Encoded Ambiguities, Embodied Ontologies: The Transformative Speech of Transgressive Female Figures in Gnosticism and Tantra

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“… It is I who am laden with the Voice. It is through me that Gnosis comes forth. … [I] am the real Voice.” (Trimorphic Protennoia)

Introduction

Gnosticism and Tantra are broad categories of esoteric religious traditions in which females play a number of roles as agents of spiritual transformation. Their cosmologies each contain female deities and other figures that symbolize and enact sacred acts of transgression considered key to attainment of mystical gnosis. There is indication in some Tantric texts (or “Tantras”) and Gnostic texts that the human female is meant to serve in this role as a transgressive as well. However, as female, she is also tacitly charged with an opposing role: of symbolizing a kind of stasis against which transcendence can occur. In effect, she defines the reality against which the (most normatively, male) spiritual practitioner can transcend, while also facilitating the symbolic fracturing of that reality. Additionally, the symbolic female in these religious systems is at times characterized as an overarching ontological principle, as in some Gnostic and Tantric texts where she is portrayed as the embodiment of speech, discourse, or sound. So, the female is encoded in (at least) three ways: as a fixed ontology, a transgressive Other to the practitioner, and a generative ontological power herself. This essay examines a select number of texts that showcase female multivalence as producing spiritual gnosis; and also engages issues surrounding the problematic question of “for whom?”

Though extant texts feature female-gendered symbolic figures abundantly, little is known of the spiritual experiences of female practitioners in the lived communities of Tantra and Gnosticism. The ambiguous sets of powers and deficiencies ascribed to females serve to complicate scholarly treatments, particularly those that rely on theoretical positions with divergent motives. Some gendered
and feminist treatments attempting social histories, especially those that try to address the lived “outcome” for the human female members of these traditions, run the risk of eliding these traditions’ cultural and spiritual context. To broach the question, “If the female serves as an agent for the spiritual transformation of the male practitioner, who is she for herself?” is to confront myriad issues of identity-formation: cultural, religious, psychological, for starters. But if scholars of religion demur, deciding not to “go there,” perhaps citing a lack of material culture with which to advance any knowledge, we feel an unsatisfied sense of leaving female subjectivity behind, thereby reifying her status as an object.

To put the scholar’s problem differently, analyses in this area are often forced to draw conclusions in an either/or sense: They either argue for her empowerment or emphasize her oppression; they either attempt a strictly “historically accurate” portrayal, or risk ending up with an eclecticized one—a universalized, essentialized portrait that attends to historicities only when convenient (as seen in many popular treatments of “the feminine”/“the goddess”/Shakti/the dākinī/Sophia, etc.). All methodological binaries risk circumscribing what can and cannot be said about the female, resulting in the potential for erasure of the salient quality being addressed—her ambiguity. Therefore, my approach here seeks to widen the terms of the debate.

I ask how a “gnostic scholarship” approach might respond to the spiritual function of the female symbolic in a manner that respects its non-logocentric nature. The goals of this essay, then, are both to analyze how select Gnostic and Tantric texts, especially those related to speech as gnosis, portray the spiritual work of what I call the female’s purposive ambiguity, and also to explore what methodological nuance may be brought by theorizing her (that is, her human

1 Comparative efforts in esotericisms may especially need to attend to this danger. Kennet Granholm notes esotericism’s “built-in drive towards eclecticism” in his *Dark Enlightenment: The Historical, Sociological, and Discursive Contexts of Esoteric Magic* (2014, Boston: Brill), 181.

2 Not to be confused with scholarship on the tradition of Gnosticism, the idea of “gnostic scholarship” is of more recent vintage. Championed especially by Jeffrey Kripal (see especially *The Serpent’s Gift: Gnostic Reflections on the Study of Religion*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007) and Jorge Ferrer (see Jorge N. Ferrer and Jacob H. Sherman, eds., *The Participatory Turn: Spirituality, Mysticism, Religious Studies*, Albany: SUNY Press, 2007), gnostic scholarship in the field of religious studies responds to the need to make room for explanations of non-ordinary experience and phenomena that do not find their conclusion strictly within the classic perennialist-constructivist debate. It also acknowledges that by-definition “anomalous” mystical and spiritual experiences make sense only when approached as “religious”—and then points to the paradox that these are phenomena to which we have no direct access as scholars, which then makes the case for the need for methodological and theoretical creativity. Kripal writes: “I was attempting to name a particular kind of intellectual reflexivity, a ‘reversal,’ ‘flip’ or ‘reflexive re-reading,’ whereby one used reason to reduce the divine—that is, all religious experience and expression—back to the human, only to discover that the human overflows any and all purely rationalist or materialist models; that it is, in effect, ‘divine’” (from his forthcoming memoir, *Secret Body*). Scholars of mysticism such as Kripal and Ferrer have begun to develop hermeneutical orientations that “recenter on the body” (Ferrer and Sherman, “Participatory Turn,” 12) and also, radically, include rather than bracket out acknowledgment of the scholar’s own experiences of mystical gnosis. Qualitatively different forms of analysis, discursively and hermeneutically speaking, are then available.
as well as symbolic “selves”) as a dynamic nexus of embodiment and symbol, as object, subject, and ontological principle. Because the intricacies of Gnosticism and Tantra are seismic in depth and have been explored by numerous scholars in very fine detail toward which I can only make cursory gestures here, I limit the scope of my essay to commenting on a small number of textual passages that feature the Gnostic Sophia, The Barbelo/First Thought, and Mary, as well as the Tantric Śakti as principle or power that manifests in such forms as goddess, yogini, ḍākinī. The first half of this essay focuses on terminologies and methodological and soteriological contexts, setting up the textual readings in the second half.

**Terms and Comparison Notes**

Whether it is appropriate or not to grant the common, though contested, grouping of a variety of sects within the categories “Gnostic” and “Tantric,” and whether such broad categories can themselves be legitimately compared, are points that must be attended to at least briefly. Debates rage over whether these terms have historically justifiable meanings, or are convenient but fraught categories, or are even perhaps best abandoned. On the other hand, the special difficulties that “Gnosticism” and “Tantra” pose as categories also reflect qualities that make them compelling to compare.

As is known, discourses of orthodoxy and heresy are a significant aspect of the shaping and defining of the identities of these traditions. Sects within each tradition were grouped partly based on the specific sorts of challenges they posed to other religious systems that were in place at the time. Most current scholarship agrees that Tantra arose out of and challenged Vedanta, Brahmanism, and indigenous Indian sects, and is distinguishable as a mode of spiritual engagement in the middle-latter part of the first millennium CE; while the Gnostic sects of the early first millennium CE existed in a milieu of intersecting forms of Christianity, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, and Neo-Platonism. Whether so-called Gnostic and Tantric sects should in fact be grouped under a set of definable characteristics is a tortuous and ongoing discussion. The categorizations are of use here as I consider the charges of myriad forms of debauchery and antinomianism made by the dominant systems coeval to each, which not only continue to affect lay notions about Tantra and Gnosticism to this day but actually link them together in the popular imagination.

Witness their eventual construal by contemporary spiritual seekers of Gnos-
ticism and Tantra as not only attractive alternatives to dominant traditions, but somewhat interchangeable ones at that. On Gnosticism’s current reception in the West, Matthew J. Dillon writes that its popularization may be traceable to the proximal symbology found in the Christian church. For some, Gnosticism “became at once Christian and non-Christian, outside but of the tradition.” In one case study, a man overcomes the loss of his Christian religious roots by embracing Gnosticism, which in turn opens him toward Tantra: “The alternative memory opened up by the Gnostics and their texts allows him to reinterpret Christianity in terms of a Tantric enlightenment of the body.”

The reasons for, as well as ramifications of, this sort of interchangeability in the public view should catch our attention. Even if anachronistic—that is, even if current interpretations confuse the issue of understanding ancient Gnosticism and Tantra—it is worth considering the efficacy of enlisting each in understanding the other. To wit, in the minds of many for whom gnosis is used to mean a mode of consciousness characterized by (perception of) direct, personal knowledge of ultimate reality, Asian Tantra can be said to be “gnostic.” Likewise, taking the most visibly essential component of Tantra, that of willfully attempting to peer behind the veil by using taboo or transgressive ideas/acts to challenge normativity and purity codes (especially those related to use of the body itself to unstick from corporeality), many Gnostic practitioners can be seen as “tantric.” At minimum, the manner in which the two categories exist in the public imagination leaves scholars with the task of accounting for them.

Methodological Considerations

One of the central methodological issues in the present treatment is that of the genderings of symbols. To the question of how genders are instantiated in mythical characters, I think we must assume purposefulness. That is, unless we imagine that figures like Sophia, Mary, and the Barbelo/First Thought in the Gnostic myths were arbitrarily cast as female, we must assume it more likely that genderings were deliberate and, moreover, constructed within a socio-political context. Connecting these genderings to the roles women were prescribed is theoretically somewhat easier in the example of Tantra. Tantra’s continued practice to this day makes it more possible to identify the structure and presentation as well as the contexts in which practices occur. This is useful to the comparison here, as we consider the efficacy of inferring something similar of Gnostic women’s roles and practices.

It is important to point out, however, that while the Tantras include numerous narrative accounts about rituals utilizing females who symbolically play the role of the Goddess, these are written not from the first-person perspective of

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a human engaged in a practice but as instructional tracts and/or mythological tales. Few texts or accounts are written by, or even from the point of view of, the female. If what we have to work from are characters in texts, not human women, how might we bring the two into more decisive relationship? I suggest it may need to be done on several fronts.

**Social, psychological and gender theories meet embodiment**

Karen King, utilizing Bourdieusian theory to make the case for an a priori social meaning of religious practice, writes: “Practice is always about power relations, insofar as practices both produce and reproduce a social group’s understanding of the way things are. … Human practices are always directed toward some purpose; they are always involved in the processes of meaning-making; and they always inscribe, reinscribe, or contest certain relations of power.” So, no matter the dearth of accounts we may have by human women, it is reasonable to begin by assuming that power relations were taking place.

Addressing the ambiguous roles of the female with respect to her symbolic identities, I borrow from Indologist Lorelei Biernacki’s research on Tantra, in which she uses feminist discourse theories, and Buddhism scholar Judith Simmer Brown’s treatment of the theoretical concerns of gender, feminism, and Jungian psychology as they impact understanding of the Tantric ḍākinī. Additionally, historian Caroline Walker Bynum’s influence is felt here in terms of her gendered reading of embodiment in medieval Christianity, treating symbols as either reinforcing or inverting social values. Their ideas serve to interrogate connections between symbolic portrayals and the agency of humans who are impacted by their interpretation. Space considerations allow for little more than an annotation of each, so what follows is meant to highlight the contributions these scholars make to the conversation.

Biernacki maintains that scholarly work on the symbolic female invites the unfolding of *new portraits*, as she calls them, of Tantric female figures—“portraits that shift the underlying differentials of power encoded in the ways that genders get represented.” She cites Sunder Rajan who writes, “Our understanding of the problems of ‘real’ women cannot lie outside the ‘imagined’ constructs in and through which ‘women’ emerge as subjects.” Biernacki feels that we can assume Tantric women were gurus and teachers and practitioners because their representation in texts of women as actors

7 A new and noteworthy scholarly treatment comes from Sravana Borkatkey-Varma’s research in contemporary Tantra communities, undertaken in “an attempt to rectify the absence of women’s voices in the scholarship…” [and] offer a new look at a tradition that has generally been studied by male scholars focusing on male practitioners” See “In the Tea-Light of Tantra: an Ethnographic Study of Kūndalinī Rising in Women’s Bodies.” PhD diss., Rice University, 2016, 13.


suggests a social space beyond the text, and interacting with the texts, which, in turn, influences the writers of these texts to incorporate women in these roles. … In a circuit of mutual influence this writing both sanctions these attitudes toward women and directs the readers of these texts to implement these images of women as gurus and practitioners. … [This institutes] a discourse, a kind of ‘talk’ about women that sets up the terms for redefining women’s identities in ways that point to women as subjects.¹¹

Bynum explores the body as a tool for taking control of the social manifestation of self. In *Holy Feast, Holy Fast*, she shows how somatic religious practices in particular illuminate fundamental aspects of individuals interacting in society. In *Resurrection of the Body*, she makes the point that Western traditions are not body-hating in an ontological sense—and explains how “personhood” is seen as present only when the body and soul unite. Matter—the body, in particular—is viewed as a locus of change. In short, Bynum would say, the body matters. And in whatever culture or time period, if the body cannot be dismissed as a site of meaning-making, then by extension, gender cannot be dismissed.

Addressing how discussions of gender, symbol and religion raise particular concerns about universalizing, essentializing, and naturalizing in interpretations of Buddhist Tantra, Simmer-Brown cautions that feminist theory, especially when applied to ethics issues in non-Western contexts, runs the risk of “bringing contemporary values to bear” on historically and culturally divergent material.¹² Symbol studies require an especially close monitoring of cultural assumptions about personal and individual meaning- and identity-formations. Also, in concert with Bynum, who observes that symbols may operate differently for males than for females, even within a single socio-cultural setting,¹³ Simmer-Brown points out that the ḍākinī, with her “ambiguous, semiotic quality”¹⁴ while more commonly thought of as a female manifestation appearing for the benefit of a male practitioners (yogis), does come to aid female practitioners (yoginis) in their spiritual realization, though playing somewhat different roles for each. Also, on occasion, a human male may manifest in the role as ḍāka.¹⁵ “Tibetans also consider the ḍākinī ambiguous and often hesitate to conceptualize, systematize, or

¹¹ Biernacki, *Renowned Goddess*, 17. An opposite approach would be to regard female portrayals in texts as a wholly separate phenomenon that cannot inform how females were used symbolically in their historical-cultural settings. Antti Marjanen writes that because of tendencies by writers of the Nag Hammadi texts toward “misrepresentation and exaggeration … The use of feminine imagery and symbolism cannot be linked directly to the social history of the groups behind the texts.” http://www.helsinki.fi/teol/pro/gnosti/eng_social/gnostic_women.html


¹³ An excerpt from Bynum’s findings: “Women’s symbols and myths tend to build from social and biological experiences; men’s symbols and myths tend to invert them. … Women’s myths and rituals tend to explore a state of being; men’s tend to build elaborate and discrete stages between self and other.” Caroline Walker Bynum, Stevan Harrell, and Paula Richman, eds. *Gender and Religion: On the Complexity of Symbols* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 13.


¹⁵ Simmer-Brown, *Dakini’s*, 32, 263.
formulate her meaning,” she writes. This suggests that ambiguity indeed holds a kind of power.

Simmer-Brown also addresses the phenomenon of intermingling Western psychological interpretations with traditional understandings of the meanings of female religious symbols, an unavoidable aspect of contemporary scholarship on Tantra and Gnosticism. As one example, Simmer-Brown notes the tremendous influence of the link from the Jungian anima to contemporary Western interpretations of the ḍākinī. She raises the important question: When feminist critiques of practices involving the ritual use of women to symbolize the Goddess are raised, are they critiquing the symbol’s meaning in its originating tradition, or the Jungian-influenced, Westernized understanding of it? In the most reductive psychological register, the ḍākinī may be clinically relegated to “psychic data,” whereas comparative scholarship today can more comprehensively account for the ḍākinī’s role in spiritual transformation by putting other bodies of theory into conversation.

Without giving contemporary Western theory a privileged position, then, Simmer-Brown’s perspective is to explore its usefulness while erring on the side of protecting practices and lived experiences that are religious in nature (or spiritual, mystical, or non-ordinary, as one may opt to call them) from being elided by Western theory. With regard to Tibetan Buddhist philosophy, for example, she observes that the concept of emptiness, if engaged in the manner intended in Vajrayana Buddhism, reconciles the problem of othering of one gender: “When both sides of the polarity are grounded in emptiness, this potential alienation is nothing but a temporary obfuscation.”

Female Bodies as Problem and Power

Jorunn Buckley writes that a number of the female figures in Gnosticism are “characterized by sexual power and by both dangerous and laudable creative autonomy. Female power to act and to create—whether legitimate or not, whether the female is alone or in partnership with a male—is a recurring motif in Gnostic texts.” As she notes, “The majority of Gnostic texts portray female entities as worldly yet transcendent beings, fertility figures as well as virgins. Frequently, contradictory characteristics are attributed to a single female; thus, paradoxes occur and categories clash.”

In both traditions, one prominent way that discourses relate the female and her body to salvation is by regarding her it as a “problem” that requires a “solu-
tion.” In the Vedic-originating traditions, purity issues surround the female. Her blood, her sexual fluids, and the birth act are all suffused with contradictory meanings: they are both impure and highly sought as symbols or essences of the power of the goddess herself. The manner of engaging this dichotomy is one key factor that differentiates Tantra from other Indian philosophic systems. The Tantric system hinges on confronting the polarities of human existence, as symbolized by the female and the fluids she emits.

Sexuality is connected to danger and to power in *The Apocryphon of John*, where Sophia’s creative willfulness against her male consort causes Ialdabaoth to be created—a monstrous figure, who in turn produces the lower world. Her fallen state results from her desire to create without the consent of her partner, and this earns her the name Prounikos (lewd, lascivious).

So, the female’s untamed, unchecked willfulness is the disaster that creates the most problematic element in the Gnostic myth—the created world. “Sophia’s condition is one of simultaneous deficiency and an excess of power.”

Sophia’s willfulness is clearly a problem. And at the same time, her problematic body is utilized toward the highest spiritual aspirations. What is going on here?

To describe this dynamic in a comparative sense, we can consider the obvious point that all salvation narratives require a certain dualism in that there must be something to transcend. (Even if that something is thought to be ultimately illusory.) The female playing the problematic Other enacts the binary that supports and defines the dominant primary (the male) as against something. This type of paradox seems built into these soteriologies.

For example, in Gnostic as well as Tantric texts, images and metaphors of fluids flowing/pouring/ floating abound, many of which are related to transgressive sexual practices. Tantrics of the left-hand variety famously sought and ingested the fluids of the female-as-the Goddess. More directly than metaphorically, in some Tantras, female sexual fluids are an ontological force. Analyzing the *Kaulavalinirnaya*, David Gordon White puts it plainly: “Without a doubt female discharge is consciousness in manifest form,” and was therefore to be ritually ingested because it is “from there that gnosis is obtained”.

Some Gnostic sects were said to collect sexual fluid and ingest it in order to save the spirit harbored within it. As to which Gnostics, the documentarian, heresiologist Epiphaneus, is apparently not very clear. However, the reported practices of the Carpocratians make their association with Tantric sexual practices/beliefs seem reasonable. According to accounts likely recorded by Irenaeus, this group believed that “it is necessary for the soul to experience all sin in order to be liberated.” In other words, salvation through transgression.

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22 Buckley, *Female Fault*, 132.
Gnostic Liminality and Speech

Liminality and Female Volition

Few figures have been assigned more liminal roles in the Gnostic myths than Sophia. In *The Apocryphon of John*, Sophia acts on her desire to encounter the Father. The myth gives her agency to act on her desire, as previously mentioned, but exercising this agency without getting “prior approval” causes big problems. In *On the Origin of the World*, Sophia’s exercise of volition brings several forces into being, including “limitless chaos”: “Immediately her will manifested itself as a likeness of heaven, having an unimaginable magnitude. … [She] functioned as a veil dividing mankind from the things above.”25 As a figure of liminality, she is neither here nor there but exists to delineate the newly formed division of being. April DeConick notes, “Because [Sophia] is known in scripture to descend from heaven into the world and interact with humans, in Gnostic systems this Aeon becomes the one who crosses boundaries.”26

The figure of the Barbelo, or First Thought, considered the first thought of the infinite in the *Trimorphic Protennoia*, also has to petition before bringing forth beings. As primordially powerful as she is, still she is mediated by the male force. When either of these female figures—Sophia or the Barbelo—acts decisively in these narratives, something at very least unprecedented, and at worst ultimately catastrophic, happens.

In *Hypostasis of the Archons* and *On the Origin of the World* the Pistis or Sophia challenges the male force. In these texts, she denounces Ialdabaoth the Creator’s arrogant claim to being the only god. It is Sophia’s and the angels’ reaction to this vain statement that brings about major cosmological events in this case. When a female figure in this narrative repents, however, as in *Apocryphon of John*, when the mother of Ialdabaoth expresses sorrow at the monster she has produced, at that point, Patricia Cox Miller writes, female power is unleashed. The feminine dimension doubles: (Pistis-Sophia), then triples: (Pistis-Sophia-Zoe), and continues to multiply. “The feminine dimension of reality not only appears, but is intensified … setting the masculine world of Ialdabaoth atremble.”27

Another narrative pattern related to symbolization of female volition is of interest to us here. Sophia and the Barbelo/First Thought are again the featured characters. In her “highest” manifestation (in the Sethian system), Birger Pearson notes, Sophia is First Thought/the Barbelo. In a lower manifestation, Sophia has a thought: “She wanted to bring forth a likeness out of herself without the consent of the Spirit—he had not approved—and without her consort, and

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26 April DeConick, *Thirteenth Apostle*. (New York: Continuum, 2007), 38. For more on Sophia’s many textual appearances in Jewish and Christian scriptures as well as other Gnostic texts, see esp. ch. 2, “A Gnostic Catechism.”
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without his consideration. ... And because of the invincible power which is in her, her thought did not remain idle and something came out of her which was imperfect.”

It seems the Gnostic myths convey that, while the female figure being a thought or having a thought contains the power to cause a rupture of norms on an ontological level, they play out differently in the narratives. Again, the first is valenced as an acceptable kind of power and the second causes huge catastrophes. In effect, then, the female as an ontological force seems to be generative in an acceptable sense, while the female as an entity with agency to do or make is portrayed as having negative ramifications.

**Speech as Gnosis in Gnosticism**

"The mystery which is beyond the world, that whereby all things exist: It is all evolution and all involution; ... We are all one and the same and thou art one and the same. This is the first mystery. (Pistis Sophia)

"I am ... the glory of the Mother. I cast [voiced] Speech into the ears of those who know me. ... [The speech] exists from the beginning in the foundations of the All." (Trimorphic Protennoia)

Several female figures in Gnostic texts are assigned a relationship with speech and voice as a form of gnosis. I will briefly mention three of them: Mary, Sophia and First Thought/Barbelo.

In the *Pistis Sophia*, Mary can be seen as the human counterpart of the Sophia character. Both are the major protagonists, along with “the Savior” with whom each interacts in separate storylines. But Mary reflects Sophia’s story in that she is “implied by her desire” for knowledge. Here Mary is a superior spiritual student, the most inquisitive and most intelligent of the disciples, and the most boldly forthright questioner of the Savior. Throughout the *Pistis Sophia*, the Savior repeats a phrase familiar from the New Testament (with slight variations): “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” Mary is the one who is depicted as having the ears to hear. The other disciples are portrayed as poor to mediocre at hearing, that is, at catching the Savior’s meanings. Fully 39 of the 42 questions posed to the Savior by the disciples in this part of the narrative come from Mary. After each of his answers, she summarizes his words effectively, to the point of earning accolades and, in the end, spiritual powers. He remarks after each summary with praises like, *Well said. It is well, Mary...* followed by a shower of compliments, for example, calling her *inheritor of light* who shall be the *pleroma of all pleromas, and the perfection of all perfections or thou all-blessed Pleroma,*

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who will be blessed among all generations. The praises from the Savior seem in fact to inflate as the narrative progresses.

She is depicted after her last summary of his teachings as having internalized the spiritual message to the fullest: “When Mary had finished saying these words, that the Savior was greatly astonished at the exposition of the words which she had given, for she had become pure spirit entirely.” Mary alone attains the gnos- sis set out for the disciples. So, her speech is gnostic power in perhaps the most literal sense in this text.

The *Trimorphic Protennoia* gives us another richly textured treatment of speech as gnosis. Here, Speech is anthropomorphized as one of three parts of the cosmology: Voice, Speech and Thought. Protennoia, the entity that comprises all three, itself, means “First Thought,” and is gendered female. Here she makes specific mention of her gender, showing its significance.

I am the Mother [of] the Voice, speaking in many ways, completing the All. It is in me that knowledge dwells, the knowledge of <things> everlasting. It is I [who] speak within every creature and I was known by the All. It is I who lift up the Speech of the Voice to the ears of those who have known me, that is, the Sons of the Light. Now I have come the second time in the likeness of a female and have spoken with them.

She beckons to the Sons of the Thought—the other characters in this dramatic telling: “Listen to me, to the Speech of the Mother of your mercy, for you have become worthy of the mystery hidden from (the beginning of) the aeons, so that [you might receive] it.”

**Tantric Double-Coding and Speech**

**Double-Coding Female Agency in Tantra**

In South Asia, the context in which Tantra is traditionally practiced, the human female can clearly be seen symbolizing two radically opposite things. Geoffrey Samuel comments, “The contradictions are most conspicuous in relation to women and their role in village society. In Brahmanical thought … the young, fertile married woman is the most immediate human representative of [the goddess] Laksmi. Yet … childbirth is seen as the most polluting of bodily processes, and traditional childbirth attendants generally belong to the lowest of social categories and are viewed with little or no respect.”

30 It should be noted that the Barbelo/First Thought is sometimes either androgynous or male, and is also called “the mother-father,” “the thrice-androgynous Name,” and “thrice-male” in *Ap. John* (II 5:8).
31 *Trim. Prot*. NHL, 42.9-18.
32 *Trim. Prot*. NHL, 44.30-33.
that women live with these ambiguous roles in their daily lives. They are by turns the Goddess—the most pure and most sought—and the most impure and outside normativity. Biernacki parses the Tantric female’s double-coding thusly: “In [a] … normative context, the woman is politically disenfranchised, without a public voice, and relegated to the dominion of the husband and his family. On the other hand, the transgression coded in the rite of sexual union that involves the wife as partner involves an underlying disruption of the coding of woman as property and, with this, an alternative response to the anxiety that woman presents.” A woman is a successful transgressor, fulfilling her role as Tantric goddess, if she “sustains the idea of difference” and “resists assimilation.”

To maintain this, “she is pushed to the outside beyond the borders of normative social and political power.” She has to be presumed “outside” for this dance of the energies to function. As a yogini, symbolizing the Goddess as a being close to the human world and divine, her liminality is called on as an important power. (However, the point should not escape our notice that it seems to be the male’s purview to engage her sustaining of her otherness, her difference, her transgressive quality.)

Eventually the whole notion of Other has to be undermined for spiritual realization to occur. The category of “other” shifts, according to Biernacki, “because the multiplicity of shifting forms explodes the binary logic that founds the idea of an ‘other.’ In one sense there is no ‘other.’ There is both unity and multiplicity. … Language divides the world into self and other. The multiplicity of the goddess’s forms as bodied language offers a way out of the … construction of self that is created by excluding that which is ‘other.’”

**Tantra and Speech**

In her explication of the *Great Blue Tantra*, Biernacki highlights something called “feminine speech” as a vidya—a kind of performative knowledge. This can take the form of mantra—a nonlinear, time-rupturing utterance—and is gendered feminine, even if coming from the voice of a male deity. This performative speech has the effect of disrupting assumptions about language, according to Biernacki. The Blue Goddess of Speech, the central figure in the *Great Blue Tan*

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36 While different Tantras showed varying ways of employing transgressive practices, some argue that the practices were taken entirely, largely, or at least by some, purely symbolically. That is, they didn’t necessarily “do those things” described in the texts. Wendy Doniger outlines arguments for and against the various theories of what Tantrics were actually doing in *The Hindus*. See especially the chapter “Sex and Sects in the Tantric Puranas and Tantras.” Some may argue that only the “left-handed Tantrics” were truly transgressive; this statement usually being made, Doniger points out, by the right-handed Tantrics; while non-Tantrics consider any Tantras/Tantrics transgressive (421).
*tra*, creates language out of her body. In a manner reminiscent of the “unsaying” of an apophatic reading, Biernacki writes about the twelve words,

which are simultaneously bodied goddesses, arise out of her body. They are not just goddesses; they are words. Not just words, they are the bodying of sound into female forms. This feminine anthropomorphized speech fuses the notion of sign and thing, giving us a word that is presence rather than the sign of absence. As words, they do not point to a being beyond themselves. They do not function the way words usually do...[they] don’t point to a being located elsewhere; they are the presence of being, the goddesses themselves.\(^{38}\)

In a similar way to the Gnostic texts we just encountered, speech/words in this Tantra are not a symbol standing for something. They are an ontological enactment, borne specifically of the female.

To return to the human female, what might it mean for her to step into the Goddess-body? And what constitutes the “reality” of the symbolic female in the capacity we have discussed here? Does her embodied-symbol-self bracket out her ordinary self while instantiating a larger-than-life ontological reality for her and for the male counterpart?\(^ {39}\) In an instrumentalist reading, the dynamic of this role that she plays for the practitioner could be read as the bodied human female displaced by the symbolic in order for a metaphoric reality—one wherein she is the Tantric yogini existing within the male—can take precedence. It would seem that attempts at further inquiry along these lines would need to declare which of the human or the symbolic beings is to be taken as sui generis.

**Conclusion**

This essay has circled the question of the lived outcome for Gnostic and Tantric women, but did not attempt to arrive at one “answer.” At the outset I noted that the heart of Tantric practice involves utilizing the condition of embodiment as a kind of encounter between that which is encoded as taboo and that which is sacred; and that this encounter acts as a teaching device toward spiritual realization. I opened the question of whether inferences could be made of similar practice philosophies in Gnostic communities. Gnostic and Tantric texts, and exemplary scholarly readings thereof, were then surveyed to see how their comparison might help us problematize the binary state of the debate about the use of the female in these traditions. In a sense, is not difficult to come down on one side of the argument—for instance, to conclude that the female’s spiritual status in these traditions offers no corrective to her human status as unequal and oth-er. How could it, we might reasonably ask, if the female’s overall roll is that

\(^{38}\) Biernacki, *Renowned Goddess*, 119.

\(^{39}\) For more on the female body as the locus of erasure for women in Gnosticism, see Deconick, *Holy Misogyny*. 

\(87\)
of an instrument for the male spiritual practitioner? But this conclusion, besides veering toward essentializing, is itself too bifurcative. Again, our focus has been on ambiguity, expressed as a powerful, sometimes messy, spiritual force that un-doehs binaries. So, my suggestion has been to encourage interdisciplinary, gnostic methodological approaches of the sort that allow a narrative consonant with the phenomenological work that we are trying to understand. This should include recognition of the performed quality of practices of spiritual transformation. The inherent immediacy and mutability of performance should cue us to make room in our scholarly determinations about these groups for the genuineness of the actors’ experiences of unaffixedness.

The efficacy of non-rigid interpretations of female participation in spiritual practices is reflected by scholars such as Doniger, who reminds us that Tantric ritual performance, while indeed constructing rigid gender roles, “also allows possibilities for the subversions of those roles.” And in a different sense by Simmer-Brown, who embeds the question of the outcome of practices into the metaphysics of the tradition in question. To wit, for Vajrayana, the genderings of symbols are crucial for all practitioners in “providing expression for the dynamic qualities of phenomenal existence.” The dakini herself “personifies in Tibetan Buddhism the spiritual process of surrendering expectation and concept, revealing limitless space and pristine awareness.” With this ontological complex in mind, it would be a disservice to circumscribe the dakini’s awesome power by relegating her to a single-vectored identity as “oppressed.” Though, it must also be said, it would be an equally great disservice to ignore the predicament of the female’s gendered, bodied nature.

The work of certain female-gendered figures was examined toward the project of expanding portraits of female actors in these traditions. These portraits remain impressionistic. And—if my suppositions here are accepted—fittingly so. It is my sense that the expansion of our conceptions of the female’s power—symbolic and otherwise—occurs in the interstices of the scholar’s third position, beyond the either/or of reductive or religious beliefs. There we may carve a space that allows the female symbolic to speak her multivalent self via the scholar’s dialectical involvement.

Bibliography


41 Simmer-Brown, *Dakini’s*, 21.
42 Simmer-Brown, *Dakini’s*, 16.
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