‘HER OWN PROPER KINSHIP’:
MARRIAGE, CLASS AND WOMEN
IN THE APOCRYPHAL ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

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For the domus need not be a family’s own space
Even for Rome’s upper classes;
Commercial apartments comprise part of the place
And the courtyard invites in the masses.

Introduction: Apostolic Homewreckers

It is a tale that became familiar to most early Christians: A well-born young woman of a prominent house in Asia Minor is causing her family some distress. When the woman’s fiancé comes to woo, her mother greets him with chagrin. A ‘strange man’ has come to town and started preaching a disastrous message. ‘My daughter also, like a spider hanging at the window bound up by his words, is conquered by a new desire and a fearsome passion. She hangs upon his sayings and the maiden has been taken captive’ (Acta Pauli et Theclae 8–9). It becomes clear that the young woman: no longer wants anything to do with her fiancé or her mother, and she turns from them in silence. At once the whole house becomes terrified: ‘And they wept bitterly: They are for losing a wife, Theoeclia a daughter, and the maidservants a mistress’ (Acta Pauli et Theclae 10).

The woman whose defection fractures a household from top to bottom is Thecla, heroine of early Christian ‘romance’ and a symbol of sexual renunciation. Her ‘captor’ is Paul, apostle of Jesus, whose message twice leads Thecla to capital condemnation and who himself leads a life of harassed itinerant preaching. Echoing and expanding the call of Jesus, who enticed his disciples away from jobs and families (e.g. Mt. 4:18–22, Mk 1:16–20, Lk. 14:26), the Acts of Paul preaches radical renunciation: ‘Blessed are they who have renounced this world, for they shall be pleasing to God!… Blessed are they who through love of God have gone out of the form of the mundane for they will judge angels and be blessed at the right hand of the Father’ (Acta Pauli et Theclae 5–6).

This disruption of households by some early Christians struck at the perceived building block of civilized society, the family. As some Christian circles became more institutionalized, such social disruption became untenable: witness the household codes in the deuter-Pauline letters to the Colossians and Ephesians, and the careful theological mapping of Christian piety onto conservative values in the Pastoral epistles (Col. 3:18–4:1, Eph. 5:21–6:9, Tit. 2:1–10). Yet in other spheres the apostles were still wielded rhetorically and socially as initiators not of household order but disorder. The so-called Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles, circulating from the second century onward, replicated this narrative of apostolic homewreckers, often centered on the choice for sexual abstinence and family renunciation made by an inspired heroine, like Thecla. In this essay, I make two arguments out of the narrative richness of these texts of family despoliation. First, I argue that a very specific form of family configuration—the elite conjugal union of husband and wife—is rejected in order to position Christian virtue in opposition to the upper-class morality becoming dominant in the later Roman Empire. Second, I suggest that the female heroines, renouncing status and marital union, should be interpreted neither as simple historical reality nor as historically meaningless symbolic rhetoric, but rather as the discursive construction of a charged new space in which women could (and, eventually, did) reconceptualize their own moral agency. It will be helpful to provide context for each of these two arguments before engaging with the ancient sources.

We must begin by attending more carefully to types of families in the ancient world. It is my contention that we witness in these tales of apostolic homewrecking and female renunciation more than merely a blanket condemnation of this world, symbolized by the


4 For an analysis of the elements of ascetic renunciation and itinerancy in the Acts of Paul and Thecla, see Davis, Cult of St Thecla, pp. 18–26.


The impact of the apostles is registered specifically in the familial bond in these texts, a choice I suggest is both deliberate and meaningful in the context of early Christian social and cultural constructions of religious identity. We are conditioned to think of marriage as the time-honoured and traditional ethical location of sexual desire and family loyalty, the core of the nuclear family structure. Yet the far more traditional understanding of family in the ancient world centred not on the union of a husband and wife, but on the exertion of power by a male head of household (paterfamilias) over his subordinates (wife, children, slaves). Other Christian groups in the second and third centuries, coeval with the producers and consumers of the Apocryphal Acts, expressed their dissatisfaction with the structures of ‘this world’ by opposing Christian virtue to the power of the paterfamilias. One example of such a paternal narrative of family disruption can be reviewed briefly in the story of another ‘homewrecking’ Christian female, the third-century North African martyr Vibia Perpetua.7

Like Thecla, Perpetua is a ‘woman of good family and upbringing’ (Passio Perpetuæ 2) brought to face public punishment for her disruptive adherence to Christian belief.8 Also like Thecla, Perpetua renounces her family in order to embrace a new Christian identity. The family structure overturned by Perpetua, however, is somewhat different from that of Thecla. Instead of a jilted fiancé we have a grey-haired father pleading for mercy:

‘Daughter,’ he said, ‘have pity on my grey head – have pity on me your father, if I am worthy to be called father by you; if I have brought you with these very hands into the bloom of life … do not now surrender me to the reproaches of men. Think of your brothers, think of your mother and your aunt, think of your own son who will not be able to live after you. Set aside pride lest it overturn all of us!’ (Passio Perpetuæ 5; cf. Passio Perpetuæ 3)

Perpetua appears as the well-born matrona who sets aside the authority of her paterfamilias, and in so doing breaks apart the extended family. She abandons her father’s will and seeks to follow the will of another Father instead.9 Thecla, by contrast, abandons a potential husband to follow another man who has ‘captured’ her in a ‘new desire and fearsome passion’ (Acta Paula et Theclæ 9).10 There is no father in Thecla’s tale, no patria potestas to overturn, just as there is no (explicit) husband to whom Perpetua is (even metaphorically) unfaithful.11

If Perpetua’s familial drama is set squarely in the context of paternal (dis)loyalty, then Thecla’s story – and the general narrative pattern of the Apocryphal Acts – focuses explicitly on the familial configuration of marriage. The reasons for this, I suggest, have to do with developing notions of family ethics and class in Late Antiquity. Far from being the default state of sexual and ethical union in Antiquity, marriage (matrimonium) was a legally and morally regulated state designed to promote the ethical union of upper-class families. Christians attacking ‘marriage’ in the Apocryphal Acts were therefore levelling charges against a very specific familial configuration, the conjugal family, as a way of demeaning a distinctly upper-class ethics and replacing it with a declassed (and yet still hierarchized) ideal of common Christian ‘kinship’. My first goal, therefore, will be to elicit from these powerful texts of family disjunction one early Christian pattern of moral virtue as a mode of class-based resistance.

My second goal is to elucidate how this struggle over ethics and class in the Apocryphal Acts can also give helpful nuance to our understanding of both ancient women’s history, and the production of ‘feminist histories’ from the Apocryphal Acts.12 These two goals are not unrelated, as scholars have traditionally assumed that these texts’ attention to the conjugal family structure can be explained by theories about the feminist nature of early Christian asceticism. Social historians once attributed the Apocryphal Acts’ focus on women’s sexual renunciation to the identity of their original authors and readers: with such interest in the ‘liberation’ of women from a repressive marriage bond into the freedom of an egalitarian Christianity, it was argued that these texts must have originated from and for various women’s groups who would ‘naturally’ embrace such a message. In 1980, Stevan Davies came to the ‘rather startling’ conclusion that ‘many of the apocryphal Acts were written by women’, due both to the subject matter (the choice of chastity over marriage) and the woman’s ‘point of view’ found therein.13 Dennis R. MacDonald curtailed Davies’ conclusions a bit by suggesting female ‘storytellers’ and (later) male ‘writers’, while Virginia Burrus drew on both scholars to examine the ‘folkloristic’ nature of these ‘women’s chastity stories’.14

More recent scholarship has called into question the relation between the Apocryphal Acts’ apostolic homewrecker and the notion that eradication of the

9 Note the visual parallel between the description of Perpetua’s earthly father (canus meus; Passio Perpetuæ 5) and the ‘heavenly father’ in one of Perpetua’s visions (nominem canum; Passio Perpetuæ 4).
10 Captura or rapus was one way in which a woman in Antiquity could be claimed by a husband: see Anti Arjasa, Women and Law in Late Antiquity (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp. 37–41.
11 Perpetua is described in Passio Perpetuæ 2 as maronallar napat, but her husband is not in evidence. Scholars have often attempted to find the husband (or, at least, father of Perpetua’s child) between the lines of the narrative: see, most recently, Carolyn Osiek, ‘Perpetua’s Husband’, JEC 10 (2002), pp. 287–90.
12 I understand ‘feminist history’ as it has been described by Joan Wallach Scott, Gender and the Politics of History (rev. ed.; New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 27: ‘Feminist history then becomes not the recounting of great deeds performed by women but the exposure of often silent and hidden operations of gender that are nonetheless present and defining forces in the organization of most societies.’
socially conservative family emanated from a context of historical female resistance.\(^{15}\) Simply focusing on the liberatory aspects of the Acts (such as they are) may not be as fruitful as was once imagined.\(^{16}\) In addition to being wary of projecting modern conceptions of marriage and feminist liberation into Antiquity,\(^{17}\) recent studies have been less optimistic about recovering a female (or feminist) point of view. For Peter Brown, these texts ‘reflect the manner in which Christian males of that period partook in the deeply ingrained tendency of all men in the ancient world, to use women “to think with”’.\(^{18}\) Similarly, Kate Cooper contends that ‘the challenge posed here by Christianity is not really about women or even about sexual continence, but about authority and the social order’.\(^{19}\) Cooper analyses the apostle’s proposal of sexual abstinence in the Apocryphal Acts as a means to a countercultural and subversive end: the political disruption of ‘this world’ by the Christian message.\(^{20}\) Marriage is a conservative metaphor, and continence a countermetaphor discharged from the camp of the Christians. Both the reality of sexual renunciation and the solidity of its female proponents dissolve in such metaphorical speculation, leaving historians interested in the lives of ancient women with nothing to hold on to.

Yet the dichotomy of reality and rhetoric in this case might be oversimplified. We need not over the straightforward historical realism of ancient texts of women’s piety in order to illuminate some corner of women’s history; nor does attention to symbolism, metaphor and rhetoric necessarily force us to disavow any hope of access to the religious identities of those ancient women.\(^{21}\) The rhetorical force of these narratives of female renunciation can potentially shape the discursive worlds of future readers and auditors of such stories, reconstruct their worldview and so transform rhetoric into a new reality. Early Christians found the narratives of apostolic homemakers and their female disciples compelling.\(^{22}\) Even as metaphor, or code for ‘something else’, the image of family disintegration, set vividly in the late Roman context of competing models of family ethics – marital concordia and paternal potestas – continued to gather rhetorical and theological steam throughout Late Antiquity. Stephen Davis has argued that, from the third century through the Islamic conquest, an ‘ethic of imitatio Theclae’ took hold among Christian women, for whom ‘Thecla’s example was a source of empowerment’.\(^{23}\) Whatever the origins of these texts, or intentions of their authors, the crafting of narratives in which women stand at the centre of broken conjugal households generated potential models for women’s piety, a rhetorical space into which real women could (and, eventually, did) step. The goal of a feminist historical study of the Apocryphal Acts, therefore, might not be so much to authenticate the tenor of the ‘woman’s voice’ within the text, but rather to delineate the potential space in which subsequent ancient voices might echo.

With this goal, we attend to the narrative structure of these texts, and ask anew: Why are apostles presented as ‘homewreckers’, and why do these aristocratic women, like Thecla, emerge as their heroic counterparts? Why is the conjugal bond, the representative familial structure, to be overturned by apostolic preaching and female resistance? If the canonical Paul chooses to address one of his churches ‘like a father with his children’ (1 Thess. 2.11),\(^{24}\) why should Thecla’s Paul instead, like a lover, seduce her away from her fiancé with ‘deceptive and subtle words’ (Acta Pauli et Theclae 8)? Or why should a Greek proconsul’s wife, who has left the marriage bed to follow the apostle Andrew, be described as having ‘so given way to desire for him that she loves no one more than him’ and as having ‘become intimately involved with that man’ (Passio Andreea 25)?\(^{25}\) What does a woman’s renunciation of marriage, initiated by this apostolic ‘seduction’, achieve for readers or auditors that rejection of patria potestas, like Perpetua’s, does not?

The issue of competing rhetorics of family, class and ethics is deeply intertwined with the role of women in this context. Below I first survey the ways in which elite authors in the first centuries of the Roman Empire came to promote the conjugal family as a model of social order and stabilization among the upper classes.\(^{26}\) Legally constituted marriage, historically a question of property transmission, became a matter of public dignitas, a gauge of a man’s moral character. Simultaneously, it transformed the (theoretically) asymmetrical relation of man–woman into the new (theoretically) symmetrical relation of husband–wife, creating a new familial economy considered particularly apt for the wealthy, educated elites. Slowly, however, this elite ethics of marital ‘couplehood’ became transformed into a universalized family ethics. I demonstrate these rhetorical fronts on which this transformation and universalization

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17 See Gillian Clark, Women in Late Antiquity: Pagan and Christian Lives (New York: Oxford University Press and Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 4: ‘There is no certainty that our own dissatisfaction was shared by women of the time, whose experience and expectations were so different from our own.’
19 Cooper, Virgin and the Bride, p. 55.
23 Davis, Cult of St Thecla, p. 194; the volume focuses on the emergence of Thecla’s saint’s cult in Asia Minor and Egypt.
were effected through comparison of legal initiatives, philosophical writings and the fanciful Greek ‘romances’. Next, I locate the Apocryphal Acts in the stream of this particular familial discourse as a form of class-based resistance. The emergence of woman-as-subject of the Apocryphal Acts can thus be fruitfully contrasted with the construction of woman-as-subject in the new elite ethics of the conjugal family, as I conclude by asking new questions about the female heroine and feminist history of early Christian homemakers.

‘Live together as Partners’: The Institution of Conjugal Ethics

According to the third-century Roman historian Cassius Dio, the Emperor Augustus delivered a public address in the year 9 CE to the men of the equestrian class. Apparently there had been complaints about the severity of a new series of laws penalizing unmarried and childless knights. Augustus first divided the members of the wealthy classes in the forum: unmarried men to one side and married to the other. To the far less numerous married men he addressed words of encouragement and gratitude; to the unmarried his words were ‘harsh and bitter’. He concluded his harangue against those negligent bachelors by expressing his ideal of the Roman family:

My ideal is that we may have lawful homes (σπίτια ἴνα προσεῖναι) to dwell in and houses full of descendants, that we may approach the gods together with our wives and children, that a man and his family should live together as partners (ἵλαρος ἔμπνεοι) who risk all their fortunes in equal measure, and likewise reap pleasure from the hopes they rest upon one another. (Historia Romana 56.9) 28

This retrospective, third-century description of the new Roman family gives important ethical nuance to Augustus’s first-century legislative efforts to coerce the upper class into marrying and producing new generations of Roman elites. Through the rhetoric of dignitas, a factor upon which a man could establish or diminish his public ‘face’, Augustus’s laws transformed the ideal of marriage: ‘Augustus … turned what had previously been a private family responsibility into a public concern, and established the basis for marriage legislation for the next five hundred years.’ This ‘public concern’ marks a shift in the ancient discourse of social status and families that has been traced on several fronts. Some scholars in the burgeoning field of the ancient family have observed a transformation of the ideal family from a coherently uniting vertical lines of patriarchal authority (husband-father-master on top, wife—children—slaves on the bottom) to a partnership centred around the affective union of the married couple. Conjugal cooperation and unity seem to replace the model of absolute authority emanating downward from the omnipotent paterfamilias. Paul Veyne first described this transformation as the psychological response on the part of elite males to their political emasculation by the new Augustan regime. His historical interpretation has since been challenged or altered on several fronts; some historians, invoking jury evidence, deny that the Roman family ‘shifted’ at all in late Antiquity, ideally or otherwise. Yet even if there is no ‘real’ shift in the legal relations of husband and wife, such factors do not obviate the rhetorical manipulation of a marital ideal. This manipulation is precisely where we must locate the variegated literature that attempts to idealize marriage as the defining feature of the correct (upper-class) family and, by extension, the correct microcosm of (aristocratic) society.

One theme that permeates our sources is the moral interiorization of the conjugal bond of concordia: marriage is not just a procreative or monetary transaction between families, but an ethical union between individuals. Veyne dubs this ‘the birth of the couple’. In the early imperial period, the rhetoric of conjugal ethics went from a charming (if irrelevant) accoutrement of marriage to its theoretical underpinning and justification. We can trace this rhetorical shift in legal and philosophical materials as well as in the so-called ‘Greek romances’, which encapsulate much of the marriage rhetoric of both the jurists and the philosophers into an exciting narrative that could

29 The laws in question are the lex Juliae de maritandis ordinibus and the lex Juliae de adulterinis (both 18 BCE) and the lex Papia Poppaea (9 CE). See Evans Grubbs, Law and Family, pp. 96–98.
spread the moral discourse of marriage quite far afield. The aim here is to establish how marriage, the ethical union between male and female partners, became the particular ethical emblem of the upper-class family, initiating a new theoretical economy (oikonomia) of class and gender relations.

The Augustan legislation was never meant to mobilize the entire citizenry to become married partners with children: the efforts were directed at the senatorial classes, whose sons and daughters were not producing sufficient legitimate progeny to perpetuate the workings of the principate. This series of legis was concerned strictly with matrimonium, that is, the legal form of marriage between two consenting parties that would result in legitimately conceived heirs. In fact, the Augustan legislation was originally designed to promote marriage and child-bearing (and to discourage extramarital sexual activity) among those Romans whose moral and social behaviour was of the greatest importance to Augustus – that is, the Roman senatorial aristocracy, and the wealthier and more socially distinguished classes in general. Most of the surviving pieces of the *lex Julia et Papia* (as this conglomeration of laws came to be known) therefore limit any ethical imperatives to their appropriate social sphere. One jurist cites a long passage from the legislation directed squarely at the highest aristocracy:

A senator, his son, or his grandson, or his great-grandson by his son shall not knowingly or fraudulently become betrothed to marry or marry a freedwoman, or a woman who is or has been an actress or whose father or mother are or have been actors. Nor shall the daughter of a senator, his granddaughter by his son, or great-granddaughter by his grandson become betrothed to marry, knowingly or fraudulently, a freedman, or a man who is or or has been an actor or whose father or mother is or has been an actor. (*Digesta* 23.2.44 [Paul])

By labelling such inapposite unions not only legally void but also morally shameful – *stuprum* – these laws invest marriage with an ethics that lies at the heart of the conjugal union yet is *de facto* (and *de iure*) restricted to a particular social location: there is little or no concern as to whether these restricted lower-class groups themselves ever marry and produce children.

Augustus’s legislation was to a large extent encouraged in moralizing terms, perhaps as a form of noblesse oblige: the laws enforced constant scrutiny of a man’s *dignitas* by his upper-class neighbours, even prompting senatorial families to inform on those in violation of marital prescriptions. Thus, we need not discount Cassius Dio’s later reconstruction of Augustus’s public defence of his legal programme as the fainciful work of a third-century historian. Later second-century sources, both historians and jurists, do suggest a certain senatorial irritation with Augustus’s legal efforts, a resistance that perhaps bespeaks the friction generated by this public moralizing. The moralizing tone of the Augustan legislation becomes so hard to hear through

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38 Simon Goldhill, *Foucault’s Virginity: Ancient Erotic Fiction and the History of Sexuality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), has to some extent anticipated me in this comparative effort, moving from *Augustus*’s legislation on marriage and adultery (p. 111) to discuss *“ideals of marriage, that key institution of normative sexual discourse” through readings of the Augustan period; see Gruen, *Women and Law*, pp. 99–102 for a more detailed discussion and bibliography on the laws, see Trappini, *Roman Marriage*, pp. 60–80; on the difficulties in reconstructing the exact wording and function of these laws, see Arpaja, *Women and Law*, pp. 77–78. The main points of the laws were transformation of adultery and *stuprum* into criminal crimes tried in court, stricter regulation of divorce, forfeiture of inheritance by unmarried or childless individuals, and prohibition of certain unions based on degree of relation and difference in status.

40 Jurists agree that *consuetum* is a central component of *ius humin matrimonium*: see, for example, *Digesta* 23.2.3 (Paul). Texts from the *Digesta* cited from Theodor Mommsen and Paul Krueger (eds.), *The Digest of Justinian* (3 vols., trans. Alan Watson; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), with the name of the cited jurist in parentheses. Lawmakers assumed consent even when parties later sought annulment: “If by his father’s force (coenoppetati) he marries a woman whom he would not have married if left to his own free will (ut arbitrariis, nevertheless he has contracted legal marriage (matrimonium), which could not have taken place between unwilling parties (invitos): he seems to have wanted to do it.” (*Digesta* 23.2.22 [Celsus]).

41 Evans Gruub, *Law and Family*, p. 105. The language of jurists commenting on these laws can be generalized, especially when considering the ethics of marriage: "Marriage is the union of a man and a woman, a partnership for life involving divorce as well as human law (Nuptiae sunt consuetudo maris et femae et consortium omnis vitae: divini et humani iuris communication): (Moderatus) ([*Digesta* 23.2.1]).

42 The commentator, Paul, softens the legislation by noting that the freeborn woman’s parents take up acting after the marriage ‘it would be most unfair to divorce her since the marriage was respectable (honestatum) when contracted, and there may already be children’. Several other prohibitions centre on senatorial dignitas: *Digesta* 23.2.23 (Celsus), 23.2.27 (Ulpian), 23.2.33 (Marcellus), 23.2.43 (Ulpian), 23.2.47 (Paul), 23.2.49 (Marcellus).

43 As Jane F. Gardner, *Women in Roman Law and Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 57, points out: ‘Augustus’ legislation on marriage and on adultery had created several categories of women who were themselves free and of citizen status, but either had no *conubium* [i.e. right to marry legally] at all, or no *contubium* with certain categories of citizens.”


the barrage of complaints that Michel Foucault even dismissed it as a significant factor in late ancient sexual ethics. Nonetheless, Augustus's legal reconfiguration of the aristocratic family cannot be separated from its broader ethical implications. As Catharine Edwards notes:

Scholars tend to treat Roman law as a domain independent of what is labeled literature, a series of practical responses to practical problems. It should rather be seen as a symbolic discourse, bearing as much or as little relationship to patterns of behavior in ancient Rome as the effusions of Roman moralists, and in dialogue with, indeed part of, moralistic discourse.

Indeed, it is precisely through the 'effusions of Roman moralists' such as Plutarch of Chaeronea that we see the new ethical economy of the conjugal family embraced and articulated.

Plutarch's Coniugalia praecepta, a recondite gift to some newly wed friends to 'swell the nuptial song' in the bridal chamber (Coniugalia praecepta preface, 138B), proclaims that the matrimonial state both produces and is produced within a certain elite philosophical ethics. This philosophical shading of the conjugal union echoes the ethical coercion of Augustus's legal reforms, as Plutarch describes moral development as the duty of well-brought up individuals who marry. The gift of this discourse itself symbolizes marriage's philosophical and ethical potential:

I am sending it as a gift for you both to possess in common, and at the same time I pray that the Muses may lend their presence and cooperation to Aphrodite, and may feel that it is no more fitting for them to provide a lyre or lute well attuned than it is to provide that harmony which concerns marriage and the household shall be well attuned through reason, concord, and philosophy (διά λόγου και συμφωνίας και φιλοσοφίας). (Coniugalia praecepta preface, 138C)

The Muses, whose 'nuptial song' in a traditional way initiated this marriage, are here drafted into a philosophical role of using their 'harmony' to phrase marriage as an ethical and reasonable union of male and female souls. Philosophy becomes the musical 'theme' of marriage, through which it 'chants a spell' over those entering a 'lifelong fellowship' (Ἰῶν κοινωνία) (Coniugalia praecepta preface, 138C). This high-status couple has a particular responsibility to marriage because they have been 'brought up in the atmosphere of philosophy' (ibid.), and it is to the ethics of 'harmony' and 'reason' that they must therefore dedicate their union. Such gross motives as money or even reproduction (standard reasons for marriage in the ancient world) are dismissed as inferior to the glorious commingling of spirits for which marriage is intended:

The marriage of the couple in love with each other is an intimate union; that of those who marry for dowry or for children is of persons joined together; and that of those who merely sleep in the same bed is of separate persons who may be regarded as cohabiting (συνβιβάζοντας) but not really living together (συμβιβάζοντας). (Coniugalia praecepta 34, 142F–143A)

Plutarch does retain a notion of hierarchy within this 'symbiosis', it is the husband's duty to 'lead' his wife into a state of higher morality. Marriage is intended to be an 'ethical schoolhouse' (διδασκαλίαν εὐθείας) in which the groom teaches his bride about 'virtue, devotion, constancy, and affection' (Coniugalia praecepta 46–47, 144F–145A). Nonetheless, the framework of symbiosis creates an economy (οἰκονομία) distinct from the rigorously hierarchical vertical structure of patria potestas: even if only theoretically, the wife enters this 'ethical schoolhouse' from which she may emerge as her husband's moral equal.

This schoolhouse replaces more common marriage settings, such as the bedroom. Plutarch insinuates his ethical ideals into the reproductive efforts of husband and wife: 'Man and wife ought especially to indulge in this [procreation] with circumspection, keeping themselves pure from all unholy and unlawful intercourse with others, and not sowing seed from which they are unwilling to have offspring' (Coniugalia praecepta 42, 144B). Plutarch nearly supplants physical reproduction altogether when he compares the fatherless uterine growths found in some women with the danger incurred by wires engaging in philosophical ruminations without their husbands' guidance: 'Great care must be taken that this sort of thing does not take place in women's minds. For if they do not receive the seed of good doctrines and share with their husbands in intellectual advancement, they, left to themselves, may conceive many untoward ideas and low designs and emotions' (Coniugalia praecepta 48, 145E). The husband's role as literal inseminator is replaced with a philosophical insemination, and the product of this intellectual reproduction is, somewhat paradoxically, the wife herself as newly reconstructed philosophical partner (if not equal to her husband, then at least 'sharing' his 'intellectual advancement'). Not only does marriage provide a convenient opportunity for wives to advance in philosophical education and wisdom along with their husbands, it is the very nature of marriage to be born from and in turn 'reproduce' a union of 'minds'. As his own version of a 'love-song' draws to a close, Plutarch once again invokes the Muses in the service of 'education and philosophy' (παιδείαν και φιλοσοφίαν) whose 'fruits' the bride Eurydice is to enjoy (Coniugalia praecepta 48, 146A).

It is unlikely that Plutarch imagines Pollianus and Eurydice would never have children or fulfill their civic duty to produce a full and prosperous oikos, or that
they would create in their homes a sort of egalitarian wonderland in which gender distinction dissolves in the dizzying light of philosophical instruction. At one point Plutarch makes the very conventional observation that ‘a man therefore ought to have his household well harmonized who is going to harmonize state, forum, and friends’ (Coniugalia praecepta 43, 144C). The husband, for all his philosophical partnership and symbiosis with his wife, is still the master of hearth and forum. Plutarch’s rhetoric, however, shifts the theoretical underpinnings of marriage in the same direction as the Augustan legislation: from the financially constituted union of variously interested paremesfamilias to the ‘philosophically’ oriented union of male and female minds, ‘an institution particularly able to foster moderation and stability in the participants’.54 Also similar to the Augustan legislation, Plutarch makes it clear that the ethical internalization of this philosophy remains within a restricted social sphere. Marriage, the ethical symbiosis of husband and wife, remains the elevated privilege of an upper-class family. When we turn to the Greek ‘romance’ novels, we see how the class-specific nature of that conjugal family begins to be camouflaged, even as it retains its reorientation toward male–female ‘partnership’.55

The world of the Greek romance – a modern designation for a constellation of thematically and generically related texts from the first centuries CE is a curious mixture of fantasy and reality:56 while its heroes and heroines participate in adventures that could justly be called swashbuckling, it is clear that their proper place remains the entirely familiar. Their travels may take them to the court of the Great King of Persia,57 or to the squalid hut of a goatherd,58 or even to battle on the deck of a pirate ship,59 but always the final destination is home and hearth, symbolized and actualized by marriage, the ‘happy ending’ par excellence.60 The extremities of the social disruption within the novels underscore the cohesion triumphantly restored

54 Cooper, Virgin and the Bride, p. 11, emphasis mine.

at their conclusions.61 Marriage between the protagonists (either celebrated at the beginning and tragically interrupted, or deferred by circumstance until the end of the story) is, as has been frequently noted, ‘the social backbone of the romances’.62 Marriage is in fact so omnipresent in the romances that merely cataloguing its appearances borders on the redundant: to a great extent the novels are marriage, conveyed through an exciting narrative.63

Brigitte Egger argues that, in comparison with Roman and provincial law, the Greek romances are socially archaicizing: they project their heroines into a fictitious legal status more reminiscent of a restrictive Attic past than a Romano-Hellenistic present.64 She posits that under the thin veil of the erotic and sentimental love story, ‘marriage’ in the end works to ‘factually debilitating … [the] image of women’.65 Egger overlooks, however, the distinctly moralizing tenor of the rhetorics of marriage in Late Antiquity. While she may find Heliodorus’s legal fiction of adultery as capital crime (for the woman) fanciful and misogynistic (a point I would not dispute), this extreme position on the moral imperatives of marriage does resonate with the ethical coercion exercised by the Augustan legislation.66 Similarly, the novels’ great attention to fidelity and legitimate procreation speaks to the same ethical duties promulgated by Augustus’s laws or even Plutarch’s ‘love-song’.67

The threat of feminine disempowerment Egger discerns in the Greek novels must be placed in the context of the overarching ideology of conjugal partnership, that is, the ideal new family promulgated by Augustan jurists and moralists. The erotic romance serves as exemplary citizens who freely fall in love and ‘live together as partners’ in ‘reason, concord, and philosophy’. The new symbiosis of the

61 See Perkins, Suffering Self, p. 46: ‘These romances filled with travel, adventure, and final union idealize social unity’; also Cooper, Virgin and the Bride, p. 34: ‘Since love and disruption were linked in the ancient imagination, romance was a narrative form well suited to the exploration of the limits of an established identity’.
63 See the excellent discussions in Perkins, Suffering Self, pp. 41–76 and Cooper, Virgin and the Bride, pp. 20–44, which focus more on social institutions and power than, as other modern works, on sexuality per se.
64 Egger, ‘Women and Marriage’, pp. 266–74: ‘Often, the law tends to be more conservative than other aspects of reality and expressions in mentality, but in the case of women in late Hellenistic society, it is not so conservative and constraining a discourse as that of Greek romance’ (p. 274).
65 Egger, ‘Women and Marriage’, p. 273; romances, she believes, are at times ‘even more frauenfeindlich than Attic law’ (p. 270).
66 Egger, ‘Women and Marriage’, p. 279 n. 48; see Heliodorus, An Ethiopion Story 1.11.4 (θανατον το τελς του παραμυπας … μωσχαται). Text in R.M. Rattenbury and T.W. Lamb (eds.), Les Éthiopiennes: Théogène et Chariclée (3 vols.; Paris: Édition Belles Lettres, 1935–43); translation by J.R. Morgan in Reardon, Greek Novels. Egger also refers to 1.17.5, but it is not clear that Demeant’s death there is imagined as commensurate with her legal ‘punishment’. For a third or fourth-century discussion of when husbands and fathers can put adulterers and adulteresses to death based on the legal iugae de adulterio coevertis, see the Mosaicarium et Romanarum Legum Collatio 4.2.1–12.8 (text in Riccobono, Fontes Iuris, II, pp. 544–89), discussed with other Digesta passages in Treggiari, Roman Law, pp. 282–85.
67 Cooper, Virgin and the Bride, p. 43, suggests that the novels’ eroticism ‘should be understood as an encouragement to fertility similar in aim to the Augustan marriage legislation’. Goldhill, Foucault’s Virginity, p. 113, also makes this connection.
conjugal family did not erase gender distinction; it rather relativized the male–female relationship into an ethical 'partnership' in which the husband still ruled hearth and home, but his symbiotic relationship with his wife was no longer merely another extension of his potestas, homologous to his relationship with his children and slaves. It is this reconfiguration of relation and difference that the Greek novels narrativize and dramatically expand.

Marriage is, first of all, construed as the locus of unique ethical and social advancement. Simon Goldhill, whose essays on ancient erotic writings attempt to supplement Foucault’s History of Sexuality, connects the philosophical significance of Plutarch’s Amatorius (a middle-Platonic dialogue contrasting the virtues of opposite- and same-sex erotic desire) with the Greek novels: Its significance is perhaps better seen as the fullest statement of an ideological or theoretical self-sitting that runs in different guises through the various texts I have been discussing and finds its most developed narrative expression in the great sophistic novels of Longus, Heliodorus and Achilles Tatus. The novels transform the philosophical guise of Plutarch’s Coningtona precepsia and Amatorius into a romanticized contrast between ‘successful’ marriages and ‘doomed’ homoerotic affairs. This contrast does not so much value ‘heterosexual’ over ‘homosexual’ desire, but rather juxtaposes types of relationships in which desire may be acted out. The married couple survives extraordinary perils to arrive at a position at the centre of society, the conjugal union, superior and triumphant, while the much less harshly tested relationships of unmarried couples end in tragedy and death. In Achilles Tatus’s Leukippe and Kleitophon, the hero’s cousin Kleinas laments that his ‘boyfriend’ (μειτρίκον) Charicles is being pushed into an arranged marriage. Kleinas, outraged, launches into a diatribe against women and marriage familiar from classical and Hellenistic Greek literature (including the Amatorius of Plutarch). As Kleiras is wrapping up, news comes that Charicles is dead, having been thrown by the horse Kleinas gave him (Achilles Tatus, Leukippe and Kleitophon 1.7–12). At the funeral, the eulogy of Charicles’s father reminds the reader what his son’s fate should have been: ‘O groom and bridgroom (ιντρις και νυμπης) — un consummated bridgroom, unlucky chevalier: Your bridal chamber is the grave, your wedlock is death, your wedding march a funeral hymn, your marriage song this dirge’ (Leukippe and Kleitophon 1.13.5). Kleinas’s own lament makes it clear that their relationship, explicitly counterpoised to legal marriage, is the cause of this tragedy: ‘O cruel fate! I bought you your murderer and gave him to you as a gift!’ (Leukippe and Kleitophon 1.14.3). Later in the same novel, as Leukipe and Kleitophon elope with Kleinas’s aid, they encounter an Egyptian named Menelas, who also tells the story of causing his male lover’s death in a hunting accident: ‘He died in the embrace of the very arms that had killed him’ (Leukippe and Kleitophon 2.34.5). This tragedy, set in the context

of Kleitophon’s erotic journey to the marriage bed and reinforced by a retelling of Kleinas’s own tale and a mock-Platonic dialogue on the virtues of boy-love versus woman-love (Leukippe and Kleitophon 2.35–38), again acts as a negative foil to the properly constituted marital relationship which is the novel’s inevitable conclusion.

The novels also echo the legal and philosophical literature on marriage by situating the conjugal union within a new, symbiotic economy of familial gender relations. David Konstan has proposed that the Greek novels alone of Hellenistic amatory literature conform their protagonists’ relationships to a model of ‘sexual symmetry’, in which the male and female partners are socially and romantically matched. The ‘pederastic paradigm’, characterized by an asymmetry between erastes and eromenos, is set forth as a negative counterpart, ‘doomed’ to failure. By contrast, the marital union is one of symmetrical ‘equals’, promoting erotic and familial partnership. The narrative flow makes such conjugal ‘happy endings’ appear natural and inevitable, in much the same way that Plutarch depicted marriage as the natural site of philosophical progression. To nuance Konstan’s potentially optimistic reading of ‘symmetry’, we might add that the inequalities of gender difference are, as in Plutarch, relativized and reconfigured by the gentle rubric of ‘partnership’ or symbiosis, through a discourse of elite matrimonial harmony.

Yet strikingly absent from the narrative framework of the Greek novels is the insistence on the proper upper-class setting for such concordia. Konstan remarks that social status is made symmetrical in a way that masks its significance altogether in the maritally driven novel:

Divisions of class and status marked ancient society as well as modern, and are reflected in the narrative presuppositions of New Comedy, epic, and other classical genres. But the Greek novelists, uniquely as it seems, elected to portray reciprocal erotic relationships between social equals and thereby defined for the genre a problematic involving love and fidelity that excluded a primary concern with issues of status or rank.

Status and rank are unrealistically ‘depersonalized’, as if they were not factors in the negotiation of a proper marriage. The class-based restrictiveness of the partnership, emphasized by Augustus and Plutarch, is thus strangely veiled in the novels, as illustrated by the house slaves Leukon and Rhode, companions of the protagonists Habrokomes and Anthia in Xenophon of Ephesus’s Ephesian Tale. Leukon and Rhode are featured sporadically throughout the novel; they make their first appearance in the second book as ‘two slaves’ (οικταις δύο), not necessarily sharing a relationship with each other (Ephesian Tale 2.2.3). Later, also subject to the misfortunes of their master and mistress, they are sold together in Lydia ‘to an old man who gave them every attention and treated them as his own children’ (Ephesian Tale 2.10.4). We meet this pair next in the last book of the novel where they are described as the companions (συντρόφοις) of Habrokomes and Anthia; their Lycian master has since died and ‘left his large estate to them’ (Ephesian Tale 5.6.3). Leukon and Rhode now play the role of wealthy householders, travelling to Rhodes where they

68 Goldhill, Foucault’s Virginity, p. 144.
69 Konstan, Sexual Symmetry, p. 29, calls the affairs ‘doomed’; John J. Winkler, translator of Achilles Tatus’s Leukippe and Kleitophon, in a note also refers to these ‘tragic gay subplots’ (Reardon, Greek Novels, p. 185).
70 See for instance Goldhill, Foucault’s Virginity, pp. 76–92, where these erotic logos are analysed as providing a particular counterpoint to the framing tale – as foreshadowing events … offering thematic focuses, constructing paradigms which help articulate the place of the hero and heroine within the realm of erotic discourse’ (p. 81).
72 Konstan, Sexual Symmetry, p. 218; see also p. 186: ‘[The Greek novel] abolishes the tension between eros and marriage that informs all previous genres.’
make offerings to Helios and erect a ‘pillar inscribed in gold’ with their own names (Ephesian Tale 5.10.6). The erection of such a monument, in normal circumstances, would seem the act of a well-to-do married couple:73 in fact, Leukon and Rhode’s monument stands next to a ‘gold panoply’ that had earlier been dedicated by Anthia and Habrokomes themselves (see Ephesian Tale 1.12.2–3). On Rhodes, Leukon and Rhode are instrumental in uniting Anthia and Habrokomes after their separation and adventures; upon recognizing Habrokomes they ‘made over their possessions to him, took care of him, looked after him, and tried to console him’ (Ephesian Tale 5.10.12). At this point they stand halfway between their former status as slaves and their current status as the ‘happy couple’: their own conjugal bliss acts as a salve for the temporarily solitary Habrokomes. When they discover Anthia mourning next to the offerings at Helios’s temple, their exclamations restore the ‘real’ happy couple to the centre of the narrative while resituating themselves in a position of servitude: ‘Mistress Anthia, we are your slaves (τὑμείς οἰκτεῖσι τοῖς), Leukon and Rhode, who shared your voyage and the pirate lair … Have courage, mistress; Habrokomes is safe, and he is here, always mourning for you!’ (Ephesian Tale 5.12.5). That night the protagonists and their entourage break up into what seem to be comparable couples: ‘Leukon with Rhode, Hippothous with the handsome Kleisthenes … Anthia with Habrokomes’ (Ephesian Tale 5.13.6). ‘Handsome Kleisthenes’, however, is soon after adopted by Hippothous, and Leukon and Rhode give over the rest of their possessions to Anthia and Habrokomes, or, as Xenophon phrases it, ‘share everything with their companions’ (Ephesian Tale 5.15).

What position Leukon and Rhode hold at the end of the Ephesian Tale is remarkably unclear. We can assume that they retain their freedom as granted by their Lycian master’s will; perhaps they are enjoying conjugal bliss alongside their former owners and masters. Or we could imagine that narratively their own conjugal union, like their wealth, was merely held in trust for the true protagonists during their unfortunate separation; both wealth and marital happiness are then transferred to their rightful owners (Habrokomes and Anthia) to generate a happy ending. This ambiguity inscribes a fluidity into the novel’s marital discourse: the happiness of the maritally centered household, the upper-class ethics of the couple, has for a brief moment slipped through the status-oriented cracks that the Augustan legislation and Plutarch’s philosophic tracts sought to cement. As Konstan remarked, class and status as issues in proper marriage have been veiled, in a genre that might itself extend deeper into the lower social and economic classes of imperial society.74 By ‘romancing’ an ethics of the conjugal family, the Greek novel seems to open up an imaginative ethical space, however small, beyond the socioeconomic sphere in which it was fabricated.75 Here is where we can begin to trace the ethical and narrative intervention of the so-called Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles.

‘This Filthy Intercourse’: Wives as Homewreckers in the Apocryphal Acts

The so-called Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles, like the Greek novels, attend a great deal to marriage and the ethical advancement of heroines. As we saw above, a previous generation of scholarship found the negative focus on marriage to be the logical counterpart to the positive exhortations to chastity and virginity. Yet, as Kate Cooper notes, the non-specific ascetic language of these Acts stands ‘poised between revolution and irrelevance’;76 it is a moral cipher masking a more profound statement about Christian values. Indeed, creating a simple inverse equation between ‘marriage’ and ‘chastity’ also ignores the salient fact that the Apocryphal Acts are being composed and disseminated in the wake of a sustained period of pro-nuptial propaganda stretching through the first and second centuries, in which marriage was beginning to attain its familiar configuration.77

‘Marriage’ began to appear, in the first and second centuries, as a new ethical model for the family, one that might (through suggestive literary devices) translate beyond its intended upper-class sphere. Often scholars fail to apply this observation to analyses of literary representation of marriage, and so ignore the class-based implications of marital discourses. Generally only the scholars writing ‘against the grain’ point out the social exclusivity of tustum matrimonium: Bernadette Brooten and John Boswell, writing to carve out a historical space for same-sex unions in Antiquity, emphasize the restrictedness of ancient marriage to very particular social classes.78 Paul Veyne, concerned to ‘de-Christianize’ the foundations of modern ethics, states it baldly:

All the transformations of sexuality and conjugality are anterior to Christianity. Two principal shifts come to pass, from a bisexuality of penetration to a heterosexuality of reproduction; and from a society where marriage is in no way an institution designed for all society to a society where it ‘goes without saying’ that marriage (‘le mariage’) is a fundamental

73 See Cooper, Virgin and the Bride, pp. 38–43, where she analyses the social significance of Daphnis and Chloe’s mutilation, which frames Longus’s novel.
74 Ewen Bowie, ‘The Readership of Greek Novels in the Ancient World’, in Tatun, Search for the Ancient Novel, pp. 435–59, argues with some acuity that the novels were likely intended for a sophisticated, educated (pepoteutamenoi) audience, but concedes that ‘a number of points could support the notion that the readership of the novel may have spilled over … to reach a slightly wider circle’ (p. 441). See also Christine M. Thomas, The Acts of Peter. Gospel Literature, and the Ancient Novel: Rewriting the Past (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 149–50 n. 58.
75 Although my focus remains on literary interpretation, it is notable that the interactive physical spaces of the urban centres of the first centuries might also have encouraged such class slippage: see the important comments of Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, ‘Domus and Insulae in Rome: Families and Housefuls’, in Bale and Osteck, Early Christian Families, pp. 3–18. Amy-Jill Levine’s verse, which serves as the epigraph for this essay, nicely conveys the material and ideological significance of Wallace-Hadrill’s argument.
76 Cooper, Virgin and the Bride, p. 52 and see p. 57.
77 Dixon, ‘Sentimental Ideal’, p. 99. ‘From the late Republic on, it is possible to discern a sentimental ideal of family life at Rome which can be compared with our own cultural ideal. The expectation of affection within marriage and the appreciation of young and youthful children were both part of this ideal.’
Accepting Veyne's proposal that as this new ethics became interiorized it was also universalized, and having traced one route by which this upper-class discourse might have penetrated to lower classes, we can now frame the Apocryphal Acts as a deliberate form of narrative resistance to this ethical family configuration centred on marriage. Therefore, I intend especially to the dynamic of female agency in this rejection of 'conjugal partnership' to ask how the subversive Christian emphasis on eradication of marital symbiosis might translate into new articulations for the possibilities of women's piety.

The generic links between the Greek romances and Apocryphal Acts have been the subject of scholarly enquiry for close to a century. When the novels were seen as a sort of popular literature, intended for women or other 'juvenile' readers, the Apocryphal Acts were similarly regarded as appealing to an analogous audience. Scholars now concede that the novels were intended for a more sophisticated audience, occasionally penetrating to a 'wider' readership; the Apocryphal Acts, however, are often still seen as the province of a lower-class audience, and thus their strange liberties and inversions of 'romantic' themes have been read more and more as incidents of political and social subversion. Judith Perkins, who maintains 'that in the so-called Apocryphal Acts of the Apocryphal Acts signs and strategies of an emerging representational and social challenge are preserved', charts the many examples of class- and status-oriented resistance in the Acts of Peter. While Perkins focuses on the subversion of 'public' social institutions and their reconfiguration according to a new model of subjectivity, I would like to redirect her enquiry into the reconfigured models of family and kinship, given the deliberate emphasis in many of the Acts on the apostles' disastrous interventions into a conjugal oriented family.

The Acts subvert many of the tropes of 'partnership' or ζυγγραμμα expressed as a marital ethics in the classical literature, and replace them with broader modes of 'kinship', συγγραμμα. The Acts of Andrew, for instance, distorts the philosophically beneficial 'procreation' lauded by Plutarch: while Plutarch transforms the bedroom into an 'ethical schoolhouse', the Acts of Andrew converts the bedroom of the heroine, Maximilla, into a Christian meeting-place (e.g. Passio Andrae 13). One of the text's more bizarre moments comes when Maximilla's husband Aegeates, proconsul of Achaea, returns to the palace while the Christians are meeting in his bedroom; as Aegeates sits outside the bedroom on a chamberpot, Andrew 'seals' the Christians so they can pass by unseen (Passio Andrae 13–14). After they have all departed, Aegeates rushes into the bedroom and attempts to return it to a place of conjugal union. His words to his wife might come from the Coniugalia praecipita: 'Give me your right hand first: I shall kiss her whom I no longer call "wife" (γυναίκα) but "lady" (δησποινή), so that I may find relief in your chastity and affection for me (τῇ σοφροσύνῃ καὶ φιλίᾳ τῇ πρὸς με'). (Passio Andrae 14). Maximilla resists, and once Aegeates has fallen asleep she sends for Andro so they may meet in 'another bedroom' (Passio Andrae 15). Much of this section of the Acts of Andrew takes place in various bedrooms of the proconsular praetorium in Patras; both the tender speeches delivered by Aegeates to his wife and the sermons delivered by Andrew to his 'brethren' make clear that the locus of elite conjugal koinōna is being actively transformed into a site of sacred sungeneia, i.e. kinship. Although Androw and Maximilla characterize Aegeates's desires as 'filthy intercourse' (μυορός μετέχος) and a 'foul and sordid way of life' (μυορό μοι καὶ ριπαρού) (Passio Andrae 14, 37), Aegeates himself echoes the ethical configuration of marriage found in the philosophical and romantic literature. Sex for Aegeates represents a higher union, in which female sexual submission becomes aristocratic, wisely 'fellowship' (as Plutarch might have described it). When Aegeates discovers that Maximilla has been sending a slave-girl to his bed in place, he does not reproach his wife with threats and potestas but beseeches her in language of partnership and union: 'I cling to your feet, having lived with you as your husband (καὶ τῆς συμβουλῆς ... συγγενεῖς νοῦ) for twelve years, you whom I held as a goddess and now I still hold you as such on account of your chastity (σοφροσύνης) and your generally refined character' (Passio Andrae 23). Later, when Maximilla persists in their separation even while Andrew sits in prison, Aegeates again attempts to win her back. His description of
their nuptial bond sets aside the typical worldly concerns of marriage and emphasizes their spiritual and ethical union, even in sexual intercourse:

Maximilla, because your parents thought me worthy to be your mate (τὴν συμπὸσιάν μοι), they pledged you to me in marriage without regard to wealth, heredity or reputation, considering only the kindness of my soul … If you would be the woman you once were, living together with me (συμπόσια μοι) as we were accustomed, sleeping with me, consorting with me, conceiving children with me (συγκαταθέσας μοι) in the future, then I would treat you well in every way. (Passio Andreeae 36)

Sharing a bed, having sex and bearing children are all subordinate aspects of ‘living together’, symbiosis, which for Plutarch had been the highest form of companionship (e.g. Coniugallia praeccepta 34, 142F–143A).

Maximilla rejects Agape’s soulful union, however, and is seduced away by a competing rhetoric of family. This coupling of moral superiority in alternative familial terms appears throughout the Patras episode by means of a repeated emphasis on sungeneia. Andrew’s speech not only refers to the Christian converts as ‘brothers’, they reconstruct the diverse body of believers into a family formed by the apostle: ‘If you desire a friend who supplies goods not of this world, I am your friend. If you desire a father for those who are rejected on earth, I am your father. If you desire a legitimate brother (αδελφὸν γνησίου) to set you apart from bastard brothers, I am your brother’ (Passio Andreeae 12). The first time Maximilla refuses to sleep with Agape, and meets instead with Andrew in ‘another bedroom’, the apostle commends her choice and prays to God. ‘If she has such a firm faith in you, may she obtain her own proper kinship (τὴν ἑαυτῆς συγγενείαν) through separation from those who affect such (τῶν προσόπων) but are really enemies’ (Passio Andreeae 16). By intervening in what might seem the correct familial context for the wife of a Greek proconsul and providing instead a ‘true’ and morally superior family life, Andrew demonstrates the deficiency of the conjugal oriented family. Maximilla is ‘freed’ from her symbiosis and marital concorda.

Unlike the Greek novels, the Apocryphal Acts do not mark the particular status of that conjugal family: the failure of this familial configuration is linked throughout with its upper-class milieu. Compare the ambiguously paired house-slaves Leukon and Rhode, who enjoy a (perhaps brief?) married family life, with the ‘wantonly slave-girl’ Eucilia in the Acts of Andrew. Sent by Maximilla to be ‘used’ by Agape ‘as his wife’ (χρυσάτους γὰς τῇ ἵπτοι συμβίω) and take Maximilla’s place in the marriage bed (Passio Andreeae 17), Eucilia grows boastful and demands both money and freedom from her mistress (gifts Leukon and Rhode receive easily from their Lycian master before beginning a life of conjugal bliss). Resented by her fellow-servants, Eucilia is betrayed and the ‘furious proconsul’ cuts out her tongue and casts her outside, where she becomes ‘food for the dogs’ (Passio Andreeae 18–22, cf. 2 Kgs 9:34–37). The marriage bed is evidently a dangerous place for slaves. In the novels, class is veiled to the point that a slave could be elevated into the ethically superior family constructed by marriage; in contrast, in the Apocryphal Acts those wealthy aristocrats instead ‘drop down’ socially into the inferior state of the other ‘brothers’.

This inversion of the novels’ ethical universalization is represented by the figure of Stratocles, Agape’s brother. Like Pollianus and Eurydice in the Coniugallia praeccepta, Stratocles is first distinguished in the Acts of Andrew as spiritually and ethically advanced: he is ‘Agape’s brother, who had petitioned Caesar not to serve in the army (μὴ στρατιωθήσεται) but to pursue philosophy’ (Passio Andreeae 1). Furthermore he endures a crisis like those of the heroes’ best friends in the Greek novels: Alcman, ‘a boy whom Stratocles loved dearly’, falls violently ill, and Stratocles blames himself. ‘If only I had never come here but perished at sea this would not have happened to me! Friends … I cannot live without him’ (Passio Andreeae 2). If this were a scene from one of the Greek novels, Alcman would die and Stratocles’ brother Agape would initiate a brief discourse on the benefits of married life over ponderosity; we are far from the land of romance, however. Instead Maximilla fetches Andrew, who promptly heals Alcman and engages Stratocles in a further inversion of the Platonic love-discourse mimicked in Leukipe and Kleitophon (Passio Andreeae 5–6). Andrew, ‘no novice at midwifery’ (ματαιοτήτι), draws out the embryonic ‘new self’ trapped inside Stratocles. Andrew recognizes that ‘whatever [Stratocles]’ former philosophy, he now knows that it was hollow’ (Passio Andreeae 7). Stratocles gives up all his possessions (an act he manages to repeat after his baptism: Passio Andreeae 8, 12) and through Andrew’s care his ‘embryos’ are ‘brought into the open, so that they may be registered by the entirety of the kindred (συγγενείαν) and brought into the donative of saving words, whose associate (κοινωνοῖς) I found you to be’ (Passio Andreeae 9). Stratocles, like Maximilla, enters into his own ‘proper kinship’ with his fellow Christian believers, one of whom is his (presumably former) young lover Alcman (Passio Andreeae 10). Leukon and Rhode had moved ‘upwards’ into a marital relationship marked by gentility and munificence; Stratocles in contrast moves ‘down’ into a kinship marked by humility and subservience. One of Agape’s servants reports to his master that ‘even though [Stratocles] owns many slaves, he appears in public doing his own chores – buying his own vegetables and bread, and other necessities and carrying them on foot through the centre of the city – making himself look simply repulsive to everyone’ (Passio Andreeae 25). This Christianized family ethics is again inscribed as ‘lower class’ at the end of the Acts of Andrew; after Andrew has faced martyrdom. Maximilla separates herself from the proconsular household and spends ‘her time happily with the brethren’. When Agape kills himself in dejection, Stratocles for a third time remounces wealth and station: ‘Stratocles … did not want so much as to

86 Cooper, Virgin and the Bride, pp. 46–67, esp. pp. 56–60, demonstrates that the ‘rivalry’ for the fidelity of a woman was designed to demonstrate the ‘moral superiority’ of the apostolic hero over his pagan (often imperial) counterpart.
87 See MacDonald, Acts of Andrew, p. 331 n. 7.
88 MacDonald assumes that the προσώπων are ‘masquerading friends’, but the emphasis in the entire work on ‘true’ and ‘false’ kin suggests to me instead ‘pretend’ families. Since Agape is repeatedly referred to as the son or relative of demons (see for example Passio Andreeae 40), as Maximilla’s husband he is the worst of these pretenders.
89 Konstan, ‘Acts of Love’, p. 20, uses this story to argue that the ‘apostle does not destroy human bonds of affection, except insofar as they necessarily involve sex’. I find his argument persuasive, but would add that a particular nexus of sex and class represented by marriage is especially to be resisted by Christian fellowship.
touch the property Aegeates left – for the wretch died childless. He said, “May your possessions go with you, Aegeates! May Jesus be my friend!” (Passio Andreae 64).

The marital union has failed on all counts – not even children were produced – and this failure signals the breakdown of a markedly upper-class oikonomía of status and gender relations.

This eradication of an upper-class familial economy is articulated variously throughout the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles, sometimes with more subtlety than the devastated family in Patras. In the Acts of John the apostle gathers a collection of formerly wealthy married couples into his wandering circle of believers. The text’s first extant portion portrays the apostle arriving at Ephesus, where he is greeted by the forlorn general Lycomedes (‘a wealthy man’) whose wife has fallen ill. Both Lycomedes and John speak of the woman, Cleopatra, as a beloved wife and partner. Lycomedes cries out that if Cleopatra dies he will follow her, and John immediately promises that his ‘partner for life’ (τὴν συμβολὴν) will be restored to him (Acta Ioannis 19–21). John raises Cleopatra, but not before Lycomedes himself falls down and seems dead. So the scene repeats itself, with Cleopatra threatening to die unless Lycomedes is raised. When both husband and wife are restored, they fall to John’s feet and beg him and his ‘companions’ to stay with them in their house. John’s disciples persuade him to transform the house of the married couple into the meeting-place of the Christians in Ephesus, ‘so that they [Lycomedes and Cleopatra] remain unsullied (ἀκόμη δωκόνατοι) before the Lord’ (Acta Ioannis 24–25; see also Acta Ioannis 26, 31). Here there is no need to defeat a male rival in order for a wife to become a continent Christian, and what had been a conjugal union based on affection and reciprocity is newly subsumed into a larger Christian sungeniea.

A duplicate story in the Acts of John (now lost) seems to have presented a rockier road to Christian kinship, but a similar ending: Drusiana, a wife of a wealthy Ephesian named Andronicus, is persuaded by John to remove herself from her husband’s bed. Later, other Ephesians recount the tale to the woman’s lusty admirer: ‘Do you alone not know that Andronicus, who was not the godly man he now is, had locked her up in a tomb, saying, “Either I’ll have you as a wife, as I had you before, or you must die!”’ (Acta Ioannis 63). The situation recalls that of Aegeates and Maximilla; at the point in the Acts of John that this story is recounted, however, Andronicus has been ‘persuaded to become like-minded’ (ἐπιηθεῖς τῷ ἰσιοτήτος νομίσμασθαι) Acta Ioannis 63), travels chastely with his wife in John’s apostolic entourage (Acta Ioannis 59, 105) and, like Lycomedes, offers his house as a meeting-place for John’s followers (Acta Ioannis 46, 62). Once again, the chaste couple allow their well-off conjugal family to be swallowed up by the more common Christian kinship led by the apostle. Like Andrew, John is a ‘father’ to the brethren who set aside the things of this world to become his ‘children’ and his ‘servants’; we are even treated to a catalogue of believers who move with John across Asia Minor: ‘Andronicus and Drusiana, Lycomedes and Cleobius, and their attendants ... Aristobula, who had heard that her husband Tertullus had died on the way, Aristippus with Xenophon, and ... chastise prostitute (ἡ σοφρονίσσα πόρνη), and many others’ (Acta Ioannis 59).90

90 Some ms read ‘Cleobus’ instead of ‘Cleobius’, perhaps signifying that the two couples, Andronicus and Drusiana, Lycomedes and Cleobius, were once listed here.

motley crew of nobles, servants, repentant harlots and others are articulated primarily as members of an itinerant Christian ‘family’.

Marriage, as in the Greek novels, could also be disrupted before the bride and groom had consummated their nuptial union. Such disruption occurs in the house of Thecla, still affianced to Thamyris when Paul breezes into town. For Thecla, breaking her bond with Thamyris and the validity of the conjugal union itself entails renunciation of wealth and station; at her first visit to Paul in prison, she hands over her bracelets and silver mirror to the jailers in order to gain entry (Acta Pauli et Theclae 18). By surrendering these precious items, Thecla symbolically surrenders her gendered social status as a ‘cultivated’ wife.91 She who was once ‘first’ among the Ionians becomes a ‘slave of God’ (Acta Pauli et Theclae 26). Even more dramatic is the treatment of the apostle Peter’s own daughter in a Coptic fragment of the Acts of Peter. A beautiful young girl, her daughter becomes a ‘stumbling-block’, and a ‘very rich man, Ptolemy by name, ... sent for her to take her for his wife’ (Acta Petri 132).92 Although the text is fragmentary, it seems that Peter asked the Lord to paralyse the girl to make her less desirable; Ptolemy, on the brink of suicide (Aegeates’s fate in the Acts of Andrew), is stopped by a vision and converted to following Christ. Upon his death, he leaves land to Peter’s daughter which the apostle promptly sells to give ‘the whole sum to the poor’ (Acta Petri 135–39).93 Wealth and marriage narrowly avoid colliding with the morally superior (i.e. poor) family of the apostle, here represented by a literal daughter.

The long and involved Acts of Thomas, probably composed in Syria, was quickly translated into Greek and transmitted through the same channels as the other Apocryphal Acts.94 The affinities of the Greek recension with the rising discourse of marital ethics in the Graeco–Roman world allow us to bring together the different scenarios of marital and familial disruption accomplished by an apostle. Thomas’s first intervention occurs at the moment of marital consummation. Having recently been sold by a vision of Jesus (his twin brother) to an Indian merchant, Thomas finds himself attending the wedding of the only daughter of the king of Andrapolis (Acta Thomae 4). At the wedding reception he is taken by the king to pronounce a blessing on his daughter and her husband. His words sound innocent enough: ‘bless thee, Lord Jesus, offering you supplication for these young persons, that you may do to them what helps, benefits, and is profitable for them’ (Acta Thomae 10). Immediately afterwards in the wedding chamber, however, a vision of Jesus ‘in the appearance of Judas Thomas’ reveals these ‘benefits’:


93 For a study of the role of wealth and class in the rest of the Acts of Peter, see Perkins, Suffering Self, pp. 124–41.

Know that if you refrain from this filthy intercourse (ἡ μορφή κοινωνίας τούτης) you will become temples holy and pure, being released from affections and troubles ... If you beget many children, for their sakes you will become grasping and avaricious, plundering orphans and deceiving widows ... But if you obey and preserve your souls pure to God, there will be born to you living children, untouched by these unholy things, and you will be without care, spending an untroubled life, free from grief and care, looking forward to receive that incorruptible and true marriage, and you will enter as groomsmen into that bridal chamber full of immortality and light. (Acta Thomae 12)

The 'benefits' of marriage, companionship and procreation, are spiritualized and their corruptible elements eliminated. The next morning the unveiled bride announces proudly to her father the king, 'And that I have set at naught this husband and these nuptials (τὸν γάμον τούτον) which have passed away before my eyes is because I have been joined in a different marriage (ἐτέρα γάμω) ... I have been united to the true husband' (Acta Thomae 14). The bride passes through the rhetoric of conjugal union into a spiritualized 'union', inverting the ethical superiority of upper-class marriage from within its own terms. Thomas sails away with his master to India, but we are told that a Hebrew slave who had served at the wedding 'rejoiced greatly' upon hearing that the couple had chosen to remain continent: 'And she arose and went to them, and was with them a long time, until they had instructed (κατηχήσατο) the king also. And many of the brethren also met there, until the rumour had spread that the apostle had gone to the cities of India and was teaching there. And they went away and joined him' (Acta Thomae 16). Although Thomas's intervention was brief (in fact the apostle's role in this conversion is unclear) the scenario is by now a familiar one: a couple turns away from an upper-class marital union learning its moral deficiencies, and instead enters into a spiritualized marriage in turn subordinated to their new 'kinship', in which their 'brethren' could as easily be slaves as kings.

In India Thomas performs a series of miracles instigated by the disastrous consequences of love, marriage and status: he heals a woman whose renunciation of sex was abrogated by a demon who chose to live with her 'as man and wife' (Acta Thomae 42–49);55 he cures the withered hands of a man who had slain his lover when she refused to live with him 'in chastity and pure conduct', and then raises the woman herself from hell (Acta Thomae 51–59); and he casts out the demons from an Indian captain's wife and daughter, who had been possessed since their unwilling attendance at a wedding (Acta Thomae 62–81).56 These incidents slowly chip at the moral edifice of marriage. Finally the Acts of Thomas strikes at the upper-class core when Thomas is heard preaching by Mygdonia, 'wife of Charisius the near relative of the king' (Acta Thomae 82; an epithet repeated throughout the text: Acta Thomae 87, 89, 93, 95, 102, 134, 135). Like a disease, Thomas's disastrous message of sexual and marital renunciation spreads through the royal family: Mygdonia converts, followed by Tertia, the king's wife, and Vazan and Mnesara, the king's son and daughter-in-law. Like Thecla, Mygdonia finds that renunciation of her married state entails surrendering her wealth and status. Thomas tells her that 'neither the fame of the authority which surrounds you nor the power of this world nor the filthy intercourse (ἡ κοινωνία ἡ μορφή) of your husband will be of use to you if you are deprived of the true intercourse' (Acta Thomae 88). She gives up her finery and wallows on the ground in sackcloth and ashes; her husband Charisius laments 'the madness of the stranger, whose tyranny throws the great and illustrious into the abyss ... her noble soul has been humbled' (Acta Thomae 135, 99). Charisius pleads with her time and again, as Aegeates pleaded with Maximilla, to restore not just their marriage bed but their sacred bond: 'You are my riches and honour, you are my family and kindred ... γένος δὲ μοι καὶ νόμος ... γενός δὲ μοι καὶ συγγενεία συ τέλος' (Acta Thomae 116). Charisius cannot convince his wife, nor later the king his queen, that the noble marriage bond which they believed would be ethically edifying and fulfilling is anything but a pale shadow of the superior kinship found in Christianity.

When the fledgling Christian community gathers on the eve of Thomas's martyrdom, his prayer reconfigures them as a family of harassed, impoverished wanderers, huddling for life and security around the bright light of Christ: 'Companion and associate,' he prays, 'hope of the weak and trust of the poor, refuge and shelter of the weary, voice which forth from on high, comforter who dwells among us, shelter and haven of those who travel through dark countries ... be with Vazan, Misaedus's son, and Tertia and Mnesara, and gather them into your fold and unite them with your number' (Acta Thomae 156). One might never suspect from such a baptismal prayer that the baptizands being prayed for are of the Indian royal family. The familial configuration which might have marked their noble status, the conjugal union, has been beaten back, and with it disappear notions of worldly hierarchy and class: the mere captain becomes a priest at the end, and the king's son his deacon (Acta Thomae 169). Eventually even King Misaedus of India, after years of resistance, is transformed into merely one of 'the multitude of those who had believed in Christ' (Acta Thomae 170).

Conclusions: The Broken Family Circle

The narrative through which the Apocryphal Acts paint their family portraits resembles a twisted, abstracted representation of the romantic ideal of the jurists, philosophers and novelists; they transform the naturalized intersections of gender 'partnership' and elite ethical advancement promulgated in the early Empire. In a doubled gesture of appropriation and renunciation, the Apocryphal Acts enter into and deconstruct the upper-class notion of symbiotic partnership trickling down through society, and replace it with a distinctly un-classed notion of 'kinship', sungeneia, through which an entirely different sense of relation and difference might be offered forth. Throughout these Acts women emerge as the focus of marital breakdown. Thecla, Maximilla, Drusiana, Mygdonia, all symbolize the destructive force of the apostles' anti-marriage message. By stepping back to consider how and why women emerge as the heroes of both narratives, that of upper-class koimônia and...
un-classed sungeneia, we can begin to understand the potential impact of this clash of ‘family values’ among early Christian women.

We might begin, as did a previous generation of social historians, by enquiring after the social location of these narratives. The particularly upper-class notion of ethics put forward in the literature of the first and second centuries takes the strongest blow in the Apocryphal Acts. The well-born heroes and heroines are precisely the figures who must discover the moral and ethical failure of the marital ideal laid before them: Thecla would not have the same impact in the Acts of Paul were she not one of the ‘first of Iconium’. The king of Antioch must be catechized by his (former?) slave-girl, and a new kinship patterned on social renunciation must transform the bedroom into a new and better ‘ethical schoolhouse’. Christian auditors and readers learning to internalize this disavowal of society must first, then, learn the lessons of society’s failure: the new, high-status ethics of the conjugal union must fail before the better ethics of Christian kinship can succeed.

Yet it would be simplistic and fallacious to assume that a truly gritty lower class produced these texts that celebrate the failure of a dangerously romanticized upper-class family ethics. When analysing early Christian discourse, we must never lose sight of its conscious reliance on rhetoric and representation. Instead we would do well to place these rich narratives in the same stream of Christian rhetoric that permitted the educated author of the third Gospel to celebrate the blessedness of the poor (Lk. 6:20), and the astonishingly well-read third-century exegete Origen happily to accept Celsus’s criticism that Christians are ‘the most illiterate and bucolic yokels’, and turn it to his advantage (Origen, Contra Celsum 3.55–60).

Judith Perkins has suggested that in the first centuries of Christianity a subjectivity constructed around suffering was deployed to empower Christian communities. Narratives of pain and subjugation do not necessarily tell the historical story of martyrdom and ‘real’ suffering, but rather construct a resistant and subversive identity. So, too, in the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles, the family as locus of ethical progression is bifurcated into a failed upper-class family, represented by the increasingly popularized ideal of the conjugal union, and a more successful ethical mode of Christian ‘kinship’, sungeneia: instituted by the homoerecting apostle, embodied by the intransigent wife, and bringing down the swashbuckling heroine of romance into a ‘simply revolting’ brotherhood of slaves, kings and women. What becomes potentially empowering for a Christian seeking detachment from social norms is not the reality of poverty, but the rejection of class as a marker of ethical superiority.

How, then, do we characterize the heroines of the Apocryphal Acts, those renunciatory women – wives, or wives-to-be – who give up both wealth and conjugal

symbiosis in order to embrace their ‘own proper kinship’. Although they reject the ostensibly symmetrical husband–wife relation promulgated by philosophers and littérateurs, we do not see them returning to a state of paternal surrender, submitting silently to apostolic fathers in lieu of living as partners with aristocratic husbands. To come back to the most famous tale, that of Thecla: her story originally ended with her taking her leave of Paul, as she had earlier left Thamyris, and marching back to Iconium as apostle and preacher in her own right. Even if Thecla’s ‘liberated’ behaviour seems extreme (baptizing herself, dressing as a man), we can still observe the relative novelty of female autonomy (of sorts) in the other Apocryphal Acts by noting that, by the end of all the Acts, the apostolic ‘homewrecker’ is dead while the converted wives and fiancées live on. Detached from paternal potestas, freed from conjugal symbiosis, the heroines of the Apocryphal Acts is neither nor: a fitting symbol of the social deconstruction preached by this form of Christianity. She is not the poor woman preaching poverty, nor is she the single woman preaching celibacy: she is the rich woman who moves outside the rigid class structures of the ancient world; she is the married (or marriageable) woman who transcends the ethics of conjugal union.

In considering the most plausible locus for the profitable consumption of these texts and these heroines, we must then move beyond the facile binaries of ‘rich/poor’ and ‘man/woman’. The very nature of these categories (class and gender) and the relationship between them is precisely what is problematized by these literary constructions of social and religious ethics and ‘family values’. We are not dealing with the simple opposition of ‘self’ and ‘other’, but rather the subversion of the ‘other’ (or the self?) from within: the rich woman, destined for symbiosis and conjugal partnership, becomes the emblem of the classless and the unmarried, a source of (potential) empowerment because of her rejection of these twin sources of power: wealth and ethical ‘partnership’. This subversion from within perhaps delineates the real power of the narrative of renunciation. If we can sense any space within which women find empowerment through renunciation, it is strangely refracted through the lens of marital concordia and the new economy of family ethics through which a woman (as ‘wife’) can potentially find moral advancement equal to her husband’s. The heroine of the Apocryphal Acts moves through this possibility of symbiosis and concordia, and emerges on the other side now equipped for a radical discipleship.

In the centuries following the circulation of these narratively subversive texts, they came to life in rather public and literal fashion. In the fourth century, generations of wealthy and noble-born ‘Theclas’, such as Macrina, the sister of Basil the Great, and the famed ascetic grandmother and granddaughter both named Melania, sought to live out these ‘strange stories’. From within the structures of an upper-class family, organized around the idealized intertwining of male and female souls, that ‘lifelong partnership’, these women enacted lives of monetary

97 See the useful remarks of Cameron, Christianity and Rhetoric, pp. 36–39.
100 See Ng, ‘Acts of Paul’, pp. 4–8 on ways to read the relationship between Thecla and Paul throughout the story.
101 Gillian Cloke, This Female Man of God: Women and Spiritual Power in the Patriarchal Age, AD 330–450 (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 165–66, who also helpfully points out the continuity of class issues between Thecla and these fourth-century ‘Theclae’. 
and sexual renunciation. Empowered by the possibilities generated by wealth and station, these women embraced poverty and familial rejection. There is, perhaps, a certain predictable irony that the celebration of non-elite ethics should be so readily available to the elites themselves: spectacular renunciation only becomes spectacle when the ascetic has so much to give up. Rich women became living symbols of holy poverty, and the female scions of famous households became emblems of familial renunciation. Through subversion and inversion they claimed a particular female agency outside the norms of family, or class, or society; they embraced an ethics of renunciation of class and marriage, and became the saintly homewreckers of Christian memory.

102 The ability of a woman like Melania the Younger or Jerome’s companion Paula to embrace ‘poverty’ so ostentatiously is made possible by their incredible wealth: it takes Melania the Younger, for instance, most of her life to manage to give away her vast riches. See Elizabeth A. Clark, ‘Piety, Propaganda, and Politics in the Life of Melania the Younger’ and ‘Authority and Humility: A Conflict of Values in Fourth-Century Female Monasticism’ both in eadem, Ascetic Piety and Women’s Faith: Essays on Late Ancient Christianity (Studies in Women and Religion, 20; Lewison/Queenston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1986), pp. 61–94 and 209–28.


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There has been a wave of recent scholarship on the social repercussions of desire in the Greek novels. Classicists and historians alike have argued that in the romances of the first through third centuries, sexual desire is most successfully consummated in heterosexual relationships either within or leading to matrimony. True love itself can be found only within the confines of proper, upper-class marriage, which in turn is required to ensure the equilibrium of the larger community: the concordia of the romantic couple parallels the concordia of the state.

With marriage comes the production of children, the maintenance of lines of inheritance within a certain social class, and the prosperity of the lovers’ communities. Through marriage, Longus’s Daphnis and Chloe are restored to their proper heritage and the state is restored to its proper leaders. Through marriage Chariton’s Chaereas and Callirhoe reconcile the two leading families of their city-state. As Kate Cooper has argued, the ‘ancient romance was designed to mobilize this complicity in desire on behalf of the social order … The love that aspired to marriage involved the temporary disruption of the social order which led to its reassertion; other forms of love might put the individual’s interests against the common good.’

The type of love that dominates the novels and drives desire is eros. Eros brings the couple together, maintains their fidelity through adventure and tragedy, and expresses itself through the marriage and passionate lovemaking of the couple. The deity Eros himself begins most of the novels, either by sparking the relationship or by

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3 All English translations cited here are taken from Reardon’s volume.