

## Disputed Piety: Intersections of Religion and Gender in Ancient Discourse

Gender and sexuality were, for ancient Greeks and Romans, arenas of conflict. Deviations from normative performance(s) were marked and derided, especially in invective, precisely because these societies existed as a zero-sum contest where masculinity was questioned, asserted, and vied for. One does not have to look far, however, to realize that these arenas are often engaged in struggles that occur outside the bedroom. As Skinner has noted ancient sexual ideology regularly converts non-sexual power struggles into nominally sexual ones (2014). Religion, too, as a discourse, was evaluated in terms of normative performance(s) which when transgressed were fodder for the ancients' rivalries. Our panel seeks to explore how, across culture and religion, ancient authors integrated gender and sexual defamations and commendations into disputes over religion. Whether the context is a long-standing political rivalry (our first paper), a bitter intellectual enmity (our second paper), or a struggle to secure socio-literary tradition (our third paper), gender and sexual performances become ciphers for the religious.

Our first paper, "Clodius' Monument to *Licentia* in Cicero's Orations," examines Cicero's arguments levied against Clodius Pulcher on the former's return from exile in 57 BCE. In both the *de Domo Sua* and the *de Haruspicum Responsis*, Cicero pans Clodius for erecting a shrine to *Libertas* – including an image stolen from the tomb of the prostitute in Tanagra – on the site of Cicero's former house. Whereas previous scholarship has focused on Cicero's depiction of a sexually deviant, unmasculine Clodius as a foil for himself, the importance of Clodius' sexual and social transgressions for the politician's case have been overlooked. The *licentia* with which Clodius violated the Bona Dea rites is the same by which Clodius has governed as tribune. When Cicero questioned Clodius' *religio*, he questioned his scruples. So too, in order to

persuade the pontiffs that Clodius' consecration was ill-performed, Cicero recalls such sexual transgressions to establish that Clodius lacked the scruple necessary to perform a proper consecration.

Our second paper, "A Satirist's Muse: Lucian's Peregrinus as a New (Christian) Socrates," aims to address Lucian's biographical parody, *The Death of Peregrinus*. Scholars have recently demonstrated the regularity with which Lucian judges the *paideia* of his literary and sophisticated contemporaries. However, few have assessed how Lucian's calumnies against Peregrinus bleed into attacks on early Christians. Lucian's work is bracketed with salacious anecdotes of Peregrinus exploiting young men. Lucian offers these stories as a lens through which to understand Peregrinus' relation to the early Christians. Lucian slyly insinuates that sexual dysfunction intimates social dysfunction and vice versa such that Lucian insinuates that the same socio-sexual abuse Peregrinus visited on his students he also visited on the early Christians. Simultaneously, Lucian deftly positions Peregrinus as an exploitative abuser, playing the clichéd role of the teacher turned seducer, and early Christians as foolish and impotent dullards susceptible to the most transparent abuser.

Our third paper, "Thecla, Female Martyrs, and Markers of Masculinity: The Gender, Martyrdom, and Authority of the Protagonist in the *Acts of Thecla*," interrogates tensions in the gender discourse of early Christian martyrdom narratives, specifically the exceptional text, the *Acts of Thecla* (*ATH*). Early Christian female martyrs are often situated as performing masculine virtues and, especially post-martyrdom, depicted in masculine manners. Thecla, renowned in Christian antiquity as protomartyr among women, is no exception despite surviving her ordeal. Generic similarities between the *ATH* and martyrdom narratives have been well-documented, with some scholars going to so far as to argue that the protagonist receives a baptism of blood.

Against this backdrop, representations of the heroine's gender in *ATH* can be seen to participate in a larger theme regarding female martyrs in antiquity and to serve as signifiers of Thecla's martyrdom. *ATH* further entered into a debate regarding the roles of women in Pauline traditions by uniquely situating Thecla as one who lives to exercise the status of her martyrdom and its gendered aspects, leveraging her newfound authority to license her to perform evangelizing tasks typically associated with masculinity.

These proposals demonstrate the variety and complexity of the contexts in which gender and sexuality were deployed in religious disputes. Performances of gender and sexuality become gauges for piety as authors convert sexual deviance into impiety and piety into masculinity. Our first two papers examine how the scurrilous details of gender and sexual misconduct offer both content and context for failures of piety, while our final paper argues that Thecla's masculine comportment, especially her martyrdom, commend her to perform other masculine deeds. Each paper indicates the natural—at least to ancient authors—connection between normative performances of gender and religion. Thus, our panel observes that gender (dys)function intimates and imitates religious (dys)function.

#### Bibliography

Skinner, M. B. 2014. *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture*. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell.