Penetration and Its Discontents: Greco-Roman Sexuality, the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, and Theorizing Eros without the Wound

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Ancient constructions of sexuality, it has generally been thought, hinged not on the gender of the person with whom one had sex but rather on what position one occupied in the sexual act: penetrator or penetrated. Indeed, penetration, and concomitant notions of active and passive, structured not only ancient senses of selfhood but also, by metonymic implication, social relations at large.[1]

These assumptions have proceeded largely from K. J. Dover's *Greek Homosexuality* and from Foucault's similar but much more theoretically sophisticated thesis that the notion of an identity based on what we would now call sexual orientation was an invention of modern (specifically, bourgeois) culture.[2] Foucault emphasizes that the word "homosexuality" was not coined until the nineteenth century, and he argues that sexuality is a politically flexible category for self-understanding—a "technology" of culture, as it were, that has a history.[3] Influenced by this argument, studies

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[1] On the history of this consensus, as well as an important critique of its epistemology and historiographical motors, see James Davidson, "Dover, Foucault and Greek Homosexuality: Penetration and the Truth of Sex," *Past and Present* 170 (2001): 3–51. Davidson specifically states, however, that his aim is "not to provide a comprehensive alternative theory of Greek sexuality, so much as to examine the will to truth which insists on taking as its object of knowledge the undisclosed details of the sexual acts of a distant culture" (ibid., 7).

[2] K. J. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978); Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, *An Introduction,* trans. Robert Hurley (1978; New York: Vintage, 1990).

[3] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 1:40–44. Foucault articulates sexuality as a technology of power and does so specifically in response to the "repressive hypothesis," which he so famously discredits. "Let there be no misunderstanding," he writes. "I do not claim that sex has not been prohibited barred or masked or misapprehended since the classical age; nor do

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of sexuality in the ancient Greek and Roman worlds have focused largely on questions of power and dominance at both individual and collective levels. David Halperin's work on classical Athens in *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, for example, emphasizes that there was no concept of a "sexuality" per se as an essential or ontological feature of one's character, only a set of behaviors and tastes that either illustrated or fortified one's social position: "Not only is sex in classical Athens not intrinsically relational or collaborative in character; it is, further, a deeply polarizing experience: it effectively divides, classifies, and distributes its participants into distinct and radically opposed categories."[4] These opposed categories are notably hierarchical. Halperin and others emphasize that these ancient attitudes toward and imaginations of sex, linked as they were to notions of masculinity and femininity, coincided with discourses of social stratification and conquest: the ideal body was a masculinized body, not only impenetrable/invulnerable but actively dominating/violating other bodies/peoples.

Halperin's book has been particularly influential in the field(s) to which I belong—New Testament and early Christian studies—for the specific historical traction it gave to Foucault's broader mission. While there have been some rather hot contestations of this model, ancient sexuality is rarely (if ever) described without recourse to an ideological paradigm in which penetration reigns supreme.[5] Penetration and its assumed relationship to

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I even assert that it has suffered these things any less from that period on than before. I do not maintain that the prohibition of sex is a ruse; but it is a ruse to make prohibition into the basic and constitutive element from which one would be able to write the history of what has been said concerning sex starting from the modern epoch. All these negative elements—defenses, censorships, denials—which the repressive hypothesis groups together in one great central mechanism destined to say no, are doubtless only component parts that have a local and tactical role to play in a transformation into discourse, a *technology of power*, and a will to knowledge that are far from being reducible to the former" (ibid., 1:12, emphasis mine). The "classical age" here refers not to antiquity, of course, but rather to the century or so following the Renaissance.

[4] David M. Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality and Other Essays on Greek Love* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 30.

[5] The penetration grid and the active/passive binary it would seem to imply have been central to some of the most vaunted and often-cited texts of early Christian studies on gender and sexuality. See, for example, Dale Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006); Jennifer Knust, *Abandoned to Lust: Sexual Slander and Ancient Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); and a number of the essays in *New Testament Masculinities*, ed. Stephen D. Moore and Janice Capel Anderson (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), especially Diana M. Swancutt, "'The Disease of Effemination': The Charge of Effeminacy and the Verdict of God (Romans 1:18–2:16)," 193–233, and Stephen D. Moore, "'O Man, Who Art Thou? Masculinity Studies and New Testament Studies," 1–22. Kyle Harper's *From Shame to Sin: Christian Transformation of Sexual Morality in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013) specifically makes use of the penetration grid and the active/passive binary to describe social relations in antiquity generally. Likewise, Davina Lopez's *The Apostle to the Conquered: Reimagining Paul's Mission* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010) specifically attends to the gendered and sexualized representation of Roman

the active/passive binary is the overdetermining model not only for erotic experience but also for social relations at large and is also occasionally opposed via idealized notions of nonhierarchical mutuality, as I will discuss in what follows.[6]

The primacy accorded the penetration paradigm is not just an effect of rigorous historicism, however, and it is certainly not a habit displayed only by classicists or early Christian historians. So many of the reigning or most often elaborated portraits of sexuality and erotic life propagated by the overlapping fields of philosophy, psychoanalysis, and queer theory (Georges Bataille, Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Leo Bersani, Julia Kristeva, Emmanuel Levinas, to name a few) imagine *erotic life itself* through or as penetration.[7] Indeed, penetration, either the word or its implicit figurations, has been so thoroughly naturalized onto sexual topography and even relational encounters at large for both the ancient and modern worlds that it seems almost counterintuitive to articulate other ways to theorize sex, interrelationality, and erotic life. But penetration is a very particular construction of the body and subjectivity, one in which the boundaries of the body or self are strongly delineated only to be punctured and, as I would like to emphasize, one that problematically constructs both bodies and selves in terms of surface/depth binaries.[8]

This is not to say penetration is a bad or wrong way to envision sex or interrelation, especially given all the compelling literature that has been engendered by that figuration. (I have myself relied heavily on this paradigm.) But I find myself, well, *dissatisfied* with it as of late, especially as a way of understanding the total organization of social relations and erotic experience in both the ancient world and the contemporary one. Penetration is, after all, only one way to understand sex/relationality, one that consistently brings traumatic experience with it, I want to suggest. If all sex, or even all

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conquest, suggesting that the penetration grid structures relationships between Rome and its conquered peoples.

[6] There has been, however, some recent discontentment with the association between being penetrated and passivity, as in Joseph Marchal's "Bottoming Out: Rethinking the Reception of Receptivity," in *Contentious Bodies: Queering Pauline Epistles and Interpretations,* ed. Joseph Marchal (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2018).

[7] There have been critiques, largely feminist ones, of the predominance of penetration in characterizations of erotic life and interpersonal relations. Most notable among them perhaps is the critique by Luce Irigaray, whose work I take up below.

[8] It is worth noting here Foucault's critique of "the repressive hypothesis" in *The History of Sexuality*, which deconstructs the opposition between surface and depth, as well as Eve Sedgwick's observation that the repressive hypothesis gets displaced in the Foucauldian project of unveiling hidden violence and carries its own structural (surface/depth) binaries. Sedgwick indeed suggests affect, texture, and touching as conceptualities that might divert readers and critics away from the repeated impulse to reveal/uncover hidden truths. I will describe my own compatible considerations, clearly indebted to Sedgwick, below. Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), esp. 1–25, 123–51.

relationality, is understood to be traumatic, what kind of room does such a reductive and flattening universalization leave for the fact that most of us experience sex as a contradictory, even lavish, and affectively variegated terrain? It would seem that comprehending eros (*erōs*) itself as a wound additionally and not insignificantly takes some of the edge off experiences that more directly include violence and injury.

The question is both historically and personally compelling for me. Historically speaking, preoccupation with the penetration grid and its appeal to hierarchically organized active/passive binaries is a steeply limited project because of its exclusive focus on frames of legibility. What any grid in fact does is make everything but itself difficult to register. It would therefore seem vital, given the important values and commitments of nondominant modes of historiography (queer and feminist historiography, in particular), to theorize ways to account for erotic life *off the grid* and to attempt to account for, in some fashion, experiences that do not make for any easy emplotment or that fall just below the official register.

More in the realm of the personal: I have found it reductive to use penetration as a primary representation of encounters between people since having gone through Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR). EMDR is a form of trauma therapy in which one recounts and reassociates traumatic memories, usually while being guided through hypnosis-style side-to-side eye movements by the therapist. One of the major benefits of that work has been a new ability to roam the world *without* a sense of imminent injury, to fumble my way through a vivid landscape of relational experiences that do not collapse easily (or even at all) into trauma or its twin in extremity, *jouissance*. What I want, what my experience pushes me to demand, is some new and perhaps warmer concepts that accommodate the pushes and pulls, the more minor and intriguing, and sometimes uncomfortable, impressions and touches that shape erotic life and relationships at large—and that do so without a sense of ontological shattering.

So in what follows, I attend to some places in ancient literature that register an erotic relationality that does not fit comfortably with figurations of penetration. I leverage these instances alongside the work of Luce Irigaray and some assumptions of affect theory to draw out a portrait of erotic life/relationality that might present an alternative (and not a mutually exclusive one) to penetration. In other words, neither penetration nor hierarchical, injurious relation disappears from the frame here, and I am not out to prove the existence of perfectly reciprocal—meaning status-free—erotic relations. (Even if we could find such relations, would we want them?) Rather, I emphasize moments in which status differentials (often articulated through gender) form part of the field of erotic imaginations and relationships in ways that are not only not traumatic but part of the pleasure. Historians' portraits of ancient erotic life and linked social relations can be refined through an extended reading of one particular ancient text,

one that happens to be Christian: the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. I will braid my own resonant experiences into a reading of this text in order to draw out ways of approaching erotic life and relational encounters that neither ignore traumatic/traumatized implications nor let them reign.

Gender and Desire in History

There have been contestations to the Dover/Foucault/Halperin model of penetrative and active/passive relations, some of which express worry about the profound level of violence implied by the model. James Davidson and T. K. Hubbard, for instance, have objected not only to the stark picture of relationships painted by the active/passive binary (what Davidson calls the "zero-sum model") but also to the hesitance to claim homosexuality as an identity in the ancient world—and these two pieces are not unrelated.[9] If one is to claim that same-sex sexual relations between men in the ancient world were always hierarchical, one would, for both ethical and political reasons, perhaps want to untangle that claim a bit from the violence of ancient social-sexual relations. Hubbard writes:

> Although Halperin's essay aims to liberate us from what he regards as the nineteenth-century intellectual construct of "homosexuality," his formulation of Greek sexuality is itself firmly rooted in the even more modern intellectual constructs of victimization theory and child molestation. . . . It equally loses sight of the notion, commonly articulated by the poets, that the lover is the yoked horse whose reins the beautiful boy controls at will. Those who have actually been in love with attractive men or women twenty years younger than themselves know where the true power in the relationship resides.[10]

Hubbard explicitly criticizes the "reductionist fallacies" and phallocentrism of the active/passive model, but he does so only to reveal a troubling obliviousness about how power and status differentials might affect erotic relations.[11]

Many (though not all) of the more direct quarrels with the Dover/Foucault/Halperin genealogy have followed various kinds of identitarian

[9] For the "zero-sum model," see Davidson, "Dover, Foucault and Greek Homosexuality." See also, for instance, James Davidson, *The Greeks and Greek Love: A Radical Reappraisal of Homosexuality in Ancient Greece* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2007); T. K. Hubbard, "Popular Perceptions of Elite Homosexuality in Classical Athens," *Arion* 3, no. 6.1 (1998): 48–78, more about which will be said below. For an important framing and characterization of this debate, see Amy Richlin, "Sexuality and History," in *The SAGE Handbook of Historical Theory*, ed. Nancy Partner and Sarah Foot (London: Sage Publications), 294–310.

[10] Hubbard, "Popular Perceptions," 71.

[11] On the other end of the spectrum, Amy Richlin has criticized the predominantly male focus of this intellectual genealogy and doubled down on the violence inherent to ancient sexuality. See Richlin, *Garden of Priapus: Sexuality and Aggression in Roman Humor* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

logic. In her critique of Halperin, Bernadette Brooten observes that female eroticism was both chronicled and eclipsed by ancient male writers in part for its occasional and stubborn inability to be assimilated into active/passive binaries.[12] While Brooten recognizes differences between modern understandings of sexuality and understandings of sex and love in ancient Greek and Roman cultures, she challenges Halperin's claim that sexual orientation as a sustained and critical dimension of one's character or personality is only a modern phenomenon.[13] Brooten captures an entire landscape of erotic relations between women in the Greek and Roman periods in order to culturally situate and critique responses to them in certain kinds of Christian literature. She thus implicitly casts "early Christianity" as only a negative resource for the forms of eroticism in which she is interested. One of Brooten's primary arguments is that the Christian polemic about the "unnaturalness" of erotic relationships between women was tied into their transgression of gendered norms—the notion not only that women should always be passive partners or objects in sex but that any given sexual pair involves a penetrating/penetrated opposition.[14] She finds that the ancient discourse on "female homoeroticism" contains expressions of worry about these transgressions—both the possibility of a woman being the active partner and perhaps the possibility that there was no way to place sex between women within the penetration grid. But like Davidson and Hubbard, Brooten struggles with the severe and reductionist picture of active/passive relations and the related reluctance to think about homosexuality as an orientation in Halperin et al.[15] Brooten, Davidson, and Hubbard thus want not only a more distinct picture of same-sex object choice as a preference and as part of one's self-understanding in the ancient world but also a friendlier picture of erotic possibilities within those same-sex relations.

Page duBois's *Sappho Is Burning* launches a different critique of Foucault. She does not hunt for ancient homosexuality or even necessarily for a sanguine picture of female homoeroticism. She objects to the historicization of lesbian identity in Sappho, in fact, even while she finds in Sappho a figure who is vastly understudied in histories of sexuality beyond her place in lesbian genealogies. For example, according to duBois, Sappho is "unthinkable" for Foucault

[12] Bernadette J. Brooten, *Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 21–23.

[13] Ibid., 8–9.

[14] For a similar argument regarding non-Christian Roman texts, see Judith P. Hallett, "Female Homoeroticism and the Denial of Reality in Latin Literature," in *Roman Sexualities*, ed. Judith P. Hallett and Marilyn B. Skinner (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 255–73.

[15] See also Deborah Kamen and Sarah Levin-Richardson, "Revisiting Roman Sexuality: Agency and the Conceptualization of Penetrated Males," in *Sex in Antiquity: Exploring Gender and Sexuality in the Ancient World*, ed. Mark Masterson, Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz, and James Robson (New York: Routledge, 2014), 449–60. Kamen and Levin-Richardson accept the penetration paradigm but seek to decouple penetration from the active/passive binary.

because she is an actively desiring woman who does not fit any prescribed social roles.[16] DuBois also wonders whether any erotic behavior between women would have even registered as sex or sexual to male writers in the ancient world.[17] Yet Sappho herself is not quite "off the grid" of legible pleasures since her desire participates in the dominant active/passive imagination. While duBois critiques the (lesbian) identitarian placement of Sappho, she still finds Sappho's desire compelling because of the gender of her object choice.

It is hardly surprising that gender takes up so much space in discussions of ancient sexuality; the relationship between gender and sexuality is intricate and inextricable, in theory and in practice. But as Brooke Holmes has argued, gender has dominated discussions of sexuality in antiquity even as homosexuality and heterosexuality as usable concepts have met their limits.[18] Gender, in other words, is the primary object of our study in discussion of ancient sexuality, overshadowing the fact that (as Holmes notes) erotic life was itself a matter of deep interest and importance to people in antiquity.[19] I would even go so far as to say that the centrality of gender and object choice in these historiographical discussions inadvertently ontologizes gender, rather than making it clear how gender (among other things) can be a language through which erotic experience is expressed. This is not to naively ignore that language can be productive or that it does not have its violences but rather to underline how the language of gender is as often a sticky and elastic web with which one toys as it is a cage in which one uncomfortably knocks around. Think, for instance, of the way one's partner's masculinity and/or femininity, playfully exaggerated or ostentatiously countered, can intensify the charge of an erotic moment—a moment that I would venture to say is only rarely if ever *about* gender in a central way, even if gender is its structural pretext.

All of this makes clear that over time and over the course of the many condensations of his work, some subtler dimensions of Halperin's readings have gotten lost. Indeed, in *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality* Halperin not only offers a broad reorientation to sex and sexuality in classical antiquity but also examines the friendships between ancient hero-pals, prostitution's relationship to democracy in classical Athens, and how the female figure of Diotima participates in male erotic ideals in Plato's *Symposium*. Following his new historicist sensibilities, Halperin is interested in the *representation* of experience rather than the reconstruction of actual experiences. The notion of "actual" experiences is itself a problematic one, as any good Foucauldian knows, since the route to reconstruction would always be through representation anyway. Thus, Halperin's tenacious focus is the cultural machinery and political ideology of sex in a given era. What is interesting

[16] Page duBois, *Sappho Is Burning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 145.
[17] Ibid., 14.
[18] Brooke Holmes, *Gender: Antiquity and Its Legacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 81.
[19] Ibid., 98–100.

about the body of Halperin's book, however, is that it hardly paints the flatly gloomy picture of sexual-social life that he outlines in his signal essay "One Hundred Years of Homosexuality" (and which so much scholarship in New Testament and early Christian studies has assimilated), where he implies that *no* relationships, *no* gendered identities are configured without some form of penetrative domination.[20] In fact, the specific examples that Halperin investigates suggest a much more colorful and tensive ancient topography for sexuality, desire, and even power than the penetration grid would let on. For instance, Halperin reads the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus in Homer's *Iliad* in relationship to two pairs of hero-warrior-friends in other ancient Near Eastern texts: the Epic of Gilgamesh and the biblical books of Samuel. What he finds is a kind of affiliation, a friendship with a "high pitch of feeling," that takes on both "fraternal and conjugal" shades but that fits into neither modern categories of (homo)sexuality nor classical active/passive dogma. [21] Indeed, as Halperin admits, later Greeks who read the Homeric epic were apparently somewhat befuddled by the relationship, since it did not quite fit the pederastic expectations of same-sex love.

Halperin takes this befuddlement, this attempt to "map their own sexual categories onto the Homeric text," as proof of the changing attitudes and constructions of sexuality even within a single culture.[22] But in a later essay, "Why Is Diotima a Woman?," he concludes that Plato's notion of eros (at least in the *Symposium*) actually departs from the active/passive binary in important ways, drawing up a notion of erotic relation that is "not hierarchical, but reciprocal; it is not acquisitive but creative."[23] Significantly, though, Halperin's reading of "reciprocal" and "creative" eros in Plato does not allow for many egalitarian fantasies. Plato is still of course referring to pederastic relations, ones in which boys/students are elevated or nurtured in some sense into a sublime love of high ideals through a kind of intoxication with the teacher.[24]

[20] Halperin, "One Hundred Years of Homosexuality," in Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality,* 32–39.

[21] Halperin, *One Hundred Years*, 86.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid., 130.

[24] Ibid., 132. Likewise in the *Symposium* there is both an acknowledgment of and a resistance to a certain passivity or "enslavement" in desire, especially if one's desire is not focused on the forms or the "ocean of the beautiful" (210d) rather than on the singular beautiful body itself. As Diotima describes in the *Symposium*, "He who would proceed rightly in this business must not merely begin from his youth to encounter beautiful bodies. In the first place, indeed, if his conductor guides him aright, he must be in love with one particular body, and engender beautiful converse therein; but next he must remark how the beauty attached to this or that body is cognate to that which is attached to any other, and that if he means to ensue beauty in form, it is gross folly not to regard as one and the same the beauty belonging to all; and so, having grasped this truth, he must make himself a love of all beautiful bodies, and slacken the stress of his feeling for one by contemning it and counting it a trifle. But his

As Halperin notes, both the student and teacher are described as active and desiring.

The point is not to uncritically accept Plato's rendition of eros in this obviously pederastic scenario. But one should notice that it is not necessarily self-interest or justification that leads Plato to this account of eros, since it departs from the active/passive social ideology of the day. It indeed ascribes a kind of idealized or stereotypical femininity to student/teacher relations, which means that the student not only is a passive object but exhibits a kind of feminine responsiveness.

In Plato's vision of erotic relations between teacher and student, sex might occur, and power relations are, obviously, not absent. But this sex would not be a dominating use of another as an object—the use of another solely for one's own pleasure (which, again, would not be terribly problematic for ancient people, since it would have been viewed as an assertively masculine virtue). Whether or not Plato's vision of eros was experienced by students this way, neither the obvious power dynamics of the relationship nor the legitimacy of mutual desire (even if only imagined) is changed. In other words, the vision of eros that Plato sets forth, whether or not it actually applies to the relationships he suggests it does, serves as witness to an erotic relation that puts power and reciprocity in tensive combination.

Halperin notes that by choosing or inventing the figure of Diotima the prophetess, who teaches about eros in the dialogue, Plato not only describes eros in feminine terms but also predictably signals femininity as that through which men negotiate male relationships and understand themselves.[25] Halperin is almost excessively cautious about inferring women's experience or subjectivity from Plato's account. While I appreciate this caution and would not wish to call for an excavation of "women's experience" as such from ancient literature, it does seem to me that allusions to femininity can be read as representations of something like *nondominant experiences*. After all, it is clear that "woman" and "the feminine" already have a difficult and not always clear relationship to representation, since, as Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray argued, they have often been posed as a problem for

next advance will be to set a higher value on the beauty of souls than on that of the body, so that however little the grace that may bloom in any likely soul it shall suffice for loving and caring, and for bringing forth and soliciting such converse as will tend to the betterment of the young; and that finally he may be constrained to contemplate the beautiful as appearing in our observances and our laws, and to behold it all bound together in kinship and so estimate the body's beauty as a slight affair. From observances he should be led on to the branches of knowledge, that there also he may behold a province of beauty, and by looking thus on beauty in the mass may escape from the mean, meticulous slavery of a single instance, where he must centre all his care, like a lackey, upon the beauty of a particular child or man or single observance" (ibid., 210a–d). And then later: "So when a man by the right method of boy-loving ascends from these particulars and begins to descry that beauty, he is almost able to lay hold of the final secret. Such is the right approach or induction to the love-matters" (211b–c).

[25] Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, 147–49.

representation—as representation's other and that which mysteriously eludes the symbolic order.[26] Diotima's gender in the representational economy, then, not only is a "projection by men of their own experience . . . for internal consumption" but also may be a kind of ventriloquized legitimacy for that which does not fit comfortably within masculinized symbolics of experience, such as the active/passive binary.[27] What if Diotima gives space, however circumscribed, for felt experiences otherwise seemingly foreclosed in the social-sexual hierarchy?

Plato's idealized notion of eros would also seem to dissociate sex from penetration, in some sense. That is to say, while sex is implied, it is not the goal of interaction, nor is it coextensive with straightforward domination. Instead, the goal of "the act" for Plato is admiring affection and apprehension of the Forms (ideal, invisible images of the existent world); the act has a valence different from the wounding infiltration implied by the term "penetration."

This reconsideration of Halperin's reading of eros in Plato was meant to point out the kinds of erotic social relations in both the ancient world and the contemporary one that come into view when we are not doubling down on identitarian attachments. What might we see when not caught in the obsessive if also sometimes pleasurable return to traumatized/traumatizing penetration? (And what is trauma if not obsessive return?)

Archives of Erotic Experience

Paralleling ancient historians' debates on penetration, contemporary theory has also centered on (and struggled with) penetration as a predominant representation of erotic experience and relationality. Here too gender often claims a primary and calcified place. In *This Sex Which Is Not One* Luce Irigaray provides a famous takedown of the symbolics of penetration, especially in Freudian thought. "Female sexuality has always been conceptualized on the basis of masculine parameters," she writes. "Thus the opposition between 'masculine' clitoral activity and 'feminine' vaginal passivity, an opposition which Freud—and many others—saw as stages, or alternatives, in the development of a sexually 'normal' woman, seems rather too clearly required by the practice of male sexuality."[28] Irigaray suggests that this "masculine sexuality" constructs the vagina as a "hole-envelope" in which "her lot is that of 'lack,'" and she goes on to describe heterosexual genital sex as an "interruption" of woman's autoeroticism: "This autoeroticism is disrupted by a violent break-in:

[26] Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian G. Gill (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985); and Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, trans. Leon Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), esp. 56–112, 157–73.

[27] Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, 145.

[28] Luce Irigaray, *The Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), 23.

the brutal separation of two-lips by a violating penis, an intrusion that distracts and deflects the woman from this 'self-caressing' she needs if she is not to incur the disappearance of her own pleasure in sexual relations. . . . Will woman not be left with the impossible alternative between a defensive virginity, fiercely turned in upon itself, and a body open to penetration that no longer knows, in this 'hole' that constitutes its sex, the pleasure of its own touch?"[29] Heterogenital sex is an essentially violent act for Irigaray either in its barging in on female autoeroticism or in the male aim to "appropriate for himself the mystery of this womb where he had been conceived."[30] She uses phrases like "forced entry," as well as the phallic cliché of the sword, and thus observes and plays with the violent implications of penetration as a way of representing sex. But since Irigaray opposes the act itself more than its figuration, her critique of penetration actually renaturalizes its accompanying symbolics onto bodies. In Irigaray's barely contained gender and biological essentialisms, acts remain stuck in the dominant symbolic economy rather than open to the adjudication and reassignment of meaning.[31]

The association of sex with injury implicit to penetration is more complicated and dynamic than Irigaray's critique lets on. Indeed, because implicit to the term "penetration" is an association of sex with injury, it is particularly productive ground for resignifications and affective reassociations of both sex and injury. For instance, in *Is the Rectum a Grave?* Leo Bersani's description of penetration as a way of reading sex offers an interruption to the happy, harmonious, life-affirming image of sex in contemporary heteronormative, marriage-obsessed culture. Drawing constructively from Freudian theory, specifically from Freud's description of the death drive, Bersani argues that sex is not only inextricable from the exercise of power but injurious at its core. He argues that both the pull and the fear of sex are its radically self-shattering potential, which is emblematized in being penetrated.[32]

[29] Ibid., 23, 24.

[30] Ibid., 25.

[31] See Judith Butler's critique of Irigaray along these lines in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 11–22. Rosi Braidotti and Diana Fuss, however, have challenged this critique, treating Irigaray's essentialisms as "strategic," or necessary rhetorical tools, rather than as ontological positions. Rosi Braidotti, "The Politics of Ontological Difference," in *Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Teresa Brennan (New York: Routledge, 1989), 89–105. See also Margaret Whitford's essay "Rereading Irigaray" in ibid., 89–105, as well as Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature, and Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 55–72. See also Amy Hollywood's rendition of Butler's critique and her engaging reading of Irigaray on penetration, woundedness, and (women's) sexuality: "'That Glorious Slit': Irigaray and the Medieval Devotion to Christ's Side Wound," in *Acute Melancholia and Other Essays: Mysticism, History, and the Study of Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 171–88. As Hollywood notes, Irigaray explicitly moves away from associations of the female sex with woundedness, associations that were part of Irigaray's earlier work in *Speculum of the Other Woman* and that—not insignificantly—were inspired by medieval mystical devotions of women to Christ's wound.

[32] Leo Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave? And Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 3–30.

Ann Cvetkovich rightly observes that Bersani's counter to sex positivity and heteronormativity contains its own essentialism, and she likewise notices that his framework "only seems counterintuitive (or 'queer') if it is assumed that everyone really wants to be 'masculine' and on top or that the trauma of penetration must necessarily be negative."[33] Commenting on the provocative and famous first line of Bersani's essay ("There is a big secret about sex: most people don't like it"), Cvetkovich writes: "Bersani's counterintuitive premise that people don't like to have sex is less startling in the case of women, for whom the dangers and discomforts of sexuality (whether pregnancy, rape, or an inability to attend to their own pleasure) have been all too readily apparent."[34]

Cvetkovich's critique of Bersani paves the way for her own project in *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*, which mines the queer productivities of trauma in contemporary North American expressions of lesbian experience. In a chapter entitled "Trauma and Touch: Butch-Femme Sexualities" she suggests that "femme accounts of receptivity avoid a redemptive reading of sex, insisting on the fear, pain, and difficulty that can block the way to and be conjured up by making oneself physically and emotionally vulnerable or receptive."[35] She suggests that "what is required instead is a sex positivity that can embrace negativity, including trauma," a positivity that refuses a collapse into experiential resolution, romanticization, or fantasies of perfectly nonhierarchical relations by holding a place for shame and perversion.[36] Cvetkovich is not uninterested in the metaphorics of penetration; instead, she sees such metaphorics, constructed as they are, as having poignant variation, illustrated by the affective revalencing of femme receptivity.[37] But because Cvetkovich intervenes in the eventfulness of trauma that is so heavily inscribed in theoretical literature, and because she seeks more mundane, less spectacular/fetishized accounts of psychic and bodily injury and their reverberations, she is also generally cued into a wider range of experiences that coalesce around erotic life than pain or self-shattering *jouissance*.[38]

Cvetkovich and Bersani demonstrate how penetration has been extraordinarily productive for queer discourse in working out injury and pain, as well as (not insignificantly) interrupting normative imaginations about what

[33] Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 63.

[34] Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?," 3; Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*, 63.

[35] Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*, 63.

[36] Ibid.

[37] See especially her chapter "Trauma and Touch: Butch-Femme Sexualities," in ibid., 49–82.

[38] Likewise, although Cvetkovich is particularly interested in lesbian experiences and cultures, she is not necessarily tied to any kind of identitarian framing as much as she is interested in those experiences as resonant and perhaps even transferable ones, especially as they intervene in dominant national narratives. See the introduction in ibid.

sex is and does. But that does not mean that it needs to be the only or predominant way of understanding sex or subjectivity. We need not dispense with penetration as metaphor or its clear associations with trauma, but we do need to notice those associations and the ways they have commanded and overwhelmed our portraits of erotic life. As Cvetkovich notes, sex positivity and sex negativity need not exclude one another. Opposing them, I think, would blot out the mixed and minor dramas of most of our daily experiences of sex specifically and erotic life in general: the frustrations, the awkwardness, the suspense and delight, for instance, or the comforts and discomforts, the neuroses, the little hungers, and the sighs of relief that often arrive together. Further, and following Irigaray, whatever the act or the gender of the actors penetration describes, it still carries within it a phallic economy, and the representation of bodies or selves as *encased* need not be mapped onto every sexual or relational encounter.

Cvetkovich's project is typical of those that theorize affect, depicting trauma not as exactly puncturing boundaried selves but as constructing boundaries *through violation*. The sense of having been injured crystallizes a sense of a "wound," and so it *produces hard boundaries through hypersensitization*, which is quite a different picture.[39] But the very fact that touch, an encounter with the "surface" of the skin, can be a violation refuses an easy dichotomization between surface and depth implied by the model of the encased self punctured through injury. Indeed, the skin, laden as it is with nerves and wired so directly into one's most seemingly internal self, could hardly be so easily relegated to "surface." What happens when touch is not wounding, though—when contact, an impression, neither sits ineffectually on the surface nor cuts to the bone? What about the pique of curiosity, the shiver, the hint, the turn away in distaste? What about the chafe, the ache, the rub?

Indeed, while the ancient term *kinaidos*, describing a man who desires being penetrated, has garnered the most attention in accounts of nondominant forms of ancient erotic life,[40] I find myself much more interested in the

[39] See, for instance, Sara Ahmed's description of wounding and pain in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 20–41, as well as Cvetkovich's rendition of Freud's account of traumatized subject as protective organism in *An Archive of Feelings*, 52–55.

[40] Some questions around the *kinaidos* include to what extent this is simply a blanket term for sexual deviance or whether it describes a certain sexual preference or identity. In his attempt to broaden discussions of appetite and eros in the classical period, James N. Davidson has suggested that the uses and implications of the term *kinaidos* challenge the active/passive model and are more about exhibiting a kind of "womanish desire" than about sexual humiliation. Davidson, *Courtesans and Fishcakes: The Consuming Passions of Classical Athens* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997). Ruth Mazo Karras notes, however, that the passivity of the *kinaidos* (at least in Halperin's description) is "anatomical" rather than "affective" ("Active/Passive, Acts/Passions: Greek and Roman Sexualities," *American Historical Review* 105, no. 4 [2000]: 1259). Kamen and Levin-Richardson stage a disentanglement of the active/passive binary from penetration ("Revisiting Roman

two slanderous terms associated with women having sex with other women in the ancient world: *tribas* and *frictrix/fricatrix*—both terms that derive etymologically from the verb "to rub."[41] While writers regularly ascribed penetration and masculinized active positioning to those designated as *tribades* or *frictrices*, we might note that the term "rub" depicts pleasure and relationships, not to mention the topography of the body, quite differently: as something like the interplay of two electrified fields. In this etymology one finds at least an imagination, perhaps even an experientially driven one, that rather than thinking of the sexual act in terms of surface/depth, one could (at least sometimes) experience oneself as all surface; and in this scenario, agency is not necessarily or automatically conferred anywhere. One might place this etymological richness alongside Irigaray's alternative to penetration, her "geography of feminine pleasure," which is self-consciously plural and diffuse—nonteleological.[42] Emblematized, strikingly, in the image of two lips rubbing together, Irigaray moves away from the concept of lack (the "hole-envelope"), as well as from the monotheistic and solid power of the phallus, and toward doubleness and liquification—a kind of "stickiness" that softens or blurs boundaries rather than crystallizing them.[43]

Irigaray also roots herself firmly in identitarian investments, however, as she conjures a quintessentially feminine/female form of relationality. So while I would like to forgo her literalization of biological metaphors, I do find myself intrigued by the notion of the rub—or shall we say *friction*—as an alternative and supplementary representation to penetration. Somewhat against Irigaray (and Brooten), it seems that friction does not actually specify very much in terms of agency/power relations or gender. Unlike penetration, friction quite capaciously entertains a whole suite of possible variations on agency and power and need not at all be confined to representations of the female body. Friction is ambiguous along all sorts of lines, since it automatically installs neither "good" nor "bad" experiences (i.e., one can be rubbed the wrong way, too).

In fact, while both Brooten and Irigaray search for a kind of lesbian and/or feminine resistance of penetration in their work, it seems to me that it is exactly because of penetration's implicitly poor mapping of the penetrated subject as a receptive cavity and because of its constitutive relation to trauma that it feels like a disappointing reduction/generalization of erotic life in general and heterosexual genital sex in particular. In other words, to associate any and every form of sex or encounter with "penetration" is both to overdetermine and perhaps to fail to accurately describe the experience, associating it exclusively with ruinous invasion. In contrast, describing

Sexuality"). See also Holmes's thorough summary of scholarship on the *kinaidos* in *Gender,* 93–93, 102–4.

[41] For a breakdown of this terminology, see Brooten, *Love Between Women*, 4–9.

[42] Irigaray, *The Sex Which Is Not One*, 90.

[43] Ibid., 106–18.

contact with others more generally and abstractly as friction opens up intriguing possibilities. However, I am less interested in postulating a grand theory of eros or of contact with the Other (a solidified, phallic concept itself) than with carving out space for specific kinds of contact that appear "off the grid." Instead, I would like to suggest that the early Christian text the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* might act as a kind of productive wedge into the history of ancient sexuality and into contemporary considerations of erotic/eroticized relations. While this text has obviously been of most interest to historians of early Christianity, it is not distinctly or distinctively Christian in any sense. It is far more productive to view it as an enthralling interlocutor in questions of ancient erotic life: an unusual piece of literature but not an exceptional one; an archive of erotic experiences that, when read closely, might cue us into a set of feelings and relations that do not ordinarily appear in accounts that depict ancient sexuality as distractingly dramatic or spectacularly troubling.[44]

Threaded through modern accounts of ancient women's sexuality, we find constant articulations (both subliminal and explicit) of longing to *make contact* with, if not specifically lesbian women, then at least ancient women "themselves." Gathering scholars such as duBois, Amy Richlin, and Brooten alongside the critiques of Foucault from Davidson and Hubbard, one might even describe this tendency more generally as a longing for one's own experience to be situated and recognized somewhere in ancient literature—a longing for the past and present to be bridged via identitarian recognition.[45] Without rejecting the possibility of tangible contact with the people of the past, might it be productive to entertain the thought that these ancient discourses on women and desire were not actually about women or their erotic lives per se? What if, somewhat in the vein of Diotima, we treat them as still preserving *some kind* of erotic

[44] While there has been debate about the extent to which sexuality in the Greek classical period was overdetermined by active/passive models, there is less debate for the Roman period. See Davidson, *Courtesans and Fishcakes*; Richlin, *The Garden of Priapus*; Hallett and Skinner, *Roman Sexualities*. See also the discussion in Karras, "Active/Passive," 1260. Yet I wonder about the implicit ways this idea of Roman culture being more bluntly hierarchical and binary might align with narratives of Roman culture as a bastardization or as representing a decline in classical Greek culture. I would not differentiate Greek and Roman periods strongly here, neither from each other nor from that hazy and expansive moment we call "the present," largely because of the critiques of historians and theorists such as Carla Freccero and Joan Wallach Scott, who have noticed the ways in which periodization and hard historical differentiation often work inadvertently to stabilize identities in a given context (ancient or, more often, modern). See Freccero, "Queer Times," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106, no. 3 (2006): 485–94; and Freccero, *Queer/Early/Modern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 1–12, 31–50; Scott, *The Fantasy of Feminist History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 45–67.

[45] Both Joan Scott and Carolyn Dinshaw make this argument in different ways. See Scott, *The Fantasy*, 1–67; and Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).

experience, particularly experiences that challenge phallocentric mapping? Indeed, in the gendering of a set of experiences as belonging to women in some fashion, one does preserve them—albeit ambivalently, since the very gendering of these experiences circumscribes their potential for recognition.

Since so much of the scholarly literature on ancient sexuality is characterized by subjective investments—inherent debates about historians' own desires along with the contemporary stakes around identity—I will not shy away from planting myself in this debate in a self-consciously subjective fashion. I do so not with identitarian motivations but rather with more loosely defined experiential motivations—and by intertwining Thecla's story with some compatible experiences of my own. I have no doubt that I find Thecla appealing or her experience resonant with mine because she is a woman; but I do not see gender as the determinative node of our connection, especially since the gender of a literary character, one who potentially ventriloquizes or registers desires of men, is always a dicey matter. I entwine her story with my own to echo and amplify the personalized stakes of the debate on writing the history of ancient sexuality. But this strategy additionally arises out of a deeper and long-running set of investments in treating history as a felt force that runs in and through us, and it builds on my previous arguments about bending toward our own subjectivity as a resource rather than an obstacle in writing ancient history.[46] More pointedly, however, I do so to offer one very particularized instance in which eros as only or primarily wounding fails to do justice to the full breadth and dimension of lived experience—the ways grids overdetermine our understanding of what even strikes us as erotic in the first place.

NEITHER MARRIAGE NOR DEATH (OTHER LOVE STORIES)

The *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, a second-century Christian tale of a young woman whose encounter with the words of the apostle Paul impel her to flout social, sexual, and gendered conventions and then venture out as a teacher, has attracted considerable scholarly and popular attention throughout its long history.[47] And while readers have recognized the author's interest in negotiating erotic life, the text's association with asceticism (generally understood as sexual renunciation and thus the cultivation of an un- or antierotic life) has meant that it has been

[46] On leaning into subjectivity as a resource for history, see the introduction in Maia Kotrosits, *Rethinking Early Christian Identity: Affect, Violence and Belonging* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015); and Kotrosits, *How Things Feel: Biblical Studies, Affect Theory, and the (Im)Personal* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

[47] On Thecla and her popularity in late antiquity, see Stephen J. Davis, *The Cult of St. Thecla: A Tradition of Women's Piety in Late Antiquity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

underappreciated in histories of sexuality, particularly those on the Greco-Roman era.[48]

In the story, the young woman (Thecla) overhears the apostle Paul expounding on the "word of Christ," which in this case includes statements on ascetic virtues, resurrection, and compassion. Enamored with his message and longing for the life of which Paul speaks, Thecla cannot tear herself away from the window where she sits, listening to the sound of Paul's voice (the text mentions that she had not yet seen him in person), even as the man she's contracted to marry comes to visit. "Where is my Thecla?" he asks. Theocleia, her mother, replies, "I have a strange story to tell you. Indeed for three days and nights Thecla has not risen from the window—either to eat or drink—but gazes as if looking upon some enjoyable sight. In this way she clings to a strange man who teaches deceptive and cunning words." She continues by explaining that Paul's words are so appealing to the local young women that he is a threat to the city. "My daughter, like a spider in the window, is also bound to his words, held sway by new desire and fearful emotions. For the maiden fixates on the things he says and is captivated." Both "loving her and also fearing her passion," Thecla's fiancé, Thamyris, goes to her and asks, "What is the emotion that binds you in passion? Turn toward your Thamyris and be ashamed." Her mother asks, "Child, why do you look down and sit like this, answering nothing but acting like a mad person?"[49] Both Thecla's mother and fiancé weep and grieve for the captivated Thecla as if she has died, yet she remains rapt in her attention to Paul's words.

Later in the story, Thamyris plots to have Paul arrested and brought to court. Thecla follows Paul to the prison just to hear him speak more about "freedom in God," a notion that emboldens her and even moves her to kiss Paul's chains. At the trial, Paul is slandered as a "magician," and Thecla is called to testify about why she will not marry Thamyris. Upon her refusal

[48] See, for instance, Matt A. Jackson-McCabe, "Women and Eros in Greek Magic and The Acts of Paul and Thecla," in *Women and Gender in Ancient Religions: Interdisciplinary Approaches*, ed. Stephen P. Ahearne-Kroll, Paul A. Holloway, and James Kelhoffer (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck), 267–78; and Eung Chun Park, "Agneia as a Sublime Form of Eros in the Acts of Paul and Thecla," in *Distant Voices Drawing Near: Essays in Honor of Antoinette Clark Wire*, ed. Holly Hearon (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004), 215–26. Park in fact draws a strict contrast between the figures of Thecla and Diotima. Rosie Ratcliffe's treatment of the text sees the figure of Thecla as an androcentric construction and the text itself as "pornographic," which is to say that Ratcliffe notices how the text exudes or archives a kind of eroticism, if one overdetermined (in her understanding) by male desires. Ratcliffe, "Violating the Inviolate Body: Thecla Uncut," in *The Body in Biblical, Christian, and Jewish Texts*, ed. Joan E. Taylor (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 184–209. One pivotal and indeed game-changing exception to the reading of asceticism as renunciation of desire is Virginia Burrus's work, to be discussed below.

[49] *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, trans. Celene Lillie, in *A New New Testament* (New York: Mariner, 2015), 10:4. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

to respond, her mother cries, "Burn the lawless one! Burn the one who refuses to be a bride in the middle of the theater so that all the women taught by this man will be afraid!" (20:5).

There follows a series of attempts to execute and harm Thecla, none of which succeed. Although she is stripped and on the pyre, ready to be burned, the fire mysteriously "did not touch her." God compassionately puts out the fire with a terrible storm. Even though many die during the storm, Thecla survives. In another scene, Thecla manages to evade an imminent sexual assault from a man on the street, and she reverses the shame he incurs by tearing off his cloak and crown and throwing them to the ground. For her "crime" of dishonoring the man, the governor sentences her to death by wild animals in the arena. This attempt to kill her also fails, as Thecla is defended by the lioness sent to devour her. In another strange turn, Thecla is saved from a pool of killer seals by a lightning strike, which kills the animals but not her. Once again, she is preserved from both harm and shame: "And surrounding her was a cloud of fire so that neither the wild animals could touch her nor could she be seen naked" (34:6).

Thecla's adoration of Paul is continually directed at his words rather than at the man himself (and the text specifies that Paul is rather unattractive).[50] Meanwhile, Paul seems ambivalent about Thecla's attachment: he witnesses Thecla's near sexual assault but does nothing. Indeed, the man attempts to persuade Paul to "give" Thecla to him, but Paul demurs, saying, "I do not know the woman of whom you speak, nor is she mine." But Thecla's world is also populated with surprising allies, generally female ones: the lioness who defends her in the arena, as well as scores of women in the stands attempting to distract the animals from killing her by throwing in flowers and spices. In this same scene, a queen named Tryphaena walks Thecla to the site of her execution and confides to her that she loves Thecla like her own, deceased daughter. She mourns Thecla's fate, pleading to God to help her.

Though not twenty years of age, Thecla hardly crumbles in the face of these dangers. She refuses to testify against Paul in court at her own peril, and she deflects shame upon the man who seeks to shame her through assault. She also boldly baptizes herself (after Paul puts off her request), makes confident petitions to God for her own rescue, and at one point stitches and dons men's clothing so that she can find Paul and report her self-baptism.

[50] In the vein of scholarship that reads the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* as anxious about (and attempting to avoid or blot out) eros, Jennifer Eyl suggests that because Thecla does not see Paul at first, the narrative manages to skirt the usual conventions of the Greek novel (the genre to which the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* belongs), in which "love at first sight" catalyzes the narrative. In Eyl's analysis, in other words, the avoidance of the "love at first sight" trope is a symptom of the text's allergy to eros. Eyl, "Why Thekla Does Not See Paul: Visual Perception and the Displacement of Eros in the Acts of Paul and Thekla," in *The Ancient Novel and Early Christian and Jewish Narrative: Fictional Intersections*, ed. Judith Perkins and Mariliá Futre Pinheiro (Groningen: Barkhuis Publishing, 2013), 3–19.

She never marries, and even Paul, who would seem to be central to the text, disappears from the story. The text closes by charting Thecla's long and productive life as a teacher and healer.[51]

This harrowing and often hilarious story is written in the style of the Greek romance novel, a popular genre that is characterized by the adventures of a couple who must face danger, death, separation, and threats to the woman's body and/or sexual reputation as obstacles to being together. The novels tend to be characterized by violence emanating from every direction—strangers, animals, pirates, bandits, local authorities—and by a climax involving the civic ceremony of marriage.[52] While much of the plot of these stories revolves around the near unraveling of civil society, the final scenes in which the couple finally comes together again, if a bit battered, in a glorious civic union reassure the reader of civic coherence.[53]

The various "Acts" of early Christian literature are elaborations of this genre, with some key variations. The Christian Acts, for instance, often culminate in violent death—that is, martyrdom.[54] Indeed, Christian martyrological texts, especially those narratives that focus on women, are not unlike Greek novels in that penetration and a kind of "immunity" from penetration are predominant themes. Virginia Burrus has most cogently highlighted and tracked this theme in early Christian literature.[55] In her article "Word and Flesh: The Bodies and Sexuality of Ascetic Women," for instance, she describes, among other things, the distinct and highly sexualized investment of later male writers in the theme of impervious female bodies, writing that "imagined physical enclosure or intactness of the female virgins' sexual organs functioned symbolically in the rhetoric of the fourth century to reinforce social and ideological

[51] In several manuscript versions, the text ends with a continuation of this pattern of threat and resilience. Many "violent young men" are sent to "ruin" her, but she evades them, not incidentally through recourse to a kind of hardened state that manages to preserve her vitality: she enters a rock, and it descends into the earth. This section, however, does not appear in the earliest manuscript traditions, and it might tend to place her more strongly (and retrojectively) in the martyrdom tradition. See Jeremy W. Barrier, *The Acts of Paul and Thecla: A Critical Edition and Commentary* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 188.

[52] On violence in Greek novels, see Philip A. Harland, "'Do Not Deny Me This Noble Death': Representations of Violence in Greek Novels and Apocryphal Acts," *Ancient Narrative* 14 (2017): 129–47. On marriage as a happy ending in Greek novels and the ways that early Christian literature riffs on that trope, see Judith Perkins, *The Suffering Self: Pain and Narrative Representation in the Early Christian Era* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 41–76. On the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* specifically as a counter to the marital plot, see Melissa Aubin, "Reversing Romance? The Acts of Paul and Thecla and the Ancient Novel," in *Ancient Fiction and Early Christian Narrative*, ed. Ronald F. Hock, J. Bradley Chance, and Judith Perkins (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 257–72.

[53] Perkins, *The Suffering Self,* 41–76.

[54] Ibid., 15–40.

[55] See also L. Stephanie Cobb, *Dying to Be Men: Gender and Language in Early Christian Martyr Texts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

boundaries."[56] But Burrus also notes that in texts that describe women's ascetic behaviors, including the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, one sees not a timidity or indifference toward erotic life as much as a renegotiation of it: "If sexual asceticism entails successful resistance to male control, this in turn liberates the women's sexual energies, albeit in 'sublimated' forms; for the women are now free to direct their eros toward the pursuit of knowledge and spiritual growth as well as the formation of new relationships."[57]

Burrus is careful to remark that she is not trying to reconstruct anything like an essentialized "women's experience."[58] But both here and in some of her other work, Burrus accounts for alternate forms of eroticism, thus expanding the archive of what counts as erotic. Most notably, in her later book *The Sex Lives of Saints*, Burrus rereads hagiographical literature for forms of eroticism (or, rather, "countereroticism") that refuse social-sexual convention.[59] Yet many of Burrus's excavations of early Christian literature as a source for the history of sexuality still circulate around not only pain and death but, more generally, a certain extremity of experience. Drawing from Elaine Scarry's work on torture, Georges Bataille's assimilation of desire to death, and Jean-Luc Nancy's equation of love and touch with wounding, Burrus argues that "when *jouissance* is understood as a 'mode of ascesis,' the ascetic emerges into view as an erotically *joyful* 'body in pain,' disclosing suffering as the vehicle of the ongoing unmaking and remaking of worlds." "Ancient hagiography," she writes, "participates in such a self-mortifying *jouissance*, such a divinely erotic joy, in which the performative 'death' of the self becomes the sanctifying matrix of life's renewal."[60]

Similarly, in "Word and Flesh" Burrus places Thecla alongside the stories of female ascetic martyrs, in which they manage to evade sexual penetration and shame but not the sexualized, penetrating wound of murder and death.[61] However, the problem with Burrus's argument is that the *Acts*

[56] Virginia Burrus, "Word and Flesh: The Bodies and Sexuality of Ascetic Women," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 10, no. 1 (1994): 27–51, 31. See also Burrus's "The Heretical Woman as Symbol in Alexander, Athanasius, Epiphanius, and Jerome," *Harvard Theological Review* 84, no. 3 (July 1991): 229–48.

[57] Burrus, "Word and Flesh," 50.

[58] Burrus writes that while she has "pushed beyond the 'word' of the dominant construction of ascetic women's sexuality," she has not made contact with "actual 'flesh' but rather more words—words which are, however, more revealing of the elusive flesh, representing the utterance of that flesh" (ibid.). It seems to me, though, that the notion of affective archives mitigates this poststructuralist tension between "word and flesh" a bit, since (to quote Ann Cvetkovich) texts can act as "repositories of feelings and emotions" or conduits for sensation (*An Archive of Feelings*, 7).

[59] Virginia Burrus, *The Sex Lives of Saints: An Erotics of Ancient Hagiography* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

[60] Ibid., 15, 14.

[61] See also Virginia Burrus, "Mimicking Virgins: Colonial Ambivalence and the Ancient Romance," *Arethusa* 38, no. 1 (2005): 49–88, in which she argues that virginity in

of Paul and Thecla differentiates itself from the martyr acts, since Thecla thwarts *both* the traumatic conclusion of execution and the happy resolution of marriage. Indeed, Thecla continually fends off traumatic injury of all kinds, even managing to deflect various forms of shame (her attempted assault, her public punishments, and her mother's rejection, for example) that would perforate her confidence. In the meantime, she finds a set of pleasures in her own fearless speech and gestures: rapt delight in the words of others; comfort in a cosmic force that thinks kindly of her; and sustaining, surprising connections to others, animal and human, in the world around her. Burrus sees in ancient literature a masochistic erotic self-annihilation as an alternative to the reproductive and marital framing of sex (not unlike Bersani's theorizing of sex and the death drive). But if Thecla is not a martyr, it seems to me that the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*'s erotics instead *bypasses* the death/marriage binary.

When I read Thecla's story, I cannot help but see myself at nearly nineteen, still a girl, having had a fragmenting episode of sexual violence that occurred a couple of weeks after my mother almost inexplicably left my father, with whom I ardently identified (and still do). Within a few months of these traumas and in the disoriented and vacated state induced by them, I had a lucky encounter with a charismatic, consistent, adoring, and deeply harmless person whom I smilingly finessed into cohabitation almost immediately and for twenty years following. The twenty years were many things, too many to recount in any single narrative or even five, but among those many things, they were structured by a steady refrain of experiments in autonomy and returns to traumatized attachment. That sweet and companionable marriage, in other words, tethered me enough to alight on adventures in quasi independence that I would have felt too frightened and too small to approach otherwise. Another way of putting it is that he held me in my fear response long and tightly enough for both my fear and the marriage itself to burn out. Or another: the marriage made possible my healing, even as my healing stripped our relationship of its most powerful motor.

Cast through the grid of the law, which rendered our lively sexualities winsomely and invariably hetero, the safe structure of this relationship had many experiential subtexts for me, ones that echo the darker moments of Thecla's story: the hot lightning strikes of shame; a constant feeling of danger narrowly escaped; the mystifying and devastating sense of being sold out by the same person who secured me to this world (which could easily happen again). These emotions stood alongside a number of people and moments and things that gave or taught me pleasure—and also resonate, all too precisely sometimes, with Thecla's story. Just to name a few: dreamlike immersions in books and ideas; regular and wild cathexes in teachers who

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the novels (both Christian and non-Christian) functions "as a site of articulated cultural ambivalence" (53).

only sometimes wanted to claim me back; minor if ostentatious exhibitionisms and the thrills of occasionally flouting tradition; a set of affectionate, captivating, and only rarely definitively sexual creative/intellectual affiliations with men and with women; and an imaginative life that regularly aligned with a sense of omnipotence and resilience. Subtending all of these was a sense of growing intellectual mastery that gave me a language for the dark and sharpened world in which I lived.

One could easily point to the continuities that these experiences and encounters had with my childhood before the traumatic eventfulness of my nineteenth year. As an ordinary girl I had lived in a mysterious and magical world, accompanied by companions of all sorts, on whom I endlessly crushed with only half a thought toward mutuality, and with music, poetry, and some capacious and generally benign cosmic force, a god of sorts, as our ambience. So these later pleasures are actually not best understood as direct responses to traumatic experience, even as they did deliver relief from trauma's consummations. They are rather diaphanously, if also ineluctably, tied to trauma, mostly by virtue of time and their inhering in the life of a single person. And these experiences were also not without their discomforts, or disjoints in agency: miscommunications and disheartening rejections; inability to get what I wanted, or being on the receiving end of more than what I wanted; the incomplete satisfactions of daydreams, or the too-fast dissipation of interpersonal chemistry and other disappointments; anger, frustration, boredom, melancholy, longing. But that is the abundance and ambivalence of friction—the currents and points of contact that sustain and fail but do not break us.

AN EROTICS OF THE MUNDANE (CONCLUSION)

In the vein of Burrus's impulses, I am proposing that we consider the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*'s erotics expansively, focusing less narrowly on Thecla's gender and even more traditional notions of the objects of her desire and attending more closely to her heightened sensual/sensory experiences, the moments of flush that pepper the story. In doing so, what emerges is an archive of pleasures in which traumatic, "penetrative" relations do not win the day, even as the story accounts for the existence and real dangers of those relations. The plotting of enjoyable and frictive moments and encounters alongside danger in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* is instructive for what we historians (and others) might miss in our overattention to the grid of legible pleasures or our relentless hunt for absolute figurations of power and/or their subversion. Where on the grid might we place the warm connection between the queen Tryphaena and Thecla as surrogate mother and daughter? Where might we place, say, Thecla's cavalier excitement in stripping and pitching the crown of her would-be offender? Her affiliations with the observing women who help save her by throwing their petals into

the arena? Or her adoration of Paul's words and chains, her exhilarating and passionate plunge into a set of ideas and a life that seem absurd to her mother and to the man to whom she is promised in marriage? Her love of risk? Of course, I worry that these delights, not uncomplicated ones, might be characterized as not quite fully erotic or, worse, as "adolescent," not least because of Thecla's literal adolescence. But that only reiterates the necessity for accounting for them. Rendering these as "adolescent" or less full pleasures would likewise place these experiences on a grid—a developmental (and thus teleological) one in which such pleasures are "outgrown" in the name of other, more "sophisticated" ones.

Thecla's erotic experiences are not exactly "without" wounding, since violence, danger, and power infuse the story of Thecla, and, as I have demonstrated, those forms of violence, danger, and power are not completely distinct from her various pleasures. More generally, there is no life without wounding or the impingements of the grid, and there are no perfect scenarios absent of differences in power and agency. What I seek in an "eros without the wound" is not a romanticism in which trauma evaporates. Nor do I want to deploy theory to hold out any kind of promise that certain forms of eroticism could be a model for relations at large or could completely shield one from injury, just as Thecla is shielded again and again. In fact, we might think of her pleasures as perhaps an electric excitement at a sense of her own resilience rather than a form of insulation. Likewise, Thecla's pleasures happen within, against, and across all kinds of status differentials, including gender, but they do not easily, or even ever, condense into the straightforward hierarchical active/passive binary that the metaphor of penetration stages. The goal here is, among other things, to interject into history and theory the relatively obvious, if vastly underplayed, recognition not only that pleasures of all kinds are ambivalently knit into relations of power and status rather than being determined by or occurring despite them but also that pleasure can happen without disfigurement and that resilience is as real as injury.

In the domains of both history and theory it is worth piecing together a fuller and more daily account of eros—an erotics of the mundane—in which wounding, while never far from the frame, is neither the prerequisite for pleasure nor the primary indicator for its realness; in which the severity of the grid of hierarchical and penetrative relations, and the subtext of gender that undergirds them, is denaturalized and seen as grid, even while questions of power and legibility remain constructively part of the picture. For the ancient world as well as the contemporary one, and some of the worlds in between, the eventfulness of trauma and *jouissance* might be supplemented by other love stories—the less dramatic but no less distinct or consequential rhythms and impressions that punctuate our lives but do not puncture them.

About the Author

Maia Kotrosits is assistant professor at Denison University, teaching in the religion, classics, and queer studies departments. Her research finds points of contact between the literature and social world of the ancient Mediterranean and contemporary cultural studies. Her most recent book is *Rethinking Early Christian Identity: Affect, Violence, and Belonging* (2015), in which she reads some late first-century and early second-century Christian texts not as the literature of a distinct social phenomenon but rather as unexceptional responses to the broad diasporic conditions of the Roman Empire. Her work has been published in *Culture and Religion*, *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, and the *Journal for the American Academy of Religion*, among other places.