

‘Do not deny me this noble death’:  
Depictions of Violence in the Greek Novels  
and Apocryphal Acts

PHILIP A. HARLAND  
York University

*Introduction*

When it comes to assessing attitudes towards Roman imperialism and potential allusions to imperial violence within fictional (or semi-fictional) literature, such as the Greek novels and apocryphal Acts, certain scholars tend to develop a picture of anti-imperialism or tension with Roman power. In this respect, scholarship has been informed by insights in post-colonial theory regarding the subtle and not-so-subtle ways in which colonial powers maintain their hegemony through the use of force, authorize top-down violence within society generally, and unintentionally trigger numerous forms of protest by subjugated peoples, including literary forms of anti-imperialism. So, for instance, Jean Alvares builds on the work of Simon Swain in order to interpret Chariton’s novel in terms of the Greek literary elites’ “resistance to Roman rule” even though this elites presumably benefited in some ways from that rule.<sup>1</sup> Alvares cites as representative of the novels’ mindset Plutarch’s comment about civic leaders’ minding the Roman “boots above your head” (*Moralia* 813e), which Alvares takes as a clear reference to Roman military violence as a factor in the critique of Roman rule. The fact that these novelistic narratives are set in a bygone age, without explicit reference to “Rome,” is then interpreted as a clear sign of ambivalence or negativity about Roman imperialism. Overall the novels are characterized as resistance literature that primarily affirms Greek identity in opposition to Roman. So Alvares sees negative representations of tyrannical empires (Athens and Persia) in Chariton’s novel as relatively clear instances of critique of Roman imperial rule as a result.

---

<sup>1</sup> Alvares 2001-02, 116-117; Swain 1996, 101-131.

Recent scholarship has rightly sought to place fictional (or semi-fictional) literature produced by Judeans or by followers of Jesus within the context of the Greek novels.<sup>2</sup> Yet in some cases here too there is an assumption that anti-imperialism was the norm not only in literature produced by these cultural minorities (where it has long been presumed as the norm) but also in the Greek novels. So, for instance, Virginia Burrus' recent article presupposes that both the Greek novels and the apocryphal Acts were resistance literature as she seeks to "explore commonalities of colonial resistance enacted across the genre," using as test cases *Kleitophon and Leukippe*, an *Ethiopian Story*, *Joseph and Aseneth*, and the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*.<sup>3</sup> Burrus does so not by carefully investigating evidence in these writings for attitudes towards empires of the past or the Roman imperial present, as with Alvares, but rather by assuming the ancient author's anti-imperial stance and then reading each author's conception of "virginity" "as a site of articulated cultural ambivalence."<sup>4</sup> This tendency to step beyond the need for evidence of anti-imperialism before going to the next stage of finding "hidden transcripts" and reading various other topics as instances of resistance is part of a larger trend within the study of early Christian literature, perhaps most clearly represented by Richard Horsley's edited work *Paul and Empire* (1997) and by other works arising out of, or inspired by, the Paul and Politics group of the Society of Biblical Literature in the years since (where the comparison and critique of American and Roman empires is often in mind).<sup>5</sup> One outcome of such approaches that privilege the imperial is a tendency to miss other important imaginal configurations of violence (or of other issues) in fictional and non-fictional literature that do not necessarily presume Roman imperialism as a focal point.

The desire to discover how an ancient author might have viewed Roman imperialism and imperial violence is, of course, understandable and warranted, especially since we know well from other evidence that the Roman imperial system, like the systems of other colonial powers, most certainly promulgated and facilitated consistent and wide-ranging violence in the real world. One need only study events such as the Roman intervention in Judea in 66-70 CE or monuments such as those from Aphrodisias depicting Roman emperors subjugating foreign peoples (represented as raped women) to recognize this reality.<sup>6</sup> In a sense, Rome's own

---

<sup>2</sup> E.g. Pervo 1987; Perkins 1995; Wills 1995; Alexander 1998; Aubin 1998; Schwartz 2003a; Schwartz 2006; Futre Pinheiro et al. 2012; Montiglio 2012, 190-224; Johnson 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Burrus 2005, 52. Cf. Burrus 1987, 94-95; MacDonald 1983, 40-42 (on the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*).

<sup>4</sup> Burrus 2005, 53.

<sup>5</sup> On problems with such anti-imperial readings, see Harland, 2013 [2003], 201, 204-205.

<sup>6</sup> See Smith 1987 on the Sebasteion.

self image was to be proud of such power to inflict harm for some supposedly grand aim such as “peace” (*pax Romana*).

Still, although Roman engagement with societies under imperial control was surely characterized by violence, it is not necessarily the case that literary elites who produced writings in this context would primarily focus on this dimension of sociopolitical reality rather than on some other dimension of life or on other sources of violence. In certain ways, the scholarly focus on potential anti-imperial sentiments and imperial violence in ancient literature has sometimes facilitated neglect of other forms of violence as portrayed in the narratives. This results in an imbalanced picture of the focal points of violence as imagined by ancient authors. When we actually look at the narratives asking where do we find violence and who are the instigators of that violence, a more varied picture emerges, a picture that does not put Roman imperialism at the centre of attention, I would argue.

The purpose of the present contribution is, in part, to rectify this imbalance through a study of the social settings and instigators of violence as depicted in the Greek novels, novels which may also shed further light on contemporary fictional narratives about the adventures of apostles, the apocryphal Acts.<sup>7</sup> My point is not necessarily to deny that violence promulgated by imperial powers may be discernible in such narratives in certain cases, nor to deny potential anti-imperial sentiments among certain authors. Rather my aim is to suggest that authors of the novels and other narratives depict a world where the origins, social settings, and instigators of violence are far more diffuse and, at times, not clearly tied to a particular author’s viewpoints on or experience of Roman imperialism. In fact, images of imperial violence (Roman or otherwise) seldom arise let alone predominate in the imagined worlds constructed by authors of the Greek novels, and a similar thing could be said for the literate elites who wrote stories about the adventures of apostles.

Violence is central within the imagined worlds of ancient Greek novels, then. But the use of physical force to do harm is pictured in various domestic, civic, rural, and regional or royal settings that I explore here. Alongside violent humans in these settings, numerous authors of both Greek novels and apocryphal stories about apostles give a somewhat consistent and prominent place for deities and supernatural beings as just or unjust instigators of violence even moreso than human figures at the pinnacle of earthly power, such as governors, kings, or other rulers. The fact that the literary elites in antiquity sometimes understood or explained the origins of violence in terms of a supernatural plane serves to illustrate how such representations might run into conflict with modern scholars’ attempts to evaluate real violence, whether imperial or otherwise.

---

<sup>7</sup> Martyrologies focussed specifically on trial and execution are not my focus here.

*Surveying violence in the novels*

Some orientation is in order regarding types, settings, and instigators of this violence before I turn to specific works.<sup>8</sup> Narrators present violence taking place in various social settings with a similar variety in the instigators of these actions, instigators ranging from bandits beyond the boundaries of civilization to masters, husbands, and wives within the household to civic and regional authorities, and, last but not least, to supernatural powers.

Violent incidents are pivotal to the plots of each of the surviving novels, although in different ways and with varying levels of importance. In some respects, violence seems more integrated and fundamental to the plot of Xenophon's *Ephesian Story* of Anthia and Habrokomes compared to other novels by Chariton, Tatius, and Longus, but only by degree.

Despite variations from one novel to the next, there are a number of continuing threads that help us to understand the cultural mindsets of the authors of the novels and, through this, provide some glimpses into how people perceived and grappled with violence in the real world. Not surprisingly, as I argue here, one of the clearest common threads is a connection between representations of violence and pivotal cultural notions of honour and shame, including but not limited to notions of noble death. When many of these ancient authors construct scenes involving violence, the value of honour and threats to it are often brought into relief.

When it comes to instigators of violence, those at or beyond the margins of 'civilized' society play a key role in moving the plot forward in almost all of the novels. In particular, bandits and pirates—whether merely aligned with barbaric practices or expressly identified as barbarians—have pride of place in instigating harmful actions.<sup>9</sup> Yet there are many others who cause key characters ostensibly legitimate or illegitimate physical harm, including kings and rulers, civic authorities, heads of households, slave-owners, and other members of the household. I suppose that, when a story begins with a young man kicking his fiancée in the stomach with an apparently fatal blow (as in Chariton, *Chaireas and Kallirhoe* 1.4), one should be prepared for a violent story, a story where women will often be victims.<sup>10</sup> That the attacker could be let off the hook might further reveal assumptions about the supposed normalcy of domestic violence in the mindsets of both author and audience.

---

<sup>8</sup> For a philological discussion of the vocabulary used for violence in the novels, see now Scippacercola 2010.

<sup>9</sup> On bandits as barbarous threats, see Harland 2009, 163-169.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Chew 2003; Haynes 2003, 62-65; Scippacercola 2010.

Contemplations of physically harming or killing oneself also play a key role in the Greek novels. The protagonist lovers, particularly female leads, are often faced with a choice that will result in either shamefully losing sexual purity or honorably withstanding physical harm or facing death itself. Overarching this often primarily male human violence, however, is a commonly encountered notion that a God or gods (e.g. Eros, Fortune, Artemis, Isis) might also be instigating, inspiring, and/or reversing violence from above, again with just or unjust results for the characters. Closely connected with this, we will see, are notions of the *shame* brought about by violence and the *honour* that a god's intervention and salvation could restore.

So these narratives provide a window into the thought-worlds of their creators, showing us how these authors creatively expressed violent acts—in part to exhort and to entertain. Yet such narrative depictions of violence may, at times, provide a window into the actual social world as well, providing us with glimpses into how particular people grappled with violence within their societies in the first three centuries of the common era. This is so because these fictional narratives—however fantastic—simultaneously seek to paint a believable picture of the real world, as J. R. Morgan so clearly illustrates.<sup>11</sup> While the stories are 'make-believe,' they simultaneously seek to 'make you believe,' and this is why we encounter so many similarities between the novels and other genres that *claim* to accurately report on reality, including historiography and biography—themselves semi-fictional, of course. In her study of trial scenes in the novel, Sandra Schwartz comments that 'the quest for verisimilitude led authors of fiction to incorporate details that their contemporary audiences might recognize as somehow coherent with reality. The novels, therefore, indicate a baseline of what was commonly assumed to be true by their ancient audiences.'<sup>12</sup> Since verisimilitude was important, these narrative representations of violence are also significant in our assessments of social realities in the Roman empire.

It is notorious, however, that while the novels were produced in a Roman imperial setting, all have apparently chosen to eschew the Roman authorities by setting their stories in a bygone age. The Roman empire is not even mentioned—though may be lurking in the background. This is not always the case with the apocryphal Acts, where the action is more explicitly set under Roman rule and where Roman officials or emperors might sometimes—though not often—make an appearance. I will need to return to the apparent absence or clear presence of Roman imperial figures as I proceed.

---

<sup>11</sup> Morgan and Stoneman 1994.

<sup>12</sup> Schwartz 2010, 331.

*Chariton*

Chariton's *Chaireas and Kallirhoe* (before 150 CE) is the one that begins with the deadly kick (*Chaireas and Kallirhoe* 1.4), and domestic violence directed at slaves recurs (1.5; 3.9). Like all of the novels, pirates or brigands as renegades living beyond the boundaries of society and its norms play a key role by robbing the tomb of the noble Kallirhoe, who revives only to be enslaved. This ironic social status switch—from noble to slave—then initiates the ongoing fateful wanderings and the ultimate recovery of noble status and marital union that are so necessary to the plot of virtually all of the surviving novels. Although civic authorities are not prominent as instigators of physical force in Chariton's story, there is the very important trial by the magistrates of Syracuse in which Theron, the pirate, is (legitimately from the perspective of the narrative) executed by crucifixion beside the tomb of Kallirhoe.

As expected in the novels, suicide plans or attempts recur in Chariton's story, but here they are less concerned with preserving the honour (i.e. virginity) of the protagonist lovers and are instead motivated by the character's feelings of desperation (e.g. 1.5; 7.1). At this point, it is worthwhile noting Plato's discussion of voluntary death, in which both extreme misfortune (as in Chariton) and overwhelming shame (as in other novels below) are considered legitimate reasons to end one's life (Plato, *Phaedo* 873c).<sup>13</sup> Juxtaposed with this is Chaireas' 'manly' or 'brave' (ἀνδρεία) confrontation with death when he and his companion participate in a rebellion against the current imperial power, the Persian king. 'We passionately want to die, and we passionately want revenge,' states Chaireas. He then cites a passage from *The Iliad* (22.304-305) that evokes the noble death tradition, dreading the possibility of dying 'without glory' (ἀκλειῶς; 7.2.4).

Although Rome is absent in name here as in other novels, the physical force of imperialism plays an important role in Chariton's story.<sup>14</sup> As Tim Whitmarsh points out, the entire story is set in the aftermath of the Athenian empire's invasion of Sicily in 416 BCE, in which Syracuse was victorious.<sup>15</sup> Kallirhoe herself is the daughter of 'the man who defeated the Athenians' (1.1.1). Perhaps even more important as a possible analogue for Roman imperialism is the *un-Greek*, foreign Persian power. The Persian king's army captures the boat of the noble Chaireas, who is then enslaved and, thereby, shamed, and those prisoners who attempt to escape are crucified at the command of the Persian satrap of Caria, Mithridates—

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Droge and Tabor 1992, 22.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Alvares 2001; Connors 2002; Schwartz 2003b; Whitmarsh 2011, 53-58.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Alvares 2001, 120.

equivalent to a Roman proconsul in the Roman system (3.7; 4.2). More importantly, the main protagonist and his companion are instrumental in the Egyptian rebellion that seeks to overthrow this imperial rule and that results in the capture of the king's own family (6.8-7.6).

So while the narrator has the hearer of the story marvel at the impressive troops and power of Persia, this power is seen to be ineffective in maintaining subjugation. If Persia can, in some way, be taken as a stand-in for Rome, then this could potentially be anti-imperial rhetoric. Both Simon Swain and Jean Alvares suggest that Chariton may be thinking of resistance to Roman rule in this respect, at least.<sup>16</sup> Alvares goes further to systematically analyze forms of rule in Chariton's novel. While his analysis is insightful in many respects, his overall claim that Chariton offers a consistent critique of Roman imperial rule vis-a-vis Chariton's characterization not only of Persian rule but also Athenian rule seems to follow more from the attempt to see the Greek novel as resistance literature than it does flow from the actual depictions of different ruling powers. These powers are depicted in somewhat varied ways with both good and bad qualities (as Alvares sometimes acknowledges). Once again the tendency to think that Rome must be in mind is questionable in some respects.

There are difficulties with proposing a primarily negative portrayal of Roman imperialism (with Persia as the cipher) in Chariton's novel. The city of Aphrodisias itself was replete with positive images of empire set up by members of Chariton's class, not least of which was the Sebasteion itself with its images of Roman emperors subduing foreign peoples. Furthermore, Chariton's portrayal of the Persian king himself is by no means entirely negative as, for example, he is seen to be guided by ideal kingly virtues such as 'justice' (6.3.8). It is noteworthy that Sandra Schwartz's study of how Rome figures in Chariton's novel with respect to Persia specifically refers to Greek ambivalence towards Roman rule but does not draw a consistently anti-imperial picture like that of Alvares.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, Tim Whitmarsh's more recent analysis of Chariton's symbolic geography draws a more complicated picture of the author's relation to Roman imperialism, both positive and negative.<sup>18</sup>

In bringing his lovers together and bringing his story to a conclusion, Chariton playfully refers to the threat of violence that ran through the story in promising that there will be 'no more pirates or slavery or lawsuits or fighting or suicide or wars or conquests' (8.1). The conclusion also highlights the important role that divine figures played in overseeing these adventures, including the violent turns.

---

<sup>16</sup> Swain 1996, 79; Alvares 2001, 116. Cf. Alvares 2001, 126; Whitmarsh 2011, 56-58.

<sup>17</sup> Schwartz 2003b. Cf. Smith 2007, 12-13, 43-49.

<sup>18</sup> Whitmarsh 2011, 50-59.

While Fortune (*Tychē*) appears at various points instigating trouble (cf. 5.1.5-6; 6.8),<sup>19</sup> it is the goddess of love, Aphrodite, who ultimately ‘takes pity’ on the protagonists and successfully saves and reunites the lovers (book 8).

### *Tatius*

An orchestrating role for Fortune is also evident in Tatius’ *Leukippe and Kleitophon* (II CE), where the trials of the protagonists are, on the one hand, attributed to the activity of Eros (*Leukippe and Kleitophon* 2.34; 5.26), Zeus (5.2), or other deities (3.10) and, on the other, playfully summarized in terms of ‘Fortune’s obstacle course’ (5.2; cf. 5.7).<sup>20</sup> Once again, violence comes from beyond the boundaries of civilization in the form of bandits who, not once, but twice (5.7), succeed in abducting Leukippe and, *apparently*, murdering her.

In the first case (3.9-25), the bandits are clearly identified as barbarians: the cowherd bandits (*boukoloi*) are described as ‘all large and black’ and Kleitophon wishes they were Greek rather than Egyptian bandits (3.10). The barbarous depiction becomes clearer as the initiatory rites of this bandit group turn out to be centered on human sacrifice of a virgin, and Leukippe is to be the victim.<sup>21</sup> It is in the wake of witnessing the apparent slaughter of his lover that Kleitophon turns to thoughts of suicide and cries ‘do not deny me this noble death (μή μοι φρονήσητε θανάτου καλοῦ)’ (3.17). Elsewhere, Tatius further indicates that the worst sort of violence naturally comes from beyond the civilized Greek-speaking world when he juxtaposes the civilized honours offered by Greeks to Artemis with those offered by Skythians to their goddess by means of human sacrifice (8.2). The author also indicates that ‘barbarian men’ (such as Thracians) are particularly prone to rape (5.5).

Although the threat to the female lead’s honour in the form of sexual violence or rape is important in all of the novels, Tatius tends to develop this threat of shame—relating to the domestic sphere—in a particular way that connects it more fully to notions of honorable death.<sup>22</sup> For early on in the narrative Leukippe’s mother, Pantheia, dreams that her daughter is attacked by a bandit with a sword, a bandit who slices Leukippe up the middle (2.24-25). The narrator has Pantheia herself interpret this as a sign that Leukippe has not been chaste. In response,

<sup>19</sup> Van Steen 1998.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Chew 2012.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Haynes 2003, 57-58.

<sup>22</sup> It should be noted that Tatius’ tends to turn such notions of chastity on their head when it comes to the male protagonist, however, whose notions of male sexual purity are quite flexible (cf. 8.5). On women and the feminine in the novels, including sexual violence, see Haynes 2003; Chew 2003; Scippacercola 2010.

Leukippe defends her honour against the accusation and emphasizes that ‘no one has disgraced my virgin body’ (2.25). While this dream ends up being far less symbolic and is, in fact, a premonition of Leukippe’s apparent slaughter—not once but twice—by bandits, the theme of Leukippe’s potential rape continues. Further on, Kleitophon witnesses a painting depicting the rape of Philomela and worries about the unfavourable indications this might have for the ‘story’s plot’ (5.3).

This rape theme culminates, I would suggest, in the Ephesian scene of Thersandros’ attempted rape of Leukippe, which takes place shortly after Kleitophon’s casual sex with Melite, Thersandros’ actual wife (6.21-22). In a violent combination of ‘anger and love’ (6.19), Thersandros uses force to take Leukippe. In her position as slave, Leukippe says ‘bring on the instruments of torture,’ she refuses Thersandros sexual demands, and she calls on the assistance of Artemis as the virgin goddess, who will ultimately come to the rescue of both Leukippe and Kleitophon. Here the connection with the preservation of honour and with noble death becomes clear as Leukippe charges Thersandros and his accomplices:

Look at what you’re doing; you are the real gang of brigands! Aren’t you ashamed (οὐκ αἰσχύνεσθε) to do what even bandits have not dared? You may not realize it, but your shameless behaviour (ἀναισχυντίας) is giving me even greater praise (ἐγκώμιόν): even if you kill me in your senseless rage, someone will say, ‘Leukippe was a virgin after the cowherd-brigands, a virgin after Chaireas, a virgin even after Sosthenes.’ These are conservative claims; the greater praise is this: ‘A virgin even after Thersandros, who was more brutal than bandits’ (6.22).<sup>23</sup>

The sexual violence threatens the honour of Leukippe, but her refusal to give in may result in her honorable death which will ultimately shame her attacker. As with many stories of apostles, facing death for the highest of virtues is considered more noble or honorable than living without those principles. Furthermore, this pattern of violence or the threat of violence leading to shame and the reversal of this situation when a deity restores the protagonists’ honour repeats itself in several of the novels. This reflects the important connections between violence, shame, and honour in the worldview of Tatius and other authors, including Xenophon.

The less chaste Kleitophon also faces public shame in the form of Thersandros’ accusations of murder. Unlike some other narratives discussed here, Tatius very seldom depicts violence taking place at an official, civic level, with the exception of this two stage trial led by civic authorities. The magistrates ultimately

---

<sup>23</sup> Trans. adapted from Winkler.

pass a judgement of execution and it is only the goddess Artemis of Ephesos, through her priest, that is able to save Kleitophon from this shameful death and, ultimately, to reunite the two lovers at the conclusion of the story. Once again, a deity is central to the preservation or restoration of honour and of noble status for the protagonists.

### *Longus*

In contrast to the lack of civic violence in Tatius's work, Longus' *Daphnis and Chloe* shifts the centre of violence's gravity to the urban sphere unlike any other novel, and this is largely due to the bucolic generic features of this narrative, which is set on the island of Lesbos.<sup>24</sup> True, there are local pirates—though described as coming from the *city* of Pyrrha and not the countryside—that threaten the lifestyle of the protagonists (*Daphnis and Chloe* 1.28). And slaves in this narrative are likewise subjected to physical mistreatment in the domestic sphere (e.g. 4.8). But the primary source of danger is the city: civic inhabitants and civic habits repeatedly threaten the rustic peace of the countryside. And so there is the group of young men from the city who come by boat and invade the serene setting, there is the war that breaks out between the cities of Mytilene and Methymna (2.12-22), and there are Gnathon's urban vices (4.1-4.17), all of which threaten the natural bliss of the countryside and the honour and innocence of the protagonists. The suggestion that Chloe might 'spend the rest of her life in a city' is considered a terrible fate (2.22). Although it turns out that Daphnis and Chloe are themselves nobles from the city (enslaved exposed children), the story concludes with them returning to the 'pastoral life' even as nobles (4.39). In Longus, the gods of the pastoral setting (Pan and the Nymphs) along with Eros himself always help to ensure the return to rustic bliss.

### *Xenophon*

In certain respects, violence seems more integrated, sustained, and fundamental to the plot of Xenophon's novel *Ephesian Tale* (usually dated to the first or second century CE) than the plots of other novels discussed here.<sup>25</sup> With Xenophon's story, Habrokomes' exceptional beauty and excessive self-confidence inspire the whole chain of events with the jealous god Eros orchestrating most if not all of the misfortunes that befall the protagonists until the Egyptian deities intervene

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Effé 1999; Cresci 1999.

<sup>25</sup> Scippacercola 2010, 400-408.

(see esp. *Ephesian Tale* 1.1-2, 4). Love itself is a clear and, sometimes, murderous danger (e.g. 3.2).

Furthermore, it is evident very early on that the idea of dying an honorable death—juxtaposed with the potential shame of failing to uphold chastity—is more prominent in this novel than any other. Near the beginning, Anthia and Habrokomes swear an oath to Artemis, vowing to remain faithful to one another or to die (1.11). And this theme of honorable suicide in connection with the oath appears again and again as various incidents or people threaten the chastity of the protagonists, in many cases involving attempted rape (2.1; 2.4; 3.5; 3.8; 3.10; 3.11; 3.12; 4.5; 5.2; 5.8; 5.14). Upon hearing that Anthia may be dead, for instance, Habrokomes tears his clothes and loudly mourns ‘Anthia’s chaste and noble death’ (3.10). This is not just a mechanical repetition of a theme; it is the glue that holds the story together.

Bandits also take pride of place in the violence that runs through this narrative, arguably more so than with any other early Greek novel. Once again certain types of violence are often imagined as originating beyond the confines of civilized society and its norms. So there are the foreign, Phoenician pirates who kill many and enslave Anthia and Habrokomes (1.13). There are Hippothous’ brigands who not once but twice (the second time without recognition) capture Anthia and enslave this noble woman (2.1; 4.3). We have another group of pirates who likewise take Anthia, leading Habrokomes to contemplate suicide (3.9). And there are the foreign herdsmen (*poimenes*) in Egypt—reminiscent of Tattius’ cowherds—who capture and enslave Habrokomes.

There is an important and ironic twist in the depiction of bandits, however, which I believe is quite important to the story. While the narrator begins by portraying Hippothous’ band as barbaric, depicting the brigands as habitually engaging in human sacrifice (2.13), later in the story the perspective on Hippothous himself changes significantly. The hearer of the story finds out that Hippothous was, in fact, a noble young man who, for love of another young man, murdered a rival. Furthermore, this set in motion his social reversal, ultimately pushing him beyond the edges of society and its laws (3.2). In this respect, Hippothous identifies with the noble protagonists who likewise face unjust social status reversal in the process of enslavement. There is a sense in which Hippothous then becomes an ongoing companion of Habrokomes and actually helps to bring the two lovers together. The author of the narrative seems to be twisting hearers’ expectations regarding the stereotype of the dangerous, barbaric brigand.

At least in name, the Roman empire is absent in this novel too. Yet there are other royal and imperial sounding figures and authorities engaged in violent acts. There is the barbaric Psammis, the Indian ruler, who is poised to rape Anthia but

is stopped, in part, by Anthia and killed by Hippothous' band (4.3). Anthia's strategy was to bring up the idea that she herself was dedicated at birth to Isis, and this was what helped to prevent the king Psammis from violating her (3.11). There is also the *'archōn'* of Egypt, a common term used for a provincial 'prefect' in the Roman period.<sup>26</sup> In his second appearance, the prefect mobilizes military forces led by Polyidos (who will be another threat to Anthia's chastity) and successfully kills or clears out the bandits, including Hippothous (5.3-6).

It is the prefect's first appearance that further suggests a Roman provincial governor is the model here, as this prefect who is also in charge of military forces puts Habrokomes on trial. This episode is quite important for understanding a key theme in this novel, a theme which ties together potentially shameful and unjust violence and honorable status with a deity intervening to bring salvation and restore honour (4.2-4). Furthermore, it is this episode that fully introduces local, Egyptian deities as the principal saviours of the protagonists, making this a turning point that anticipates the end of troubles and the final reunion of the lovers.

Habrokomes is brought to trial for allegedly murdering his master, Araxos. Upon hearing the accusation, the prefect immediately sends Habrokomes for execution (4.2). Habrokomes is then set up to be crucified by the Nile, but he calls on the god of the Nile (Osiris) to bring justice. The god intervenes by blowing the cross down into the Nile. When Habrokomes floats safely to the delta, he is then re-arrested by the prefect's guards. In a manner reminiscent of Thecla's multiple executions in the *Acts of Paul* (discussed below), a further attempt at execution takes place, with the prefect ordering that a pyre be constructed to burn Habrokomes alive. Once again Habrokomes prays to the Egyptian deities, and the Nile rises to extinguish the fire that was about to consume him. At this miraculous turn of events, the prefect then begins to take it seriously that Habrokomes is protected by the gods, and so Habrokomes is ultimately saved. Egyptian deities—Osiris, Apis, and Isis—are there to save the protagonists through to the climax of the story (cf. 4.5). When the lovers recognize each other on Rhodes, the crowds hail Isis as their rescuer (5.13), but Artemis is also given her due once they finally return to Ephesos itself (5.15).

### *Comparison with Narratives about Apostles*

While certain scholars have touched on some of the issues raised here, a systematic comparison of representations of violence in the novels and in roughly contemporary narratives (second-third centuries) about apostles still remains to be

---

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Mason 1974, 27.

done.<sup>27</sup> It is important to note at the outset, however, that these apocryphal narratives—unlike the novels discussed above—are only partially preserved, and so it is difficult to know with any certainty whether we are missing other episodes which would balance out our perception of any one author’s depictions of violence. Still, I would like to conclude with some preliminary observations concerning how violence in the Greek novels may be juxtaposed with narratives that Christ-devotees told about the apostles, setting the stage for further comparative study.

First, virtually all of the novels I have surveyed give prime place to the preservation of chastity against violent threats, and many of them push this to the point of noble death. In this respect, domestic violence sometimes plays a very similar role in certain narratives about apostles. As scholarship on apocryphal Acts so clearly illustrates, one of the central themes uniting many of these stories of apostles is chastity, and even chastity as the ultimate principal that is worth dying for.<sup>28</sup> The authors of virtually all of the better preserved apocryphal documents represent a form of Christ devotion which gave sexual abstinence pride of place. Honorable preservation of the principles of following Christ are largely coterminous with preservation of chastity. To be an *ideal* Christ-devotee is to be chaste, and so Paul preaches: ‘Blessed are the bodies of the virgins’ in the *Acts of Paul* (2.6).

However, while the Acts and the novels share in common the ideal of chastity, these narratives about apostles do not share the idealization of marriage that is so central to the novels. The ‘happy ending’ of the Acts is not marriage but noble death, as Judith Perkins (1995) so clearly demonstrates. And a scholar like Melissa Aubin (1998) can in some respects accurately speak of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* ‘reversing romance.’ Turning the central love-theme of the novels on its head seems to be important to authors such as these.

A fairly representative example is provided by the surviving portions of the *Acts of Andrew* (ca. 200 CE), where the focus of violence in the narrative is on a domestic situation, and where the confrontation ends with reference to noble death (cf. *Acts of John* 63; *Acts of Peter* 33-34; *Acts of Thomas* 95, 114). The Roman proconsul of Achaia, Aigiates, threatens and delivers physical harm not so much in his role as a representative of Rome as in his role as a jealous husband of Maximilla. So it is difficult to see this as anti-imperial sentiment, for instance. In fact, emperors or kings do not appear as active characters in the surviving sections. Maximilla’s refusal to sleep with her husband makes physical harm imminent for

---

<sup>27</sup> On violence to women characters and martyrs, do see Chew 2003. For a recent study of the likely dates of the apocryphal Acts which I adopt here, see Bremmer 2001, revised as 2017.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Davies 1980; Burrus 1987.

the two chaste ‘lovers’, Maximilla and Andrew (compared to Adam and Eve later in the story):

Scorn Aigeates’ threats, Maximilla, for you know that we have a God who has compassion on us. Do not let his threats move you but remain chaste. Let him not only avenge himself on me with the tortures of captivity, let him also throw me to the beasts, burn me with fire, and throw me off a cliff. What does it matter? Let him destroy this body as he wishes, for it is only one body and it is akin to him (*Acts of Andrew* 39(7)).<sup>29</sup>

Later on, the narrator has the character Stratokles say to Andrew: ‘You yourself are departing, and I know well that you will do it nobly’ (44[12]). So while the preservation of chastity leads to honour and potential or real death in both the novels and some of the Acts (*Acts of Andrew*, *Acts of John*), it is only in the Acts that chastity is extended to marriage and where these semi-marriages without consummation are presented as a norm for Christ-devotees.

Second, the imagined worlds of the novels and the Acts give pride of place to supernatural beings in connection with violent incidents. Deities save (e.g. Osiris, Isis, Artemis) and kill (e.g. Eros, Fortune) in both. On the one hand, certain supernatural beings are imagined as unleashing or threatening physical harm on human beings. And so the *Acts of John* (ca. 150-200 CE) has its apostle rail against the crowds at Ephesus in a competition of gods: ‘You all say that you have Artemis as your goddess.... Pray to her, then, that I, and I alone, may die; or if you cannot do this, then I alone will call upon my own God and because of your unbelief I will put you all to death’ (*Acts of John* 40; cf. *Acts of Peter* 32). The convert-or-die scenario here sways the crowd. John’s God trumps the Artemis who saved Leukippe and Kleitophon through her priest and John’s God kills the priest himself.

While the novels can have certain gods harming characters and other gods saving them, the function of harming the just in the Acts is usually reserved for another supernatural being: Satan or the Devil. The theme is particular clear in the *Acts of Thomas* (ca. 220-240 CE), as when the enemy sends a snake to kill a young man who is promptly brought to life again or when a demon rapes a female character (*Acts of Thomas* 30-37, 42).

The activity of the gods in saving the protagonists from physical harm and death in particular and in restoring honour is, of course, prominent in the novels and in some apostle narratives more than others. Habrokomes’ repeated executions only to be saved by the god find an analogy in the repeated attempts to have

---

<sup>29</sup> Elliott 1993, using MacDonald’s translation.

Thecla executed, without success (*Acts of Paul and Thecla*, ca. 160-200 CE). So the Roman governor orders that Thecla be burned for refusing to give up her chastity and marry Thamyris, but her God—thanks to Paul's prayers—sends hail and rain to extinguish the fire. When Alexander threatens Thecla's chastity and honour at Iconium, Thecla is brought before the Roman governor. Here she is saved not once or twice, but three times by her God. Even the apparent noble suicide, which is also Thecla's self-baptism, does not end her life. For both Habrokomes and Thecla, the deity intervenes to reverse the shame and humiliation of public execution and replaces this with honour.

Third, violent brigands and pirates play a less prominent role in most of the surviving apocryphal Acts when compared to the Greek novels. Still, there is the story of Clement (who becomes a student of Peter) and his long-lost brothers in the novelistic portion of the Pseudo-Clementine writings (ca. 220 CE or later), where pirates capture Niketas and Aquila (Clement's brothers) and sell them as slaves (*Recognitions* 7.32-33, 9.36). As with some of the Greek novels, those separated by pirates are ultimately reunited in recognition scenes, though in this case it is not lovers but brothers.

While bandits are relatively absent in other apostle stories, there are some *barbaric* characters that do function in a similar manner in threatening physical harm to the protagonists. In general, some authors of the Acts present certain inhabitants of the Greek cities as overly violent and uncivilized people aimed at harming the apostles and their companions. The most blatant case comes from what is likely a later tale in the *Acts of Andrew and Matthias*. Matthias is chosen to go and teach those living in a city where they 'ate no bread and drank no water, but ate human flesh and drank their blood.' The author seems firmly to place the city within the Greek, Achaian sphere (perhaps alluding to Homer's Myrmadons, if Dennis MacDonald [1994] is on track), not in far-off Skythia. The story goes that the civic authorities themselves were responsible for arranging a cannibalistic feast on a regular basis (and Matthias and his companions were to be the meal on this occasion). So this combines violence by civic authorities with violence by 'barbarians.' This is, in part, a retorsion countering a recurrent depiction of Christ-devotees as uncivilized ones engaging in human sacrifice and cannibalism.<sup>30</sup> Greeks who don't follow Jesus (rather than Christ-devotees who refrain from sacrificing to Greek deities) are the barbarians for the *Acts of Andrew and Matthias*.

Fourth, beyond the intermittent references to civic authorities which we have encountered, there is the question of actual or potential imperial-instigated violence in these narratives. At the outset, it should be stated that the mysterious *absence* of Roman emperors and imperialism in the novels—at least expressly—

<sup>30</sup> Cf. MacDonald 1994, 37.

does indeed have some affinities with certain narratives about apostles. In the surviving parts of the *Acts of Andrew*, at least, kings and emperors are almost absent, with the exception of brief references to Caesar and, of course, the fact that Aigiates is himself an imperial proconsul. Notable is the fact that Aigiates' violence arises within the domestic sphere in connection with the loss of his wife's companionship in bed, not as imperial-instigated actions. Similarly, in the *Acts of John*, the only rulers and kings to appear are Christ and his nemesis, the 'ruler of the world' (Satan), which certainly suggests who is in charge on a cosmic scale. Yet it would be problematic to argue that this absence of the emperor is somehow anti-imperial without further indications of such.

In part due to its setting in India, the emperors or imperial authorities are also absent from the *Acts of Thomas*. Still, as with the novels, there are nonetheless kingly figures in this Indian setting. Both king Gundaphoros and king Misdaeus initially seek to deliver fatal violence on Thomas due to his apparent offences against each king. Yet ultimately both follow the Christ that Thomas proclaims and end up positive royal models. The author of the *Acts of Thomas* passes on the opportunity to use these kings as models of uncivilized barbarians, something that Philostratos does not hesitate to do (in the *Life of Apollonios* 3.26ff.) with at least one Indian king, and we have seen the case of the dangerous Indian king Psammis in Xenophon's tale.

Violent episodes are surprisingly rare within surviving portions of the *Acts of Peter*. There are violent dreams, as when Marcellus sees Peter slaughter a demon (presented as an Ethiopian woman) who is actually representative of Simon Magus, who is to be 'destroyed' by Peter in the competition (22). The wives of important civic and imperial notables at Rome withdraw from their husbands' beds after adopting Peter's teaching, and this leads a figure like the urban prefect, Agrippa, to threaten violence (33-34). Even Peter's own execution upside down is less centred on the violence itself than it is on his speech to crowds. Here it is the urban prefect, Agrippa, who is presented as responsible for the crucifixion (36-40) and, like Aigiates, it seems that the issue of Peter's influencing married women to adopt chastity is central.

Overall, the emperor plays very little role in the narrative of the *Acts of Peter*. At the beginning of the story we are told by a voice from heaven that the emperor Nero specifically is a 'wicked and bad man' (1) and the entire story ends with Nero *wishing* he had had a chance to torture Peter himself (because some of Nero's servants had followed Christ, as in 41). Still, actual violence by the emperor is nonexistent. So here, too, imperial-instigated violence is largely absent.

Unlike the novels, the setting of the story is expressly the imperial era (the principate of Nero), but like the novels Roman imperialism specifically or violent acts promulgated by the emperor do not take centre stage.

It is only in portions of the *Acts of Paul* that a more prominent role is given to violence by Roman governors and the emperor, in this case Nero once again. I have already mentioned the role of governors in discussing the repeated attempts to execute Thecla. In the narrative, the governors take violent action on the request of citizens or civic authorities, and there is some hesitancy on the part of the governors, as when a governor orders that Thecla be clothed after a miraculous rescue from execution.

Nero's violent actions against followers of Christ—such as Paul himself—are presented as motivated by fear of an alternative king and kingdom. Nero charges Paul with raising an enemy army, and Paul does not refute the charge, although he eventually emphasizes that his Christ establishes a heavenly rather than an earthly kingdom and army. Nero orders the arrest of Christ-devotees and Paul himself is beheaded, only to return to life. This seems to be the most anti-imperial or—perhaps better put—anti-Neronian episode within surviving portions of the apocryphal Acts. Followers of Christ are pitted directly against adherents of the emperor Nero. Yet even some of Nero's servants and centurions change sides in the conflict. Nero himself releases some prisoners after Paul appears to him, threatening 'great punishment' for Nero from God.

This episode brings us full circle, returning to the ambivalent place of imperial-instigated violence not only in narratives about apostles but also in the Greek novels themselves. As this preliminary exploration shows, much more work remains to be done in comparing images of violence in the novels and in stories told by Christ-devotees. The authors of both types of narratives employ similar techniques in depicting violence and in presenting their protagonists as honorable men and women protected by the god(s), but imperial violence is not the focal point of their imaginations.

### *Bibliography*

- Alexander, L. 1998. "Fact, Fiction and the Genre of Acts." *NTS* 44: 380–399.
- Alvares, J. 2001. "Some Political and Ideological Dimensions of Chariton's 'Chaïreas and Callirhoe.'" *CJ* 97 2: 113–144.
- Aubin, M. 1998. "Reversing Romance? *The Acts of Thecla* and the Ancient Novel." In *Ancient Fiction and Early Christian Narrative*, edited by Judith Perkins, J. Bradley Chance, and Ronald F. Hock, 257–272. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature.
- Bremmer, Jan N. 2001. "The Apocryphal Acts: Authors, Place, Time and Readership." In *The Apocryphal Acts of Thomas*, 149–70. Leuven: Peeters.

- 2010. *The Pseudo-Clementines*. Leuven: Peeters.
- 2017. “The Apocryphal Acts: Authors, Place, Time and Readership.” In *Maidens, Magic and Martyrs in Early Christianity: Collected Essays*, 219–34. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
- Burrus, V. 1987. *Chastity As Autonomy: Women in the Stories of Apocryphal Acts*. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press.
- 2005. “Mimicking Virgins: Colonial Ambivalence and the Ancient Romance.” *Arethusa* 38: 49–88.
- Chew, K. 2003. “The Representation of Violence in the Greek Novels and Martyr Accounts.” In *The Ancient Novel and Beyond*, edited by Stelios Panayotakis, Maaïke Zimmerman, and Wytse Hette Keulen, 129–141. Leiden: Brill.
- 2012. “A Novelistic Convention Reversed: Tyche vs. Eros in Achilles Tatius.” *CPh* 107: 75–80.
- Connors, C. 2002. “Chariton’s Syracuse and its Histories of Empire.” In *Space in the Ancient Novel*, edited by Michael Paschalis and Stavros A. Frangoulidis, 12–26. Ancient Narrative Supplementum 1. Groningen: Barkhuis.
- Cresci, L.R. 1999. “The Novel of Longus the Sophist and the Pastoral Tradition.” In *Oxford Readings in the Greek Novel*, edited by Simon Swain, 210–242. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Davies, S. 1980. *The Revolt of the Widows: The Social World of the Apocryphal Acts*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Droge, A.J., and J.D. Tabor. 1992. *A Noble Death: Suicide and Martyrdom Among Christians and Jews in Antiquity*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco.
- Effe, B. 1999. “Longus: Towards a History of Bucolic and its Function in the Roman Empire.” In *Oxford Readings in the Greek Novel*, edited by Simon Swain. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Elliott, J.K. 1993. *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in An English Translation*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Futre Pinheiro, M.P., J. Perkins, and R. Pervo, eds. 2012. *The Ancient Novel and Early Christian and Jewish Narrative: Fictional Intersections*. Eelde, Netherlands: Barkhuis.
- Harland, Philip A. 2009. *Dynamics of Identity in the World of the Early Christians: Associations, Judeans, and Cultural Minorities*. New York: Continuum / T & T Clark.
- 2013 [2003]. *Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations: Claiming a Place in Ancient Mediterranean Society*. Second edition. Kitchener: Philip A. Harland <<http://philipharland.com/associations/>>.
- Haynes, K. 2003. *Fashioning the Feminine in the Greek Novel*. London: Routledge.
- Horsley, R.A. 1997. *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society*. Harrisburg: Trinity Press.
- Johnson, S.R. 2004. *Historical Fictions and Hellenistic Jewish Identity: Third Maccabees in Its Cultural Context*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- MacDonald, D.R. 1983. *The Legend and the Apostle: The Battle for Paul in Story and Canon*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press.
- 1994. *Christianizing Homer: The Odyssey, Plato, and the Acts of Andrew*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mason, H.J. 1974. *Greek Terms for Roman Institutions: A Lexicon and Analysis*. American Studies in Papyrology 13. Toronto: Hakkert.
- Montiglio, S. 2012. *Love and Providence: Recognition in the Ancient Novel*. Oxford: OUP.
- Morgan, R., and R. Stoneman, eds. 1994. *Greek Fiction: The Greek Novel in Context*. New York: Routledge.

- Perkins, J. 1995. *The Suffering Self Pain and Narrative Representation in Early Christian Era*. London: Routledge.
- Pervo, R.I. 1987. *Profit with Delight: The Literary Genre of the Acts of the Apostles*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
- Schwartz, S. 2003a. "The Trial Scene in the Greek Novels and in Acts." In *Contextualizing Acts: Lukan Narrative and Greco-Roman Discourse*, edited by Todd C. Penner and Caroline Vander Stichele, 103–135. Atlanta, GA: SBL.
- 2003b. "Rome in the Greek Novel? Images and Ideas of Empire in Chariton's *Persia*." *Arethusa* 36: 375–394.
- 2006. "From Bedroom to Courtroom: The Adultery Type-scene and the Acts of Andrew." In *Mapping Gender in Ancient Religious Discourses*. Leiden: Brill.
- 2010. "Chronotopes of Justice in the Greek novel : Trials in Narrative Spaces." In *Spaces of Justice in the Roman World*, edited by Francesco De Angelis, 331–356. Leiden: Brill.
- Scippacercola, Nadia. 2010. "La Violenza nel romanzo greco." *Lexis* 28: 399–431.
- Smith, R.R.R. 1987. "The Imperial Reliefs from the Sebasteion at Aphrodisias." *JRS* 77: 88–138.
- Smith, S.D. 2007. *Greek Identity and the Athenian Past in Chariton: The Romance of Empire*. Barkhuis.
- Swain, S. 1996. *Hellenism and Empire: Language, Classicism, and Power in the Greek World AD 50-250*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Van Steen, G. 1998. "Destined to Be? Tyche in Chariton's *Chaereas and Callirhoe* and in the Byzantine Romance of *Kallimachos and Chrysorroï*." *AC* 67: 203–211.
- Whitmarsh, T. 2011. *Narrative and Identity in the Ancient Greek Novel: Returning Romance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wills, L.M. 1995. *The Jewish Novel in the Ancient World*. Cornell University Press.