It is indeed an honor to contribute to this anthology of studies on the subject of Women and Knowledge in Early Christianity in recognition of our esteemed colleague Antti Marjanen—to my knowledge the only Professor of Gnostic Studies in the modern academic world—who has taught us so much on the subject of gender and the role of women in antiquity and the early Christian world. Although he has dealt extensively with real women as intellectual leaders in these contexts, I would like to explore a more abstract topic, namely the ways in which wisdom (σοφία) and (spiritual) knowledge (γνῶσις) are frequently personified as female entities. Of course one must bear in mind that there is a distinction between functional femininity and merely grammatical femininity in ancient Greek, Latin, and Coptic sources, in which various significant nouns and pronouns in the philosophical and mythological schemes can appear in the feminine gender, sometimes for good and substantial reasons, and sometimes for reasons that are purely grammatical and lexicographic.¹

In this chapter, I survey the phenomenon of feminine principles in the metaphysics of selected Platonic and gnostic literature. The Platonic sources will include Plato’s later dialogues and oral teaching, and continue with some subsequent Platonist sources, including Speusippus, Philo of Alexandria, Moderatus, Plutarch, Numenius, the Chaldaean Oracles and Plotinus. I will limit the treatment of gnostic sources to texts commonly referred to as “classic gnostic” or “Sethian.” These will include the theogony that Irenaeus in his Adversus Haereses 1.29–30 attributes to certain “gnostics” later identified as Ophites, Sethians and Barbeloites, and the related Nag Hammadi treatises Eugnostos the Blessed, Apocryphon of John, Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit (Gospel of the Egyptians), Trimorphic Protennoia, Allogenes, Zostrianos, and Marsanes. I begin with Plato and Platonic sources.

In his *Timaeus*, Plato first accounts for the created order as the best possible copy of a perfect transcendent model carefully reproduced by a completely intelligent male demiurge. But at the end of section 48, he makes a fresh start, stating that his account is incomplete without a consideration of a second, maternal cause of the universe in addition to Intelligence. Plato then goes on to characterize all earthly existents as offspring of two transcendent “parents.” All phenomena are images (εἴδωλα), the offspring or Child (ἐκγόνος) of their Father the Forms, emerging and existing within the volume of their “Mother,” the “all-receiving nature” of “space,” called the “Receptacle and Nurse of becoming.”

Indeed, the Mother is not so much a parent, as she is a Nurse, since there is no direct sexual interaction between her and the paternal Forms. The Forms, which alone have real being, never undergo alteration nor actually enter into anything else at any point. The receptacle is itself entirely homogeneous, without any inherent quality, and never undergoes alteration. It is a space that contains an endless flux of indistinguishable sensible qualities. Like a mirror, the Receptacle receives and reflects the images of the Forms, enabling this qualitative flux to become defined as distinguishable things within her. In order to survive as offspring or Child, they must continue to exist “in” the Mother. The implication is that only the Forms and the formless Receptacle have any independent reality of their own. The images, the things that we see in the world, are only reflections or impressions of the Forms in the eternally subsisting nature of the Receptacle, apart from whom they would simply cease to be.

Although the *Timaeus* is the only place where Plato employs the terms Father, Mother, and Child to designate ultimate metaphysical principles, the tradition of his later oral teaching seems to be much occupied with developing the ontological implications of this metaphysical triad. According to the var-

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2 *Timaeus* 48e: “For this world came into being from a mixture and combination of necessity and intelligence ... and it was by the subordination of necessity to reasonable persuasion that the universe was originally constituted as it now is.”


4 The images constitute the contents of the sensible world. While the Forms are the object of intellecction and the images are objects of perception, the Receptacle is neither an intelligible nor a sensible object. It only partakes of the intelligible in a most puzzling way, and can be apprehended only by a kind of spurious reasoning.