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Permission to Speak?

Cleobulina/Eumetis in Plutarch's *Symposium of the Seven Sages* and Mary in the *Pistis Sophia*

Dawn LaValle Norman

Abstract

In his life, Plutarch publicly claims to have had intellectual conversations with women such as Clea, the dedicatee of both *De Iside et Osiride* and *Mulierum virtutes*. Within the *Lives* women are permitted reported speeches, and his work *Lacaenarum Apophthegmata* preserves the *bons mots* of brave women. Yet, in his multiple philosophical dialogues, none of these philosophical or verbal women are allowed to carry on conversations out loud while “on-stage.” Plutarch's *Septem sapientium convivium* provides the clearest example of this avoidance. Cleobulina/Eumetis, although depicted as wanting to speak, maintains silence while Aesop speaks up for her, quoting her previous speech, and leaving her maidenly modesty intact. In this essay, I contrast Plutarch's use of silent women in his dialogues with the Christian dialogue gospels written between the second to fourth centuries CE, which sometimes depicted female disciples in privileged conversation with the resurrected Jesus. As in Plutarch's *Septem sapientium convivium*, their verbal participation is resisted by some of the men present within the fictional world but speaking rights are granted to them from Jesus himself. In particular, I will examine the roles played by Mary in the *Pistis Sophia* (third century CE). Plutarch's strategies of ventriloquism are abandoned in these early Christian dialogic texts. This was to herald a new period of dialogic writing, when women would begin to be depicted “on-stage” speaking in their own voices. Examining the “hinge generation” of Plutarch and the dialogic gospels will illuminate the causes of this change in generic expectation.

Introduction

This essay focuses on a subsection of Plutarch's varied corpus—his philosophical dialogues—and the way in which they use (or rather fail to use) the female voice in ways

distinct from the rest of his corpus.¹ In order to throw into relief Plutarch's method, I will compare the women in his dialogues to another set of dialogic texts which, although roughly contemporary, have not entered into the realm of Plutarchan dialogue studies, namely the dialogue gospels, written in the second and third centuries CE, presumably in Greek, although preserved in Coptic.² Plutarch's dialogues and the dialogue gospels both use female characters, which is a rare enough occurrence in the genre of the dialogue to warrant an investigation. In this essay I will analyze how these dialogues all dramatize the tension over inclusion of women into their dialogic events and ultimately come to different solutions about their verbal participation.

Plutarch claims to have had stimulating philosophical conversations with women, such as Clea, the dedicatee of both *Mulierum virtutes* and *De Iside et Osiride* (*Mul. virt.* 242F). He also cares about preserving women's voices in other genres, such as women's speeches in the *Lives* and the miscellanistic collection of the inspiring *Sayings of the Spartan Women* (*Lacaenarum Apophthegmata*).³ Yet, in his multiple *philosophical dialogues*, no woman is allowed to speak while "on-stage." In this, Plutarch expands upon Plato's precedent and continues a strongly felt restriction in the genre of the philosophical dialogue. Plato too had only had the off-stage words of Diotima in the *Symposium* and Aspasia in the *Menexenus* ventriloquized by on-stage men. In this article, I will first look at Plutarch's closest "near miss", when a woman *almost* speaks in his dialogues, only to finally keep her mouth shut: Cleobulina, also known as Eumetis, in *Septem sapientium convivium*. Over her silence, Plutarch has another character speak up on her behalf in what I call a move of "benevolent ventriloquism," echoing Plutarch's own positionality in relationship to the voices of his female intellectual friends.⁴

¹ This essay is part of a larger research project, *The Female Voice in Ancient Philosophical Dialogues*, funded by a Discover Early Career Research Award from the Australian Research Council.

² For introduction to the dialogue gospels, see P. Perkins, *The Gnostic Dialogue: The Early Church and the Crisis of Gnosticism* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980); J. Hartenstein, *Die Zweite Lehre: Erscheinungen des Auferstandenen als Rahmenerzählungen frühchristlicher Dialoge* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2000); S. Parkhouse, *Eschatology and the Saviour: The Gospel of Mary among Early Christian Dialogue Gospels* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019). The fundamental study of the interplay between female characters and the feminine in the dialogue gospels is S. Peterson, "Zerstört die Werke der Weiblichkeit!" *Maria Magdalena, Salome und andere Jüngerinnen Jesu in christlich-gnostischen Schriften* (Leiden: Brill, 1999).

³ For the *Lives*, Bradley Buszard has analyzed the speeches of eleven different women: Chilonis (Agis 17.4–10), Aristomache (Dion 51.1–5), Theste (Dion 21.8), Porcia (Brut. 13.6–10), Licinia (C. Gracch. 15.2–4), Cornelia (Pomp. 74.4–6), Octavia (Ant. 35.3–5), Julia (Ant. 20.3), Hersilia (Rom. 19.4–7), Valeria (Cor. 33.3–4), and Volumnia (Cor. 33.5, 35.1–36.3). He concludes that they "all demonstrate impressive rhetorical ability and a surprising capacity for public action when necessary" (B. Buszard, "The Speech of Greek and Roman Women in Plutarch's Lives," *CPh* 105.1 (2010) 111).

⁴ The concept of gendered ventriloquism has been developed for the field of Renaissance literature in E. D. Harvey, *Ventriloquized Voices: Feminist Theory and English Renaissance Texts* (London: Routledge, 1992).

Plutarch's ventriloquism becomes starker when put in comparison with roughly contemporaneous Christian dialogue gospels, where the female disciples of Jesus are not only present, but verbal; not only verbal, but the star participants—to such an extent that the men involved get annoyed. Both Plutarch and the dialogue gospels dramatize male resistance to female participation, and both display an awareness that including women would break precedent.⁵ But Plutarch decides to keep his women ventriloquized by benevolent men, and the dialogue gospels authorize women to speak for themselves in the drama of the dialogues. I will argue in this essay that the different uses to which the male authors of these texts put women's voices is due to their larger views on the right order of the cosmos.

Background on the Texts

Plutarch, as a wealthy and influential intellectual at home in a Romanized Greece, might seem far from the authors of the dialogue gospels, who were working on the margins of the empire with imaginations saturated in questions of postmortem existence. Instead of using composition to advertise a strong authorial persona, the authors of the dialogue gospels chose to occlude their own identity, presenting tales of extended teachings of Jesus to special groups of listeners, offering elite knowledge of salvation. Despite the difference in their cultural context, I will argue that Plutarch and the writers of the dialogic gospels, as rough contemporaries, can still be usefully compared in how they use gendered voices within their dialogic texts.

The dialogue gospels have been the subject of much controversy. Most were rediscovered only in the modern period, at Nag Hammadi in 1945, although the one that I will chiefly be looking at in this essay, the *Pistis Sophia*, has been known since 1773 as the Askew Codex.⁶ We have female interlocutors present mainly in four of the dialogue gospels: *The Gospel of Mary*, the *Dialogue of the Savior*, the *Sophia of Jesus Christ*, and the *Pistis Sophia*. The earliest two, *The Gospel of Mary* and the *Dialogue of the Savior*, are most likely from the second century CE and therefore roughly contemporaneous with Plutarch. Although dating for all of these remain contentious, the *Sophia of Jesus Christ* and the earlier sections of the *Pistis Sophia* both seem to date from the third century CE. In this chapter, I will take

⁵ A clear moment of this self-awareness of generic exclusion of women from philosophical dialogues comes later in Augustine's fourth century Latin dialogue *De Ordine* 1.11.31, where Monica resists being written into a dialogue because she knows women do not belong in the genre.

⁶ A description and history of the Askew Codex can be found in C. Schmidt (ed.), *Pistis Sophia*, transl. V. MacDermot (Leiden: Brill, 1978) xi–xviii.

the *Pistis Sophia* for my main point of comparison with Plutarch. There is a practical reason behind this. It is complete, while the *Gospel of Mary* is not. Also, it contains multiple female speakers, whereas *The Gospel of Mary*, the *Dialogue of the Savior* and the *Sophia of Jesus Christ* contain only one female speaker. Finally, it is by far the longest. This gives us a greater amount of data to work with, and to see how the dynamics of the female voice play out.

Both Plutarch's *Septem sapientium convivium* and the *Pistis Sophia* present intellectual competition among a friendly gathering. Plutarch's competition sets up the structure of the text: the Seven Sages who have been gathered by Periander are asked to participate in various sympotic games, such as interpreting riddles and expressing gnomic one-line statements. The *Pistis Sophia* is set after Christ's death, during the eleven years that the text claims Jesus lived with his disciples on earth and taught them before his Ascension. Like the group of Sages in Plutarch, Jesus also sets up an academic competition among his disciples, who are challenged to match the songs he tells them were sung by an allegorical figure named Sophia with canonical poems such as the biblical *Psalms*. When they suggest good matches and interpretations, they are praised by Jesus.

Not only are both texts concerned to present intellectual competition among a friendly gathering, but they also both present an idealized version of the past. For Plutarch, this is an idealized archaic Greece, where even the tyrants are learned. For the *Pistis Sophia*, it is a community with direct access to the risen Jesus. A vital question to those in the story is who the legitimate heirs and interpreters of Jesus' revelation are, and whether women are included among them.

In addition to these topical similarities, both writings share a relationship with the dialogues of Plato. Although the dialogue gospels may at first glance seem exotic, their authors were, in fact, working in a milieu that was not radically separate from the Platonic streams in which Plutarch was functioning. The only Coptic translation of Plato that survives, a section of Plato's *Republic*, was found among the works at Nag Hammadi, side by side with many of the dialogue gospels.⁷ In addition, many of the texts show a clear Platonizing character.⁸

⁷ P. Ashwin-Siejkowski, "Plato in Bad Company? Plato's *Republic* (588b–589b) in the Nag Hammadi Collection: A Re-Examination of its Background," *Gnosis: Journal of Gnostic Studies* 5.2 (2020) 172–187.

⁸ J.D. Turner, *Sethian Gnosticism and the Platonic Tradition* (Quebec: Presses Université Laval; Paris: Peeters, 2001).

The similarity in structure as well as the presence of Platonic works in the library where some of these texts were preserved make it surprising that there has been resistance to including the dialogue gospels within the story of the development of the philosophical dialogue. They are never mentioned in the history of the genre of the philosophical dialogue.⁹ Not even Rudolf Hirzel, who does include a brief discussion of dialogic Hermetic writings known to him,¹⁰ thinks to include the *Pistis Sophia* in his discussion of the genre, which was the one dialogue gospel that was already known at the time he wrote his literary history of the dialogue genre. Those that study the dialogue gospels also disagree as to whether they belong to this genealogy. The first scholar that collected these texts together to put them into one genre, Kurt Rudolph, in an important article from 1968, believed that they were influenced by Plato and question-and-answer literature.¹¹ Scholarship since then has been less interested in such comparisons, focusing instead on the relationship of these dialogues with other texts within the Christian tradition rather than looking at broader relationships with literature beyond confessional bounds. For instance, the overview of scholarship of the dialogue gospels provided by Sarah Parkhouse reveals a conversation more interested in the “gospel” half rather than the “dialogue” half of the term, that is, more interested in how these fit into the constellation of early Christian literature than diachronic works across religious commitments.¹² In this essay, I am reviving the oldest interpretation of Rudolph, which I think has fallen to the wayside more because of the bias of scholarly subfields than any more fundamental critique.

But as Rudolph himself emphasized, there are some reasons to resist putting the dialogue gospels into the category of dialogue. In particular, the nature of Jesus as revealer creates a power differential different to what we have in Plutarch’s sympotic works. The *Pistis Sophia* shows a clear teacher-student dynamic, while the *Septem sapientium convivium* is more democratic (even though hosted by a tyrant). Yet, both of these, I would argue, participate in the *range* of possibilities open to writers of dialogue, and such differences do

⁹ E.g. M. Hoffmann, *Der Dialog bei den christlichen Schriftstellern der ersten vier Jahrhunderte* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1966). They are not treated in A. Rigolio, *Christians in Conversation: A Guide to Late Antique Dialogues in Greek and Syriac* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019) because Rigolio limits his languages to Greek and Syriac. Although these dialogues were most likely composed in Greek, we only have access to Coptic versions.

¹⁰ R. Hirzel, *Der Dialog. Ein literarhistorischer Versuch. Zweiter Theil* (Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1895) 359–360.

¹¹ K. Rudolph, “Der gnostische ‘Dialog’ als literarisches Genus’,” in P. Nagel (ed.), *Probleme der koptischen Literatur* (Halle: Wissenschaftliche Beiträge der Universität Halle-Wittenberg, 1968) esp. 89.

¹² Parkhouse, *Eschatology and the Saviour*, 13–68.

not preclude their comparison,¹³ especially along the lines of interest to me here—their use of the female voice. After all, some of Plutarch’s other dialogues are more comfortable with a strong power differential, such as that displayed in his *Adversus Colotem*, where Plutarch takes down the Epicurean argument in a book by Colotes section by section in front of admiring students.

Plutarch’s Silenced Philosophical Women: The Septem sapientium convivium

We have already mentioned that Plutarch was happy to advertise his relationship with philosophical female friends like Clea of Delphi. In his preface to a work addressed to her, he remembers a conversation they shared as a philosophical one (“not without philosophy,” εὐθύς τε μετὰ σοῦ τότε πολλὸν λόγον εἶχομεν οὐκ ἀμοιροῦντα παραμυθίας φιλοσόφου, *Mul. virt.* 242F). But although their conversation happens right before the text, and is the cause of the text, it is not represented in the text.¹⁴ In fact, Plutarch goes on to say that the treatise we are about to read contains the things that were left *unsaid* in the conversation itself. In the following treatise, then, and for posterity, he does not care about preserving *Clea’s* insights into the matter of female virtue, nor of recording their actual conversation, but about making sure that his own voice is heard on the topic, displaying his encyclopedic control over the miscellaneous information he has gathered through his research—and giving it as a gift to his intellectual female friend. His communication with her in the preface to *Mulierum virtutes* can stand as a model for how Plutarch treats women in his other texts. He explicitly honors women, virtuous and philosophical. He is unashamed to admit that they are capable of philosophical conversation. Yet, at the same time he pushes them to the margins even when he seems to be looking straight at them. Jill Harries has examined this Plutarchian gender dynamic as a reflection of more “insidious—and perhaps more effective—forms” of male control than outright suppression through force.¹⁵ Harries believes that the challenge to traditional Greek norms that came from the rising importance of new Roman definitions of

¹³ For a discussion of the range of uses open to dialogue writers in this period, see D. LaValle Norman, *The Aesthetics of Hope in Late Greek Imperial Literature: Methodius of Olympus’ Symposium and the Crisis of the Third Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019) 69–118.

¹⁴ He is explicit about Clea’s reading at *Mul. virt.* 243D and respects her as a reader: he says he is not going to write something to give pleasure, but to prove an argument. He also mentions the danger that some people think he is telling these stories for “feminine” reasons, that is, for *charis* and distraction. The implication is that he is not interested in writing a book “for women” or a “feminine book.”

¹⁵ J. Harries, “The Cube and the Square: Masculinity and Male Social Roles in Roman Boiotia,” in L. Foxhall & J. Salmon (eds.), *When Men Were Men: Masculinity, Power and Identity in Classical Antiquity* (London-New York: Routledge, 1998) 194.

social roles left Plutarch in two minds about women and resulted in contradictions in his work. There was less need to define men in opposition to women when Roman control had reduced the expression of traditional civic values.¹⁶ But Harries does not specifically focus on how the presence of intelligent women in Plutarch's oeuvre interacts with the verbal role they are allowed in Plutarch's different genres.

The specifically *dialogic* avoidance of women's voices by Plutarch can be further seen in his treatment of Ismenadora in the *Amatorius*. The dialogue opens with Plutarch and his wife going to make sacrifice to Eros, in gratitude for the reconciliation of their parents (*Amatorius* 749B). Although the dialogue begins with an excuse that brings Plutarch and his wife together, Plutarch's wife does not appear in the dialogue at all. Plutarch spends his time "in the palaestra" talking philosophy to his male friends (φιλοσοφοῦντες ἐν ταῖς παλαίστραις, *Amatorius* 749C). In that way, Plutarch's wife parallels the main subject of the dialogue, the rich and beautiful widow Ismenodora, who has fallen in love with a young man named Bacchon, and wishes to marry him, even though he is her inferior in age, status and wealth. Ismenodora is the topic of conversation and is able to send messages to summon characters "off-stage" (*Amatorius* 756A), but she never comes "on stage" at all.

Two of Plutarch's dialogic works are structured via the cultural institution of the *symposium* and inspired by both Plato and Xenophon's writings under this title.¹⁷ The *Table Talk* is the voluminous collection of personal reminiscences from a lifetime of intellectual conversation at parties. Plutarch himself, at various ages, is usually a main interlocutor, but there are no women present at any of these parties he recollects personally. The intellectual social groups are entirely male. However, in his other *symposium*, the *Septem sapientium convivium*, Plutarch includes women in a way completely unprecedented in the literary sympotic genre: they are present not as low-class entertainment (as in Xenophon's *Smp.* 2.7–9 and 9.1–7), nor as wives of the symposiasts who are waiting at home (Xenophon's *Smp.* 9.7), nor as absent speakers of remembered wisdom, as Diotima in Plato's *Symposium* (*Smp.* 201d-212c), but as high-class participants in the party along with their husbands and fathers.

The *Septem sapientium convivium* is set in a very different time and place from the collection of the *Table Talk*. Rather than contemporary conversations, it depicts the misty, legendary time of the Seven Sages, ficting an opportunity for all of them to gather for a feast in honor of Aphrodite hosted by the tyrant Periander of Corinth, inspired by a dream of his

¹⁶ Harries, "The Cube and the Square," 193–194.

¹⁷ For Plutarch's indebtedness to Xenophon's *Symposium* in particular, see LaValle Norman, *The Aesthetics of Hope*, 136–146.

wife, Melissa. Two women are present in this *Symposium*. The first is Periander's wife herself. While Melissa is the root cause of the party, she plays a very minor role in the subsequent narration, and never comes close to speaking. The second is known by two names: Cleobulina because she is the daughter of the tyrant (and sage) Cleobulus, and the name her father calls her, Eumetis, a clear reference to her famous intelligence.¹⁸ Eumetis plays a much larger and more ambiguous role in the story.

This Eumetis, the first woman that we encounter in the *Septem sapientium convivium*, is praised for being well-known (τὴν σοφὴν, ἔφη, καὶ περιβόητον ἀγνοεῖς Εὐμητιν; *Sept. sap. conv.* 148D). The readiest reason for her fame, which is said to spread as far as Egypt, is her ability to devise clever riddles. But when the onlookers first catch a glimpse of her at Periander's house, they say that she is truly famous for much more: her great sense, her political mind and her philanthropic way of life (φρόνημα θαυμαστὸν καὶ νοῦς ἔνεστι πολιτικὸς καὶ φιλόφρων ἦθος, *Sept. sap. conv.* 148D–E). As they watch her prepare the wild Scythian philosopher Anacharsis for the party, they surmise that she is not only tending to his bodily needs, but dialoging with him to learn his wisdom (μανθάνουσαν τι καὶ προσδιαλεγομένην, *Sept. sap. conv.* 148E). From a distance, she is viewed as a philosophic conversation partner, and even a potential political actor. Later on, she will find her place at the table of the party, along with Melissa.

Although the first glimpse of Eumetis is a positive one, as the men admire her wisdom and political mind, later on in the story, a male participant (the doctor Cleodorus) expresses his opinion that any wisdom women like Eumetis may have is only useful to other women (*Sept. sap. conv.* 154B):

ἂ ταύτην μὲν ἴσως οὐκ ἀπρεπὲς ἐστὶ παίζουσιν καὶ διαπλέκουσιν ὥσπερ ἕτεραι ζωνία καὶ κεκρυφάλους προβάλλειν **ταῖς γυναιξίν**, **ἄνδρας δὲ** νοῦν ἔχοντας ἐν τινὶ σπουδῇ τίθεσθαι γελοῖον.

Perhaps it is not inappropriate if this woman, playing and weaving such things, just as other women do belts and veils, offers them to women. But it is comical for men with sense to take them seriously.¹⁹

¹⁸ Her two names are also mentioned in *De Pyth. or.* 401B.

¹⁹ All translations of the *Sept. sap. conv.* are my own.

There is a clear contrast in the μὲν ... δέ ... clause between what *women* do and say and what *men* (specifically men of sense) do and say. In Cleodorus' opinion, Eumetis' wisdom is not the kind that is of interest or use to men. The sexes are definitely separate and definitely not equal.

However, this is not the last word on the story. Eumetis is scripted by Plutarch as *responding*, but importantly her response is limited to the *non-verbal* (*Sept. sap. conv.* 154B):

Ἡ μὲν οὖν Εὐμητις ἠδέως ἂν εἰποῦσά τι πρὸς αὐτόν, ὡς ἐφαίνετο, κατέσχευεν ἑαυτὴν ὑπ' αἰδοῦς, καὶ ἀνεπλήσθη τὸ πρόσωπον ἐρυθρήματος· ὁ δ' Αἴσωπος οἶον ἀμυνόμενος ὑπὲρ αὐτῆς “οὐ γελοιότερον οὖν,” εἶπε, “τὸ μὴ δύνασθαι ταῦτα διαλύειν, οἷόν ἐστιν ὁ μικρὸν ἔμπροσθεν ἡμῖν τοῦ δεῖπνου προέβαλεν...”

Eumetis, wanting to say something to him, held herself in check with modesty and her face was covered with blushes. But Aesop, like one taking her part, said, “Isn't it more ridiculous not to be able to solve these, like the one that she proposed to us a little bit before dinner...?”

Aesop speaks up on Eumetis' behalf, arguing that men of sense listen to the wisdom of women. In fact, he slyly shows that they had all been listening to Eumetis propound her clever riddles right up until the moment when the dialogue proper began. Zoe Stamatopoulou has investigated Eumetis' role as Plutarch's ideal for women: intelligent, using that intelligence to support male authority, and refraining from speaking through modesty.²⁰

But if Eumetis presents Plutarch's feminine ideal, where does that place Plutarch the author? Aesop here can be seen as a cipher for Plutarch himself, who retells the sayings of women because they cannot yet speak for themselves (or rather, he does not let them). Plutarch cares about preserving the wisdom of women, writing works such as the *Sayings of the Spartan Women* and including praiseworthy women's speeches in his *Lives*. Ann Chapman has called this Plutarch's “benevolent chauvinism.”²¹ And this benevolent chauvinism brings with it a benevolent ventriloquism, where men speak up for women rather than letting them speak for themselves.

Plutarch's generosity in this text does not last indefinitely. The women leave half-way through the party (*Sept. sap. conv.* 155E) when the drinking begins in earnest. Yet, they were

²⁰ Z. Stamatopoulou, “Women, Politics, and Entertainment in Plutarch's *Symposium of the Seven Sages*,” *ICS* 44.1 (2019) 227–228.

²¹ A. Chapman, *The Female Principle in Plutarch's Moralia* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2011) 3.

present for the discussions not only of household management, but also of politics. Even though they were not allowed to participate directly, Eumetis at least (if not Melissa) is spoken of as someone who *could* have participated, with her political mind, but was restrained from doing so because of her modesty.

Plutarch links this appropriate silence for modest women into harmonious partnerships between the sexes. Even when women are unmarried, Plutarch provides a husband stand-in to do the husband's job of speaking for her: for instance, Aesop performs this mouthpiece function for Eumetis. Male-female pairs can then speak with one voice, if the male is practiced in Plutarchan benevolent ventriloquism. Such an arrangement suits Plutarch's advice to a newly married woman Eurydice in *Coniugalia praecepta* (142D):

δεῖ γὰρ ἢ πρὸς τὸν ἄνδρα λαλεῖν ἢ διὰ τοῦ ἀνδρός, μὴ δυσχεραίνουσιν εἰ δι' ἄλλοτρίας γλώττης ὥσπερ ἀύλητῆς φθέγγεται σεμνότερον.

For it is necessary for [the wife] to speak either to her husband or through her husband, not being annoyed if she sounds a more august tune through another's tongue, just like a flutist.²²

Jeremy McInerney argues that Plutarch's obsession with harmony between superior and inferior partners is a structuring principle that goes through multiple layers of his thought. The concord of a happy marriage participates in same logic as the positioning of Greeks under Roman domination.²³ Plutarch is himself a sub-altern in the Roman setting. He is not part of the centers of power. He is subordinated to his Roman political authorities. His intelligent women strive to come to the narrative surface but are kept down as surely as Plutarch himself is also kept in his place as an intellectual rather than a political mover. Plutarch sympathizes with them, while doing his own part to keep them in their proper, subordinate place, maintaining an ordered structure of domination throughout the culture, and assuring his own place within it.

²² Translation my own.

²³ J. McInerney, "Plutarch's Manly Women," in R. Rosen & I. Sluiter (eds.), *Andria: Studies in Manliness and Courage in Classical Antiquity* (Leiden: Brill, 2003) 343: "The true antecedent, then, to the *Mulierum Virtutes* is not the body of complex and contradictory literature about women. Rather, it is the Hellenistic legacy to which Plutarch was heir: namely the belief that reciprocity was the key to all social relations, linking the weak and the strong in a relationship with clear boundaries and mutual rights. That is the model on which the radical concession to women is made. Plutarch's women, therefore, are manly and virtuous not only because of his generosity of spirit and the novelty of his intellect, but because it mattered so much to his own place in the world."

How are we to understand Eumetis' blush, her silent response? The way that Plutarch tells it, there are three steps in the process: Eumetis *wants* to speak, she restrains herself through modesty, then she blushes. The blush does not come from modesty, but rather from the effort of suppression. Modesty causes her silence, but the *need to silence* causes the blush. Plutarch shows us *how much effort there is* in maintaining his in-between role for women: intelligent and allowed to be present, but not allowed to speak.

Mary's Verbal Role in the Pistis Sophia

Of the texts identified as dialogue gospels,²⁴ four feature female interlocutors: the *Sophia of Jesus Christ*, the *Gospel of Mary*, *Dialogue of the Savior* and the *Pistis Sophia*. The significance of this substantial proportion has often been connected to the role played by Mary Magdalene in the writings of the communities who penned these texts. The issue is not straightforward however, since there have been heated disputes over exactly *which* women is speaking, and whether there has been too easy an assumption by scholars that a verbal and authoritative "Mary" in any of these texts must refer to Mary Magdalene. At least three edited collections have been devoted to untangling the knotty problems of identification of the Marys in the dialogic gospels.²⁵ Sometimes "Mary" clearly refer to multiple people in the same text (which is the case in the *Pistis Sophia*), but other times authors seem to be referencing one character, even when they use different forms of her name. A growing trend in scholarship has been to resist the desire to untangle the Marys, and instead see them as a "composite Gnostic Mary", who has taken on characteristics of a variety of Marys of Christian tradition, e.g. Mary the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, Mary of Bethany and Mary of Clopas.²⁶ The *Pistis Sophia* has played an especially central role in the Mary debate,

²⁴ There is debate in the scholarship of exactly which texts should be included under the genre of dialogue gospel, with the list ranging from seven to nineteen texts. S. Peterson, "Zerstört die Werke der Weiblichkeit!", 36 provides a table of previous scholars' lists. For the most recent list (which includes thirteen texts) and a discussion of the genre, see Parkhouse *Eschatology and the Saviour*, 13-68, with her list at page 14 and table of other scholars' lists at page 27.

²⁵ F. Stanley Jones, ed., *Which Mary? The Marys of Early Christian Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 2003); Deirdre Good, ed., *Mariam, the Magdalen, and the Mother* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005); Mary Ann Beavis and Ally Kateusz, eds., *Rediscovering the Marys: Maria, Mariamne, Miriam*, Scriptural Traces (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2020).

²⁶ This reflects the popularity of the name in Palestine between 330BCE-200CE, for which Tal Ilan calculates that 25% of Jewish women bore a version of the name Mary. That was to fall substantial after 200CE, due, perhaps, to the connection the name now had to Christianity (Tal Ilan, Thomas Ziem, Kerstin Hünefeld, *Lexicon of Jewish Names in Late Antiquity: Palestine 200-650* [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002], 7). Stephen J. Shoemaker, "Rethinking the 'Gnostic Mary': Mary of Nazareth and Mary of Magdala in Early Christian Tradition," *J. Early Christ. Stud.* 9.4 (2001): 571. While the debate has mostly raged between *two* Marys (the Magdalene and the mother of Jesus). The work of Mary Ann Beavis and Mark Goodacre make the case for the

since it includes both Mary the Mother and Mary Magdalene explicitly by name. Yet, for the vast majority of the *Pistis Sophia*, the Mary who is speaking is unspecified. Ann Graham Brock calculates that of the 197 references to Mary in the first three books of the *Pistis Sophia*, only twenty-three make clear which Mary is speaking.²⁷

Among the four dialogue gospels that feature a Mary figure, two of them also feature resistance to her verbal participation, the *Gospel of Mary* and the *Pistis Sophia*. These are particularly important for our argument, since they parallel the resistance to Eumetis' wisdom by the doctor Cleodorus examined above. One of the important characteristics shared by these two texts, implying that they have a common influence, is that Peter is the character chosen to resist Mary's contributions.²⁸ The *Gospel of Mary*, from what can be understood from its fragmentary state, begins as a post-resurrection discussion between Jesus and his disciples. Early in the text, however, Jesus ascends to heaven and the majority of the text takes place without the character of Jesus present. Peter asks Mary to tell them what she remembers of the words of Jesus (GMary 10.1-8, trans. S. Parkhouse, *Eschatology and the Saviour*, 250). The next pages comprise an inset dialogue that Mary says occurred between herself and Jesus (GMary 10.9-17.9, trans. S. Parkhouse, *Eschatology and the Saviour*, 250-253). After Mary's contribution, Andrew and Peter insist that she is lying,²⁹ Levi defends her special access to Jesus, and the disciples go forth to preach the gospel (GMary 17.10-18.15, 254). Note that Peter, despite being the one to resist Mary's message, was also the one who

importance of Mary of Bethany in the composite, especially for the *Pistis Sophia*, which features the corresponding character of Martha of Bethany, Mary Ann Beavis, "Reconsidering Mary of Bethany" *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 74.2 (2012) 281-297 and Mark Goodacre, "The Magdalene Effect: Reading and Misreading the Composite Mary in Early Christian Works," in *Rediscovering the Marys: Maria, Mariamne, Miriam*, ed. Mary Ann Beavis (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 7-24. It should be mentioned that it is only the *Pistis Sophia* which explicitly names Mary the Mother as a participant. In the other dialogues where Mary is not specified as the Magdalene, she is not further specified at all.

²⁷ Ann Graham Brock, "Setting the Record Straight--The Politics of Identification: Mary Magdalene and Mary the Mother in *Pistis Sophia*," in *Which Mary? The Marys of Early Christian Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 46.

²⁸ Parkhouse brings forward this similarity, but also remarks that "the championship of Mary and the simultaneous Peter-Mary conflict is not unique to these two texts" (Sarah Parkhouse "The Canon of the *Pistis Sophia* Books 1-3," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 73.2 (2022): 671). The other place where Peter resists Mary's participation is in the *Gospel of Thomas* 114. For a thorough overview of the literature, see Ann Graham Brock's chapter "Competition between Peter and Mary Magdalene in Other Texts", Chapter Five of *Mary Magdalene, The First Apostle: The Struggle for Authority* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003): 73-104.

²⁹ "Then Andrew answered and said to the brothers, 'Say whatever you say about what she said. I myself do not believe that the Saviour said such things, for surely these are alien teachings.' Peter answered, he spoke about such matters. He asked them about the Saviour, 'Did he speak with a woman secretly (and) not openly to us? Are we all to turn and listen to her? Did he choose her over us?'" (GMary 17.10-22, trans. Parkhouse, *Eschatology and the Saviour*, 254). Notice that Peter (but not Andrew) grounds his doubt about Mary's knowledge on her gender. He does not use Mary's proper name, but instead the general designation "a woman".

prompted her to speak in the first place. This is not the case in the *Pistis Sophia*. There, Peter never encourages Mary to speak, and only acts as a resisting figure.

Mary is even more of a star participant in the *Pistis Sophia* than in the Gospel that bears her name.³⁰ Her participation has been tabulated as comprising sixty-seven out of the one-hundred-and-sixteen questions asked by Jesus' disciples, with a far-distant second place awarded to Peter who asks seven questions.³¹ The *Pistis Sophia* has a few layers of composition, and therefore a complicated structure. The first three books form one unit, with the fourth book seen to be an older composition. For the first half of the first three books, Jesus stages a competition among his disciples (*Pistis Sophia* 1.1-2.82). Jesus relates to his gathered disciples a song that the allegorical Sophia sang in repentance, and the disciples have to match particular parts of the song to a "scriptural" text. Most often this is a *Psalms*, but sometimes another traditional hymn such as one of the *Odes of Solomon*.³² After a disciple speaks up with a comparative poem, they are praised by Jesus for their contribution. The disciples gain status by answering well in the presence of their teacher.

Mary, here called by one of her multiple names in the text, Mariam, is the one to initiate the dialogue with the Savior, who up till then had been monologuing to his disciples. She does so by requesting permission to speak, which Jesus happily grants her (*Pistis Sophia* 1.17, transl. Schmidt):

Now it happened when Mariam heard these words as the Saviour was saying them, she stared for one hour into the air and said: "My Lord, command me that I speak openly." Jesus, the compassionate, answered and said to Mariam: "Mariam thou blessed one, whom I will complete in all the mysteries of the height, speak openly, thou art she whose heart is more directed to the Kingdom of Heaven than all thy brothers."

This competitive praise, placing Mary first above the male interlocutors, is repeated in various ways throughout the text. Her contributions are frequently called "excellent" by Jesus,³³ who is not so superlative about all of the disciples' words. She also gives a mini-

³⁰ "...the attention Mary receives...is astounding." Bart Ehrman, *Peter, Paul and Mary Magdalene: The Followers of Jesus in History and Legend* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 208.

³¹ In S. Parkhouse, *The Canon of the Pistis Sophia*, 670. Bart Ehrman more generously (and less precisely) states that she asks four out of five questions (B. Ehrman, *Peter, Paul and Mary*, 209).

³² S. Parkhouse, *The Canon of the Pistis Sophia* treats the different levels of textual authority witnessed in this text.

³³ *Pistis Sophia* 1.25: "Excellent, Maria. Thou dost ask well with an excellent question and thou dost seek everything with certainly and with accuracy" (transl. Schmidt).

discourse rather than only asking a question (*Pistis Sophia* 3.132), which gives her a unique status among the disciples gathered around Jesus.³⁴

The competition becomes heated after the first successful poetic match by Mary. Peter complains that Mary's contributions are out of line. After Jesus again calls her contribution "excellent," Peter jumps in (*Pistis Sophia* 1.36, transl. Schmidt):

Peter leapt forward, he said to Jesus: "My Lord, we are not able to suffer this woman who takes the opportunity from us, and does not allow anyone of us to speak, but she speaks many times." Jesus answered, he said to his disciples: "Let him in whom the power of his Spirit has welled up so that he understands what I say, come forward and speak."

As in the *Gospel of Mary*, Peter complains along particularly gendered lines. It is not only that Peter is being overlooked, but that he is being overlooked in favor of a woman.³⁵ Jesus then needs to soothe the egos of his students, who care about who will be labeled the star pupil. He allows Peter to have his own turn next, but he insists on Mary's right to speak as an inspired disciple.

My argument in the first half of this essay followed the political interpretation suggested by Jeremy McInerney that Plutarch cared about what I term "benevolent ventriloquism," of men speaking for women rather than letting them speak for themselves, because of his belief in the requirement of a harmonious relationship between weak and strong, including his own weaker political position in the Roman Empire. Can we suggest any related conclusions about the new use of women's *emerged* voices in the dialogue gospels?³⁶

³⁴ This passage is doubly unique because Mary is responding to a question of Salome. Therefore, we get a woman speaking to a woman, in a rare ancient moment that passes the Bechdel Test. Suggested by Alison Bechdel in a cartoon from 1985 called "Dykes to Watch Out For", and popularized by cultural critic Anita Sarkeesian in her YouTube channel *FeministFrequency*, the "Bechdel Test" relies on a simple series of questions: are there at least two named women in a story, who talk to each other about something other than men? A surprisingly small number of fictional creations in the twentieth century pass this examination, and ancient texts fail it with even greater frequency.

³⁵ "Although it is possible that theological or philosophical differences lay behind Peter's objections to Mary, the consistent way in which the figure of Peter refers to women or Mary's gender in each of these major controversy dialogues strongly suggests that the issue at stake involves leadership roles for women" (Brock, *Mary Magdalene*, 84).

³⁶ Judith Hartenstein reminds us that the very presence of conflict over the inclusion of female voices in the dialogues implies that "a completely conflict-free, strong female role in the historical situation of the supporting groups of all these scriptures is therefore unlikely" (J. Hartenstein, *Die Zweite Lehre*, 327).

I am not interested in this essay in extracting the historical roles open to the women in the Christian communities that wrote these dialogues,³⁷ but rather in exploring the importance of women as a site of metaphor and particular interest to male writers. To that end, it is important that the *Pistis Sophia* presents a strongly gendered myth. The “Sophia” of the title stands in for all of humanity, which has fallen into matter and must ascend to her redemption through repentance. In this version of the story, all of humanity is figured as female, subordinate to the male divinity. The overarching narrative is not necessarily liberating for the female, but the effects are refreshing.³⁸ In a bizarre twist of fate, the gendered subordination might actually elevate the use of the female voice. This imaginative identification of all humanity, including men, with the female may be precisely what permits a new role for women’s voices in the dialogue. “We are all women now,” all mired in matter and singing songs of repentance.³⁹

Conclusion

The second century represents the hinge moment in the use of the female voice in philosophical dialogues. Up through Plutarch, women were almost never allowed on-stage speaking roles in dialogues.⁴⁰ But in third and fourth centuries CE, in dialogues written by Methodius of Olympus, Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine, women were given central and importantly *verbal* roles in philosophical dialogues, as women became models *in their femininity* for males as well as females.⁴¹ The dialogic gospels are the earliest sources that

³⁷ For a discussion of the question of the role of women in Gnostic circles and how this might (or might not) be extracted from surviving texts, see A. McGuire, “Women, Gender, and Gnosis in Gnostic Texts and Traditions,” in R.S. Kraemer & M.R. D’Angelo (eds.), *Women and Christian Origins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) 257–299.

³⁸ For discussions about the complicated gender dynamics in these myths, see J. Cahana, “Androgyne or Undrogyne?: Queering the Gnostic Myth,” *Numen* 61.5/6 (2014) 509–524.

³⁹ For my work on the importance in early Christian discourse about “becoming female” as a counterweight to the more typical emphasis on “becoming male”, see Dawn LaValle Norman, “Becoming Female: Marrowy Semen and the Formative Mother in Methodius of Olympus’ *Symposium*,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 27.2 (Summer 2019): 185-209 and Dawn LaValle Norman, *Early Christian Women*. Cambridge Elements in Women in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

⁴⁰ The main exception to this story is Theodote’s speaking role in Xenophon’s *Memorabilia* 3.1. There is also evidence of female speakers in the fragmentary Hellenistic dialogic *Life of Euripides* by Satyrus of Callatis and a satyric symposium by Parmeniscus, for which see K. Jazdzewska, *Greek Dialogue in Antiquity: Post-Platonic Transformations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022) 61–66; 33–36.

⁴¹ Methodius of Olympus *Symposium*, Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and Resurrection* and Augustine, *De Beata Vita* and *De Ordine*. The role and exemplarity of these three women in dialogues is examined and explained in Dawn LaValle Norman, *Early Christian Women*, 1-59. The argument for moments when the feminine becomes a model for all Christians is a necessary counterweight to the other important (and very common) early Christian ideal for all Christians to metaphorically “become male”, seen strikingly in the final logion of the *Gospel of Thomas* 114. For some of the many important discussions of this dynamic, see Margaret

show the growing willingness to bring women's voices to the narrative surface *in dialogues*, drawing on the importance their voices had already found in dialogic moments in other genres, such as the canonical gospels.⁴²

Placing the Platonist Plutarch next to his contemporary, Platonic-inspired Christian dialogue writers also provides new clarity on Plutarch's avoidance of staging the emerged female voice. His choice to include women in his symposium shows an openness to changing his archaic banquet structure anachronistically to reflect the greater role that women had in elite dining during his *own* period.⁴³ However, his choice to keep them silent aligns him strongly with Plato's precedent in the *Symposium*. Plutarch's strong women in dialogues are either kept off-stage (like Ismenadora in the *Amatorius*) or spoken up for when participating in the event (like Eumetis in the *Septem sapientium convivium*). Aesop's resistance to the misogynistic stance of the doctor Cleodorus, who rejects women's intelligence, does not open a door to their verbal participation in Plutarch's work. In contrast, Jesus' resistance to Peter's misogynistic stance in the *Pistis Sophia* (and Levi's to Peter's in the *Gospel of Mary*) comes along with an insistence that the female character be free to participate verbally in the event. These near contemporaries both decide to stage the resistance to female verbal participation but resolve the conflict differently. They represent a tipping point of change in the history of the role of women in philosophical dialogues, as the dialogue gospels ushered in a period where women's on-stage verbal roles would be welcomed.

Miles, "Becoming Male': Women Martyrs and Ascetics," Chapter 2 of *Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 53-80; Kerstin Aspegren, *The Male Woman: A Feminine Ideal in the Early Church* (Stockholm, 1990); Elizabeth Castelli, "I Will Make Mary Male': Pieties of the Body and Gender Transformation of Christian Women in Late Antiquity," in *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*, ed. Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub (New York: Routledge, 1991), 29-49; Gillian Cloke, *This Female Man of God: Women and Spiritual Power in the Patristic Age 350-450* (New York: Routledge, 1994). See also Dawn LaValle Norman "Becoming Female: Marrowy Semen and the Formative Mother in Methodius of Olympus' *Symposium*," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 27.2 (2019): 185-209.

⁴² This does not explain why the writers of the dialogue gospels chose to write their gospels as dialogues in the first place. Women's voices were central to the canonical (non-dialogue) gospels too. In fact, Judith Hartenstein reminds us that, "...none of the canonical gospels can do without women in the apparitions, that is more than can be said of the dialogue gospels" (J. Hartenstein, *Die Zweite Lehre*, 328). However, the verbal role of women in non-dialogic texts is markedly different from their role in dialogic texts throughout ancient literature, even in the extreme case where the different genres are written by the same author, as I have argued is the case for Plutarch earlier in this essay. Therefore, I am hesitant to draw out the importance of "dialogic moments" in texts that do not belong to the genre of the dialogue as part of my argument about changing expectations of the dialogic genre.

⁴³ The inclusion of two female characters in this dialogue [*Sept. sap. conv.*] is noteworthy, given that the archaic aristocratic symposium was an institution that excluded "respectable" women; Plutarch's historical fiction is informed by the culture of his own era, in which the inclusion of "respectable" women in banquets was not unusual." (Stamatopoulou 2019, 210).

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Keywords:

women, dialogue, speakers, voice

Index of Passages (main text):

Pistis Sophia

1.17

1.36

Plutarch:

Mul. virt.: 242F, 243D

Sept. sap. conv.: 148D–E, 154B, 155E

Amat.: 749B, 749C, 756A

Con. Praec.: 142D

Xenophon:

Smp. 2.7–9

Smp. 9.1–7

SMp. 9.7