WOMEN, GENDER, AND GNOSIS IN GNOSTIC TEXTS AND TRADITIONS

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Introduction

Female characters figure so prominently in gnostic texts and traditions that many have asked whether women played similarly significant roles in ancient gnostic communities. Unfortunately, the relation between the mythic worlds of Sophia, Barbelo, Eve, and Norea and the social worlds of real "gnostic" women is not clear," and the task of reconstructing the social roles of women in "gnosticism" remains one of the most challenging in the study of ancient Mediterranean religions. Difficulties arise in part from the problem of defining "gnosticism" and related terms, but even more serious problems of evaluation, interpretation, and analysis face those who would evaluate, interpret, and analyze the evidence for this complex and esoteric religious phenomenon of the ancient world.

The evidence for "gnosticism" consists principally of two types: (1) the detailed, but highly polemical reports from the antiheretical writers of the early Christian church, and (2) primary sources, such as the writings of the Nag Hammadi library, which are attributed to ancient "gnostics" or associated with "gnostic" themes. Before the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library in 1945, our knowledge of gnostic traditions derived almost exclusively from the reports of the antiheretical writers of the early Christian church. These writers, including Irenaeus, Tertullian, Hippolytus, Clement, and Epiphanius, provide relatively systematic accounts of "gnostic" teaching, the names of individual "gnostic" teachers, schools, and sects, as well as occasional reports of social organization and ritual practice. Even more important, their writings preserve the names and
roles of specific women in "gnostic" schools, sects, or communities. Nonetheless, the value of these sources has diminished in recent years as scholars have recognized the distorting effects of their authors' polemical concerns and as the writings of the Nag Hammadi library have become available.

Since the discovery at Nag Hammadi, it has become increasingly clear that the term "gnosticism" is a modern scholarly construct that derives not so much from the self-designation of those who called themselves "gnostics" or "knowing ones" (gnōstikoi), though some individuals and communities undoubtedly did, but rather from the antithetical writers' efforts to identify and expose their opponents under the pejorative term "falsely so-called gnostics" (1 Tim 6: 20). Traditional definitions, it has been pointed out, often retain or reflect the antithetical strategies of unifying several varieties of thought and practice into a single system or school of Christian heresy and of attributing to all the same stereotyped set of negative characteristics, including concepual error or falsehood, immorality, and behavioral extremes.

In recent years, several serious challenges to traditional definitions of "gnosticism" as a single religion or heresy have emerged. Some scholars have chosen to abandon the category altogether as hopelessly outdated and distorting. Still, a majority of scholars has chosen to retain the category, redefining "gnosticism" with more neutral language, with a clearer distinction of its major varieties, such as "Sethian" and "Valentinian," and with a far broader scope than the single Christian heresy of the antithetical writers. Among those who take such an approach, "gnosticism" is often defined as a single religious movement that flourished from the second to fourth centuries CE in Jewish, Christian, and pagan forms. While the origin and historical development of the varieties of "gnosticism" continue to be debated, there is general agreement among those who use the term that the varieties of "gnosticism" shared two essential features: (1) an emphasis on the salvific power of gnōsis, that is, a personal or experiential knowledge of the divine, the self, and all that exists ("gnōsis"); and (2) radical dualism, that is, a worldview that distinguishes sharply between the superior realm of the divine and the inferior realm of the cosmos and its creator.

Still another option is to retain the categories "gnosticism," "gnostic," and "gnosis," but to reconceive them not as terms that identify a single religion of antiquity, but rather as heuristic devices that highlight a shared pattern of thought, in this case, a shared emphasis on the saving significance of religious knowledge or "gnosis," which appeared across a broad range of ancient religious traditions and phenomena. Given the wide range of such traditions and the differing conceptions of gnosia among them, individual texts and traditions are selected and examined not as products of a single religious movement called "gnosticism," but as expressions of a distinctively "gnostic," that is, "gnosis-centered," pattern of religious thought, which appeared across religious traditions and in many distinct varieties.

The discovery of the Nag Hammadi texts has similarly heightened awareness of the difficulties involved in reconstructing social roles from "gnostic" patterns of thought. It has led to the emergence of at least three distinct positions on the relation between gender imagery and the social roles of women in "gnostic" communities. Elaine Pagels' The Gnostic Gospels, originally published in 1979, first called attention to the preponderance of positive female imagery in gnostic texts and argued that such imagery may correlate directly with prominent social roles for women in gnostic communities. A sharply different viewpoint is the work of Frederik Wisse, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, and Daniel L. Hoffmann, among others. These scholars, noting many negative references to "femaleness" in gnostic sources, argue that these images betray the devaluation and subordination of women and the female gender in gnostic thought and social practice alike. Despite their very different conclusions, these first two positions appear to proceed from a similar position on the relation between imagery and social practice. In their view, there is a direct correlation between gnostic images of the female and the social status of women in gnostic communities. In addition, even as both positions take account of diversity in form and practice, they both reflect a generalizing conception of "gnosticism" as a single religious movement with a fairly unified body of imagery, thought, and practice.

A third position on the relation between religious imagery and social practice has appeared more recently in the work of several scholars, who seek a more nuanced approach to the analysis of gendered imagery and the roles of women in gnostic texts and traditions. Central to this approach is the notion that the relation between gendered imagery and social roles is varied and complex and depends on several factors, including variations in literary form and the social location of authors and readers. Recognizing that gendered imagery and social roles may have a direct correlation, an inverse relation, or no apparent relation at all, this approach seeks to ground its interpretation in the analysis of varying patterns within and among texts and in the relations between texts and their readers.

As an interpreter sympathetic to this third approach, my contribution to this volume seeks primarily to illustrate the varied representations of women and gender in a selection of individual texts. The survey begins with the external reports of the antithetical writers of the early church and moves to the central task of analyzing a selection of primary sources. In each case, the central task is to analyze the ways in which each of these texts represents the "female" as a social and symbolic category. The analysis is organized around three distinct types of gender imagery in gnostic sources: (1) the gendered depiction of characters (divine and human) in mythic narratives; (2) direct statements about gender (male and female relations, differences, social roles) in narrative and nonnarrative sources; and (3) more abstract references to "femaleness" and "maleness" as categories of existence in narrative and nonnarrative sources. Each text is analyzed independently and internally, with a particular focus on the interrelation of gender imagery, religious reflection, and ideological construction of the female. The results of this analysis may well contribute to our understanding of the social impact of female imagery in gnostic texts and traditions, but its primary concern is to suggest a broader range of interpretive possibilities than a strictly social-historical approach focused on the "positive" or "negative" charge of female imagery would allow.
Women and Gender in Antithetical Sources

Almost all of the evidence describing women’s roles in gnostic communities or schools comes from the reports of Christian antithetical writers, who were concerned primarily to expose and undermine the teaching and practice of their gnostic opponents. In the course of describing such practice, these writers refer to a small number of women by name and describe the behavior of many unnamed women among “gnostic” schools and sects. These accounts are designed to illustrate both the multiplicity of “gnostic” teachers and schools and their adherence to shared heretical themes. As a result, they tend to follow the same formulas, emphasizing recurring patterns in the behavior and thought of their opponents.14

References to Historical Women in Antithetical Sources

While Irenaeus and other antithetical writers report in detail on a wide variety of “gnostic” teachings, they provide potentially more valuable evidence on occasional references to specific women. Some of these represent legendary or mythicized women, but together these references provide evidence of the names and activities by which various historical women were remembered and revered in “gnostic” traditions and communities. Among the most prominent of these are references to the following four women:

Helena, a former prostitute from Tyre who was said to have accompanied Simon Magnus during the time of the emperor Claudius (41–54 CE).17 According to Justin and Irenaeus, Simon claimed that Helena represented the “Mother of All” and the “First Thought” (Ennoia, f.) begotten by him, and that Helen/Ennoia had descended and created the angels and powers who created the world. These powers took Helena captive in the body, and Simon delivered her. Origen preserves a tradition that Celsus “knows of some also who are Simonians, who reverence as teacher Helena or Helenus and are called Helenians.”18 While these reports may not tell us much about the historical Helena, they do suggest that second-century followers of Simon looked back to the references of Simon and Helena as earthly manifestations of a familiar mythic pattern. As Simon rescues Helena from prostitution, so the divine male principle redeems the divine First Thought, now descended into captivity as the female soul.

Marcellina, a Carpocratian teacher, who, according to Irenaeus, “came to Rome in the time of Antoninus” (154–166) and “led multitudes astray.”19 According to Irenaeus, “they” (the followers of Marcellina or Carpocratians?) “call themselves gnostics and possess images.” Origen writes: “Celsus knows also of Marcellians who follow Marcellina, and Harcocratians who follow Salome, and others who follow Marianne, and others who follow Martha.”20 Since Salome, Marianne, and Martha appear in other early Christian literature, including the canonical gospels,21 it is possible that Marcellina, like the female disciples of Jesus, was revered not merely as a teacher of Carpocratian gnost, but as an authoritative source of apostolic tradition.22

Philumen, a prophetess associated with Apelles, a disciple of Marcion. According to Hippolytus, Apelles wrote “revelations” of a prophetess, Philumen.23 Flora, a disciple of Polymny, a leading teacher of the Italian or Western branch of the Valentinian school.24 Polymny’s Letter to Flora, an introductory lesson on the character of the law and the Valentinian reading of scripture, was addressed to her.25 In Pann orth 33.7–8–9, Polymny urges Flora to learn and assures her: “You shall learn since you are adjudged worthy of the apostolic tradition.”

References to these four women provide relatively meager evidence for the activities of women in “gnostic” communities. They tell us only that women were active as members of several “gnostic” schools, and that some were regarded as teachers and prophetesses and may have inspired some of their male colleagues to write (Apelles, Polymny). We have no evidence that these women were themselves active as writers, ministers, or leaders, except for Marcellina, who was regarded in her own right as a teacher of the Carpocratians, or of her own group of Marcellians, in Rome. Yet the sources describe each of them, including Marcellina, in relation to a male figure, who appears in these sources to have taken a more active role in leadership, teaching, and writing. Whether this male prominence reflects the assumptions of the antithetical writers, the actual relationships of these individuals, or both is unclear.

Divine Female Figures in Irenaeus, Adversus Haereses 1.1–8

Antithetical accounts of “gnostic” teaching tend to follow a pattern of elements established by the reports of Irenaeus of Lyons: (1) the depiction of the divine realm as a fullness of male and female spiritual beings; and (2) mythic narratives of creation and redemption, which often focus on the highly ambivalent figure of Sophia, or Wisdom (Greek: Ἡ σοφία), the divine female who sets in motion the processes of world creation and plays a crucial role in the redemption of humankind. Irenaeus’ account of the teachings of the Valentinian teacher Polymny in Adversus Haereses 1.1–8 provides a particularly detailed example of these patterns.26

In Irenaeus’ account of the teachings of Polymny, Sophia is the last or “youngest” of thirty aeons, organized in fifteen male-female pairs or syllogies.27 Though narratives of Sophia’s actions vary greatly among the sources,28 it is the whose actions comprise the central events in the drama of creation. In one strand of Irenaeus’ account (Haer. 1.2.2),29 Sophia suffers passion apart from the embrace of her male consort, Desired, as she seeks to know the first male principle, the “Father” or “Depth,” who can be known, according to the myth, only by the second male principle, “Mind.” In her misguided and passionate search, Sophia is restrained by a power called Boundary or Limit (Homos), which preserves the ineffability of the Father by holding back Sophia and restoring her to herself (1.2.3–4). The Boundary separates the “formless, weak, and female fruit” of Sophia (her thinking and passions) (1.2.5),30 and establishes them outside the divine realm. Sophia’s thinking, called “Achamoth,” is given “a fragrance of incorruptibility” by the Anointed (Christ) and the Holy Spirit, but as she searches for “the Light that had left her” (the Anointed), she again experi-
behavior of women in relation to a specific male "gnostic" teacher. According to Irenaeus, Marcus induced a "great number of men and not a few women" to join him as one possessed of "the greatest knowledge and perfection." Marcus deceived these followers, including several "silly" and "deluded" women, Irenaeus reports, into believing they had received through him the gift of prophecy and divine Grace (Greek, Charis, E). Irenaeus describes Marcus' followers as women of great wealth and claims that they practiced a ritual "bridal chamber" in which they received Charis from Marcus as a bride receives her bridegroom. In this way, Irenaeus portrays Marcus as a charlatan who seduced women into believing they received the divine "seed of Charis" through his semen.

He is especially concerned about women, and those who are well-dressed and clothed in purple and of great wealth, whom he often attempts to seduce. Flatteringly he says to them: "I want you to partake of my Grace (Charis), because the Father of all sees your angel in his presence... It behooves us to be united. First receive Grace from me and through me. Adorn yourself as a bride awaiting her bridegroom; you may be what I am, and I may be what you are. Put the "seed" of light in your bridal chamber. Take from me the bridegroom. Receive him and be received in him. Look, Grace is descending upon you. Open your mouth and prophesy... From now on she considers herself a prophetess and thanks Marcus for having given her of his Charis. She tries to reward him not only by the gift of her possessions—in this manner he has amassed a fortune—but by sharing her body, desiring to unite herself with him in every way so that she may become one with him.

In this and other carefully crafted reports, Irenaeus draws on two powerful ideological images: the heretical male teacher as seductive charlatan and the heretical woman as deluded fool, weak and vulnerable to seduction, easily duped into giving her possessions and body to the deceiving male. While such seduction and ritualized sexual behavior may or may not have occurred, it is quite likely in any case that Irenaeus interpreted his opponents' use of sexual metaphor ("planting seeds," "becoming pregnant," "giving birth") literally and put this literal misinterpretation to powerful polemical use. Even more effectively, while showing how Marcus manipulated the Pauline image of bridegroom and bride (for Christ and the church; 2 Cor 11) to apply to himself and his female followers, Irenaeus instead applies to Marcus and his followers the roles Paul deliberately contrasts with bridegroom and bride: deceiving serpent and deceived Eve. For as the serpent beguiled Eve, by promising her what he had not himself, so also do these men, by pretending [to possess] superior knowledge, and [to be acquainted with] ineffable mysteries... plunge those that believe them into death, rendering them apostates from Hnus who made them. Here, Irenaeus uses his rhetorical powers to discredit Marcus as the seductive heretic-serpent and his female followers as uncommonly foolish "Eve's." Yet in addition to its polemical punch, Irenaeus' report provides valuable evidence that in the social world of the late-second-century Rhone Valley, a teacher named Marcus appealed to women of wealth, encouraged these women to prophesy, and led them to understand their gift of prophecy and salvation as mediated through him, their teacher and 'bridegroom.' Bishop Irenaeus, by con-

enues passions: grief, fear, uncertainty, lack of gnosis, and "turning back (or conversion) toward the one who had made her alive" (1.4.1). The distraught Acharna, or lower Sophia, is visited by yet another male figure, "the Savior," who cures her of her passions by turning them from "incorporeal passions" into "incorporeal matter" (1.4.5). The lower Sophia becomes "pregnant with the contemplation of the lights," or angels, that accompanied the Savior, and produces "a spiritual offspring" after their image (1.4.5). From the lower Sophia emerge the three types of substance that constitute the world: (1) the material (hyliks) essence, which derives from her passions; (2) the ensouled or animate (psychikes), deriving from her turning back, but "tainted with passion"; and (3) the spiritual (pneumatikak) essence, which derives from her own conception (1.5.1). According to Irenaeus, the Valentinians derive their understanding of the cosmos and its creator from this mythic account. The cosmos and its matter are formed of the hylic or material substance; the creator (Demiaruge) is formed of psychic or ensouled essence; and human beings are composite beings, formed by the creator of hylic matter and soul (psyche), but containing within the superior element of spirit.

Sophia thus appears in Irenaeus' account as a highly ambivalent figure. On the positive side, Sophia (higher and lower) functions as mother and source of the spiritual essence and as a mediator or link between the divine and cosmic realms. On the negative side, her inappropriate emotions or "passions," which are weak and "female" because they lack "male" form, are responsible for generating the cosmos and its creator; bringing into existence all that is nondivine or nonspiritual; and dispersing spiritual elements in the nonspiritual cosmic realms below. Yet the same female figure(s) also work toward the perfection and redemption of the spiritual elements dispersed below. Sophia's redemptive roles, however, pale in comparison to those of the male figures who come to redeem her, the creator, and humankind alike. These include the Boundary or Limit, the Anointed, Jesus, and the Savior, who becomes Acharna's "bridalroom" in the final, eschatological redemption (1.7.1).

Even while idealizing the union of male-female pairs, the gendered metaphors of Irenaeus' account point neither to a gender balance nor to an equalizing of male and female. Rather, they provide graphic depiction of the calamitous consequences of independent female activity and the benefits of restoring the rebellious female to her proper place. At almost every crucial redemptive moment, the mythic narrative reinforces ancient Mediterranean ideologies of gender relations by idealizing redemption and marriage alike as coming about through the hierarchical union of a superior, perfect, and dominant male and an inferior, imperfect, and subordinate female. In the end, the independent and rebellious Sophia-Acharna is redeemed and restored precisely by returning to her proper place as subordinate female bride.

Antithetical Reports about Sexual Behavior and Attitudes

In his account of Marcus, a Valentinian teacher or "magician" who came to the Rhone Valley before 180 CE, Irenaeus provides the most detailed account of the
trast, wrote to convince his readers to perceive this bogus "bridegroom" as a "serpent," leading his female followers astray into spiritual, economic, and sexual exploitation.

Additional information about the roles of women in "heretical" or "gnostic" communities may be gathered from several other heresiological works, including Tertullian's "On the Prescription against Heretics," written some twenty years after Irenaeus' work. Like Irenaeus, Tertullian uses the strategy of intertextuality to endow his anti-gnostic polemic with the authority of the apostle Paul, in this case, the Paul of the Pastoral Letters. Criticizing women who would "usurp the power to teach" and "baptize" by appealing to the example of Thecla in the apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla, Tertullian credits the authority of both the writing and Thecla herself. He reminds his readers that the presbyter who composed "the writings which wrongly go under Paul's name [and] claim Thecla's example as a license for women's teaching and baptizing" was removed from office. To drive home his point, he contrasts the apocryphal work's empowering message to women with the silencing message of the Pastors' Paul (1 Tim 2):

"For how credible would it seem, that he [Paul] who has not permitted a woman even to learn with over-boldness, should give a female the power of teaching and of baptizing! 'Let them be silent,' he says, 'and at home consult their own husbands.'"..."34

Similarly, with his account of the conduct of heretics (De Pace 41-44), Tertullian criticizes his opponents for failing to maintain proper role distinctions. He focuses particularly on the boldness of women:

All are puffed up, all offer you knowledge. Their catechumens are perfect before they are fully taught. The very women of these heretics, how wanton they are! For they are bold enough to teach, to dispute, to enact exorcisms, to undertake cures—it may be even to baptize.46

While some have read this passage as evidence that women served as "bishops" or "priests" in some "gnostic" groups, the text states only that within communities that may not have recognized the church offices of bishop, deacon, or priest or that sought to blur such distinctions, women engaged in various activities that other communities, including Tertullian's model of the "church," were increasingly seeking to deny them.47 If these communities recognized an alternate system of church office or no offices at all, it is unlikely that their activities (teaching, disputing, exorcising, curing, and baptizing) were linked to an office such as bishop or priest. Although the women Tertullian describes engaged in ritual and teaching activities, it does not appear likely that they held official titles, such as bishop, priest, deacon, or presbyter.

While Irenaeus and Tertullian attack their "gnostic" opponents by highlighting the foolish or inappropriate behavior of women among them, Clement of Alexandria and Epiphanius of Salamis provide more detailed reports on their opponents' perspectives on sexuality and marriage. From their accounts, modern scholarship has inherited the stereotype of two types of "gnostic" attitudes toward sex: libertinism and asceticism. Between these two extremes, the Valentinians are often depicted as moderates who "approve of marriage" as a reflection of the union of male and female emanations in the divine realm.19 On one side of them, Clement reports, are "libertines" like the Carpocratians, who "think that wives should be common property, ... and meet for communal "love feasts," having "intercourse where they will and with whomever they will,"48 As with Irenaeus' charges against Marcus, it is possible that Clement's report is based on a literal misreading of metaphorical language. But it is not unlikely that Clement has transformed a pagan polemic against Christian immorality into a Christian polemic against gnostic immorality.49

On the other side of the moderate Valentinians, however, Clement describes several of his "gnostic" opponents as ascetics who "reject marriage and the begetting of children."49 Yet in contrast to the increasingly positive evaluation of asceticism in Christian circles, Clement depicts "gnostic" asceticism negatively, as grounded in radically heretical anticosmic attitudes and in a saying of Jesus found in the apocryphal Gospel according to the Egyptians:50 "When Salome asked the Lord, 'How long shall death hold sway?' he answered: 'As long as you women bear children.'"51 In another passage, Clement cites a saying of Jesus that even more strongly betrays the negative valuation of sexual reproduction and symbolizes it as among "the works of the female": "They say that the Savior himself said, 'I came to destroy the works of the female.'" Clement adds that in this passage "female" means desire and "works" refers to birth and corruption.52

Another saying attributed to a dialogue between Jesus and Salome betrays no clear sign of this negative symbolization of the female, but does describe a sex- and gender-free salvific state.53

On this account he says: "When Salome asked when she would know the answer to her questions, the Lord said, 'When you trample on the robe of shame, and when the two shall be one, and the male with the female, and there is neither male nor female:'.54 Here, it is not the category of "the female" itself that will be destroyed, but rather shame and the distinctions of two genders that will be overcome or dissolved in a new redemptive state.

Even more than Clement, Epiphanius of Salamis sought to demonstrate the immorality of his opponents' sexual behavior. To that end, he describes in detail the ritual practices of the Borborians or Kodians, also known as Phibiones and Statios, who "have their women in common," and perform a love feast involving ritual intercourse and the consumption of semen and blood. According to Epiphanius, after sexual intercourse, these "gnostics" offer up the male semen to God as a gift, "the body of Christ," and then consume it. They do the same, he reports, with menstrual blood, which they claim is the "blood of Christ."55 They also "have sex with each other," not for the purposes of reproduction, but only for their own pleasure.56

They derive warrant for these practices, Epiphanius claims, from a story in the Greater Questions of Mary, an otherwise unknown apocryphal work, in which Jesus himself has sexual intercourse and consumes his emission:

For in the so-called Greater Questions of Mary, they suggest that he revealed it to her after taking her aside on the mountain, praying, producing a woman from his
side, beginning to have intercourse with her, and then partaking of his emission, if you please, to show that “Thus we must do, that we may live.”

Since this account, like those of Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Clement, serves polemical purposes and may reflect a literal (mis)reading of sexual metaphor, its historical accuracy is questionable. Nonetheless, it is quite possible, as Jorunn Jacobsen Buckley has argued, that the story of Jesus’ mountaintop liaison in the Greater Questions of Mary was used to undergird a ritual ideology that stressed the necessity of creating, collecting, and transmitting upward the Christ-energy that was trapped in the Phiblonites’ own bodies. By ingesting female blood and male semen, rather than the “unnecessarily mediated substances” of bread and wine, these “gnostics” may have understood themselves to be expressing and recreating their spiritual affinity with Christ precisely by reenacting his paradigmatic and salvific release of captured light.

The reports of the antheretical writers hint powerfully at the wide and rich range of “gnostic” representations of women and the female gender, attitudes toward sexuality, and metaphorical associations between the domains of gender and sexuality and those of theological religious reflection. Yet, because of their polemical tendency to exaggerate and misread their opponents, the antithetical sources can only be used as an opening to some of the features of gnostic texts and traditions. To construct a more persuasive account of women and gender in gnostic texts and traditions, a representative selection of primary sources must be considered and analyzed closely.

Women, Gender, and Gnosis in the Primary Sources

The primary sources for gnostic texts and traditions include epigraphical evidence, or inscriptions; fragments and excerpts from ancient “gnostic” writers quoted in the works of other writers; and, most important, original literary compositions, such as those preserved in the Nag Hammadi library and other ancient codices. The corpus of original gnostic compositions currently available for study includes many genres of religious literature, from mythic accounts of creation and redemption, to collections of Jesus’ sayings, narrative accounts of Jesus and his disciples, and revelatory discourses written in the name of the divine. The survey below focuses briefly on one piece of epigraphical evidence and, in much greater detail, on three representative gnostic compositions from the Nag Hammadi library.

Epigraphical Evidence: The Flavia Sophē Inscription

One of the most extraordinary pieces of evidence for the association of actual women with gnostic traditions is not textual, but epigraphical. The tomb inscription of a woman named Flavia Sophē, which dates from third-century Rome, exhibits several features that might well be identified as gnostic in character. The words of the inscription memorialize Flavia Sophē as a woman who yearned for the divine light and was anointed with holy oil so that she might receive a visionary experience of the divine, enter the “bridal chamber,” and be joined to the bosom of the Father:

You, who did yearn for the paternal Light,  
Sister, spouse, my Sophē,  
Anointed in the baths of Christ with everlasting, holy oil,  
Hasten to gaze at the divine features of the aeons,  
The great Angel of the great council (i.e., the Redeemer),  
The true Son;  
You entered the bridal chamber and deathless ascended  
To the bosom of the Father.

This inscription provides invaluable evidence for the spirituality and hopes of a third-century Christian woman in Rome and suggests some of the reasons why such a woman would be attracted to the religious rituals and claims of gnostic traditions. It shows clearly that Flavia Sophē had participated in the redemptive rituals of baptism and anointing, and that she was expected to achieve the visionary experience of gazing at the divine aeons, the great Angel, and the true Son, entering the redemptive bridal chamber and becoming joined to the bosom of the Father. It is even possible that Flavia Sophē, like others before and after her, was understood to have achieved this visionary experience of entering the bridal chamber and ascending to the divine already in this life. One feature of the inscription that stands out is the masculine language used to represent the divine. The only divine figures the inscription mentions by name are male (Christ, the great Angel, the true Son, the Father), but it is quite possible that the “aeons” upon whose “divine features” the inscription hastens Flavia Sophē to gaze were male and female beings, as in the depictions of the divine world in Irenaeus and in several Nag Hammadi texts (Apocryphon of John, Hypostasis of the Archons etc.).

Literary Evidence: Gnosis, Women, and Gender in Nag Hammadi Texts

As with the antithetical sources, women and gender appear in original gnostic compositions in a variety of ways. The female characters in these texts can usefully be divided into three categories: (1) divine beings, such as Barbelo, Sophia, and her daughter, Zoe; (2) mythic women of primordial times, such as Eve and her daughter, Norea; and (3) legendary women of more recent historical times, such as Jesus’ disciples Mary Magdalene, Salome, and Martha. The texts’ representations of gender include relatively straightforward statements about females, males, or both; symbolic references to the categories of “femaleness” and “maleness”; and more subtle figurative uses of imagery, as in gendered metaphors of kinship, sexual reproduction, birth, marriage, prostitution, and rape.

This discussion of women and gender in gnostic texts addresses three very distinctive genres or types of religious literature: (1) a mythic account of creation and redemption in one of the best examples of gnostic rewriting of Genesis, The Hypostasis of the Archons (HypArch); (2) accounts of Jesus and his disciples, especially Mary Magdalene, with particular focus on The Gospel of Thomas (GThom); and (3) an aretale, or revelation discourse, in the voice of the female deity,
Thunder, Perfect Mind. These texts represent very different religious perspectives and literary genres, but they share two important characteristics: they place central emphasis on the saving significance of gnostics, and they represent female characters (divine and human) and employ the categories of male and female in interesting and challenging ways.

Gender, Gnosis, and Spirit: Creations and Redemption in the Hypostasis of the Archons. In its present form, the Hypostasis of the Archons (Hy-Arch) or the Reality of the Rulers is a composite of two genres: a narrative of creation—from the origins of the cosmos through the creation of the first humans and their children: Cain, Abel, Seth, and Norea. The second is a revelation or apocalypse to Norea, which includes a dialogue between Norea and the angelic Illuminator Eleleth. These are introduced by a brief letter in which the narrator informs an unnamed recipient of his purpose in writing: to provide an account of "the reality or nature (hypostasis) of the authorizes" about whom the "great apostle" (Paul) wrote as the "authorities of darkness" (Eph 6:12) and "the authorities of the cosmos and the spiritual forces of evil." The narrative portions of Hy-Arch offer a retelling of the early chapters of Genesis as a story of confrontation and subversion. At the center of the drama is the conflict between two distinct and opposed modes of power: the Archons or Rulers of this world and the divine. Human beings enter the narrative as composite creatures, caught between these two opposed forces, archontic and divine. The narrative begins abruptly with a pointed characterization of the chief Ruler:

Their chief is blind; [because of his] power and his ignorance [and his] arrogance he said, "It is I who am god; there is none [apart from me]." When he said this, he sinned against [the entirety]. And this utterance got up to Incorruptibility, and a voice came forth from Incorruptibility, saying, "You are mistaken, Samael," which is "god of the blind."

The Ruler’s claim to be the only God appears immediately to identify him with the God of biblical tradition. In the inverted world of Hy-Arch, however, Ialdabaoth (alternately named Samael and Sakla) only thinks he is the only God. He is not the only God; he is not even a real God. He is merely the chief Ruler and Creator, without gnosis (ignorant) of the true God. His vain and arrogant claim elicits a voice of rebuke from Incorruptibility that exposes his error and reidentifies him as Samael, "god of the blind."

This episode introduces two patterns that recur throughout the text: (1) a narrative pattern in which vain and arrogant claims evoke a divine rebuke, and (2) a pattern of representation in which the identity of each character is explicitly gendered. The Rulers are depicted as androgynous, a monstrous mixing of male and female, and divine beings and humans appear as either female or male. The complex intersection of gender imagery and religious perspectives becomes even clearer in three crucial episodes: the origin of the Rulers; the creation of the first humans; with its disturbing account of the rape and abandonment of the bodily "Eve;" and Norea’s struggle against the Rulers, with its account of rape resisted and overcome.

The origin of the Rulers is narrated late in the text, in response to Norea’s request for instruction from Eleleth. Eleleth reveals that the Rulers are a product of the divine, the imperfect result of Sophia’s misguided effort to create alone. Eleleth offers a highly condensed account of Sophia’s action and its consequences:

Within limitless aeons dwells Incorruptibility. Sophia, who is called Pistis (Faith), wished to create something, alone without her consort; and her product became a celestial image. A veil exists between the things above and the aeons below; and shadow came into being beneath the veil; and that shadow became matter; and that shadow was cast apart. And that which she had made became a product in the matter, like a miscarried fetus. And it took (its) pattern from the shadow, and became an arrogant beast resembling a lion. It was androgynous (my-het-shime) as I have already said, because it was from matter that it came forth.

Sophia appears in Hy-Arch as a decidedly ambiguous character. Although all things may take place according to “the will of the Father,” Sophia’s desire to create without her male consort has disastrous results. Her product is grossly deficient, lacking the generative principle of form that can come only from the male. Ialdabaoth possesses only the formless, material principles of body and matter from the female, his mother Sophia.

Sophia’s independent act also brings into being a shadow beneath the veil that serves as a boundary around the previously limitless divine realms. Prefiguring the fates of Adam and Eve, Sophia’s product is expelled from the divine and enters this shadowy realm of matter “like a miscarried or aborted fetus.” He becomes an arrogant, androgynous beast, more closely aligned with the lower elements of matter and the passions than with the higher elements of Spirit and Wisdom from his mother. Sophia’s product becomes the first of many Rulers of this world and sets in motion a chain of disturbing events.

In Eleleth’s narration, the chief Ruler also claims to be the only God and is rebuked by a voice from above. In response, Ialdabaoth puts forth the challenge: “If any other thing exists before me, let it become visible to me!” Sophia, in turn, responds to the challenge by “stretching forth her finger” and introducing Light into matter.” The chief Ruler proceeds to make himself a vast realm after the pattern of the divine realms, complete with seven offspring of his own. But in contrast to the beings of the divine realms, these offspring are “androgynous just like their father.” In their presence, he claims once again to be “the god of the entirety,” and this brings forth yet another rebuke from above, this time from Zoe, spiritual daughter of Sophia. Zoe’s response moves beyond verbal correction to the creation of a fiery angel as Zoe breathes into his face: “Her breath became a fiery angel” and “that angel bound Ialdabaoth and cast him down into Tartaro, below the abyss.” Seeing the power of that angel, Sabaoth, one of his offspring, repeats and is raised by Sophia and Zoe to the seventh heaven, where he reigns as God of the forces. Ialdabaoth’s envy at seeing his
offspring’s splendor engenders envy, death, and further offspring, until “all the heavens of chaos became full of their multitudes.” Even this, the narrator insists, took place “by the will of the Father” so that “the sum of chaos might be attained.”

The conclusion of Eleleth’s narrative leads Norea to question her own origin and the future of her “offspring.” Eleleth assures her that Norea and her offspring “belong to the primordial Father,” that they possess “the Spirit of Truth,” and that “all who have gained gnosis with this way exist immortal in the midst of dying humankind.”

In three generations, Eleleth promises, when “the True Human Being (Anthropos)” comes to teach and anoint them, “all the children of Light” will be freed from error and gain gnosis of “the Truth, their root, the Father of the entirety, and the Holy Spirit.”

Eleleth’s promise rests in part on a distinction between the divine parentage of Norea and her offspring and the archontic parentage of the Rulers and chaos. To understand Eleleth’s characterization of Norea, her offspring, and all who gain gnosis as immortal “in the midst of dying humankind,” the attentive reader must recall the events of the second crucial episode in the narrative: the creation of Adam and Eve and the rape of Eve.

Immediately after the vain claim with which the text abruptly opens, the Voice from above projects an image of incorruptibility in the waters and thereupon sets in motion the creation of the first human beings. Upon seeing the image in the waters, “the authorities of darkness became enamored” of the female image and conspired to capture her by means of a “male counterpart” that they would create for her. The Rulers, however, fail to understand their utter inability to grasp the divine—for they are made only of matter and soul (psychos), while it/she (the image) is made of Spirit (pneumati). Nonetheless, the plot proceeds according to the plan of the Father from above, and the Rulers create as their “male counterpart” a composite being formed from soil, after the body of the Rulers and after the image in the waters, their creature is animate or psychik, from the soul (psych) or breath infused by the Rulers. But it is only the Spirit that brings him Life. When the Spirit “came to dwell within him,” the first human creature became “a living soul.”

Soon after placing him in the garden, the Rulers conspire, bring ignorance and forgetfulness upon Adam, and open “his side like a living woman.” When they build up his side with flesh in her place, Adam came to be “entirely of soul.” The Rulers have extracted from Adam the Spirit, who now appears before him as “the spiritual woman” (pneumatik shime). She awakens Adam from sleep. He, in turn, addresses her: “It is you who have given me life; you will be called ‘Mother of the Living’—For it is she who is my Mother. She is who is the Physician and the Woman and She who has given birth.” Adam’s praise of the Spiritual Woman is immediately interrupted as the Rulers, aroused once again by the female Spirit, draw near and conspire. This time their conspiracy takes the form of attempted rape.

And when they [the Authorities] saw his [Adam’s] female counterpart speaking with him, they became agitated with great agitation; and they became enamored of her. They said to one another, “Come, let us now our seed in her,” and they pursued her. And she laughed at them for their senselessness and their blindness. And in their clutches, she became a tree, and she left her shadow resembling herself before them; and they defiled [it] foully.

The victim of this rape is neither the intended target (the Spiritual Woman) nor the heroine of the story. The female Spirit evades the Rulers’ attempts to grasp and dominate by metamorphosing into a tree and laughing at them. From the perspective of the text, this is a moment of victory and mockery, for the rape victim is “only” the bodily Eve, a shadowy reflection of the Spiritual Woman who departs and laughs. “From a more critical, contemporary perspective, however, as Karen King has perceived, this is a scene of victory and horror: victory for the disembodied Spirit, but horror for the bodily Eve.” Even as the narrative condemns rape and allows the female Spirit to escape, “the victory of the Spiritual Woman is traded against the division of her self, against the denial of her material body, the carnal Eva.”

This dissociation of Spirit and body, King points out, is not unlike the dissociation of mind and body that functions as a survival mechanism among victims of incest and rape. While such dissociation can be effective at maintaining some sense of self, King writes: “Ultimately it is an extremely painful solution to violence, insofar as it abandons the body as one’s self.” This is precisely what Hypaïch asks its readers to do: dissociate the “defiled body” of Eve from the “real Mother” of humankind, the female Spirit that escapes the body and becomes a tree. The negative effects of dissociation become even clearer in the account of struggle between Norea, spiritual daughter of Eve, and the Rulers.

Following Cain’s murder of Abel, the births of Norea and her brother, Seth, mark a decisive improvement in the situation of humankind. Two epiphanies associated with Norea—“an assistance for many generations” and “the virgin whom the Forces did not defile”—link her immediately to the spiritual realm. At the same time, they set her apart from her mother, Eve. The account of Norea’s struggle against the Rulers discloses the character of Norea’s virginal power as it recalls the rape of Eve and adds to her abandonment.

The Rulers went to meet her [Norea], wishing to lead her astray. Their supreme chief said to her, “Your mother Eve came to us.” But Norea turned to them and said to them, “It is you who are the Rulers of Darkness; You are accursed. You did not know my mother; instead it was your female counterpart that you knew. For I am not your descendant; rather it is from the world above that I am come.” The arrogant Ruler turned with all his power . . . and . . . said to her presumptuously, “You must render service to us, [as did] your mother Eve.” But Norea turned, in the power of [ . . . ] and cried out in a great voice to the Holy One, the God of the Entirety: “Rescue me from the Rulers of Unrighteousness and save me from their clutches—at once!”

Here, as in previous episodes, a powerful spiritual female challenges the Rulers and overturns their efforts to grasp the female Spirit by speaking out in a powerful voice.

On an explicit level, Norea’s words unmask the Rulers’ claims, expose their
ignorance of the Spirit, and nullify their efforts to extend "sexual service" from mother to daughter. Norea challenges any kinship claims the Rulers might make since they are from below and she is from above and, at the same time, negates her kinship with the bodily Eve. Norea disavows the raped woman, her bodily mother, and recognizes the Spirit alone as her true mother. In so doing, Norea, like the narrative itself, "turns its back on the victimized woman—and both the Spiritual Woman and Norea have traded their purity and spiritual power against this discourse" of division.86 Though embodied, Norea dissociates herself from the body of Eve and so from her own body. Her real identity resides not in the body, but in the female Spirit that gave her spiritual birth. This spiritual mother dwells in her, yet is fully separable from her body, as from the woman who gave her physical birth.

In a previous essay, I interpreted Norea as a powerful female model of re-demptive subversion. In her resistance to the androgyrous Archons who would rape her, Norea represents the subversion of all Powers that falsely claim to rule the cosmos, the social order, and the body.87 Viewed from a more critical perspective, however, Norea participates in just such a system of power: an ideological system in which true identity and value reside only in the spiritual. In siding exclusively with the Reality of the Spirit against the False Reality (hypostasis) of the Rulers, Hyparch encourages its readers to subvert oppressive powers, yet denies the value and reality of embodied life. Norea’s bodily mother is abandoned by the Spirit, by her own daughter, and by a narrative that oppressively ignores the defiled woman’s pain as it denies her identity as "Mother" of Norea or of humankind. Eleleth’s promise of redemption for Norea and her "spiritual children" reinforces this ideological framework. They are "from the Primeval Father," and when the True Human Being comes, the spiritual seed ( sperma) sown in Norea and her offspring will become known and will "free them from the bondage of the Authorities’ error." All the children of the light will gain gnosis of "the Truth and their Root," that is, the divine spiritual element within them.

For ancient Christian readers, the True Human Being Jesus had come, taught, and anointed. As a result, some of them may have rediscovered themselves as children of Norea, spiritual seeds of light, and possessors of salvific gnosis. From a more critical perspective, however, such readers may be understood as sharing the ideological perspectives of the text. Their anointing may empower them to resist the oppressive Rulers of this world, but it also leads them to dissociate their true selves from their bodies and to distinguish the Spiritual Woman, "Mother of the Living," from the "carnal Eve," "Mother of the Embodied."

The imagery of gender in Hyparch intersects with the category of gnosis in highly complex ways and must be understood within the context of the text’s overarching dualisms (Spirit-Flesh, Entirety-Cosmos, living-dying, gnosis-ignorance, redeemed-unredeemed) and its tripartite division of Spirit-Psych-Flesh. These create an ideological system of hierarchical values in which one pole is esteemed, while the other is demeaned.

The narrative uses sexual metaphor to represent both re-demptive and nonre-demptive states. Metaphors of virginity, conception, and birth, for example, ennoble the categories of the female and the Spirit, while metaphors of sexual desire and rape criticize the Archontic and the androgyrous. As Norea’s metaphorical virginity represents the spiritual power to resist and subvert available to all who have gnosis, the Archons’ desire to rape represents the lust for dominance, power, and control of the Spirit.

Hyparch also uses gender simply to distinguish characters as female, male, and androgyrous. Of these, only the category of the androgyrous is clustered in a single realm. Female and male intersect and cross the boundaries of Entirety and Cosmos, divine and human, redeemed and unredeemed. The hierarchical distinction of these categories, however, creates other boundaries that are less flexible and more difficult to cross. The distinction between spiritual women of gnosis and carnal women of ignorance, for example, does allow women more than a single value or place, but it decisively grants spiritual women, as well as the spiritual elements of a particular woman, a far higher status than women of the flesh or the fleshly elements of the same woman. Even if persons or elements in the latter group are capable of moving higher,88 they remain devalued and demeaned as long as they remain in the ignorant and unredeemed category of the flesh.

Women, Gender, and Gnosis in Accounts of Jesus and His Disciples
Stories about Jesus and collections of his sayings provided a powerful and flexible medium in early Christianity for ideas about Jesus’ significance and a wide range of other religious and social issues. Gnostic traditions about Jesus include many distinct literary genres and religious perspectives. Among the many representations of women, gender, and gnosis in these traditions, none are more significant than those involving Mary Magdalene. Mary Magdalene appears in a variety of roles in gnostic traditions, but the most important appear in The Gospel of Mary (GMary),89 The Gospel of Philip (GPhil),90 the Dialogue of the Savor (DialSav),91 and The Gospel of Thomas. In some of these texts, Mary appears with other female disciples, such as Sioime,92 but more often, she appears as the sole female disciple amongst a group of male disciples. In many, Mary is depicted as especially beloved by Jesus or as having a special relationship with him. This pattern is not found in all the texts in which she appears. Indeed, portrayals of Mary Magdalene in gnostic sources vary so much that generalizations “do not do justice to the great variety characterizing the portraits and the use of Mary Magdalene in all of these texts.”93

Authority, Apostleship, and Revelation in The Gospel of Mary
In its depiction of Mary Magdalene, The Gospel of Mary addresses two issues widely debated in the early church: (1) the validity of teaching delivered in private, visions, or appearances, and (2) the leadership and authority of women.94 Mary is depicted in GMary as an ideal disciple who understands Jesus and his words and plays a leading role among the disciples after he goes. When Mary receives a vision of Jesus, he commends her "for not wavering at seeing me.”95After Jesus departs, the disciples begin weeping and ask themselves how they will preach the gospel of the Kingdom of the Son of Man.96 Mary emerges here as the comforter and instructor of the male disciples. She exhorts them: "Do not weep...for his grace will
be entirely with you and will protect you. But rather let us praise his greatness, for he has prepared us and made us into human beings (anthropoi)." Here, Mary shows herself to be an unwavering leader who understands that the disciples must turn toward their nongendered nature as anthropoi in order to gain salvation.108

Peter initially appears to acknowledge Mary's wisdom, but ultimately he and the other disciples fall short of the religious ideals of the Savior. The crucial portion of the narrative is set in motion when Peter acknowledges: "Sister, we know the savior loved you more than the rest of women." He asks Mary to share with him and the other disciples "the words of the Savior that you know." Mary then begins to reveal and reflect on the "hidden" things that she has received through her visionary experience of the Savior.

On hearing Mary's revelations, the disciples become contentious. Andrew, for one, cannot believe the Savior said the things Mary reports "because those opinions seem to be so different from his thought." As Karen King has noted, Andrew's objection to Mary's teaching echoes a much debated problem in early Christian circles: how can the validity of such teaching be determined? For Andrew, Mary's words did not seem to conform to the teachings that he knew and used as a standard for the truth. But Mary's teaching concords perfectly with that given by the Savior himself in the first part of the text. GMark clearly affirms the truth and authority of Mary's teaching and thus implicitly affirms the validity of Mary and of visionary revelations.109

Peter also expresses skepticism and doubt about Mary's teaching, but not principally on the grounds of its visionary character. The narrative depicts Peter as addressing the entire group with his doubts about the secret character of the teachings. As he expresses these doubts, he also reveals a specific concern about the gender of their carrier: "Has the Savior spoken to a woman and not openly so that we would all hear? Surely he did not wish to indicate that she is more worthy than we are?" Although Peter does express doubt about the secret, seemingly exclusive, character of the Savior's revelation, Peter's doubts are more clearly directed to Mary's gender and her status relative to the male disciples than they are to their content.110 In response, Mary challenges Peter to declare, before all the disciples, if he thinks she made it all up. Levi comes to Mary's defense:

If the Savior considered her to be worthy, who are you to disregard her? For he knew her completely and loved her devotedly. Instead, we should be ashamed and, once we clothe ourselves with perfect humanity, we should do what we were commanded... and announce the good news as the Savior ordered, not laying down any rules or making laws.

While Peter and Andrew express doubt concerning Mary's teaching, the narrative itself casts doubt on the witness of Andrew and Peter, and identifies the true apostolic witness with Mary Magdalene and Levi. King summarizes the relevance of the narrative to the nongendered issue of "the reliability of apostolic testimony" and the gendered issue of "the authority of women":

The prominence of Mary Magdalene gives one example of the leadership roles of women in early Christianity, roles that came to be increasingly challenged... Peter was willing to admit the Savior loved Mary "more than all other women," but he halted at the idea that the Savior may have preferred her, a woman, to the male disciples. Yet Levi states explicitly that this is the case... In every way, the text affirms that her leadership of the other disciples is based upon superior spiritual understanding. Peter, however, cannot see past the superficial sexual differentiation of the flesh to Mary's true spiritual power. He again shows his ignorance of the Savior's true teaching, while the Gospel of Mary unreservedly supports the leadership of spiritually advanced women.110

Peter's deficiencies are based in part on his inability to overcome his competitive feelings of jealousy in response to the favor shown Mary. Even more important, Peter's question about the Savior's choice of a woman over the male disciples illustrates his inability to move beyond gender bias, as it exposes his failure to understand the Savior's teaching that gender differentiation is insignificant in the true identity of an anthropos. The authority of Mary, in contrast, is grounded in her unwavering character, her visionary experience, and her spiritual insight into the significance of becoming human beings (anthropoi) and thus transcending the petty differences of social status and gender differentiation.

Union as an Image of Salvation: The Gospel of Philip There is no narrative or dialogue comparable to GMark, and no explicit discussion of the authority of women, revelation, or revelation-receiving women, in The Gospel of Philip. Instead, Mary Magdalene appears in GPhi as the female part of a symbol of salvific union. In one passage that depicts the special relationship of Mary and Jesus, Mary is one of "three who always walked with the Lord: Mary his mother, her sister and the Magdalene, the one who was called his companion (ταξινομημ)". For Mary is his sister and she is his mother and she is his companion (τελοτε).110

In a second passage, which describes Mary as "companion," it is said that Jesus loved Mary "more than all the disciples [and used to] kiss her [often] on her [ . . . ]." Their kiss may have been understood to express love, but even more important, it provided a mythic foundation for the ritual kiss in the religious life of the community: "For it is by a kiss that the perfect conceive and give birth. For this reason we also kiss one another. We receive conception from the grace which is in one another."110 In this way, the kiss of Mary Magdalene and Jesus establishes a paradigm and originating moment for spiritual conception through the mouth, that is, for the production of spiritual utterance: prophecy, poetry, song, and other manifestations of the divine Logos in language and sound.110

The kiss of Jesus and Mary Magdalene leads the rest of the disciples to recognize that Mary was not only loved more than all women, as the GMark claims, but that she was loved more than the other disciples as well.

They [the rest of the disciples] said to him [Jesus]: "Why do you love her more than all of us?" The savior answered and said to them, "Why do I not love you like her? When a blind man and one who sees are both together in darkness, they
are no different from one another, but when the light comes, then he who sees will see the light, and he who is blind will remain in darkness."\(^{110}\)

In reply to the disciples, Jesus poses a question that turns the disciples away from their concern about Mary and toward themselves. The juxtaposition of this question with the saying contrasting the blind man and the person of sight, however, at the same time offers an answer to the disciples’ question. It suggests strongly that Jesus loves Mary precisely because she has seen the light, while the jealous disciples remain in darkness.

Even more important, the companionship of Mary and Jesus serves as prototype and symbol of the salvific union of female and male. Behind this image of salvation as union lies a mythic narrative that consists of three stages: primordial union, separation, and reunification.\(^{111}\) The first stage, based on a rereading of Gen 2–3, involves the separation of Eve from Adam, of female from male:

If the woman had not separated from the man, she would not die with the man. His separation became the beginning of death. Because of this Christ came to repair the separation which was from the beginning and again unite the two and to give life to those who died as a result of the separation and unite them.\(^{112}\)

Within the mythic context of the separation of Eve from Adam, the relationship of Mary and Jesus represents a reunification of the separated female and male.\(^{113}\) As with the iconic or imaged “bridal chamber,”\(^{114}\) the companionship and kiss of Mary Magdalene and Jesus symbolizes the salvific moment when female and male are reunited and bring forth spiritual fruit. As female “companion” to Jesus, Mary Magdalene plays a role in GPhil that is at once symbolic and salvific.

Discipleship and Destroying the "Works of Womanhood": The Dialogue of the Savior. The Dialogue of the Savior provides another depiction of Mary in conversation with Jesus and other disciples, but in this case, the disciples are not contrasting for authority, and Mary does not take on a highly symbolic role. Instead, Mary is depicted, along with Judas and Matthew, as a representative of all the disciples. All three are depicted in a positive light. One of Mary’s utterances earns her praise, revealing her “as a woman who had understood completely.”\(^{115}\) Another of her sayings leads Jesus to declare that she has “made clear the abundance of the revealer.”\(^{116}\)

Later in the same dialogue, however, Mary becomes involved in a discussion that appears to devalue the category of the female or “womanhood.” Judas asks Jesus how the disciples should pray. Jesus replies: “Pray in the place where there is no woman.” Matthew interprets this to mean: “Destroy the works of womanhood, not because there is any other [manner of birth], but because they will cease [giving birth].”\(^{117}\) In the analysis of Antti Marjanen, the text communicates a double message to its female readers with its “contradictory . . . use of gendered language.”

On the one hand, they heard about Mary Magdalene, a prominent woman, who together with her two male colleagues played the most important part in a dia-

logue between Jesus and his disciples . . . On the other hand, . . . the text used metaphorical language which clearly and in an unqualified way devalued women.\(^{118}\)

While the text does communicate a complex and mixed message, its negative evaluation of “the works of womanhood” does not necessarily devalue women as a group. Central to the encratic or ascetic perspective that this and many other texts of gnostic tradition reflect\(^{119}\) is a negative attitude toward sexual intercourse, reproduction, and childbirth.\(^{120}\) Thus, I would argue that it is not “women,” but what the symbolic “works of womanhood” represent, namely, sexual intercourse, reproduction, and childbirth, that are devalued by this text.\(^{121}\) The symbolic association of the category of the female (“femaleness” or “womanhood”) with the negative pole of sexuality and reproduction does not necessarily devalue women, lead to a negative attitude toward women, or exclude women from leadership, as some have implied. Such an association may, of course, lead in that direction and has frequently been used to justify such devaluation and exclusionary practice.\(^{122}\) Individual women, however, can become free of such devaluation and exclusion, as the example of Mary Magdalene makes clear. Even groups that question women’s authority as a matter of course may nonetheless value and legitimate the authority of a woman who exemplifies religious ideals, as Mary Magdalene clearly did within several varieties of Christianity in the ancient world.

Gender, Gnosis, and Redemptive Transformation: Mary Magdalene in The Gospel of Thomas. In the collection of Jesus’ sayings known as The Gospel of Thomas, Logion 114, Jesus tells Peter that he will lead Mary and “make her male.”\(^{123}\) Many of the sayings in the GThom parallel sayings of Jesus found in the New Testament gospels, especially those usually attributed to the sayings source Q.\(^{124}\) Mary Magdalen and other women figure significantly in only a few sayings in the GThom, but the gospel’s complex use of gender symbolism has become the center of much discussion and debate.\(^{125}\) To understand its significance, it is important to consider Logion 114 and other sayings within the context of the gospel as a whole and its multiple images of salvation.

Unlike the canonical gospels, which blend Jesus’ sayings into a narrative account, the GThom is a collection of sayings with no narrative or historical frame. As a result, the significance of Jesus resides not in the events of his life, death, or resurrection, but rather in the meaning (hermenēia) of his sayings.\(^{126}\) Finding the hermenēia of Jesus’ utterances and overcoming the state of “death” are two of many images the GThom employs to describe the experience of salvation. Others include “entering the Kingdom,” “making an image in place of an image,” and “entering/seeing the Light.”\(^{127}\) The gospel also uses two highly gendered images of salvation, which have differences that have generated much debate. One speaks of salvation as transcending male and female altogether (“making the two one”), the other of an ascent to maleness (“making Mary male”).

The first of these gendered images is presented in Logion 22, in which Jesus compares nursing infants to those who enter the Kingdom. In response to his disciples’ question whether they too must become “little ones,” Jesus replies
that they will enter the Kingdom when a series of transformations and substitutions have taken place:

Jesus said to them, "When you make the two one and when you make the inside like the outside and the outside like the inside, and the above like the below, and when you make the male (boyt) and the female (shime) into a single one, so that the male will not be male nor the female be female, when you make eyes in place of an eye, and a hand in place of a hand, and a foot in place of a foot, an image (eikon) in place of an image, then you will enter the Kingdom."

With each of these images, something new comes into being, replacing something that was: duality becomes unity, as two become one; opposing spatial categories undergo a transformative exchange (inside like outside, outside like inside, above like below); the two genders become a single one; new "body parts" (eyes, hand, foot) replace old; and a new image is made in place of another image. When "the male and the female" are made into "a single one," this saying suggests, the distinction of the two genders is transformed, but not abandoned. There is still a "male" and a "female," but they are not male and female as they once were: the (new) male will not be male in the old sense and the (new) female will not be female in the old sense. Yet, in contrast to the different states of the old male and female, the new male and female become one and the same. The old, untransformed states give way to a new identity, a new way of being human, for male and female alike. The new redeemed male and female are one and the same as the two become one.

The gospel's second gendered image of salvation emerges in the final saying of the Gethsemane, Logioon 114. There, salvation is represented not as a process of male and female becoming a single one, but as a process of the female becoming male. Jesus' saying is enclosed here within a brief narrative in which Peter declares that Mary Magdalene should leave the circle of disciples because "women are not worthy of Life." As in GMark and the synoptic gospels, Peter stands in need of correction, and Jesus' teaching provides it.

Simon Peter said to them, "Mary should leave us, for women (shime) are not worthy of Life." Jesus said: "Look, I will lead her to make her male (boyt), in order that she too may become a Living Spirit, resembling you males (men - boyt). For every woman/female (shime) who makes herself male (boyt) will enter the Kingdom of Heaven."128

Against Peter's view that "women" or "females" are not worthy of Life, Jesus' response overturns Peter's misconception. He does not argue that Mary and other women are in fact worthy, however, but claims that he can make this female or woman (shime) male (boyt) so that she can "become a Living Spirit, resembling you males (boyt)."

The goal may be described here in the gender-neutral terms of becoming "a Living Spirit" and "entering the Kingdom." Jesus declares that every woman/female (shime) must make herself male (boyt) in order to enter the salvific state. The saying thus aligns the categories of Life, Spirit, and entering the Kingdom with that of the male. Only by making herself male, it would appear, will Mary become worthy of the spiritual state of Life in the Kingdom.

The imagery of Logioon 114 appears to put forward the asymmetrical view that only women require salvific transformation. This stands in striking contrast to Logioon 22, in which male and female achieve the salvific state along parallel lines. Their juxtaposition raises two questions: Are the images of transformation in Logioon 22 and 114 essentially different, or do they represent two symbolic expressions of the same thing? Did Peter and the other male disciples undergo a transformation to become "Living Spirits," or were they already "worthy of Life"?

Many scholars have addressed the apparent tension and have adopted one of at least four distinct positions. Some have assigned Logioon 114 to a later source,129 and argued that Logioon 22 and 114 do not agree because they come from different editors or layers of the tradition. A second strategy seeks to erase the imbalance and argue that both male and female undergo transformation to become "spiritual males."130 Peter and the other male disciples have also been transformed from nonspiritual men (boyt) to spiritual men or males (boyt). This solution provides a plausible blending of Logioon 22 and 114 for the transformation of men, but leaves in place very different accounts of the transformation women undergo. Both men and women must be spiritually transformed, according to this reading, but only women must undergo a second, more radical change in gender identity. The spiritual male that Mary becomes is not literally a man, of course; she needs no sex-change operation. What Mary needs, however, is a radical shift in gendered identity. Here, the asymmetry remains because women must experience both a transformation from nonspiritual to spiritual and a symbolic change in gender identity, from female/woman to male.131

A third strategy seeks to relate Logioon 114 to some of the same symbols of gender outlined above, as well as to those that symbolize higher and lower elements of the soul as male and female, respectively. Marvin Meyer132 and Elizabeth Castelli,133 for example, find an important interpretive clue in Philo of Alexandria's symbolization of male and female as "superior and inferior states," respectively, or elements of the soul that "have been divided and separated." In Philo's language, the goal is to bring together those elements "not that the masculine may be made womanish, and relaxed by softness, but that the female element, the senses, may be made manly."134

For progress is indeed nothing else than the giving up of the female by changing into the male, since the female is material, passive, corporeal, and sense-perceptible, while the male is active, rational, incorporeal, and more akin to mind and thought.135

In Castelli's reading, Mary becomes worthy of Life only by transcending the female parts of her self—material, passive, corporeal, and sense perceptible—and allowing the superior male elements—active, rational, incorporeal—to reign.

Within Philo's conception, however, men, as well as women, possess the female elements of the soul. Yet the Gethsemane says nothing about Peter or the other male disciples giving up their female elements to become fully male. Castelli's analysis of the conditions under which "Mary" and other early Christian women were included among the worthy is illuminating,136 but the argument may move
too quickly to link Thomas’ categories of male and female to higher and lower elements of the human person or his or her soul as in Philo, or even to the same conception of feminality as in the DialSer and other ascetic texts.130

An alternative to these approaches seeks to relate the language of both logia to other sayings in the text and to the traditions of Genesis interpretation on which they draw.131 Within the immediate context of Logion 114, Jesus’ words come as a direct challenge to Peter’s claim that Mary should leave “because women are not worthy of Life.” Peter’s ideology of exclusion is grounded not in the perception that Mary’s soul, or part of it, is female, but rather in the misguided view that women like Mary are not worthy of Life, perhaps because they lack something that he and the male disciples have. The phrases “worthy of Life” and “Living Spirit” bring the reader into two of the gospel’s central dualisms: Life and Death140 and Spirit and Flesh.141 These dualisms, like those of Light and Darkness142 and Kingdom and Cosmos, represent two hierarchically ordered realms or states of existence and two ways of being human. These dualisms, however, do not correspond directly to the categories of male and female in the GThom as a whole. Most of these opposed categories appear without gendered imagery.143 Among those dualistic symbols that use gendered imagery, such as Logion 101, both genders are associated with the negative pole of Death and the positive pole of Life:

Jesus said: “Whoever does not hate his fa[ther] and his mother as I do cannot be a disciple to me, and whoever does [not] love his Father and his Mother as I do cannot be a disciple to me. For my mother [. . .], but my true [Mother] gave me Life.”

This saying echoes the radical Q sayings about hating one’s parents144 and instructs its readers to distinguish their biological parents from their true Father and Mother. Contrary to conventional pieties, one’s biological parents are to be hated because they bring merely the bodily life that is Death. Only one’s spiritual parents, the “Living Father” and “true Mother,” are to be loved, for they alone give the true Life that comes from the Spirit.

The text’s dualism of Life and Death may help to illuminate Logia 22 and 114 as two distinct images for the state of Life, but it leaves unanswered the question of why the state of salvation is gendered as male in Logion 114, and why Mary, of all the disciples, is singled out as the one in need of transformation. One intriguing suggestion comes from those who place the GThom within the context of Genesis interpretation, particularly of an Adamic typology, which developed in relation either to baptismal practice (Davies) or visionary mysticism (DeConick). This typology was based on a three-stage myth of creation and redemption:145 (1) a state of perfection in which the Spirit/primal Adam existed as Light in perfect unity with the divine; (2) a moment of corruption or loss in which the Light Adam is cast into darkness/the body/the Cosmos; (3) a salvific restoration or return to the beginning in which the primal human being of Gen 1:26–27 is recovered, and the individual redemptively transformed.

Within this mythic framework, the GThom may be said to reflect the notion that ritual initiation or visionary ascent effects a restoration of the primordial human being, the “Adam of great power and wealth” (Logion 85). This Adam represents primordial human nature before it became subject to death. Recovering this “Adam before Adam” is compared to several things: standing at the beginning and knowing the end (Logion 18); “images of yourselves that came into being before you” (Logion 84); and, most strikingly, “the one who came into being before coming into being” (Logion 19). Paradoxically, the newly redeemed human being is identical to the original and oldest Adam, the prordial self, with “the face he had before the world was made.”146 That face is not literally a physical, fleshly face, but figuratively a metaphor for an uncreated, divine self, the face in place of a face from Logion 22.

In light of this pre-Adamic typology, Logia 22 and 114 may reflect two distinct representations of this primordial and salvific human state. The image of Logion 22 implies a transformation of self and of humankind from duality to unity; from a created face, eye, or hand to an uncreated or precreated image of Light. Neither old nor new state is symbolized as male or female. Rather, each gender has corresponding old and new states. Logion 114, in contrast, represents the restored self as symbolically male. Although neither Adam nor anthropos is gender-specific in its original sense, Logion 114 appears to reflect an interpretation of the primordial human being (generic ἄδαμ, anthropos, ῥόμα) of Gen 1:26–27 in the gender-specific, masculine sense of primordial Man (gender-specific ἄνθρωπος, ῥόμος), the male Living Spirit that was in the beginning.147 By this reading, both Peter and Mary, like all children of the created Adam and Eve, must put on this new Man which is, at the same time, their oldest and best Self.

This Self is ultimately the same for all, but women require a more radical transformation because the redeemed human being is imaged as male. Although the Peter of Logion 114 blunders by reading Mary’s womanhood as a sign of her unworthiness, it is not her womanhood, but her unredeemed state as a created female that has kept her outside of salvific Life. Similarly, Peter and other readers mistake the physical and social reality of men as one with the symbolic category of the primordial, redeemed Male. Just like Mary, the male disciples, too, must undergo a transformation from nonredeemed created selves to the redeemed state of Living Spirits. The end, however, is the same for all. Those who are transformed achieve the redeemed state of Living Spirits, identical to that of the Primal Adam. The difference is that Mary and women who enter that state undergo a more radical shift from created female selves to precreated spiritual male selves.

Misinterpretations like Peter’s have legitimated the exclusion of women from leadership throughout the history of Christianity. What is curious is that the same interpretive maneuver that links the primordial, redeemed human being of Genesis 1 to the symbolic category of male serves to undercut Peter’s exclusionary ideology in Logion 114. Jesus transforms Mary and “makes her male” in order to show that women, as well as men, are “worthy of Life,” the state of the Primordial Man and of entering the elite circle of the redeemed. But Mary’s
sense of herself will no longer be that of the woman Mary, female daughter of Eve, but rather of a “Spiritual Male” who has recaptured the primordial Adamic Self and thus has earned a “place” in the Kingdom of the living Father.

By concluding with Logion 114, the GThom puts an androcentric seal on its multifaceted images of redemption through the Living Jesus. As a result, even as this gospel affirms the inclusion of women like Mary, its representation of the human ideal as male nonetheless devalues the symbolic category of the female, as well as the embodied, sexual identities of all persons. Not only among the literal-minded Peters of the world, but even among those who read symbolically, the GThom may well have legitimated asymmetrical gender roles as it supported ascetic lifestyles for those who found in it a spiritual home.

Gender, Gnosis, and the Revelatory Voice of the Divine: Thunder, Perfect Mind Thunder, Perfect Mind (Thunder, Perfect Mind) offers a radically different example of gender imagery in gnostic traditions. Thunder belongs to the genre of revelation discourse and presents the revelation of a mysterious female divinity whose name may be found in the title of the work. As name and title, “Thunder” (Bonté, f) may well be related to biblical conceptions of the thundering voice of the divine (e.g., Exod 19:19; Job 40:9; Rev 6:1). Thunder’s sophisticated reworking of images and ideas from other traditions, especially those associated with helenistic Jewish Wisdom, the goddess Isis, Middle Platonism, and other gnostic traditions, helps mark this poem as the product of a syncretistic and visionary imagination.

The opening lines reveal a literary pattern that recurs throughout the text: the divine voice begins with first-person statements of identity and shifts to second-person address. Here, the speaker identifies herself in terms of her origin and destination and then admonishes her audience to use their faculties of sight, hearing, and speech to enter into relation with her.

> It is from the Power that I was sent,
> And it is to those who reflect upon me that I have come,
> And I was found among those who seek after me.
> Look at me, you who reflect upon me; And you hearers, hear me!

Even as the divine voice invites all who “hear” to enter into a “knowing” relation with her, the rhetorical features of the text reconstruct the reader’s conception of the speaker and her relation to those who hear her. The alternating structure of first- and second-person address, for example, works both to differentiate and to connect the “I” who speaks and the “you” she addresses. While the first lines suggest a sharp boundary between those who know and those who remain ignorant, other statements point to the paradoxical and liminal character of the speaker. The initial series of self-predications, or “I am” statements, use the language of paradox and kinship to describe the speaker as one who exists “betwixt and between” antithetical categories and as one who exists in relation.

> I am the first and the last.
> I am the honored and the scorned,
> I am the harlot and the holy one.

This passage recalls the imagery of a wide range of divine figures, including Isis, Sophia, Jesus, and Barbelo/Protennoia. But the text’s interweaving of paradox and kinship with the imagery of gender resonates beyond such allusions and discloses the complex identity of the speaker and her metaphorical association with the antithetical roles assigned to women in patriarchal culture.

As “the harlot and the holy one,” the speaker is linked metaphorically with a pair of female roles that frequently serve to divide and reduce women to the polar opposites of harlot (pornē) and holy one (semne). The juxtaposition of this statement to the previous reference to “the honored and the scorned” appears even more to reinforce the oppressive polarization of scorned harlots and honored holy ones. Yet, by including negative and positive poles within the divine, Thunder pushes beyond the literal sense and valuation of both polarities and links the speaker directly to the conflicting, though sometimes overlapping, roles of women. In this way, the text opens new possibilities for the ideological critique and reinterpretation of such polarities, the identities they shape, and the values they ascribe to the female gender in its divine and human manifestations.

The following lines move from sharply antithetical polarities to the relational language of gender, kinship, and childbirth. As “wife and virgin,” and “mother and daughter,” the speaker identifies herself with the most basic kinship roles by which women are related to one another and to others. The juxtaposition of these with the claim to be “the members of my mother” points to the unity and multiplicity within the speaker’s identity as “Mother” and especially as “daughter(s)” or “children” to her own mother. Insofar as the reference to members echoes the Pauline image of the body and its members (1 Cor 12:12–26) as a metaphor for the church, so this line identifies the speaker not only with the divine Mother, but with her dispersed human members.

The relation of the speaker to the roles of women becomes even clearer with the metaphors of sexual relations and reproduction. The paradoxical pairing of such identities as “the barren one and the one with many children,” however, underlines the polarity that defines and values women by their reproductive capacity or incapacity, their fertility or infertility, and revalues both by placing them together within the divine. The association between the speaker and reproduction becomes even more complex, however, as the mother with many children identifies herself as “the midwife,” “she who does not give birth,” and “the comforting of my labor pains.” Echoing simultaneously the curse on Eve (Gen 3:16) and the image of Isis as protector of women in pregnancy and childbirth, these statements identify the speaker with both the divine power of healing and the experience of women in childbirth and infertility.
The paradoxical joining of conventionally opposed categories breaks down their restrictive functions in several ways: (1) they include polarity, particularity, and multiplicity within the identity of the divine; (2) they cross boundaries that often work to separate and divide women; and (3) they question, dispel, or even nullify such basic cultural categories as the distinction between the maternal and the virginal, unity and multiplicity, immanence and transcendence, and even the divine and the human.

While this first set of gendered metaphors associates the speaker almost exclusively with female roles, the last of the statements quoted above places both female and male characteristics within the speaker’s identity. With its allusion to the bridgroom-bride metaphor for the relation of God and Israel or Christ and the church, this self-predication associates the speaker simultaneously with the “divine” and “male” role of bridgroom, traditionally played by God or Christ (or even Marcus), and the traditional “human” and “female” role of the bride, played by Israel or the church. The speaker thus claims an identity that is simultaneously male and female, singular and collective, divine and human.

From this assertion of female-male union, the text moves to a series of paradoxical statements about the speaker’s relation to various male figures:

- I am the mother of my father and the sister of my husband.
- And he is my offspring.
- I am the one who begot me.
- But he is the one who begot me.
- Before time on a day of birth and he is my offspring in time, and my power is from him.
- I am the staff of his power in his youth and he is the rod of my old age.
- And whatever he wills happens to me.

The roles of husband, father, and offspring may belong to different male figures, or they may refer to the same figure at different “moments” or in distinct manifestations in time. In this series, the text reinscribes conventional patterns of gender relations, with the image of a superior male power empowering a subordinate female figure to realize his will, articulate his thought, and utter his name in the world. She may be “the staff of his power,” but ultimately the power appears to be his. Against this image, however, the paradoxical mixing of gender and kinship relations, together with other statements that reverse the relation of female and male, undermine a rigid stratification of male dominance and female subordination and set in its place a more dynamic structure of reciprocity and exchange. The multiplicity and paradox of these images of the speaker destabilize the reader’s conception of “her” gendered identity and point to her transcendence of the categories of female and male. They suggest that the various self-descriptions of the divine point to, but cannot exhaust, the mysterious identity of the divine or her “members.” The figure who speaks in Thud to this point is a single, yet multifaceted, character who exists in the dynamic interrelationships of various female and male roles, yet associates herself particularly with the roles and experiences of women.

In many other passages, the speaker challenges her audience to recognize the antithetical character of their own responses to her and to relate these to her identity and their own. In several statements, Brontë poignantly as the subject and object of conflicting responses. She is the object not only of honor, exaltation, and love, but also of derision, disgrace, and hatred. “I am the disgraced and the exalted one; give heed to my poverty and my wealth. Do not be haughty to me when I am discarded upon the earth . . . and do not look upon me on the garbage heap and go and leave me discarded.” She is “hated everywhere and . . . loved everywhere.” Insofar as these opposed responses, and the pain that accompanies them, constitute her very identity, she is the subject who experiences, and exists within, the poles of negative and positive human attitudes and response. On the positive side, she is also “the exalted one,” who speaks in the future tense of being found “among those that are to come” and “in the kingdoms.” In the present voice of the text, however, her existence is characterized by the dualities of poverty and wealth, weakness and power, fear and pride, silence and speech. She urges her audience to recognize their own complicity in these dualities and to change their vision, attitudes, and relation to her and her “members,” recognizing them even in those things or persons that are in disgrace and pain, in shamelessness and shame.

In one of the text’s most striking passages, the speaker declares her relation to multiple categories of being, including angels, gods, the spirits of all human beings, and women: “But I am the [perfect] mind and the reposer . . . I am the gnostic of my seeking, and the finding of those who seek after me . . . And it is with me that the spirits of all humans exist, and it is within me that women exist.” In these parallel statements, the text invites all its hearers, both male and female, to perceive their “spirits” as dwelling with the divine, but it leads women to understand themselves as dwelling within the divine. At the same time, the speaker’s claim to be “an alien and a citizen” places her simultaneously inside and outside the boundaries of divine and human “society.” Insider and outsider, the speaking voice of Thud is both a liminal figure and a figure of liminality itself. She exists at the threshold of, or between, the known and unknown, the visible and invisible, the immanent and transcendent, the accepted and rejected. At the same time, she manifests herself in the violation and crossing of boundaries: “[I am] restraint and unrestraint. I am the union and the dissolution . . . I am the judgment and the acquittal.” In attaching no specific objects to these terms, the text remains ambiguous and invites the interpretive claim that the speaker manifests herself in “the union and the dissolution” of polarities, including the duality of divine speaker and human audience, the “I” and “you” of the text.

The dissolution of this duality is supported further by statements that place the linguistic faculties of speaking, hearing, and writing not only within the divine, but also within her hearers:

Hear me, you listeners, and be taught my utterances, you who know me! I am the hearing that is acceptable in every matter;
I am the utterance that cannot be restrained.
I am the name of the sound and the sound of the name.
I am the sign of writing and the manifestation of difference.\textsuperscript{112}

As “hearing,” these lines suggest, the divine is available to all. As silence or singular utterance, she cannot be grasped or reduced to a singular word, conception, or interpretation. She is, rather, a “mute who does not speak,” yet whose “multitude of words” is manifold in number and in polysemic significance. Together, these and other passages link the speaker to the linguistic and intellectual faculties. They point suggestively toward the identity of the speaker with the poetic language of the text and with its “hearing” or interpretation as well. The divine is present and active, the text implies, not only in its revelatory utterances, but also in its hearing among those the text addresses, the human audience she calls.

With the speaker’s claim to be “the name of the sound and the sound of the name,”\textsuperscript{113} the text focuses attention on the reflexive identity of the speaker as divine name and as the thundering sound that utters that name. By juxtaposing this self-description with the claim to be “the sign of writing and the manifestation of difference,” the text extends the media of divine manifestation to the activities of reading, writing, and differentiating. In identifying the divine as the “sign (σημεῖον) of writing,” the text identifies the divine not only with the hidden significance of writing in general, but also, more particularly, with the hidden significance of this text, the revelation discourse of Thunder, Perfect Mind. Finally, as “the manifestation of difference,” the text suggests that the speaker’s significance is manifested in the differentiation of features, the distinction of categories, the processes of separation and dissolution, and the multiplicity of expression and interpretation.

If the members listen and respond as she commands, the divine voice asserts, they will discover in this text and in themselves both the one who “cries out” and the one who “listens.”\textsuperscript{114} When she exhorts her hearers to “give heed. . . For I am the one who alone exists,” Thund introduces a strikingly new perspective on the identity of the speaker that serves both to solve and to dissolve the mystery of the speaker’s identity. The “one” who speaks in Thund, these lines suggest, is the unity that encompasses all duality and multiplicity, including those of her utterances and her members. Indeed, she is “the one who alone exists,” and knowing or “gnostic” readers discover her within themselves as they discover themselves within the divine.

This redemptive moment comes, the concluding lines suggest, when those who have embraced the “many pleasant aspects” of sin, unrestrained acts, and passions “become sober and go up to the place of rest.” There, the speaker claims, “they will find me” and “live” and “not die again.”\textsuperscript{115} Within the symbolic world of the text, this redemptive “place” or state is available already to those who understand the mysterious utterances of the text. For, in understanding the discourse with gnostics, they operate with the divine faculties of hearing, seeing, and knowing, which are simultaneously grounded in the divine and manifested in themselves. Such knowing readers understand the speaker’s claim to be “the union and the dissolution” as they realize the conjunction and dissolution of the central duality of the text: the distinction between the divine “I” who speaks and the human “you” she calls. When such members of the audience hear the divine voice, they become sober, discover the divine faculties within, and transport themselves “upward” to the “place of rest” as restored members of the divine. The symbolic world and rhetorical features of the text thus work together to break down and dissolve the boundaries separating the I and you of the text as the divine voice shares her faculties and empowers her members to speak her/their name and to discover her/themselves.

Within a religious setting, the revelation of Thunder, Perfect Mind may have had the effect not only of invoking divine presence, but also of communicating a distinctive ideology of gnostics and a radically new understanding of both the divine and the human self. Without denying or negating the particularity and multiplicity of images and categories, Thund leads its readers to discover in the text and in themselves the one who is “honored and scorned,” “she who cries out,” and “she who listens.” In realizing their shared identity with the divine, female and male readers alike might come to a new understanding of the categories of difference that shape their understanding of themselves and the world, including those of strong-weak, inside-outside, transcendent-immanent, divine-human, and male-female. In perceiving the conjunction and dissolution of such categories within the divine, they not only recognize the divine, but also reconstitute their membership within her complex and multifaceted identity.

More than any texts of gnostic tradition, Thunder, Perfect Mind, uses the imagery of gender, paradox, and language to communicate a distinctive conception of the divine and her members. Through its complex literary form and rhetorical devices, Thund effects a new understanding of the identity of the divine with her human hearers as it places the “divine” powers of language and interpretation within them. With these powers, they, in turn, come to understand themselves in the divine “place of rest,” joined to “the one who alone exists,” the divine female voice of revelation and redemption in Thunder, Perfect Mind.

Summary and Conclusions

Gnostic texts and traditions use images of gender extensively, even extravagantly, as they present their varied and complex religious perspectives. It is possible that some of the authors and readers of these texts chose images of gender because they were engaged in a process of contesting, revising categories of gender and the social roles of women and men. But even more important, they chose images of male and female because these provided a particularly apt and rich set of metaphors for reflection on a variety of issues, particularly those involving differentiation, unity, or both. Although no single pattern exists among the sources, all of the texts surveyed use the female gender as a symbolic category to reflect on a variety of topics, especially categories of difference. These range from the social categories of social class, kinship, ethnicity, and gender to the more abstract philosophical and religious categories of space and time, being and becoming, creation and redemption, and Spirit, Soul, and Matter.
As male and female represent two forms of a single species, metaphors of gender allow the transfer of meaning from the social domain of gender difference to other domains—conceptual, spiritual, experiential—which might also concern reflection on difference, unity, and relation: the relation of two or more entities to one another and to others, the relation of different manifestations of one and the same thing to each other and to the thing from which they arise. These texts show clearly that gender imagery was used to represent a variety of more abstract issues in religious speculation, including the relation of duality or multiplicity to unity and of the many to the one.

This survey begins to touch upon the variety and richness in the representation of women and gender in gnostic traditions. I hope it has demonstrated that those who would unify these texts and traditions under a single category (like “gnosticism”), under a singular attitude toward women, or under a single use of gender run the risk of ignoring the diversity of these texts. At the same time, they fail to understand the complex ways these texts served their ancient readers, particularly in legitimating particular conceptions of gnosticism as the key to the meaning of scripture, experience, and salvation. We contemporary readers can begin both to understand these uses and to subject them to critique as we bring new modes of reading that are both more critical and more sensitive to their riches than were those of the antithetical writers of the early church.

NOTES

1. In this chapter, I use the terms “gnosis,” “gnostic,” and “gnosticism” (with quotation marks) to refer to the traditional conception of a unified phenomenon, religion, or movement; I use the terms “gnosis,” “gnostic” (without quotation marks), and the like to refer to the broader conceptions of experiential religious knowledge, a pattern of thought centered on such knowledge, or both.


3. In addition to the Christian heresiologists, there exist contemporary reports in rabbinic writings and pagan sources (e.g., Plotinus, Enneads 2.9, “Against the Gnostics”). These supply relatively little social information about women and gender and carry interpretive problems similar to those of the heresiological sources.


5. Irenaeus, Against the Heresies (hereafter cited as H), written around 180 CE, was originally entitled Refutation and Overthrow of False So-Called Gnosis. For a readable and recent English translation, see Dominic J. Unger, ed. and trans., St. Irenaeus of Lyons, Against the Heresies. Ancient Christian Writings (New York: Paulist, 1993).


8. Elaine H. Pagels, The Gnostic Gospels (New York: Random House, 1979; New York: Vintage Books, 1983) 59–66, suggests that the evidence “clearly indicates a correlation between religious theory and social practice.” In gnostic communities, “women were considered equal to men; some were revered as prophets; others acted as teachers, teaching evangelists, healers, priests, perhaps even bishops.” At the same time, Pagels notes, this “general observation” is “not universally applicable.” In her more recent Pursuing the Spiritual Eye: Imagery and Hermeneutics in the Hypostasis of the Archons and the Gospel of Philip,” in King, IFIG 187–285, Pagels acknowledges the difficulty of moving from symbolism to sociology.

9. Frederik Wisse, “Flee Femininity: Antifemininity in Gnostic Texts and the Question of Social Milieu,” in IFig 305–6: “The meaning of feminism in the passages under discussion appears to focus on sexuality and birth... The obvious link between antifemininity and gnostic literature should caution interpreters against drawing inferences concerning the role of women in gnosticism from the positive hyponotized female beings in the pseudepigrapha.”

10. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins (New York: Crossroad, 1983) 744: “Gnosticism employed the categories of ‘male’ and ‘female’ not to designate real women and men, but to name cosmic religious principles or archetypes. Salvation in the radically dualistic gnostic systems requires the annihilation and destruction of the female or the ‘feminist principle.’” “In gnostic systems, the female principle is secondary; since it exists for the part of the divine that became involved in the created world and history. Gnostic dualism thus shares in the patriarchal paradigm of Western culture” (278–79).

11. Daniel L. Hoffmann, The Status of Women and Gnosticism in Tertullian and Tertullian. Studies in Women and Religion 36 (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellin, 1997) 3–4: “Gnostics for the most part neither honored femininity in theory, nor treated women equally with men in practice, based on available evidence.” “It is unlikely that gnostic women acted as priests or bishops or that they enjoyed a remarkably high status in general in gnostic groups.” “The presence of negative female motifs and uncertainty involved in attempting to relate female deities or accounts of prototypical women like Mary or Helena to actual gnostic communities make possible conclusions about the status of women in real gnostic groups based on this evidence very speculative.”


14. For an illuminating discussion of the relevance of "intertextuality" and ideological analysis for the study of ancient religious texts, see Elizabeth A. Clark, "Ideology, History, and the Construction of 'Woman' in Late Ancient Christianity," JETS 2 (1994) 155–84, esp. 164–65, in which she cites Daniel Zohar's Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990) and other relevant works.

15. Williams, "Variety" 21–22: "The examples provided are sufficient to demonstrate the complete inadequacy of applying one or two unilinear gauges, such as the amount of female imagery or whether the female imagery tends to be 'positive' or 'negative'. . . . More 'positive' or 'negative' gender roles appearing in the imagery of a text may or may not directly reflect an author's notion of the proper patterns of socialization for men and women."

16. Irenaeus, Haer 1.23–30 illustrates well the style of heresioloogical summaries of "gnostic" teaching.

17. Justin, Apology 1.26.1–3; Irenaeus, Haer 1.23.2–24.4; Tertullian, de Anima 34; Hippolytus, Refutatio omnium haeresium (Refutation of all Heresies) 6.19; Epiphanius, Panarion (Pam.), 21–23. Madeleine Scopello, "Jewish and Greek Heroines in the Nag Hammadi Library," in King, IFFG 89–90, notes intriguing parallels between Irenaeus' account of Helena's fate and that ascribed to the soul in the Exegesis on the Soul and Authoritative Teaching from Nag Hammadi. "Gnosticism seems to have had cultivated women in its circles. The role of hekatim ("courteens") probably influenced gnostic writers—are the first of them, Simon the Magician, in the composition of their myths. . . . Women were probably attracted too by a mythology where feminine figures played such an important role." For a contrasting position, see Hoffman, Status 89–92.

18. Origen, ConCels 5.61, in Henry Chadwick, ed., Origen, Contra Celsum, Translated with an Introduction and Notes by Henry Chadwick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980; first published by Cambridge University Press, 1953) 312. In the same paragraph, Origen goes on to report that Celsus "knows also of Marcellina who follow Marcellina, and Harpocratians who follow Salome, and others who follow Mariamne, and others who follow Martha."

19. Irenaeus, Haer 1.25.6. Epiphanius, Pan. 27.6.1 and 8, writes: "I have now heard in some connection of a dupe of theirs, a Marcellina, who corrupted many people in the time of Anicetus, Bishop of Rome. . . . During Anicetus' episcopate, then, Marcellina appeared at Rome, spewing forth the corruption of Carcoprates' teaching, and destroyed many there by her corruption of them. And that made a beginning of the so-called gnostics." Marcellina appears also in Origen, ConCels 5.62, and Augustine, Haer 7.

20. Origen, ConCels 5.62. Chadwick cites several other figures to these on 312 nn. 8, 9.

21. In Mark, Salome is described as one of the women who followed Jesus in Galilee and witnessed the crucifixion (15:40) and as one of the women (with Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mother of James) at the empty tomb (16:1). Mariamne may be a reference to Mary Magdalene, referred to as Marium in the Dialοο. In Pisto Sophia, Salome; Marth; Mary, the mother of Jesus; and Mary Magdalene appear together in dialogue with Jesus. Salome also appears in The Gospel of Thomas (hereafter, GThom), Logion 61, and in The Gospel according to the Egyptians. According to Hippolytus, Ref. 5.7.1 and 10.3.9, "the Ophites held that their doctrines were taught to Mariamne by James the Lord's brother." Chadwick, Contra Celsum, adds: "Her connexion with them appears in the Acts of Philip (M. R. James, Apocalypse N.T. p. 446) where Philip and Mariamne go to the land of the Ophites."

22. Origen's report may indicate that the followers of Marcellina represented a distinct group, while the "Harpocratians" were divided into different strands, each following the teachings of an individual woman disciple of the first generation. The juxtaposition of female teachers, however, also suggests that Marcellina's followers claimed that she preserved teachings handed down from Salome, Mariamne, and Martha, revered women disciples of the first generation.

23. See Hippolytus, Ref. 7.33.3 (GCS 26.224).

24. Hippolytus, Ref. 6.35.3–7.

25. Epiphanius, Pan. 33.3.7. In Pan. 33.3.1, Prolemy addresses her as "my good sister Flora."

26. For the entire account of Haer 1.1–8, see Unger, St. Irenaeus 23–47. For an abbreviated translation with detailed introduction and notes, see Bentley Layton, "Prolemy's Version of the Gnostic Myth," in The Gnostic Scriptures (New York: Doubleday, 1987) 276–302. According to Irenaeus, this version of "Valentinian teaching used metaphors of insemination and birth to describe the emanation of thirty divine aeons in male-female pairs or syzygies, from the initial union of "Profoundini (m. Bylos) and Silence (f. Sygno), Mind (m. Nous) and Truth (f. Aletheia)."

27. Irenaeus, Haer 1.1.1–2.


29. In other strands, it is Sophia's desire to create something alone, apart from her male consort, that brings the Demiurge and his cosmos into being.

30. Irenaeus, Haer 1.2.4: "For, thinking and its consequent passion were separated from her; she remained inside the fullness; but her thinking and the passion were bounded apart by the boundary, were fenced off with a palisade, and existed outside the fullness. This (thinking) was a spiritual essence, since it was a natural impulse to action on the part of an aeon. Yet it was without form and imageless because she had not comprehended anything. And—they say—for this reason it was a weak and female fruit" (in Layton, Gnostic Scriptures 285).

31. Irenaeus, Haer 1.7.1: "When all the seed has grown to maturity, Achamoth their mother will—she says—leave the place of the midpoint, enter the fullness, and receive as her bridegroom the savior, who derives from all (the aeons), so that a pair is produced consisting of the savior and Sophia who is Achamoth: they are the bridegroom and bride, and the entire fullness is the bridal chamber. And the spirituals are supposed to upf all their souls; become intellectual spirits; unrestrainedly and invisibly enter the fullness; and become brides of the angels that are with the savior" (in Layton, Gnostic Scriptures 294–95).

32. For further analysis of images of Sophia in gnostic sources, see Deidek, J. Good, Reconstructing the Tradition of Sophia (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1987); Karen L. King, "Sophia and Christ in the Apocalypse of John," in King, IFFG 158–76; Williams, "Variety," and

33. Irenaeus, Haer 1.13.2. As the women drank from the cups, Marcus invoked the presence of Charis with these words: "May that Charis who is before all things, and who transcends all knowledge and speech, fill your inner chamber, and multiply in you her own knowledge, by sowing the grain of mustard seed in you as in good soil."

34. J. J. Buckley, "Libertines or Not? Fruit, Bread, Semen and Other Body Fluids in Gnosticism," JGER 2 (1994) 17–18, analyses the pattern in Irenaeus' report of "spiritual impregnation" and bodily seduction: "One notes the sequence: 1) Marcus' seducing the women by words, 2) the Charis/spouse as a sort of spiritual seed impregnating the woman, who, 3) gives birth to the word. The woman imitates her initiator, who in turn acts as the male spouse. Spiritual seduction precedes the bodily one."

35. Irenaeus, Haer 1.13.3.

36. Ibid. 1.13.4, narrates Marcus' seduction of the wife of a deacon in his own church: "This Marcus compounds philters and love-potions, in order to insult the persons of some of these women. . . A sad example of this occurred in the case of a certain Asiatic, one of our deacons, who had received him (Marcus) into his house. His wife, a woman of remarkable beauty, fell a victim both in mind and body to this magician, and, for a long time, traveled about with him. At last, when, with no small difficulty, the brethren had converted her, she spent her whole time in the exercise of public confession, weeping over and lamenting the defilement which she had received from this magician."


38. In 2 Cor 11:2–3, Paul represents the members of the church, and women alike, as "chaste virgin" brides of Christ and as vulnerable to deception, like Eve: "I feel a divine jealousy for you, for I promised you in marriage to one husband, to present you as a chaste virgin to Christ. But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ."


40. Tertullian of Carthage, On Baptism (De Bap) 1.2, uses the image of the serpent to attack a female leader of the "Cainite" heresy, describing her as "a viper of the Cainite heresy, lately conversant in this quarter," who "has carried away a great number with her most venomous doctrine, making it her first aim to destroy baptism."

41. Tertullian probably wrote On the Prescription of the Heretics (De Prsecriptio haereticorum, hereafter, De Pries) around 200 CE and certainly before his conversion to Montanism in 207. See J. Quadent, Patrology, Volume 2 (Westminster, MD: Newman) 269–73, for further discussion.


43. Tertullian, De Bap 17.5.

44. Tertullian, De Pries 41.2–6: "To begin with, it is doubtful who is a catechumen, and who a believer; they have all access alike, they hear alike, they pray alike—even beathens, if any such happen to come among them. . . All are put up, all offer you knowledge. Their catechumens are perfect before they are full-grown. The very women of these heretics, how wanton they are! for they are bold enough to teach, to dispute, to enact exorcisms, to undertake cures—may it be even to baptize. Their ordinances are carelessly administered, capricious, changeable. At one time they put novices in office; at another time, men who are bound to some secular employment; at another, persons who have apostatized from us, to bind them by vain-glory, since they cannot by the truth. . . And so it comes to pass that today one man is their bishop, tomorrow another; today he is a deacon who tomorrow is a reader; today he is a presbyter who tomorrow is a layman. For even on laymen do they impose the functions of priesthood."

45. On the gradual exclusion of women from church office, see, for example, Karen Jo Torjesen, When Women Were Priests (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993).

46. For a useful discussion of the appeal of both ascetic and libertine options for women, see James E. Goehring, "Libertine or Liberated: Women in the So-Called Libertine Gnostic Communities," in King, JER esp. 329–44. For a thorough discussion of the categories of "libertine" and "ascetic" forms of "Gnosticism," see Williams, Relinking "Gnosticism," chapters 3–4. Buckley, "Libertines or Not" 15–16, adopts a similar position.

47. Clement of Alexandria, Stromata (Strom) 3.1, reports that the Valentinians hold that the union of man and woman is derived from the divine emanation in heaven above and "approve of marriage."

48. Clement, Strom 3.5–6, attributes their view that women or wives are to be held in common to a radicalized conception of "no distinctions," as in Gal 3:28. In Strom 3.10, he attributes it to Epiphanius’ misreading of Plato’s Republic (457D).

49. Clement, Strom 3.6–10: "They gather together for feasts. . . men and women together. After they have tasted their appetites, then they overturn the lamps and so extinguish the light that the same of their adulterous ‘righteousness’ is hidden, and they have intercourse where they will and with whom they will. After they have practiced community of use in this love-feast, they demand by daylight of whatever women they wish that they will be obedient to the law of Carcoprates."


51. Clement, Strom 3.45.

52. Clement cites the work by name in Strom 3.65, but there makes clear that he refers to it also at 3.45.

53. Clement, Strom 3.45. See also 3.63, 3.66, 3.92, and ExeTheod 67.

54. Clement, Strom 3.63.

55. Ibid. 3.92. It is not clear that this account of a dialogue between Jesus and Salome comes from the same source as that presented in Strom 3.45 (The Gospel according to the Egyptians), though it is often assumed that it does.

56. Ibid. The language of this passage is remarkably close to that of GThom 22, discussed in this chapter.

57. Epiphanius was Bishop of Salamis in Cyprus from 367 CE and wrote the Panarion ca. 375. For English translation, see Frank Williams, The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis, Book I (Sets 1–46). NHMS 35. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1987).

58. Epiphanius, Pan 26.4.1.

59. Ibid. 26.4.3–5.

60. Ibid. 26.5.1. "But though they copulate they forbid procreation. Their eager pursuit of seduction is for enjoyment, not procreation."

61. Ibid. 26.8.1–2.
63. Buckley, "Libertines or Not" 18, argues that the internal logic of the practice rests on a mythic account of the divine Barb elo's seduction of the Archons to make them release castrated light: "Their sacramental theology emphasizes the female blood and the male semen, the two components of Christ's body, to be naturally produced in the Phibionites' own bodies. . . . Direct products of the human body, semen and blood express and recreate the believers' affinity with Christ.
64. Clement of Alexandria, for example, preserves the most important fragments of Valentinus, as well as the Valentinian "Excerpta of Theodotus". See Layton, Gnostic Scriptures 229–49, for the fragments of Valentinus; see Robert P. Casey, The Excerpta ex Theodote of Clement of Alexandria (London: Christopher, 1934) for English translation of the ExcThod, and Werner Förster, Gnostic: A Selection of Gnostic Texts, Volume 1, ed. R. McL. Wilson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972) 222–33 for a portion of the ExcThod.
67. Hyparch 86.25–27: "I have sent you (this) because you inquire about the reality [of the] authorities. For full English translations, see Bentley Layton, "The Reality of the Rulers," in Robinson, NHLE 61–69, and also Layton, Gnostic Scriptures 65–76. Consistent with conventions for citing texts from Nag Hammadi, material in square brackets indicates a lacuna in the ancient manuscript. Material in parenthesis has been supplied either by me or by the modern editors to clarify interpretative matters. Unless otherwise noted, translations of Nag Hammadi texts are my own.
69. Hyparch 93.52–94.2: "But I (Norea) said: Lord, teach me about the power of these authorities—how did they come into being and from what reality (hypostasis) and of what matter, and who created them and their power?" Nora's question recalls the question of the unnamed recipient ("you have inquired about the reality (hypostasis) of the Rulers") and thus sets up a parallel between the narrator-reader relation and the Eleleth-Norea relation. This parallel implicitly links the role of the narrator to that of Eleleth as it connects the text's reader to the implied recipient and to Norea herself.
70. Hyparch 94.2–19.
71. Ibid. 96.11–15: "It was by the will of the Father of the entirety that they all come into being." For similar assurances from the narrator, see 87.20–23 and 88.10–11.
72. On ancient reproductive theory, see, for example, Richard Smith, "Sex Education in Gnostic Schools," in King, IFG 345–60.
73. G. MacRae, "The Jewish Background," argues that the Sophia myth is directly related to the story of Eve in Gen 2–3.
74. Hyparch 94.19–33.
75. Ibid. 94.34–95.4.
76. Ibid. 95.4–12.
77. For further analysis, see Francis Fallon, The Enthronement of Sobdoth: Jewish Elements in Gnostic Creation Myths, NHMS 10 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1978).
78. Hyparch 96.3–16.
79. Ibid. 96.19–26.
80. Ibid. 96.27–97.20.
81. Ibid. 97.11–97.10.
82. Cor 2:14–16: that is which of psyche/sole (psychikon) cannot grasp the things of the spirit (te pneumatikà).
83. Hyparch 89.17–27.
85. Ibid.
86. Ibid.
87. Hyparch 92.18–93.1.
90. See, for example, M. Williams, "Determinate Elitism? or Inclusive Theories of Conversion?" in Williams, Relinking "Gnosticism" 191–212; and Anne McGuire, "Conversio and Gnosis in the Gospel of Truth," NTS 28 (1982) 338–55. In the majority of "gnostic" texts, even those with apparently deterministic worldviews, persons without gnosis may well be considered capable of transformation and redemption.
93. S. Emmel, trans. "The Dialogue of the Savior" (hereafter DidSav) 139.8–13, 140.4–19, 144.6–21, in Robinson, NHLE 244–255.
94. The First Apocalypse of James (hereafter 1Apoc) (V.3) 40.25–26: "The Lord said, "James, I praise you . . . Cast away from yourself all lawlessness. And beware lest they enjoin you. When you speak these words of this perception, encourage these four: Salome and Mariam and Martha and Ariston."" The names of Salome and Mary also appear in GThom, but not in the same logia.
97. GMary 10:9-16.
98. Ibid. 8:7-10. Karen L. King, "The Gospel of Mary Magdalene," in Schössler Fiorenza, Searching the Scripture 610, views their weeping as indicative of their failure to attain the kind of inward peace Mary has attained.
99. GMary 9:15-20. For further discussion of the nongendered significance of anthropoi, see K. L. King, "Prophetic Power and Women's Authority: The Case of the Gospel of Mary (Magdalene)," in Women Preachers and Prophets Through the Millennium of Christianity, ed. Beverly Mayne Kienzle and Pamela J. Walker (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press) 21-41. I am grateful to the author for sharing the manuscript with me before publication.
100. King, "The Gospel of Mary Magdalene" 610. I am also indebted in this section to M. Greenblatt, "Mary Magdalene: Gnostic Icon of Salvation," and K. Cuffari, "Confrontation of Cosmic and Social Systems of Authority: The Female Character as Textual Tool," unpublished term papers, Religion 222 (Gnosticism), Haverford College, Haverford, PA, December 1996. Citing King, "Prophetic Power," Greenblatt writes: "Differences in gender and sexualities belong to the external, material world Christ warned the disciples against. Gender is of little significance since it exists solely on material bodies that will cease to exist." (5).
101. GMary 6:1-5.
102. King, "Gospel of Mary" 358.
103. GMary 10:3-6.
105. King, "Gospel of Mary" 358.
106. GPhil 79:6-11, my own translation. Contrast with W. W. Isenberg, trans., "The Gospel according to Philip," in Nag Hammadi Codices II, 2-7, ed. B. Layton (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1989) 159: "His sister and his mother and his companion were each a Mary."
108. Ibid. 58:30-59:6.
110. GPhil 63:72-64:10.
112. GPhil 70:9-17. See also GPhil 68:22-26: "When Eve was still in Adam death did not exist. When she was separated from him death came into being. If he enters again and attains his former self, death will be no more." (111).
113. Their companionship may also parallel the union of Light with Holy Spirit and of angels with images. GPhil 58:10-14: "He said on that day in the thanksgiving, ‘You who have joined (hot) the perfect Light with the Holy Spirit, unite the angels also with us, as images.’"
114. "Bridal chamber" appears as a central symbol throughout GPhil; in GPhil 65:11-12, it is modified by ἐκοίμησα (iconic, imaged, or mirrored), the adjective formed from the Greek noun ἐκόμοιον (image).
117. Ibid. 144:16-21.
118. Marjaneh, The Woman Jesus Loved 64-79, here 79.
119. This includes passages from Aratos, Zostrians, and The Book of Thomas the Contender, all of which are analyzed by Marjaneh, The Woman Jesus Loved, 76-79, and by Wisse, "Flee Femininity." Rather than assuming that all of these texts use the category of "feminalness" in the same way, it is crucial to examine the significance and social implications of feminalness within each context separately. See also the passage from The Gospel of the Egyptians quoted by Clement of Alexandria, Strom 3:45 and 3:63, and discussed in this chapter.
120. Marjaneh, The Woman Jesus Loved 76-77.
121. Gilhus, "Gnosticism—A Study in Liminal Symbolism" 111, links feminalness to bodily symbolism in "gnostic religions" generally: "Gnostic religion implements bodily symbolism of a special kind. It uses symbolism which connects a negative evaluation of the female physiological processes to a negative evaluation of theology, cosmology, society, and material existence. This symbolism concentrates on the female reproductive organs and their discharges—children."
122. See esp. Wisse, "Flee Femininity," for the interpretation that antimemininity is linked to a negative attitude toward women and to the social milieu of asceticism.
123. For English translations, see "The Gospel of Thomas" (II, 2) (GThom) trans. T. O. Lambdin, in Robinson, NLHE 124-38; Marvin Meyer, ed. and trans., The Gospel of Thomas: The Hidden Sayings of Jesus (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992); Layton, The Gnostic Scriptures 376-99. Most scholars date the original Greek version (of which we have three papyrus fragments from Oxyrhynchos) to the period between 100 and 180 CE, though some date it as early as the canonical gospels, i.e., between 70 and 100 CE. This gospel's place of origin cannot be known for certain, but many believe it reflects the cultural environment of Edessa, Syria.
125. Among the most interesting contributions to the debate are those contributed by M. Meyer, J. Buckley, E. Custoli, and A. DeConick.
126. The opening words of the gospel claim that finding the secret meaning of Jesus' words brings salvation: "These are the hidden sayings that the Living Jesus spoke and Didymos Judas Thomas wrote down. And he said: Whoever finds the interpretation (hermeneia) of these sayings will not experience death." (125).
129. GThom 114. I deliberately translate the same Coptic word, shine or shine, as "woman" in the words attributed to Peter and as "female" or "woman" in the words attributed to Jesus. While Peter clearly uses the term in the literal sense, there is ambiguity in Jesus' use of both shine and hooN. When Jesus addresses the other disciples as "you men/men," the term carries both literal and symbolic senses.
131. Attempts to harmonize the two sayings may too hastily ignore these tensions and seek to "make the two one."
132. Jortner Jacobsen Buckley, "An Interpretation of Logion 114 in the Gospel of Thomas," NovT 27 (1985) 245-72, argues that women need an extra initiation ritual to
bring them to the intermediary state of "maleness" that men occupy by reason of their sex. In her view, both men and women become males must then make the final transition to the status of "living spirits."


135. Philo of Alexandria, Questions and Answers in Genesis 3:49 (cited by Castelli, p. 32).

136. Philo, Questions and Answers in Exodus 1:8, cited by Castelli, p. 32.

137. Castelli, "I Will Make Mary Male," 33. GThom 114 reinterprets "the traditional gender hierarchies of male over female, masculine over feminine," even as it opens the religious community to women and "reveals the tenuousness and malleability of the naturalized categories of male and female.” In this way, "the double insistence ... that Mary should remain among the disciples at the same time as she must be made male—points to the paradoxical ideological conditions that helped to shape the lives of early Christian women."

138. In the view of Williams, "Variety" 19–20, interpretation of this passage has too hastily treated the exchange as sheerly allegorical in intent, as if it were an allusion to the transformation of the femaleness of any human, man or woman, into maleness. "The loction simply does not say that there is something female about every human which must be transformed into male. ... Log. 114 suggests that proper socialization involved asymmetrical requirements for men and women." Williams cites R. Perkins, "Promiscuous Stories in the Gospel of Thomas," Semeia 20 (1981) 130 who suggests that this saying may represent a community rule that "justifies the inclusion of women in the community against orthodox slander that those so-called ascetics were really sexual libertines.” Even so, Williams points out, the saying would still be calling attention to females as the sex for which special comment is required.


140. Logia 111 and 59 contrast the realms of Death and Life and suggest that one who lives from or looks to the Living One will not see death and becomes superior to the world.

141. Logion 29, for example, illustrates the opposition between Flesh and Spirit as Jesus declares his amazement that the great wealth of Spirit has come to dwell in the poverty of the body.

142. Logia 24 and 61 show that the dualism of Light and Darkness corresponds to two types of people: those who are "uncombined," having made the two one, are filled with Light and shine upon the Cosmos; those, on the other hand, who exist in duality are dominated by darkness.

143. Some logia, however, represent either or both poles in images of female or male. A number of sayings, for example, symbolize the positively valued pole as male and the negatively valued pole as female. In Logion 15, for example, Jesus says: "When you see one who was not born of woman, fall on your faces and worship. That is your father." But there are also a number of sayings that associate the category of male with the negative pole or female with the positive pole of the Spirit.


145. Davies, The Gospel of Thomas 119: The imagery of becoming "little children” is also part of a general Adamic typology, for the little child, the baptized person, was thought to be as innocent and sinless as Adam and Eve were before the fall.” Such innocence has to do only with sexuality, but also with ignorance of the distinction between good and evil.

146. Harold Bloom, "Whoever Discovers the Interpretation of These Sayings . . .: A Reading,” in Meyer, The Gospel of Thomas 121, appropriates a trope from W. B. Yeats to describe this pre-Adamic self and conclude his reading of GThom: "Like William Blake, like Jakob Böhme, this Jesus is looking for the face he had before the world was made.”

147. As with traditional Christian representations of God as literally neither male nor female, yet most frequently addressed as "Father,” so the primordial Human of GThom 114 is not literally male, but is symbolically of the male gender. This human being, a restoration of the primordial Human Being, is neither male nor female in a literal sense, but is male in a figurative sense.

148. Thunder, Perfect Mind (VI,2) (hereafter Thunder), trans. G. W. MacRae, in Robinson, NHLE 195–203, and Layton, Gnostic Scriptures 77–85, survives only in the Coptic version found at Nag Hammadi. The author, date, and place of composition are unknown, but Thunder was probably composed in Greek well before 250 CE, the approximate date of the Coptic manuscripts.

149. For a more detailed version of my reading of the text, see Anne McGuire, "Thunder, Perfect Mind (NHC VI,2),” in Roder’s Guide to the Nag Hammadi Library, ed. Karen L. King and Charles Hedrick (Somona, CA: Polebridge, forthcoming), and also McGuire, "Thunder, Perfect Mind,” in Schissler Fiorenza, Searching the Scriptures 39–54. For further research, see the excellent edition, translation, and commentary by Paul-Hubert Poirier, Le Témaire, Intellecs Parait (NH VI,2), (Quebec: University of Laval Press; Louvain: Peeters, 1996). In addition, see my translation and notes to the text at the Diotima web site: http://www.uky.edu/ArtSci/Classics/thunder.html.

150. For a powerful contemporary use of much of this passage in the work of an African American filmmaker, see the opening scene of Julie Dash, Daughters of the Dust, American Playhouse Theatrical Films in association with WMPG, New York: Kino Video, 1992.

151. Thunder, 16.9–11.

152. Ibid. 20.26–35.

153. Toni Morrison chose a quotation from this section as the epigraph to her novel Jazz (New York: Knopf, 1992).


155. Ibid. 21.20–32.