ὁ σὺν ἐμοὶ ὢν καὶ ἐν ἐμοὶ ἀναπαυόμενος), which matches the use of the verb ἐνοικέω in the blessing of Thomas.

After this scene, the narrative pace of the *Acts of Thomas* slows and attention turns to doctrinal aspects, as can be clearly seen from the so-called *Hymn of Pearl* (chapters 108–113).[33] The last section focused on the conversion of Mygdonia appears in chapters 114–121. Here one may find the true significance of the conversion of the Indian noblewoman with respect to the axes of chastity, temporality, and eschatology. In my opinion, there is a clear connection in the text between chastity and eschatology, as in the *APTh*, which is observed in Mygdonia's attitude towards her husband and even her past life. The dichotomy between perishable and eternal goods is embodied in the comparison between Charisios and Jesus

32 *AThom* 98: οὐκ ἔχεις λοιπὸν χώραν πρὸς ἐμέ· ὁ γὰρ κύριός μου Ἰησοῦς κρείττων σού ἐστιν ὁ σὺν ἐμοὶ ὢν καὶ ἐν ἐμοὶ ἀναπαυόμενος.

33 This hymn has been interpreted as an allegorical summary of the entire *Acts of Thomas* and as a gnostic narrative in relation with some of the aspects mentioned above. For further discussion, see: Albertus F.J. Klijn, "The So-Called Hymn of the Pearl (Acts of Thomas ch. 108–113)," *Vigiliae Christianae* 14 (1960): 154–64; Gerard P. Luttikhuizen, "The Hymn of Jude Thomas, the Apostle, in the Country of the Indians (*ATh* 108–113)," in Bremmer, ed., *The Apocryphal Acts of Thomas*, 101–14; Israel Muñoz Gallarte, "El 'Himno de la Perla' en el contexto de la literatura cristiano primitiva: Análisis y primeras conclusiones de HT 108–111.62," *'Ilu. Revista de Ciencias de las Religiones* 22 (2017): 245–65.

that Mygdonia repeats again in chapter 117, when she claims that "he whom I love is better than you and your possessions, for your goods are of the earth and remain on the earth, but he whom I love is heavenly, and he will take me to heaven."[34] With this affirmation and the following ones, she states the difference between earthly and heavenly marriage, although shame is still present in Mygdonia's mind, as can be inferred from her own words about her earlier life. She affirms: "Jesus abides alone forever with those souls which believe in him. He will save me from the shameful actions which I used to do with you."[35] This last statement reflects her will to erase her previous life before the conversion. Here we can see a more radical encratite position, since marriage and sexual relations are vividly rejected and, similarly, the notion of the divine forgiveness of the actions accomplished before baptism, as was also the case with the story of Falconilla inserted into the *APTh.* There are important differences between the two stories, since, as pointed out, Falconilla's virginity is implied, whereas Mygdonia is a married woman and used to have sexual intercourse with her husband, as can be inferred from the scene of the sexual assault of her husband. Her conversion, finally performed in chapter 121, grants her forgiveness for her mistakes in this world so that she may obtain her heavenly reward, as is clearly expressed by Thomas after baptizing the noblewoman, when he says: "You have received the seal and gained for yourself the eternal life" (ἐδέξω σου τὴν σφραγῖδα, κτίσαι σεαυτῇ ζωὴν αἰώνιον). There was no room for doubt: baptism had an eschatological goal, a heavenly reward, as in the case of the palace of the Indian king. Thus, Mygdonia's ascetic discipline and renouncement of marriage seem a training for the real conversion, produced *de facto* at the moment of her baptism. As was stated a few lines above, the spiritual marriage with Christ transcends the temporal order of the things. It belongs rather to the eternal life awaiting her after her corporeal death, although, once she embraced a chaste life and renounced her husband and sexual relations, her spiritual relationship was already materialized in this world and would persist forever, as it broke the dichotomy between here and there and focused only on the eternal life to come.

The relation to the model of Thecla's conversion is obvious, despite the differences, such as the condition of both Mygdonia and Thecla or the development of some gnostic ideas in the story of the former. However, these differences do not imply a significant change in the perception of both texts regarding the dichotomy between perishable and eternal goods or the primacy of chastity over the other

34 *AThom* 117: ἐκεῖνον ὃν φιλῶ βελτίων σού ἐστιν καὶ τῶν σῶν ὑπαρχόντων· ἡ γὰρ ὕπαρξίς σου ἐκ γῆς οὖσα εἰς γῆν ὑποστρέφει· ὃν δὲ ἐγὼ φιλῶ οὐράνιός ἐστιν, κἀμὲ σὺν αὐτῷ εἰς οὐρανὸν ἄξει. **35** *AThom* 117: Ἰησοῦς δὲ μόνος μένει εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα καὶ αἱ ψυχαὶ αἱ εἰς αὐτὸν ἐλπίζουσαι. αὐτὸς Ἰησοῦς ἀπαλλάξει με τῶν αἰσχρῶν σου πράξεων ἃς ἔπραττον μετὰ σοῦ.

virtues in the pursuit of heavenly rewards. It is true that, if one goes back to the initial episode of the heavenly palace built for King Goundaphor in the *AThom*, renunciation of material riches and charity are the actions performed by Thomas on behalf of the king. Nonetheless, one should remember that the episode of the wedding of Andrapolis, in which the theology of the bridal chamber and the renunciation of sex and marriage are connected with the consummation of a spiritual union with Christ, comes first within the narrative sequence of the *AThom* and has its real application in the case of a married woman in this section with Mygdonia. This fact stresses the importance of chastity throughout the entire narrative.

The story of Mygdonia has often been interpreted as evidence of the radical encratite position of the *AThom.*[36] It is obvious that there is a clear objection to sexual intercourse, and, inasmuch sexual relations were normally conceived within the context of marriage, it has been argued that there was a radical opposition to marriage as well. This last idea is not very clear to me. The conceptual framework seems much more complex than this. There is a clear preference for virginity, but a common married life in chastity is also possible. Marriage was a very important social institution in both the Graeco-Roman and Jewish societies, so it should be expected to play some role in the new Christian context. The example is the brief episode of Vazan before the martyrdom of the apostle. In *AThom* 150 Vazan declares that he was married to a woman, but they never had sexual intercourse. The young man asks the apostle to heal his wife, which he accepts if she believes in Christ. Is the author of the text here opening the door for a chaste Christian marriage? The question seems reasonable and may find its answer in the following section of this essay.

4 Xanthippe and Polyxena

The so-called *Acts of Xanthippe and Polyxena,* in which the two women convert to Christianity during Paul's evangelizing mission in Hispania, borrow a great number of elements from the *APTh.*[37] The text has been dated to the fifth or sixth cen-

36 Besides the general article on the relationship between encrastism and the apocryphal Acts, Tissot exposes his reasons for considering the *Acts of Thomas* as encratite in another article focused exclusively on this text: Yves Tissot, "L'encratisme des Actes de Thomas," in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt 2* 25/6 (Berlin - New York: De Gruyter, 1988): 4415–30.

37 Erik Peterson, "Die 'Acta Xanthippae et Polyxenae' und die Paulus-Akten," *Analecta Bollandiana* 65 (1947): 57–61; Richard Pervo, "Dare and Back: The Stories of Xanthippe and Polyxena," in *Early Christian and Jewish Narrative: The Role of Religion in Shaping Narrative Forms,* eds. Ilaria Ramelli and Judith Perkins (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015): 161–204, 171–74.

turies and possesses all the ingredients of a pious hagiographical novel.[38] It is clearly divided into two sections, each one devoted to one of the two Hispanic sisters mentioned in the title.[39] Both sisters follow the steps of Thecla in her path to sanctity, but each one emphasizes different elements of the story of the young woman from Iconium.[40] Xanthippe is the main character of the first half of the text. She is a non-Christian woman from Hispania married to a nobleman called Probos. After hearing from a slave about the Christian doctrine, she experiences a corporeal reaction resembling that of Thecla in *APTh* 8, sometimes interpreted as a sort of *signa amoris.* Here the connection with the ancient novel becomes particularly obvious, as scenes of this kind appear largely exaggerated.[41] A clear example is precisely the corporeal disease caused by the hearing of the Christian message regarding asceticism. Whereas in the *APTh* the text is clearly subverting some of the main symptoms of the manifestation of romantic love, as in the novel, in *AXP* a real disease is described. In fact, the slave who triggers the conversion of her mistress dies, as she could not bear the thought of being far from the apostle Paul and his preaching (*AXP* 2).

In the same passage, the ritual of the full conversion to the Christian doctrine is mentioned. Xanthippe asks to be healed from the disease from which she was

38 The text was traditionally dated to the third or fourth centuries: Montague R. James, *A Collection of Thirteen Apocryphal Books and Fragments* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1893), 43–48. Many authors, however, have dated the texts in the fifth or sixth century during the last decades: Éric Junod, "Vie et conduite des saintes femmes Xanthippe, Polyxène et Rébecca (BHG 1877)," in *Oecumenica et Patristica: Festschrift für Wilhelm Schneemelcher zum 75. Geburtstag*, eds. Damaskinos Papandreou, Wolfgang A. Bienert, and Knut Schäferdiek (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1989): 83–106, 90–92; Tibor Szepessy, "Narrative Model of the Acta Xanthippe et Polyxenae," *Acta Antiqua Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 44 (2004): 317–40; David L. Eastman, "Life and Conduct of the Holy Women Xanthippe, Polyxena, and Rebecca," in *New Testament Apocrypha: More Noncanonical Scriptures*, Vol I, eds. Tony Burke and Brent Landau (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016): 416–52, 422; Carlos J. Martínez Arias, *Hechos de Jantipa y Polixena* (Reus: Rhemata, 2020), IV–V. On its relationship with the ancient novel, see David Konstan and Ilaria Ramelli, "The Novel and Christian Narrative," in *A Companion to the Ancient Novel*, eds. Edmund P. Cueva and Shannon N. Byrne (West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2014): 180–97, 187.

39 Junod, "Vie et conduite des saintes femmes," 93–98.

40 Narro, *Tecla de Iconio*, 252–63.

41 The relationship between the *AXP* and the Greek novel has been stressed by Gorman in a polemic article in which a hypothetic romantic link between Xanthippe and Polyxena is suggested, which is very difficult to accept: Jill C. Gorman, "Producing and Policing Female Sexuality: Thinking With and About 'Same-Sex Desire' in the *Acts of Xanthippe and Polyxena*," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 10 (2001): 416–41. This hypothesis was supported by Burrus in a later essay on the basis of similar arguments: Virginia Burrus, "Desiring Women: Xanthippe, Polyxena, Rebecca," in *Reading and Teaching Ancient Fiction: Jewish, Christian, and Greco-Roman Narratives*, eds. Sara R. Johnson, Rubén R. Dupertuis, and Christine Shea (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Studies, 2018): 9–27.

suffering. The answer of the slave is clear: "The invocation of a new name, the unction with oil and the bathing of water" (*AXP* 2: ἐπίκλησις ὀνόματος καινοῦ, καὶ χρίσις ἐλαίου, καὶ λοῦτρον ὕδατος). Baptism is the remedy to Xanthippe's disease. However, the idea of a disease caused by hearing the apostle's preaching still seems out of context. What follows explains that both Xanthippe and her slave are afflicted by it because they are not baptized and do not belong to the Christian community. One must consider that this is primarily a tale of conversion placed in a similar context to that of the *APTh*, but here the hagiographer puts additional emphasis on the erroneous beliefs of non-Christians. Both the slave and Xanthippe become conscious of their error from the moment they are aware of the existence of the Christian doctrine, and this is what causes the disease affecting their bodies. Clear proof of this is found in the description of the images of the idols shaking and falling down while the slave and Xanthippe are conversing.

From this moment on, Xanthippe closely follows the steps of Thecla until the arrival of Paul in town and imitates Mygdonia to a certain degree in her ascetic behavior. She constantly looks out her window in search of the apostle, she does not sleep nor eat,[42] and asks her husband to sleep separately. As in the case of Mygdonia, the Thecla-model must be adapted to match Xanthippe's condition as a married woman. When the apostle Paul enters the scene, she falls at his feet like Thecla, bribes the gatekeeper guarding the door of her chamber to let her see the apostle, who was hosted in a neighbor's house, and asks for the seal (σφραγίς) of Christ. The narrative plot is quite similar to that of the story of Mygdonia, which demonstrates the great significance of the ideal of Thecla in early Christian narrations focused on pious women. The main difference with regard to both Thecla and Mygdonia is the conception of baptism and conversion. Ascetic behavior and baptism are described in the text as a protection from demonic attacks, physical desires and other evils in this life and, even if there is a clear defense of the Christian ascetic way of life, the eschatological reward of a behavior of this sort is not stressed as it was in the texts discussed previously. In fact, baptism is considered literally as an "unconquerable chest plate" (ἀκαταμάχητος θώραξ), a protection against diseases or demonic attacks in this world, which suggests that the hagiographer focuses on material benefits and establishes a connection between ascetic life and physical protection.

As for marriage, the text adopts a more tolerant position. Probos, Xanthippe's husband, also converts to Christianity and it is said that "the great Paul taught that

42 On the importance of fasting in the section devoted to Xanthippe, see Jill C. Gorman, "Sexual Defence by Proxy: Interpreting Women's Fasting in the *Acts of Xanthippe and Polyxena*," in Levine and Robbins, eds., *A Feminist Companion*, 206–15, 210–12.

those who are burned by the flesh, shall keep a legal marriage and reject fornication, especially with the stranger woman, and those who were married shall keep mutual fidelity."[43] From this moment onwards, both display an ascetic behavior and the same virtues as the celibate marriages portrayed in late antique hagiography as in the stories of Sts. Julian and Basilissa, Andronikos and Athanasia or Galaktion and Episteme.[44] As for the depiction of Paul as a defender of legal marriage, the text has an interesting parallel in the so-called *Life and Miracles of Saint Thecla*, the fifth-century literary paraphrase of the *APTh*, in which the hagiographer modifies Paul's discourse before the governor of Iconium to defend the benefits and social value of marriage, even as a guarantee for the perpetuation of the human race, which necessarily implies the existence of sexual relations between the spouses (*VTh* 7).[45]

The conversion to Christianity brings about physical protection against the attacks of the demon, as observed in chapter 21, where Xanthippe faces the devil transformed into a mime actor. Here she exhibits incredible physical strength, granted by God along with the baptism to defeat the devil and his aggressions. The same view of baptism persists in the section of the story focused on Polyxena. It begins with a warning by Xanthippe to her sister to be baptized "to be freed from the ties of the dragon,"[46] a common allusion to the devil in early Christian literature.[47]

As Polyxena was not under the protection of baptism, she was kidnapped by an enemy of her anonymous fiancé, sold as a slave, and taken to Babylon by pi-

43 *AXP* 20: ὁ δὲ μέγας Παῦλος ἐδίδασκεν ὅτι οἱ πυρούμενοι τῇ σαρκὶ τὸν ἔννομον γάμον τηρείτωσαν παραιτούμενοι τὰς πορνείας, ἐξαιρέτως τὸ πρὸς ἀλλοτρίαν γυναῖκα, καὶ οἱ ζευχθέντες ἀλλήλους φυλασσέτωσαν.

44 For the edition of the Greek texts with an English translation and commentary, see Anne P. Alwis, *Celibate Marriages in Late Antique and Byzantine Hagiography: The Lives of Saints Julian and Basilissa, Andronikos and Athanasia, and Galaktion and Episteme* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011).

45 The Greek text can be observed in Gilbert Dagron, *Vie et miracles de sainte Thècle* (Bruxelles: Société des Bollandistes, 1978), 194–99. For further discussion, see also my Spanish translation and notes on the text in Ángel Narro, *Vida y milagros de Santa Tecla* (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 2017), 34–41. Paul's apology for marriage in the *Life of Thecla* was echoed by Choricius of Gaza in his *Epithalamium for Procopios, John and Elijah* (Op. VI, 7), which suggest a certain popularity of this section in late antiquity: Ángel Narro, "La Vie et Miracles de Saint Thècle et l'École de Gaza," in *L'École de Gaza: Espace littéraire et identité culturelle dans l'Antiquité Tardive. Actes du Colloque international de Paris, Collège de France, 23-25 mai 2013*, eds. Eugenio Amato, Aldo Corcella and Delphine Lauritzen (Leuven: Peeters, 2016): 313–24.

46 *AXP* 22: λαβὲ τὸ ἅγιον βάπτισμα, καὶ αἴτησαι ἐν τῷ βαπτίσματι ῥυσθῆναι σε τῶν τοῦ δρακόντος παγίδων.

47 Antonio Quacquarelli, *Il leone e il drago nella simbolica dell'età patristica* (Bari: Università di Bari, 1975), 19–48.

rates. From this point on, the narration enters a phase in which many novelistic motifs are introduced starting with the elements of kidnapping, slavery and travel, very popular in the Greek romantic novel. The final part of the story of Polyxena deserves more attention for its relevance to the main aim of this paper. Here Polyxena enjoys God's protection even before receiving the seal of Christ, in part thanks to the intervention of her sister and Paul on her behalf. What is significant with regard to the portrait of Thecla is Polyxena's imitation of her during her martyrdom in an unknown location in Greece. She shows a determination and a physical strength (ἀνδρεία) akin to that of Thecla, and she even manages to provoke attitudes of reverence and submission in the wild beasts which she meets in the arena as Thecla did during her second martyrdom in Antioch.

The eschatological value of baptism is only evoked in a scene in which one can see the respect of a wild animal for the sacred body of the virgin. This occurs in *AXP* 26–28, when she finds an isolated hilly area and an empty cave to rest, in which a she-lion used to dwell that was away at the moment of the young woman's arrival. When the she-lion returned and found Polyxena, she asks the animal not to shred her until she had received baptism,[48] as if it were a requirement for heaven or eternal life. After this scene, she is baptized by the apostle, who was in the surroundings.

The episode of the she-lion is completed with the martyrdom of Polyxena in chapters 36–37, where she is condemned to death together with the son of the prefect of the city, who had also converted to Christianity through Paul's preaching. As it also happened in Antioch in the *APTh*, the she-lion that should have killed her, forgot her violent nature and licked Polyxena's feet. As a result of the supernatural reaction of the wild beasts both Polyxena and the son of the prefect were set free. Polyxena then returned to Hispania accompanied by the son of the prefect who wanted to see Paul again. The happy ending takes place.

5 Final Remarks

The examples of Mygdonia, Xanthippe and Polyxena stress the significance of Thecla as a model for portraying women converts in early Christianity and late antiquity. These three examples are only a few among many others, but they represent the first attempt of creating a sort of *imitatio Theclae* in the creation of specific portraits of holy women. In the case of Mygdonia, similarities appear not only

48 *AXP* 27: κατὰ τὸν θεὸν Παύλου, συμπάθησόν μοι τὸ θηρίον καὶ μή με σκορπίσῃς ἕως οὗ λάβω τὸ βάπτισμα.

in the narrative elements, but also in important ideas regarding chastity, temporality, and eschatology. In both the *APTh* and the *AThom* an encratite vision of material life and its connection with the eternal one is present. Renunciation of marriage, chastity and ascetic behavior during this life represent a way to obtaining the reward of the eternal life after death, a place among the righteous.

The *AXP*, on the other hand, show a very different theological profile, though similar narrative patterns are repeated. As it is rather a hagiographical novel or edifying tale, it borrows many elements from the story of Thecla and uses them to create two portraits of pious women: a converted married woman, who finally will conduct an ascetic life together with her husband, and a young virgin showing a brave attitude towards martyrdom as Thecla does in her Acts. Here the connection with Thecla is more superficial, built only on narrative elements focused on the defiant behavior of both women facing the attacks of the demon or the trials in the arena. Conversion and baptism do not have a clear eschatological goal, but rather a material one, since they only serve as a protection from the evils of this life. From this perspective, it is closer to the protection provided to Thecla by God in the martyrdom scenes of the *APTh*, although there Thecla's ascetic lifestyle aimed at obtaining eternal life and the miracles on her behalf are secondary. In any case, the similarities between Xanthippe and Polyxena and Thecla denote how much the latter was appreciated as a model at the time, especially for portraying pious women, even if in a different context and ideological framework.