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## Gender Trouble in 1 Tim. 2:8-15

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Arco DEN HEIJER,  
Jermo VAN NES (eds.)

TROUBLING TEXTS  
IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Essays in Honour of  
Rob van Houwelingen



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# GENDER TROUBLE IN 1 TIMOTHY 2:8–15

Peter-Ben SMIT

## Abstract

This contribution takes as its point of departure the virtues as they are mentioned in 1 Timothy 2:8–15, in particular in verse 15. Analyzing how gender is constructed through the performance of virtues, and noting that certain virtues when performed by women contribute to their autonomy, the proposal is made that, however “conservatively” the author of 1 Timothy may have intended his discourse on gender in these verses, the stress on female virtue may well foster greater autonomy for these women than would have been intended by the author. The question is asked whether this text does not cause its own kind of gender trouble and, in a way, give birth to women like Thecla.

## Introduction

As reassuring as a text that advocates the subordination of women may be to some,<sup>1</sup> it can be just as troubling to those who take a subversive stance vis-à-vis forms of submission.<sup>2</sup> 1 Timothy 2:8–15 is a text that has troubled the honoree of this volume, Rob van Houwelingen,<sup>3</sup> on more

<sup>1</sup> See for an analysis of arguments, David M. Scholar, “1 Timothy 2.9–15 and the Place of Women in the Church’s Ministry,” in *A Feminist Companion to the Deutero-Pauline Epistles*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Marianne Blickenstaff (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2003), 98–121.

<sup>2</sup> The title of this chapter refers, of course, to Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1999), which highlights a performative understanding of gender and identity; the perspective on virtue and gender that is developed here is indebted to this way of thinking, although, due to lack of space, its theoretical ramifications cannot be discussed here.

<sup>3</sup> See, apart from the discussion in his commentary on the pastoral epistles (*Timoteüs en Titus: Pastorale instructiebrieven*, 4th ed., Commentaar op het Nieuwe Testament, derde serie [Kampen: Kok, 2011]), *ad loc.*, also his “Paul’s Injunction about Women: A Response,” in *Correctly Handling the Word of Truth: Reformed Hermeneutics Today*, ed. Gerhard H. Visscher and Mees te Velde (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014), 155–67; “Meaning and Significance of the Instruction about Women in 1 Timothy 2:12–15,”

than one occasion, and he is in the company of a substantial cloud of equally troubled witnesses when it comes to wrestling with and making sense of this text, both historically and hermeneutically. Anyone who merely peruses the text will immediately see what the issues might be...

This contribution takes its cue from the troublesome aspect of the text and argues that being troubled by gender roles in authoritative texts is nothing new. 1 Timothy 2:8-15, itself, is already part of a larger discourse that seeks to make sense of gendered forms of order in the ἐκκλησία. The precise manner in which this text, penned in the name of Paul, attempts to achieve this provides reason enough to continue this discourse, especially because of the statements made in v. 15. It will also be suggested in the course of this contribution that creating discipline and order in connection with gender in 1 Timothy 2 is of concern not only to women, but also to men. The relevance of such research is threefold; first, there is a historical and exegetical dimension, as new light will be shed on a text that is being discussed controversially from a historical perspective; second, the relevance is societal, as the notion that all forms of religion automatically lead to subordination and disciplining will be problematized; third, the relevance is ecclesial, given the contemporary reception of 1 Timothy 2 in discussion about church order, in particular regarding the role of women, in the twenty-first century.

## Gender and Discourse in 1 Timothy 2

A first part of the argument presented here concerns discursivity and gender. It has as its main purpose to recall insight on this topic presented by earlier scholars and to point to the historical and possible contemporary hermeneutical consequences when it comes to receiving texts such as 1 Timothy 2.

First, as will be obvious to any reader of 1 Timothy, the author of the letter, presenting himself as the apostle Paul,<sup>4</sup> is seeking to create a reality that does not yet exist. The letter and the agency of “Timothy”, be

*Sárospataki Füzetek* 19 (2015): 59–71; “Power Play in the Church? The Case of 1 Timothy 2:8–15,” *Verbum Christi* 6 (2019): 159–85, “Power, Powerlessness, and Authorised Power in 1 Timothy 2:8–15,” in Annette Merz and Pieter de Villiers, eds., *Power in the New Testament* (Leuven: Peeters, 2021), 195–221. Due to the reduced accessibility of libraries, both Van Houwelingen’s commentary and other commentaries could only be consulted to a very limited extent.

<sup>4</sup> I leave the question of authenticity open here, as I am mostly interested in the question of discourse as such. Also, the likely gender of the historical person behind the text has to remain open.



he historical or fictional, are the tools for achieving this. Timothy has to create some order in the ἐκκλησία in Ephesus (cf. 1 Tim 1:3: ... παρεκάλεσά σε προσμεῖναι ἐν Ἐφέσῳ). The creation of order also pertains to the role of differently gendered people within the congregation, notably different kinds of men and women. This observation alone already demonstrates that 1 Timothy is part of a larger discourse and can only be understood historically within that discourse. Of course, the precise shape of that discourse is a matter of discussion, in which questions concerning the detail of the situation in Ephesus (if it was Ephesus),<sup>5</sup> are raised. These are many, and include, for instance, the cult of Artemis,<sup>6</sup> social developments, such as the rise of the “new woman” in the first century (as proposed by Winter and others),<sup>7</sup> and longer standing social ideals such as the ordering of a (patriarchal) household (οἶκος). The discourse also raises the precise relationship of this letter to the undisputed (or at least: less disputed) Pauline letters and the remarks about church order and gender that can be found there. Just as important is the relationship between 1 Timothy and (roughly) contemporary texts that also receive earlier instantiation of Pauline or Paulinist teaching, such as the Acts of Paul (and Thecla), in which Paul seems to contradict flatly what Paul has to say in 1 Timothy.<sup>8</sup> The relationship of the letter to yet other strands of early Christian tradition, including the (canonical and non-canonical) gospels and (other) acts and letters, also needs to be considered. The relevance of this for a historical appreciation of 1 Timothy is that what we hear through the letter cannot be regarded as one, representative voice, speaking for all of early Christianity, but that it is

<sup>5</sup> For a survey of backgrounds that have been suggested, see (up to 2004): Annette Merz, *Die fiktive Selbstausslegung des Paulus. Intertextuelle Studien zur Intention und Rezeption der Pastoralbriefe*, NTOA / SUNT 52 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004), 303–33.

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., Annette Weissenrieder, “Of Childbirth and Salvation: 1 Timothy 2:15 in Light of Ancient Medicine and the Artemis Cult in Ephesus,” in *Gender and Social Norms in Ancient Israel, Early Judaism and Early Christianity: Texts and Material Culture*, ed. Michaela Bauks, Katharina Galor, and Judith Hartenstein, *Journal of Ancient Judaism Supplement Series 28* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2019), 347–80.

<sup>7</sup> See for this thesis Bruce W. Winter, “The ‘New’ Roman Wife and 1 Timothy 2:9–15: The Search for a *Sitz im Leben*,” *TynBul* 51 (2000), 285–94; for a critical consideration, see, e.g., Annette Merz, “‘New’ Woman? Bruce W. Winters These und ihre Rezeption in der exegetischen Diskussion kritisch beleuchtet,” in *Frauen im Antiken Judentum und Frühen Christentum*, ed. Jörg Frey and Nicole Rupschus, *WUNT 2/489* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 209–34.

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., Mathijs den Dulk, “I Permit No Woman to Teach Except for Thecla: The Curious Case of the Pastoral Epistles and the Acts of Paul Reconsidered,” *NovT* 54 (2012): 176–203.

but one voice among many. The very fact that the letter's aim is to shape the reality in a church in a particular way is in itself evidence that the message is neither listened to nor agreed automatically by everyone.

Second, the observation just made has had obvious historical consequences, and it can be shown that 1 Timothy, and certainly 1 Timothy 2, has not been the only voice heard by Christian traditions seeking to work out appropriate roles for men and women in the church. The trajectories in the reception of this text have been diverse and encompass a variety of cultures and times. The most recent reception of these texts occurs today and it is important to acknowledge that the diversity of opinion on gender-based roles is nothing new, but can be seen as continuing a polyphonic discourse found in 1 Timothy itself, and also with regard to gender roles in the ἐκκλησία. This polyphony, of course, agrees well with the polyphonic character of the Christian tradition, including the Christian Bible.<sup>9</sup>

When combining these two observations, one arrives at two conclusions. First, that 1 Timothy, including its chapter 2, is a text that aims to provoke change, for whatever reason – the background may be an anxiety about the status and role of men –,<sup>10</sup> rather than to “conservatively” confirm a status quo (being “conservative” means to agitate for change in this case!). And secondly, that a variety of different movements can be observed in the reception of 1 Timothy, together with other early Christian voices on the topic of gender and order in the ἐκκλησία.

### Gender at Large in 1 Timothy

Whenever 1 Timothy 2, especially vv. 8–15, is considered to be a “troubling text”, this usually has to do with the way in which women are disciplined in this text, something that is attributed to a particular construction of the female gender, which leads to their submission, their silencing, and, according to some, their reduction to childbearing capabilities.<sup>11</sup> While femininity and its construction are certainly of importance

<sup>9</sup> The notion originates with Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1984), 6–7.

<sup>10</sup> So-called “precarious masculinities.” See Peter-Ben Smit, “Supermen and Sissies: Masculinities in Titus and 1 Timothy,” *Journal for the Study of Paul and His Letters* 9 (2019): 62–79.

<sup>11</sup> E.g., Claudia Janssen, “Geburt (NT),” <https://www.bibelwissenschaft.de/stichwort/48894/>: “1 Tim 2,15 reduziert Frauen auf ihre Gebärfähigkeit und macht das Gebären von Kindern zur Bedingung für ihr Heil.” Cf. Bridget Gilfillan Upton, “Can Stepmothers be Saved? Another Look at 1 Timothy 2.8–15,” *Feminist Theology* 15

and will be the focus of more detailed exegetical observations later on in this contribution, it is not the only gender that is being constructed in this text.<sup>12</sup> In fact, masculinities are also being constructed (throughout the letter and in later heavily gendered remarks about men and their roles).<sup>13</sup> In fact, this takes place in such a way that something becomes apparent for women only a little later on in the letter: not all men are equally masculine, just as not all women are (or can be) feminine in the same manner. This latter remark has to do with something that won't be developed further here: the role of widows, who may well be in part childless, in 1 Timothy 5:3–16.<sup>14</sup> This diversity of masculinities and femininities is, of course, a good fit with ancient thinking that was, at the very least, very flexible when it came to assigning gender to persons. Based on their role and behavior and, in many ways, determined by the performance of virtues, the (appertaining) exercise of self-control as well as control over others, persons of any kind of sex (ancient society was also quite open to imagining biological sex changes, to be sure) could be assigned different degrees of femininity and masculinity.

This also pertained to early Christian discourse on gender at large, in which “deviant” genders (such as those of the Ethiopian eunuch, but also of others, possibly including Jesus, and certainly including Thecla), had their place, and in which the transcendence of gender, or at least of biological sex could well be imagined.<sup>15</sup> The relevance of this observation for an appreciation of 1 Timothy 2 is that the men who appear in this text are also constructed quite emphatically by (the person writing as) Paul and through the assumed agency of Timothy. These men are told how they should pray and also how they should relate to (their) women:

(2007): 175–85. This also seems to be the position of Merz, *Selbstausslegung*, 301–303 (303: “die Mutterschaft als heilsnotwendiges Werk”). All of this notwithstanding, “childbearing” or “childbirth” is the most plausible meaning of *τεκνογονία*, see the succinct considerations of Anna Rebecca Solevåg, *Birthing Salvation: Gender and Class in Early Christian Childbearing Discourse*, Biblical Interpretation Series 121 (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2013), 130.

<sup>12</sup> For this and the following, see Smit, “Supermen,” as well as Suzan Sierksma-Agteres, “Faithfulness as Subhegemonic Antidote to a Precarious Existence: A Response to Peter-Ben Smit,” *Journal for the Study of Paul and His Letters* 9 (2019): 80–88.

<sup>13</sup> As it is also noted and stressed by Van Houwelingen, “Power.”

<sup>14</sup> It would seem that their salvation does not *depend* on childbearing in any case. At least this is not indicated in 1 Timothy 5, and therefore any interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:15 that understands *τεκνογονία* as a condition for salvation is probably mistaken.

<sup>15</sup> See, in general, Brittany E. Wilson, *Unmanly Men: Refigurations of Masculinity in Luke-Acts* (Oxford; London; New York: Oxford University Press, 2015) and L. Stephanie Cobb, *Dying to Be Men: Gender and Language in Early Christian Martyr Texts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

arguing that women should be submissive to men also means that men should “take the lead”; in other words: the construction is reciprocal. That there is a connection between the two kinds of gendering that take place in 1 Timothy 2 is also suggested by ὡσαύτως in v. 9. Yet, by giving men this position of authority, they are also placed in a position subordinate to that of Timothy (who is to teach them how to behave), who is in turn subordinate to (the person writing as) Paul. These men can well be regarded as embodying “subordinate” masculinities, which are, if they obey the instructions in the letter, simultaneously complicit with the ideal-typical kind of masculinity that the letter takes as its point of departure.<sup>16</sup> The result of all of this may well be seen as a “patriarchal” hierarchy of gender, which includes men (with different kinds and degrees of “ideal” masculinity) as much as it includes women. In fact, the gendering of women and the determination of their role in the congregation simultaneously determines the kind of masculinities that are appropriate in the ἐκκλησία.

### Forms of Femininity in 1 Timothy 2

It is difficult to debate whether the author of 1 Timothy intends to introduce (or at least: promote) a relatively “conservative” understanding of gender roles (e.g., when compared with the “new woman”, were she to have played a role in occasioning the letter). This difficulty maintains, despite its being relevant for both historical and hermeneutical reasons that this kind of vision for gender roles is one among many and part of a broader discourse. Also, it should be stressed that the author of 1 Timothy is apparently addressing a situation in which women were less submissive than he desired. Yet, two aspects of the way in which female gender is constructed here (as noted, it is constructed differently with reference to a different class of women in chapter 5) are nonetheless open for further reflection, as these two aspects can be seen as connecting well (at least in part) with topics that lead to rather different, one might say “liberal” proposals for the construction of gender in texts such as the Acts of Paul.

While observing that in chapter 2 “wealthy wives” are primarily at stake (which makes sense given the stress on the relationship with men,

<sup>16</sup> On such terminology, see R.W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept,” *Gender & Society* 19 (2005): 829–59.

the emphasis on adornment, and the reference to child bearing),<sup>17</sup> and that a strong connection with the context of the cult is also likely (ὡσαύτως in v. 9 refers back to v. 8, which has behavior during prayer in view),<sup>18</sup> it is of particular interest that their behavior is constructed along the lines of particular virtues implying forms of self-control and self-mastery that can also be seen to be reflected in the emphasis on a disciplined dress code in v. 9. The virtues that are mentioned are σωφροσύνη (v. 9, 15), θεοσέβεια (v. 10), and πίστις, ἀγάπη, ἀγιασμός (and again σωφροσύνη) in v. 15. Why is this of interest? This is of interest because these are not (only) typically feminine virtues (which also existed)<sup>19</sup> – σωφροσύνη, for instance, although it *could* also be a typically feminine virtue, is shared with men in 3:2, with reference to an ἐπίσκοπος, who is to be σώφρων – and because it was precisely the embodiment of virtue, implying self-control, that could lead to a shift in gendered status. A lack of it made a person less masculine and more effeminate, and vice versa. In fact, the performance of virtues is precisely what leads to Thecla’s “sex change” in the Acts of Paul and Thecla, to name but one example. The occurrence of the same virtues and their connection with gender roles is also indicative of the fact that 1 Timothy and the Acts of Paul and Thecla participate in the same kind of discourse.<sup>20</sup> Here, in fact, there might be a source of gender fluidity in the midst of a conservative text (“gender trouble” in the midst of a “troubling text”). This can be argued, despite

<sup>17</sup> William Loader, *Sexuality in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 420, argues that there is no indication that it is primarily married women who are in view here, but that can be disputed. The text can certainly be read as also referring to non-married women, but the reference to child bearing, the remarks about Adam and Eve (a first “couple” as much as progenitors of all men and women) and the fact that ἀνὴρ (v. 12) can mean both husband and man (cf. 1 Tim 3:2: μιᾶς γυναικὸς ἄνδρα, see also, e.g., 1 Cor 7:3, would at least allow some space for thinking of married women here. (And also the use of the term in the course of Mark 10:1–9, here also with reference to the situation “in paradise.”)

<sup>18</sup> See also, e.g., George M. Wieland, *The Significance of Salvation: A Study of Salvation Language in the Pastoral Epistles*, Paternoster Biblical Monographs (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006), 69–70.

<sup>19</sup> See on gender and virtues in 1 Timothy, e.g., Susan Hulen, *A Modest Apostle: Thecla and the History of Women in the Early Church* (Oxford; London; New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 43–70, whose observation that virtues lead to authority and are characteristic of leadership are consonant with the line of argument presented in this essay. See also, idem, “Women διάκονοι and Gendered Norms of Leadership,” *JBL* 138 (2019): 687–702, for a further elaboration of this notion with regard to the ministry of διάκονοι, as it occurs in 1 Timothy 3.

<sup>20</sup> Also, as Den Dulk, “Permit,” 199–200, observes, 1 Timothy 2:15 finds a (partial) parallel with regard to child-bearing and salvation in *ActPI* 3.14, albeit that in the latter text, this view is held by Paul’s opponents.

the forceful argument of Malherbe that the virtue that forms an *inclusio* around vv. 9–15, i.e. σωφροσύνη,<sup>21</sup> is the *virtus feminarum* par excellence and that it entails for women both self-control and submission.<sup>22</sup> This is a sentiment echoed (and paraphrased) by Weissenrieder when she states that “While σωφροσύνη is an active moral engagement for men, utilizing a wide range of skills, the word when used to describe women, collapses into a narrower meaning: modesty, submission.”<sup>23</sup> Although Malherbe, Weissenrieder, and others certainly have a point in that σωφροσύνη could be understood to mean modesty in the sense of submission when applied to women, and something along the lines of self-control and sensibility when it comes to men, there is also ample evidence of a strong tradition, for instance within Stoicism,<sup>24</sup> that attributed the same kinds of virtue to men and women, including an understanding of σωφροσύνη that amounted, at the very least in its core, to the same.<sup>25</sup> As North has shown, this development is one that clearly continues into the patristic period.<sup>26</sup> And, as Chew has supplemented, it was key for heroines in both Hellenistic novels and early Christian martyr acts,<sup>27</sup> as well as in earlier texts, such as 4 Maccabees (cf. on the mother as one of the *exempla* in this work: 4 Macc 1:3.6.8.18).

On the other side of the historical spectrum, in his extensive exposition of the use and understanding of σωφροσύνη up to and during the time

<sup>21</sup> See, e.g., Myriam Klinker-De Klerck, *Herderlijke regel of inburgeringscursus? Een bijdrage aan het onderzoek naar de ‘burgerlijke’ ethiek in 1 Timoteüs & Titus* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum Academic, 2013), 60.

<sup>22</sup> Abraham J. Malherbe, “The *Virtus Feminarum* in 1 Timothy 2:9–15,” in *Renewing Tradition*, ed. Mark W. Hamilton, Thomas H. Olbricht, and Jeffrey Peterson (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2007), 45–65.

<sup>23</sup> Annette Weissenrieder, “What does σωθήσεται δὲ διὰ τῆς τεκνογονίας ‘to be saved by childbearing’ mean (1 Timothy 2:15)? Insights from Ancient Medical and Philosophical Texts,” *Early Christianity* 5 (2014): 313–36, p. 334.

<sup>24</sup> See, e.g., the well-documented discussion in Liisa Tuomela, “Virtues of Man, Woman – Or Human Being? An Intellectual Historical Study on the Views of the Later Stoics Seneca the Younger, Musonius Rufus, Epictetus, Hierocles and Marcus Aurelius on the Sameness of the Virtues of Man and Woman” (PhD diss., University of Helsinki, 2014).

<sup>25</sup> See, e.g., Hylén, *Apostle*, 19–42, for a survey.

<sup>26</sup> Helen North, *Sophrosune: Self-Knowledge and Self-Restraint in Greek Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1966).

<sup>27</sup> Kathryn Chew, “The Chaste and the Chased: ΣΩΦΡΟΣΥΝΗ, Female Martyrs and Novelistic Heroines,” *Syllecta Classica* 14 (2003), 205–22. Cf. Rosa M. Andújar, “Charicleia the Martyr: Heliodorus and Early Christian Narrative,” in *The Ancient Novel and Early Christian and Jewish Narrative: Fictional Intersections*, ed. Marília P. Futre Pinheiro, Judith Perkins, and Richard I. Pervo (Eelde: Barkhuis, 2012), 139–52, esp. p. 149 on self-control.

of Plato, Rademaker has demonstrated, that the genderbending capacity of this virtue was also known in earlier centuries, e.g., in Aeschylus' description of Clytaemnestra or Sophocles' presentation of Electra.<sup>28</sup> One particular instantiation of this line of thinking, and one that is also close to the Pastoral Epistles in time, culture, and popular philosophical concerns, is Plutarch. A full consideration of his remarks on men, women, virtue in general and σωφροσύνη in particular would go, too, for the present contribution. But, building on the work of others, it is evident that Plutarch operates on the basis of the (not uncontested, but nonetheless eminently viable) conviction that "...that man's virtues and woman's virtues are one and the same" (τὸ μίαν εἶναι καὶ τὴν αὐτὴν ἀνδρὸς καὶ γυναικὸς ἀρετὴν; Plutarch, *Mulier. virt.*, 243A) and that this also applies, at least in very many ways, to the exercise of σωφροσύνη in the sense of self-control (or self-restraint). This is not only implicit in passages such as the one about the women of Chios (o.c., 245-A-B), who, endowed with much self-control and courage (two concepts that are very closely linked in Plutarch's thinking), embolden and thereby save their men in battle.<sup>29</sup> Courage and calmness in the face of adversity are one possible effect of σωφροσύνη (here embodied by women). For Plutarch, moderation and modesty are another set of effects of a life that is characterized by σωφροσύνη and although these are often associated with women, they are, in fact, part of Plutarch's general understanding of this virtue:

But the fact is that temperance (σωφροσύνη) belongs to the sphere where reason guides and manages the passionate element, like a gentle animal obedient to the reins, making it yielding in its desires and willingly receptive of moderation and propriety... (*Virt. mor.* 445B [Helmbold, LCL])<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup> See Adriaan Rademaker, *Sophrosyne and the Rhetoric of Self-Restraint: Polysemy and Persuasive Use of an Ancient Greek Value Term*, Mnemosyne Supplements (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2004), 111, citing the choir of the *Agamemnon* (351), which refers to Clytaemnestra as follows: "Madam, you are speaking sensibly like a man of sensible restraint" (γύναι, κατ' ἀνδρα σώφρον' εὐφρόνως λέγεις), following a particularly determined and sensible speech of the queen, and the description of Electra in the similarly named play by Sophocles.

<sup>29</sup> As discussed, with a range of other examples, by Zacharoula Antoniou, "Women in Antiquity through the eyes of Plutarch," *Journal of Gender and Power* 13 (2020): 59–69.

<sup>30</sup> See for a concise and insightful discussion Margaret DeMaria Smith, "Enkrateia: Plutarch on Self-Control and the Politics of Excess," *Ploutarchos* 1 (2003): 79–88, esp. p. 81.



When it comes to women and their behavior, their “modesty” and self-restraint is, at least in many instances, expressive of their σωφροσύνη, as Beneker has shown for Plutarch’s portrayals of Camma, Porcia, and Cornelia by discussing how the devotion of these women to their husbands – even deceased – is not so much an expression of female submission, but of self-restraint (that also makes them comparable to male heroes). In fact, their self-restraint takes the shape of resistance to (other) men, who want to possess them – it appears that modesty, after all, is not all that modest or submissive.<sup>31</sup> Fittingly, in the *Amatorius*, Plutarch is quite explicit about the correlation between a number of female virtues, noting the relationship between self-restraint and courage, the latter being a virtue that has little to do with being submissive:

What need is there to discuss [women’s] prudence and intelligence, or their loyalty and justice, when many have exhibited a daring and great-hearted courage which is truly masculine? (*Amat.* 23 = *Mor.* 769C [Helmbold, LCL])

A particular telling example of Plutarch’s attribution of such virtue(s) to women is Porcia, who is lauded as follows at the end of the biography of Cato the Younger:<sup>32</sup>

And still more true is it that the daughter of Cato was deficient neither in prudence nor courage (οὔτε σωφροσύνης οὔτε ἀνδρείας ἀπολειφθεῖσα). She was the wife of the Brutus who slew Caesar, was privy to the conspiracy itself, and gave up her life in a manner worthy of her noble birth and her lofty character (ἀξίως τῆς εὐγενείας καὶ ἀρετῆς) ... (*Cat. Min.* 73,4 [Perrin, LCL])

This association of σωφροσύνη with women and their (oftentimes submissive) “modesty” (in the sense of self-control and unavailability for others) also occurs in contemporaries of Plutarch, such as Dio Chrysostom, who, standing in a longer tradition of doing so, highlights Odysseus’ wife Penelope as a person who exemplifies this virtue (cf. *Or.* 15.4).<sup>33</sup> Similarly, later authors, such as Heliodorus in the *Aethiopica*, continue

<sup>31</sup> See Jeffrey Beneker, “Death is not the End: Spousal Devotion in Plutarch’s Portraits of Camma, Porcia, and Cornelia,” in *The Discourse of Marriage in the Greco-Roman World*, ed. Jeffrey Beneker and Georgia Tsouvala (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2020), 199–218.

<sup>32</sup> As discussed by, e.g., Sulochana Asirvatham, “Plutarch, Ἀνδρεία, and Rome,” *Illinois Classical Studies* 44 (2019): 156–76, p. 167.

<sup>33</sup> On which see, e.g., Dimitri Kasprzyzk, “Morale et sophistique: sur la notion de σωφροσύνη chez Achille Tatius,” in *Passions, vertus et vices dans l’ancien roman*, ed. Bernard Pouderon and Cécile Bost-Pouderon (Lyon: Maison de l’Orient et de la Méditerranée, 2009), 97–115, p. 103.



this tradition by, for instance, ascribing σωφροσύνη in this sense to the heroine Theagenes (*Aethiopica* 5.4.5, 8.6.4).<sup>34</sup>

When reading 1 Timothy and its discourse on virtues in this context, and when taking into account the immediate literary context of 1 Timothy 2:15, it becomes inviting to associate the virtues mentioned in 1 Timothy 2:8–15 with a quite “Plutarchian” view of the same. This means that it would seem to be well possible to understand both 1 Timothy 2:8–15 and 3:1–7 as operating with an understanding of σωφροσύνη that is similar – at its core: the same – for men and women and coheres well with the “newer” (and at its core Stoic) understanding of this virtue where sexual self-control (3:2; only one wife, which may preclude the sexual use of slaves and prostitutes), self-control regarding food and drink (3:3), control of emotions such as anger (again 3:3), and a desire for money (3:3), all played a role.<sup>35</sup> The juxtaposition of 1 Timothy 2:8–15 and 3:1–7 not only suggests that women are capable of virtue, which is, obviously, assumed by 1 Timothy 2:8–15, but that these virtues have much in common as well and may well be very similar for men and women.

Thus, what follows in 1 Timothy 2:9–15, i.e., an emphasis on σωφροσύνη, can also be seen as preceding it; the behavior prescribed for men, i.e., to pray χωρίς ὀργῆς καὶ διαλογισμοῦ (v. 8) is an expression of self-control, hence, the explicit reference to σωφροσύνη that occurs in v. 9 may well be logical, following on ὡσαύτως at the beginning of this verse, which then connects that is being said about the men and about the women, both syntactically and in terms of content.<sup>36</sup> When viewed from this perspective, then, the control over their appearance and speech that women are to exercise according to vv. 9–12 is also a form of self-control.<sup>37</sup> Self-control, finally, is also what governs the “arena” of child-birth and enables the performance of (other) virtues there.

Although there is an emphasis on female submission in 1 Timothy 2:9–15, this submission is, in the end, a corollary of self-control and the according performance of virtue, which, in many (other) sources, lead to an increase in both the (social) standing and autonomy of women. Reading the text in this way, one would have to come to the conclusion that that there is a tension in 1 Timothy 2:9–15 in the sense that the author

<sup>34</sup> See Rachel Bird, “Virtue Obscured: Theagenes’ *Sōphrosynē* in Heliodorus’ *Aethiopica*,” *Ancient Narrative* 14 (2017): 195–208.

<sup>35</sup> For a survey of these themes in popular philosophers, see Tuomela, *Virtues*, and Hylen, *Apostle*, 19–42.

<sup>36</sup> See also Hylen, *Apostle*, 57.

<sup>37</sup> Hylen, *Apostle*, 58–59.

tries to have his cake (by calling on women to σωφροσύνη and various other virtues) and eat it (by arguing that women should be submissive). In the end, submission and the kind of understanding of σωφροσύνη (and the other virtues) that he seems to have cannot coexist in a stable manner, as self-control and (other) virtue(s) lead to the very opposite of submission and subordinate position, namely to high regard and authority (and the suitability to minister, cf. 1 Timothy 3). In what may well be receptions of this discourse on the position of women in the (praying) assembly, such as the Acts of Paul (and Thecla) and the (later) Life and Miracles of Thecla, this tension can be seen as resolved by portraying Thecla as someone who in the former text performs self-control in an emancipatory manner,<sup>38</sup> while she exclaims in the latter “And I fight with the self-control (σωφροσύνης) dear to me and you, thinking little of the beasts.”<sup>39</sup> As an aside, one could also maintain that the decision to ordain both women and men to the apostolic ministry follows suit when it comes to resolving this tension. Its resolution, furthermore, also implies a particular view of what constitutes a person’s suitability to minister: virtue (and not, for instance, gender).

In relation to another aspect of 1 Timothy 2:15, there is significance in the (in)famous remark about being saved through childbirth that uses the uncommon term τεκνογονία, as it can be interpreted in a manner quite consonant with this emphasis on the performance of virtues. To begin with, it can be observed that the author does something here that is quite unnecessary for his (I assume) line of argument: he underlines that precisely what “the woman” received as the wages of her sin in Genesis 3:16 is presented here as the (or rather: a) means of salvation (or a means of salvific mystagogy: what is described is also a kind of ongoing initiation into a virtuous identity). This is of interest, as it gives a very positive twist to something very precarious in the life of first-century women, while further interpreting an aspect of biblical tradition. Loader, for instance, has argued that v. 15 can easily be interpreted as a confirmation of Gen. 3:16, viewing the emphasis on childbearing as a *chiffre* for the subordinate (and punished) position of the woman, which is to be endured virtuously.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>38</sup> See, e.g., the discussion by Hylen, *Apostle*, 71–90.

<sup>39</sup> From the *Life and Miracles of Thecla* 18, as quoted by Scott Fitzgerald Johnson, *The Life and Miracles of Thekla: A Literary Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 53.

<sup>40</sup> Loader, *Sexuality*, 421–24. Loader, however, can easily be seen as overstating his case. While 1 Timothy 2:15 does not explicitly undo the punishment inflicted on women (or

However, it is well possible to go beyond Loader's argument here, even if only for the simple reason that, although childbearing is emphasized in both 1 Timothy 2:15 and 3:16 as part of the "fallen" state of women, a number of elements that appear in Genesis 3:16 are absent from 1 Timothy 2:15 and others are there, while absent from Genesis 3:16. Elements that are not repeated include the emphasis on pain and punishment as well as the ἀποστροφή (LXX, HB: הִקְוִשׁוּ) of the woman to the man and the stress on the latter's ruling over the former. Instead, τεκνογονία is now presented as a means of salvation (favoring the instrumental sense of διὰ in v. 15 and an existential understanding of σῶζω)<sup>41</sup> and it is connected with the performance of virtues. In other words, the sense that childbirth is a form of (divinely sanctioned) female torture has disappeared, and it has become a place where virtues might be exercised, in particular faith, love, holiness, and modesty (assuming that the latter part of v. 15 qualifies the former part).<sup>42</sup>

on "the" woman) in Genesis 3:16, it is striking that some elements return explicitly (notably, bearing children), where other elements do not (such as a reference to pain, which Loader suggests is not a focus of 1 Timothy 2:15, or a reference to submission, which Loader suggests is implied in 1 Timothy 2:15. It certainly is part of the verse's context, but nothing in the verse itself suggests submission as such, or a reference to the "urge" of the woman to turn towards her husband, which is stressed by Loader, but the idea of an urge is not present explicitly in Genesis 3:16 nor in 1 Timothy 2:15). The transformation of a punishment into a means of salvation, which is how 1 Timothy 2:15 treats the idea of childbirth as punishment as presented in Genesis 3:16 is, of course, also notable and probably the most outstanding aspect of this verse.

<sup>41</sup> Although it is tempting to classify σωθήσεται as a *passivum divinum* (e.g. Loader, *Sexuality*, 422), some reticence would be appropriate here: *passiva divina* are a problematic category to begin with and the effect of a third person of the passive voice without an explicit *agens* has also the effect of highlighting the act, rather than the actor as such. Given the emphasis here on the agency of the woman giving birth while being virtuous, it may well be that not only divine agency is in view here, but also the agency of the woman is also at stake (notwithstanding the tension this would produce with the Pauline emphasis on "grace alone" – compare, however, Phil. 2:12). See on the *passivum divinum*, Peter-Ben Smit and Toon Renssen, "The *passivum divinum*: The Rise and Future Fall of an Imaginary Linguistic Phenomenon," *Filologia Neotestamentaria* 47 (2015): 3–24.

<sup>42</sup> See for this and the decisions regarding διὰ and σῶζω, e.g., Stanley E. Porter, "What Does It Mean to Be "Saved by Childbirth" (1 Timothy 2.15)," *JSNT* 49 (1993): 87–102, esp. 94–98, and Solevåg, *Birthing*, 129–30; Merz, *Selbstauelegung*, 296–97; on σῶζω, see also Weissenrieder, "What," 331–32. Even if a different interpretation is preferred, i.e., that the performance of these virtues preserves a woman through childbirth (interpreting διὰ temporally or spatially), the τεκνογονία remains the site of the exercise of virtue. The connection with Genesis 3:16 makes an emphasis on being saved through childbirth, i.e., by not succumbing while giving birth, less likely. The point of Genesis 3:16 is not the life-threatening dimension of childbirth, but its painful nature. See for a proposal that takes precisely this view, Moyer Hubbard, "Kept Safe

It would be worth considering whether this way of putting things in 1 Timothy 2:15 turns giving birth into something otherwise only available to women, an “arena” in which an ἀγών could be conducted, leading to the exercise (literally) of virtue.<sup>43</sup> There could be good reasons for taking this suggestion seriously: (a) the metaphor of childbirth is often borrowed by Paul and other men (as well as by God) to indicate a particular effort on behalf of others and in a manner that is quite similar or compatible with the idea of an ἀγών (see, e.g., Gal 4:19; (b) Jewish traditions exist, in which childbirth is associated with virtue in a manner that may well be analogous to what is stated in 1 Timothy 2:15.<sup>44</sup> Childbirth could then be seen as analogous to the battle field, the athletic arena, or the arena of politics for (free) men, where virtues could be exercised under challenging conditions – precisely the kind of situation in which virtue mattered most.<sup>45</sup> A situation that can be seen as characterized by lack of self-control (as childbirth “overcomes” a woman) and caused by the same (being penetrated was an act considered to signify lacking self-control in ancient thought) becomes a situation where such threatening loss of self-control is overcome by its disciplined and forceful exercise. This would show that a person is truly capable of this virtue, relatively easy to perform in less precarious circumstances but a real challenge in dire straits, and when performed successfully, a true feat. The painful circumstances under which childbirth usually took (and takes) place thus fit the call for the performance of virtues. This combination becomes all the more poignant when reading it in the context of

Through Childbearing: Maternal Mortality, Justification by Faith, and the Social Setting of 1 Timothy 2.15,” *JETS* 55 (2012): 743–62. A different view, but also with a focus on being saved through childbirth, is expressed by Christopher R. Hutson, “‘Saved through Childbearing’: The Jewish Context of 1 Timothy 2:15,” *NovT* 56 (2014): 392–410. Hutson’s position is also compatible with the view taken here that childbirth is an “arena” where virtues are to be performed.

<sup>43</sup> Alicia D. Myers, *Blessed Among Women? Mothers and Motherhood in the New Testament* (Oxford; London; New York: Oxford University Press), 125–30, positions 1 Timothy 2:9–15 in ancient discourses about motherhood, also arguing that the virtues are connected to gaining status and masculinization (as is female insemination by men); her interpretation is compatible with what follows here (even if the suggestion that this text may contain the seeds of its own deconstruction is not made here, the observation that the performance of virtues enhanced status and authority is made).

<sup>44</sup> See Kenneth L. Waters, “Revisiting Virtues as Children: 1 Timothy 2:15 as Center-piece for an Egalitarian Soteriology,” *LTQ* 42 (2007): 37–49.

<sup>45</sup> See the discussion by Joy Connolly, “Like the labors of Heracles: *Andreia* and *Paideia* in Greek culture under Rome,” in *Andreia: Studies in Manliness and Courage in Classical Antiquity*, ed. Ralph M. Rosen and Ineke Sluiter, *Mnemosyne Supplements* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2003), 287–317.

Genesis 3:16, obviously a pre-text of 1 Timothy 2:15. The punishment that is inflicted on “the woman” there, i.e. the pain associated with giving birth, is transformed into a salvific opportunity for the performance of virtues in 1 Timothy 2:15 (to be sure, this does not diminish the pain, nor mitigate any misogynistic aspects of Gen 3:16, but it is a twist that is there in 1 Timothy 2:15 nonetheless).

The emphasis on self-control and on childbirth as a chance to practice virtue is of relevance for a number of reasons: it goes beyond childbirth as a painful form of punishment, which was already noted, but it also has the potential of enhancing the status of women – in general –<sup>46</sup> who give birth in this manner. It is noticeable, namely, that the majority of the virtues highlighted in 1 Timothy 2:15 also occur in that writing that has often been compared to this pastoral epistle: The Acts of Paul (and Thecla) (to wit: σωφροσύνη, θεοσέβεια [its equivalent εὐσέβεια], and πίστις). In this text, as was already noted, it is precisely the performance of such virtues that fulfills an important role for the (literally) emancipatory “career” of one of the main characters: the girl Thecla.<sup>47</sup> This does not need to surprise, as virtuousness and independence or autonomy (or αὐτάρκεια) were closely connected in many forms of popular philosophy, including, for instance, Stoicism.<sup>48</sup> In the case of Thecla, her embodiment and performance of these virtues also leads to a change in her gender role: she ends up in a masculine role (as a preacher, with Paul’s blessing) and wearing clothing that appertains to the role, i.e., male clothing.<sup>49</sup> The line of thought seems to be: the more virtuous, the more

<sup>46</sup> With, e.g., Porter, “What,” 98–99, and Wieland, *Significance*, 81–84, the grammatically awkward shift in v. 15 from the singular σωθήσεται to the plural μείνωσιν is interpreted in such a way that the plural refers to women in general as they have been mentioned in v. 9 already.

<sup>47</sup> While σωφροσύνη indicates self-control (as well as moderation, which is a consequence of self-control; see also 1 Tim 3:2) and hence can make a person less dependent on others, piety (θεοσέβεια or its equivalent εὐσέβεια) is often seen as both a virtue and the basis (and legitimation of certain kinds) of virtues (not just in the Acts of Paul and Thecla, 4 Macc. is also a good example), and πίστις indicates someone’s allegiance to, for instance, a deity, which can also enhance a person’s independence from other human beings (and deities). The latter has been documented extensively by Theresa Morgan, *Roman Faith and Christian Faith* (Oxford; London; New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>48</sup> For this in relation to σωφροσύνη in Paul and 1 Timothy 2, see Weissenrieder, “What,” 334–35.

<sup>49</sup> For an account of this, see Peter-Ben Smit, “Thecla’s Masculinity in the Acts of (Paul and) Thecla,” in *Biblical Masculinities Foregrounded*, ed. Ovidiu Creanga and Peter-Ben Smit (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2014), 245–69.

masculine, with masculinity representing (androcentrically) the anthropological ideal.<sup>50</sup>

It would probably not do to suggest that the author of 1 Timothy would have wanted the virtues he encourages in women while giving birth to have the emancipatory effect that occurs in the Acts of Paul (and Thecla), given that Thecla turns out to be anything but the picture presented in 1 Timothy 2:9–15 (and the narrative of her conversion and development as a follower of Christ is also powered by her escape from marriage). Nonetheless, authors are not in control of their texts, or their effect, and it may well be that the effect of performing what is described in 1 Timothy 2:15 turns out to be at odds with the prescriptions regarding female behavior in 1 Timothy 2:9–12. The Acts of Paul and Thecla certainly show that this possibility existed, and, as suggested earlier in this contribution, this text may well resolve a tension inherent in 1 Timothy 2:9–15 when it comes to virtues and gender roles in the worshipping assembly.

In sum, one could propose that, however “conservative” and “static” an impression 1 Timothy 2 might make (an impression that would be mistaken, given that the text attempts to provoke change, rather than to affirm a status quo!), in fact the text contains the seeds of what may well lead to changes in gender roles, or the attribution of particular forms of gender, when the kinds of behavior that the text envisages both in general and in the particular situation of childbirth are adopted. In this way, the text would play a double role in the polyphony of early Christian voices regarding gender roles and their appropriate shape, namely by pushing a “conservative” agenda on the one hand and by doing so in a manner that contains the seeds of its own undoing at the same time. Does 1 Timothy 2:15 give birth to Thecla, then? Even if Thecla herself, famously, refused to submit to the role of a childbearing woman determined by the wishes of her family (especially her mother) and husband? (As recounted in the Acts of Paul and Thecla)

<sup>50</sup> Interestingly enough, this could, finally, link up with another interpretative concern regarding 1 Timothy 2:15 and which pertains to the verb σφύζω. It can mean eschatological salvation or “being healed.” The two can, in fact, coincide. Transcending gender, certainly gender that is conceptualized as “weak” (such as certain forms of [unvirtuous] femininity), could and was imagined as belonging to the salvific (and eschatological or “heavenly”) transformation of people (see, e.g., *Gos. Thom.* 114; see also the transformation of Thecla in the Acts of Paul and Thecla).

## Concluding Reflections

In the above considerations, it has been argued that 1 Timothy, in particular its chapter 2, is a text that is part of a broader and more diverse discourse on gender and order in early Christianity, in the context of which it seeks to provoke a “conservative” kind of change, or at least to exercise influence in the direction of a more “conservative” view of what gender roles and church order should look like. Beyond this, it was observed that the argument concerning gender and order pertains, both in chapter 2 and in 1 Timothy as a whole, to *all* involved, both men and women, when formulating things in a more binary fashion than may have been common in antiquity. The kinds and degrees of (ideal) masculinities and femininities that emerge in the course of the letter vary strongly. Not all men are masculine in the same manner, nor are all women feminine in the same manner. Finally, it was observed how the kind of construction of femininity, or at least desired female behavior (and with that a particular construction of femininity) may well contain within itself the seeds of change (against the grain of 1 Tim as such).<sup>51</sup> This is the case because the performance of virtues, especially the kind of virtues that could be performed by men and women, can well lead to receptions of 1 Timothy 2 that encourage gender fluidity, rather than a static attribution of gender roles. This is supported by the construction of an “arena” for the performance of virtues in a specific kind of *agora* that offers opportunities suitable for women especially, i.e., childbirth as no longer a punishment but as an instrument of salvation (and – potentially – gendered transformation). Because while men are being put in their place, subordinate to Timothy, who is subordinate to Paul, women are offered a new opportunity to exercise virtue, self-control, and thereby (potentially) overcome precisely the kind of submissiveness and passivity to which the author of 1 Timothy seems to exhort them. Does this troubling text contain, then, within itself and due to its own argumentative *modus operandi*, the promise of much more gender trouble than its author may have asked for?<sup>52</sup>

<sup>51</sup> See for other contributions that propose reading 1 Timothy 2:15 against its own grain, Elna Mouton and Ellen van Wolde, “New Life from a Pastoral Text of Terror? Gender Perspectives on God and Humanity in 1 Timothy 2,” *Scriptura* 111 (2012): 583–601, and Gerald West, “Taming Texts of Terror: Reading (Against) the Gender Grain of 1 Timothy,” *Scriptura* 86 (2004): 160–73.

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