Early Christian and Jewish Narrative

The Role of Religion in Shaping Narrative Forms

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Following Paul: The *Acts of Xanthippe, Polyxena, and Rebecca* as an Ancient Novel

Vincent Hunink

In recent years, research into the genre of the ancient novel has been expanded to include early Christian narrative prose, which had been largely neglected in earlier periods. It seems only natural that this new scholarly attention has been mainly directed at major Christian texts, such as the canonical Acts of the Apostles, Greek and Latin martyr acts, and their influential successors: hagiographical accounts.

On a somewhat smaller scale, research is also devoted to Christian tales in a stricter sense of what we feel inclined to call "fiction."[1] Perhaps best known in this area is the tale of Thecla, a woman who was attracted to Paul and his teaching, consequently devoted herself to his cause, and after many problems and much suffering managed to participate in Paul's missionary work, thereby effectively becoming almost a female apostle.[2]

The popular Greek *Acta Theclae* seems to have appealed to a wide audience,[3] and the text rapidly spread in the eastern Mediterranean during the third and fourth centuries, as did the cult of Saint Thecla. The apparent success of Thecla and her story heavily influenced later texts.[4] The present paper focuses on a lesser-known text which partly follows in Thecla's footsteps: the *Acta Xanthippae, Polyxenae et Rebeccae* (hence *AXPR*). This is an anonymous text of some length,

[1] The term *fiction* is, of course, problematic as such and seems particularly difficult to apply to early Christian texts of any kind. One might argue that early Christian readers may have accepted all Christian texts as somehow (re)presenting "truth." It remains a matter of perspective and definition. For short discussion and an introductory overview of relevant early Christian texts, see Holzberg 2006, 34–38. For the Apocryphal Acts, see also, e. g., Lalleman 1998.

[2] The *Acts of Paul and Thecla* is in fact, a large section of the *Acta Pauli*, an early apocryphal text, dated at ca. A.D. 200. The most recent text and commentary in English is Barrier 2009. Cf. also Hunink 2013 for a translation in Dutch.

[3] Hardly anything is known with certainty about the intended and actual readers of this text, as is the case with nearly all narrative texts in Greek and Roman literature. Meanwhile, it is an attractive hypothesis that the readership of the *Acts of Thecla* was predominantly female, since Thecla might be seen as an attractive role model for ancient women.

[4] There is, e. g., a fifth-century *Life and Miracles of Thecla*. For a study of this text in the tradition of the ancient novel, cf. Johnson 2006. See particularly 199–203, which focus on five themes that bring the text close to the novel: the playful romance of Paul and Thecla, the use of invented speeches, the use of recapitulation, the theme of education of the lovers, and the foreshadowing of events. On the Thecla tradition, see also, e. g., Aspegren 1990, 109–114.

dating from an uncertain period in late antiquity.[5] It was discovered as late as the nineteenth century; its first publication dates from 1893,[6] and its first (and still only) English translation from 1897.[7]

The text tells about not one woman, but several women, who come under the spell of Paul and wish to imitate his way of life. The text is rather more lengthy than the *Acta Theclae* and accordingly offers more in terms of adventure and spectacle, with many details recalling the tradition of the ancient novel. The *AXPR* can stand as a concrete example of the kind of popular texts that Christian readers in late antiquity apparently liked to read, in addition to the Bible and other authoritative or apocryphal texts.

Since its rediscovery and publication in 1893, fairly little attention has been paid to the *AXPR*. The few scholars who ventured to write about it have focused either on textual matters or on specific aspects of its content.[8] Therefore, it seems worthwhile to reassess the narrative, and briefly study it in terms of the ancient novel.[9]

The Tale

In the absence of an accessible book edition and of modern translations in any of the major languages used in classical studies (English, French, German, Italian, or Spanish), I propose to start with a summary of the text as a whole.

The *AXPR* opens in medias res, that is, without a formal announcement or programmatic paragraph. Instead, it clearly locates the tale within both space and time:

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[5] Estimates concerning the date vary, ranging from the middle of the third century A.D. (James 1893, 54) to the sixth century A.D. (Szepessy 2004, 318; cf. Junod 1989, 91). Although the former date is probably too early in the light of the various Apocryphal Acts that have influenced the *AXPR*, such as the *Acta Philippi* (which can be dated to the fourth or fifth century), the latter seems rather late. For lack of conclusive evidence, the matter may be left aside.

[6] Greek text: James 1893, 43–85. James's text is still the only available version of the Greek text. It is not entirely reliable and contains numerous dubious points or mistakes. Some corrections have been advanced in scholarly literature, e. g., in Bonnet 1894. Cf. also Junod 1989, 84–85. A new, critical edition obviously is a desideratum.

[7] English translation: Craigie 1897. Craigie's version has been reprinted in various editions and now circulates widely on the Internet, sometimes anonymously or referred to with a wrong, later date. For instance, Gormann (2001, 416) gives 1980 as the year of publication. According to Junod (1989, 84), the Greek text "n'a reçu sa première traduction (en anglais) que tout récemment," ("was given its first translation (in English) only very recently") while Dannemann (1998, 748) refers to a translation that is difficult of access. As far as I can see, the translation has remained virtually unchanged since 1897 and has always been easily available.

[8] From earlier scholarship, e. g., Peterson 1947, who focuses on some sections without presenting a coherent analysis.

[9] Surprisingly, the *AXPR* has not yet been studied in this generic context. For the narrative of *AXPR* analyzed within the tradition of the Apocryphal Acts, see Szepessy 2004.

When the blessed Paul was at Rome through the word of the Lord, it happened that a certain servant of a ruler of Spain came to Rome with letters of his masters, and heard the word of God from Paul, the truly golden and beautiful nightingale. This servant being greatly touched, and being unable to remain and be filled with the divine word because he was hastened by the letters, returned into Spain in great grief, and being unable to show his desire to any one, because his master was an idolater, he was always pained at heart and sighing greatly. (c. 1)

Right at the start, we see how Paul is active in Rome. This fixes the narrative date at shortly after the middle of the first century A.D. Paul is introduced in highly complimentary terms and seems to be an inspiring model. Interestingly, no woman is mentioned in the entire opening chapter, which mainly consists of a dialogue between the Spanish servant and his master, after the former's return to Spain. At the end of this, the master is ready to send his servant back to Rome, in order to have his "illness" cured by the "doctor" he had met there.

At this point, the master's wife, Xanthippe,[10] appears to have overheard the dialogue, and she enters into a private conversation with the servant, who tells her everything he knows. Thus, she gets acquainted with the teaching of Paul, and she feels deeply moved. From that day, she starts "wasting herself away with waking and abstinence and other austerities" (c. 2), and she laments and prays intensely (c. 4).[11] Her husband, Probus, is, of course, worried about this, if only because he suspects that Xanthippe wants to get divorced, after merely two years of marriage (c. 6).

In c. 7, Paul makes his entry into the tale. In one or two lines, he is depicted traveling from Rome to Spain,[12] where he enters through "the city gate."[13] Xanthippe's reaction on seeing him is revealing in more than one sense:

When Xanthippe saw the blessed Paul walking quietly and equally, and adorned with all virtue and understanding, she was greatly delighted in him and her heart leaped continually, and as possessed with an unexpected joy she said with herself: "Why does my heart beat vehemently at the sight of this man? Why is his walk quiet and equable, as of one who expects to take in his arms one that is pursued? Why is his countenance kindly, as of one that tends the sick? Why does he look so lovingly hither and thither, as one who desires to assist those who are seeking to flee from the mouths of dragons? Who shall tell me that this is one from the flock of preachers? If it were possible for me, I should wish

[10] Most likely, both Xanthippe and Polyxena are entirely fictional characters, not based on any historical models. Even in Byzantine sources, their historical authenticity as saints was doubted; see Szepessy 2004, 322. In ancient literature, the name Xanthippe is, of course, best known because of the (generally detested) wife of Socrates.

[11] For laments as a typical feature of the Greek novel, see Birchall 1996.

[12] The apostle Paul evidently planned a journey to Spain; see Rom 15:24, 28. Whether he fulfilled this intention is not known. Early Christians believed that he actually had visited Spain. For this tradition, see Meinardus 1978.

[13] It is curious to see that no city of Spain is specifically mentioned. Szepessy (2004, 319) refers to "an unnamed town in Hispania." One is tempted to assume that the author of the text regards "Hispania" as a city rather than a country.

to touch the hem of his garments, that I may behold his kindness and readiness to receive and sweet odour." (c. 7).

For an ancient reader who is familiar with ancient novels, Xanthippe's rapid heartbeat and joy, and perhaps even her self-address, clearly suggest that she has somehow fallen in love with Paul. Love is, of course, one of the most familiar and characteristic motifs of the ancient novel.[14] In addition, the passage cleverly manages to convey something of Paul's countenance without actually giving any detail about his external appearance.[15] Finally, this admiration at the appearance of a wondrous human being may also be called an "epiphanic situation," recalling many notable passages from the Greek novels.[16]

Probus invites Paul to enter his house, apparently hoping that it will be beneficial to Xanthippe. As Paul enters the house, Xanthippe receives a vision of sorts: "When Xanthippe therefore saw the great Paul, the intellectual eyes of her heart were uncovered, and she read upon his forehead, having as it were golden seals, these words: 'PAUL THE PREACHER OF GOD.' Then exulting and rejoicing she threw herself at his feet, and twisting her hair together she wiped his feet, saying: 'Welcome, O man of God, to us humble ones, that live as shadows among shadows'" (c. 8).

Paul does not wish to be considered a messenger of God, and he turns Xanthippe's attention away from himself to Christ. As many people come to visit Paul, Probus changes his mind and forces Paul to leave. Another representative of the local elite, a man with the telling name Philotheus,[17] receives Paul in turn (c. 11). This adds to Xanthippe's distress, as she still has not received baptism.

Being locked in the house by Probus, Xanthippe manages to bribe one of the guards and visits Paul at the house of Philotheus, where she is baptized and receives the Eucharist. On her return home, she is comforted by the vision of "a beautiful youth" (c. 15), who assumes the shape of Paul but clearly is the Lord Jesus, who even addresses her: "The Lord said to her: 'My servant Paul is richer than all wealth, for whatsoever treasure he acquires here he sends it before him into the kingdom of heaven, that departing thither he may rest in the unending and eternal rest. This is the treasure of Paul, thou and thy like" (c. 15).

Next, in what seems a proper cliffhanger,[18] Xanthippe faints and falls to the ground, due to her excessive fasting. The focus then shifts to Probus. In a lengthy

[14] Cf. Holzberg 2006, 39, where "erotische Motive" are mentioned as the first element in a list of typical features by which the genre can be defined.

[15] The canonical New Testament texts hardly provide any concrete detail about Paul's looks. See, however, the *Acta Theclae* 2, where he is described as a small, bold man with bandy legs, pronounced eyebrows, and a hooked nose.

[16] On epiphany in the novels, see now Cioffi 2014 with further literature.

[17] Significant names of protagonists are a minor but typical characteristic of the ancient novel; cf. Keulen 2000 on the motif in Apuleius; and Habermehl 2006, xvi–xix on Petronius, both with further literature. Similar observations may be made with regard to other novels.

[18] The cliffhanger may be generally defined as a consciously constructed moment of suspense

passage, he describes a dream he has had and seeks explanation of it from two wise men, who succeed in bringing him into contact with Paul. Thus, he too comes to accept Paul's teaching on sexual abstinence and receives baptism and the Eucharist (c. 21).[19]

Complex Developments

The tale then seems to reach a peaceful, happy ending, with a great party being prepared by Probus and Xanthippe to celebrate their new blessedness in Christ. Some unexpected events bring the story into a second phase: the appearance of a demon (c. 21), an evil dream of Xanthippe's beautiful, younger sister Polyxena,[20] who has not yet been baptized (c. 22), and an attempted kidnapping of Polyxena (c. 23). Again, we are in novel territory here; predictive dreams and kidnappings appear as motifs in virtually every ancient novel.

Next follows a dazzling sequence of scenes, difficult even to summarize. Polyxena is taken to the coast and put on a ship going in the direction of Babylon (c. 24). Again, these events are common novel motifs. Seafaring and travel, often at great distances, preferably from familiar Greco-Roman territory to the exotic east (Egypt, Babylon), is a dominant motif in ancient novels. On its course, the ship is met by another vessel, which carries the apostle Peter, whom we see praying to Jesus. Polyxena's ship lands in Greece (c. 25), right at the spot where another apostle, Philip, is preaching. Philip takes care of Polyxena and helps her escape.[21]

We meet Polyxena again in a lonely scene in the countryside, where she meets a lioness, which on hearing the name of Paul does not harm her (c. 27). As she

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at the end of a chapter or scene (whether in written text or performed drama), intended to retain the interest of the audience and to make it eager to read or see more. As a literary technique in ancient literature, it is as old as Homer. Nonetheless, it seems particularly typical of the Greek novel. Many instances may be found, e. g., in Chariton's novel *Kalliroe*. For example, see 1.4.12, where the heroine appears to have died as the result of a kick in the stomach by her husband. Some changes of scene follow, and it is only several pages later that she appears to be still alive.

[19] With the conversion of Probus, the storyline of *AXPR* clearly departs from what may be observed in various Apocryphal Acts, where an apostle usually manages to convert just the wife or the husband, with further conflicts (or even martyrdom of the apostle) as a consequence; for this recurring narrative pattern, see Konstan 1998.

[20] The Greek leaves little doubt that both women are sisters in the biological sense of the word: ἀνακειμένης τῆς ἀδελφῆς αὐτῆς τῆς Πολυξένης ἐπὶ τῆς κλίνης (22). In that context, it is also said that Probus loves her very much, too, which strengthens the idea that she is his relative rather than his wife's female lover. Gorman (2006, 207 n. 6) misinterprets the text as referring to "Christian sisters," on the basis of Xanthippe's address of Polyxena on her return to Spain as γνησία μου ἀδελφὴ Πολυξένη (my true sister; 41). I would argue rather the other way around: Xanthippe can finally address her as a "true sister" in the sense that she is not merely her biological sister but also, at the end, a companion in the Christian faith.

[21] The section c. 25 is not clear in every respect, and it brings in some complicated action, including a battle of thirty men against thousands of men.

pursues her way, she is met by yet another apostle, Andrew, who brings her to a well. There a Jewish prisoner, Rebecca, appears. Andrew baptizes both girls and asks them to stay together "as of one people" (c. 29) and to live an exemplary life. The lioness briefly reenters the stage and miraculously utters a prayer to Andrew in a human voice (c. 30).

The last few pages of the narrative introduce yet more secondary figures, such as a Christian ass-driver, with whom Polyxena and Rebecca talk and travel for a while, and who himself briefly meets the apostle Philip (c. 34). Polyxena and Rebecca are separated – the former being taken away by a prefect, the latter by a soldier (c. 35). Separation of protagonists, usually young lovers, is again a common motif in the ancient novel.

In a rather nice move, the son of the prefect announces that he wishes to marry Polyxena, but in a chaste, Christian way. For the young man recalls Christian lessons he received: "'For a certain man of glorious countenance lately in Antioch preached this God, and a certain maid, whose name was Thecla, believing him followed him, and encountered dangers on account of her beauty, of whom I have heard that she was condemned to the wild beasts'" (c. 36).

The circle seems almost to have come round again, with the reference to Paul, while the brief but explicit mention of Thecla establishes a link that goes even beyond the present text. As if to recall Thecla's confrontation with wild beasts, another lioness briefly appears and licks Polyxena's feet (c. 37).[22] The young man persuades his father to let them go and causes him and the whole city to convert to Christ. The young man, Polyxena and Rebecca prepare to go to Spain.

Finally, we are in for a surprise, for not all is over and done as yet. The story is rounded out by a man who presents himself as the author of the tale:[23] "And as I, Onesimus, was sailing into Spain to Paul, I received from the Lord a revelation saying to me: 'Onesimus, the vessel in which thou now art will land in the parts of Greece, and thou wilt find on the shore of the harbour two maids and one youth. Assist them and take them to Paul'" (c. 38).

Two maids? The detail seems a little awkward, since Rebecca had last appeared in c. 35, locked up with an old woman and clearly separated from Polyxena. But who else but Rebecca could be meant here?

The journey to Spain involves some minor adventures (c. 38–39), but after twelve days, Onesimus and his company arrive safely. Immediately, they meet Paul, who regardless of his mission apparently is still there, although by this time

[22] The motif of the mild and finally even "human" lion may be connected with Polyxena's moral progress and transformation to a higher state; see Konstan 2009, 114–16 (with further literature).

[23] Little or nothing has been said by scholars on this surprising turn. One may ask, for instance, what effect this introduction of a male narrator has on the whole of *AXPR*. The point seems particularly valid for some recent interpretations that seem to discern a certain "proto-feminist" layer in the text (see, e. g., nn. 20, 25, and 31).

several months must have elapsed,[24] and Xanthippe, who is happily reunited with her sister: "And she made haste and came to us, and seeing Polyxena, was overcome by an unspeakable joy and fell to the ground; but Polyxena embracing her and caressing her for a long time brought her back to life" (c. 41). Again there is a subtle suggestion of sisterly tenderness verging on the erotic.[25]

Even then the story is not entirely finished: the two men who seek Polyxena's hand (her kidnapper and her savior) are both converted, and the whole town turns to celebration (c. 42). Polyxena stays with Paul, and everybody is glad. This is truly a happy ending, as is common in most Greek and Latin novels.[26]

Unbalanced Book

This survey of the novel's plot easily shows some of its most glaring shortcomings, considered from a traditional classicist perspective. It is, first of all, unbalanced in its overall structure. As James (1893) already observed,[27] there is a sharp line of demarcation between sections 1–21 and 22–42. In the first sections, the encounter of Xanthippe and Paul is central, and the tale is told at a rather slow pace. The second part introduces a great number of minor characters, although Polyxena may be said to be the most important one. And as the summary suggests, there is an almost breathtaking sequence of all sorts of exciting events.

James also observed a notable difference in the use of sources. The first part shows some traces of the apocryphal Acts that remain somewhat understated, while the second part even contains an outright reference to the *Acta Theclae* and

[24] There are few indications of time throughout the tale. A notable exception is the end of c. 18, where Xanthippe is said to have been fasting for twenty-nine days. In c. 41, Xanthippe will refer to their separation as "not quite forty days." Craigie (1897, 217) renders the statement as "I … went not forth at all for forty days," which seems rather strange. I would suggest that the Greek adverbial phrase οὐδ' ὅλως should not be combined with the verb but with the number of days. The point then is that Xanthippe has not entirely completed a full cycle of forty days of praying.

[25] Jill Gorman (2006) makes too much of the scene. On the assumption that Xanthippe and Polyxena are not biological sisters but Christian sisters (and hence can be "lovers" in some sense), she argues that Xanthippe has fasted for forty days to preserve Polyxena's virginity, a point that prompts Gorman to further theoretical considerations. I have argued previously (n. 20) that both women are probably biological sisters. Moreover, the Greek here does not refer to fasting at all: "Ἐγὼ, γνησία μου ἀδελφὴ Πολυξένη, οὐδ' ὅλως προῆλθον ἐπὶ τεσσαράκοντα ἡμέρας δεομένη πολλὰ ὑπέρ σου τοῦ φιλανθρώπου θεοῦ ὅπως μὴ κλαπῇ ἡ παρθενία σου." Whatever the exact sense of προῆλθον here, it certainly cannot be "I fasted." Only much earlier in the tale, at the end of c. 18, there is a clear reference to Xanthippe's fasting: "ἰδοὺ γὰρ εἰσὶν ἡμέραι εἴκοσι καὶ θ ἀφ' οὗ οὐδενὸς ἐγεύσατο." It is, of course, not excluded that Xanthippe actually fasted and prayed during the (almost) forty days, but it seems wrong to develop a far-reaching argument on the basis of what is at best an implication in the Greek.

[26] Even Apuleius's *Metamorphoses*, for all its somber and ironical variations of novel elements, seems to end on a happy note, with Lucius (having regained his human shape) joyfully taking up his duties as a priest (*Met.* 10.30).

[27] James 1893, 52–53.

further references to yet more texts in the genre. In short, James concludes, part one is more homogeneous than part two.

As there is no apparent difference of language and style between the two parts, one would presume that the text was written by one author, who has somehow combined a number of tales from various sources.

A second shortcoming is the less-than-perfect way in which the tales have been combined. In fact, there are a number of odd elements and loose ends throughout the novel. To the examples already mentioned in the summary, one could add many more. A few examples will illustrate this.

The relation of the three female characters from the title remains uncertain at some points. What exactly is the relationship between Xanthippe and Polyxena? If they are biological sisters, why do they almost seem to be in love? And what is the fate of both sisters after they have been reunited?[28] Do Probus and Xanthippe keep on living as a couple after Polyxena's happy return?[29] And what further happens to Rebecca?[30] It is suggested (though not explicitly said) that she travels with Polyxena to Spain, but the author does not devote a single word to her after the passage of her captivity.

Similar questions may be raised about most minor characters – both in Spain, such as the faithful servant (from the opening chapter) and Philotheus, and in Greece, such as the prefect, the ass-driver, and the traveling apostles.[31] Characters easily enter the story for a short while and are just as easily written out by the author when he no longer needs them.[32]

Third, in addition to the overall structure and the treatment of characters, the development of the plot lacks cohesion and balance. As has been argued and shown, the pace of action is often high, with major developments or changes of place being told in just one or two lines.[33] In contrast to the rapid action, there

[28] Of Polyxena, it was said that she stayed close to Paul (c. 42), but we hear nothing more about Xanthippe; see Dannemann 1998, 751–52, on Polyxena's "freedom of marriage."

[29] This is cautiously suggested by Dannemann (1998, 750), who adds that a "solution" as in 1 Cor 7:5 may have been adopted – that is, of a couple accepting moderate sexual intercourse within their marriage. On p. 755, by contrast, she suggests that Xanthippe and Probus live on as a missionary couple, a point not confirmed in the Greek text.

[30] According to Dannemann (1998, 755), Rebecca may have moved in with Polyxena. For this notion, the Greek text does not provide a clue.

[31] Although the apostles and other male characters do not seem to be fully developed, it is surely exaggerated to suggest that they are presented in an unfavorable light, as Dannemann (1998, 754–55) does, underscoring the men's lack of protection of the female protagonists. She even remarks that the images of Paul, Peter, and Andreas at times seem ironical (755). I fail to see in what sense the apostles in the *AXPR* could be interpreted in such a sense.

[32] As such, the technique of easily disposing of secondary characters seems typical of the ancient novel as well. On reading, e. g., Chariton or Apuleius, to mention just two examples, many examples of such "momentary" figures spring to mind. As far as I know, the motif has never been studied specifically for the ancient novel.

[33] Some striking examples: c. 1 (the opening lines, moving the focus from Rome to Spain); c. 7 (Paul's coming to Spain); c. 24 (the ship's travel to the East); c. 25 (action on the shore);

is extensive dialogue and, more importantly, monologue, usually (though not always) in the form of prayers.[34] Given the nature of prayer and inner monologue, the "action" comes to a complete standstill for the length of the passages in question. The overall impression is one of quick and somewhat careless leaps forward in time combined with extended pauses.

Considered from a literary point of view, this could be labeled as careless writing. However, when seen within the limits and common practices of the ancient novel, the *AXPR* is not so very different in this respect from other specimens of the genre.[35]

Unifying Themes

The first impressions concerning this novel seem confusing for the modern reader, who probably expects to find a carefully constructed narrative but actually finds one that shows a lack of balance at several levels. However, on closer scrutiny, the book offers some themes, motifs, and general interests that effectively unite not only both parts of the book, but also the story as a whole.

A major interest throughout the *AXPR* is love, which as a motif assumes various shapes. Most importantly, there is the love of Xanthippe for Paul, the bodily signs of which are apparent at the start of the book (as has been observed), but which quickly develops into a spiritual love with transcendent dimensions. That is, the physical and sexual elements of human love, which are so often highlighted with loving detail in ancient novels, are downplayed in favor of religious, Christian tones. Meanwhile, Xanthippe's strong longing for Paul, particularly when she is separated from him, shines through at various places and recalls the erotic longing felt by novel heroines.[36]

In addition to Xanthippe's and Paul's love,[37] there is the love of Probus for his wife: he is worried about her and wishes to help her (c. 5), and the prospect of losing her to Paul's teaching about sexual renunciation is really worrying to him.

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c. 34 (the ass-driver meeting Philip); c. 37 (Polyxena being thrown to the wild beasts); c. 38–42 (events involving Onesimus). Cf. also Szepessy 2004, 334: "the anonymous author of the *Acta* often spins the thread of the story with undue haste."

[34] Xanthippe has by far the most lines of prayer. Her words of prayer are given in long sections in c. 3; 4; 6; 12; 14; 15; and 19 (a song or psalm). In addition, there are prayers in c. 20 (Probus); 24 (Peter); 28 and 30 (Andreas); 35 (Polyxena); and 37 (prefect and city in Greece). Some other longer sections of direct speech are to be found in c. 4 (monologue by Xanthippe); 8–9 (address of Paul by Xanthippe, and vice versa); and 26 (monologue of Polyxena). The prayers and speeches mostly occur in the first part of the tale; cf. also James 1893, 53.

[35] In this combination of rapidly told action and lengthy direct speech, the *AXPR* particularly recalls Chariton's *Kallirhoe*.

[36] The motif is particularly strong before she has met him; cf. c. 2–6; further, e. g., c. 11–13.

[37] Paul may be said to be free from earthly love and from personal affection for Xanthippe. However, he is also pictured as kind and caring for all men (c. 2), and in his encounters with

His methods to retain her by locking her up, however, resemble the behavior commonly displayed by literary tyrants who, invariably in vain, attempt to force female characters into loving them. But at the end of part 1, even Probus appears susceptible to the Christian faith, and thus may be said to come to a new understanding of Love.

In part 2 (c. 22–42), Xanthippe, Paul, and Probus all recede to the background, but love is never far away. There is the love of Xanthippe for her younger sister, Polyxene (c. 22), who as an attractive young woman in distant lands is an obvious target for male desire, as is known from similar romance tales.[38] And in this second part, too, some minor loves may be mentioned, such as the kindly care and affection of the prefect's son for Polyxena (c. 36 and 42), the rather less innocent desire of an anonymous soldier for Rebecca (c. 35), and, for that matter, the suggestion of a close relation between Polyxena and Rebecca.[39] Finally, Polyxena follows Xanthippe in remaining very close to Paul "in her fear of temptations" (c. 42), a choice that definitely suggests a feeling for Paul that is at least akin to that of Xanthippe.

It is not just love that unites the whole of *AXPR*; the same may be argued for friendship, loyalty, and fidelity, features of most major and minor characters, and a constant concern for sexual purity, which characterizes both Xanthippe and Polyxena. Even the Jewish woman Rebecca does not form an exception here.[40] The motif is, of course, quite familiar in the ancient novel.[41]

Although most scenes in the novel are rather static, with a considerable part of the text devoted to direct speech and description, there are also flashes of ac-

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Xanthippe, he appears gentle. In this sense, he is much more "normal" than Paul in the *Acta Theclae*, who seems even rude at times.

[38] Various attempts are made to abduct or seduce Polyxena; e. g., c. 23; 25; 35. However, her virginity seems only vaguely threatened in this tale (e. g., at the beginning of c. 33 in the words of the ass-driver and at the end of c. 36 in the words of the gentle son of the prefect, both suggesting that she should wear male clothes so as to remain inconspicuous), and her sexual vulnerability is not prominently represented, when compared with earlier heroines.

[39] Both young women are closely connected in c. 29 by the apostle Andreas, and they remain together until c. 35. Rebecca's fate remains uncertain (see above). Although there are no overtly sexual overtones in their relation, a reader of the text may be tempted to interpret their relation as something more than casual, e. g., because of the manifest erotic feelings by Xanthippe for Polyxena earlier on (c. 22) and later (c. 41). This aspect is studied in great detail from a modern, academic perspective by Gorman (2001; see also Gorman 2006). The American scholar suggests that it both "constructs female same-sex desire and commitment" and simultaneously condemns this desire (417). This seems a rather heavy theoretical load for just a few lines of Greek, and the danger of reading too much into the text looms large.

[40] "And one of the soldiers seized Rebecca, but the maid secretly escaping fled into the house of an old woman" (c. 35). The latter detail recalls the fate of Charite in the central sections of Apuleius's *Metamorphoses* (4.28–6.24), where an old female housekeeper tells her the Amor and Psyche tale.

[41] In his survey of typical themes in the section, Junod (1989, 96–97; see also 99–101) lists "mariage et continence" as the first item and "traits et procédés romanesques" as the fifth and last one. This seems to underestimate the novel tradition in more than one sense.

tion, as has been observed earlier. In these, there is constant attention to travel, particularly by sea,[42] and to exciting action and adventure.[43]

Finally, there is, of course, a subtle religious layer in the plot. This unites the book as a whole and characterizes the *AXPR* as a properly Christian text. It must be said, however, that there is little trace of specific Christian theology. The references to Christianity are, on the whole, rather general and superficial.[44]

Simple Novel

If we consider the whole of the text, with its overall structure, special features, and unifying themes, it seems justified to call the text a Christian novel firmly rooted in the tradition of Greek erotic novels. The plain style of the text, while also connected to biblical and apocryphal examples, may be said to confirm this.[45] The Latin novel, in contrast, as represented by Petronius and Apuleius, seems decidedly further away from the *AXPR*. The irony and complex literary techniques of the Roman writers do not seem to find an echo in the plain narrative of the *AXPR*. Even the potentially intriguing "gender questions," relating to male or female identities and social roles, seem to be downplayed rather than underscored. Several such points have been mentioned previously.[46] More could be mentioned here, notably the close association of not only Xanthippe but also Polyxena with Paul. In the line of the *Acta Theclae*, this might have been expanded by the author to present both women as becoming something like "female apostles," that is, as women with properly male roles. But no such authorial intention can be discerned.

The *AXPR*, then, might be qualified as a plain and interesting but in the end rather innocent narrative, based on the standard pattern of the Greek novel, which has effectively been combined with the biblical and apocryphal traditions.

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[42] Sea travel occurs in c. 1 (presumably); 24; 25; 38; and 39. Wandering and travel by land appear in c. 26; 27; 28; 31; 33; 34; and 37.

[43] Cf., e. g., Xanthippe's bribing the guard (c. 13) in part 1 and the military interlude in c. 25 or the threefold appearance of a lioness in part 2.

[44] The concluding words might be said to be the most outspokenly theological statement, in this case referring to the Trinity: "These things then being thus, all rejoiced in the Lord, glorifying Father, Son and Holy Ghost, one God, to whom is glory and power, now and ever and to all eternity. Amen" (c. 42). According to Szepessy (2004, 328), these words "could close the prayer of a believer well-versed in the Christian liturgy." In addition, there are some quotations from the Psalms in c. 23; 25; and 26. The numerous prayers scattered through the text hardly contain anything that would presuppose theological debate. This even goes for Xanthippe's prayer in c. 12, which shows knowledge of some basic Christian teaching but hardly more than that.

[45] One is reminded of Greek novels that have been written in a rather easy style, such as Xenophon of Ephesus's *Ephesiaca* or Longos's *Daphnis and Chloe*.

[46] E. g., the erotic undertone in c. 22 (Xanthippe and Polyxena) or the references to women wearing male clothes (c. 33; 36). See further discussion in, e. g., nn. 20, 24, and 29.

It does not show great aspirations or pretensions, and can hardly be labeled subversive or groundbreaking in any way.

To many readers, this may seem disappointing. But perhaps modern expectations of ancient texts in which women occur are simply too high. These simple texts merit our attention, if only because they were used and read, and they do not need to live up to twenty-first-century academic standards. A text such as the *AXPR* must have been made for daily use and "immediate consumption" by its intended readership, not as a literary monument for eternity or a document promoting late ancient women's emancipation. If we accept this, its reappearance in the nineteenth century and its modest afterlife may also be considered a small gift of Fortune, allowing us to come a little closer to the apparent concerns and interests of normal readers in late antiquity.

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