



FIGURE 12. Rafael Rachel Neis, *Hyenas*. Ink on paper, 2022.

Generation

*garbage-gut humans should not continue ourselves
it can only come a frightful cropper*

—JULIAN TALAMANTEZ BROLASKI, “AGAINST BREEDING”

IN THIS BOOK, I HAVE USED THE TERM “GENERATION” AS MUCH AS “REPRODUCTION.” I have done so to interrupt the ease with which we might be tempted to think about “reproduction” as a transhistorical, continuous, phenomenon. This might seem counterintuitive to some, for surely there is nothing more stable as the very “*facts of life*.” The *Oxford English Dictionary* documents something along these lines. In two entries under the word “fact” it defines “facts of life.” The first refers to the phrase as “a thing that cannot be changed and so needs to be accepted, however unpleasant or unpalatable that may be; a (stark) reality of existence.” The second, “the details of human sexual functions and practices, especially as given to children,” is dubbed a colloquialism. We can already see some of the constraints that the obvious conceals: the link between the idea that “life’s” facticity is given and a particularly narrow understanding of the subjects of this “life” as humans. This narrowing conforms with the relatively recent entry of “reproduction” into our lexicon. Historians of science and medicine describe the shift that occurred in European languages in the mid-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as a more humancentric conception of life bound up with industrialization and production. Susanne Lettow shows how from the mid-eighteenth through nineteenth centuries, the new “reproduction” was “constituted through the three interrelated biopolitical problematics of ‘population,’ ‘race,’ and ‘gender,’” the latter “enmeshed with ideas of sexual complementarity.”¹ These studies demonstrate the ways in which science and culture are inextricably linked: hence the recourse to the neologism “natureculture.”

In both their more colloquial and technical variants, accounts of reproduction today often create and replicate specific kinds of cultural work. These accounts are often rooted in the idea that coitus is essential, focus on reproductive “rights” or “choice,” and implicitly center white, cisgender, heterosexual, and able-bodied

humans.² That “reproduction” is a recent coinage and that it does not properly describe the full range of how most beings—including humans—generate, even in the present, is affirmed by a range of scholarship in and on science and medicine. This research demonstrates the range of ways that life proliferates, the diversity of ways that humans generate, and how the latter goes well beyond cherished conventional stories about two people engaging in coitus.³ While reproduction is so freighted for us, it can be salutary and humbling to confront how life can proliferate by so many other means. Seeking to similarly widen our gaze, this book as a whole has sought to bring the full otherness of ancient generation into view.⁴ As part of this effort, it has pointed to the multiplicity of actors, both human and nonhuman, as well as the variety of *modes* involved in life-making.⁵

In this chapter, I turn to two types of evidence—in the Talmud and in the Babylonian incantation bowls—and attempt to build on this generative multiplicity. While the arena of human proliferation can particularly attract the desire to promote certain kinds of normativity and to curtail nonnormativity, we experiment here and ask what happens when we read ancient Jewish sources without limiting ourselves to our default humancentric, dual notions of gender, sexuality, and “reproduction.”

GENERATION BEYOND HUMAN DYADIC COITUS

Before conducting these alternate readings, let us recall that coming into being in antiquity could involve a variety of actors—more than two—and multiple mechanisms. The latter included spontaneous generation; parthenogenesis; and interspecies generation.⁶ The signature characteristic of these differently generated beings is that they are not the products of two heterosexual, same-species beings engaging in coitus. In this sense, they are the ultimate breakers of the rule that like begets like. Earth, silt, water, oil, and wine beget mice, flies, mosquitoes; rotting flesh or other organic material generate bees, flies, maggots, and worms.⁷

As we will see in our examination of Babylonian incantation bowls, the role of nonhumans in human reproduction is accounted for in a variety of ways. We see this in earlier sources, too: in the (roughly) third-century CE Mekhilta, God is figured as an artist commissioned to paint a portrait of a son in the image of its father. No uterus or gestating parent is mentioned.⁸ All that is needed is God as artisan and the ingredient of “a drop of water.”⁹ On the one hand, this is patrilineal generation in a dyadic relation with the nonhuman/divine; on the other hand, it renders men’s contribution entirely passive. The Mekhilta’s conception and generation is a curious reconfiguration of Aristotle. Where for Aristotle the female provides inert matter or blood, which agentive male seed forms in the manner of an “artist,” here divine artistry molds the passive matter of *male* seed.

The absenting of women in the Mekhilta differs from those rabbinic accounts of “three partners” in generation. Here there is a divine-(hetero)human threesome.

The rabbis also think about what happens when a *fourth* actor enters the scene under the aegis of “adultery” (for them always entailing a married woman and a man who is not her spouse). The fifth-century CE Palestinian midrash, *Leviticus Rabbah*, describes a scenario in which a pregnant woman “ruins” the fetus as portrait of her spouse: she has sex with another man, making God’s “hands shake.”¹⁰ In a more sanguine scenario, Palestinian amoraim rely on God’s first person plural declaration “let us make *adam* in our image” (Genesis 1:26) to signify that the generation of the human (*adam*) is a three-way enterprise.¹¹

Vision is another way in which actors outside marital relationships enter human—and nonhuman—generation. These entrants upset tropes that rely on parental (not to mention paternal,) mimesis and can introduce women’s erotic and generative agency. Thus, the fifth-century CE midrash *Genesis Rabbah* elaborates the story in which “the sons of God saw the daughters of humans; and they took them as wives” (Genesis 6:2) and “came in unto the daughters of men and generated children to them” (Genesis 6:4). Reversing the dynamic in which the sons of God saw the human women, the midrash declares: “a woman would go out into the marketplace, and she would see a young man (*bahur*) and desire (*mit’avah*) him. She would go serve her bed (have sex with her spouse: *meshameshet mitatah*) and bring forth a young man like him.”¹² These women transfer their desire—and vision—to the marital bed and their ensuing progeny. Their process allows far more agency than the passivity conjured by the term “maternal impressions.”¹³ The active posture is ever so unsightly tagged as transgressive by these women going out into the marketplace.

Such objects of vision involving reproduction were also used proactively. *Genesis Rabbah* recounts how Jacob compelled female sheep to gaze at spotted rods while being mounted by rams in order to engineer a different patterned wool in their progeny.¹⁴ A variety of sources testify to the technique—gazing at particular visual objects during intercourse—in human and nonhuman generation in Greek, Roman, and Persian contexts.¹⁵ This mechanism is transferred to men in the *Bavli*.¹⁶ Likewise, the *Bavli* suggests that in the wake of Jewish enslavement, elite Roman couples gazed at bound young captives who replaced the seals previously used.¹⁷ Here, the Babylonian rabbis incorporate a coercive, homoerotic dimension into the threesome. Perhaps more transgressively, this anecdote suggests that Roman elites were effectively reproducing Jews. It is thus that various parties—Israelite youths, sons of God, signets, painted rods—intrude on dyadic cisheterosexual reproduction via the eyes. *Genesis Rabbah* also presents an alternative view about how Jacob’s visual technique operated. The claim supposes that no rams were introduced. Rather, as an amora has it, the water that the sheep drank was transformed into seed: a novel mode of reproduction involving no male parent.

This variety of mechanisms—including in scenarios involving humans—allow outsiders to “straight” sex between dyads of man-woman to become tangled in conception. Other kinds of nonhuman entrants to heterosexual human marriage

also feature in later rabbinic accounts of generation. Genesis Rabbah reads the “all” in Eve’s title “mother of all who live” (Genesis 3:20) expansively to include spirits. During a period of sexual separation between Eve and Adam, we learn that “male spirits (*ruḥot ha-zekharim*) were heated (*mithamenin*) by her and she would give birth (*yoledet*) and female spirits (*ruḥot neqevot*) became heated (*mithamemot*) by Adam and would give birth (*yoldot*).”¹⁸ The implication here is that a generative mechanism involving heat joined humans and demons—seemingly heterosexually, though it is unclear whether this is knowingly or consensually on both parts—and that these unions were generative of progeny.

The Bavli transmits a variation on this theme focusing solely on Adam in which he begets (*holid*) spirits, demons, and Liliths. This ostensibly explains why the Bible declares that Adam begat (*holid*) Seth in his image and likeness at the age of 130 (Gen 5:3). Until then he abstained from sex with Eve, but (as the Bavli explains) through involuntary seminal emissions he generated those quasi-demonic offspring who were *not* in the image and likeness of the fully human/*adam*.¹⁹ In a chronologically reversed exegesis, Genesis Rabbah extrapolates that *after* the generations of Adam, Seth, and Enoch, humans ceased being born “in the likeness and in the image.” Instead—in a play on Kenan (Enoch’s firstborn, Gen 5:9–14)—they were born centaurs (*kintorin*).²⁰ The Zoroastrian Bundahišn tells of how demons interfere with the sex drives of the primal human couple Mašyā and Mašyāne, who, succumbing to them, cannot get themselves to have sex with each other for fifty years.²¹ It also recounts that the mythical Iranian king Jam and his sister/wife Jamag each married demons and that these unions generated “harmful” creatures.²² While elements of the preoccupation with seed resonate with the Bavli, the attention to both members of the human couple matches human-demonic non/generative encounters in Palestinian sources.²³ It is with some of this variety in mind—the plurality of actors and mechanisms, and also with this sense of the ways that humans become generatively linked with nonhuman beings—that we turn to a narrative about nonmonogamous generation in the Babylonian Talmud and then to the demons, in particular Lilith, in the Aramaic incantation bowls.

THE DAUGHTERS OF ISRAEL AND RABBI YOḤANAN

The Bavli arranges and assembles a variety of traditions attributed to, and narratives about, tannaim, and Palestinian and Babylonian amoraim. The form in which it reaches us—in discernable literary units (*sugyot*), with a sizeable editorial layer, sequenced across tractates—is understood by scholars to be the work of later anonymous editors (*stammaim*). These editors are supposed to have flourished in the sixth and seventh centuries and perhaps beyond.²⁴ The passage we examine is inserted within a larger framing passage and is considered to be late.²⁵ Our story features Rabbi Yoḥanan, a third-century Palestinian amora, and is embedded amid a long narrative sequence about the second-century Palestinian tanna, Rabbi

Eleazar son of Shimon. A crucial motif in this framing narrative is generation. The theme emerges most obviously just before, and as a pivot to, Rabbi Yoḥanan's entry, when a Roman matron casts aspersions on the legitimacy of the children of Rabbi Eleazar son of Simon and Rabbi Ishmael son of Yose given their size. As the Talmud puts it, "a herd of oxen could pass between them without touching them" (bBava Metsia 84a).

The pivot to the embedded sequence with Rabbi Yoḥanan as protagonist is achieved when Rabbi Yoḥanan reports on the size of Rabbi Ishmael's penis. Printed edition and manuscripts, but *not* the one that we follow here, also include a tradition about Yoḥanan's.²⁶ Yoḥanan's next statement introduces the narrative that then follows, which I present minus the interruption of the later editorial layer of the Bavli: the latter I signal with an ellipsis.²⁷

Rabbi Yoḥanan said, "I am one of the last of the Jerusalem beauties." . . .

Rabbi Yoḥanan would go sit at the opening of the [place of ritual] immersion, saying, "when the daughters of Israel come up,²⁸ let them gaze at me that they will have seed (or offspring, *zara*) as beautiful as me."²⁹

They (other rabbis) said to them (Yoḥanan), "our rabbi, are you not concerned about the eye?"

[Yoḥanan] said to them: "I come from the seed of Joseph and the evil eye does not rule over Joseph's seed."

As it says, "Joseph is a fruitful vine, a fruitful vine by a fountain" (Genesis 49:22).³⁰

Yoḥanan performatively announces their own singular and nearly extinct beauty, which they reiterate as they explicate the reasoning for their appearance to Israelite women's eyes. These women are emerging from the ritual bath, marking the end of menstrual impurity and the laconic narrative arguably implies that they're on their way to have sex with their spouses. This, then, is akin to the Palestinian Genesis Rabbah's read of how the daughters of humans viewed objects of their desire only to later bed their spouses and conceive offspring like the sons of God. In the Bavli, the anecdote moves from the women's eye to their seed ("they gaze"; "seed"), which is then chiastically reinforced as Yoḥanan signals that, as "seed" of Joseph, they are immune to the evil "eye."

Let us consider a more radical possibility for the kind of conception that Yoḥanan proposes at the mikveh. Read without the implication that these women go home and sleep with their spouses, one is tempted to wonder whether Yoḥanan is describing a process of conception that is more akin to the view in Genesis Rabbah in which sheep imbibe water-become-seed while gazing at spotted rods. A parallel text that recounts the Yoḥanan/women episode, precedes it with another (bBerakhot 20a). Rav Giddal also sits at the ritual immersion entrance, but his practice was to correct the women while they immersed themselves. In that case, he is challenged about his evil inclination. His defense is that the women "appear" (*damyan*) to him as white geese. Then, in what is clearly an inversion, we read the anecdote about Rabbi Yoḥanan sitting in the same place. Instead of Giddal looking

at these naked women, Yoḥanan appears as the visual object of these immersing women. In that case, then, it makes sense to ask given Yoḥanan is the one who is seen, whether they are not worried about the evil eye. Here it also makes sense to understand that women are as proximate as in the previous scenario, immersing and rising to the surface to gaze at Yoḥanan. Consider, then, the possibility that the Bavli's protagonist Yoḥanan relies on a mechanism akin to the midrash's account of sheep who gaze at spotted rods as they imbibe water turned into semen. If the Bavli's storytellers are signaling that something in the very water effects conception of Yoḥanan look-alikes, we find a suggestive narrative about the Zoroastrian savior figure. In the Bundahišn, a Pahlavi composition that probably reached its final form around the ninth century CE, the seed of Zoroaster, "entrusted to the divine Anahid," is secreted in a lake. Over three eras, three savior figures—Saošyant—are born when a virgin bathes in the lake and Zoroaster's "Glory will mingle with her body and she will become pregnant."³¹

Yoḥanan's vulnerability to the evil eye consists in their ostentatious display of beauty.³² Their ability to withstand the evil eye, like their aesthetic quality, is a matter of pedigree; related to this is their generativity—the fruitful vine (*ben porat*) that is Joseph being Jacob's deathbed blessing. It is also a form of ritual power (what some would call "magical" skill). Indeed, elsewhere the Bavli recommends that one who enters a city and is afraid of the evil eye can recite Yoḥanan's words ("I come from the seed of Joseph . . .") as an incantation.³³ Do this, it specifies, while placing each thumb (*ziqpa*, or an erection) in the opposite hand, making a double *mano fica* (fig., hand): an ancient and ubiquitous gesture possibly representing a phallus penetrating or emerging from a vulva, an apotropaic symbol, along with the phallus on its own.³⁴

Elsewhere the Bavli and Palestinian sources link this exegesis on Jacob's blessing to Joseph (and seed) and sexual temptation. In those sources, and here, instead of the Joseph being a "fruitful vine (*ben porat*), a fruitful vine by a spring (*aley ayin*)" (Gen. 49:22), Joseph and seed are a "fruitful vine that transcends the eye (*oley ayin*).³⁵ The exegesis continues by summoning an earlier blessing (Gen. 48:16) that Jacob gave Joseph and children: "and may they multiply into a multitude (*veyidgu larov*) in the midst of the earth (*bekerev haarets*).³⁶ Reading the verb *veyidgu* (*d.g.h.*) as fish (*dagah*), we note, relatedly, that it says: "just as fish (*dagim*) in the sea, the water covers over them (*alehem*), so that the evil eye (*ayin ra 'ah*) cannot dominate them, so, too, the evil eye cannot dominate the seed of Joseph."³⁷ This full midrash is presented after Yoḥanan's own defensive words, transparently binding the themes of the evil eye, fruitfulness, multiplication, and Joseph's seed in water.

Related to the proliferation of seed/progeny is the very device that brought Yoḥanan in originally: Yoḥanan's affirmation of the fruitfulness of the framing story's protagonists. Echoing that move, the Bavli's anonymous editorial voice steps in to affirm Yoḥanan's beauty—marked in the quotation above by the ellipsis between Yoḥanan's first pronouncement about their beauty and the ritual bath anecdote.

The editor recommends a procedure if one “desires to see Rabbi Yoḥanan’s beauty.” One must procure a freshly forged silver cup, fill it with pomegranate seeds, frame its rim with roses, and then set it in the spot between sunlight and shade. And lo, you have “Rabbi Yoḥanan’s beauty.” The phrasing, “one who desires to see . . . let them . . .” and the content of these instructions, ingredients, and actions amount to a ritual recipe (or “magical” ritual) for conjuring Yoḥanan’s beauty.³⁶ I would go further and propose that the editor’s placement of this recipe, inserted in between Yoḥanan’s declaration of beauty and the episode at the ritual bath, suggests it is offered as an alternative summons for a vision of Yoḥanan’s generative beauty. In other words, I suggest that this is one of several techniques, of which we find quite a few in the Bavli, for manipulating generation: a how-to for those at home who want to beget Yoḥanan-like progeny. The incorporation of pomegranate seeds—a fertility symbol—marks this openly as such. Ritual power (or “magic”) reverberates through the passage, including in Yoḥanan’s incantation of immunity against the evil eye. As we will see in the next section on Babylonian bowls, the evil eye and averting its deleterious effects served as an important impetus for incantations.

Having affirmed Yoḥanan’s self-reported fabulosity, the editorial voice (in typical fashion) challenges it.³⁷

Is that so? But didn’t the master say, “Rav Kahana’s beauty (*me’ein shufrey*) is like the beauty of Rav; Rav’s beauty is like the beauty of Rabbi Abbahu’s; Rabbi Abbahu’s beauty is like the beauty of our forefather Jacob’s; our forefather Jacob’s beauty was like the beauty of the first Adam.”³⁸

This list constitutes a select chain of people whose beauty is ultimately derived—*me’ein shufrey*, literally “from (*me*) the eye or appearance (*ayin*)”—from that of the primeval human, who was in God’s own image. Surely, if Yoḥanan’s looks matched their boast, they would be there.³⁹ The counter is: “Rabbi Yoḥanan did not have *hadrat panim*.” Elsewhere in the Bavli, a sage insults someone as a eunuch (*gozaa*) for not having children, a spouse, or “*hadrat panim*” (glory of the face); the latter is explained as referring to a “beard” (*zaqan*).⁴⁰ Lack of facial hair is further racialized: in a disturbing discussion of Tamar, the Babylonian amora Rava notes that Israelite women have a unique beauty in that they produce no armpit or groin hair, but that Tamar (inversely to Yoḥanan) was “different” in this regard because she was the daughter of a captive (gentile) woman.⁴¹ The term *hadrat panim* itself alludes to the Aramaic *h.d.r.*—that is, to return, repeat, circle. In fact, a beard encircles the face with hair, and so forms a literal *hadrat panim*. The motif of encircling is one of the elements in the Yoḥanan conjuring recipe that calls for “encircling” (*h.d.r.*) a silver goblet with roses.⁴² And, as we see, the associations conjured by Yoḥanan’s peculiar genre of beauty threaten variables that materialize gendered bodies.

To reiterate, Yoḥanan’s claim to exceptional beauty is upheld, despite their omission, precisely because theirs is a different kind of beauty than the list’s bearded members.⁴³ Notably, Yoḥanan is Joseph’s seed. The Bible describes Joseph, unlike

“Jacob our father,” as beautiful but Joseph is also not on our list: here is another character whose gender variation the rabbis emphasize. Adam *is* on the list. Yet some rabbinic exegeses read Genesis’s account of God creating the first human literally, as a creature who was both “male *and* female” or, in rabbinic parlance, *androgynus*.⁴⁴ While God ultimately severs this *androgynus* human into two (man and woman) and thus relegates the *androgynus* default to a mythical past, rabbinic ritual deliberations also recognized ongoing variety in gendered embodiment, including *androgynus* people. If a “facial glory” signifies anything, it is a particular concept of masculinity. Yoḥanan, however, has a singular beauty, a unique genealogy, a different gender. Their beauty troubles a stable binary sexgender scheme. But whose? The Babylonian storytellers’ or ours?

You’ll notice by now that I’ve been using “they” for Yoḥanan. I’m doing this even though the Hebrew and Aramaic describing them uses masculine pronouns and verb endings, and even though classical Aramaic and Hebrew inflects all grammatical subjects—animate or inanimate—of verbs, adjectives, pronouns, and nouns, in a binary gendered fashion. Our hesitation to entertain sexgender multiplicity when translating languages whose grammars seems to only express gender duality for fear that it is an imposition, or our concerns about anachronism might make my move challenging. I would suggest that such hesitation is as much about our own culturally shaped—and uneven—commitments regarding sexgender. The sense that sexgender beyond male and female is anachronistic, if applied to a cultural epoch outside the present, is rooted in the conviction (sometimes explicit and sometimes unacknowledged) that cisness—meaning the idea of binary sexgender—is an essential and transhistorical phenomenon.

To unpack this further, let me reiterate what I mean by the term binary sexgender. First, I use the term “sexgender” to deliberately fuse what is often taken to be a distinction between sex—as biological, something given and natural—versus culturally enacted and shaped gender. That is, I take sex itself to be a culturally instantiated product of shifting variables—including scientization, racialization, disability, and species. Indeed, as queerfeminist theorists and feminist science scholars have shown, “sex” (like other dimensions of “nature”) is inseparable from culture. This does not mean that it is not embodied. It means that there is no neutral ground before culture: hence sexgender. Binary sexgender then refers to the convictions or ways of thinking that presume there is only male and female (and, correspondingly, masculine and feminine), or that view variation outside these possibilities as exceptions or deviations. This is a cultural commitment to reading a variety of data—be they “cultural” or “biological”—in a binary fashion, rather than recognizing their multiplicity and variety.⁴⁵ A commitment to binary sexgender is a commitment to cisnormativity.

As scholars, we—and I include myself—often take cisness for granted and as the default without even realizing it. We tend to be cisnormative interpreters. By this I mean that we do not question but instead center an account of “sex” and its

alignments with forms of embodiment that we take to be legible, stable, and also dual. We naturalize this understanding of embodiment and sexgender *as nature* (or “sex” as opposed to “gender”), an understanding heavily informed by contemporary notions of “common sense” and “biological” Euro-American accounts. Cisness is taken to be the unmarked, transhistorical ground—the way things always were/are—against which transness or nonbinarity must define itself, and over which it historically emerged. In other words, only transness is an historical phenomenon, and a recent one at that, rendering it a deviation from what is taken to be the long-established norm. Not only this; given the invisible hold of cisness, “queerness” can often be deployed to uphold it when a person’s “gender” doesn’t “conform” to the certainty of sexgender alignments and expected embodiments. Thus, for instance, scholars (including me) have read Yoḥanan as queer, in one or both ways. First, by taking sex to be naturalized dually, they have read Yoḥanan as genderqueer, “effeminate,” and/or enacting a very particular form of rabbinic “masculinity.”⁴⁶ Second, they have read the interaction between Yoḥanan and any number of actors—Resh Laqish (whom we will soon encounter in this passage), for example, or the Bavli’s storyteller or editor—to express homoerotic desire of some kind. These gendered and eroticized forms of queerness have served to preserve the character’s cisness and even shore up a hierarchical heteronormativity that is ultimately uncompromised by homoeroticism.⁴⁷

How does this all relate to Aramaic, Hebrew, and grammatical gender? Sometimes the argument against considering past (or contemporary) sexgender variation and multiplicity in languages that have binary grammatical gender is that this multiplicity is impossible if one wishes to maintain fidelity to linguistic norms (e.g., in rabbinic Hebrew). This assumes a rather narrow theory of translation, as well as a very transparent view of language and its relationship to sexgender, embodiment, and culture. And, of course, it often fails to acknowledge multiplicity in the “target language”—for us English—both past and present.

Linguists note that English is a language of great variability when it comes to gender. Even a conservative characterization of English as a triple pronominal gender system (he, she, and it) with relative pronouns (who and which) that distinguish along the lines of animacy hierarchy must admit the variability of gender assignments.⁴⁸ Thus, a cat can be he, she, or it, though certain animals are rarely referred to as “he” or “she.” A ship can be it or she.⁴⁹ Linguists have noted many more examples, in which speaker perspective or affect can shift pronoun usage, to the extent that some declare that English has no fixed gender system.⁵⁰ As outlined in my note on style at the beginning of this book, I have chosen to work against the predilection in English to deny the animacy of nonhuman animals by using the neutral “they” and at times “he” or “she.” And this leads me to my second reassurance for those who worry that it is anachronistic to use “they” as an English translation for binary-gendered Aramaic and Hebrew words. In Hebrew and Aramaic all nouns are gendered (and verbs, adjectives, and pronouns agree) in a binary

fashion. This pertains to all entities: human, animal, plant, mineral, and otherwise. Thus, a bed—*mitah*—is feminine and a table—*shulhan*—is masculine. Yet, all the time, we blithely translate these words, as well as animal vocabulary in Hebrew, using “it” as the singular pronoun, rather than “he” or “she.” We freely assign “it”—a neutral gender—despite the “source” language specifying otherwise. That we do so without any caveats or reflection says everything about how our commitments to dual gender (as a kind of cisnormativity) and humanness—as Max Strassfeld and Mel Chen have argued—are intertwined.⁵¹ To assume that grammatical gender binaries in ancient languages necessarily mapped onto a directly corresponding sexgender “reality” (or our own limited conception thereof) is to ascribe a realistic epistemology and the correspondence theory of truth to all language (or at least to ancient languages). That is a lot to assume.⁵² Instead, I suggest we make room for the possibility that our own limitations in languaging or conceptualizing sexgender beyond duality were not necessarily those of late ancient people.

By conjuring nonbinarity or gender plurality for Rabbi Yoḥanan—a little like the evocative yet nonhuman object-oriented process for conjuring their beauty—I seek to open a space for the possibility of Rabbi Yoḥanan *not* being what *we* might think of as a cisgender man. Certainly, this ought to be as plausible to countenance as the by now neutral request to forgive the “anachronism” of positing Yoḥanan (or their progenitor Joseph) as queer. Of course, I am not making a biographical claim: rather, I suggest instead that the storytellers and editors of the Bavli shape the figure of Yoḥanan as someone who doesn’t quite fall on either side of a sexgender binary.⁵³

Recall that the framing narrative had paused after introducing an insult calling into question rabbinic propagation: “your children are not yours.” Having ostensibly dispelled any ensuing disquiet by wielding a set of penises, and having now dwelt on Yoḥanan’s beauty, the embedded tale ventured back into the same morass, this time with Yoḥanan deliberately introducing themselves into the “seed” of (or in my more suggestive reading, by introducing their seed into) the “daughters of Israel.”⁵⁴ We will return to those mechanics shortly, but for now we will move to the next episode in the Yoḥanan subplot that solidifies my claim about Yoḥanan:

One day they (Yoḥanan) were bathing in the waters of the Jordan, and Resh Laqish came by.⁵⁵ They (Yoḥanan) looked like a woman (*damyey ke-itetah*).⁵⁶

He (Resh Laqish) thrust his spear in the Jordan and leapt behind them (Yoḥanan).⁵⁷

They (Yoḥanan) said to him: your strength is of the ~~ox~~ Torah (*le-tura orayta*).⁵⁸

He said to them: your beauty is of women.

They said to him: if you withdraw yourself (*hadarat bakh*), I have a sister who is more beautiful than I am and I will give her to you.

He withdrew himself (*hadar beih*).⁵⁹ He wanted to return (*lemeihadar*) to get his gear but he wasn’t able to.⁶⁰

Yoḥanan, rather than the “daughters of Israel,” is now immersed in water. Like the latter, Yoḥanan is presumably unclothed and they look like a woman. The version of the tale we are following has “and Resh Laqish came by, and they (Yoḥanan)

looked like a woman.”⁶¹ This is different from other witnesses that have “Resh Laqish saw them (*hazyey*) and he (Resh Laqish) thought they were a woman (*savar ke’ittetah*).” The latter versions endeavor to clarify that it is Resh Laqish’s subjective and mistaken impression that casts Yoḥanan as a woman, thereby upholding Yoḥanan’s sexgender as a man. Our version does not make this a question of Resh Laqish’s perspective and faulty perception; instead, the omniscient narrator describes Yoḥanan’s appearance, which is in concert with the earlier part of the passage about their lack of masculine marked beauty. Resh Laqish’s approach to R. Yoḥanan is aggressive, proximate, and direct “thrust his spear . . . leapt behind them.” This should be contrasted with the version in the Hamburg manuscript:

He (Resh Laqish) leapt to the Jordan after them (Yoḥanan). He (Resh Laqish) stuck his lance in the Jordan and vaulted to the other side of the Jordan. When Rabbi Yoḥanan saw Resh Laqish they said to him . . .

In this version Resh Laqish approaches Yoḥanan from a distance initially, rather circuitously, to end up on the other side of the river. Its additional detail—“when Rabbi Yoḥanan saw Resh Laqish”—implies less of a physical approach and adds an interval of space or time, during which Yoḥanan realizes the presence of Resh Laqish.⁶² These extra elements thicken a comedy of errors or “mistaken-identity” plot-line in which Resh Laqish, as Daniel Boyarin has it, “misprises” Rabbi Yoḥanan’s gender because of the “distance” between them.⁶³ Contrast these details absent in our version, in which instead Resh Laqish leaps into the river, right behind Yoḥanan, with the latter responding immediately.

The thrusting spear has been interpreted as a phallic metaphor. Yoḥanan earlier claimed to be impervious to the evil eye. Notably, phallic imagery was used ubiquitously in the ancient Middle East to ward off the evil eye. Paintings, amulets, and other media depicted entities such as a phallus, spear, snake, or lion thrusting into the evil eye. The evidence ranges from Arabia to Dura-Europos and from Rome to Palestine.⁶⁴ Therefore the doubled reversal of Resh Laqish’s lance/ phallic assault in the face of Yoḥanan’s prior claim would not be lost on readers.

The ensuing exchange is cryptic:

They (Yoḥanan) said to him (Resh Laqish): your strength is your strength is for (or, of) the ~~ox~~ Torah (*le-tura orayta*).

He (Resh Laqish) said to them (Yoḥanan): your beauty is of women.

The Florence manuscript has Yoḥanan describe Resh Laqish’s strength in bovine terms. The word “ox” (*tura*) is then struck out and Torah (*orayta*) is penned on top. While this is the only textual witness of “ox,” and while it has been corrected, it is a poignant error (if it was one) as it lines up with other characteristics of this story version. These include the following: its brevity in key instances and its omission of plot elements that tend to either neutralize the physicality and proximity of the encounter between Yoḥanan and Resh Laqish, and the absence of features that

undermine the literalism of Yoḥanan's sexgender or that emphasize the subjective and erroneous perception of Resh Laqish.

This manuscript preserves a significantly different version of the passage overall. It has fewer glosses than others (including Hamburg), particularly fewer explanatory phrases, such as putting Resh Laqish's attack on Rabbi Yoḥanan down to a case of mistaken identity, or preserving more physical distance between the two. It generally presents a more compact, coherent (anachronistic as that may be), and perhaps, for some tastes, a less "pious" version of the passage.⁶⁵ On this reading, it is not implausible if Yoḥanan reacts to Resh Laqish's forceful and seemingly nonconsensual sexual advance by casting his force as bovine. This is rather different from Yoḥanan righteously advising Resh Laqish to redirect it to the higher purposes of Torah study.⁶⁶

Palestinian midrashim in fact make a similar move. Genesis Rabbah narrates that Yoḥanan's claimed ancestor Joseph, a legendary gender-variant figure, is confronted by a bear—a motif also alluding to sexual aggression. In one exegesis this bear is Potiphar's wife; in another the bear is Potiphar.⁶⁷ In the case of Potiphar, divine intervention involves his castration, which the midrash depicts as the bear's defanging. In the encounter with Potiphar's wife, we can find key elements in the midrash parable that are present in our narrative: a gender-variant character announces and displays their beauty and is then almost immediately attacked by a figurative bear who attempts to have sex with them.⁶⁸ These themes of Joseph and animal sexuality resound yet louder considering Yoḥanan's citation of Joseph. If "ox" was indeed the intended word here, then its use nicely echoes the framing narrative's "herd of oxen" (*baqra detura*), which testify to the size of Rabbi Ishmael and Rabbi Eleazar.⁶⁹ The ox itself is a classic figure in southwest Asia known for its unpredictable violence and danger, and this reputation continued as the rabbis parsed biblical rules about liability, as well as human obligations to oxen exploited in agricultural contexts—a subject of inquiry in this very chapter and tractate.⁷⁰

On the reading of "Torah" rather than "ox," what we seem to have is Yoḥanan exclaiming, on being confronted by Resh Laqish and his lance, that his force would be ideal for—or better directed to—the labor of Torah study. The notion that Torah study is weakening is found in other rabbinic contexts and is arguably presaged in the end of this scene when Resh Laqish finds himself unable to retrieve his "gear."⁷¹

Resh Laqish's retort to Yoḥanan quite straightforwardly confirms the storyteller's earlier statement that Yoḥanan "appeared as a woman." "Your beauty is of women," he says. On my reading, this is a frank doubling down of what attracted Resh Laqish in the first place (not a regretful statement). This is harder to sustain in the face of those manuscript versions that gloss Resh Laqish's attack as based on an erroneous gender identification ("Resh Laqish *thought* they were a woman"). Centering this error as explanation, allows scholars to read the two protagonists as the two men (one "masculine," the other "effeminate") whose responses mirror one another: "your strength *should be* for Torah," and "your beauty *should be* for

women.” In other words, the anecdote becomes a story of two men admiringly or enviously seeking to redirect each other’s appeal.⁷² Relatedly, one might read “your beauty is *of* women” to indicate that Yoḥanan has a kind of femme beauty, which is taken to support a homoerotic reading.⁷³

Yoḥanan deflects with the desperate but disturbing offer of a sister “more beautiful than I am” but only “if you withdraw (*h.d.r.*) yourself.”⁷⁴ Most—myself included—have read this, plausibly enough, as “if you repent.”⁷⁵ I now propose that we read that instruction quite plainly, with the prior phallic thrust. Yoḥanan bargains with their assailant: if he retracts his threat or phallus, they will “give” their sister to him. Resh Laqish does so, then tries to “withdraw” (*hadar*, *leme-hadar*) to get his “gear” (*maneh*) and finds that he cannot. Here again, I suggest allusions to the rabbinic Joseph. In some accounts, when Joseph, like Yoḥanan, is attacked by Potiphar’s wife, they find themselves sexually responsive: “the bow was extended.” Yet they manage to “retract” (*hazar*, Hebrew; equivalent to *hadar*, Aramaic).⁷⁶ In something of a turnaround, it is the assailant here, Resh Laqish, who is thus quelled. He retracts his lance, perhaps unchastened, tries to retrieve it, but finds he can no longer access his “gear.”⁷⁷ In this scene, at least, Yoḥanan has confounded him.

In sum, this manuscript’s narrative provides a coherent, tight, though less pious version than the version usually read by scholars. Yoḥanan wishes to proliferate their singular arguably nonbinary beauty and seed, taking unusual measures as women surface from immersing in water, but confident in their proliferative and invulnerable inheritance.⁷⁸ When Yoḥanan bathes, Resh Laqish jumps in right behind them, his lance proffered. In the first round, Yoḥanan exclaims about Resh Laqish’s taurine qualities; this then becomes a redirection to Torah study. In the Florence manuscript, Resh Laqish never explicitly “accepted upon himself” Yoḥanan’s proposal.⁷⁹ These elements—together with the earlier representations of Yoḥanan as a person whose embodied sexgender does not conform to a cisgender binary—amount to a tale about a person whose effects on others are generative and unpredictably potent.⁸⁰

Taking all this to heart does not make this a tale about a “mistake”—a trope that presumes that any sexgendered embodiment outside of binarity only *seems to be such* and simply needs to be ascertained, or that such nonnormative embodiment leads to confusion that must be corrected or ascertained by uncovering a person’s “real” sex. Rather, Resh Laqish sees Yoḥanan as they are—“they appear as a woman”—and doubles down on this, “your beauty, of women.” They are not exactly a man—as has been established—and they are not exactly a woman, though their beauty is often assigned as such. A noncishnormative approach lets the difficulty that this may arouse in our logics be, without trying to “compel” Yoḥanan into the category of a man or a woman.⁸¹

Turning back to the women surfacing from the waters of the mikvah, I find myself revisiting what I previously suggested elsewhere, albeit in a more

cisnormative vein. Previously I suggested that we should afford consideration to the women who, like Resh Laqish, saw Yohanan as a woman and desired them. Yohanan's beauty is indeed "for women." But I upheld a cisnormative reading by insisting on Yohanan as "passing as a woman" in a sense that ultimately upheld their cisness as a man. I therefore entertained the possibility of women's desire for women, albeit in the guise of a kind of mistake (allowed by Yohanan's gender-queerness). However, an alternative reading that does not insist on the impossibility of sexgender outside of man/woman allows that these women gazed at Yohanan with queer desire for their nonbinary embodiment. It is of course important to observe that even this agentive account for women's queer desire is figured through Yohanan's telling.⁸² We can nonetheless consider the ocular and erotic agency of those women (or femme people) "who will see" Yohanan. They, too, express a species of queer desire that is of generative potency.

RABBINIC NONBINARITY

So, am I arguing that Yohanan is nonbinary? Naturally, my answer is yes and no. First, I am not claiming or defining a specific and reified version of nonbinarity in the realm of sexgender for the present, which I then apply to the past. Rather, I hold the term lightly, aware that even now it is an umbrella term—for a variety of embodiments and ways of doing queer sexgender beyond dual cisnormativity—rather than a narrow prescription. I offer nonbinarity *as an approach* to our sources that seeks to dislodge ahistorical and essentialist perspectives on sexgender duality. The rabbis entertained a variety of sexgender embodiments, some of which they seem to have characterized as nonnormate ways of being men or women (e.g., *saris* and *'aylonit*) and others that were understood as multidimensional or utterly distinctive (e.g., androginus). It is the latter that may offer us some direction, if our concern is to place Yohanan in a potentially compatible rabbinic category. I will emphasize that my goal is not diagnostic. Furthermore, we as contemporary interpreters need not subscribe to a totalizing and systematic ritual scheme—or halakhah—as determinative. Indeed, I am not certain, despite the imperialist desire of the rabbis to subsume their known world and everything in it to their knowledge making enterprise, that we can speak of their total conviction therein. We have, after all, adduced instances where they acknowledge their own limits or the excess of what remains outside. Nonetheless, it can be helpful for us to consider that rabbinic sexgender categories admit some variety and multiplicity. For instance, the tannaim institute various signs of maturity (*simane bagrut*) to assess when or whether a child assigned as a boy or a girl has become a man or woman (respectively). Those who do not develop those "signs" are considered a person who is a *seris hammah* (born "eunuch") or *'aylonit*, respectively. The inability to produce hair (above and below) is one of the signs for the *saris*.⁸³ In tYevamot 10:6 the signs of a *saris* are someone who hasn't produced two (pubic) hairs, does not

have a beard (*zaqan*), has soft flesh (*basar*), and whose genital emissions—urine, semen—are nonnormate.⁸⁴ While most translate *basar* as skin rather than flesh, it could be understood as penis. An additional sign is a thin or weak voice, which “is not distinguishable (*niqar*) as a man’s or woman’s.” As Sarra Lev astutely notes, the latter phrasing may refer not to the voice but to the entire person.⁸⁵

Signs of maturity not only mean that a person has come of age and is now obligated to fulfill the Torah’s *mitsvot*. If a person is a saris rather than a normate adult man (or woman), they have no generative levirate obligation. The levirate is operative when a married man dies without children: his widow is expected to marry his brother and generate offspring. Pertinently, in our Bavli passage, the stakes are generative from the get-go.⁸⁶ We should also notice that, in an almost mirror levirate, Resh Laqish goes on to marry Yohanan’s sibling, who is their “more beautiful” sister. Yet generation does not really occur in our Bavli passage, or in the framing narrative, in ways that exclusively privilege what might be seen as conventional methods (e.g., coitus between cisheterosexual couples). While a saris person is treated as a man ritually, as Lev points out, beyond this treatment, the ways the rabbis talk about them indicates they didn’t see them as “entirely male.” In Lev’s words, “Ultimately, they treat him as a man, but see her as a woman.” Lev rightly reads rabbinic texts beyond the purely ritualistic. I suggest then that there are aspects of Yohanan that map onto saris.

It is also possible to view Yohanan and their treatment in these texts as congruent with the rabbinic recognition of the androgynous person. While it is plausible that being androgynous includes embodied variation of the sort that we might think of as combining “dual sexgender” based in genitalia, Lev notes “no descriptions of the androgynous whatsoever can be found in the tannaitic literature.”⁸⁷ Some have argued that despite—or even in the course of—considering androgynous people over and over again, the rabbis ultimately maintained sexgender duality. In an influential essay Charlotte Fonrobert maintains that “rabbinic halakhic discourse institutes a functional gender duality, anchored in the need of reproduction of the Jewish collective body.”⁸⁸ This scheme “imagines the human body to be sexed as either male or female,” and as genitally determinative. The Tosefta explains that circumcision happens on an organ that excludes women, being “the place where it is distinguishable whether they are male or female.”⁸⁹ However, as we saw, tannaitic sources use precisely this phrase to describe the existence of those who are “not distinguishable.” That is, the rabbis understood that recourse to an essential dualism can be insufficient.

Still, it is hard to deny that a sexgender binary plays a large part in shaping rabbinic conceptions of obligation and that, to the extent that this binary is operative, it is deeply hierarchical. It is also true that to quite an extent the same hierarchical binary shapes even rabbinic approaches to those sexgender embodiments that challenge it. Yet, several significant factors counter a reduction of rabbinic embodiments in toto to man versus woman, based in “commonsense” “sex”

assignments. First, while it is vital to expose how the rabbis varyingly place those they designated as women in subordinated positions, it is important not to do the job for them, as it were. Second, and this very much relates to the previous point, to overly prioritize an assumed sexgender binary as prior, is to do so on behalf of an imagined coherent system. This entails buying into a particular, potentially anachronistic, and certainly reified idea of “halakhah” that is exhaustive and systematic. Thirdly, and relatedly, it is to prioritize this dualism over other sexgender embodiments recognized within the system (on the basis of their minority) as well as additional embodiments that intersect with sexgender (e.g., related to ethnicity, race, or ability) and that also determine status.

The passage that is central to positioning the androginus person is tBikkurim 2:3–7:⁹⁰

The androginus person has ways they are like men and ways that they are like women, and ways that they are like men and women, and ways that they are neither like men nor women. (tBikkurim 2:3)

The passage then outlines these permutations and combinations, including the idea that an androginus person, like a man, may take a woman in marriage (*noseh*) but not be married (*nisah*) by a man.⁹¹ Elsewhere this is worked out as a problem of improper sex between men (thus potentially permitted if an androginus person has vaginal sex with a man).⁹² We may recall that Resh Laqish declaims “your beauty, of women” to Yoḥanan. One could equally translate this as “your beauty, of wives.” A coercive marriage proposal makes sense of Yoḥanan’s reply: “if you withdraw yourself, I will bring you my sister who is more beautiful than I am.”⁹³

The variety of ways that the androginus person is likened to men, women, both, and neither, exposes their embodied polyvalence and sexgender multiplicity beyond binarity. The rabbis show a conceptual flexibility in parsing them via these *four* permutations. Certainly, given that men/women form not a neutral but a hierarchical relation, it can be shown, as both Charlotte Fonrobert and Sarra Lev do, how this makes for stringencies based on their male dimensions. As the passage closes, however, the final voice is that of Rabbi Yose:

An androginus person is a creature unto themselves (*biryah le-atmo*) and the sages were unable to decide about them, whether he is a man or she is a woman (*ve-lo yakhlu hakhamim le-hakhria alav im ish hu oh isha hi*).⁹⁴

The term for “decide” (*le-hakhria*) can equally be understood in the sense of “compel” or “force,” which suggests more than indecisiveness: it denotes an inability to force or to slot the androginus person into a fixed either/or, he/she, man/woman, binary sexgender system in an essential way. This does—and did—not foreclose the pragmatic (even coercive) efforts to make them “legible” as Max Strassfeld has emphasized, even as rabbis may disagree about the particulars, for instance, when it concerns who is having sex with whom.⁹⁵ Lest one valorize the marginality of the

androgynous person, Strassfeld vividly points to the costs of being illegible under the “law.” Yet I do not take this summary or position (whichever it is) of Rabbi Yose’s to represent an aporia that banishes the androgynous person to outside the rabbis’ ritual project. That is, I understand Rabbi Yose to be describing precisely the simultaneity of the four aforementioned permutations as a form of *multiplicity* that is unique to the androgynous person. They are a combination of yes, no, both, and none. *And* they are not just defined by negation/addition or likeness/difference: they are their own creatures.⁹⁶

In our previous chapter we saw that this move toward both/and is very much a Rabbi Yose orientation. This tractate follows its discussion of androgynous people with an identically structured disquisition on the koy. Recall that in the same series laying out four permutations of likeness/difference (although, in this instance, with wild and domesticated creatures) Rabbi Yose consigned the koy with similar or even identical multiplicity: the koy is a “creature unto themselves (*biryah le’atmo*),” whom the sages also “could not compel” into an either/or of wild as opposed to domesticated.⁹⁷ As we saw, this term of “creature unto themselves” is used by the sages to carve out discrete categories. The koy is beyond the binary of wild/domesticated; containing aspects of both and elements that match neither. This is a kind of nonbinary multiplicity and complexity that Yose recognizes and summarizes and extends to other creatures like the field human and the marten. The former, declared a wild animal by the anonymous voice, is said by Rabbi Yose to possess the ultimate human feature—conveying tent corpse impurity. Likewise, the Mishnah simply asserts that the marten is a wild animal, but Rabbi Yose ascribes to them *two* kinds of purity: one typical of reptiles (*sher-atzim*); the other typical of wild animals. In the previous chapter, I described such creatures as the field human and koy as multiform. By this I meant to convey that the seeming complex morphology or form of these beings does not indicate that they are products of two different species (i.e., hybrids): they are kinds of their own. We can build on that given our consideration of binarity here. The multiplicity I have in mind here pertains not necessarily (or only) to species forms but (also) to classifications and their contents (e.g., man/woman or wild/domesticated and their entailments), and it includes content that is entirely unique to the creatures themselves.⁹⁸

NONBINARY GENERATION

How does all this classificatory multiplicity—of species and gender—help us understand the mechanics at play in bBava Metsia 84a? It might deter us from being dazzled by the chain of penises that inaugurates the switch from the main narrative to our embedded passage, especially as a naturalized understanding of what this may have meant to our ancient editors is far from clear. I suggest that the earlier rabbinic frameworks—which allow for gender variation and which are

taken up by the later rabbis—create the context for someone such as Yoḥanan, whose genitalia MS Florence doesn't consider among those ostensibly measured or marked male, and who looks like a woman. Yoḥanan's visibly femme gender, moreover, is pictured as highly desirable by all who encounter them.

As I said previously, I am loathe to closely scrutinize Yoḥanan's body in a diagnostic fashion in order to slide them into one or other of rabbinic sexgenders (e.g., man, woman, androgynus) or as a man who is nonnormate (e.g., a saris or person with nonnormate genitals).⁹⁹ This does not mean, as Mira Balberg and Charlotte Fonrobert have pointed out, that the rabbis would have hesitated.¹⁰⁰ Their writings about close examinations of people's bodies violated their own modesty customs (whether or not these were in fact maintained), as Balberg points out, and comports with the scrutiny in other parts of their classificatory projects, projects that included nonhuman beings. Nonetheless, the Mishnah (mSanhedrin 8:1) describes its own reticence to talk about pubic hair as euphemistic language (*lashon neqiyah*). The rabbis thus explicitly name a linguistic reticence or gap that we as readers may wish to consider. This, coupled with their forensic gaze, makes the (cultural) story of an easy, simple, and (anachronistically) legible "biological" sexgender dualism less easily universalizable.¹⁰¹ If what you see is what you are, then Yoḥanan comes to disrupt precisely this. At the same time, I do not necessarily see this as a punishment tale for nonbinary visibility.

In anachronistic terms, Yoḥanan was not a cisgender man inasmuch as they did not have the features that tend to be associated with men (in a cisgender-oriented framework). In analytic terms, a nonbinary lens allows their profound interruption of sexgender duality to come into relief.¹⁰² A nonbinary approach helps us denaturalize the inevitability of cisness that underpins the seemingly essential and transhistorical duality of gender. This may seem like a radical recentring of the margins: and it is. Moments such as these, in which sources stumble or suspend the ease with which the links between embodiment and sexgender come together, are the precise opportunity to see how the assumptions and assignments are iterated rather than natural; all the more so when we are dealing with a culture in which there already exist conceptual resources for considering sexgender variation. With these cautions in mind, we can check the ease with which we might even be willing to entertain cisgender queerness or homoerotics—which almost always end up affirming marriage and babies on the side—before countenancing these other femme, queer, nonnormate, and nonbinary bodies and circuits of desire and generation.¹⁰³

Yoḥanan's generative method is transgressive in its adulterous targeting of married women, who, in the heteropatriarchal terms of rabbinic marriage, owe their sexual and generative capacities exclusively to their husbands. While monogamy is far from the only game in town for the rabbis—men can have more than one wife—(simultaneous) polyamory for women is not countenanced: and indeed the offspring resulting from such unions are heavily stigmatized as *mamzerim*

(illegitimate).¹⁰⁴ This may explain the legitimacy—on a technicality—of a method that forgoes sexual intercourse. If we take the method at face value as a form of conception in the ritual waters that is triggered by gazing at Yohanan, then we may have a form of parthenogenesis, or possibly a kind of insemination in/of the water.¹⁰⁵ However, even on this reading, which centers figures “(d)etached from the geometry of straight lineage,” we must face the problematic generative imperative that insists on progeny begotten by women.¹⁰⁶

LILITH AND THE DAUGHTERS OF ISRAEL

The larger pretext for this exercise has been to illustrate my quest to decelerate habitual analytic reflexes about seemingly “natural” accounts of reproduction, even those (including my own) that have sought to “queer” them. When people started using the word “queer,” it was a deliberate repudiation of the unmarked “natural” as normative and a celebratory embrace of what had previously been an insult. The notion that there is nothing more “natural” than that which is designated by “nature” is itself an artifact that counts on a cultural split between nature and culture. The artifice of the “natural” is as operative today as ever, its invocation as rhetorically calculated. The idea of the natural, often couched as etiology, serves normative claims. Whether or not we can even rightly say that the rabbis had a concept of “nature,” or whether it is more accurate to talk of the rabbis being “before nature” given the absence of the term in the Hebrew of the Mishnah and the Talmud, this book has focused on dimensions *we* might think of as part of nature—generation, species, sexgender—and the knowledges (or “sciences”) about them.¹⁰⁷ In this vein, I offer another case study of what happens when we let go of modernist naturalizing and moralizing assumptions, this time focusing on nonhumans. The protagonists we center here are Lilith and the Jewish women of Babylonia, the latter often named in the evidence we are treating. Together these beings unseat monogamous, same-species, heterosexual reproduction. The evidence I adduce is from the large corpus of incantation bowls (roughly two thousand known) found in the central and southern regions of Iraq dating from the third to seventh centuries CE. These were everyday earthenware bowls used in domestic spaces, whose interiors were inscribed by ritual experts in ink, often with space left for a drawing of a demon at their center and/or on the exterior.

While demons existed for Palestinian rabbis and Jews, they take on a far larger role in Babylonian life, as demonstrated in both the Bavli and the bowls.¹⁰⁸ The Bavli relates that “if the eye were given power to see no creature would be able to survive the demons” and that they outnumber humans by far.¹⁰⁹ Demons are said to have three elements in common with angels—wings, flight, and foresight—and three with humans: eating and drinking, generation (*parin ve-ravin*), and death.¹¹⁰ Scholars have shown this ubiquity of demons was a feature of other communities in the Persian-ruled Mesopotamian world.¹¹¹ The bowls, all of which imprecate

against demons, and some of which are written in Syriac or Mandaean Aramaic, contain multiple and sometimes simultaneous Christian, Mandaean, Persian, and Zoroastrian elements (e.g., names, demons, divinities, holy figures, and the like).

As we have seen, divine involvement in human generation expands heterosexual reproduction from the supposedly sacrosanct dyad to a divine-human ménage à trois. By the same token, others could intervene, including humans like Rabbi Yoḥanan, or nonhumans, including demons.¹¹² The incantation bowls—especially but not only those which we can identify as “Jewish” owing to their invocations of rabbis, the script and style of their Aramaic, and other features—offer an intriguing vantage point on such coupling (or tripling). These bowls, inscribed with incantations, commissioned by women and men, and to be placed or buried in the homes of clients, were overwhelmingly in aid of protecting or healing against a variety of afflictions attributed to demons. These afflictions ranged from migraines and miscarriage to lawsuits and lovesickness. There was frequent usage of divorce formulae to expel these demons, particularly Lilith, including by women clients.¹¹³ I would like to focus our on how these devices testify to nonheterosexual *marriages*, albeit in associations that had clearly gone sour—necessitating these divorces.

Here is an excerpt from one such incantation:

This day of all days, years, and generations of the world, I, Komiš daughter of Mahlaphta, have dismissed and released and divorced you. You Lilith, lilit of the wilderness,¹¹⁴ grabber, and snatcher. You, the three of you, the four of you, the five of you, you are stripped naked and are not clothed.¹¹⁵ Your hair is unraveled, cast over your back. It has been heard about you that your mother's name is Palhan and your father is Palhadad Lilith. Listen and get out and do not associate¹¹⁶ with Komiš daughter of Mahlaphta in her house. So you get out¹¹⁷ of her house and of her dwelling and from her daughter-in-law and Artasherit her children. I have decreed against you, a ban that Joshua bar Perahiah sent against you. I adjure you by the honor of your father and by the honor of your mother, and take your divorces and separations, your divorce and your separation, in the ban that is sent against you by Joshua son of Perahiah, for thus has spoken to you Joshua ben Perahiah: A divorce has come to us from across the sea . . .¹¹⁸

The incantation begins in the first person: the voice of the client. As Avigayil Manekin-Bamberger has shown, this, along with other features in this incantation, like other incantations, echoes formulae in rabbinic divorces (or divorces discussed by the rabbis).¹¹⁹ The incantation marks time, introduces the ritual actor (ostensibly the client commissioning the incantation), addresses the other party, Lilith, and states its business—divorce. One imagines Komiš commissioning the bowl, and participating in its ritual deposit and burial at the entrance or corner of “her home” (my emphasis), which might include having the incantation recited aloud. Of the exact troubles Lilith has wrought we are not informed. She is named as she often is—grabber and snatcher—in terms that allude to her interference with offspring and generation.¹²⁰ Thrice she is commanded not to “associate” with

Komiš and to leave her house; in two instances this is coupled with the imperative to “get out” of Komiš’s house and dwelling (one of those times again in the short continuation after the citation above). I will return to this emphasis on space and domesticity—a theme in many bowls—below.

The deployment of divorce formulae, the effort to address Lilith in accordance with rabbinic ritual juridical norms, along with the invocation of a rabbinic figure, manifest a form of respect for the parties involved, even as they register discontent. Divorce need not be viewed as stigmatizing *per se*: as scholars have observed in the human-human Jewish realm, remarriage for reasons of divorce or death was common, even as traumatic circumstances may have sometimes led to it.¹²¹ That Christians, including Mesopotamian Christians, may have condemned it is another matter.¹²² In fact, as we see from the liturgical poetry of Ephrem and the writings of Aphrahat, marriage itself was cast into question in the Christian communities of Mesopotamia, with people remaining celibate virgins. Those who did this they considered holy, angelic even, having entered into marriage with Christ.¹²³ Aphrahat, in defending this practice, represents it as an object of attack by members of the local Jewish community.

The idea that angels were nonsexual beings who did not proliferate is found in Jewish and Christian sources. Palestinian rabbis, for instance, positioned humans as a species between angels and animals, sharing sexual generation (*periyah ure-viyah*) in common with the latter. Not coincidentally, the Babylonian rabbis add demons to the mix of charting differences and overlaps between angels, humans, and animals (bHagigah 16a). And it is demons, who, like humans, proliferate sexually—though this is also implicit in the Palestinian midrashim we discussed that dub Eve “mother of *all* life” (including demonic progeny). What the rabbinic sources lack, however, is the idea that it is aspirational to repudiate marriage and abstain from sexual proliferation. Christian sources reflect additional support at large among Mesopotamian Jews for marriage rather than abstinence. And both Palestinian and Babylonian accounts of the generation of demonic-human point to the sexual separation of Adam and Eve as its originating cause. Demons, in this scenario, jump in all too enthusiastically when the marriage bed is cold.

My point in reminding us of these cultural unions between demons, humans, and generation, then, is to account for the substantive resonances in using divorce formulae in many of the bowl incantations. Certainly, these generative resonances are frequently named in the bowls, with references to interference with offspring, to bedchambers, to nighttime appearances, and even to more explicit sexual harassment. It is also worth recalling that in order to divorce someone you need to be married to them in the first place and that for the rabbis one way of establishing a marital relationship is through intercourse. In plain terms, to divorce a demon suggests that one was in some way married to them as well as being potentially sexually involved with them. I suggest that a sensitive reading of the divorce formulae in the incantation above, and in the bowls generally, demands our

attention to the full spectrum of their meanings. This includes, but is not limited to, the familiarity that these formulae demonstrate with rabbinic ritual language and procedure. The scribes who wrote the bowls, and the clients who demanded them, did not choose to deploy other rabbinic ritual formulae or concepts. For instance, they did not treat the Lilith as an unlawful occupier of their property and register a formal “protest” or accuse the demon of tortious injury, including the kind related to miscarriage.¹²⁴ This points to the deliberate use of divorce and its allusions to the fruits of marriage—including sex and progeny—gone sour.

DEMONIZING LILITH

The writers of the bowls address a properly named Lilith regularly, particularly as the object of divorce proceedings between the demon and their client (both men and women). Scholars have sought to link Lilith to the few mentions in the Bavli to the earlier Isaiah 34:14, to the Dead Sea Scrolls, and on, to the earlier Babylonian Lamashtu and/or Lilitu, to other child-killing demons, and to the likely somewhat later child-killing first wife of Adam named Lilith in the *Alphabet of Ben Sira*.¹²⁵ The few mentions in the Talmud seem to echo some of the affective and descriptive associations in the bowls. One is forbidden to sleep in a house alone in case Lilith seizes them.¹²⁶ Lilith seems to (implicitly) be of human form, as the rabbis deem a being that looks like her is that is delivered by a human to be offspring (thus implicitly with “something of human form”).¹²⁷ These few allusions, along with one discussed below, are hardly flattering, but I am less concerned with establishing questions about Lilith’s derivation or originality, and more interested in ways that the bowls and also scholars target Lilith, as a protagonist.

While divorce language is itself not necessarily disparaging, bowl incantations often join it with insults and threats toward demons, and toward Lilith in particular. Lilith is “evil” and (generic, plural) liliths are “evil”.¹²⁸ Scholars have also written of Lilith herself in highly charged terms, pointing to her wretchedness, abjection, and sexual promiscuity. Emblematic of this are the influential Shaul Shaked, who declares Lilith “an object of degradation . . . repulsive and degenerate,” and Rebecca Lesses, who, in a foundational article, characterizes them as “dangerous, seductive creatures.”¹²⁹ Scholars highlight elements such as “you are stripped naked and are not clothed” and “your hair is unraveled, cast over your back.” There is certainly good reason to consider imagery of disheveled hair and undress in negative terms, as an ignominious ejection of an adulterous wife (as in Hosea 2:5, “I strip her naked”). It evokes biblical and rabbinic descriptions of stigmatized sexuality that involve exposure of hair and nudity.¹³⁰ Furthermore, the few Talmudic traditions about Lilith are not necessarily complimentary. Take the following, which fuses Lilith with women *in general*, in the context of the punishments owed to Eve: “It was taught in a tannaitic tradition: she grows her hair like Lilith, she sits and

urinates like an animal (*kivehemah*), and she is made into a bolster for her husband (*le-ve'alah*).¹³¹

Post-Edenic Eve's (and hence all women's) embodiment is demonic, animalized, and sexualized in a diminished fashion. Yet the anonymous voice of the Talmud questions the above view—namely, that these women's ways are negative—suggesting instead that they are marks of distinction. Lesses, however, takes the above source as emblematic of rabbinic constructions of women. Joining it with other rabbinic traditions on the hair of married women, she argues that it signifies “illicit female sexuality” across the incantations and images on the bowls. The married woman must therefore “cover the hair that makes her like the demonic lilith, seducer of men and slayer of children.” Lesses applies this to the Lilith figures: “although they have a marriage relationship with men, they do not cover their hair as respectable Jewish married women should.”¹³² Although I also believe that the marriage relationship within the bowls must be treated with the gravity that Lesses accords them, governing their interpretation with a fully rationalized rabbinic halakhic model is unwarranted. It not only strains the limits of the rabbinic sources themselves; it also imposes on them a particular modernist halakhic conception of halakhah that insists on uniformity, totality, and coherence. Let us pause, then, over the descriptions of Lilith that have aroused these sorts of reactions. Scholars often use the term “disheveled” rather than “unraveled” to describe Lilith's hairdo, which gives a rather different sense to the expression: “your hair is unraveled (*r.m.y*), cast over your back.”¹³³ A similar expression utilized as an idiomatic phrase in Syriac with “casting” (*r.m.y*), with or without an object “hair,” can refer to either loosening or casting one's hair or clothing back over one's shoulders. The fifth-century Syriac *Acts of Pelagia* describes the great beauty of the saint (before repenting) who had their “[hair] spilled (*r.m.y*) over the shoulders without modesty like a man (*gbry'yt*)” or their “clothing loose around the shoulders like a man.”¹³⁴ However, before one assumes that this exposure of hair confirms an affective resonance of shame and humiliation, let us note that the underlying issue is hair/gender out of place. Hair on its own is not at issue. It becomes so only when someone who is not considered a normate man is nonetheless wearing it “like a man.” The narrative does not depict the hair as unequivocally and inherently shameful. The protagonist, whose appearance captivates everyone, repents, affirms Christ, and eventually must flee. Escaping to Jerusalem, they become known as Pelagios, the eunuch monk. There, the narrator recounts meeting them, but failing to recognize them. Pelagios speaks and—again—looks “like a man,” albeit one emaciated by an ascetic regimen.¹³⁵ Their earlier manifestation of manliness clearly presages this later transition. The example of Pelagios suggests rich and complex associations with the phrase “unraveled hair cast over your back” that is not coincidentally pinned to a figure whose sexgender itself is far more complex than traditional analyses of women as whore/virgin that seem to still haunt the way scholars view

Lilith and rabbinic women. Exposed hair worn about the shoulders and back does not inevitably indicate feminized humiliation.

Lilith's unraveled hair and bodily exposure may, at the very least, have been multivalent. To read these descriptions (and images) from the perspective of utter abjection is to flatten the complexity that these bowls manage to convey of the Lilith figure, even in their repetitive variety of epithets and descriptions. Relatedly, not all nudity—the other element in Lilith's description in the incantation above and in general in the bowls and to some degree in the images that adorn them—was bound up with a prurient and moralizing late ancient gaze.¹³⁶

Scholars of art and visual culture, have investigated the shared visual idioms and distinctive styles in Sasanian Persian and Roman mosaics, statuary, architecture, silver plate, clothing, and coinage.¹³⁷ Such stylistic commonality and variation did not only obtain at the register of elite urban centers and state sponsored art. Take the third-century frescos of the Dura-Europos synagogue, for instance.¹³⁸ Nudity—including genitalia—is depicted in the paintings, perhaps most memorably that of Pharaoh's daughter who while bathing, takes up a similarly nude baby Moses. Likewise, gods such as Anahita were sometimes depicted nude or partly undressed in Sasanian art.¹³⁹ In like manner, the motif of a dancing woman or of a woman playing musical instruments adorned Sasanian seals, mosaics, and silver plates. This is to say that the unclothed body did not inevitably make for associations of shame and degradation.

To the extent that the pose and frontality of Pharaoh's daughter in the Dura Europos fresco, evoke iconography of Aphrodite and Anahita, those images can certainly be taken to express—among other things—power and invulnerability, depending on context (including viewership and use).¹⁴⁰ A cursory glance at the Dura-Europos image reveals Pharaoh's daughter in a forthright stance, holding the infant, gazing to her right, and signaling her entourage. Unlike them, she is bejeweled about her neck and upper arm; her long black hair is *unraveled and uncovered* (theirs is veiled) and *cast over her shoulders and back*. Even though baby Moses is ostensibly the internal and external focus of the scene, our eye is drawn to the princess who alone occupies the register of the painting that is the lower and most proximate to the viewer. She commands not only our gaze but the subservience of the attendants behind her, whose body languages speaks of their hastening to do her bidding in answer to her peremptory gesture. It would take an assumed and transhistorical understanding of nudity and uncovered loose hair—women's, divine, or demonic—as inherently shameful to insist that the artists set out to demean the royal figure in this Parthian-Roman era depiction from Syro-Mesopotamia. In fact, scholars suggest a variety of understandings of this figure raising the infant Moses.¹⁴¹

Returning to Lilith, and to verbal and iconographic depictions of her loose hair and nude body on the bowls at large: we need not succumb to the false lure that these are necessarily—or at least unequivocally—expressions of “humiliation and

degradation.”¹⁴² The bowls themselves point to a Jewish culture that was not disconnected from that of the Talmudic rabbis, and that was also linked in complex ways with Christian, Persian-Zoroastrian, and other communities.¹⁴³ It is thus no surprise to find, even in the relatively spare drawings on the magic bowls, resonances with a multiplicity of elite, subelite, and nonelite iconographic motifs and styles, including partial or whole nudity and variously coifed hairstyles.

Let us take a particularly vivid bowl image (see fig. 13) on the interior of an incantation bowl. Drawing on biblical and rabbinic associations of women’s hair and women’s sexual licentiousness, Rebecca Lesses considers the depictions of nudity, hair, and genitalia to “point to the sexual meaning of the demonesses’ nakedness.”¹⁴⁴ Gideon Bohak interprets the drawing in the context of a larger argument about how demons excited both sexual attraction and fear in late antiquity. For him, “the iconographic imaginaire” manifests the appeal and repulsion of demons for human men. This attraction/repulsion dynamic consists “especially of female demons seducing *innocent* men.”¹⁴⁵ Bohak considers that an ancient viewer would see the nakedness and “disheveled” hair as “extreme humiliation” for the demon thus portrayed. Of this image, he avers that: “Looking at such an image, a modern viewer is immediately reminded of *Playboy* magazine, or of Gustave Courbet’s notorious picture, *L’Origine du monde*.”¹⁴⁶ The apparently instant association of our bowl’s image with the portrayal of women in a publication aimed at men and most well-known for its centerfold nudes is, at least to my eyes, far from self-evident. Such a ready association says far more about particular twentieth-century Europeanized ideas of gender, bodily exposure, and cisheterosexuality. So, too, is linking an ancient image to a nineteenth-century realist painting of vulva amid a prone and (compositionally) cropped body. The notion that nineteenth- and twentieth-century construals of gender, power, and pleasure— from a “male” gaze—can be projected back to late ancient Mesopotamia is unsustainable. Bohak’s bold attention to the affective relationships between demons and their humans companions materialized through iconography is commendable. Let us consider the drawing itself from a somewhat different point of view.¹⁴⁷

The style does not deploy the conventions of naturalism.¹⁴⁸ Across the Sasanian and Roman empires a variety of heterogenous visual idioms and conventions flourished, from the mimetically inflected conceit of naturalism to more schematic stylizations like that of the incantation bowls.¹⁴⁹ Our demon faces us in a frontal pose. The countenance is a semicircular oval, with eyebrows and nose joined by a single line, large emphatic eyes with prominent irises, and lips rendered relatively schematically with two short lines. On the head’s flat top rests an elaborate coiffure: aside from a middle part are two plaited, knotted coils of hair that extend to just above the ear (or its position). From the topknots, on each side, stream several straight strands (possibly ribbons), with braided (or perhaps bejeweled) topmost tresses. This extended, longer hair curves along and frames the face, shoulders, and upper arms. We can recognize this sort of hairstyling on multiple



FIGURE 13. Rafael Rachel Neis, *Lilith*. Rendering of image in the interior of “Incantation Bowl Representing the Demon Lilith,” Musée des Explorations du Monde, Cannes.

genders (men, women, “eunuchs,” divinities) from Sasanian coinage, seals, and silverwork.¹⁵⁰ Wide, squared shoulders top a torso that narrows to the hips. An uneven line extends all the way from one edge of the chest to the other, dipping upward in the center. Extending from the left of the torso, this line forms a square base, as if following the pectoral muscle. On the right, the line forms a gentle curve, as if outlining the base of the breast tissue. Atop this are two small circles, indicating nipples; below, the navel is outlined. The demon stands in a powerful frontal pose, long arms by their sides, hands open with flared elongated fingers.¹⁵¹ Their torso looms large, joining their smaller hips and their shorter, solidly planted legs that turn outward and bend in a slight squat. The feet are bare, with high arches. Between the legs are prominent, protuberant genitalia (vulva or perhaps testicles or a double phallus); above is a semicircular row of small lines depicting pubic hair (not vagina dentata, as Bohak suggests).¹⁵² From a perspective that does not assume cisness as transhistorical and normative, this being’s sexgender

is altogether outside constructed binaries. Neither is their “gender” unambiguously assignable to a simple reduction of their “sex.” The particular image we are discussing, as a depiction of a naked being who possesses gender nonbinarity, may have also projected defiance and strength rather than a chastened and sexually humiliated femininity. One could argue that it is this very quality that is transgressive, and if so, it is curious that the image does not represent the demon as having been overcome (other bowls do seem to).¹⁵³ While this image does not stand for all demons or illustrations thereof, the genders of demon images, as scholars have recognized for some time in varying ways, generally express more multiplicity than has been acknowledged until recently.¹⁵⁴

Naʿama Vilozny, in her book on the art of incantation bowls, analyzes the figures’ anatomical and iconographic components.¹⁵⁵ She mounts a meticulous argument, demonstrating the deliberately “blurred,” “confused,” “dual-,” “asexual,” or “ambivalent sex” of many of the bowls’ images (particularly representations of Lilith).¹⁵⁶ Vilozny’s is the first sustained analysis of the images as a corpus in their local Mesopotamian and broader Middle Eastern cultural contexts. She links the sexgender of our demons with earlier ancient and late ancient representations and figures like Lamashtu, Ishtar, and the Gorgon, who were sometimes represented with a beard or other “male” features.

Lilith, for Vilozny, similarly embodies fertility and its structural opposite—death and destruction, as well as the so-called male and female principles. On the one hand, these correspond in a mimetic way to Vilozny’s view of gender as a binary matter. This is what then allows her to grasp their “mixture” as meaningful. For example, “a beard can also hint at other, more masculine roles, of the female goddess, including her ability to be a warrior or destroyer.”¹⁵⁷ On the other hand, this “mixture” is “no contradiction,” following good old-fashioned structuralist principles of the “union” of opposites. It is thus that “sexual ambivalence” mirrors the structural binaries associated with fertility, life/death, healing/destruction, and, of course, male/female.¹⁵⁸

Vilozny begins with an *a priori* assumption of sexgender binarity and ends with it, suggesting that the figures’ “lack” (where things are unclear) or “dual sex” of the figure was deliberate (which is correct), so that the demons can be understood to “seduce people of both sexes.”¹⁵⁹ This allows Lilith to take on a “male likeness and seduce women and a female likeness and seduce men.” While Vilozny is absolutely right in taking Aramaic bowl iconography as deliberate and intentional, she errs in her insistence on reading it in ways that preserve sexgender dualism and concomitant heterosexuality at all costs. In doing so, she blatantly ignores the explicit and more subtle evidence of Lilith’s erotic associations with women (whether as clients or members of the sponsoring client’s family) in the incantations.

Vilozny’s achievement is worth dwelling on, both in itself and for how it ultimately supports a nonbinary understanding of Lilith as manifested both in the incantation texts and the images in the bowls. Her argument bases itself on an

implied but never stated transhistorical sexgender binary which is taken to normatively correspond with visually legible “sex” (whether genitalia, body shape, hair, or clothing). Yet it is precisely through Viložny’s scrupulous and painstaking analysis of drawing after drawing, undertaken on the basis of these very coordinates, that the argument founders: none of these indicia turn out to be stable.¹⁶⁰ The principles by which Viložny measures exceptions, make for an accumulation of exceptions that she acknowledges outrun the rules by far. This ought to prompt a radical questioning of the way the principles are instituted in the first place. Rather, and despite the evidence that Viložny mounts to the contrary, she turns to essentialist notions of gender—even returning to the long debunked “Great Mother” fertility goddess myth.¹⁶¹ And the cisnormativity of the sex binarity serves, not coincidentally, to uphold heterosexuality.

Viložny’s “confusion” is expressed in the way that she describes the gender “confusion” (or complexity) of the images as deliberate, while still maintaining that many of them are “female.” Despite this, Viložny insists that genitalia, long hair, and chest—features that she herself had destabilized as reliable gender markers in this corpus—establish this, theoretically via the figure of the Great Mother. The dual-sexed nature of the Lilith drawings also allows the heterosexuality of erotics to be maintained.¹⁶² The hesitation to accept the evidence that she has herself amassed is understandable. The epistemic pressures and constraints of a cisheteronormative gaze dominate the fields of Jewish studies, ancient history, and art history. This is happily beginning to shift. These bowls as artifacts provide us with a remarkable opportunity to explore the “rich and rapidly proliferating ecologies of embodied difference.”¹⁶³ This evidence also offers us a chance to interrogate other binaries that scholars still use to evaluate the images and their makers. These include realism versus abstraction, skill versus crudeness, and creativity versus influence, as well as the boundaries of communities and “religions.”¹⁶⁴

SOURD ASSOCIATIONS

Some of the relationships between Lilith and the women with whom Lilith “associates” are made more explicit in the incantations. Several bowls enjoin Lilith to “not lie with” the client, and sometimes also their spouse and/or children.¹⁶⁵ The named client is just as often as not a woman. In this vein, two bowls, both addressed to Aphrodite, describe how she enslaves all women who are “shown to her” at night. One of the incantations on the bowls demands

that you should not come near [her], nor be visible in the form of daughters of Eve during her sleep at any place, whether by day or by night, to this Bahroi daughter of Sisai or to this Mahkird, her husband, son of Denak, and that you should not come near them, or touch them, or cause injury to their sons and daughters, those that they have and those that they will have from this day and forever, Hallelujah.¹⁶⁶

At night, Bahroi, the primary focus of this incantation, is “shown to” Aphrodite and vice versa. Bahroi, like all Aphrodite’s women, is enslaved to her: Aphrodite comes (*tavoiy*) to her at night during her sleep in the form of a fellow human woman—“in the image of daughters of Eve”—and we infer she comes to “draw near . . . [to] touch,” which can cause injury. Shaul Shaked suggests:

That Aphrodite . . . represents female profligacy. She is thus one of the female figures that make themselves visible to people in sleep in female form, probably in a sexually arousing context for men, and in a menacing, corrupting, context for women. The immediate danger is to the children, born or unborn, who may be harmed by their mothers’ misbehaviour being shown to her “by authority at night.”

Here Shaked attempts to disavow the homoerotic enslavement that the incantation expresses. Assuming heterosexual circuits of gendered desire makes it hard to contemplate what it means for Bahroi—the one who is in fact named in this encounter—to fall under the spell of Aphrodite who appears in “female form.” The incantation actually describes a form of reciprocal visual encounter that is at the heart of ritual viewing: each protagonist appears to and sees the other.¹⁶⁷ This is Aphrodite after all: the erotic nature of their encounter is hard to deny, but then this supposedly “represents female prolificacy” writ large. The danger to women (“mother’s misbehavior”) is in the realm of generation, but the eroticism is between the demon and the husband. More recently Shaked has revised this approach as follows:

In this text the overriding concern is not the fate of the children, but an apprehension (felt presumably by the husband) with regard to the sexual attachment of a woman to her husband: the menacing demonic power appears to cause women to divert their sexual craving away from the rightful owner of their affection and their obedience.¹⁶⁸

More on the mark, this observation still centers the Mahkird, despite the prominence of Bahroi in the incantation. Shaked characterizes the incantation’s enslavement language as a distortion of what he takes to be the real ownership of husband over wife’s affections. Bernadette Brooten has shown, however, in what ways language of domination, including of enslavement and bondage, is a feature not only of ancient heteroerotic love spells but also of homoerotic love spells between women.¹⁶⁹ Shaked acknowledges this but from a perspective, again, that takes for granted the stigmatization of the erotic bond between Bahroi and Aphrodite:

it is likely that the full story of how the demon causes this diversion of sexual interest from the husband to a female demon—in fact, to herself—was told, perhaps in a hushed voice, intimately and outside the written records of the bowls.¹⁷⁰

Despite its plain expression in the incantation, this comment relegates Bahroi and Aphrodite’s sexual involvement to a space beyond the historical record. This recalls Brooten’s description of how a scholar publishing a homoerotic love spell between women emended the tablets to “correct” one of the women to a man. As she puts it:

no other female-female love spells were known, so perhaps it did not even cross Boll’s mind that women would commission love spells to attract women. Further, in

1910—as now—relationships between women and men occupied a more prominent place in people's minds that relationships between women, and many people would have preferred not to think about sexual love between women at all.¹⁷¹

While Shaked does admit the homoerotic dimensions of this incantation, his shunting of the plainly visible to a realm outside of history is a manifestation of a wider trend. In Brooten's words, this "teaches us something . . . about ourselves as scholars." Our "failure to consider the possibility that this spell could be homoerotic . . . exemplifies why we lack knowledge of the history of women . . . Our ignorance does not stem from a lack of sources, but rather from our ignoring and misinterpreting the available sources."¹⁷² While my project is not working in quite the same recovery vein as Brooten, her words contain import for the writing of any nonnormative gender histories.

Another incantation in which the Aphrodite demon enslaves specifically women (*shēfahot*) with no mention of men, but whose primary client is the man in a household, involves her appearing to the married couple "in the form of Adam and Eve" (*bidmut adam ve-hava*). The incantation names congeries of demons, who have taken up residence "within the house" of the husband and "the threshold of the house" of his wife. This longer incantation deploys divorce formulae and invokes Rabbi Joshua son of Perahia, clarifying that this bond has the shape of a marriage whose dissolution is effected by formal ritual means.¹⁷³

In several bowls demonic nighttime visitations allude to sexual liaisons in other ways. One incantation invokes the aid of "Rafael Mital," "evil spirit smiter," on behalf of the client Mihranahid daughter of Ahat, who is troubled by a "spirit (*ruha*) that lies (*deshakhva*) in the body, the head, the temple, the ear, and the nostril, and in all the members (*hadamey*) of the body of Mihranahid daughter of Ahat."¹⁷⁴ This is Shaked and others' translation. However, one could translate *hadamey* as sexual organs, so that the detailing of the demon's "lying in" every part of Mihranahid's body includes a more pointed sexual reference. Rabbi Hanina is invoked against the demon in question, Agag. And she is enjoined "not to come and become to her (the client) . . . not as a companion in the night and not as a companion in the day in the body . . ."¹⁷⁵ Then follows a repetition of the various body parts ending with Mihranahid's members or genitals. The terms for coming (*a.z.l*) and becoming (*h.v.y*) can both have sexual connotations (as in "do not enter into or have intercourse with Mihranahid"), which are reinforced when juxtaposed with the request to not be Mihranahid's "companion (*tsavta*)."¹⁷⁶ All the more so, when, toward the close of this lengthy incantation, the supplicant requests the removal of the "evil spirit . . . that services her (*sh.m.sh*)," where the term *sh.m.sh* can just as well mean "has intercourse with her."¹⁷⁷

Other bowls combine divorcing Lilith with references to sexuality and more explicit generative distress. Dukhtoy daughter of Hormizdukh asks for her children and her own body to continue to endure and that "no demon (*maziq*) in the world shall touch her."¹⁷⁸ In particular, a Lilith "dwells on her house's threshold" and "appears to boys and girls." After a violent threat, divorce language appears,

along with references to Dukhtoy and “the children that she has and that she will have.” This appears again at the very end of the incantation. Lilith is bidden to “take your deed of divorce” and, while words are missing, we can infer that she is told “[I have written to you just as demons write deeds of divorce to] their wives and they do not come back again to them.” Dukhtoy dispatches Lilith as a demon husband may dispatch his wife: Assuming the unilateral power of a man in a heterosexual marriage (demonic and human), she dismisses Lilith from “*her* house and dwelling” (my emphasis). Toward the end, the demon is enjoined not to appear to her, approach her, or harm her present or future children, and her husband’s name is mentioned. A drawing of a demon appears (largely faded) in the bowl’s center.

Certain elements in this bowl echo across others. Firstly, Lilith is taken to be causing generative harm to a woman. Implicit in her names “grabber and snatcher,” this is one way of naming the problems that some incantations come to solve. Other bowls make Lilith’s threat even more graphic: she feasts on babies’ blood and women’s milk, or she kills her own and her companions’ babies.¹⁷⁹ Many ban Lilith not just from the threshold, house, and dwelling, but from entering the client(s)’ bedchamber (*bet mishqeveihon*) or “entrance,” (*p.t.h.*) and against appearing to her (or them) at night. We find a recurrence of attention to the architecture of the home (*beitah*) and dwelling (*dirtah*), and entrances, which, as Cynthia Baker and Charlotte Fonrobert have shown, were used by the rabbis to construe and constrain women’s bodies. The word *petah* has the double connotation of both opening (as in doorway) and the vaginal canal or introitus.¹⁸⁰ The incantations will often switch back and forth from persons to places. The demon is thus bidden to depart from “the opening (*p.t.h.*) of, the dwelling of, Mahdukh daughter of Newandukh, and from her house, from her grandchild, from her child, from her opening (*p.t.h.*), and from her family.”¹⁸¹

Scholars have been quick to infer Lilith’s sexual liaisons with men, doubtless from these mentions of bedchambers and nighttime visitations. They have also to a lesser and sometimes ambivalent degree considered these unsubtle allusions to also pertain to her women lovers.¹⁸² Let us take one such incantation that details something of the mechanics of demonic coercion:

I adjure you, all species (*minei*) of Lilith[s], by [the na]me of your [s]eed (*zaritkhin*), which [de]mons beget (*deyaldin*) . . . By the wind they [fly] and spread about in an impure place (*be-atar mesa'av*) [---]. And they whip and wound and inflame. And they press and muzzle (or restrain) with kinds of bridles and in your place they [---] and they [---] they go around to strike and [th]ey resem[ble] hu[man] beings, to men [in the l]ikeness of women and to women in the likeness of men, and with human beings they lie (*sh.kh.v*) [by] night and they resemble (them) by day. I [be]swear you b[y] the [name] of š‘šgš gšk. I have written against you, evil Lilith, for you have (many) resemblances, and with the wind you fly, and with the weather you change, and you stand at the side [of G]ista daughter of Ifra-Hormiş and you appear to her by day, and you resemble her by night. . . .

I adjure all of you by the name of your god, in order that you should be struck in your pericardiums and not appear to Gista daughter of Ifra-Hormiṣ, neither by night nor by day, and neither as male nor as female, because this amulet shall [b]e for you your deeds of divorce and your (writs of) release, just as demons take deeds of divorce to their wives and they do not come back again unto them. Evil spirits, evil liliths, male and female, you [shall] not come back again [n]or appear to Gista daughter of Ifra-Hormiṣ from this day and forever. [Amen], Amen, Selah, Hallelujah [---]¹⁸³

This incantation details the ways in which Lilith(s) torment(s) Gista daughter of Ifra-Hormiṣ in particular and humans in general. It begins with an allusion to the propagation of the demons, who move to attack and sexually “inflamm” humans. Recall a similar mechanism by which demons were “heated” by Eve and Adam during their separation in Palestinian midrash. Shaked and others suggest that the “impure place” (which they translate as “unclean place”) that the demons occupy, could reference “the idea that demons frequent latrines.” Derivatives of the term for impure (*s.ʿb*) can denote sexual “defilement” or coercion, and even menstrual impurity. I would therefore suggest that “impure place” may equally refer to human genitalia. The Bavli variously refers, particularly to women’s genitalia, variously as “that place” (*oto maqom*), “place of dirt” (*maqom hatinofet*), or “place of filth” (*maqom haturpah*).¹⁸⁴ From this location demons cause injury, sexually “inflaming” their human victims, whom they constrain: the language suggests sexual coercion and compulsion.

The demon also appears to humans, taking on human shape. These appearances themselves, as Shaked notes, are a form of sexual contact and excitation.¹⁸⁵ Things seem to get more complex as the demons—who in some incantations are named as male Liliths (or spirits) and female Liliths (or spirits)—are here marked for their changeability (*sh.n.y*) and range of likeness or kinds (*gavney, g.v.n*), taking on a different sexgender “likeness” (*demut*), depending on the gender of the “human beings they lie with.” It is thus that by shifting between likeness, difference, and both in Gista’s case, and also by blending internal and external compulsion, that the demon captures their human target. Despite the illusory heterosexuality of the demon that the incantation depicts, it castigates “evil Lilith” for “resemble[ing]” Gista at night and demands that the demons cease appearing to Gista “neither as male nor as female.” Shifting its gendering again, the incantation closes by designating itself as a divorce deed that is the equivalent of the kinds of writs that demons deliver to their wives. This gendering positions Gista with demon-husbands and renders “evil Lilith” and the various other demons Gista’s wives. They must comply with this divorce writ, leaving Gista’s domain, just as they would in the context of demonic relationships.

In this section of the chapter, I have sought to delineate the ways that Liliths appear in the incantations and to the humans in them, including women. Lilith’s appearance and sexgender are, it seems, difficult to pin down, just as in many of the figure drawings that populate the bowls. Similarly, and relatedly, the gendering of the sexual

encounters is capacious beyond the strictures of heterosexuality. Fully recognizing this can enable us to not shy away from the implications of human women issuing divorces to demons just as demon husbands do to their wives.

NONHUMAN, NONMONOGAMOUS, NONGENERATIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Several incantations not only focus on women clients but also reference generation and Lilith's interference with it. There are those that focus on men and reference generation, including their reproductive material.¹⁸⁶ It becomes all too easy to essentialize women and "women's history" around the themes of reproduction and to ascribe universalizing and supposedly easy-to-access feelings about what it must have meant to want to have children or to face the potentially mortal dangers of childbirth in antiquity. Hence, for instance, the overinterpretation of figures with supposedly feminine forms as embodied icons of fertility and women's religion. The combination of themes we have noted in the incantation bowls offer us an opportunity to explore alternate configurations of sexgender, embodiment, and sexuality, even when generation does explicitly arise. A nonbinary approach to sexgender and generation that allows their pluralities to emerge, rather than an essentialized, ahistorical concept of reproduction, allows the "weirdness" of these bowls, their images and texts, to materialize.

Giselle Liza Anatol suggests that ancient-medieval Lilith stories and Afro-Caribbean soucouyant tales express disgust at the woman who refuses her naturalized place as a "maternal, nurturing female presence," while also using this demonized woman to "control women's behavior, especially when it comes to child-bearing and child-rearing."¹⁸⁷ Anatol contrasts such stories with those by contemporary women who "imbue their works with a narrative strain that undermines orthodox models of womanhood and motherhood . . . with characters who refuse to use their bodies as the 'locus of patrilineal preservation' and instead thrive as single mothers, Other-Mothers, or women who privilege their own physical and sexual needs over and above others."¹⁸⁸

Lilith, we find across the incantations, not only sleeps with women and snatches children, but also appears in various "likenesses," as women, as men, as both, and as nonhuman and multiform creatures.¹⁸⁹ Lilith is blamed for a variety of failed generative outcomes.¹⁹⁰ The Bavli expresses this concern, including even the possibility that her likeness might transfer to a fetus:

She who expels a likeness of Lilith (*demut lilit*), its mother has childbirth impurity; it is offspring (*valad*), but it has wings. It was also taught: there was a case of a woman from Simoni who expelled the likeness of a Lilith and the case came before the sages and they said, it is offspring except it has wings.¹⁹¹

This pseudo-Tannaitic case is clearly a variation on the earlier Tosefta's woman from Sidon who "expelled a likeness of a raven" the residues of which are embodied in their wings.

Lilith here is a winged creature—yet seemingly human-appearing in other respects (the Bavli does consider the fetus offspring). As we saw, the rabbis knew that demon-human coupling of one sort or another could yield offspring. Perhaps the prospect of generation without husbands was even more threatening than the danger to fully human offspring. But what if the incantations' (and the Bavli's) concern about offspring is sending us on a false path the way that figurines from ancient Judah with significant chest size trigger supposedly obvious associations with women and fertility? What would it mean to read these bowls, especially those commissioned by women both with and against their spiraling script and vivid visual grain? Perhaps Lilith is someone who is akin to Donna Haraway's cyborg figure:

I would suggest that cyborgs have more to do with regeneration and are suspicious of the reproductive matrix and of most birthing . . . We require regeneration, not rebirth, and the possibilities for our reconstitution include the utopian dream of the hope for a monstrous world without gender.¹⁹²

Lilith seems to embody this "monstrous world without gender." Such a world can admit nonprocreative intimacies and associations that altogether disrupt the propagative harmonies of the marital heterosexual wife and husband pairing. Perhaps the lack of celebration and the demonization at play in the bowls express something about those who refuse their naturalized roles? Reckoning with the marriages that these divorces end, and allowing that they occurred between demons and women and not just men, certainly does not quite map onto the pronatalism and sanctioned polygyny in Babylonian rabbinic kinship relations.¹⁹³ Nor does it map onto the basic tenet of divorce according to which only men, in rabbinic ritual, may initiate it (although even within rabbinic sources we see that focusing on this act alone misses the relational contexts in which divorces may have occurred at the insistence of wives).¹⁹⁴ Other cases exist of women initiating divorce and we do not know enough about the institutional or communal cultures of Jews who were not rabbis. But we do have these bowls. While they reveal a host of shared cultural and ritual themes and mechanisms—including the divorce mechanism itself—we cannot assume that this tells us anything about the direction or flow of knowledge among rabbis, scribes, and artists (who wrote and drew on the bowls), and their Jewish and other clientele.¹⁹⁵

For those Mesopotamian Jewish (and Christian and Zoroastrian) women who were unable to divorce, whether through reasons of custom and/or lack of resources, this lends a further poignancy to these artifacts.¹⁹⁶ Their ability to shake things up domestically may have been limited for some women, but we can only speculate about how divorcing Lilith may have effected a shift in dynamics between human spouses. There are a few potential problems with this suggestion about the motivations for some of these divorces of Lilith by women. First, men, women without men, and couples deploy them too. However, we need not espouse a unified explanation across the divorce corpus. Second, we need to be

careful about assuming a total passivity and lack of agency by women in their domestic-human relationships. Third, my suggestion runs the danger of making the human-demon divorces metaphoric or symbolic devices whose sole purpose is to stand in for relations between the human couples. Again, here I don't think that we need to succumb to a false choice between human-demon divorce being just about those parties versus the ways it can stand for additional tensions. Finally, perhaps this suggestion is less sensitive to the erotic dimensions between women and the demons that we have named.

The Aphrodite bowls that describe the demon's enslavement of women may provide us with some clues, to the extent that we can extrapolate from them something regarding the dynamics of demon-human erotic bonds. The rhetoric of bondage, of enslavement, and of lovesickness in love spells, as well as physicalized accounts of lovesickness in other contexts, give us a picture of the terrain of nonconsensual erotic ties in late antiquity.¹⁹⁷ In suggesting that the Aramaic incantations express erotic and even ritual bonds—marriages—between Lilith and women, we have to acknowledge that, at least in theory, at the time of these bowls' commission, such relationships were unwanted and were depicted as having always been unwanted. That they may also testify to the desires of women for Lilith—whether in her form as Aphrodite or otherwise—including in their beds at night, is also the case.

The corpus of bowls published thus far testifies to repeat clients who had multiple bowls made.¹⁹⁸ Here we might consider the relative affordability of such devices and their domestic usage inside homes. This allows the possibility that in some contexts, while the situations described and the language expressed are pointed and dramatic, they are nonetheless prophylactic in the sense that they describe genuine conditions related to sex, among other things, but also are ways to live *with them*, and to materially (literally) domesticate them. Consider that the incantation, likely with attendant ritual burying in the home, seeks to drive Lilith and attendant demons away. Yet it materializes the bond between the client and the demon, and by being deposited in the house ensures that Lilith and company stay on in some capacity. Finally, if demons were as effective as the incantations claim, we might do well to remind ourselves that the bowls only reveal those relationships that soured. And we only hear the human side of the story.

. . .

Bavli Bava Metsia 84a and the incantation bowls are companions, cultural products of the Jewish communities of Persian Babylonia. While the presence of their immediate generators—rabbis and incantation scribes and their clients—is perhaps most obviously evident, the creative contributions of other participants can also be discerned. Let us begin with the account of the Jewish women as they

rise to the surface and behold the sage sitting at the entrance, resulting in their conceiving children who are beautiful like Yoḥanan. While this bears traces of Palestinian conception concepts, we pointed to Zoroastrian notions of mythic conception in which water conveyed male seed to bathing virgin women. What is missing there, however, is the particular combination of a visual trigger and water-seed conception in the Palestinian midrash. It is not impossible that the Babylonian rabbinic storytellers consciously combine these elements to furnish their tale. The search for origins and influences, however, can often unwittingly cause us to narrow our ideas of how creative work is generated. We can be tempted to succumb to the false choices of Jewish versus non-Jewish, internal versus external, resistance versus influence. Indeed, in scrutinizing the mechanics of conception in the Bundahišn, scholars have pointed to its own Galenic resonances, which in turn have been discerned in various rabbinic sources pointing to female seed as an active contributor to generation.¹⁹⁹

The fantasy of the virgin birth, scholars have noted, is not unique to the making of the Zoroastrian savior figure. Much ink has been spilled to account for its origins and spread in ancient sources. It is certainly worth observing that the virgin birth fantasy itself is a very particular way of putting a stop to the endless search for origins. Preserving as it does the supposed sexual “integrity” of the woman concerned, and guaranteeing the paternity of the sperm donor, the myth spawns something of a unidirectional or influence model of generation. It is a patrilineal model in which a person’s (often nonconsenting) reception of seminal “influence” or influx, is tendentiously gendered. But simultaneously, virginity might frustrate patriarchal attempts to verify paternity, allowing for parthenogenesis.

To take this back to the rabbinic storytellers and the story’s transmitters and recipients: it is reasonable to suppose their exposure to a variety of Zoroastrian ideas, stories, and rituals and that some of these elements resounded in the tales they crafted and heard. Similarly, the links between demon worship, lack of sexual desire, and infertility with the primal humans, and the story of mythical humans marrying demons and begetting “harmful” offspring in Pahlavi sources, all echo the motifs of demons entering conventional human marriages and interfering with human propagation in the incantation bowls. However, the generative practices we have discussed, of the rabbis’ Yoḥanan and Adam, as well as of the Zoroastrian characters, all belong to singular mythic—even transgressive—figures. They are hardly presented as models for human propagation writ large. Precisely what is exciting about the incantation bowls—albeit mediated in formulaic language—is the glimpse they allow into social classes broader than those of the religious scholars responsible for crafting the rabbinic and Zoroastrian legends.²⁰⁰ It is worth contemplating the appeal that a not exactly cis Rabbi Yoḥanan and their unconventional reproductive methods would have held for a rabbinic audience. How shall we make sense of this next to the roughly contemporary ambivalent attraction that

the not exactly cis, nonhuman Lilith assumed for the clients, women and men, who commissioned the incantation bowls?

. . .

Ancient women are manifested through the medium of these incantations and their scribes, enacting ritual divorce writs to eject Lilith from their lives. We can discern that, at some point, some of these women were quite taken with the demon. Yoḥanan, or the storyteller, imagines women captivated by Yoḥanan's brand of beauty. In these scenarios, both figures—Yoḥanan and Lilith—disrupt formalized relationships, “marriages,” in which (only) women were supposed to be monogamous and sexually exclusive to their spouse. Both protagonists inaugurate alternate forms and products of generation, while embodying sexgender in ways that defy a cisgender sex binary. They transgress and go beyond: beyond human and beyond man/woman. One haunts ritual baths, beds, and rivers. The other inserts themselves in the bodies, beds, and dwellings of women, as much as men. Both have peculiar relationships with those ritual practices known as magic and both trade in the potent effects of vision, sexuality, and generation combined. I have sought to show what might be gained by opening our parameters of the possible beyond supposedly obvious circuits of sexuality, the “natural,” and reproduction as they pertain to humans. If the “standardized” account in rabbinic ideas of human generation is already a *menage-a-trois* of sorts, these figures step into the opening offered by the more-than-two it takes to generate. These variations mix things up even further, with sex and sexuality beyond cisgender humans and nonhuman kinds. To venture into late ancient generation is to find ourselves not only in a realm of species and sexual strangeness, in which humans and nonhumans cohabit and couple or triple, but also in a world of genuine reproductive uncertainty. Yet for some of us, this combination of weirdness and uncertainty is perhaps not so unfamiliar after all.