THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE PRODUCTION OF THE APOCRYPHAL ACTS OF APOSTLES

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In 1980 Steven L. Davies published a revised version of his doctoral dissertation (Temple University) under the title *The Revolt of the Widows: The Social World of the Apocryphal Acts* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press). Davies' book has generated considerable interest inasmuch as he argues that the apocryphal Acts of Apostles (which for him include the *Acts of Peter,* the *Acts of John,* the *Acts of Paul,* the *Acts of Thomas,* the *Acts of Andrew,* and the *Acts of Xanthippe and Polyxena)* were written by women—more specifically, by women in the order of widows, women who opposed the male-dominated great church. In a book of my own, I argue that the *Acts of Paul,* though written by a man, relies heavily on oral legends about Paul told primarily by celibate women, in many respects similar to Davies' putative authors of the apocryphal Acts.[1]

This paper explores the differences between Davies' book and mine, and goes beyond both in order to investigate more precisely the role of women in the production of this literature. First, I shall argue that professor Davies' suggestion that women wrote the apocryphal Acts is seriously flawed. Second, I shall argue that in some instances the prominence of women in the Acts derives from the oral taletelling of women. And third, I shall suggest other areas of research that also might contribute to this discussion.

The Case Against Female Authorship of the Acts

Almost all of our literature from the early church was written by men. According to Davies, this fact has prejudiced scholars and has unnecessarily placed the burden of proof on those who claim the apocryphal Acts were written by women. He argues that the burden of proof rests rather on those who claim male authorship (p. 95), and he does so by braiding together three strands of argument.

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[1] *The Legend and the Apostle: The Battle for Paul in Story and Canon* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983).

1. *Women and Hellenistic Romances*

Davies claims that the foundation of his research is a book by Rosa Söder who argues that the apocryphal Acts are Christian counterparts to popular Hellenistic romances (p. 5).[2] Because some scholars have thought that these romances were written primarily for women, Davies says the Acts too were written for them. He gives no primary evidence that women read the romances; instead he cites the work of Erwin Rohde and F. F. Abbott (p. 86, n. 17). But neither of these scholars give primary evidence.[3] All of their arguments are inferential. On the other hand, we have good evidence that this literature was read by men, including "Byzantine monks, who were exceedingly fond of the novels."[4] This may explain why in the sixth century two of the Hellenistic novelists were thought to have been bishops.

But even if we were to concede that both the Hellenistic romances and the apocryphal Acts were written for women and were read by them, it simply does not follow that women themselves wrote these books. On the contrary, all of the authors of the romances were men: Dio Chrysostom, Iamblicus, Iambulus, Chariton, Antonius Diogenes, Xenophon of Ephesus, Nicostratus of Macedon, Lucius of Patrae, Longus of Lesbos, Heliodorus of Emesa, Achilles Tatius, and Apuleius. Even Erwin Rohde, who argued that the primary audience for the romances might have been women, did not think women wrote them. In fact, he says that "Individual learned and artistically active women of that time were noteworthy exceptions."[6] The identification of the Acts with contemporary romances would seem to hurt Davies more than help him.

2. *Women Teaching Women*

This strand of Davies' argument can be expressed syllogistically:

Major premise: Women frequently instructed other women in the early church.

Minor premise: The Acts were written to instruct women.

Conclusion: Ergo, women wrote the Acts.

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[2] *Die apokryphen Apostlegeschichten und die romanhafte Literatur der Antike* (Würzburger Studien zur Altertumswissenschraft 3; Stuttgart: S. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1932; reprint edition; Stuttgart, W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1969). Söder's conclusions have not been accepted by all scholars. See the discussion of the genre of the apocryphal Acts in Jean-Daniel Kaestli, "Les principales orientations de la recherche sur les Actes apocryphes," in *Les Actes apocryphes des Apôtres* (ed. by Francois Bovon; Publications de la faculté de théologie de l'Université de Genève 4; Genève: Labor et Fides, 1981) 49-67, especially 57-67.

[3] Erwin Rohde, *Der griechische Roman und seine Vorläufer* (Hildescheim: Olms Verlag, 1960; reprint of the 1876 edition), and F. F. Abbott, *Society and Politics in Ancient Rome* (New York: Scribners' Sons, 1909).

[4] Moses Hadas, *Three Greek Romances* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1953) xiii.

[5] Heliodorus and Achilles Tatius were bishops according to Socrates' *Ecclesiastical History.*

[6] *Der griechische Roman,* 72.

The major premise undoubtedly is true: women did teach other women. I consider the minor premise highly debatable; it is not at all obvious to me that the Acts were written for women. But even if I were to concede this point, the conclusion does not necessarily follow. Men too taught women in the early church. Among the contemporary church fathers who wrote instructing women are Tertullian, Methodius, Cyprian, Augustine, and Jerome. Furthermore, if a woman wrote the *Acts of John* for her Christian sisters, she certainly did not want them to know it. According to external evidence, in the beginning of the *Acts of John* the author introduced himself or herself as a disciple of John named Leucius![7]

3. *Woman's Point of View*

Davies develops this strand of his argument in two ways, both of which fail. First, he contrasts the strict segregation of male and female virgins in the *Pseudo-Clementine Epistles on Virginity* with the close contacts between virgins of both sexes in the Acts. But it does not follow, as Davies would have us think, that because a man wrote the *Pseudo-Clementine Epistles* men could not have written the Acts. All he proves is that men with the orientation of this Pseudo-Clement could not have written the Acts.

As a matter of fact, these same epistles show that there were other men in the early church who were more sympathetic to the concerns of celibate women and who were closely aligned with them. Pseudo-Clement complains about other celibate men who, in spite of their renunciation of sexual activity, continued to have social relations with celibate women. They lived with them, travelled with them, and frequently visited the houses of virgins in order to read the scriptures to them (this might imply the men were literate but the women were not).[8] It is just such literate, celibate men who closely identified with celibate women, and who, according to Pseudo-Clement, travelled about "hunting for stories," whom we might expect to have written the Acts.[9]

Second, Davies claims that the remarkable sensitivity in some passages of the Acts to the personal concerns and social positions of women implies that women wrote them. But surely Davies overstates the significance of women throughout the Acts. Not all of the Acts or even all of the stories within the same Acts reveal a sensitivity to women's concerns. For example, in the *Acts of John* the apostle prays: "Thou who hast kept me also till this present hour

[7]For a discussion of the reference to Leucius in the *Acts of John* see the article by Wilhelm Schneemelcher and Knut Schäferdiek in *New Testament Apocrypha* (2 vols.; ed. by Edgar Hennecke and Wilhelm Schneemelcher; trans. by Robert McL. Wilson; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963-65) 2. 178-88.

[8]"Others gad about among the houses of virgin brothers or sisters, on pretense of visiting them, or reading the scriptures to them" (1. 9; ANF 8. 58). "But if, moreover, we chance upon a place, and find there one believing woman only, ...we do not stop there, nor pray there, nor read the scriptures there" (2. 5; cf. 2. 4; ANF 8. 62).

[9]*Pseudo-Clementine Epistles on Virginity* 1. 10-11; ANF 8. 58-59.

pure for thyself and untouched by union with a woman;...who when I regained my sight didst disclose to me the repugnance even of looking closely at a woman" (113.)

In principle I would agree that some of the Acts could have been written by women, but one must demonstrate this for each book individually. I find professor Davies' lumping of all the apocryphal Acts together, and ascribing to them a common theological and social setting quite unsatisfactory.

Were he to argue his case individually for each Acts, he probably would begin with the *Acts of Paul,* about which he says: "if any of the Acts lend themselves to argument focusing on 'a woman's point of view' the Acts of Paul do" (p. 105). But it is precisely in connection with these Acts that Davies' thesis is most vulnerable. The story of Thecla, which more than any other story in the apocryphal Acts shows a sensitivity to women and hostility for men, appears in the Acts that has the best external evidence for male authorship.

Tertullian on the Acts of Paul

The following quotation from Tertullian's treatise *On Baptism* undoubtedly refers to the *Acts of Paul.*

> But if they claim writings which are wrongly inscribed with Paul's name—I mean the example of Thecla—in support of women's freedom to teach and baptize, let them know that a presbyter in Asia, who put together that book, heaping up a narrative as it were from his own materials under Paul's name, when after conviction he confessed that he had done it from love of Paul, resigned his position.[10]

Davies claims that Tertullian's report "seems too ambiguous and unreliable to be used as evidence for or against the position that a woman was the author of those Acts" (p. 108). His arguments are four: (1) Tertullian was not well informed about the affairs of individual churches in Asia Minor. (2) It is unlikely that Tertullian's alleged disposing of the author ever took place inasmuch as the *Acts of Paul* was popular in the eastern church after that time. (3) Tertullian claims that the presbyter wrote out of "love of Paul," but the story of Thecla "does little to add to Paul's reputation." And (4) "Tertullian is notorious for his willingness to manipulate fact in the interest of rhetorical flourish."

[10] *On Baptism* 1, 17, as quoted in *A New Eusebius: Documents Illustrative of the History of the Church to A.D. 337* (ed. J. Stevenson; London: S.P.C.K., 1968) 184.

First, to what extent was Tertullian aware of conditions in Asia Minor? This question is difficult to answer, except to say that he was not ignorant in this regard. He obviously had ties with Anatolian Montanists, and in his treatise *On the Veiling of Virgins* he deals specifically with problems of churches in Asia Minor.[11] Second, does the popularity of these Acts in the East rule against accepting Tertullian's statements about the deposing of the author? Not necessarily. Modern research on the history of the New Testament canon shows how dangerous it is to make univocal judgments about the status of Christian literature in the second century. One church's scriptures were another's bane. Third, are the contents of the *Acts of Paul* consistent with Tertullian's claim that the author wrote the book out of "love of Paul?" Absolutely. Throughout the *Acts of Paul* the apostle is exalted as a nearly divine miracle worker, and a model preacher, ascetic, and martyr. Surely it is illegitimate for Davies to isolate the Thecla story from the rest of the Acts and to focus on the few passages there which portray Paul as incredulous or timid. Even in the Thecla story Paul is *the* apostle par excellence. And finally, was Tertullian willing "to manipulate fact in the interest of rhetorical flourish?" Of course he was, but even liars occasionally tell the truth.

In favor of the reliability of Tertullian's testimony is its specificity: the author was a presbyter, was in Asia Minor, was convicted, confessed, and resigned his position. All of this fits with the contents of the *Acts of Paul,* which shows clear signs of having come from Asia Minor, from someone in the mainline church (i.e., not Gnostic or Marcionite), and from someone who knew of the bishop-presbyter-deacon hierarchy of the church.[12]

But Tertullian undoubtedly was wrong in claiming that the author concocted the story of Thecla from his own fantacies. Adolph Harnack's judgment still holds true: "the hypothesis is completely adequate that the author did not freely invent everything, but rather relies upon an oral tradition which dragged on throughout a century."[13] In the next section of this paper we shall see that the author of the *Acts of Paul* took at least three stories from an oral tradition whose primary tradents probably were women. In other words, the sensitivity to the concerns of women in the *Acts of Paul* should be attributed not to a female author but to female storytellers.

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[11] "In a certain place a virgin of less than twenty years of age has been placed in the order of widows" (*On the Veiling of Virgins,* 9, ANF). This "certain place" undoubtedly was in Asia Minor. Before writing this Latin treatise Tertullian had already gone to the trouble of writing one in Greek, which indicates the objectionable practice of not veiling virgins obtained to the Greek East. But Greece was not the place, for he says that all adult women there wore veils—even in Corinth (8). Furthermore, the congregations where virgins were not veiled were founded by "apostles and apostolic people" (2).

[12] Davies denies that the author knew of these offices (p. 78), but in the Philippi section we find references to a certain Stephanus, who seems to be a bishop, to Daphnus, Eubulus, Theophilus and Xenon as presbyters, and to Threptus and Eutychus as deacons.

[13] *Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur bis Eusebius;* part 2, *Die Chronologie* (second edition; Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1958) 1. 505, as quoted in *New Testament Apocrypha* 2. 333.

Our investigation will be restricted to three stories in the *Acts of Paul* which together comprise almost three-fourths of the book as it has been reconstructed by Carl Schmidt and others.[14] These stories are the Thecla story, the Ephesus story (sometimes known as the story of Paul and the baptized lion), and the martyrdom story. I have chosen to concentrate on these three because each of them is attested by Tertullian, Origen, or Jerome, and therefore undoubtedly was present in the ancient version of the Acts, and because each story has its own integrity. That is, each has a discrete beginning and ending, and has content independent of other parts of the Acts.

Three Traditional Tales Told by Women

The Thecla Story

The longest story in the Acts tells of the fate of Thecla, a young and beautiful woman who, on the eve of her wedding to Thamyris, a wealthy Iconian, hears Paul preach and is converted to his message of resurrection and chastity. When Thamyris fails to woo her back from Paul, he and Thecla's mother, Theocleia, take her to the governor, who orders her burned at the stake. A hailstorm extinguishes the fire, and Thecla is saved. With Paul she goes to Antioch where another frustrated would-be lover takes her to the governor. She is subsequently thrown to the beasts, baptizes herself in a pool of seals, is saved by a series of miracles, and flees to Paul, who ordains her to preach and provide for the poor.

Davies certainly is correct in seeing in this story a preoccupation with women's concerns. Those who come to hear Paul preach are "women and the young," or "women and virgins" like Thecla. The Iconians complain that Paul beguiled their wives. Thecla's mother asks the governor to burn her, so "that all the women who have been taught by this man may be afraid." Notice also the significance of women in the following precis of one episode:[15]

> In Antioch of Pisidia Thecla defended herself against the violent embraces of Alexander, whom the local governor appeased by condemning Thecla to the beasts, in spite of the protests of the Antiochean women. When Thecla asked to be kept pure from men until the day of her execution, she was entrusted to Queen

[14]See Carl Schmidt, *Acta Pauli aus der Heidelberger koptischen Papyrus-handschrift Nr. 1* (Hildescheim: Georg Olms Verlangsbuchhandlung, 1965; reprint of the second edition; Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1905), and Πράξεις Παύλου *: Acta Pauli nach dem Papyrus der Hamburger Staats-und Universitäts Bibliothek* (with Wilhelm Schubart; Glückstadt and Hamburg: J. J. Augustin, 1936).

[15]The precis is of 3:26-39.

Tryphaena, and was escorted to her home by crying women. While with Tryphaena, Thecla offered a prayer for the widow's deceased daughter. Although Tryphaena and the other women again protested the injustice, the soldiers finally took Thecla to the theater, where they released wild beasts against her. Then a "fierce lioness ran to her and lay down at her feet. And the crowd of women raised a great shout." A bear ran against Thecla and the lioness killed it. When a lion was released, the lioness fought with it until both died. "And the women mourned the more, since the lioness which helped her was dead." When the men released more beasts, "the women threw petals, others nard, others cassia, others amomum, so that there was an abundance of perfumes. And all the beasts let loose were over-powered as if by sleep." While the men prepared other means of execution, Tryphaena fainted. Thinking she had died and fearing imperial reprisals for the death of this member of the royal family, the authorities released Thecla to her cheering sisters. Tryphaena, revived, received Thecla once again into her house, and the majority of her maidservants converted to Christ.

Not one male—man or beast, pagan or even apostolic—befriends Thecla in this episode. If the contents of any early Christian story suggests its tellers were women, this is it.

Furthermore, Tertullian's statements about the *Acts of Paul* leave little doubt that he knew of Christians who told the story to legitimate women teaching and baptizing. He does not tell us explicitly if women themselves were doing so, but it is reasonable to think they were. We have evidence that other women in the early church cited precedents of holy women of the past to justify their ministries.[16]

But no matter who were the primary tellers of this tale, it is clear that the author of the Acts took it over from a vital oral tradition: I know of no scholar who agrees with Tertullian's charge that the author created the story from scratch. It is laden with folkloric elements. Beautiful, nubile women, frustrated lovers, journeys, perils, and miraculous rescues are the storyteller's stock in trade.

Ludwig Radermacher has argued that the legend of Thecla is a Christian adaptation of the ancient legend of Hippolytus in which Phaedra tries to seduce Hippolytus to break his vow of chastity.[17] I remain unconvinced that the legends of Hippolytus and Thecla are as closely related as Radermacher

[16]The Montanist prophetesses Maximilla and Priscilla harked back to Ammia of Philadelphia and the daughters of Philip (Eusebius, *HE* 5, 17 4, and Origen on 1 Corinthians, fragment n. 74), and Quintillian female clergy harked back to Eve, Miriam, and the daughters of Philip (Ephipanius, *Panorion,* 49, 2).

[17]*Hippolytus und Thekla: Studien zur Geschichte von Legende und Kultus* (Kaiserliche Akademie der Wissenschaften in Wien. Philosophisch-historische Klasse. Sitzungsberichte 182, 3; Vienna: In Commission bei Alfred Hölder, 1916).

would have us think, or that the legend ultimately derives from the cults of mother-earth goddesses. But he does show brilliantly that the Thecla story is a variation of a tale-type popular in Greek antiquity from the fifth century BCE when Euripides wrote his *Hippolytus* until the fifth century CE when Christians told the legend of Pelagia of Tarsus, who was killed for not becoming mistress to the emperor.[18] He also shows that some of the Hellenistic novelists knew of the tale-type and adopted it for their romances.[19] In other words, Radermacher would argue that the similarities between these romances and the apocryphal Acts are due in part to their common debts to popular oral legends. (Undoubtedly, new analyses of traditional tale-types in Hellenistic narratives could help us immensely in detecting the strata of tradition and redaction in the apocryphal Acts.)[20] For example, in Apuleius' *Golden Ass* an old woman tells a younger woman the story of Cupid and Psyche. Longus' romance *Daphnis and Chloe* contains two folktales: the legend of Echo and a story about a girl who became a bird.

Further proof that the story of Thecla came from oral tradition is the reference to Queen Tryphaena. There was in fact a Pontic queen named Tryphaena, a contemporary of Paul and a relative of the reigning Claudians, just as the *Acts of Paul* says. This correspondence does not prove the historical reliability of the Acts, as William M. Ramsay had argued,[21] for the *Acts of Paul* says she lived in Antioch of Pisidia and converted to Christianity, while other evidence indicates she made her home in Cyzicus and was a priestess of Livia.[22] Nevertheless, it is unlikely a story about her would have been created late in the second century.

In spite of the many authors in the first millennium of the church who questioned the acceptability of the *Acts of Paul,* none of them ever doubted Thecla's existence.[23] Surely this rejection of the book and the reception of the legend suggests that her memory persisted independent of the Acts. Perhaps oral tradition was also the source for the life of Thecla written by

[18] *Ibid.*, 70-79.

[19] *Ibid.*, 83-92.

[20] For pioneering studies in the area see Paul Wendland, *De fabellis antiquis earumque ad Christianos propagatione* (Göttingen: W. F. Kaestner, 1911), *Die urchristlichen Literaturformen* (1, 3; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1912), Richard Reitzenstein, *Hellenistische Wundererzählungen* (third ed.; Stuttgart: B. G. Teubner, 1974), Hippolyte Delehaye, *Die hagiographischen Legenden* (trans. by E. A. Stückelberg; München: J. Kösel, 1907), and A. J. Festugière, "Lieux communs littéraires et thèmes de folk-lore dans l'hagiographie primitive," *Wien. Stud.* 73 (1960).

[21] "The Acta of Paul and Thecla," *The Church in the Roman Empire before A.D. 170* (New York, London: G. P. Putnam, 1893; reprint edition; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1954), 382-89.

[22] David Magie, *Roman Rule in Asia Minor to the End of the Third Century after Christ* (2 vols.; Roman History; New York; Arno Press, 1975), 1. 513, and 2. 1368.

[23] For example, Jerome lists Thecla among the saints in one passage (Letter to Eustochium, *PL* xxii, col. 424), while challenging the credibility of the *Acts of Paul* in another (*On Illustrious Men* 7). See also Léon Vouaux, *Les Actes de Paul et ses lettres apocryphes: introduction, textes, traduction et commentaires* (Les apocryphes du Nouveau Testament; Paris: Librairie Letouzey et Ané, 1913), 24-69.

Athanasius,[24] and for the variations of the legend in Pseudo-Chrysostom,[25] and in the textual transmission of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla.*[26] So popular was she that by the fourth century we find literary and archaeological evidence for a Thecla cult especially attractive to women, and extending from the shores of the Caspian to the shores of the Atlantic.

The Ephesus Story

The Ephesus story is a Christian version of "Androcles (or more correctly, Androclus) and the Lion." Androclus, a Roman slave, fled into a northern African wilderness to escape his cruel master serving as proconsul there. While he was hiding in a cave, a lion approached him limping on a wounded paw. Instead of devouring the intruder of his lair, the lion offered his paw, from which Androclus removed a large splinter and drained the pus. The two became intimate companions and even shared the cave for three years. Weary of this speluncular home, Androclus returned to the city, was arrested, and condemned to the beasts. The beast released against him was the very lion he had formerly befriended. When the lion licked Androclus' feet, the spectators were so moved that they released both of them.

The story appears in the *Attic Nights* of Aulus Gellius (5, 14, ca. 160 CE), who borrowed it from Apion's *Aegyptiaca* (first century CE), but no doubt the story originated in oral tradition. At the theater in Corinth archaeologists have discovered at the bottom of a wall enclosing the orchestra a series of paintings of human figures fighting with wild animals, under one of which they found an inscription reading: "The lion recognizes the man under the bull as his savior and licks him."[27] Since the orchestra wall dates from early in the first century CE, the tale apparently was popular lore by that time. One can trace the basic tale-type much earlier, for it appears already in Aesop's fable of "The Lion and the Mouse."

In the *Acts of Paul* the apostle tells the Ephesians that once he had been accosted by a ferocious lion, who, on hearing him preach, believed and was baptized. As a result of Paul's story about the lion, so many attached themselves to the apostle that the jaundiced authorities condemned him to be eaten by a recently captured lion. Of course, the lion was none other than the

[24]Baronius, *Martyrologium romanum,* Venice, 1593, p. 434.

[25]I shall print only one such variant here: "The demon was lying in wait for her on her journey; it sent her fiance against her in the desert, like a thief of her virginity. And as the noble woman continued on her way, she saw him pretending to rush up to a horse behind her and to make merry to have her reunited. She went away, danger on all sides; the enemy is strong, the victim weak. Where can one find refuge in this desert?" (translated from Vouaux, *Actes,* 55).

[26]See *Acta apostolorum apocrypha* (ed. Robert Adelbert Lipsius and Maximilian Bonnet; Leipzig: Herman Mendelssohn, 1891; reprint ed., Damrstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1959) 1. 269-72.

[27]Robert E. Osborne, "Paul and the Wild Beasts," *JBL* 85 (1966), 228.

[28]*Commentary on Daniel* 3, 39 (GCS 1, 176; the translation is mine.)

one Paul had baptized, and Paul was spared. Embedded in this larger story is another also full of traditional themes, such as a miraculous prison escape, a persecution by a jealous husband, ghosts, and the restoration of the dead to life.

Furthermore, we have good evidence that this story was known in the early church apart from the *Acts of Paul.* Hippolytus of Rome wrote in his *Commentary on Daniel* (ca 202): "For if we believe that when Paul was condemned to beasts, the lion let loose on him fell at his feet and licked him, how shall we not believe the things that happened to Daniel?"[28] Hipploytus not only indicates here that those in his community ("we") believed this story about Paul, he even uses their belief in it to lend credibility to the Daniel story. Several scholars have seen evidence here that the *Acts of Paul* was used widely in Rome at the beginning of the third century,[29] but this judgment would seem quite unjustified. Apart from this one passage there is absolutely no evidence that the *Acts of Paul* was known in Rome or anywhere else in the West before Ambrose late in the fourth century.[30] It is much more likely that the Romans knew of this story via oral tradition.

In one passage from Ignatius' letter to the Romans (ca. 107) we find evidence that Ignatius also had heard of beasts who had refused to eat those thrown to them:

> I long for the beasts that are prepared for me; and I pray that they may be found prompt for me; I will even entice them to devour me promptly; not as has happened to some whom they have not touched from fear.[31]

There is no story about reluctant wild beasts in Christian narratives written before Ignatius. Of course, he might have been referring to Jewish or Greek stories and the likes of Daniel and Dionysus. But if he were referring to stories about previous Christians—as I would judge most likely—he probably knew the stories from oral sources, and the story about Paul and the Ephesian lion can claim more antiquity than any other.

The author of the Pastoral Epistles also knew the Ephesian lion story. In 2 Timothy Paul tells the young bishop of Ephesus how all had previously abandoned him, and how the Lord had stood by him that "all the Gentiles might hear his message." Even though these Gentiles did not accept Paul's message but condemned him to the beasts, God spared his life: "and so I was rescued from the lion's mouth" (4:16-17). These verses are remarkably consistent with the version of the legend which appears in the *Acts of Paul* where all

[29]For example, Vouaux, *Actes,* 24-27.

[30]Canon Muratori does not mention the *Acts of Paul.* Vouaux has carefully collected patristic allusions to the Acts, and none of them come from the West, except for this single reference in Hippolytus to Paul and the lion (*Actes,* 24-69).

[31]*Romans* 5:2 (Loeb).

abandon Paul in Ephesus, Paul gives his solo defense before the Gentiles, is sentenced to be eaten by a lion, and ultimately is spared.[32]

The popularity of the Androclus and the Lion tale-type and the references in Hippolytus, Ignatius, and the Pastorals are sufficient to suggest that, as with the Thecla story, the author of the *Acts of Paul* borrowed this story from an oral tradition which reached back into the first half of the second century.

Furthermore, there is reason to think that this story, like the story of Thecla, was told by women. Paul's travel companions are the widow Lemma and Ammia, her daughter. Paul stays at the house of Aquila and Priscilla, but the household of Ammia turns against Paul because he had converted Procla and her household. While in prison, Paul converts Eubula and Artemilla, whose husbands are livid with jealousy because of their wives' love for Paul. Paul's only male allies are Aquila, an angel, and a lion.

The Martyrdom Story

Like the previous two stories, the story of Paul's martyrdom in Rome is full of folkloric themes, such as a theophanic *quo vadis* scene, a resuscitation of a corpse, an imperial trial, and appearance of Paul's ghost. No doubt stories of Paul's death were told far and wide. The author of the Acts of the Apostles, Clement of Rome, and Ignatius all knew of such stories,[33] but apart from saying that Paul was beheaded in Rome during the reign of Nero they give no information concerning the contents of the stories. Consequently, we cannot use them to establish how much of the story in the *Acts of Paul* might have been traditional. But there is some evidence suggesting that at least one element of the story was known long before the writing of the Acts.

Eusebius says that the daughters of Philip told Papias about a certain Barsabas Justus who was forced to drink poison, and was miraculously saved from its effects.[34] Eusebius recognized that the Acts of the Apostles also mentions a Barsabas Justus: he was one of the two followers of Jesus eligible to replace Judas among the Twelve (Acts 1:23). But it is highly unusual for a Christian to have been given poison as a means of execution. In fact, I have found no other example of poison used for this purpose in any ante-Nicean source.[35] Poison was reserved for Roman officials or soldiers accused of

[32]In a recent article I argue that Paul himself knew of the story circulating among the Corinthians ("A Conjectural Emendation of 1 Cor 15:31-32: Or the Case of the Misplaced Lion Fight," *HTR* 73 (1980), 265-76.

[33]Acts 20:23; 21:11-14; 28:30; *1 Clement* 5:5-7; Ignatius, *Ephesians* 12:12.

[34]*Ecclesiastical History* 3, 39, 9.

[35]Ignatius does not list poison among means of execution used against Christians (*Romans* 5:3 and *Smyrneans* 4:2), nor is there a single reference to death by poison in Herbert Musurillo's *Acts of the Christian Martyrs: Introduction, Texts and Translations* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972). Some editions of the *Acts of John* contain a trial by ordeal using poison, but this story probably was added to the book much later (*New Testament Apocrypha* 2. 204-6). The longer ending of Mark may have known the story of Barsabus Justus or a story like it, for here the risen Christ promises his followers that "if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them" (16:18). This ending to the gospel was already known to Justin Martyr and Tatian, and therefore must have been written before the second half of the second century.

treason. I suggest that the story told by the daughters of Philip was not about the Barsabas Justus in Acts but about another man with the same name who, according to the *Acts of Paul,* was in fact a Roman soldier and who was saved from execution.

In the *Acts of Paul,* Paul is brought before Nero for judgment, and during the hearing several of Nero's own military guard—including one named Barsabas Justus—admit to being soldiers of Paul's King. Nero orders these traitors executed along with the other Christians, but when the Romans complain about the many deaths of their fellow citizens Nero relents. Barsabas Justus and his friends are released. We are not told in the Acts by what good fortune Barsabas was spared while so many others were killed. At this point, of course, the story known to the daughters of Philip would fit perfectly: Barsabas was ordered to drink poison and was unaffected. It appears that the Barsabas Justus story told by the daughters of Philip was one episode in a legend about Paul's death, but for some reason was omitted, except for a trace, in the *Acts of Paul.*

If we are correct in linking the two stories, we have direct linkage between the legends behind the *Acts of Paul* and women storytellers. The daughters of Philip told Papias other stories as well. One concerned the raising of the mother of Manaemus from the dead—notice, it was a miracle story in which the beneficiary was a woman.[36] Perhaps they also told Papias the story of "a woman who was accused before the Lord of many sins, which," says Eusebius, "the Gospel according to the Hebrews contains."[37] Presumably, this is the story of the adulterous woman which appears in some texts of the Fourth Gosepl between 7:52 and 8:12, and in which Jesus defends the woman against her male accusers. In any case, Papias apparently knew the story only in its oral form.

Papias was not the only man in the early church to have recorded the oral utterances of women. The Marcionite Apelles wrote a book consisting of the oracles of the prophetess Philoumene,[38] and the Montanist Asterius Urbanus wrote down the oracles of the prophetess Maximilla.[39] It is quite likely that the books of Maximilla and Priscilla known to Theodoret and Didymus the Blind were actually written by their followers.[40]

It would therefore seem unreasonable to think that the apparent feminism in the *Acts of Paul* is due not to female authorship but to female storytellers, who told the stories to the gullible Asian presbyter later deposed for his pious literary efforts.

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[36]Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3, 39, 9.

[37]*Ibid.,* 3, 39, 17.

[38]Tertullian, *Prescription Against Heretics* 30; Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies* 7, 26; and Theodoret, *Compendium of Heretical Fables* 1, 25.

[39]Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 5, 16, 17.

[40]Theodoret, *Compendium of Heretical Fables* 3, 2; Didymus, *On the Trinity* 3, 41, 3.

The *Acts of Paul* is not unique in this respect, for other apocryphal Acts also may be dependent on women's stories. In the *Acts of John* we find stories about Cleopatra and Lycomedes, Drusiana and Callimachus, and the healing of the old women of Ephesus; in the *Acts of Peter* the stories of Peter's daughter, the raising of the gardener's daughter, the paralysis of Rufina, and the raising of the widow's son; in the *Acts of Andrew* the healing of Maximilla, and the conversions of Maximilla and Iphidamia; and in the *Acts of Thomas* the stories of Mygonia, Tertia, the demon-possessed woman, the flute-girl, the youth who murdered a girl, and the serpent who loved a girl. As in the stories about Thecla and Paul and the lion, many of these stories in the other Acts emphasize the virginity of the women and the hostility of their husbands. Also like the *Acts of Paul,* the *Acts of Peter,* the *Acts of Andrew,* and the *Acts of Thomas* all end with martyrdom stories, and in all three jealous lovers of female converts engineer the executions of the apostles.

Furthermore, animal stories are a favorite type of folk narrative, and in our Acts we find several of them. The *Acts of Paul* has friendly lions; the *Acts of John* has stories about a serpent, a partridge, and bed bugs. The *Acts of Thomas* tells of a lion who ate one of Thomas' opponents, an amorous snake, a talking colt, and obedient wild asses.

If all of the apocryphal Acts are as dependent on oral traditions as the *Acts of Paul* seems to be, surely one of the most fruitful areas for future research will pertain to these oral substrata with respect both to their literary features and their social origins.

The Literary Features of the Acts

Even though scholars have much work yet to do in analyzing the Acts in their present redacted form, we have even more work to do on their oral antecedents, as one can see from the paucity of form critical studies in this area. But not only should we do more form criticism, we should also employ methods made available to us from folkloristics. For example, we might attempt to catalogue the stories in the Acts according to the tale-types identified by Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson,[41] for by so doing we might be able to see how the stories fit into the geographical distribution of tales which has been a concern of the Finnish school. Or we might apply the approaches to oral narrative taken in Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktalke,*[42] or in Alex Orlik's "Epic Laws of Folk Narrative."[43] I have found Olrik's "laws" par-

[41] *The Types of the Folktale: A Classification and Bibliography* (second edition; Helsinki; Finnish Academy of Sciences, 1961).

[42] *Morphology of the Folktale* (first edition translated by Laurence Scott with an introduction by Svatava Pirkova-Jakobson. Second edition revised and edited with a preface by Louis A. Wagner, and with a new introduction by Alan Dundes; Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968).

[43] *The Study of Folklore* (edited by Alan Dundes; Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1965) 131-41.

ticularly ellucidating with respect to the three legends behind the *Acts of Paul.* Or we might adopt a more generative approach such as those of Albert B. Lord, Heda Jason, or Dimitri Segal.[44] Particularly interesting might be a comparison of the stories about women in the apocryphal Acts with Ilana Dan's article, "The Innocent Persecuted Heroine: An Attempt at a Model for the Surface Level of the Narrative Structure of the Female Fairytale."[45] Or we might focus on the particular redactions of these stories in the Acts, or on their structural and semiotic features. Several of the articles in *Les Actes Apocryphes des Apôtres* also explore these aspects.[46]

The Social Settings of the Acts

In spite of the considerable agreements between professor Davies and myself regarding the social world of the apocryphal Acts, we disagree rather fundamentally in the way we attempt to reconstruct that world. Davies groups the apocryphal Acts together primarily because they share a common genre and then assigns them a common community. But surely there are more important typicalities than genre for assessing a social setting. What about a shared geographical origin? For example, the *Acts of Thomas,* coming from Syria, may well have more in common with the *Gospel of Thomas,* the *Book of Thomas the Contender,* or even the Syrian church father Aphraates than it does with the *Acts of Andrew.* Or what about a shared theological tradition? The *Acts of John* may share more with Valentinus or offshoots of the Johannine tradition than it does with the *Acts of Peter.* Or what about a common veneration of an apostle? Perhaps the *Acts of Peter* shares more with the *Gospel of Peter* and the Pseudo-Clementines than it does with the *Acts of Paul.* The study of the social world of the apocryphal Acts should be undertaken for each Acts individually, and in each case we should ask which typicalities are most helpful for reconstructing their social provenience.

If the apocryphal Acts are dependent on oral legends, this process of reconstruction becomes even more atomistic and complex. That is, if we are convinced that a certain story was told orally prior to its appearance in the Acts, we must ask: Who told it? To whom did they tell it? Why did they tell it? What does the story disclose about the symbolic social universe of the community transmitting it? These questions must be asked of each story individually. We must not even assume that other stories in the same Acts necessarily travelled through the same storytelling channels or reflect the same social values. We still are a long way from a comprehensive analysis of the social world of the Acts.

[44]Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press; reprint ed.; New York: Atheneum, 1978), and Jason and Segal, "Introduction," *Patterns in Oral Literature* (World Anthropology; The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1977), 1-10.

[45]*Patterns in Oral Literature,* 13-30.

[46]*Les Actes Apocryphes des Apôtres: Christianisme et monde païen* (Publications de la faculté de théologies de l'Universite de Genève 4; ed. by François Bovon; Genève: Labor et Fides, 1981).

But if the recognition of oral substrata beneath the Acts makes this analysis more complex, it also makes it more flexible and usable for the early church historian. It allows distinctions between tradition and redaction. It allows us to see the stories not as the ad hoc creations of individual—even idiosyncratic—authors, but as the controlling *logoi* of entire communities. It allows geographical, theological, social, structural, and thematic typicalities to play their proper roles in establishing the *Sitze im Leben* of the stories. It allows us to see the stories as fossils of an earlier period embedded in more recent soil. For example, even though the *Acts of Paul* probably was written after the Pastoral Epistles, the antiquity of the stories themselves allows us to suggest that the author of the Pastorals knew the stories and wrote in Paul's name to oppose them. But most important for our present discussion, the recognition of oral substrata beneath the Acts allows us to account for the prominence of women in the Acts without appealing to female authorship.

Other Ways to Account for the Prominence of Women

Let me be the first to suggest that neither professor Davies' thesis about female authorship nor mine about female storytellers can fully account for the prominence of women in the Acts. We must consider three other factors.

The Nature of the Genre

If Rosa Söder is correct in classifying the apocryphal Acts as romances, this observation of itself would help explain the prominence of women. It takes two to tango, like Daphnis and Chloe, Habrocomes and Anthia, Ninus and Semiramis, Chaereas and Callirhoe, Metiochus and Parthenope, Rhodanes and Sinonis, Apollonius and Cyrene, Cleitophon and Leucippe, Theagenes and Chariclea, and on and on. Sometimes the romances focus on the fate of the woman, such as Anthia in *An Ephesian Tale* by Xenophon. If the authors of the Acts consciously modelled their works after the romance, they would have been virtually obliged to give some attention to female characters. The prominence of women in Greek drama also may have influenced both the romances and the Acts. Here we find Medea, Phaedra, Alcestis, Clytemnestra, Cassandra, Electra, Lysistrata, Iphigenia, Antigone, and Ismene.

The Exaltation of Virginity

The romances, though characteristically erotic, at the same time exalt sexual self-control and marital fidelity. Out of love for Anthia Habrocomes repells the advances of Manto, and Anthia in return takes poison rather than marry another, kills a lustful pirate, and feigns insanity to escape a brothel.

The apocryphal Acts, however, sublimate the eroticism of the romances and develop the motif of self-control into absolute celibacy, especially for women. I would suggest that this concern for sexual continence in the Acts helps us account for the prominence of women.

During the empire many Jews and Christians shared the platonic notion that physical passions were female and intellectual powers were male. Philo thought that the creation of Eve from Adam's side was the inauguration of the human struggle with passions, especially with sexual desires.[47] Likewise, the *Gospel of the Egyptians* known to Clement of Alexandria clearly relates Eve's fall with human sexuality.

> Salome said, "How long will people die?" Jesus answered, "As long as women bear children?" And Salome said to him, "Then have I done well in not bearing children?" Jesus answered and said, "Eat every plant, but the plant that is bitter you shall not eat."[48]

Consequently, when early Christian authors wanted to praise celibacy, they often did so by giving examples of women who had abandoned femaleness and had become male, i.e., intellectual, no longer physical. As Clement of Alexandria expressed it:

> [To the true Gnostic] his wife after conception is as a sister... as being destined to become a sister in reality after putting off the flesh,...For souls themselves by themselves are equal. Souls are neither male nor female when they no longer marry nor are given in marriage. And is not the woman translated into a man when she is become equally unfeminine, and manly and perfect?[49]

When Methodius wants to praise chastity he writes a symposium in which the speakers are ten virgins, one of whom is Thecla. Tertullian's letters to his wife are obsessed with the virtues of widowhood and virginity over marriage. Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Macrina* continually emphasizes her chastity. Jerome's letters to women also are obsessed with matters of sexual continence.

The period during which the apocryphal Acts were written is also the period when virginity and the cult of the Virgin Mary made great advances. As Rosemary Reuther has shown, the cult of the Virgin developed alongside male monastacism, supplying the monks with an idealized woman to substitute for

[47] *Op. Mund.* 151-152.

[48] *Stromateis* III, 9, 64 (cf. III, 6, 45, and *Exc. Theod.* 67), and III, 9, 66. Clement explicitly says these two sayings appeared together in this order.

[49] *Stromateis* VI, 12, 100.

real women, who were often seen as little more than sexual temptations.[50] As Chaucer put it:

> For take my word for it, there is no libel
> On woman that the clergy will not paint,
> Except when writing of a woman saint
> But never good of other women, though.[51]

Perhaps the prominence of women in the Acts is to be explained in part as another example of the glorification of celibate women who scorned earthly pleasures in order to gain heavenly rewards.

The Significance of Women in Early Christian Social Conflicts

Over and over again the apocryphal Acts tell us that the continence of Christian women aroused the ire not only of their lovers, but of whole cities. In the *Acts of Paul* the men of Iconium accuse the apostle of having destroyed that city in that he convinced all of their wives to cease sexual relations. Ephesus is troubled by the rumor that Artemilla would not accompany her husband, the governor Hieronymus. According to the *Acts of John,* when Cleopatra refuses to sleep with Lycomedes he is able to incite the crowds against John. We find the same phenomenon in the *Acts of Peter.*

> But one woman who was especially beautiful, the wife of Albinus the friend of Caesar, Xanthippe by name, came with the other ladies to Peter, and she too separated from Albinus. He therefore, filled with fury and passionate love for Xanthippe, and amazed that she would not even sleep in the same bed with him, was raging like a wild beast and wished to do away with Peter; for he knew that he was responsible for her leaving his bed. And many other women besides fell in love with the doctrine of purity and separated from their husbands, and men too ceased to sleep with their own wives, since they wished to worship God in sobriety and purity. So there was the greatest disquiet in Rome (34).

This hostility of the populace to Christian celibacy almost certainly reflects actual circumstances in some communities. Jérôme Carcopino has

[50] *New Woman/New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 48-59. See also Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (New York: Pocket Books, 1976), 68-78. Ruether develops some of these ideas also in "Misogynism and Virginal Feminism in the Fathers of the Church," in *Religion and Sexism: Images of Woman in the Jewish and Christian Traditions* (ed. by Rosemary Radford Ruether; New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974), 150-183.

[51] Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* (trans. by Nevill Coghill; London: Penguin, 1971), 295.

shown that threats to the welfare of the household in this period caused public outrage throughout the empire.[52] In fact, some Greek cities retained ancient laws forbidding celibacy.[53] Such a law may be alluded to in the Thecla story where the governor asks her, "Why dost thou not marry Thamyris according to the law of the Iconians?"

Women in ancient societies found their identities largely within the household, as daughters, slaves, wives, and mothers. Women outside of the household, such as prostitutes and widows not cared for by their children or extended families, were socially marginal and sometimes troublesome. Hence, when Christian missionaries preached celibacy and in some cases even dissolutions of existing marriages, the consequent social conflicts related particularly to the places of women in society. For example, when Thecla refuses to marry Thamyris, she steps out of the household and her traditional roles, causing great pain to those within: "those who were in the house wept bitterly, Thamyris for the loss of a wife, Theocleia for that of a daughter, the maidservants for that of a mistress. So that there was great confusion of mourning in the house."

Because the apocryphal Acts repeatedly emphasize the conflicts between the church and surrounding society, it is not surprising that they place women at the center of the storm. One of the great strengths of professor Davies' book is his sensitivity to these matters in his chapters entitled "Women in the Apocryphal Acts," and "Widows and the Apocryphal Acts," where he provides us with an excellent discussion of the significance of virgins and widows in the Acts and in contemporary churches.

Conclusion

There would appear to be at least five explanations for the prominence of women in the Acts, none of which necessarily excludes the others. First, women may have written them. Second, women may have been the primary raconteurs of legendary substrata of the Acts. Third, the authors may have modelled their works after Hellenistic novels in which women characteristically play significant roles. Fourth, the authors may have told the stories of women in order to make them fitting champions of celibacy. And fifth, the authors may have given prominence to women because women were indeed central to social conflicts between the church and society at large.

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[52] *Daily Life in Ancient Rome: The People and the City at the Height of the Empire* (ed. Henry T. Rowell; trans. B. O. Lorimer; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1940), 90-100.

[53] Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges, *The Ancient City: A Study of the Religion, Laws, and Institutions of Greece and Rome* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1956), 50.