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Embodiments of Wisdom: Feeling, Knowing and the Boundaries of the Self

Eva Rosenthal

In this paper, I explore the qualities of knowing and embodiment as presented by different female characters from ancient texts who in some way resemble Wisdom (otherwise known as Sophia). The experimental method used to present this research heavily includes the element of personal experience: my own narrative is woven in alongside the ancient texts and modern scholarly sources.

The model for what is considered “embodied” in each ancient text is based off of Brooke Holmes’ book *The Symptom and the Subject*. The narrative style that I took cues from lies in Eve Sedgwick’s book titled *A Dialogue on Love*. I wrote small excerpts on selected texts which were read this summer which addressed Sophia’s level of relationality and removal from the human and divine worlds, the extent to which she seems to have a physical body and boundaries, and my own personal reactions to these texts.

In writing smaller excerpts in combination with longer, purely academic writings on the modern sources, I find that Sophia’s engagement with the world often has to do with a sense of woundedness, a frustration with a seeming inability to physically change certain happenings on earth. This frustration often has to do with her *placement*, or where she exists in relation to other beings. A separation is born from a danger in her omniscience; the fact that she has seen so many human workings and has the ability to “tell the truth” about humanity is what causes the fearful limiting of her by others.

The Thunder: Perfect Mind

The Thunder: Perfect Mind was discovered in the mid-20th century along with the Nag Hammadi codices. It is known for its deep and emotional tone, and its contradictory presentation of glory and embarrassment. It seems to encapsulate many voices within the human experience at once.¹ The speaker is presumably related to the character of Wisdom, who appears in many books of the New Testament. She generally acts as a sort of guide and a source of advice for characters in the Bible, telling them what and who to follow in order to live a good and happy life. Wisdom is known to have been present since the beginning of time, all-knowing, and capable of providing reward to those who “do the right thing.”

1 Hal Taussig, *A New New Testament* (2013: Taussig), 279.

She speaks of herself sometimes as being all-powerful and capable of affecting humans how she pleases, but there are times at which she is more vulnerable, *The Thunder: Perfect Mind* being a clear example of this.

It is in this text that Wisdom feels especially cloudy, surrounded by layers, contradictions and riddles. She is everything and everyone, regardless even of gender: a “bride and bridegroom,” “limbs of my mother,” and “the root of sin.” The storyline of this text has much to do with Wisdom declaring herself all things, a wide range of emotions and positions. The interesting result of this narrative style is that Wisdom’s positive character stigma (proper lifestyle, guidance and the like) is applied to a variety of messy and unconventional situations that, quite frankly, cannot be considered conventionally “good.” At one point, she declares herself to have been in the “shit pile,” discarded and looked past. The notion of omniscience, of infinite, impenetrable knowledge is being placed (dare I say embodied?) in strikingly vulnerable, human situations. In this way, it seems as though the concept of knowledge itself as a stuffy, noble, isolating concept is undermined in a subtle manner: if it exists (or has existed) everywhere, no one group of people can claim it as their own. True knowledge may indeed come from an infinite and exhausting existence in many worlds and perspectives at once.

Secret Revelation of John

In the *Secret Revelation of John*, we hear directly from Jesus as he tells a strange, dystopian and dreamlike tale to John, who is distraught over his death. Jesus introduces a hierarchical heavenly structure and a genealogy of its divine figures, laying out with specificity how and when each “generation” was born. In this story, Sophia-Wisdom is portrayed as an independent, rash thinker. She independently births a son, Yaldabaoth, without the permission of the highest order. Yaldabaoth, however, turns out to be evil, claiming himself the only real god and wreaking havoc. Sophia-Wisdom is blamed for his actions and made an outcast of the divine world, separated from the others, as well as from the human world.² She is the cause of many of the actions in the divine world, but is unable to live and operate within it, instead helplessly watching it unfold.

Secret Revelation of John reads like an origin story in the way that it provides a concrete story pertaining to the mysterious figure of Wisdom. Rather than wondering where Wisdom sits within all the text-heavy layers surrounding her, we see firsthand a shame and mishap that has caused her character to experience such removal. We see a more personal take on her, rather than her own proclamations:

² Taussig, 467.

the bare actions and the causation. These are the reasons why reading this text reminded me of being a young child and learning that my parents weren't perfect, all-knowing or invincible.

Macrina's Tattoo

Although Macrina's scar is a result of a bodily issue that she did not have control over, she did choose to "self-heal" rather than let anyone else lay eyes upon her body. Rather than expose herself more to any kind of outsider that she does not know, she instead emotes privately, crying and making a solution from her tears than end up ultimately healing her. In a way, her resulting scar is miraculously manifested, as if written by the divine. At the same time, however, the existence of the scar is a result of Macrina's taking control of her situation and healing herself. As a result, she is marked. As Burrus specifies, tattoos were once marks for foreigners and criminals, holding a negative stigma. The Christ movement, however, pushed the meaning of tattoos further from solely signifying of lower class and toward a powerful act of self-definition (in some cases, belonging to Jesus rather than any kind of social strata). In the case of Encolpius and Giton, their tattoos actually serve as disguises from their real selves, and their past romantic counterparts are fooled by their self-inflicted marks.³

In the cases of tattooing that Burrus describes through different social backdrops, a key element which I noticed was that each time certain characters' bodies are marked, it separates them from those around them in some way: in the case of Macrina, it signifies a kind of independence; in the case of Encolpius and Giton, it links them together while putting them on a comedic "team" against their resentful past lovers, and in the cases of slaves, gladiators (those subjugated for another's cause), the tattoo signifies a strange mix between "performance and shame." Whether the tattoos represent the lowering of a person or a surge of independence, they separate a person from those around them, rendering them "special" or "other" in some way. They have something that those around them do not, in the simplest way. This same kind of specialness or "othering" is inked onto the being of Wisdom in both *The Thunder: Perfect Mind* and *The Secret Revelation of John* in her separation and otherness to both physical bodies on earth and the divine. She seems to exist in a painful and knowledgeable space between the two worlds, not belonging in either one. She performs her wisdom and experiences, albeit sometimes seemingly on deaf ears, from a situation of sensitive emotion. Her emotions seem to be her ink in that they both mark and situate her among oth-

3 Virginia Burrus, *Macrina's Tattoo* (Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies, 2003).

ers. Additionally, despite the metaphorical tattoo of painful knowledge that Wisdom seems to bear, the tattoo itself is placed on a physical body which sometimes does not seem to exist, signifying the importance of her *placement* over any kind of cohesive personhood she might hold. In this way, Karmen MacKendrick's quote is especially important: "We are who we are by virtue of these places in us that have been not-us, those marks that remind us that we can be broken, and that the I who is healed is not who I was."⁴ Wisdom's marks illustrate the transience of any physical body she has existed in. Her marks are indeed ruptures that remind us of her vulnerability, shedding light on who she has been in the past, her humiliations or downfalls, as well as the times in which she has been loved and listened to.

In more personal reflection, I see that the transience of the physical body as shown by a tattoo is what I most identify with. I feel as though I have indeed lived in many bodies, and the knowledge that there are many versions of myself that I could be presenting is often a scattering and melancholy, and very much a recurring, thought.

Metis

Metis is an iteration of Wisdom that has been endlessly punished for taking initiative without the permission of those around her. She is a well-respected goddess, looked to for counsel and advice, especially in regards to war. Metis is a particularly interesting sort of iteration of Wisdom because she explicitly demonstrates the "danger in knowing" paradigm; her prophecies are resented, feared, and taken all too seriously (in the case of her prophecy to Zeus, she is feared enough to be swallowed whole and alive). This raises the question of which part of her, exactly, is inciting the reaction of fear and uneasiness in this particular narrative: her physical (but malleable) body or her inner wisdom and its destabilizing capabilities? What actions were taken against her by Zeus to prevent his usurping by her future son? Zeus swallows her, literally trapping her within a physical body that does not belong to her, creating an extra layer of boundary between her inner knowledge and the world. It is as though he wishes to prevent the two from touching or coming into contact. By physically separating her, he can undo his prophecy. Such an action is reminiscent of the idea that spirits can be "trapped" or "entombed" within a physical body, that having those extra layers of flesh is somehow a weakness. The action of Zeus can, therefore, be associated with desired isolation of a physical unit in the hopes of entrapping its inner wisdom (such isolation is at times manifested in Wisdom's character from *The Thunder: Perfect Mind*

⁴ Burrus, 87.

and *Secret Revelation of John*; her physical body has been shamed and feared, and at times, this has forced her into painful corners of nonbeing).

In questioning the wisdom of Metis, as well as her physical boundaries, it is useful to watch the ways in which the world is affected by her. Which parts of them is she able to reach? In Metis' particular case, her prophecies do not physically harm anyone; they leave the outer boundaries unharmed. But her knowing is weighted with the trust placed on it, especially when she predicts something as dire as one's future downfall at the hands of his own son. Therefore, although she only has the capability to reach the minds of other beings, her words carry a weight that affects the physical goings-on of the divine world. Her own physical agency, in addition, seems to be limited, as she is physically manipulated by Zeus, swallowed by him and, according to some stories, still exists within his body, giving him counsel and advice at times. Therefore, she is literally entombed within a body, not permitted to take real action as a divine being, but becoming a bodiless being who thinks on Zeus' behalf at times. It seems that not being able to penetrate people's physical bodies, in Metis' case, comes with the outcome of not owning a physical body to accompany her intellect and agency. In addition, although Athena is able to escape Zeus' insides with the armor that Metis made for her, becoming of the most well-known of the gods, Metis herself remains trapped after her sacrifice. Her one misstep (allowing Zeus to trick her) has led to an existence trapped, offering advice when others have a need for it, but for the most part, remaining quiet.

The characteristics of Wisdom that appear in Metis become increasingly clear in vocalizing the implications of Metis' story. Again, both Wisdom and Metis seem to have had a sort of downfall, a grand defeat showing a hole in their impeccable wisdom. This defeat has led to their minds being banished to a frustrating "between" place, not engaged in the physical or divine worlds but left to watch them, offering advice and hoping they are listened to. It seems as though helping those in the physical world around them (albeit from which they are thinly barred) is a form of leaving their traces in the world, maintaining some kind of presence despite their removals, on some level. There is a part of all of these characters that wants to be acknowledged, but after the initial fight and defeat, they find a means to live vicariously and semi-in the world.

Sedgwick

In Eve Sedgwick's *A Dialogue on Love*, Sedgwick gradually develops a trusting, fulfilling friendship with her therapist, who she at first assumes to be less

intelligent than her. Despite the fact that he is not an academic or particularly intellectual, she finds that she can indeed still learn things from him. It is this aspect of the book that reminds me of the wisdom in *The Thunder: Perfect Mind*: it exists everywhere and in everyone, and the wisdom present in everyone is of different sorts, and that when combined, they somehow have the capacity to encompass absolutely everything.

More specifically, this book contains many exciting example of how knowledge can truly be emotional and within the self, redefining at times what it means to “know” something. The narrative has much to do with mining the depths of one’s memories and traumas in order to feel in touch with the physical body again. “*I know depression, have my own history with it.*”⁵ Sedgwick “knows” depression in the way that her personhood has met it, intermingled with it and reacted to it for quite some time. In this way, she indeed knows how she felt as a result of such intrusions. Her knowing of something that has deeply affected her has to do less with knowing an overarching definition or archetype of depression and more with an intermingling of herself with her depression, and the entrance of depression into her being, the feeling that her personal self and the illness make together.

In this vein, perhaps “knowing” someone is connected with being inhabited by someone. Sedgwick describes Michael, her close companion. “*It preoccupies me a lot*” (24)... “*not sure I even knew what the feeling was like before*” (25)... and finally, maybe most importantly, Michael “*makes a world, a warm, musical, hilarious private culture*” with her. I remember reading a quote a while back that said something along the lines of “friendship or love is creative in the way that you make a world for someone else.” In reflecting on my interpersonal relationships, I realize that the extent to which I feel close to someone ties in heavily with how they have created a world for me. There are a few, the closest few who I actively miss and feel physically, even when they are far away. This is because I am still living in their world, imagining them go about their daily business, thinking of their family who I feel like I also know or am related to. I am “addicted” to them, as Sedgwick specifies. Someone else’s projection of the grand culmination of their experiences—what they are able to tell you in the truest of forms (because when you love someone, you want them to love you back by feeling (or empathizing with) the things that you feel), which will never be enough. It never should be enough, because its sustainability lies in the continued hunger to know more, to dig deeper, and when the digging is done, to maintain.

5 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *A Dialogue on Love* (Beacon Press, 2000).

That is the creativity that comes with intimacy for me; in creating and maintaining a world and escape for another person, in drawing a person in, and in “alluring” them by sharing those mundane or confusing or vague experiences, in being gathered piece by piece and put back together in a way that makes sense. In doing those things for someone else, especially. So here, “knowing” someone can mean living in one’s world as it is in the process of being punctuated by someone else. An intrusion, no less fracturing in that it should be in semi-consistent motion, growing pains included, with the welcome of those stillnesses in excitement or active, warm love, either platonic or romantic.

When one moves around enough, then, and has forged as creative and close relationships as Sedgwick describes with Michael, those worlds are collected. In “knowing” a few people, in the most intimate senses of the word, one is living in a fractured and multi-faceted world including a wide range of experiences and feelings. This, I would say, is an interpersonal and experiential dimension of knowing, is to be pulled outside of one’s personal world and mind and into another person’s world. Knowing things outside of yourself, and knowing at the same time that you are knowing them from inside yourself. Knowing them differently than anyone else could, not in the way of stunted subjectivity but of a sense of some kind of special feeling, a special and mixed world that can then be shared with others and (hopefully) be taken seriously as lived experience. Knowing is and will always be situated, as Wisdom-Sophia’s character illustrates.

Kotrosits

The well-known work of Michael Foucault has popularized the idea that sexuality did not exist in the ancient world as categories that constituted any sort of collective “queer” identity or community. Rather, Foucault argues, it is a construction of the modern world. Halperin would agree, adding that sex did not constitute relationality, but was instead polarizing in the way that sexual acts placed people in hierarchical positions relative to one another. In fact, penetration is not a satisfactory act in determining ancient erotic experience, a problem that has been combatted with incomplete portraits of egalitarian (trauma-free, nonhierarchical) sex.

In her article titled *Penetration and Its Discontents: Greco-Roman Sexuality, The Acts of Paul and Thecla, and Theorizing Eros Without the Wound*, Maia Kotrosits argues that penetration in ancient Greece is inherently traumatic, as it involves the definition of surface level boundaries of the body in order for those boundaries to be violated. It is a very particularized sexual act and should not be

a blanket visual accompaniment to the referral to sex; in figuring every erotic act as traumatic penetration, trauma is naturalized, taking the significance of more explicit trauma from abusive sexual experiences. Gender can be a “language” through which eroticism is expressed, not the defining characteristic of sexual experience but instead a complex web of ever-changing presentation and resulting sexual charge. Diotima’s gender might be a way to express legitimacy for a non-dominant (non-masculinized) set of experiences. Such experiences can be considered “off the grid”, as in *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*: they describe a set of experiences that are not necessarily spectacularly violent or troubling, but were simply in existence in the ancient world, in the most bare sense of the word, outside the spectacular or purposefully indicative violences or hierarchical sexual experiences.

Kotrosits’ article in particular made me think about how relationality to people, in an erotic or platonic sense, does not always need to be categorized or “on the grid,” so to speak. It made me think of how very close friendships hold many of the characteristics of what people expect from romantic relationships; one simply uses different or additional parts of their body or energy (one does not use their physical body in the same way with a significant other and with a platonic lifelong friend), nor is their physical energy directed in the same manner. The close and intimate connection that lifelong friends feel for one another brings the “soul” into motion, giving a part of the self that doesn’t necessarily need to mean the physical body. In this sense, how does Wisdom in *The Thunder: Perfect Mind* and *Secret Revelation of John* want to connect with others, and with which layers of her being? In other words, when she asks of others to “see” her, which boundaries of herself does she wish for others to connect with and learn from? In what ways have her past traumatic experiences shaped the trajectory of her “personhood”, and how have they led to her current state?

Plato’s Symposium

Much of what I observed in the Symposium specifically had to do with the ideals of Socrates concerning love: there were many archetypes involved of what men and women say or perform in situations of love or eros. Much of the argumentation in this text had to do with what exact form love takes, or what it is represented by in the world at large. In this way, Socrates was projecting his views of idealized eros onto the actions of others. His version of “doing philosophy” has to do with dialogue in a question-and-response format in which two people challenge one another (or one person asks questions of the other); in other words,

it has to do with external interaction with others and realization of certain truths through those interactions. Being wise also has to do with an application of certain ideas to real-world situations (in other words, knowing things through experience). In this way, Wisdom's experiences in *The Thunder: Perfect Mind* and in the *Secret Revelation of John* precede her words, but she speaks seemingly to a general populus on whose ears her words can sometimes fall deaf, rather than carrying on a personal conversation.

In relating this text to Wisdom, I noticed that Diotima in the Symposium is represented as more of a removed and godlike figure than Socrates. Where Socrates represents a constant motion in discovering Wisdom and in attaining knowledge and credibility, always reaching for it, Diotima has already attained it and speaks from that situation. Diotima, as well, holds space for those elements of being that exist between two states, a fact that I found to be important in parallel with Wisdom's existence in both *The Thunder: Perfect Mind* and the *Secret Revelation of John*. In the way that Wisdom seems to exist between the divine and the earthly, Diotima explains that it is possible to be between beauty and ugliness, between wisdom and ignorance. I don't think that it's insignificant that she carves out that space for such "off the grid" existence between different labels and ideals. Part of Diotima's way of "being wise" is to argue and to explain with others. In other words, her wisdom is heavily rooted in verbal contact with others, contact which is reciprocated by whoever she is explaining her argument to. In contrast, Wisdom in *The Thunder: Perfect Mind* and the *Secret Revelation of John* seems to wish for such reciprocal communication with humans, but cannot quite ever get proper response or recognition from the other side. In this vein, part of what it means to "relate" to Wisdom is to be in motion: to be constantly traversing between oneself and the objects of one's desire or affection. The knowledge coveted in Platonic texts seems to be more interpersonal and situates Wisdom among, not above, the men who are debating.

Interactions between Wisdoms:

The Gospel of Mary and *The Thunder: Perfect Mind*

In collecting such different portraits of Wisdom in different texts, I began to think about their interactions with one another. In what texts do certain emotions seem to be present, yet un-vocalized? For what reasons might certain words be missing? In a class that I took last semester, I remember writing a relational paper on *The Thunder: Perfect Mind* as being a vocalization for the unspoken words of the female character with wisdom (Mary) from the *Gospel of Mary*.

"When trying to understand the speaker in *The Thunder: Perfect Mind* as one cohesive character, the array of contradictory adjectives and descriptions that are thrown at the reader can seem nonsensical and frustrating. This indeed is a tendency of humans: to look for depth in different characters, to get to know them, to classify them in some way. However, in this text, it seems difficult to reach some kind of "core" of the speaker; they are indeed everything: male and female, shamed and glory, war and peace. In *The Gospel of Mary*, however, we see an earthly woman with a core: she has steadfast belief in the words of the savior, and she cares deeply about conveying these words to her fellow disciples so that they may go out and share them with others. Since the writing of this gospel, Mary has been made into a saint, her character colored with prostitution (a result of Pope Gregory I's "creative license"), and entangled in other time periods, stories, and Marys to boot. We now think of Mary as one singular person, when in reality, she is many combined into one. Today, who we see as Mary can be compared to the "spiritual body" of Christ: there are many ideas and characters that exist within her; she embodies the voices and stories of many. She is thought of as both an otherworldly, chosen saint, and a lowly, earthly whore. She has been "taken in" by many and changed or embellished based on their personal needs or motivations."

What I mean by this is that the different iterations of Wisdom in each passage seem to have the capacity to "speak for" one another at times. They vocalize the emotions that their counterparts cannot. These different embodied versions of Wisdom may not all belong to one continuous thread the way that I had hoped they would, but they do interact with one another, sometimes "covering" for one another in tricky, tender spaces.

"In comparing *The Thunder: Perfect Mind* and *The Gospel of Mary*, what is striking is that the speaker of the former actually seems to vocalize the inner, unspoken voice of Mary. Perhaps the most chilling example of this appears in *The Thunder: Perfect Mind*: "You honor me...and you whisper against me" (4:27). Mary is the saint who is faintly and implicitly looked down upon for her sexualized body, and yet she is held on a pedestal and seen as an example for others. She lives this contradiction. Her body, her presence and sheer existence are the "core" that we have been looking for in the mysterious speaker from *The Thunder: Perfect Mind*. What this means is that Mary's physical body is the vessel with which these confusing and contradictory traits are held and manifested. As the speaker from *The Thunder: Perfect Mind* states, "I am a mute that does not speak and my words are endless" (4:23). Perhaps these endless words are expressed by this all-

encompassing, contradictory speaker, where Mary could not express them for fear of shame and rebuke.”

“Kathryn Imray suggests that the sexualized “strange woman” from Proverbs 1-9 is correlated with Wisdom in certain ways. To put it simply, according to Imray, this woman is hard to “pin down.”⁶ Imray believes that the wildness presented by this character has most to do with her presentation of her own body in a sexual manner, and is furthered by the fact that she does not belong to a man in any sense. The contradiction inherent in Wisdom, in this example, and the ways in which she encompasses even the “messier” traits of the strange woman, are perfectly descriptive of the ways in which Mary can somehow be a wise guide and a teacher, but be implicitly lowered a notch based in the inherent suspicion by men that she is plotting to somehow mislead them. That mistrust is an extremely important aspect of *The Gospel of Mary*, and the strange woman’s character in Proverbs 1-9 speaks to this mistrust, and even revels in it in a knowing and quiet way. She is saying, “Look at and acknowledge only my body, this living and breathing thing that you have chosen to change with your own gaze and presuppositions.” She has completely succumbed to what men subtly and constantly expect from her in her self-presentation, of what she truly is “inside.” In this way, the strange woman is the manifestation of the doubt and anger of Andrew and Peter, their deepest fears and inner thoughts which have been projected and painted onto Mary permanently over the years. These fears, the male gaze which is fixed on Mary, are remembered and validated throughout the years in her character. It is a parallel interpretation, therefore, that these fears are extrapolated and manifested in the “strange woman” from Proverbs.”

The comparison of this wide and colorful array of texts represents more than just a similar set of emotions and experiences, but additionally highlights the need to look for the words of the oppressed in places outside of their immediate stories. *The Thunder: Perfect Mind* speaks to the emotion of Mary, but beyond that, it speaks to the experiences of many iterations of wisdom throughout history, those that are both glorified and looked down upon. These iterations of Wisdom in each text have their own unique voices and the texts their own distinct color. Their collective emotion and overlap, however, can come to light after an analysis of the different characters.

6 Kathryn Imray, *Love is (Strong As) Death* (Catholic Biblical Quarterly, 2013).

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