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From the Womb to the Cosmos: A Feminist Investigation into Porphyry's Interpretation of the Cave of the Nymphs

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Abstract

Porphyry wrote an interpretation of a passage from the *Odyssey* under the title *On the Cave of the Nymphs*; this passage talks about a cave sacred to the water nymphs, which has two gates. Inside the cave, there are stone amphoras where bees store honey; stone looms where sea-purple clothes are woven, and a spring from where water flows ceaselessly. Porphyry interpreted this cave as a symbol of the cosmos; however, caves represent the womb of a goddess in the matriarchal tradition. In this paper, I aim to show how patriarchal transition takes place in Porphyry's interpretation of seeing caves as a symbol of the cosmos. From a philosophical perspective, I will also show that Porphyry attributes to the noetic principle a qualification which puts matter into form, while he sees matter as the source of ignorance, an attitude that is compatible to the feminist critique of reason in which rationality is associated with masculinity rather than femininity.

Porphyry interpreted the following passage from Homer's *Odyssey* about the cave of the Nymphs:

and at the head of the harbor is a slender-leaved olive
and near by it a lovely and murky cave
sacred to the nymphs called Naiads.
Within are kraters and amphoras
of stone, where bees lay up stores of honey.
Inside, too, are massive stone looms and there the nymphs
weave sea-purple cloth, a wonder to see.
The water flows unceasingly. The cave has two gates,
the one from the north, a path for men to descend,
while the other, toward the south, is divine. Men do not
enter by this one, but it is rather a path for immortals.¹

According to the Neoplatonist Porphyry, the ancients made caves sacred to the cosmos, which is likened to Plato's analogy where caves represent the cosmos—but there they

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imprison souls. In Plato's *Timaeus*, the cosmos is likened to a child since it comprises the unformed matter (mother) and forms (father), which means the cosmos is a formed matter. From his *Timaeus*:

For the moment, we need to keep in mind three types of things: that which comes to be, that in which it comes to be, and that after which the thing coming to be is modeled, and which is the source of its coming to be. It is in fact appropriate to compare the receiving thing to a mother, the source to a father, and the nature between them to their offspring. (Plato 1997a, 1253, 50d)

In the above passage, *that in which it comes to be*, or the receiving thing which receives forms, is the unformed matter and is likened to a mother; *that after which the thing coming to be is modeled, and which is the source of its coming to be* is the world of forms and is likened to a father. As to the sensible cosmos, it is *the thing which comes to be*, and it is likened to the offspring. I refer to the above passage from Plato's *Timaeus* to illustrate the similarity in Plato's and Porphyry's conceptions of the sensible cosmos, which shares the characteristics of both (unformed) matter and the noetic universe (the world of forms).²

The cosmology and metaphysics of Plato relate the immutable forms to reason and the mutable material world with the senses. Matter, which Plato describes as mother, is a changeable thing, so it can take any form given to it by the noetic universe, that is, the world of forms. Relating the world of forms with masculinity (father) and matter with femininity (mother) can also be seen in his *Theaetetus*, since Plato makes Socrates say, "my art of midwifery ... differs as much by the fact that it midwives men and not women as by the fact that it examines their souls in giving birth and not their bodies" (Plato 2006, I. 13, 150b). As seen, the art of midwifery of Socrates, namely the Socratic Dialectic, only midwives men, which means it only works on men, which means only men can use the Socratic Dialectic. Consequently, the world of masculine forms—I say masculine because it is likened to a father by Plato—can only be grasped by men because only men can practice the Socratic Dialectic.³

Plato was not the only philosopher who developed such a cosmology and metaphysics. Parmenides conceived Being as immutable and associated it with reason, while he attributed the senses and change to the world of appearances. For him, the world of appearances is an illusion created by our senses. Parmenides' rejection of mutability in nature is seen by Domenico A. Conci as ancient matricide in philosophy (Conci 1989), and Adriana Cavarero says she is convinced by Conci's claim (Cavarero 1995, 123). This concept of ancient matricide (ancient murder or original matricide) was first asserted by Luce Irigaray, who says, "our society and our culture operate on the basis of an original matricide" (Irigaray 1993, 11). For Irigaray, this murder can first be seen in the killing of Queen Clytemnestra by her son Orestes. In philosophy, the concept of ancient matricide is to reject or underestimate change in the material world; and by this refusal or underestimation, a philosopher denies his mother because he denies the world into which he was born; instead, a philosopher should seek to reach the unchangeable intelligible realm through reason and abandon the world of change to achieve immortality. As Cavarero puts it:

In effect the philosopher abandons the world of his own birth in order to establish his abode in pure thought, thus carrying out a symbolic matricide in the erasure of his *birth*. This act of matricide extends to everyone, insofar as all humans are born

of woman into a world of appearances, a world where they, too, “appear” as they come forth from their mother. (Cavarero 1995, 38)

Parmenides did not associate his immutable Being with masculinity and the world of appearances with femininity, but still, this relationship of Being with reason and immutability and the world of appearances with senses and mutability was a patriarchal development because it reflected the original matricide that occurred in society and culture. The same association of the world of forms and intellect with changelessness in Plotinus is expressed by Mauro Bonazzi as follows:

Forms, the intelligibles, are the true and real being, which is always identical to itself, as opposed to sensible objects, which undergo continuous processes of transformation and change. The opposition between being and becoming is obvious for any Platonist, and so should be the consequence that Plotinus draws from it. (Bonazzi 2022, 119–20)

Here, we see that forms are intelligible, that is, forms can only be apprehended by the mind; and since the sensible objects are changeable, and forms are opposed to sensible objects, forms do not undergo any change and transformation; and finally, sensible objects can be comprehended by the senses. Therefore, the world of forms is unchangeable and is apprehensible by the mind, while the material world is changeable and is comprehended by the senses.

If we examine the Greek myths, we can say that the relationship between immutability with reason and mutability with the senses reflects Zeus’ overthrow of the matriarchal Chthonic order and establishment of the new Olympian order. As Walter Burket says, “It seemed very natural to attribute the Olympian patriarchal religion to the Indo-Europeans and the Chthonic realm of the mother to the pre-Greeks” (Burket 1987, 40). Francis M. Cornford also explains the patriarchal change in Greek myths as follows: “When the divine community is patriarchalised—a change which presumably reflects a corresponding transformation in human society—an attempt is made to substitute for Destiny the *patria potestas*, the will of Father Zeus” (Cornford 2004, 104). The reflection of this shift in philosophy was that reason took the place of Zeus. In Cornford’s own words:

in his “mythical” manner, Plato amplifies and reinterprets the famous doctrine of Anaxagoras: “all things were confounded together, when Reason came and introduced distinction and order.” Reason takes the place of Zeus, as Zeus had taken the place of *Moirai* [Destiny or Fate]. But the function of the supreme power remains the same—to “introduce distinction and order,” ... (Cornford 2004, 36)

Similar to the immortal Zeus, who settled beyond the clouds, in philosophy, reason later took the place of Zeus and settled in the changeless intelligible realm, while matter, which was in flux and changeable, was only associated with the senses.

Zeus established the Olympian order, becoming a god who could give birth (to the goddess Athena); therefore, Zeus became a legitimation for men who wanted to be the true parents of their children. We can see this explicitly in Aeschylus’ play, *The Oresteia*, where the god Apollo and goddess Athena acknowledge Orestes as right to kill his mother, since she killed her husband, the true parent of his child. In *Oresteia*, Apollo

states that a man is the true parent of his children because the goddess Athena was born through a crack of the head of her father, Zeus. Even though Zeus impregnated the goddess Metis before swallowing her, Apollo does not consider Metis, but Zeus, to be Athena's true parent. Zeus giving birth to Athena is seen by Apollo as proof of man's ability to be a father without a mother. This can be seen in Apollo's words in Aeschylus' play *Eumenides*, the final part of *The Oresteia* trilogy:

The mother is no parent of that which is called her child, but only nurse of the new-planted seed that grows. The parent is he who mounts ... There can be a father without any mother. There she [Athena] stands, the living witness, daughter of Olympian Zeus, she who was never fostered in the dark of the womb yet such a child as no goddess could bring to birth. (Aeschylus 2013, 148)

Gods giving birth in mythologies were a result of patriarchal impact, showing that the true parents of children are their fathers, not their mothers. This change in mythology reflected itself in philosophy regarding human reproduction, according to which men provide the soul of an embryo through sperm, while women provide the body with menstrual blood.⁴ Plato believed that women also have seeds, but their seeds make no contribution to reproduction (see Wilberding 2015).

Despite being a Platonist, Porphyry gives an important role to the mother in reproduction (Wilberding 2008; Porphyry 2014). In line with this role, Miira Tuominen argues that Porphyry does not view femininity as inferior to masculinity (Tuominen 2022, 147–68; see also Brisson 2022, 64–78). However, as discussed below, Porphyry's view of the Moon as the gate for souls to descend into the material world and Saturn as the gate to ascend to the noetic universe shows us that he relates the noetic universe to masculinity and the sensible world to femininity. This is because the Moon is known in Greek myths as a feminine celestial body (goddess Selene), and Saturn is known as the god Kronus.

Although Porphyry had a positive attitude towards women, it should not be forgotten that he grew up in a society shaped by patriarchal values and adopted the Platonic philosophy, which had a certain cosmological view reflecting ancient matricide; therefore, it should not surprise us that he interprets the cave of the Nymphs to reflect ancient matricide. Accordingly, reason is associated with the immutable Being and the senses with the mutable material world, and a philosopher seeks immortality in the noetic universe by getting rid of the material world through reason.

As I will show below, the above-mentioned passage from the *Odyssey* is also full of other symbols which show that the cave represents a womb.⁵ These are the symbols of the matriarchal past of the Greeks. In saying this, I do not mean that Homer did not live in patriarchal Greece, but what he did was to convey to us some symbols of the matriarchal past through the *Odyssey*. And this paper aims to show how Porphyry bends these symbols of the matriarchal past (as seen in Greek mythology) to fit them into the framework of a particular view of the cosmos and ontology, which reflects the ancient matricide. This means that Porphyry considers the immaterial noetic universe to be superior to the sensible world because, for him, the sensible world is irrational and reason belongs only to the noetic universe.⁶ Therefore, a philosopher's goal should be to get rid of the irrational sensible world by aligning his soul with the reason of the immaterial noetic universe in order to achieve immortality.

Menstrual blood as an active and formative principle in Greek mythology

In the first section, I will show how menstrual blood (hence womb), seen as primordial waters or primal (unformed) matter, was viewed as an active principle that gives things their form. This role of menstrual blood and the womb is contrary to the patriarchal idea that primal (unformed) matter receives the form given to it by the noetic universe, an idea also supported by Porphyry in his interpretation of the cave of the Nymphs.

In the ancient matriarchal tradition, caves do not represent the cosmos, but rather, the womb of the goddess, that is, the place of birth and rebirth.⁷ This is a cyclical view of life and the cosmos according to which everything comes to an end then returns to its initial state, called chaos for regeneration. While describing death as reintegration with chaos, Eliade says: “It [death] was the reduction of substances to the *materia prima*, to the *massa confusa*, the fluid, shapeless mass corresponding—on the cosmological plane—to chaos. Death represents regression to the amorphous, the reintegration of chaos” (Eliade 1978, 153). He then quotes from Anton Josef Kirchweger’s work, *Aurea Catena Homeri*, printed in 1723: “For this is certain, that all nature was in the beginning water, and through water all things were born and again through water all things must be destroyed” (quoted by Eliade 1978, 153).

The womb of the goddess is where this transformation occurs and is represented by the underworld, including caves, springs, wells, and containers such as amphoras. The word *menstruum*, which means “solvent,” is a word derived from menstrual, and this sense of the word in Medieval Latin arose from the alchemists’ view of the transmutation of base metal into gold, which they compared to the action of menstrual blood in the womb on sperm (Hoad 1996, 289). It was believed that menstrual blood (primal matter, solvent) turns things (e.g., metals) into their primordial chaotic state, and then the solvent (the menstrual blood) transforms these things into their new form, and this transformation can be physical or mental. Erich Neumann states this transformative role of the womb as follows: “such transformation is possible only when what is to be transformed enters wholly into the Feminine principle; that is to say, dies in returning to the Mother Vessel, whether this be earth, water, underworld, urn, coffin, cave, mountain, ship, or magic caldron” (Neumann 2015, 291).⁸

When the womb of the goddess is considered, sexual intercourse becomes an important ritual and a religious act. The transformation mentioned above happens in the womb through sexual union with the goddess, and entering a sacred cave which symbolizes the womb of the goddess signifies the sexual union with her. Entering a sacred cave (or a temple) representing the womb of the goddess means that those who participate in her mysteries have sexual union with her, and through sexual union with the goddess, participants believe they can benefit from the transformative role of the womb, namely, menstrual blood.⁹

We also know that water was seen as the womb and the primeval water of creation.¹⁰ Primeval water represents chaos, or to use a more philosophical term, unorganized or unformed matter or primal matter. So, the water flowing unceasingly in the cave in the *Odyssey* passage signifies the primeval water from which everything comes. This primeval water is also related to the underworld, and the underworld is the womb of the goddess. We know that, in fairy tales, wells and springs are often used as gates to the underworld.¹¹

In his interpretation of the cave of the Nymphs, Porphyry ascribes wisdom to the noetic universe, not to the blood of the goddess in her womb, represented by the primordial water of creation. Menstrual blood, however, had previously been associated

with the intellectual faculty of human being. We see that the word which comes to mean menstrual blood (Latin word *menses*) has many related words: the Greek word *méné* means “moon,” and *mén* (genitive *méné*s) means “month”; the Latin word *mensis* means “month” (Watkins 1985, 39; Steinmetz and Barnhart 1988, 651, 678). An Indo-European word *men*, which means “to think,” has many derivatives which show us that qualities and states of mind and thought were related to menstrual blood or the primeval waters. These derivative words can be listed as follows: memory, mind (Latin *mēns*), mental, mentor, the Greek word *mantis* (seer), and the Indo-European word *menes* (thought) (Watkins 1985, 41; Mallory and Adams 2006, 325). All these words show us that our mental faculties are related to menstrual blood, and therefore to primeval waters, because menstrual blood represents the primeval waters. The following words of Hilda M. Ransome also show us how springs, and therefore waters, are associated with intellectual activities: “The Muses, originally nymphs of inspiring springs, afterwards regarded as the goddesses of poetry, arts, and sciences, were frequently connected in ancient times with bees, who were called ‘Birds of the Muses’” (Ransome 2004, 103).

Alchemists compared their solvent (*menstruum*) with menstrual blood, which acts on sperm in the womb. This means that menstrual blood transforms sperm and gives it a new form, meaning menstrual blood is active rather than sperm. The solvent of the alchemists is active (not passive) on base metals and transforms them.¹² However, primal waters, which were the symbol of menstrual blood (or the womb) represented by the flow of waters in the Nymphs’ cave, were made by Porphyry as the symbol of the sensible world, and the sensible world was reduced, again by Porphyry, to something irrational, organized by the rationality of the immaterial noetic world.¹³

Dampness of the caves and the flux of matter

Porphyry explains the dampness and humidity of the caves with the flux of matter as follows:

Since matter itself is in a state of flux and in itself is deprived of that form through which it takes shape and is made manifest, they took the dampness and humidity of caves, their darkness and, as the poet says, “murkiness,” as an appropriate symbol of the properties the cosmos owes to matter. It is on account of matter that the cosmos is misty and dark and it is on account of the intermingling in it of form and the resultant order (διακόσμησις, whence the name “cosmos” itself) that the cosmos is beautiful and lovely. So, moreover, a cave might appropriately be called “lovely” seen from the point of view of one who chances upon it and perceives in it the participation of the forms—and, on the contrary, it might be called “murky” seen from the point of view of one who sees more deeply into it and penetrates it by the use of mind. Thus, as far as its exterior is concerned, and viewed superficially, it is “lovely,” but as far as its interior is concerned, and viewed in depth, “murky.” (Porphyry 1983, 24–25)

To avoid any misunderstanding of the above passage, let us clarify Porphyry’s following sentence: “on the contrary, it might be called ‘murky’ seen from the point of view of one who sees more deeply into it and penetrates it by the use of mind.” It is said here that the cave might be called “murky” when someone sees more deeply using the mind. Akçay says Porphyry’s statement “is reminiscent of Plato’s *Phaedo* (65d–66a), whereby

reality is not grasped by sense-perception but with intellect alone” (Akçay 2019, 56). What Plato means by reality here is the world of forms; for Plato, reality is not the cave, namely material world, it is the world of unchangeable forms, and the world of the forms can only be apprehended by mind. Porphyry associates the noetic universe with the mind, and matter with irrationality. However, Akçay’s comparison of the role that Porphyry gives to the mind to comprehend the murkiness of the caves and the role that Plato assigns to the mind to apprehend reality (the world of forms) is wrong. For Porphyry, when form is abstracted through the mind, the cave can be called murky because only amorphous matter, that is, primal matter, remains. The mind’s role in grasping unformed matter (or first or primal matter) is the mind’s ability to abstract form. This role can be compared to that of the mind in the abstraction of geometrical shapes from their matter; for example, a mathematical sphere is an abstraction, and a material sphere cannot be as perfect as a mathematical sphere. Therefore, when Porphyry says, “it [a cave] might be called ‘murky’ seen from the point of view of one who sees more deeply into it and penetrates it by the use of mind,” the relation he establishes between the mind and the murkiness of the caves is different from the relation Plato established between reality (the world of forms or noetic universe) and the mind. Porphyry also associates the mind only with the noetic universe, while he associates matter with irrationality.

Regarding the above passage, as mentioned, Porphyry interprets the murkiness of the caves as the symbol of the flux of (unformed) matter, that is, the state of chaos; but when the exterior of the caves is concerned, the rock that gives it its shape is why it has a separate nature and identity. Hence, on the one hand, there is the cosmos (formed matter), which has a certain nature and identity symbolized by the exterior part of the caves and gives them their solidness; and on the other hand, the interior part of the caves, which I claim represents the unformed state of matter, symbolized by the mistiness, darkness, and dampness. Since the cosmos consists of a combination of formless matter and form, it owns the characteristics of both formless matter and form. The flux of matter is the characteristic of formless matter, represented by the interior part of the caves, while the rockiness of the caves or the solidity of their shape is the characteristic of form or the noetic universe. I should point out that when Porphyry says the interior part of the cosmos, he does not mean the hollow part, but the flux of (unformed) matter out of which the cosmos emerged.¹⁴ The state of the flux of the unformed matter symbolized by the dampness and mistiness of the caves is similar to the womb, which was defined by the ancients as misty, dark, and damp. In the womb, generation happens through the transformation of unformed matter into formed matter. When we consider a woman’s womb, it was believed that the menstrual blood, which represents chaos or unformed matter, turns into a human being by having a human form (see n. 12). A human being is a formed matter, and when she/he dies, it returns to its unformed state; and to regain its form, that is, to be reborn, she/he must enter the womb, the place where she/he can have form. This is why the ancients buried their dead in a cave that represented the womb. The flux of matter represents the unformed matter; it refers to the fluidity of matter before the solid stamp of forms is applied on it. And to the matriarchal way of thinking, the menstrual blood in the womb is something fluid in a place that is dark and damp, and it was believed that this blood was seen as something from which everything was made.

For Porphyry, the cosmos is lovely since it is formed matter, but where the interior is concerned—by interior, he means the unformed state of matter—it is murky. We can see in this interpretation the inversion of the patriarchal way of thinking, according

to which matter is something passive, open to receiving forms, while the ability and power to create the cosmos is attributed to immaterial forms. In contrast, matriarchal tradition saw menstrual blood (chaos or unformed matter) as something that owns formative power. But patriarchy introduced forms (εἶδος) and nous (νοῦς), abstracted from matter, as a new intellectual power that could be effective on the passivity of matter.¹⁵

Besides these, for Porphyry, the ancients also made caves symbols of the noetic substance; so, caves were made by the ancients as a symbol of both the sensible cosmos and the noetic universe:

They made them symbols of the sensible cosmos because they are dark and rocky and damp, and the cosmos likewise has these properties because of the matter from which it is sprung, and it resists form and is unstable. They made caves symbols of the noetic universe, on the other hand, because they are not easily grasped by the senses and at the same time they are essentially solid and enduring. For the very same reason they made caves symbols of the obscure, fragmentary powers, and most of all those participating in matter. (Porphyry 1983, 26–27)

I want to point out the following in Porphyry's words: the sensible cosmos is dark, damp, and unstable; it is watery and resistant to being formed. These properties of the inside of the cave are mentioned in the *Odyssey*; however, when the noetic universe is considered, Porphyry says it cannot be grasped by the senses easily because caves are solid and enduring. The noetic universe (the world of forms) cannot be grasped by the senses, but by the intellect. However, when Porphyry's cave analogy is considered, the outer part of a cave, which is solid and enduring, does not refer to the noetic universe; it refers to the form given to matter (cave, cosmos) by the noetic universe. The outer part of the cave refers to its form given to matter by the noetic universe. When Porphyry refers to the caves as symbols of the noetic universe, he means the outer part of the caves because they are solid and enduring, but the inside is damp and watery.¹⁶ It follows, therefore, to ask that, if the rockiness of caves is one of the symbols of the sensible cosmos, does this not also refer to its solidness? This is an important question because readers may think that rockiness refers to the solidness of the outer part of the caves, but rather, it refers to the interior of the caves. Now, before I go any further, let me explain.

Porphyry says that caves are rocky because all caves are composed of earth and that "the ancients ... passed down the tradition that earth is a symbol of the matter out of which the cosmos emerged. For this reason, some even took earth simply to be that matter itself" (Porphyry 1983, 24). From these words of Porphyry, we can say that earth was seen by some of the ancients as the symbol of primal matter, and some of them even took earth to be primal matter (see n. 10). Therefore, we can say that the rockiness of caves refers to their interior parts, not their outer parts, because rock consists of earth. Porphyry uses both water and earth as the symbols of primal matter. Readers may think that the rockiness of caves refers to their solidness, that is, the outer parts of caves which should be seen as the imprint of the noetic universe on matter, but it does not. Porphyry says that ancients saw earth as a symbol of matter out of which the cosmos emerged, and this means that earth is the symbol of unformed matter and refers to the rockiness of the caves. Suppose you have a certain amount of earth (primal matter), and you compact it and create a cave by imitating a certain model, then the form you give to the compacted earth indicates its solidness, or the form

imprinted on (primal) matter by the noetic universe; therefore, (compacted) earth (or rockiness) indicates the unformed or primal matter. When Porphyry says that caves are solid and enduring, these characteristics relate them to the form given to matter by the noetic universe. The solidness here indicates the immutability of the model, that is, of the noetic universe. While earth (rockiness of caves) is what caves are made of, that is, primal matter, the solidness of the caves is the property that matter owns through stamping with the seal of the noetic universe. Without owning the seal of the noetic universe, that is, form symbolized by the solidness, the characteristic of unformed matter is also defined by Porphyry as fluidity or flux. Here, I must argue that water or earth as the symbol of primary matter does not matter; both can be considered fluid. Fluidity refers to the mutable property of primal matter, as opposed to the immutability of immaterial forms, so earth should be considered as mutable as water, as both refer to (primal or unformed) matter. Since the cosmos owns both these characteristics, the fluidity of (unformed) matter and the solidness of the forms, these characteristics can be seen in the cosmos to some extent. The formed matter owns both the fluidity of unformed matter and the solidness of the noetic universe. So what Porphyry means is that, for the ancients, caves are the symbols of both the sensible cosmos and the noetic universe and that while the sensible cosmos shares much with the properties of unformed matter (the interior part of the caves), the outer part of the caves shares much with the noetic universe. For Porphyry, the cave mentioned by Homer is the key cave symbolizing the sensible cosmos, since he says:

When a cave is double, like the one with two entrances that Homer describes, they used to consider it symbolic not of the noetic but rather of the sensible cosmos, and likewise the cave under consideration, because its “water flows incessantly,” would not be a symbol of the noetic hypostasis, but rather of material existence. (Porphyry 1983, 27)

We can also deduce from Porphyry’s words that the caves which do not contain springs represent the noetic universe more than the sensible cosmos. If it is a cave without springs and two entrances, it should be seen as a symbol of the noetic universe rather than the sensible cosmos. Here, it can be said that there might be a contradiction in Porphyry’s words: on the one hand, he says that caves are seen as symbols of both the sensible cosmos and the noetic universe; on the other hand, he says that a cave which has two entrances and water sources cannot be seen as a symbol of the noetic universe. For our inquiry, in both cases, we can say that things which are feminine such as water and springs, which represent the flux of matter, are seen as separate from the noetic hypostasis. But I would like to point out that, if a cave harbors springs, which represent the flux of matter, the cave’s properties should be seen as something which makes the cave a symbol of the sensible world because the cosmos harbors the flux of matter. However, if a cave does not harbor springs, it should be considered a symbol of the noetic universe because these kinds of caves are destitute of the interior part, that is, water. Of course, these caves also have interior parts, but what Porphyry means by the interior part is the springs, the flow of waters, the initial state of chaos or the unformed matter. So, if a cave lacks the interior part, we can only talk about the exterior part, that is, the form of the cave, which reflects the noetic universe. This is why Porphyry divides the caves into those that reflect the material universe and those that reflect the noetic universe. When we think of earth (soil) as an alternative to primary matter, as we have mentioned before, the rocks of caves refer to primary

matter, that is, its interior. In summary, Porphyry says the cave represents both unformed matter and the noetic universe because a cave (i.e., the cosmos) is formed by imprinting the seal of the noetic universe on primary matter; however, if a cave has springs and two gates, it should be considered a representation of the cosmos rather than the noetic universe. Both earth and water represent unformed matter, and only the shape of a cave should be seen as an imitation or reflection of the model (i.e., the noetic universe) that formed the unformed matter.

Naiad nymphs, waters, and sexual pleasure

Porphyry says the following regarding the term *Naiad Nymphs*:

the ancients used to use the term to designate the general class of souls descending into γένεσις. They believed that souls settled upon the water, which was “god-inspired” as Numenius says, adding that it is for this reason that the prophet [Hebrew prophet] said, “The Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters,” and that the Egyptians depicted all their gods standing not on dry land but rather in a boat—the sun along with the rest of them—and these are to be thought of as the souls coming down into γένεσις and hovering over the water. He goes on to say that this is why Heraclitus says, “It is a delight, not a death, for souls to become wet” [Fr. B 77, D-K], for it is a pleasure for them to fall into matter, and elsewhere, “We live their deaths while they live our deaths” [cf. Fr. B 62, D-K]. Moreover, he says, the poet calls those in γένεσις “wet” [διερός, *Od.* 6. 201] because they have damp souls. They are in love with blood and semen, just as the souls of plants are nourished by water. (Porphyry 1983, 27)

Here, *Naiad Nymphs*, who are linked with springs and wells, are seen as souls who descend into the material world, and the sensible world is related to wetness and pleasure. These souls are in love with blood and semen, both watery materials. To become embodied, souls must be moistened, but according to Porphyry, pure souls avoid γένεσις¹⁷ (the sensible world) (Porphyry 1983, 27), which means that they avoid moistness. To support this idea, he quotes Heraclitus, who says, “a dry soul is wisest” (Porphyry 1983, 27). In this material world, souls become wet, and for Porphyry, this is a function of their sexual desires (Porphyry 1983, 27). When we consider the sensible world, wetness, pleasure, and sexual desire are placed together, and when we consider the noetic universe, dryness and being wise are banded together.

Porphyry calls those souls coming into the sensible world (γένεσις) *Naiad Nymphs* and believes the custom to call brides “nymphs” is because brides are married for childbearing. He explains childbearing by using the word γένεσις. For Porphyry, the souls that come into the material world are symbolized only by *Naiad Nymphs*, not any other kind of nymphs. This is because these nymphs are related to water sources. However, contrary to Porphyry’s claim, the custom calls brides “nymphs” in general, not only *Naiad Nymphs*.¹⁸ Porphyry bends the tradition to fit his interpretation of *Naiad Nymphs* as the souls descending to the sensible world, and this descending to the sensible world is defined with feminine words. I believe this is not just a coincidence. Souls descending into the sensible world are called brides, and coming to the world is explained by childbearing, which only women can do.

However, to ascend into the noetic realm, one must get rid of the sensible world. How can one do that? To become free from the life of the senses, there are a few labors

to be accomplished. Among them, Porphyry counts giving sacrifice to the gods, showing patience, and being poor. By poverty, he means a kind of asceticism or ascetic way of life, including abstaining from sensual pleasures (especially sexual pleasure), material possessions, and the desire for fame and power. Abstaining from sexual pleasure is especially important because Porphyry says that sexual pleasure causes souls to descend into the sensible world. I will discuss this in detail in the following sections. For now, it should be noted that, for the matriarchal tradition, sex was a sacred act and practiced as a fertility rite. Therefore, seeing the feminine symbols of springs and water as the symbols of the sensible world, which we must get rid of to ascend into the noetic realm, and seeing sexual pleasure as something which descends us into the sensible world, shows us the patriarchal change.

Sea-purple color, bees, nymphs, and sexual pleasure

Homer's passage states there are stone looms in the cave, and Porphyry believes the stone represents bone and weaving sea-purple clothes on these looms refers to flesh. In the words of Porphyry:

Flesh comes into being by means of bones and wrapped around bones, and stone represents these bones, because within living creatures they resemble stone. This is why the looms were said to be made of stone rather than some other material. The sea-purple cloth would clearly be the flesh, woven of blood: the sea-purple wool, the fiber itself, is ultimately the product of blood and the wool is even dyed with a product derived from living creatures. Likewise, the production of flesh is accomplished both by blood and out of blood. Moreover, the body surely is a cloak for the soul around which it is wrapped, "a wonder to see" whether you consider it from the point of view of the composition of the composite entity or from that of the soul's bondage to the body. Thus, according to Orpheus, Kore, the overseer of all things sown in the earth, is depicted as a weaver, and the ancients called heaven a "robe," as if it were a garment cast around the heavenly gods. (Porphyry 1983, 29)

A sea-purple color is not purple but rather a dark red wine color, the color of blood, which means life. It is also the color of menstrual blood. This color was known as the sea-purple color because the shell from which it is obtained comes from the sea. From Isidore of Seville, we read the following:

Purple (*conchylium*) is named because its color is collected from the marine *conchula* ("small mollusc"). This is also called *ostrum* (lit. the blood of a sea mollusc). *Ostrum*, which is prepared for purple dye, is found in many places, but the best is on the island of Cyprus or in those places where the sun's path shines closer to the earth. *Conchyliia* (i.e. purple shellfish) are from the sea, and when they are cut all the way around with a blade, they exude tears of a purple color. Once these tears have been collected, purple dye is prepared. Furthermore, *ostrum* is so named because it is drawn forth from the liquid of the shell. (Isidore 2006: 389)

As mentioned, this color is the color of menstrual blood. The Greek word for menstrual blood is *katamēnia*—from *katá* (down) + *mēn* (moon, month)—and literally means "the moon below." And *kathédra* or *katáhedra*—from *katá* (down) + *hédra*

(seat)—means “the seat below” (Grahn 1993, 178). During the menstrual period, the seat of a queen or nun, representing the goddess, was used to collect her menstrual blood. She had the authority to rule since she had the power and sacredness of the blood. This is why the seat of bishops are called *cathedra*. Even today, the word *chair*, which means a seat, also means “to manage,” “to invest with power,” “president,” and “office of the president.”¹⁹

To summarize, sea-purple was the color of (menstrual) blood, and it was related to the sea because the sea was seen as the symbol of the menstrual blood of the goddess from which everything came, and the blood of the goddess was also related to authority. However, when we read Porphyry’s interpretation, we can see that this meaning and the role of blood is underestimated. The sea-purple color is still seen as blood, but it becomes just the flesh which wraps the bone and the symbol of descending wet souls (not dry souls, that is, pure souls) into the sensible world.

Another theme to be noted in Homer’s passage is honey. In this passage, it is said that the stone amphoras in the cave were filled with honeycombs instead of water. Porphyry interprets this as follows:

The theologians have used honey to symbolize many different things since it combines multiple powers, and is both cathartic and preservative in its effects ... According to Orpheus, Zeus used honey to trap Kronos, for full of honey he became blind drunk, as if with wine, and fell asleep, just as did Poros in Plato, full of nectar—“for wine did not yet exist.”

This is what happened to Kronos, and when he was bound he was castrated, like Ouranos, and the theologian is hinting that divine beings are ensnared by pleasure and drawn down into γένεσις, and that they discharge their powers like semen when they are made feeble by pleasure. This is why Kronos castrates Ouranos as he is settling down on Earth, driven by his desire to have intercourse with her [Gaia (Earth)], and for the ancients the pleasure of the honey that deludes Kronos and brings about his castration had exactly the same meaning as the pleasure of intercourse ...

In view of its relationship to purification, to the prevention of decay and to the pleasure of descent into the flesh, honey is an appropriate symbol as applied to the Water Nymphs ... (Porphyry 1983, 30–31)

In these words, honey is seen as a preservative and a kind of drink which makes people or gods drunk. Before wine was invented, honey was used as an intoxicating drink called mead. The infant Zeus was fed on honey by the sacred bees or nymphs in the cave on Mount Dicte. Nymphs became the symbol of bees and were known as Melissae (Ransome 2004, 92). Melissa is the daughter of the Cretan king, Melissus. She and her sister Amalthea fed the infant Zeus on honey and goat’s milk. We learn from the Greek scholar Didymus, who lived in the first century BCE, that King Melissus appointed his daughter Melissa as the first priestess of the Great-Mother Goddess, and the priestesses of the same goddess were still called Melissae (Ransome 2004, 94). We also know that the priestesses of Demeter were called Melissae (Williams 1978, 98). In the following words of Bachofen, we can see how bees were associated with the feminine principle and again how honey was related to female sexuality:

Bees embody the female aspect of nature. They are associated with Demeter, Artemis, and Persephone because they represent earthly substance from a

maternal perspective. Bees are the perfect reflection of Demeter in her role as the maternal soul of the earth because they never rest in their skillful and productive activities. Heraclides (reported in Ath. 14.647a) describes a custom of celebrating the Thesmophoria in Syracuse. The women paraded so-called *μύλλοι* [cakes] in honor of Demeter and Persephone. These cakes were made of sesame and honey and shaped like the pudenda [vulva]. In Germany, the honey flower, Melissa, is also called *Mutterkraut* [mother's herb], which is considered medicinal especially for female sexual diseases. (Bachofen 2007, 35)

In Bachofen's words here, we can see the relationship of sexuality with birth, fertility, and nutrition because he talks about how the bees reflect Demeter's mother role. But sexuality is also about death. The woman-centered view of life and nature is cyclical, so it starts in the mother's womb and, when it ends, it returns to the mother's womb to be renewed. Therefore, dead creatures enter the womb to be reborn, and that is sexuality. When a dead body is placed in a tomb or a cave²⁰, which are the symbols of the womb, this entry into the womb should be considered as a sexual union with the goddess. In ancient Greek, there was a saying, "to fall into a honey jar," and it meant "to die" (Persson 1942, 12–13). In this example, the jar represents the womb, and the honey represents menstrual blood that transforms the dead so that the dead can be reborn through the womb. Let me explain this by giving the following example: the queen bee-goddess, Melissa, kills (sacrifices) her king husband, who represents a god, annually (see Graves 1992, 42). This is a sacrificial killing of the king, who represents the god, by the queen, who represents the goddess, and this ritual killing of the king happened annually as a fertility rite. James Frazer gives many examples of this sacrificial killing of the kings (and gods) (see Frazer 1911). The word honeymoon now becomes clearer: the Moon represents the goddess; honey represents rebirth and sexuality. Because sexuality was necessary for giving birth, it was also considered necessary for rebirth.²¹ A honeymoon was the celebration of fertility through the sexual union between the queen (goddess) and the king (god), but at the end, according to the matriarchal cyclical view of nature, the king should be killed again for the fertility rite. What should be emphasized here is that the killing of the king also comes to mean his rebirth, so killing is related to sexuality because the rebirth of the king is possible through sexuality. After his sacrificial killing, the king returns to the womb of the goddess to be reborn, which was seen by the ancients as a sexual act.

Another point Porphyry notes is that divine beings are trapped by pleasure and drawn towards the sensible world, and when they become weak by pleasure, they discharge their semen, which is their power. Porphyry claims that for the ancients, the pleasure of honey refers to the pleasure of intercourse. God Kronos was deluded by the pleasure of honey, and when he became drunk, Zeus castrated him easily. So, the pleasure of honey, that is, the pleasure of intercourse, refers to the pleasure of the descent into the flesh. Since descending into the flesh comes to mean birth, and birth is possible through sexual pleasure, Porphyry saw sexual pleasure as the desire that binds the souls to the sensible world. Porphyry defines these souls as wet souls, and he believes pure souls avoid descending into the material world. When wet souls are purified from sexual pleasure, which is the desire which binds souls to the material world, they become dry souls, and then they can ascend to the noetic universe, where souls truly belong. Porphyry reiterates:

The kraters symbolize springs—just as a krater is set beside Mithras to stand for a spring—as do the amphoras, which we use to draw water up from springs. Springs

and running streams are appropriate to Water Nymphs and even more so to those nymphs that are souls, whom the ancients specifically called “bees,” because of their diligence in the pursuit of pleasure.

... the ancients used to call the priestesses of Demeter “bees,” as initiates of the chthonic goddess, and to call Kore herself “Melitodes” or “honey-like” and the moon, which presides over γένεσις, they also called “the bee,” among other reasons because the moon is also called a bull and Taurus is its exaltation, and bees are born from cattle. Souls coming into γένεσις, are likewise “born from cattle...” Honey also has been made a symbol of death and thus they used to pour libations of honey to the chthonic deities. In the same way, they made bile a symbol of life, hinting that the life of the soul expires through pleasure but is revived through bitterness. (Porphyry 1983, 31–32)

Porphyry correctly states that kraters and amphoras symbolize springs, but I should emphasize, as mentioned above, springs are the symbol of the goddess’ womb, so kraters, amphoras, and pithos are also symbols of the womb of the goddess. Homer says that there are honeycombs in these stone kraters and amphoras placed in the cave. As mentioned, for Porphyry, honey represents the pleasure of descent into the flesh, that is, being born, and honey also represents death. As Porphyry rightly says, honey is related both to being born and dying, but the honey in these stone jars represents menstrual blood in the womb.²² As mentioned before, menstrual blood was the symbol of chaos or the primal matter from which everything is composed, and when things lose their life force, they must return to this initial state to be reborn, that is, reformed; therefore, menstrual blood refers to both birth and death. Since sexuality was seen as a sacred act for both being born and reborn, honey (honeymoon) is also related to sexuality and of course pleasure; however, what is important for the development of the patriarchal way of thinking in these interpretations is that pleasure, which is indeed related to (sacred) sexuality, is negated, while bitterness is affirmed, because Porphyry thinks that pleasure causes souls to expire, but bitterness revives them.

North wind, moon, and eroticism

Another of Porphyry’s interpretations of the *Odyssey* passage is regarding the two gates of the cave, one for men and the other for immortals. It is said that the one on the north of the cave is for men and the one on the south for immortals. Porphyry interprets the two gates as the tropics, Cancer and Capricorn. Since Cancer is northerly, it represents the gate on the north side of the cave, while Capricorn is southerly, and is therefore a symbol of the gate on the south side of the cave. Porphyry tells us that theologians think there are two gates in heaven, one for the descent of the souls, which is Cancer, and the other for the ascent of the souls, which is Capricorn. He also lets us know that Cancer is associated with the Moon, the closest celestial body to the earth; and Capricorn is associated with Saturn, the farthest and highest body to the earth. The important observation in this interpretation is that the Moon, the closest celestial body to the earth, is seen as the gateway of souls to the earth. In Greek myths, the Moon is associated with a goddess, so descending to the sensible world relates to the feminine principle (Moon, goddess Selene); and ascending to the noetic universe relates to the male principle, Saturn (god Kronus). This also shows us that femininity and things related to women are all linked to the sensible world by Porphyry.²³

Porphyry thinks that the north wind is assigned to the souls entering the sensible world (γένεσις), while the south wind is to the souls leaving it. The north wind is colder and the south one is warmer. The north wind is associated with entering γένεσις because Cancer is northerly; and the south wind is associated with Capricorn, which is the gate for the souls who are leaving the sensible world for the same reason, because Capricorn is southerly. An important observation is that Porphyry sees the north wind as erotic, as is seen in his words, “Since souls enter into γένεσις through the northern gate, this wind has been called erotic” (Porphyry 1983, 35). He thinks this because, in mythology, Boreas (the north winds) took the form of a stallion and impregnated the mares. Here, we can still see the relationship established between sexual pleasure and the sensible world through the north wind because souls can only be held in the cold grip of earthly life, while the south wind melts them so they can go back to the warmer divine.

Athena, olive, and wisdom or noetic nature

In the passage quoted from the *Odyssey*, it is written that there is a slender-leaved olive at the head of the harbor, and near the olive tree, there is the cave. Olive is a sacred plant to the goddess Athena, and she was born from the head of her father, Zeus. Porphyry explains the olive tree was planted at the head of the harbor because goddess Athena was born from the head of Zeus. As mentioned before, after Metis became pregnant with Athena by Zeus, she was swallowed by him, then Zeus became pregnant with Athena. When the time came, Hephaestus (god of blacksmiths and craftsmen) split Zeus’s head with his axe and Athena was born from the crack in her father’s head.

Goddess Athena was known as the goddess of wisdom, so Porphyry interprets her as thoughtfulness, and her thoughtfulness shows us that “the universe did not come to be spontaneously nor was it the work of irrational chance, but rather that it is the result of noetic nature and of wisdom” (Porphyry 1983, 38).²⁴ Another important note is that, just as the tree is separate from the cave, according to Porphyry, divine wisdom is separate from the cosmos. Here we see the patriarchal change regarding the nature of wisdom as a separate thing from matter. This wisdom, or the noetic nature as mentioned by Porphyry, is symbolized by the goddess Athena; however, this wisdom mentioned by Porphyry represents the patriarchal way of thinking which covers the relationship of wisdom with Mother Nature (or the sensible world).

Porphyry discusses the separateness between the cosmos and the noetic world, symbolized by the separation of the olive tree from the cave.²⁵ However, before patriarchy, there was no separation between the cosmos (or matter) and wisdom. The water of creation, which was interpreted just as unorganized matter, was indeed the creative menstrual blood of the goddess, who owns the wisdom and the mystery of birth and rebirth through her womb. This watery source of creation was detached from its wisdom by patriarchy through turning it into a passive recipient of the formative power of the noetic universe. Above, I mentioned how the words “mind” and “to think” were derived from the word meaning menstrual blood; and how *menstruum* (solvent), another word derived from menstrual, was likened by alchemists to the menstrual blood which acts on sperm. This shows us that menstrual blood is active, transforming sperm into a human form, similar to the solvent of the alchemists, which transforms base metals into gold.

As mentioned, Athena, as a female divinity, was seen as wisdom, but she was born through her father’s head, not her mother’s womb, and Athena approved this, saying that men can give birth and are the true parents of their children. So, as the goddess

of wisdom, Athena is the symbol of the separation of wisdom from the cave, that is to say, the womb. Although Athena is seen as the goddess of wisdom, what she actually possesses is the wisdom of Zeus, held by him when he swallowed the goddess of wisdom, Metis. When Porphyry explains the separation of the cosmos from noetic nature, he uses the separation of the olive tree (the wisdom of Athena) from the cave because the tree was planted at the head of the harbor, which means that it represents Athena's birth from the head of her father. What we see in his interpretation is that the philosophical separation of wisdom (noetic world) from the flux of matter is compared with the mythological separation of wisdom from the womb.

From the womb to the cosmos as the transition of feminine wisdom to masculine wisdom

Contrary to Porphyry's interpretation of the symbols of the matriarchal past, water, which symbolizes menstrual blood (or the womb) of the goddess, that is, the initial state of chaos, was not a passive entity formed by the nous, but it was believed that the blood of the goddess owned the formative force through which it forms itself into the cosmos. The transformative power (or the formative power) of menstrual blood shows us its relation to the mind and thought, which can be seen in the etymologies of words such as "memory," "mind," "mental," "mantis" (seer), and "to think" because these words are related to menstrual blood. The patriarchy separated the mind and thought from the primeval waters and saw it as ignorance, placing nous in something immaterial and superior to the sensible world, the noetic universe. When this transition was over, we had lost contact with the womb, our mother. This loss of our bond with our mother refers to the ancient matricide at a cosmological and philosophical level. Therefore, Porphyry's interpretation of the cave of the Nymphs should be seen as a defense of the patriarchal view of the cosmos, which reflects the ancient matricide.

The womb was the source of wisdom. When I say this, I don't differentiate the womb from menstrual blood. Menstrual blood was the sea of fertility; it was the dark waters from which everything emerged. The waters (menstrual blood or the womb) are unformed or primal matter; they are Plato's receiving thing which takes the form, but indeed they produce forms. The world of appearances or the cosmos should be likened to foam on the sea's surface. The sea creates foam and even though this foam seems something separate from the sea, this is not true. Foam emerges on the sea's surface then disappears, but later, new foam emerges, and this cycle continues forever. With the emergence of patriarchy, the sea lost its formative power. Instead, the immaterial world of forms (the noetic universe) was invented as a new formative power which works on passive matter (the sea, primal matter). The sea and the foam, namely the womb and the cosmos, were the same thing because the foam was not different to the sea; therefore, the cosmos should be considered as the womb.

The formative power has become the immaterial noetic universe, and an insurmountable gulf has formed between the formative power (noetic universe) and the cosmos. As mentioned, the foam and the sea were of the same essence, and when all the faculties and virtues of the primal matter (the sea, menstrual blood) were taken and given to the noetic universe, both primal matter and the physical world became inferior to the noetic universe. While the sea had formative power, the physical world (foam) was not inferior to it, for they were of the same essence, but the immaterial noetic universe is not of the same essence with both the primal matter and the physical world,

instead it is superior to them and irreducible to them. The cosmos (the foam) can no longer be considered the womb (the sea) because it had become shaped not by the womb of which it was of the same essence, but by the noetic universe to which it could not be reduced. When the faculties of the womb were taken, the physical world's faculties were also taken away. Therefore, I believe the true meaning of the Fall lies in these losses of the physical world (or womb).

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Notes

1 Quoted from Porphyry's *On The Cave of the Nymphs*, see Porphyry 1983, 21. This passage from the *Odyssey* can be read from Ian Johnston's translation as follows: "An olive tree with long pointed leaves stands at the harbour head, and close beside it there's a pleasant shadowy cave, sacred to the nymphs whom people call the Naiads. Mixing bowls and jars of stone are stored inside, and bees make honey there. The cave has long stone looms where nymphs weave cloth with a deep sea-purple dye, an amazing thing to see. In there, too, are springs which always flow. The cave has two entrances—one, which faces North Wind, is the one men use to go inside; the other one, which faces South Wind, is divine—human beings may not go in there, for the pathway is confined to the immortals" (Homer 2007, 256; book 13, 120–32).

2 The noetic universe refers to the world of forms seen as the non-physical essences of things in the material universe, and this world is also called the intelligible realm. Porphyry also expresses this concept as the noetic principle, noetic substance and the noetic world; however, all of these concepts refer to the all-pervasive mind as a formative and organizing force.

3 On Plato's association of the mind and the world of forms with masculinity and the senses and the material world with femininity, see also Lovibond 1994, 93–94. In Plato's *Symposium*, there is a speech from Diotima about the birth of Love, and Love is the symbol of a philosopher. What Diotima says about the birth of Love is in harmony with the words of Plato, which I have quoted from *Timaeus* and *Theaetetus*. She says that Love is the child of Poros and Penia. Penia is Love's mother and she is a beggar. However, Poros is the son of Metis, the goddess of wisdom. Therefore, Love (the philosopher) is needy like his mother, but like his father, he is "resourceful in his pursuit of intelligence, a lover of wisdom through all his life" (Plato 1997b, 486, 203d). If we look at the qualifications he received from his parents, we see that seeking wisdom and being a lover of wisdom comes from his father, and being always in need comes from his mother.

4 For detailed explanations, see Lloyd 2003, 150; Freudenthal 2007, 24; Bianchi 2012, 10; Wilberding 2019, 15–32.

5 Yulia Ustinova says that seeing every grotto as womb, which is a Freudian inclination, has been largely abandoned in recent research (Ustinova 2009, 4). And she talks about a study by Lauren E. Talalay who considers the issue from an archaeological point of view (see Talalay 1994). In this paper, however, I will show that the aforementioned passage from the *Odyssey* has enough data to see the cave of the Nymphs as a womb.

6 For detailed explanations about the association of rationality with masculinity and irrationality with femininity in Western philosophy, see Lloyd 1989 and Cavarero 1995.

7 Mircea Eliade says the following regarding the assimilation of the womb to a cave: "But the historian of religions encounters other homologies that presuppose a more developed symbolism, a whole system of micro-macrocosmic correspondences. Such, for example, is the assimilation of the belly or the womb to a cave, of the intestines to a labyrinth, of breathing to weaving, of the veins and arteries to the sun and moon, of the backbone to the *Axis Mundi*, and so on" (Eliade 1987, 169). And Otto Rank also says, "Everywhere, then, we find the same symbolic representation of the womb as a well, a kettle, a ditch, a dark cave, or a hollow tree" (Rank 2015, 61).

8 Joseph Campbell states the transformative role of the goddess through the water as her vehicle as follows: "The water is the vehicle of the power of the goddess; but equally, it is she who personifies the mystery of the waters of birth and dissolution—whether of the individual or of the universe" (Campbell 1960, 64).

9 The relation of the womb with the origin of the universe and sexual intercourse is well stated in the following words of Joseph Campbell: “In mythology, of course, the image of birth from the womb is an extremely common figure for the origin of the universe, and the sexual intercourse that must have preceded it is represented in ritual action as well as in story” (Campbell 1960, 59).

10 Neumann says the following about the water as a womb of life: “The natural elements that are essentially connected with vessel symbolism include both earth and water. This containing water is the primordial womb of life, from which in innumerable myths life is born. It is the water “below,” the water of the depths, ground water and ocean, lake and pond” (Neumann 2015, 47). Otto Rank quotes from Ferdinand Freiherr von Reitzenstein that in Germany there are “localized wells and ponds in which the unborn children live as fully formed beings,” and these children are waiting to be pulled up from these wells and ponds” (Rank 2015, 59). Rank also quotes from Reitzenstein that “The Australian aborigines believed that children come from the forest, stones, or pools of water; among native peoples of Mexico we encounter a belief in a complete children’s kingdom in the sea” (Rank 2015, 61).

11 Regarding wells, springs, woman, and the underground, Erich Neumann says the following: “To the realm of the earth water belong not only the pond and lake but also the spring. While in the well the elementary character of the Feminine is still evident—it is no accident that in fairy tales a well is often the gate to the underworld and specifically to the domain of the earth mother—in the spring the rising, erupting motif of ‘being born’ and of creative movement is more strongly accented than that of being contained” (Neumann 2015, 48). Regarding the cult of springs in Greek caves, see Håland 2009.

12 According to the woman-centered view, while menstrual blood works on sperm and turns it into a human, the male-centered view claims that it is sperm (semen) that processes menstrual blood (egg) and uses it as a sculptor uses clay. However, we can actually see an older version of reproduction in which the role of the male in pregnancy is unknown; according to this earliest view, menstrual blood turns into a baby in a woman’s womb. For example, the indigenous Maori people of New Zealand believed that human beings are formed from menstrual blood (Briffault 1927, 413). This view is also woman-centered. Today, we know that none of this is true. What we do know is that both the sperm and the egg are equally effective on the newborn baby. But we cannot deny that these ancient views had a strong influence on our culture.

13 One of the important sources of Porphyry, Numenius, interprets the battle between Atlantis and Athens mentioned by Plato in his *Timaeus* (23d ff.) as the battle between the irrational and rational souls. Irrational souls who are experiencing the sensible world were seen by Numenius as the followers of the sea god Poseidon (water), while rational souls were seen as the followers of the goddess Athena, that is, intellect (see Akçay 2019, 16–17). This interpretation of Numenius also shows us how water is viewed as irrational, which is in line with how Porphyry sees water or springs in caves. Athena is associated with rationality, born from the head of her father, not from the womb, and supports the idea that the true parent of children is their fathers. All this shows us that she is a patriarchal goddess. Another aspect that supports this idea is that she is known as the goddess of warfare. Archaeologist Marija Gimbutas suggests that the Neolithic matriarchal cultures of Europe and Anatolia were occupied by Indo-European, patriarchal, warlike nomadic tribes. The recognition of Athena as the goddess of warfare and other attributes mentioned above may be a result of the invasion of these patriarchal tribes (Gimbutas 1991, 2001, 2007).

14 Regarding what Porphyry means by the interior part of the caves, I think differently from Akçay who approaches the inner parts of the caves as the symbols of the hollows of the earth in which water, mist, and air have gathered: “In *De Antro* 5.7, Porphyry describes the inner part of ‘caves’ (ἄντρα) and ‘caverns’ (σπήλαια) as κοίλα, a term associated with Plato: the geographical description of the earth as a hollow spherical body is found in *Phaedo* 108e. Socrates claims that everywhere there are ‘many hollows’ (πολλὰ κοίλα, *Phaedo* 109b5), different in appearance and size, in which water, mist and air have gathered. Water, mist and air are in fact the residue of the aether that always flows in the hollows of earth. Human beings dwell in the hollows of the earth, even if they are unaware of this (*Phaedo* 109b–c). For hollows, Anaxagoras (c. 510–428 B.C.E) seems to have been one of Plato’s sources, who reportedly claimed that the earth is hollow (κοίλη) and includes water ‘in its hollow places’ (ἐν τοῖς κοιλώμασιν)” (Akçay 2019, 49).

15 Most people believe that matter has nothing to do with intellectual and formative power, because all this comes from a god who is transcendent and completely separate from matter. But there are also those who believe in a god as Spinoza describes. As is known, he defines nature as god. According to his view, the owner of intellect and creative (formative) power is nature, or matter, and he calls this power God. *Natura Naturans* means, for Spinoza, the creative (formative) nature, which I liken to menstrual blood,

and by *Natura Naturata*, he means the world of appearances, the physical world or the cosmos. However, the essence of these two is the same, like the sea and the foam in the sea. The appearance of the foam is different from water, but its essence is the same as water. Therefore, we can compare the sea to *Natura Naturans* and the foam to *Natura Naturata*. Another example can be given from the mystic, Mansur Hallaj, who said “I am god,” and was therefore executed by the caliph. When he says, “I am god,” it means “like the foam in the sea, the water and I (the foam) have the same essence.” And there are those who are still loyal to Hallaj’s view. Examples can be multiplied. There are similar views in some Christian sects that are considered heretical.

16 Here we can see that Porphyry’s explanations are similar to Plato’s divided line. Plato likens the cave to the cosmos, but there is also the intellectual, immaterial world. When Porphyry says that the ancients also made the caves the symbol of the noetic universe, the reader may think that this is against Plato, but it is not. What Porphyry is trying to do is to emphasize that the cosmos consists of both matter (primal matter) and the form given to matter by the noetic universe. Therefore, Porphyry thinks that the solidness of the outer parts of caves is the reason why caves were seen by the ancients as the symbol of the noetic universe. When the outer part of a cave is compared to the water flowing inside, it is solid; and the outer part of a cave is the shape (form) given to it by the noetic universe. The outer part of a cave can be viewed as the imprint of the noetic universe on primal matter, and the water flowing inside caves is why caves are seen as symbols of the sensible cosmos, because the water flowing inside expresses matter of the caves, not the form. Here, Porphyry says that the outer parts of the caves are solid, while he does not say that the solids are immutable, like the forms of the noetic universe; in fact, the outer parts of the cave are also in a state of flux, as they are made of matter; However, since the cosmos contains both matter and the seal of the noetic universe, Porphyry thinks that the exterior of the caves reflects the seal of the noetic universe, while the interior of the caves can only be symbolic of (formless) matter.

17 Robert Lamberton refrains from translating this term as “genesis” and argues that in some cases it can be translated as “coming into being” and in others as “giving birth”; he says that it refers generally to “the life of this world” (see Porphyry 1983, 41). If we look at these translations, they all point to the sensible world: “coming into being” means “being born”; “the life of this world” comes to mean the life that we experience after “coming into being”; and “genesis” means the formation of the material world and “being born.” Therefore, in this paper, I prefer to use this Greek word (γένεσις) to mean “the sensible world.” All these concepts express “Becoming,” that is, the world of change. If we look for “Being” in Porphyry’s *On The Cave of the Nymphs*, we can only speak of the “Noetic Universe.”

18 The Greek word *numphe* (nymph) comes to mean “bride” (Mallory and Adams 2006, 208; Karenberg 2013, 13).

19 Also, for the ancient Romans, purple was an imperial color, seen as a sign of authority. “Porphyrogenite” means “born in the purple” and is derived from the Greek words *profureos* (purple) and *ghemmao* (to generate). The word was a title in the Byzantine Empire, used for the children of the emperor. There was a palace chamber (purple palace) known as the *Porphyra*, which was used by empresses to give birth (Rapelli 2011, 46). For the sea-purple color, see Anderson 2003, 206–09.

20 The word *tomb* is derived from the old English word *wamba*, meaning cave, and *wamba* is derived from the word *wambe*, meaning womb (Sjöö 1987, 131). These words show us how the womb, the cave, and the tomb are related.

21 Rudolph Brasch gives the following explanation for the origin of the honeymoon, which refers to its relationship with sexuality: “the most likely origin of the phrase is an old Scandinavian, and generally Northern European custom, of drinking honeyed wine or other kinds of diluted and fermented honey as an aphrodisiac during the first month of marriage” (Brasch 1990, 45).

22 Neumann states that all honey comes from the moon, which means that honey is another symbol of menstrual blood: “The beehive is an attribute of the Great Goddess as Demeter-Ceres-Spes. But the bee is also associated with the moon: the priestesses of the moon goddess were called ‘bees,’ and it was believed that all honey came from the moon, the hive whose bees were the stars” (Neumann 2015, 267). Honey is related to death because someone who died must return to the primeval waters to rebirth.

23 Here the Moon (goddess Selene) is associated with the sensible world because the Moon is the gateway for descending souls to Earth. But Saturn (god) is associated with the intellectual world because Saturn is the gateway for ascending souls to the noetic universe. Therefore, we can say that the feminine principle is considered earthly. This can be compared to the story of Eve, as she is seen as responsible for the fall from Heaven to Earth.

24 Akçay interprets goddess Athena as *phronesis* (φρόνησις) (Akçay 2018).

25 Regarding the separateness between the cave and the olive tree, Akçay states that, “For Porphyry, Homer’s image of the olive tree and Athena as separate from the cave means that acquisition of *phronesis* is the first step in achieving a state of impassivity towards all kinds of pleasures, emotions, power and wealth which belong to the material world. Porphyry underlines the ‘evergreenness of the olive tree’ ... The guidance of eternal and evergreen *phronesis*, located at the top of the cosmos, is apparently in sharp contrast with the process of genesis which is reflected in ‘ever-flowing water,’ ἀέντων ὕδωρ under the protection of Naiad nymphs at the bottom” (Akçay 2019, 168); see also Akçay 2018.

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