

## Challenging Women: Female Wisdom Figures and Spiritual Progress in *The Shepherd of Hermas* and Tibetan Buddhism

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*A striking feature of The Shepherd of Hermas, when compared with other works of early Christian literature, is the key role played by the Lady, who offers him extensive spiritual guidance before disappearing and being replaced by the more conventional figure of the Shepherd. Readers familiar with the Buddhist tradition will recall analogous narrative tropes deployed by some strands of Tibetan teaching. In Vajrayāna Buddhism, schools of thought ascribe special importance to female yoginis and bodhisattvas, who can play a crucial role in the spiritual development of many practitioners. Some monks and lay Buddhists experience a personal encounter with female supernatural figures, and as a result, they undergo a profound spiritual transformation that appears to be at odds with the often pessimistic or misogynistic attitude towards women characterizing other aspects of the Tibetan tradition. The first part of this essay offers an overview of the gendered interactions that constitute the backbone of The Shepherd of Hermas, while the second section explores the question of the role of gender in the pursuit of enlightenment according to Mahāyāna teaching, underscoring the unique soteriological value that the female gender comes to play in a number of tantric traditions within Tibet. The last section of the paper offers some comparative reflections, exploring the points of contact, as well as the irreducible differences between the role played by female wisdom figures in these two traditions.*

*Keywords: Tibetan Buddhism, Shepherd of Hermas, Dreaming, Wisdom, Spirituality*

This essay considers an example of early Christian literature—*The Shepherd of Hermas*—and examples taken from the Vajrayana Buddhist tradition in comparative perspective. One of the most striking features of *The Shepherd of Hermas* when compared with other works of early Christian literature is the key role played by the Lady, who inaugurates Hermas's spiritual journey and offers him extensive guidance. Later in the story, the Lady disappears and Hermas engages in an extensive conversation with a Shepherd, who comes to play the more conventional role of the teacher and spiritual master. This trajectory from an initial encounter with a female figure who challenges the main character's worldview to a relationship of discipleship with a male figure who completes the main character's spiritual initiation may be quite idiosyncratic in a Christian context, but readers who are familiar with the Buddhist tradition will be reminded of analogous narrative tropes deployed by some strands of Tibetan teaching. In Vajrayāna Buddhism—a current of Mahāyāna that comprises the form of Buddhism that is practiced on the Tibetan plateau and in the surrounding region—some schools of thought ascribe special importance to female *yoginis* and *bodhisattvas*, who come to play a crucial role in the spiritual development of many practitioners.<sup>1</sup> Monks as well as lay Buddhists who are devoted to, and sometimes experience a personal encounter with these female figures—many of whom belong to supernatural spheres of existence, and are also objects of veneration—appear to undergo a profound spiritual transformation that appears to be at odds with the often pessimistic, or outright misogynistic attitude towards women that characterizes other aspects of the Tibetan tradition. While encounters with female glorified figures that embody wisdom marks the beginning of one's spiritual path, it is nonetheless expected that

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<sup>1</sup> For an introduction to Vajrayāna Buddhism, see Geoffrey Samuel, *Introducing Tibetan Buddhism* (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2012); for a discussion of the role of female Buddhas and *bodhisattvas*, see also Reginald A. Ray, *Secret of the Vajra World: The Tantric Buddhism of Tibet* (Boston: Shambala, 2002), Ch. 9–10, 177–229. A comprehensive discussion of the role of female sexuality in Tibetan Buddhism can be found in Serinity Young, *Courtesans and Tantric Consorts: Sexualities in Buddhist Narrative, Iconography and Ritual* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

the recipients of these experiences continue their spiritual formation with monastic masters or teachers who are unfailingly male. In *The Shepherd of Hermas* no less than in the Tibetan tradition, the result of this trajectory is that the hierarchy between genders is both subverted and reaffirmed. Where the fixed gender binary characteristic of the Western Christian tradition ensures that this dichotomy is enshrined at the core of spiritual practice, Mahāyāna’s—and Vajrayāna’s—resort to the distinction between conventional and ultimate reality ensures that the distinction between the roles of gender is affirmed as a useful skillful means, but is not taken to be an enduring feature of the ultimate nirvanic reality.<sup>2</sup>

The first part of this essay will offer an overview of the gendered interactions that constitute the backbone of the Shepherd’s narrative, while the second section will explore the vexed question of the role of gender in the pursuit of enlightenment according to the teaching of the Great Vehicle, underscoring the complementary roles that female and male figures come to play especially in the Nyingma tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. The last section of the paper will offer some comparative reflections, exploring the points of contact, as well as the irreducible differences between the role played by female wisdom figures in these two traditions. This comparison will make readers grounded in the Judeo-Christian tradition more fully aware of the particular theological and spiritual claims about gender and spiritual progress that are present—perhaps hidden in plain sight!—in the text of the *Shepherd*.

### **Hermas’s Quest**

Like a large proportion of ancient narratives, the Shepherd of Hermas depicts the main character on a quest to acquire some object.<sup>3</sup> This quest usually takes the form of a journey during which the hero has to overcome obstacles.<sup>4</sup> The hero also receives help from characters encountered on the journey. These may travel with the hero for some time and/or provide the hero with some means to overcome obstacles. After securing the object that prompted the quest, the hero returns home rich with experience, wisdom, and new friendships. Hermas, the main character is on a quest to acquire knowledge about his salvation. As many quest narratives, he will return home with more than he had expected when he started his journey.

Two primary helpers guide Hermas during his quest: the Lady and the Shepherd. The transition from the first helper to the second comes unannounced and is accordingly far from being

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<sup>2</sup> For the distinction between ultimate and conventional reality, see Paul Williams, *Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations*, 2nd ed., The Library of Religious Beliefs and Practices (New York: Routledge, 2009), 68–71, 76–9.

<sup>3</sup> In this essay, we consider *The Shepherd of Hermas* as a work that comprises the five Visions, twelve Mandates, and ten Similitudes. At an early stage, the work may have included only the initial four visions as would attest for instance Papyrus Bodmer 38 which contains the first three visions. Henne (18–21) has nevertheless showed that Clement of Alexandria and Origen cited from all three parts and that Tertullian cited from both the Visions and the Mandates. Manuscripts have either all three parts, only the Visions or the Mandates together with the Similitudes. This indicates that the actual work in three parts already circulated in Egypt and North Africa during the third century. See Philippe Henne, *L’unité du Pasteur d’Hermas. Tradition et rédaction*, Cahiers de la Revue Biblique 31 (Paris: Gabalda, 1992), 18–21.

<sup>4</sup> Here, we follow Greimas’ actantial scheme. See Algirdas Julien Greimas, *Sémantique structurale: recherche de méthode*, Langue et Langage (Paris: Larousse, 1966), 155–57. Greimas explains (ibid. 174–86) that his actantial scheme is essentially a simplification of a comparable scheme proposed earlier by Vladimir Propp. Greimas refers to the 1958 US translation of Propp’s work: *Morphology of the Folktale*, edited with an introduction by Svatava Pirkova-Jakobson, trans. Laurence Scott (Bloomington, IN: Research Center, Indiana University, 1958).

smooth. This section of the essay describes Hermas's relation with his two helpers. The Lady provides much help to Hermas in his quest, but the story eventually assigns him to a male master who will help him bring his quest to completion. The actual title of the work—*The Shepherd of Hermas*—may even indicate which one of the two helpers the tradition considers to be preeminent even if the Shepherd appears later in the story.

The beginning of the story may give the impression that Hermas, the former slave, will go on a quest for Rhoda, his previous owner. He realizes that her beauty and character make her desirable when he helps her out of the Tiber where she was bathing. This possibility is nevertheless quickly dismissed when she appears to him in a dream and accuses him of the sin of having evil desires toward her.<sup>5</sup> This oneiric encounter with Rhoda leaves Hermas in a state of shock and anxiety about his salvation. Without any mention of a time gap or a passage from the state of sleep to the state of being awake, Hermas meets an elderly woman who greets him by his name. She addresses Rhoda's accusation of evil desires in the dream as sinful but depicts him as being self-controlled, abstaining from evil desire, full of sincerity, and innocence. Her positive assessment of Hermas mitigates dream-Rhoda's accusation—as if Hermas's desire for Rhoda were a minor issue compared to his failure as a householder whose duty is to discipline his family.<sup>6</sup>

At the primary level, the object of Hermas's quest throughout the book is knowledge; initially knowledge of his sins, but soon after knowledge about repentance and salvation. Hermas proves to be relentless in his pursuit of knowledge. He keeps pressing his interlocutors with questions and is oblivious of the rebukes he receives when his thirst for knowledge is not immediately satisfied and when he fails to understand everything. Through his questioning of the Shepherd, his observation of the construction of the tower, and the various states of willow branches, he acquires knowledge about salvation and repentance. This type of knowledge may nevertheless not be the most significant gains of Hermas's quest.

At a secondary level, Hermas acquires self-control and cheerfulness during his quest. The issues of self-control appear early in the story and recur periodically. At their first encounter, even though the Lady describes Hermas as “self-controlled”—a cardinal male virtue—she also intimates Hermas to “man up.” This injunction indicates that Hermas has not reached the appropriate level of masculinity and hence, self-control. Hermas exhibits a broad emotional range during the story

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<sup>5</sup> Young considers the initial episode—Hermas's encounter with Rhoda, with its erotic overtone—to be a ‘bait and switch’ literary device. In that regard, it would simply function to capture the audience's attention before moving to a different topic. We consider this label to be partially true. If indeed the narrative moves to other considerations once the Lady enters the scene, a potentially comparable episode—from an erotic standpoint—returns toward the end of the book when Hermas spends the night with twelve young women depicted as being desirable (87.7–88.7). The contrast between Hermas's mindset in the former and the latter episode indicates how he has evolved under the direction of his teachers. See Steve Young, “Being a Man: The Pursuit of Manliness In *The Shepherd of Hermas*,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 2 (1994):241. Brox similarly refers to the latter scene when commenting on Hermas's encounter with Rhoda. Norbert Brox, *Der Hirt Des Hermas*, Kommentar zu Den Apostolischen Vätern 7 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991), 77.

<sup>6</sup> Young, “Being a Man,” 242–43, understands the reference to Hermas's household as a reference to a house church that Hermas—its leader—could not properly oversee. Although she initially prefers to read the term *oikos* literally, as designating a family, Osiek similarly entertains the possibility that it may function as a cipher for a church. See Carolyn Osiek, *Shepherd of Hermas. A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 49. In the present essay, we prefer to remain at the level of the story itself and therefore not to attempt to uncover the social reality that stands behind the story.

that comprises sadness, gloom, fear, confusion, shame, astonishment, wonder, longing, gladness, joy, and the impression of being young. The events, characters, and even locations placed on Hermas’s journey prompt these emotions. At the end of the story, this rich palette of emotional colors has given way to a monochromatic steady state of cheerfulness.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Lady: Hermas’s first helper and teacher**

At the opening of the book, Hermas is the knowledgeable character. He knows Rhoda’s name, her social status, says that that he has known her for several years, likely contemplates her naked—a type of knowledge that denotes intimacy—and helps her out of the river. Still, nothing indicates that Rhoda knows Hermas since she remains silent and merely serves as an object of desire. Hermas can only engage in a conversation with Rhoda as a character in a vision. This version of Rhoda seen in the vision proves to be far more knowledgeable than the one he had met by the river. Not only does she know his name, but she also knows his thoughts about her and confronts him on this, something that makes him anxious. Still, she is not the Rhoda that he met at the river.

The situation is reversed when Hermas meets the Lady for the first of their five encounters. She knows Hermas by name and mentions some traits of his personality even though nothing indicates that they have ever met. Hermas, therefore, finds himself in a position of ignorance. Hermas provides two traits of the Lady at this first encounter: she is dressed in a shining garment and holds a book in her hand (2.2) from which she will soon read (3.3). The narrative, therefore, describes the Lady as a knowledgeable person: she knows Hermas and is literate. She is accordingly apt to impart knowledge to Hermas. The instruction that she provides immediately proves to be challenging for Hermas. He confesses that, at the exception of the last words, he does not have the strength to remember what the Lady read because all the words were frightening and unbearable for a human being (3.3). Hermas’s low level of literacy also emphasizes the contrast between the Lady’s knowledge and his. When copying the Lady’s book, Hermas copies it letter by letter likely because he is not literate enough to quickly identify words present in these chains of characters.

Hermas’s dealings with the Lady give the impression to be generally pleasant: The Lady is cheerful and hopeful toward Hermas. She also takes the initiative to touch him on his breast before intimating the order to act manly (4.3). The tone of her teaching tends to be conversational, focuses on Hermas’s management of his family, the Church, and the proper conduct of its members. Hermas is eager to meet with her in visions and induces such visions through fasting and/or prayer (9.2; 22.3).

In spite of seeing the Lady in two visions, Hermas still ignores his teacher’s identity. He assumes that she is the Sybil until a young man instructs him in a dream that she is the Church (8.1). This element also illustrates the discrepancy between the Lady’s knowledge of Hermas and Hermas’s knowledge of the Lady.

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<sup>7</sup> In a recently published essay, Andrew Crislip explains how cheerfulness would have also served as an identity marker for the Christian community in Rome. See “The Shephard of Hermas and Early Christian Emotional Formation,” in *Papers Presented at the Seventeenth International Conference on Patristic Studies Held in Oxford 2015. Volume 9: Emotions*, Markus Vinzent ed., *Studia Patristica*, vol. 83 (Leuven: Peeters, 2017), 231–50.

Hermas makes progress under the direction of the Lady and even passes the test of the encounter with the wild beast (22.1–10) which proves that he can avoid being double-minded. The Lady, who now looks like a young bride, explains to Hermas the meaning of the wild beast (23.1–24.7). The Lady's appearance as a young bride makes one wonder how the relation between Hermas and the Lady could evolve. Hermas will, however, not see her again because he has been transferred to a new teacher, a male individual this time, whose pedagogical approach and program significantly differ from the Lady's.

### **The Shepherd: Hermas's second helper and teacher**

At the difference of Hermas's first encounter with the Lady that took place outdoor in an open space, Hermas's first encounter with the Shepherd happens indoor in his house. The opening moments of this initial acquaintance with the Shepherd are awkward. It is worth reproducing these lines to comprehend the uneasiness of that meeting.

He greeted me, and I greeted him in return.

He immediately sat next to me and said: "I have been sent from the most reverend angel to live with you for the rest of your life."

I thought that he had come to put me to the test, and I said to him, "Who are you? For I know the one to whom I have been entrusted."

He said to me, "Do you not recognize me?"

"No," I replied.

He said, "I am the shepherd to whom you have been entrusted."

While he was speaking his appearance changed, and I recognized him, since he was in fact the one to whom I had been entrusted. And I was suddenly thrown into confusion, seized with fear, and entirely broken up by grief, because I had given him such a wicked and foolish response.<sup>8</sup>

Since Hermas suspects that the intruder has come to tempt him, his answer to the Shepherd's statement about his commission to be with him implies that his allegiance is still to the Lady whom he knows. Hermas states his ignorance about the Shepherd with a definite "No" when asked whether he recognizes him. The Shepherd's self-identification as the one to whom Hermas has been entrusted begs the question of who has decided to entrust Hermas to the Shepherd? Whatever the Shepherd's answer would be to this next hypothetical question, Hermas could express further his lack of trust in the Shepherd. His sudden and unexpected recognition of the Shepherd, especially since the narrative has not prepared the audience for the Shepherd's appearance nor Hermas's transfer to his care, defuses this potential confrontation and leaves unanswered the question of the identity of the decision-maker behind Hermas's transfer to the Shepherd's care. Hermas's emotional meltdown before the Shepherd may also give the impression that the progress he made under the Lady's guidance about gaining greater self-control was illusory, and hence that he needs a better teacher. The dialogue also indicates that the Shepherd comes in the position of Hermas's caretaker with tenure: He will live with Hermas for the rest of his life. This statement dissipates any possibility that the Shepherd has received a short-term assignment and that Hermas will eventually return to the Lady's care.

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<sup>8</sup> *Shepherd of Hermas*, 25.1b–4 from Bart D. Ehrman, ed. and trans., *The Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 2, Loeb Classical Library 25 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

As she entered the narrative, the Lady was holding a book. It is not the case with the Shepherd. A book will nevertheless emerge from Hermas’s dealings with the Shepherd, a section of the story that is more than four times longer than the part that covers Hermas’s dealings with the Lady. Hermas will produce this book under the Shepherd’s dictation for his edification and repentance (25.5).

When they begin to unfold, the commandments that the Shepherd imparts sound like a pre-packaged collection of sayings about God and ethical behavior which governing principle is “one size fits all.” For the first two of the twelve commandments, the Shepherd lectures Hermas uninterrupted. Hermas soon disrupts the delivery of the third commandment with his weeping and expression of doubt about his salvation. From the fourth commandment until the end of the series, the Shepherd’s lecture gives way to an exchange of questions and answers because Hermas keeps interrupting the Shepherd with pressing personal questions on matters such as adultery (29.4) or the possibility of a second repentance (31.1) or because he simply wants the Shepherd to expand on what he is saying. This shift of pedagogical style results in a formula that resembles Hermas’s previous dealings with the Lady. The Shepherd willfully answers all Hermas’s questions and even personalizes his teaching to revisit issues which the Lady had previously discussed with Hermas, for instance, self-control (38) and double-mindedness (39).

While he was under the Lady’s guidance, Hermas’s capacity to exercise self-control was put to the test with the vision of the beast (22). At that moment, Hermas successfully withstood that trial that had come as a surprise. His subsequent emotional meltdown when meeting the Shepherd for the first time nonetheless indicated that Hermas could fail at controlling himself. The Shepherd sets a comparable test for Hermas at the end of his teaching cycle. This time, the trial features the twelve young women (87.5–88.8) that he had previously been observing at work (79.3–87.3) without having any interaction with them. When facing the beast, Hermas had to exercise self-control for a short moment when facing an object that conveyed terror. When left in the company of the twelve young women, Hermas has to exercise self-control during a whole night spent with women whose character and appearance he has been admiring for some time, not unlike Rhoda in the opening scene of the narrative. Hermas successfully withstands this second trial, especially as it recalls the opening scene of the narrative that features Rhoda, his former owner. His successful exercise of self-control indicates that his quest has reached its objective. The Shepherd’s guidance was, therefore, effective in guiding him in his journey. He can return home to be with his new friends for the rest of his life.

To conclude that section, one remarks that the narrative positively describes Hermas’s first helper, the Lady, as being knowledgeable about salvation and household management. She also prepares him to exercise self-control when he faces the beast successfully. Still, Hermas is not immune to lapses of self-control and needs to pursue his quest under the guidance of a better teacher, a male one—the Shepherd—whose superiority is conveyed by having Hermas spend more time with him, undergoing a standard educational program.

### **Gendered tensions in Buddhism**

We now introduce a discussion of the role of the feminine within the Buddhist tradition, starting with a broad overview of the role of gender in early Buddhist literature, moving on to the

Mahāyāna tradition and its Tibetan offshoot, and finally offering some examples from the Nyingma school of thought within Tibetan Buddhism. This trajectory will foreground the move from an ambiguous -or sometimes decisively negative- attitude towards the female gender in early Buddhism, to a more positive approach in the broader Mahāyāna rendition of the tradition, and finally to the surprisingly crucial role of female Buddhas and *bodhisattvas* in the broader tradition of Vajrayāna.

In an article on attitudes towards women and the feminine in early Buddhism, Alan Sponberg observes that scholars of Buddhism, both sympathetic and critical, “often are struck by the apparent ambivalence toward women and the feminine that one finds in Buddhist literature.”<sup>9</sup> Readers of early Christian literature find themselves on familiar territory when they encounter the overt misogyny of some early Buddhist texts, which begrudgingly acknowledge the acceptance of women into the *sangha*, but also present it as the cause of the *dharma*’s decline in the present age. According to Sponberg, this attitude reflected the broader unease of Indian society at a time when the social and religious shackles of the Vedic order were increasingly being questioned, and new religious movements embraced practitioners regardless of gender or caste.<sup>10</sup> What characterized Buddhism from its very origins however, was an attitude of soteriological inclusiveness; from its very inception, Buddhism affirmed that one’s gender or caste presented no obstacle to the achievement of liberation. In this perspective, women could become *arhats* or *bodhisattvas*, breaking though the cycle of death and rebirth. When comparing the parts of a chariot to the different teachings of the Buddhist path, the *Samyutta Nikāya* claims that “be it woman, or be it man for whom/Such chariot doth wait, by that same car/Into *nirvāna*’s presence shall they come”.<sup>11</sup> This does not mean that there is no difference at all between male and female practitioners; indeed, many Buddhists throughout history would find reasons to limit women’s access to various modes of meditational practice or speculative training; at the same time; the teaching of no-self (*anatman*) clearly indicated that individual practitioners lacked an ultimately fixed nature.

This tension between the tradition’s soteriological egalitarianism and the reality of a heavily gendered—and androcentric—society would characterize Buddhist communities—and traditional Buddhist societies—until the present day. The rigidly codified character of Theravada monasticism did allow women to be tonsured and enter religious life, but only within a heavily regulated structure where women monastics were subordinated to male authority and spiritual direction.<sup>12</sup> Within Mahāyāna monastic settings, the same phenomenon obtains, but the Madhyamaka teaching on the two truths<sup>13</sup> ensures that the difference between genders and their different modes of practice are cast as one of the manifestations of the difference between conventional and ultimate reality. In this perspective, a woman’s birth is something less conducive to enlightenment and is the result of karmic defilement, but at the same time, it is also the springboard for the pursuit of

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<sup>9</sup> Alan Sponberg, “Attitudes Towards Women and the Feminine in Early Buddhism,” in *Buddhism, Sexuality, and Gender*, ed. José Ignacio Cabezón (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992), 3.

<sup>10</sup> Sponberg, 4–5.

<sup>11</sup> *Samyutta Nikāya*, I, 5–6, in Bhikku Bodhi, trans., *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Samyutta Nikāya* (Somerville, MA.: Wisdom Publications, 1989).

<sup>12</sup> See Mohan Vijayaratna, *Buddhist Monastic Life According to the Texts of the Theravada Tradition*, trans. Claude Grangier and Steven Collins, with an introduction by Steven Collins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

<sup>13</sup> Madhyamaka distinguishes between the everyday conventional world based on the laws of cause and effect—a world which forms the basis for religious practice and without which enlightenment cannot be achieved—and the ultimate truth of emptiness. As Williams points out (77), these two truths mutually imply each other and indeed are one indivisible reality seen from two distinct perspectives.

enlightenment. According to the Mahāyāna redefinition of the third noble truth, all samsaric reality is already nirvanic, and therefore even women’s lowly condition is an expression of the Buddha’s all-encompassing compassion.<sup>14</sup>

The tradition of Vajrayāna Buddhism retains this kind of ambivalence towards women and their role in the context of practice. Indeed, the tradition’s great plurality of positions ensures that strongly negative attitudes towards the female gender co-exist with more optimistic positions that sometimes emphasize the unique soteriological import of women’s religious experience. The Gelug tradition that developed in the fifteenth-century based on the teachings of the monk and scholar Tsong kha pa (1357–1419) emphasized the centrality of philosophical training in monastic formation and promoted a vision of religious life that relegated nuns -and women in general- to a marginal position or subordinated position. The fact that after 1620 and the unification of the country under the rule of the Fifth Dalai Lama (1617–82), Tibet was effectively ruled by the Gelug monastic establishment ensured the institutionalization of these patriarchal attitudes, with only a low number of women—even in monastic circles—receiving anything beyond basic education.<sup>15</sup> This strongly monastic approach affirmed the centrality of sexual renunciation and envisaged women as largely a threat to male ascetic practice. Some Gelug manuals go back to the Tripitaka, retrieving highly charged language on the dangers of entertaining social relations with women: “monks, I see no other single form so enticing, so desirable, so intoxicating, so binding, so distracting, such a hindrance to winning the unsurpassed peace from effort... as a woman’s form [...] Verily, one may say of womanhood: it is wholly a snare of Mara”.<sup>16</sup>

Despite its extraordinary political and religious influence, however, the Gelug tradition never became wholly normative, allowing the continuation of alternative practices, most of whom were considerably more ancient than Gelug scholasticism. Alternative forms of Vajrayāna practice that drew on teachings from the Old Transmission—conventionally dated to the eighth and ninth century—blended meditational and ritual practices with the worship of divine and semi-divine figures from the pantheon of pre-Buddhist Tibetan deities. While the pre-Buddhist religion of Bon—a broadly animistic, totemic tradition—associated different locales with specific spirits and supernatural protectors, the Buddhist imagination would replace these figures with *bodhisattvas* or *dharma* protectors. The most important such figures were Chenrezig (*Wylie* Spyon dregs dzig) —believed to be incarnate in the person of the Dalai Lama—and his counterpart or sometimes female manifestation Tolma (*Wylie* Skrol ma), more often known by her Sanskrit name Tara.<sup>17</sup>

While gender differentiation does belong to conventional reality and thus is ultimately tangential to the pursuit or achievement of enlightenment, gender can also be construed as a locus of nirvanic illumination; in fact, those very characteristics of the female gender that certain ascetic

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<sup>14</sup>Williams, 75–6. Theravada Buddhism affirms an ontological distinction between *samsara* and *nirvāna*, while Mahāyāna affirms their identity. As such, the third noble truth, which teaches that cessation of suffering is possible, comes to have a very different meaning in these two traditions: in the former, the goal of spiritual practice is to leave *samsara* behind to enter into *nirvāna*, where in the latter, the goal is to rediscover the nirvanic character of *samsara*.

<sup>15</sup>Reginald A. Ray, *Secret of the Vajra World: The Tantric Buddhism of Tibet*, foreword by Tulku Thondup, The World of Tibetan Buddhism, vol. 2 (Boston: Shambala, 2002), 189–207.

<sup>16</sup>*Anguttara Nikāya* III, 67-8, in Bhikku Bodhi. *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: A Complete Translation of the Anguttara Nikāya* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2012).

<sup>17</sup>On the relationship between Bon religion and its appropriation by Tibetan Buddhism, see Reginald Ray, *Secret of the Vajra World*, 28–66.



and monastic currents tended to characterize as obstacles to the spiritual path now become vehicles of the Buddha's compassionate activity. On one hand, this could be interpreted as merely a retrieval of the original stance of soteriological inclusiveness that was mentioned above. On the other hand, certain tantric or visualization practices focusing on female protectors (*dākinīs*) or female tantric Buddhas actually emphasize the specific liberative potential of the female gender.<sup>18</sup>

The theoretical justification of this reassessment of the gender differential is closely associated with the theory of the Buddha nature (*tathāgatagarbha*), which the Tibetan tradition envisages as virtually co-extensive with the cosmos and as identical with the nirvanic character of reality.<sup>19</sup> If the Buddha nature is *nirvāna*, and *nirvāna* is *samsara*, that means that every aspect of our ordinary world, even those that clearly flow from negative karmic deposits or are colored by unskillful emotions, manifests the Buddha's intention to bring all sentient beings to ultimate liberation.<sup>20</sup> Echoes of the Indian tantric tradition are clear: where the Vedic tradition strongly underscored the impure character of alcohol, meat, human excrements, and menstrual blood, and the duty of high-caste Hindus to distance themselves from any contact with them, different tantric practices embraced a form of ritualized antinomianism, where all these substances would be consumed in complex rituals—often performed on charnel grounds—to harness their transformative power. In a similar way, the power of sexuality that is closely associated with the female gender comes to play an important role in this particular current of the Buddhist tradition—often in ways that are meant to obliquely criticize, or sometimes openly debunk, the claims of greater soteriological effectiveness made by the philosophical schools.

The Bon deities' interpretation as manifestations of the *tathāgatagarbha* also reflect the teaching of the Buddha bodies that—albeit in different renditions—is shared by all schools of Tibetan Buddhism. While the formless *dharmakāya* is co-extensive with the ultimate emptiness of the universe, the bodies of form (*rūpakāyas*) manifest the Buddha's enlightened activity in the contingent world we inhabit, making his presence accessible and tangible. At the same time, a distinction is drawn between ordinary *nirmanakāyas* (bodies of transformation) that indwell the everyday world we inhabit and the powerful *sambhogakāyas* (bodies of enjoyment) that are the bodies of all Buddhas, *bodhisattvas* and protectors who have an infinitely higher level of attainment than the vast majority of sentient beings, but condescend to interact with them to bring them on to the path to enlightenment. Within the different tantric currents of Vajrayāna Buddhism, female *bodhisattvas* and protectors usually manifest as radiant bodies of enjoyment, invested with supernatural powers that is deployed to help ordinary practitioners flee the clutches of *samsara*.<sup>21</sup>

In the wake of the renewed emphasis on monasticism accompanying the Gelug ascendancy of the seventeenth century, folk traditions emphasizing the liberative potential of the gender

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<sup>18</sup> For a contemporary example of this tradition, see for instance Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, *The new guide to Dakini Land: the highest yoga tantra practice of Buddha Vajrayogini* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Combria, England: Tharpa Publications, 2012).

<sup>19</sup> The doctrine of Buddha nature (*tathāgatagarbha*) in its oldest meaning appeared to indicate the belief that all sentient beings contained a Buddha (a Tathāgata) within themselves. Gradually this term comes to acquire a cosmological dimension, where everything that exists is believed to be a manifestation of the wisdom of the Buddha; see Williams, 104–6.

<sup>20</sup> Williams, 103–29.

<sup>21</sup> The literature on the Buddha bodies is immense. For an introduction, see Williams, 172–87. On the Nyingma tradition specifically, see R. Ray, *Indestructible Truth*, 103–30.

dialectic and specifically of female sexuality would acquire a subversive edge. During a *dharma* talk in Kathmandu, Nepal, in January 2012, a Nyingma lama recounted the following story:

...a Gelug *geshe* [someone with a vow of celibacy who had undergone extensive philosophical training] was traveling in the Kham region [which in modern times has become the center of the Nyingma lineage], and as there were no *gompas* nearby, had to spend the night in a tavern. During the night, a prostitute entered his room as he was preparing to go to sleep. When he saw her, she dropped her clothes, standing stark naked in front of him. The *geshe* had never seen a naked woman, and pointing at her vagina, he asked “What is that?” At that point, the woman’s countenance was transfigured into that of a *dakini* surrounded by flames, and with a thunderous voice, she said: “This is the gate from which all Buddhas and *bodhisattvas* have arisen.” At that point the *geshe*, who had spent his entire life studying philosophical treatises, but had not achieved liberation, was suddenly enlightened, and chose to abandon his monastery and embrace the practice of the Great Perfection [or Dzogchen, a teaching transmitted by the Nyingma lineages].<sup>22</sup>

This legend, with its clear anti-establishment overtones, clearly underscores the liberative power—and indeed, the nirvanic quality—of female sexuality in ways that would have been utterly unacceptable to the author of the *Anguttara Nikaya*. One should not think however that the more positive attitude towards women and sexuality that is found in non-Gelug contexts amounts merely to *risqué* anecdotes or stories. What characterizes this tradition—and actually ends up influencing other trends within Tibetan Buddhism—is the routine personification (and feminization) of the Buddha’s liberating wisdom—Prajñāpāramitā—that is the subject of the Mahāyāna Perfection of Wisdom literature.<sup>23</sup> While the mother of the historical Buddha did enjoy a moderate popularity in different locales and was the recipient of popular veneration, within this tradition Prajñāpāramitā, who was originally an impersonal concept, is iconically represented as a female figure who is the repository of all knowledge; as such, she is considered to be the Mother of all the Buddhas. In the same way as the various female deities of different Hindu traditions were often seen as distinct manifestations of Śakti, female *bodhisattvas* like Tara, no less than the various female *dharma* protectors associated with different monastic lineages, are associated with this female Prajñāpāramitā. Indeed, we are told that “the Buddhas in the world-systems in the ten directions/Bring to mind this perfection of wisdom as their mother./The Saviors of the world who were in the past, and also those that are [just now] in the ten directions,/Have issued from her, and so will the future ones be./ She is the one who shows this world for what it is, she is/the genitrix, the mother of the Buddhas.”<sup>24</sup>

The internal fluidity of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition—where it is not uncommon for individual practitioners to successively study under the tutelage of masters from a variety of lineages, or even to hold simultaneous positions in two distinctive lineages—ensures that elements of ascetic misogyny can coexist with outward devotion to female *bodhisattvas* and *dakinis*. It was not uncommon for Dalai Lamas and other high-ranking Gelug monastics to undertake extensive

<sup>22</sup> Talk attended by Thomas Cattoi at Rangjung Yeshe monastery, Kathmandu, January 2012. To the present day, folk stories and anecdotes such as this may circulate in different versions without a specific literary source.

<sup>23</sup> Paul Williams and Anthony Tribe, *Buddhist Thought: A Complete Introduction to the Indian Tradition* (London: Routledge, 2000), 131.

<sup>24</sup> *Prajñāpāramitāratnagūṇasamcayagāthā*, XII, 1–2, from Edward Conze, trans., *The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines and Its Verse Summary* (Bollingen, Calif.: Four Seasons Foundations, 1973), 31.

scholastic training with other male masters within their own tradition, while later in life—though sometimes simultaneously—studying tantric practices with a Nyingma master and establishing a regular devotion to Prajñāpāramitā. This *de facto* internal ecumenism, which only became more intense in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the development of the Ris med movement and the attempt to bridge the divide between all non-Gelug lineages, is made possible by the wide-spread acceptance of the Madhyamaka teaching of the two truths. According to this teaching, doctrinal divergences between different sects are merely conventional, and as such do not jeopardize a fundamental agreement about the ultimate nature and purpose of practice.<sup>25</sup> In the Tibetan diaspora, where different lineages find themselves obliged to co-operate as they work together of the preservation of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, but where the latter is also subject to a process of reassessment in light of its encounter with globalized modernity, Nyingma practices such as the Great Perfection and the veneration of figures such as Tara, have actually come to enjoy renewed popularity, not only among Tibetan practitioners, but also among Westerners searching for more devotional practices beyond the dry speculative reflections of Madhyamaka philosophers.<sup>26</sup>

One further aspect of the devotion to female *bodhisattvas* and protectors—albeit one that would require a far more extensive treatment than is possible in the ambit of this paper—is its association with the purification of one’s own inner emotions that is the initial step in the gradual trajectory towards enlightenment. In classical Theravada, where an ontological wedge is drawn between *samsara* and *nirvāna*, emotions are an obstacle to the achievement of radical detachment that characterizes enlightenment—in fact, they are the markers of one’s attachment to the samsaric realm. Mahāyāna’s assertion instead of the ultimate identity between the two ensures that the panoply of emotions that characterizes *samsara* comes to be regarded as a resource for one’s spiritual path, and actually a manifestation of the Buddha’s all-encompassing compassion. Spiritual practice is thus characterized by a consistent policing, rather than suppressing of one’s emotions, where lust is purified and transformed into compassion and love towards all sentient beings, anger is turned into hatred for injustice and other karmically unskillful behaviors, and pride in one’s achievement becomes pride of one’s identity with the Buddha nature.<sup>27</sup> Devotion to female *bodhisattvas*, who overcome the drawbacks of their gender to become powerful vehicles of the Buddha’s salvific activity, is thus a symbol and a catalyst for the emotional purification that seals one’s commitment to the spiritual path. At the same time, one must not forget that even the most ardent devotees of Tara will only advance towards *nirvāna* if they engage in intense meditative practices and extensive philosophical studies under the guidance of an (invariably male) master. As such, even the institutionalized antinomianism of devotion to female supernatural figures ultimately functions within a highly patriarchal system, where spiritual and religious authority resides with male lamas.

## **Conclusion**

Readers of Tibetan texts that encounter the *Shepherd of Hermas* for the first time may be unaware of the history of Christian misogyny, and most likely will also be unfamiliar with the early Christian tradition of a feminine wisdom or Sophia. At the same time, it is quite likely that these readers

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<sup>25</sup> Reginald Ray, *Indestructible Truth*, 207–27.

<sup>26</sup> Representatives of the Kagyud lineages based in Europe or North America have been particularly active in promoting deity yoga among Western Buddhists. See for instance the Rig Dzing Dharma Foundation in Albuquerque, New Mexico: (<http://www.rigdzindharma.org/deity-yoga-practice.html>).

<sup>27</sup> See HH Dalai Lama, *Heart of Mantra*, in Jeffrey Hopkins (trans.), *Deity Yoga* (Boston: Snow Lions, 1987).

would recognize in the narrative arc of the text an echo of their tradition’s ambivalent attitude towards the spiritual character and soteriological power of the feminine. The role of the Lady serves an analogous role to those of the female Buddhas and *bodhisattvas* that awaken practitioners from their complacent slumber and set them on the path of committed spiritual practice. In the second part of the story, the Shepherd is closer to the figure of the ascetic masters who play significant roles in the education and training of younger monks, especially in the Gelug tradition. The twelve female figures who play a secondary role in Hermas’s vision are not so easily typecast, though their auxiliary role evokes the role of the *dakinis* or attendants that lack a clearly defined identity, but appear in the retinue of more important supernatural figures.

Readers of early Christian literature will be familiar with the appropriation of sophiological discourse by theologians reflecting on the mystery of the incarnation. Wherever pre-Nicene Christologies tended towards a subordinationist configuration of the relationship between Father and Son, the tendency to view the latter as the embodiment of the Fathers’ plan for the cosmos made it easier to conceptualize him as an expression of the divine Wisdom that so majestically appeared in Prov 8:22–31. After the council of 328 affirmed the ontological equality between Father and Son, the normativity of Logos discourse—after the example of Athanasios’ *De Incarnatione*—would effectively displace the earlier identification of Christ with the divine Sophia.<sup>28</sup> Eventually, while Eastern Christianity would retain some liturgical references to Christ as Sophia—leaving aside the rather idiosyncratic sophiological synthesis of Sergei Bulgakov (1871–1944)<sup>29</sup>—Latin Christianity would largely relegate sophiological language to Mariology, ensuring the oblivion of its early Christological deployment.<sup>30</sup> As the *Shepherd of Hermas* comes from a period when the great Trinitarian and Christological questions are still open, and in fact the vast conceptual and terminological armory of later conciliar theology has yet to be cast, what we find in its pages is a narration of the individual spiritual trajectory that predates later Christocentric construals, and instead charts the growth of the protagonist as the upshot of an initial transformative relationship with a mode of incarnate wisdom that inaugurates an unexpected reconfiguration of Hermas’s own inner life. The Lady and the Shepherd are sophiological ciphers, but also markers of specific stages of spiritual development. The encounters with the female figure signal the beginning of his intellectual and emotional conversion, while the dialogues with its male counterpart constitute a more advanced level of transformation, where Hermas’s speculative and affective palette is brought in line with God’s demands and expectation. There is no atonement theology in the *Shepherd*; its Eastern alternative—deification—is yet in the future, but intimations of its coming can be seen in Hermas’s gradual transformation at the behest of his two spiritual tutors.

In the broader Mahāyāna tradition, no less than in the Vajrayāna schools that developed in Tibet, all different currents of thoughts shared a belief in the cosmic reach of the Buddha’s own nature (*tathāgatagarbha*) which coincides with *nirvāna* no less than its samsaric manifestations. This all-encompassing reality will both transcend the world of limitations in ultimate reality, and enter the world of form in conventional reality—though the latter is itself divided between a higher congeries of glorified bodies (*sambhogakāyas*) and a multitude of lower bodies (*nirmanakāyas*). It is not

<sup>28</sup> See Athanasios, *De Incarnatione*, PG 26: 1093–1169.

<sup>29</sup> See Sergei Bulgakov, *Sophia, the Wisdom of God: An Outline of Sophiology*, Library of Russian Philosophy (Herndon, VA: Lindisfarne Books, 1993).

<sup>30</sup> See for instance Matthias Joseph Scheeben’s nineteenth-century classic *Mariology*, trans. T.L. Geukers (St. Louis, MO: Herder, 1946).

difficult to see how the female Buddhas and *bodhisattvas* often belong to the *sambhogakāya* class, their exalted status as semi-divine beings serving as a convenient corrective to outweighs their more problematic gender. Monastic masters and teachers can be accommodated under the umbrella of the *nirmanakāya*—ordinary beings that nonetheless will lead practitioners to ultimate realization. In the end, all characters in the stories recounted above—even the Gelug monk and the prostitute/*dakini* that led him to embrace the Great Perfection—are mere expressions of the *tathāgatagarbha* that transcends all subjectivity.<sup>31</sup>

In the world of the *Shepherd of Hermas*, it is not possible to clearly apportion the different figures into distinct ontological categories. The different figures that Hermas encounters are more overtly functional to the stage of spiritual development that the protagonist has achieved at different moments in the stories. At the same time, it appears that they are expressions of a providential design where the female figure paves the way for the more advanced teaching of the *Shepherd*. In a hagiographic piece, the different characters would have distinct subjectivities and would not be regarded as prisms of an undifferentiated reality or insight. The *Shepherd's* more allegorical nature may however justify a reading where all figures are *de facto* sophiological epiphanies—manifestations of the divine wisdom in this fallen world, designed in such a way as to meet the recipient—Hermas—where the latter is in his life. A historian of Christian thought may even be tempted to view Hermas's trajectory as paradigmatic of early theology's shift from a sophiological to a more overtly logocentric Christological reflection.

Reading the *Shepherd* in light of Vajrayāna thought can then highlight unexpected points of contact between early Christianity and Tibetan Buddhism when it comes to the gendering of propaedeutic figures in works of literature charting the spiritual development of adherents of the two traditions. The subordination of initial female helpers to later male teachers simultaneously subverts and reaffirms traditional gender roles, as the female figures may display more extraordinary supernatural powers, but at the same time lack the power to bring this trajectory to conclusion. This approach would effectively become normative in the Christian tradition: ultimately, it was Bernard of Clairvaux (and not Beatrix) that prepared Dante for the divine vision; and even the Virgin Mary is only an intercessor mediating between humanity and her son.<sup>32</sup> In the Buddhist tradition, this subordination may be qualified by the belief that at the ultimate level all sentient beings are a manifestation of the all-encompassing Buddha nature. Within Christianity, instead, the assertion of our subjectivity's enduring character ensures that the gender hierarchy remains fixed, even at the eschatological level where we preserve our own gendered identity.

An encounter between these two traditions, of course, is not going to benefit Christian practitioners alone. If Tibetan Buddhists were to come across the text of the *Shepherd*, their reaction would most likely be colored by their familiarity with Vajrayāna's rich history of private revelations and encounters between spiritual masters and supernatural beings. Indeed, Tibetans would in no way be surprised by the appearance of female figures invested with extraordinary wisdom, or by reports of lengthy conversations on spiritual matters between a practitioner and an otherworldly guide. The Mahāyāna concept of skillful means implies that Tibetan practitioners could envisage the dialogues of the *Shepherd* as appropriate responses to the spiritual needs of the main character

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<sup>31</sup> For a discussion of the Buddha bodies and their relationship with the *tathāgatagarbha*, see Paul Williams, *Mahāyāna Buddhism*, 172–87.

<sup>32</sup> Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso*, Canto XXXII.

or of the author of the text. At the same time, the Tibetan tradition would view these figures as merely one set of manifestations of the Buddha nature that underlies the cosmos. As such, it would dismiss the tendency to absolutize their teachings as universally valid as a symptom of a lower stage of spiritual development— one where practitioners are unable to move from a personal relationship with incarnations of ultimate reality to an impersonal embrace of *nirvāna*.

This brief conversation between an early Christian text and a Buddhist tradition that is in all respect very remote from its cultural context and broader soteriological preoccupations has highlighted a number of surprising convergences in their respective understanding of gender, while also underscoring the uneasy coexistence in both traditions between an appreciation of the subversive power of female sexuality and the enduring affirmation of patriarchal normativity. At the same time, the dialectic of conventional and ultimate reality ensures that gender discourse in Tibetan Buddhism is always marked by a margin of fluidity, whereas the Christian vision—perhaps qualified by Paul’s claim that in Christ there is no male or female (Gal 3: 28)—invites us to look towards an eschatological horizon where gender boundaries are preserved, but also redeemed of all trace of conflict and strife.



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