FROM BEDROOM TO COURTROOM:
THE ADULTERY TYPE-SCENE AND
THE ACTS OF ANDREW

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The end of the apocryphal Acts of Andrew, like the conclusion of all the apocryphal Acts of the Apostles, comes as no surprise. Aegeates, the proconsul of Patras, is convinced that Andrew has corrupted his wife, Maximilla. He arrests him, leaving him to languish in prison for a long time until he suddenly remembers to bring him before the tribunal, where he renders the following summary verdict against him:

The time to complete my judgment (τὸ τέλος τῆς περὶ σε χρίσεως) against you has arrived, you stranger (ξένε ἄνθρωπε) and alien (ἄλλοτροι) to this present life, and enemy (ἐχθρὲ) of my home and corrupter (λυμετῶν) of my entire house. Why did you decide to burst into places alien to you (ἐσσηδήσατε ἄλλοτροις τόποις) and corrupt a wife (ὑποδι- αφθείραι γυναῖκα) who used to please me in every way and never slept with another man? She has convinced me that she now rejoices in you and your God. So enjoy my gifts!

Without allowing Andrew an opportunity to speak in his own defense, Aegeates orders the apostle to be flogged, tortured and crucified. The apostle welcomes this opportunity to imitate his teacher, Jesus Christ, by meeting a glorious death at the hands of his persecutor. His fortitude and the love he inspires in his disciples—in particular, Maximilla and Stratocles, the proconsul’s brother—eventually convince even the wicked proconsul of the truth of the message of Andrew’s faith. In the end, the apostle foils the proconsul’s attempt to free him and defiantly expires on the cross, thereby becoming a martyr for the faith, earning for himself the narrative of which he is the hero.

The catalyst for this noble martyrdom is paradoxical for its sheer banality: it is a love triangle—specifically, an adulterous triangle—although, ironically, without the sex. There is perhaps no other dramatic formula that has generated more narratives in Western literature than “the unstable triangularity of adultery.” In the Acts of Andrew, we can see how one early Christian narrative used the archetype of the adulterous triangle as it was articulated in Greek culture and transformed it so as to create a matrix for the reordering of both personal affective relationships, as expressed through a renunciation of sexuality, and social and political associations, as expressed in the creation of an androgynous community of believers, where men appropriate such traditionally feminine functions as nurturing and midwifery, while women assume the role of spectators to the initiation of new members into a community that exists separately from the hierarchies encoded in the imperial state.

In order to advance this agenda, it has been argued that the apocryphal Acts of the Apostles, as well as other early Christian texts, drew upon the “entertaining” themes from the general culture in order to make the tenets of what was an exotic ideology more palatable (as well as intelligible) to audiences who were still at home within the cultural paradigms of the Greco-Roman world during the first centuries c.e. Yet it is necessary to dissect the concept of what it means to say a motif is “entertaining.” For the purposes of analyzing how a narrative keeps its audience engaged enough to continue reading or listening, perhaps the term “compelling” is more precise. Pre-existing story patterns—literary archetypes or topos—offer just such efficient conduits for drawing in the reader/audience.

The application of oral-formulaic theory in the scholarship on the Homeric epics provides a model for understanding the function of formulaic narrative sequences, better known as “type-scenes.” Elizabeth Minchin has recently argued that type-scenes are more than mnemonic devices for oral poets; they are also expressions of culturally determined, but deeply embedded, cognitive structures. Indebted to insights

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4 It is precisely for this reason that ancient rhetorical treatises place the narratio before the argumentum.