



mothers, virgins & demons

READING BEYOND THE FEMALE
STEREOTYPES IN MANICHAEAN
COSMOLOGY AND STORY¹

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Unlike the intense scholarly interest over the last century in the analysis of women characters and themes related to women in biblical texts (often dated from the publication of Elizabeth Cady Stanton's *The Women's Bible* in 1895), and in classical, patristic, and Gnostic texts in general, scholars have been slow to attempt similar analysis of the texts of Manichaeism. Manichaeism represents the last and greatest flowering of the Gnostic systems of the early centuries ce, named for its founder Mani, a native of Babylonia in Persia, born in 216 ce. This lack of interest is all the more surprising because there is general scholarly consensus that women fared rather well within Manichaeism by their eligibility to join the inner circle of the Elect, although at least in Western Manichaeism they were not eligible for the higher administrative positions in the community.²

Recently there have been a number of studies on women in Manichaeism, the major contribution coming from the Canadian scholar Kevin Coyle who, in 2001, proposed an agenda for the study of women in Manichaeism,³ and more recently addressed the question of Manichaean women's missionary work.⁴ The Gnosticism scholar Madeleine Scopello has also published work on a number of individual women.⁵ I have added to this work on individuals and groups of women with two studies of the personal and spiritual lives of

women from the Manichaean community at fourth-century Roman Kellis on the Dakhleh Oasis in Egypt, based primarily on the personal letters from that community,⁶ as well as an investigation more generally of the range of female characters and female imagery in two major western Manichaean texts that were also influential in eastern communities — the teaching text of the *Kephalaia* and the liturgical text of the *Psalm Book*.⁷

The initial investigation of the *Kephalaia* and the *Psalm Book* reveals that the most prevalent female imagery in the texts is either of birthing and motherhood or connected with women as creatures of lust and inspiring lust in others. The imagery of birthing and motherhood is used in a positive way in association with certain female cosmic figures, or female-imagined figures like the soul or the church. On the other hand, when these two texts deal with 'real' women who live in the world of the flesh, the same female imagery is used negatively. Women produce offspring from corrupt and filthy wombs, and they are creatures of lust who inspire lust in men, according to the *Kephalaia*. For the *Psalm Book* women are of three types — virginal, continent, or married. The 'married ones' are those who belong to the flesh and the world. Only those who are virginal and continent, like the martyrs, the Elect, and catechumens or Hearers, are worthy of spiritual praise.

(above)
Montage detail,
MIK III 6286. See
pages 58-59 for
source image and
information.

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The study of female Manichaean catechumens who appear in the personal letters from Kellis reveals a very positive view of the spiritual lives of these women. How then did women in their ordinary lives as Manichaeans appreciate or understand these images, not the Elect in the rarefied inner spiritual circle but rather the catechumens who served them, many of whom were married and had children? Catechumens would have heard some of these texts in the communal liturgy, been instructed in Manichaean doctrine that made use of these images and concepts about women, and doubtless would have applied some, if not all, of these teachings to their own lives.

Manichaean women's actual experience, as far as one can know that from the Kellis letters at least, provides both another viewpoint to balance the imagery of these two major Manichaean texts, and an impetus towards questioning further initial conclusions about the texts. In what follows, further steps in reading the texts are taken that go beyond the rather simple categories such as cosmic and earthly, virginal/continent and married. First, I seek to question what more can be learned or appreciated by a deeper look at the imagery. Secondly, I aim to investigate other types of Manichaean texts that present women in a different way from that of the formal teaching and liturgical texts, as a means of explicating the complex, overlapping and at times contradictory stereotypes that structured representations of women in Manichaean texts.



DIGGING DEEPER INTO IMAGES

The Mother of Life, a cosmic figure of great importance in the Manichaean drama of salvation and of creation, has not yet been the subject of any major scholarly study.⁸ A preliminary study of this figure in the *Kephalaia* immediately brings her motherly qualities to the forefront, as might be expected. She is an example of motherly care, as she kisses the Primal Man, her son (38.22-24), arms him and makes him mighty, lays hands on him and sends him forth to battle the powers of the

darkness (39.3-7). There are strong themes in these passages of the protective and nurturing mother in relationship with her son. Yet, reading further in the Middle Persian texts, one finds other strong attributes for the Mother as she battles to have her son return when he is trapped in the darkness. The Mother and her warrior colleague, the Living Spirit/Virgin of Light, go out to the border of the Light to attempt to save her son, as he is beset by demons in the darkness below. They send out the god, 'Call', like a saving letter and an arrow that one shoots into a fortress. The 'Call' and 'Answer' return to the Mother of Life and the Living Spirit who bring up the Primal Man, and then create ten heavens and the zodiac.⁹

There are aspects of the warrior here in the portrait of the Mother that can be lost with too narrow a focus on her motherly activities. The Mother of Life knows how to equip a warrior for battle; she is knowledgeable in the ways of war, giving him weapons before sending him

(left)

FIG. 1. MIK III 4815. Fragment of a painted textile from Khocho depicting female Manichaean Elect; at the Asian Art Museum, National Museums in Berlin.

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off to battle. Moreover, the imagery used of the Mother and her colleague as they send out the 'Call' — like shooting arrows into a fortress — associates the Mother with warrior attributes. She also has a facility with planning and creative work; she fashions with her colleague the agent referred to as 'the Call' and creates on a cosmic scale.

When investigated more closely, the activity of the Mother of Life goes beyond what might be considered particular to a mother, to attributes of a much more complex character. She is mother, warrior and adept at war, a person of ideas, and powerfully creative. Digging deeper makes more of what is offered in the text to provide a richer understanding of a character, especially where the name or title of the character exerts its own pressure towards approaching her in a more simplistic way.

SHARPENING THE IMAGES

A study of the *Kephalaia* and *Psalm Book* reveals a number of frequently occurring opposing images or concepts — light and dark, virgin and married, purity and lust, and many more. The polarities can seem so strong that one cannot imagine that they can be brought together in any way. However, the Virgin of Light provides a ready example of a figure who brings together the seemingly opposing concepts of virginity and lust.

The texts involving the Virgin of Light are redolent with polar imagery. One of the most powerful descriptions of the struggle between Light and Darkness, for example, involves the clash between the Virgin of Light and the female demons, in a great battle involving the forces of nature controlled by these female figures. In the description of the creation of the world through the Living Spirit in M 263 there is an excursus about the demons and the damage they do with weather, using dark destructive wind clouds billowing out like great pregnant women. Over against the demons is the Virgin of Light, who has angels at her command to overcome the destructive demons,¹⁰ coming against them with clouds behind her rising up like a great tower.¹¹ It would be difficult to find a stronger image built on these polar opposites.

The Virgin of Light is a warrior and a physically beautiful female character. She has 'ineffable beauty' which puts the powers to shame, according to *Psalm Book* 2.27-29. She is equipped with five powers to fight against and conquer the five abysses of the dark (10.6-19). The darkness she fights against is characterised by corruption, hatred, lust and desire, anything related to the flesh and the entrapment of the light within it.

But how does her beauty put the powers to shame? The hymn M 741, in which the Virgin of Light is named Sadwēs, provides some detail:

Bright Sadwēs shows her form to the Demon of Wrath. He cries out to her as his own (?), he thinks she is the essence (of Light).

He sows [...] he groans when he no longer sees the form. Light is born in the sphere: she gives it to the higher Powers.

The dirt and dross flows from him to the earth. It clothes itself in all phenomena, and is reborn in many fruits.

The dark Demon of Wrath is ashamed, for he was distraught and had become naked. He had not attained to the higher, and had been bereft of what he had achieved.

He left the body an empty shell and descended in shame. He covered himself in the womb of the earths, whence he had risen in brutishness (M 741/R/3-7).¹²

The event described here is generally referred to as the 'seduction of the archons', and is known from a variety of Manichaean texts from different cultural/language groups, some much more circumspect in their telling than others. In each version the Light or some agent of the Light uses the nature of Darkness against itself, to achieve a release of the Light, invariably involving some kind of sexual activity. Here the Virgin of Light uses her beauty to inspire lust in the Demon of Wrath who ejaculates the previously captured light as semen that falls to earth and is reborn in fruits.

(right)
FIG. 2.MIK III 6286.
Fragment of a
painted textile
temple banner from
Khocho depicting
female Manichaean
Elect; at the Asian
Art Museum,
National Museums
in Berlin.

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Another version of this drama occurs in the *Kephalaia*, in which the male cosmic figure called the Third Ambassador accomplishes the same seduction in order to free the Living Soul from Matter in which it is entangled. The text likens him to a great free woman who comes out of her seclusion and shows herself in her beauty in order to save her brother, despite, or because of, the lustful gaze of the men around her (Keph 134.13-135.14).

Both of these descriptions bring together the realm of Light and its agents and an aspect of darkness that seems to be wholly antithetical to them. Quite clearly in each case the end justifies the means, and in the story of the Third Ambassador the reader is told quite explicitly that there is no blame attached to the symbolic woman who represents him because she is not like wanton or proud women who inspire lust by exhibiting themselves. The difficulty with the passage concerning the Virgin of Light/Sadwēs is that she appears to be doing exactly that — exhibiting her beauty in order to inspire lust. The episode inevitably raises a question mark over the nature of virginity and the positive spiritual aspects usually associated with virginity in the Manichaean texts, when the text presents a powerful cosmic female virginal character who takes her revenge on the dark forces in just the same way as they have used lust as a weapon against believers and forced the light into further entrapment in the corrupt flesh and the dark world.¹³ Indeed, it is a very practical and pragmatic way of using the dark against itself. As the Sermon on the Light-Nous states, the wise and clever person is like the Virgin of Light.¹⁴ Surely the seduction as it is described here is the clever ploy of a rather more complex character than her name would indicate.

QUESTIONING GENERALISATIONS

The Kephalaia and the Psalm Book exhibit a strong thread of imagery dealing with lust, and women as creatures of lust, inspiring lust in others. There are plentiful images and teachings about the danger, where women are presented as major actors inspiring lust. Outside of these texts, however, one finds other writings where the links between lust and



women may not be quite as pronounced. M 572/V/2-19 contains a parable about a woman who allows a monk to put his alms into a storage space or vessel.¹⁵ Then he goes away. A hunter comes who has captured a wolf and wants to put the wolf into the same space and sees that there is a pretty girl in it already. He asks the woman what is in the space. She replies that a monk has put his alms in it. The hunter takes the girl out and puts his wolf in instead. The monk comes in the night, wanting to retrieve the girl. As he puts his hand in to do so, the wolf comes out and eats him. The story concludes with a moral about sin and hell and the final statement: 'so it is with that monk who sought the girl and found the wolf'.

Surprisingly there is no guilt ascribed here to the pretty girl; the entire focus of blame is on the monk. The girl is used in an example of moral wrongdoing by a man but she goes almost unnoticed, in much the same way as she is hidden physically in the story. Yet it is important to notice her, because this story at least proposes that a woman who inspires lust may not be guilty at all. It is only one story, but is a question mark over generalisations about women and lust in other teaching texts.

BROADENING THE RANGE OF EXAMPLES OR GENRES

In teaching and liturgical texts, the simplest and most readily understood themes are often used to drive home an easily-learned and easily-reinforced message in an unsophisticated way. Stories, however, are different and less easily restrained in their imagination and the sweep of their drama and line of characters, even though the morals or teachings drawn from these

stories may mirror those in the more formal teaching and liturgical texts. It is not surprising, therefore, that stories and parables turn up a larger number of roles and occupations for women than one finds in the rather more straightforward teaching or liturgical texts.

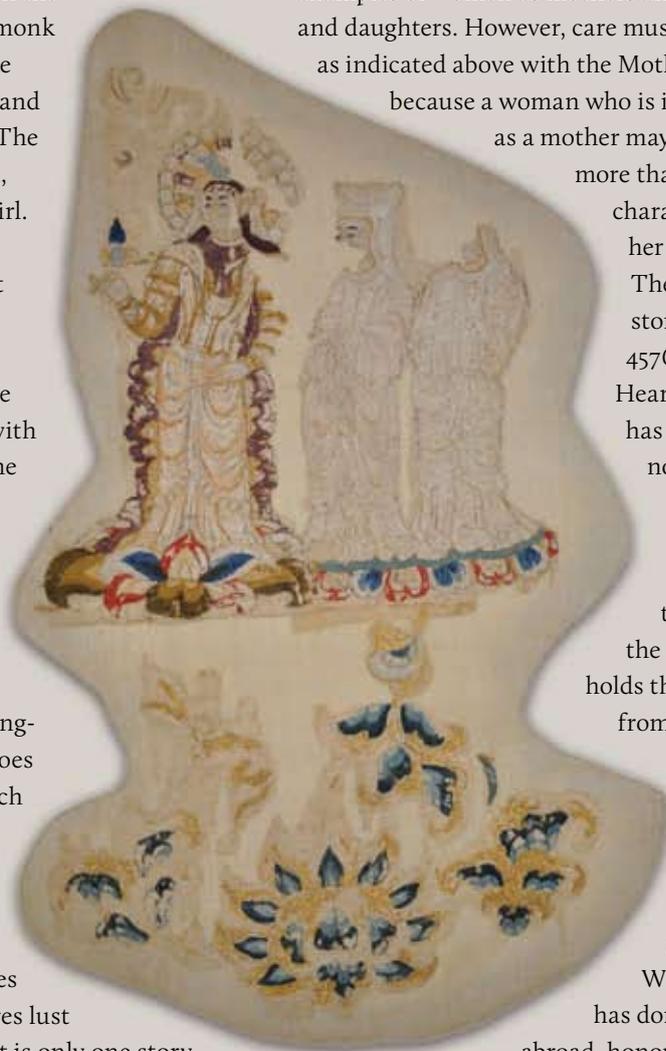
First, as expected, there are numerous examples of women as mothers and wives and daughters. However, care must be taken, as indicated above with the Mother of Life, because a woman who is identified

as a mother may illustrate more than motherly characteristics by her behaviour. The first of four stories in M 4576 deals with a Hearer whose son has died. She does not weep for him, because weeping would be to grieve for the body that holds the soul back from salvation.

Instead she performs spiritual works and gives alms generously.

When what she has done is reported abroad, honour is given to Mani because of her great belief.¹⁶ This is not so much a story about motherhood as about a true believer, the story made more poignant by the fact that it is her son who has died.

Apart from familial roles, stories and parables include women as queens, singers and courtesans of the court, ordinary housewives, women in need of healing, women as victims of war, women as believers, and so on. There are some frequently used formulae, like queens who are described as those who produce diadem-bearing sons/princes,¹⁷ or beautiful daughters who are married to kings as a way of gaining a better life for them or their fathers.¹⁸



In similar fashion there is a stereotypical way of referring to wives and children as a burden on a man's spiritual advancement,¹⁹ but there are also stories where wives are of enormous help to their husbands, for example in the story in M572,²⁰ where a man finds a treasure and wishes to retrieve it when it grows dark. The man is forced however to take a corpse out of the place where the treasure is located, instead of the treasure itself, and to put the corpse on his back and carry it to a grave. He cannot get the corpse off his back, no matter how hard he tries, so in the night he goes home to his wife and asks her to cut the corpse off his back. She is very afraid but she does so, and the corpse

characters than perhaps the author intended.

In this story there are two women, clearly opposites — a lovesick young unmarried princess and a clever old woman. The story unfolds as follows. The daughter of a king suffers from her love for a wonderful boy who does not return her love. He takes refuge sitting up in a tree. The king sends horses and men to bring the boy in so he can give the boy to his daughter, but the boy slaughters the horses and men. There seems no way of resolving the impasse, and the daughter is near to death from her love-sickness, when an old woman appears before the king suggesting she knows another way to capture the boy. The old woman takes

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falls open to reveal treasures and pearls. Thus, the woman who would often be described as a spiritual burden, is in fact the one to lift the burden from her husband and help him find the spiritual treasure he desires.

The power of a woman's belief is possibly best described in a very brief story in M4576, where Ahrmen (lord of the world of darkness) is jealous of a female Hearer. He thinks about tempting her with treasure or trapping her with worldly concerns for good works or for her husband and son and daughter.²¹ The story is all the more significant as it refers to a Hearer as the object of Ahrmen's jealousy rather than a spiritually advanced member of the Elect.

READING AGAINST THE GRAIN

Although many parables and stories have a similar teaching theme about the struggle of the soul against the entrapment of the darkness, the narratives have a life of their own beyond the moral to be drawn from them and it is in 'reading against the grain' of the author's apparent intention that sometimes much more can be appreciated about female characters. The following example is taken from a story from two Central Asian manuscripts, M 46 and M 652/R,²² in which there are clear female stereotypes but, at the same time, ways of reading the text that make more of the

wine and a lamb and proceeds to the tree where the boy is sitting. She begins by pretending to try to kill the lamb, taking the lamb by its tail. The boy, watching on, suggests that she is going about it the wrong way and that she should be trying to kill the lamb at its neck not its tail. The boy thinks she is stupid and comes down from the tree to give her advice on how to carry out the killing. Once he is down, the old woman gives him wine to drink which is drugged, and then brings him back to the king on her donkey. The king gives the boy to his daughter, locking him up behind three doors (two made of copper and lead, and the innermost one made from iron and lead), from which the boy eventually escapes by playing on his flute and thereby calling a steer that breaks down the doors.

The story is a parable about the fate of the soul, represented by the boy, separated from its heavenly homeland. The parable ends with an outline of who the characters in the story represent, but in the damaged text one can only read that the king represents Ahrmen, the king of darkness. The old woman must be understood as an agent of the king of darkness and thus an evil force herself, and a character to be interpreted negatively. Read in this way, she is a character of little importance in the scheme of salvation for the soul, the most important characters being the king as the ruler of

(left)

FIG. 3. MIK III 6251. Fragment of an embroidered textile from Khocho depicting three females; at the Asian Art Museum, National Museums in Berlin. The two figures on the right are Manichaean Elect; the one on the left may be the Virgin of Light.

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darkness and the boy as the soul who escapes his clutches.

However, if one reads against the grain of the moral of the story, then the old woman is integral to the plot and the development of the story. While the lovesick princess initiates the action by her desire for the boy, it is the old woman who resolves the impasse and moves the action forward. She is indeed the most powerful character in the story, more powerful than the princess who would usually be understood to be above her by virtue of her royal status, more powerful than the king who is unable to dislodge the boy and bring him back with his own forces, and temporarily more powerful than the young man whom she tricks and overpowers and brings back to imprisonment. She is also clearly the most intelligent character in the story. The girl we cannot comment upon, the king fails in his military strategy, and the boy easily falls into her trap by assuming that an old woman is simply stupid and of no danger to him. The story deserves a fuller interpretation than can be given here, within the context of other stories about old women, but it shows what more can be appreciated about characters who seem unimportant in the scheme of things, when reading against the apparent intentions of the author.

CONCLUSION

We cannot deny that stereotypical female characters and imagery appear in Manichaean literature, even in stories and parables that may in other ways go well beyond the typically strong stereotypes found in teaching and liturgical material that are supported by the heavily and strictly dualistic nature of the Manichaean system itself. Further steps are required to break down and reach beyond the stereotypes to appreciate more about the female characters and imagery in Manichaean texts.

There is a much more complex range of activities for the Mother of Life than simply motherhood. There is also the surprising case of the Virgin of Light who uses lust-inciting behaviour against the darkness, and a girl who inspires lust in a monk but does not share his blame. There are a range of character types in

parables and stories beyond the limited range found in major teaching and liturgical texts, and a clever old woman, who unexpectedly, as an agent of the darkness, exhibits a power and intelligence greater than the agents of the Light.

Collecting, listing and categorising key themes and imagery for female characters in major Manichaean works is important to gain a first overall impression of Manichaean women and female figures. Nevertheless, while much of this current research brings to the foreground important concepts about women, it tends to dismiss less noticeable or less frequent images that could be of equal importance. Thus it is important to revisit, again and again, the various steps and interim conclusions of the research process, treating that process as a spiral movement, reaching back and sharpening ideas and conclusions even as we push forward with the attempt to assemble and appreciate the entire network of female characters, imagery and themes in the Manichaean system. ¶



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2. A question remains whether women may have held the position of deacon/deaconess in Central Asia. A text (with archive number Zong 8782 T, 82 = Y 974 = K 7709 in the Museum for Chinese History in Beijing), dealing with housekeeping matters of a Manichaean monastery, lists the winter clothing and shoes