

Thecla, Female Martyrs, and Markers of Masculinity: The Gender, Martyrdom, and Authority
of the Protagonist in the *Acts of Thecla*

Early Christian female martyrs are often situated as performing masculine virtues and, especially post-martyrdom, depicted in masculine manners. Christian martyrdom accounts in late antiquity often played up the feminine features of female martyrs in the arena via their nudity while simultaneously having them extol traditional masculine virtues and later bequeathing them with masculine authority and even appearance; thus, aligning martyrdom with masculinity (Cobb 2008; Streete 2009). The character of Thecla, renowned as protomartyr among women, is no exception, despite surviving her ordeals in the *Acts of Thecla (Ath)* and later tales. While scholarship has explored themes of Thecla's virginal femininity within the context of the arena, the generally positive portrayal of women contrasted with the generally negative portrayal of men, and Thecla's later cross-dressing and performance of masculine responsibilities (Bremmer 1996), the relation of gender-transformative motifs to Thecla's status as a martyr has been under-explored due, in part, to the frequent bracketing of *Ath* within martyrdom studies because of the survival of its protagonist.

Though the character of Thecla as portrayed in *Ath* is thus not frequently considered a martyr in modern scholarship, nevertheless similarities between the *Ath* and martyrdom narratives have been well-documented with the greatest concentration of the generic similarities being displayed in the Antioch sequence of chapter 4 rather than the Iconium cycle in chapter 3 (Jensen 1995; Moss 2012). In common with frequent themes exhibited in early Christian martyrdom narratives, *Ath* includes: 1) a faith act which angers the authorities; 2) the arrest of the believer; 3) a courtroom and trial scene; 4) a defiant testimony of faith from the protagonist which ends in his/her condemnation; 5) an elaborate and public spectacle in which the

protagonist is to be executed; 6) miraculous signs during the spectacle; 7) a last-minute prayer before the expected moment of death; and 8) some form of vindication of the protagonist (usually post-martyrdom). Moreover, while the majority of scholars have viewed Thecla's baptism as an auto-performed rite (Barrier 2009; Pervo 2014), some have posited Thecla's baptism itself as an expression of martyrdom, suggesting it is a modified baptism of blood and perhaps even substituted for an earlier, non-extant end of the Antioch tale in which the protagonist was killed (Esch-Wermeling 2008). Added to the list of themes which help to confirm the presence of martyrdom connotations and the martyrdom of the protagonist should be the transformation which her gender presentation undergoes post-baptism and post-trial in the arena. Following her baptism and second trial, Thecla dresses as a man and receives a commissioning from Paul to perform evangelizing duties typically associated with masculine responsibilities, roles, and authority.

In this way, *ATH* entered into a debate regarding the roles of women in Pauline traditions. Scholars have frequently positioned the work in conversation with the Pastoral Epistles on issues of gender and women's roles, with some proposing more common ideological ground (Hyllen 2015) and others an antithetical polemic (MacDonald 1983). In favor of the later, is the manner in which *ATH* uniquely situates Thecla as one who lives to exercise the status of her martyrdom and its gendered aspects, leveraging her new-found authority to license her to perform evangelizing tasks typically associated with masculinity. The author's attempt to situate Thecla as a martyr, though living, equips her with masculine status and authority and thus makes her commissioning and the performance of the typically male duties which accompany it more difficult to challenge and dismiss.

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