

Thinking with and about “Same-Sex Desire”:
Producing and Policing Female Sexuality in
the *Acts of Xanthippe and Polyxena*

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And while we were giving the letters of the brethren to Paul, one ran and told Xanthippe of the arrival of Polyxena. And she made haste and came to us, and seeing Polyxena, was overcome by an unspeakable joy and fell to the ground; but Polyxena embracing her and caressing her for a long time brought her back to life. Then Xanthippe said to her, I, my true sister, Polyxena, went forth not at all for forty days, praying to the loving God that your virginity might not be stolen. And Paul, the preacher of God, said to me, “Her virginity will not be taken away and she will come quickly.” And Probus said to me, “It was assigned to her by God to be thus afflicted. Do you see how by many devices God saves many?” But now, my beloved sister, having unexpectedly seen your face, just now I shall willingly die.

—*Acts of Xanthippe and Polyxena*, 41¹

WHAT CAN THE modern reader learn about the past from examining the fourth-century Christian *Acts of Xanthippe and Polyxena* (*AXP*)? Bernadette Brooten’s work presents one possible clue. Brooten has written

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¹The Greek text can be found in M. R. James, *Apocrypha anecdota I*, Texts and Studies, II, 3 (Cambridge, 1893), 43–85. The English translation upon which I primarily rely is *The Acts of Xanthippe and Polyxena*, trans. W. A. Craigie, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 10, ed. Allan Menzies (Grand Rapids, 1980), 203–17.

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that history provides evidence of “women who found their primary identification in other women and who may or may not have expressed that [identification] sexually.”² The above excerpt from the concluding chapter of the *Acts of Xanthippe and Polyxena* invites its reader to share in the reunion of Polyxena, a beautiful young virgin, and her “true sister,” Xanthippe. Despite the implied presence of the apostle Paul and of Xanthippe’s husband, Probus, Polyxena embraces the collapsed Xanthippe, “caressing her and bringing her back to life.” In addition, the *AXP* constructs these two female heroines using the same techniques with which the Greek novel fashioned its own pairs of committed male and female lovers. Judith Perkins summarizes the typical Greek romance as “the story of two souls that were joined together or wished to be joined together, that underwent adventures to test their commitment and devotion to each other, and by proving their commitment were reunited or united forever in an ongoing social unity.”³ With these factors in mind, the historian of ancient sexuality immediately ponders whether Xanthippe and Polyxena might fall within Brooten’s historical trajectory mentioned above.

Still, the message of the *AXP* is not a simple celebration of the relationship between these two women. This study will show that the *AXP*, while it constructs female same-sex desire and commitment, simultaneously condemns that desire. This rhetorical move within the *AXP* would seem to support Brooten’s arguments, given elsewhere, that female same-sex relationships were disdained, marginalized, and literally damned in Christian writings.⁴

Anyone writing about same-sex representations in late antiquity, however, realizes that discourse about sexuality is much more than discourse about sexual acts. David M. Halperin notes that Michel Foucault “treat[ed] sexuality as the instrument and effect of a series of discursive and political strategies, [and] translate[d] sex from the realm of individual fantasy to the domain of social power and knowledge.”⁵ A close methodological attention to such discursive strategies informs my analysis of the same-sex

²Bernadette J. Brooten, “Paul’s Views on the Nature of Women and Female Homoeroticism,” in *Immaculate and Powerful: The Female in Sacred Image and Social Reality*, ed. Clarissa W. Atkinson, Constance Buchanan, and Margaret R. Miles (Boston, 1985), 79.

³Judith Perkins, *The Suffering Self: Pain and Narrative Representation in the Early Christian Era* (London, 1995), 63.

⁴Bernadette J. Brooten, *Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* (Chicago, 1996). In her introduction, Brooten discusses the merits of individual terms, that is, lesbian, homoerotic, homosexual, to discuss female same-sexual acts and chooses “homoerotic” for her discussion. I share Brooten’s discomfort with applying modern labels to ancient women, and I will attempt consistently to use “same-sex desire” or “woman-identified woman” to refer to the *AXP* construct of the relationship between Xanthippe and Polyxena.

⁵David M. Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (Oxford, 1995), 121.

relationship in the *AXP*. While I argue that the text constructs women who identify with and desire other women, I take Foucault's injunction seriously and pause to ask how this sexual construction might serve other discursive agendas as well. In short, I assert that the *AXP* adds a previously unexplored dimension to understanding late antique female sexuality because it stands as another example of not only how Christians thought about female same-sex desire but, indeed, how Christians may have used this desire "to think with."

My discussion consists of four parts. First, I examine how the *AXP* produces its female-desiring subjects, relying primarily on David Konstan's analysis of the Greek novel.⁶ Konstan identifies an essential component of the novel as a loyal and reciprocal bond deliberately created between an elite male and female who experience separation and reunion. This essay examines the similarities between the *AXP* and the Greek novels studied by Konstan, particularly Chariton's *Chaereas and Callirhoe*.⁷ In its production of the relationship between Xanthippe and Polyxena, the *AXP* replicates the reciprocal bond that characterized Greek lovers. Second, I examine the conflicts about gender, shaped by gender, within the text. That is, the *AXP* contests the ideal of the female same-sex bond through the views embodied in the male characters.⁸ Third, I analyze the *AXP* within a Foucaultian framework that asks what sociopolitical agendas may have contributed to the formation and policing of such female same-sex commitment. Finally, although we cannot know how the *AXP* affected or informed its women readers or, more precisely, how women affected or informed the creation of the *AXP*, I briefly examine how the female commitment envisioned in the *AXP* adds to our current understanding of the late antique world of female same-sex relationships.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF GREEK LOVERS INTO CHRISTIAN SISTERS

The *AXP* is most easily divided into two halves. The first half narrates the story of Xanthippe and her conjugal separation from her husband, Probus, after the apostle Paul rides into town with his Christian message. The second half recounts the tale of the beautiful young Polyxena, who is ab-

⁶David Konstan, *Sexual Symmetry: Love in the Ancient Novel and Other Genres* (Princeton, 1993).

⁷All quotations from Chariton's work will be taken from the English translation in B. P. Reardon, ed., *Collected Ancient Greek Novels* (Berkeley, 1989), 21–124. Reardon dates *Chaereas and Callirhoe* to the middle of the first century C.E. in Asia Minor (17). While this study makes most of its comparisons between this novel and the *AXP*, a direct link or dependence is not being argued. For the Greek text of Chariton, see G. Molinié, *Le Roman Chairéas et Callirhoé* (Paris, 1979).

⁸In the assertion that there is a "male perspective" and "female perspective" evidenced by the *AXP*, I do not mean to imply that there are natural or essential male or female perspectives but, rather, that the text constructs these perspectives.

ducted from Xanthippe's bedroom in the middle of the night, falls into many misfortunes, finds Christian baptism, and finally returns safely home.⁹

The *AXP*, from the inception of the Polyxena narrative, describes an intimate bond between the two women. To be sure, Xanthippe is married. However, the first half of the *AXP*, like any good ascetic text and specifically like its forerunners, the *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, ruptures the erotic attachment and sexual relationship between husband and wife. For example, upon thinking she sees her husband waiting for some conjugal relaxation, Xanthippe protests, "Many a time have I said to him that I no longer care for toys, and he despises me as being a woman" (*AXP* 21). Her identity as "wife" has been rendered obsolete. Yet the second half of the tale immediately identifies her bond with Polyxena, whom she loves because she was "younger [than Xanthippe] and beautiful." The Greek term deployed here in reference to Polyxena's beauty is *opôpia*, which means "ripe for the picking."¹⁰ This term was commonly used in reference to beautiful and sexually vulnerable girls, and it is invoked here to explain precisely why Xanthippe loves Polyxena.

Like the lovers in the Greek novel, the two protagonists enjoy some initial time together.¹¹ Xanthippe reads the biblical prophets to Polyxena while the two are alone in the former's bedroom. Polyxena later awakens

⁹The *AXP* represents a transition in Christian ascetic self-representation. The first half of the tale, which narrates Xanthippe's conjugal separation from her husband upon the advice of the apostle Paul, imitates the earlier second- and third-century *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*. These tales, in an almost formulaic fashion, narrate the decision of young elite women to adopt lives of Christian celibacy. The second half of the *AXP*, the tale of Polyxena, seems to anticipate the medieval hagiographies. For more on the genre of the *Apocryphal Acts*, see Virginia Burrus, *Chastity as Autonomy: Women in the Stories of the Apocryphal Acts* (Lewiston, NY, 1987); Stevan L. Davies, *The Revolt of the Widows: The Social World of the Apocryphal Acts* (Carbondale, IL, 1980); Ross Shepard Kraemer, "The Conversion of Women to Ascetic Forms of Christianity," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 6 (1980): 298–307; and Dennis R. MacDonald, *The Legend and the Apostle: The Battle for Paul in Story and Canon* (Philadelphia, 1983). For more on the genre of the medieval hagiographies, see Alison Goddard Elliott, *Roads to Paradise: Reading the Lives of Early Saints* (Hanover, NH, 1987). For more on the transition in Christian self-representation, see Averil Cameron, "Stories People Want," in *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire: The Development of Christian Discourse* (Berkeley, 1991); and Kate Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, 1996).

¹⁰See Liddell and Scott, *Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon*, 7th ed. (Oxford, 1992).

¹¹I do not mean to imply that all Greek novels are identical. To be sure, Konstan's study, *Sexual Symmetry*, emphasizes that while there is a common structure, some of the Greek novels deviate from it. For example, he claims that Chariton's novel highlights the voice of the female protagonist in a way that no other novel does. Still, for the purposes of this study, I will appropriate the language of most scholars of the Greek novel, including Konstan, who refer collectively to the five ancient Greek novels with the term "novel." See recent discussion on this topic in Konstan, as well as James Tatum, ed., *The Search for the Ancient Novel* (Baltimore, 1994), and Gareth Schmeling, ed., *The Novel in the Ancient World* (Leiden, 1996), among others.

from a horrible dream in which she has been swallowed by a dragon but rescued by a beautiful male youth. Xanthippe interprets this dream for Polyxena by informing her that it is a sign from God that she should receive holy baptism because God has claimed her as his own.

However, in the tradition of the novel, Xanthippe and Polyxena are fated to endure trial and separation. The novel's couple, according to Konstan, "endures shipwrecks and separations, and falls captive to brigands, pirates, princesses, and satraps, who are susceptible to the beauty of the hero and heroine and are in a position to exploit their power in the service of their passion. Both partners bear up under these trials with a certain fortitude, though they may yield to the thoughts of suicide."¹²

In the *AXP* Xanthippe, ecstatic about her sister's newly discovered calling, runs to tell Paul; however, in so doing, she leaves Polyxena vulnerable to a jilted suitor who magically breaks into the home and abducts the young virgin. Polyxena calls out to Xanthippe for help but ultimately must leave with the ex-suitor. This particular theme of separation through abduction echoes the Greek novel, in which, for example, grave robbers abduct the young virgin Callirhoe.¹³

The novel's separated lovers typically experience extreme grief; often, they share a desire to die. Konstan identifies this as a literary device that effectively conflates the lovers' identities because such a shared or identical response demonstrates the couple's mutual love and loyalty.¹⁴ Reminiscent of the separated lovers, a bereaved Xanthippe starves herself and endures many other hardships during Polyxena's abduction. Her behavior invokes that of Chariton's Chaereas, who, after his separation from Callirhoe, "begins to waste away until he is at the point of death."¹⁵ Polyxena, too, expresses her despondency and despair as she cries, "Alas, my sister Xanthippe . . . for this evening you did read, 'I looked to my right hand and beheld, but there was no one that knew me; flight perished from me and there is no one that seeks out my soul'" (*AXP* 23). Later, she wishes for death as she laments, "Woe is me, left desolate, that not even Hades, that no one escapes, has devoured me" (*AXP* 26). In the *AXP* both women express extreme sorrow over their separation, sorrow that sometimes is expressed as a desire for death.

Further similarities exist between the behavior of Xanthippe and Polyxena as a couple and the novel's male-female couple. For example, Chaereas throws himself from a ship in a frustrated moment during his search for Callirhoe but is conveniently pulled back into the ship by sailors.¹⁶ Likewise, when Polyxena feels threatened by yet another abduction

¹²Konstan, 34.

¹³Chariton 1.8.

¹⁴Konstan, 24.

¹⁵Chariton 1.1.8–10.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 3.5.6.

during her return home, she too hurls herself overboard and is similarly retrieved by sailors. In its invocation of lovers' frustration and commitment, the *AXP* borrowed from the depiction of trials and tribulations present in earlier novels and thus replicates the commitment the audience would have sensed in the novel's hero and heroine.

The *AXP*'s appropriation of the novel's motifs extends beyond its reproduction of a distraught and separated couple. Konstan discusses the use of "subordinate or peripheral characters who fall in love with one or the other of the protagonists" in the novel.¹⁷ These characters, who are generally in powerful positions, are controlled by their lust for either the hero or heroine. Polyxena, too, encounters these threats; for example, she finds the right to access to her body traded between men, both pagan and Christian, a total of seven times. Three of these men are pagans who want to rape her, and the remaining four are men who desire to protect and preserve her virginity. Consistently, however, Polyxena expresses anxiety while under the care of each man, regardless of his religious identity.

Another similarity between the novel and the *AXP* is in the characterization of the protagonists' class and social status. Konstan believes that the Greek novel is innovative precisely because it provides a sense of "equality" or "reciprocity" between its protagonists. In contrast to earlier Greek genres and to the Roman novel, where the presentation of the couple depends upon a social hierarchy, the Greek novels level out such disparities. Instead, Konstan finds that the novels' authors sought to emphasize the "loyalty and constancy" that propelled the couple through its adventures.¹⁸ This reasoning would explain why the male characters are more passive, whereas the female characters often defy their expected passive "natures" and act on their own behalf.¹⁹ In the *AXP* Xanthippe and Polyxena are not portrayed as active partner versus passive partner but rather are mutually affective and effective in their desire to reunite.

Konstan argues that the novel's hero is "best understood as a function" of the efforts to equalize the disparities between active male and passive female. In other words, the male, traditionally characterized as the aggressive problem solver in other ancient literary genres, becomes more passive. In so doing he enables the female to behave proactively and thus to demonstrate her equality with the hero. In this paradigm Xanthippe best conforms to the male character of the Greek novel. Polyxena roams the countryside, while Xanthippe remains at home. Of course, just as Chaereas

¹⁷Konstan, 36.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 46.

¹⁹For an excellent study of the pervasive understanding of women's bodies as "passive," see Lesley-Dean Jones, *Women's Bodies in Classical Greek Science* (Oxford, 1996). See also Brooten's work, which argues forcefully throughout the entire study that it is exactly this "natural" state of women as passive that makes "active" homoerotic women so troublesome to most areas of the ancient world, including Christianity (*Love Between Women*).

attempts to find Callirhoe by ship, Xanthippe does what she can while living under society's gendered constraints.²⁰ In seclusion at home Xanthippe performs a severe fast and constant vigil because she believes that these efforts might best protect Polyxena's virginity.

In contrast to the novel's relatively passive hero, the heroine remarkably exhibits proactive responses. In Chariton's novel Callirhoe marries the foreign king Dionysius to save herself from slavery.²¹ Polyxena, too, attempts to control her own plight during her abductions. For example, while under the "protection" of the apostle Phillip's disciple, Polyxena learns that her abductor has mustered an army in an effort to recapture her. Instead of remaining under the protection of the disciple and his own army, Polyxena independently sneaks into the mountains during the night.

Konstan finds that while the novel's heroine exhibits such proactive responses, her efforts do very little actually to reunite her with her hero. Instead, the resolute action is "displaced onto a marginal character" whose motives have nothing to do with erotic desire. In the *AXP* it is the apostle Paul's friend, Onesimus, who returns Polyxena to a grieving Xanthippe. He holds no erotic attachment to Polyxena; instead, he explains, he has responded to a "revelation of the Lord" (*AXP* 38).

The similarities between the novel and the *AXP* can be found in each text's creation of peripheral characters who call upon a protagonist's loyalty. For example, while Callirhoe is separated from Chaereas, she enters into a marriage with Dionysius upon the advice of his maid, Plangon. She does this to protect Chaereas's child, which she is carrying, and to provide some sort of social stability for herself. Likewise, in the *AXP*, during her separation from Xanthippe, Polyxena forms a relationship with a Jewish slave named Rebecca. The two women enter into this relationship upon the advice of the apostle Andrew. After baptizing them in the wilderness, he orders that the two must not "separate from each other" (*AXP* 30).²² Left alone after Andrew departs, the two women resolve to live in the mountains together rather than risk falling into "the filth of marriage" (*AXP* 31).

²⁰The idea that elite women must remain secluded in order to protect their virginity was widespread in both pagan and Christian sources. For Roman legislation concerning the seclusion of women, see *Codex Theodosianus* 1.22.1, which prohibits judges from bringing a matron into court because she should be at home "out of consideration for her sex." The Theodosian Law Code can be found in *Theodosiani Libri XVI cum Constitutionibus Sirmondianis et Leges Novellae ad Theodosianum Pertinentes*, vols. i.1, i.2, and ii, ed. Theodor Mommsen and Paul M. Meyer (Berlin, 1905); English translation: *The Theodosian Code and Novels and the Sirmondian Constitutions*, trans. Clyde Pharr in collaboration with Theresa Sherrer Davidson and Mary Brown Pharr (Princeton, 1952; repr. ed., Union, NJ, 2001).

²¹Chariton 3.2.9.

²²The representation of the Jewish Rebecca as a slave is theologically significant. When Andrew baptizes and unites the Greek Polyxena and the Jew Rebecca, the *AXP* is performing a theological union of Judaism and Christianity. The fact that the baptism takes place at a well invokes the Gospel of John, chapter 4, during which Jesus discusses a theology of unity with the Samaritan woman.

In Chariton's work the marriage between Dionysius and Callirhoe does not last; indeed, it cannot last, for the reunion of the two principal characters must prevail over all obstacles in the Greek novel. Likewise, the union between Polyxena and Rebecca ruptures when a roaming prefect abducts Polyxena, while Rebecca finds refuge in the house of an old woman. During their separations, both of the peripheral characters lament the disappearance of their mates. Dionysius cries to Aphrodite, "Why did you show me Callirhoe, when you did not intend to let me keep her?"²³ Rebecca, too, bemoans the departure of her Polyxena. Rebecca cries out to Polyxena in the presence of her host, "Most grievous of all, behold I have been separated from you and am again a captive, but will you search for me even into the next world, my sister Polyxena?" (*AXP* 25).

The *AXP* also mirrors the way in which the Greek novel perceives the intrusion of gods in the lives of its protagonists. In the novel, when all the conflicts are resolved and the couples are reunited, everyone learns that the entire adventure was simply the plan of pagan deities. For example, according to B. P. Reardon, Chariton "gives the impression that Tyche—Fortune—is dominating the action."²⁴ The gods have completely controlled the plot. Konstan writes that the "endurance and dependency of the protagonists is coordinate with the controlling presence of divinity in the Greek novels. At the end . . . what has seemed like arbitrary luck or suffering is revealed as the work of a god who has punished but knows how to relent, or as the fulfillment of some mysterious plan laid by higher powers."²⁵ In other words, all the trials and misfortunes of the characters have arisen from a theological blueprint.

This sense of divine craftsmanship is replicated in the *AXP*. Polyxena, released from her abduction, returns home to Spain, believing that her misfortunes were caused by her own blasphemy. Explaining this to the apostle Paul, she begs him to prevent anything similar from recurring. But Paul corrects her as he responds, "Thus must we be troubled, my daughter, that we may know our defender, Jesus Christ" (*AXP* 40). As in the novel, the audience learns that the separation and reunion of the couple are the result of divine providence, and, like the novel's characters, the protagonists learn that they are always and already in submission to the deity.

In borrowing the structure of the Greek novel, in which a male and female couple are separated, endure hardships, and then experience reunion, the *AXP* creates the same bond between its female couple. In addition to appropriating the novel's motifs the *AXP* also celebrates the female bond when Xanthippe dies by rewriting normative literary portrayals of death. In so doing the *AXP* reinforces the exclusive, committed, and interdependent nature of the relationship between the women.

²³Chariton 5.10.

²⁴Reardon, 20.

²⁵Konstan, 56.

Within ancient literary genres, scenes of death were important pedagogical instruments. At the moment of death the spouse or, if the spouse were absent, a close family member would embrace the dying, and there would be one last “kiss.”²⁶ During this kiss the dying person’s soul was believed to be present in his or her breath. The *AXP* narrates such a last kiss between Polyxena and Xanthippe. When Polyxena returns, Xanthippe runs to meet her. While approaching, Xanthippe is “overcome by an unspeakable joy and fell to the ground; but Polyxena embracing her and caressing her for a long time brought her back to life” (*AXP*41). Polyxena becomes Xanthippe’s most intimate confidante, while others, notably, Paul and Probus, stand idly in the narrative background.

Part of the purpose of these literary death scenes was the dissemination of words of wisdom by the dying, words from which the circle of those surrounding the sick would inevitably and eagerly learn a great lesson.²⁷ In her dying speech Xanthippe offers her own words of wisdom as she discusses her attempts to protect Polyxena through prayer and fasting, and she discusses the difficulty she experienced from the men around her because of that performance. Xanthippe explains, “And Paul, the preacher of God, said to me, ‘Her virginity will not be taken away and she will come quickly.’ And Probus said to me, ‘It was assigned to her by God to be thus afflicted. Do you see how by many devices God saves many?’” (*AXP*41). Xanthippe explains that *despite* what Probus and Paul have told her, she continued her austere performance to God on behalf of Polyxena.

Here the physical displacement of men in the text becomes reinforced by the actual words Xanthippe speaks. The unsupportive references to Paul and Probus effectively distance them from Xanthippe mentally, as they are simultaneously distanced from her physical embrace during her death. Both the logistical construction and the dialogue of the death scene in the *AXP* transform the socially coded expressions of the last “death kiss” as a privileged moment between husband and wife to one privileging a female same-sex relationship. In the construction of Xanthippe and Polyxena in the same fashion as the male-female couple of the Greek novel and in its reinscription of the standard literary constructions of death, the *AXP* produces an emotional, spiritual, and desiring bond between two women.

GENDERED TROUBLE IN THE *AXP*: POLICING FEMALE SAME-SEX RELATIONS

Judith Butler writes that “‘sex’ [is] an artificial concept which effectively extends and disguises the power relations responsible for its genesis.”²⁸ The

²⁶Susan Treggiari, *Roman Marriage: Iusti Coniuges from the Time of Cicero to the Time of Ulpian* (Oxford, 1991), 285.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 289.

²⁸Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, 1990), 92.

AXP, while it constructs an ideal same-sex bond between Xanthippe and Polyxena, also unsettles this relationship through disparate power relations. The narrative posits that women should not, indeed, that they cannot be left to manage their sexualities themselves: it does this by bringing authoritative men into the texts whenever the women are left alone and by ultimately dissolving the same-sex female bond at the tale's conclusion.

Polyxena's constant and continual abductions stand as the first indication that the *AXP* disdains the bond between Xanthippe and Polyxena. Briefly, Polyxena's seven exchanges between men occur as follows. The narrative begins when a jilted suitor abducts Polyxena. The ship carrying the kidnapped virgin then crashes onto a distant shore, at which time the apostle Phillip rescues her and commands that she be housed with him. Phillip leaves and hands Polyxena over to one of his disciples. The jilted suitor returns to retrieve his lost booty with the help of an army, but Phillip's disciple arranges his own army to protect Polyxena. However, he discovers that Polyxena has escaped into the mountains during the night. While in the mountains, she prays to God for help, and the apostle Andrew appears. He baptizes Polyxena and unites Polyxena with Rebecca. Andrew leaves, and an ass driver, who is also a disciple of Phillip, arrives and informs the women he will convey them home. But a prefect intervenes and abducts Polyxena. Trapped at the prefect's house, Polyxena is befriended by the prefect's son, a "closeted" Christian who promises to lead Polyxena home. Their escape attempt is thwarted, and Polyxena is put in the arena with a lioness but survives, thus prompting the prefect to convert to Christianity. One of Paul's disciples, Onesimus, arrives and transports Polyxena to her home, but not before the ship lands on an unfriendly island, where yet another group wishes to abduct Polyxena. Onesimus escapes with Polyxena and finally returns her home safely.

The continual exchanging of Polyxena reveals an anxiety within the narrative over Polyxena's sexuality and a concern about who can best control it. To be sure, a woman's sexuality was considered valuable, even more so if she was a virgin or a "bride of Christ."²⁹ So sacred was this identity that the Christian emperor Constantine instituted legislation severely punishing those responsible for abducting a virgin and even sanctioned murdering the nurse responsible for guarding that virgin.³⁰ However, Polyxena's narrative

²⁹The Eastern bishop John Chrysostom warned that a virgin, even if at home, must be under constant supervision for, if she falls, "the evil ends in the destruction of the soul." John Chrysostom *De Sacerdotio* 1.17, in *Patrologia Graeca*, ed. J. P. Migne, vol. 48, cols. 624–25. English translation: John Chrysostom, *Six Books on the Priesthood*, trans. Graham Neville (Crestwood, NY, 1977).

³⁰For legislation concerning abducted female Christian virgins, see *Codex Theodosianus* 9.24.1. For commentary on this law and its situation within a detailed historical context, see Judith Evans Grubbs, *Law and Family in Late Antiquity: The Emperor Constantine's Marriage Legislation* (Oxford, 1995), esp. 183–202. For discussion on the problem of abductions in late antiquity, both Christian and non-Christian, see Antti Arjava, *Women and Law in Late Antiquity* (Oxford, 1996), 37–41.

does not emphasize the legal or even moral gravity of the abductions. In fact, at the end of the tale, the original abductor receives no punishments, and the apostle Paul even baptizes him into the Christian community. While some Christian bishops took a more lenient approach to the abductors of virgins,³¹ the text's absolute and neat conclusion, wherein the abductor experiences immediate salvation and community acceptance, would seem to indicate that the morality of the abductions is not what is at issue in the *AXP*.

Instead, it is the excessive number of Polyxena's exchanges between men that is remarkable, becoming clearly visible in the narrative summary. The *AXP*, in its depiction of an abundance of apostles and their disciples against an abundance of pagans and their armies, constructs Polyxena's sexuality and its accompanying vulnerability when she is separated from Xanthippe as *really* a contest between men—a male-dominated war between good and evil or Christian and non-Christian. This narrative framework might well be read through the lens of Claude Lévi-Strauss's theory about the exchange of women in marriage. He found that the arrangement of marriage between a man and a woman was a "total relationship of exchange . . . not established between a man and a woman, but between two groups of men, [in which] the woman figures as only one of the objects in the exchange, not as one of the partners."³² Read in this context, the prominent and dominating subtext of Polyxena's "precarious" sexuality is significant. Here, in contrast to the novel, which emphasized the potential ability of the abducted heroine to protect her bodily integrity, the *AXP* emphasizes the absolute inability of Polyxena to protect her own body. While the *AXP* constructs its female protagonists like the committed male-female couple of the novel, it simultaneously places the protection of the virgin's sexuality in the hands of men.

The *AXP* further disquiets its constructed same-sex female bond through the constant introduction or, rather, interruption of men into the women's relationships. For example, Xanthippe and Polyxena are immediately separated by Polyxena's abduction. Further, even the peripheral

³¹Basil of Caesarea, for example, adopted a much more lenient position toward the abductors. The family of the abducted virgin could accept the abductor as the girl's husband, if it so desired. Further, the abductor, after a period of penance, could be accepted into the church. See Basil *Epistle* 199, in Basil of Caesarea, *Letters*, trans. R. J. Deferrari, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, 1902). See also Canon 11 from the Council of Ancyra in 314, which also promotes the restoration of the virgin back to her family. See R. B. Rackham, "The Text of the Canons of Ancyra," *Studia Biblica et ecclesiastica* 3 (1891): 139–216.

³²Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (Boston, 1969), 115. Gayle Rubin, in her classic essay "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna R. Reiter (New York, 1975), discusses Lévi-Strauss's exchange theory and ends her critique of the patriarchal structure that promotes such an exchange with an almost idyllic notion that, if given the opportunity to be free of the invasive male-designed social precepts, all women would form relationships with women. It is interesting that this seems to be what the *AXP* promotes, too, but in a different and perhaps more complicated way. For arguments along this line relevant to the *Apocryphal Acts*, see the works of Kraemer, Davies, and Burrus cited above (n. 9).

same-sex relationships become disrupted. When the Jewish slave Rebecca and Polyxena decide to escape into the mountains in order to fulfill Andrew's commandment that they "not separate from one another," a disciple of Phillip intrudes and prevents their departure. Then the dissolution of the bond between Rebecca and Polyxena is completed as the prefect abducts Polyxena but not Rebecca, who runs away. As this happens, the narrative demonstrates the failure of Polyxena and Rebecca to obey Andrew's command at their baptism. Finally, when Xanthippe dies, Polyxena declares that she will live by Paul's side in order best to protect herself. These instances of male intrusion into female relationships provide evidence of the desire of the *AXP*'s author to unsettle and control the female same-sex bonds the narrative has produced.

Xanthippe's death, with the subsequent dissolution of the earthly relationship between Xanthippe and Polyxena, perhaps reveals the author's greatest condemnation of the female same-sex bond. Judith Perkins writes that one of the necessary components in the Greek novel is the reunion of the couple and the accompanying "happy ending." Though the couple in the novel must experience separation and tribulation, the stories conclude with a "final reunion with its implicit promise of a life together happily ever after."³³ For example, when Callirhoe returns home, she visits Aphrodite's temple and exclaims, "Thank you, Aphrodite! . . . You have shown Chaereas to me once more in Syracuse. . . . I do not blame you, my lady, for what I have suffered; it was my fate. *Do not separate me from Chaereas again, I beg of you; grant us a happy life together, and let us die together!*"³⁴ In the tradition of the novel, Chaereas and Callirhoe do not experience separation again, and they do indeed live a happy life together.

The *AXP*, in a move away from the Greek novel's structure, prohibits a stable reunion of the two female protagonists. Though the women experience the necessary reunion, it is short-lived. They are immediately separated by Xanthippe's death. From that moment on, Polyxena lives in fear about her own capacity for self-control: "From then on, she, fleeing temptations, did not leave the blessed Paul at all" (*AXP* 41). If Perkins is correct in writing that the reunion of the couple provides "an affirmation of society and its future,"³⁵ then the absence of a stable reunion at the conclusion of the *AXP* demonstrates a dissolution of the envisioned same-sex society it had momentarily produced. In fact, it guarantees the dissolution through its institution of male control, evidenced as Polyxena clings to Paul for the remainder of her life.³⁶

³³Perkins, 42.

³⁴Chariton 7.8, emphasis added.

³⁵Perkins, 41.

³⁶It is possible to interpret Xanthippe as a contrary and contentious apostolic character. Her death mirrors the formula of the early *Apocryphal Acts*, wherein the (male) apostles experience martyrdom and leave the elite woman follower to live her Christian life alone. Here, Xanthippe arguably experiences a form of martyrdom, that is, dying because she believed she had to perform extreme asceticism in order to protect Polyxena. When Xanthippe

Messages about gender become even more apparent in the varying explanations of the origin of misfortune, or the theodicy, concerning the abduction of Polyxena. Theodicy has been defined as the “justification of the goodness and justice of a deity in the face of evil and suffering.”³⁷ Like the Greek novel, the *AXP* concludes with an acknowledgment that a divine being orchestrated all of the events. As Paul informs Polyxena, “thus must we be troubled, my daughter, that we may know our defender, Jesus Christ” (*AXP* 40). Using similar reasoning, Probus tells Xanthippe: “It was assigned to [Polyxena] by God to be thus afflicted. Do you see how by many devices God saves many?” (*AXP* 41). Both of these male authorities (the apostle Paul and Xanthippe’s husband, Probus) believe that God is in control of all misfortune in order to enact a greater didactic purpose.

This understanding is embodied in male authorities elsewhere in the tale. When the prefect abducts Polyxena while she is in the care of Phillip’s disciple, the ass driver, the latter immediately panics over the loss of the virgin. “Woe is me. . . . Would that I had died before yesterday, that I might not have met with these maidens at all” (*AXP* 34). However, when he learns of Polyxena’s kidnapping, the apostle Phillip assures his disciple that his soul is not in jeopardy because her abduction has occurred according to God’s plan: “For this same Polyxena, when she first came from the sea, I entrusted to a certain brother, who also was greatly distressed because of her running away secretly from his house. I also persuaded him not to grieve, for through her tribulation and wanderings many shall recognize God” (*AXP* 34). In contrast to Polyxena, who believes that her troubles are a result of her offending God, and Xanthippe, who believes that she needs to perform severe asceticism in order to protect Polyxena, the male authorities in the tale understand Polyxena’s misfortunes to be divinely willed and guided.

Several authors provide suggestions that might help readers to understand the significance of these gendered differences of opinion in the *AXP*. Perkins, discussing the relationship between beauty and privilege in the Greek novel, writes that there is a “veil of power” that operates to “distort the real situation, or concerns of other groups in a society.”³⁸ Nowhere is

dies, she leaves the elite woman, Polyxena, to live her Christian life. However, I think this is a difficult reading to sustain. First, the text treats Xanthippe’s death in an unmemorable way, almost as a nonevent. Second, the death does not enable Polyxena to live her Christian life alone, but, rather, it almost frightens her into living at the side of the apostle Paul.

³⁷*The HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion*, ed. Jonathan Z. Smith (San Francisco, 1995), 1065–67.

³⁸Perkins, 54. She appropriates the term from Richard Gordon’s study of ancient religions; see Richard Gordon, “The Roman Empire,” in *Pagan Priests*, ed. Mary Beard and John North (Ithaca, 1990), 177–255. Perkins appropriates Gordon’s notion that religion does not intentionally mask the concerns of others but, rather, that this masking is an inherent aspect of ideology.

this distortion more evident than in the novel's deployment of a "theodicy of good fortune," the contention that the elite deserved to be exactly where they were in society."³⁹ She describes how the novel's reunion of the principal couple would be seen by the novel's audience as the way the gods had intended it and thus as a sign of divine pleasure. Those who questioned the reunion and its accompanying resolution would be viewed as questioning the will of the gods and thus potentially contributing to divine displeasure.

The *AXP* shares much in common with Chariton's *Chaereas and Callirhoe*, including a strong female protagonist who, while in the course of her absence from home, lends her voice to the narrative. As Konstan remarks about Chariton's unique heroine, her view "is expressed through soliloquies, prayers, and reminiscences that give her an independent voice and bring her into the center of the narrative."⁴⁰ Polyxena likewise expresses her views through ubiquitous and solitary laments, pleas, and prayers. Similarly, both tales construct divisions between the behavior and sentiments of men and women. Konstan provides several instances in which the women sympathize with the heroine while the men "side with Chaereas."⁴¹ This tension in Chariton's work bears similarity to the gendered tension in the *AXP*.

What might such gendered divisions reveal about the audience and/or authorship of these texts? Konstan believes that Chariton carefully includes female responses because Chariton had a "complex audience or readership for his work."⁴² Konstan writes:

Chariton is evidently concerned to record the parallel but differential responses of men and women to the events narrated in the text. He seems thereby to project two independent and autonomous audiences within the novel, discriminated according to gender and each with its own sympathies and motives. . . . Rather than a single "implied reader," in the terminology of the phenomenological school of criticism, *Chaereas and Callirhoe* provides us with two, each with its counterpart in the text.⁴³

In other words, Konstan believes that the presence of both male and female voices indicates that Chariton may have been attempting to address separate concerns important to males and to females in his audiences.

³⁹Perkins, 55. She attributes the term "theodicy of good fortune" to Max Weber.

⁴⁰He explains that while Callirhoe's speeches mark Chariton's heroine as unique in comparison to the other Greek novels, her dominant narrative voice "does not, however, wholly cancel the fundamental equality of the partners as lovers" (Konstan, 9).

⁴¹Ibid., 78.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Ibid.

If Perkins is correct in describing the novel's (and the *AXP*'s) theodicy as representative of those who enjoy and condone the novel's endings, then this points to one concern that the *AXP* may have attempted to address. First, it is significant that the tale ends with two perspectives: one that views the abduction of a virgin and threats against her body as divinely ordained, and another that views these threats as horrific and as some sort of divine punishment. The former view, which seems to gloss over or at least undermine Polyxena's fear, is embodied in the Christian male authorities, while the latter view, the "wrong theodicy," is embodied in the Christian women, most notably, Xanthippe and Polyxena.

The full implications of these differing treatments of men and women come into focus when they are considered in the light of Brigitte Egger's insights. Egger, in her discussion of the Greek novel's construction of women and marriage, writes that the novel's emphasis on the reunion of the primary couple came "to mean the equivalent of self-possession, autonomy, and sense of identity" for the reader.⁴⁴ Egger finds that for the heroine, such autonomy is "frequently identical with escaping rape by men whom she has not chosen."⁴⁵ To be sure, escaping rape is a feat that Polyxena performs at least four times; however, the *AXP* continually negates Polyxena's role. Likewise, though Xanthippe independently performs a fast and vigil to protect Polyxena, the *AXP* undermines her independence in the conclusion by reporting Paul's and Probus's condescension toward her performance and by attributing Polyxena's safety to the "providence of God."

If Egger is correct in asserting that the reunion of the primary couple would have evoked a sense of autonomous identity in readers of the Greek novel, then what would the resolution have evoked in the reader of the *AXP*? After all, the tale ends with the ultimate dissolution of the primary couple when Xanthippe dies and when Polyxena turns herself and the control of her sexuality over to Paul. Female readers of the *AXP*, with its narrative binary of females who question the divine versus male authorities who "get it right," probably would not have gained the same sense of self-possession or autonomy that Egger asserts the novel's male readers would have acquired. Indeed, the female readers of the *AXP* might have acquired exactly the opposite sense. The story's assertion that God willed the virgin Polyxena to experience abduction and separation from Xanthippe and its resolution, in which Polyxena was only safe at the side of Paul, indicated that these particular ascetic women were incapable of understanding God's intention. The "unhappy ending" of the *AXP* would have undermined any self-empowerment or independence felt by ascetic women who dared to question male ascetic authority. In other words, women reading this tale who might have similarly questioned male authority within

⁴⁴Brigitte Egger, "Women and Marriage in the Greek Novels: The Boundaries of Romance," in *The Search for the Ancient Novel*, ed. James Tatum (Baltimore, 1994), 260–80, at 262.

⁴⁵Ibid., 275.

their own ascetic communities would have “learned” that they stood in contrast to God’s own will. Perhaps this was the underlying intention of the *AXP*, to persuade similarly independent women to question their own instincts about how to perform as ascetic Christians.

READING FEMALE DESIRE IN THE *AXP*: IS THE TEXT SIMPLY
PRODUCING WOMEN IT WISHES TO POLICE?

Biddy Martin, discussing the strategic power implicit in the creation of sexual discourse, writes that “Western culture, far from having repressed sexuality, has actually produced it, multiplied it, spread it out as a particularly privileged means of gaining access to the individual and the social bodies, as a way of ‘policing’ society through procedures of normalization rather than prohibition.”⁴⁶ This essay has analyzed the ways in which the *AXP* produced a woman-identified female sexuality. While the next section discusses the ways in which we might read this production within the world of late antique female same-sexual representations, Martin reminds us that the *AXP*, in its production of a female couple similar to the novel’s couple, might be actually “policing” something else. This section investigates that possibility.

The *AXP*’s appropriation of the Greek romance was not the first time that ascetic Christianity embraced the genre of the novel. Christians utilized and transformed the ancient novel to fit their needs during the second and third centuries in the literary corpus called the *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*. In these *Acts*, the romance between elite male and female Greek citizens was transformed into a spiritual romance between the Christian male apostle and an elite female who had been sexually involved with a non-Christian elite male.⁴⁷ The non-Christian male, because of the spiritual relationship between the apostle and the woman, finds himself at the margins and then retaliates against the intruding apostle, usually by sentencing him to death.⁴⁸ In the *AXP*, however, the couple is no longer an apostle and an elite woman but rather an elite ascetic woman and another elite ascetic woman.

Kate Cooper argues that Christians writing the *Apocryphal Acts* appropriated the novel’s genre in order to transform readers’ allegiances. Instead

⁴⁶Biddy Martin, “Feminism, Criticism, and Foucault,” in *Femininity Played Straight: The Significance of Being Lesbian* (New York, 1996), 190.

⁴⁷The Christians writing the *Apocryphal Acts* may or may not have appropriated the novel’s genre in a conscious manner. Instead, it seems more likely that the Christians were simply living in and influenced by the same literary culture as those creating the novels. The novels were produced from approximately the first century C.E. (Chariton) to the fourth century C.E. (Heliodorus), and thus the influence went both ways. For the dates of the novels, see the essays in Schmeling. For more on the *Apocryphal Acts*’ appropriation of the novel’s genre, see Rosa Söder, *Die apokryphen Apostelgeschichte und die romanhafteste Literatur der Antike* (Stuttgart, 1932), as well as Cooper and Cameron.

⁴⁸For more on the literary genre of the *Apocryphal Acts* and its relationship to the emerging social world of ascetic Christianity, see Kraemer, Davies, Burrus, and MacDonald.

of being asked to identify with marriage and civic ties reinforced by the “happy endings” of the novel, readers were invited to identify with those characters in the *Apocryphal Acts* who renounced such political and civic commitments because they were filled with “resentment against the politically powerful.”⁴⁹ According to Cooper, the heroines of the *Apocryphal Acts* renounced marriage and carnal sex in order to “assert moral superiority” within the group itself.

In perhaps her most important contribution to *Apocryphal Acts* scholarship, Cooper has argued that the elite heroines of the *Apocryphal Acts*, those who renounced social responsibilities of marriage and child bearing, were not the main concern of the *Acts*’ authors. Instead, she believes that the true contest was one between men, the pagan males who represented civic duty and the Christian apostles who represented Christian asceticism. Whether or not Cooper is correct in her understanding of the purpose behind these *Acts*, she does emphasize that the authors of these earlier *Apocryphal Acts* had no control over how the tales were read and interpreted. For example, female readers, as they read the tales of women renouncing their household identities as wives and mothers, embraced the Christianity envisioned in these tales—a Christianity that presented women as equal to the apostles. Indeed, the heroine Thecla from the second-century *Acts of Paul and Thecla* was presented well into the fifth century as a devout and faithful ascetic and, as such, as a wonderful example for women.⁵⁰ While Thecla served as a positive example for the women whom late antique bishops addressed, some of the heroine’s deeds from the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* were prohibited as the fourth-century church attempted to control ascetic women. Forbidden behavior included cutting hair, teaching men, and performing baptism.⁵¹

Read within this late antique move both to emphasize the acceptable traits of Thecla for women (such as her piety and ascetic renunciation) and

⁴⁹Cooper, 67.

⁵⁰For example, the bishop Gregory of Nyssa, in writing the biography of his sister Macrina, reveals that her “secret name” was Thecla. Gregory of Nyssa *Vita Macrinae* 2; *Patrologia Graeca*, ed. Migne, vol. 46, cols. 960–1000. English translation: Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Macrina*, trans. Joan M. Peterson, in *Handmaids of the Lord: Contemporary Descriptions of Feminine Asceticism in the First Six Christian Centuries* (Kalamazoo, MI, 1996), 51–86. Jerome, a Western bishop who was both revered and ridiculed for his ascetic zeal, informed his female disciple, Eustochium, that she should follow in Thecla’s footsteps. Jerome *Epistle* 22, in Henry Wace and Philip Schaff, eds., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ser. 2, vol. 6 (Grand Rapids, MI, 1978–79), 22–41. Finally, the town of Seleucia, where Thecla was reputed to have died, had a church dedicated in her name that the nun Egeria visited during her pilgrimage to Egypt and the Sinai. See *Egeria’s Travels*, trans. John Wilkinson (London, 1971), 23.

⁵¹The earliest condemnation of women baptizing in the name of Thecla comes from the early-third-century North African bishop Tertullian. He writes that he knows of women baptizing in Thecla’s name. Tertullian *On Baptism* 17.5. Females continued to emulate Thecla’s acts, such as cutting their hair and baptizing, well into the fourth century, as evidenced by the prohibitions of such acts in the Councils of Gangra and the Councils of Ancyra.

to condemn those unacceptable traits (such as teaching [men], baptizing, and cutting her hair), the same-sex bond developed in the *AXP* might be understood as a useful way to suppress women's leadership roles in ascetic Christianity. Certainly, some Christian writings legislated against women's teaching authority, such as the documents produced at the Council of Ancyra in 314 and at the Council of Gangra in 343. The latter specifically prohibited any woman from cutting her hair or from wearing men's clothes.⁵² Might the *AXP*, in its construction of Polyxena's sexuality, also be an attempt to rewrite the independence of Thecla?

During her abductions, Polyxena assumes male attire twice: once at the suggestion of Phillip's disciple and once at the suggestion of the "closeted" Christian, the prefect's son. Significantly, both occasions result from the suggestion of a male who is trying to protect Polyxena's sexuality, and on both occasions the suggestion proves futile. This unsuccessful assumption of male attire by the virgin stands in stark contrast to Thecla, who eagerly assumes male clothing on her own in order to control her own sexuality.⁵³ Further, the fourth-century reader, who would remember that Thecla, in the face of death, threw herself into a pool of water to baptize herself, would find a very different ascetic heroine in Polyxena. When she faces death in the wilderness, she does not perform her own baptism but instead pleads to God, "Whoever shall have pity on me, to him I will go" (*AXP* 27). In contrast to the *AXP*'s Xanthippe, who declares that she has prayed to God on behalf of Polyxena's virginity (and subsequently dies as a result of her zealous prayer), Polyxena can only offer prayers in the name of the apostle Paul.⁵⁴ Finally, in contrast to the Thecla from the second-century tale who receives the apostle Paul's blessing to "go and teach the word of God," Polyxena finds herself safest at the side of Paul the rest of her life—and willingly stays there.⁵⁵

Women presented many complications for Christian men thinking about asceticism. On the one hand, women's sexuality was viewed suspiciously

⁵²Canons 13 and 17 of the Council of Gangra. See C. J. Hefele and H. Leclercq, eds., *Histoire des Conciles d'après les documents originaux* (Paris, 1907). An English translation of the Council of Ancyra canons is available in Wace and Schaff, ser. 2, vol. 14, 63–75.

⁵³See the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* 40. Paul at first expresses concern over her dress, but then she explains her actions, and he seems to consent. For the Greek, see *Acta Pauli et Theclae* in *Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha*, ed. Richard Adelbert Lipsius and Maxmilian Bonnet (Leipzig, 1898), vol. 2, pt. 1, 151–216. An English translation is available in J. K. Elliott, ed., *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation* (Oxford, 1998), 365–74.

⁵⁴While in the prefect's house, she prays, "O Lord, Jesus Christ, God of all, *since I dare not ask you myself*, I bring to you the prayers of your holy preacher Paul, that you may not suffer my virginity to be destroyed by anyone" (*AXP* 35, emphasis added). This stands not only in contrast to Thecla's prayers and baptism on her own behalf but also in contrast to Xanthippe's declaration that "I prayed much on your behalf to the loving God, that your virginity might not be stolen" (*AXP* 41).

⁵⁵*Acts of Paul and Thecla* 41; *AXP* 41.

by celibate men living in the deserts and by bishops writing in the cities.⁵⁶ On the other hand, however, these same “dangerous” bodies from the wealthy classes provided money, land, and honor to the growing Christian church.⁵⁷ Further, contrary to the patristic ideal that an ascetic virgin acted primarily as a “sacred vessel dedicated to the Lord,” other evidence indicates that ascetic women became active participants in theological debates of the church.⁵⁸

Indeed, the feared sexuality of women that was always present for men stimulated further polemic by church leaders. For example, some female ascetics known as the *subintroductae* chose to live together with male ascetics in “spiritual marriages.” While some of the advocates of this arrangement saw practical advantages to it, the participants in such living arrangements proved a constant cause for concern by the bishops.⁵⁹ They viewed these relationships as dangerous for many reasons, one of which was the suspicion that celibacy could not be maintained if a male and female lived together. In this context, the *AXP*’s appropriation of the Greek novel and the *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, in which the couple was no longer male apostle and female convert but instead an elite female couple, might have addressed the anxieties wrought by the *subintroductae*. In fact, the *AXP* seems to address the issue of cohabitation of males and females directly. When the apostle Andrew encounters the beautiful Polyxena in the wilderness, he experiences “some commotion arising in himself” and must pray to God for guidance (*AXP* 28). After receiving

⁵⁶The trope of females as sexually promiscuous, dangerous, and therefore something from which men must hide was always present in male ascetic writing. For example, the desert monks often visualized their own sexual temptations in the form of demons disguised as beautiful women. Palladius *Lausiac History* 1.19–20, discusses the dangers of ascetic women to Egyptian monks. See R. T. Meyer, trans., *Palladius: The Lausiac History*, Ancient Christian Writers 34 (New York, 1964). Many examples and commentary can be found in Aline Rouselle, *Porneia: On Desire and the Body in Antiquity*, trans. Felicia Pheasant (Oxford, 1988).

⁵⁷See Elizabeth A. Clark, “Holy Women, Holy Words: Early Christian Women, Social History, and the Linguistic Turn,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6 (1988): 413–30; and Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York, 1988), 263.

⁵⁸For “sacred vessel,” see Eusebius of Emesa *Homily* 6.18, in *Eusèbe d’Emèse: Discours conservés en latin*, ed. E. M. Buytaert, *Spicilegium sacrum Lovaniense* 26 (Louvain, 1953). For women’s roles in theological issues, see Athanasius *Second Letter to Virgins*, trans. David Brakke, in *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism* (Oxford, 1995), 292–302, and Basil of Caesarea *Epistle* 52 to the *Canonicæ*, in which he clarifies the use of the intensely debated christological term *homoousion* for them, in Wace and Schaff, ser. 2, vol. 8, 155–56.

⁵⁹See John Chrysostom *Quod regulares feminae viris cohabitare non debeant*, in *Patrologia Graeca*, ed. Migne, vol. 47, col. 519. For the English translation, see Elizabeth A. Clark, *Jerome, Chrysostom and Friends: Essays and Translations* (Lewiston, NY, 1982), 513–32. For commentary, see Clark’s “John Chrysostom and the *Subintroductae*,” *Church History* 46 (1977): 171–85; Blake Leyerle, *Theatrical Shows and Ascetic Lives: John Chrysostom’s Attack on Spiritual Marriage* (Berkeley, 2001).

baptism, Polyxena informs Andrew that she will follow him wherever he goes, but Andrew explains that she cannot because “this was not made known to me by the Lord” (*AXP* 30).

Wandering female virgins also presented a problem for some Christian bishops in late antiquity. The term for this wandering, *xeniteia*, described the activity of those ascetics who wandered the countryside because they believed they acquired spiritual merit away from familiar settings and persons.⁶⁰ The bishop Evagrius condemns the desires of an ascetic woman named Severa to travel in such a manner, and Gregory of Nyssa declares that such journeys toward spiritual perfection are best taken in one’s own self rather than literally on the road.⁶¹ The *AXP* provides its own opinion on this subject but does so in a rather ambivalent manner. While the apostle Phillip refers to Polyxena’s abduction in a positive manner by claiming that “through her tribulation and wanderings [*xeniteia*] many shall recognize God” (*AXP* 34), the conclusion, in its situation of a frightened Polyxena next to the apostle Paul, ultimately condemns the practice of *xeniteia* for women.

ARE THEY, OR AREN’T THEY? READING SAME-SEX DESIRE IN THE ACTS OF XANTHIPPE AND POLYXENA

Placing Xanthippe and Polyxena within the scholarly conversations about the world of late antique same-sex love immediately becomes complicated. David M. Halperin has recently outlined “four prehomosexual categories of *male* sex and gender deviance . . . (1) effeminacy, (2) pederasty or ‘active’ sodomy, (3) friendship or male love, and (4) passivity or inversion.”⁶² Although Halperin only focuses on male relationships, his description of male friendship and love merits examination at least for the purpose of comparison because the ideal of female friendship and love seems to be the desired construction between Xanthippe and Polyxena. In his genealogy, Halperin argues that reciprocal love between male social equals provided an “established discursive venue in which to express, without social reproach, sentiments of passionate and mutual love for one another.”⁶³ It was their equality,

⁶⁰These ascetics believed they were emulating the directions of God to Abraham in Genesis 12:1 to leave one’s homeland. For an excellent discussion of the phenomenon and problem of *xeniteia* in fourth-century Asia Minor and Egypt, see Susanna Elm, *Virgins of God: The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford, 1996), 276–82. See also A. Guillaumont, “Le Dépaysement comme forme d’ascèse, dans le monachisme ancien,” *Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, Sciences Religieuses* 76 (1968–69): 31–58.

⁶¹Evagrius of Pontus *Epistles* 7 and 8 in *Euagrius Ponticus*, ed. W. Frankenberg, *Abhandlungen der königlichen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaft zu Göttingen, phil.-hist. Kl., NF* 13:2 (Berlin, 1912). Gregory of Nyssa *Epistle* 2, in Wace and Schaff, ser. 2, vol. 5, 528–29.

⁶²David M. Halperin, “How to Do the History of Male Homosexuality,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 6, no. 1 (2000): 87–123, at 92, emphasis added.

⁶³*Ibid.*, 100.

that is, the fact that one was not subordinate and therefore not available for sexual use by the other, that enabled the love between them to be publicly acknowledged. Xanthippe and Polyxena easily fall within the realm of “friendship or [fe]male love.” However, because women were always idealized in the subordinate position to a man, whether a husband or a father or a bishop or Christ, the story of mutual desire and commitment constructed in the *AXP* that is *between two women* immediately becomes more complicated.⁶⁴

The construction of Xanthippe and Polyxena as a Christian couple falls within the historical subject matter of two previous works on same-sex pairs in early Christianity: John Boswell’s study on both male- and female-paired saints and Mary Rose D’Angelo’s work on female pairs in the New Testament. Boswell, in his *Same-Sex Unions in Pre-Modern Europe*, discusses the earliest “paired saints” in early Christianity: the female pair of Perpetua and Felicitas and the male pairs of Polyeuct and Nearchos and of Serge and Bacchus. Boswell finds that the institution and memorialization of these pairs reveal Christian affirmation of “saints who directed their affections toward their own gender (or who could be interpreted to have so directed them).”⁶⁵ The historiographical and methodological problematics of Boswell’s identification of these saints as “homosexual” has been thoroughly and properly critiqued elsewhere.⁶⁶ Respectful of the progress in queer historiography, a more productive approach at this point might be to discern how the identification of the paired saints of Xanthippe and Polyxena in this study differs from Boswell’s identification of same-sex partners. Boswell argues that the mere production of two male or female saints together in a hagiographical text is evidence enough that the pair was revered as a same-sex couple. The hagiographical *AXP* stands as a stronger piece of evidence because the story clearly indicates that its author found the commitment and loyalty of the Greek novel’s male-female lovers to be a useful way to think about two women ascetics.

⁶⁴During the late fourth century, the literature describing women’s devotion to one another was increasing. Significantly, however, the women in most of the literature are biologically related, and usually mother and daughter. See, for example, Gregory of Nyssa’s description of the mutual commitment between Macrina and her mother (*Vita Macrinae* 970C) and the growing number of mother-daughter stories in Syria. For sources, citations, and excellent commentary, see Susan Ashbrook Harvey, “Sacred Bonding: Mothers and Daughters in Early Syriac Hagiography,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 4 (1996): 27–56. The earlier *Apocryphal Acts* contain stories of paired women who are not biologically related (e.g., Queen Tryphaena and Thecla in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*), but the women’s relationships are only mentioned briefly, in contrast to the consuming narratives of the adventures of the apostle. In contrast, the second half of the *AXP* is entirely focused on the narrative about the women. Additionally, the women in the earlier *Apocryphal Acts* who work together are not usually of the same class but instead are an owner and her female slave, for example, Maximilla and her slave Marcia in the *Acts of Thomas* (translated in Elliott, 439–511).

⁶⁵John Boswell, *Same-Sex Unions in Pre-Modern Europe* (New York, 1994), 159. The discussion of paired saints occurs on 139–62.

⁶⁶The best critique of Boswell from a lesbian-feminist perspective can be found in Brooten, *Love Between Women*, 11–13. For methodological critiques in general, see Brent Shaw, *New*

Mary Rose D'Angelo discusses pairs of women in the New Testament and finds that these women should fall within a transhistorical "lesbian continuum."⁶⁷ Citing Tryphaena and Tryphosa (Rom. 16:12), Evodia and Syntyche (Phil. 4:2), and Mary and Martha (John 11:1-2; Luke 10:38-42), D'Angelo argues that these pairs present real women who demonstrated a "commitment to each other."⁶⁸ While she is persuasive in her assertions that these women worked, preached, and lived together, D'Angelo makes a more problematic leap that these women's decisions "can [also] be seen as a sexual choice" that was, therefore, approved by the early church.⁶⁹ She describes the church's approval as a blessing that "would have consecrated female friendship as a means to supply the support, protection, and intimacy lost in the disruption of familial bonds and the rejection of marriage. In this context, the choice of women to work and live together, rather than with a man, emerges as a sexual as well as a social choice."⁷⁰ D'Angelo's assertion that the church approved of female friendship as a means of support among women is compelling and provocative. Yet it is difficult to discern what constitutes a "sexual choice" and even more difficult to ascertain how that sexuality would be mapped out on a grid of female homoerotic relationships. D'Angelo concedes that "these early Christian sources give no evidence about erotic practice."⁷¹ Her argument is somewhat supported by her placement of the relationships within Adrienne Rich's "lesbian continuum."⁷² Still, her argument might have been strengthened by a more precise explanation of how she is interpreting "sexual choice." At the very least, her study solidly demonstrates that the New Testament female pairs, even if they cannot be understood as same-sex partners in an erotic sense, might be "relics of the silenced past of women's affective lives and relationships with each other."⁷³

The primary difference between D'Angelo's study and this one rests on historiographical issues. Whereas D'Angelo reads her texts and finds reliable evidence for what existed outside that text, this study assumes that we cannot know how these texts were read outside of their constructions. More

Republic, July 18, 25, 1994: 33-41; Denise Kimber Buell, "Did They or Didn't They?" *Harvard Gay and Lesbian Review* 1, no. 4 (1994): 27-29; Robin Darling Young, "Gay Marriage: Reimagining Church History," *First Things* 47 (November 1994): 43-48; Elizabeth A. Castelli, "Will It Be a Church Same-Sex Union?" *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 3 (1996): 289-99; and Mark D. Jordan, "A Romance of the Gay Couple," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 3 (1996): 301-10.

⁶⁷Mary Rose D'Angelo, "Women Partners in the New Testament," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 6, no. 1 (1990): 65-86.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, 72.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 68.

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, 83.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, 85.

⁷²See Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and the Lesbian Continuum," in *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose, 1979-1985* (New York, 1986), 23-75.

⁷³D'Angelo, 67.

precisely, we cannot indisputably discern whether or not the text indicates a female desire for these bonds. Instead, what seems more convincing is the assertion that the *AXP* provides yet another example of how women's sexualities presented a continual threat to men. First, the story demonstrates an attempt by the author to marginalize the threat of female sexual bodies by constructing them as the loyal and committed couple from the Greek novel. Second, the author then manipulates and polices those same female sexual bodies by demonstrating how this female bond, if left alone and unmanaged by the male apostles, threatens men and women.

In *Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism*, the most comprehensive study of female homoeroticism in antiquity, Bernadette Brooten argues that same-sex desires between women were especially problematic in the larger androcentric world of Roman antiquity because these desires deviated from the normative understanding of sexual relationships. Both Christians and non-Christians alike understood sexual relationships, she explains, in terms of an "active-passive" dichotomy in which the socially dominant partner, the male citizen, was expected to play the active role in sexual relations, and the socially "inferior" partner (slave, boy, or woman) was expected to play the passive role. These roles were, Brooten argues, meant to be "asymmetrical and unequal" in both Christian and non-Christian configurations of sexual relationships.⁷⁴ The implied ideal woman in this schema was a "high-status, truly feminine woman, subservient either to her husband, or in the case of a celibate Christian woman, to the church."⁷⁵ Female homoeroticism would be incomprehensible in this schema because one of the women would have to be acting as an active participant in sex. Brooten has demonstrated that "gender role transgression emerges as the single most central reason for the rejection of female romantic friendship" because "such pleasure was against *both nature and divine will*."⁷⁶ Any woman daring to transgress these prescribed boundaries was at best disdained, according to Brooten's sources, and at worst—in some Christian tracts—sentenced to hell.⁷⁷ So, then, how do we interpret the same-sex desire created in the *AXP*, a desire purposefully invoking the Greek novel's lovers yet ending tragically in the separation of those who desire?

The historian of late antique Christian sexuality cannot forget that all Christian virgins, including Polyxena and Xanthippe, were conceived as "brides of Christ." In this capacity, they were always in a state of "ex-

⁷⁴Brooten, *Love Between Women*, 303.

⁷⁵Ibid., 360.

⁷⁶Ibid., 359, emphasis added.

⁷⁷Brooten cites the third-century apocryphal *Acts of Thomas* and the second-century *Apocalypse of Peter* as two examples of Christian texts "sentencing" homoerotic women to hell. For textual references and commentary, see *ibid.*, 305–13.

change” between the Christian church body here on earth and Christ. Elizabeth Castelli correctly summarizes that “women’s sexuality was being used structurally in the same way, that the underlying idea of women’s sexuality was the same in the social world and the religious realm.”⁷⁸ The construction of the same-sex bond between Xanthippe and Polyxena might then be seen as a liberatory alternative to some women who read the *AXP* because of its alternative reinscription of women’s sexuality, a sexuality dependent upon and committed to other women.⁷⁹

One more similarity between the *AXP* and the Greek novel becomes relevant at this point. Judith Perkins argues that “most of the homosexual relations ended tragically in the romance because . . . they existed only in the domain of personal desire and thus had no function in the society idealized in the romance.”⁸⁰ While the female bonds idealized in the *AXP* may have served particular needs of its author to control and regulate ascetic life for men and women, the ultimate rupture of this bond, embodied in Xanthippe’s death, might be understood in yet another way. It had to be destroyed because it was same-sex oriented and thus disrupted the notion of the female vessel betrothed to Christ.⁸¹ The *AXP* indicates the primacy of the virgin’s identity as necessarily and only linked to Christ when Rebecca and Polyxena become separated. Rebecca laments that she is no longer with Polyxena and begs for the latter to “search for me even into the next world, my sister Polyxena.” In contrast to Rebecca, Polyxena does not protest the separation from Rebecca. Instead, her main concern, as she prays in the prefect’s room, is the protection of her status as a virgin of Christ (*AXP* 35). The words and deeds of Polyxena, who realizes at the tale’s conclusion that she should stay with Paul, indicate a concern on the part of the author that the same-sex desire should not overshadow the virgin’s identity as divine bride.

It is impossible to know what, if any, “real-life” same-sex bonds between women the author of the *AXP* might have known as he constructed his heroines in the manner of the Greek novel’s lovers. However, the *AXP* provides further evidence about how such relationships were viewed (at least in some circles) and furnishes potential evidence of the stories that

⁷⁸Elizabeth A. Castelli, “Virginity and Its Meaning for Women’s Sexuality in Early Christianity,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 2, no. 1 (1986): 61–88, at 86.

⁷⁹Even if the author ruptured the bond at the conclusion of the story, such an interpretation emphasizing multiple possible interpretations of the *AXP* would be supported by Foucault’s notion that power is a “composite result made up of a multiplicity of centers and mechanisms,” quoted by Alan Sheridan in *Michel Foucault: The Will to Truth* (New York, 1980), 218.

⁸⁰Perkins, 72.

⁸¹For the notion of the virgin as a sacred and delicate vessel, see Castelli, “Virginity,” and Brown, 266–84.

women-identified Christian women may have read and the sort of literary women they may have emulated. Kate Cooper's study of the *Apocryphal Acts* has been so provocative, in part, because she reverses our understanding of the elite women characters in those stories. In contrast to Ross Kraemer, Stevan Davies, Virginia Burrus, and Dennis R. MacDonald, who see the stories as fictional accounts of real women's lives, Cooper argues that the stories are not really about women at all but, rather, about Christian and pagan men's views about social power.⁸² Regardless of the merit of Cooper's arguments concerning the creation of the *Apocryphal Acts*, her views on the effects of those stories bear mentioning here. She asserts that "we have little evidence that the authors of the *Apocryphal Acts* considered the effect their heroines might have on the self-understanding and behavior of actual women."⁸³

With Cooper's insight in mind, it becomes possible to argue that, while the author of the *AXP* may have aimed to reconstruct the "ideal" ascetic woman through the same-sex bond, he could not control the way that the bond would then be read by its audiences—audiences that would have most likely included woman-identified ascetic women living in single-sex communities. For as Brooten writes, "As these [female] communities spread, same-sex romantic friendship found new homes in which to flourish."⁸⁴ The ancient evidence supports this assertion. For example, the ascetic physician Basil of Ancyra attests to this danger when he warns against what might happen when young girls lie together in bed.⁸⁵ Further, Augustine and Shenute of Atripe, bishops writing about female communities, similarly admonish against such female sexual activity.⁸⁶ The *AXP*'s condemnation of a female same-sex bond supports Brooten's claim that the church fathers were hostile toward female homoeroticism. At the same time, its construction of such a bond might have also provided useful and empowering examples for those woman-identified women living within these settings.⁸⁷

⁸²See note 9 for relevant bibliographic information.

⁸³Cooper, 115. The idea that the authors of the *Apocryphal Acts* did not consider the effects of the literary women "on the self-understanding and behavior of actual women" forms the basis of the second part of my argument that the *AXP* was written in order to react to the license being taken by women after reading the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*.

⁸⁴Brooten, *Love Between Women*, 344.

⁸⁵Basil of Ancyra *On Virginity*, in *Patrologia Graeca*, ed. Migne, vol. 30, cols. 559–809, at col. 797BC.

⁸⁶See Brooten's excellent discussion of these two authors in *Love Between Women*, 348–57.

⁸⁷For example, the fact that Xanthippe remains strong in her ascetic performance to protect Polyxena, precisely in spite of the admonishments of Paul and Probus, could be seen as empowering. In other words, the readers would not have to "accept" the author's conclusion. I would like to thank the anonymous reader for helping me clarify my thoughts about the relationship of "real" women to the representations of women offered in the *AXP*.

In conclusion, the historiographical landscape of late antique female sexuality is rocky terrain indeed. Its many representations of “woman” such as those in the *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles* must be read with suspicion when attempting to recover “real women’s subjectivities.” If Brooten is correct in her presentation of the disgust of Christian men for female homoerotic relationships (a disgust resulting from both Christian males’ place in a society that defined sexual acts in terms of active/passive and their places in a Christian religion that provided divine reinforcement for these secular beliefs), then the *AXP* presents an interesting piece of Christian evidence that supports Brooten’s conclusions. It is unquestionable that the *AXP* recommends and promotes a same-sex bond of desire between women while at the same time ultimately condemning that bond by subordinating it to male (apostolic) control.

The production of this same-sex bond might simply have reflected male concerns about the dangers of female sexuality. How this prescription about women’s relationships was heard and lived by female listeners is something we can never know. Still, the multiple layers of meaning in the *AXP* are suggestive. The complicated message in the *AXP* has continued to reverberate through the centuries. In a more recent version of the same story, the seventeenth-century Pseudo-Dexter created his own summary of the *Acts of Xanthippe and Polyxena*. In so doing, he mistakenly (or perhaps uncannily) referred to the heroines as “Xanthippe and Polyxena, her spouse.”⁸⁸

⁸⁸“Xanthippe et Polyxena eius uxor,” in Pseudo-Dexter *Chronica* (1619), cols. 44, 108. In his introduction to the Greek text, M. R. James cites the Pseudo-Dexter passage: “Xanthippe et Polyxena eius uxor (*sic!*)” (45, emphasis and exclamation point *not* added).