Shifting the poetics of gender ambiguity: the Coptic naturalisation of Thekla

Shifting the Poetics of Gender Ambiguity: The Coptic Naturalisation of Thecla

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> This book, which contains the Holy Scriptures of the Old and the New Testament, we know from tradition that it was written by the hand of Thecla, a noble woman of Egypt, about one thousand three hundred years ago…[1]

When the Patriarch of Constantinople Kyrillos Loukaris sent the Codex Alexandrinus as a gift to King Charles I in 1627, he claimed that it had been written by an Egyptian woman called Thecla who lived at the time of the Council of Nicea, and that for thirteen hundred years it had been kept in Alexandria, where he found it during his tenure as Patriarch. On his return to Constantinople, he had presumably brought the precious codex with him. Writing to the Archbishop of Canterbury, the ambassador Sir Thomas Roe, who was charged with the transfer of the Codex, gives more details about the purported scribe:[2]

> He doth testefye vnder his hand, that it was written by the virgin Thekla, daughter of a famous Greeke, called Αργιερινος,[3] who founded the monestarye in Egypt vpon Pharoas tower, a deuout and learned mayd, who was persecuted in Asya, and to whom Gregorye Nazienzen hath written many epistles. At the end whereof, vnder the same hand, are the epistles of Clement. She dyed not long after the councell of Nice.

In an earlier letter to the Earl of Arundel, however, Roe had identified Thecla differently. The Codex, he says, was[4]

> an autographall bible intire, written by the hand of Tecla the protomartyr of the Greekes, that liued in the tyme of St. Paul; and he doth auerr yt to be true and authenticall, of his owne writing, and the greatest antiquity of the Greeke church.

However interesting this tradition may be to explore in its own right, I only mention it here to highlight how closely connected Thecla had become with Egypt over the medieval and early modern period.[5] In his study of the cult of St Thecla, Stephen Davis showed how the figure of Thecla had become linked with early female asceticism in and around Alexandria, with the

[1] *Liber iste Scriptura Sacra N(ovi) et V(eteris) Testamenti, prout ex traditione habemus, est scriptus manu Theclae, nobilis fœminæ Agyptiæ, ante mile et trecentos annos circiter…* See note at the beginning of vol. 1 of the Codex Alexandrinus (Kenyon, *The Codex Alexandrinus*, 1915).
[2] See Sir Thomas Roe's Letter to George Abbot, 17/27 February 1626 in Roe, *The Negotiations of Sir Thomas Roe in His Embassy to the Ottoman Porte*,1730: 618. See also Spinka, "Acquisition of the Codex Alexandrinus by England," 1936.
[3] The name (*Argierienos*) is written in the Greek alphabet by Roe. It corresponds to no known Egyptian or Greek name of the time, which could indicate he only heard it orally and attempted to transcribe it as it sounded.
[4] See Sir Thomas Roe's Letter to the Earl of Arundel, 20/30 January 1624 in Roe, *The Negotiations of Sir Thomas Roe in His Embassy to the Ottoman Porte*,1730: 334-335.
[5] A discussion of the attribution of the Alexandrinus to Thecla can be found in Smith, *A Study of the Gospels in the Codex Alexandrinus*, 2014: 32-34.

explicit encouragement of bishop Athanasios.[6] For Davis, that connection fueled the development of her cult. Collecting the evidence for a cult of Thecla in the vicinity of Abu Mina in the Mareotis area, he compellingly demonstrated not only the existence of a cult site, but also its integration in the pilgrim route to Abu Mina, and its strong relation—at least textually—with female pilgrimage practices.[7] The story of a rich woman who had left home secretly to visit the shrine of St Menas, and who was saved by him from sexual assault near the "martyrium of saint Thecla," is but one of several examples of such a relation.[8] Thecla was styled in the *APT* as an itinerant woman, a "stranger" (ξένη) and therefore in danger of sexual assault—something from which she later protects other travelling women.[9] Her wearing of a male cloak the next time she travels, mentioned almost in passing, can be understood, in the plot of *APT*, simply as a way to avoid similar episodes as the one in Antioch.[10] Yet it proved foundational for much of the later tradition, as well as in large portions of recent scholarship.

It is invoked very explicitly in the story of Eugenia, daughter of the governor of Alexandria under Commodus, as the reason why the latter refused to marry, left home, and dressed up as a man in order to join a monastery: 'She came across the story of the holy Apostle Paul and the virgin Thecla, and reading it secretly she cried at every page, not least because she also had parents who were very committed pagans'.[11] Eugenia's story is part of a series of narratives with a similar—if not identical—plot, even though it is the only one that cites *APT*. It even attributes to Thecla's example her decision to dress up as a man.[12] The intertextual relations between these narratives and the *APT* have been discussed more than once, most thoroughly, in relation to Thecla, by Davis in an article published after his study on the saint's cult,[13] and in Julie van Pelt's chapter in this volume, so I shall leave them aside here.

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[6] Davis, *The Cult of St. Thecla*, 2001: 158-159; Athanasios of Alexandria, *De virginitate* 211-213, in Casey, "Der dem Athanasius zugeschriebene Traktat," 1935: 1034.
[7] Davis, "Pilgrimage and Cult of Saint Thecla in Late Antique Egypt," 1998.
[8] All the relevant evidence is collected by Davis, "Pilgrimage and Cult of Saint Thecla in Late Antique Egypt," 199, and Davis, *The Cult of St. Thecla*, 2001: 113-136.
[9] Ibid.: 315 and 317-319.
[10] The protective function of male clothing is the central motif in one of the narratives discussed by Marie Delcourt in her early article on transvestite saints, which has attracted no attention because it is western and dating from the time of the Crusades: this was Hildegund of Schönau, whom her father took with him on pilgrimage to Jerusalem having dressed her up as a boy and renamed her Joseph. The rest of the story is very different to the Byzantine narratives. See Delcourt, "Le complexe de Diane," 1958: 6, and *AA.SS.* April II, 782-784.
[11] *Life of Eugenia* 2 in Apserou, "Το αγιολογικό dossier της Αγίας Ευγενίας," 2017: 291: Ἐνέπεσεν δὲ εἰς τὰς χεῖρας αὐτῆς τοῦ ἁγιωτάτου Ἀποστόλου Παύλου καὶ τῆς παρθένου Θέκλης ἡ ἐξήγησις καὶ ἀναγινώσκουσα λαθραίως ἐδάκρυεν ἐφεκάστης, διὰ τὸ καὶ μάλιστα ἑλληνικωτάτοις αὐτὴν γονεῦσιν ὑπάρχειν.
[12] *Life of Eugenia* 19 in Apserou, "Το αγιολογικό dossier της Αγίας Ευγενίας," 2017: 308: "changing her clothes, with the zeal and in imitation of her teacher Thecla." (τὸ σχῆμα μεταβαλοῦσα, ζήλῳ καὶ μιμήσει τῆς διδασκάλου Θέκλης)
[13] Davis, "Crossed Texts, Crossed Sex," 2002.

What has been less discussed, except in 1974 by John Anson, is the connection of many of those narratives with Egypt, and more specifically with the monastic literary landscape of Alexandria and its hinterland.[14] When they are not *from* Alexandria, the heroines leave their homes, often in Constantinople, to join monasteries in or around Sketis. This *foisonnement* of transvestite narratives in the area is not unconnected with the popularity of Thecla and her story in the same circles. Already in the fourth century, the injunction by Athanasios to a group of "virgins" to imitate Thecla shows that the character was not only known, but uncontroversial—to the controversial bishop, at least—and popular enough to be proposed as a model. Yet Athanasios cast Thecla in a purely ascetic role: she was to serve as an example of chastity and abstinence for a community of female ascetics, not of a life of adventure and defiance. The element of gender transgression present in the initial legend does not seem to have struck all its readers to the same degree.

Dressing in male clothes, despite its subversive undertones, is not the only device through which gender categories are blurred in those texts. A woman travelling alone would also be bending gender rules, and Thecla's characterization as an itinerant stranger, but also as well educated, morally sound, and socially prominent, is almost oxymoronic: a woman was either a vagabond following a man outside her home, or she was a well brought-up girl from a good family who did what she was told and did not run the streets. Combining these traits was a male prerogative.

It is not difficult to imagine the attraction of such narratives of reversal among high-status Alexandrian women in late antiquity. They float the themes of independence and free roaming in the perfectly acceptable framework of female Pauline piety. After all, Paul's history of converting women was not limited to Thecla: according to the Acts of the Apostles, in Athens he won over Damaris, about whose identity there was some intrigued discussion in late antiquity.[15] The women portrayed in those stories come mostly from the highest strata of society (daughters of emperors and governors), mirroring Thecla's own high status, which is repeatedly stressed in *APT*. The rich intertextual and citational tradition of that work in the fourth and fifth centuries remains resolutely in the same social circles. And just like Thecla's following of Paul, despite being modelled on the love romance, was not a carnal following but an intellectual one, so the heroines who emulated her were sometimes quite straightforwardly

[14] Anson, "The Female Transvestite in Early Monasticism," 1974: 12 and *passim*.
[15] Acts 17.34; see Childers, "A Reluctant Bride," 2007: 212-221.

intellectual: at sixteen, for instance, Eugenia "had made such remarkable intellectual progress, being educated to the highest degree in the learning of the Greeks and the Romans, that she was admired even by wise men."[16]

Books, reading, and intellectual reflection were important elements of the forms of female piety constructed in those narratives: an elite woman like Eugenia is converted to the ascetic life after reading about an earlier elite woman who did the same, and thinking about that story while travelling in her litter.[17] Like a matryoshka doll, a woman in search of a female model would read a narrative about a woman and her search for a female model by reading another narrative about a woman and her heroic deeds. As Kate Cooper has recently suggested, a female reader would have found a mirror in such a story: Eugenia was a reflection of herself, and the reader might well "identify with Eugenia's own attempt to respond to the challenge posed by a shared heroine, Thecla."[18] The importance of books is not confined to the *Life of Eugenia*: wealthy women projected the image of the assiduous reader by carrying miniature codices around their necks, a habit remarked upon by Isidore of Pelusium in Egypt, but also John Chrysostom and Gregory of Tours.[19] Egeria also mentions reading *APT* when she visited the saint's shrine in Seleucia.[20] Stephen Davis has noted the small size of some of the earliest surviving manuscripts of *APT*,[21] and has compellingly argued that they point to their use during travel, possibly pilgrimage.[22] I would go further and suggest that exhibiting such conspicuously precious and intellectual objects was part of the construction of a social persona within the female circles of the empire's urban elites, even without actual travel: portability could be useful even for a stroll downtown.

The association of Thecla with the social aspirations of the nerdy bourgeoise seems to have lingered in Alexandrian church lore, and given rise at some point between the fifth and the seventeenth century to the legend Kyrillos Loukaris heard when he came to the city briefly as its patriarch: that after the Council of Nicea, a rich Alexandrian woman called Thecla had

[16] *Life of Eugenia* 1 in Apserou, "Το αγιολογικό dossier της Αγίας Ευγενίας," 2017: 290: οὕτως ἐξαιρέτως φρονήσει προέκοπτεν ἑλληνικοῖς τὲ καὶ ῥωμαϊκοῖς εἰς ἄκρον πεπαιδευμένη λόγοις, ὥστε καὶ παρὰ σοφῶν θαυμάζεσθαι.

[17] *Life of Eugenia* 1 in Apserou, "Το αγιολογικό dossier της Αγίας Ευγενίας," 2017: 291: "as she was leaving, sitting in her litter, she considered Thecla's story and remembered how she believed what Paul was saying." (ἐν τῷ ἀπιέναι αὐτὴν ἐν τῷ βαστερνίῳ καθεζομένη, ἔνδον διελογίζετο τὰ τῆς Θέκλης καὶ ἐνεθυμεῖτο ὅπως τε ἐπίστευσεν τοῖς ὑπὸ τοῦ Παύλου λεγομένοις.)

[18] Cooper, "The Bride of Christ," 2013: 539-540.

[19] Isidore of Pelusium, *Epistula* 2.150 (PG 78.604); John Chrysostom, *Ad populum Antiochenum* 19.4 (*PG* 49.196). See Davis, *The Cult of St. Thecla*, 2001: 145-146 for further discussion and references.

[20] Egeria, *Itinerarium* 23.5.

[21] See in particular the papyri from Oxyrhynchus and Antinoopolis: *P.Oxy*. I 6 (5th c.) and *P.Ant*. I 13 (4th c.).

[22] Davis, *The Cult of St. Thecla*, 2001: 146.

founded a monastery on Pharos and, presumably, copied the entire Bible in its scriptorium. The popularity of the figure in elite Alexandrian circles eventually trickled down to the urban elites of the Valley, and by the sixth century, at the latest, Coptic translations of *APT* were being produced.[23]

Until the fifth century, however, the fascination with Thecla was arguably not a cult properly speaking. This changed as the cult of saints developed from the later part of the fifth, and especially in the sixth century. A cult figure like Thecla, despite her itinerant identity, started requiring the topographical anchoring of a shrine. This spawned new narratives, attached to competing shrines. Thus, a major rewriting of the section of *APT* morphed into the *Life and Miracles of Thecla*, which promoted her shrine in Seleucia,[24] and a partial rewriting of the end of *APT* was carried out in Rome, which states that she had followed Paul there at the end of her life, and thus supports a Roman shrine's claim to her relics.[25]

The appearance of a cult spot in the vicinity of Abu Mina in the Mareotis might also have been supported by a now-lost story. The proximity to a shrine of St Menas, whose intriguing connection with Phrygia in Asia Minor is emphasized in his *passio*, could well not be a coincidence: like with Paul's cult in Rome, Thecla's cult in Egypt could have piggybacked, so to speak, on that of Menas. That shrine devoted to Thecla west of Alexandria does not seem to have had much success, and apart from the mention in passing in one of Menas' *Miracles*, and the ampullae shared with Menas and probably produced at Abu Mina, hardly any memory remains of it.

Davis argues, however, that Thecla's initial popularity was not lost on the Egyptians: following a well-practiced tradition, they turned her into a recognizably Egyptian martyr through a retelling of her story in the local martyrological idiom.[26] The result was what has come down to us as the *Martyrdom of Paese and Thecla* (henceforth *MPTh*), the story of a brother and a sister from a village called Pousire in Middle Egypt, near Antinoe.[27] Although at

[23] Schmidt, *Acta Pauli aus der Heidelberger koptischen Papyrushandschrift*, 1904; Kasser and Luisier, "Le Bodmer XLI en édition princeps," 2004.
[24] Johnson, "*The* Life and Miracles of Thekla," 2006.
[25] Cooper, "A Saint in Exile," 1995.
[26] Davis, *The Cult of St. Thecla*, 2001: 177-190.
[27] Reymond and Barnes, *Four Martyrdoms from the Pierpont Morgan Coptic Codices*, 1973: 33-79 (text) and 151-184 (translation); this is a critical edition based on the only complete text, found in the ninth-century codex 591, fol. 49r-88r of the Pierpont Morgan Library, with variants from several fragmentary manuscripts: see Ibid.: 20. For an additional fragment see Browne, "The Martyrdom of Paese and Thecla," 1974. In this chapter, the quotations from this text correspond to the pages of the translation in Reymond and Barnes, where the folio and column of the manuscript are indicated.

first sight the two texts are very different, Davis states, it is possible to discern signs of rewriting of *APT* in *MPTh*.

Paese, a rich landowner, and Thecla, the widow of an extremely rich man from whom she has a "small child," are keen, from the very beginning of the persecutions, to visit the prisons to comfort and feed those awaiting martyrdom. Paese has a business partner and friend named Paul, a rich merchant who lived in Shmoun/Hermopolis and bought Paese's flax. On a trip to Alexandria, Paul falls ill, and thinking he is about to die, he asks Paese to visit. Once in Alexandria, Paese finds that Paul has recovered, but would like Paese to wait until they can travel south together. In Alexandria too, Paese visits the impending martyrs in prison. One day, he witnesses the trial and torture of Victor at the hands of the prefect Armenios. This inspires him to confess his faith, and he ends up in prison, where the other "saints" welcome him as one of them. Several very stereotypical scenes of courtroom exchange, torture, miraculous recovery, and imprisonment ensue for two days in a row. Meanwhile, the worried Thecla decides to go and find her brother. She finds a boat docked in Antinoe with two women and a sailor, and they promise to take her along. She does not know at first that these characters are actually Mary and Elizabeth, and the archangel Raphael. Later, Mary reveals her identity and anoints Thecla with oil, promising her that Raphael will remain with her throughout her trials-to-come. Having reached Alexandria, she goes to feed the martyrs in prison, and to look for Paese. The next day when the court scenes resume, she confesses with her brother. They are both tortured again vainly, and sent back to the prison at the end of the day. That night an angel comes to Paese and takes him on a tour of heaven, where he shows him his future house, vast and lavish, with three thrones, for him, Thecla, and Paul. Back in prison the next night after another day of tortures and recovery, Thecla writes a parting letter to her son. The next day the prefect confers with the priests, who have realized that the saints are becoming too popular with the inhabitants of the city, and decides to pass them on to the dux of the Thebaid, Eutychianos, to whom he had also sent Victor earlier in the narrative. They are finally taken by boat to Tepot, a place in the Antinoite, and beheaded.

Davis argued that *MPTh* was an offshoot of *APT*, intended to support a local cult place by capitalizing on Thecla's popularity, and that it recycled several motifs from the original story. More specifically, he pointed to "the three interrelated themes of chastity, itinerant 'stranger-hood,' and martyrdom—along with the theme of androgyny,"[28] which are essential for the characterization of both Theclas. The Coptic Thecla's chastity is marked by her refusal

[28] Davis, *The Cult of St. Thecla*, 2001: 183.

to remarry after her husband's death; like her namesake, she leaves home to find the male character in a prison, and suffers martyrdom in a city where she is a stranger, but is saved miraculously by God.

His demonstration did not convince Carolyn Osiek, "for the elements of similarity are common to many romances and martyrdom accounts,"[29] and I suspect that the overall silence of Copticists on the subject reflects their tacit agreement with that verdict. Yet if the theme of chastity is indeed ever-present in Christian hagiography, it is much less common for female itinerancy to be caused by a strongly expressed, yet platonic relation to a male character. The scene where the Coptic Thecla finds Paese in prison is directly inspired by the meeting between Paul and Thecla in *APT*, and both involve a kiss:[30]

> [Thecla] went in to Paul and, having sat down at his feet, she heard about the magnificent acts of God. And Paul feared nothing, but conducted himself with the boldness of God; and her faith increased as she kissed his fetters (*APT* 18).
>
> She discovered him fettered with the saints – there was great favour upon his face, after the manner of an angel of God. She advanced toward him, and kissed him (*MPTh* 170).

Davis quotes the two scenes, as well as the various moments in the narrative when both Paese and Thecla identify as "strangers" when they are in Alexandria.[31] I would argue that the prison scene itself here is an intertext at least as important as itinerancy, if not more so, as it is a less frequent motif. Prison scenes did become a stock motif in *passiones*, in Coptic as well as in Greek and other languages—but they do not usually contain meeting scenes, nor do they concern itinerant women.[32]

As for the theme of martyrdom, the archetypal scenes in *APT* represent an entire genre, where the impending martyr is saved several times through divine agency—even though Thecla does not succumb to death while protagonists of *passiones* do. In that sense, this motif is perhaps less central in connecting the two narratives, as it is more generic. This was recognized by Theofried Baumeister, in his study of stock scenes of repeated tortures followed by angel-assisted recoveries in Coptic *passiones*. He characterized texts based on those very standardized scenes as belonging to the "koptischer Konsens."[33] Yet although Baumeister found that a number of Coptic *passiones* conform almost militantly to the structure he outlined, he did not find this to be the case of *MPTh*: it is not, he says, a simple reproduction of the usual

[29] Osiek, "Review of *The Cult of St. Thecla*," 2003: 423.
[30] All reference to *APT* are drawn from R.A. Lipsius, *Acta apostolorum apocrypha*, vol. 1 (Leipzig 1891) 235-271.
[31] Davis, *The Cult of St. Thecla*, 2001: 184
[32] See now on this motif Papavarnavas, *Gefängnis als Schwellenraum in der byzantinischen Hagiographie*, 2018.
[33] Baumeister, *Martyr Invictus*, 1972.

structure, but a "nicely recomposed, individually designed martyr story, almost along the lines of ascetic legends, but interspersed with scenes in the style of the *koptischer Konsens*."[34] This resemblance to ascetic legends sets *MPTh* apart from other Coptic martyrologies, and reflects its unusual literary origin.

It is possible, I believe, to go even further in examining the relation between the two narratives. A closer reading suggests that even if the author of *MPTh* did not have a copy of the *APT*, he knew the story, and especially that he was conscious of the connotations of gender ambivalence and role reversal that had come to be attached to Thecla's character. Unlike Davis, however, I do not think that this was achieved through a characterization of the Coptic Thecla as slightly androgynous.[35] The ambivalence of the gender roles is rendered in *MPTh* through a creative game of literary reordering and expansion of the cast. The resulting work is not merely a transformation of the original one, nor even a cultural translation into a new idiom. It is a new, strongly citational work, for which *APT* is but one of many subtexts. Like the transvestite saints' narratives, it self-consciously situates itself and its heroes in a broader set of narratives that circulated in Egypt, including those of the *koptischer Konsens*.

The characters and their relations are constructed with obvious nods to the *APT*, but along different lines. First, far from being a secondary figure whose only function resided in his name and its reinforcement of the link with *APT*, as Davis suggests in passing,[36] Paul is a central character in *MPTh*. He is the one who sets the plot into motion, since his trip to Alexandria is what brings about the separation of brother and sister, and thus prepares the scene of their reunion in prison—one of the flagship scenes in *APT*. His place in Paese's universe is at least as large as that of Thecla.

In the *MPTh* narrative, the male character of *APT* is split, and the romantic, novelistic relations and sub-erotic connotations of the original story are reorganized into a new love triangle. In that way, the author maintains the powerful gender ambiguity associated with Thecla in the literary tradition, while at the same time entirely subverting *APT* through the depiction of the male characters. Here the boundaries are blurred, and the initial motifs remixed across genders and across the family/non-family divide. This new take is established from the outset, in the presentation of the first character: it is Paese and not Thecla who has "the conversation" with his parents about marriage:

[34] Ibid.: 123: "eine schön durchkomponierte, individuell gestaltete Martyrergeschichte etwa in der Art der Mönchslegenden, jedoch durchsetzt mit Szenen im Stil des koptischen Konsenses."
[35] Davis, *The Cult of St. Thecla*, 2001: 185-186.
[36] Ibid.: 184, n. 120.

> And his father Elias and his mother Mariam kept urging him, saying, "Let us take a wife for thee, that we may see joy of thee before we die." But he would not endure this at all, saying, "I care not for a wife; for my sister married a husband, and behold, she has become a widow. Now, she has borne a son; he together with her will suffice me." (151)

This passage gives Paese the traditional role of Thecla, while at the same time setting up his sister symbolically as his wife: she and her son will be his family. Thecla also resists matrimonial advances, but at the same time she is no longer a virgin. Like her namesake, her refusal is accompanied by a preference for prisoners:

> And many rich men of the city urged her, saying "We wish to take thee to wife;" but she was not persuaded, but resolutely devoted herself to the saints, binding up their wounds; to their bodies, subjected to tortures, she applied oil and wine. (153)

Brother and sister share some common characteristics, in particular their wealth and their strong commitment to feeding and comforting "the saints"—i.e. the victims of the persecutions in the local prisons.[37] After the titular characters, Paul is introduced with at least as much weight:

> There was a man in the city of Shmoun who was a great merchant in his family, being a kinsman of theirs. And this man had much wealth; and it was he who bought the flax fibre of that whole nome; and the name of that man was Paul. And he was a God-fearing man, performing very many charities secretly. And that man was friendly with Paese, since the latter sowed a great plantation of flax. And Paese was noble and rich and famous in that whole nome. He would load the camels for the goods for disposal, and arise and go to the city of Shmoun to Paul the merchant; and Paul was glad whenever he saw Paese and he would keep him with him for a month at a time, while they ate and drank together, rejoicing exceedingly and conversing together upon the word of God. (153)

Already at this point, one of the central themes of *MPTh* is introduced, namely the friendship between Paese and Paul. The depth of bond is established immediately, and food, drink, and common prayer and devotion serve as markers of their intimacy. Once the plot is set in motion, however, powerfully emotional language is used to describe their relation. Thus, when Paul falls ill in Alexandria, he wrote to his servants back home to come and find him, and to tell Paese:

> "If thou art willing to come, that I may see thee before I die, then come! Otherwise I bid thee farewell." It befell that when the letter came to the south, Paese was informed. Straightway as soon as Paese heard, his heart was very sorrowful, and he arose and took about the amount of one pound of gold, and goods for disposal, and boarded the boat. (153-154)

On his arrival in Alexandria with Paul's servants, Paese lets them go in and waits outside. Paul's first reaction is to enquire about his friend, thinking he had not come: "Is he well, my

[37] The translation "saints" is slightly misleading, as the Coptic notes ⲉⲧⲟⲩⲁⲁⲃ, which is rather equivalent to "the holy ones."

friend Paese, and his God-loving sister Thecla?" When the servants let him know that Paese is just outside the door, Paul goes through several emotional phases in quick succession, before settling into the usual eating and drinking together:

> They said, "Here is Paese, outside the door." He was angry with his servants, and he arose and came out, and cast himself down on the ground and did him reverence upon his face. And Paese was much moved, and they fell upon each other's necks and wept for a great while. Paul said to Paese, "Come in; why dost thou stand outside? Come in, thou man worthy to be loved by God and men." Paese said, "Verily, my brother, I was glad when I found thee well." (…) And he took him into his house, and he himself rejoiced with him, and they ate and drank together. (154-155)

Paese makes the best of his time in Alexandria by visiting the prisons. When after a couple of weeks of this charitable work, thinking of his sister, he wants to go back to the south, Paul pleads with him to wait until they can leave together. He asks, "Why art thou so faint-hearted? Stay for this week, and we will go off together; why shouldst thou go and leave me?" (156)

This moment of emotional weakness marks another turning point in the plot, as the following day Paese is witness to the arrest and torture of Victor, which ultimately results in his own arrest and torture. Again, Paul's guilty feelings over this development are conveyed in strong language:

> Paul was in his house, and he did not know what had befallen Paese. But his servant went weeping, and told him what had befallen him. And Paul when he heard this laid hand upon his clothes and rent them, and wept with sore weeping, saying, "O that I had let him go home! For he was distressed, entreating me and saying, 'Let me go away,'" and I did not let him. I would rather have lost twenty pounds of gold today than that this should have happened. What use is wealth of gold and silver to me compared with a friend who is sweet and good?" (160)

Paul visits his friend in prison. When he sees the marks of torture on Paese's body, he weeps and cries out: "The pain of my heart is great today. O my brother; O that I had lost all that I had rather than that this should have befallen thee." (160) Despite the protestations voiced by Paese, who explains that becoming a martyr and being redeemed of his sins is the most joyful outcome he could hope for, Paul goes home and does "not eat or drink for three days and three nights, and he fell sick of bilious humor because of Paese." (160)[38] – just like Thecla when she first heard Paul, and stayed at the window for three days without eating or drinking.

These passages characterize the relation between the two characters as powerfully emotional. The body language described at moments of crisis—renting clothes, falling in each other's arms and weeping—and the cries and lamentations of Paul when he realizes he might lose his friend, are used to reinforce this characterization. At the same time, they draw on a

[38] This echoes Thecla's reaction the first time she heard Paul, when she sat at the window for three days without eating or drinking: *APT* 8.

gendered repertoire of emotions that is here used against the grain, expressed by a man for another man in a context of male friendship, and not depicting the affection of a mother, a lover, or a servant—the three categories of figures highlighted in *APT* as afflicted by Thecla's choices.[39]

As the story continues, this aspect becomes more prominent. Instead of the usual rhythm of torture by day and prison by night, the prefect on the following day has Paese put in a furnace and leaves him overnight. This becomes the occasion of a surprising escapade: at midnight, while Paese is praying in the middle of the furnace, an angel comes and takes him to Paul's house. The passage is worth quoting in full:

> Now Paul was sleeping, grieving for Paese, not knowing what had befallen him. And the blessed Apa Paese awakened Paul; and Paul, when he opened his eyes and saw his friend Paese, was amazed, because a bright light was glowing at him within his bedchamber continuously; and since he did not understand the thing which had befallen him, the blessed Apa Paese said to him, "Fear not, my brother; I am Paese." And it befell that when Paul heard the voice of his friend Paese, he arose straightway in haste, and cast himself at his feet, and reverenced him joyfully; and straightway he raised him up, and they both embraced one another. (…) And they sat down, and talked together of the great (works) of God, and the miracles which he performs for his saints. (…) Paul said to him, "By thy health, my brother, since the time when thou wast taken to the tribunal yesterday, I have neither eaten bread nor drunk water." And straightway he aroused his servants; and when they had seen the blessed Apa Paese they reverenced him, (bowing) down to the ground, and greeted him. And Paul gave orders to his servants and they prepared a table; and they ate and drank together, and they slept until the light spread abroad. (163)

Here the author is venturing into a literally "promiscuous brotherhood,"[40] where the ambiguity of the language used is very reminiscent—if on a different register—of that in *APT*, where Thecla is said to be found "bound in affection" with Paul, sparking a scene of jealousy from her aspiring husband.[41] Made up of a recognition scene, a reunion, a declaration of love, and a peaceful night together, the passage plays on a series of stock motifs from romance, repurposed to describe a male spiritual friendship.

MPTh further forces gender categories by applying to Paese the imagery of the Bride of Christ. When for the first time the imprisoned "saints" see him come, not as a visitor, but as a tortured fellow martyr, they tell him, "We see thee daily, but today we rejoice the more with thee because thou hast come into the bridechamber of Christ with thy whole heart." Meanwhile, a prisoner back in Antinoe asks his sister Thecla during one of her visits:

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[39] *APT* 10: "And they wept bitterly, Thamyris for losing a wife, Theocleia a child, the female slaves a mistress."
[40] Brown, *The Body and Society*, 1989: the expression is the title of ch. 7, 140-159, taken from a passage in Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 9, which takes—or feigns to take—literally the use of para-erotic vocabulary by Christians to describe their relations.
[41] *APT* 19: συνδεδεμένην τῇ στοργῇ.

> "Why hast thou not gone to the wedding feast of thy brother Paese? For behold, the wedding feast is celebrated with great rejoicing. For it is an angel of the Lord who has said to me: Say to her, 'Go to the wedding feast of thy brother.'" (166)

This fellow sufferer in the making reassures Thecla that her brother is still alive and that many people have "assembled for his wedding," and this is repeated when the passengers of the boat she takes to go north, Mary and Elizabeth, tell her that they are "going to visit Paul the merchant, who holds a marriage feast for a man named Paese, from Pousire." (167-168) Later Mary, after revealing her identity, anoints Thecla with sweet-smelling oil "from the wedding of my son, which I have brought for the wedding of thy brother." (168)

Paese is thus insistently represented as the Bride, while Thecla herself is not once described in this way. The erotic subtext that often accompanies that metaphor in hagiographic texts about women is here not only transferred to a man,[42] but inserted in the context of a male-male friendship. The scene where Paese, sitting in Paul's bedchamber during the night they spend together, tells him that Christ has summoned him "to his holy bridechamber," (163) is reminiscent of the chaste marriages so popular in early hagiography, where the metaphoric bedchamber is superseded by the material one, a theme that also underpins the plot of *APT*.

The relation of Paese to Thecla, on the other hand, is less balanced emotionally: the display of emotion comes only from Thecla, who goes to her death in Alexandria because she is "very sore at heart for her brother" (166). In the initial parting scene, when Paese leaves to go and find Paul, she tells him:

> "My brother, I know that if thou goest away from me, and I do not come with thee, I shall not be able to endure it because of thee; indeed, in general, if ever I pass a week without seeing thee, I am most afflicted, and I send my son Apollonius to thee in Pousire to bring me news of thee. If thou goest to this distant place and I do not hear news of thee, I shall die because of thee. Thou thyself knowest, my brother, that I have no brother or sister on earth beside thee." He said to her, "Do not be faint-hearted, my sister; but I shall go and satisfy him, for he is my friend; and if it is the will of God, I shall come to thee in peace." Thecla loved him very much. She said to him, "If then this is the way it is, go in peace, and come again in peace, that I may see thee before I die." (154)

Paese's injunction not to be faint-hearted echoes Paul's words to Paese when he wants to leave Alexandria to find Thecla: both come at moments when Paese is thinking of *the other person*. Paese is made the center not of an "Apostolic love triangle," as Kate Cooper described the Paul-Thecla-Thamyris complex in *APT*,[43] but of a partly incestuous, partly homoerotic, and—contrary to *APT*—entirely spiritual love triangle.

[42] For another example, see the discussion of the martyr Bassus by Flavia Ruani in this volume.
[43] Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride*, 1999: 51.

They are also an eschatological love triangle, whose destiny, we are told, is to live together in heaven. Indeed, the angel who takes Paese to show him his future house in heaven tells him, "Thou seest this house: it is thine, and thy sister's and thy friend Paul's. Lo, your three crowns are prepared for you; one for your lot as a stranger, one for your blood which shall be shed for the Name of Christ, and another one because of your chastity. And your bodies shall be in a single shrine on earth."[44] (177) This marks *MPTh* as more than a simple *passio*: as Baumeister very astutely noted, many elements are borrowed from ascetic literature, and the three main characters are recompensed for both these aspects of their lives—as well as their itinerancy.

This "eschatological association of monastic friends," to use Derek Krueger's expression,[45] takes the intertextual nexus of *MPTh* beyond that of *APT* and the narratives of the *koptischer Konsens*, into the wider group of texts recounting strong male relationships in monastic contexts. Studied by Krueger, and most recently by Claudia Rapp,[46] the motif seems to have known something of a boom in the seventh century. The stories of male companionship written by the likes of Leontios of Neapolis and Sophronios of Jerusalem are replete with the language of brotherhood, silent understanding, and common prayer. In the *Spiritual Meadow*, the advice given by a hermit to Sophronios and John Moschos on how to conduct their partnership in asceticism is to live somewhere "only with vigilance and in tranquillity, praying unceasingly."[47] Rapp notes that the motif is especially prominent in a cluster of texts associated with Cyprus, a cluster which, I have argued elsewhere, is also associated with narratives originating from Sketis.[48]

The new literary motif had clearly reached our author, who was writing somewhere in the area of Antinoe. Here, however, sobriety has no place: wine and food loom large as rituals of fraternity: from the banquets prepared for the prisoners to the intimate dinners *en tête à tête*, common meals are the marker of friendship and grace. Not eating is a sign of grief, and when Paul stays without food and drink for days because of Paese's imprisonment, it is understood as a pathological situation that has to be treated. But the language of brotherhood, and the moments of common prayer and shared meditation, remain central in the relationship. After seeing Victor being tortured—a decisive moment in the narrative—Paese goes home:

[44] On this passage, and more generally on the motif of multiple crowns, see Łajtar and Wipszycka, "SB IV 7315," 1999 and Łajtar and Wipszycka, "Martyrs Who Received Two Crowns," 2002.
[45] Krueger, "Between Monks," 2011: 58.
[46] Rapp, *Brother-Making in Late Antiquity and Byzantium*, 2016: esp. chapter 4 A, "Seventh-century Transitions," 180-191.
[47] John Moschos, *Spiritual Meadow* 110 (87/3.2973); see the comments in Krueger, "Between Monks," 2011: 34.
[48] Papaconstantinou, "Child or Monk?," 2008: 173-176.

> As the blessed Apa Paese was saying this in his heart, he came into the house of Paul, and they ate together at noontide. And Paul said to Paese, "My brother, do you see this great man today, how he has endured these great tortures for the Name of Christ?" Paese said to him, "Yes, my brother, I was greatly moved." They continued talking together about his honour (158).

Like the fourth- and fifth-century Alexandrian narratives inspired by Thecla, *MPTh* is also unashamedly a story about the landed and urban elites: A rich landlord in a valley village who befriends a rich merchant in the city, and whose sister is the widow of a "very rich man" (152) in another city, courted by the city's other rich men. Paese leaves for Alexandria with a pound of gold and goods to sell; (153) similarly, Thecla also takes a pound of gold and loads her "baggage upon her servants" to go to the capital. (166) Despite spending considerable sums on the prisoners in Alexandria, as they are about to die there is still some left, and Paese suggests she should send it back to her son. (170) For his part, he leaves his belongings to Paul.[49] (179)

Of course, this wealth is ostensibly given up by the martyrs for a higher ideal—but not before being shown, in a painstaking and voluptuous description, the form of wealth that awaits them through the looking glass. This description—the tour of heaven—is the only part of the text that, for no apparent reason and without any framing, suddenly switches to a first-person narrator, letting Paese describe his dream. This long passage, which alternates between *ekphrasis* and dialogue with the angel, starts with the description of a richly decorated house "built like a church," (175) that is the house of Victor, "who renounced his dignity and all his possessions" to follow Christ. The angel then shows him the luxurious house he is to share with his sister and Paul:

> And I said to the angel, "My lord, thou hast honoured me exceedingly and beyond measure. But my house is small in comparison with the first one." He answered and said to me, "Dost thou not know that the honour of a king is one thing, and the honour of a magistrate another?" (179)

Thus, *MPTh* powerfully reaffirms social hierarchies: even in martyrdom, some are more noble than others, and that is measured on how much earthly honor and wealth each of them gave up. Equality before the Lord was clearly not what the author of *MPTh* had in mind.

Conclusion

There has been a fair amount of discussion on the "domestication" or the "taming" of Thecla in later accounts.[50] Susan Hylen, on the other hand, argued that even in the *APT*, there

[49] See the discussion on property transmission between male companions in Krueger, "Between Monks," 2011: 46-47.
[50] See Davis, "From Women's Piety to Male Devotion," 2015.

was little about the heroine that was subversive.[51] Whatever the case, it is clear that by the late fourth century the figure had been built up as a model for a number of female literary characters whose non-conventional attitudes were constructed in dialogue with *APT*. In several of those narratives, the choice of asceticism and chastity against marriage was inextricably linked to literary strategies and the manipulation of a semantic field that dissolved or subverted gender boundaries, even if this did not touch directly on the character of Thecla herself. This is most striking in the case of *MPTh*. Indeed if, as Davis suggested, it is true that in this story Paese is Thecla's "Paul," arguably he is also Paul's "Thecla." It is when Paul leaves, and Paese follows him, that the narrative is set into motion, and this choice to follow Paul is ultimately the cause of Paese's martyrdom—or, if we prefer, his "wedding." This redoubling of the two main characters of *APT* made it possible to maintain the blurred gender categories with which it was associated, while maintaining Thecla quite firmly within the female sphere—the fact that she showed strength in martyrdom notwithstanding.[52] At the same time, this blurring was inscribed in a literary tradition of chaste male brotherhood that connected it at least partly to the textual universe of Alexandrian monasticism. And although this involved a strong reassertion of social hierarchies and elite values, its rather unconventional heavenly *ménage à trois* also conveys a heightened sense of sexual ambiguity, but with Paul rather than Thecla as its epicenter. Ultimately, however, by the time Loukaris arrived in Alexandria, it was the association of Thecla with learning and books that had prevailed, at least within the Patriarchate.

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[51] Hylen, *A Modest Apostle*, 2015: esp. ch. 4, 71-90.

[52] Davis, *The Cult of St. Thecla*, 2001: 185, signals this in an attempt to find "male" characteristics for the Coptic Thecla. Yet that is something said of every female martyr, and in that sense is, I believe, a very weak marker. Davis also notes that her breasts are slashed off, then stuck back by an angel: but that is also a stock figure for female martyrs, and in another text even results in the (miraculously restored) breasts squirting milk into the tormentors' faces (*Martyrdom of Shenoufe and his Brethren*, Reymond and Barns, *Four Martyrdoms from the Pierpont Morgan Coptic Codices*, 1973: 206-207). I see it more as a theme that points out to the audience that this is a woman, since slashing off body parts is one of the most common motifs of those torture scenes, and what one can slash off them defines the gender of the martyr in question.

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