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Procreative Imagery and Cosmology in *On the Origin of the World*

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1. Background

1.1 Introduction

On the Origin of the World (henceforth: *Orig. World*), one of the long lost Christian texts that were unearthed 1945 in Nag Hammadi, presents a fascinating retelling of the creation narrative in Genesis 1-3. One of the most striking departures from the “prooftext” is the manner in which the world and its plants and animals are conceived. Instead of the *ex nihilo* creation of the Hebrew Bible, *Orig. World* uses the imagery of procreative activities – conception and birth – to illustrate how the cosmos and its inhabitants came into existence.

As Ismo Dunderberg points out in the introduction to his recent book *Gnostic Morality Revisited*, these early Christian cosmogonies aimed not only to provide a colorful story, but also to impart paraenetic teachings concerning everyday matters.¹ Could there be a particular reason why the mythmaker(s) of *Orig. World* replace the pseudo-procreative creations of the Hebrew bible with more explicit sexual imagery? And if so, what is the purpose of this creative exegesis? How does the cosmogony, the creation myth, relate to the cosmology, the understanding and evaluation of the created world?

In this essay, it is argued that the procreative imagery in *Orig. World* has close parallels in the discourses of other early Christian teachers, who employed biological symbols in order to dispel the hypnotic hold of corporeal beauty. Worldly beauty, while not negative in itself, could provide a distraction and distance the believer from God. The procreative imagery in *Orig. World*, I suggest, has a similar function: through graphic depictions of bodily fluids, the mythmaker(s) of *Orig. World* wanted to remind its readers that the beauty of nature (as well as the worldly creations) was transitory and destined for destruction, as is the case for all things created through natural means.

Furthermore, I suggest that *Orig. World* uses the sexual appetite of the gods and angels of the cosmos to provide the reader with an antitype that the believer must outshine through the practice of self-restraint and moderation.

¹ Dunderberg 2015, 11-15.

1.2 Purpose Statement

Unlike most of the earlier studies of procreative imagery in the Nag Hammadi literature, this essay is not primarily concerned with gender.² Although *Orig. World* employs the theoretical framework of ancient medicine– a conceptualization that, of course, abounds with gendered imagery – I believe that the main purpose of the procreative imagery is not to single out men from women as much as to differentiate between the eternal and the transient – and to instruct the addressees how they should relate to these things.

Why then, is this differentiation between transient and eternal important? Dunderberg has recently called for a new evaluation of the relation between the Nag Hammadi cosmogonies and the practices of the adherents. Heeding his call, I provide a hypothesis on how the myth in *Orig. World* contains moral exhortations and argue that the use of procreative language, and the dichotomy between material and spiritual that is presented in *Orig. World*, is employed to support these exhortations.

My study can also be seen as an interjection into the debate on “Gnostic” morality. Before Michael Allen Williams’ deconstruction of “Gnosticism” as a religious category, one of its main characteristics was a lack of interest in issues pertaining to morality.³ Drawing on the descriptions of the church fathers, leading scholars such as Hans Jonas characterized the “Gnostics” as ancient nihilists, who either renounced the world as ascetics or choose to oppose the worldly norms through impious deeds.⁴ This understanding of the “Gnostics” could take several impressions: In his 1972 dissertation *Gottes Geist und der Mensch: Studien zur frühchristlichen Pneumatologie*, Hans-Dieter Hauschild uses the presence or absence of ethics as a criterion to determine whether a text is Gnostic or not;⁵ and in a 1968 article, Stephen Benko even suggests that it was Gnostic ritualistic baby killing that spawned the rumors about infanticide and cannibalism in the early Christian churches.⁶ Instead, we will see how the rewritten creation account reflects neither stereotype about Gnostic immortality. Although few scholars today would present the “Gnostics” as libertinists, the notion that the so called

² See section 1.7 for a more exhaustive discussion of earlier research.

³ Williams 1996, 96-115.

⁴ Jonas, 1963, 270-281.

⁵ Hauschild 1972, 235

⁶ Benko 1967, 103-119.

“Gnostics”⁷ were less interested in ethics than other Christians still lives on and needs to be challenged.⁸

1.3 Research Questions

- *How does the cosmogony, the creation myth, relate to the cosmology, the understanding and evaluation of the created world in Orig. World?*
- *How is the procreative imagery used and evaluated in paraenesis to foster an awareness among Christians about the need for moderation?*

1.4 Disposition

This essay consists of five chapters. The first introduces the research questions and the theoretical assumptions that have guided that working process, as well as provides a survey of earlier research.

Chapter 2 investigates and discusses the Sophia narrative and the procreative imagery in the beginning of *Orig. World*. Chapter 3 goes on to analyze the procreative activities in 108-111 that result in the creation of plants, trees and flowers. In the forth chapter, I discuss the implications of these observations. The fifth chapter provides a summary of the argumentation and conclusions.

1.5 Methodological Considerations

In empirical studies with contemporary focus, particularly in the social sciences, there is a clear distinction between an interpretative framework – often a sociologically or

⁷ As discussed more extensively in the section below, I refrain from using the term Gnosticism, as it creates a false dichotomy between “Gnostics” and “Christians.”

⁸ In a recent article, Nicola Denzey Lewis and Justine Ariel Blount, claims that that the Nag Hammadi texts were almost exclusively concerned with cosmology: “They contain no “secular” writings, no Scripture, no correspondence, and precious little homiletical, ethical, or paraenetic material, with the exception of (for example) the Gospel of Truth in Codex I and what remains (very little) of the Interpretation of Knowledge in Codex XI” (Denzey Lewis & Blount 2014:415.) See also Kent Gunnarsson’s dissertation from 2004 (*sic!*), where he presents the Gnostics as anti-cosmic nihilists! Gunnarsson, 2004, 22 writes: “Förändringen i synen på lagen fick etiska konsekvenser, där den nihilistiska hållningen i kombination med anti-kosmismen blev mer påtaglig på ett praktiskt plan än på det teoretiska.”

psychologically oriented theory - and method, which often concerns how information is collected, how interviews are conducted etc. In the humanities, in particular in qualitatively and hermeneutically oriented investigations, theory and method often overlap. In this case, the methodological considerations primarily concern how I approach the interpretative framework through which I approach *Orig. World*.

My interpretation of the text rests on several assumptions. First, I believe that *Orig. World* has an ambiguous attitude towards the creation narrative in Genesis. On the one hand, the text radically reinterprets the events in Genesis, as if its mythmaker(s) found the content of the “proof-text” bothersome. Traditionally, this attitude has been interpreted as a “protest exegesis” and a rejection of values presented in Genesis.⁹

On the other hand, one can also see how *Orig. World*, which could easily have rejected and discarded the whole creation narrative, attempts to solve the problems in order to retain the Genesis narrative – albeit in a slightly modified version – as an authoritative text.¹⁰ I believe that this problem solving aspect of our text is important to emphasize. If one were to assume that *Orig. World* merely sought to reject the Jewish-Christian creation myth, the interpretation of the text would be fundamentally different; one would understand it as a polemical work and view the alterations as attempts to ridicule and oppose the Hebrew Bible. By contrast, understanding of *Orig. World* as a problem solving text allows me to approach the narrative and ask what the author(s) found troublesome and what the reinterpretations attempt to communicate.

A second assumption is that *Orig. World* uses the theoretical framework of ancient medicine and philosophy as tools to convey a message. On this point, I am heavily indebted to the conceptualizations of Perkins and Fischer-Mueller, who read *Orig. World* (as well as other Nag Hammadi literature) through the lens of Aristotelian medicine.¹¹

The narrative in *Orig. World* is structured around a series of repetitions and imitations. The highest spiritual realm serves as a template and its inhabitants as models, after which also the cosmic world and its celestial powers are fashioned. As *Orig. World* draws on the platonic notion that the model is always superior to the copy, I have also looked at how the text contrasts acts, beings and structures in the higher realm to the lesser. On this point, it is assumed that these contrasts have a normative function: the events, actions and structures in the upper realm provide the guidelines for

⁹ See for example Hans Jonas 1963, 91-95.

¹⁰ See also Williams 1996, 63-70 for a discussion problem solving in the Nag Hammadi literature.

¹¹ See “Earlier Research,” section 1.7, below.

a desirable behavior. In contrast, the deeds of the arrogant rulers of the lower realms is presented as antitypical and representative for a behavior that should be avoided.

As a point of departure in my discussions of the implications of these binary structures in the text, I also adopt Sherry Ortner's theory on the discourse of masculinity and femininity and the dichotomy between nature and culture. Due to the radical dualism of the text, I believe that Warren Shapiro's distinction between the discourse of natural birth and pseudo-procreative symbolism provides a useful complement to Ortner.

Similarly to the conceptualizations of male pseudo-procreative symbolism in Shapiro's discussion, we find a dualism in *Orig. World*: that which is ontologically spiritual is defined primarily in relation, and in contrast, to the corporeal. As the physical creations are subject to time and decay, the physical birth, we are told in *Orig. World* 109:22-25, ultimately leads to death. The material existence is lacking and its creations suffer from sorrow, weakness and the temptations of the evil powers, who rule over the material world.¹² The spiritual realm, on the other hand, is eternal and perfect, and will withstand in the end times, when everything else is destined to perish.¹³ In the theoretical section below, I provide a more extensive discussion of the theories of Ortner and Shapiro and their implication for my work.

A third assumption concerns the need to contextualize through comparative work. In this case, underlying assumptions pertaining to the nature of the text affects the scope of investigation. For example, if one were to assume, as some scholars working with procreative imagery in Nag Hammadi have, that *Orig. World* is a distinctively "Gnostic" text that has little to do with "Christianity," this assumption would limit the comparative scope and exclude "proto-orthodox" texts.¹⁴ In the theoretical section below, I discuss the usefulness of "Gnosticism" as a religious category and conclude that there are no good reasons to maintain the dichotomy between "Gnostic" and "Christian." Therefore, I make use of canonical and patristic as well as apocryphal materials to shed light on *Orig. World*.

In my work with the Sophia narrative – an account of how the aion Sophia initiates the events that lead to the creation of the world – I make extensive use of *The*

¹² *Orig. World* NH II 121:23-27.

¹³ *Orig. World* NH II 127:1-14.

¹⁴ See for example Cahana in section 1.7 below, "Earlier Research." See also Fischer-Mueller who approaches Gnosticism as single group.

Apocryphon of John's (Henceforth abbreviated: *Ap. John*) Sophia myth in order to shed light on the account in *Orig. World*.

The purpose of this comparative reading is twofold. On the one hand, *Ap. John*, with its much more extensive description of the sacred realm and the events that leads up to the creation of the world, can be used to illuminate some of the enigmatic passages in *Orig. World*. On the other hand, a comparative perspective can also help us to detect and pinpoint decisive differences between the two texts and their respective versions of the Sophia narrative.

1.6 Theoretical Considerations

1.6.1 Some Short Notes on Categorization and the Pitfalls of “Unconventional Sentimentality”

Since the mid-nineties – and the publication of Michael Allen Williams’ pioneering work *Rethinking Gnosticism: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* – scholars of ancient religion have struggled to redefine the term Gnosticism.¹⁵ Like the vast majority of Nag Hammadi scholars, I welcome this increasing theoretical awareness as a positive development. Before Williams’ dismantling of the term, we find a reoccurring tendency to depict Gnosticism as a single unified movement – as a religion in and of itself, that was decisively different from Christianity and Judaism.

During the first half of the twentieth century – before the Nag Hammadi library was found – the scholarly historiography was, understandably, indebted to the polemical accounts of the church fathers, depicting Gnosticism as the dark twin of Christianity, as a Hellenized heresy capable of almost any twisted deed.¹⁶ Retaining the boundary demarcations of the older paradigm, the evaluation of the Gnostics went through a radical change during the seventies and eighties. Elaine Pagels’ *The Gnostic Gospels* broke the mold, being not only the first popular publication on the subject, but also one of the first books to “side” with the Gnostics.¹⁷ Pagels’ book had a huge impact on

¹⁵ Williams 1996. See also King 2003 and Anti Marjanen (ed.), 2005.

¹⁶ See for example Stephen Benko’s article “The Libertine Gnostic Sect of the Phibionites According to Epiphanius” from 1967, where it is argued that Gnostic baby snatching was the cause of the Roman accusations of Christian cannibalism. See also Karen King’s discussion of the scholarly historiography of gnosticism as a Hellenized heresy of Christianity in King 2003, 55-70

¹⁷ See Pagels 1979. It may be worth to note that Pagels has changed her mind since then and in a recent article has argued against the adequacy of the term Gnosticism. See Pagels & Jenott 2010.

feminist theology and scholarship during the eighties and nineties.¹⁸ Suddenly the Gnostics were no longer the bad guys, but rather victims of the patriarchal proto-orthodox church, oppressed for their love of equality and freedom.

In a sketch of the pitfalls of label theory and the sociology of deviance, Kai T. Erikson has demonstrated that scholars tend to be particularly protective of groups that have previously been excluded and labeled as deviants.¹⁹ Erikson refers to the tendency to idealize these particular groups as “unconventional sentimentality.” “Whatever form sentimentality takes,” Erikson writes, “its distinguishing mark is the refusal to consider distasteful possibilities.”²⁰ In this case, a “distasteful possibility” would be to reconsider the adequacy of the underdog label and start to consider the probability that the “Gnostics” had much in common with proto-orthodox Christianities.

According to most scholars, the Gnostics emerged in the second century, long before “proto-orthodox” Christianity became a religious norm. Some scholars, such as Williams, have even suggested that the platonic elements and the many allusions to pagan religion indicate a reduced cultural distance between Gnostic Christianities and the Graeco-Roman world, a conclusion that on the contrary would suggest that the underdog label would be more aptly applied to many of the proto-orthodox Christianities than to the Gnostics.²¹

I refrain from using the term Gnosticism in this essay. Historically, it has been a derogatory term used to create an anachronistic dichotomy between heresy and orthodoxy. As discussed above, I believe that the attempts to rehabilitate the Gnostics as oppressed underdogs have proven just as counterproductive as the earlier tendency to view them as heretics.

¹⁸ See for example Rita Gross 1996, 181-184 and Jonathan Cahana 2014.

¹⁹ Erikson 1964, 4-5.

²⁰ Erikson 1964, 5.

²¹ Williams 1996, 107-115. On page 113 Williams argues that: “Compared with what are usually considered more “orthodox” forms of Judaism and Christianity, which seems to be Scott’s point of reference, demiurgical myths in general do seem rather ‘deviant.’ But compared to the wider spectrum of cosmologies in antiquity, at least many of the biblical demiurgical mythologies can be viewed as attempts to *reduce* deviance in worldview through adaptations and accommodations of Jewish and Christian tradition to Hellenistic and Roman cosmologies.”

1.6.2 The Nature/Culture Dichotomy and Male Pseudo-Procreation

In spite of a fair amount of critique over the past years, Sherry Ortner's pioneering 1974 article "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" has aged surprisingly well and is, forty years after its initial publication, still relevant.²² Ortner undertakes a task of gargantuan proportions – to account for the universal subordination of women in society.²³ Drawing on Simone de Beauvoir, Ortner argues that the secondary status of women can be partly explained by the female bodily function. Menstruation, pregnancy, birth and breast-feeding, Ortner claims, bring women closer to activities associated with nature and animals, while men, whose physiology allows them to "transcend" the domain of nature, are free to devote themselves to "culture."

In other words, [a] woman's body seems to doom her to mere reproduction of life; the male, in contrast, lacking natural creative functions, must (or has the opportunity to) assert his creativity externally, "artificially," through the medium of technology and symbols. In so doing, he creates relatively lasting, eternal, transcendent objects, while the woman creates only perishables – human beings.²⁴

I am highly skeptical to Ortner's universalistic claims. It is doubtful whether the nature/culture dichotomy – itself, as Ortner points out, a product of culture²⁵ – is as strongly present in all cultures. I also agree with Shapiro's critique of the binary juxtaposition of female and male in Ortner's model. While it is, as Shapiro maintains, "a very general tendency" in several cultures, I concur with him that the dichotomy is not "diamond-hard."²⁶ History is dynamic rather than static, and so – I believe – are the structures on which it rests.

Like scholars such as Warren Shapiro and Margaret Clunies Ross, I believe that Ortner's theory, when slightly modified, can still be of use.²⁷ While Ortner's dichotomy may not have a universal validity, it is certainly applicable to ancient Christianity. Her theoretical perspective seems to be particularly useful when applied to the branches of early Christianity that merged with the platonic legacy. These strands of Christianity shared an obsession with the notion of a pure primal unity that later had become

²² See below for a critique of Ortner's universalism.

²³ Ortner 1974, 67-68.

²⁴ Ortner 1974, 75.

²⁵ Ortner 1974, 84, writes: "The Nature/Culture distinction is itself a product of culture, culture being minimally defined as the transcendence, by means of systems of thought and technology, of natural givens of existence.

²⁶ Shapiro 1988, 277.

²⁷ Clunies Ross 1994, 84.

corrupted and split into two. When we in some of these Christian texts also find an extensive use of procreative imagery and body imagery, Ortner's understanding of gendered dualism becomes an even more relevant tool for analysis.

As a complement to Ortner's theoretical perspective on the nature/culture dichotomy, I apply the anthropological conceptualization of "male pseudo-procreation" to the investigation. Male pseudo-procreation is the act through which male characters emulate the female generative function and bring forth new life. Clunies Ross writes:

Along with the denial of the value of physiological maternity in comparison with the pseudo-procreative abilities of men goes the appropriation of female roles, especially those involved in parturition by non-sexual and especially non-vaginal means are also involved, such as the idea of anal procreation or births from the mouth, from an arm or leg or some other body part. The births of Athena and Aphrodite in Greek myth as well as the Holy Ghost's impregnation of the Virgin Mary through her ear may spring to mind as readily as the Old Norse account of how the primeval giant Ymir brought forth progeny.²⁸

By applying the symbolism of male pseudo-procreation to their myths, the ancient mythographers could not only evince the ontological primacy of the male deities, but also juxtapose a "natural," female manner of conception with a "spiritual," masculine creation. In an article on male pseudo-procreative symbolism and ritual kinship in the Roman Catholic Church²⁹ and Aboriginal religion, Shapiro identifies a discourse where the female ability to generate life becomes a symbol for death and transience.

In view of the nature of the lodges, it would seem to be this: 'Marriage is an ephemeral affair, a matter of the flesh and of individual interest, unenduring not only because of people's passions but also because of their mortality. It brings forth others whose fate is death inescapably. We as human beings are given to consider this to be an intolerable state of affairs. We wish therefore to render marriage as an enduring relationship between or within enduring social bodies-bodies which transcend individual whim and which do not decay; and wherein birth, instead of forcing upon us an irrevocable sentence of death, is but part of an eternal plan for self-maintenance.'³⁰

Earlier research on the procreative imagery in *Orig. World* has mainly focused on the birth of Ialdabaoth, the creator God, as an isolated event.³¹ With the theoretical framework of male pseudo-procreation, however, the birth of Ialdabaoth – the first procreative activity described in biological terms – becomes interesting primarily in relation to the procreation of the aions. As Shapiro demonstrates, the use of male

²⁸ Clunies Ross 1994, 150-151.

²⁹ Problematically, Shapiro does not further specify his object of investigation. Neither does he problematize potential differences in thought between, for example, a small congregation of liberation theologians in El Salvador and the staff in the Vatican. In spite of these methodological shortcomings, I nevertheless find his overall argumentation persuasive.

³⁰ Shapiro 1988, 283.

³¹ See section 1.7 for a discussion of earlier research.

pseudo-procreative symbolism always presupposes a dualism. In aboriginal religion, the lodge system and ritual kinship between men is constantly defined against marital activities, as well as the carnal union between man and woman.³² Likewise, the pseudo-procreative symbolism of spiritual life –and spiritual birth – provides a contrast to the female ability to create transient life.³³

1.7 Material

Due to space constraints, I have chosen to focus primarily on procreative imagery in *one* text, an untitled text from the second Nag Hammadi Codex, most commonly known as *On the Origin of the World*.³⁴ The title is a scholarly construct and refers to the purpose of the treatise: to account for the origin of the world and refute the standpoint that nothing preceded chaos – a notion that was popular in Hellenistic philosophy and religious thought during antiquity.

Orig. World engages in a dialogue with the first three chapters of Genesis. Subscribing to the main narrative frame of the creation narratives³⁵ in the Hebrew Bible, the text incorporates elements from astrology and Greek mythology, as well as Jewish apocalyptic, Platonic and Christian literature.

As with most apocryphal works, *Orig. World*, it is difficult to provide a date or geographical context. In his introduction to Brill's edition of the text, Hans Gebhard Bethge argues that the text was composed around the third to early fourth century.³⁶ I believe Bethge's suggestion is reasonable. As he remarks, *Orig. World* appears to have been influenced by Manichaeism, which would make a date earlier than the second half of the third century unlikely. As the Nag Hammadi Codices have been dated to the second half of the fourth century, that would leave us a time frame of about a hundred years when it is likely that the text has been composed.³⁷ Due to its allusions to Egypt

³² Shapiro 1988, 283.

³³ Shapiro 1988, 286. We also find a similar division in Roman Catholic theology, Shapiro claims: "Immortality is lost, in Roman Catholic theory, because the 'first' woman 'tempted' her mate to share with her a 'fruit' - a fairly obvious metaphor for her vulva; and regained through the advent of a 'sinless' 'Second Adam', born of a 'contained' vulva and conceived pseudo-procreatively by aural penetration."

³⁴ It would be of great interest to see if the imagery of procreative activities was used in a similar manner in other Christian texts, contemporary to *Orig. World*. Due to space limitations, it is not possible to pursue such a project in this essay.

³⁵ Narrative in singular for the ancient author, who seems to have understood Gen 1-3 as a single narrative rather than as a composition of two sources.

³⁶ Bethge 1989, 12-13 in Layton (ed.) 1989.

³⁷ See also Simone Petrement 1984, 126, who dates *Orig. World* quite late, but before the beginning of the fourth century.

and hieroglyphs, Bethge suggests that text originated in Alexandria.³⁸ On this point, I am not as convinced. Throughout the Graeco-Roman world, ancient Egypt was admired for its antiquity and exoticism. Even in Marathon, at the outskirts of Athens, there was a sanctuary dedicated to Egyptian Gods. A fascination with Egypt and references to Egyptian animals does not necessarily imply that the text was composed in Egypt, although it is far from impossible. The place of composition is not, however, of immediate importance for the research questions.

Only one manuscript of *Orig. World* is fully preserved, in Nag Hammadi Codex II. A highly fragmentary (but identical, according to Bethge) manuscript is also preserved in Nag Hammadi Codex XIII.³⁹ Unfortunately, only the opening lines have survived. A third, equally fragmentary manuscript, has been preserved and conserved in the British Library. According to Bethge, the several surviving manuscripts⁴⁰ suggest that it was a work that was circulated and considered important by a number of Christians.⁴¹

Due to the fragmentary state of the less well preserved manuscripts, I focus exclusively on the well preserved version in Nag Hammadi Codex II.⁴² When I discuss a particular passage, I use the conventional system of reference and refer to the codex page and line. The manuscript in Codex II comprises approximately 30 pages, with each page being around 35 lines. It starts Codex page 97:24 and ends at 127:17. During my working process, I have used Hans Gebhard Bethge's and Bentley Layton's edition of the manuscript from Brill's Coptic Gnostic Library.⁴³

In my discussion of the Sophia narrative in *Orig. World*, I also make use of *Ap. John*, in order to contextualize and pinpoint differences between the two texts. Several scholars, among them Karen King, John D. Turner, Roelof van den Broek and Birger Pearson, date *Ap. John* to around 150.⁴⁴ This dating is primarily based on *Adv. Haer.* 129, where the church father Irenaeus of Lyon describes a cosmology that resembles that of *Ap. John*. King suggests that since Irenaeus wrote around 180, it is reasonable to assume that *Ap. John* would have had time to be composed and spread to Rome, where Irenaeus

³⁸ Bethge 1989, 12-13 in Layton (ed.) 1989.

³⁹ Bethge 1989, 18 in Layton (ed) 1989.

⁴⁰ Most Nag Hammadi texts are only preserved in one manuscript.

⁴¹ Bethge 1989, 18.

⁴² The differences between the fragments, on the one hand, and the manuscript in Nag Hammadi Codex II, on the other hand, are minor and have no implications for the research questions.

⁴³ I have worked with the Coptic text and the translations provided are my own, unless noted otherwise.

⁴⁴ Van den Broek 1996, 53; Turner 2001, 220; Pearson 2007, 29. King 2006, 17 does not suggest an exact date, but argues that the text must have been written sometime before 180. A minority of scholars, such as Stephen Davies 2006, p XXV, argue for an even earlier dating of the text and suggest around 80.

resided.⁴⁵ This early dating has been questioned by Waldstein and Wisse, who argue in the introduction to their synoptic edition of *Ap. John* that Ireneaus did not have access to the text, but refuted an earlier version of the myth, by which *Ap. John* was influenced.⁴⁶

Regardless of whether we chose an earlier or later date for *Ap. John*, the scholarly consensus is that *Ap. John* is earlier than *Orig. World*. I do not mean to suggest that *Orig. World* exhibits a direct literary dependence on *Ap. John* (although that is by no means impossible) but, rather, that both texts provide different versions of a similar myth.

Ap. John is preserved in four manuscripts. Two longer versions, that are almost identical, and two shorter versions that differ from one another in terms of details and vocabulary. Waldstein and Wisse have suggested that the two shorter manuscripts therefore are likely to be two independent translations of a shorter version of the text, while the two longer manuscripts are likely to be copies of the same translation.⁴⁷ In this essay, I only use the longer and most well preserved of the manuscripts, which was also found in the same codex as *Orig. World*: Nag Hammadi Codex II. During my working process, I have used Waldstein and Wisse's synoptic edition of *Ap. John*. The translations from Coptic to English provided in the essay are my own.

1.8 Earlier Research

Four scholarly studies – all of which involve interesting perspectives on the procreative imagery in the text - have been of particular interest for this study: PHEME PERKINS' "On the Origin of the World (CG II, 5): A Gnostic Physics;" AYDEET E. FISCHER-MUELLER'S "Yaldabaoth: The Gnostic Female Principle in Its Fallenness;" PATRICIA COX MILLER'S "'Plenty Sleeps There': The Myth of Eros and Psyche in Plotinus and Gnosticism;" JONATHAN CAHANA'S "Androgyne or Undrogyne: Queering the Gnostic Myth." In this survey, I outline their contribution to the field of research, before I conclude with a brief discussion of how my study relates to their work.

⁴⁵ King 2006, 17.

⁴⁶ Waldstein & Wisse 1995, 1. Further, Wisse writes in his article "After the Synopsis: Prospects and Problems in Establishing a Critical Text of the Apocryphon of John and in Defining its Historical Location" that there are not sufficient reasons to assume that any of the Nag Hammadi texts were composed prior to the third century (Wisse 1997, 149).

⁴⁷ Waldstein & Wisse 1995, 1.

1.8.1 Scholarly Perspectives on the Procreative imagery

1980, Pheme Perkins suggested that *Orig. World* should be read as a “Gnostic Physics.” Perkins aims to refute an older scholarly historiography, according to which the Gnostics were only superficially interested in philosophy, and demonstrate that the metaphors and mythology display a clear indebtedness to ancient physics.⁴⁸ Further, Perkins categorizes the text as a defense against “popular middle Platonic and Stoic alternatives.”⁴⁹ In her analysis, Perkins discusses influences not only from philosophical but also medical literature, demonstrating that the biological metaphors build on the theoretical framework of ancient physicians, such as Aristotle and Galen.⁵⁰

In *Orig. World*, the principle of Jealousy, which eventually leads to the emergence of the creator God, comes to existence, when one of the characters impregnates herself. The pregnancy fails, however, because it lacks πνεῦμα, the male contribution, which – according to Aristotle – provides form to the fetus. Consisting purely of matter, the female contribution to the fetus, the offspring comes forth as an aberration – monstrous being who initiates the process of decline.

Although I do not wholly subscribe to Perkins’ reading, according to which the author defines his mythological narrative against stoic and platonic teachings, I find her argumentation for Aristotelian influence on the procreative imagery most convincing. As Perkins’ primary aim is to show how the text relates to ancient philosophy, her discussion of the procreative imagery is quite brief and limits itself to the first birth in the text (NH II 99:8-20). She does not discuss how the first birth relates to other procreative imagery in the text, nor does she elaborate on how and why the metaphor is used, other than to polemicize against and ridicule the stoic theories on origin. According to Perkins, the inclusion of the procreative imagery is primarily polemically motivated.

Aydeet Fischer-Mueller’s article “Yaldabaoth: The Gnostic Female Principle in Its Fallenness” (1990) builds on Perkins discussion of bodily metaphors, but goes even further in assessing the importance of gendering in *Orig. World*. Fischer-Mueller argues that Ialdabaoth, the horrendous offspring, in spite of being referred to with masculine

48 Perkins 1980, 36.

49 Perkins 1980, 44.

50 Perkins 1980, 37-38.

titles,⁵¹ possesses primarily female characteristics and appears and acts as a female character, due to the lack of male involvement in the conception.

Fischer-Mueller's observations are both intriguing and convincing, but as in Perkins' article, the discussion of procreative imagery is limited to the first birth in the text. Furthermore, Fischer-Mueller works with a decisively larger corpus of texts – which includes not only *Orig. World* but also *Ap. John* and *Hypostasis of the Archons* (Henceforth: *Hyp. Arch.*) – and has chosen to focus primarily on *Ap. John*. Highlighting the many similarities between *Ap. John*, *Orig. World* and *Hyp. Arch.*, Fischer-Mueller sometimes seems to neglect several decisive differences. In *Orig. World*, for example, Ialdabaoth's female side, Pronoia, plays an important role in the narrative as it is she who initiates the chain of events that leads to the material world and its inhabitants. Furthermore, the procreative imagery are not only much more frequently occurring in *Orig. World*, but also more explicit. The category of gnosticism does more damage than good in Fischer-Mueller's discussion. Nevertheless, I find her overall argumentation convincing.

Patricia Cox Miller's article "Plenty Sleeps There': The Myth of Eros and Psyche in Plotinus and Gnosticism" (1992) examines the reinterpretation of the Eros myth in *Orig. World*. Miller's main hypothesis is that the text presents a fairly positive evaluation of the material world, in spite of a radically negative portrayal of the creator God. Miller claims that through assigning the act of creating, not to *one* deity, but to several, the author of *Orig. World* seeks to present the first reality as "a flow, not as a work of a potter."⁵² Although I do not concur with her main hypothesis, I find her reading thought provoking and original. Particularly interesting – and in many respects ahead of its time – is her critique of the presupposition that all Gnostic thinking is dualistic.⁵³ Although controversial in 1992, Miller's problematization of the Gnostic dualist template is today widely accepted.

The major problem with Miller's reading, I claim, is that it assumes that the procreative imagery in *On the Orig. World* mirrors the scheme of emanations in neo-Platonism. Miller does not motivate her reading, nor does she attempt to explain the many problems that arise from it. How, for example, can we understand the discrepancy

⁵¹ *Orig. World* refers to Ialdabaoth as "the ruler" (ΠΑΡΧΩΝ) (a noun with masculine article) and "father" (ΠΑΤΕΡ) (of the seven forces of Chaos, 102:1-2).

⁵² Miller 1992, 228.

⁵³ Miller 1992, 224.

between the seemingly asexual emanations in Plotinus, on the one hand, and the virtual cascade of blood and bodily fluids we encounter in *Orig. World*? If the mythmaker(s) of *Orig. World* employed a language of procreative imagery in order to mediate a world affirming view as well as a positive evaluation of the female bodily functions, how do we account for the highly misogynic passage that occurs in conjunction to these metaphors and links the female to death?⁵⁴ Miller does not even attempt to answer these questions. Nor does she engage in dialogue with other scholars, such as Perkins and Fischer-Mueller, whose understanding of the procreative imagery stands in stark contrast to Miller's world affirming interpretation and positive evaluation of the female imagery.⁵⁵

Published in 2014, Jonathan Cahana's "Androgyne or Undrogyne: Queering the Gnostic Myth" is the only article discussed in this section that postdates Michael Allen Williams' *Rethinking Gnosticism*. Unlike most modern scholars, however, Cahana rejects Williams' critique of the term altogether and reads the Nag Hammadi texts through the theoretical framework of Hans Jonas' *The Gnostic Religion*.⁵⁶ While Williams suggests that the Gnostics attempted to reduce cultural distance to the Graeco-Roman world, Cahana quotes Jonas' view that "non-conformism was almost a principle of the Gnostic mind."⁵⁷

Following Jonas' characterization of the Gnostics as metaphysical rebels, Cahana suggests that the gender imagery in texts, such as *Ap. John* and *Orig. World*, serves as a critique against the patriarchal structures and norms of the Graeco-Roman world. The procreative imagery, Cahana argues, does not reproduce patriarchal values, but is "subversively" cited to expose the irrationality of the ancient medical writers.⁵⁸

Overall, I find the argumentation lacking. Cahana widely generalizes about the Gnostic mentality – as if there ever was such a thing as *a* Gnostic conception of gender. If there was one Gnostic notion of gender and if, as Cahana argues, his Gnostics were proto-feminists, how do we account for passages such as "Pray in a place where there is no woman and destroy the works of femininity" from *The Dialogue of the savior* 144:18-

⁵⁴ 109:22-25: "Woman came after earth and marriage came after woman, birth came after marriage, destruction (ΒΩΛ ΕΒΟΛ) came after birth."

⁵⁵ Miller 1992, 236, n. 30 recommends Perkins article as further reading on the biological metaphors. Miller does not comment, however, on the many fundamental differences between Perkins' view and her own interpretation.

⁵⁶ Cahana 2014, 511 writes: "Here I must beg to differ; not only will I use the g-word throughout this article, I also find Hans Jonas's understanding of Gnosticism, which can be opposed to both Harnack's definition and the modern trend of rejecting the category altogether, much more convincing. Throughout his work, Jonas delineated the gnostic phenomenon as opposing the Greco-Roman culture in which it developed, stressing that "non-conformism was almost a principle of the gnostic mind" (1963:42).

⁵⁷Ibid. See also Cahana 2014, 511 n. 4 and Cahana 2014, 521 for other quotes from Jonas.

⁵⁸ Cahana 2014, 517.

20; or “Do not become female, so that you give birth to their evils and brothers” from *The Second Treatise of the Great Seth* 65:25-26? Furthermore, Cahana fails to motivate why Jonas’ more than fifty year old understanding of the Gnostic mindset – a conceptualization currently rebuked by virtually every specialist in the field⁵⁹ - would be an appropriate theoretical point of departure.

Although I do not agree with Cahana, I find his argumentation and depiction of the “Gnostics” important, as it is emblematic of the historiography in much feminist scholarship.⁶⁰

1.8.2 Summary and Discussion of my own Contribution

Both Perkins and Fischer-Mueller have both made invaluable contributions through their research on gender and medicine in *Orig. World*.

Due to a limited scope of investigation their discussions have centered on the initial birth in 98-100. The mythological narrative, however, conveys not just one birth but rather a series of births, mainly concentrated to 108-111, that brings forth the material world and its inhabitants.

In this study, I aim to expand the scope of investigation to also include the procreative imagery in 108-111. The new material raises several new questions. How does the narrative in 108-111 relate to 98-100? Are there any differences in evaluation and function of the procreative imagery? How do they relate to the creation narrative in general?

Shapiro’s theoretical framework of male pseudo-procreative symbolism emphasizes the tension between spiritual and physical birth. In previous research, scholars have worked thematically with the birth of Ialdabaoth and discussed the event as an isolated episode. While their analyses and discussions have been of much value, they fail to account for: 1. The relation between Ialdabaoth’s birth, on the one hand, and the other procreative imagery, that refers to the creation of the world in its inhabitants, on the other hand; and 2. The relation between the procreative imagery that results in Ialdabaoth and the material world, on the one hand, and the sexless procreation in the sacred realm.

⁵⁹ See Karen King 2003, 11-19; Nicola Denzey Lewis 2013, 13-28; Waldstein 2012 341-372; Williams 1996, 43-44, 53-57.

⁶⁰ The depiction of the Gnostics as gender-bending rebels, whose egalitarian values provided a sanctuary for Christian proto-feminists, is highly reminiscent of Elaine Pagels 1979, 71-88 and Rita Gross 1996, 181-184.

Miller is the only scholar who has worked with the procreative imagery in *Orig. World* 108-111, a passage that accounts for the creation of trees and flowers. According to Miller's conceptualization of the passage, the procreative imagery should be seen a critique of the understanding of God as the patriarchal artisan of the Old Testament. Miller argues that the text, through the use of the procreative imagery, depicts the divine creative activities as a dynamic flow, a process in which several female principles are active. Miller claims that through the use of erotic and female imagery, *Orig. World* attempts to demonstrate that the world is a positive place. In spite of some, for its time, original and important contributions to the field of research, I do not find Miller's argumentation persuasive.⁶¹ Nor do I subscribe to Cahana's hypothesis, that the Gnostics were proto-feminists and that the gender imagery in the Nag Hammadi literature served to refute patriarchal views.

2. Investigation and Analysis of the Sophia Narrative

2.1 Summary of the Sophia Narrative and the Procreative imagery in *On the Origin of the World* 97-99

Before proceeding to the cosmological accounts, *On the Origin of the World* opens with a purpose statement and a refutation: since many have claimed that nothing existed before chaos, the author seeks to demonstrate that they all are mistaken (97:24-98:11).⁶² While it may seem appropriate to refer to the primal chaos as a darkness, the

⁶¹ See the discussion of Miller's contribution in the section above.

⁶² PHEME PERKINS 1980, 44 suggests that *On the Origin of the World* is an attempt to systematize the Sophia myth, presumably as a defense against stoic and platonic attacks. I find her reading plausible, as it would explain the almost apologetic tone and academic outline of the text. It could also account for the brief treatment of the process of divine emanations. If the author wrote in order to defend and systematize an already well known myth, there would be no reason to elaborate on the emanation process, as it from a platonic point of view was fairly non-problematic.

author argues, it is in fact a shadow – a shadow cast by the “immortal ones” who existed before it.

Unlike the Sophia narrative in *Ap. John, Orig. World* does not elaborate on the nature of these supreme divine beings. It is clear that their process of emanation is already completed when Sophia, one of the key characters in text, enters the narrative. Sophia – an emanation of Pistis - desires (ΟΥΩΩ) to become a “product” (ἔργον) resembling the First light. As a result, her wish becomes a curtain (παραπέτασμα) between the immortal ones and the creations that came into existence after them (98:11-20). The curtain casts a shadow and from the shadow, several powers (δυνάμεις) emerge. When the shadow realizes that it is inferior to the realm above, it becomes jealous. The thought of Jealousy impregnates the shadow, which gives birth to the principle of Jealousy. In the process of birth, the afterbirth (ΠΕΡΙΣΣΟΝ⁶³) becomes matter. Pistis, who discovers the chaotic matter,⁶⁴ trembles and as a result her disturbance becomes a “product of fear” (ΟΥΕΡΓΟΝ ΝΖΡΤΕ). Desiring the entity “which had no spirit” (ΠΗ ΕΤΕ ΜΝΤΕΨ ΠΝΑ) to rule over matter, Pistis breathes into the abyss and afterwards, Ialdabaoth, the fierce and lion-like creator God, emerges.

The place in which Ialdabaoth finds himself is desolate, consisting only of darkness and water. Following Gen 1:2 , the word (ΠΩΛΛΕ) – the instrument through which the God creates – appears as a spirit on the water. Ialdabaoth separates the water and creates dry land, and from the matter he makes himself a footstool (ὑποπόδιον) which he calls earth.

When Ialdabaoth has brought order to the chaos and created an abode for himself, he immediately starts to produce children. In accordance with Pistis’ will, the children are androgynes, modeled after the immortal archetype in the higher spiritual sphere (102:2-4). Honored by a host (στρατία) of angels and lesser Gods, Ialdabaoth believes himself to be the first and highest divinity.

⁶³ Literally: “the abundance.” Cf. the Greek περισσεύω: “be superfluous.”

⁶⁴ Literally: “That which had originated from her deficiency” (ΠΕΨΩΤΑ). NH II 99:30.

2.2 Analysis

At the very heart of this complex narrative, with its massive cast and eluding imagery, lies the problem of evil.⁶⁵ Like other ancient authors steeped in the platonic tradition – according to which the first ontological category consisted of pure perfection and unity – these Christian mythmaker(s) struggled to explain the emergence of deficiency. How could a single principle of perfection have deteriorated into the diversity and perplexity of worldly existence?

Several Christians understood the first reality as a series of emanations – as a flow, through which all celestial beings derive from a first divine principle. Through each step in this process, the emanated entities – referred to as “aions” in Nag Hammadi literature – become less divine and more distant from the primal source. In several Nag Hammadi texts, the chain of emanations breaks when it reaches Sophia, an aion who desires to create something out of herself, without the assistance and consent of the higher divine beings.⁶⁶

As *Orig. World* provides scarce details on Sophia’s initial mistake and seems to address an audience already familiar with the Sophia myth, I now turn briefly to *Ap. John*. Its Sophia narrative not only provides an important background to the Sophia myth in one of its longest and most widespread versions, but can also enable us to see how the author of *Orig. World* deviates from and redefines a more famous version of the creation narrative in his argumentation.⁶⁷

2.2.1 The Sophia Narrative in *The Apocryphon of John* and *On the Origin of the World*

As *Ap. John* portrays Sophia as an androgynous being, the aion clearly possesses both female and male characteristics. The feminine aspect of Sophia wishes to create an image of herself, but the Invisible Spirit – that is, one of the first and highest emanations

⁶⁵ See Williams 1996, 63-79 on the Nag Hammadi literature and problem solving.

⁶⁶ See below for a discussion of Sophia’s pregnancy and why it was seen as problematic.

⁶⁷ As *Ap. John* is preserved in no less than four manuscripts – more than any other Nag Hammadi text, including *GosThom* and *GosTruth* – scholars generally assume that it was the most widely circulated and well known of the Sethian texts. Waldstein 2000, 341 refers to *Ap. John* as “generally considered to be a paradigmatic text,” and as “surely one of the most important Gnostic texts” (Waldstein 2000:370). It has also been referred to as “the Gnostic Bible” (Williams 1996: 8). Several of the Nag Hammadi texts that contain a Sophia myth also follow a similar pattern as *Ap. John*.

– and Sophia’s consort (ϣΒ̅Ρ̅ ΝΖΩ̅Τ̅Ρ̅) do not consent to her wish. Her consort, it seems, is the masculine side of Sophia, in the text referred to as “the character (πρόσωπον) of her masculinity” (ΜΝΤ̅ΖΟΟΥ̅Τ̅, 9:31-33). When the feminine aspect of Sophia chooses to defy her consort and nevertheless brings forth a “thing” (ΖΩΒ̅), the result is disastrous. Ashamed and disgusted of Ialdabaoth, the hideous creature inside of her, she removes it and throws it out (NH II 10:1-14).

In this passage, several scholars have noticed the subtle references to abortion. As Perkins points out **ΝΟΥ̅Ξ̅ ΕΒΟΛ̅** – the Coptic equivalent of the Greek ἐκβάλλειν – was technical term for abortion during antiquity.⁶⁸ The reason for Ialdabaoth’s monstrosity in *Ap. John* is the lack of male involvement in his conception (10:3-5). Divine males with the ability to create without a female is widely attested in ancient mythological literature and often contrasted to their female counterparts. As James E. Gohring points out, the sequence of events in *Ap. John* mirrors the narrative in some of the Homeric Hymns, where Hera, who seeks to imitate Zeus’ creation of Athena, fails miserably when she, through a self-induced pregnancy, gives birth to the dragon Typhon.⁶⁹ Rather than looking for explanations in mythological literature, Aydeet E. Fischer-Mueller turns to Greco-Roman medicine. “The Gnostics,” Fischer-Mueller claims, “knew what the medical authorities knew: the female seed was weak and could give no adequate form to the fetus.”⁷⁰

The major flaw in Fischer-Mueller’s otherwise brilliant conceptualization of gendering processes in Nag Hammadi literature is that she sometimes turns a blind eye to the many differences between the texts that she investigates, presenting the wide variety of perspectives as one concordant voice speaking for “Gnosticism” in general. As Fischer-Mueller claims, the text does convey the rather general belief that the female generative function is inferior to the male. But as Gohring has demonstrated, this understanding is by no means unique for the medical tradition but also occurs frequently in the ancient myths.

The birth narrative in *Ap. John*, I argue, does not presuppose the theoretical framework of ancient medicine, nor does it allude to any motifs exclusive for the medical tradition. In comparison to the graphic depiction of birth and pregnancy in *Orig. World*

⁶⁸ Perkins 1980, 37. See also Gohring 1981, 19.

⁶⁹ See Gohring 1981.

⁷⁰ Fischer-Mueller 1990, 86.

NH II 99-100, the account in *Ap. John* NH II 9:26-10:20 is quite brief. Following the lengthy account of the creation of the aions – a section that compromises almost a third of the text – the pregnancy of Sophia serves as a transition in the narrative, as the first step away from the primal ontological unity. Squeezed in between the long list of the divine source and his perfect beings in NH II 2:26-9:24, and the almost equally extensive description of Ialdabaoth and his minions in NH II 10:10-13:13, the birth narrative provides a bridge between the flawless spiritual sphere and its material imitation. The birth event itself, although crucial for the narrative progression, receives little attention.

The narrative structure in *Orig. World* provides quite a contrast to the disposition in *Ap. John*. While the mythmaker(s) of *Ap. John* dedicate almost a third of the text to the ideal primal state and the creation of the aions, this primal perfection does not even receive a full sentence in *Orig. World*. The stage is already set when the narrative starts. Employing a Coptic precursive construction – a dependent adverbial clause used to provide background to the main clause – the narrator presents the primal state as an already past event. “*When the constitution (φύσις) of the immortals had been perfected by the limitless (one), then (τότε) an image emanated from Pistis, and it was called Sophia.*” Immediately after the stage is set, the narrator proceeds to the birth narrative. As in *Ap. John*, Sophia exercises an act of desire (ΟΥΩΩ). Unlike *Ap. John*, however, the desire is not unambiguously negatively evaluated and it does not, as in *Ap. John*, directly result in the birth of Ialdabaoth. Rather, we are told in *Orig. World* NH II 98:17-23, the will of Sophia becomes a thing (ΖΩΒ) of its own, “being in the likeness of heaven, having an unthinkable greatness.” Positioned in the outskirts of the spiritual sphere, “between the immortals and that which came after them,” the desire of Sophia becomes a “curtain” (παρεπέτσμα), separating the sacred from the profane – or, to use Ortner’s terminology, culture from nature.

How the spiritual sphere gets separated from the lesser, profane reality differs slightly between the two texts. In *Ap. John*, the birth itself becomes, as illustrated above, a bridge between the two worlds. Shapiro’s and Clunies Ross’ distinction between the natural birth and the male pseudo-procreation, enables us to see how the text gender codes the procreative processes and creates a division between spiritual and “worldly” birth. The series of emanations that precede the birth of Sophia are almost clinically asexual in their nature. The aions, being incorporeal and from the same divine source,

procreate without sexual union or conception. Sophia, whose feminine side is emphasized and differentiated from her masculine side in *Ap. John* NH II 9:31-33, is the first character to appear as clearly gendered. Her pregnancy and abortion in *Ap. John* NH II clearly breaks from the pattern of asexual and incorporeal procreation.

Shapiro interprets the differentiation between male pseudo-procreative activities and female “natural” births in mythology as analogous to that between the transient and the eternal.⁷¹ If this understanding is also applicable on this myth, which I believe, the gendered Sophia’s break of the pseudo-procreative pattern signals the beginning of a new transient sphere of existence. The gendered Sophia herself becomes an intermediary character, placed between pure spirit – that which was before her – and the things of nature that she has created. This middle role is further emphasized in NH 13:13-14:13, where Sophia, in spite of her repentance and the forgiveness she receives, is not allowed to return to the highest sphere and becomes confined to “the Ninth,” an intermediary sphere slightly above Ialdabaoth’s domains.

According to Ortner, the use of the female as an intermediary principle, mediating culture and nature, is a widely attested concept.

Because of woman’s greater bodily involvement with the natural functions surrounding reproduction, she is seen as more a part of nature than man is. Yet in part because of her consciousness and participation in human social dialogue, she is recognized as a participant in culture. Thus she appears as something intermediate between culture and nature, lower on the scale of transcendence than man.⁷²

Ap. John seems to draw upon this notion. In the narrative, Sophia becomes gendered first when it gives in to the temptation of creation. Separated from its masculine half, it is denied entry to the most sacred area. The characterization of Sophia, as well as the understanding of the limit between the spiritual and the profane in *Orig. World* differs decisively from the narrative in *Ap. John*.

First of all, we find a much milder rejection of Sophia’s act in *Orig. World* than in *Ap. John*, where it is explicitly denounced. Although *Orig. World* refers to the act as a “deficiency” (ϞΤΑ) in one passage,⁷³ the aion is never punished or excluded from the sacred realm (unlike other characters in the narrative⁷⁴).

⁷¹ See Shapiro 1988, 283.

⁷² Ortner 1974, p 76.

⁷³ *Orig. World* NH II 99:30.

⁷⁴ See the discussion of Adam of Light in chapter 3.

Second, and perhaps most important, Sophia does not give birth to Ialdabaoth in *Orig. World*. Her act merely initiates a chain of events that ultimately leads to his creation. In *Orig. World*, her will becomes a curtain that separates the sacred sphere of the aions (culture) from the lesser sphere that proceeds from it (nature). Unlike *Ap. John*, where Sophia herself and her act of transgression becomes the dividing line between culture and nature, the curtain, serving as a protective wall, is already present when evil emerges.

The curtain casts a shadow on the exterior realm and from it, several powers (δυνάμεις) emerge.⁷⁵ These powers, existing in ignorance of the higher spiritual sphere, refer to the shadow as “the endless Chaos.”⁷⁶ The shadow itself, however, realizes the existence of something higher and becomes jealous. The feeling of jealousy begets – here in a quite literal sense – jealousy as a concept.⁷⁷ Jealousy, in turn, gives rise to the material world and the demiurge.

Why does *Orig. World* differ from *Ap. John* (and the other versions of the Sophia narrative)? I argue that *Orig. World*, through increasing the steps between Pistis Sophia, on the one hand, and the lesser material sphere, on the other hand, seeks to preserve the transcendence of Sophia and rehabilitate the character. The curtain, already functioning as a barrier between the spiritual realm and the chaos outside of it, also separates the divine Pistis/Sophia from the creation of Ialdabaoth and matter.

An interesting theme in *Orig. World* – which I return to later in the essay – is the corruptible effect of sexual activities. After having mingled with lower Pronoia, who is the female aspect of Ialdabaoth, Adam of Light is unable to return to the higher spiritual sphere.⁷⁸ Similarly, the archons conspire to rape the heavenly Eve, in order to prevent her ascent in *Orig. World* NH II 116:12-20. Pistis Sophia in *Orig. World* is never – unlike the Sophia who gives birth to Ialdabaoth in *Ap. John* – restricted in this manner.

Third, as already mentioned above, *Orig. World* provides a more extensive and graphic narration of the chain of births that gives rise to Ialdabaoth and matter than in any other version of the Sophia myth. As these procreative imageries are of considerable importance for both the research questions and the narrative as a whole, I now proceed to discuss them in the subsection below.

⁷⁵ *Orig. World* NH II 98:23-30.

⁷⁶ *Orig. World* NH II 98:31.

⁷⁷ *Orig. World* NH II 99:2-8.

⁷⁸ *Orig. World* NH II 112:10-18.

For a summary of the discussion above and an outline of the main differences between *Ap. John* and *Orig. World*, see the table below:

Main Differences between <i>Ap. John</i> and <i>Orig. World</i>	Apocryphon of John	On the Origin of the World
1. Evaluation of Sophia	After her birth, Sophia is punished and unable to return to the sacred realm.	Sophia receives no punishment. Rather, the character acts as the main protagonist.
2. The Birth of Ialdabaoth	Sophia impregnates herself and gives birth to Ialdabaoth. The emergence of Ialdabaoth results in the creation of the material world and the division between culture (the sacred realm and its inhabitants) and nature (Ialdabaoth and the material world).	Sophia initiates the events that lead to the birth of Ialdabaoth, but she does not give birth herself. A division between culture (the sacred realm) and nature (the chaos outside of it) already exists when Ialdabaoth emerges. The steps between Sophia and Ialdabaoth are also increased.
3. Disposition of the Texts	<i>Ap. John</i> dedicates a lengthy account to describe the births in the sacred realm. The birth of Ialdabaoth, however, is quite short.	<i>Orig. World</i> only briefly mentions the activities in the sacred realm.

2.2.2 The Procreative imagery in *On the Origin of the World* 98-100

Unlike in *Ap. John*, in *Orig. World* Sophia does not conceive Ialdabaoth, the creator God. Sophia merely initiates the series of events that eventually leads to the creation of Ialdabaoth. In *Orig. World* 98:17-22, we learn that Sophia creates a curtain between the sacred realm and formless void outside it. Inside the sacred realm, there is an everlasting light, but outside of it, there is only Shadow.⁷⁹

When the Shadow learns that there is something superior to it, it becomes envious. Suddenly it becomes pregnant (ΟΥΟΥ) through itself (ΖΙΤΟΟΤ̄ ΟΥΛΛΑΤ̄). The pairing of the reflective instrumental ΖΙΤΟΟΤ̄ (through herself) and the predicative adjective ΟΥΛΛΑΤ̄ (alone) serves to underline that the conception occurred without any other involvement.

The offspring is born (ΞΠΟ), but, as in *Ap. John*, the result is disastrous. We learn from 99:8-10 that: “That Jealousy was discovered to be an abortion, because there was no spirit in it.”⁸⁰

My translation is close to Layton’s and Bethge’s: “Now as for the Jealousy, it was found to be an abortion without any spirit in it (ΕΜΝ̄ ΠΝᾹ ΝΖΗΤϣ).”⁸¹ I differ, however, in that I understand the circumstantial Ε paired with a ΜΝ̄-construction, used to negate nouns without article (e. g. there is no house by the road), as a causal explanatory clause: “because there was no spirit in it.”

Orig. World employs a causal clause, I argue, in order to demonstrate why Jealousy should be regarded as an “abortion,” although it is the result of a natural birth. The verb that *Orig. World* uses to describe the conception of Jealousy is ΞΠΟ, the Coptic standard verb for giving birth. Furthermore, it is first after the birth that the monstrosity of the offspring is revealed. Although no actual abortion was performed, the offspring receives the same status as an aborted fetus, *because* it lacks spirit.

The problem of the lack of spirit, is, as we shall see, a key motif in *Orig. World*. But what does it refer to? Perkins and Fischer-Mueller have identified the spirit here as

⁷⁹ I have rendered the Shadow with a capital S, since *Orig. World* depicts it as a personification.

⁸⁰ 99:8-10.

⁸¹ See Layton & Bethge, *Nag Hammadi Codex II 2-7* (ed. Bentley Layton) 1989, 33.

referring to the male contribution to the fetus.⁸² As stated in section 1.7 (Relation to Earlier Research), I am heavily indebted to this interpretation.

In *On the Generation of Animals* (henceforth: *Gen. an.*), Aristotle provides a lengthy discussion of human male and female physiology. The female, Aristotle claims, shares most male characteristics, but is decisively weaker than the male.⁸³ Accordingly, the menstrual fluid is analogous to the male semen, just as the female is analogous to male – in every aspect similar, yet inferior.⁸⁴ The male contribution is “the active and efficient ingredient,” while the female contribution is passive.⁸⁵ To illustrate how procreation works, Aristotle uses the analogy of a bed and a carpenter. After the sexual union between male and female, their offspring “is formed from them only in the sense that in which a bed (κλίνη) is formed from the carpenter and the wood, or a ball from the wax and the form” (translation: A. L. Peck).⁸⁶ The female fluids function as analogous to the material, while the male contribution – the spirit (πνεῦμα) – serves as the carpenter and provides form to the material.

If the male contribution “gains the mastery” over the “material” (i. e. the female contribution), the offspring becomes male.⁸⁷ If it fails, however, the offspring will be “deficient” – that is, either female⁸⁸ or, in worst case, a monstrosity.⁸⁹ A severely deformed offspring, Aristotle claims, should be treated as if it were an abortion:

And wherever a deficiency occurs in such parts as *e. g.* an extremity or some other limb, we must take it that the cause is the same as it is if the whole of the forming creature suffers abortion – and abortions (ἀμβλωσις) of fetations frequently occurs (Translation A. L. Peck).⁹⁰

As discussed above, we find a similar series of events in *Orig. World*, where a parthenogenesis fails miserably because the offspring lacks *pneuma*, the “active and efficient ingredient” in the process of conception.

In *Orig. World* 99:10-14, the passage that follows, we learn that Jealousy came to existence in “a watery substance of great proportions.” “Then, the bile (χολή [Greek: χολή]) that had come out of the shadow (during the process of birth) was thrown into a region of the Chaos.”

⁸² Perkins 1980, 38; Fischer-Mueller 1990, 86.

⁸³ *Gen. an.* 728a,

⁸⁴ *Gen. an.* 727b.

⁸⁵ *Gen. an.* 729b.

⁸⁶ *Gen. an.* 729b.

⁸⁷ *Gen. an.* 766b.

⁸⁸ *Gen. an.* 767b.

⁸⁹ *Gen. an.* 769b.

⁹⁰ *Gen. an.* 773a.

The sudden and unexpected introduction of bile has, as Andrew Crislip remarks, puzzled many scholars.⁹¹ To make sense of the passage, Louis Painchoud has suggested an emendation to χόριον, afterbirth.⁹² In *Nag Hammadi Deutsch* Hans-Gerhard Bethge argues that χολή should be interpreted in a figurative sense and translates it as wrath (Zorn).⁹³ Crislip follows Bethge's interpretation and argues that since wrath often appears in conjunction with envy in literature contemporary to *Orig. World* it is reasonable that the text attempts to link the two concepts here as well.⁹⁴

While I agree with Crislip that no emendation is needed to make sense of the passage, I hold that the allusions to Aristotelian medicine which we encounter in the text actually suggest that χολή should be understood in a literal sense. In this case, the inclusion of bile in the narrative would not, I propose, only function as an etiology for the concept of wrath and its close relation to envy, but could also serve to stress the inferior status of the natural birth and its offspring.

In *Parts of Animals*, Aristotle characterizes bile as one of the bodily residues that does not have a function. Not only is bile useless – it can also be harmful and shorten the lifespan.⁹⁵

So it is evident that bile exists for no definite purpose, but is merely an offscouring. So that was an extremely neat remark which we find made by some of the old authors, when they say that if you have no gall in you your life will be longer. This was a reference to animals with uncloven hoofs and to deer, which have no gall-bladder, and are long-lived. And also, certain other animals are long-lived, such as the dolphin and the camel, which, though unobserved by them, have no gall-bladder. After all, the liver is vital and indispensable for all blooded animals, and so it is quite reasonable to hold that the condition of it controls the length of its owner's life (Translation: E. S. Forster)⁹⁶

But why then, would it appear as afterbirth in *Orig. World*? The purpose, I believe, is twofold. On the one hand, it serves to further underline the monstrous condition of Jealousy, the offspring that has been nourished by a bodily residue repulsive and harmful to others. On the other hand, it also displays the inferiority and transient nature of matter. After the introduction of the bile, *Orig. World* identifies the residual products

⁹¹ Andrew Crislip, 2011, 296.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Bethge 2001, 243.

⁹⁴ Crislip, 2011, 309-310.

⁹⁵ In *Parts of Animals* 677a, Aristotle writes: "So it is evident that bile exists for no definite purpose, but is merely an offscouring. So that was an extremely neat remark which we find made by some of the old authors, when they say that if you have no gall in you your life will be longer. This was a reference to animals with uncloven hoofs and to deer, which have no gall-bladder, and are long-lived. And also, certain other animals are long-lived, such as the dolphin and the camel, which, though unobserved by them, have no gall-bladder. After all, the liver is vital and indispensable for all blooded animals, and so it is quite reasonable to hold that the condition of it controls the length of its owner's life" (Translation: E. S. Forster).

⁹⁶ *Part. an.* 677a

of the afterbirth with matter, the building blocks of Cosmos: “Just as one who gives birth to a child and all of her afterbirth falls out, in this manner, matter came into existence from the shadow and was thrown out.”⁹⁷ From the perspective of Aristotelian thought, the identification of afterbirth with matter is not particularly surprising, as Aristotle refers to the female contribution to the fetus as “the primal matter” (ἡ πρώτη ὕλη).⁹⁸ Through contrasting the sexless emanation of Sophia from Pistis, as well as the curtain that separates the sacred realm from the other darkness, with the graphically depicted pregnancy and birth of the Shadow, *Orig. World* employs a pseudo-procreative discourse. The curtain, that separates the realm of light from the darkness outside, becomes a boundary between the eternal, which is brought forth through otherworldly means of procreation, and the temporal, whose manner of conception resembles a natural birth. Through associating matter with bile, which is known to shorten the lifespan, *Orig. World* emphasizes the transient nature of Cosmos.

In its eschatological section, *Orig. World* reconnects to this motif. Since the world – unlike the eternal realm of the aions – is temporary, it is also destined for destruction.⁹⁹ In 125:32-127:17, the final apocalyptic section, we learn that everything that postdates the heavenly realm and has originated in darkness is doomed to perish.

2.3 Summary

Orig. World employs procreative imagery in order to differentiate between the eternal and spiritual realm of God, on the one hand, and the transitory and material cosmos, on the other hand. When the principle of envy comes into being through a self-induced pregnancy, matter, which is the building block of Cosmos, appears as its afterbirth. Another product of the afterbirth, we learn, is bile, a residual product that Aristotle understood as harmful and life shortening. Through associating matter with bile, *Orig. World* emphasizes the transient character of Cosmos and anticipates the destruction of the world.

A main difference from the Sophia narrative in other Nag Hammadi texts is the evaluation of Sophia, which is more positive in *Orig. World*. Unlike in *Ap. John*, it is not Sophia who gives birth. Sophia merely initiates the events that lead up to the creation of

⁹⁷ 99:17-22

⁹⁸ Gen. an. 729a

⁹⁹ See also 103:25-28, where Pistis Sophia at an earlier stage in the narrative announces the destruction of the world: “The whole deficiency that has truly become evident will be destroyed at (the time of) the end of your works, and it will perish and be like that which never existed.”

the world, and there are several steps between her and the Shadow, who is described as having a natural birth. Furthermore, in *Orig. World*, Sophia is not punished or excluded from the higher realm, as in *Ap. John*.

The more positive evaluation of Sophia in *Orig. World* is interesting and could imply that the text had problems to reconcile Sophia's birth with her prominent role in salvation history. Through increasing the steps between her initial act of volition and the biological birth that results in the creation of matter, *Orig. World* prevents her from being closely associated with transient activities, and reinforces the dichotomy between natural and spiritual birth.

3. Birth and Destruction in *Orig. World* 108-115 and 125-127

3.1 Summary of the Events in *Orig. World* 108-115: Eros and Psyche, and the Creation of Trees, Plants and the first Humans

With a great host of Gods and angels gathered before him, Ialdabaoth, the creator God, becomes boastful. "I am God, and there is no other, except for me," he claims (103:3-13.) Pistis answers immediately: "You are wrong, 'Samael' (which is 'the blind God'). An immortal man of light existed before you" (103:15-31). When Pistis reveals her likeness in the waters, Ialdabaoth realizes that he had been wrong and grieves (107:17-108:2). After a short time of expressing regrets, however, Ialdabaoth makes the same mistake again when challenging the higher divinities of the sacred realm: "If there existed someone before me, let him reveal himself, so that we can see his light!"

A being of light – identified as "Adam of Light" – then appears before Ialdabaoth (108:3-25). While the male aspect of the creator God becomes ashamed of his mistake, Pronoia, the feminine aspect, instantly falls in love.¹⁰⁰ Adam of Light, however, hates her,

¹⁰⁰ As discussed below, it is unclear whether Pronoia should be understood as simply an aspect of the creator God or an independent character.

“because she exists in darkness.” Unable to embrace him and equally unable to “cure”¹⁰¹ her love, Pronoia “pours her light upon the earth” (108:15-19). Although Pronoia pours light upon the earth in 108:15-19, the substance that reaches the ground and generates new life is described as blood in the subsequent passages.¹⁰²

The blood of Pronoia that has been poured on the earth initiates the growth of trees: grapevines, fig trees and pomegranates sprout up from it (109:25-111:8). From the blood of Pronoia, Eros – the Greek God of love – emerges (109:1-22). As all of the Gods and angels fall in love with him, the erotic urges of Eros becomes dispersed in all of the creations. This event also introduces sexual intercourse and pleasure.

The First Soul (Psyche), an entity that has not been mentioned prior to this point, falls in love with Eros. Mirroring the “romance” of Adam of Light and Pronoia, the First Soul pours blood over the earth, from the first rose emerges. Afterwards, various fragrant flowers sprout up from “the daughters of Pronoia.”¹⁰³ Also they fall in love with Eros and pour their blood on the earth.

From The First Soul’s blood, other plants emerge, which contains the seed of “the authorities and their angels” (111:21-29). Then the authorities create different animals, which all contain the seeds of them and their angels.

Adam of Light withdraws from the world and ascends towards the sacred realm, but he cannot enter, because Pronoia has mingled with his light and he has lost some of his purity (112:10-18). Instead, he creates a realm for himself, positioned between the cosmos and the sacred realm.

3.2 Analysis

3.2.1 Cupid and Psyche in the *Golden Ass*

Unlike the Sophia Narrative in *Orig. World* 97-99, we find no parallels to the procreative imagery in *Orig. World* 108-111 among the other Nag Hammadi texts. Rather, *Orig. World* 108-11 builds loosely on two narratives: Genesis 1-3 and the myth of Cupid (the latin version of the Greek God Eros) and Psyche, in Apuleius’ *The Golden Ass*.

¹⁰¹ τᾶσο causative of λαθε: “heal, make to cease.” Crum 1939 151b; 411b.

¹⁰² See section 3.2.2 for a discussion of these inconsistencies in the text.

¹⁰³ Prior to this point in the narrative, we find no mention of “the daughters of Pronoia” and we receive no explanation for their identity, nor for their role in the narrative.

The Graeco-Roman influences in *Orig. World's* Eros and Psyche myth – and in particular the indebtedness to Apuleius' *The Golden Ass* – have been discussed extensively by Michel Tardieu.¹⁰⁴ I do not claim to make any new contributions to questions regarding intertextual parallels or the relation between the two texts. Tardieu has done a great job and I am only interested in the Eros and Psyche narrative, insofar that it can shed light on the research questions of this essay. As I do believe that the confusing narrative of *Orig. World* becomes a little clearer if the reader is familiar with the Cupid and Psyche narrative in *The Golden Ass* and is aware of the allusions to the text made in *Orig. World*, I will provide a brief summary of the events in Apuleius' novel.

The Cupid and Psyche narrative covers roughly a fifth of Apuleius' book and centers around the character Psyche, who is one of three royal sisters.¹⁰⁵ The sisters are all famous for their looks, but Psyche's extraordinary beauty exceeds the others'. As in many other ancient tales of beautiful mortal women, Psyche's loveliness soon becomes a curse.¹⁰⁶ When some visiting admirers claim that her beauty even surpasses the splendor of Venus, the Goddess decides to punish the girl. As a punishment, Venus decides, the beautiful Psyche will fall in love a hideous monster. She dispatches Cupid to carry out the task and shoot Psyche with one of his magic arrows. Not even Cupid, however, remains unaffected by Psyche's beauty. At the sight of her, he accidentally cuts himself with the head of an arrow. Madly in love, Cupid fails to carry out his task and leaves without obeying his mother's orders.

As time passes, Psyche's sisters find husbands and marry. Psyche, however, is not as lucky. In spite of being the most beautiful girl in the area, Venus' hostility prevents any of the suitors from ever falling in love with Psyche. Psyche's parents, who begin to suspect that something is wrong, consult an oracle. The answer they receive is far from encouraging: Psyche is destined to marry a monster whom neither God nor mortal can resist. Instructed by the oracle, they leave Psyche at a mountaintop, and the wind takes her to a castle where the monster (and future husband) resides. Her future husband only visits her at night, when the bedroom is covered in darkness, and he tells her that she must never see what he looks like. After some time, Psyche grows curious. Persuaded by her sisters, she waits for the nocturnal visitor to fall asleep and fetches a lamp. Struck by

¹⁰⁴ Tardieu, 1974, 146-150.

¹⁰⁵ *Golden Ass* book IV 28 to book VI 24.

¹⁰⁶ There are several examples of ancient myths where beautiful women suffer horrible fates, after having attracted the attention of the Gods. See for example Poseidon's rape of Medusa (and her subsequent punishment by Athena) or the violent death of Semele, Dionysus's mother.

the beauty of the visitor (who, in fact, is Cupid), Psyche first pricks herself with one of his arrows, and then accidentally pours some burning oil on him. Furious, Cupid tells her that she will never see him again and flees.

Psyche, who is now as madly in love as Cupid, embarks on a quest to set things right and retrieve her beloved. In order to see Cupid again, Venus tells her, she must perform a series of dangerous tasks, which involve a trip to the underworld. Against all odds (and with the help of several divine beings), she succeeds. As a reward, she is granted immortality and receives permission to marry Cupid. Together they have a daughter called Voluptas, "Pleasure" (Greek: ἡδονή).

Corresponding narrative in *Orig. World* builds primarily on one scene in *Golden Ass*, book V 21-24, where the curious Psyche, overwhelmed by the beauty of her nocturnal visitor, drops oil on him. The implications of the events in *Orig. World*, however, are vastly different from the passage in Apuleius' tale. The spilling of the oil in the *Golden Ass* could easily count among the great anticlimaxes in the history of literature: Psyche's lover has just been revealed as the most beautiful of the Gods, but all she manages to do is to drive him off. In *Orig. World*, the oil serves instead to designate the orgasmic climax of the sexual union between The First Soul (Psyche) and Eros, which is further underlined by the generative function of the blood/light that the First Soul pours on the ground.

In addition to the romantic union between the First Soul and Eros modeled, the encounter between Adam of Light and Pronoia is also modeled on Apuleius' tale. Since Adam of Light and Pronoia initiate the events that ultimately lead up to the union between the First Soul and Eros, I will follow the chronology of the narrative and first discuss the former before I proceed to the latter.

3.2.2 The Blood of Pronoia

When Ialdabaoth challenges the supremacy of the sacred realm and questions whether there is someone above him, Adam of Light appears as a proof. Ialdabaoth, we are told, is greatly ashamed, but Pronoia, "who is with him" (that is, with Ialdabaoth) (ϵΤΝΜΜΑϣ), falls in love.

Who is this Pronoia character? *Orig. World* 101:10-102:2, a previous passage, might provide a clue. In *Orig. World* 101:10-101:24, Ialdabaoth “creates” three sons.¹⁰⁷ After this event, seven androgynous entities appear in the Chaos, which is positioned outside the sacred realm (101:24-102:2). All of these, we are told, have a feminine name as well as a masculine name. The text provides us with a complete list of names for six of the seven entities. The first of them, however, is only referred to by the female name Pronoia Sambathas. Bethge and Layton suggest that the passage is corrupt and that a scribe unintentionally has left out Ialdabaoth’s name.¹⁰⁸ The next name in the list, Jao, is referred to as the son of Pronoia. As Jao is also one of the entities that Ialdabaoth created in *Orig. World* 101:10-24 - in other words, Ialdabaoth’s son - I find Bethge’s and Layton’s hypothesis plausible, that Pronoia Sambathas is the female aspect of Ialdabaoth.

It is difficult to grasp exactly how the mythmaker(s) of *Orig. World* would have imagined the relations between Pronoia (the female aspect) and Ialdabaoth (the male aspect of the androgynous creator God). On the one hand, it seems from the short account on the male and female names in 101:25-102:2 that Pronoia and Ialdabaoth are simply designations for the male and female features of the same entity. In the encounter with Adam of Light in *Orig. World* 108:15-19, on the other hand, we find Ialdabaoth and Pronoia depicted as two separate characters, almost as if the creator God would have suffered from a split personality (or a split ontology).

A similar ambiguity occurs in the Sophia narrative in *Ap. John* 9:31-33, where Sophia defies her “consort” (ΩΒΡ̄ ΝΖΩΤΡ̄), an entity who is also described as “the character” (πρόσωπον) of Sophia’s “masculinity” (ΜΝΤΖΟΟΥΤ). While Sophia and her consort are closely intertwined, they also act as separate characters.

Orig. World is full of such logical incoherencies. In *Orig. World* 109:9-16, for example, we learn how the essence of Eros becomes dispersed (ΧΩΩΡΕ) and comes to exist within all people – even before Adam, the first human, has been created. Likewise, it is notoriously difficult to separate Pistis and Sophia, who seem to be different characters in *Orig. World* 98:13-14 (we find Sophia described as an aspect of Pistis), but appear as a single being in later passages, referred to as “Pistis-Sophia” (100:1-2; 100:10; 103:17; 106:11).

¹⁰⁷ Interestingly, the verb is ΤΑΜΙΟ, “create,” rather than the expected ΧΠΟ, “beget.”

¹⁰⁸ Bethge and Layton 1989, 37.

Contradictory and eluding passages such as these cannot always be harmonized and explained. In this essay, where the main purpose is to investigate the procreative imagery in the text, I believe it is sufficient to say that Pronoia as a character is closely associated with Ialdabaoth.

As Psyche in Apuleius' tale, Pronoia falls in love at first sight, but differently from in Apuleius' romance, the love is not mutual. Not only does Adam of Light not love her back – he hates (ΜΟСТΕ) her. Unable to make her love cease (ΤΑΛΟΟ), Pronoia pours out “her light” over the earth.

The “light” that Pronoia drops presents another interpretive difficulty. From the passages that follow we learn that it is, in fact, blood that falls on the ground. Tardieu suggests that the text implies that it is a mixture of blood and light that falls to the ground – light from Adam and blood from Pronoia.

Le consequence de l'amour de Pronoia pour le premier Adam est que l'élément lumineux d'Adam passe à Pronoia. Celle-ci, ne pouvant étreindre la totalité de l'Adam-Lumière, en obtient ainsi une partie. Le texte précise bien que c'est *sa* propre lumière que, dans l'impossibilité de s'unir au premier Adam, Pronoia répand sur la terre. 'Depuis ce jour-la' est-il ajouté précédents du mythe permettent d'identifier sang et lumière, vierge et Pronoia.¹⁰⁹

I find his interpretation plausible. In *Orig. World* 109:1-7, a later passage, we learn that Eros, the offspring of Pronoia, originated from both light and blood. Like most of the characters in *Orig. World*, Eros is androgynous and has a masculine side as well as a feminine. His “masculinity” consists of “fire from the light,” while his femininity is “a soul of blood” that comes from “the essence (οὐσία) of Pronoia). Tardieu thus suggests that Eros is a mixed creature, whose masculine parts stem from Adam of Light, whereas the feminine features come from Pronoia.¹¹⁰ Another passage that further strengthens Tardieu's hypothesis is *Orig. World* 111:2-8, where we learn that the olive tree originated from “the light of the first Adam,” in contrast to the other plants, bushes and trees that came from the blood.

Orig. World 109:25-111:29 provides a detailed account on the origins of plants and animals, which are genealogically connected to either Adam of Light, Pronoia, Eros, the First Soul or the archons. As these passages are of key importance for this paper's research questions, I will return to them and provide a more extensive analysis. First, however, it is necessary to discuss the birth metaphor in the Pronoia narrative.

¹⁰⁹ Tardieu 1974, 142.

¹¹⁰ Tardieu, 1974, 144.

As Gedaliahu Stroumsa points out, there are several ambiguities in the description of Pronoia's conception.

Similarly, as a consequence of her lust, Pronoia became pregnant by herself and immediately thereafter aborted the fetus. The abortion is what the text calls her "blood." The ambiguity of the female blood is here explicit. In addition to the obvious reference to menstrual blood, it is both a sexual emission – parallel to the male semen – and a miscarriage. Thus, the text can say that Adam "had taken form like the aborted fetuses."¹¹¹

Perhaps interpreting the Pronoia narrative in light of the preceding procreative imagery, Stroumsa suggests that the blood that Pronoia pours on the ground should be understood both as a miscarriage and a sexual emission.¹¹² While I concur with Stroumsa that the passage links the emission of blood with sexual desire, I fail to find any references to a miscarriage. Problematically, the passage that Stroumsa quotes from, *Orig. World* 115:1, where Adam is likened to an aborted fetus, occurs much later in the text and refers to the archons and their inability to generate a fully functioning being.

The notion of menstrual blood as an expression for female desire also occurs in Talmud (bNid20b; bNid 66a). In *Menstrual Purity: Rabbinic and Christian Reconstructions of Biblical Gender*, Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert defines this "blood of desire" as "blood that a women discharges prior to intercourse out of excitement and anticipation."¹¹³ According to Tirzah Zechura Meacham, the "blood of desire" has no equivalent in ancient medical literature.¹¹⁴ Fonrobert argues persuasively that "blood of desire" is a purely fictional construction and a product of male fantasies, where "the male ejaculation as a result of excitement would serve as a model for the 'blood of desire.'"¹¹⁵ In a brief discussion of the concept of "blood of desire," Ishay Rosen Zvi reaches a similar conclusion.¹¹⁶

Orig. World seems to draw on a similar idea. The blood comes forth as a result of Pronoia's desire and excitement. Unlike in the rabbinic accounts, however, the blood of desire in *Orig. World* has a generative function, thus combining the rabbinic notion of the blood of desire with ideas from ancient medicine.

¹¹¹ Stroumsa 1984, 66.

¹¹² See section 2.3, for a discussion of the previous procreative imagery in the text.

¹¹³ Fonrobert 2000, 116-117.

¹¹⁴ Fonrobert 2000, 261 n. 39. See the quote from Tirzah Zecharah Meacham.

¹¹⁵ Fonrobert 2000, 262, n. 39.

¹¹⁶ Rosen Rvi 2011, 125-126.

Scholars who read the Nag Hammadi literature in the light of ancient medical works have received some criticism for their inability to specify *which* medical author the Nag Hammadi texts draws on. As Elisabeth A. Castelli demonstrates, there are several points where Aristotle and Galen differ from one another: Galen claimed, for example, that also females produced semen, and that the testicles were of fundamental importance during the conception.¹¹⁷ Much of this criticism, I argue, is unjustified. Problematically, Castelli fails show what differences these observations would make for the interpretation of *Orig. World*.¹¹⁸

Several scholars have identified the lack of *pneuma* as a characteristic of an abortive offspring as an Aristotelian notion, and I believe that they are right. The difference between Aristotle and Galen on this point, however, is not as vast as Castelli would make it seem. While Galen, unlike Aristotle, claimed that the female also produced semen, he shared his conviction that the male contribution had to prevail over the female in order to produce a healthy offspring. In one of his treatises, Galen even states, in an Aristotelian fashion, that “the female semen is exceedingly weak and unable to that state of motion that could impress an artistic form upon the fetus.”¹¹⁹ While the lack of *pneuma* probably refers to an Aristotelian framework, the implication of the passages in *Orig. World* where the expression occurs by no means excludes a Galenian understanding. Although the technical details may differ, it is clear what the text seeks to communicate: that the conceptions fail due to the lack of male involvement.

The mythological account in *Orig. World* and *Ap. John* - where different characters throughout the narrative, both male and female, bring forth new life – does not follow any medical authority of its time wholeheartedly. Although Aristotle and Galen did differ on whether women were able to produce semen or not, none of them claimed that anyone, whether male or female, would be able to create new life alone.¹²⁰ Through the aetiologies and genealogies, the mythmaker(s) of *Orig. World* aimed to add meaning to and explain the world as they saw it. When they saw fit, they used the theoretical

¹¹⁷ Elisabeth A. Castelli 1988, 362.

¹¹⁸ Castelli 1988, 362, holds that: “there are these serious points of disagreement between the two thinkers, and these differences should be placed in sharper focus in order to represent the heterogeneous character of ancient medical discourse.” She does not, however, motivate what impact these points of disagreements would have on *Orig. World*.

¹¹⁹ Galen, *On the Usefulness of the Parts of the Body*, II, trans. Margaret Tallmadge May (Ithaca, New York: Cornell Univ. Press, 1968), 303. See quote in Fischer-Mueller 1990, 85-86.

¹²⁰ See Pres 1977, for a great survey of Aristotle's and Galen's views on conception.

framework of ancient medicine, but they did not conform or restrict themselves to a particular school.

The question remains why the text breaks from the pattern of the previous birth metaphor, where the birth is initiated with a self-induced pregnancy. The main reason, I believe, is that the text aims to provide a genealogy, where the manner of conception resembles the characteristics of the offspring. In *Orig. World* 99-100, for example, the shadow learns that light is greater than darkness and becomes envious. Affected by the feeling of envy, the shadow becomes pregnant through herself (ΖΙΤΟΟΤC) and gives birth to the character Envy. Similarly, the sight of the radiantly beautiful Adam of Light and that passion it evokes brings forth several creations that are all in some way related to sexuality.

3.2.3 Eros

The encounter between Eros and the First Soul in *Orig. World* 111:8-10 is brief and much similar to *Orig. World* 108:15-19, where Pronoia falls in love with Adam of Light. Unlike the account about Pronoia and Adam of Light, the meeting between Eros and the First Soul is more mutual, and unlike Adam of Light, Eros does not display any reluctance against his partner. Similarly to the passion of Pronoia, the First Soul falls in love with Eros and pours her blood over him and over the earth. As in the case with Pronoia, various creations spring forth from her blood of desire. For a discussion of the creations that emerge from the blood and their implications for the text as a whole, see the subsection 3.2.4 “The Origin of Plants and Flowers” below.

The reason why Eros acts more favorably against his partner than Adam of Light did to Pronoia may seem fairly obvious: He is the God of love and it would not be fitting for a deity so closely associated with erotic passion to turn down a lover. An additional reason, however, is the composite nature of Eros, who descends from both Adam of Light and from Pronoia.

From the first blood, Eros emerged, androgynous. His masculinity is Himireris, as it is fire from light. His femininity, which is with him, is a blood soul from the substance of Pronoia (109:1-6).

The reason for this emphasis on the dual nature of Eros, I argue, is that *Orig. World* seeks to establish a connection between the radiant beauty of Adam of Light and the equally mesmerizing qualities of Eros (108:6-9). Unlike Adam, however, who consists of

pure light, comes from the eighth heaven, a place of light, and is indifferent to the erotic passions (108:16-19) Eros is also, through his affinity with Pronoia, associated with sexual desire.

The tension between a character such as Adam of Light, on the one hand, and Pronoia, the female side of the creator God, on the other hand, is clear in *Orig. World* 112:10-12. Because Adam's light has intermingled with "poverty," that is, the substance of Pronoia, he is banished from the sacred realm and not allowed to return. From *Orig. World* 108:15-19, the enigmatic account of the meeting between Adam of Light and Pronoia, it seems that Adam of Light does not actively partake in the erotic encounter. He hates Pronoia, because she is in the darkness, and she is unable to embrace him. From later passages such the one on the composite nature of Eros, quoted above, and *Orig. World* 111:2-8, on the origin of the olive tree, we learn that both Adam and Pronoia, somehow, during their encounter have dropped a substances that falls to the ground: Pronoia, her "blood of desire," and Adam, his divine light. As the episode seems to be modeled on a passage from the *Golden Ass*, one can easily imagine how Adam drops his light when he attempts to flee from Pronoia's embraces, much like Cupid flees from Psyche when the light is dropped in Apuleius' tale, but as *Orig. World* provides so little information about the event, one can only speculate.

The punishment and exile of Adam from the sacred realm in 112:10-12 depicts the mixing of the light and blood as a transgression. Eros is the product of seemingly irreconcilable opposites, a fusion of light and beauty, on the one hand, and darkness and sexual desire, on the other hand. Eros, in other words, has all of his father's mesmerizing qualities, as well as his mother's sexual passion. Thus, the composite nature, I argue, should be seen as an attempt to explain how Eros - a creature that is sexual desire personified, a repulsive vice, according to the mythmaker(s) of *Orig. World*¹²¹ - comes across as otherworldly beautiful.

As Eros is even more irresistible than his father, Adam of Light, the Gods and angels cannot help but fall in love when they see him (109:8-10). In the same manner as "many lamps are lit from a single lamp and a single fire, although the lamp does not go out," Eros appears and spreads out in "all of the creations of Chaos" (109:10-16).

Through these events, sexual desire emerges and comes to affect all the divine entities of Chaos. But Eros does not only influence the divine beings, but also humanity.

¹²¹ See the discussion below, on how *Orig. World* links sexual passion to death.

Just as (he appeared) in the middle of light and darkness, Eros revealed himself in the midpoint of angels and humans; in this manner was the sexual intercourse of Eros completed, (and) the First Pleasure sprouted up from the ground (109:16-21).

The creation of pleasure, ἡδονή, is clearly an illusion to Cupid's and Psyche's child Voluptas in the *Golden Ass* VI 24. Unfortunately, we do not receive much information about Eros' offspring in *Orig. World* – and even less so about Cupid's in the *Golden Ass* – but it is clear from the circumstances that the First Pleasure, who appears through “the sexual intercourse” (συνουσία) of Eros, has sexual connotations.

The next passage in the text, which breaks the Eros narrative with a statement of a more general nature, may at first look seem oddly displaced.

Woman came after earth and marriage came after woman, birth came after marriage, destruction (βωλ εβωλ) came after birth (109:22-25).

First, the statement does not fit with the overall chronology of the text. The animals, plants and celestial bodies are yet to be created and neither Adam, nor Eve exists. The break in the narrative, however, becomes less of a problem, if it is read against the previous passage, where Eros appears “in the midpoint of angels and humans.” *Orig. World* deliberately breaks the chronology, I argue, in order to provide an etiology, which explains how sexual desire emerged and spread throughout the cosmos. As sexual desire continues to affect different celestial beings throughout the narrative (see for example “the daughters of Pronoia” in *Orig. World* 110:15-20 and the archons in 115:12-20), it was necessary to introduce sexual desire at this point, rather than to wait until humanity had been created.

The second problem may seem more puzzling: what on earth does “woman” have to do with Eros and the First Pleasure? And how is birth linked to death?

In a male pseudo-procreative discourse, the female ability to generate life often becomes a symbol for decay and transience.¹²² *Orig. World* 109:22-25 seems to draw on a similar notion: everything that comes into life through a natural birth is ultimately destined for destruction. That this enigmatic passage appears immediately after emergence of the First Pleasure, a product of the “sexual intercourse” of Eros, is not, I believe, a coincidence. Employing a male pseudo-procreative discourse, *Orig. World* uses “woman” and natural birth as a symbol for the transient life, as opposed to the eternal

¹²² Shapiro 1988, 286.

life that awaits the followers who have attained the right understanding.¹²³ This notion, it seems, is also paired with the ancient conception of female sexuality as an almost uncontrollable force of nature that had to be tamed by men.¹²⁴ Following this line of thought, *Orig. World* 109:22-25 links erotic pleasure (ΖΗΔΟΝΗ; Greek: ἡδονή, the offspring of Eros) with the female.

Furthermore, the view on natural birth in *Orig. World* 109:22-25 also serves as an interpretative key for the previous procreative imagery. The graphic depiction of the birth in *Orig. World* 99:2-22 – where the shadow brings forth envy, an offspring that is likened to an abortion due to its manner of conception, and where the afterbirth becomes the matter of which the universe will consist – builds on this theoretical framework. The natural birth brings forth the temporal and transient, as opposed to the eternal and indestructible. The birth metaphor serves, I argue, to underline the transience and inferiority of the creation. Just as the introduction of sexual passion also introduces death into the world, since everyone that is born is destined to die, the use of a birth metaphor to describe the creation of matter indicates in a similar manner that everything that consists of matter someday will dissolve and perish.

As we will see below, in the next section 3.2.4, “The Origin of Plants and Flowers,” *Orig. World* provides a genealogy of plants and animals, where desire is explained and traced back to the blood of Pronoia. As they originally stem from menstrual blood – described by Aristotle in *Gen. an.* 729a as “the primal matter,” (τὴν πρώτην ὕλην) – they are also temporal and inferior. These creations are contrasted against the olive tree, the tree of life and the tree of knowledge: three plants that are either imperishable (the tree of life and the tree of knowledge) or have an important role in the end times (the olive tree), and derive from either Adam of Light or from the highest God.

In section 3.3, “‘The Light Will Destroy the Darkness’: The Destruction at the End of Times,” I demonstrate how the eschatological account in *Orig. World* 126-127 refers back to the births in 108-110 and thereby further strengthens my hypothesis that the procreative imagery are used to indicate that the creations are transient and ultimately destined for destruction.

¹²³ See for example *Orig. World* 110:9-13, where we learn how the tree of eternal life will make the believer immortal.

¹²⁴ Pomeroy 1975, 8-9

3.2.4 The Origin of Plants and Flowers

With the exception of Eros, the grapevine is the first creation that emerges from the blood of Pronoia:

After that Eros, the grapevine was produced from the blood that had been poured upon the ground, which is why (ΕΤΒΕ ΠΑΙ) those who drink from it bring forth for themselves the desire for sexual intercourse (109:25-29).

The explanatory clause, introduced with the Coptic ΕΤΒΕ ΠΑΙ, serves to further underline the connection between the blood of Pronoia and sexual desire. The reason that wine tends to evoke sexual desire is thus explained genealogically: it is because it stems from the blood of Pronoia.

After the grapevine is completed, the fig tree and the pomegranate sprout up from the ground, “together with the other trees of all kinds (κατὰ γένος).” All of these plants, we learn, contain “the seed of the authorities and angels.” It is reasonable that this seed alludes to the previous passage in 109:8-16, where Eros becomes dispersed in all of the creatures of chaos. “The seed of the authorities and angels,” then, refers to the ability to procreate.

As discussed in the section above, the erotic encounter between Eros and Psyche in 111:8-10 clearly mirrors the passage where Pronoia tries to seduce Adam of Light. Aroused by Eros, Psyche pours blood over him and upon the ground. Nurtured by Psyche’s blood, a rose – an attribute of Aphrodite – emerges from the ground.

This motif is repeated a third and final time, when we encounter “the virgin daughters of Pronoia” in 111:15-20. Like several other characters in the text, the enigmatic daughters of Pronoia appear without any introduction or explanation, and their role in the narrative is not fully clear. Enamored by the extraordinary beauty of Eros, they pour their blood over him and upon the ground, imitating the behavior of Pronoia and Psyche. From their blood of desire, several flagrant and beautiful flowers appear.

What are we to make of these passages? In her article “‘Plenty Sleeps Here’: The Myth of Eros and Psyche in Plotinus and Gnosticism,” Patricia Cox Miller argues that the procreative imagery in *Orig. World* serves to underline the continuity between the sacred realm and the earthly creations. Unlike other creation narratives, where the gap between the divine craftsman and his creations may seem insurmountable, *Orig. World*,

Cox Miller claims, presents a cosmogony where the differentiation between cause and causation becomes blurred.

Creation is not, in this view, a single event that establishes distances between the maker and thing made, but rather a continuous process of the birth of the boundless One in the soul, and the erotic, sexual imagery of both texts serves, I think, to underscore this point.¹²⁵

I find several problems with Cox Miller's analysis of the text. Cox Miller argues that the gendered imagery in the text serves to undermine the authority of patriarchal characters such as the Jewish God, and that *Orig. World* utilizes a highly erotic discourse in order to depict the created world as "organic" (as opposed to "plastic") and thus positively evaluated. Cox Miller writes:

The feminine dimension of reality not only appears, but is intensified, underscored, by its multiple form, setting the masculine world of Ialdabaoth atremble. Accompanied by metaphors of desire, erotic ecstasy, flowing and pouring, and watery reflection, these figures carry a vision of reality that is organic rather than plastic, sexual rather than technological.¹²⁶

Curiously, Cox Miller does not contextualize her interpretation. Nor does she discuss how earlier research has interpreted birth imagery and gendered discourses in the Nag Hammadi texts. PHEME PERKINS – whose work Cox Miller refers to in a footnote¹²⁷ – has argued, on the contrary, that *Orig. World* draws heavily on the theoretical framework of ancient medicine and that the procreative imagery has a highly polemical function.¹²⁸ In "Yaldabaoth: The Gnostic Female Principle in Its Fallenness" (1990), which builds on Perkins's discussion, Aydeet Fischer-Mueller demonstrates how several Nag Hammadi texts employ a gendered discourse to illustrate inferiority.¹²⁹ As Cox Miller's evaluation of the female imagery is the complete opposite of these previous studies, her analysis would have benefited greatly if she had also taken earlier research into account.

Nor does Cox Miller discuss how the procreative symbolism relates to the surrounding literary context of the passage. In the middle of the erotic imagery, immediately after Eros has been dispersed throughout the inhabitants of cosmos, we find a statement, which I find almost impossible to reconcile with Cox Miller's positive evaluation of the female body in *Orig. World*: "Woman came after earth and marriage came after woman, birth came after marriage, destruction (ΒΩΛ ΕΒΟΛ) came after

¹²⁵ Cox Miller 1992, 234.

¹²⁶ Cox Miller 1992, 232.

¹²⁷ See Cox Miller 1992, 236, n. 30.

¹²⁸ Perkins, 1980, 37-39. See also section 1.7, "Earlier Research", for a more thorough presentation of Perkins' views.

¹²⁹ See section 1.7, "Earlier Research", for a more thorough discussion of Fischer-Mueller' views.

birth" (109:22-25).¹³⁰ Since this highly misogynic passage contradicts Cox Miller's interpretation of the text, it is unfortunate that she does not even mention it in her article.

Even more problematic for Cox Miller's interpretation, however, is the distinction between pseudo-procreative symbolism and natural births, which figures prominently throughout *Orig. World*. In the beginning of the text, the sexless pseudo-procreative creation of the aions provides a marked contrast to the self-induced pregnancy that results in the creation of the cosmos.¹³¹ In 108-111, we find a similar differentiation between the plants, trees and flowers that emerge from the menstrual blood of Pronoia, Psyche or the daughters of Pronoia, on the one hand, and the trees that are either created by God or emerge from Adam of Light. If *Orig World*, as Cox Miller suggests, uses erotic symbolism, with graphic depictions of the female body and its function, in order to decrease the distance between the creator and the created, it would come as quite a surprise also to find other creations in the same passage that originate through other means.

Unlike the majority of plants, which all have a similar genealogy and originate from acts of desire, the tree of eternal life and the tree of insight (γνῶσις), we learn, came into being through the will of God.¹³² Another difference concerns the soteriological and eschatological role of the two trees. The tree of eternal life is crucial for the soteriology of the text, as it will make the souls of "the holy ones" eternal when they leave their bodies during the end times.¹³³ The tree of insight imparts the knowledge that is necessary to open the mind of the believer, enabling them to escape from the "slumber of demons" (Τῶν Νῆδαιμῶν) – that is, from the conditions of worldly existence and ignorance – and to eat from the tree of life.¹³⁴

The olive tree seems to occupy an intermediary position, below the two trees in the Garden of Eden but above the creations of Pronoia, Psyche and the daughters of Pronoia. Unlike the tree of eternal life, the olive tree does not appear through the will of God, but through the procreative activity of Pronoia and Adam of Light. Unlike the other plants,

¹³⁰ See page 39 for a more thorough presentation of this passage.

¹³¹ For a more detailed presentation and discussion of this passage, see section 2.

¹³² Actually, *Orig. World* only provides a genealogy for the tree of eternal life (109:8-9). But since the tree of insight is placed next to the tree of eternal life and is described as "having the power (δυναμὶς) of God," it is not too far-fetched to assume that also the tree of insight stems from the highest God.

¹³³ 110:9-113.

¹³⁴ 110:25-29.

however, which originate from the blood of desire, the olive tree sprouts up from the light, the essence of “the first Adam.”¹³⁵ What could be the reason for its special status?

The interpretative key for the special status of the olive tree, I believe, lies in the choice to use the future tense to describe its functions. Similar to the tree of eternal life but unlike the other creations in 108-111, the olive tree has a vital function in the end times ($\overline{\text{N}}\text{Z}\alpha\epsilon\Upsilon$ $\overline{\text{N}}\text{N}\text{Z}\text{O}\text{O}\Upsilon$), when it will purify and anoint the kings and highpriests who will appear then. Unlike the tree of eternal life and the tree of insight, however, the olive tree does not exist in the mythological Garden of Eden but in the world. It is a mundane creation with a divine purpose, and receives a corresponding intermediary position.

Unlike Cox Miller, I do not interpret the procreative metaphors as a rhetorical device to illustrate a connection between God and the creations. Rather, *Orig. World* uses the symbolism of procreation (and pseudo-procreation) to differentiate between the sacred and the mundane. The procreative imagery in 108-111, I suggest, has primarily two functions: 1. To provide the reader with an etiology that explains the origins of fertility and natural growth; and 2. To differentiate between the transient (what is begotten through procreative activities) and the eternal (what is created through pseudo-procreative activities).

The tree of eternal life and the tree of insight receive their unique status partly due to their inability to multiply. As they are eternal and created by God through pseudo-procreative means, they are not subjected to the rules of existence as the other plants, created through procreative activities. Unlike the grapevine, the fig tree and “all other trees of different kinds,” the mythological tree of eternal life and tree of insight do not contain “the seeds of the authorities and angels” – that is, the passion that inspires procreative activities and provides the ability to procreate (109:30-110:1; 111:22-28.) As a result, the circle of life and death, illustrated in 109:22-25 where a birth is always followed by destruction,¹³⁶ does not pertain to them.

Contrary to Cox Miller, I suggest that the procreative imagery in *Orig. World* aims to establish, not a sense of continuity between God and the material world, but a discrepancy between the divinely ordained, on the one hand, and the chaotic and irrational, on the other hand. The activities through which the trees and plants emerge are not initiated by a divine command but fueled by blind sexual passion, an

¹³⁵ 111:2-8.

¹³⁶ See above for quotation.

uncontrollable force that not even the Gods and angels of chaos are able to resist (109:9-10). The power of “love” is further emphasized through the identity of its first “victim.” Not even Pronoia – the providential force of cosmos, who has the ability to influence earthly events¹³⁷ – can withstand its passion.

The creations that emerge from the blood of Pronoia differ significantly from the tree of eternal life, the tree of insight and the olive tree. While the latter trees all somehow relate to the soteriology of the text, the creations that sprout up from the blood of Pronoia are characterized by their outward appearance rather than their function.¹³⁸ The trees are beautiful, “with [sexual] desire in their midst” (110:6-7) and so are the flowers, which also are fragrant (111:15-20).

To sum it all up, the creations that came into being through the will of God, the tree of eternal life and the tree of insight, are imperishable and unique (as they cannot procreate), and they have an important soteriological role in the end times. The olive tree, which has been created through procreative activities and has emerged from the light of Adam, occupies a middle position, between the two mythological trees in the Garden of Eden and the creations that stem from the blood of desire. In contrast to the two mythological trees, the olive tree is not unique, since it is able to procreate. Like every other thing conceived through biological means, it is not eternal and is thus destined to perish (109:22-25). Unlike the creations from the blood of desire, however, the olive tree has an important soteriological function in the end times and is clearly positively evaluated. The plants, trees and flowers that stem from the blood of desire are transient life forms that procreate and perish. Unlike the two mythological trees in the Garden of Eden and the olive tree, they have no soteriological or eschatological function, but they are characterized as beautiful and fragrant, and they are associated to sexual desire.

If, as I suggest, *Orig. World* uses the procreative imagery to differentiate between the eternal and the transient, why does it characterize the transient creations as beautiful? I believe that *Orig. World* deliberately links procreative imagery with descriptions of beauty in order to advocate self-restraint and detachment from transitory beauty.

¹³⁷ For the concept of Providence and its relation to fate in ancient philosophy, as well as its possible implications for *Orig. World*, see Michael Allen Williams, 1992, 438-508.

¹³⁸ The grapevine does provide an etiology for the connection between drunkenness and sexual desire, but unlike, for example the eschatological purpose of the olive tree, the role of the grapevine strictly relates to mundane matters.

In several other Nag Hammadi texts, the Coptic word **Ⲭⲁⲉⲓⲉ**, “beauty,” designates something that is enticing and dangerous – a phantasm that lures the good Christian away from the truth. In the *Gospel of Truth*, for example, the demiurgic being referred to as “Deceit” (**ⲡⲗⲁⲛⲏⲏ**) creates, “through power and beauty” a substitute for the truth (NH I 17:19-20)

Often we find **Ⲭⲁⲉⲓⲉ**, beauty, used to designate sexuality and erotic temptation. The *Exegesis of the Soul* uses a quote from Ezekiel, where a brothel is referred to as “a place of beauty” (**ⲟⲩⲧⲟⲡⲟⲥ ⲛⲉⲬⲁⲉⲓⲉ**) to illustrate the dangers of erotic love (NH II 130:13-15).¹³⁹

In *Thomas the Athlete*, the “corruptible beauty” can not only be seen, but also smelled: We learn about the fate of those who “run after that which is visible and far from the truth” in NH II 140:20-28:

For that which guides them – which is fire – will give to them an illusion (**ⲫⲁⲛⲧⲁⲥⲓⲁ**) of truth, and it will shine on them with a beauty that will corrupt (**ⲟⲩⲬⲁⲉⲓⲉ ⲉⲓⲛⲁⲧⲉⲛⲟⲩ**) and make them captives through a dark sweetness, and it will seize them through a fragrant pleasure and it will blind them through an insatiable desire and it will burn their souls and it will become for them a piercing stake in their heart, for it is not possible for them to ever cast it off (NH II 140:20-28).

In the *Authoritative Teaching*, we find bodily beauty (**ⲟⲩⲬⲁⲉⲓⲉ ⲛⲉⲱⲙⲁ**) referred to as one of the baits that the devil uses to lead Christians astray (NH VI 31:4-5). A later passage in the same texts contrasts the “inner garment,” which is the “beauty” (**Ⲭⲁⲉⲓⲉ**) of the intellect (**ⲉⲓⲛⲧ**, literally “heart”), to the vanity of the flesh (NH VI 32:6-8).

We also find a similar contrast between corporeal and inner beauty in the works of John Chrysostom. In his letter to Theodore, a friend who for the sake of a woman has abandoned his spiritual pursuits, Chrysostom uses to the language of biology to dispel his amorous affections. The human body (and in this case, the female body in particular), Chrysostom demonstrates, is nothing but phlegm, blood and humor, and while it is not negative in itself, it can provide a distraction for those who confuse illusory corporeal beauty with the true beauty of the soul:

I know that you now marvel at the sight of Hermione, and you consider nothing in the world to be equal to her corporeal beauty, but if you would like to, my friend, you would be more

¹³⁹ “The lord said: You built yourself a brothel and created for yourself a place of beauty (**ⲟⲩⲧⲟⲡⲟⲥ ⲛⲉⲬⲁⲉⲓⲉ**).”

glorious than her and more beautiful, as much as golden statues are superior to those of clay. For if the bodily beauty strikes the minds of men with passion and puts them in great excitement, what would then be equal to (its) beauty and goodness, whenever it shines brightly in their minds? For the nature of such a beauty is nothing other than phlegm, blood, bodily fluid, gall and chewed food being digested. For through these, the eyes and cheeks are nourished with fluid, and if they would not receive this irrigation, which goes up from the stomach and the liver every day, then the skin succumbs, the eyes become hollow and all of the outer beauty diminishes, so that, if you would contemplate what lies behind, inside of these beautiful eyes, and that straight nose and the mouth and cheeks, you will say that the corporeal beauty is nothing other than a tomb sprinkled with ashes – its inside is full of so much filth! (*Letter to Theodore after His Fall* 14, Translation: mine)¹⁴⁰

The procreative imagery in *Orig. World* serves a similar purpose and aims to provide a similar “shock therapy.” By creating a genealogy where nature and its inhabitants originate from bodily fluids, *Orig. World* reminds the addressees that the realm of God is far superior. While the world and the things in it may appear fragrant and attractive, their superficial beauty does not match the true beauty of the spiritual things.¹⁴¹

3.3 “The Firmament of the Woman” and the Destruction of the World

Our treatise does not only account for the origin of the world but also for the end of it – and as in much other eschatological literature, the world does not go out with a whimper but with a bang.

As soon as the world had been completed, we learn from *Orig. World* 123:15-24, it become apparent that it was imperfect and “erring.” Its inhabitants were not much better: “all humans” lived in sin and worshipped “lesser Gods” (δαίμονες). They all lived in error, *Orig. World* 123:24 states, until the coming of the “true man.”

¹⁴⁰ Οἶδα ὅτι θαυμάζεις τὴν Ἑρμιόνης ὥραν νῦν, καὶ τῆς εὐμορφίας ἐκείνης οὐδὲν ὅμοιον εἶναι κρίνεις ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς· ἀλλ’ ἐὰν θέλῃς, ὦ φίλος, τοσοῦτον αὐτῆς εὐπρεπέστερος ἔσῃ καὶ ὠραιότερος ὅσον τῶν πηλίνων οἱ χρυσοὶ βελτίους ἀνδριάντες εἰσίν. Εἰ γὰρ ἐπὶ τοῦ σώματος τὸ κάλλος οὕτω τὰς τῶν πολλῶν ἐκπλήττει ψυχὰς καὶ ἀναπηροῖ, ὅταν ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ τοῦτο ἀποστίλῃ, τί ἴσον τοῦ οὕτω καλοῦ καὶ ὠραίου γένοιτ’ ἂν; Ἡ μὲν γὰρ τούτου τοῦ κάλλους ὑπόστασις οὐδὲν ἕτερόν ἐστιν ἢ φλέγμα καὶ αἷμα καὶ ῥεῦμα καὶ χολὴ καὶ τροφῆς διαμασηθείσης χυλός. Τούτοις γὰρ καὶ οἱ ὀφθαλμοὶ καὶ αἱ παρειαὶ καὶ τὰ λοιπὰ πάντα ἄρδεται, κἂν μὴ καθ’ ἐκάστην ἡμέραν δέξηται τὴν ἀρδεῖαν ἐκείνην ἀπὸ τῆς γαστρὸς καὶ τοῦ ἥπατος ἀνιούσαν, τοῦ δέρματος παρὰ τὸ προσῆκον ὑφίζανοντος, τῶν τε ὀφθαλμῶν κοιλαινομένων, εὐθέως ἢ πᾶσα τῆς ὀψεως ἀφίπταται ὥρα. Ὡστε ἐὰν ἐννοήσῃς τί μὲν τῶν καλῶν ἔνδον ἀπόκειται ὀφθαλμῶν, τί δαί τῆς εὐθείας ῥινός, τί δαί τοῦ στόματος καὶ τῶν παρειῶν, οὐδὲν ἕτερον ἢ τάφον κεκονιαμένον εἶναι φήσεις τοῦ σώματος τὴν εὐμορφίαν· τοσαύτης ἔνδον ἀκαθαροῦς ἐστὶ μεστή.

¹⁴¹ For a more general discussion of cosmology in *Orig. World* and how it relates to world view, as well as the implications of the observations made in this section, see section 4, “General Discussion.”

The identity of the true man is clear from another of his designations in *Orig. World* 125:14: he is the Word (ὁ λόγος). To further underline that the savior is identical with the Christ from the Gospels, *Orig. World* 125:17-19 puts the word from Mark 4:22 (and parallels) in his mouth: “There is nothing concealed that is not apparent, and that which has not been known will be understood.”

Christ and other emissaries¹⁴² descend to proclaim the “unknown one” and to impart knowledge about the sacred sphere and the truth about the creation of the world. When this truth has been instructed, the world will perish: kings will wage wars against each other, and blood will fill the earth (126:4-10). Then, *Orig. World* 126:10-11 states, and alludes to Mark 13:24-25: “the sun will be dark and the moon will destroy its light.” Thunder will come from a great power that is situated “above all of the powers of darkness, where the firmament of the woman is” (126:15-16).

Unfortunately, we receive little explanation for the enigmatic term “the firmament (στερέωμα) of the woman.” From the passage, we learn that it is situated above the realm of Ialdabaoth and his minions (126:15), but that is about all the information we get. Nor is “the woman” properly introduced as a character. From the description we receive in 126:17-19, it seems, however, she is identical with one of the characters from the creation narrative in *Orig. World* 97-98: “When she had created the first product, she would put down the wise fire of understanding and dress herself with irrational anger” (126:17-19)

Perhaps the “first product” (ΠΩΟΠΠ ΝΕΡΓΟΝ) could provide a clue and help us to delineate the identity of “the woman.” At the beginning of *Orig. World*, we learn that “the first product,” is something that existed before the darkness and the chaos:

How agreeable it was for all people to say that Chaos is a darkness! But actually it comes from a shadow, and it is called darkness. And the shadow is from a product that existed before it, and it is evident that it (the product) existed before Chaos had come into existence, and it (the darkness) came after the first product (97:30-98:7).

In the next passage that follows, we learn that “a product” appeared when Sophia exercised an act of volition. “The product” resembles “the first light” and functions as a curtain, separating the “immortal ones” in the sacred realm from “those who came after them” (98:11-23).

¹⁴² It is clear from *Orig. World* 124 that there are several saviors present, but in 124:14-15 we learn that Christ is “higher than all of the others.”

As it is Pistis Sophia who brings forth “the first product” in *Orig. World* 98:11-23, it is reasonable to assume that the designation in 126:17-19, “the woman,” also refers to her. But if “the woman” is Pistis Sophia, why does not *Orig. World* 126:17-19 refer to her by that name? And why would *Orig. World*, a text that underlines the androgyny of the characters, also place such an emphasis on their gender?

The only way to make sense of these passages is to read them through the theoretical framework of Ortner and Shapiro and view the procreative imagery as part of a male pseudo-procreative discourse.¹⁴³ In such a discourse, the natural birth is contrasted to a spiritual birth, where the offspring of the former is limited to worldly conditions and is destined for old age and death, whereas the offspring of the latter is considered immortal and imperishable. That the text draws upon this notion is further indicated by 109:22-25 where the introduction of the woman also introduces death into the world: “Woman came after earth and marriage came after woman, birth came after marriage, destruction (ΒΩΛ ΕΒΟΛ) came after birth.”

We know from passages such as *Orig. World* 102:2-7 that “the immortal ones,” who are the entities that reside in the sacred realm of light, are all androgynous. As Pistis Sophia is one of them, it is reasonable to conclude that she also share this quality. *Orig. World* 126:17-19 refers to Pistis Sophia as a woman, because her actions initiate the events that lead to the creation of the temporal and transient universe. Through the gendering of Pistis Sophia, *Orig. World* also determines the quality of her offspring: just as any other offspring conceived through a natural birth, the universe is subject to temporality and destined to someday perish – in contrast to the sacred realm, which is eternal.

3.4 Summary

I have argued that the procreative imagery in *Orig. World* serves to differentiate between the eternal realm of God and the transient domains of people. Furthermore, I have suggested that the graphic depictions of menstrual blood and abortions aim to provide a “shock therapy” similar to John Chrysostom’s strategy in his Letter to

¹⁴³ See the theoretical considerations in 1.6.

Theodore. By reminding the addressees that worldly beauty ultimately stems from blood and phlegm, *Orig. World* attempts to turn their attention to God.

4. World View and Sexuality in *Orig. World*

In this section, I discuss the implications of the observations made above. First, I turn to world view and ethics. Then, I take up the question of gender and discuss the procreative imagery and the evaluation of women in the text.

4.1 Ethics and World View in *Orig. World*

Drawing primarily on patristic literature, Hans Jonas suggested that the “Gnostics” had little interest in the world and that they choose to reject it, either through ascetic practices or impious deeds.¹⁴⁴ Jonas’ characterization came to be highly influential; we find a similar understanding of the Gnostic mindset in several scholarly portrayals of the “Gnostics” from the 60s and up to the 90s.¹⁴⁵

I want to stress that my intention is not to reinforce stereotypes such as a “Gnostic” hated of the world, as opposed to some notion of a “Christian” world affirming view. Rather, the dichotomy between the transitory world and the realm of God is common in early Christian literature and has several parallels in canonical as well as patristic literature.

Compare, for example, the rejection of the world and material things in 1 John 2:15-17 and 2 *Clement* 5:5-7:¹⁴⁶

Do not love the world or the things in the world. The love of the Father is not in those who love the world; for all that is in the world – the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the

¹⁴⁴ Jonas, 1963, 270-281.

¹⁴⁵ See Lance Jenott’s article “Emissaries of Truth and Justice: The Seed of Seth as Agents of Divine Providence” 2013, 43-62 for an excellent survey of the older paradigm as well as a convincing criticism as well as Williams, 1996, 96-115. See also section 1.2 in this essay, “Purpose Statement,” for more thorough presentation of the problem.

¹⁴⁶ See also: John 1:10, 7:7, 15:19; Rom 12:2; Gal 6:12; Col 2:20; Clement of Alexandria, *A Rich Man’s Salvation* 37: “And if owe our lives to the brethren, and admit such a reciprocal compact with the Saviour, shall we still husband and hoard up the things of the world, which are beggarly and alien to us and ever slipping away.”

pride in riches – comes not from the Father but from the world. And the world and its desire¹⁴⁷ are passing away, but those who do the will of God live forever (1 John 2:15-17).¹⁴⁸

Moreover, you know, brothers and sisters, that our stay in this world of the flesh is insignificant and transitory, but the promise of Christ is great and marvellous: rest in the coming kingdom and eternal life! What then, must we do to obtain these things, except to live a holy and righteous life, and to regard these worldly things as alien to us, and not desire them? For when we desire to acquire these things, we fall away from the path of righteousness (2 *Clement* 5:5-7. Translation: Michael W. Holmes).

Early Christian rejections of the transitory world often appear in conjunction with ethical exhortations. 2 *Clement* 3:4-4:5, for example, discusses the relation between faith and deeds and concludes that true believer needs to behave accordingly. As a result, the addressees must dissociate themselves from “worldly” values and cease to desire transient objects (2 *Clement* 5:1-7). A similar discourse is also present in James 4:1-10,¹⁴⁹ where we learn that a world affirming stance separates the believer from God and results in greed, jealousy and enmity.¹⁵⁰

Unlike these texts, *Orig. World* does not contain explicit ethical exhortations, but it is nevertheless reasonable to infer that the text exhibits an interest in morality.¹⁵¹ The hierarchical afterlife is divided into (at least) two levels: the “kingless realm,” where the perfect will reside; and the “kingdom of the immortals,” where those who fail to achieve perfection will spend their eternity (127:5-14).¹⁵² From the closing passage, we learn that it is ethical conduct that separates the wheat from the chaff:

For it is necessary that everyone goes to the place that he has come from, for each and everyone will make his nature known through his acts and his insight (127:14-27).

The question is what kind of ethical behavior that is expected from the addressees.

¹⁴⁷ It is also possible to translate ἡ ἐπιθυμία αὐτοῦ as an objective genitive: “the desire for it.”

¹⁴⁸ The translation is from NRSV.

¹⁴⁹ NRSV: Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet[a] something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures. Adulterers! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. Or do you suppose that it is for nothing that the scripture says, “God[b] yearns jealously for the spirit that he has made to dwell in us”? But he gives all the more grace; therefore it says, “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Lament and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy into dejection. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

¹⁵⁰ See also Dale C. Allison’s discussion of “Friendship with the World Versus Friendship with God” (Allison 2013, 589-639), which concerns the relation between ethical exhortation and cosmic rejection in James chapter 4.

¹⁵¹ The only transgression that *Orig. World* explicitly denounces is idolatry (123:8-15).

¹⁵² Although the text is not clear on this point, one could also assume that the even less fortunate may share the fate of the powers and authorities – destruction.

In a recent article concerning the theme of moral progress in Nag Hammadi literature, Ismo Dunderberg briefly discusses ethics in *Orig. World*.¹⁵³ Dunderberg understands the list of male and female names for death's offspring in 106:30-36 as a key passage and observes that five of the seven male names correspond to emotions associated with funeral rites.¹⁵⁴ Dunderberg remarks that rites of mourning were controversial both among philosophers and early Christians, who found an excessive display of emotions revolting. Furthermore, the list occurs in conjunction with the repentance of Sabaoth, the son of the evil chief ruler, Ialdabaoth. Dunderberg suggests that Sabaoth, who rejects his father and everything that he is associated with – death, matter and excessive passions – serves as a role model and illustrates “the soul making the right choice.” I concur with Dunderberg's interpretation and suggest that the procreative imagery further stresses the need to practice detachment from negative emotions and the alluring sensations of the material world.

In a footnote, Dunderberg writes that the passage about the grapevine and its aphrodisiacal properties probably suggests a negative evaluation of sexual desire, but concludes that the text is quite vague.¹⁵⁵ He goes on to claim that the only passage in the section that contains a “real argument against sexual desire” is 110:29-111:2, where the enlightened Adam, after having eaten from the tree of insight, loves his true companions but condemns “other kinds of copies.” On this point, I disagree with Dunderberg and suggest that the differentiation between pseudo-procreative activities, such as emanation and creation, and procreative activities, such as natural births and biological imagery, provides an additional argument for a negative evaluation of sexuality.

Another example of what seems to be a negative evaluation of sexuality is *Orig. World*'s reinterpretation of the biblical command to “multiply.” When God has completed his work in Gen 1:28, he commands humanity to procreate, to be “fruitful and multiply,”¹⁵⁶ and to rule over all the other creations. *Orig. World* reinterprets this divine command in a spiritual sense, as it is directed to the souls before they are “imprisoned.”¹⁵⁷ The passage appears in conjunction with Eve's speech in 114:8-15, about her ability to give life without being impregnated. It is likely that this speech refers to a later passage, when Eve descends as a teacher to Adam, who is crawling on

¹⁵³ Dunderberg, 2015, 19-38.

¹⁵⁴ Dunderberg, 2015, 35-36.

¹⁵⁵ Dunderberg 2015, 36-37, n. 80.

¹⁵⁶ Αύξάνεσθε καὶ πληθύνεσθε in the Septuagint.

¹⁵⁷ 114:15-24.

the ground due to his lack of soul (115:35-116:8). Finally able to stand upright with help from Eve, Adam refers to her as “Mother of the living” and thanks her for giving him life.

Similarly the reinterpretation of the command to “be fruitful and multiply” seems to refer to the giving of life in a figurative rather than a literal sense, perhaps missionary activities such as instruction and baptism.¹⁵⁸

Furthermore, throughout the text, *Orig. World* depicts sexual activities, on the one hand, and proximity to God, on the other hand, as mutually exclusive. When the powers see the luminous Eve, their first impulse is to rape her, not primarily for the sake of sexual pleasure, but because sexual contamination would prevent her to return to the sacred realm (116:11-20). Likewise, Adam of Light cannot, after the incident with Pronoia, return to the eighth heaven,¹⁵⁹ because “his light has mixed (τῷ2) with poverty” (that is, Pronoia’s blood of desire).¹⁶⁰

A third example concerns the divine emissaries, who descend to instruct humanity in 124:21-25. When the authorities see them, they become jealous and attempt to involve them in illicit sexual activities. As in the case with the luminous Eve, their motive is not primarily sexual pleasure but a wish to defile them and render them harmless.¹⁶¹

I concur with Dunderberg that Sabaoth serves as a role model for the believer, but I suggest that the emissaries have a similar function. Through their ability to resist the advances of the authorities, they illustrate how the pious should handle sexual temptations. Likewise, the powers and authorities provide an example of antitypical behavior, being particularly inclined towards negative emotions such as envy, fear, pride and sexual desire.¹⁶² Through resisting foul impulses, the addressees can elevate themselves above the cosmic powers and through their acts prove that they belong in the sacred realm, rather than in the transient world.

¹⁵⁸ Another equally allegorical understanding of Gen 1:28 can be found in Augustine’s *Against the Manicheans* 1:19:30, where Augustine interprets the commandment as referring to a spiritual union, since sexual procreative activities was introduced first after the fall. Augustine writes: “Should we understand it carnally or spiritually? For we are permitted to understand it spiritually and to believe that it was changed into carnal fecundity after sin. For there was first the chaste union of male and female, of the former to rule, of the latter to obey, and there was the spiritual offspring of intelligible and immortal joys filling the earth, that is, giving life to the body and ruling it” (Transl. Roland J. Teske).

¹⁵⁹ That is, the realm of the highest God.

¹⁶⁰ 112:10-13.

¹⁶¹ When the blessed ones then revealed themselves in bodies created by the authorities (ΠΑΛΑΜΑ ΝΕΞΟΥΓΙΑ), they (the authorities) became jealous. And because of the jealousy, the authorities mixed (τῷ2) their seeds with them in order to defile them, but they did not succeed (124:21-25).

¹⁶² See 103:2-13; 104:13-18; 106:19-25; 106:30-34; 107:18-19; 107:25-35; 108:5-7; 108:10-14; 109:8-16; 117:2-7; 118:10-12; 120:15-17; 121:13-15; 124:21-25.

4.2 The Gendered Discourse in *Orig. World*

I have argued against Cox Miller's positive evaluation of the procreative activities and suggested that *Orig. World* uses a gendered imagery to depict the material creations as inferior to the eternal. What then, are the implications of these observations? Is it reasonable to conclude, from the use of a gendered language, that the mythmaker(s) of *Orig. World* also had a negative evaluation of women?

In some regards, yes. As Pomeroy states, women were systematically devaluated during Graeco-Roman antiquity and, from a contemporary perspective, we must answer affirmative.¹⁶³ Even the more progressive thinkers of that period were hopelessly misogynic by our modern standard.¹⁶⁴ The idea of an egalitarian form of Christianity, a Gnostic proto-feminism, has been brought forth by feminist scholars such as Elaine Pagels, Jonathan Cahana and Rita Gross, but unfortunately there is precious little in the Nag Hammadi literature that could remotely support this view and indicate that the "Gnostics" would be an exception to the general understanding of gender in the Graeco-Roman world.¹⁶⁵

Although *Orig. World* would not qualify as a feminist text, it would nevertheless be inappropriate to label it as misogynic. While it does utilize imagery of the female body for polemical purposes, the primary aim is not to disparage women, but to denounce worldly beauty and sexual indulgences. Why then, one could ask, does the text employ a female body rather than that of a male? The imagery in *Orig. World* is the product of a patriarchal culture in which the male is the norm, and is viewed as an individual and defined by his profession and social position. Due to her role as either a mother or a sexual object,¹⁶⁶ as well as her bodily functions (menstruation, breast feeding and ability to give birth),¹⁶⁷ woman is more closely identified with her body.

¹⁶³ Pomeroy, 1975, 227-230.

¹⁶⁴ Pomeroy 1975, 330, writes: "Even Plato – of ancient authors one of the most sympathetic to women – found that the one sex was in general inferior to the other, although he allowed for exceptions. Plato had strayed far from the mainstream of Greek thought. The views of Aristotle were more representative: he elucidated in detail the range of woman's inferiority, from her passive role in procreativity to her limited capacity for mental activity. Serious intellectual thought about women continued: Stoicism, the most popular of the Hellenistic and Roman philosophies, directed women's energies to marriage and motherhood. The argumentation is brilliant and difficult to refute. And this rationalized confinement of women to the domestic sphere, as well as the systematization of anti-female thought by poets and philosophers, are two of the most devastating creations in the classical legacy."

¹⁶⁵ Elaine Pagels 1979; Rita Gross 1996, 181-184; Jonathan Cahana 2014.

¹⁶⁶ See Pomeroy, 1975, 8-9, who traces the Madonna/Whore taxonomy to Graeco-Roman antiquity and claim that prostitute or wife were the only female identities.

¹⁶⁷ See Ortner 1974, 76-78.

The use of a woman as a symbol for the body is by no means unique for *Orig. World*, but is rather emblematic for religious discourse during late antiquity. In his *On the Trinity*, Augustine presents a conceptualization, where woman appears as defined by her body and her bodily sex, while man, who has been created in the image of God, is closer to the eternal and divine:

Pray, have faithful women then lost their bodily sex? But because they are there renewed after the image of God, where there is no sex; man is there made after the image of God, where there is no sex, that is, in the spirit of his mind. Why, then, is the man on that account not bound to cover his head, because he is the image and glory of God, while the woman is bound to do so, because she is the glory of the man; as though the woman were not renewed in the spirit of her mind, which spirit is renewed to the knowledge of God after the image of Him who created him? But because she differs from the man in bodily sex, it was possible rightly to represent under her bodily covering that part of the reason which is diverted to the government of temporal things; so that the image of God may remain on that side of the mind of man on which it cleaves to the beholding or the consulting of the eternal reasons of things; and this, it is clear, not men only, but also women have (*On the Trinity* XII, 7:12, Translation: Philip Schaff).

A second example is Jerome who, in his *Commentary on Ephesians*, presents woman as as different from man as “body is from soul.” It is only through true devotion to God that she will be able to transcend her womanhood and be a real person – a man:

In fact, a woman also possesses this difference in respect to a man which the body has in respect to the soul in the literal sense inasmuch as a woman is devoted to birth and children. If, however, she should wish to be devoted to Christ more than to the world, she will cease to be woman and be said to be man, because we all desire to attain to the perfect man (*Commentary on the Ephesians* 658, Translation Ronald E. Heine).

We encounter this notion – that women needed to disassociate themselves from their bodily identity and transcend femaleness in order to be saved – in several early Christian works, as for example *the Gospel of Thomas* 114 and the *Martyrdom of Perpetua* 10:7. Dennis Ronald Macdonald observes that also the myth of primal androgyny – a reoccurring motif in *Orig. World* – is a variation of this theme:

The primordial unity was disrupted by the creation and fall of the woman. Therefore a return to that unity necessitates an undoing of the “works of the female.” Contrary to the opinion of many interpreters, the androgyne myth is not antiquity’s answer to androcentrism; it is but one manifestation of it.”¹⁶⁸

Daniel Boyarin remarks that primal androgynes, rather than being dual-sexed, were sexless and devoid of body:

According to this myth, the first human being was an androgyne who was later split into the two sexes. However, and this is the catch, in the Hellenistic world and late antiquity the

¹⁶⁸ Dennis Ronald Macdonald 1988, 285.

primal androgyne was almost always imagined as disembodied, so that the androgyne was really no-body, and dual-sex was no-sex.' This myth, I suggest, encodes the dualist ideology whereby a spiritual androgyny is contrasted with the corporeal (and social) division into sexes.¹⁶⁹

I suggest that *Orig. World* draws on a much similar conception: the aions in the sacred realm are sexless and devoid of bodies through their androgyny, and their state of being is throughout the text contrasted to the human condition. The female body and her offspring, on the other hand, is used a representative for the human condition: corporeal, gendered and subject to old age.

Jonathan Cahana, an advocate for the notion that there was a Gnostic proto-feminism, concurs with the scholarly conceptions of the evaluation of androgyny during Graeco-Roman antiquity, but suggests that Gnosticism is an exception to this general tendency.

Both Marie Delcourt and Luc Brisson, who studied the androgyne in Greco-Roman antiquity extensively, noted the apparent discrepancy between the androgyne in the heavenly sphere or as a concept, and androgyny in humans. While the former was sometimes praised and adored, a human androgyne was considered abject and treated either with horror or, later, as an entertaining freak to put on show (Delcourt 1961:45–46; Brisson 2002:72–73). The gnostics, however, would have none of that. For them, “as above, so below,” and if there is something to be treated with horror, it is exactly the evil “Nature” that enforces gender.¹⁷⁰

There are several problems with Cahana’s inference. First, he claims to speak for Gnosticism as a whole, ignoring the diversity of perspectives in Nag Hammadi literature. Second, the argumentation is flawed. Cahana seems to assume that a “worldly” androgyne would be positively evaluated because several “Gnostic” texts portray the gendering process as a fall away from a primal perfection. Well, so did Augustine and Jerome, who were prominent theologians in the “orthodox” church with which Cahana contrasts the Gnostics. The mythic, heavenly androgyne was, as Boyarin points out, positively evaluated by Jews and Christians alike, since they imagined it as sexless and devoid of body.¹⁷¹ The “worldly” androgyne, treated in the medical works of Aristotle and referred to as a monster, is negatively evaluated because it is the complete opposite of the heavenly androgyne: corporeal and (bi)gendered.¹⁷² Furthermore, throughout several “Gnostic” texts, the archons are depicted as androgynous and monstrous, as

¹⁶⁹ Boyarin, 1993, 4.

¹⁷⁰ Cahana 2014, 518-519.

¹⁷¹ Boyarin, 1993, 4.

¹⁷² *Gen. an.* 769b.

beastlike and horrific parodies of the harmonious order of the sacred sphere.¹⁷³ No endorsements of “worldly” androgynes are to be found, however, in the Nag Hammadi literature. It seems that the “Gnostics” had more in common with their “orthodox” contemporaries than with the queer theoreticians of our time.¹⁷⁴

5. Summary

Orig. World employs procreative imagery in order to differentiate between the eternal and spiritual realm of God, on the one hand, and the transitory and material cosmos.

When the principle of envy comes into being through a self-induced pregnancy, matter, the building block of cosmos, appears as its afterbirth (99:1-27; see table below). Also part of the afterbirth, we learn, is bile, a residual product that Aristotle understood as harmful and life shortening. Through associating matter with bile, *Orig. World* emphasizes the transient character of Cosmos and anticipates the destruction of the world.

Orig. World draws on the theoretical framework of ancient medicine and uses bodily imagery to communicate inferiority. The imagery in *Orig. World* is the product of a patriarchal culture where the male is norm, viewed as an individual and defined by his profession and social position. Due to her role as either a mother or a sexual object, as well as her bodily functions (menstruation, breast-feeding and ability to give birth), woman is more closely identified with her body. Although *Orig. World* primarily uses female bodies, I have argued that the main purpose is not to reject or polemicize against women. The female body and her offspring are merely used a representative for the human condition: corporeal, gendered and subject to old age. The addressees in *Orig. World* must transcend this condition through practicing detachment from negative emotions and passions. There is nothing in the text that indicates that women were excluded from these activities.

Furthermore, I have argued that the series of procreative activities in 109-111, that results in the creation of trees, plants and flowers, uses biological imagery as a “shock”

¹⁷³ In *Orig. World*, the chief archon and his children are androgynous (100:10-102:11) as well as Death and his children (106:26-107:1)

¹⁷⁴ Cahana 2014, 521, compares the Gnostic criticism of gender to our contemporary queer theories.

therapy. Through the use of a genealogy where the world and its inhabitants originate from blood, phlegm and humors, *Orig. World* reminds the addressees that the realm of God is superior to the world. The mundane things may be fragrant and alluring, but their outwardly and superficial beauty could provide a distraction from the divine things. Through the dichotomy between sacred and mundane, *Orig. World* stresses the need for a proper conduct. As can be seen in other early Christian writings such as *2 Clement* and *James*, the world becomes a symbol for immoral behavior, illicit sexuality and negative emotions such as jealousy, fear and pride.

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