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The notion that sexuality in the Greek and Roman periods was predicated on a social-sexual hierarchy that casts relationships in the binary terms of active/passive and penetrator/penetrated has been both influential and controversial over the last 30 years. Both the articulation of this hierarchy and its critique have been haunted by various gendered and identitarian investments, leading to several theoretical and historical impasses. This essay offers up a second century Christian text, the Acts of Paul and Thecla, as an intervention into this debate and the impasses it produced -- that is, as an inquiry into the continuing predominance of penetrative models for relationality in contemporary theory, as well as the near-total subsuming of ancient erotic relations under the rubric of gender. Indeed I read the Acts of Paul and Thecla as an archive of erotic experiences that don’t fit comfortably within penetrative and active/passive frameworks, and do so with gender working as a language inflecting (but not determinative of) erotic life. I thus hope to widen our aperture for ancient sexuality, as well as for contemporary theories of sexuality that imagine penetrative wounding as primary models for sex and relational encounters at large.

Ancient constructions of sexuality, it has been generally thought, hinged not on the gender of the person with whom you had sex, but rather on what position one occupied in the sexual act: penetrator or penetrated. Indeed penetration, and concomitant

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1 I offer my deep thanks to Carly Daniel-Hughes, my closest conversation partner in imagining and developing this piece.
notions of active and passive, structured not only ancient senses of selfhood, but by
metonymic implication, social relations at large.²

These assumptions have proceeded largely from K.J. Dover’s Greek
_Homosexuality_, and the similar but theoretically much more sophisticated thesis in
Foucault’s work on the history of sexuality, in which Foucault argues that the notion of
an identity based on “sexual orientation,” so to speak, was an invention of the modern
(and specifically bourgeois) culture – “homosexuality” particularly being coined in the
19th century.³ Sexuality for Foucault was a politically flexible category for self-
understanding – a “technology” of culture, as it were, that has a history.⁴ Thus studies of
sexuality in the ancient Greek and Roman worlds have focused largely on questions of
power and dominance at both individual and collective levels. David Halperin’s work on

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² On the history of this consensus, as well as an important critique of its epistemology
and historiographical motors, see James Davidson, “Dover, Foucault and Greek
Davidson specifically states, however, that is aim is “not to provide a comprehensive
alternative theory of Greek sexuality, so much as to examine the will to truth which
insists on taking as its object of knowledge the undisclosed details of the sexual acts of a
distant culture,” 7.
Michel Foucault, _The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction_ trans. Robert
⁴ Foucault articulates sexuality as a technology of power and does so specifically in
response to the “repressive hypothesis,” which he so famously discredits. “Let there be
no misunderstanding:” he writes, “I do not claim that sex has not been prohibited barred
or masked or misapprehended since the classical age; nor do I even assert that it has
suffered these things any less form that period on than before. I do not maintain that the
prohibition of sex is a ruse; but it is a ruse to make prohibition into the basic and
constitutive element from which one would be able to write the history of what has been
said concerning sex starting from the modern epoch. All these negative elements –
defenses, censorships, denials – which the repressive hypothesis groups together in one
great central mechanism destined to say no, are doubtless only component parts that have
a local and tactical role to play in a transformation into discourse, a *technology of power*,
and a will to knowledge that are far from being reducible to the former.” _The History of
Sexuality, 12_ (emphasis mine). The “classical age” here refers not to antiquity, of course,
but rather the century or so following the Renaissance.
classical Athens in *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, for example, emphasizes that there was no concept of a “sexuality” per se as an essential or ontological feature of one’s character, only a set of behaviors and tastes that rather illustrated or fortified one’s social position. He writes, “Not only is sex in classical Athens not intrinsically relational or collaborative in character; it is, further, a deeply polarizing experience: it effectively divides, classifies, and distributes its participants into distinct and radically opposed categories.”

Notably, these opposed categories are hierarchical. Additionally, ancient discourses and imaginations of sex, linked to notions of masculinity and femininity, coincided with discourses of social stratification and conquest: the ideal body was a masculinized body, not only impenetrable/invulnerable, but actively dominating/violating other bodies/peoples.

Halperin’s book has been particularly influential in the field(s) to which I belong – New Testament and Early Christian Studies – for the specific historical traction it gave to Foucault’s broader mission. While there have been some rather hot contestations of this model, ancient sexuality is rarely (if ever) described without recourse to an ideological paradigm in which penetration reigns supreme. Penetration and its assumed

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relationship to the active/passive binary is the over-determining model for not only erotic experience, but again, for social relations at large, and is also occasionally opposed via idealized notions of non-hierarchical mutuality, as I’ll discuss in what follows.

The primacy accorded the penetration paradigm is not just an effect of rigorous historicism, however, and certainly not a habit displayed only by classicists or early Christian historians. So many of the reigning or most often elaborated portraits of sexuality and erotic life propagated by the overlapping fields of philosophy, psychoanalysis, and queer theory (Bataille, Freud, Lacan, Bersani, Kristeva, Levinas, to name a few) figure *erotic life itself* through or as penetration. Indeed penetration, either the word or its implicit figurations, has been so thoroughly naturalized onto sexual topography, and even relational encounters at large, that it seems almost counterintuitive to articulate other ways to theorize sex, interrelationality, and erotic life. But penetration is a very particular construction of the body and subjectivity, one in which the boundaries of the body or self are heavily articulated only to be punctured, and, as I’d like to press, one that problematically constructs both bodies and selves in terms of surface/depth binaries.

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Transformation of Sexual Morality in Late Antiquity (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), specifically makes use of the penetration grid and the active/passive binary to describe social relations in antiquity generally. Likewise, Davina Lopez’s The Apostle to the Conquered: Reimagining Paul’s Mission (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010) specifically attends to the gendered and sexualized representation of Roman conquest, suggesting that the penetration grid structures relationships between Rome and its conquered peoples. There has been, however, some recent discontentment with the association between being penetrated and passivity, as in Joseph Marchal’s “Bottoming Out: Rethinking the Reception of Receptivity,” [biblio info]

It’s worth noting here Foucault’s critique of “the repressive hypothesis” in *The History of Sexuality*, which deconstructs the opposition between surface and depth, as well as Eve Sedgwick’s observation that the repressive hypothesis gets displaced in the Foucaultian project of unveiling hidden violence, and carries its own structural (surface/depth)
This is not to say penetration is a “bad” or wrong way to figure sex or interrelation, especially given all the compelling literature that is engendered by that figuration. (And I have also relied heavily on this paradigm.) But I find myself, well, dissatisfied with it as of late, especially as way of understanding the total organization of social relations and erotic experience both in the ancient world and the contemporary one. Penetration is, after all, only one way to figure sex/relationality, one that consistently brings traumatic experience with it, I want to suggest. If all sex, all relation, is figured as traumatic, I wonder what kind of room such reductive and flattening universalization leaves for what I would even risk to say all of us experience as contradictory, even lavish, and affectively variegated field? It would seem that figuring eros itself as wound additionally and not insignificantly takes some of the edge off of experiences that more directly include violence and injury.

The question is both historically and personally compelling for me. Historically speaking, preoccupation with the penetration grid and its appeal to hierarchically organized active/passive binaries is a steeply limited project because of its exclusive focus on frames of legibility. What any grid in fact does is make everything but itself difficult to register, and it would seem vital then, given the proclaimed commitments of non-dominant modes of historiography (queer and feminist historiography, in particular), to theorize ways to account for erotic life off the grid, and to attempt to account for, in

some fashion, experiences that don’t make for any easy emplotment or that fall just below the official register.

More in the realm of the personal: I’ve found penetration as a primary figuration for encounters between people especially reductive, frankly, since having gone through Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) as a form of trauma therapy. While my experience with EMDR did not follow any obvious course or fit any stereotypical pictures of healing, one of the major benefits of that work has been a new ability to roam the world without a sense of immanent injury; to fumble my way through a vivid landscape of relational experiences that don’t collapse easily (or even at all) into trauma or its twin in extremity, jouissance. What I want, what my experience demands, is some new and perhaps warmer concepts that accommodate the pushes and pulls, the more minor and intriguing, and sometimes uncomfortable, impressions and touches that shape erotic life and relationships at large – and do so without a sense of ontological shattering.

So in what follows, I attend to some places in ancient literature that register an erotic relationality that does not fit comfortably with figurations of penetration. I leverage these instances alongside the work of Luce Irigaray and some assumptions of affect theory to draw out a portrait of erotic life/relationality that might present an alternative (and not a mutually exclusive one) to penetration. In other words, penetration or hierarchical, injurious relation does not disappear from the frame here, and I’m not out to prove the existence of perfectly reciprocal – meaning status-free – erotic imaginations.

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8 EMDR is a form of psychotherapy in which one recounts and re-associates traumatic memories, usually while being guided through hypnosis-style side-to-side eye movements by the therapist.
(Even if we could find them, would we want them?) Rather, I emphasize moments in which status differentials (often articulated through gender) form part of the field of erotic imaginations and relationships in ways that not only are not traumatic, but part of the pleasure.

While I attend first and primarily to historians’ portraits of ancient erotic life and linked social relations, I intervene in and refine these portraits more directly through an extended reading of one particular ancient text, one that happens to be Christian, The Acts of Paul and Thecla. Into that reading, I braid my own resonant experiences in order to draw out ways of approaching erotic life and relational encounters that neither ignore traumatic/traumatized implications, nor let them reign.

*Gender and Desire in History*

There have been contestations to the Dover/Foucault/Halperin model of penetrative and active/passive relations, and indeed some of these contestations express worry about the profound level of violence implied by the model. James Davidson and T. K. Hubbard, for instance, have not only objected to the stark picture of relationships painted by the active/passive binary (what Davidson calls the “zero-sum model”),9 but also to the hesitance to claim homosexuality as such in the ancient world – and these two pieces are not unrelated.10 If one is to claim “homosexuality” as such in the ancient

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9 Davidson, “Dover, Foucault and Greek Homosexuality.”
world, one would, for both ethical and political reasons, perhaps want to untangle it a bit from the violence of ancient social-sexual relations. Hubbard writes:

Although Halperin’s essay aims to liberate us from what he regards as the nineteenth-century intellectual construct of ‘homosexuality,’ his formulation of Greek sexuality is itself firmly rooted in the even more modern intellectual constructs of victimization theory and child molestation….It equally loses sight of the notion, commonly articulated by the poets, that the lover is the yoked horse whose reins the beautiful boy controls at will. Those who have actually been in love with attractive men or women twenty years younger than themselves know where the true power in the relationship resides.11

Interestingly, Hubbard explicitly criticizes the “reductionist fallacies” and phallocentrism of the active/passive model, but does so only to reveal a naivety around how power and status differentials might affect erotic relations.12

Many (though not all) of the more direct contestations of the Dover/Foucault/Halperin genealogy have fallen along various kinds of identitarian lines. In her critique of Halperin, Bernadette Brooten’s Love Between Women observes how female eroticism was both noted and eclipsed by ancient male writers, in part for its occasional and stubborn inability be assimilated into active/passive binaries.13 While Brooten recognizes differences between contemporary understandings of sexuality and understandings of sex and love in ancient Greek and Roman cultures, she challenges Halperin’s claim that sexual orientation as a sustained and critical dimension of one’s character or personality is only a modern phenomenon.14 Brooten captures an entire

12 On the other end of the spectrum, Amy Richlin has criticized the predominantly male focus of this intellectual genealogy, and doubled down on the violence inherent to ancient sexuality. See Richlin, Garden of Priapus: Sexuality and Aggression in Roman Humor (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).
14 Ibid., 8-9.
landscape of erotic relations between women in the Greek and Roman periods in order to culturally situate and relativize responses to them in certain kinds of Christian literature. Not insignificantly, she thus implicitly casts “early Christianity” as only a backhanded resource for the forms of eroticism in which she is interested. One of Brooten’s primary arguments is that the Christian polemic about the “unnaturalness” of erotic relationships between women was tied into their transgression of gendered norms – not only the notion that women should always be passive partners or objects in sex, but that any given sexual pair involves a penetrating/penetrated opposition.¹⁵

Brooten indeed finds that the ancient discourse on “female homoeroticism” expressed worry about these transgressions – both the possibility of a woman as representing the active partner, and perhaps the possibility that there was no way to figure sex between women in the penetration grid. But like Davidson and Hubbard, Brooten struggles with the severe and reductionist picture of active/passive relations and (not unrelated) the reluctance to think about homosexuality as such in Halperin et al.¹⁶ Brooten, Davidson, and Hubbard thus want not only a more definitive notion of same-sex object choice in the ancient world, but a friendlier picture of erotic possibilities within those same-sex relations.

¹⁶ See also Deborah Kamen and Sarah Levin-Richardson “Revisiting Roman Sexuality: Agency and the Conceptualization of Penetrated Males,” Sex in Antiquity: Exploring Gender and Sexuality in the Ancient World, edited by Mark Masterson, Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz, and James Robson (New York: Routledge, 2014), 449-460. Kamen and Levin-Richardson accept the penetration paradigm, but seek to de-couple penetration from the active-passive binary.
Page duBois’ *Sappho is Burning* launches a critique of Foucault, but not in a hunt for ancient homosexuality, or even necessarily for a sanguine picture of female homoeroticism. She objects to the historicization of lesbian identity in Sappho, in fact, even while she finds in Sappho a figure who is vastly under-resourced in histories of sexuality beyond her place in lesbian genealogies. For example, according to duBois, Sappho is “unthinkable” for Foucault because she is an actively desiring woman who does not fit any prescribed social roles.\(^\text{17}\) duBois indeed wonders whether any erotic behavior between women would have been registered as sex or sexual to male writers in the ancient world.\(^\text{18}\) Yet Sappho herself is not quite “off the grid” of legible pleasures since her desire is rendered in the dominant active/passive figuration. Likewise, while duBois critiques the (lesbian) identitarian model for Sappho, Sappho’s desire is still largely described as compelling because of the gender of her object choice.

It is hardly surprising that gender takes up so much space in discussions of ancient sexuality – the relationship between gender and sexuality is intricate and inextricable, in theory and in practice. But as Brooke Holmes has observed, gender has distinctly dominated discussions of sexuality in antiquity, especially as homosexuality and heterosexuality as usable concepts have met their limits.\(^\text{19}\) Gender, in other words, is the primary object of our study in discussion of ancient sexuality, despite the fact that (as Holmes notes) erotic life was itself a matter of deep interest and importance to people in antiquity.\(^\text{20}\) I would even go so far as to say that the centrality of gender and object choice

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 14.
\(^{20}\) Ibid., 98-100.
in these discussions inadvertently ontologizes gender, rather than, say, thinking of gender as (among other things) a language through which erotic experience is expressed. This is not to make some kind of naïve or retro claim that language isn’t productive, or doesn’t have its violences, but the language of gender is as often a sticky and elastic web with which one toys as it is a cage in which one uncomfortably knocks around. Think, for instance, of the way one’s partner’s masculinity and/or femininity, playfully exaggerated or ostentatiously countered, can intensify the charge of an erotic moment – a moment that I would venture to say is only rarely if ever “about” gender in a central way, even if gender is its structural pretext.

It also seems to me that over time, and over the course of the many condensations of his work, some subtler dimensions of Halperin’s readings have gotten lost. Indeed in One Hundred Years of Homosexuality, Halperin not only offers a broad re-orientation to sex and sexuality in classical antiquity, but examines the friendships between ancient hero-pals, prostitution’s relationship to democracy in classical Athens, and how the female figure of Diotima participates in male erotic ideals in Plato’s Symposium. In his new historicist sensibilities, Halperin is interested in the representation of experience, rather than reconstruction of actual experiences. The notion of “actual” experiences is itself a problematic one, as any good Foucaultian knows, since the route to reconstruction would always be through representation anyway. Thus, Halperin’s tenacious focus is the cultural machinery and political ideology of sex in a given era. What’s interesting about so much of Halperin’s book however is that it hardly paints the flatly gloomy ideological picture of sexual-social life he first sets out (and which so much scholarship in New Testament and Early Christian Studies, for instance, has assimilated), in which it seems
no relationships, no gendered identities are configured without some form of penetrative domination. In fact, Halperin’s book suggests a much more colorful and tensive ancient topography for sexuality, desire, and even power than the penetration grid would let on. For instance, Halperin reads the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus in Homer’s *Iliad* in relationship to two pairs of hero-warrior-friends in other ancient near eastern texts – the Epic of Gilgamesh and the books of Samuel. What he finds is a kind of affiliation, a friendship with a “high pitch of feeling,” that takes on both “fraternal and conjugal” shades, but fits neither into modern categories of (homo)sexuality, nor classical active/passive dogma. 21 Indeed, later Greeks who read the Homeric epic were apparently somewhat befuddled by the relationship since it didn’t quite fit the pederastic expectations of same-sex love.

Halperin takes this befuddlement, this attempt to “map their own sexual categories onto the Homeric text,” as proof for the changing attitudes and constructions of sexuality even within a single culture.22 But in a later essay, “Why is Diotima a Woman?”, he concludes that Plato’s notion of eros (at least in the *Symposium*) actually departs from the active/passive binary in important ways, drawing up a notion of erotic relation that is “not hierarchical, but reciprocal; it is not acquisitive but creative.”23 Significantly, though, Halperin’s reading of “reciprocal” and “creative” eros in Plato doesn’t allow for too many egalitarian fantasies. Plato is still of course referring to pederastic relations, ones in which boys/students are elevated, or nurtured in some sense,

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21 Halperin, *One Hundred Years*, 86.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid., 130.
into a sublime love of high ideas through a kind of intoxication with the teacher. As Halperin notes, both the student and teacher here are described as active and desiring.

The point is not to uncritically accept Plato’s rendition of eros in this obviously pederastic scenario. But one should notice that it’s not necessarily self-interest or justification that leads Plato to this account of eros, since it departs from the active/passive social ideology of the day. It indeed ascribes a kind of idealized or stereotypical “femininity” to student/teacher relations, part of which means the student is not passive object but exhibits a kind of feminine responsiveness.

In Plato’s vision of erotic relations between teacher and student, sex might occur, and power relations are, obviously, not absent. But it is also importantly not a dominating

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24 Ibid., 132. Likewise in the Symposium there is both an acknowledgement of and resistance to a certain passivity or “enslavement” in desire, especially if one’s desire is not focused towards the forms or the “ocean of the beautiful,” (210D) rather than on the singular beautiful body itself. As Diotima describes in the Symposium, “‘He who would proceed rightly in this business must not merely begin from his youth to encounter beautiful bodies. In the first place, indeed, if his conductor guides him aright, he must be in love with one particular body, and engender beautiful converse therein; but next he must remark how the beauty attached to this or that body is cognate to that which is attached to any other, and that if he means to ensue beauty in form, it is gross folly not to regard as one and the same the beauty belonging to all; and so, having grasped this truth, he must make himself a love of all beautiful bodies, and slacken the stress of his feeling for one by contemning it and counting it a trifle. But his next advance will be to set a higher value on the beauty of souls than on that of the body, so that however little the grace that may bloom in any likely soul it shall suffice for loving and caring, and for bringing forth and soliciting such converse as will tend to the betterment of the young; and that finally he may be constrained to contemplate the beautiful as appearing in our observances and our laws, and to behold it all bound together in kinship and so estimate the body’s beauty as a slight affair. From observances he should be led on to the branches of knowledge, that there also he may behold a province of beauty, and by looking thus on beauty in the mass may escape from the mean, meticulous slavery of a single instance, where he must centre all his care, like a lackey, upon the beauty of a particular child or man or single observance….” (210 A-D) And then later: “So when a man by the right method of boy-loving ascends from these particulars and begins to descry that beauty, he is almost able to lay hold of the final secret. Such is the right approach or induction to the love-matters.” (211 B-C)
use of another as an object, the use of another solely for one’s own pleasure (which, again, wouldn’t be terribly problematic for ancient people, but rather an assertively masculine virtue). Whether or not Plato’s vision of eros was experienced by students this way – perhaps some did and some didn’t experience it as such – changes neither the obvious power dynamics of the relationship, nor the legitimacy of at least the imagination of mutual desire. In other words, the vision of eros that Plato sets forth, whether or not it actually applies to the relationships he suggests it does, witnesses to an erotic relation that puts power and reciprocity in tensive combination.

Halperin notes that by choosing or inventing the figure of Diotima, the prophetess who teaches about eros in the dialogue, Plato not only figures eros in feminine terms, but predictably signals femininity as that through which men negotiate male relationships and understand themselves. Halperin is almost excessively cautious about inferring women’s experience or subjectivity from Plato’s account. While I appreciate this caution, and don’t wish to surface anything like an essentialized “women’s experience” from ancient literature, it does seem to me that “femininity,” in this case and in others, may represent, and even archive, something like non-dominant experiences. After all, it’s clear that “woman” and “the feminine” already have a difficult, and not always clear relationship to representation, since they have often been posed as a “problem” for representation, as representation’s other, that which mysteriously eludes the symbolic order. Diotima’s gender in the representational economy, then, is not just a “projection

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25 Halperin, One Hundred Years of Homosexuality, 147-149.
by men of their own experience…for internal consumption,” but may also be a kind of ventriloquized legitimacy for that which does not fit comfortably within masculinized symbolics of experience such as the active/passive binary. What if Diotima gives space, however circumscribed, for felt experiences otherwise seemingly foreclosed in the social-sexual hierarchy?

Not insignificantly, Plato’s idealized notion of eros would also seem to dissociate sex from penetration, in some sense. That is to say, while sex is implied, it is neither the goal of interaction (the goals seems to be admiring affection and apprehension of the Forms), nor is it coextensive with straightforward domination. “The act” for Plato has a different valence than the wounding infiltration implied by the term “penetration.”

This reconsideration of eros in Plato, and Halperin’s reading of it, makes me wonder what kind of erotic/social relations, both in the ancient world and in the contemporary one, might we suddenly be attuned when not doubling down on identitarian attachments? What might we see when not caught in the obsessive if also sometimes pleasurable return to traumatized/traumatizing penetration (and what is trauma if not obsessive return)?

Archives of Erotic Experience

In a similar arc, contemporary theory has centered on (and struggled with) penetration as a predominant representation of erotic experience and relationality at large – and here too gender often claims a primary and calcified place. In Luce Irigaray’s This Sex Which Is Not One, her well-known takedown of the symbolics of penetration especially in Freudian thought, she writes, “Female sexuality has always been

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27 Halperin, One Hundred Years of Homosexuality, 145.
conceptualized on the basis of masculine parameters. Thus the opposition between
‘masculine’ clitoral activity and ‘feminine’ vaginal passivity, an opposition which Freud
– and many others – saw as stages, or alternatives, in the development of a sexually
‘normal’ woman, seems rather too clearly required by the practice of male sexuality.”

Irigaray suggests that this “masculine sexuality” constructs the vagina as a “hole-
envelope” in which “[h]er lot is that of ‘lack.’”

Irigaray goes on to describe heterosexual genital sex as an “interruption” of woman’s autoeroticism:

This autoerotism is disrupted by a violent break-in: the brutal separation of two-lips by a violating penis, an intrusion that distracts and deflects the woman from this ‘self-caressing’ she needs if she is not to incur the disappearance of her own pleasure in sexual relations…Will woman not be left with the impossible alternative between a defensive virginity, fiercely turned in upon itself, and a body open to penetration that no longer knows, in this ‘hole’ that constitutes its sex, the pleasure of its own touch? (24)

Hetero genital sex is an essentially violent act for Irigaray, either in its barging in on female autoeroticism, or in the male aim to “appropriate for himself the mystery of this womb where he had been conceived.”

She uses phrases like “forced entry,” as well as the phallic cliché of the sword, and thus observes and plays with the violent implications of penetration as a figuration. But since Irigaray opposes the act itself more than its figuration, Irigaray’s critique of the symbolics of penetration actually re-

naturalizes those symbolics onto bodies. In Irigaray’s barely mitigated gender and

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29 Ibid.
30 Ibid., 25.
biological essentialisms, acts remain stuck in the dominant symbolic economy, rather than open to the adjudication and reassignment of meaning.  

Penetration’s association of sex with injury is more complicated and dynamic than Irigaray’s critique lets on. Indeed because penetration associates sex with injury, it is particularly productive ground for re-significations and affective re-associations of both sex and injury. In Leo Bersani’s *Is the Rectum a Grave?*, for instance, penetration as a way of reading sex offers an interruption to the happy, harmonious, life-affirming image sex has absorbed in heteronormative, marriage-obsessed culture. Drawing constructively from Freudian theory, and specifically the death drive, Bersani argues that sex is not only inextricable from the exercise of power, but injurious at its core. He argues that both the pull and the fear of sex is its radically self-shattering potential, which is emblematized in being penetrated.  

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Just because penetration has been extraordinarily productive for queer discourse in working out injury and pain, as well as (not insignificantly) interrupting normative imaginations about what sex is and does, doesn’t mean it needs to be the only or predominant way of understanding sex or subjectivity. Where I would agree with Irigaray is that “penetration,” whatever the act or the gender of the actors it describes, still carries in it a phallic economy, a figuration of bodies or selves as encased that need not be mapped onto every sexual or relational encounter.

Ann Cvetkovich rightly observes that Bersani’s counter to sex positivity and heteronormativity contains its own essentialism, and she likewise notices that his framework “only seems counterintuitive (or ‘queer’) if it is assumed that everyone really wants to be ‘masculine’ and on top or that the trauma of penetration must necessarily be negative.”33 Likewise, Cvetkovich comments on the provocative and famous first line of Bersani’s essay, “There is a big secret about sex: most people don’t like it.”34 She writes, “Bersani’s counterintuitive premise that people don’t like to have sex is less startling in the case of women, for whom the dangers and discomforts of sexuality (whether pregnancy, rape, or an inability to attend to their own pleasure) have been all too readily apparent.”35

Cvetkovich’s critique of Bersani paves the way for her own project in *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* which, in part, mines the queer productivities of trauma. In her chapter “Trauma and Touch: Butch-Femme Sexualities,” she suggests that “femme accounts of receptivity avoid a redemptive

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34 Bersani, “Is the Rectum a Grave?,” 3.
reading of sex, insisting on the fear, pain, and difficulty that can block the way to and be conjured up by making oneself physically and emotionally vulnerable or receptive.”

She suggests that “What is required instead is a sex positivity that can embrace negativity, including trauma,” which refuses a collapse into experiential resolution, romanticization, or fantasies of perfectly non-hierarchical relations by holding a place for shame and perversion. Cvetkovich is not disinterested in the metaphorics of penetration, but rather sees such metaphorics, constructed as they are, as having poignant variation. But because Cvetkovich intervenes in the eventfulness of trauma that is so heavily inscribed in theoretical literature, and because she seeks more mundane, less spectacular/fetishized accounts of psychic and bodily injury and their reverberations, she is also generally cued into a wider range of experiences that coalesce around erotic life.

Again, I’m not suggesting we need to dispense with penetration as metaphor or its clear associations with trauma, but we do need to notice those associations and the ways they have commanded and overwhelmed our portraits of erotic life. As Cvetkovich notes, sex positivity and sex negativity need not exclude one another. Opposing them, I think, would blot out the mixed and minor dramas of most of our daily experiences of sex specifically and erotic life in general: the frustrations, the awkwardness, the suspense and

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36 Ibid.
37 Ibid., 63.
38 See especially her chapter, “Trauma and Touch: Butch-Femme Sexualities,” in An Archive of Feelings, 49-82.
39 Likewise, although Cvetkovich is particularly interested in lesbian experiences and cultures, she is not necessarily tied to any kind of identitarian framing as much as she is interested in those experiences as resonant, and perhaps even transferable ones, and especially as they intervene in dominant national narratives. See Cvetkovich, An Archive of Feelings, Introduction.
delight, for instance, or the comforts and discomforts, the neuroses, the little hungers, and the sighs of relief, often that arrive together.

Likewise, in so many projects which, like Cvetkovich’s, theorize affect, trauma has been seen not as exactly puncturing boundaried selves, but as constructing boundaries through violation. The sense of having been injured crystallizes a sense of a “wound,” and so it produces hard boundaries through hypersensitization, which is quite a different picture. Indeed affect theory at large hardly abides by the surface/depth binary suggested by the notion of the punctured organism or the visual of the wound: the imagined boundaries of the body are not only formed through contact, but the skin, laden as it is with nerves and wired so directly into one’s most seemingly internal self, could hardly be so easily relegated to “surface.” In other words, the fact that touch, an encounter with the “surface” of the skin, can be a violation, refuses such dichotomization.

What happens when touch is not wounding, though – when contact, an impression, neither sits ineffectually on the surface, nor cuts to the bone? What about the pique of curiosity, the shiver, the hint, the turn away in distaste? What about the chafe, the ache, the rub?

Indeed while the ancient term kinaidos, describing a man who desires being penetrated, has taken on most of the attention in the vein of non-dominant forms of ancient erotic life, I find myself much more interested in the two slanderous terms

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41 Some questions around the kinaidos include to what extent this is simply a blanket term for sexual deviance, or whether it describes a certain sexual preference or identity. In his attempt to broaden discussions of appetite and eros in the classical period, James
associated with women having sex with other women in the ancient world: *tribas* and *frictrix/fricatrix* – both terms that derive etymologically from the verb “to rub.”\(^{42}\) While writers regularly ascribed penetration and masculinized active positioning to those designated as *tribades* or *frictrices*, we might note the term “rub” figures pleasure and relationships, not to mention the topography of the body, quite differently: as something like the interplay of two electrified fields. In the etymology one finds at least an imagination, perhaps even an experientially driven one, that rather than surface/depth, one could (at least sometimes) be all surface – and in this scenario, agency is not necessarily or automatically conferred anywhere.

One might place this etymological richness alongside Irigaray’s alternative to penetration, her “geography of feminine pleasure,”\(^{43}\) which isconcertedly plural and diffuse; non-teleological. Emblematic, strikingly, in the image of two lips rubbing together, it moves away from the concept of lack (the “hole-envelope”) as well as from the monotheistic and solid power of the phallus, and towards doubleness and liquification – a kind of “stickiness” that softens or blurs boundaries rather than crystallizing them.\(^{44}\)

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\(^{42}\) For a breakdown of this terminology see Brooten, *Love Between Women*, 4-9.
\(^{43}\) Irigaray, *The Sex Which Is Not One*, 90.
\(^{44}\) Ibid., 106-118.
Irigaray, too, roots herself firmly in identitarian investments, as she conjures a quintessentially feminine/female form of relationality. So while I don’t follow her literalization of biological metaphors, I do find myself intrigued by the notion of the rub – or shall we say *friction* – as an alternative and supplementary figuration to penetration. Somewhat against Irigaray (and Brooten), it seems that friction doesn’t actually specify very much in terms of agency/power relations or gender. Unlike penetration, friction quite capaciousness entertains a whole suite of possible variations on agency and power, and need not at all be confined to representations of the female body. Friction is ambiguous along all sorts of lines, since it automatically installs neither “good” nor “bad” experiences (i.e., one can be rubbed the wrong way, too).

In fact, while both Brooten and Irigaray impute a kind of lesbian and/or feminine resistance of penetration to the figures and figurations in their work, it seems to me that it is exactly because of penetration’s implicitly poor mapping of the penetrated subject as receptive cavity and because of its constitutive relation to trauma that it feels like a disappointing reduction/generalization of erotic life in general, and sex in particular (including, say, heterosexual genital sex). In other words, to associate any and every form of sex or encounter with “penetration” is both to over-determine and perhaps fail to describe the experience, namely by associating it with ruinous invasion.

There are, I think, intriguing possibilities in figuring contact with others in a more generalized or abstract way as friction. However, I’m less interested in any grand theory of eros or of contact with the Other (a solidified, phallic concept itself) than with carving out space for specific kinds of contact that appear “off the grid.”
In what follows, in fact, I’d like to suggest that the early Christian text The Acts of Paul and Thecla might be a kind of productive wedge into the history of ancient sexuality, as well as contemporary considerations of erotic/eroticized relations. While this text has been of most interest to historians of early Christianity, obviously, I’d like to propose it not as distinctly or distinctively Christian in any sense. I’d rather suggest it as an enthralling interlocutor in questions of ancient erotic life in general: an unusual piece of literature, but not an exceptional one; an archive of erotic experiences that, when read closely, might cue us into a set of feelings and relations that don’t ordinarily appear in the distractingly dramatic, or spectacularly troubling, picture of ancient sexuality.\(^45\)

Not insignificantly, threaded through modern accounts of ancient women’s sexuality are articulations (subliminal or explicit) of longing to make contact with, if not specifically lesbians, ancient women “themselves.” Gathering these scholars alongside the critiques of Foucault from Davidson and Hubbard, one might even describe it more generally as a longing for one’s own experience to be situated, recognized somewhere in

\(^{45}\) Interestingly, while there has been debate about the extent to which sexuality in the Greek classical period was overdetermined by active/passive models, there is less debate for the Roman period. See Davidson, *Courtesans and Fishcakes*; Richlin, *The Garden of Priapus: Sexuality and Aggression in Roman Humor*; Skinner and Hallett, *Roman Sexualities*. See discussion in Karras, “Active/Passive,” 1260. Yet I wonder about the implicit ways this idea of Roman culture being more bluntly hierarchical and binary might align with narratives of Roman culture as a bastardization or as representing a decline in classical Greek culture. I don’t differentiate Greek and Roman periods strongly here, neither from each other nor from that hazy and expansive moment we call “the present,” largely because of the critiques of historians and theorists such as Carla Freccero and Joan Scott who have noticed the ways in which periodization and hard historical differentiation often work inadvertently to stabilize identities in a given context (ancient or, more often, modern). See Freccero, “Queer Times,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* Vol. 106, no. 3 (2006): 485-94 and *Queer/Early/Modern* Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.
ancient literature, the past and present thus being bridged via identitarian lines.\textsuperscript{46} I don’t negate the possibilities of real, tangible (if not exactly direct) contact with past figures. But again, what if we entertain these ancient discourses on women and desire as not about women or their erotic lives per se? Rather what if, somewhat in the vein of Diotima, we treat them as still preserving some kind of erotic experience, particularly experiences that challenge phallocentric mapping? Indeed in the gendering of a set of experiences as belonging to women in some fashion, one does preserve them – albeit ambivalently so, since the very gendering of these experiences circumscribes their potential for recognition.

Since what characterizes so much of this scholarly literature on ancient sexuality are the claims around subjective investments in the writing of a history of sexuality, and an inherent debate about the desire of the historian and the contemporary stakes around identity, I too am planting myself in this debate in a concertedly subjective fashion. Though, again, I do so not along identitarian lines as much as more loosely defined experiential ones – and by intertwining Thecla’s story with some (apparently) compatible experiences of my own. I don’t doubt that I find Thecla appealing or her experience resonant with mine because she is a woman; I just don’t see gender as the determinative node of our connection, especially since the gender of a literary character, one who potentially ventriloquizes or registers desires of men, is always a dicey matter.

I entwine these stories not simply to echo and amplify the personalized stakes of the debate on writing the history of ancient sexuality. I also do so out of a deeper and

more long-running set of investments in treating history as a felt force that runs in and through us, as well as a set of recommendations to bend towards our own subjectivity as a resource rather than an obstacle in writing ancient history. More pointedly, however, I do so to offer one very particularized instance in which eros as only or primarily wounding fails to do justice to the full breadth and dimension of lived experience; the ways grids overdetermine our understanding of what even strikes us as erotic in the first place.

Neither Marriage Nor Death (Other Love Stories)

The Acts of Paul and Thecla, a second century Christian tale of a young woman whose encounter with the words of the apostle Paul impel her to flout social, sexual, and gendered conventions, and then venture out as a teacher, has attracted a lot of scholarly and popular attention throughout its long history. And while readers have recognized its interest in negotiating erotic life, the text’s association with asceticism (generally understood as sexual renunciation, and thus un- or anti-erotic) has meant that it has been under-resourced in writing histories of sexuality, particularly in the Greco-Roman era.

In the story, the young woman (Thecla) overhears the apostle Paul expounding on the “word of Christ,” which in this case includes ascetic virtues, resurrection, and compassion. Enamored with his message, and longing for the life of which Paul speaks, Thecla cannot tear herself away from the sound of Paul’s voice (the text mentions she hadn’t yet seen him in person), even as the man she’s contracted to marry comes to visit. “Where is my Thecla?” he asks. Theocleia, her mother, replies, “I have a strange story to tell you. Indeed for three days and nights Thecla has not risen from the window – either to eat or drink – but gazes as if looking upon some enjoyable sight. In this way she clings to a strange man who teaches deceptive and cunning words….” She continues by explaining that Paul’s words are so appealing to the local young women, that he is a threat to the city. “My daughter, like a spider in the window, is also bound to his words, held sway by new desire and fearful emotions. For the maiden fixates on the things he says and is captivated.”

When her fiancé, Thamyris, goes to her, both “loving her and also fearing her passion,” he asks, “What is the emotion that binds you in passion? Turn toward your Thamyris and be ashamed.” Her mother, too, asks, “Child, why do you look down and sit like this, answering nothing but acting like a mad person?” Both her mother and her fiancé weep and grieve the captivated Thecla as if she has died, but still Thecla remains rapt in her attention to Paul’s words.

androcentric construction, and the text itself as “pornographic,” which is to say that Ratcliffe notices the text exudes or archives a kind of eroticism, if one overdetermined by (in her understanding) male desires. Ratcliffe, “Violating the Inviolate Body – Thecla Uncut” in The Body in Biblical, Christian, and Jewish Texts, edited by Joan E. Taylor (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014). One pivotal, and indeed game-changing, exception to the reading of asceticism as renunciation of desire is Virginia Burrus’ work, to be discussed in what follows.
As the story goes on, Thamyris plots to have Paul arrested and brought to court. Thecla follows Paul to the prison, just to hear him speak more about “freedom in God,” a notion that emboldens her, and even moves her to kiss Paul’s chains. At the trial, Paul is slandered as a “magician,” and Thecla is called to testify about why she will not marry Thamyris. Upon her refusal to respond, her mother cries, “Burn the lawless one! Burn the one who refuses to be a bride in the middle of the theater so that all the women taught by this man will be afraid!”

What follows is a series of attempts to execute and harm Thecla, none of which succeed. Stripped and on the pyre ready to be burned, the fire mysteriously “did not touch her.” God compassionately puts out the fire with a terrible storm. Even though many died, Thecla survives. In another scene, Thecla manages to evade an immanent sexual assault from a man on the street, and reverses the shame by tearing off his cloak and crown and throwing them to the ground. For her “crime” of dishonoring the man, the governor sentences her to death by wild animals in the arena. This attempt fails, too, as Thecla is defended by the lioness sent to devour her, and then saved from a pool of seals by a lightning strike out of the heavens. It kills the animals, but again not Thecla. Here, too, she is preserved not only from harm, but from shame: “And surrounding her was a cloud of fire so that neither the wild animals could touch her nor could she be seen naked.”

Thecla’s relationship to Paul throughout is one in which her adoration is continually directed at his words, rather than the man himself (and the text specifies that
Paul is rather unattractive). And Paul himself seems ambivalent about Thecla’s attachment: he witnesses to Thecla’s near-sexual assault, but does nothing. Indeed the man attempt to persuade Paul to “give” Thecla to him, but Paul demurs, saying, “I do not know the woman of whom you speak, nor is she mine.” But Thecla’s world is also populated with surprising allies, and generally female ones: the lioness who defends her in the arena, as well as scores of women in the stands attempting to distract the animals from killing her by throwing in flowers and spices; a queen in this same scene who loves Thecla like her own, deceased daughter, and mourns Thecla’s fate, pleading to God to help her.

Thecla, though not yet the age of twenty, hardly crumbles in the face of these dangers. She not only refuses to testify against Paul in court at her own peril, and returns shame upon the man who seeks to shame her. She also boldly baptizes herself (after Paul puts off her request) in the pool of seals, makes confident petitions to God for her own rescue, and at one point stiches and dons men’s clothing, so that she can find Paul and report her self-baptism. The text closes by charting Thecla’s long and productive life as a teacher and healer.

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50 Jennifer Eyl, in the vein of scholarship that reads the Acts of Paul and Thecla as anxious about (and attempting to avoid or blot out) eros, suggests that because Thecla does not see Paul at first, the narrative manages to skirt the usual conventions of the Greek novel (the genre to which the Acts of Paul and Thecla belongs) in which “love at first sight” catalyzes the narrative. In Eyl analysis, in other words, the avoidance of the “love at first sight” trope is a symptom of the text’s allergy to eros. Eyl, “Why Thekla Does Not See Paul: Visual Perception and the Displacement of Eros in the Acts of Paul and Thekla,” in The Ancient Novel and Early Christian and Jewish Narrative: Fictional Intersections, edited by Judith Perkins and Mariliá Futre Pinheiro (Gronigen: Barkhuis Publishing, 2013).

51 In several manuscript versions, the text ends noting a continuation of this pattern of threat and resilience. Many “violent young men” are sent to “ruin” her, but she evades them, not incidentally through recourse to a kind of hardened state that manages to
This harrowing and often hilarious story is written in the style of the Greek romance novel, a popular genre that is characterized by the adventures of a couple who must face danger, death, separation, and threats to the woman’s body and/or sexual propriety as obstacles to being together. The novels are not only characterized by violence emanating from every direction – strangers, animals, pirates, bandits, local authorities – but by the culmination in the civic ceremony of marriage.\(^{52}\) If much of the plot of these stories revolves around the near-unraveling of civil society, the final scenes in which the couple finally comes together again, if a bit battered, in a glorious civic union, reassures the reader of civic coherence.\(^{53}\)

amplified and tracked this theme in early Christian literature most cogently.\(^{55}\) In her article, “Word and Flesh: The Bodies and Sexuality of Ascetic Women,” for instance, she describes, among other things, the distinct and highly sexualized investment later male writers had in such impervious female bodies, writing that “imagined physical enclosure or intactness of the female virgins’ sexual organs functioned symbolically in the rhetoric of the fourth century to reinforce social and ideological boundaries.”\(^{56}\) But Burrus significantly notes that in texts that describe women’s ascetic behaviors, including the Acts of Paul and Thecla, what one sees is not a timidity or indifference toward erotic life, as much as a renegotiation of it. She writes, “If sexual asceticism entails successful resistance to male control, this in turn liberates the women’s sexual energies, albeit in ‘sublimated’ forms; for the women are now free to direct their eros toward the pursuit of knowledge and spiritual growth as well as the formation of new relationships.”\(^{57}\)

Burrus is careful to remark that she is not trying to reconstruct anything like “women’s experience,” at least not in any limited way.\(^{58}\) But both here and in some of her

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\(^{55}\) See also L. Stephanie Cobb, *Dying to Be Men: Gender and Language in Early Christian Martyr Texts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), and Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), chapter 3, which chart (to different degrees) the ways in which sexuality, gender, the active/passive binary infuse ancient literary texts about Christian martyrs. Boyarin, borrowing from Burrus, treats Thecla specifically.


\(^{57}\) Burrus, “Word and Flesh,” 50.

\(^{58}\) Burrus writes that while she has “pushed beyond the ‘word’ of the dominant construction of ascetic women’s sexuality,” she has not made contact with “actual ‘flesh’ but rather more words- words which are, however, more revealing of the elusive flesh, representing the utterance of that flesh.” “Word and Flesh,” 50. It seems to me though that the notion of affective archives mitigates this poststructuralist tension between “word
other work, Burrus accounts for alternate forms of eroticism, thus expanding the archive of what counts as erotic. Most notably, in her later book *The Sex Lives of Saints*, Burrus re-reads hagiographical literature for such forms of eroticism (or rather “countereroticism”) that refuse social-sexual convention. So much of what Burrus excavates in this re-telling of the history of sexuality via early Christian literature, however, still circulates around not only pain and death, but in general a certain extremity of experience. She writes, “Ancient hagiography, I am suggesting, participates in such a self-mortifying *jouissance*, such a divinely erotic joy, in which the performative ‘death’ of the self becomes the sanctifying matrix of life’s renewal…” Drawing in this section from Elaine Scarry’s work on torture, George Bataille’s assimilation of desire to death, as well as Jean-Luc Nancy’s equation of love and touch with wounding, she writes, “When *jouissance* is understood as a ‘mode of ascesis,’ the ascetic emerges into view as an erotically joyful ‘body in pain,’ disclosing suffering as the vehicle of the ongoing unmaking and remaking of worlds.”

Similarly, in “Word and Flesh,” Burrus places Thecla alongside the stories of female ascetic martyrs, whose stories include them evading sexual penetration and shame, but not the sexualized, penetrating wound of murder and death. But the Acts of Paul and Thecla differentiates itself from the martyr acts, since she thwarts the traumatic conclusion of execution, in addition to the happy resolution of marriage. Indeed Thecla continually fends off traumatic injury of all kinds, even managing to deflect the shame

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60 Ibid., 14.
61 Ibid., 15.
that would perforate her confidence. She finds, in the mean time, a set of pleasures in her own fearless speech and gestures; rapt delight in the words of others; comfort in a cosmic force that thinks kindly of her; and sustaining, surprising connections to others, animal and human, in the world around her. Burrus sees in ancient literature a masochistic erotic self-annihilation as an alternative to the reproductive and marital framing of sex (not unlike Bersani’s theorizing of sex towards the death drive), but if Thecla is not a martyr, it seems to me that the Acts of Paul and Thecla’s erotics rather bypass the death/marriage binary.

When I read Thecla’s story, I cannot help but install myself at nearly nineteen, still a girl, having had a fragmenting episode of sexual violence that occurred a couple of weeks after my mother almost inexplicably left my father, with whom I ardently identified (and still do). Within a few months of these traumas, and in the disoriented and vacated state induced by them, I had a lucky encounter with a charismatic, consistent, adoring, and deeply harmless person who I smilingly finessed into cohabitation almost immediately, and for twenty years following. The twenty years were many things, too many to recount in any single narrative, or even five, but among those many things, they were structured by a steady refrain of experiments in autonomy and returns to traumatized attachment. That sweet and companionable marriage, in other words, tethered me enough to alight on adventures in quasi-independence that I would have felt too frightened and too small to approach otherwise. Another way of putting it is that he held me in my fear response long and tightly enough for both my fear and the marriage itself to burn out. Or another: it made possible my healing, even as my healing stripped our relationship of its most powerful motor.
The safe structure of this relationship, formed in the grid of the law which rendered our lively sexualities winsomely and invariably hetero, had many experiential subtexts for me, ones that echo the darker moments of Thecla’s story: the hot lightning strikes of shame; a constant feeling of danger, narrowly escaped; the mystifying and devastating sense of being sold out by the same person who secured me to this world (which could easily happen again). These stood alongside a number of people and moments and things that gave or taught me pleasure – and also resonate, all too precisely sometimes, with Thecla’s story. Just to name a few: dream-like immersions in books and ideas; regular and wild cathexes in teachers who only sometimes wanted to claim me back; minor if ostentatious exhibitionisms, and the thrills of occasionally flouting tradition; a set of affectionate, captivating, and only rarely definitively sexual creative/intellectual affiliations with men and with women; and an imaginative life that regularly aligned with a sense of omnipotence and resilience. Subtending all of these was a sense of growing intellectual mastery that gave me a language for the dark and sharpened world in which I lived.

One could easily point to the continuities these experiences and encounters had with my childhood before the traumatic eventfulness of my nineteenth year: I lived as an ordinary girl in mysterious and magical world, accompanied by companions of all sorts, on whom I endlessly crushed with only half a thought toward mutuality, and with music, poetry, and some capacious and generally benign cosmic force as our ambiance. So these later pleasures are actually not best understood as direct addresses to traumatic experience, even as they did deliver relief from trauma’s consummations. They are rather diaphanously, if also ineluctably, tied to trauma, mostly by virtue of time and their
inhering in the life of a single person. And these experiences were also not without their discomforts, or disjoints in agency: miscommunications and disheartening rejections; inability to get what I wanted, or being on the receiving end of more than what I wanted; the incomplete satisfactions of daydreams, or the too-fast dissipation of interpersonal chemistry and other disappointments; anger, frustration, boredom, melancholy, longing.

But that is the abundance and ambivalence of friction; the currents and points of contact that sustain and fail, but do not break, us.

*An Erotics of the Mundane (Conclusion)*

In the vein of Burrus’ impulses, I’m proposing that we consider the Acts of Paul and Thecla’s erotics expansively – focusing less narrowly on Thecla’s gender and even more traditional notions of the objects of her desire, and attending more closely to her heightened sensual/sensory experiences, the moments of flush that pepper the story. In doing so, what emerges is an archive of pleasures in which traumatic, “penetrative” relations don’t win the day, even as it accounts for the existence and real dangers of those relations. The plotting of enjoyable and frictive moments and encounters alongside of them in the Acts of Paul and Thecla is instructive for what we historians (and others) might miss in our over-attention to the grid of legible pleasures, or our relentless hunt for absolute figurations of power and/or their subversion. Where on the grid might we place the warm connection between the queen Tryphaena and Thecla, as surrogate mother and daughter? Where might we place, say, Thecla’s cavalier excitement in stripping and pitching the crown of her would-be offender? Her affiliations with the observing women who, throwing their petals in the arena, help save her? Or her adoration of Paul’s words and chains, her exhilarating and passionate plunge into a set of ideas, and a life, that seem
absurd to her mother and the man to whom she is obligated? Her love of risk? Of course I worry that these delights, not uncomplicated ones, might be characterized as not quite fully erotic, or worse, as “adolescent,” not least because of Thecla’s literal adolescence. But that only reiterates the necessity for accounting for them. Rendering these as “adolescent” or less full pleasures would likewise place these experiences on a grid – a developmental (and thus teleological) one, in which such pleasures are “outgrown” in the name of other, more “sophisticated” ones.

Suggesting an eros “without” the wound is a bit of a miscast, of course, since violence, danger, and power infuse the story of Thecla, and again, those forms of violence and danger and power are not completely distinct from her various pleasures. More generally, there is no life without wounding or the impingements of the grid, and there are no perfect scenarios absent of differences in power and agency. What I seek is not a romanticism in which trauma evaporates, nor do I want to hold out via theory any kind of promise that certain forms of eroticism could be a model for relations at large, or could completely shield one from injury, just as Thecla is shielded again and again (though we might think of her pleasures as perhaps an electric excitement at a sense of her own resilience, rather than a form of insulation). Likewise, Thecla’s pleasures happen within, against, and across all kinds of status differentials, including gender, but they do not easily, or even ever, condense into the straightforward hierarchical active/passive binary that penetration stages. The goal here is, among other things, to interject into history and theory the relatively obvious, if vastly underplayed, recognition that not only are pleasures of all kinds ambivalently knit into relations of power and status rather than

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62 I am even cautious about calling these pleasures “sublimation,” as if they are secondary to sex, or as if sex is the more direct or foundational pleasure.
being determined by or occurring despite them, but that pleasure can happen without disfigurement, and that resilience is as real as injury.

It is worth piecing together in the domains of both history and theory a fuller and more daily account of eros – an erotics of the mundane – in which wounding, while never far from the frame, is neither the prerequisite for pleasure, nor the primary indicator for its realness; in which the severity of the grid of hierarchical and penetrative relations, and the subtext of gender that undergirds them, is denaturalized and seen as grid, even while questions of power and legibility remain constructively part of the picture. For the ancient world as well the contemporary one, and some of the worlds in between, the eventfulness of trauma and jouissance might be supplemented by other love stories – the less dramatic, but no less distinct or consequential, rhythms and impressions that punctuate our lives, but do not puncture them.

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