A recurring stumbling block for feminist scholars of early Christianity is that whenever we encounter a female character in a text, the surrounding narrative—imbued with strong patriarchal tendencies—overshadows any glimmer of potential prominence she might have. Relatedly, when we spot damsels in distress, we eagerly hope that Jesus or one of his fellow male protagonists will be a good ally and challenge the antagonists who are causing the strife. Unfortunately, rarely, if ever, does an act of allyship play out. Instead, we are left scratching our heads as to why a text might praise a female disciple as “a woman who understood completely,” but then insist that one ought to “Pray in the place where there is no woman” and “destroy the works of womanhood.” Although scholars recognize that women frequently function as rhetorical devices, especially in heresiological and polemical contexts, there still appears to be an underlying hope that somewhere in these ancient texts the woman is more so concerned about the iteration of power structures between men over women.

ABSTRACT

Feminist approaches to early Christian texts have consistently evaluated female characters as the primary focus of analysis. Yet in doing so, placing the spotlight on the female figure inevitably pushes male figures, and by extension, the broader context to the margins. This type of analysis runs the risk of overemphasizing the role of a woman in a given text while neglecting their narrative function in relation to male characters. This article looks specifically at Mary in the Gospel of Thomas. Previously, Mary has been seen as equal to or even more important than other disciples in the text. But using Eve Sedgwick’s homosocial bond theory reveals that the Gospel of Thomas wishes to emphasize the relationship between Jesus and Peter more so than it does Mary. This example is but a case in point in seeing that although our focus as modern scholars shifts to the woman, the ancient text is more so concerned about the iteration of power structures between men over women.

KEYWORDS

Gospel of Thomas, Mary Magdalene, Eve Sedgwick, feminist criticism
cient texts, we will find a woman who was capable of breaking free from the shackles of patriarchy and embodies the feminist qualities that we ourselves cherish.

Yet, the urgency to find feminist heroines in ancient Christian texts seems to have caused scholars to unwittingly set the bar quite low for what constitutes evidence of female participation/leadership in early Jesus groups. Nowhere is this more evident than in scholarship on the Gospel of Thomas, in particular, on sayings 21 and 114. The mere appearance of a character named Mary in these two places has spurred no shortage of suggestions that Mary was not only a part of this “community” but also played a notable role. However, when viewed in the broader context of the Gospel of Thomas, the participation of Mary, who asks a brief question in saying 21 and is the topic of debate in 114, seems less impressive. In fact, I argue that Mary’s appearance in Gos. Thom. 114 as “Mary” should not be used as evidence for any sort of indication of the status of women in early Christianity or even as part of the “Gnostic” or “Apocryphal” Mary corpus of texts in which the Gospel of Thomas is so frequently mentioned.

In isolation, the fact that the Gospel of Thomas mentions Mary’s name twice among a collection of 114 sayings would seem inconsequential. But the fact that Mary appears in other apocryphal texts including the Gospel of Philip, the Dialogue of the Saviour, Pistis Sophia, and the Gospel of Mary has led scholars to magnify these trivial details and include the Gospel of Thomas in monographs and analyses that group these texts together in discussions of Mary (Magdalene). Without these other texts that mention Mary to varying degrees, it is difficult to imagine that Mary’s appearance in Gos. Thom. 21 and 114 would receive as much attention as it has. Essentially, these references serve as two tiny bricks in the construction of a giant edifice that is the non-canonical Mary (Magdalene).

As part of this monumental Mary (Magdalene), the tiny bricks that are Gos. Thom. 21 and 114 are rarely analyzed in isolation for how they function independent of other Mary-related texts. As part


of the same monument, they are given as much prominence as the Gospel of Mary, a text not only named after Mary, but one where she is tasked with leading and comforting the other disciples after receiving a special revelation from Jesus.9 Certainly the Gospel of Mary has the potential female heroine we seek as feminist scholars, but the Mary of the Gospel of Thomas has nowhere near the same function. While it is tempting to study all these Marys together, doing so runs the risk of overlooking each of their individual functions within their respective texts. To that end, this study restricts its analysis to the Mary of the Gospel of Thomas without supplementing details or characteristics from other sources that mention her name.

Over the past few decades, the Gospel of Thomas has become one of the most-studied non-canonical texts. Thomas’ numerous parallels with the canonical gospels have made it an indispensable source of data for the early Jesus movement so much so that it has earned the title of “The Fifth Gospel.” Not surprisingly, each of the 114 sayings of the text, whether paralleled in canonical texts or not, has received a significant amount of scholarly attention. The last saying of the text, which features a debate about the status of Mary amongst the group of Jesus followers, is no exception. The primary focus and debate of saying 114 concerns the interpretation of the final verse: “For every woman who makes herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven.” The various interpretations range from women having to cut their hair and physically having to appear “male,” to renouncing that which is female, namely childbirth and sex.10 While I have previously attempted to suggest my own interpretation of this passage and what it means to “become male,” my focus in this article is solely on the relationship between Peter, Jesus, and Mary, regardless of how one understands this saying within Thomas or in ancient Christianity more broadly. Focusing on the structure of the saying itself reveals details that are often overlooked by scholars in their haste to interpret what it means for Mary to become

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11 Anna Cwikla, “Become Male or Leave: Understanding the Gendered Language in the Gospel of Thomas Logion 114” (presented at the Colloquium for Religions of Mediterranean Antiquity, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON, 2016).
“male.”

**Shifting Focus from Imagery to Characters**

Focusing on the characters rather than the gendered language requires a methodological approach that has not yet been utilized for this passage. I have in mind in particular Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s notion of male-male homosocial bonds. Sedgwick’s theory essentially posits that in the context of rivalries between men, social bonds are formed through competition over women. In other words, while the competition might revolve around a woman, what is actually more crucial to the story is the jostling for position that occurs between the men. While Sedgwick’s theory was developed based on her reading of English novels and literature, it has been used to analyze one of the more notable texts in early Christian tradition, the *pericope adulterae* in the Gospel of John (7:53–8:12).

Jennifer Knust has used Sedgwick’s approach to draw out the embedded power structure between Jesus, the Pharisees and scribes, and the adulteress. While the original context of Sedgwick’s theory was based on erotic rivalries between men over a given woman, Knust’s essay demonstrates the applicability and usefulness of Sedgwick’s initial findings in analyzing the power dynamic between men even outside of romantic contexts. What Knust essentially visualizes is a triangular structure where a line forms between the two (groups of) men, each of which is connected to the same woman.

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a detailed reception history of *pericope adulterae*, a brief summary of some of the key points from Knust’s analysis of this story should suffice to demonstrate the usefulness of Sedgwick’s theory in analyzing ancient Christian literature. In the famous pericope, the scribes and Pharisees bring an unnamed woman to Jesus directly. They along with Jesus are the only ones who speak until verse 11, when the woman finally utters but a few words “No one, sir” (Οὐδείς, κύριε). Throughout the rest of the episode, she remains utterly silent, unable or unwilling to speak up for herself. While previous scholarship might see Jesus as a liberator in this passage because he seems to “save” this woman from being stoned, Knust rightly observes that Jesus may win the day, the woman may be ‘loved’ (if not vindicated) by the truly ‘good man,’ but the fact that God’s Law must be obeyed is never called into question ...What is the point of being saved into an argument where the structures that bring on the predicaments that face the adulteresses are left unchallenged?

In other words, while we can see that Jesus saves the adulteress from stoning in this case, he does nothing to challenge the very structures that brought about this situation in the first place. Addition-

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17 Knust, “Can an Adulteress Save Jesus?,” 407; emphasis added.
ally, it is only after Jesus tells the woman that he does not judge her and tells her to depart that she is able to leave.

To further illustrate how the power dynamics in *pericope adulterae* operate, Knust constructs the following triangle:\(^{18}\)

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{Scribes and Pharisees} \\
\downarrow \\
\text{Woman} \\
\uparrow \\
\text{Jesus}
\end{array}
\]

Knust recognizes that she is not the first to see this triangular structure at hand in this pericope.\(^{19}\) Gail O’Day sees a similar triangular structure between Jesus, the woman, and the Pharisees, although she does not explicitly draw a triangle in her essay. In contrast to Knust, O’Day’s structure insinuates that what she calls Jesus’ “two sets of conversation partners,”\(^{20}\) the scribes/Pharisees and the woman, are on equal footing with each other. Knust illustrates O’Day’s understanding of the pericope in the following manner:\(^{21}\)

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{Jesus} \\
\downarrow \\
\text{Scribes and Pharisees} \\
\uparrow \\
\text{Woman}
\end{array}
\]

The significance of Knust’s revision of this triangular structure of *pericope adulterae* cannot be overstated. While O’Day and others may want to see Jesus at the pinnacle or apex of the triangle, given that the narrative presents him with having power over both the woman and the Pharisees and scribes, Knust’s triangle evocatively draws our attention to the fact that “[t]he inverted pyramid I built *crushes the woman*...rather than placing her on an equal plane with her accusers, but there it balances, a seemingly insurmountable monument to male dominance and female submission.”\(^{22}\)

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\(^{18}\) Adapted from Knust, “Can an Adulteress Save Jesus?,” 416.


\(^{21}\) Knust, “Can an Adulteress Save Jesus?,” 416.

\(^{22}\) Knust, “Can an Adulteress Save Jesus?,” 417; emphasis added.
crushing of the woman draws our attention towards what we might have missed initially. The observation that this woman is used as a means to an end is not new. Rather than seeing Jesus as some sort of ancient version of a male ally who rescues this woman, we see that he is merely reinforcing the natural patriarchal and juridical structures that are in place and left unchallenged at the expense of this woman, who functions as the object or “passive ground” through which Jesus and his other male counterparts establish and reinforce their dominance. The woman is nameless, passive, and subject to the whim and waves that are transmitted through her by the men, who are only interested in maintaining their own power.

The framework used by Knust can be expanded to a more robust set of methodological questions that can help us analyze the ways in which a text uses female characters. I am not suggesting that the triangular power structure is applicable universally each time a woman appears in a text—far from it. Rather, I see this framework as a type of entry point or initial step in the process of analyzing any instance where a woman appears in a narrative. When we encounter a woman in an ancient text, our first question should be: where are the men? It is rare to find a woman appearing in isolation or only with other women in ancient texts. What we usually find is at least one man, if not more. And if we do not allow ourselves to be whisked away on a voyage of feminist analysis that focuses solely on the woman but rather remain critically aware of the patriarchal structures that produced and inhabit the text, we are likely to find that what is really at stake has little or nothing to do with the woman herself but with the men surrounding her.

Of course, we have stories about women preaching, leading, and challenging the patriarchal structures in ancient Christian texts. Thecla, for example, rejects the status quo by refusing to marry her fiancé Thamyris and choosing to follow Paul instead, upsetting not only Thamyris but also her mother and enslaved worker in the process (APTh 3.9–10). Thecla’s story is filled with defiant acts such as rejecting the advances of another man, Alexander, in dramatic fashion by grabbing the wreath off his head (APTh 4.1); baptizing herself after Paul refuses to do so earlier in the narrative (APTh 4.9); and altering her clothing so that it looks masculine (APTh 4.15). Yet even with this narrative where Thecla is not only able to speak for herself but also act in a way that undermines patriarchal structures embedded in the cultural context of the text, commentators have wondered if “Thecla chiefly serves to demonstrate the greater status of Paul.” After all, as Sarah Parkhouse rightly observes, “the catalyst for the entire plot is Thecla’s obsessive desire for this man [i.e., Paul].” Regardless of how one evaluates Thecla’s narrative function or that of other female characters who similarly challenge the status quo, these women are few and far between. What we encounter more frequently are women

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mentioned as following Jesus to the cross or, if we are lucky, a question or saying framed as emanating from a female character.

To that end, I propose these questions be asked any time a woman appears in a text in order to determine if the triangular power structure might be in play:

1. Are there men present? Do they speak directly to the woman?
2. Does the woman speak? To whom?
3. What details or characteristics are associated with the woman?
4. What is said about the woman?
5. Does a man intervene on the woman’s behalf? For what purpose?
6. Who gets the final word?

Considering these questions allows us to hone in on the extent to which the text, and not our own modern proclivities, wants to spotlight a female character. Sometimes we may find a Thecla, but most times we find an unnamed adulteress who is but a means to an end for advancing a man’s narrative. In the case of Gos. Thom. 114, we will find that Mary is simply a female placeholder who happens to have a name.

**Mary as a Placeholder in Gos. Thom. 114**

While a great deal of ink has been spilled examining Thomas’ similarities to the canonical gospels, the majority of studies focus on questions of whether Thomas is dependent on the canonical gospels, or an independent witness to a tradition of Jesus sayings. But here I propose that by using the set of guiding questions set out above coupled with the type of triangular framework proposed by Knust, several functional and structural similarities between the *pericope adulterae* and Gos. Thom. 114 are brought into focus. Recognizing these overlooked details of Gos. Thom. 114 reframes the ways in which we understand Mary’s presence, a detail that perhaps has incited too much fervor among feminist scholars wishing to see Mary as some sort of “Gnostic” or unorthodox leader in early Christian settings.  

![Image](image-url)
(1) Simon Peter said to them, “Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of Life.”
(2) Jesus said, “Behold, I myself will guide her to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you men. (3) For every woman who makes herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Gos. Thom. 114) 29

In this passage, we have two men (Peter and Jesus) speaking, but neither of them address Mary directly. Mary does not speak at all, and it is not even clear that she is within earshot of the conversation. Moreover, there are absolutely no details related to her role or relationship to Peter or Jesus, nor are there any biographical details included. One could argue that because the Gospel of Thomas is a sayings source containing very little narrative material, the inclusion of such details is beyond the scope or interest of the text. For example, the Gospel of Thomas has Jesus refer to his disciples in general 21 times, while addressing individuals by name far less frequently (“Simon Peter” Gos. Thom. 13, 114; “Matthew” Gos. Thom. 13). Moreover, on two occasions, statements are attributed to unnamed individuals (a “man” or “person” in 72; “a woman in the crowd” in 79). Elsewhere, however, the Gospel of Thomas does attribute details to certain disciples, and these details appear to enhance the role of these particular characters.

In the prologue, the sayings of Jesus contained in the text are said to have been written down by “Didymus Judas Thomas.” 30 Entrusting the transmission of the sayings of Jesus to a particular disciple certainly puts them above those disciples who merely ask a question in the text itself. Later in saying 13, Thomas receives a revelation from Jesus on his own, away from the other disciples, after Thomas says to Jesus, “Teacher, my mouth is utterly unable to say what you are like,” in response to Jesus’ request to have the disciples compare him to something. Another character who stands out in the Gospel of Thomas is “James the Just,” whom Jesus essentially designates as his successor. The disciples ask who their leader will be after Jesus departs. Jesus responds: “No matter where you are, you are to go to James the Just, for whose sake heaven and earth came into being” (Gos. Thom. 12). Finally, and perhaps most relevant to the present discussion, is saying 61: 31

Salome said, “Who are you, sir? You have climbed on my couch and eaten from my table as if you are from someone.” Jesus said to her, “I am the one who derives from what is whole. I was granted from the things of my father.” [Salome said:] “I am your disciple.” [Jesus said:] “For this reason I say, ‘If one is whole, one will be filled with light, but if one is divided, one will be filled with darkness.'” 32

In this passage, not only does Salome speak to Jesus, the narrative reveals that he has had an extended interaction with her, eating from her table and having climbed on her couch. Moreover, Salome in her own words says that “I am your disciple (ΔΙΝΟΚ ΤΕΚΛΩΝΤΗΣ).” Although Salome’s name appears only in this saying, compared to Mary’s question in 21 and Peter’s mention of Mary in 114, Salome appears to have a bigger role than Mary. 33 The tendency of the Gospel of Thomas to speak of char-

29 Meyer, “The Gospel of Thomas: Text & Translation,” 154. I have adjusted the translation slightly. I have replaced female(s) with women/woman and males with men. Additionally, I have added “myself” to Jesus’ response to better reflect the original Coptic. For more on this latter point, see the discussion below.

30 For a commentary on the prologue and bibliography, see Gathercole, The Gospel of Thomas, 189–94. Gathercole notes that there is no room for “Didymus” in the Greek version of the gospel.


32 In the original text, the change of speaker, marked above in brackets, is not present in the texts. Gathercole suggests that this might have been to avoid repetition. Additionally, he argues that “Salome is clearly the speaker in 61.4 because of the feminine article prefixing ‘your disciple,’” The Gospel of Thomas, 442.

33 To what extent, if any, Salome’s role is reflective of the role of women in early Jesus groups or of an “egalitarian” brand of Christianity, is far beyond the scope and interest of the present discussion. For more on Salome in
acters in general terms (i.e., referring to “disciples” or named disciples without extensive details) compared to the three instances where disciples are given more prestige suggests that while the Gospel of Thomas usually refers to disciples in general terms, details are included for those disciples and instances where particular emphasis is warranted. So while Mary’s name appears more often than that of James or Salome, it is crucial to bear in mind in what contexts these names appear. Frequency alone should not govern our interpretation of the prestige afforded to these characters in the text itself or in the broader context of ancient Christian traditions.

The Gospel of Thomas gives Mary a name but not much else. Peter’s initial comment in saying 114 states that Mary should leave the group because women are not worthy of life. Jesus does not really focus on Mary as an individual but simply talks about how he will solve the problem of Mary being a woman. So while it could seem that Jesus is intervening on behalf of Mary (after all he does not say “Yes, Peter. You’re right! Get out of here, Mary!”), he does nothing to uphold Mary’s presence in and of herself. With Jesus getting the final word, coupled with the lack of engagement with or by Mary directly, it seems that Gos. Thom. 114 is far more interested in accentuating the role of the men than it is in liberating Mary.

A philological analysis of the Coptic further supports the reading of Gos. Thom. 114 as focused on Peter and Jesus and not Mary. The passage begins with Peter bringing forth what he perceives to be an issue: Mary. His reasoning that Mary should be made to leave, based on the explanatory clause in the Coptic, is that she, as a woman, is not worthy of life. Regardless of how one interprets what Peter means by “not worthy of life,” one thing remains clear: Mary is a problem for Peter. He brings this problem forward to a group of individuals that includes Jesus, since in the very next line Jesus responds to Peter. What is sometimes overlooked in Jesus’ response—most often because of the preoccupation with explaining what “living spirit” means—is the fact that it is Jesus who will take responsibility for whatever this transition might entail. This notion is evidenced in the Coptic where the stand-alone pronoun precedes the verbal form. In English, the emphatic is inconsistently conveyed in translations, but I argue that this philological detail should not be overlooked.

The reading of as an emphatic “I myself will guide” is supported by similar constructions found elsewhere in the Gospel of Thomas. For example, saying 108 reads “I myself shall become that person.” What is curious is that the very same


35 The presence of others besides Jesus is based on the third plural “them” ( OpCode ) and first plural “us” ( OpCode ).
36 Some exceptions that briefly mention Jesus’ responsibility in guiding Mary are Gathercole, The Gospel of Thomas, 615; Uwe-Karsten Plisch, The Gospel of Thomas: Original Text with Commentary (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2008), 246.
translation that does not translate the emphatic pronoun in 114 does so in 108.\textsuperscript{38} Regardless of the way the text is translated, what the Coptic emphasizes is that Jesus is responsible for making Mary male. Although the explanatory clause that follows seems to put agency back into the hands of the woman (“For every woman who makes herself male”), I see this functioning more to explain Jesus’ emphatic “I myself” statement, rather than suggesting that Mary and women by extension are themselves solely responsible for their being worthy of life and entry to the kingdom of heaven.\textsuperscript{39} In her reading of this passage, Johanna Brankaer goes so far as to suggest that having Jesus as a guide is a “privilege” bestowed upon Mary, one that the “disciples,” like Peter, do not receive.\textsuperscript{40} In her opinion, Jesus reserves access to the Kingdom of Heaven not for the “disciples” but for women who make themselves male, those who allow themselves to be guided.\textsuperscript{41} The fact that the focus should be placed on Jesus as a guide in response to Peter’s original statement coincides with the triangular structure, even if the “ironic” reading of this passage is not entirely convincing.\textsuperscript{42}

Another key component of Gos. Thom. 114 that is easily overlooked is that although Mary’s name is mentioned, she does not say a word. Furthermore, it is not even clear if she is within earshot of this conversation between Peter and Jesus. The fact that Peter insists Mary should “leave us” at most suggests that she has been present at some point, for some time. But the extent of her role or the exact amount of time she has spent with the group is unclear. While scholars take for granted Mary’s presence in this passage, possibly because she asks a question in saying 21, it is not actually clear where Mary is in saying 114. In fact, considering the genre of the Gospel of Thomas—a collection of sayings rather than a narrative—and the fact that there is no narrative coherence throughout the gospel, there is no basis to assume that just because Mary appears earlier in the text that she is also present at the very end. One may even conclude that Mary has even less agency than the nameless woman in \textit{pericope adulterae} since at least she explicitly bore witness to the discussion about her fate and uttered a few words to Jesus! What these details reveal is that Gos. Thom. 114 has little to no interest in foregrounding Mary.

\begin{center}
\begin{tikzpicture}
\node (Peter) at (0,0) {Peter};
\node (Jesus) at (2,0) {Jesus};
\node (Mary) at (1,-1) {Mary};
\draw (Peter) -- (Mary);
\draw (Jesus) -- (Mary);
\end{tikzpicture}
\end{center}

\textsuperscript{38} Meyer, “The Gospel of Thomas: Text & Translation,” 153 Gos. Thom. 30 also includes the same construction, and also does not get translated as “I myself.” It is unclear what made the translators retain the emphatic nature in 108 but not in 30 or 114.

\textsuperscript{39} Richard Valantasis sees this clause as articulating a “general principle,” \textit{The Gospel of Thomas} (London: Routledge, 1997), 195.

\textsuperscript{40} “[C]e qui distingue Marie de Pierre, c’est que Jésus la guide, privilège qui n’est jamais conféré aux ‘disciples.’” Brankaer, “L’ironie de Jésus,” 161.

\textsuperscript{41} “L’accès au Royaume est promis par Jésus aux femmes qui se font mâles et non aux disciples.” Brankaer, “L’ironie de Jésus,” 161–62.

Based on this analysis, the narrative structure we saw in *pericope adulterae* is also evident in Gos. Thom. 114. Peter and Jesus form homosocial bonds and situate their power over and against a passive, silent woman named Mary.

Much like in interpretations of the famous passage in John, we might be inclined to see Jesus’ response to Peter as some sort of stand against misogyny. But once again, Jesus is not challenging the implicit structure that brings about the problem in the first case. Jesus does not state that Peter’s concern is irrelevant much like he does not contend against the Pharisees and scribes initial complaint about the woman. Instead, what seems to be the main concern in these two examples is not what happens to the women, but which man wins. As Knust explains, “[the woman’s] desire is depicted as irrelevant to the case at hand, and the shared desire for male dominance is established once again, even if it is one, superior man who emerges triumphant. The real question is not ‘will the woman be saved?’ so much as ‘which man will win?’”

Viewing *pericope adulterae* and saying 114 together, we can detect the same power structure that Sedgwick describes in the theory of homosocial bonds:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Pericope adulterae</th>
<th>Gos. Thom. 114</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Initiator of Problem</td>
<td>Pharisees and scribes</td>
<td>Peter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. “Problem”</td>
<td>Adulteress</td>
<td>Mary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Reason</td>
<td>Sinning/adultery</td>
<td>Women not worthy of life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Unchallenged structure</td>
<td>Law</td>
<td>Women not worthy of life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Resolution/male winner</td>
<td>Jesus wins; tells her to sin no more</td>
<td>Jesus wins; will guide Mary to make her male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Details re: women</td>
<td>Adulteress; no name/biographical details</td>
<td>Mary (common name); no biographical details</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Woman’s voice?</td>
<td>“No one, sir.” (John 8:11)</td>
<td>none</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Admittedly, the contexts that surround *pericope adulterae* and Peter’s conversation with Jesus are different. In *pericope adulterae*, the Pharisees and scribes approach Jesus with the unnamed woman in order to challenge his knowledge of the law. Peter, on the other hand, does not appear to challenge Jesus’ authority but seeks his approval by suggesting that Mary should leave them. One could argue that there are different types of bonds at work here, with the bond between Jesus and the Pharisees/scribes being more adversarial than the bond between Jesus and Peter. However, because the current analysis uses the homosocial bond framework to identify these structures as an entry point into assessing the function of women in these narratives, it is not the type of homosocial bond between Jesus and his male counterparts that bears the most significance. Instead, the recognition that any type of homosocial bond exists through a passive, crushed woman allows us to reconsider what is at stake for both parties. In other words, the type of bond or relationship that the two (sets of) men is tangential to the very fact that the bond is formed by negotiating the status of a woman without the woman herself entering the conversation.

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44 Knust, “Can an Adulteress Save Jesus?,” 410.
The unnamed woman in *pericope adulterae* and the unspecified Mary in Gos. Thom. 114 are both significant in their insignificance to the overall purpose of their inclusion within the texts. Both are brought forth to Jesus as “problems” from the perspective of other male characters (Pharisees and Scribes/Peter). This initiating discourse sets in motion the ability for the two sets of men to negotiate and form bonds. These bonds are formed on the basis that the men share a common social understanding. In the case of the Gospel of John, it is the knowledge of the law; in the Gospel of Thomas, it is the notion that women are not worthy of life. These non-disputed concepts are what enables these men to come together and battle for position. In both cases, Jesus appears to come out as the winner. In the Gospel of John, his words lead the crowd to disband one by one and he is left alone with the woman. While the Gospel of Thomas does not include a definitive ending, Jesus once again gets the last words in, and he claims that he himself will be the one to guide Mary.

Both of these battles that end up proclaiming Jesus as the winner take place over and against women, with whom minimal details are associated. In the Gospel of John, the woman does not have a name, which coincidentally allows her to be conflated with Mary Magdalene in later Christian tradition. All we know about this woman is her sin: adultery. For Mary in the Gospel of Thomas, there has also been a tendency to suggest that this Mary is Mary Magdalene, but there is no textual basis within Thomas to support this hypothesis. Ultimately, much like with the unnamed woman in John, in the Gospel of Thomas, we are left with an insignificant woman who just so happens to have a name that was extremely common in antiquity.

**Reflections as Conclusion**

Similar to the disappointment we see in commentaries on the *pericope adulterae* regarding Jesus’ response to the plight of the woman, scholars are equally dismayed by Jesus’ response to Peter. For example, Anne McGuire laments, “By concluding with Logion 114, the GThom puts an androcentric seal on its multifaceted images of redemption through the Living Jesus… Even as this gospel affirms the inclusion of women like Mary, its representation of the human ideal as male nonetheless deval-

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47 For a discussion and bibliography on the identity of the unspecified Mary in non-canonical texts, see n. 6 above. Within this debate, Stephen Shoemaker maintains that the Mother of Jesus is just as likely a candidate to be associated with the these Marys as Magdalene. See, e.g., Stephen J. Shoemaker, *Mary in Early Christian Faith and Devotion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 88–89; Stephen J. Shoemaker, “Jesus’ Gnostic Mom: Mary of Nazareth and the ‘Gnostic Mary’ Traditions,” in *Mariam, the Magdalen, and the Mother*, ed. Deirdre Good (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005), 153–82; Stephen J. Shoemaker, “Rethinking the ‘Gnostic Mary’: Mary of Nazareth and Mary of Magdala in Early Christian Tradition,” *JECS* 9, no. 4 (2001): 555–95. In addition to Mary Magdalene and the Mother of Jesus, Mary of Bethany has also become a contender in the Which Mary? debate. Mary Ann Beavis, “Reconsidering Mary of Bethany,” *CBQ* 74 (2012): 281–97; Mary Ann Beavis, “Mary of Bethany and the Hermeneutics of Remembrance,” *CBQ* 75 (2013): 739–55; Other possibilities of identifications of this Mary, as Marvin Meyer suggests, could be “Mary the mother of Jesus, Mary Salome, or some other Mary” or “[p]erhaps the safest conclusion is that a ‘universal Mary’ is in mind.” “Making Mary Male,” 562; As I argue elsewhere about the unspecified Mary in another Nag Hammadi text, the Dialogue of the Saviour, the commonality of the name Mary between 330 BCE and 200 CE suggests that no specific Mary needs to be summoned each time a woman named Mary appears in a given text Anna Cwikla, “Magdalene, Mother, Martha’s Sister, or None of the Above? The Mary in the *Dialogue of the Savior*,” in *Rediscovering the Marys: Maria, Mariamne, Miriam*, ed. Mary Ann Beavis and Ally Kateusz (London: T&T Clark, Forthcoming); For more on the Which Mary? debate and other topics related to the Marys of ancient Christianity, see collection of essays in Mary Ann Beavis and Ally Kateusz, eds., *Rediscovering the Marys: Maria, Mariamne, Miriam* (London: T&T Clark, Forthcoming).

ues the symbolic category of the female.” This disappointment seems to stem from an anticipation that somehow Jesus would challenge Peter and the existing structures that devalue women. Is it time to admit that we should not expect an ally in Jesus?

Following the triangular framework and Sedgwick’s homosocial bond theory, it is not the woman or her interests that are the main concern to Jesus or Peter. The goal is for these men to form social bonds with each other, while Mary is the foil that reinforces masculine social bonds in the text. If we recognize that women are not in these narratives for their own sake, but more than likely, for the purpose of being the ground on which men stand, battle, and establish power structures, we reduce our level of disappointment. Perhaps more importantly, we no longer need to burden these ancient women with our modern feminist expectations that they—as bystanders in male-defined texts and realities—are in no position to fulfill.

My contribution in this article is threefold. First, it shows that ancient authors and audiences would have been less concerned with the interests of female characters, such as Mary, and more concerned with the interests of male characters, such as Jesus. After all, in the case of both the Gospels of John and Thomas, Jesus is the main character. Second, by highlighting the insignificance and disposability of these female characters, I challenge the perception that the mere inclusion or mention of these placeholder figures reflected any sort of reverence or allegiance to them, at least in the earliest stages of the Jesus movement. Finally, focusing on the bonds created between men in these narratives allows us to more clearly determine what ideologies or interests they had in common.

This approach positions us to reconsider the role the more well-known “heroines” of ancient Christianity played, such as Thecla (briefly discussed above), Perpetua the famous martyr, and Macrina the Younger, sister of Gregory of Nyssa, known for her steadfast chastity and asceticism. At the same time, we can re-evaluate the salacious and demeaning descriptions of women in patristic sources. For example, was Helena—the companion of so-called heretic Simon Magus—a “common prostitute” as Irenaeus describes her (Against Heresies 1.23)? Or is Irenaeus simply disparaging Helena in order to undermine Simon Magus? Whether we analyze the “heroines” or the “whores” of ancient Christianity, it is clear that men benefited from their stories in some way.

In closing, I want to reflect briefly on why we, as scholars in the twenty-first century, so desperately seek these women in ancient Christian texts. According to Silke Petersen, the reason we want to find powerful women in ancient Christian texts might relate to our modern concerns about the exclusion of women from certain ecclesial positions. While her study primarily deals with patristic polemic against women in so-called “heretical” groups, Petersen recognizes that modern religious discourses focus on women in a similar way. As Petersen points out, “The attitude a religion shows toward


‘the woman question’ is a popular indicator of the value granted to that religion.” In the case of our concern for searching for women in ancient sources, she explains that

[while patristic sources use this claim [about women] in a polemical sense in order to downgrade “heresy” for the important role it gives to women, in many present-day discussions the same claim means an upgrading of “heresy” because of its (supposed) woman-friendliness. The exclusion of women from ecclesiastical office is then explained as a reaction to the stronger feminine presence in heretical groups.]

In other words, our need to look for women in non-canonical texts such as the Gospel of Thomas reflects our frustration with the lack of leadership roles for women in certain ecclesiastical settings. Even beyond theological and ecclesiastical concerns, there seems to be something about the Nag Hammadi codices and other Apocryphal texts that evoke an “underdog” sentiment. Finding women in “non-mainstream” contexts might be our own way of fighting structures that we have little to no power to change.

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53 Petersen, “‘Women’ and ‘Heresy,’” 187.

54 Petersen, “‘Women’ and ‘Heresy,’” 190.


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