

Research Article

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Feminine Metaphorical Language: Platonic Resonances in Origen of Alexandria

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Abstract: This article explores the use of feminine metaphorical language in the works of Plato and Origen. Drawing from Hanne Løland's definition of gendered metaphorical language, it examines how Plato and Origen both inherit and challenge the stereotypical use of feminine metaphorical language to advance their philosophical and theological agendas. While partially adhering to the stereotypical uses of gendered metaphorical language, both Plato and Origen navigate beyond them to conceptualize a fluid and multifaceted feminine continuum. By anchoring the analysis in Plato's *Symposium* and *Timaeus* and in Origen's exegetical works, the article demonstrates how both authors represent intellectual ascent and spiritual transformation through feminine metaphors. In this regard, the article suggests the possibility that Origen inherited this feminine continuum from Plato's philosophy. Through this comparative analysis, the article contributes to a deeper understanding of feminine metaphorical language in ancient philosophy and theology, thus challenging a simplistic interpretation of gendered metaphorical language. Overall, the article underscores the complex interplay between cultural constructs, philosophical frameworks, and gender representations in the intellectual legacies of Plato and Origen.

Keywords: Plato, Origen, feminine, metaphor, allegory

1 Introduction

This article evaluates a possible Platonic influence on the Origenian use of feminine metaphorical language (e.g. metaphors, allegories, similia, etc.) as an intellectual category and, particularly, as a means of discussing philosophical and theological issues. Furthermore, it aims to show how Origen and Plato both inherit and challenge the stereotypical use of feminine metaphorical language¹ in their contemporary literary environments to advance their own philosophical and theological agendas. In doing so, they establish a new framework for employing gendered metaphorical language in philosophical and theological discussions. By anchoring itself in the longstanding debate surrounding the relationship between Origen and Platonism, this article takes a gender-oriented approach to shed new light on an age-old question, revealing continuity in philosophical mechanisms between the two figures.²

¹ I understand that gender terminology is loaded with meaning, and adopting a binary distinction between genders (feminine/masculine) presents challenges within our contemporary cultural understanding of gender, as it does not fully encompass the breadth of gender identities. However, for the purposes of this article, I will utilize the traditional female/male binary paradigm, as it was the main gender framework, albeit not the only one, envisioned by ancient authors. It's important to note the various nuances and contradictions inherent within this dichotomous paradigm. I will outline in the following paragraphs what I mean by a stereotypical gender paradigm.

² It would be here impossible to make a history of the scholarship on Origen and Platonism, so I offer here a very brief survey of the major scholarly positions. Traditionally, Origen has been considered among the ranks of the so-called Platonic Christians, as he

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The terminology “feminine metaphorical language” is borrowed from Hanne Løland,³ who defines gendered, as in both masculine and feminine, metaphorical language as “a label for language that can denote or evoke connotations of gender and construct concepts or ideas of gender. Further gender must be part of the source domain of the metaphor; it must be one of the associated commonplaces [...]” Løland is modelling her definition after the terminology established by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in their Conceptual Metaphor Theory,⁴ and Max Black on the nature of metaphors and the related commonplaces.⁵ Following Løland’s definition, by feminine metaphorical language I mean all those metaphors, similia and allegories used by Plato and Origen that contain explicit and/or implicit references to the feminine gender in and/or the source and target meaning of metaphorical language.

The existence of a cultural tendency to consider the feminine and the masculine as two opposing conceptual and intellectual metaphorical categories – with the feminine often bearing material, emotional, and degrading connotations while the masculine usually representing qualities of spirituality, perfection, and superiority – is widely attested in the literature from the Mediterranean and Near Eastern antiquity.⁶ In large part, Greek philosophers and early Christian theologians worked within this dichotomous and binary paradigm of gender metaphorical language, associating masculinity with perfection, ontological superiority, and active agency, whilst the feminine was associated with defectivity, deformity, materiality, and passivity. This means that the genders of entities (e.g. beings, characters, virtues, etc.) were meaningful, and the author expected the reader to understand the implied philosophical and theological “commonplaces” associated with genders.⁷ These gendered features worked as a baseline for the portrayal of genders in philosophical and theological works, thus being perceived as established commonplaces (e.g. assigning femininity to the soul due to its perceived ontological inferiority compared to the masculine intellect). With respect to Plato and Origen, it is necessary to acknowledge the reciprocity of influences, as these authors both made use of these stereotypical paradigms and also contributed to their development.⁸ In this article, I contend however that feminine metaphorical language in Plato and Origen encompasses a *continuum* or *spectrum* of intellectual attributes, rather than being a self-replicating category like the masculine. This concept of continuum or spectrum is specific

vastly incorporated Platonic elements in his philosophy, see Crouzel, *Connaissance Mystique*; Perrone, *Il cuore indurito*; Fürst, *Von Origenes und Hieronymus*; Martens, “Embodiment, Heresy, and the Hellenization of Christianity;” Limone, *Origene e la filosofia greca*. Against the dominant voice in support of Origen’s affinity to Platonic doctrines, Edwards raised numerous objections, the most famous of which is the denial of the pre-existence of the soul, thus generating a lively debate, Edwards, *Origen against Plato* and “Origen in Paradise;” Martens, “Response to Edwards.”

³ Løland, *Silent or Salient*, 84–90. Sometimes, she speaks of “conceptual metaphorical language,” but she also uses gendered metaphorical language. Edwards, “Origen: A Response to Peter Martens.”

⁴ Lakoff and Turner, *More than Cool Reason*, 38–9. Lakoff and Johnson have theorized that metaphors are more than simple rhetorical and literary forms of comparison, as they are conceptualized by human experience and generate new meaning each time that they are read. They describe metaphors as composed by a target meaning – the intended concept/idea – and the source meaning – that is, the concept/idea from which one draws to understand the target meaning.

⁵ Black, *Metaphors*. The notion of “commonplaces” stresses that metaphors are conceptualized within a specific textual, cultural, social and historical context, and it is essential for any historical investigation.

⁶ Affirming the existence of a stereotypical gender paradigm regarding the representation and conceptualization of masculine and feminine genders in antiquity within the Mediterranean and Near Eastern region may raise some concerns. This notion risks to oversimplify the diversity across cultures and eras, as it conflates the views of early Greek philosophers with those of third-century Christian philosophers, spanning almost ten centuries of history. It is therefore essential on my part to stress that this paradigm is not the sole metaphorical language framework in Antiquity. To a certain extent, this very article aims to challenge the stereotypical nature of this paradigm by revealing the complexity in the use of feminine metaphorical language to describe God, a complexity often overlooked in previous scholarship. Nevertheless, I noticed a prevailing trend among ancient authors in understanding the binary opposition between masculine and feminine in a hierarchical way, a tendency that modern interpreters must critically examine and question. It would be impossible here to list all the literary evidence that testifies the existence of this paradigm, so I refer to the scholarly discussion about few examples, Burrus, *The Making of a Heretic*; Burrus, *Begotten, not Made*; Kraemer, *Unreliable Witness*; Smith, *Gender of History*; King, *Images of Feminine*; Turner, “The Virgin that Became Male;” Haynes, *Fashioning the Feminine*; Bianchi, *The Feminine Symptom*; Schultz and Wilberding, *Women and the Female in Neoplatonism*; Borresen and Prinzivalli, *Le donne nello sguardo degli antichi autori cristiani*; Layne, “Feminine Power in Proclus’s Commentary on Plato’s Timaeus.”

⁷ See Løland, *Silent or Salient*, 84.

⁸ For instance, Plato, *Tim.* 42a–c; Origen, *Hom. Jos.* 9, 9; *Comm. Rom.* 3, 10, 4.

to feminine metaphorical language and offers an alternative interpretation of gender paradigms in Origen and Plato.

The term “intellectual category” underscores that this comparative analysis considers women and the feminine as a symbolic construct, encompassing the metaphorical and conceptual meanings often attributed to them by ancient male authors.⁹ By concentrating on the intellectual representations of the feminine, the article sheds light on the cultural assumptions and constructs that underpin gender roles in antiquity. There are indeed undeniable connections between the feminine as an intellectual category, biological knowledge and social roles. For instance, the philosophical notion of feminine generative power finds its roots in the biological understanding of the reproductive function of female sex characteristics, which in turn influences the maternal role assigned to women in society. While these connections merit further exploration, this article serves as a foundational exploration, focusing solely on the feminine as an intellectual category rather than delving into the historical experiences or conditions of women in antiquity. Rather, the feminine metaphorical language is investigated here in its own right as part of larger cultural systems, such as the Platonic and Origenian philosophies. Consequently, analysing the social implications of these cultural paradigms for historical women goes beyond the scope of this article.

Within this cultural milieu, Plato and Origen stand out for their originality. On the one hand, their works display the same dichotomous and binary distinction between genders proper to the mainstream paradigm. On the other hand, unlike their contemporaries, they seem to grasp the nuances of the feminine as an intellectual category; they articulate the concept of a fluid and multifaceted feminine continuum that transcends simplistic dialectic oppositions between defective/inferior femininity and perfect/superior masculinity.¹⁰ The idea of a feminine continuum, initially explored in Plato's *Symposium* by Kate Gilhuly, is further developed here, incorporating comparisons with other Platonic and Origenian works.¹¹

The article consists of two sections. The first section analyses the Platonic use of feminine metaphorical language and how this constitutes an intellectual category. It focuses on the representation of the soul in the *Republic* and the *Timaeus*, the *χώρα* in *Timaeus*, and the female characters of the *Symposium*. These examples demonstrate how Plato employs the feminine to symbolize the ascent towards philosophical knowledge and the necessary intellectual transformations accompanying it. The second section focuses on Origen's use of feminine language, specifically highlighting references that bear the closest resemblance to Platonic intellectual constructs concerning femininity. It argues that Origen, like Plato, interprets the feminine as a continuum rather than a fixed category. In particular, it shows that Origen often represents the *epinoia* of the Logos, Wisdom, the intelligences and souls as female with no regard to the biological sex of the associated bodies. The conclusion offers some observations on the overlap between the two authors and their affirmation of a feminine continuum that is a multi-layered representation of the feminine intellectual category through metaphorical language, stressing particularly how this intellectual construction is shaped by male authors according to the sexual habits of women. This research claims therefore a certain continuity between Plato's and Origen's notion of the feminine continuum.

⁹ This is a line of investigation opened up by Clark, “The Lady Vanishes,” 31 who offered the theoretical ground to the women-as-a-code investigative lens. So far, only a few studies have approached gender in such a manner. The first to do so have been scholars in Classical Studies and Ancient Philosophy, respectively, Gilhuly, *The Feminine Matrix*; Bianchi, *The Feminine Symptom*; Schultz and Wilberding, *Women and the Female in Neoplatonism*. For similar applications in early Christian studies, refer to Prinzivalli, “La donna, il femminile;” Tervahauta, *Women and Knowledge*; Cerioni, *Revealing Women*.

¹⁰ Gilhuly, *The Feminine Matrix*, 58–97.

¹¹ A re-evaluation of the existence of a feminine continuum in the intellectual representations of ancient authors is also important for the social analysis of gender identities in antiquity, as recent studies have proved that gender identity was perceived as a spectrum, a combination of biology and cultural factors which were more fluid than we are used to think, refer to Parks et al., “Jewish and Christian Women,” 6–32.

2 The Platonic Soul, the *χώρα* and Feminine Continuum

Plato sketches several human and divine female characters in his works. The most studied are certainly the original cosmic matter named *χώρα* as described in *Timaeus* – one of the three semi-divine eternal entities that are involved in the creation of the world – and the priestess Diotima in his *Symposium* – the wise woman who is made a spokeswoman for Plato's own theories. Traditionally, feminist studies have dismissed these characterizations as an appropriation of female characters by the ancient philosopher, mostly grounding their theories on the fact that Diotima is considered the literary female counterpart of Socrates and the *χώρα* is described as a container of male forms.¹² On the contrary, I argue that such a harsh judgment of the representation of the feminine in Plato is still influenced by the interiorized categories of active/perfection/masculinity and passive/defectivity/femininity which still characterize our modern interpretation. A close reading of the texts about *χώρα* shows that her assumed passivity transcends the active/passive paradigm to assume a renewed importance in the overall Platonic philosophy.

Before showing how Plato's representation of the feminine moves away from the stereotypical gender paradigms, it is important to show how he also conforms to these paradigms. A neat binary paradigm is displayed by Plato's use of gender categories with respect to the identity of souls. Even if souls are not gendered in themselves but inherit one of the two sexes when incarnated in a body, Plato considers female souls inferior to male ones. More precisely, female souls exist in the cycle of reincarnation only because of a male soul failing to uphold a virtuous life:

42a And he explained that human nature comes in two forms, and that the superior kind was that which would subsequently come to be called 'male'. ... 42 b-c Any soul which made good use of its allotted time would return to dwell once more on the star with which it had been paired, to live a blessed life in keeping with its (male) character; but any soul that fell short would, for its second incarnation, become a woman instead of a man.¹³

Here, Plato acknowledges that human souls are not ontologically gendered, and this is functional to affirming his so-called "egalitarian" political theories in the *Republic* according to which women and men should both be involved in the ruling of the *polis*.¹⁴ Nevertheless, from the perspective of using genders as intellectual categories, this division between masculine and feminine underlines a neat hierarchy: masculine is the superior gender associated with form and perfection, while feminine gender is associated with formlessness and weakness.¹⁵

If however we read *Timaeus*'s portrayal of the *χώρα* closely, we can see that there is room for interpreting the feminine in a more nuanced way than was underlined by the previous readings of Plato's works, as I believe that a complete appropriation of feminine agency is not possible in Plato's system. In the *Timaeus*, Plato theorized the existence of three original beings: a divine creator who ordains the cosmos (the Demiurge), the ideas through which the cosmos is ordained, and a receptacle which receives these ideal forms.¹⁶ Feminine traits are associated with the latter, the *χώρα*, which Plato describes as follows:

¹² Most studies on Plato and the feminine are focused on his interpretation of women's role in *Rep.*, and in the social life of the polis, refer to Townsend, *The Woman Question*; and the studies collected in Tuana, *Feminist Interpretations*, whilst minor attention is given to the feminine as an intellectual category.

¹³ Plato, *Tim.* 42a-c: διπλῆς δὲ οὐσης τῆς ἀνθρωπίνης φύσεως, τὸ κρεῖττον τοιοῦτον εἶη γένος ὃ καὶ ἔπειτα κεκλήσεται ἀνὴρ ... καὶ ὁ μὲν εὖ τὸν προσήκοντα χρόνον βιούς, πάλιν εἰς τὴν τοῦ συννόμου πορευθεὶς οἰκήσιν ἄστρου, βίον εὐδαίμονα καὶ συνήθη ἔξει, σφαλεῖς δὲ τούτων εἰς γυναικὸς φύσιν ἐν τῇ δευτέρᾳ γενέσει μεταβαλοῖ. For the English translation, see Waterfield and Gregory, *Plato*. For the Greek texts, refer to Burnet, *Platonis Opera*. To look at this topic further, refer to Schultz, "Conceptualizing the 'Female' Soul."

¹⁴ I am here referring to the *Rep.*'s famous theory according to which both men and women are suited to act as guardian of the ideal Platonic city, refer to Plato, *Rep.* 454d–456a.

¹⁵ In this regard, I agree with Zeitlin, *Playing the Other*, 368–9 where she affirms that "Plato's inclusion of women is contingent upon them becoming masculine, and thus is not really a reclamation of the feminine or women as valuable for their inherent being."

¹⁶ Plato, *Tim.* 50c.

49a ... the receptacle (ὑποδοχήν) or nurse (τιθήνην), if you like of all creation. ... 50 d-e. And it would not be out of place to compare the receptacle to a mother (μητρί), the source to a father, and what they create between them to a child. ... the molding stuff itself, in which the product is formed and originates, absolutely must lack all those characteristics which it is to receive from elsewhere, otherwise it could not perform its function.¹⁷

The original substratum onto which all forms are impressed is unequivocally described by Plato in feminine terms: τιθήνη; μητήρ; ὑποδοχή. This terminology is strictly connected with the sphere of women's reproductive abilities and ancient conception theories, and I argue that if we move along these medical lines of comparison, it is easier to understand the cosmic role of the χώρα.¹⁸ From these attributes, it is clear that the χώρα is equated to a sort of cosmic uterus, and Plato had very specific biological assumptions about how this organ works.

Later in *Timaeus* 91c-d, Plato describes the womb as “wandering all around the body,” until “they (the man and the woman) sow in the field of the womb tiny creatures, too small to be seen.”¹⁹ The notion of an itinerant womb is intriguing in medical history, as it is also found in Hippocratic literature. As Lesley Dean-Jones discusses extensively in her study of women's anatomy in ancient Greek medical literature, it was commonly believed that the uterus did not have a specific place in a woman's body and that it was held in place by sexual intercourse and the resulting pregnancies.²⁰ It is possible that this medical notion reinforced the philosophical metaphors which describes the feminine as a mutable and ever-changing entity, in which not even the body's reproductive organ can stay still. In other words, even biologically, women were believed to need the restriction of male sexual desire to have a healthy reproductive life. In comparing the χώρα with a womb, there is indeed little room for women's agency, and consequently, it seems that feminine agency – both cosmic and human – is equated to constant movement and imperfection.

In the paragraph following this definition of the womb, however, Plato adds the following explanation about the embryos mentioned in 91d: “At first not fully formed, these creatures then become articulated, while the womb nourishes them until they have grown enough to emerge into the light of day.”²¹ Although the forms are provided by the male agent, the female can hardly be reduced to a mere container. The action of nourishing, growing, and bringing into light cannot be dismissed as passive actions. Although the feminine is interpreted as a mere container of masculine forms and the need for male power to restrain and stabilize women's will to generate is stressed, growth and movement are concepts that are inextricably linked to the representation of the feminine gender in antiquity and are the exact opposite of passive and imperfect agency, as they are the only actions to produce a complete child – both literally in the case of humans and metaphorically in the case of the world that comes forth from the χώρα. Only feminine agency accounts for the becoming of the embryos, even in the primordial cosmic intellectual creation of ideal perfect forms. To summarize in Emanuela Bianchi's words, Plato's χώρα is “a labile and unstable notion with undeniable feminine and maternal resonances; occupying a zone and role between Being and

¹⁷ Plato, *Tim.* 48e-50e: (48e) τότε μὲν γὰρ δύο εἶδη διελόμεθα, νῦν δὲ τρίτον ἄλλο γένος ἡμῖν δηλωτέον. ... (49a) τίν' οὖν ἔχον δύναμιν καὶ φύσιν αὐτὸ ὑποληπτέον; τοιάνδε μάλιστα· πάσης εἵναιγενέσεως ὑποδοχήν αὐτὴν οἶον τιθήνην. ... (50 d-e) καὶ δὴ καὶ προσεῖκάσαι πρέπει τὸ μὲν δεχόμενον μητρί, τὸ δ' ὅθεν πατρί, τὴν δὲ μεταξύ τούτων φύσιν ἐκγόνῳ, νοῆσαι τε ὡς οὐκ ἂν ἄλλως, ἐκτυπώματος ἔσεσθαι μέλλοντος ἰδεῖν ποικίλου πάσας ποικιλίας, τοῦτ' αὐτὸ ἐν ᾧ ἐκτυπούμενον ἐνίσταται γένειτ' ἂν παρεσκευασμένον εὔ, πλὴν ἄμορφον ὃν ἐκείνων ἀπασῶν τῶν ἰδεῶν ὅσας μέλλοι δέχεσθαι ποθεν.

¹⁸ For Plato's conception theory, see *Tim.* 91a–d, where he claims that: “men sow in the field of the womb tiny creatures” and that the female womb is a “living being with an appetite for child-making.” In this regard, Plato seems to have anticipated theories very close to the future Aristotelian conception theory, according to which the man provides the seed and the form, and the woman provides the receptacle/matter (*Gen. an.* 716). It is worth mentioning that it seems there were two competing conception theories in the ancient world: if Aristotle granted no (or certainly marginal role) to woman in the formation of the child, Galen promoted the so-called two seeds theory according to which the woman also produces a seed, even if weaker than the man's seed (Galen, *De usu partium* 14,6). To look at this topic further, refer to Preus, “Galen's Criticism.”

¹⁹ Plato, *Tim.* 91c: “πλάνώμενον πάντῃ κατὰ τὸ σῶμα”. For the full quotation of 91d, refer to n. 20.

²⁰ For a detailed study, refer to Dean-Jones, *Women's Bodies*, 69–77.

²¹ Plato *Tim.* 91d: “ὡς εἰς ἄρουραν τὴν μήτραν ὁράτα ὑπὸ σμικρότητος καὶ ἀδιάπλαστα ζῶα κατασπείραντες καὶ πάλιν διακρίναντες μεγάλα ἐντὸς ἐκθρέψονται καὶ μετὰ τοῦτο εἰς φῶς ἀγαγόντες ζῶων ἀποτελέσωσι γένεσιν.”

Becoming, being neither, having no predicates, knowable only via sort of dreamlike awareness or ‘bastard reasoning’.”²²

Feminist scholars from the seventies and eighties, such as Irigaray, Nussbaum, and Butler, concluded that the Platonic feminine indicates passive and formless features, which are ontologically inferior to the masculine transcendent world and the generative role of the feminine is mostly appropriated by masculine characters.²³ However, recent studies – including the present analysis – are stressing how the generative role of the Platonic feminine entities can be considered active agency, since it involves an active becoming and nurturing rather than a reproduction of the masculine ideal paradigms.²⁴

The theme of nurturing and bringing forth ideas is reiterated at a metaphorical level in the representation of the philosopher’s pregnancy in Plato’s *Symposium*.²⁵ Here, Plato discusses at length the role of procreation in the life of a philosopher and concludes that being pregnant with intellectual children is the aim of the philosopher’s life. This discourse is particularly striking since it is pronounced by a woman, the priestess Diotima, and therefore envisions a woman praising a masculine pregnancy. However, this pregnancy is nothing like a carnal pregnancy, as the philosopher can only remember those ideas which he had within himself since his birth.²⁶ Furthermore, the philosopher does not nurture and bring forth his ideas, but they remain within himself as if he were eternally pregnant. It is indeed this feature that led David Leitao to conclude that Plato appropriated feminine pregnancy to such an extent that he considered a true generation mostly that in which a man *remains* pregnant with his intellectual children, over and against the pregnancy in which women *beget* children.²⁷ However, I would stress that this pregnancy is merely a remembering as there is no begetting, no becoming, and no change, but only the *anamnesis* of what was already brought forth by the *χώρα* in the intellectual cosmic generation of primordial ideas. Therefore, even when the generation becomes a masculine metaphor, they cannot reach their full philosophical potential without a female entity which nurtures the intellectual forms which the philosopher had within him since his youth. Consequently, even in Plato’s male-centric vision of the generation, it cannot happen without some feminine element.

Kate Gilhuly has also emphasised a more variegated representation of the feminine in Plato by studying the representations of women in the *Symposium*.²⁸ If previous scholars considered the women of *Symposium* – especially Diotima – as spokespersons for male characters,²⁹ she brought to light a new interpretative paradigm which she defines as the “feminine continuum.” She noted that Plato’s representation of the feminine cannot be reduced solely to the dichotomic opposition masculine/feminine, as the feminine itself is conceived as a multi-layered identity. Gilhuly identified three different representations of the feminine: the *auletris*, the women of Agathon’s house, and Diotima. These three characters are used by Plato to embody the philosophical ascensive steps to the transcendent world: a) the *auletris* represent the lower philosophical apprehension; b) the women of Agathon’s house are those who are progressing but have not yet reached a full understanding; c) and Diotima embodies she/he who achieved knowledge of the transcendent truth. Contrary to the perfect self-replicating masculine agency, the feminine accounts for the existence of the very philosophical and intellectual advancement, which can only happen in movement and becoming. In offering such a multi-layered feminine paradigm (i.e. a feminine continuum), Plato is showing awareness of the necessity of conceiving a philosophical ascensive path as inclusive of feminine traits. While masculine identity – that is, the philosophical ideal of a perfect wise man or the pregnant philosopher – is considered as a monolithic and fixed status and does

²² See Bianchi, “Receptacle/Chōra,” 124.

²³ Irigaray, *Speculum*; Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*; Nussbaum, “The Speech of Alcibiades;” Butler, *Bodies That Matter*. In truth, Irigaray pushes her interpretation of Plato’s feminine to the point of denying any real “feminine” feature to *χώρα* as she considers it a mirror – or a speculum – to reinforce masculine images.

²⁴ Bianchi, “Receptacle/Chōra;” Han, *Plato and the Metaphysical Feminine*.

²⁵ For instance, Plato, *Symp.* 206c.

²⁶ *Symp.* 209 a–c.

²⁷ Leitao, *The Pregnant Male*, 182–226.

²⁸ See Gilhuly, *The Feminine Matrix*.

²⁹ This is indeed the conclusion reached by Halperin, *One Hundred Years*.

not know any internal differentiations, the feminine identity is understood as a plural and multi-layered identity, the faces of which are the various steps in the philosophical process of ascension to the truth.

Kate Gilhuly's analysis focuses on the social status of the *Symposium's* women but does not account for the connection between these feminine metaphors and women's sexual status, which I consider to be an essential implication of Plato's feminine metaphorical language. In Plato's metaphor, the sexual status connected with the social status undergirds the philosophical metaphor: the sexual promiscuity of the enslaved *auletris* is associated with the lower ability to understand the philosophical ideas, whilst the virginity of the priestess Diotima represents the highest philosophical apprehension. As is often the case in the course of history, women's sexuality, and men's control thereof, becomes a distinctive element in the representation of the feminine.

This brief analysis of the roles of female representations in Plato shows that the feminine is an essential part of Plato's idea of philosophy. The *χώρα's* importance becomes clearer when it is not evaluated according to the paradigm of masculine activity and feminine passivity. The female *χώρα* exceeds and transcends the dichotomic active/passive paradigm to affirm that without the feminine nurturing of ideas, there is no progression of knowledge and no philosophy possible. The feminine is change, not in the negative sense of not embodying the masculine eternal self-replicating identity, but in the sense of making possible the ascensive path towards divine knowledge. The importance of the feminine for the philosophical path is confirmed by the analysis of the women in the *Symposium*, as they are the literary embodiment of the progressive path to knowledge. In Plato's philosophy, the feminine represents the possibility to move further into philosophical knowledge. This analysis suggests that previous studies understate the importance of the feminine. Far from being a mere mimetic reflection of masculine power, its importance lies in the ways in which the philosophical complexities of Plato's philosophy are expressed by the feminine.

In the following section, I argue that Origen too makes use of the feminine continuum, mirroring Plato's original use of the feminine as an intellectual category representative of the nurturing, becoming, and ascensive path towards true Wisdom that, unlike Plato, Origen identified in God.

3 Origen's Feminine and the Platonic Influence

Comparing heuristically how Origen and Plato employ feminine metaphorical language means looking at the ways in which female characters are positioned in their works and how similar philosophical and theological features are presupposed when describing these female characters. This analysis is further complicated by the fact that Origen contextualized Plato's works within the contemporary middle Platonic philosophies, which had heavily revised Plato's doctrines.³⁰ In regard to the feminine, Platonists showed greater awareness of the importance of gendered metaphorical language than Plato's himself,³¹ and this is probably reflected in Origen's own understanding of gender. Although Origen never directly quotes any of the Platonic passages that deal openly with the feminine, it is still possible to consider relevance by searching for similar patterns of representation of the feminine.

At first glance, it is not easy to find a divine feminine entity like Plato's *χώρα* in Origen's works. While Plato uses feminine metaphors to describe the original cosmic matter, Origen does not describe matter as an outright feminine entity.³² Therefore, a comparison between matter in Origen and Plato makes little sense in this case. Furthermore, the previous analysis has shown that *χώρα* is hardly physical matter as it might be understood by a third-century Christian like Origen, who knew Platonism in its Middle and Neoplatonic forms. In fact, in the third century, Platonism was highly influenced by the Stoic notion of materiality, and Origen was

³⁰ For Plato's reference to middle platonic works, see Edwards, *Origen*, 47–86. Ramelli, "Origen, Patristic Philosophy, and Christian Platonism Re-Thinking the Christianisation of Hellenism."

³¹ This has indeed been largely proved by Schultz and Wilberding, *Women and the Female in Neoplatonism*.

³² For the notion of materiality in Origen, refer to Lettieri, "It doesn't matter;" *Tzamalikos, Origen and Hellenism*, 311–63.

careful to distance his works from any material understanding of God, mostly against dualistic interpretations of Christianity.³³

However, Origen does encompass some of the *χώρα*'s features into another feminine character, a non-material and utterly divine one: Wisdom. Origen considers Wisdom as feminine – in name, at least –³⁴ and ranks her as the first *epinoia* of the Son.³⁵ Origen considers the *epinoiai* as the different aspects of the Son, each having a specific function. Wisdom is the beginning of creation and is the first contemplation of the Father.³⁶ In this sense, she represents the first movement, the first alterity in the Father. Wisdom is also the only *epinoia* to have an ontological existence, and not only a logical existence like the other *epinoiai*.³⁷ Her role is described as follows:

For I think that just as a house and a ship are built or devised according to the plans of the architect, the house and the ship having as their beginning the plans and thoughts in the craftsman, so all things have come to be according to the thoughts of what will be, which were prefigured by God in Wisdom, “For he made all things in wisdom.” And we must say that after God had created living Wisdom, if I may put it this way, from the models in her he entrusted to her [to present] to the things which exist and to matter [both] their conformation and forms, but I stop short of saying their essences.³⁸

Wisdom contains in herself the rest of the creation. Being the beginning of all creation, she nurtures the models entrusted by the Father, from whom she is eternally generated, and transmits them to the rest of creation by making them accessible through the Logos, the second *epinoia* of the Son. Origen discusses at length the works of Wisdom in his *Commentary on the Gospel of John* and describes Wisdom and Logos as working together. Wisdom should be “taken in relation to the structure of the contemplation and thoughts of all things,” while the Logos “is received, taken in relation to the communication of the things which have been contemplated to spiritual beings.”³⁹ Wisdom and Logos are the first aspects of the Son and it is relevant that one entity is feminine and the other masculine. Although Origen does not explicitly use a gendered language in the *Commentary on the Gospel of John* 1, 111, his unspoken assumptions about the “container” role attributed to Wisdom encourage a comparison between her and the maternal and nurturing features of Plato's *χώρα*. As in Plato, Origen interprets the feminine role as that of nurturing and containing the world's ideal models, for it is through her that the world comes into being, and for this reason, she is called beginning.

Unlike Plato, Origen is openly critical of the use of feminine metaphorical language to describe divine entities: “you will not think that Wisdom is a woman because she appears under a feminine name.”⁴⁰ A similar opinion is also expressed in his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, where he stresses that: “For we ought not to imagine that because of the feminine name, Wisdom or Righteousness are feminine in their being.”⁴¹ I believe there are three possible reasons for Origen's reticence to openly claim Wisdom's femininity. First, Origen is extremely conscious of the risks that some may interpret Wisdom alongside the Valentinian mythological

³³ On Origen and Stoicism, refer to Ramelli, “The Philosophical Stance of Allegory,” Heine, “Stoic Logic.”

³⁴ A different perspective on the feminine nature of Wisdom can be found in the contribution by Anders Christian Jacobsen in this special issue, who downplays the importance of the femininity of the Wisdom character in Origen.

³⁵ On the Son's *epinoiai*, refer to Simonetti, “Note sulla teologia trinitaria,” Lettieri, “Il nous mistico,” Jacobsen, *Christ, the Teacher*, 122–33; Hermanin de Reichenfeld, *The Spirit, The World and the Trinity*, 39–150.

³⁶ *Comm. Jo.* I, 111.

³⁷ See Hermanin de Reichenfeld, *The Spirit, the World, the Trinity*, 48; Ip Him, *Divine Simplicity*.

³⁸ *Comm. Jo.* I, 114–115: Οἶμαι γάρ, ὥσπερ κατὰ τοὺς ἀρχιτεκτονικοὺς τύπους οἰκοδομεῖται ἡ τεκταίνεταί οἰκία καὶ ναῦς, ἀρχὴν τῆς οἰκίας καὶ τῆς νεὼς ἔχόντων τοὺς ἐν τῷ τεχνίτῃ τύπους καὶ λόγους, οὕτω τὰ σύμπαντα γεγονέναι κατὰ τοὺς ἐν τῇ σοφίᾳ προτρανωθέντας ὑπὸ θεοῦ τῶν ἐσομένων λόγους «Πάντα γὰρ ἐν σοφίᾳ ἐποίησε». Καὶ λεκτέον ὅτι κτίσας, ἴν' οὕτως εἴπω, ἐμψυχον σοφίαν ὁ θεός, αὐτῇ ἐπέτρεψε ἀπὸ τῶν ἐν αὐτῇ τύπων τοῖς οὐσίαι καὶ τῇ ὕλῃ <παρασχεῖν καὶ> τὴν πλάσιν καὶ τὰ εἶδη, ἐγὼ δὲ ἐπίστημι εἰ καὶ τὰς οὐσίας. See also *Comm. Jo.* XIX, 147 and *Cels.* V, 39 and VI, 69. For the Greek texts of *Comm. Jo.* see Blanc, *Commentaire sur saint Jean*. For the English translation, see Heine, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*.

³⁹ *Comm. Jo.* I, 111: ἐν τῇ σοφίᾳ κατὰ μὲν τὴν σύστασιν τῆς περὶ τῶν ὅλων θεωρίας καὶ νοημάτων τῆς σοφίας νοουμένης, κατὰ δὲ τὴν πρὸς τὰ λογικὰ κοινωνίαν τῶν θεωρημένων τοῦ λόγου λαμβανομένου. A similar description of Wisdom's functions can be found in *Princ.* 1, 4, 4–5.

⁴⁰ *Comm. Cant.* 3, 9, 2: *Et sicut hic sapientiam non ideo aliquam feminam dici putabis, quia femineo nomine appellari videtur.*

⁴¹ *Cels.* 5, 39: Οὐ γὰρ παρὰ τὸ θηλυκὸν ὄνομα καὶ τῇ οὐσίᾳ θήλειαν νομιστέον εἶναι τὴν σοφίαν καὶ τὴν δικαιοσύνην, ἅπερ καθ' ἡμᾶς ἐστὶν ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ. For the critical edition, refer to Borret et al., *Commentaire sur le Cantique des Cantiques*. For the English translation, refer to Chadwick, *Contra Celsum*.

character of Sophia, the rebel aeon who sinned against the Abyssal Father, disrupted the pleromatic order and originated the material world. Origen refuted Valentinian doctrines in all his works, but particularly in his *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, where he responded to the commentary written by the Valentinian teacher Heracleon.⁴² The second is that Origen is aware that the feminine gender is charged with philosophical and theological implications – that is, passivity and materiality. However, these attributes hardly describe Origen's Wisdom. In his *On the First Principles*, he calls her “*figura expressa substantia dei*” and “ἐνέργεια, *inoperationis dei*,”⁴³ underlining the active role which she plays in the cosmic unfolding and her immaterial status. Third, compared to the Logos, the *epinoia* Wisdom embodies the more static aspect of the Son, and as such she should not be feminine. However, her role of nurturing and container would suggest otherwise. It seems to me that Origen is very careful as he knows that these attributes could induce the reader to assign a female gender to Wisdom, even if she has also “masculine” traits.

When speaking about Wisdom, Origen seems to experience some hermeneutical descriptive tension. On the one hand, traditional Jewish readings of biblical texts and pagan authors often embodied virtues (like wisdom) in female characters, and Origen was probably accustomed to thinking of Wisdom in feminine terms and consequently refers to Wisdom in this gender. Furthermore, Wisdom's *epinoia* has some inherently feminine features, such as being the movement of the Father, the first alterity within him, the container of all forms and ideas of future creation. On the other hand, Origen denies a straightforward and simplified association between Wisdom and the traditional feminine philosophical and theological attributes (such as passivity, weakness, and defectivity) to avoid possible confusion in his readers who could interpret Wisdom according to these established feminine features.

It seems therefore that there are several similarities between Origen's Wisdom and Plato's χώρα, as in both cases the commonplaces about pregnancy make the feminine gender extremely relevant in understanding their roles. They both are described as feminine entities as they are the first alterity within the Father, they both contain in themselves the entirety of creation and they both nurture the ideal worlds to make it known to the rest of creation, which also happens through them.

Just like Plato, Origen shows awareness of the use of genders as intellectual categories, making an explicit distinction between sex and gender:

But you also who under the name “women” are weak, slack, and sluggish, may you be warned so that ‘you may raise up the slack hands and loose knees’, that is, that you may stir up neglectful and idle spirits and assume a bold firmness in accomplishing legal and gospel precepts and hasten swiftly to the perfection of strong men. For divine Scripture does not know how to make a separation of men and women according to sex. For indeed sex is no distinction in the presence of God, but a person is designated either a man or woman according to the diversity of spirit. How many out of the sex of women are counted among the strong men before God, and how many of the men are reckoned among slack and sluggish women?⁴⁴

Origen understands there is a use of gender categories which transcends the biological data to construe and signify theological entities in a hierarchical fashion.⁴⁵ According to this passage, masculinity represents the

⁴² It goes beyond the scope of this article to enquire the relationship between Origen and Valentinianism. In this regard, refer to Cerioni, “Origen, Valentinianism;” van den Kerchove, “Origen and the ‘Heterodox;’” Simonetti, “Eracleone e Origene.”

⁴³ Respectively *Princ.* 1,2,8 and 1,1,12.

⁴⁴ Origen, *Hom. Jos.* 9, 9: *sed et vos, qui sub mulierum appellatione infirmi et remissi ac languidi estis, commonemini, ut remissas ‘manus et dissoluta genua erigatis’, id est ut negligentes et desides animos suscitetis et virile constantiam in explendis praeceptis legalibus et evangelicis assumatis atque ad virorum fortium perfectionem celeriter properetis. Non enim novit scriptura divina secundum sexum separationem virorum ac mulierum facere. Etenim sexum apud Deum nulla discretio est, sed pro animi diversitate vel vir vel mulier designatur. Quantae ex mulierum sexu apud Deum in viris fortibus numerantur, et quanti ex viris inter remissas et languidas mulieres reputantur?.* For the Latin text, refer to Jauber, “Homélies.” For the English translation, refer to Bruce and White, *Homilies on Joshua*. A similar opinion is also visible in Origen, *Comm. Matt.* 14, 16.

⁴⁵ Using Rufinus' translation of Origen's works is not exempt from linguistic and theological issues, see Prinzivalli, “L'originale e la tradizione di Rufino.” Nevertheless, there are no evidence that Rufinus' has manipulated Origen's theology when it comes to gender metaphorical language. Although I believe it is fair to include Rufinus' translation for the sake of this research, it is worth always considering these passages with a pinch of salt. Clark, “Ideology, History, and the Construction of “Woman” in Late Ancient Christianity;” Clark, “Women, Gender, and the Study of Christian History.”

perfection needed to achieve salvation; on the contrary, femininity represents the weakness of those humans inclined towards material and bodily pleasures. It is however interesting to note that Origen admits the possibility that perfect/masculine souls belong to women and weak/feminine souls belong to men, thus separating the biological sexual differentiation from the intellect's gendered identity. Thus, Origen's conclusions about the relationship between soul, gender, and sex are strikingly similar to Plato's texts on the soul.

From the previous example, Origen may seem to adhere to the mainstream gendered paradigm, limiting his view to a dichotomous and binary understanding of genders as intellectual categories. However, he shifts the binary ontological paradigm into an exegetical hermeneutical paradigm – namely, a hermeneutical mechanism which attributes genders to entities according to the hierarchical order of the elements considered. Emanuela Prinzivalli called this a *relational use* of gender categories.⁴⁶ Thus, Origen attributes masculine and feminine gender to characters or entities (e.g. the soul) based on the theological relations that entities entertain between them, and the same entity can be both masculine and feminine depending on the entity to which it is compared. For instance, Christ's soul is metaphorically described as a woman when it is to be understood by feminine and weak souls, but it is described as a man when it is considered in relation to the perfect rational creatures:

Concerning the nature of the Word, just as the quality of food changes in a mother into milk suitable for the nature of her infant, or is prepared by a physician with the intention of restoring a sick man to health, while it is prepared in a different way for a stronger man, who is more able to digest it in this form; so also God changes for men the power of the Word, whose nature it is to nourish the human soul, in accordance with the merits of each individual.⁴⁷

In other words, the Logos manifests himself according to the capacity of each soul. For the weak female souls, the Logos is a breastfeeding mother who nourishes them with milk, while the Logos is a male physician who prepares solid food for mature male souls.

This idea of the Logos as a breastfeeding mother recurs also in Origen's *Commentary on the Song of Song*, where, however, Origen makes an even more audacious use of feminine metaphors by flipping entirely the mainstream gender paradigm and hierarchy in a very incisive way:

[...] as long as a person is a child and has not yet offered himself wholly to God, he drinks the wine which that field produces, which holds within itself the hidden treasure too; and he is gladdened by the wine he drinks. But, when he has offered and vowed himself to God and has been made a Nazirite, and has found the hidden treasure and come to the very breasts and fountains of the Word of God, then he will no longer drink wine or spirit, but with reference to these treasures of wisdom and knowledge That are hidden in the Word of God, he will say to Him: 'Thy breasts are better than wine.'⁴⁸

Origen spends several paragraphs commenting on Song 1,2 about the bridegroom's breast. He explains several possible meanings of this unusual phrasing and tends to equate the breast with the hearth, which he considered the place of residence of the intellectual faculties. Reading Song 1,2 through the lens of Ps 103,15, Origen is even more specific by saying that the breasts are "the teachings that are within Thee," that is, the ideas within God.⁴⁹ Therefore, the maternal milk represents the Wisdom of God, which feeds the souls and brings them knowledge of the divine. Origen creates an opposition between wine, which was usually associated with maleness (e.g. in ancient symposia, wine plays an essential role) and adulthood, and maternal milk, a female-

⁴⁶ Prinzivalli, "La donna, il femminile."

⁴⁷ Origen, *Cels.* 4, 18: περί μὲν οὖν τῆς τοῦ λόγου φύσεως ὅτι, ὥσπερ ἡ τῶν τροφῶν ποιότης πρὸς τὴν τοῦ νηπίου φύσιν εἰς γάλα μεταβάλλει ἐν τῇ τρεφούσῃ, ἢ ὑπὸ τοῦ ἱατροῦ κατασκευάζεται πρὸς τὸ τῆς ὑγείας χρεῖῳδες τῷ κάμνοντι, ἢ τῷ ἰσχυροτέρῳ ὡς δυνατωτέρῳ οὕτως εὐτρεπίζεται οὕτως τὴν τοῦ πεφυκότος τρέφειν ἀνθρωπίνην ψυχὴν λόγου δύναμιν ὁ θεὸς τοῖς ἀνθρώποις ἐκάστῳ κατ' ἀξίαν μεταβάλλει.

⁴⁸ *Comm. Song* 1, 2, 23-24: *donec quis parvulus est et nondum semet ipsum et integro obtulit Deo, bibit vinum quod affert ager ille qui habet intra se etiam thesaurum absconditum, et bibens laetificatur ex vino. Cum autem obtulerit et devoverit semet ipsum Deo ac Nazareus fuerit effectus, atque invenerit thesaurum absconditum et ad ipsa ubera fontesque pervenerit Verbi Dei, vinum et sinceram iam non bibit dicens ad ipsum Dei Verbum de his thesauris qui in ipso sapientiae et scientiae reconditi sunt: Quia bona sunt uber atque super vinum.* For the Latin text, see Borret et al., *Commentaire*. For the English translation, see Lawson, *The Song of Songs*.

⁴⁹ *Comm. Song* 1, 2, 6.

produced drink for infants, to signify the different stages of apprehension of the divine. As often happens in Origen's works, this food metaphor is layered since there are several hermeneutical levels underlying it (e.g. breast/wine; lactation/drunkenness; infancy/adulthood; feminine/masculine), but gender is certainly a factor to account for understanding the meaning of this metaphor.⁵⁰ The unusuality of this latter example consists in the inversion of the adulthood/infancy and male/female dynamics: rather than affirming that wine is superior to milk as masculine is superior to feminine and adult comprehension is superior to the infant's ability to understand God, Origen flips the hierarchy and affirms that the feminine milk is superior to male wine, as the children comprehension is higher than the adult one. Although this flip of traditional gendered metaphors is invited by the very erotic texts of the Song, I believe it is still relevant to underline how feminine metaphorical language is employed by Origen with a specific theological intent, that is to use the feminine commonplaces to underlie the inevitable changing and ascensive nature of the path towards God.

Another very interesting use of gendered metaphors is visible in Origen's allegorical commentary and homilies on the Song of Songs. The souls that have the more spiritual understanding of the Logos, the above-mentioned "perfect men," are here understood as feminine. In the biblical spousal metaphor, God is obviously occupying the position of the bridegroom, while the creatures are the bride. However, this hierarchy between genders is largely complicated by Origen's understanding of the feminine as a multilayered identity, where the female dramatic characters should not be reductively interpreted according to the masculine/feminine dichotomy. The feminine dynamic is very similar to Plato's *Symposium*, and it is possible to say that Origen also displays a feminine continuum. Previous research has already underlined how erotic desire is a driving element in both authors,⁵¹ and here, I explore further the significance of female characters within their interpretation of erotic narratives.

In the Biblical erotic drama, which the Christian tradition early on interpreted as the bond between God and his creatures, the feminine is not understood as a group of features opposed to the masculine (as in the previously illustrated cases), but it symbolizes the different steps which the soul undergoes to become worthy of marrying Christ/the Bridegroom. In Origen's interpretation, the female characters of the Song are souls who received three natural gifts from God: a rational nature, the free will, and the natural law.⁵² These ontological gifts are, however, used by the soul at different degrees of spiritual maturity, which are embodied by three different female figures:

In this marriage drama we must take it that some souls who are associated with the Bridegroom in a nobler and more splendid sort of love, have with Him the status and the love of queens; others whose dignity in respect of progress and the virtues is undoubtedly less, rank as His concubines; and others again are in the position of the maidens who are placed outside the palace, though not outside the royal city.⁵³

Thus, Origen distinguishes three female characters: the Bride/Queen, the concubines, and the maidens. Origen's exegesis of the Song is entirely based on the use of feminine imagery to describe the souls' path of ascension to God. Here, feminine imagery is the privileged means of representation of Origen's theology of progress, according to which each soul will reach the union with God at a different pace.⁵⁴ It is important to note that the various degrees of proximity to God are described by women's sexual status since the difference between these feminine characters is measured in terms of sexual purity (virginity/prostitution), according to the patriarchal paradigms of the time. Women's bodies and their sexual activities are a driving feature of Origen's use of feminine metaphors, as they easily recall commonplaces about women's sexual habits in Origen's readers. Origen plays on these commonplaces so much that they describe the life's arch of each

⁵⁰ On the food metaphors in Origen's work, refer to Soler, *Orígenes y los alimentos espirituales*.

⁵¹ Zorzi, "In principio era Aglaia;" Fürst, *Die Homilien Und Fragmente Zum Hohelied*.

⁵² Origen, *Comm. Song* 1, 2, 23–4: original text.

⁵³ Origen, *Comm. Song* 2, 4, 6: *Secundum hanc ergo speciem etiam haec intelligenda sunt et alias quidem animas putandum est in hoc sponsali dramate, quae magnificentiore affectu sponso atque illustriore sociantur, apud eum reginarum loco et affectu haberi, alias, quarum inferior sine dubio in profectibus et virtutibus honor est, concubinarum loco duci et alias adulescentularum, quae videntur extra aulam quidem positae, non tamen extra urbem regiam.*

⁵⁴ On Origen's theology of progress and his reception, Lettieri, "Il nous mistico;" Prinzivalli, "L'uomo ed il suo destino;" Jacobsen, *Christ, the Teacher*; Lettieri et al., *Progress in Origen*; Lettieri, "Il corpo di Dio."

intellectual creature ever created and destined to be reunited with the Logos. In this regard, the parallel between the metaphorical meanings Plato attributes to female characters in his *Symposium* and Origen's aforementioned female characters is striking, even though explicit Platonic quotations cannot be identified in Origen's work on this subject.

Even more than Plato, and probably encouraged by the numerous female metaphors present in the Biblical texts, Origen makes large use of female metaphorical language and images in his works. These metaphors are always used to convey the complexities of Origen's theology of progress by representing the different ascensive steps towards God. In doing so, Origen transcends the mainstream and traditional uses of the feminine gender as an intellectual category in philosophical and theological texts of his time. He conceives the feminine as a continuum, the only metaphorical language appropriate to convey the nuances of God's relationships with his creatures.

4 Conclusion

Feminine metaphorical language in Plato and Origen shows several points of contact. First, they both deviate to some extent from stereotypical uses of metaphorical language that envision a neat subordination of the feminine to the masculine. While traces of such a paradigm are evident in their works, as they reflect some of the biases ingrained in their patriarchal society regarding women and the feminine, they also transcend these limitations by offering a nuanced portrayal of femininity, which becomes integral to the development of their philosophical thought. Secondly, both Plato and Origen establish a very close connection between the erotic dynamics of knowledge/divine apprehension and the feminine multi-layered identity.

Neither of them can adequately depict the journey towards the philosophical knowledge or the theological ascent towards God using exclusively masculine terms. The concept of masculinity, representing an unchanging, eternal, and static perfection, proves insufficient for facilitating the attainment of philosophical knowledge or divine reunion. Plato and Origen conceive such ascensive process as involving change, evolution, and progress, qualities that a purely masculine framework fails to encompass, thus necessitating an inseparable connection with the feminine. Some commonplaces – that is, the cultural, biological, and social knowledge recalled by the feminine gender – are crucial elements to understand fully the metaphorical language of both Plato and Origen. This is indeed the case of the sexual habits of women in both the *Symposium* and the *Commentary on the Song of Songs*. Rather than being relegated to the negative counterpart of assumed masculine perfection, the feminine emerges as a conceptual framework and a philosophical and theological language consistently employed by both Plato and Origen to elucidate the intricacies of their ideas and the multifaceted path to wisdom.

Examining the commonplaces and assumptions which feed into ancient Christian authors' philosophical and theological uses of the feminine – and, by implication, the masculine – presents a novel perspective to analyse their works that underscores the significance of the feminine as an intrinsic component of their philosophical and theological discourse. The gender-oriented methodology applied in this article touches on two crucial knots of Origenian studies. First, the question of Origen's dependence upon Platonism. The analysis conducted in this article proves that Origen replicates some of the structure of Plato's work in his theological thought, without giving in to the commonplace according to which the masculine represents superiority and the feminine inferiority. Secondly, it delves into Origen's exegetical method, revealing how his allegorical and typological approach to Scriptures facilitates the utilization of the feminine as metaphorical language. In this regard, the example of the Bridegroom's breast in the *Song* exemplifies well how feminine biblical metaphors are reinterpreted by Origen in a way that shows clearly the importance of gendered metaphorical language in theological production.

In conclusion, this article stimulates further inquiry by posing questions such as: What is the role of allegory in interpreting gender within Scriptures? How do gender meta-narratives and biblical associations with female characters contribute to the formation of gendered paradigms? Exploring these questions promises to chart new avenues for Origenian studies.

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