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Mallory Challis

Wingate University

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Wingate University

Abstract

The psychological concept of human flourishing measures the quality of a person's life based on multiple factors of well-being. If a person achieves flourishing, they have scored high on these factors. In modern evangelical Christianity, premarital sexual abstinence is encouraged as a spiritual discipline to promote human flourishing by discouraging immoral sexual behavior that could harm a person's spiritual well-being. This ideal is facilitated by the Purity Movement, which began in the 1990s with organizations like True Love Waits but has earlier historical origins. Although conversations about sexual ethics may seem like a modern topic, early Christian texts like the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles also include teachings about sex. Using psychologist Tyler VanderWeele's framework of human flourishing, this paper aims to discuss how early Christian narratives emphasized standards of sexual abstinence in ways that are similar and different to the modern Purity Movement, critiquing the ways in which the bodies of women in these narratives are utilized as a means of spiritual flourishing for others. My feminist analysis of these narratives also attempts to show how the bodies of women drive these narratives by controlling the wills of those around them, illuminating the ways in which their bodies find power, even when victims of violence and subjugation. In this paper, I focus on two ancient Christian narratives to exemplify this: the story of Peter's disabled daughter (Acts of Peter 1-2) and the story of Drusiana and Kallimachos (Acts of John 63-86).

Keywords*:* Critical Theory, Disability Studies, Early Christian Literature, Feminist Theory, Gender, Human Flourishing, Sexuality, Willfulness

In their narratives, the writers of the *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles* attempted to formulate a literary basis for ancient readers to understand and revere the power of the Apostles. Many of these narratives do so by emphasizing the importance of sexual chastity as an example of submission and spiritual discipline.[1] However, across many of the narratives within these texts, it seems the bodies of men and of elite women are the only ones who can flourish by adherence to these teachings, as the bodies of women that are utilized for teaching in these narratives suffer in-agency, aggression, and sexual violence at the hands of their beneficiaries. In this paper, I argue that these women should be viewed by modern interpreters as "Martyrs of Chastity"[2] because their sufferings are undeserved, yet serve as a means of salvation and learning for both the women themselves and the surrounding characters within the text. These narratives allow interpreters to question what it means to flourish within the boundaries of sexual chastity and bodily discipline in church teachings, accounting for the violence and injustice they endure at the hands of apostolic power in an androcentric society.

According to Tyler VanderWeele, the concept of human flourishing (or well-being) can be defined as "a state in which all aspects of a person's life are good."[3] There are many activities that a person can do to promote flourishing, such as journaling, walking outdoors, or engaging in self-reflection. The activities that promote human flourishing are broken up into three categories of cognitive exercise: Gratitude, Savoring, and Imagining.[4] When studied, participants required to engage in these exercises measured higher in levels of happiness and life satisfaction, which contributed positively to other areas of their physical and mental health and well-being.[5] There are also behavioral exercises that seem to contribute positively to human flourishing.[6] However, the specific benefits of cognitive and behavioral practices differ according to each person practicing them, so not all persons achieve flourishing in the same ways.

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[1] I am grateful to Dr. Christy Cobb, who supervised this project and supported me greatly throughout the process of research and writing this paper.

[2] In Catholicism Petronilla is revered as a saint for her sexual chastity and was considered in the first few centuries a martyr as evidenced by a fourth century fresco naming her "Petronilla martyr". This was contested later as it is believed she died a natural death; yet many still hold the opinion that she died for her faith.; Day, E. "Saint Petronilla." In *New Catholic Encyclopedia*. Detroit, MI: Gale, 2003. *Gale In Context: Biography* (accessed July 21, 2022). https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/K3407708744/BIC?u=nclivewingu&sid=summon&xid=00168e13.

[3] Tyler J. VanderWeele, "Activities for Flourishing: An Evidence Based Guide" in Journal of Positive Psychology and Wellbeing Vol, 4 No.1, (Boston, Harvard University Press), 79.

[4] These cognitive exercises are: (1) Gratitude, as to reflect upon, understanding, or appreciating the past; (2) Savoring, as to recognize and appreciate the good of one's present situation; and (3) Imagining, as to discover what one believes is or desires to be their best self.; VanderWeele, *Activities for Flourishing,* 81.

[5] VanderWeele, *Activities for Flourishing,* 81-82.

[6] These are categorized as: (1) Use of character strengths, to identify specific areas of virtue that are appropriate for unique individuals; (2) Acts of kindness, to increase a person's community engagement and feelings of social connectedness; (3) Volunteering, as a commitment to repeated acts of kindness; and (4) Engaging in relationships and institutional practices, such as marriage, religious service attendance, or job-crafting.; VanderWeele, *Activities for Flourishing,* 82-85.

For example, some studies have shown that among married individuals, maintaining a failing marriage (despite disagreements and strife) increases flourishing in the long-term by promoting happiness and life satisfaction as the couple resolves issues over time. Likewise, divorcing should reduce levels of flourishing by decreasing happiness and life satisfaction.[7] However, longitudinal studies have shown that, although flourishing does decrease as the result of the stress of divorce, this may only be temporary, and divorcees can regain life satisfaction through various methods as time goes on.[8]

It should also be noted that human flourishing is multifaceted and sometimes difficult to measure. For example, in studies that measured levels of human flourishing among attendees of religious services, participants who regularly attended religious services tended to measure higher in all aspects of human flourishing (happiness and life satisfaction, mental and physical health, meaning and purpose, character and virtue, and close social relationships).[9] This suggests that there is something unique about religious communities that helps promote human flourishing. However, researchers observe there may also be correlational associations between religious service attendance and flourishing.[10] Thus, human flourishing, although objectively measurable, is also dependent on factors such as lifestyle, personal belief, and willingness (or ability) to consistently engage in behaviors that promote well-being. It is this understanding and critique of human flourishing through which I will discuss the practice of sexual purity in early Christian literature.

In many current protestant evangelical circles, the concept of sexual purity is a popular topic. Sexual purity, or pre-marital abstinence from sex, is a spiritual discipline through which many modern evangelical Christian churches promote human flourishing. Although there have been no longitudinal studies focusing directly on the impact of sexual purity on well-being, there is an overlap between sexual purity and what is known about marriage and religious institutions in terms of flourishing. This is because religious institutions, especially protestant evangelical ones, often promote purity and marriage as a goal for attendees, emphasizing their spiritual, social, and physical benefits. Thus, spiritual disciplines related to sexual purity, using VanderWeele's explanation of flourishing, might be understood as an exercise through which Christians attain human flourishing. Further, existing studies related to both marriage and religious service attendance are likely impacted by teachings about sexual purity, sexuality, and

[7] Nadine F. Marks, James D. Lambert, "Marital Status Continuity and Change Among Young and Midlife Adults Longitudinal Effects on Psychological Well-being" in the *Journal of Family Issues*, 19, 652-686.

[8] Jonathan Gardner, and Andrew J. Oswald, "Do Divorcing Couples Become Happier By Breaking Up?" in *IZA Discussion Papers* No. 1788, (Germany, Institute for the Study of Labor), 19-20.; It should be noted that this source is a discussion paper, intended to explore and consolidate work that is being done in a specific field of study. As more data becomes available about this subject, discussion papers can be revised by the author. This discussion paper was last updated in September of 2005.

[9] Tyler J. VanderWeele, "Religious Communities and Human Flourishing" in *Current Directions in Psychological Science* Vol. 26(5), (Boston, Harvard Univeristy Press), 476.

[10] Correlational effects may include church teachings that promote the general disposition that one should value life, and/or lifestyle choices such as abstinence from sex, or not smoking.; VanderWeele, *Religious Communities and Human Flourishing,* 479.

sexual expression, as the behavior of these married couples has likely been impacted by the moral teachings of the church.

Church teachings related to sexual purity often encourage parishioners to abstain from sex as a means of maintaining one's relationship with God,[11] idolizing the virginal status of women and girls in preparation for marriage, while asserting violent and/or hypersexual standards of masculinity among men and boys.[12] This ideology is facilitated by purity culture and promoted by the Purity Movement. The Purity Movement is a modern evangelical Christian effort to advocate for abstinence from sex (prior to heterosexual marriage) as the spiritual basis for purity, having different standards for church members based upon gender orientation.[13] Sentiments of the modern evangelical Purity Movement can be traced back to the 1960s, when Sex Manuals (instructional books about marital sexual activity) were marketed predominantly to Christian women promoting sexual submission to their husbands.[14] The modern Purity Movement began later in the 1990s with organizations such as *True Love Waits* as teachings about sexual authority and submission became mainstream within Christian culture.[15] Purity culture can be defined as the subsequent lifestyles and practices that evangelical Christians promote and engage in because of these assertions. Overall, purity within modern evangelical Christianity can be characterized by an ideological emphasis of abstinence and virginity among Christians that is particularly polarizing in its standards of virginal feminine purity for women and girls and uncontrollable, strong, or violent standards of masculinity for men and boys.[16]

Today, purity is a means of promoting flourishing for churches with the goal of preventing parishioners from engaging in or enjoying sex that is deemed "wrong" by the ideology of the leaders of the Purity Movement. Church leaders discourage sexual experiences outside of marriage as they assert that sexual promiscuity is sinful and a source of spiritual harm for believers. Therefore, abstinence from sex functions as a promotion of human flourishing within purity culture by preventing believers from engaging in sexual practices that may jeopardize their spiritual well-being. The issue with this, however, is the ways in which the Purity Movement and purity culture function within the church. Rather than promoting sexual abstinence as a means of human flourishing by encouraging believers to autonomously value and care for their bodies, church officials often utilize teachings surrounding sex and sexuality to assert power and control over the bodies of believers, facilitating an understanding of sexuality that is transactional based on one's possession or lack of power. This phenomenon of Transactional Sexuality disproportionately objectifies women and girls, viewing their bodies as

[11] These teachings are typically asserted in protestant, evangelical churches.

[12] Olivia Stanley, *A Personal Encounter with Purity Culture: Evangelical Christian Schooling in Aotearoa/New Zealand* (Women's Studies Journal, vol. 34, no. 1, 2020), 117.; Ligia Crut, *I'm Taking Back My Body (the Female Body in Purity Culture)*, (Linguaculture, Vol.12, No.1, 2021), 124.

[13] Heather Hendershot, "Virgins for Jesus: The Gender Politics of Therapeutic Christian Media" in *Shaking the World for Jesus: Media and Conservative Evangelical Culture,* (University of Chicago Press, 2004), 87-113.

[14] Barbara Pease and Allan Pease, *Why Men Want Sex and Women Need Love: Solving the Mystery of Attraction,* (New York, HarperCollins, 2009), 48-49.

[15] Joe Carter, "The FAQs: What You Should Know About Purity Culture", accessed May 14, 2022, https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/faqs-know-purity-culture/

[16] Hendershot, 88.

sources of sexual desires, and deliverers of sexual gratification.[17] This creates an environment in which gender-segregated standards of sexual expression among parishioners can prevent flourishing by encouraging shame, blame, and guilt associated with one's body, sexual desires, and sexual orientation.

Although conversations regarding sexuality, sexual freedom, and sexual expression seem like a modern topic, conceptions of purity within Christian circles are not bound to modern thinking. Abstinence from sex, chastity, and other forms of sexual purity can be seen in the ancient world and are evidenced by ancient Christian writings such as the *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*.[18] Throughout an array of these texts, readers can see that conversations regarding sexual purity were occurring within circles of early Christian believers, and practices of abstinence and chastity were viewed as important spiritual disciplines for many believers (especially women).[19] When discussing the moral ideal of sexual purity in antiquity, it is important to note that differences in social class impacted a person's ability to adhere to these moral standards. It was likely that only elite, wealthy groups of Christians were able to make these choices, in comparison to lower class, poor, or enslaved persons, whose life experiences would have provided struggles in the pursuit of sexual purity such as lack of socioeconomic agency forcing a person into sex work, or lack of social and political agency leading to the inability to assert bodily autonomy. However, it is likely that this ideology was still prevalent in the broader Christian community during the period in which early Christian literature was being developed.

Using the framework of human flourishing, this paper serves to critique ancient conceptions and practices of sexual purity as a means of promoting spiritual well-being, finding

[17] Mike Cosper, "The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill: The Things We Do To Women", accessed September 1, 2021, https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/podcasts/rise-and-fall-of-mars-hill/mars-hill-mark-driscoll-podcast-things-we-do-women.html

[18] The *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles* were written during early Christianity, the earliest possible dates being in the late first century and the latest possible dates being in the late third or early fourth centuries. I follow the dating provided in the *Polebridge Early Christian Apocrypha* series, which dates the *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles* in this order: The *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, with the earliest portions dated between 68-98 CE, and the latest editions around 160-196 CE. The *Acts of Peter* dated as early as 160 or 170 CE (due to its influence on the Acts of Andrew). The *Acts of Andrew* dated no later than 200 CE (due to its influence on traditions in the early third century and the Acts of Thomas). The *Acts of John* dated no earlier than 190 CE, but likely revised soon after 200 CE. Finally, the *Acts of Thomas* written as early as the first half of the third century, but possibly revised by the Manicheans in the late third or early fourth centuries.; see also Jeremy W. Barrier, *The Acts of Paul and Thecla: A Critical Introduction and Commentary,* (Rottenburg, Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek, 2009), 23-24.; Robert F. Stoops Jr., *The Acts of Peter,* (Salem, Polebridge Press, 2012), 23.; Dennis R. MacDonald, *The Acts of Andrew,* (Salem, Polebridge Press, 2005), 9.; Richard I. Pervo, *The Acts of John,* (Salem, Polebridge Press, 2016), 16.; Harold W. Attridge, *The Acts of Thomas,* (Salem, Polebridge Press, 2010), 14.

[19] Some early Christians seemed to view celibacy as a goal, allowing sexual relations only within the bounds of marriage. As Peter Brown notes, the ideal was for a person to remain celibate even if they were married, as notions of morality were philosophically incongruent with the pursuit of pleasure. Sexual discipline, then, became a very important teaching of the early church as they provided the church with "a distinctive code of behavior", although complete celibacy seemed to be an exception in terms of attainable Christian lifestyle. Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity,* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2008), 153-154.

similarities between ancient and modern church practices. I show that early Christian narratives depict chastity as an avenue for salvation, facilitating violence and control over the bodies of women. However, my feminist analysis of these narratives attempts to exemplify the ways in which the bodies of women drive these narratives by controlling the wills of those around them, even if they have no agency, illuminating the ways in which their bodies find power as central aspects of the narrative, even when victimized by violence and subjugation.[20] This paper will focus on two ancient Christian narratives found in the *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles* focusing on conceptions of sexual purity: the story of Peter's disabled daughter (*Acts of Peter* 1-2) and the story of Drusiana and Kallimachos (*Acts of John* 63-86).

Purity in Early Christian Writings

Peter's Disabled Daughter in the Acts of Peter

The *Acts of Peter* is a fragmented text including three editions: the *Coptic Act of Peter*, the *Acts of Peter the Apostle*, and the *Martyrdom of the Holy Apostle Peter*. The earliest version, the *Coptic Act of Peter*, is a very short, two-chapter narrative describing the life of Peter's virgin daughter (1-2).[21] I will analyze this narrative to discuss the impact of her body's influence on other characters within the narrative and her lack of agency within the text. I argue that the virgin daughter's narrative offers a clear example of subjugation within sentiments surrounding sexual purity, and yet, her body still serves as the source of spiritual experience for other characters.

The narrative begins as Peter heals a crowd of sick people, one of whom inquires about his daughter, who is paralyzed. The crowd member recalls other healings Peter has done, but asks him, "in the case of your virgin daughter, who has grown to be beautiful and has faith in the name of God, why didn't you help her?" (1:1-4). The questioner goes on to describe that, by failing to heal her, Peter has neglected her. Peter laughs in response to this crowd member. He then heals her so the crowd can see he can do so, but only for a moment. Immediately, Peter undoes the action, explaining that if she were to be permanently healed, her beauty would jeopardize the souls of others around her by inciting lust (1:5-19), telling the crowd that when she was only ten years old, "many were scandalized by her" (1:20). Ptolemy, a rich man, watched her bathing with her mother and "couldn't wait" to have sex with her, sending for her multiple times (1:21-22). The narrative breaks, then continues when Peter and his wife find her on the door of Ptolemy's house, paralyzed on one side of her body.[22] After returning home, the

[20] Rhiannon Graybill notes in her essay *Fuzzy, Messy, Icky* that consent discourse among biblical scholarship should recognize narratives in which a victim's will and desire is unclear or unknown to the modern reader. The framework of consent as a binary "yes" and "no" is problematic because of the ambiguous nature of many of these narratives, and feminist readings and discussions should consider the limitations of consent for these characters.; Rhiannon Graybill, "Fuzzy, Messy, Icky: The Edges of Consent in Hebrew Bible Rape Narratives and Rape Culture" in *the Bible and Critical Theory vol. 15, no.2,* (Auckland, University of Auckland Press, 2019), 1-23.

[21] English quotations from the Acts of Peter are from Robert F. Stoops, trans., *The Acts of Peter,* Early Christian Apocrypha Series, Vol. 1 (Salem, Polebridge Press, 2012).

[22] There is a break in the narrative here where one leaf of the text is missing. It is unclear what occurs between the time in which Ptolemy calls for the girl to when Peter and his wife find her paralyzed.

couple praised the Lord, as he had "saved his servant from defilement, pollution, and destruction" (2:3-4) through paralysis.

When interpreting this narrative, I consider three factors: sexual purity, disability, and Peter's apostolic power. At first glance, it seems as though this narrative serves as a teaching moment for Peter, in which he is forewarning the crowd about the harm that can be done if they are sexually promiscuous. However, readers may question this harsh punishment inflicted upon the body of the daughter. After all, she made no efforts to instigate sexual temptation and plays no active role throughout the text; she is not even named by the writer, nor does she speak.[23] Rather, she is sentenced to paralysis because of the way her body is perceived by others. It is difficult to discuss the importance of sexuality and sexual purity within this passage when the body most prominently featured is not able to choose to have (or not have) sex, as the virgin daughter has neither committed a sexual sin, nor has she personally asserted a faith commitment to chastity (but been forced into one). So, although it is her body the text punishes for the sake of sexual purity, it is the choices of others this narrative speaks to as the writer (or Peter) uses her body "to think with" as he teaches the crowd an object lesson about the impacts of sexual behavior.[24]

What is most curious about the punishment Peter inflicts upon his daughter is that it is a physical disability. He paralyzes his daughter because it is "beneficial for you and for me" (1:15). According to the work of Meghan Henning, paralysis in antiquity evaded the social institution of marriage because of popular medical beliefs which asserted that paralysis (specifically of the bodies of women) was linked to infertility and other reproductive issues.[25] Henning states that ancient medical literature explains paralysis as being caused by the excessive cooling of blood, and because women's bodies were generally believed to be cooler than men's, improper blood flow caused by excessive cooling needed to be purged during the menstrual cycle. However, if a woman's menstrual cycle failed to achieve this, her body would become paralyzed due to a build-up of this blood.[26] It is likely ancient readers would have interpreted Peter's daughter's disability not only as a punishment, but as a reproductive restriction. This disability is "beneficial" for both Paul and for his virgin daughter because it prevents suitors from making sexual advances on her, wanted or unwanted. Viewed in this light, her disability is doubly powerful because not only is she protected from potential sexual violence (and all sex in general), but her body is no longer harming souls by instigating lust and sexual temptation among men, thus helping to maintain the spiritual well-being of surrounding community

[23] It should be noted that there is a later narrative which names her "Petronilla", *The Acts of Nereus and Achilleus*. Petronilla has more agency in this narrative, praying so that others can be healed and obtain salvation.; Richard Pervo, trans., "The Acts of Nereus and Achilleus" in *New Testament Apocrypha: More Noncanonical Scriptures Volume 2* edited by Tony Burke, (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2020), 257-258.
[24] Brown, 153-154.
[25] Meghan Henning, "Paralysis and Sexuality in Medical Literature and the Acts of Peter" in *Journal of Late Antiquity 8.2,* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), 319.
[26] Henning, *Paralysis and Sexuality in Medical Literature and the Acts of Peter*, 314-317.; Henning notes that it was also believed that the temperature of the uterus determined an infant's gender, the right side being warmer than the left, with boys being formed on the right Likewise, infants formed on the cooler left side of the uterus were to be born girls, or with deformities because of the lower temperature.

members struggling with lust.[27] Thus, because her body is clearly seen by community members in this narrative, it serves as the means through which Peter and the crowd hear his message about sexual purity. Her paralysis serves as "bodily "un-wholeness" which has the capacity to affect "spiritual wholeness" in others"[28] while the power of Peter to disable her functions to create fear among the crowd which promotes their adherence to chastity and subsequent subjugation to Peter's apostolic power.

Therefore, the disabling of Peter's virgin daughter, although a message about sexual purity, relays the underlying message: the assertion of Peter's power as an apostle. Henning describes this as an anti-healing and calls it "useful apostolic harm,"[29] as Peter forces his daughter's body into physical, sexual, and societal subjugation to legitimize his power. In becoming paralyzed, she is now viewed by potential suitors as, at least partially, infertile and is no longer a viable option for marriage because of her disability. She is also condemned to chastity, without having chosen this spiritual discipline herself, and serves simultaneously as a cautionary tale and as a model for a perfectly chaste lifestyle to the observing crowd.

Within the framework of flourishing, her body is the center of this narrative, even though the writer gives her no autonomy. Despite her subjugation, her body exemplifies power as she directly influences the actions, reactions, and spiritual lessons carried out by Peter and received by all other characters within the text. She inadvertently rejects the patriarchal forces surrounding her as Peter's expression of apostolic power, meant to bolster hierarchal norms, presents her with sufficient opportunity and willfulness to escape heteronormative sex that would further subjugate her body below a husband.[30] I argue that, although interpreters must recognize that she is the victim of violence at the hands of Peter's anti-healing power, she flourishes within her subjugation by finding power as her body is paralyzed into chastity, willing the narrative by forcing the other characters to move around the space in which she exists, controlling their communal sense of spiritual flourishing, and establishing her influence as a social spectacle that both displays and protests her father's power to inflict harm.

Yet, though her will and power allow her to flourish by controlling the spiritual edification of those around her, the forcible disabling of Peter's daughter's body as an expression of apostolic power cannot be validated.[31] I note this because her power within the narrative forms directly from the physically and sexually violent actions of those in power over her, and although she is able to reject heteronormativity and uproot the lives and perspectives

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[27] Meghan Henning, "Chreia Elaboration and the Unhealing of Peter's Daughter: Rhetorical Analysis as a Clue to Understanding the Development of a Petrine Tradition" in *Journal of Early Christian Studies 24:2,* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), 158.

[28] Henning, *Chreia Elaboration and the Unhealing of Peter's Daughter: Rhetorical Analysis as a Clue to Understanding the Development of a Petrine Tradition*, 162.

[29] Henning, *Chreia Elaboration and the Unhealing of Peter's Daughter: Rhetorical Analysis as a Clue to Understanding the Development of a Petrine Tradition*, 167.

[30] In an article titled, *Euclia's Story: Coordinated Sexual Assault, Violence, and Willfulness in the Acts of Andrew,* Christy Cobb uses Sara Ahmed's theory of willful subjects to reveal how the will of Euclia, an enslaved victim of sexual violence, causes tension within the narrative, serving as a subtle resistance to power.; Christy Cobb, "Euclia's Story: Coordinated Sexual Assault, Violence, and Willfulness in the Acts of Andrew" in *Sex, Violence, and Early Christian Texts,* (Lexington Books, 2022), 37-49.

[31] Cobb, 48.

of everyone else within the text, her story does not end with redemption. Instead, her body perpetually suffers for the sake of others, and her power functions as an object of outward moral impact, not personal empowerment or autonomy. So, the sexual purity of Peter's disabled daughter within the narrative does, in terms of her willfulness and control over the narrative, allow her to flourish as a means of spiritual edification for others. However, this narrative does not exemplify her flourishing in ways that are beneficial to her own bodily autonomy, sexual freedom, and personal well-being.

Drusiana and Kallimachos in the Acts of John

The *Acts of John* is a fragmented collection of twelve episodic narratives describing the ministry, teachings, and martyrdom of John. Throughout the text, the writer utilizes the bodies of women, and imagery thereof, to emphasize the importance of chastity and assert the detriment of sexual sin. Episode eleven, *Drusiana and Kallimachos: A Life and Death Adventure* (63-86),[32] is centered around the sexual purity of Drusiana's body and the influence her body has on others. I argue that, in the *Acts of John*, the bodies of women are a powerful force within narratives focusing on chastity and sexual abstinence, and Drusiana's body functions both as a source of temptation and salvation as she utilizes violence to obtain control over her aggressors.

Drusiana's narrative begins by describing how a "certain individual" (Kallimachos) lusts after her (63:2). As he expresses his lust, many people warn him that there is no way he will be able to have sex with her, as she has devoted herself to chastity (63:3-6). Despite this, he grows obsessed with Drusiana, sending her a message describing his lust (64:1). Knowing her body has been a "source of temptation" (64:4) for Kallimachos, she feels responsible for damaging his soul (64:5-6). In fact, Drusiana is so unhappy and full of grief over this, she dies (64:8).

After her death, Drusiana's body is prepared, entombed, and a funeral takes place. However, while John addresses the believers, Kallimachos bribes Andronikos's[33] chief servant, Fortunatus, to open her tomb, planning to rape her posthumously (70:1-2). He says to her dead body, "What good did it do you, poor Drusiana? Couldn't you have done this while living? Had you done it wittingly, it just might not have been all that unpleasant" (70:6), mocking her pursuit of chastity. As he is about to tear the final cloth away from her body, a snake appears in the tomb, striking the servant and wrapping itself around Kallimachos, causing him to collapse (71).

When John and Andronikos return to the tomb two days later, they discover the key to the tomb is missing, enter, and find the bodies of Kallimachos and the chief servant on the floor of the tomb. John is perplexed, but Andronikos recalls the lust Kallimachos had for Drusiana (73:6-74:4). John then raises Kallimachos from the dead so he might confess and attain salvation (75). When he arises, he tells John that he was not able to rape Drusiana because both the snake and an attractive figure appeared and prevented him from doing so (76:1-8). He then

[32] English quotations from the Acts of John are from Richard I. Pervo, trans., *The Acts of John*, Early Christian Apocrypha Series, Vol. 6 (Salem, Polebridge Press, 2016).
[33] Andronikos is Drusiana's husband.

proclaims he is convinced of the validity of John's God and would like to become a believer (76:9-78).

After this, the believers beg for Drusiana to be raised from the dead (79:1-4). In response, John calls upon the Lord saying, "Raise up Drusiana, so that Kallimachos may become stronger in you, who provide salvation and resurrection" (79:8). Drusiana rises from the dead, learns what happened during her entombment, and rejoices (80). She then asks John if Fortunatus can rise as well. Kallimachos first protests, but John rebukes him, and Drusiana herself resurrects the slave with a prayer. However, Fortunatus rejects salvation, flees the tomb and claims he would have rather remained dead (81-83). John offers more prayers for the believers present and predicts that Fortunatus will die morbidly from the snake's bite, ending Drusiana's narrative as the believers partake in the eucharist (84-86).

When interpreting this narrative, I first elevate the importance of Drusiana's choice. For Drusiana, David Konstan argues the choice to refuse all sexual expression by remaining chaste "has the consequence of collapsing the hierarchal structure of gender roles into the undifferentiated communion of brethren."[34] This is because she, by refusing to have sex with her husband, threatens the heteronormative structure of marriage and family in the ancient world.[35] Drusiana's narrative juxtaposes the narrative of Peter's disabled daughter in that her chastity here is an autonomous choice which seemingly liberates her from the patriarchy, not a punishment by which she is meant to succumb to power. However, interpretation of this narrative must recognize that her choice to remain chaste has both positive and negative consequences as she both rejects the power and authority of men while still suffering at the hands of their violence. It must also be recognized that this choice was not available for all women in antiquity; Enslaved women, for example, would not have had autonomy to refuse sexual advances from enslavers. Thus, Drusiana's narrative demonstrates the complex structure of and struggle for power women experienced in the early Christian world in attempts to assert their own sexual freedom.

In a discussion about the literary genre of the Apocryphal Acts, Tamás Adamik notes similar motifs between the Ancient Greek Novels and the Aprocyphal Acts. Adamik states that one of these motifs is, "married life is sinful,"[36] found in the *Life of Malchus*. In this narrative, Malchus, who is enslaved, is given a captured woman to be his wife by his enslaver and is unable to refuse. To preserve his virginity, he brings her into a cave and commits suicide. In response, the woman dedicates her life to chastity, even refusing to have sex with her husband once she is freed from captivity.[37] This is echoed by Drusiana who, once she becomes a Christian, "refused even her husband's lawful embraces"[38] and wills herself to death once she becomes an object of temptation for Kallimachos. Paola Francesca Moretti notes this similarity

[34] David Konstan, "Acts of Love: A Narrative Pattern in the Apocryphal Acts" in *Journal of Early Christian Studies 6:1,* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 36.
[35] Konstan, 35-36.
[36] Tamás Adamik, "The Influence of the Apocryphal Acts on Jerome's Lives of Saints" in *the Apocryphal Acts of John*, (Kampen, Kok Pharos Publishing, 1995), 171-182.
[37] Adamik, 177.
[38] Adamik, 179.

as well using an example from *A Milesian Tale*, explaining that the virtue of chastity chosen by women for the sake of their spirituality "pushes them to long for death"[39] yet the theme of resurrection throughout the *Acts of John* teaches readers that "a physical life can be a spiritual death."[40] Utilizing this comparative lens, modern readers can see how ancient readers might have understood Drusiana's resurrection as a final triumph over death symbolizing both a physical and spiritual resistance to sexual desire and the perils of physical life as her dedication to chastity becomes the means through which she, herself, gains the spiritual and mystical ability to resurrect others. Her transition between life and death also serves as the means through which her attempted abuser, Kallimachos, is resurrected and saved.

Early Christian practices of celibacy, according to David Hunter, can be considered a form of social queerness, as the avoidance and devaluing of marriage and procreation created by the practice "subverted the traditional patriarchal household" which was "the bedrock of civic and political life"[41] as it rejected societal norms for the sake of religious practice, and even broke down gender roles as it rejected gendered notions of power that would normally be asserted between marriage partners. As Hunter suggests, celibacy came to be viewed as the best option for elite Christians, and other options which included sexual activity (such as marriage and procreation) were options "for those without the power (or gift) of celibacy"[42] such as lower class or enslaved Christians. Using this framework, Drusiana can be viewed within her narrative as the ideal or model Christian. Her choice to be celibate expresses her civic and political power as an elite woman as she equalizes her power with Andronikos by rejecting sexually penetrative assertions of domination over her body in the conjugal bed. Essentially, she attains a masculine role in the narrative as her spirituality is elevated and established by her assertion of bodily autonomy through her decision to remain chaste. This power is solidified during her entombment by the angelic figure's posthumous protection of her wishes to maintain a pure body as she navigates sexual violence and patriarchal power.

Drusiana's narrative, although expressive of her power through celibacy, must also be critiqued. A responsible interpretation of her narrative recognizes her victimhood as Kallimachos attempts to rape her twice, and out of grief and in defense of her body's chastity, she "wills her own death."[43] Drusiana even asserts responsibility for the violence attempted against her by naming herself a "source of temptation" (64:4) within the narrative, utilizing the death of her body to protect herself and the spiritualities of those surrounding her. Although her pursuit of chastity can be spiritually, and perhaps socially, commended as it rejects patriarchal norms, the experience her body goes through is brutal. Drusiana, as she personally engages with her faith by choosing chastity, is made responsible for the sexually violent urges of those around her to the point of death. Further, when she resurrects, she is portrayed as overjoyed to heal an accomplice in her attempted rape and given no space within the narrative

[39] Paola Francesca Moretti, *The Two Ephesian Matrons,* (Milano, Università degli Studi, 2008), 4.
[40] Moretti, 6.
[41] David Hunter, "Celibacy Was Queer" in *Queer Christianities: Lived Religion in Transgressive Forms,* (New York, New York University Press, 2014), 13-14.
[42] Hunter, 21.
[43] Konstan, 25.

to mourn or reject the violence attempted against her body (not to mention the utter disrespect of her spiritual vows to chastity). Instead, the narrative points readers towards the spiritual edification of her aggressor as a benefit of her suffering. It is through this violence that her body struggles for power. As she desperately attempts to maintain her own autonomy, her body bears the burden of sexual shame for others.

Like the narrative of Peter's daughter, it seems as though Drusiana's experience turns readers' focus toward the apostolic power of John to heal, convert, and save souls more than it does on the liberation of Drusiana as a victim of sexual violence. Konstan notes that, "the Acts of John offers a tale that emphasizes the power of the apostle to cure passion and resurrect the dead"[44] as the primary interest of the text is not to address violence, but to formulate a rhetoric in which the authority of the apostle is unquestioned. Drusiana's body is thus the mode through which the writer achieves this, as she suffers and survives violent scenarios under the authority, maintenance, and protection of the apostle.

Within the framework of flourishing, Drusiana's bodily struggle for power further exemplifies how the bodies of women are the driving forces through which these early Christian narratives speak to readers. Like Peter's daughter, her affliction serves to avoid the harming of souls for those who sexually desire her. However, Drusiana's narrative offers a potentially redeeming aspect of power: Her death, although making her the victim of attempted violence once more, serves as the only reason for which her aggressor obtains salvation. Konstan notes that by dying and resurrecting, her sacrifice can be conflated with the Passion narrative of Jesus as she suffers innocently for the salvation of those who are spiritually immature and undeserving.[45] She apostrophizes Jesus as she dies then resurrects in response to the sins of others while she herself maintains a life dedicated to spiritual discipline. In this way, her body facilitates and controls the salvation of those surrounding her, acting as a sacrificial lamb in protest of the violence attempted against her, then forcing her aggressors into spiritual submission to her God. Drusiana's narrative is, as Rhiannon Graybill might describe, a "messy"[46] example of bodily autonomy and sexual expression within discussions of chastity in early Christian literature, as the boundaries of consent and control are not defined by the author, and thus difficult for modern readers to discern. However, I argue that her autonomous choice to practice sexual purity before, during, and after death elevates her power throughout the narrative, bolstering modern claims of liberation for her narrative.

As these interpretations show, the bodies of both Peter's disabled daughter in the *Acts of Peter* and Drusiana in the *Acts of John* function as the means through which the apostles in their narratives can teach and obtain power. In different ways, the bodies of both women are made "un-whole"[47] for the sake of the spiritual edification and wellbeing of those surrounding them, as Peter's daughter suffers a permanent paralyzing disability that prevents male suitors from experiencing sexual temptation, and Drusiana wills herself to death out of grief for the

[44] Konstan, 26.
[45] Konstan, 24.
[46] Rhiannon Graybill uses the words "fuzzy", "messy", and "icky" to describe blurred scenes of sexual encounters in the Bible.; Graybill, *Fuzzy, Messy, Icky* (2019).
[47] Henning, *Chreia Elaboration and the Unhealing of Peter's Daughter: Rhetorical Analysis as a Clue to Understanding the Development of a Petrine Tradition*, 162.

sexual sins of Kallimachos. In these ways, they become responsible for the desires of others (men) who are more socially powerful than them. Their bodies serve as martyrs within these narratives as their sacrifices facilitate the teaching and salvation of others through physical pain and suffering, yet this suffering is undeserved and utilized for the spiritual edification and apostolic gain of those surrounding them rather than themselves.

The women's narratives differ when considering autonomy. Peter's daughter is forced into chastity as a young girl as Peter exploits the marginalizing and undesirable status of disabled persons in antiquity to prevent her from ever experiencing sexuality. Her attractiveness (noted specifically by a crowd member; 1:4) is squandered by the writer as she is driven into submission, becoming a spectacle for onlookers whom Peter intends to teach, and demoted by potential suitors as unable to deliver sexual pleasure or procreative responsibility in the conjugal bed. She serves as an example of sexual purity in early Christian literature in which the body asserting chastity does so because of abuse, and not out of personal choice or agency. Although her body finds power as she drives the space through which she exists within the narrative, this story exemplifies how the bodies of abused women ultimately do not flourish at the hands of apostolic power which forces her into submission.

Drusiana's narrative, on the other hand, expresses autonomy in a more complex way than Peter's daughter. As an elite and married woman, she is able to engage in the autonomous choice to practice sexual purity, and although this disrupts and angers some of the men surrounding her, this choice provides her with a unique spiritual authority that is not present in the Petrine narrative. Although she suffers because of her choice to remain chaste, she willfully does so throughout the narrative, and in doing so controls the actions and reactions of those around her. This results in the spiritual edification and salvation of her abuser, Kallimachos, for which she is overjoyed. In fact, had Drusiana never expressed influence and power throughout the narrative by asserting chastity over the sexual advances of others, their salvation would not have been possible. At once, it is important to recognize, acknowledge, and denounce the attempted sexual violence within the text, and her story offers an example in which a woman can spiritually flourish (and promote the flourishing of others) because of her choice to practice sexual purity. Even still, Drusiana's autonomy is complicated as, once she discovers that she will lose her purity at the hands of Kallimachos, she chooses death. One may view her death as autonomous, as she chooses for herself to make a sacrifice to protect her sexual purity, yet interpreters must recognize that the redeeming qualities of this text should not justify death by suicide as a means of practicing sexual purity. One may also understand that the spiritual pressure placed upon her body by Kallimachos's sexual advances compromises her ability to choose. Therefore, although Drusiana expresses more agency within her narrative than Peter's disabled daughter, she is still a victim of attempted sexual violence.

Conclusion

The ways in which the bodies of Peter's daughter and Drusiana function throughout these narratives is comparable to modern expressions of purity culture when considering Transactional Sexuality. Transactional Sexuality refers to the notion that, in evangelical Christianity, women are the deliverers of sex while men are the desirers of sex. This means that when sex occurs between married individuals (because purity culture asserts heterosexual

marriage as a prerequisite for all sex), it is not necessarily consensual, but rather an opportunity for husbands to seek out satisfaction for their sexual desires and fantasies for which their wives are responsible for relieving. Within this transaction, women are often viewed as sources of temptation, or simply as agents of sexual gratification, and not as active participants in sexual encounters. In this way, sex is viewed in evangelical purity culture as transactional, because women deliver satisfaction for the desires of men.[48] In these apocryphal narratives, the concept of Transactional Sexuality is present and can be seen when the bodies of Peter's disabled daughter and Drusiana are viewed as responsible for the sexual temptations and uncontrollable desires of the men who desire to have sex with them. However, this framework applies to the institution of chastity as well, as the bodies of these women serve as a free market for the spiritual edification of others at the hands of apostolic power. Instead of serving as the deliverers of sex, they become the deliverers of apostolic teachings, messages, and power. Within this transaction, the bodies of women (as the product necessary for spiritual edification) are the only source through which salvation can be attained, even if they are subjugated into this position, such as when Peter un-heals his daughter. Thus, these women transactionally provide the basis for which apostolic power can be asserted, driving the narrative through their bodily displays of sexual purity.

Therefore, these narratives from the Acts of Peter and the Acts of John exemplify how concepts from modern evangelical purity culture were present in early Christian culture and literature, at least among elite Christian communities. The stories of Peter's disabled daughter and Drusiana show readers that when discussing consent and sexual autonomy in these ancient narratives, there is often ambiguity given the patriarchal nature of these texts.[49] Although we as readers are illuminated about the power and influence of women in antiquity, it is important to note that issues like social class, gender, and in the case of Peter's ten-year-old daughter, age, cloud the ability of women and girls to assert bodily autonomy in these ancient texts. Modern readers must understand that "our ways of reading are shaped by our own cultural and historical contexts, and that any interpretation of ancient texts must always bear in mind the contextual nature of all interpretations."[50]

This makes reading and interpreting stories like that of Peter's disabled daughter and Drusiana messy, especially when attempting to empower them through modern interpretive lenses. Thus, I conclude that these women should be viewed by modern interpreters as "Martyrs of Chastity;" This is because the bodies of these women suffer within their assertions of chastity for the sake of apostolic power, ministerial teaching, and soteriological progression, sometimes irredeemably. The bodies of women, because of the androcentric society in which they live, protest patriarchal power simply by existing, simultaneously bearing the burden of and offering salvation for the sexual desires of men. Due to the messiness of these women's narratives, wherein power stems from in-agency, aggression, and sexual violence, the framework of flourishing falls short. While the writers of the Apocryphal Acts were attempting

[48] Mike Cosper, "The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill: The Things We Do To Women"
[49] Graybill, 16.
[50] Caroline Vander Stichele and Todd Penner, "Gender and the Modern Interpreter" in *Contextualizing Gender in Early Christian Discourse: Thinking Beyond Thecla,* (London, Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2009), 138.

to provide a literary basis for the power of the Apostles among early Christian audiences, their use of the bodies of women to do so creates a problematic example. It is only elite women who can flourish through the assertion of chastity in these narratives, and further, only women who endure aggressive sexual advances and sexual violence. So, as my interpretation of these narratives has revealed, there is power in the bodies of women throughout early Christian narratives regarding expressions of sexual chastity, and this power may be revealed through modern interpretive lenses. However, the patriarchal forces that subjugated them in ancient culture must be recognized and critiqued by modern readers. Attempts to redeem these texts must acknowledge the violence and in-agency that these Martyrs of Chastity suffered for these narratives to exist.

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