The Hypostasis of the Archons, also known as the Nature or Reality of the Rulers, is an early Christian retelling of the Genesis creation story preserved in the Nag Hammadi codices. There are two clear sections to this text. The first is the reshaping of the Genesis creation narrative, and the second is Eleleth’s revelation to Norea. In this manner the Hypostasis of the Archons echoes many themes found in other Nag Hammadi texts. For example, the Apocryphon of John is among those Nag Hammadi sources that retell a similar creation myth, and Eleleth’s revelation includes familiar Nag Hammadi figures such as Yaldabaoth, Sophia, and Zoë, and the rape of Eve appears in other Nag Hammadi texts such as On The Origin of the World. However, what sets the Hypostasis of the Archons apart from these comparable narratives is the central role that sex and gender play in shaping the conflict between the archons and spiritual protagonists. In the retelling of this creation myth, the catalyst for human creation stems from the archons lust for the female spiritual principle whose image they see reflected on the surface of a body of water. From their desire for the female spiritual principle, the archons try to fashion her likeness out of dirt and subsequently create Adam. It is from Adam that Eve is formed, and upon seeing Eve the archons plot to rape her. From this assault Cain is born, although the moral

1 I am framing my discussion of this text as an early Christian source from an established reading of the text amongst Nag Hammadi scholars. However like many ancient sources, this text draws on ideas and thoughts that are not exclusively associated with early Christian communities (notably Jewish thought) and I recognize that labelling this text Christian is not neat, nor is it without debate. In order to draw out nuances of power and submission however, I have chosen to focus on this text as an early Christian source. In doing so I do not overlook the wealth of evidence of non-Christian traditions preserved in this ancient source, rather this paper looks to develop a new reading of the source. For more on this topic please see the introduction to the translation in Marvin Meyer, trans. “The Nature of the Rulers,” in The Nag Hammadi Scriptures, ed. Marvin Meyer (New York: HarperOne, 2007), 187-198.

2 The Hypostasis of the Archons is the fourth tractate of CG II. This copy is from the fourth century and preserved in Coptic, although most scholars date the origin of the text to the late second and early third centuries, where it was most likely composed in Greek. It is considered to reflect Sethian thought, one of the major forms of gnostic thought preserved in the Nag Hammadi codices.


4 It must be noted that the use of the word rape is not seamlessly transferable to discourses of sexual assault in the ancient world. Sexual availability, and by extension consent, were bound to the social status of the assaulted be they freeborn or slave. Slaves’ bodies were understood to be openly available to their masters complicating their ability to consent to any sexual demand. As consent is the axis upon which our current understanding of the rape turns, it is important to demarcate the limits of the term in this discussion since both free and slave born persons are discussed. For a longer discussion on this dynamic, see Jennifer Glancy, Corporeal Knowledge: Early Christian Bodies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 70-74.

5 As discussed in Anne McGuire, “Virginity and Subversion: Norea against the Powers in the Hypostasis of the Archons,” in Images of the Feminine
consequence of his character is not played out. Instead, the text marginalizes the conflict between Cain and Abel, and moves swiftly to the birth of Seth, but more importantly, Norea. In anticipated form, the archons see Norea and plan to rape her as they did Eve, but unlike Eve, Norea is able to thwart the archons’ attacks and receive the revelation of Eleleth that announces the salvific role of her offspring. So while the expected male characters are present in this retelling of the Genesis creation myth, it is the sexual aggression of the archons for the female characters that pushes the creation myth forward. In other words, male names are secondary references next to the female characters in this retelling of creation.

While this text centralizes its female characters, their presence is always framed by the archons’ sexual desire, or aggressive sexual pursuit. The characterization of Eve and Norea are especially defined by the archons’ rape/attempted rape of each. In this sense, female gender in this text is bound to the motif of aggressive sexuality; one does not stand independent of the other in this text. So, as the female protagonists in the Hypostasis of the Archons are vital to its theological agenda, so too is the motif of sexual aggression a central participant in the cosmic reality unfolding in the narrative. This paper looks to further explore this thematic connection in the text in light of the Roman system of corporeal punishment and entertainment. This was a system that feminized the conquered,6 sexually assaulted its slaves,7 and whose imperial ruler aligned himself with a mythic pantheon littered with narratives of heroes conceived by divine rape.8 In imperial Rome, sexual assault was a show of dominance, a method of social ridicule, a comedic tool, and a source of mass entertainment. By bringing these themes together, the Hypostasis of the Archons is playing on their social relationship as it was built into a system that demonstrated imperial power. Gender performance in this text is not a characteristic of a Spiritual Woman, or spiritual women, but rather is a synonym for the domestically conquered, socially ridiculed, and those generally dominated by Rome. In having a female protagonist skirt dominant, virile, sexual pursuers, the text creates a cosmic reality where the imperial system of power, built on similar methods of corporeal punishment, is overturned by those it seemingly dominates. By framing its cosmic conflict in gendered terms, the Hypostasis of the Archons draws on the established gendering of the Roman punitive system to disrupt, and critique its application of power.

Considering Gender in the Ancient World

According to Judith Butler, a postmodern philosopher and modern pioneer in gender theory, gender is not something that one has, rather it is something one does. It is a set of actions that only in performing them does one come to understand oneself as masculine or feminine. This is the foundation to Butler’s idea that gender is performative.9 In this sense, gender is not as a naturalized category inherited through biological forms, but instead is a set of “norms that endlessly compel us to participate in the practices corresponding to one gender or the other.”10 These actions are not performed at a level of consciousness, but are regulated

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6 Natalie Boymel Kampn, Family Fictions in Roman Art (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
9 For more on Butler’s understanding of gender as performance, see Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (New York: Routledge, 1999).
through bodily practices mandated by social conventions. Gender, then, is created by actions informed by social expectations.

With Butler’s turn in theorizing gender, contemporary scholars of antiquity have applied this understanding of gender as performance to ancient sources in order to develop our current understanding of the ancient social world. These studies have disrupted the presumed stability of ancient gender performance and demonstrated the dynamic reality of gender in the ancient world. By uncovering a variety of gender identities, and conceptualizing fluid gender frameworks in the ancient world, contemporary historians have returned to ancient sources to uncover instances of ancient gender slippage. One such example is the work by Elizabeth Castelli. In her essay “‘I Will Make Mary Male’: Pieties of the Body and Gender Transformation of Christian Women in Late Antiquity,” Castelli navigates the complexities of gender performance in the ancient world so as to examine instances where early Christian holy women transform into men and explores the function of gender slippage within these ancient texts. Through her case study of the early Christian martyr Perpetua, Castelli demonstrates that these moments of gender slippage (where Perpetua emulates masculine characteristics) function to both reaffirm the text’s naturalization of a male over female gender hierarchy all the while demonstrating the flexibility within that system given women’s ability to transition. She states, ‘Becoming male’ marks for these thinkers the transcendence of gendered difference, but it does so only by reinscribing the traditional gender hierarchies of male over female, masculine over feminine; the possibility that women can ‘become male,’ paradoxically however, also reveals the tenuousness and malleability of the naturalized categories of male and female. That feminine gender identity can be set aside in the process of spiritual advancement both reiterates the dominant understandings of gender differences (in the insistence that movement from female to male is a sign of development and progress, a movement from the lesser to the greater) and undercuts the dominant understandings of gender differences (in the recognition that they are not fixed).

What Castelli points to in her examination of these holy women is the complex set of meanings created through gender performance where instances of holy women becoming holy men are ancient moments where gender expectations are both affirmed and undercut. Butler points to similar realities concerning gender slippage in her 2004 work *Undoing Gender* where she stresses that these moments of rupture emphasize the malleable and fluid nature of gender. What both of these discussions point to are the naturalized frameworks of expected gender performances and the reality that these expected performances are ruptured; there is the expectation, and the schism from that expectation. The analysis in this article is informed by both layers of this understanding of gender. It considers the naturalized framework from which the *Hypostasis of the Archons* is working, identifying it as a top-down gender model informed and informing of political roles and imperial institutions where the male dominates, and the

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11 Here gender slippage is used to refer to seemingly paradoxical moments when a person’s gender presentation includes characteristics typically found in the opposite gender.


13 Castelli, “‘I Will Make Mary Male’”, 33.

female is deficient. It also considers the gaps, and spaces in the expectations of this top-down gender performance to better understand how the text established its political critique. In the words of Karen King when considering a gender analysis of early Christian sources (and arguably, any ancient source) one must ask, “how was gender organized and performed in early Christian literature in ways that show us how Christians were both presupposing widespread ancient notions of gender and challenging them?”

As demonstrated in the following section, the gender performance employed in the Hypostasis of the Archons is reimagining political space by working out of the an established understanding of Roman gender relations. By playing on those expectations, the text ultimately makes a farce of the system. In this view, the text is not making a critique about ancient misogynistic practices, but instead making a comment on its contemporary political situation.

**Gender and Subversion in the Hypostasis of the Archons**

Works by both Karen King and Anne McGuire have established a gender analysis of the Hypostasis of the Archons, which argue in their own way, that the text’s application of gender and subversion are intended critiques of the imperial dominance that permeated the ancient world. Karen King, in her article “Ridicule and Rape; Rule and Rebellion,” takes up the issue of gender and rape. In this article, she explains the text’s application of gender difference through a social lens where the categories of masculine and feminine came to code all aspects of ancient life. For example, strength, courage, instruction, and wealth were all coded masculine, whereas obedience, nurture, shyness, and weakness were coded feminine. The gender division of these character traits not only appeared to assign social roles based on nature (women to child rearing, for example), but when these characteristics appeared in the opposite sex they suggested something abnormal, unnatural, and therefore, false and untrustworthy. So while the text affirms ancient gender roles according to King, it also uses this division to comment on the dominant powers in the social world by feminizing their masculine station and coding their power as flawed. The archons, with their hyper-aggressive sexuality, which is ancient social code for masculine, are made the fool when despite their sexual dominance both Eve and Norea’s spirituality are unhindered by their advances. This narrative power play is not a critique of male dominance over females, but instead a social comment on the influence of ruling forces over those they seem to dominate. King says,

This image is an extremely straightforward indication of the text’s view of totalitarian political power. The title of the text—the Nature of the Archons—further emphasizes that exposing the nature of absolute power is the central topic of the text. The text’s covert social criticism is aimed directly at (Roman) totalitarianism, not patriarchy, though patriarchy does provide the text’s model for the misuse of power.

King argues then that the use of gender play in this narrative is a critique of Roman power, and not a comment on gendered stations and should be read as such.

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17 King, “Ridicule and Rape; Rule and Rebellion,” 5.

18 King, “Ridicule and Rape; Rule and Rebellion,” 22.
Anne McGuire’s gender analysis of Hypostasis of the Archons takes into account the feminization of spiritual power in the text, and how the role of Norea as “the virgin the forces did not defile” supports the text’s uncovering of false, worldly domination in the archons. In the article “Virginity and Subversion: Norea Against the Powers in the Hypostasis of the Archons,” McGuire states, “I want to suggest that the meaning and power of gender imagery in the Hypostasis of the Archons resides in its projection of an image of subversion...[and] that the unmasking of illegitimate male domination by female figures of spiritual power proved to be a powerful vehicle for the expression of the gnostic revolt”.  

According to McGuire, the power subversion at play in this text, through its organization of gendered characters, served as a potent trope for gnostic communities to express their challenge to worldly powers. Gendering here becomes a narrative choice that works to emphasize the duplicitous nature of worldly rulers in light of the truly powerful spiritual reality. In contrasting the feminine spiritual powers over the masculine worldly ones, the Hypostasis of the Archons works to bring this dominating false reality to the fore.

The following analysis builds from both of these studies and looks to add to the discussion of gender and the subversion of worldly powers in the Hypostasis of the Archons. By exploring the text’s understanding of ancient “rape culture” as it reflected and reinforced imperial domination, this analysis suggests that the power subversion emphasized in the narrative by its gender play was informed by the imperial system of corporeal punishment, and entertainment. This paper argues that the sexual aggression in the text is not merely a vehicle that emphasizes ancient gender difference, but instead were acts grounded in a social reality of sex, gender, and power.

Eve, Daphne, and Arena Recreations
The strongest demonstration of sexual aggression and assault by the archons is focused around their rape of Eve. In the text, upon seeing Eve speaking with Adam, the archons proceed to rape her. In order to escape from their advances the spiritual Eve separates from her fleshy self and becomes a tree. So while the archons continue to attack the fleshy Eve, her spiritual self is beyond their reach. The text reads,

The authorities approached their Adam. When they saw his female partner speaking with him, they became aroused and lusted after her. They said to each other, “Come, let’s ejaculate our semen in her,” and they chased her. But she laughed at them because of their foolishness and blindness. In their grasp she turned into a tree, and when she left for them a shadow of herself that looked like her, they defiled it sexually. They defiled the seal of her voice, and so they convicted themselves through the form they had shaped in their own image.

This scene confirms that while the assault was real and explicit, it was not an attack on the spiritual nature of Eve. Instead, the archons ended up assaulting the ensouled image of humanity that they themselves had created. So despite the archons desperate attacks, the most potent and desirable aspect of Eve, her spiritual self, escapes. In this sense the text explains that the rash and foolish exploits of the archons, while threatening, did not impact spiritual reality. Instead their rule only influenced the corporeal, fleshy world.

This narrative of Eve’s rape by the archons carries with it allusions ancient readers would have associated with the myth of Apollo and Daphne as told in Ovid’s Metamorphoses. In

this narrative, Apollo insatiably lusts after Daphne, a water nymph, who desperately tries to fend him off in order to preserve her chastity. In order to successfully avoid Apollo’s advances, Daphne turns into a laurel tree.22 What is most interesting about this allusion in light of this analysis is not the peculiar characterization of two ancient women’s escape from would-be sexual attacks, but the braiding together of Christian and imperial narratives in a text preoccupied with political subversion.

As examined above in the work of King and McGuire, the Hypostasis of the Archons is a text primarily concerned with the subversion of worldly powers, so it seems peculiar that within it, there would be allusions to narratives of the mythic histories of the state. There are two possible readings of this connection in light of the text’s emphasis on the fictitious nature of worldly powers. The first is that the Hypostasis of the Archons draws on the myth as a possible insult to the station of the emperor, the head of the Roman dominion. The narrative of Apollo and Daphne can be read as a farce on the first emperor who was especially fond of the deity Apollo. Augustus is said to have had a “particular interest in reviving the worship of Apollo along with other elements of Greek culture.”23 Scholars read this portrayal of Apollo in his lust for Daphne as an inflammatory jab at the emperor by portraying his god of choice as a disorderly deity in heat. These characteristics are, of course, the exact opposite of those Apollo exemplified. As the god of ancient Athens, he was the epitome of rationality, good health, and bodily discipline. Apollo was the ancient man par excellence.24 In this sense, the irrational lust by Apollo for Daphne becomes a satirical comment on the supreme head of Rome, and of course, this farce on the imperial office heightens the critique of worldly powers made in the Hypostasis of the Archons.

A second possible reading of the allusion made between Eve and Daphne rests in the Roman arena. As Sheila Briggs explains in her examination of the technology of the amphitheater and the construction of early Christian moral imagination, the Roman arena was a locale where state justice and mass entertainment collided. Judicial punishment surfaced in the arena as a way to assuage the masses through gross spectacles where slaves and criminals would fight to the death with gladiators and wild animals. The public death of these criminals in the arena became an opportunity for dramatic reenactments of mythic legends of the Roman pantheon. As Briggs writes,

Capital punishment became a way to recruit gladiators to satisfy the insatiable public appetite for blood in the arena. Carrying out executions in the amphitheater served that desire and radically changed the way they were conducted. The critical moment came in the reign of Nero, when he decided to combine executions with theatrical displays. Condemnation to the beasts became increasingly common. The executions remaining distinct from the hunts in the program, but the use of wild animals and machinery of the amphitheater allowed the emperors to turn executions into gruesome reenactments of myths and legends.25

As the technology of the amphitheater developed, it shaped the possible narratives for state executions where the deaths of criminals served to recreate the mythic narrative of the state. So not only was a criminal’s execution a demonstration of state power, but the staged

22 Karen King takes up a further examination of the connection between Eve and Daphne in “Ridicule and Rape; Rule and Rebellion,” 12-15.
23 Harris and Platzer, Classical Mythology, 958.
24 Harris and Platzer, Classical Mythology, 230.
history of the pantheon worked at a secondary level to affirm the influence of the state through its claimed history.

Christians were certainly among the criminals who were put to death in this fashion as odes to Roman gods. In the third century martyrlogy, *The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicity*, the group of Christians martyred in the arena were initially dressed in garbs of priests and priestesses of Roman deities. As the text records the martyrs were given these garbs to put on as they entered the arena. The narrator states, “they were led up to the gates and the men were forced to put on the robes of priests of Saturn, the women the dress of the priestesses of Ceres. But the noble Perpetua strenuously resisted this to the end.”

26 Perpetua, as the text’s heroine, refused to die in the garment of a priestess given that she was being put to death for refusing to recognize Roman religious tradi-tions, and as the text tells us, Perpetua’s protest won. Even in light of her objection, this martyrdom harbours evidence for the theatrical style of execution described by Briggs. In the arena Christian bodies were forced to take on the appearance of Roman gods and symbols of the imperial cult for the purpose of execution. It has been established by many scholars of ancient Christianity, such as Brent Shaw, that through the willful act of martyrdom, early Christians used the performance of imperial punishment to subvert its social expectations, and overturn the power and authority that ultimately put them to death. The act of dying in the arena, for early Christians, was an act of defiance to worldly powers, and an affirmation of their religious reality. It is a potent demonstration of the dynamic intersection of religious identity and political power in the ancient world. This subversive comment on worldly powers is similar to the *Hypostasis of the Archons* in its affiliation with Roman deities; both Eve and Perpetua find themselves affirming their religious worldview while alluding to Roman deities, disrupting imperial power. It is possible then to read these radical acts as a sort of double social comment, at once creating a new religious identity while making a farce of Rome’s supreme beings in their escape from Roman power in death.

The characterization of spiritual Eve’s great escape from the lusting archons is layered in possible readings in its association with Daphne and her transformation into a tree. Above I have offered two possible readings of this connection as it relates to power and subversion given the objective of this Nag Hammadi source. The theme of subversion in the *Hypostasis of the Archons* is fortified by its association with the Daphne myth through the emperor’s idolization of Apollo, and through the recreation of like myths in the arena by gladiators, prostitutes, criminals, and Christians. While it is impossible to argue for the author’s intent to draw on these associations, it is productive to draw out these allusions as they were a part of the framework of power and domination in the ancient world. Given that the *Hypostasis of the Archons* is a text by its very name looking to disrupt the nature of worldly powers, these Roman associations should be read as such.

**Rape, Entertainment, and Female Modesty in Imperial Rome**

After rejecting the garbs of priests and priestesses, Perpetua and Felicity are thrown naked into the arena, only to be returned and dressed in loose clothing. Their naked bodies are rejected from the gaze of the onlookers, and returned only when modestly dressed. The martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicity, and the *Hypostasis of the Archons* are not the only early


Christian texts where the sexually objectified female body finds itself in front of Roman powers and onlookers. The proto-martyr Thecla, in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, through her rejection of marriage and the Roman family system, finds herself thrown to the beasts in the arena. Being stripped of her clothes and baptizing herself in a pool of vicious seals, Thecla is miraculously saved from death. Not only is her life saved, but the miracle likewise preserves her modesty by sending a cloud to cover her naked body from the eyes of the crowd.  

In the way that spiritual Eve escapes the archons rape by leaving only her fleshy self, and Perpetua while rejecting the clothes of the religious cult still manages to die modestly dressed, Thecla manages to preserve the uncompromised nature of her feminine body through an opaque cloud. What these texts speak to collectively is not just the desire to preserve a woman’s sexual modesty, but the threat that Roman power posed to their gendered bodies.  

While the arena was notorious for its gruesome fights between male gladiators, and its executions by wild animals, women also played important roles in these staged fights. According to Sheila Briggs, women took part in the gladiatorial fights, and their gendered bodies brought with them the aspect sexual titillation. By adding female bodies to these already carnally charged battles, sexual violence became an expected part of the show. In this sense, these female performers were equated with the social status of prostitutes as both categories of women used their bodies for public recreation. These shows thrived on debasing the female sex. In the recreation of Roman myths mentioned in the previous section, no perversion was off limits. For example, there are records of the myth of Pasiphae mating with a bull having been reenacted in the arena. Viable female gladiators and slaves in the amphitheatre allowed for the possibility of the most deviant demonstrations of death. Bestiality, for example, was not out of moral bounds in these spectacles.  

Moral concerns do appear in recollections of these events, but not as it concerns the deviant women and her sexual perversion. Instead, morality surfaces when individuals of the elite find themselves caught up in these transgressions. For example the work of Apuleius which recounts a fictitious story of a high ranking male citizen turned into an ass who was put into the arena with a female serial killer as part of her dramatic execution, shows strong concern for the elite male’s predicament, but little sympathy for the female who is put to death in the most disgraceful manner. What narratives like Apuleius’s demonstrate, is that the spectators of these events were not concerned with the debasement of their human entertainment, but wanted to see their
expectations of social class and nobility protected. Briggs explains:

The reputation of women performers as sex workers was not an ancient version of a contemporary celebrity scandal. Entertainment in the Greco-Roman society was the public display of the social hierarchy: there were those who paid for the entertainment, those who watched the entertainment, and those who were the entertainment. The elite held civic offices that included the honor and financial obligation of putting on public shows. The public display of the elite’s wealth and nobility needed a foil the social, and often sexual, degradation of the entertainer supplied it. The sexual availability of the female entertainer served to contrast her dishonor with the chastity of the honorable citizen’s wives and daughters.\(^{34}\)

The women’s bodies that took part in the Roman spectacle worked to reinforce the social hierarchy by contrasting their abhorrent sexuality with the virtuous women of the aristocracy. These shows of women did not just serve entertainment purposes, but they also acted to enforce the status quo of the elite. In doing so, these displays ensured the stability of the emperor and the stations of power which supported him.

Returning to Thecla, Perpetua, and Eve, all of these women found themselves and their sexuality under the guise of the ruling power, but in each instance, these women were spared the indignity typical of women under public watch. Spiritual Eve transformed into a tree leaving her fleshy self subject to the lustful archons in an act of spiritual preservation; Perpetua’s negotiations resulted in modest robes for both her and Felicity during their execution; and a strategic cloud found its way to Thecla’s body at the moment she would have been displayed to all those watching. All of these women, in ways that would not compromise their virtue, manage to skirt the system of power that would demoralized their beings through the debasement of their bodies. In avoiding this discrimination these women not only preserved their virtue, but disrupted Roman expectations and its system of power.

**Phallic Satire, Rape, and Reversal**

While the previous two sections have grounded themselves in discussions of Roman punishment and power as it was manifest in the amphitheatre, a space where early Christians defined much of their emerging identities, at its core the *Hypostasis of the Archons* is a satirical and comedic text.\(^{35}\) Its rebellion against worldly powers is created through a farce, given that the powers the text looks to subvert are characterized as completely foolish and absurd. The archons embody the exact reversal of characteristics expected in great rulers. For example, in a moment of passion the archons attempt to recreate the image of Incorruptibility\(^{36}\) by making Adam. However, their creation lays on the ground motionless for days until the Spirit descends onto the mud man. The archons, despite having already claimed their superiority over the entire reality, are clueless in their creation and ignorant of the power of spiritual animation.\(^{37}\) In the scene of Eve’s rape, the spiritual Eve laughs\(^{38}\) at the lusting archons despite their sexual dominance over her fleshy self because of their “foolishness and blindness” to the fact they are defiling a mere “shadow” of

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\(^{34}\) Briggs, “Gender, Slavery, and Technology,” 162.

\(^{35}\) King, “Ridicule and Rape,” 10.

\(^{36}\) *Incorruptibility* is another name for the female spiritual principle in this literature. *Light* is also another possible reference to this spiritual quality in the *Hypostasis of the Archons*.


\(^{38}\) The trope of laughter is well established among other Nag Hammadi sources. For an introduction to this use of laughter, see Ingvild Saelid Gilhus, *Laughing Gods, Weeping Virgins: Laughter in the History of Religion* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 74-81.
what they desired. In a similar sense, the archons are not able to exert their force over the virgin Norea who instead of submitting to their advances names the archons for what they are: “the rulers of darkness.” As a group of dominant men, they cannot even tame a young girl into submission. In all of these scenarios the archons present an empty power, one that when contrasted with the spiritual power of the world above, is void of any veritable influence, a fact to which the archons remain oblivious.

In their inability to conquer the female characters, the archons become “caricatures of ideal masculinity.” Their hyper sexuality, and uncontrollable lust characterize them as abnormal, and unnatural men given that in this text’s gender framework the female is naturally subservient to the male and they are unable to achieve this gendered dynamic. So not only are they ignorant of the true power at play in their world, they also fail at simple top-down gender domination.

As explored in the previous two sections, the system of imperial crime and punishment was fused with demonstrations of entertainment. This style of performance relied heavily on shows of gruesome carnal transgressions, such as disembowelments and sexual violence. The arena was not the only form of Roman entertainment where the threat of sexual assault loomed large as a tool that reinforced Roman expectations of power. As Amy Richlin explains in her book The Garden of Priapus, Roman satire worked through a model of a dominant male sexual assailant. Richlin refers to this model as the Priapus model. She explains that this Priapus figure stands at the centre of all Roman sexual humour. She states:

The general stance of this figure is that of the threatening male. He is anxious to defend himself by adducing his strength, virility and all traits that are considered normal—and this is the appeal of the joke teller to his audience, as if both are confirming and checking with each other that they are all right, despite the existence of abnormalities in other people. Hence the central persona or protagonist or narrator is a strong male of extreme virility…This figure is active rather than passive and does not always restrict himself to foul descriptions of his victims but sometimes threatens them with punishment, usually by exposure or rape.

In this model of ancient humour, the scale of normality is a sexually potent male who threatens social deviants with rape. In this humorous dynamic, the virile male establishes the boundaries of normal and abnormal through his heightened masculinity. So while the satire plays with social abnormalities, its central figure maintains the status quo in respect to

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41 King, “Ridicule and Rape; Rule and Rebellion,” 9.
42 King draws on images of half-man/ half-beast in her discussion of the archons hyper sexuality. She speaks of images of satyrs, for example, and their characterization as sexual fiends. An interesting aside that cannot be followed through here is the association of the archons sexuality with animal-like qualities. Ruth Padel notes that prostitutes were associated with panthers, and lionesses: Ruth Padel, “Women: Model for Possession by Greek Daemons,” in Images of Women in Antiquity, ed. Averil Cameron and Amelie Kurt (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993), 5. A further consideration of animal nature, human sexuality, and social debasement inside of this text would be interesting given the discussion in this paper of sexual assault in the arena and prostitutes.

gender through his masculine sexual dominance. Roman social expectations are maintained.

This model is oddly similar to that of the archons in the *Hypostasis of the Archons* who are at once virile, and believe themselves to be sexually dominant. Unlike the Priapus model, however, the archons only believe themselves to be the dominant force in the text. They are completely unaware that their attack is flaccid. The archons are the Priapus figure gone wrong. Their masculinity is heightened to the point that they no longer control their virile nature and are perpetually clueless to the actual source of power in the text. Instead of the supreme masculinity Richlin describes in the Priapus model, the archons are absurd and out of control. They exemplify the exact opposite set of virtues expected in a Roman man.

There is a second reversal on the ancient satirical form in the *Hypostasis of the Archons* and it is in the role of the audience. The audience of a Roman satire is expected to see themselves in the role of the Priapus figure, or at least associate with it. As the Priapus figure enforces the social standard, so to does the audience in their desire to be included in the norm. In the *Hypostasis of the Archons*, however, the reader is expected to relate to the female characters, to the women performing the sexual subversion against the “virile” and “masculine” archons. The reader is expected to participate in the text’s rebellion through their association with Eve, Norea, and the female spiritual principle. As the audience of a Roman satire is expected to participate in reinforcing Roman social standards, the readers of the *Hypostasis of the Archons* are likewise participants in the text’s rebellious objective. The *Hypostasis of the Archons* is not only a play on the Roman worldly rulers through its application of gender and punitive subversion, it is also a play on Roman expectations of humour. It was a humour that grounded itself in a dominant male attacker, whose phallus was the ultimate weapon of social enforcement, and it is this phallus that the *Hypostasis of the Archons*, through its satirical comment on worldly powers, demonstrates is impotent.

**Conclusion**

The *Hypostasis of the Archons* is a retelling of the Genesis creation myth preserved within the Nag Hammadi codices. While this retelling does not stand-alone among these texts, its centralization of female characters does make this particular retelling unique. The above analysis chose to focus on the gendered aspect of the text in order to highlight ways in which ancient texts relied on systems of gender to create meaning and shape worldviews. In this case, the narrative challenges social expectations of gender when the female characters manage to skirt the sexual attack of the archons, disrupting the reader’s expectation of female submission to male sexual dominance. In reading this instance of gender slippage, when the feminine deflects the masculine in a sexual encounter, this analysis is informed by an understanding of gender as a performance. Performance, in this context, means that gender identity is established through a regulated set of repeated actions, instead of biological prescriptions. By approaching gender as a set of actions instead of a biological fixture, it is possible to consider dissonance within gender performances and consider its meanings. In this case, the split from expected gender roles in the text is a political comment about worldly powers. A comment that frames the text’s worldview in subversion and rebellion against said powers.

By framing this analysis with the work of both Karen King and Anne McGuire, this article has been able to further develop the understanding of rebellion and subversion in the text by demonstrating its affiliation with the imperial system of power and dominance. Tracing the social framework associated with ancient rape culture and sexual assault, this

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analysis has demonstrated that the depiction of subversion in the *Hypostasis of the Archons* is informed by the Roman systems of punishment and entertainment. Whether these acts of subversion draw on the mythic past of the state, the Roman spectacle, or the genre of ancient humour, by following the theme of sexual assault we see how rape, and explicit sexual violence functioned in imperial Rome to re-establish the status quo of power and dominance. Rape and sexual assault played a vital role in assuring the framework of the Roman social hierarchy where the authority of the state was bolstered through a masculine display of sexual dominance in a variety of imperial venues. By contrasting the social role of sexual aggression with its appearance in the *Hypostasis of the Archons*, this theme emerges from the text as a characteristic of the overall narrative of subversion and rebellion. The motif of sexual aggression directs the reader to think of imperial systems that employ similar images and acts of sexual violence to ultimately prove the empty power inscribed in those systems. Both the sexual violation of material Eve by the lusting archons and the escape of Norea from their aggressive pursuits overturn the social expectation of male dominance invested in Roman institutions. The application of gender difference in this text is not concerned with the spiritual status of women, but rather is interested in making a social comment on ruling powers. Similarly, the theme of sexual assault in the *Hypostasis of the Archons* is not a comment on misogynist, sexual violations, but instead is concerned with overturning social order and imperial dominance.

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