

WRITING WRONGS:
RE-VISION AND RELIGION IN
CONTEMPORARY WOMEN'S FICTION

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis examines in what ways contemporary women writers have revised Biblical figures and texts in order to challenge and deconstruct male authority, how previously silenced female voices are given speech through a new feminist religious discourse, and how women have renegotiated male 'power' for female empowerment. Focusing on five different Biblical figures or groups of women, Eve, the wives and daughters of Abraham, the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene and medieval female virgin martyr saints are examined in turn through the re-visionary fiction of nine authors. Examining both literary authors such as Angela Carter, Michèle Roberts, Jenny Diski and Emma Tennant and popular ones such as Penelope Farmer and Dan Brown, as well as several authors who have received little previous attention such as Anita Diamant, Sue Reidy and Ann Chamberlin, this thesis highlights the multiple and subjective nature of feminist re-vision of the Bible, while simultaneously exposing the pre-existing subjectivity within their foundational texts. By identifying how contemporary women writers both re-read and re-write received history, this thesis brings to the fore the transgressive potential of a tradition of women's religious writing that is marked by its marginalised position. Beginning with the suggestion that patristic origin myths validate the invisibility of women, I investigate how a focus on non-canonical and apocryphal traditions can give speech to previously silenced female voices, allowing for reconfigurations of gender beyond the patriarchally defined models of the Bible. Predicated upon Adrienne Rich's view of re-vision as 'an act of survival', this thesis suggests that religious discourse continues to affect cultural conceptions of gender. This thesis proposes therefore that feminist Biblical re-vision is just such an act of survival in which biased assumptions perpetuated about women can be exposed and problematised in order to both 'write' and 'right' the wrongs of the Bible.

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INTRODUCTION

The awakening of consciousness is not like the crossing of a frontier - one step, and you are in another country.¹

The 8th of March 2011 saw the 100th anniversary of International Women's Day.² Born out of the political unrest of the early twentieth-century, in which oppression and inequality was spurring women on to become active campaigners for the vote, equal pay and employment rights, a conference of working women was held in Copenhagen in 1910 where Clara Zetkin suggested an international yearly celebration of women. Zetkin envisioned this day as an opportunity for women to come together to press for their demands; a Women's Day, in which the ongoing denial of women's rights to work, vote, receive professional training and education and hold political office would be fought. Her suggestion was met with unanimous approval. Yet a hundred years later women are still paid, on average,

¹ Adrienne Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision', *College English*, 34: 1 (1972), 18-30 (p. 25).

² For further information on International Women's Day see *International Women's Day 2011* (Aurora GCM, 2011) <<http://www.internationalwomensday.com>> [accessed 19 March 2011].

20% less than their male counterparts in the workplace.³ They struggle to enter business and politics in equal numbers with men, with only 18.2% of the world's parliament members being women.⁴ Poverty has a female face, with 70% of the people living below the poverty line worldwide being women.⁵ In England and Wales rape conviction rates are just 6%, the lowest rate in Europe.⁶ These depressing statistics lend credence to Lucy Mangan's recent article suggesting that 'the feminist fight is not over yet', in which she wearily refutes the oft-repeated question 'what [...] do you lot need another *wimmin's* day for? Haven't you got everything now?'⁷ While the question may be misguided it raises another interesting one. Why *haven't* women 'got everything' now? Why does gender equality remain an elusive aim? Why has society not yet crossed the frontier of sexism?

While feminist writers and thinkers are perhaps known more for their diversity of approaches rather than their agreement, there is some parity as to a potential cause of the persistent asymmetry in the relations of power between men and women. Mary Daly famously stated 'if God is male, then the male is God'.⁸ Elaine Pagels suggests that 'religious rhetoric assumes [...] that the men form the legitimate body of the community while women are allowed to participate only when they assimilate themselves to men'.⁹ Kate Millett goes further to insist that

³ *Statistical Bulletin: Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings* (London: Office for National Statistics, 2009).

⁴ *Women in National Parliaments* <www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm> [accessed 19 March 2011].

⁵ Lin Lean Lim, *More and Better Jobs for Women: An Action Guide* (Geneva: International Labour Organization, 1996), p. 11.

⁶ Jo Lovett and Liz Kelly, *Different Systems, Similar Outcomes? Tracking Attrition in Reported Rape Cases across Europe* (London: Child and Women Abuse Studies Unit, 2009).

⁷ Lucy Mangan, 'The Feminist Fight is Not Over Yet', *Guardian*, 5 March 2011 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2011/mar/05/mangan-feminist-international-womens-day>> [accessed 19 March 2011].

⁸ Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973; repr. London: The Women's Press, 1986), p. 19.

⁹ Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), p. 72.

‘patriarchy has God on its side’.¹⁰ Furthermore, she argues that the Bible in particular is a ‘highly influential ethical justification [...] of things as they are’ (ibid, p. 51). From Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1949), arguably the foundational text of second-wave feminism, feminist thinkers have acknowledged the role of religious rhetoric, and Biblical literature in particular, in insisting that ‘the subordinate position of woman is willed in heaven and advantageous on earth. The religions invented by men reflect this wish for domination’.¹¹ Genesis, the first book of the Christian Bible, states both that God is male and that man is created in God’s image (Genesis 1.5; 1.26).¹² Woman is made only after the beasts and fowl of Eden have been created and no help-meet for Adam is found. Only then is Eve ‘taken out of Man’ (Genesis 2:23). This is the ‘Word of God’, inherited by women but written by men. This book, what Amy Benson-Brown terms the ‘ur-text of Patriarchy’, presents a history in which man is the standard, the original human, God-like in his powers of creation and naming, and in which woman is second in both birth and status and always the ‘other’.¹³ In a radical negation of the female body and its creativity, Adam gives birth to Eve through his side. Female procreation is named as a punishment for sin, a marker of female guilt and a consequence of female knowledge. It is perhaps unsurprising therefore that, according to Catherine Redfern and Kristin Aune, those who identify as

¹⁰ Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (London: Virago, 1977), p. 51.

¹¹ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. by H.M. Parshley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972; repr. 1983), p. 22.

¹² ‘And God called the light Day, and the darkness *he* called Night’; ‘And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness’, *The Holy Bible: Authorized King James Version* (Glasgow: CollinsBible, 1957); ‘And *he* called the light Day, and the darkness Night’; ‘And he said: Let us make man to our image and likeness’, *The Holy Bible Douay-Rheims Version: With Challoner Revisions 1749-52* (n.p: John Murphy, 1899) <www.drbo.org> [accessed 19 March 2011].

¹³ Amy Benson Brown, *Rewriting the Word: American Women Writers and the Bible*, Contributions in Women’s Studies, 172 (Westport: Greenwood 1999), xii.

feminist today are less likely to be religious.¹⁴ Yet despite this negative legacy, contemporary women's writing in the West chooses to engage with, rather than reject, this received 'history'. Conflicted and dissenting as female engagement with religious discourse has been, feminism *does* nonetheless engage with it.

Perhaps the best example of the troubled, yet troubling, attitudes that feminism has portrayed towards religion can be found in the famous 1970s feminist slogan 'a woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle'. Often attributed to Gloria Steinem but actually written by Irina Dunn, it derives from an anti-religious statement that proclaims 'a man without faith is like a fish without a bicycle'.¹⁵ Dunn's simultaneous engagement with and deviance from this masculinist profession of anti-theism highlights the exclusion of women from such debates, violently disrupting the androcentric paradigm that both professes male freedom from God while, ironically, having recourse to Biblical mores that view humanity as essentially male, that view human relationships with the divine as a male realm, and that present the male voice as universal. Dunn's statement thus trenchantly insists upon female access to such discourses while radically transgressing their boundaries, its playful mimicry as much an acknowledgement of the godlike power that men have held over women as it is a rejection of such power. Yet it is only in entering such debates, by insisting upon a subjective and particular viewpoint *within* a dialogue that has been male-dominated but presented as universal, that Dunn has been able to expose all such perspectives as subjective and create space for the dissenting female voice. Ursula King suggests that '[r]eligion has not only been the matrix of cultures and civilizations, but it

¹⁴ Catherine Redfern and Kristin Aune, *Reclaiming the F Word: The New Feminist Movement* (London: Zed Books, 2010), p. 154. See also Kathryn Feltey and Margaret Poloma, 'From Sex Differences to Gender Role Beliefs', *Sex Roles* 25 (1991), 181-3.

¹⁵ Charles Harris, *Swarthmore Phoenix*, 7 Apr 1958, cited in Fred R. Shapiro, *The Yale Book of Quotations* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), p. 342.

structures reality – all reality, including that of gender – and encompasses the deepest level of what it means to be human'.¹⁶ To reject religion wholesale would therefore be to further exclude women from the very realms of humanity that feminism has fought so hard to gain access to. Instead feminist critics and female writers have increasingly attempted to renegotiate the terms of 'humanity' and 'reality' in relation to women through a re-examination of such matrices as religion and history. Yet such attempts must tread carefully. Mary Eagleton has argued that:

[i]n the 1970s, feminism's position on any rewriting of literary 'masters' was hardly encouraging. The line seemed to be either to ignore them and concentrate on women's literary production or to adopt a very cautious engagement. This is not surprising. Texts such as Elaine Showalter's 'Women and the Literary Curriculum' (1971), Adrienne Rich's 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision' (1971), and Judith Fetterley's 'The Resisting Reader' (1978) point out the disabling effect on women of being educated into an almost exclusively male canon of authorities that fails to speak to the experience or aspirations of women. Why would one want to reinforce that relationship by reproducing it?¹⁷

The texts included in this thesis reflect such a concern. Like Dunn's statement, contemporary women's writing on the Bible re-examines the male word that has masqueraded as universal, re-reading the human past from a female perspective and as such it therefore represents an ongoing project of re-reading reality itself, of examining unquestioned assumptions about both men and women and their relationships to each other from a previously silenced point of view, looking again at what it means to be *human*, rather than simply male. Yet it is crucial that such texts do more than simply re-read the past. This thesis is predicated on Adrienne Rich's notion of 're-vision'. In her seminal essay 'When

¹⁶ Ursula King, *Religion and Gender* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), p. 2.

¹⁷ Mary Eagleton, 'Rewriting the Master: Emma Tennant and Robert Louis Stevenson', *LIT Literature Interpretation Theory*, 17 (2006), 223-241 (p. 223).

We Dead Awaken' (itself a re-visionary play upon the male word – in this case the title of Ibsen's play about male artistic appropriation of women), Rich suggests '[r]evision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival' (p. 18). Rich demonstrates how the male literary canon uses women to create and sustain a male-dominated society, arguing that the only way to refuse the identities given to women is to utilise the literature of the canon as a key to how women are named by men. Re-vision's first effect is therefore to expose the historical conditions through which the identity of 'woman' is constituted. Yet re-vision is more than re-reading. In its subversive act of *rewriting* texts, re-visionary writing such as that presented in this thesis challenges received 'history', offering instead the lost or silenced female point of view, testifying to a female history that has been rendered invisible, 'challenging the sacredness of the gentlemanly canon, sharing the rediscovery of buried works by women, asking women's questions, bringing literary history and criticism back to life' (p. 33). The effect of re-visionist texts is to both rediscover a lost or hidden past, to give voice to the silenced or ignored, and to literally *rewrite* history, for woman to 'put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement', to become, as Rich says, 'consciously historical'.¹⁸

Woman's historicity has been a consistent focus of feminist theory and criticism, giving rise to seminal writings such as Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) in which the silenced female writer is given voice, while Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) did the

¹⁸ H. Cixous 'The Laugh of the Medusa', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 1:4 (1976), 245-264 (p. 245); Adrienne Rich, 'Resisting Amnesia', in *Blood, Bread and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-1985* (London: Virago, 1986), pp. 136-155 (p. 145).

same for the silenced female subject.¹⁹ Woman's relationship to religious history in particular has been the focus of works such as Elaine Pagel's *The Gnostic Gospels* (1980) in which she undertakes a critical examination of the alternative epistemologies of Judao-Christian narratives, including a potential Gospel of Mary, while Marina Warner's *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* (1976) re-evaluates one of the most visible yet misunderstood figures in Judao-Christian history.²⁰ Feminist theologians such as Mary Daly, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Judith Plaskow have specifically sought to come to terms with Anglican, Catholic and Jewish models of femininity, as well as considering the possibilities of matriarchal religions, paganism, mysticism and polytheism for women. Yet Ursula King acknowledges that '[t]he existence of women scholars and the critical transformation of their consciousness means that their research challenges the existing paradigms of religious studies because all phenomena are examined from the perspectives of gender and power'. Thus even the broader political and philosophical considerations of feminist theorists such as Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Judith Butler and Donna Haraway, while lacking the stated religious focus of feminist theology, have nonetheless persistently found expression in re-examining Biblical tropes (King, p. 2).

These writers and their works arguably embody some of the most recognisable feminist theory and literary criticism of the 21st century, yet they represent only a small part of the work that has been undertaken on this topic.

¹⁹ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1929; repr. London: Grafton Books, 1977); Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 2nd edn (New Haven; Yale University Press, 2000).

²⁰ Warner, Marina, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1976; repr. New York: Vintage, 1983).

Events such as the recent Post-Graduate Contemporary Women's Writing Network's *Writing Bodies/Reading Bodies* conference and the Nottingham Trent-Loughborough-De Montfort-Leicester Link seminar series, in which a number of papers on religious themes were presented, including my own work on Roberts's *Impossible Saints* and Diamant's *The Red Tent*, parts of which were taken from Chapters Two and Five of this thesis, testify to the ongoing and persistent interest of female scholars in religious narratives.²¹ This interest has additionally been echoed in a number of scholarly works in the field of literary criticism. Jeanette King's *Women and the Word: Contemporary Women Novelists and the Bible* (2000) has examined some of the most well known and illustrious female authors of the last forty years. Covering works by Emma Tennant, Michèle Roberts, Sara Maitland, Jeanette Winterson, Angela Carter, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison, Jeanette King seeks to examine how 'these texts deconstruct and reconstruct [religious] myths not only to expose the patriarchal beliefs which underpin them, but to provide alternative myths which can offer women a more constructive view of their own gender'.²² Amy Benson Brown's *Rewriting the Word: American Women Writers and the Bible* (1999) examines authors such as Emily Dickinson, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, Toni Morrison and Gloria Naylor to suggest that the contentious dialogue between American women writers and the Bible ultimately

²¹ The papers on religious themes at the PGCWWN Conference include Clare Read, 'The Body, Judaism and Sexuality in Lesléa Newman's *A Letter to Harvey Milk* and Irena Klepfisz's *Dreams of an Insomniac*'; Elizabeth Howard-Laity, 'Writing Wrongs: Rewriting the Body in Michèle Roberts's *Impossible Saints*'; Anna Fisk, 'The Female Body in Agony and Ecstasy: Ascetic Women in Michèle Roberts and Sara Maitland'; Kirsten Banks, 'Lighting up the Underworld: (Re)visioning the Mother's Resurrection in Patricia Duncker's *Seven Tales of Sex and Death* and Kathy Acker's *Eurydice in the Underworld*': all presented at *Writing Bodies/Reading Bodies in Contemporary Women's Writing*, 2nd biennial conference of the Postgraduate Contemporary Women's Writing Network (University of Oxford, 11th-12th September 2009) <<http://pgcwwn.wordpress.com/events/writing-bodies-reading-bodies>> [accessed 19th March 2011].

²² Jeanette King, *Women and The Word: Contemporary Women Novelists and the Bible* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), p. 3.

serves to construct an alternative authority in which the woman writer can rediscover the voice that Biblical narratives have silenced. More recently Andrew Tate's *Contemporary Fiction and Christianity* (2008), covering predominantly male authors but also including work on Roberts and Winterson, has examined what he sees as the 'apparent revival (or resurrection) of religion' in contemporary fiction since the 1980s.²³ Rebecca Styler's recently published study, *Literary Theology by Women Writers of the Nineteenth Century* (2010), suggests on the other hand that, for women at least, re-examination of the 'Word' is by no means a contemporary phenomenon, arguing that women writers of the nineteenth century 'used literature as a means to engage in theological discourse, through which they reinterpreted Christianity to meet deeply felt personal and political needs'.²⁴ My own study will be situated alongside and build upon these texts, along with those of a number of other critics and theorists, while going beyond them in a number of ways.

Examining eleven texts by nine authors from England, America, New Zealand and Canada, while encompassing characters living in the disparate locations of New York, Cornwall, Biblical Egypt and Jerusalem, amongst others, I offer a broader geographical scope than the works listed above, which focus on American and English writers and in which Western experiences of religion predominate. Although the largely Anglo-American image of contemporary Christianity perhaps requires such a focus to some extent, and indeed is given centrality in Emma Tennant's *Sisters and Strangers* (1990), Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* (1977), and Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* (2004), I attempt to additionally reflect its middle-eastern Judaic origins in Anita Diamant's

²³ Andrew Tate, *Contemporary Fiction and Christianity* (London: Continuum, 2008), p. 3.

²⁴ Rebecca Styler, *Literary Theology of Women Writers of the Nineteenth Century* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), p. 1.

The Red Tent (1997), Jenny Diski's *Only Human: A Comedy* (2000) and *After These Things* (2004), and Michèle Roberts's *The Secret Gospel of Mary Magdalene* (1984) as well as Christianity's continuing influence outside the UK and the US today in Commonwealth countries as seen in Sue Reidy's *The Visitation* (1996).²⁵ Furthermore, contextual considerations of place are matched by those of time and genre, with ancient gospel in Roberts's and Brown's novels, the realm of myth in Ann Chamberlin's *Leaving Eden* (1999) and Penelope Farmer's *Eve, Her Story* (1985) and medieval hagiography in Roberts's *Impossible Saints* (1997) featuring as much as contemporary Western discourse.²⁶

However, I have made no attempt to be conclusive or exhaustive in my choice of texts. Irrespective of the impossibility of so doing, this thesis is structured around the women of the Bible themselves, ordered by Biblical appearance as Eve, Old Testament women, the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene and, in a consideration of post-Biblical religious women, medieval virgin saints. I have therefore chosen texts that most accurately or helpfully express what I have considered to be the overriding central myths surrounding each woman. Although I will be revisiting some texts previously studied by King, offering newer theoretical considerations not covered in the earlier study to provide an updated and recontextualised reading, I have chosen to focus predominantly on authors that have received little or no critical attention. Some are very recent while others are older but have never received academic appreciation. In either case, such an approach allows me

²⁵ Versions used are Emma Tennant, *Sisters and Strangers* (London: Flamingo, 1994); Angela Carter, *The Passion of New Eve*, (London: Virago, 1982); Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (London: Corgi, 2004); Anita Diamant, *The Red Tent: The Oldest Love Story Never Told* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2002); Jenny Diski, *After These Things: A Novel* (London: Little, Brown, 2004); Jenny Diski, *Only Human: A Comedy* (London: Virago, 2000); Michèle Roberts, *The Secret Gospel of Mary Magdalene* [formerly published as *The Wild Girl* (1984)] (London: Vintage, 2007); Sue Reidy, *The Visitation* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996);

²⁶ Ann Chamberlin, *Leaving Eden* (New York: Forge, 1999); Penelope Farmer, *Eve, Her Story* (London: Gollancz, 1985); Michèle Roberts, *Impossible Saints* (London: Virago, 1998).

to offer new and alternative approaches to literary engagement with the Bible and thus to enter more fully into the lively and ongoing dialogue within the field of contemporary women's writing in relation to religious debates.

Furthermore, unlike the studies mentioned above, I do not limit my examination solely to 'literary' authors, although several of the novels and authors featured within this thesis, such as Carter and Roberts, have received academic attention. Rather, the eleven texts that I have selected reflect a broad range of literary forms, including popular and genre fiction. In so doing I hope to reflect, at least in part, the 'unauthorised' nature of much women's writing, including that of the writers found *within* the novels themselves. While several of the female figures encountered in these novels are writers, none is an author of high status 'literature'. Rather, they are writers of popular romances, like Farmer's Eve; memoir, such as Diamant's Dinah and Roberts's Mary Magdalene; or autobiography like Roberts's Josephine. These women lack prestige as authors and their writings lack status as literary forms, yet equally they address questions of authority. Farmer's Eve is also a scientist and bluestocking, suggesting that her ability to engage with the 'male' realm of logic and intellect is present in her fictional works; Diamant and Roberts's female subjects are not only writers of their own past, but that of society – they are chroniclers, gospel writers and mystic interpreters. These women are witnesses to history, and to some extent therefore, its authors. Mary Eagleton suggests that the terms 'authorising' and 'authority' 'have been highly problematic concepts for women in the cultural sphere and for the development of a feminist cultural criticism'.²⁷ My choice of novels therefore reflects this difficulty by including not only those writers who have gained access

²⁷ Mary Eagleton, *Figuring the Woman Author in Contemporary Fiction* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 2.

to the literary canon, such as Carter and Tennant, but also emerging voices like Diamant, Diski and Roberts, lesser known authors such as Chamberlin and Reidy and those who are perhaps more familiar as writers of children's fiction, such as Farmer, as well as examining the popular blockbuster in the shape of Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*.

I have taken a broad theoretical approach to the texts contained within this thesis. Where Jeanette King utilises a predominantly Kristevan approach to the literature she examines, I have found it helpful to expand the theoretical range that has been applied to contemporary women's religious writings. Throughout this thesis I have investigated the numerous ways in which contemporary women writers have revised Biblical narratives, and while all the texts examined have engaged in a project of both re-reading and re-writing such narratives, there is nonetheless no single way in which they have done so. The methods utilised by the authors of these texts vary widely in their attempts to reposit a Judao-Christian history which need not exclude or denigrate women. The strategies employed within these novels range from the pseudo-historical imaginings of 'lost' or silenced women's stories such as Farmer's *Eve, Her Story* or Diamant's *The Red Tent* to recontextualisations of Biblical women in contemporary settings like Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* and Reidy's *The Visitation*. While historical and contemporary events form the basis for many of these stories, myth, legend and fairytale are equally prevalent, and modern genres such as science-fiction and 'magic realism' or historiographic metafiction sit alongside the more traditional gospel, hagiographic and genealogical forms in the canon of feminist Biblical re-vision. It is clear then, that there is no 'one' type of feminist Biblical re-vision, yet all the novels discussed within this thesis *can* be identified as such. The

effects of such stories range from reincorporating a ‘feminine’ aspect into narratives of divinity to rejecting notions of gender altogether, yet all of them display a firmly feminist stance in their engagement with the patriarchal texts that make up Judao-Christian histories. The ultimate success or otherwise of each novel in establishing alternatives to such histories remains a subjective judgement, yet the challenge these texts pose not only to sexism but also to the andro-centric bias of related human experience is undeniable. The key to such a challenge perhaps lies in the very differences that appear, at first glance, to divide the many forms of feminist Biblical re-vision. Eagleton describes feminist criticism as ‘a broad church with a number of co-operating and competing approaches’.²⁸ Differences in both the approaches and effects of these novels reflect this contemporary acknowledgement that there is no one type of feminism, preferring instead the notion of ‘feminisms’, incorporating, amongst others, essentialist and constructivist views, socialist, Marxist, cultural and separatist feminisms, gender feminism (bordering on and to some extent overlapping with lesbian and queer theories), eco-feminism, black feminism, third-world feminism. I have, therefore, preferred to allow the texts to speak for themselves rather than dictating any specific theoretical approach.

However, I have attempted to provide an overview of some major trends within feminist Biblical re-vision in chapter One. Beginning with the earliest book in the Bible, my first chapter explores four alternative narratives surrounding Eve. Examining the relationship between Simone de Beauvoir’s famous statement that ‘one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman’ and Biblical creation narratives, this chapter investigates how contemporary woman writers have

²⁸ Mary Eagleton, *Feminist Literary Criticism* (New York: Longman, 1991), p. 2.

engaged with differing approaches to gender acquisition within feminist and gender studies, highlighting the differences between feminist re-vision of the origin story with that which is merely female-authored (Beauvoir, p. 295). Beginning with the previously unstudied *Leaving Eden*, I show how Ann Chamberlin engages with the myth of Genesis to link the ‘becoming’ of woman with the repression of female power under the aegis of patriarchal monotheism. Chamberlin suggests that the aim of literature is to ‘retell history from the points of view of people who did not get to tell their side because their side lost’.²⁹ As such, she explicitly uses her fiction to carry out Rich’s definition of re-vision as ‘an act of survival’, resurrecting both her own Goddess, Lilith, within the novel, after she is killed, as well as the myth of a pre-patriarchal Mother-Goddess religion that, Chamberlin suggests, can reinstate a specifically feminine model of the divine. Yet if feminist Biblical re-vision is to be seen as an act of survival, a political act in which biased assumptions made and perpetuated about women can be exposed and the binary oppositions imposed upon the identity of ‘woman’ are problematised and deconstructed, then it is crucial that it does not simply replace one form of oppressive myth with another, perhaps more favourable but no less confining stereotype. I discuss how Chamberlin’s matriarchal approach to female origins serves to highlight the absence of women from history, yet, in its insistence upon ‘female’ power, ultimately reifies an essentialist paradigm of gender that serves to further the historical ‘othering’ of women, while obscuring the very real repressions that result from such an action.

²⁹ Chamberlin is the author of ten historical novels, as well as a number of plays, one of which, ‘Jihad’ on the Islamic representation of women, won The Off Off Broadway Review’s best new play of the year in 1996. For further information see Ann Chamberlin, ‘Biography’, *Ann Chamberlin.Com* (2011) <http://www.annchamberlin.com/pages/int_about_biography.html> [accessed 30 Jan 2011].

Emma Tennant's *Sisters and Strangers* is no less interested in the mythic models of femininity that the Bible offers, yet while Chamberlin's text attempts to overcome the repression of women by entering further into the myth of nature, Tennant exposes such myth as culturally determined and offers instead a radical narrative of 'otherness' that troubles the univocity of traditional creation texts. Following Eve through the seven stages of womanhood, identified by King as 'romantic heroine (or mistress), wife, whore, Madonna, courtesan, bluestocking, witch', Tennant examines the archetypes surrounding women (King, p. 34). Using Kathie Birat's reading of Tennant, I investigate whether Tennant's narrative strategies proffer a positive 'otherness' that radically deconstructs such archetypes, troubling the univocity of creation texts, as Birat suggests, or whether Tennant's metafictional insistence on inhabiting the realm of myth which she works to trouble ultimately undermines such an aim. Unlike Chamberlin and Tennant, Penelope Farmer rejects cultural notions of female subjection, drawing instead from a third-wave feminist focus on female transgression and self-sufficiency. Highlighting Farmer's utilisation of the transgressive potential of the 'fall', through which Eve can finally become a woman, I contrast the positive potential of female agency that *Eve, Her Story* promotes with the opposing reification of an 'authentic' femininity that Farmer's transitional text attempts, but ultimately fails, to overcome. In discussing these three texts I highlight both the positive potential as well as the flaws of feminist Biblical re-vision. I suggest that while these texts take several steps forward in the awakening of a feminist consciousness of the genesis of gender, they all too often retreat into an apocalyptic essentialism. This chapter closes, therefore, with what I propose is the most radical alternative to Biblical notions of gender, despite being the earliest

of the texts included in this thesis. I devote the largest part of chapter One to a new reading of Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve*. Highlighting some fundamental differences between Carter's presentation of gender acquisition and those informed by Butler's notion of 'performativity' that have characterised Carter scholarship of the last decade, I suggest instead that Carter's radical renegotiation of gender acquisition both speaks to de Beauvoir's proto-second wave feminism while pre-empting the cyborg theory of Donna Haraway. Utilising Haraway's concept of 'affinity' over identity, I show how Carter foreshadows Haraway's argument that 'in the fraying of identities and in the reflexive strategies for constructing them, the possibility opens up for weaving something other than a shroud for the day after the apocalypse that so prophetically ends salvation history'.³⁰ In so doing, I suggest that Carter shows how the genesis of gender for women need not be the whole story.

The idea of a 'whole story' is central to the novels discussed in chapter Two. Jenny Diski's *Only Human* and *After These Things* retells the stories of Sarai and Rebecca, wives to the patriarchs of the Old Testament, while Anita Diamant's *The Red Tent* follows these events with a reimagining of the story of Dinah, daughter to Jacob, whose story, in the Bible, ends with her rape. Both these authors show how Biblical history absents women from the concepts of 'home' and 'family', presenting only a male perspective that fails to tell the 'whole story'. Where the Biblical women are subsumed within the narratives of their male relatives Diski and Diamant suggest that '[t]here was far more to tell' (Diamant, p. 2). Engaging with the formulaic genealogical concepts of family

³⁰ Donna Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century' in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Association Books, 1991), pp. 149-181 (p. 158).

that the Bible presents, these novels give voice to previously unheard Old Testament women and their stories to, as Rachel Blau DuPlessis suggests,

dissent from an ideological formation by attacking elements of narrative that repeat, sustain or embody the values and attitudes in question. So after breaking the sentence, a rupture with the internalization of the authorities and voices of dominance, the woman writer will create that further rupture... breaking the sequence – the expected order.³¹

This ‘expected order’, Diski shows, can be found in Biblical concepts of family. When reciting his genealogy, Sarai’s father, in the voice of the Old Testament, states:

These are the begetting of Shem: Shem begot Arpakhshad. And Arpakhshad begot Shelah. And Shelah begot Ever. And Ever begot Peleg. And Peleg begot Re’. And Re begot Serug. And Serug begot Nahor. And Nahor begot Terah. And Terah begot Nahor, Abram and Haran.
(Diski, *Only Human*, p. 22)

Yet there is ‘no mention of Sarai’ (ibid). Diski thus counters the invisibility of women like Sarai by proffering two novels that give equal weight to the stories of her female characters as they do to her male ones, and, crucially, to God himself, questioning the authority of the Bible to write women’s stories. Diamant too highlights how Biblical notions of family remove women from history, overturning masculinist genealogical conventions by beginning her novel with ‘My Mother’s Stories’, again proffering the missing voices of history. Yet these novels go further than simply reinserting women into the male-identified narrative of history. I argue in this chapter that the act of re-vision can be seen as an example of what Elaine Showalter calls ‘gynocriticism’. Showalter suggests that ‘Gynocritics begins at the point when we free ourselves from the linear absolutes

³¹ Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth Century Women Writers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), p. 34.

of male literary history, stop trying to fit women between the lines of the male tradition.³² Previously unacknowledged within literary criticism, I propose that Diamant's rendering of the latter portion of Dinah's life follows the story of a far more well-known Biblical woman – Ruth. Utilising the famously close relationship between Ruth and her mother-in-law Noemi, I suggest that the incorporation of Ruth's story into Dinah's invisible one allows Diamant to explore what Showalter calls 'the newly visible world of female culture', asking whether women can ever be seen as 'belonging' in a male dominated world or simply as 'belongings' (ibid).

The question of 'belonging' is a troubling one within feminist debates. Pam Morris questions if 'the construction of this 'woman's' tradition of writing [is] actually producing a literary history of exclusively western, white, middle-class, heterosexual women?'³³ Where feminism has claimed to speak for the marginalised category of 'woman', it has often done so at the expense of categories of race, class, religion and sexuality. Diamant and Diski's novels counter such homogenisation by not only give voice to the silenced *woman*, but to a specifically *Jewish* woman. Furthermore their stories concern slaves as much as queens, prostitutes as much as wives. Engaging with contemporary theories of diaspora, as well as Julia Kristeva's suggestion that women are always foreigners in the symbolic order, I show that these novels utilise such marginalised positions to reveal how concepts of 'home' and 'family' are always conditional for women, offering a subversive potential in the unsettling condition of exile.³⁴

³² Elaine Showalter, *New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory* (New York: Pantheon, 1985), p. 131.

³³ Pam Morris, *Literature and Feminism: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p. 164.

³⁴ Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake suggest that '[b]ridging generations as much as races, as much as classes, as much as all our other bisecting lines, and being humble enough to realize that our ideas are not so new, is one fine way to fight paralysis, to move, to shake, to rock the world one more time'.³⁵ Where the novels of the first two chapters suggest that rejecting a tradition that gives voice only to men is key to transforming gender politics, they nonetheless do so through an insistence upon a parallel tradition of women's words. Yet the perceived absence of such a tradition has left feminist debates open to constant reinvention, often overturning or outright rejecting the lessons of previous generations. Heywood and Drake argue that 'we've hated our mothers (and ourselves) long enough. Their struggles are still our struggles, if in different forms' (Heywood and Drake, p. 54). Yet as Kristeva points out, in religious terms, there are no mothers; 'the object excluded [...] whatever form it may take in Biblical narrative, is ultimately the mother'.³⁶ According to *The Times* 'nearly three quarters of Christians think that god is male, compared with less than half of the general population'.³⁷ Furthermore, 'only one in a hundred believes that She is female' (ibid). That is, a quarter of the surveyed Christians and over half the general population do not believe God is male, but nor do they necessarily believe that God is female. In chapter Three I look at how Sue Reidy's *The Visitation* examines how such debates are played out in religious discourse, highlighting the absence of not only feminist foremothers, but also of divine ones. Luce Irigaray has suggested that 'God has been created out of man's gender. He scarcely sets limits within Himself and between Himself: He is father, son, spirit. Man has not

³⁵ Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake, *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 54.

³⁶ Julia Kristeva, 'Reading the Bible' in *The Postmodern Bible Reader* ed. by David Jobling, Tina Pippin, Ronald Schleifer (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), pp. 92-101 (p. 95).

³⁷ 'God Moves in a Gender Neutral Way', *Times*, 19 May 2008, p. 25.

allowed himself to be defined by another gender; the female. His unique God is assumed to correspond to the human race'.³⁸ Reidy focuses on the figure of the Virgin Mary to suggest that female access to historicity can only be found through an equal access to divinity. Highlighting how the sole representation of female divinity in a Judao-Christian tradition is in fact a model of passivity and silence which negates female access to the divine, Reidy draws instead on the apocryphal and popular presentations of the Virgin to proffer a fluid model of divinity that is as human as it is godlike, and that crucially places access to 'the Word' in women's own hands.

It is of course true that female access to the word (or 'the Word') is central to the project of feminist re-vision, yet is it necessarily true that feminist rewriting must be that which is written by women? Mary Eagleton suggests that 'Fetterley's term "resisting," rather more than Rich's term "re-vision," expresses a sense of struggle; the woman reader feels at odds with the text, knows she is not the implied reader and, hence, can read only "against the grain"' ('Rewriting the Master', p. 224). Is it possible for men to rewrite patriarchal stories in ways that could be described as 'feminist' and with a female reader in mind? With such diversity, and to some extent, conflict, present in the numerous texts studied within this thesis and the accompanying politics that underpin them, how can one firmly identify what, exactly, 'feminist re-vision' is? These questions are at the heart of chapter Four in which I compare Michèle Roberts's *The Secret Gospel of Mary Magdalene* (previously published as *The Wild Girl*) and Dan Brown's bestselling blockbuster *The Da Vinci Code*. Brown's apparently re-visionary novel can perhaps be seen as a reflection of the increasing contemporary

³⁸ Luce Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies* trans. by Gillian C. Gill (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 61.

fascination with the ‘bad girl’ of the Bible, repositing Mary Magdalene as not only Jesus’s wife but as the Holy Grail itself. Examining the interplay between genre and gender in these two texts, I suggest that the popular attitudes that Brown reflects (and to some extent creates) reveal an unacknowledged male bias in popular culture that subsumes ‘woman’ into a male-identified salvation narrative, and which, even while claiming to speak for women, still fails to speak *to* them. In contrast, I show how Roberts utilises the same popular and theological traditions surrounding the Magdalene to unsettle the authority that Brown so deftly appropriates, highlighting both the complexity and the quotidian aspects of women’s lived realities, refusing to simplify ‘woman’ to a fixed and eternal category. Furthermore, in making Mary the author of her own story, a poet, mystic and gospel writer, I suggest that Roberts not only engages in an act of ‘demythologising’ but also in creating a new mythology that reflects the self-conscious and subjective nature of much women’s writing while simultaneously exposing patriarchal narratives as equally so.

While the novels studied throughout this thesis have looked at both their Biblical origins as well as the continuing effects that such stories have on contemporary women, it is important to acknowledge the vast period of time between the two. If contemporary women writers are to ‘write’ the wrongs of religious discourse then they must also chronicle the lived realities of religious women outside the pages of the Bible as well as document the ‘struggle’ that such women have historically undertaken. Rosemary Radford Ruether charts the emergence of feminist theology from the medieval period, suggesting that ‘[a]mong many female spiritual writers of the Middle Ages, such as Hildegard of Bingen and Julian of Norwich, one finds women able to gain some theological

education, to claim and be accepted by other women and men as producers of theological writing, teachers, and preachers'.³⁹ During the medieval period few British men achieved the power of Hild, Abbess and founder of Whitby, host of the famous Synod of Whitby, and credited by the Venerable Bede with such wisdom that she was an advisor to Kings.⁴⁰ Despite Mary Daly's wholesale rejection of any positive message for women in Christianity, suggesting that 'a woman's asking for equality in the church would be comparable to a black person's demanding equality in the Klu Klux Klan', other contemporary feminists have acknowledged the very real freedoms that religion has historically allowed certain women.⁴¹ Irigaray notes that 'certain women mystics have been among those rare women to achieve real social influence, notably in politics'.⁴² In chapter Five I examine how Michèle Roberts's novel, *Impossible Saints*, draws on the positive legacy of such women as found in the popular medieval text, *The Golden Legend*, showing how the figure of the female saint offers a transgressive model of female agency which is, to some extent, endorsed by Christian tradition. Exposing how such transgression has been historically contained within the repression of the body in hagiographical narratives, resulting in a pronounced emphasis on martyrdom for female saints, Roberts's *Impossible Saints* step beyond the pages of their foundational texts, rejecting the glorification of death encompassed in such narratives to literally enact Rich's 'act of survival'.

³⁹ Rosemary Radford Ruether, 'The Emergence of Christian Feminist Theology' in *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology* ed. by Susan Frank Parsons (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 3-22 (p. 5).

⁴⁰ Bede, 'Historia Ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum' or 'Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation', *Internet Medieval Sourcebook*. (Fordham University Center for Medieval Studies) <<http://www.fordham.edu>> [accessed 12 Oct 2009].

⁴¹ Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975), p. 6.

⁴² Luce Irigaray, 'Divine Women', in *Sexes and Genealogies*, trans. by Gillian C. Gill (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp. 57 – 72 (p. 63).

Like the saints of Roberts's novel, each of the authors included within this thesis can be seen as enabling woman's survival. In an era named by some as 'post-feminist' women are still named by men as archetypes: sinners or saints, virgins or whores, through the Bible, in religious discourse, and through these apparatuses, in society. In constructing alternatives to the myths surrounding women, these female authors not only make visible a lost female history, but also make possible a new female future. Yet in order for such a possibility to occur it is crucial that their voices be heard. When Virginia Woolf wrote about the absence of a female literary tradition in the early twentieth century, she herself was unaware of the rich history of women's writing. From Sappho in 6th century BC Greece, through the troublesome Roman, Agrippina the younger, writing in the first century AD, Julian of Norwich, the great women writers of the nineteenth century, Woolf herself, contemporary women writers like Carter and Roberts, there has never been a lack of female voices. Women buy more books than men and they read more books than men, yet the Booker Prize shortlist for the last ten years has included over fifty percent more male authors than female ones.⁴³ The overriding message from publishing houses is that, irrespective of the number of books *written* by women, the books that are published are far more likely to be written by men, while the *London Review of Books*, *Times Literary Supplement* and *New York Review of Books* follow suit, giving 74%, 75% and 83% of their respective review space to books by male authors. This is perhaps unsurprising when one considers that, on average, 78% of their reviewers are male.⁴⁴ The problem has never been a lack of women writers. The problem has been that these women have been invisible to us. In Austen's *Persuasion*, Anne Elliot

⁴³ *The Man Booker Prizes* <<http://www.themanbookerprize.com>> [accessed 25 Mar 2011].

⁴⁴ All information on gender inequality in publishing taken from *Vida: Women in Literary Arts* <<http://vidaweb.org/the-count-2010>> [accessed 25 Mar 2011].

states: ‘Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands. I will not allow books to prove anything’.⁴⁵ The texts studied in this thesis view the Bible as one such book, yet I hope to have allowed perhaps a few books to prove something; that women’s writing is crossing the frontiers of history, that the pen is being wielded by women, that they will not allow the Bible to prove anything, and that they are not only rewriting the history of women, but that they are writing the future. Most importantly, they are doing it together, differently and subjectively, but it is in the multiple and individual voices of *many* women that the univocal voice of God is finally rewritten. Patricia Duncker suggests:

making meanings is both an individual and a collective project. It cannot be done by one woman alone. It cannot be done once and for all. Not only must the old stories be continually challenged and re-told; sometimes they must simply be mocked and abandoned. We need to make up new stories of our own.⁴⁶

These are some of them.

⁴⁵ Jane Austen, *Persuasion* (1818) (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), p. 239.

⁴⁶ Patricia Duncker, *Sisters and Strangers: An Introduction to Contemporary Feminist Fiction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), pp. 134-5.

CHAPTER ONE

REVISING GENESIS AND GENDER

In perhaps the most virulent example of the anti-feminist Christian tradition, Tertullian, writing at the turn of the third century AD in a treatise aimed at women, writes:

Do you not know that you are Eve? [...] The judgement of God upon this sex lives on in this age; therefore, necessarily the guilt should live on also. You are that gateway of the devil; you are the one who unseals the curse of that tree, and you are the first one to turn your back on the divine law; you are the one who persuaded him whom the devil was not capable of corrupting; you easily destroyed the image of God, Adam. Because of what you deserve, that is, death, even the Son of God had to die.⁴⁷

From the earliest Judao-Christian writings, to the present day, Eve has been denigrated, blamed for original sin, for *all* the sins of humankind, and used to justify the continuing inequality that women face in the twenty-first century. Simone de Beauvoir famously wrote ‘one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman’ (p. 295). Yet according to the Christian Bible, the first woman is born

⁴⁷ Tertullian, ‘The Appearance of Women’, in *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended*, ed. by Alcuin Blamires (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), pp. 50-58 (p.51).

fully formed, already a woman, owned and named as such by man.⁴⁸

Furthermore, Eve, arguably the most reviled person in Western history, has historically stood for *all* women. It seems therefore that, from a Judao-Christian viewpoint, one is not only born a woman, that is to say pre-ordained with the negative connotations of the female sex, but born with the weight of history's censure already upon one's shoulders. How then, can one 'become' a woman without also becoming Eve? What does it mean to become a woman, and is it possible to become any other kind of woman?

The novels examined in this chapter engage with these very questions, interrogating the notion of 'becoming a woman' through re-vision of the Genesis myth. Ann Chamberlin's *Leaving Eden* (1999), Emma Tennant's *Sisters and Strangers* (1991), Penelope Farmer's *Eve, Her Story* (1985), and Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* (1977) all rewrite the story of Genesis in ways that specifically address how the history of humanity as presented within the Bible has privileged male narratives of origin that exclude and denigrate women. However, the ways in which these authors do so are radically different, reflecting the contemporary acknowledgement that there is no one 'feminism'. I will therefore provide a reading of these four novels that situates them within feminist thought to outline some predominant themes and aims of feminist Biblical re-vision, evaluating their success in revising the origin myths that have made up the 'herstory' of humankind, suggesting that the Biblical Genesis of gender need not be the whole story.

⁴⁸ 'And the Lord God built the rib which he took from Adam into a woman: and brought her to Adam. And Adam said: This now is bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called woman, because she was taken out of man' Genesis 2. 22-3.

Starting with the latest of the four novels examined in this chapter, Ann Chamberlin's *Leaving Eden*, I will show how Chamberlin engages with an essentialist feminist notion of pre-patriarchal origins that offers a focus on female power lacking within Judao-Christian histories. I will examine the strengths and weaknesses of such an approach to suggest that the female empowerment presented in such narratives can only be realised through an insistence on what de Beauvoir terms 'equalitarian segregation' that risks validating an essentialised category of 'woman' (Beauvoir, p. 23). I will go on to examine Emma Tennant's novel *Sisters and Strangers* to show how she renegotiates patriarchal myth to offer a narrative of 'otherness' that troubles the univocity of traditional creation texts about women. I will situate Tennant's text within feminist discussions of the 'other' to suggest that while Tennant's 'demythologising' text successfully highlights how patriarchal history has confined women to mythic archetypes, its insistence on inhabiting the realm of myth that it attempts to trouble ultimately renders freedom from such archetypes impossible, and thus fails to establish an alternative text for female becoming. I will then examine Penelope Farmer's *Leaving Eden* to show how Farmer's text represents a transition from such essentialist feminist arguments, opposing a pre-fall identity of woman that draws on nature, associated with essentialist feminism, with a post-fall cultural identity that speaks to the ethos of self-sufficiency found in early third-wave feminist movements. I will show that while Farmer's focus on transgression promotes a potentially positive enablement of female agency, the model of gender acquisition provided within the novel can be shown to be 'problematic when it [...] supports,

even inadvertently, the reification of a precultural sphere of the authentic feminine'.⁴⁹

Finally, I will devote the last part of my chapter to Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve*. I will suggest that previous readings of Carter's novel, utilising the theories of Judith Butler, show that, despite being the earliest of the four texts examined herein, it is the most radical in its feminist critique of Christian tradition. I will go on to show that such readings, which focus on the performative nature of gender in *The Passion of New Eve*, can be usefully complemented with an examination of Carter's treatment of the origins of gender informed by Donna Haraway's cyborg theory. In so doing I will offer a new reading of the novel that goes beyond those informed solely by Butler to highlight how Carter's theories of gender acquisition speak both to Beauvoir's proto-second-wave feminism of the 1940s while also foreshadowing Haraway's cyborg theories of the 1990s. I will aim to use this reading to show how Carter subverts the reproductive politics of patristic theories of gender as well as feminist appropriations of Biblical narratives of origin, and in so doing, recognises the unnaturalness of historically formulated conceptions of 'woman'.

Ann Chamberlin's website states that she

believes that the purpose of storytelling –as of all true art as well as all true religions—is to support positions in exact opposition to the views prevailing in a culture's powerhouses, whatever those views happen to be. Nowhere is this more crucial than in the retelling of history. ('Biography')

Her novel *Leaving Eden* rejects traditional origin myths, focused on Eve, and retells the story of the first people on earth from the point of view of Na'amah,

⁴⁹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 49.

Adam's daughter by his first wife Lilith, an ancient Goddess. The novel follows Na'amah through her adolescence, her entry into womanhood told alongside the novel's move from a goddess-worshipping community setting to that of Adam's own patriarchal monotheism, engendered by his rejection of Lilith and desire for Eve, a young and submissive woman from a neighbouring clan. As such, Chamberlin's novel links the 'becoming' of woman with the concurrent repression of female power under the aegis of patriarchal religion. Yet the subjugating text of Judao-Christian origin histories is shown by Chamberlin to be itself already subject to re-vision. Although much discussion of Biblical origin myths focuses on Genesis chapters 2-3, in which woman is created from man's rib and named Eve, Chamberlin's novel instead utilises what has been termed the 'non-subordinating' text of Genesis Chapter 1.⁵⁰ Jewish myth draws on Genesis 1.27, which reads 'God created man to his own image: to the image of God he created him; male and female he created them' to suggest that the first woman, named in Jewish writings as Lilith, was created simultaneously with and equal to the first man and, like him, made of dust. The *Alphabet of Ben Sira*, the most commonly acknowledged source for writings on Lilith, portrays her as a defiant woman who refuses to sexually submit to Adam, flying away to become a demon who is condemned to the death of one hundred of her children every day. As such she has been utilised by both feminist and anti-feminist interpreters to become a figure who, according to Jay Jacoby, 'has been subject to a remarkably broad variety of incarnations'.⁵¹ Jacoby points to the conflicting depictions of Lilith as 'the archetypal seductress, a personification of men's erotic dreams and suppressed desires' as well as 'the prototype of the female who refused her role as

⁵⁰ Evelyn Stagg and Frank Stagg, *Woman in the World of Jesus* (Philadelphia: John Knox Press, 1978).

⁵¹ Jay Jacoby, 'Lilith in Jewish Literature', *Judaica Librarianship*, 3: 1-2 (1986-7), 79-82 (p. 79).

enabler' (Jacoby, pp. 80-81). The other authors discussed in this chapter reflect what Jacoby identifies as a predominant trend to 'use Lilith as a vehicle for effecting some kind of reconciliation between the two figures [of Eve and Lilith]' (p. 81). Yet Jacoby suggests that 'given this feminist interpretation of Lilith, one might expect more recent literature to depict her as the rebellious displacer of her polar opposite, the submissive Eve' (ibid). Chamberlin's utilisation of just such an interpretation, which I will show to be dependent upon essentialist paradigms of gender, perhaps demonstrates why such depictions are not more prevalent.

Chamberlin's focus on Lilith, rather than Eve, reflects her novel's concerns with pre-patriarchal origins. As the first woman, preceding Eve, Lilith has been viewed by feminist theologians as a form of proto-Goddess, representing what Deborah Grenn, founder of the Lilith institute, terms "'original sources' of power and spiritual authority".⁵² Such power, Grenn argues, is at the root of the demonization of Lilith, reflecting the patriarchal appropriation of female spiritual authority. Chamberlin's imagined pre-history reflects this view, describing how the powerful laws of the Old Goddess, Lilith, are imperilled by her husband Adam's desire for Eve. Adam's marriage to Eve engenders a catastrophic cultural shift throughout the novel from that of the female goddess to a world in which a new, male God rules. Chamberlin contrasts the two cultures in stark terms. The relentless march of Adam's linear patriarchal vision violently imposes itself upon the natural imagery of Lilith's world:

Adam had broken apart what had been until then a spiral,
a circle. By brute force of his own will, he had stretched

⁵² Deborah J Grenn, 'Lilith's Fire: Examining Original Sources of Power, Redefining Sacred Texts as Transformative Theological Practice', *Feminist Theology* 16: 36 (2007), 36-46 (p. 36). See also Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God Talk: Towards a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983); Judith Plaskow, 'The Coming of Lilith', in *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, ed. by Carol P Christ and Judith Plaskow (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979), pp. 198-209.

the arc taut and long, made a line. He had shoved a great stone off its balance at a cliff's edge. Now nothing could stop its fall. (p. 230)

Within Lilith's world of natural rhythms ruled by 'the thrum of the moon', men and women maintain a differentiated but largely equal status (p. 200). Na'amah states 'I already knew, at fifteen summers, that men had their own bonds, their own tales, and considered their own sex superior. Men were stronger, smarter, I'd heard it said – but only by men... Except that we women thought – rather, *knew* – the same pride of our own sex' (p. 20). Crucially, this pride is rooted firmly in a matriarchal culture. Lilith's recitation of Eve's ancestry recalls 'your mother [...] as daughter of Semadar who was a daughter of Nitza' (p. 157). Furthermore, Lilith claims Eve's foremothers as her own descendents:

have no doubt that I am your mother, Eve. Your great-great-great-many-greats-grandmother. But still you are my child, as is every soul in the world, for I have engendered clan mothers and fathers wherever I go. I am your mother, as I am the mother of every soul in the world, and have only your interest at heart. You should not feel yourself alone, feel that you have no mother, that you are the only woman in the world. Or that only a man and his bull of a god can create life for you. (p. 158)

This genealogical narrative evokes those of Genesis itself, Lilith's mention of man's ability to 'create life' highlighting how Biblical texts utilise just such genealogies in the formation of male authority by making male life, the 'taut and long' line of Adam's history, visible. Chamberlin thus overturns the male bias of such narratives through a focus on female history, while concurrently questioning male authority through an insistence on the female origins of life. Chamberlin's identification of a pre-patriarchal female power that has been obscured through male-focused histories mirrors opinions that feminist theologians first began to voice in the 1970s. Mary Daly, writing in 1973 suggested that

there was a universally matriarchal world which prevailed before the descent into hierarchical dominion by males. Having experienced the obliterating process in our own history (which is pseudo-history to the degree that it has failed to acknowledge women), we have a basis for suspecting that the same dynamics operate to belittle and wipe out arguments for and evidence of the matriarchal period. (*Beyond God the Father*, p. 93)

Such arguments are intrinsically linked to the project of feminist re-vision, whether focused on Christianity or otherwise. Daly associates the ‘obliterating process’ of Christianity with a larger process termed the ‘Great Silence’. This silence, ‘the failure to record or even to acknowledge the creative activity of great women and talented women [...] the wiping out of women’s contributions within the context of patriarchal history’, is at the heart of feminist re-visionary concerns (ibid). Chamberlin’s re-visionary novel thus suggests that Lilith can be viewed as a keeper of female power that has been suppressed by patriarchal history. Chamberlin shows how Adam’s break with the Goddess Lilith, necessary for his marriage to Eve, disrupts the ‘natural’ order, forcing the clan away from their nomadic hunter-gatherer community to a society of nuclear families sustained by male-led crop cultivation, leading in turn to Adam’s use of the patriarchal rhetoric of the Bible itself: ‘keep the garden and dress it...Dominion over all creation’ (p. 229). This divinely ordained shift in culture thus concurrently elevates Adam to the status of patriarch, with ‘the voice of God’ while reducing Lilith to “‘Female wind spirit,’” no more’ (p. 229; p. 43). Yet while Chamberlin suggests that suppression of female power has been enacted at the hands of men, she also identifies how women themselves have collaborated in such subjugation.

Daly has claimed that the ‘original sin’ of woman is a ‘state of complicity in patriarchal oppression that is inherited by women through socialisation

processes'.⁵³ Chamberlin's Eve is shown to be guilty of just such complicity. Early in the novel Eve denies Lilith's very existence, claiming 'she never really existed. Except in your [Na'amah's] stories to frighten children into good behaviour' (p. 155). Chamberlin thus firmly identifies woman as both the purveyor of Lilith's monstrous identification as well as being complicit in her eradication from history. Further on in the novel Chamberlin suggests that Eve's collaboration in the defiance of Lilith's laws is directly caused by the 'socialisation processes' of sexual relations. The clan's ultimate break with the goddess is engendered by Adam and Eve's shared feast of forbidden figs: 'We can even eat the figs without punishment [...] Adam and I have been eating them for days. In fact [...] we took them for our wedding meal' (p. 227). This link between Adam and Eve's wedding and the cultural shift from matriarchy to patriarchy suggests that Chamberlin views contemporary sexual relations as a primary cause of the obliteration of women's 'original power'. As such, Chamberlin appears to advocate a separatist ideology common to radical feminists, countering Adam and Eve's negatively identified heterosexual relationship with the woman-identified relationship between Lilith and Na'amah, both in possession of 'female power' within the novel. While separatist feminism has often identified woman-centred relationships as specifically lesbian relationships (as, for example, Monique Wittig does), Adrienne Rich has argued for the expansion of what she terms the 'lesbian continuum' to 'embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the

⁵³ Mary Daly [with Jane Caputi and Sudie Rakusen], *Websters' First Intergalactic Wickedary of the English Language* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), p. 222.

sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support'.⁵⁴ Rich suggests that:

Woman-identification is a source of energy, a potential springhead of female power [...] The denial of reality to women's passions for women, women's choice of women as allies, life companions and community; the forcing of such relationships into dissimulation and their disintegration under intense pressure have meant an incalculable loss to the power of all women *to change the social relations of the sexes, to liberate ourselves and each other.* (p. 657)

The evocation of radical and cultural feminist separatism within Chamberlin's novel thus works to undermine the 'social relations of the sexes' while attempting to recall the lost 'power of all women' through which such relations can be changed. Yet I would argue that while Wittig and Rich's radical feminism serves to empower women through contesting institutionalised gender roles, highlighting how 'the absence of choice remains the great unacknowledged reality', Chamberlin's apparently radical separatist ideology obscures a troubling essentialism that confines women to a biological destiny and thus equally promotes an absence of choice for women (Rich, p. 659).

Pam Morris suggests that separatist ideals are often 'based on what were perceived as 'female' values of co-operation, non-aggression, nurture, creativity and an intuitive affinity with the ecologic welfare of the planet' (p. 169). Such 'female' values are firmly delineated in Chamberlin's novel, identifying female power as defined through biological characteristics. Na'amah's example of female strength is found in childbirth: 'We had the more abiding strength. To know this I only had to look at my cousin Devorah slipping her brown breast out of her doeskin smock to give to her little son. I remembered her three days' labor

⁵⁴ See Monique Wittig, 'One is not Born a Woman', in *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), pp. 9-20. Adrienne Rich, 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence', *Signs*, 5:4 (1980), 631-660 (pp. 648-9).

just before we left the valley of “our” river five months ago’ (p. 20). Female resistance to Adam’s dominion over the clan is subdued by female members of the community who have been forced into abortion by season-moving: ‘I stepped back from my clansfolk as they stood debating what to do. Devorah I heard, shrill with the hope that she might not have to give up the child in her womb’ (p. 253). Rich suggests ‘As we address the institution [of heterosexual relationships] itself, moreover, we begin to perceive a history of female resistance which has never fully understood itself because it has been so fragmented, mis-called, erased’ (Rich, pp. 659-60).

While Chamberlin clearly promotes female resistance to patriarchally identified heterosexual relationships I would argue that her representation of such resistance, drawing on essentialised categories of woman, fails to acknowledge lived social realities and thus further fragments and erases a female historical presence. Na’amah’s own attempts to resist the patriarchal power of Adam’s new God result in her inculcation into what Donna Haraway terms the ‘imagined organic body’ of her mother (Cyborg Manifesto, p. 154). When Adam tries to kill Na’amah in order to free himself from his bond to Lilith, enabling his marriage to Eve, Lilith passes on her female strength, killing herself to save her daughter: ‘the power shall be yours’ (p. 204). Na’amah herself becomes Lilith, imbued with her power, yet such power, founded purely in nature, renders women the object of powerful male desire while identifying women as ‘monstrous’. Lilith herself is shown to be the stereotypical ‘temptress’, Chamberlin’s text littered with references to her being a ‘wildcat’; ‘bitch in heat’; a ‘she-demon’ from not only Adam’s perspective but also that of Na’amah, suggesting an endorsement of such views (p. 199). Adam and the other men of Na’amah’s tribe are shown to be

helpless in the face of Lilith's overwhelming temptation: 'Adam struggled, wordlessly, a fish hooked below the jaw. This was an old battle between them, I could see, and between more than just this immediate man and woman' (p. 198). When Na'amah takes Lilith's power she thus *becomes* Lilith, losing her social identity in favour of a mythical archetype which leads her to exile outside her community through fear of rape. Furthermore, this battle, which Chamberlin identifies as 'between more than just this immediate man and woman' is shown to be that between *all* men and women, identifying Lilith/Na'amah as *all* women. Such an outcome is thus ultimately shown to justify a patriarchal view that female power is monstrous and a danger to men. The submissive Eve, far from being displaced by Lilith, becomes the leader of the women of the clan, under Adam's control. Although Chamberlin clearly presents this as an unsatisfactory outcome for the daughters of Lilith, it is hard to see how the alternative offered by Lilith is any more satisfactory. Na'amah's exile from Eden appears to suggest that the only choices available to women are submission to male power or a radical separation from men altogether arising from the 'equalitarian segregation' that defines women by their biology, and which de Beauvoir views as having 'resulted only in the most extreme discrimination' (Beauvoir, p. 23).

Deborah Grenn draws on Anne Wilson Shaef to suggest that the "original sin" of being born female is an assigned inferiority, a sin from which we can **never** absolve ourselves'.⁵⁵ Yet I would argue that the biological categories which Grenn herself, like Chamberlin, draws upon, to promote 'female power' reify such inferiority by suggesting that 'being born female' is an inescapable destiny. Kathleen Gough insists that 'There is in fact no true "matriarchal," as

⁵⁵ Deborah J Grenn, *Lilith's Fire: Reclaiming our Sacred Lifeforce* (San Mateo: The Lilith Institute, 2000), p. 69.

distinct from “matrilineal,” society in existence or known from literature, and the chances are that there never has been’.⁵⁶ Yet she goes on to argue that ‘it is not necessary to believe myths of a feminist Golden Age in order to plan for parity in the future’ (ibid). Chamberlin’s novel demonstrates that, as Haraway argues, narratives which ‘recall’ woman to the ‘imagined organic body’ serve only to ‘integrate our resistance’ (Haraway, ‘Cyborg Manifesto’, p. 154). When female resistance is enacted through essentialised roles, such resistance inevitably leads to a biological determinism that segregates men and women, excluding women from social agency. Despite Chamberlin’s identification of patriarchal monotheism as a subjugating power over women, the ‘mythic woman [...] eternal and divine’ that she offers as an alternative is shown to be equally repressive (Chamberlin, *Leaving Eden*, p. 25; p. 29). Angela Carter famously suggested that ‘Mother goddesses are just as silly a notion as father gods. If a revival of the myths of these cults gives women emotional satisfaction, it does so at the price of obscuring the real conditions of life. This is why they were invented in the first place’.⁵⁷ Chamberlin’s novel ultimately shows that, as Na’amah herself first suggests, ‘Lilith was a myth’ (p. 34). In this incarnation I would suggest that she remains as such.

Carter suggests that ‘all the mythic versions of women, from the myth of the redeeming purity of the virgin to that of the healing, reconciling mother, are consolatory nonsenses’ (Carter, *The Sadeian Woman*, p. 5). Emma Tennant’s novel *Sisters and Strangers* explores how mythic representations of women have governed female becoming through male paradigms that identify woman as the ‘other’ to a male standard. Feminist critics have long recognised that the story of

⁵⁶ Kathleen Gough, ‘The Origin of the Family’, in *Towards an Anthropology of Women*, ed. by Rayna R. Reiter (London: Monthly Review, 1975), pp. 51-76 (p. 54).

⁵⁷ Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman* (London: Virago, 1979), p. 6.

Genesis has been utilised to legitimate a patriarchal concept of gender in which woman, born after man and, crucially, born *to* a man, is also born as the ‘Other’ to the male standard as represented by Adam.⁵⁸ According to Mary Daly, ‘the projection of “the Other” – easily adaptable to national, racial, and class differences – has basically and primordially been directed against women’ (Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, p. 46). de Beauvoir specifically refers to Eve as an example of how female ‘otherness’ has come about:

Woman thus seems to be the inessential who never goes back to being the essential, to be the absolute Other, without reciprocity. This conviction is dear to the male, and every creation myth has expressed it, among others the legend of Genesis, which, through Christianity, has been kept alive in Western Civilization. (Beauvoir, p. 173)

Yet Kathie Birat has examined how the idea of female ‘otherness’ can be used as a deliberate fictional strategy in postmodern feminist writing, exposing the illusory nature of female ‘otherness’ by challenging the unassailable ‘sameness’ of ‘the male vision of identity’.⁵⁹ Drawing on the work of Paul Ricœur, Birat uses the idea of “narrative identity” to highlight the ‘dialectic between the persistence of the same through time in the form of what we call character and the variations introduced by the narrative, which ultimately modify, or rather shape, the character’ (Birat, p. 37). This concept of narrative identity, Birat argues, ‘makes possible a better understanding of the ways in which women writers have used fiction to bring about a redefinition of the self incorporating the otherness of their feminine experience’ (ibid).

⁵⁸ For a brief selection see Elizabeth Cady Stanton, ‘Letter to the Editor’, *The Critic* (1896) cited in *Up from the Pedestal: Selected Writings in the History of American Feminism*, ed. by Aileen S. Kraditor (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1968), p. 119; Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*; Millett, *Sexual Politics*, pp. 52-54; and Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, pp. 44-68.

⁵⁹ Kathie Birat, ‘Feminist Principle and Fictional Strategies’, *L’Altaeritae dans la Littérature et la Culture du Monde Anglophone* (1993), 36-45 (p. 37).

Birat's essay examines the narrative strategies of Tennant's novel, identifying a metafictional aesthetic throughout her work that serves to destabilise male-identified narratives through a concurrent focus on female stories and traditionally male narrative forms. As such she situates Tennant within postmodern feminism, in which 'multiple readings underlie the multiple selves which she [Tennant] would like to reveal' (p. 42). Emma Tennant is renowned for her re-visionary approach to women's stories, taking on, amongst others, Jane Austen, Robert Louis Stevenson and Thomas Hardy. *Sisters and Strangers* draws on Biblical narratives of the creation of Eve, while also alluding to Woolf's *Orlando* (1928), the second text to which Birat refers, itself a narrative which questions female becoming through a subversion of the traditionally masculine *roman a clef* form in which the narrative of male self-discovery is undermined by Orlando's shift in gender. As such, Tennant displays a commitment to undermining the 'consolatory nonsenses' that Carter identifies (Carter, *The Sadeian Woman*, p. 5).

Patriarchally defined mythic versions of women are explored throughout Tennant's novel, following the tale of Eve as told by Grandmother Dummer to a young girl who narrates the novel and her friend, Dummer's granddaughter. During the course of the tale, Grandmother Dummer describes Eve's life through a series of stereotypically female roles. Such roles are consistently identified by Grandmother Dummer as '[l]ies [...] what you have already been brought up on, my poor girls. And the lies will go on until the day you die, unless you really take care to identify a lie when you hear one' (p. 134). As such, Tennant highlights the ubiquity of canonical representations of Eve, and draws on what Mary Joe Frug identifies as a fundamentally postmodernist principle in which female

identity is located ‘inescapably within language’.⁶⁰ The ‘lies’ that Grandmother Dummer identifies confirm Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s view that male privilege over language has created ‘those mythic masks male artists have fastened over [woman’s] human face both to lessen their dread of her “inconstancy” and by identifying her with the “eternal types” they have themselves invented to possess her more thoroughly’ (p. 17). These eternal types are rendered inevitable within Tennant’s novel when situated within patriarchal narratives of female history: ‘there are seven ways... and nothing’s changed since the very first woman was plucked from Adam’s rib-cage. Seven ways and seven women, and you’ll be all of them in your time’ (Tennant, p. 8). These seven ‘ways’ are identified by Jeanette King as ‘romantic heroine (or mistress), wife, whore, Madonna, courtesan, bluestocking, witch’ (p. 34).

Tennant’s identification of the ‘seven women’ of female narratives echoes Shakespeare’s seven ages of man, a concept which John Burrow traces to twelfth century writings that relates human [for which read male] behaviour to governing astrological influences.⁶¹ Tennant also obliquely refers to the idea that there are only seven basic plots throughout all literature. Christopher Booker examines this idea, suggesting that these seven plots ‘allow us at last to see ...that all kinds of story, however profound or however trivial, ultimately spring from the same source, are shaped around the same basic patterns and are governed by the same

⁶⁰ Mary Joe Frug, ‘A Postmodern Feminist Legal Manifesto’, *Harvard Law Review*, 105: 5 (1992), 1045-1075, (p. 1049).

⁶¹ J.A. Burrow, *The Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986). For Shakespeare’s use of the concept of the seven ages of man see William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, ed. by Alan Brissenden (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), II. 7. 143-166. For an interesting discussion on Shakespeare’s usage of this concept also see Marjorie Garber, *Profiling Shakespeare* (Oxford: Routledge, 2008), pp. 291-93.

hidden, universal rules'.⁶² Tennant therefore suggests that women themselves are 'governed by the same hidden, universal rules' when read through 'the same source' of a male narrative framework that purports to be universal. This is confirmed when Grandmother Dummer tells the girls 'You must remember...that Eve, while apparently to blame for everything that goes wrong in the world, has in fact little choice when it comes to the category in which men place her...she's been told so many lies when she was a child that she can't tell the truth from fantasy' (p. 139). However, while Tennant's novel highlights such lies, it also ultimately fails to free Eve from their confines by providing her with a story of her own.

Gilbert and Gubar suggest that, in coming to terms with mythic images of women, 'a woman writer must examine, assimilate, and transcend the extreme images of "angel" and "monster" which male authors have generated for her' (Gilbert and Gubar, p. 17). Eve's shifting identity within Tennant's novel, the positive 'otherness' that Birat identifies, can be read as an attempt to do just this. Her transcendence of the extreme opposites of housewife and 'whore' is at first presented as a means of potentially positive enablement. Eve escapes her submission to Adam, and later prostitution to the serpent, Frank Blake, through her friendship with Sally, another 'whore'. Together they run away to live together 'free of men, paradoxically, for by becoming whores they had freed themselves from the whole chain of stereotypes into which men place and always will place women: it's as if the whore, by being so necessary and so utterly beyond the pale, cancels all the others out immediately' (p. 86). Yet it must be remembered that this apparently emancipating role remains one of the seven

⁶² Christopher Booker, *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories* (New York: Continuum, 2004), p. 13.

stereotypes identified by Tennant and far from negating female otherness, serves simply to amplify it in masculinist terms as ‘so necessary and so utterly beyond the pale’ (ibid). I would argue that Tennant’s Eve, in attempting to ‘come to terms with the images’ that Gilbert and Gubar identify reflects how ‘Gilbert and Gubar themselves display what feminists have seen as the inferiorised psychology of women under patriarchy’.⁶³

Jeanette King points out that ‘being interpellated into the patriarchal discourse deriving from the Eden myth, Eve internalises male values and the roles they valorize’ (p. 35). The novel’s insistence upon such internalization, its metafictional strategy of inhabiting the realm of myth it attempts to trouble, ultimately renders freedom from such myths impossible, necessitating Eve’s return to Adam and her continuing and inevitable identification through mythic archetypes such as mother, courtesan, bluestocking and witch. Moreover, the novel’s self-consciousness continuously draws attention to the impossibility for women of escaping the confines of the story it embodies. Eve’s brief stint as a novelist finds her unable to write any story other than ‘bodice-ripper’ style romances. As such, Birat points out, ‘she is unable to do anything but reproduce her own situation by writing love stories in which women play a subordinate role’ (p. 39). When Eve is finally revealed to be Grandmother Dummer the novel precariously undermines the narrative ‘self’ it seeks to establish. She tells the girls: ‘Biology is not destiny. No. But you’ll find that all the old categories – stereotypes – are still there for women and every single one of them is a pitfall. And one of the most dangerous moments is when a woman, either intentionally or in spite of herself, changes over from one category to another’ (p. 58).

⁶³ Janet Gezari, ‘Sandra M Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic*’, *Essays in Criticism*, 56: 3 (2006), 364-279 (p. 276).

Grandmother Dummer, in changing from one category to another, from narrator to subject, from Eve to Grandmother, from Bluestocking to Witch, wanders into this pitfall. Rather than establishing a narrative self which successfully identifies Eve's 'otherness' as an alternative text through which her own story can be told, Grandmother Dummer is subsumed by Eve, identified as one of 'the old categories – stereotypes'. The impossibility of establishing her own story is ultimately confirmed when she is revealed to be still located *within* the story narrated by her grand-daughter's friend, appearing finally as the archetypal witch.

According to King, Tennant suggests that 'instead of fighting for equality with men, for a place at the centre of the existing power structure, women should accept their marginal role and turn it to their advantage' (p. 41). The role of witch is indeed presented as a powerful one in the novel, and that which enables Eve to finally tell the story of her own 'otherness' but it is hard to see how this is turned to her advantage. Jung's *Aspects of the Feminine* suggests that the identity of witch has arisen in opposition to that of the Virgin Mary with devastating consequences: 'The consequence of increasing Mariolatry was the witch hunt'.⁶⁴ Despite Grandmother Dummer's apparent power, the narrator recalls 'the children laughing and pointing at Grandmother Dummer when she went to the village for stores; and we remembered our indignation when a snotty little girl with acne and a white face from eating too many chocolate bars had told us that Grandmother Dummer was a big bad witch' p. 184). I would suggest that this type of 'otherness' does not satisfactorily challenge the authority of its foundational Biblical narrative, but, instead confirms it. As Grandmother Dummer herself says: 'Well, what do you expect? [...] If a woman isn't one type in the eyes of

⁶⁴ Karl Jung, *Aspects of the Feminine* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 21.

men, then she must be another' (p. 183). Birat points out, '[m]etafiction tries to avoid various ideological traps by constantly focusing on itself, but the final result may be to throw out the baby with the bath [sic]...Emma Tennant to some extent falls into this all too inviting trap (pp. 36-7). I would argue, against Birat, that Tennant does not only 'to some extent' fall into this trap. Birat suggests that 'the other, in becoming creator, will have "other" strategies for making himself visible [sic]' (p. 36). Yet although Birat notes that Tennant refuses 'to allow Grandmother Dummer to establish a text of her own', she fails to acknowledge that it is *Eve* whose text is being rewritten and who, ultimately, disappears into the story of Grandmother Dummer (39). In a crushing failure to make *herself* visible, Eve is subsumed into the myth of witch, remains an archetype, and it is left to the two girls to 'try to change the world of men... and make a new Eve' (Tennant, p. 184).

While Tennant's novel certainly highlights the troubling nature of archetypes, showing, as King points out, how 'stories of women achieving success in a male dominated world are "a fairy tale just as pernicious as the rest"[...] designed to obscure the price women will have to pay for such 'success'', its ultimate reliance on the archetype of witch to do so is just such a fairytale which simply confirms the 'otherness' of women in masculinist terms (p. 35). Rosi Braidotti suggests that 'the Jungian myth is granted anteriority over its own literary and cultural manifestations and consequently it enjoys a higher authority over modern scientific culture, in so far as it pertains to a more ancient, timeless rhythm of nature'.⁶⁵ Tennant's witch myth, invested in nature, thus subsumes the narrative otherness of Grandmother Dummer's tale, confirming such authority and

⁶⁵ Rosi Braidotti, *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), p. 130.

once again containing any positive sense of female otherness within a patriarchal archetype. Carter is certainly accurate therefore when she suggests that ‘all archetypes are spurious but some are more spurious than others’ (Carter, *The Sadeian Woman*, p. 7).

I have suggested that Tennant’s failure to successfully establish an alternative text for female becoming lies in her reification of the very stereotypes of the ‘other’ that her novel attempts to undermine. As such, I would argue that the apparently postmodern metafictional strategies that Tennant employs mask a continuing commitment to essentialist categories of woman, however transgressively employed, that have more in common with Chamberlin’s ‘mythic woman’ that characterises cultural feminism than the postmodern ‘otherness’ that Birat suggests (Chamberlin, *Leaving Eden*, p. 25). Germaine Greer, writing in 1970, perhaps most forcefully argued against the reification of female ‘otherness’, suggesting that all such representations of the feminine stereotype are:

nothing more than a blueprint for the approved woman and as such it presents an artificial unattainable ideal. Such a woman cannot be a person, for she does not exist in her own terms at all. Her significance can only be conferred by the presence of a man at her side, a man upon whom she absolutely depends.⁶⁶

Penelope Farmer’s novel *Eve, Her Story* (1985) offers an alternative creation text which reflects how second wave feminist ideas such as Greer’s, founded on a disruption of gender relations, led to a third-wave focus on self-sufficiency and individualism. Farmer utilises the transgressive aegis of the fall to suggest that such transitional moments can promote a potentially positive enablement of female agency.

⁶⁶ Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch* (London: Granada, 1970), p. 95.

Farmer retells the story of Genesis from Eve's point of view, divided into three parts entitled 'Child', 'Girl' and 'Woman'. The novel follows Eve from her awakening in the moments after her birth from Adam's side, her early life in Eden where she meets Lilith, the first woman, through her growing awareness of a world beyond the walls of Eden, and finally to her transgression and expulsion from the garden with Adam. In the novel Eve identifies the moment of the fall as a deliberate act which finally makes her a woman: 'A childish, accidental act you could say, this eating, in its beginning. Yet the moment that I realized what I did it became a knowledgeable bite, the considered careful action of a woman who needing, as a woman, what the garden could not give her, had to take the risk that her husband would not follow' (p. 84). Farmer's insistence on Eve's self-knowledge at the moment of the fall suggests that female emancipation from patriarchal authority lies in female agency. Moreover, her acceptance of Adam's potential rejection of her suggests that such agency allows woman to exist 'in her own terms' without 'a man upon whom she absolutely depends' (Greer, p. 85). The key to Eve's ability to define herself, Farmer suggests, lies in her ability to use the tool of storytelling. Haraway suggests that the tools women must use to 'mark the world that marked them as other... are often stories, retold stories, versions that reverse and displace the hierarchical dualisms of naturalized identities' (Haraway, 'Cyborg Manifesto', p. 162). Farmer's re-vision of Eve's transgression shows that it is only through such subversion of Biblical narratives of original innocence, shown in the novel to contain female agency, that the 'child' of the first section of her novel can make the transition to the 'woman' at its end. Farmer rewrites the serpent as a contradictory creature, part animal, part humanoid, who befriends Eve, secretly teaching her survival skills away from

Adam's watchful eye while living in the garden. During such lessons the serpent regales Eve with stories of 'one woman eaten up by dogs, and another who'd cut off her husband's hair... about lost babies in baskets or patriotic giants bullied by little upstart shepherds, or trumpets that blew down walls...or wise men who knew the language of animals' (pp. 161-2). Yet such stories, while contained within Eden, remain marked by Biblical discourse, simply repeating the narratives of the Bible itself, demonstrating how male boundaries have denied women cultural access.

Farmer links the serpent's stories with Eve's growing knowledge of tool making, tempting Eve to 'pull... my thoughts outside the garden where he wanted them to go; where all his other teaching was taking me' (p. 107). However, though Farmer, like Haraway, sees storytelling as a tool, it is one that Eve herself lacks. She laments 'Another longing I had of course was this; to tell stories like the serpent. Yet as frequently as he demonstrated this art to me these days, when I begged him to show me how to do it, he shrugged and said I did not know what I was asking. What, for a start, did I have to tell stories about? he demanded. A question I could not answer, remembering the lively events with which his stories were filled, while I knew of no doings other than my own' (p. 128). Eve's containment in the garden of Eden thus serves to render her voiceless as she lacks the experience of the world that, it is suggested, will make her a woman. Such experience is linked in Farmer's retelling to the Fall. It is only through her transgression in eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge that she begins to notice that 'the garden wall...seemed now to hem us in at every turn' (p. 12). Eve links this wall with her inability to tell stories: 'If half the problem in finding a story is to recognize a story when you have it, I did not know it then. When within a short

time of setting out to look for one, I met an immovable stone barrier – in other words the wall of the garden, I assumed it had been put there to thwart me; that the adventures all lay on the other side, and that to reach them I would have to circumnavigate it by one means or another’ (pp. 134-4). Farmer therefore suggests that female agency can only be enabled through women’s access to culture, and furthermore, that such access can only be granted through female transgression of male boundaries.

Eve’s transgression is shown within Farmer’s novel to be a positive moment of emancipation, in which Eve can finally utilise the tools that the serpent has given her, providing her with a story of her own that will make her a woman. Yet the acquisition of such womanhood is problematic within feminist terms. Farmer utilises the relationship between Lilith and Eve to reflect the tensions between second and third-wave feminist mores, distinguishing between the often essentialising and homogenising impetus of feminist movements that arose in the 1960s and the acknowledgement of the contradictory and diverse identities of women that arose in the 1980s. Lilith suggests that Eve’s self-reliance is problematic: ‘I told you you were listening to too many of the serpent’s stories [...] That’s the whole trouble, Eve; you’re ready to work everything out for yourself, now, in one way or another, and arrive at your own conclusions. You’ve grown up in other words. So what use am I to you, or Adam for that matter?’ (p. 155). Eve’s ability to ‘work everything out’ for herself reflects how third-wave feminist movements reject the universal female identity that second wave feminism promoted in favour of personal experience. Early in the novel, while Eve remains identified as ‘Child’ she meets Lilith for the first time and immediately sees her as ‘a sister instantly, and with unutterable joy’, reflecting

the emphasis on ‘sisterhood’ that characterised second wave feminism (p. 30). Yet the bond between Eve and Lilith is shown to be formed only through a shared physicality, as Eve questions ‘Would I have recognised her as a woman, I wonder, if I had not just seen the shape of my own body?’ (ibid). The doubts Eve has reflects the ways in which black feminism and third-wave feminists have resisted Anglo-American essentialist conceptions of ‘woman’ as a homogenous group, bound only by shared sex. Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards assert that ‘We’re not doing feminism the same way that the seventies feminists did it; being liberated doesn’t mean copying what came before it but finding one’s own way’.⁶⁷ Eve’s self-sufficiency can therefore be seen as embodying a feminist ethic that rejects ‘what came before’, in favour of what she repeatedly insists is ‘my story’ (Farmer, p. 161). Yet I would argue that Farmer’s novel, like those of Chamberlin and Tennant, ultimately fails to adequately provide a new story for women. Despite Eve’s personal rejection of the past, her story still follows its Biblical pattern and [thus?] to its conclusion in exile and death ‘where I seemed, inexorably, to be heading’ (p. 155).

I would suggest that such a failure lies in Farmer’s ironic dependence upon the very origin story she attempts to subvert. Haraway cautions ‘every story that begins with original innocence and privileges the return to wholeness imagines the drama of life to be individuation, separation, the birth of the self, the tragedy of autonomy, the fall into writing, alienation; that is war, tempered by imaginary respite in the bosom of the Other’ (Haraway, ‘Cyborg Manifesto’, p. 177). Eve’s own loss of innocence reflects how such narratives privilege a concept of ‘wholeness’ that establishes a pre-cultural ‘authentic’ feminine identity. Despite

⁶⁷ Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, *ManifestA: Young Women, Feminism and the Future* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000), p. 130.

Eve's story making her a woman, that story comes at a terrible cost. Eve's expulsion from Eden, 'my second awakening to the world', leaves her and Adam 'chained helplessly, like animals, to the struggle to survive. For struggle we did, constantly, unendingly, against cruel weather and an equally cruel land, against heat, cold, wind and sometimes even rain' (Farmer, p. 15; p. 35). Eve's ultimate entry into womanhood is marked by bodily violence. She pinpoints 'the lowest day of my despair' as 'the day I began to bleed. Having no means of knowing that such loss of perfection meant that out here in the desert I'd become a woman at last' (p. 36). Such a becoming leads inexorably to Eve's rape at the hands of the fallen angel Sammael 'who had without doubt chosen his moment very carefully', leading to the conception of Cain (p. 36). The violence of Eve's inculcation into womanhood ironically renders her story impotent. Despite now having a story to tell, the narrative of loss inherent to the story confines her to continual repetition: 'We'd been woken with cruel abruptness from a marvellous dream; and though I had long realized that we would have to awake some day, it did not stop me trying to recall the dream from the beginning, as if only that could soothe my present pain' (p. 15).

Farmer's retelling of Genesis thus ultimately leads to Eve's story being colonised by what Haraway calls 'these origin myths, with their longing for fulfilment in apocalypse' (Haraway, 'Cyborg Manifesto', p. 175). The end of Eve's cruel life reflects just such a longing: 'Cleansed for the most part of inconvenient desires, we waited calmly for an end to which we'd long resigned ourselves and now almost wished for' (Farmer, p. 163). The problem with Farmer's transitional feminist retelling is that while Eve attains her freedom, she does so through a movement from a pre-fall 'natural' identity to a post-fall

‘cultural’ one. Judith Butler suggests ‘The postulation of the “before” within feminist theory becomes politically problematic when it ... supports, even inadvertently, the reification of a precultural sphere of the authentic feminine’ (Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 49). Farmer’s retelling of Genesis, perhaps inadvertently, does just this. Eve’s pre-fall state is clearly defined as ‘natural’. The tools that Eve learns to use, but only fully utilises after the fall, are designated as those of a specifically male ‘culture’, as identified by the male serpent: ‘he defined as cultural everything his own skill had created’ (p. 117). When the serpent teaches Eve to make fire Adam responds ‘Can’t you see it is not for us? Can’t you see it’s not natural?’ (ibid). While Adam is included in this definition of ‘natural’, his own nature is defined through his right to name the animals of Eden, while Eve is allied with those animals through her ability to communicate with them. Although Eve to some extent escapes this ‘nature’ through the serpent’s imposition of culture upon her, the loss entailed in such an escape impels her to return again and again throughout the novel to her own origins in Adam, ‘since he was in a sense both my father and my mother’ (p. 17). As such, Farmer reflects a concept of gender acquisition ‘with the consequence that “sex” is to nature or “the raw” as gender is to culture or “the cooked”’ (Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 50). However understandable Eve’s desire for ‘womanhood’ is, in presenting the acquisition of gender in such terms, far from utilizing such tools to ‘subvert the central myths of origin’, as Haraway suggests, Eve, defined through her original innocence and subsequent loss is doomed to simply repeat myths of origin, reifying a pre-fall ‘authentic feminine’ which has its roots only in nature, while a post-fall female experience must necessarily be one of loss and individuation from the ‘other’ (Haraway, *Cyborg Manifesto*, p. 162).

I have suggested that the three novels discussed so far within this chapter fail to provide a radical alternative to origin myths of female becoming. Despite their success in troubling such myths, their dependence upon essentialist tropes undermines their re-visionary aspects, ultimately confining the stories, and the women, they contain. Despite being the earliest of the four texts addressed in this chapter, I suggest that Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* is the most radical, renegotiating patriarchal myth to offer a narrative which fundamentally questions the conditions governing the production of gender. In order to do so I will examine how Carter's fiction can be read not only through Judith Butler's notion of performativity but also Donna Haraway's concept of the cyborg, placing Carter firmly at the centre of contemporary feminist debates about gender.

Haraway suggests that 'biology tells tales about origins, about genesis, and about nature [...] biology is the science of life, conceived and authored by a word from the father'.⁶⁸ *The Passion of New Eve* specifically questions the role of biology in gender acquisition, linking scientific enquiry into the genesis of gender with Biblical accounts of such through a dystopian retelling of Genesis. In this case a misogynistic male professor named Evelyn is kidnapped by radical guerrilla feminists and surgically altered by 'Mother', the 'great, black, self-anointed, self-appointed prophetess' to become 'Eve', a young woman 'born' in the womb-like environs of the feminist city of Beulah, who must learn how to 'become' a woman in an increasingly hostile world (p. 58). The question of Eve's gender is central to the novel and has led to a plethora of Butlerian readings of the

⁶⁸ Donna Haraway, 'In the Beginning Was the Word : The Genesis of Biological Theory', in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 71-80 (p. 72).

text.⁶⁹ Following Carter's death in 1992, an explosion of critical and popular attention has consistently kept her work at the forefront of academic enquiry, famously engendering more proposals for doctoral study in 1992-3 than for the entire eighteenth-century.⁷⁰ Much of this enquiry in recent years has focused on the obvious parallels between Carter's presentation of gender and theories of performativity proposed by Judith Butler. *The Passion of New Eve*, with its transvestite film star Tristessa, transsexual Eve, the absolute gender characteristics of the self-made goddess 'Mother' and impotent one-eyed new Adam, Zero, has been what Sarah Gamble calls 'particularly amenable' to Butlerian readings (pp. 119-120).

Joanne Trevenna suggests that these readings 'can be seen to have facilitated a kind of feminist 'recovery' of Carter's work...counteract[ing] previous tensions between Carter and other feminist perspectives'.⁷¹ Such tensions can perhaps be seen in her negative portrayal of the radical feminists of New York and Beulah in *The Passion of New Eve*, revealing what Trevenna calls 'Carter's critical response to the essentialising and universalizing tendencies of certain aspects of 1970s feminism' (p. 268).⁷² Carter's divergence from mainstream feminism can perhaps be most firmly identified in her work on the

⁶⁹ A good example of the prevalence of Butler's work in readings of Carter can be found in Joseph Bristow and Trev Lynn Broughton's anthology on Carter in which a third of the essays as well as the introduction and afterword utilise Butler's theories of performativity. These are as follows: Paulina Palmer, 'Gender as Performance in the Fiction of Angela Carter and Margaret Atwood', pp. 24-42; Clare Hanson, "'The Red Dawn Breaking Over Clapham': Carter and the Limits of Artifice', pp. 43-58; Elizabeth Mahoney, "'But Elsewhere?": The Future of Fantasy in *Heroes and Villains*', pp. 73-87; Paul Magrs 'Boys Keep Swinging: Angela Carter and the Subject of Men', pp. 184-197. All in *The Infernal Desires of Angela Carter: Fiction, Femininity, Feminism*, ed. by Joseph Bristow and Trev Lynn Broughton (Harlow: Addison Wesley Longman Limited, 1997).

⁷⁰ Paul Barker, 'The Return of the Magic Story-Teller', *Independent on Sunday*, 8 January 1995, pp. 14-16, cited in Sarah Gamble, *Angela Carter: Writing From the Front Line* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), p. 1.

⁷¹ Joanne Trevenna, 'Gender as Performance: Questioning the 'Butlerification' of Angela Carter's Fiction', *Journal of Gender Studies*, 11: 3 (2002), 267-276 (p. 267).

⁷² For further discussion of Carter's own attitudes towards the novel and its portrayal of feminism see Gamble, p. 119.

Marquis de Sade, which provoked an angry backlash from the anti-pornographic feminists of the 1970s at the time of its publication.⁷³ Yet the text itself maintains a firmly feminist stance, arguing that:

pornographers are the enemies of women only because our contemporary ideology of pornography does not encompass the possibility of change, as if we were the slaves of history and not its makers, as if sexual relations were not necessarily an expression of social relations, as if sex itself were an external fact, one as immutable as the weather, creating human practice but never a part of it. (Carter, *The Sadeian Woman*, p. 3)

Despite the controversial nature of Carter's argument for the 'moral pornographer', a phrase that Carter herself acknowledged 'got me into a lot of trouble with the sisters', it is clear that Carter's stance is situated *within* a feminist ideology (Katsavos, p. 12). Furthermore, her concern that 'sexual relations' are 'necessarily an expression of social relations', her questioning of 'sex itself' as an 'external fact', places Carter's work firmly within the third-wave ideologies characterised by Butler et al that she predates by over a decade. Yet despite the reparative effects that a Butlerian reading offers to Carter's contentious feminist position, Trevenna questions what she terms this 'Butlerification', distinguishing between 'Carter's overtly theatrical presentation of "gender as performance"' and Butler's theories of "gender as performative" (Trevenna, p. 268). Such performativity, in Butlerian terms, crucially denies the possibility of any prediscursive 'subject' prior to gender acquisition. Trevenna points out that this denial 'thus rejects de Beauvoir's statement in *The Second Sex* (1949) that "[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" as it implicitly suggests just such an

⁷³ Anna Katsavos, 'An Interview with Angela Carter', *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 14: 3 (1994), 11-17 <<http://find.galegroup.com/gtx/infomark.do?&contentSet=IAC- Documents&type=retrieve&tabID=T002&prodId=EAIM&docId=A15906129&source=gale&srcprod=EAIM&userGroupName=leicester&version=1.0>> [accessed 30 Jan 2011].

agency or subject position prior to gender acquisition through its emphasis on ‘one’ *becoming* a ‘woman’ (p. 269). Carter’s position, on the other hand, clearly identifies such a subject. While lost in the desert Evelyn is captured and taken to Beulah, a womb-like underground town marked by a castrated phallus, where ‘Mother’ resides and where Evelyn is technologically transformed into a woman. Despite being told ‘a change in the appearance will restructure the essence’ and undergoing extensive psycho-sexual programming, Eve’s transformation is initially unsuccessful (Carter, *The Passion of New Eve*, 68). Upon looking in the mirror Eve states, ‘I did not see myself. I saw a young woman who, though she was I, I could in no way acknowledge as myself’ (p. 74). Although it would be easy to read an essentialist position into this passage, opposing, as it does, a male ‘myself’ and a discordant female ‘other’, Trevenna points out that Eve’s conflicted sex and gender identity are ‘fully in accordance with de Beauvoir’s statement that “[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” as well as her recognition of the body as a ‘situation,’ which is ‘not enough’ to define a ‘woman’ (p. 271). Although Evelyn’s ‘self was a perfect stranger to me’, the post-operative Eve/lyn clearly maintains a distinction between *a* self and his/her female body, stating ‘*I have not yet become a woman, although I possess a woman’s shape. Not a woman, no; both more and less than a real woman*’ (Carter, *The Passion of New Eve*, p. 38; p. 83. [My italics]). Thus Carter maintains that a ‘self’, albeit not necessarily a sexed or gendered one (‘both more and less than a real woman’), does exist separately to the sexed body Eve/lyn ‘possesses’. While this deviation from Butler’s theories does not diminish the close affinity between her notion of performativity and Carter’s work, as Trevenna points out, it does suggest that there are some very real differences

between Butler's theories of gender acquisition and those of Carter. Trevenna utilises this conclusion to suggest that 'Angela Carter is ultimately not as radical in her treatment of sexual identity as Judith Butler' (p. 275). Yet she also suggests that 'these complex and malleable texts continue to resist critical closure and remain intriguingly open to shifting and sometimes contradictory theoretical positions' (ibid). I suggest that far from rendering Carter less radical than Butler, such contradictory positions tie Carter's work more firmly to that of Donna Haraway, whose 'cyborg feminism' utilises the metaphor of fusion of machine and organism to suggest a politics that 'could embrace partial, contradictory, permanently unclosed constructions of personal and collective selves and still be faithful, effective – and, ironically, socialist feminist' ('Cyborg Manifesto' p. 157).

In 'A Cyborg Manifesto' Haraway defines a cyborg as:

a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction... a matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as women's experience in the late twentieth century... who populate worlds ambiguously natural and crafted. (p. 149)

Carter, writing nine years before Haraway, utilises just such a figure in *The Passion of New Eve*. Created in a 'complicated mix of mythology and technology' (p. 48), Carter's Eve inhabits the boundary state of a Biblical Eve that is read in the twentieth century as both a fiction and a fact, both 'not natural' in her form of creation and 'unnatural only in that I was perfect' (p. 50; p. 107). Literary critics and scholars have previously linked Carter's work to that of Haraway, suggesting 'we may draw a parallel between Carter's image of the being who can survive by adapting and reinventing itself and the work of the

American cultural critic Donna Haraway' (Magrs, p. 194).⁷⁴ However, such readings have negatively identified Carter's use of a cyborg aesthetic as 'dark, sinister, perhaps even dangerous' (Armitt, p. 179). The danger that Armitt identifies appears to centre around the 'intriguing but worrying deconstructions of gender' (ibid). Accordingly Nicole Ward Jouve complains '[it is] as if Eve were only acceptable when she has no origins – not the slightest link with the maternal feminine; *no genesis*' (p. 19) while Paul Magrs suggests that Carter's 'refutation of a biologism that sets out to essentialize gender, goes too far towards the wish to elide gender altogether' (pp. 194-5). However, I will argue that Carter's novel identifies the cyborg as an emancipatory condition, which, rather than eliding gender, values the specificity of lived social reality over a homogenous 'female' identity and which insists, along with Haraway, that 'by the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organisms; in short, we are cyborgs' ('Cyborg Manifesto' p. 150).

Carter's presentation of gender acquisition in *The Passion of New Eve* owes as much to Biblical accounts of genesis as it does to feminist theory, utilising the 'transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities', highlighting the transformative possibilities of a cyborg aesthetic (Haraway, 'Cyborg Manifesto' p. 154). Much like the Biblical first woman, Carter's Eve is born 'whole', a fully-formed adult female and is taken, quite literally, 'out of man'. Yet in a 'potent fusion' with contemporary feminist debates on gender, Eve's insistence that she has 'not yet become a woman, although I possess a woman's shape' highlights how Genesis is surprisingly unclear on what being 'female' really means (Carter, *The Passion of New Eve*, p. 83). Genesis 1:27

⁷⁴ See also Nicole Ward Jouve, *Female Genesis: Creativity, Self and Gender* (New York, St Martin's Press, 1998), p. 19 and Lucie Armitt, *Theorising the Fantastic* (London: Hodder, 1996), pp. 164-79.

reads ‘God created man to his own image: to the image of God he created him; male and female he created them’. Reading ‘man’ as ‘human’, this suggests that ‘male’ and ‘female’, in Biblical terms, are simply sex divisions and do not imbue any psychological or behavioural characteristics to those sexes at all. Within the later, ‘subordinating’ text of Genesis Chapter 2, while it is true that woman is created as a ‘helper’ for man only after none is found amongst the beasts of Eden, Eve is, it is stated, to be ‘a helper like himself’ (Genesis 2.20). It is only after the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden that any characteristics are applied to the sexes:

[16] To the woman also he said: I will multiply thy sorrows, and thy conceptions: in sorrow shalt thou bring forth children, and thou shalt be under thy husband's power, and he shall have dominion over thee. [17] And to Adam he said: Because thou hast hearkened to the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, whereof I commanded thee that thou shouldst not eat, cursed is the earth in thy work; with labour and toil shalt thou eat thereof all the days of thy life. [18] Thorns and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herbs of the earth. [19] In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread till thou return to the earth, out of which thou wast taken: for dust thou art, and into dust thou shalt return. [20] And Adam called the name of his wife Eve: because she was the mother of all the living. (Genesis 3.16-20)

While later Biblical exegesis insists upon the pre-ordained inferiority of women, it is clear that in the simplest terms male and female only become ‘man’ and ‘woman’ in the Bible, that is, imbued with gendered characteristics, through divine intervention following the transgression of God’s command. It is of course this transgression, placed squarely at Eve’s feet, that has led to the vitriol present in Tertullian’s antifeminist tract quoted at the beginning of this chapter or Andreas Capellanus’s assertion that ‘[t]here is no woman alive in the world so wise and circumspect that, if she is forbidden the improper use of something, she does not

fight the prohibition with all the strength of her body, and set out to transgress it'.⁷⁵ It is clear from such passages that the gendered 'woman' as read through patriarchal theology, as opposed to the sexed female, is intrinsically linked to the concept of sin and punishment and accordingly Carter's Evelyn laments 'I had transgressed and now I must be punished for it' (p. 74). Although inauspicious beginnings for a revolution in gender relations, it is precisely in re-examining such beginnings that Carter's theories of gender acquisition are based.

In appropriating the Biblical account of the creation of woman, associated with transgression, Carter highlights the troubled, and troubling, nature of gender acquisition for women. Evelyn is initially presented in the novel as a virulent misogynist who revels in his own cruelty to women. A 'child of a moist, green, gentle island', Evelyn takes up a post at a New York university where he finds a 'gothic darkness' populated by giant rats, angry blacks and even angrier women (p. 10; p. 16). Here Evelyn beds, impregnates and abandons a young black girl named Leilah, and, having lost his job following the occupation and destruction of the university by black combatants, he flees for the desert. The metaphorical 'fall' from the Edenic 'gentle island' of Evelyn's youth to the barren desert which 'shines and glistens, reeks and swelters till its skin peels, flakes, cracks, blisters' marks the beginning of Evelyn's transformation, and can be read in Biblical terms as a punishment for his 'sin' of succumbing to the temptation that Leilah represents (p. 41). However, its emptiness also suggests a concomitant lack within Evelyn himself: 'I am lost, quite lost...there is no-one, no-one... I have found a landscape that matches the landscape of my heart' (ibid). It is this lack,

⁷⁵ Andreas Capellanus, 'De Amore' 14 (89), in *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended*, ed. by Alcuin Blamires (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 121.

presented in performative gender terms, that Carter suggests is responsible for his inability to love Leilah, and for his own unloveableness:

She was a perfect woman; like the moon, she only gave reflected light. She had mimicked me, she had become the thing I wanted of her, so that she could make me love her and yet she had mimicked me so well she had also mimicked the fatal lack in me that meant I was not able to love her because I myself was so unlovable. (p. 34)

Evelyn's recognition of Leilah's constructed femininity thus leads to a more radical transgression, a critical acknowledgement of the 'fatal lack' of his own masculinity and thus the illusory nature of 'that most elusive of all chimeras, myself' (p. 38). This illusory 'self' suggests that Carter's notion of gender acquisition could be read in purely performative terms, yet as I have shown, the 'gender trouble' that Carter presents diverges from that which is proposed by Butler and which is so often utilised in reading Carter's work. As 'a construction that regularly conceals its genesis', gender, in Butlerian terms is a 'production that create[s] the effect of the natural, the original, and the inevitable'.⁷⁶ In other words, as Butler states, 'the performative is not a singular act used by an already established subject but one of the powerful and insidious ways in which subjects are called into social being'.⁷⁷ While Carter is in accordance with Butler in suggesting that both Evelyn's prior male self as well as his new female one are illusory categories, insufficient to constitute 'myself' as a 'subject', her deviance from Butler's theories of gender acquisition lies within her retention of such a 'subject', an ungendered 'self [who] was a perfect stranger to me' (Carter, *The Passion of New Eve*, p. 38). This 'self', I suggest, is a cyborg self.

⁷⁶ Judith Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory', *Theatre Journal*, 40: 4 (1988), 519-531, (p. 522); *Gender Trouble*, x.

⁷⁷ Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 160.

Haraway's cyborg politics has much in common with Butler's theories of performativity. Both challenge essentialist views of gender, rejecting both the concept of a female 'identity' as well as the homogenisation or 'assimilation' of female experience, described by Haraway as 'the diverse "moments" or "conversations" in recent women's politics named radical feminism' ('Cyborg Manifesto' p. 158). Most notably, the stability of sex itself is contested through both theorists. Butler stated that "'female" no longer appears to be a stable notion' (*Gender Trouble*, xxix) and this finds echoes in Haraway's argument that 'There is nothing about being "female" that naturally binds women. There is not even such a state as 'being' female, itself a highly complex category constructed in contested sexual scientific discourses and other social practices' ('Cyborg Manifesto', p. 155). Carter's Eve affirms just such a politics. Against the 'concrete fact' of Mother's 'personified and self-fulfilling fertility', Eve's identity is fragmented at the point of her physical transformation: 'I saw a young woman who, though she was I, I could in no way acknowledge as myself, for this one was only a lyrical abstraction of femininity to me' (*The Passion of New Eve*, pp. 58-9; p. 74). This fractured identity serves to oppose what Butler terms 'the exclusionary practices that do not "show" once the juridical structure of politics has been established' (*Gender Trouble*, 3). Eve's 'synthesise[d]' biology leaves her unable to identify with the 'concrete essence of woman' that Mother represents while equally denying Evelyn an uncontested masculine identity (Carter, *The Passion of New Eve*, p. 60). However, critics of Butler emphasise how the fragmentation of identity categories that she celebrates also serves to reject the specificity of experience which serves as a basis for political action on

the grounds of shared identities.⁷⁸ Thus Eve's 'notional unfemininity, which still remained significant to me', her inability to share a female identity with the feminists of Beulah, grounded in her experience as a man, leaves her unable to engage with their political action (84). Rachel Alsop, Annette Fitzsimons and Kathleen Lennon draw on Bidy Martin to suggest that 'the problems are not gender itself but the "correlations between biological sex, gender identity, gender or sex roles, sexual object choice, sexual identity [...] It is this system and the denial of any other construction of gender" which is problematic' (p. 107).⁷⁹ Haraway thus allows for an 'other construction of gender' by suggesting that 'there has also been a growing recognition of another response through coalition – affinity, not identity' ('Cyborg Manifesto' p. 155). Carter thus utilises the cyborgian fracturing of identity to affirm political kinship on the grounds of affinity, constructing 'a kind of postmodern identity out of otherness, difference, and specificity' (ibid).

The shared focus on specificity in Haraway and Carter's work is rooted in a common rejection of essentialising practices in certain aspects of feminism. Haraway begins her 'Cyborg Manifesto' with the suggestion that cyborg writing is faithful to feminism 'as blasphemy is faithful' (p. 149). To explain, Haraway argues 'blasphemy protects one from the moral majority within, while still insisting on the need for community' (ibid). Carter's own feminism, in its rejection of the dogma of certain aspects of second wave feminism, while retaining a deep and immutable link to a larger feminist approach or 'community', can therefore be read as just such a 'blasphemy'. Nicole Ward Jouve says of

⁷⁸ See for example Rachel Alsop, Annette Fitzsimons and Kathleen Lemon, *Theorizing Gender* (London: Polity Press, 2002), p. 107.

⁷⁹ See also Bidy Martin, 'Sexuality without Gender and other Queer Utopias', *Diacritics*, 24: 2-3 (1994), 104-21 (p. 112).

Carter ‘no other writer I can think of has so repeatedly and passionately jousted against what feminists call “biological essentialism”’ (Jouve, p. 153). The tensions between essentialist and constructivist views evident in Carter’s work parallel those of any feminist project of Biblical re-vision which aims to displace the patriarchal construct of faith while maintaining the possibility of faith itself. As Haraway insists, ‘blasphemy is not apostasy’ (ibid). Carter’s fictions consistently utilise such blasphemy, demonstrating both her stance against the production of what she termed ‘agit-prop’ while simultaneously returning time and again in her own work to the very fictions, the fairy tales and myth that constitute such propaganda.⁸⁰

The effect of this feminist blasphemy is to produce a body of texts that, as Sarah Gamble reads them, ‘celebrate borderline states and conditions of being’ (Gamble, p. 12). For Haraway, such borderline ‘states of being’, ironic ‘contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, even dialectically...holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true’ centre around the ‘image of the cyborg’ (‘Cyborg Manifesto’, p. 149). The cyborgian contradictions of Eve’s own borderline state, both a perfect ‘*Playboy* center fold’ yet still ‘just like a man’ (Carter, *The Passion of New Eve*, p. 75; p. 78) highlights how even the most self-evident truths may be contradictory, showing how the ‘natural’ representation of women inherent in the biologically defined narratives of the Bible is itself unnatural. Haraway notes that cyborgs are ‘illegitimate offspring...illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins. Their fathers, after all, are inessential’ (‘Cyborg Manifesto’, p. 151). In Carter’s case, it is not only Eve’s father that is inessential, but crucially, her mother also.

⁸⁰ John Haffenden, ‘Angela Carter’, in *Novelists in Interview* (London: Methuen, 1985) p. 93.

Carter's presentation of the feminists at Beulah can only be read as a searing indictment of branches of the Women's Movement that celebrated the Earth-Mother. Carter publically rejected such movements, stating 'By the time I wrote *The Sadeian Woman*, I was getting really ratty with the whole idea of myth. I was getting quite ratty with the sort of appeals by some of the women's movements to have these sort of "Ur-religions" because it didn't seem to me at all to the point. The point seemed to be the here and now, what we should do now' (quoted in Katsavos). The echoes of Chamberlin's monstrous goddess Lilith in Carter's 'Mother – but too much mother, a femaleness too vast, too gross for my imagination to contain' belies the fact that, as Ornella De Zordo points out, 'Mother's body, no matter what its similarities to mythical chthonic figures might imply [...] is not in fact natural at all, but constructed'.⁸¹

This deconstruction of the 'nature' of Mother's naturalness exposes how historically formulated conceptions of 'woman' claim a nature that is itself unnatural. Furthermore, the surgical construction of Mother's body highlights how contemporary cosmetic surgery practices define a 'standard' female body that serves to eradicate female difference in the 'here and now'. Carter instead suggests that the unnatural cyborg can allow for a resignification of the identity of 'woman' that is rooted in shared, but crucially, *different*, experiences of womanhood through a re-examination of the figure of Lilith. Leilah, later revealed to be Lilith, is the impetus for Eve's transformation in Carter's novel. Already defined as the cause of Evelyn's first 'fall', Carter highlights the Biblical tropes which place blame for male oppression of women at the hands of women themselves: 'why did you seduce me, in the first place, if you were so innocent.

⁸¹ Carter, *The Passion of New Eve*, p. 66; Ornella De Zordo, 'Larger than Life: Women Writing the Excessive Female Body', *English Studies in Italy*, 13: 2 (2000), 427-48 (p. 441).

Why didn't you eat pills, or get them to put a coil of plastic in your womb, or slide a disc of rubber into your hole before it swallowed me?' (p. 36). Yet it is this 'swallowing' of Evelyn's male self which allows Eve to later recognise his culpability, and realise that 'she can never have objectively existed, all the time mostly the projection of the lusts and greed and self-loathing of a young man called Evelyn, who does not exist, either' (p. 175).

The recognition of the illusory nature of Evelyn's prior male self is a crucial one in the novel. Haraway insists that '[c]yborg writing must not be about the Fall, the imagination of a once-upon-a-time wholeness' ('Cyborg Manifesto, p. 175). Carter's representation of Lilith confirms how fall narratives reify what Butler terms 'the imaginary before' which 'is inevitably figured within the terms of a prehistorical narrative that serves to legitimate the present state of the law' (*Gender Trouble*, p. 49). When Evelyn first notices and then follows Leilah he notes, 'I felt all the ghastly attraction of the fall. Like a man upon a precipice, irresistibly lured by gravity, I succumbed at once. I took the quickest way down, I plunged. I could not resist the impulsion of vertigo' (p. 25). This moment clearly identifies in Evelyn a pre-fall concept of gender rooted in essentialist terms: 'All my existence was now gone away into my tumescence; I was nothing but cock' (ibid). Situated against Evelyn's own positive male sense of self, Leilah is thus marked as Evelyn's 'other', 'black as my shadow', her vagina posited in binary terms as 'the exquisite negative of her sex' (p. 27). Carter thus clearly identifies fall narratives as constructing a binary concept of gender which 'makes' women 'other' to the phallic wholeness of man, bound up in male desire. Yet the narrative of original unity in such constructs is ultimately rejected by Carter's transformative cyborg text. Braidotti suggests that 'transformation cannot affect

only the pole of 'the other'. It must equally dislocate the position and the prerogative of 'the Same', the former centre' (Braidotti, p. 14). Eve's permanently partial and conflicted identity, which opposes a womanhood that is established through science with a 'natural' manhood that is shown to be illusory, inhabits a boundary position between Eve and Evelyn, exposing both states as 'other'. Lilith's exposure of her own constructed femininity, rather than 'making' a woman, thus 'unmakes' a man, denying Evelyn any possibility of a 'return' to his previously perceived 'whole' self: 'I was exiled from Nirvana forever' (p. Carter, *The Passion of New Eve*, 60).

Lilith's ability to enable Eve to finally accept the illusory nature of his own masculine identity can be identified through Carter's acknowledgement of what Haraway describes as 'an adequate feminist theory of gender [which] must *simultaneously* be a theory of racial difference in specific historical conditions of production and reproduction'.⁸² Carter shows how, as a woman of colour, Leilah, otherwise Sophia and Lilith, is not only established as other to Evelyn in terms of gender, but also in terms of race. She is 'nigredo, the stage of darkness' (*The Passion of New Eve*, p. 14). Lilith's identity as a woman of colour is associated by Evelyn with slavery: 'sometimes she lashed her calves with thongs, like a slave [...] I never knew a girl more a slave to style' (p. 29; p. 31). This evocation of slavery is important to Carter's cyborgian rejection of origin myth. Haraway notes that 'Slave mothers could not transmit a name; they could not be wives; they were outside the system of marriage exchange. Slaves were unpositioned, unfixed in a system of names [...] In these discursive frames, white women were not legally or symbolically *fully* human; slaves were not legally or symbolically

⁸² Donna Haraway, 'Gender for a Marxist Dictionary' in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp.127-148 (p. 146).

human *at all*' ('Gender for a Marxist Dictionary', p. 147). As such, women of colour can be seen to have an intrinsically cyborgian identity that rejects the homogenising practices of both patriarchal visions of female identity as well as those feminist arguments that attempt to reclaim a 'natural' female identity. If the image of the cyborg suggests a lack of origin, a copy without an original which destabilises the concept of any 'natural' identity, then the political identity that women of colour have begun to construct over the last decades, divested of history by a white male voice, radically inhabits a 'self-consciously constructed space that cannot affirm the capacity to act on the basis of natural identification, but only on the basis of conscious coalition, of affinity, of political kinship' ('Cyborg Manifesto', p. 156).

I believe it is here that Carter's most radical re-vision of female 'becoming' lies. Haraway shows how '[g]ender identity discourse is also intrinsic to feminist racism, which insists on the non-reducibility and antagonist relation of coherent women and men' ('Gender' for a Marxist Dictionary', p. 135). She suggests that '[t]he task is to 'disqualify' the analytic categories, like sex or nature, that lead to univocity. This move would expose the illusion of an interior organizing gender core and produce a field of race and gender difference open to resignification' (ibid). Lilith's own changing identity, from black temptress Leilah who can 'never have objectively existed', through 'blonde, stern, monomamiliat Sophia' to feminist warrior Lilith, allows her to concomitantly reject Eve's prior male identity, instead offering her 'disinterested friendship, though in the past I might have caused her pain' (Carter, *The Passion of New Eve*, p. 175). Ultimately, Carter shows that a rejection of the past, a disavowal of origins, is necessary to allow for the construction of 'woman' founded on 'affinity

not identity' (Haraway, 'Cyborg Manifesto', p. 155). Rather than a shared history, Haraway proposes a cyborg world based on a shared present: 'a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of ... permanently partial identities' ('Cyborg Manifesto', p. 154). Carter shows that it is only within such partial identities that the blasphemous cyborgian rewriting of oneself beyond the 'identity' of 'woman' can begin. Haraway suggests that 'cyborg writing is about the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other' ('Cyborg Manifesto', p. 175). Carter's re-vision of 'the Word' can be read as an attempt to do just this.

Alison Lee notes that throughout the novel:

even direct discourse cannot be easily assigned either to male or female. The first sentence, for example, appears to be spoken by Evelyn: "The last night I spent in London, I took some girl or other to the movies and, through her mediation, I paid you a little tribute of spermatozoa, Tristessa" (5). Logically, the speaker is Evelyn, since only Evelyn could pay such a tribute. Yet it could also be argued that the speaker is an Evelyn who has been temporarily remembered by Eve, whose distance from an "actual" Evelyn is made clear.⁸³

The unknowability of the narrative self which authors Eve's story calls into question the conditions governing the production of its foundational narrative in Genesis. It not only fragments the imagined unity of a male concept of history against which female otherness is posited, but also draws attention to the multiple narrators of the Bible itself that pose as 'one' authoritative voice who names 'woman', highlighting that 'reality has an author' (Haraway, 'In the Beginning', p. 78). Evelyn's questioning tone when he suggests 'I think it was Rilke who so

⁸³ Alison Lee, 'De/En-Gendering Narrative: Angela Carter's New Eve(lyn), in *Ambiguous Discourse: Feminist Narratology and British Women Writers*, ed. by Kathy Mezei (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), pp. 238-49 (p. 245).

lamented the inadequacy of our symbolism – regretted so bitterly we cannot, unlike the (was it?) Ancient Greeks, find adequate external symbols for the life within us’ belies his authoritative affirmation ‘yes, that’s the quotation’ (Carter, *The Passion of New Eve*, p. 6). In asking ‘was it?’ Evelyn invites the reader into the narrative, encouraging him or her to question Evelyn’s own male vision. Such an invitation suggests that Carter views re-reading one’s own self as a necessary step towards authoring a new ‘self’ outside the regulatory illusion of a ‘whole’ identity while affirming a feminist focus on agency. The new Eve may be ‘a creature without memory’, fragmenting the stability of Evelyn’s male vision of identity, but the dislocated ‘I’ of the narrator, the genderless experiential ‘self’ that I have termed ‘cyborg’, sustains the ability to author the changing text of Eve’s creation throughout the novel by acknowledging that ‘I’ is not the owner of that portion of space and time that I occupy; ‘I’ is only a rubber stamp and ‘I’ is actually only passing through’ (Carter, p 78; Braidotti, p. 171). In naming the subject which is the narrator’s self as alternatively ‘Eve’ *or* ‘Evelyn’ according to the events being narrated, Carter confirms Braidotti’s suggestion that self-representation is a ‘process of de-familiarization [...]’ (Braidotti, p. 171). Although taken out of ‘man’, ‘Eve’ is emphatically *not* Evelyn, yet Eve is just as emphatically part of Evelyn. Eve’s experienced selves, ‘her own fleshly ones and his mental ones’ are only part of the narrative ‘I’ in the partial identity of ‘Eve/lyn’ and it is crucial that such a self *remains* partial (Carter, *The Passion of New Eve*, p. 78). Haraway insists that ‘a concept of a coherent inner self, achieved (cultural) or innate (biological), is a regulatory fiction that is unnecessary--indeed, inhibitory--for feminist projects of producing and affirming complex agency and responsibility’ (‘Cyborg Manifesto’, p. 135).

The multiple, partial, shared and separate roles that Eve experiences allow for the radical possibility of ‘a kind of disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self’ (Haraway, ‘Cyborg Manifesto’ p. 163). Where Evelyn’s male experience of women is marked by the heteronormative vision of a male-dominated Hollywood, the very real attachments that Eve forms after her transformation, based on her shared experience as an oppressed wife, a transgendered woman, a comrade, a friend, a mother and a daughter, allow her to continue the process of ‘restructuring’ and reinvention that was begun in Beulah. Eve’s ‘affinity’ with both men and women allows for the confusing task of making partial, real connection’ based on specificity and difference (Haraway, ‘Cyborg Manifesto’, p. 161). In so doing Carter refuses to allow ‘woman [to] disintegrate into women’ (Haraway, ‘Cyborg Manifesto’, p. 160). Carter employs the myth of genesis to not only revise Biblical narratives of womanhood but also to examine the genesis of gender itself, and in so doing troubles the central myths of female origins. Carter’s Eve, created a decade before Haraway’s cyborg, crucially questions ‘the systems of myth and meanings structuring our imagination’ (Haraway, ‘Cyborg Manifesto, p. 163). As such Carter’s radical re-vision of Eve offers a self that is ‘a matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as women’s experience in the late twentieth century’ (Haraway, ‘Cyborg Manifesto’ p. 149). This, Haraway, insists, ‘is the self feminists must code’ (‘Cyborg Manifesto, p. 163).

CHAPTER TWO

FEMALE BELONGINGS: REWRITING ‘FAMILY’ AND ‘HOME’
IN OLD TESTAMENT NARRATIVES

In her introduction to ‘Unsettling Women’, a special issue of *Contemporary Women’s Writing* on the subject of diaspora, Emma Parker suggests that ‘female subjects have the power to disturb or subvert ... dominant ideologies of home and nation as well as the hegemony of a patriarchal, Western literary tradition and history’.⁸⁴ In this chapter I examine how Anita Diamant’s *The Red Tent* (1997) and Jenny Diski’s *Only Human: A Comedy* (2000) along with its sequel, *After These Things* (2004), utilise just such female subjects, revising Genesis from Abram to Joseph to expose the ways in which narratives of ‘home’, ‘nation’ and their corollary, ‘family’, have been historically formulated through the ‘patriarchal, Western literary tradition’ of the Bible as pertaining only to male experience. I suggested in the previous chapter that Biblical configurations of gender acquisition confer upon women a pre-ordained inferiority that serves to subordinate ‘woman’ to male power. I argue in this chapter that Scriptural accounts of the foundation of the ‘great nation’ of Abraham, constituting the

⁸⁴ Emma Parker, ‘Introduction: Unsettling Women’, *Contemporary Women’s Writing*, 3:1 (2009), 1-5 (p. 5).

creation of the Jewish race from which Christianity is drawn, go beyond this subordination to literally absent women altogether from the historical record (Genesis 12.2). I go on to suggest that the three novels examined in this chapter utilise this symbolic exile of their female subjects to show how, as Julia Kristeva suggests, women are always foreigners in the symbolic order. Furthermore, I suggest that the ‘unsettling women’ of these novels offer a subversive potential for alternative models of society to predominant patriarchal power structures through recognising and embracing the female condition of exile.

I will examine the texts from three angles. Firstly, I will explore how the re-vision of these women’s stories works to reinsert the female voice into an androcentric past, exposing how this lack of voice has obscured the historical oppression of women in kinship groups which has worked to constitute women as exiles within the traditionally defined ‘family’. Secondly, I will show how the provision of an alternative point of view enables an exploration of the limitations placed upon female-centred modes of experience in the Bible, resulting in a corresponding alienation of women from each other. Finally, I will conclude by showing how the very concept of ‘family’ is disturbed and subverted through these texts, challenging the historical, ideological bias towards the patriarchal kinship groups that constitute ‘home’ within the Bible and offering alternative models for women outside a patriarchal framework to suggest a subversive potential in the ‘unsettling’ condition of exile, in which ‘home’ is not ‘family’ and ‘family’ is the multiple and particular relationships which make up the lives of individual women.

Kathleen Gough suggests that ‘[t]he trouble with the origin of the family is that nobody knows’ (p. 51). Yet the Book of Genesis purports to illuminate such

origins. *Genesis*, meaning origin, demonstrates its preoccupation with lineage, yet the origins of humanity, presented in familial terms, appear to be almost entirely male. Chapter Five is typical:

This is the book of the generation of Adam. . . . Adam lived a hundred and thirty years, and begot a son to his own image and likeness, and called his name Seth. And the days of Adam, after he begot Seth, were eight hundred years: and he begot sons and daughters. And all the time that Adam lived came to nine hundred and thirty years, and he died. Seth also lived a hundred and five years, and begot Enos. And Seth lived after he begot Enos, eight hundred and seven years, and begot sons and daughters. And all the days of Seth were nine hundred and twelve years, and he died. And Enos lived ninety years, and begot Cainan. After whose birth he lived eight hundred and fifteen years, and begot sons and daughters. (Genesis 5. 1-10)⁸⁵

‘Man’ may have begotten ‘sons and daughters’, but none of these daughters is named. Sixty-two men are specifically named in chapter ten of Genesis alone, while only twenty-six women are named throughout the entire fifty chapters of the book.⁸⁶ The ‘Genesis’ of women is thus characterised by subordination to an overwhelming male presence.

If Eve represents the negative identification of women in the Bible as shown in the previous chapter, she is unusual in at least *being* identified. The five women portrayed in the novels studied in this chapter, who originally appear in Genesis in chapters 11-46, are therefore exceptional in being named, yet they are only present as unwitting participants in a narrative of male experience: Sarai is regarded solely as ‘Abram’s wife’, her only perceived achievement being her

⁸⁵ The genealogy continues in this vein for the entire 31 verses of the chapter.

⁸⁶ The women mentioned are: Eve, Ada, Sella, Noema, Sarai, Melcha, Agar, Rebecca, Roma, Cetura, Judith, Basemath, Maheleth, Rachel, Lia, Zelpha, Bala, Dina, Debora, Ada, Oolibama, Thamna, Meetabel, Sue, Thamar and Asseneth. The sixty-two men named in Genesis 10 are: Cham, Sem, Japheth, Gomer, Magog, Madai, Javan, Thubal, Mosoch, Thiras, Ascenez, Riphath, Thogorma, Elisa, Tharsis, Cetthim, Dodanim, Chus, Mesram/mesraim, Phuth, Chanaan, Saba, Hevila, Sabatha, Regma, Sabatacha, Saba, Dadan, Nemrod, Ludim, Anamim, Laabim, Nephthuum, Phetrusim, Chasluim, Sidon, Elam, Assur, Arphaxad, Lud, Aram, Us, Hull, Gether, Mess, Sale, Heber, Phaleg, Jectan, Elmodad, Saleph, Asarmoth, Jare, Aduram, Uzal, Decla, Ebal, Abimael, Saba, Ophir, Hevila, Jobab.

pregnancy at the age of ninety, despite being, both in terms of descent and parentage, equally the progenitor of the ‘great nation’ promised by God to Abram (Genesis. 11. 29; 12. 2). Rebecca, Sarai’s daughter-in-law, could be held up as an example of female agency in the Bible; Rebecca herself is responsible for ensuring that Isaac’s paternal blessing passes to Jacob, her favourite and younger son, over Esau, the older. Yet this female agency is utilised only to further the aims of her male progeny, and can also be read as unwittingly participating in the greater design laid out by God, that ‘two nations are in thy womb, and two peoples shall be divided out of thy womb, and one people shall overcome the other, and the elder shall serve the younger’, thus confirming a divinely ordained patrilineal descent in which male territory is key (Genesis 25.23). Rachel and Lia, in turn the daughters-in-law of Rebecca, are presented consistently only in terms of their marriageability, their procreative capabilities, the number of their sons; their sororal relationship is portrayed only as competition for Jacob’s affection. Finally, Dinah, Sarai’s great-granddaughter and Jacob and Lia’s only daughter, is mentioned only five times, all of which relate to her familial status and marriage, told only as background to that of her better known brother, Joseph, while her disappearance from these pages is read as a literal death.⁸⁷

These women’s lives, as portrayed in the Bible, are indicative of Luce Irigaray’s suggestion that women ‘have been exiled into the house of our husbands’.⁸⁸ Nico Israel suggests that

⁸⁷ All spellings of names follow the Douay-Rheims Bible Online except for where the novels are referred to and spellings differ, in which cases spellings will follow Diski or Diamant. Additionally Abram and Sarai are referred to as such, and not by their later names of Abraham and Sarah, except in quotations. Sichem of the Bible is renamed as Shalem of Shechem in *The Red Tent* and is therefore referred to as Sichem in his Biblical context and Shalem when referring to Diamant’s text.

⁸⁸ Luce Irigaray, ‘Body Against Body: In Relation to the Mother’, in *Sexes and Genealogies*, trans. by Gillian C. Gill (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 19.

“Diaspora” [...] has traditionally possessed a specifically religious and spiritual significance [...] In the context of its appearance in Deuteronomy, this diasporic removal is associated with a curse, with a perpetual otherness amid others.⁸⁹

The generations examined by Diamant and Diski embody such a definition.

Starting with Abram, Diski’s novel, *Only Human*, centres on the relationship between Sarai and Abram and the crisis engendered by their inability to produce an heir, interpolated with the battle between Sarai and God for Abram’s love.

After These Things examines the devastating effects upon the family, now including Isaac’s wife Rebecca, of God’s demand upon Abram for the sacrifice of his only legitimate son, Isaac. Diamant’s *The Red Tent* follows chronologically from Diski’s narratives to explore the relationships between Jacob, Isaac’s son, and his wives Leah, Rachel, Zilpah and Bilhah, and finally that of Leah and Jacob’s daughter Dinah and her rape by Shalem, son of Shechem, here represented as an unsanctioned marriage.

The theme of territory is central to the events of these three novels. The battle between the omnipotent ‘I am’ and the women of Diski’s novels is reinscribed as a claim for the territory of Abram’s love. Dinah’s marriage to Shalem, enacted without patriarchal consent, and Shalem’s subsequent murder is played out in Diamant’s novel as a battle between the house of Jacob and the dynasties of Shechem. Yet it is the women of these novels upon whom the ‘curse’ of perpetual otherness is placed. Both authors show their female subjects continually moving in both time and place. Their marriages lead the women on journeys out of their homeland, Sarai to follow Abram into the wilderness in search of his promised land, Rebecca to the home of Isaac, Leah, Rachel, Zilpah

⁸⁹ Nico Israel, *Outlandish: Writing Between Exile and Diaspora* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 2.

and Bilhah to follow Jacob into the land of his father, and Dinah from her mothers' tent into the city of Shechem. Thus the men of the Bible are situated in an autochthonous position while the women become diasporic settlers through their marriages.

The notion that women are necessarily rendered a diasporic people within male-centred familial groups is reflective of the fracturing of female lineage in the genealogically based histories of Genesis, a concern that is central to Diamant and Diski's re-visionary politics. The events re-examined in the three novels constitute the creation of the Jewish race. However, Philip Tew, in the only critical analysis of Diski's two novels so far, reads them as concerned 'not so much [with] creation, but primarily parenthood, lineage, family, betrayal'.⁹⁰ *Only Human* and *After These Things*, are necessarily concerned with kinship representing the vast family history of Genesis, yet Tew suggests that it is betrayal of these ties that most fully marks the texts: 'Pivotal to the dynamics of both of Diski's Pentateuchal novels (and Genesis itself) is Abraham's binding of Isaac for sacrifice on Mount Morah' (p. 70). Certainly, her first novel ends with this event, known as the *Akedah* in Jewish tradition, while the second picks up the story with Isaac's fear that 'death for him was never more than a heart's beat away' (*After These Things*, p. 7). However, while Tew views the perceived centrality of the *Akedah* in the novels as a confirmation of their orthodoxy, I would argue that Diski specifically *decentralises* this event to establish her re-visionary aims. The Biblical telling of the *Akedah* culminates at Genesis 22. 12: 'And he said to him "Lay not thy hand upon the boy, neither do thou any thing to him: now I know that thou fearest God, and hast not spared thy only begotten son for my sake'.

⁹⁰ Philip Tew, 'Jenny Diski's Millennial Imagination: 1997-2004', in *British Fiction Today*, ed. by Philip Tew (London: Continuum, 2006), pp. 67-77 (p. 67).

The *Akedah* can therefore be established as a mechanism of patriarchal control, yet Diski completely omits the lesson, attributing it instead to weakness. God states:

I had been rendered too weak, too fearful, too human to
pass the test. I called out to him before the knife fell.
‘Abraham, Abraham.’
‘Here I am.’
And those were the last words he ever spoke to me -----
----- . (*Only Human*, p. 213)

God’s mercy, and Abraham’s reciprocal obedience and fear are absent. The narrative moves directly to Isaac’s return to his mother, and the story ends with Sarai’s anguish at the sight of her traumatised child. The second novel begins several years later with the traumatic consequences of Isaac’s ordeal being visited upon his wife, Rebekah. Rather than making this event the culmination of her first novel and the starting point of her second, Diski in fact uses this ‘pivotal’ point to dismiss the lesson. The patriarchal authority established by this event in the Bible is undermined, while its tragic consequences are established as a cause of female suffering. Tew’s own concerns are outlined in his comment that ‘Diski [situates] the *Akedah* as the culmination of the first novel, which largely concerns Abram (later Abraham) and God’s relation to *man*, and the second novel considers the traumatic aftermath, the perhaps unexpected effects upon *Isaac and the tribe of Israel*’ [my emphasis] (p. 71). While he does, seemingly as an afterthought, admit that ‘the consequences are played out in the life of the women as much as the men’, he also states that the novels ‘are almost entirely consistent with the scriptural accounts, except in matters of emphases’ (ibid). For Tew it is clear that these novels primarily seek to construct a literal retelling of Genesis based on elite and patriarchal domination rather than any iconoclastic or re-

visionary concerns. Yet these ‘matters of emphases’, almost entirely dismissed by Tew, are key to Diski’s gender politics.

The betrayal mentioned by Tew is not only of Isaac by Abraham, but also of *Sarai*. It is her grief that begins the first novel and ends it. What Tew fails to notice is that where the Biblical narrative of the events contained within these novels unremittingly concerns itself with male lineage, male voices and a male perspective, Diski’s does not. Nor does she offer the somewhat weakly stated ‘feminized formation’ that Tew suggests ‘reconcile[s] the fragments’ of the ‘essentially patriarchal text’ (p. 72). It is, rather, the fragmented history of men *and* women together that Diski offers. These two novels centre around a *shared* experience, offering multiple narrators, including Sarai herself, the entire cast of husbands, wives and children from Genesis 22 – 37, and ‘I am’, an all-knowing and vengeful Old Testament God punctuating the first text, alongside an omniscient narrator-editor performing the same task for the second in alternating perspectives.

Diski’s multiple narrators, her move from God in the first novel to ‘Editor’ in the second brings together the scattered witnesses of women’s history, highlighting her refusal to ‘accept that we are helpless victims rather than interpreters of myth, and that our consciousness is solely conditioned by it’.⁹¹ This ‘Editor’ (mistakenly read by Tew as either the God of the first novel or indeed Diski herself) rejects God as the maker of myths, positing instead that ‘humankind beat the Lord at the story game’ to highlight the all too human and multiply edited genesis of Biblical narratives, and with them, female oppression (Diski, *After These Things*, p. 1). Simultaneously, this editor troubles the

⁹¹ Jenny Diski, ‘The Daddy of All Patriarchs’, in *A View From the Bed and Other Observations* (London: Virago, 2003), pp. 68-75 (p. 68).

authority of the storyteller who produces ‘version after version; story without end’

(p. 2). Instead of confirming a univocal genesis of humanity the editor asks:

If someone were to listen in to the stories each of them [humankind] told of themselves and their relation to others, and were to present them together, a compilation, what might emerge? Another version [...] Let’s not talk about truth, or any other such foolishness. And what would this god-like character be, listening in, cutting and pasting, re-shaping, juxtaposing, adding a little here, taking something away there? With no story of his or her own to tell? Hardly. Such a one has never been. (p. 3)

For Diski then, Genesis must be read as a composite of half-truths and myth, *always* told with an agenda, by a person with a story of his or her own to tell. Yet as Diski is obviously aware, it has always been with a story of *his* own to tell. Nonetheless, Diski’s retelling of Genesis does not seek to promote a female-centred perspective overtly, instead countering the traditional male bias through a balance of both male and female perspectives. Rather, she points to male appropriation of the role of editor in the history offered by Genesis in order to offer future interpretative possibilities for the *individual* reading of the text asking, ‘[i]n any case what story is not the editor’s story? And this story is certainly mine. Mine as much as anyone’s’ (*After These Things*, p. 5).

This usurpation of the ‘male’ story also characterises Anita Diamant’s novel, *The Red Tent*. Unlike Diski, Diamant chooses to counter the silence of women in the Bible by making a woman, Dinah, her main focus. *The Red Tent*’s prologue begins ‘We have been lost to each other for so long. My name means nothing to you’ (p. 1). In the Bible, Dina is silent. Diamant, on the other hand, narrates the entire novel from Dinah’s point of view, recounting her entire life, addressing a specifically female reader. In so doing Diamant exposes both Dinah’s own silence and those of women throughout history: ‘and now you come

to me – women with hands and feet as soft as a queen’s [...] so free with your tongues. You come hungry for the story that was lost’ (p. 4). Furthermore, Diamant lays the blame for this loss squarely at the feet of men: ‘This is not your fault, or mine. The chain connecting mother to daughter was broken and the word passed to the keeping of men [...] That is why I became a footnote’ (p. 1). Diamant’s identification of Dinah as a ‘footnote’ highlights how her story is subsumed by those of her male relatives. Dina is mentioned only five times in the Bible and the story outlined by these five instances tells that while visiting the women of the city of Salem in Canaan, Dina is observed by prince Sichem who falls in love with her.⁹² Sichem, the Bible states ‘took her away, and lay with her, ravishing the virgin’ (Genesis 34. 2). Sichem then attempts to marry Dina by offering Jacob a dowry of his choosing. Dina’s brothers, angry at the ‘deflowering of their sister’, insist upon the circumcision of all the men of the city as their price (Genesis 34. 13). Finally, the Bible states:

when the pain of the wound was greatest, two of the sons of Jacob, Simeon and Levi, the brothers of Dina, taking their swords, entered boldly into the city, and slew all the men. And they killed also Hemor and Sichem, and took away their sister Dina, out of Sichem's house. And when they were gone out, the other sons of Jacob came upon the slain; and plundered the city in revenge of the rape. (Genesis 34. 25-27)

Dina’s fate following this revenge is not revealed, and she is not mentioned again.⁹³

The Red Tent, rather than focusing on the male lineages of Genesis, tells the story of Dinah’s entire life, beyond her disappearance in the Bible, from her own point of view, beginning with ‘My Mothers’ Stories’: ‘There was far more to

⁹² Genesis 30. 21; 34. 1; 34. 25; 34. 26; 46. 15.

⁹³ Dina’s name does appear in a further genealogy of Jacob later, but does not figure in the narrative of Genesis from this point onwards.

tell. Had I been asked to speak of it, I would have begun with the story of the generation that raised me, which is the only place to begin' (p. 2). Given the predominance of the male line in Genesis's own genealogies it is remarkable that Dinah refers to her *mothers* as 'the generation that raised me'. While this may seem unsurprising within a culture that allots childrearing to women, the use of the term 'generation' knowingly evokes Genesis 5: 'This is the book of the generation of Adam'. Where the descent from Abraham to Joseph is explicitly laid out in Genesis, both through the patrilineal genealogies scattered throughout the book, as well as in direct speech, the parallel descent from Sarai to Dinah remains unmentioned and is discernable only through interpretation of the male lineage.

The effect of Diamant's subversion of this masculinist genealogical convention is to affirm Irigaray's contention that women 'need to assert that there is a genealogy of women. Each of us has a female family tree: we have a mother, a maternal grandmother and great-grandmothers, we have daughters' (Irigaray, p. 19). Furthermore, Diamant's insistence upon a female generation echoes Elaine Showalter's suggestion that female history cannot be read via a male lineage (p. 131). Just as Virginia Woolf famously stated 'we think back through our mothers if we are women', Dinah states, 'If you want to understand any woman you must first ask about her mother and then listen carefully' (Woolf, p. 83; Diamant, p.2). Yet their absences cannot be filled by recourse to historical texts. Just as in the Biblical genealogies, very often our 'mothers' are simply not there. Furthermore, when these absent mothers are read in cultural terms as exiled women, can their

voices be reconstructed? Gayatri Spivak has asked ‘Can the Subaltern speak?’⁹⁴ That is to say, can the constructed voice of the silenced ‘other’, in this case the exiled woman, have any authenticity? Spivak suggests ‘If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow’ (p.287). If, as Hélène Cixous has suggested, ‘all women are exiles’, how then can one ‘understand any woman?’⁹⁵

Diamant’s response to this question lies in her assertion that her novel engages with the tradition of Midrash, a mode of exegesis characterised by non-literal interpretation of Hebrew Scriptures.⁹⁶ Traditionally the preserve of (predominantly male) rabbinical writers, midrashic interpretation relies on imaginative reading based on implications within the text itself in order to glean further meaning. This usurpation of traditionally male interpretative and sacred power allows Diamant to go beyond the mere ‘fictionalisation’ of the events and voices surrounding Dinah, which would provide only a pseudo-historical shared female past, to offer instead a reading that lies *within* the authority of her own Jewish culture to provide a multiplicity of female perspectives, a narrative characterised by individual women’s preoccupations shared through a collective faith. The patriarchal voice that has pretended to speak for the silenced Jewish woman is questioned, while Diamant is enabled to speak for Dinah, Dinah to speak for her mothers, through a shared culture. Ann Heilmann, writing about historical women’s fiction in relation to Michèle Roberts’s *In the Red Kitchen* (1990) suggests that ‘the spirit of women [...] is powerful enough to unite women

⁹⁴ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 271 – 313 (p. 283).

⁹⁵ Hélène Cixous, cited in Cathy Leeney, ‘Ireland’s ‘exiled’ women playwrights: Teresa Deevy and Marina Carr’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Irish Drama*, ed. by Shaun Richards (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 150-162 (p. 150).

⁹⁶ Alex Clark, ‘Life in Writing: Rewriting the Good Book’ [Interview with Anita Diamant], *Guardian*, 30 March 2002, p. 11.

across the divide of centuries: the gendered space of the kitchen (a site of warmth and passion, its red color an emblem of the female body) facilitates the commingling of the voices of a female Egyptian pharaoh, a Victorian medium, and the late-twentieth-century protagonist'.⁹⁷ It is easy to find a parallel between Heilmann's reading of Roberts's Red Kitchen in Diamant's Red Tent. The not only gendered but culturally determined space of the tent ('a site of warmth and passion, its red color an emblem of the female body') facilitates the commingling of Dinah's voice with those of her mothers, freeborn and slave, but also of the women of the Bible with their daughters, its contemporary readers. If the past is a foreign country, then Diamant's historical novel offers a female space within that country that allows the women of the Bible to speak to women of the present, to 'make them our own daughters' (Diamant, p. 208).

However, Diamant's mingling of shared voices also insists upon the *differences* between women and their heterogeneous lived experiences. Dina's mothers are presented in the Bible as homogenised biological entities, of importance only through their childbearing capabilities, or lack thereof. Jacob's original dislike of Lia is tempered by her prolific fertility, her many sons named as her 'dowry' while Rachel's eventual conception after years of barrenness is accompanied by the notion that 'God hath taken away my reproach' (Genesis 30. 20; Genesis 30. 23). The novel offers a richer, personal account of female lives, taken from Diamant's own reading of these women, in which Leah not only gives Dinah birth, but also 'her splendid arrogance. Rachel showed me where to place the midwife's bricks and how to fix my hair. Zilpah made me think. Bilhah listened. No two of my mothers seasoned her stew in the same way' (p. 2).

⁹⁷ Ann Heilmann, 'Elective (Historical) Affinities: Contemporary Women Writing the Victorian', *Contemporary Women's Writing*, 3:1 (2009), 103 – 111 (p. 108).

Heilmann suggests of *In the Red Kitchen* that ‘the instability of these voices and our uncertainty as to who their owners are forces the reader to be involved actively in establishing the relationship of one voice to another, and the connections between women’s consciousness at different periods’ (p. 126). The framing of the women of *The Red Tent*’s voices within those of Dinah as well as Diamant herself equally insists upon the establishment of connections and difference. The personal, intimate, shared but above all, *individual* details provide a history that is categorised by its specificity to a potential female reality in its historical context as well as speaking to the consciousness of its contemporary reader. Diamant has stated in relation to *The Red Tent*, ‘I wanted to write about the lives of women in the ancient world – not Jews, but women’.⁹⁸ Dinah’s mothers are ‘women’ who speak to ‘women’, but they are not reduced to the monolithic category of ‘woman’, homogenised purely in terms of their value within a male identified Jewish race.

The absence of women from the male-defined line is also marked by Diski as a source of real anxiety for Sarai in *Only Human*. Diski takes Genesis 20. 12: ‘otherwise also she is truly my sister, the daughter of my father, and not the daughter of my mother, and I took her to wife’ to read Sarai as a half-sister to Abram.⁹⁹ Yet during the recital of the lineage of Terah, Abram and Sarai’s father, Sarai is absent:

These are the begetting of Shem: Shem begot Arpakhshad.
And Arpakhshad begot Shelah. And Shelah begot Ever.

⁹⁸ Jodi Gilman, ‘Anita Diamant: Writing into the Silence’, *Tufts Observer Online*, <http://ase.tufts.edu/observer/news4.html> cited in Ann Finding, *Anita Diamant’s The Red Tent* (New York: Continuum, 2004), p. 11.

⁹⁹ Rabbinical interpretations read Genesis 11.29 differently to mean that Sarai is in fact Abram’s niece, otherwise known as Iscah or Jescha. Emil G. Hirsch *et al*, ‘Sarah’, *Online Version of the 1901 – 1906 Jewish Encyclopedia* (2002) <www.jewishencyclopedia.com> [accessed 16 January 2009]: ‘Abram and Nachor married wives: the name of Abram’s wife was Sarai: and the name of Nachor’s wife, Melcha, the daughter of Aran, father of Melcha, and father of Jescha’ (Gen. 11.29).

And Ever begot Peleg. And Peleg begot Re'. And Re
begot Serug. And Serug begot Nahor. And Nahor begot
Terah. And Terah begot Nahor, Abram and Haran.
(Diski, *Only Human*, p. 22)

As she herself notes, there is 'no mention of Sarai' (ibid). As a child Sarai thus secretly revises the genealogy of her father, adding 'a final 'Sarai', like a sigh, to the list of Terah's children' (p. 23).

If it is notable that Sarai can only insert herself into male history secretly, it is even more so that she *is* in fact included in the Bible's genealogies. The lineage of Sem down to Abram covers Genesis 11. 11-30, including Sarai as 'Abram's wife' and ends with 'Sarai was barren, and had no children'. Diski's re-vision, removing Sarai from the genealogy, only to include it in Sarai's own secret utterances, allows her to explore the manner in which Sarai *is* included. While Sarai's presence in the Bible as 'Abram's wife' is authorised, her own insertion in the novel, however private, remains unauthorised and angers the all-seeing God, who responds '*I* made the beginning and I allowed the begetting. The generation of generations was in my gift, as was everything' (Diski, *Only Human*, p. 24). This first-person voice is dialogic with that which speaks to Abram in Genesis: 'I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and magnify thy name, and thou shalt be blessed. I will bless them that bless thee, and curse them that curse thee, and IN THEE shall all the kindred of the earth be blessed' (Genesis 12.2-3). This echo is significant when taken, through Diski's assertion, as in fact the voice of a male editor, affirming that the inclusion of women in Biblical narratives has been dependent only upon male concerns, offering blessings only to 'THEE', that is man, while the anger of 'God' in the novel suggests that it is the patriarchal voice that has resisted and denied the self-expression of women beyond such

concerns in Genesis. Furthermore, it highlights that women are not only excluded from history, but from patriarchal definitions of family and nation. It is a male God who ‘allowed the begetting’, man alone whose line will be ‘a great nation’. Just as the story of Adam and Eve usurps female procreative power in favour of male creative power, rendering woman merely the vessel for man’s seed, the story of Abram and Sarai removes women from the family altogether, both in the past and for the future, rendering them invisible in a long line of male descent.

If Sarai’s difficulty in fitting herself between the lines of male tradition confirms Elaine Showalter’s view that women cannot be read through male literary history, Diamant shows its corollary, that female culture should be focused upon, to be necessary to Showalter’s gynocritical model, outlined in the introduction to this thesis. The aim of such readings, according to Showalter, is to understand the distinction between women’s experiences and those presented as ‘universal’ and in fact pertaining only to men (Showalter, p. 131). *The Red Tent* does precisely this in its re-vision of Dinah’s supposed rape. The utilisation of the words ‘rape’, ‘ravishing’, and ‘deflowering’ in Genesis suggest that the actions of Dina’s brothers are undeniably in her defence, yet Diamant reads these events differently. Where the Bible uncritically represents the male point of view, that the union between Dina and Shichem must be rape because it has not yet been agreed to by Dina’s father, Diamant offers an alternative point of view. In *The Red Tent*, Dinah’s perspective shows her to be the victim, not of rape, but of a power play instigated by her brothers against the men of Canaan. In light of Genesis 34. 3; 19, ‘his (Sichem’s) soul was fast knit unto her [...] the young man [...] loved the damsel exceedingly’ Diamant reads the events surrounding Dina’s deflowerment as a love story, in which Dinah is sexually free. When Dinah enters

the palace of Hamor she catches sight of the young prince and falls in love at first sight:

His name was Shalem. He was a firstborn son, the handsomest and quickest of the king's children, well liked by the people of Shechem. He was golden and beautiful as a sunset [...] He was perfect. (p. 217)

The betrothal between the couple, as in the Bible, remains unspoken, and yet it is agreed:

...his eyes sought the answer to a question I did not fully understand [...] He saw me color and his smile widened. My awkwardness vanished and I smiled back. And it was as though the bride-price has been paid and the dowry agreed to. It was as though we were alone in our bridal tent. The question had been answered. (pp. 217-8)

Crucially, it is Dinah *herself* who answers the question. Julia O'Faolain and Lauro Martines state that, for the early Hebrews, 'a woman with a father or husband remained under his authority and could conclude no contracts without his consent'.¹⁰⁰ Thus Dinah reports 'He (Jacob) does not like to lose control of his family's fate' (Diamant, p. 232). The rape told of here is not of Dinah, but of Jacob's patriarchal authority over his daughter. Furthermore, it is Dinah's *own* voice that exposes this truth. Like Spivak's subaltern *sati*, the Biblical Dina is silenced at the point of her husband's death. While her physical silence in the Bible is replicated in Diamant's novel it is rendered irrelevant when the story is told from her own point of view:

I wish I had been as bold with my words. Not that I was shy. Shalem knew of my delight in him, my gratitude for him, my lust for him. I gave him everything. I abandoned myself to him and in him. It was only that I could not find a voice for the flood of my happiness. (p. 228)

¹⁰⁰ Julia O'Faolain and Lauro Martines (eds.), *Not in God's Image: Women in History* (London: Virago, 1979), p. 100.

The fact of Dinah's own presence in the text allows Diamant to elucidate the Bible's concern with patriarchal power structures. Genesis itself states that Dina's brothers' insistence upon the circumcision of the Schemites is 'deceitfully' presented as a point of religion to conceal the real motive of revenge (Genesis 34. 13).¹⁰¹ Dinah's own voice, and those of her mothers, show that this revenge is not for her honour, but for the perceived wrong done to her father, and the transgression of her own sexual freedom. Bilhah 'carried the word of my happiness into my father's tents, but her voice was drowned out by the shouts of my brothers, who called me harlot' (p. 234). Furthermore, her brothers' hegemonic concerns are revealed:

they raised their voices against the marriage, sensing that their own positions would be diminished by such an alliance. Jacob's house would be swallowed up in the dynasties of Shechem, and while Reuben might expect to become a prince, they and their sons would remain shepherds, poor cousins, nobodies. (p. 235)

The rape that occurs in *The Red Tent* is shown, when viewed through Dinah's own point of view, to be emphatically *not* of Dinah, but of the property, territory and dynastic rights of her male relatives. As Jacob himself says, 'She is of Shechem now, I suppose, and of no use to me' (p. 231). This exemplifies Gayle Rubin's view that there exists 'a systematic social apparatus which takes up females as raw materials and fashions domesticated women as products'.¹⁰² Rubin argues that women become such products through their relationships with others, and 'torn from these relationships, she is no more the helpmate of man than gold in itself is money' (ibid). After first leaving her father, and following

¹⁰¹ This 'deceit' is, of course, forgiven in the Douay-Rheims commentary: 'The sons of Jacob, on this occasion, were guilty of a grievous sin, as well by falsely pretending religion, as by excess of revenge: though otherwise their zeal against so foul a crime was commendable' (Douay-Rheims Bible Online, Genesis 34, note 13).

¹⁰² Gayle Rubin, 'The Traffic in Women: Notes on the "Political Economy" of Sex', in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. by Rayna. R. Reita (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), pp. 157-210 (p. 158).

her brothers' attack on the men of Canaan, losing her husband, Dina simply vanishes from the Bible, apparently ceasing to exist outside her role in the lives of men. *The Red Tent*, however, explains Dina's absence from the Bible following the murder of Sichem/Shalem as self-imposed exile. This exile not only removes Dinah from the land of her father but, of course, from her father himself, from 'these relationships'. It is precisely such 'relationships' that Diski highlights as placing women in a position of exile within the family. Just as Sarai is unmentioned in Diski's rendering of the genealogies, there is no mention of any woman. Again, for Sarai, there *are* no mothers to provide her with a history. This historical absence is made explicit in the novel through the physical absence of women in Sarai's life. Her own mother, 'a slave girl whom Terah took into the household as his concubine when she became pregnant' dies at the point of her birth, while her stepmother, Emetlai, Abram's own mother, dies, also in childbirth, when Sarai is eight (Diski, *Only Human*, p. 26).

The fact of Sarai and Abram's differing mothers makes Sarai's absence from the recited genealogies all the more significant: 'Sarai was all the more eager to add her name to the latest generation of the descendents of Shem, because she knew she wasn't entirely entitled to. Not just because she was a girl, but because she was not a full, proper sister' (p. 25). The lack of entitlement that Sarai perceives through the recitation of the patrilineage is thus not only due to her status as a female but is further compounded by her mother's own racial identity. As a concubine and slave, Sarai's mother lacks even the limited belonging accorded to Terah's wife and Abram's mother, Emetlai. Sarai's 'pang at the final name never spoken' thus carries meaning beyond that of an individual girl seeking a sense of belonging (p. 23). Like Diamant's rendering of Dinah's rape, Diski

suggests that female history, when uttered only by men, is rendered legitimate only through its relationship to men. Emetlai, although missing from the genealogy itself, is Terah's wife, and thus her sons are included in Terah's spoken lineage. Sarai on the other hand is doubly exiled, both through her sex and her mother's racial status in Terah's self-defined kinship group. The further fact that, as in the case of Sarai and Abram, these two paternally related groups are hierarchically distinguished in terms of their descent from either legitimate wife, or non-legitimate lover, reaffirms that patrilineal history ascribes female belonging purely through women's relationships with men, rendering them as either exiles or 'belongings' themselves.

The sense of female exile within the patriarchal kinship group can be read through Kristeva's notion of women as the original foreigners. Kristeva asserts 'it is noteworthy that the first foreigners to emerge at the dawn of our civilization are foreign women – the Danaïdes' (p. 42). The Danaïdes, in Greek mythology, are the fifty female descendents of Iō, Zeus's beloved, who flee into exile when forced to marry the fifty sons of Aegyptus, descended from Hēra, Zeus's wife and rival to Iō. The fact that this exile is engendered by the sisters' potential marriages is significant to the familial framework in which Biblical women are placed. Kristeva notes that 'in Greece the bride was thought of as a foreigner, a suppliant' (p. 46). The Danaïdes' foreignness is specifically related to their status as brides of the sons of Aegyptus. In the androcentric kinship group *women* are the outsiders, assimilated into the patriarchal lineage. Rubin identifies how incest taboos have led to the economic exchange of women through 'gift-giving' in which societal bonds are formed. Yet she notes, 'If it is women who are being transacted, then it is the men who give and take them who are linked, the woman

being a conduit of a relationship rather than a partner to it' (p. 174). Furthermore, she suggests '[t]he result of a gift of women is more profound than the result of other gift transactions, because the relationship thus established is not just one of reciprocity, but one of kinship' (p. 173). Within exogamic societies women serve simply as tokens of *male* kinship within marriage and do not engage in the societal bonding process on their own behalf. Women within marriage are thus not only the first foreigners, but arguably the first diaspora. Gayatri Gopinath notes that 'all too often diasporas are narrativised through the bonds of relationality between men'.¹⁰³ The contested category of Jewish identity lies between questions of race and religion while contemporary political debates also bring into play categories of citizenship.

For male Jews therefore, according to Daniel and Jonathon Boyarin, '[t]he physical connection of common descent from Abraham and the embodied practices with which that genealogy is marked off as difference are rejected in favour of a connection between people based on individual re-creation and entry *de novo* into a community of common belief'.¹⁰⁴ Yet, as Alicia Ostricker points out, for Jewish women:

myth moves forward into legend, legend melts into history. Annals records, myths, legends, rituals, laws converge: they become the accepted canon, the official texts. The women disappear, they cease to act, they become objects of the law, they become property, they become unclean, they become a snare, they become a metaphor. The disappearance of the women is the condition and consequence of the male covenant. Meanwhile at every step the men advance into individuality. No two alike.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (London: Duke University Press, 2005), p. 5-6.

¹⁰⁴ Daniel Boyarin and Jonathon Boyarin, 'Diaspora: Generation and the Ground of Jewish Identity', *Critical Enquiry* (1993), 695-725 (p. 695).

¹⁰⁵ Alicia Ostricker, *The Nakedness of the Fathers: Biblical Visions and Revisions* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), p. 15.

Despite the matrilineal transmission of the Jewish identity, female Jews are exiled from this male covenant, becoming simply ‘belongings’ themselves, lacking the ‘belonging’ that characterises male diaspora narratives. This dichotomy of exile/belonging is fundamental to the female relationships presented by the Bible, and examined by Diamant and Diski. Women, as presented in Genesis, are shown to be tied to the domestic sphere, childrearing, cooking, spinning. They are ineluctably associated with the ‘home’. Yet, as I have demonstrated, they are also disassociated from it, excluded from the male lineage that constitutes ‘family’, from the decision making processes that make up their lives, and are made literal exiles when taken from the home of their father to the home of their husbands. Thus the concepts of ‘home’ and ‘family’ as signified through Genesis are inevitably troubled for women, their status as always-foreigners established by exogamic patriliney. Nonetheless there *are* examples in the Bible of women engaging in relationships that do not centre on men, living in what may be seen as the ultimate exile, outside the confines of male kinship. Spivak suggests that ‘[i]n the field of rational analysis, a feeling of recognised kinship is more desirable than nationalism’.¹⁰⁶ Kristeva suggests that Ruth can be read as an example of one such woman who rejects her national identity in favour of ‘recognised kinship’. Having first married Elimelech, himself exiled from his homeland, Ruth is later widowed and follows her mother-in-law to her homeland. For Kristeva, ‘Ruth was first a foreigner’ (p. 70). Yet Ruth is *not* exiled from her family at this point. This has already occurred upon her marriage to Elimelech. Rather Ruth chooses not to return to the home of her father and instead to enter

¹⁰⁶ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Acting Bits/Identity Talk’, *Critical Inquiry*, 19 (1992), 770 – 803 (p. 773). It is important to note that for Spivak, ‘recognised kinship’ does not mean the kinship of shared biology or marriage but of shared experience, or culture.

into a female-centred relationship with her mother-in-law. Although Ruth is not specifically mentioned in any of the novels studied here, I propose that the portion of Dinah's life after her death in the Bible is modelled by Diamant upon the Book of Ruth. Very little has previously been written about *The Red Tent* but thus far work on the last two sections of the novel has viewed it as a homogenised or symbolic representation of Biblical women's lives.¹⁰⁷ However, I suggest that Diamant goes beyond mere symbolism to critique Genesis from a theological stance through a deliberate incorporation of the story of Ruth and her importance to women as both a figure of exile, *and* as a woman who engages in a female-centred relationship outside the confines of the patriarchal norm. I further argue that Diamant suggests that the potential of such female-centred relationships is confined by Biblical narratives to maintain a state in which women are not only exiled from their homes and their families, but also from each other.

There are several parallels between Ruth and Diamant's Dinah that have thus far remained critically unacknowledged. Like Ruth, Dinah is married to a foreign man. She is later widowed, but rather than return to her father, she chooses instead to accompany her mother-in-law, Re-nefer, to her homeland after the deaths of both their husbands. As with Ruth, Dinah later bears a son who is acknowledged to be that of her mother-in-law. However, while Ruth is perhaps best known for her idyllic relationship with her mother-in-law, Noemi, Dinah's relationship with Re-nefer is far more problematic.

Judith Kates and Gail Twersky Reimer see the Book of Ruth as:

¹⁰⁷ For example see: Naomi Graetz, *Unlocking the Garden: A Feminist Jewish Look at the Bible, Midrash and God* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2005).
Jessica Schantz, 'The Redemption of Dinah in Anita Diamant's *The Red Tent*', *Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary Journal*, 5:2 (2008)
<<https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/wjudaism/article/view/3519/1561>> [accessed 23 October 2010].
Holly Blackford, 'The Wandering Womb at Home in The Red Tent: An Adolescent Bildungsroman in a Different Voice', *Alan Review*, 32:2 (2005), 74-85.

a story of women caring and women plotting, women mourning and women rejoicing. And perhaps more than anything else, the story is an emblem of women like ourselves seeking to feel at home in a patriarchal tradition and discovering support and sustenance in both the resources of that tradition and the voices of other women.¹⁰⁸

This potential in the Book of Ruth for ‘support and sustenance’ between women in the Bible is clearly highlighted by Diamant. After Dinah curses her father and brothers for the murder of her husband she walks to the gates of Shechem, intending to find her husband’s body and there commit suicide, where she is sought out by Re-nefer’s servant. Dinah’s death is obviated by her mother-in-law’s care:

[...] maybe I was too well cared for to perish in sorrow. Re-nefer never left me. She kept my lips moist and spoke to me in the soothing, all-forgiving tone that mothers take with fretful babies. (pp. 254-5)

Re-nefer’s compassion and care is without question and Dinah’s survival utterly dependent upon her actions. As Dinah herself states, ‘If [her brother] Reuben had found me and carried me back, my life would have ended’ (p. 247). Furthermore, this refrain, ‘If Reuben had found me’ is repeated five times in the course of four pages, each time followed by the disastrous consequences of staying with her father, within ‘these relationships’. Diamant suggests, therefore, that like Ruth, Dinah’s life is changed for the better in ‘discovering support and sustenance in [...] the voices of other women’. Yet, Diamant makes it clear that this support is no more unconditional than that of Dinah’s father. Re-nefer’s motives for protecting Dinah are plainly told: ‘She had hope of a grandchild – someone to build her tomb and redeem the waste of her life, someone to live for’ (p. 254).

¹⁰⁸ Judith A. Kates and Gail Twersky Reimer (eds.), *Reading Ruth: Contemporary Women Reclaim a Sacred Story*, (Ballantine Books: New York, 1994), xix.

While this may seem contrary to the relationship shared between Ruth and Noemi, Francine Klagsbrun's reading of Ruth highlights Noemi's adoption of Ruth's child to demonstrate the dynamic which Diamant draws upon here: 'Noemi offers Ruth strength and confidence and a vision of possibility [...] For Noemi, Ruth provides youth and a chance to undo the past'.¹⁰⁹ One might paraphrase this to propose that Re-nefer offers Dinah strength and confidence [...] For Re-nefer, Dinah (and her pregnancy) provides youth and a chance to undo the past. Crucially, Klagsbrun points out that in the Book of Ruth, 'we hear no more dialogue between them. Perhaps if we did we might discover it to be less idyllic than before' (p. 266). Diamant offers this possibility. Outside the confines of the patriarchal text, the reader is privy to Dinah's own experiences. When Re-nefer claims Dinah's son, just as Ruth's son is declared to be Noemi's, Dinah herself tells the reader 'she laid me low' (Diamant, p. 271).

Klagsbrun further asserts that 'Ruth serves Noemi – lovingly, willingly, generously, but serves her nevertheless. Noemi dominates Ruth – with concern, deep love, and an eye to Ruth's best interests, but dominates nonetheless' (pp. 265-6). Once again, the same can be said of Dinah and Re-nefer, yet it is not only her present but also Dinah's, and by inference Ruth's, *future* that is dominated. Beyond her relationship with her mother-in-law, Ruth is perhaps most famous for being at the root of the line of David, which ultimately ends in the birth of Jesus Christ. That this illustrious line is in fact acknowledged to be of Noemi is key to the relationship Diamant portrays between Dinah and Re-nefer.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ Francine Klagsbrun, 'Ruth and Noemi, Rachel and Leah: Sisters Under the Skin', in *Reading Ruth*, ed. by Kates and Reimer, pp. 261-272 (p. 265).

¹¹⁰ The importance of an inheritance to Noemi and the fact that this entire lineage is given to her is demonstrated by verses 14 and 17: 'And the women said to Noemi: Blessed be the Lord, who hath not suffered thy family to want a successor, that his name should be preserved in Israel [...] And

Simone de Beauvoir has discussed at length the role of patrimony in the oppression of women. She argues that ‘woman was dethroned by the advent of private property’ and that this property ‘can be [the owner’s] beyond death only if it belongs to individuals in whom he sees himself projected, who are *his*’ (Beauvoir, p. 113). In other words, private property can only be sustained through heirs, and thus through the absolute ownership of women to provide these heirs. Furthermore, de Beauvoir sees this ‘property’ as fundamentally linked to the spiritual: ‘to cultivate the paternal domain, to render worship to the [...] father – these together constitute one and the same obligation for the heir: he assures ancestral survival on earth and the underworld’ (ibid). Just as Dinah and Re-nefer’s relationship initially appeared to be based in love and loyalty, like that of Ruth and Noemi, it is actually a mutual dependence beyond which the two women have little in common. Dinah’s need for protection, like Ruth’s, is bought at the expense of her son, her future inheritance taken from her, just as Ruth’s spiritual inheritance, the lineage of Jesus, is taken from her. In a patriarchal culture that values male lineage above all, Re-nefer’s ‘adoption’ of her child, echoing Noemi’s adoption of Ruth’s, is exposed as a further example of how Dinah/Ruth is constituted as a ‘domesticated woman’, a product, within a patriarchal economy of reproduction, becoming little more than a nursemaid. While it seems remarkable that Ruth’s apparently calm acceptance of her son’s ‘allocation’ to Noemi should be accepted at face-value the Biblical text does not allow the reader any further insight. Dinah’s comment ‘she laid me low’ demonstrates how, once again, Diamant’s bestowal of a voice upon the female character allows the reader to see how Dinah (and Ruth) has no choice in this matter, that she, and by

the women her neighbours, congratulating with her and saying: There is a son born to Noemi: called his name Obed: he is the father of Isai, the father of David’ (Ruth. 14; 17).

inference Ruth, has merely exchanged one form of economic relationship for another. More importantly, it suggests that it is patriarchal culture, in this case the need for male heirs, that has confined the positive potential for female 'support and sustenance' in the Bible, and an androcentric history that has obscured this fact.

Diamant's troubling of the seemingly idyllic relationship between Ruth and Noemi is perhaps inspired by the Bible's invocation of Rachel and Lia, two of Dina's mothers, who appear in both *The Red Tent* and Diski's second novel, at the end of the Book of Ruth. The people of Bethlehem bless Ruth, stating 'The Lord make this woman who cometh into thy house, like Rachel, and Lia, who built up the house of Israel (Ruth 4. 11). These two sisters are typical of the limitations of the potential for female-centred relationships within the Bible. Although Jacob pays their father, Laban, seven years labour for Rachel's hand in marriage, Lia is substituted at the last minute, eventually giving Jacob six sons, while Rachel remains barren for many years. Rachel, becoming Jacob's second wife, is deemed 'well-favoured and of a beautiful countenance' while Lia is 'blear-eyed' (Genesis 29. 17). The dynamic between these two women is best illustrated by Genesis 14-15:

And Ruben, going out in the time of the wheat harvest into the field, found mandrakes: which he brought to his mother Lia. And Rachel said: Give me part of thy son's mandrakes. She answered: Dost thou think it a small matter, that thou hast taken my husband from me, unless thou take also my son's mandrakes? Rachel said: He shall sleep with thee this night, for thy son's mandrakes.

The Bible makes no query into the guiding interests suggested here, yet Lia's willingness to exchange a root believed to have both magical and medicinal properties in exchange for a night with her husband implies both that Lia does not

regularly sleep with her husband, and that she blames Rachel for this state. Both Diamant and Diski extrapolate this episode to highlight the animosity between the sisters brought about by their mutual alliance with Jacob, but with differing causes. Diski presents Leah's marriage to Jacob as a bed-trick brought about by the example of Jacob's own deceit in obtaining his father's blessing and birthright. Jacob's reaction is catastrophic. 'The treachery overwhelmed him [...] For him there had been some justification, but this [...] To trick him into marrying a wife he did not love, a wife he did not desire, to have and to hold for ever. An enemy, now, for a wife. Even if he *was* going to have Rachel too' (*After These Things*, p. 124). Conversely, Diamant presents their marriage as the combined result of Rachel's fear and Leah's desire for Jacob, minimally concealed and realised and accepted by Jacob before the wedding.

The differing reactions of Jacob between the two novels nonetheless does not alter the ensuing effect upon the two sisters of sharing a husband. In both instances Leah and Rachel react with jealousy; Leah for Rachel's beauty and Jacob's excessive love of her; Rachel for Leah's prodigious fertility. In both cases the women's concerns centre around their worth to their common husband. The mandrake therefore becomes emblematic of their relationship both to their husband and to each other. Rachel's desire for the mandrake symbolises her infertility, but it also symbolises Leah's superiority to her sister as a mother in being able to give it away. Indeed Diski's Leah revels in the moment: 'Not one particle of Leah felt the need to be gracious in this longed-for moment of triumph. Her pains were uncorked and flowed smooth and freely like fine oil towards her sister in distress' (*After These Things*, p. 159). Likewise, Rachel's authority in 'selling' her sister a night with her husband denotes her own higher status as

preferred wife to Leah. Leah wonders ‘was it love or a desire for a quiet life with Rachel that made him do everything he was told?’ (p. 160). Klagsbrun reads this incident as ‘an expression of the life they lead and their adaptation to it. Each sister has something the other wants and needs: Leah, the blessing of fertility; Rachel, the husband’s love. In their seemingly snappish dialogue, they bargain with each other so that both give and gain something’ (Klagsbrun, p. 264). Despite this apparent gesture towards diplomacy, Diski suggests the result would be disastrous. Leah’s hopes of love from her husband are ‘buried deep beneath her humiliation at having to order her husband to spend a night with her, and the knowledge that he would do it because it had been sanctioned – demanded even – by the woman he really loved [...] She wept and kept up her loving of Jacob’s vacated body’ (*After These Things*, p. 160; p. 162). Finally accepting Jacob’s unremitting rejection of her, the editor tells the reader ‘the prospect of love had now been drained out of the dregs of her hope’ (p. 162). Despite Rachel achieving her desire and finally giving birth to a son, her awareness that ‘all the care in the world could not guarantee that he would survive’ leads her to continue attempting to conceive, eventually leading to ‘the realisation that she had wanted too much’ as she lies dying in childbirth (p. 212).

Both Leah’s bitterness and Rachel’s death are occasioned by their desire to please their husband, but more tragically they are brought about by the inevitable competition between women who are valued only for their worth to men. At the point of Rachel’s death, Jacob, with a remarkable lack of insight, asks in anger ‘Why did she have to have more [children]? Because of her sister. Because her jealousy of Leah was greater than her love for Jacob’ (*After These Things*, p. 212). Leah herself answers this question. Rachel’s baby ‘would consolidate the true

family of Jacob, the family of which she [Leah] and her children could never be part' (p. 211). Likewise, Rachel's attempts to conceive are illuminated through her comment 'I'll take my place in the dynasty through [Bilhah's sons]' (p. 150). Each woman's sense of belonging is inescapably tied to Jacob's dynastic concerns. He admits 'whatever his feelings for Rachel [...] children were needed if Jacob was to build a world of his own, as his grandfather, and even his father had done' (p. 143). The mandrake transaction therefore symbolises more than what Klagsbrun sees as female co-operation. In fact it suggests that there cannot *be* any female co-operation when women are reduced to objects of child-rearing or beauty alone. The bargain the two women strike is only to the benefit of Jacob, and is in fact deleterious to their own interests and their own relationship. The entire transaction is symptomatic of the detrimental effects of a patriarchal framework in which, like Ruth and Noemi, Dinah and Re-nefer, Rachel and Leah's relationship must be built upon mutual dependence within a polygamous society that ascribes importance to women only on the grounds of their value to men.

The potentially ruinous consequences of this episode are also marked by Diamant through a re-visionary consideration of possible alternatives. In *The Red Tent* Rachel's mandrake is brought to her by Reuben himself, and Leah does not 'purchase' a night with her husband. Rachel remains the beautiful sister, Leah the fertile one, the sisters' relationship remains troubled, yet Diamant refuses to reduce the potential for female co-operation to the role it plays in Jacob's happiness. While their dislike of each other is directly related to their competition over Jacob's affections, their co-operation is based, not upon Jacob's happiness, but upon a shared female culture. The eponymous red tent, a communal area for

the women of the tribe for seclusion and rest during menstruation and childbirth, is where Jacob's wives learn to co-operate. As Leah prepares to give birth to her first child, Rachel recalls:

I wandered in and out of the tent, eaten up by jealousy.
But as the hours came and went, each one harder than the last, my envy waned and I was horrified by the pain I saw on Leah [...] Zilpah and I became Leah's chair, with our arms around her shoulders and beneath her thighs. "You lucky girl," Inna said to Leah [...] "Look at the royal throne of sisters you have". (pp. 46-7)

This suggests that the positive potential for female support amongst women is only confined when centred around their relationships with men. However, when placed outside these relationships, in this case in the red tent where only women can enter, female support, in this case *literal* bodily support, is enabled.

Nonetheless, Diamant also suggests that female support in an androcentric society is *only* enabled when women are separated from men, and that this separation is ultimately unsatisfactory for women. The theme of female community is taken to its logical conclusion when Dinah visits the home of her grandmother Rebecca, a fierce matriarch in whose tents 'no men lived' (p. 177). The Biblical figure of Rebecca is remarkable for her independence, herself agreeing to leave her home to marry Isaac, as well as tricking Isaac into giving his blessing to Jacob over Esau (Genesis 24. 58; 27. 6-17). Rebecca is one of few women in the Bible to attain empowerment, and Diamant places her at the heart of a female-centred community, yet this is shown to be unsatisfactory when 'femaleness' is valued above the specificity of female individuality.

Rebecca's insistence upon a female tradition is demonstrated through her naming of all her servants 'Deborah' in honour of her dead nurse. Dinah tells the reader 'I quickly stopped trying to see them as individuals and began to think of

them all as the Deborahs' (p. 178). The loss of individuality in this female-only society comes to a head when Dinah's cousin Tabea, who hopes to become a Deborah, is exiled when her mother does not observe the proper rites upon Tabea's menarche. The reason for this exile is explained by Leah:

she had no choice. She was defending her mother and herself, me and your aunties, you and your daughters after you. She was defending the ways of our mothers and their mothers, and the great mother who goes by many names, but who is in danger of being forgotten. (p. 186)

While the intention of maintaining a female tradition is perhaps understandable, even laudable, the fact remains that Tabea, the individual, is 'sacrificed' for this greater notion. The centring of this episode around Tabea's menstrual cycle highlights how separatist ideals affirm a biologically essentialist formation of 'woman', and as such, the female-centred community, where female tradition is upheld at all costs, is shown by Diamant to be as unsatisfactory in nature as that which centres around men.

This leads to my final suggestion that the three novels studied in this chapter propose that women must reconfigure the very notions of 'home' and 'family', to embrace the condition of exile in order to offer alternative models for kinship in which the treatment of women within patriarchal sexual economies can be recognised and overcome. I have already noted that 'home' and 'family' are troubled categories for women, yet it is exactly these concepts that are crucial to the Old Testament. Adele Berlin observes that 'the theme which gives continuity to the books from Genesis through Kings, and informs much of the Prophets and the Writings, is *the land and the people*'.¹¹¹ The men of Genesis are notable for their deep spiritual connection with the land; Abram is instructed by God: 'Go

¹¹¹ Adele Berlin, 'Ruth and the Continuity of Israel' in *Reading Ruth*, ed. by Kates and Reimer, pp. 255-260 (pp. 255-6).

forth out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and out of thy father's house, and come into the land which I shall show thee. And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and magnify thy name, and thou shalt be blessed. (Genesis 12. 1-2). Isaac likewise is told, 'Go not down into Egypt, but stay in the land that I shall tell thee. And sojourn in it, and I will be with thee, and will bless thee: for to thee and to thy seed I will give all these countries, to fulfil the oath which I swore to Abraham thy father (Genesis 26. 2-3). Jacob, upon receiving his father's blessing is told 'give the blessings of Abraham to thee, and to thy seed after thee: that thou mayst possess the land of thy sojournment, which he promised to thy grandfather. (Genesis 28.4). For the men of Genesis the land is inextricably linked with family. Their divinely ordained occupation of foreign soil is tenable only through its genealogical aims. Abram is given land in order to create a 'great nation' through his offspring; Isaac and Jacob are to fulfil this promise both through their descent from Abram and their future 'seed'. For Biblical men then, 'home' is the land of their fathers, 'family' their dynasty. For their wives and daughters 'home' and 'family' become the same thing; their fathers and husbands. For women there is no land, only people. Yet the framework which constitutes women as objects nullifies the perceived security that 'family' denotes. In *After These Things*, Rebekah affirms 'It was the way of the world. A young girl grows up waiting for change. She waits to be taken somewhere new, away from her land, her birthplace and her father's house, to be clothed in new status in the company of strangers who become her life and her future.' (p. 15).

It could be argued that the men of Genesis are also marked by their foreignness. Jacob becomes 'Israel', the father of a diasporic race, to serve as a

'symbol of the Jewish people in the minds of the Jews. As a people more often than not in positions of subordination or vulnerability, Diaspora Jews could identify closely with Jacob's predicaments'.¹¹² Yet male peregrination is identified as divinely authorised and, as such, 'home' becomes a site of male dominion. After Dinah's disappearance from the Bible, God tells Jacob 'nations and peoples of nations shall be from thee, and kings shall come out of thy loins. And the land which I have given to Abraham and Isaac, I will give to thee, and to thy seed after thee (Genesis 35. 11-23). Jacob *is* the land and the people, to be inherited by his 'seed' or family, yet this 'symbol' lies in a Biblical tradition where 'family', figured through genealogy, means men. Where is the Biblical symbol for women, arguably another diasporic people, always exiles within the red tent, the travelling home?

When Ruth leaves Moab she famously says to Noemi 'whithersoever thou shalt go, I will go: and where thou shalt dwell, I also will dwell' (Ruth 1. 16). Reading Ruth as a symbol for the diasporic woman again suggests that for Biblical women home is not 'the land' but 'the people'. When Jacob decides to return to the land of his father, Diamant reflects this suggestion that 'home', for women, is centred upon common people rather than place. At the point of their emigration Zilpah worries 'how will the gods know where I am if I am not here [...] This tree, this place, this is where *she* is, my little goddess' (p. 106). Leah responds, 'your family, your sisters, are the only surety against hunger, against cold, against madness' (ibid). Once again the suggestion is that women must seek 'support and sustenance' from their sisters, other women, yet this 'sensible blasphemy' (ibid) is ignored by Rachel, who steals the Teraphim, Laban's idols.

¹¹² Sylvia Barack Fishman, 'Soldiers in an Army of Mothers' in *Reading Ruth*, ed. by Kates and Reimer, pp. 273-283, (p. 278).

According to Klagsbrun, ‘Unlike Ruth, she appears to lack the moral fiber to truly renounce her father’s way of life, to follow the invisible God of whom her husband speaks’ (Klagsbrun, p. 267). I would argue, contrary to Klagsbrun, that the theft of the Teraphim, rather than adherence to the ways of the father, symbolise how women have clung to the idea of the mother, to an imagined pre-patriarchal idyll of goddess-worship.¹¹³ The notion of a female past as one’s birthright is stressed by Diamant:

Rachel had some claim to [the idols]. In the old days [...] it was the unquestioned right of the youngest daughter to inherit all the holy things. Those ways were no longer held in universal respect, and Kemuel could claim the Teraphim as part of an older son’s birthright with just as much authority. (p. 107)

Graetz views the centrality of polytheism, and in particular Goddess worship, in *The Red Tent* as ‘responding to the lack of direct covenant women have with the divine’ providing ‘feminine metaphors’ for God, and it is therefore crucial that Dinah views the Teraphim as *family*, ‘aunts and uncles who were bigger than my parents’ (Graetz, p. 163; Diamant, p. 108). Dinah’s access to the spiritual is therefore contained within her concept of her female-centred but male-ruled family. Yet as I have discussed in chapter One, mother-goddess cults inevitably depend upon essentialist notions of woman that ultimately confine women to biologically defined modes of being, giving rise to Angela Carter’s assertion that ‘mother goddesses are just as silly a notion as father gods. If a revival of the myths of these cults gives women emotional satisfaction, it does so at the price of obscuring the real conditions of life’ (Carter, *The Sadeian Woman*, p. 6). Dinah’s youthful matriarchalism is therefore exposed as a shattered myth

¹¹³ This is discussed in greater detail in chapter One. For a recent discussion on the topic see Cynthia Eller, *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Won’t Give Women a Future* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001).

when Diamant alters the Biblical story of Jacob finding the Teraphim and burying them to having Jacob order Rachel herself to break them (Genesis 35. 4).

Monotheistic patriarchalism, embodied by Jacob, has literally 'smashed' Rachel's goddess worship, and along with it, Dinah's spiritual 'family', equated with her mothers. It is at this point in the novel that Dinah 'stopped worshipping my mothers as perfect creatures' and marries Shalem leading to her self-imposed exile (p. 209). However, if Dinah's exile frees her from a flawed and naive matriarchalism, it only does so by assimilating her into a more problematic patriarchy. Dinah's marriage ends disastrously in the murder of her husband by her brothers. As I have already discussed, the fact of Dinah's insubordination to the authority of her male relatives renders her an object of dynastic conflict. It is the very fact of her marriage that ascribes to her the designation of 'belonging'. Prior to her marriage she is little more than a name in the Bible, but Shalem's desire for her presents her as a potential object of worth and thus a site of contention. Does she 'belong' with her father or her husband? Whose 'belonging' is she? It thus becomes clear that marriage, as presented by the Bible, works as an apparatus of female subordination to patriarchal concerns.

Through Diski's explication of the male reaction to female marriages in Genesis it becomes clear that it is contrary to the interests of the ruling patriarchal class to provide the crucial economic and ideological support necessary for female emancipation. Genesis itself does not interrogate the male motive for marriage, emphasising only the choice of wife from within the extended family of Abram, suggesting that, Biblically at least, matrimony and procreation are viewed as a male right. Diski's presentation of marriage does not contradict this from the bridegroom's perspective, but she does illuminate the male rationale through

which the institution of marriage is established. Diski echoes Laban, brother of Rebecca's, reaction to Isaac's proposition of marriage in Genesis 24. 30: 'And when he [Rebecca's brother] had seen the earrings and bracelets in his sister's hands [...] [he said] Come in thou, blessed of the Lord' to suggest that it is 'good to be well-connected. As good as gold. You make a living any way you can. Family was important' (*After These Things*, p. 103). For all the women in Diski's two novels marriage is presented as a means of preserving the male line, gaining wealth. Sarai is told that she must marry so that 'we will grow through you, and our losses, my lost sons and their off-spring, will be made good' (*Only Human*, p. 52). 'Daughters', the editor of *After These Things* states, 'were for marrying, contacts and bride-price' (p. 105).

Of course the Bible does not offer any insight to the female perspective upon marriage. Interestingly, Diski's women all anticipate their marriages with pleasure. This is not to suggest that Diski presents such marriages as pleasurable. On the contrary, the marriages of Sarai, Rebekah, Rachel, Leah and even Dinah, who marries for love, all end in disaster. Rather, Diski suggests that there *is* a latent potential in the Bible for women to be released from the constraints of patriarchy, symbolised by their separation from their fathers. All five women in Diski's texts ultimately leave the homes of their fathers due to their marriages. The positive possibilities engendered by this act of migration are voiced by Diski: 'Rebekah's heart soared as she watched her family hand her over to the stranger. She was to be free at last' (*After These Things* p. 22). Yet Rebekah is, of course, not free. She is only married. As with Dinah, the potentiality offered through Rebekah's act of leaving remains unfulfilled when it is enabled only through marriage within a framework that ascribes to men hegemony over women.

Likewise, Sarai looks forward to her marriage to her worshipped half-brother Abram. Not only does Sarai love Abram, but she sees it as legitimising what she sees as her tenuous position within her family. She muses ‘apart from her childish love for Abram, she had wanted also to be enclosed for ever within the family that she secretly feared she was not entirely part of’ (*Only Human*, p. 54). Yet her sense of exile from her family is compounded upon her marriage to Abram. His reaction to their change in status from brother and sister to husband and wife is one of alienation: ‘it was as if their forthcoming marriage had severed the lifetime of love and comfort they had between them’ (p. 55). Again and again the potential for female empowerment, for *belonging* outside the home of the father, is curtailed when marriage is driven by male economic and dynastic concerns. Women who marry in the Bible are merely confirmed in their status as exiles - belongings certainly, but never belonging.

The repetitive and formulaic nature of Genesis’s genealogical narratives is taken by Diski to suggest that new possibilities for women need to be found outside the established pattern of Biblical history. The editor complains ‘and so on. And so forth. Round and round and on and on. How early in the telling of the story of family the pattern emerges. One generation, two, and already the serpent is chasing its tail. Family, not-family, love, not-love, duty and consequences. But no surprises, even so soon, no surprises’ (*After These Things*, p. 83). George Santayana famously said ‘those who cannot remember the past are doomed to repeat it’.¹¹⁴ Diski likewise implies that women who have no female history to draw upon are trapped in a cycle of repetition, of ‘family, not-family’. ‘Family’ is troubled within her texts, Sarai can never be fully at home within a

¹¹⁴ George Santayana, *The Life of Reason*, 5 vols (1905 – 1906 repr. The Echo Library, 2006), I.

family that renders her a foreigner when based upon an androcentric lineage, nor fully belonging once married to her half-brother Abram when such a marriage is based only upon economic and dynastic concerns. 'Home' is shown to be unfixed and contingent for women, defined in terms of male dominion. Yet the absence of a female history does not allow for change in Diski's novels. The women in her texts have little 'real' history to draw upon. When Rachel meets Jacob at the well near to her house she imagines herself as following in the footsteps of her aunt Rebekah, who she knows to have made a 'good' marriage. Her ignorance of Rebekah's unhappy marriage makes it all the more bathetic that her dream comes true. Without a history women are forced to rely upon the false dreams they are fed. As a child Leah hears a voice that whispers to her 'you are so beautiful, Leah, my Leah' (*After These Things*, p.92). Despite this being contrary to the reality of her physical appearance, Leah clings to the dream. Later she recognises Jacob's voice as that of her whisperer, leading her to fall in love with him. Diski's narrator marvels at Leah's lack of insight into her own situation: 'someone had to be [...] ordinary enough to get the chores done, not to be a dreamer but to be a help in the daily business of keeping a household going. That was what unmarried girls were for. They had their uses. But she had had her dreams. Quiet private dreams which had convinced her that there was some way she could be seen, really seen, by the right person. Where had she got such a notion?' (p. 126).

While the message appears to be a dismal one, Diski and Diamant's point appears to be that women cannot alter their situation by relying upon the false 'dream' of 'the right person'. Even Dinah, who 'had responded to the voice of love and perhaps even found a voice of her own' is shown to be powerless against

the underlying fact of her position as a possession to be bought and sold (*After These Things*, p. 205). Her tentative voice is silenced when the reality of her lack of power is made clear. She is 'brought home to her family. She had made a strangled sound in the back of her throat when she saw the body of Shechem, but after that she was silent. Dinah did not speak again' (p. 208). For Diski women can never escape the reality of their own oppression when placed within a patriarchal concept of kinship unless they are given access to their history. Diski's women are doomed to repeat the past.

Diamant, however, does offer an alternative possibility for Dinah through her re-vision of the Book of Ruth. Dinah's acceptance of her identity as an exile allows her to live outside the framework in which Diski's Dinah is silenced. Ruth, like Dinah, is silenced in Genesis. Bonnie Honig asks of the book of Ruth 'How should we read Ruth's closing silence? Has she been successfully assimilated or has she been left stranded?'¹¹⁵ Diamant effectively removes this silence, continuing Dinah's story not only beyond her disappearance from the Bible, but beyond Dinah's own death to present her as an exile living in Egypt. Holly Blackford reads *The Red Tent* as a bildungsroman in which Dinah moves from an idyllic but naive matriarchalism, through a traumatic awakening into heterosexuality, into 'the growing separation from her mothers, the lessening of the authority of the red tent [...] and the nomad rhythm of Dinah's voice [...] an adventure into nomad homelessness that is *never* fully at home again because that is the nature of becoming an adult' (Blackford, p. 79). However, I would argue that, on the contrary, Dinah is enabled to find 'home' only once she *embraces* the

¹¹⁵ Bonnie Honig, 'Ruth, the Model Émigré Mourning and the Symbolic Politics of Immigration', in *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation*, ed. by Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), pp. 192-215 (p. 195). My thanks to Dr. David Farrier for bringing this article to my attention.

condition of exile, ceasing to rely upon the notion of a shared female history, to seek instead a particular and individual path. Honig, reading the Book of Ruth, suggests that Noemi acts as a ‘transitional object that enables Ruth to make the (progressive) move from Moab to Israel’ (p. 206). I read the Teraphim in the same way, allowing Dinah to make the progressive move from her family, and their flawed matriarchalism, to the path of the exile in which ‘home’ and thus the identity of ‘woman’ is no longer fixed, challenging dominant models of femininity.

Gail Twersky Reimer suggests that the book of Ruth ‘focuses on the experience of being “other” – the other as foreigner and the other as woman (Reimer, xviii). Dinah then, like Ruth, becomes a ‘foreigner’, and doubly ‘other’ when she leaves her family. This notion of being a ‘foreigner’ is key to the sexual politics of *The Red Tent*. Kristeva views Ruth as ‘unsettling’ the land in which she settles:

[...] such indeed is the role of Ruth – the outsider, the foreigner, the excluded’, yet through her virtue she revitalises it, providing ‘its mainspring, its vital momentum, its sovereignty. Perhaps damaged, worried at any rate, that sovereignty opens up – through the foreignness that founds it – to the dynamics of a constant, inquisitive, and hospitable questioning, eager for the other and for the self as other. (Kristeva, p. 75)

Dinah too personifies this ‘unsettling’ quality, but her foreignness is equated *with* her femaleness. When she practises her skills as a midwife, unknown in Egypt and saving many women (potentially revitalising the community), she is blamed for the death of a young concubine: ““The foreigner raised a knife to her?” he shrieked. “Only a surgeon can do such a thing. This woman is a menace’ (p. 308). She is denounced as ‘A foreign sorceress in the

House of the Gods!’ (p. 309). This echoes the fate of Inna, the midwife who teaches Rachel and later Dinah, and who is forced to travel to Canaan with Dinah’s family after she is accused of killing a young mother in childbirth ‘by casting spells’ (p. 128). The suggestions that Diamant makes here is that while Dinah is exiled in Egypt by dint of her ‘foreignness’, women, especially those with knowledge and power, are always *already* foreigners by dint of their femaleness, and this particular type of foreignness cannot ‘open up’ the sovereignty of the land in which the dispossessed settle, which is taken here as the patriarchal culture in which Dinah still resides at this point. Like Ruth, Dinah ‘not only reinvigorates the order she joins, she also taints and troubles it’ (Honig, p. 200).

Following the death of Nakt-re, the brother of Re-nefer, and Dinah’s protector, Dinah is left without economic or familial support. Previously seen as a glorified nursemaid, Dinah is now, worse, a single woman, a foreign woman at that, without male protectors, in a culture that allows women little opportunity for self-sufficiency. Dinah tells the reader ‘for the first time since my childhood, I was restless’ (p. 309). Her longing for her childhood home reflects that Dinah, as a woman, is both unable to settle in, and unwilling to settle for, a patriarchal ‘fatherland’, and yet no ‘motherland’ is available to her.

Dinah’s foreignness allows her to transcend the cultural expectations of the society in which she lives. Sneja Gunew suggests that ‘[d]iasporic subjects are often used to represent deviations from the supposedly “pure” and “rooted” characteristics of national citizens.’¹¹⁶ *Contra* Kristeva’s reading of Ruth, Dinah does not thus reinvigorate the order she joins through her virtue, but through her

¹¹⁶ Sneja Gunew, ‘Resident Aliens: Diasporic Women’s Writing’, *Contemporary Women’s Writing* 3:1 (2009), 28-46 (p. 30).

transgressive deviation from the cultural norms of that order. Honig's reading of Ruth is that she 'is not only a virtuous character, she is also transgressive [...] she boldly seduces Boaz on the threshing room floor' (p. 200). Dinah's transgression, her 'sorcery' as a midwife, allows women to live through childbirth, thus enabling reproduction, but this power enables other *women*. Most importantly perhaps, it ultimately enables Dinah. When Dinah moves to the Valley of the Kings her midwifery skills provide her with a profession, and thus with economic means. No longer a burden or a servant, but a free and respected woman, Dinah chooses to marry Benia to create a reconfigured 'family'. Dinah's description of her marriage exemplifies the move she has made from a domestic 'product' to an emancipated woman. Benia laughs at her attempts to cook - 'I lacked the ingredients and I forgot the proportions'- and he states, 'I did not marry you to be my cook' (Diamant, p. 326). More importantly perhaps, Dinah finally has a home, a house which is 'a world of my own possession, a country in which I was ruler and citizen, where I chose and where I served' (p. 327). This insistence upon being both 'ruler and citizen', chooser and server, offers the possibility of a home and a family in which neither patriarchy nor female separatism rule.

The question remains, 'has she been assimilated or has she been left stranded?' (Honig, p. 195). The answer must be neither. Honig suggests that both Ruth and Orpah, Ruth's sister-in-law who returns to Moab, must be read to recognise the importance of mourning, 'connections to the past' in assimilation of immigrants (p. 210). When mourning for Orpah, and her own past in Moab, is denied to Ruth in the Bible, it becomes 'endless, melancholic. Her losses get in the way of the closure this community seeks to attain through her *and* in spite of her' (Honig, p. 211). Dinah, on the other hand, *is* allowed this connection. In the

penultimate chapter of *The Red Tent*, Joseph meets Dinah to ask her to visit their father on his deathbed. She rages ‘If my mothers are dead, then I am an orphan. My brothers are no more to me than the livestock of our youth’ (p. 351). Dinah’s family is *not* the sons of Jacob. Furthermore, like Ruth, she is *not* the Genesis of important men but unlike Ruth, she is allowed to break free of her male dominated genealogy. Where Ruth is later mentioned in the Bible as the root of David’s line, Dinah recognises that Remose sees her as ‘no more than his wet nurse’ and leaves him ‘brokenhearted but free’ (p. 353). Dinah ends her days with Benia, surrounded by an ‘adopted’ family, her friend Meryt, Kiya, Meryt’s granddaughter, and her children. Upon visiting her father Dinah finds herself left unmentioned in his blessings, ‘Dinah is forgotten in the house of Jacob’ she laments (p. 373). Yet Gera, a young girl in Jacob’s tribe retells her story. Dinah reflects ‘Gera had given me peace. The story of Dinah was too terrible to be forgotten. As long as the memory of Jacob lived, my name would be remembered. The past had done its worst to me, and I had nothing to fear of the future’ (p. 379). Diamant’s rendering of Dinah’s story neither abandons her, voiceless and invisible as she is in the Bible, nor ‘assimilates’ her into the story of patriarchy, like Ruth. She is disconnected from her patriarchal family, to live, not as a ‘daughter’ or a ‘sister’, but ‘a human life’ (p. 382).

All three novels studied in this chapter offer a critical exploration of the ways in which women have been passed over, ignored, and assimilated into patriarchal history, exemplified by the stories of Sarai, Rebecca, Rachel, Lia, Dinah and Ruth. Diski and Diamant offer not only female voices, but *human* ones. Their radical re-vision of representations of Old Testament women highlights the deleterious effects of patriarchal notions of kinship upon women.

Diski's multiple narrators offer a variety of perspectives upon events that have previously remained unquestioned to both reinstate the female voice into an androcentric history, and to trouble the very authority of that past. Her female characters proffer a lost 'her story' that enables the historical oppression of women in patriarchal concepts of 'home' and 'family' to become visible. The alternative views of both Diamant and Diski enable the positive potential for female-centred relationships in the Bible to be seen, and also how this potential is curtailed through traditionally androcentric 'families', while the idea of 'family' itself is shown to be an ideological apparatus of oppression to women that must be troubled if the historical bias towards patriarchal kinship groups is to be countered. The radical re-vision of Genesis by Diski and Diamant rejects both the patriarchal family and the limited and ultimately androcentric 'sisterhood' offered by the Bible to suggest a subversive potential in the condition of exile, in which 'home' is not 'family' and 'family' is the multiple and particular relationships which make up the lives of individual women.

For Diski the future for women lies in understanding the conditions in which history is created. She ends her second novel by silencing God himself: 'and from God, the Dreamed One, the great Redactor, the Editor in Chief, there was only silence' (*After These Things*, p. 216). For Diski, it is already clear that 'God' does not speak in the Bible, only man. She suggests, through her radical re-vision of Genesis 11 – 37, that history can be rewritten, that indeed it *has* been rewritten, and that the future for women lies in using their own voices to do so. Diamant too emphasises the importance of the individual voice in altering the future for women. Dinah's tale, through Diamant's rendering, is not only the 'terrible' story of the Bible, it is also the tale of a potentially 'real' woman who is

enabled to live outside the confines of the patriarchal text. She and her mothers are reinstated into history. As she dies she is welcomed along the way by 'Leah, Rachel, Zilpah, and Bilhah. Inna, Re-nefer, and Meryt. Even poor Ruti and arrogant Rebecca [...] I recognized Adah and Sarai as well. Strong, brave, wonder-struck, kind, gifted, broken, loyal, foolish, talented, weak (p. 382). She sees the future 'Shif-re..Kiya [...] Joseph [...] Gera [...] Dinah [...] Re-mose [...] Re-mose's children core children unto the hundredth generation' (p. 383). Diamant suggests that once the history of women is made visible, so too is the future. As Dinah herself suggests, 'there is no magic to immortality' (p. 383).

CHAPTER THREE

WOMEN AND 'THE WORD': THE VIRGIN MARY IN SUE
REIDY'S *THE VISITATION*

But Mary kept all these words, pondering them in her heart. (Luke 2. 19)

The previous two chapters have focused on the ways in which women can escape from the confines of Biblical narratives, both in terms of the restricted notions of gender that are inscribed through the Old Testament as well as the oppression of women within patriarchal notions of 'family' and 'home'. Yet, much as the novelists examined in this thesis have sought freedom from these limitations, it is crucial to note that they equally insist upon the *inclusion* of women in a Judao-Christian tradition. As I have shown in the previous chapter, Jenny Diski and Anita Diamant challenge the male-dominated genealogical formation of Biblical history in order to reinstate women into the historical record, while in chapter One I have suggested that Ann Chamberlin, Emma Tennant, Penelope Farmer and Angela Carter have all, in different ways, called into question the 'othering' text of Biblical formations of gender that has excluded

women from social and cultural participation. Such inclusion is fundamental to feminist re-visionary projects. Jan Montefiore suggests ‘no one can write...without being enabled, however contradictorily, by knowledge of a tradition, even if their relationship to that tradition is marginal and awkward’.¹¹⁷ Furthermore, she suggests, ‘the appeal of such traditional material... especially for feminists, lies not only in its archaic prestige, but in the strong connections with human subjectivity, so that using this material seems to be a way of escaping the constrictive hierarchies of tradition and gaining access to the power of definition’.¹¹⁸ In a Biblical context, this ‘power of definition’ has been found in access to ‘the Word’, constituted as a divinely authored text, yet ‘channelled’ through the all-too-human hands of men. While access to ‘the Word’ has been the preserve of men, so too therefore, has access to divinity.

Luce Irigaray concludes in ‘Divine Women’, her essay on female divinity, or the lack of it, that the ‘margin of freedom and potency (*puissance*) that gives [women] authority yet to grow, to affirm and fulfil ourselves as individuals and members of a community, can be ours only if a God in the feminine gender can define it and keep it for us’ (‘Divine Women’, p. 72). In this chapter I use the theories of Irigaray to argue that Sue Reidy’s novel *The Visitation* (1996) revises the figure of the Virgin Mary to offer just such a figure. While many theorists have commented upon both female access to ‘the Word’ and the role of Mary herself in the constructions of femininity, Irigaray’s dual focus upon female writing practices within an inherently phallogocentric discourse as well as her examination of the role of the mother in the critique of patriarchy place her at the

¹¹⁷ Jan Montefiore, ‘Women and the Poetic Tradition: The Oppressor’s Language’, in *Encyclopedia of Literature and Tradition*, ed. by Martin Coyle (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 208 – 222 (p. 211).

¹¹⁸ Jan Montefiore, cited in Patricia Duncker, *Sisters and Strangers: An Introduction to Contemporary Feminist Fiction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), pp. 134-5.

centre of such debates.¹¹⁹ Although Irigaray's focus on the 'feminine' has been criticized as being 'utopian' or, worse, promoting an essentialist division of sex and gender, I suggest that Irigaray simply reflects the fact that, as Claire Duchén argues, 'our entire cultural framework is predicated on the differentiation of gender, on the repression/suppression of the feminine'.¹²⁰ As such, Irigaray's writing, far from insisting upon an essentialist mode of 'feminine' being, simply reinstates a previously excluded feminine articulation of culture that has, as Joy Morny and Kathleen O'Grady view it, 're-envision[ed] religious structures in a process that is simultaneously *critical* (of that which has gone before) and *creative* (of what it could be)'.¹²¹ I engage with the possibilities of this simultaneously critical and creative aspect of Irigaray's theories to suggest that Reidy's novel challenges male authority over the divine realm, not by denying 'the Word' itself, or by insisting upon a displacing female authority, but by highlighting its interpretative possibilities, its already re-visionary nature, to suggest that the apocryphal and popular myths that surround the Virgin Mary offer an emancipatory theology for women predicated on a specifically female 'Word' that can only be articulated through female experience, and that Mary herself can be re-read as the 'keeper' of this Word.

¹¹⁹ For more on female writing practices and access to language see Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. by Betsy Wing (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986) and Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa'. For an alternative feminist approach to the Virgin Mary see Daly, *Beyond God The Father, Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978) and *The Church and the Second Sex*, Julia Kristeva, 'Stabat Mater', in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. by Toril Moi (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986).

¹²⁰ Claire Duchén, *Feminism in France: From May '68 to Mitterrand* (London: Routledge, 1986), p. 85. For further discussion of criticisms of Irigaray, as well as a compelling argument against such criticism, see Joyce Davidson and Mick Smith, 'Wittgenstein and Irigaray: Gender and Philosophy in a Language (Game) of Difference', *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, 14: 2 (1999), 72 – 96.

¹²¹ Joy Morny and Kathleen O'Grady, *French Feminists on Religion: A Reader* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 9.

It may seem anachronistic to discuss the Virgin Mary, arguably the most famous female figure in Christian literature, in a thesis founded on the notion of silenced and invisible women. Not only is Mary manifestly visible in Christian culture, particularly in the Catholic Church, she is also relatively vocal. Where Eve, Mary's only equal in Biblical fame, speaks only three times in the Old Testament, with a total of only sixty-two words, Mary, in one speech alone, utters more than twice as many words, and more than three times as many in total.¹²² *Relatively*, of course, is the operative word here. Despite her popular influence, Mary still speaks only seven times in the Bible. As the sole female aspect of what Irigaray calls 'the most influential representation of God in our culture over the last two thousand years' Mary's wordlessness is astonishing ('Divine Women', p. 62).¹²³ Indeed, if one examines Mary's actual relationship to 'The Word' it is remarkably passive. Her few speeches are marked by deference, to both 'Father' and son, and are almost entirely centred around the annunciation. This event, told in the Book of Luke, chapter 1, refers to the revelation made to Mary by the angel Gabriel that she would conceive the son of God. Gabriel's speech is noteworthy for its authoritative and absolute language, made weightier by its echoes of earlier messianic prophecies, in opposition to Mary's fearful and questioning presence.¹²⁴ The dominance exerted in Gabriel's assertion that 'the power of the most High shall overshadow thee' (Luke 1. 35) is contrasted by Mary's submissive response: 'be it done to me according to thy word' (Luke 1. 38). The patriarchal Word thus defines Mary exclusively in terms of man, as a passive vessel for the male son of

¹²² Eve's three instances of direct speech are Genesis 3.2-3; 3.13; and 4. 1. Mary utterances are found at Mark 16. 2; Luke 1. 34; 1.38; 1.46-55; Luke 2. 48; and John 2.2. There is also one incidence of reported speech at Luke 24. 10.

¹²³ Irigaray defines this representation as 'a male trinitary God and a virgin mother' (ibid).

¹²⁴ For an excellent discussion of the parallels between Luke's account of the annunciation and earlier Biblical prophecies see Marina Warner, *Alone of All her Sex*, pp. 8-13.

a male God. Female access to ‘the Word’ as figured through authorised Marian theology, is therefore restricted to the role of unresisting receiver of male authority.

Reidy questions this position, using her fiction to interrogate the authority of the patriarchal Word, asking whether women can voice their own ‘word’ within a Christian framework, and re-examining the ideal of womanhood created by ‘the Word’, as represented by Mary. Reidy explicitly engages in re-visionary topics throughout her work, writing about subjects as diverse as female friendship after forty and transexuality in underground cultures. The New Zealand Book Council describes Reidy as ‘distinctive for her complex treatment of female identity and spirituality [...] defying notions of realism by shifting between reality, dream and fantasy’.¹²⁵ *The Visitation* explicitly investigates female access to ‘the Word’. The novel follows the Flynn girls, two sisters in a large Catholic family, who see a vision of the Virgin Mary. Set in the 1960s at the time of the publication of *Humanae Vitae*, the Vatican II document on birth control, the novel follows the girls after Mary appears to them, asking them to deliver an envelope containing a message recommending birth control to the Pope. When the message is opened and altered by their father, Mary’s words literally usurped by male authority, the girls follow Mary as she spreads her word through more modern methods of communication and becomes a TV celebrity, known as Mary Blessed. Mary Blessed becomes a reappearing figure in the girls lives throughout the rest of the novel in the late sixties and early seventies, slowly gaining a following, mirroring the girls’ own struggles to be heard in a repressive Catholic society. It seems, however, that it is not only the girls of the novel who are not heard. Despite

¹²⁵ ‘Sue Reidy’, *New Zealand Book Council* (2010)
<<http://www.bookcouncil.org.nz/writers/reidysue.html>> [accessed 5 Nov 2009].

popular appreciation of her work and being the recipient of several awards, Reidy has thus far escaped academic attention outside New Zealand.¹²⁶ The reasons for this may perhaps be found in the popular consensus that Reidy's novel fails to deliver on its promise. Reviews of the novel have suggested that 'the author never developed the theme of Mary coming to earth to deliver a message to the Pope'.¹²⁷ I suggest that, far from failing to deliver on its promise, Reidy's novel directly addresses the difficulty of such an enterprise, the impossibility for women of being heard in a male-dominated Christianity.

The novel is therefore engaged, not only in an exploration of how 'the Word' has been misappropriated and misconstrued by patriarchy, but also with the question of how women can find their voices in a male-dominated culture that claims to speak for them. Reidy's novel is thus explicitly critical of patriarchy and its usurpation of the female voice, but moreover it is interested in how Mary herself has been usurped in the name of God to further such aims. Irigaray suggests that 'Man is able to exist because God helps him to define his gender (*genre*), helps him orient his finiteness by reference to infinity' ('Divine Women', p. 61). I intend to show how Reidy overturns the Biblical presentation of Mary as an impossible role model for women, drawing on apocryphal and popular myth to

¹²⁶ Reidy was the winner of the Bank of New Zealand Katherine Mansfield Award 1985 and was runner up in The Sunday Times Short Story Award 1995. *The Visitation* was shortlisted for the fiction section of the 1997 Montana NZ Book Awards. Most recently she was awarded the 2000 Buddle Finlay Sargeson Writers Fellowship. Further information is available from the New Zealand Book Council. For articles on Reidy see: Marion McLeod, 'Katherine Mansfield: a painter with words', *Listener* 2528: 121 (1988) pp. 22-3; Donna Yuzwalk, 'Peopletalk: Got it Covered', *More* 67 (1989), p. 14; David Gee, 'A Lapsed Catholic's Continuing Fascination', *Press* (1996), p. 19. Reviews of Reidy's work have appeared in a number of New Zealand press articles which I have thus far been unable to obtain. The only critical article to discuss Reidy (which is on her short stories) has been John Watson, 'From Mansfield to Svensson: The Female Hero in Recent Short Fiction by Women Writers.', *JNZL: Journal of New Zealand Literature* 7; (1989): 44-64.

¹²⁷ 'The Visitation' (Review), *Amazon.com*, June 17 (1998) <http://www.amazon.com/Visitation-Sue-Reidy/product-reviews/0684839547/ref=cm_cr_dp_all_summary?ie=UTF8&showViewpoints=1&sortBy=bySubmissionDateDescending> [accessed 25 Feb 2011].

refigure her instead as the ultimate re-visionary figure, enabling woman to define *her* gender, orient *her* finiteness by reference to infinity by giving voice to the female Word that Mary has kept 'in her heart'.

Using the theories of Irigaray I will demonstrate that Reidy counters Mary's role as simply the mother of Jesus to offer a historically absent focus on mother-daughter relationships, rejecting the identification of women as simply further ways to think about men. I will show that such relationships are brought about in the novel through female speech, and thus offer a new concept of the 'Word' that is specifically female. In so doing I will investigate how Reidy critiques traditionally restrictive concepts of the divine, using Irigaray's theory of divinity as a space for female becoming to overturn the paradigm God/Word, which privileges male access to 'the Word' *through* privileging male access to the divine. In conclusion I will show how Reidy revises the figure of Mary as a subject-in-becoming to offer an emancipatory theology for women predicated on a strategic redefinition of the female Word as a dialectic between women themselves which is subjective and unmediated.

Irigaray suggests that without a God in the feminine gender, women 'are forced to comply with models that do not match them, that exile, double, mask them, cut them off from themselves and from one another' ('Divine Women', p. 64). Reidy's novel clearly highlights the difficulties women face in identifying themselves through patriarchal models of divinity, as epitomised by the Virgin Mary. Despite containing a female majority, the Flynn family around whom the novel centres is dominated by its patriarch, Terrence Flynn, who is consistently shown to impose his own concept of religion upon his family. When the two oldest girls upon whom the narrative focuses, Theresa and Catherine Flynn,

discover that their Mother converted to Catholicism upon her marriage they are unable to imagine an alternative religion: ‘Did that mean that once their mother had been Godless, they asked. Or worse, a pagan?’ (p. 16).¹²⁸ The suggestion that Catholicism, ‘the One True Faith’, is indeed a religion of the father is neatly symbolised by the family’s nightly rosary, led by Mr Flynn:

They always began the rosary kneeling upright. Within a few moments, however, they would all be slumped into the seats with their bottoms protruding, using the seats as elbow supports. It meant that none of the children could see their father. If he thought they were too slow with their responses, or mumbled, or slurred their words, they would be brought back abruptly to the task at hand by a well-timed kick to one of the row of bottoms presented to him. (Reidy, p. 43)

The invisible power that Mr Flynn exerts clearly marks him out as a God-like figure in the Flynn household: ‘In the Kingdom of Flynn, he was treated royally. They ran to obey his commands’ (p. 42). In contrast, the inculcated model presented by their mother is marked by placidity: ‘Their mother, who always appeared to be in agreement with their father’s disciplinary measures, offered them no support’ (p. 43). Reidy suggests that this passive mother figure is directly linked to the model of Mary offered by Catholicism, evidenced by Mrs Flynn’s unanswered prayers: ‘They heard her tired voice continue to murmur the responses night after night, “...Hail Mary full of grace ... Holy Mary Mother of God... Hail Mary ... Holy Mary”’ (p. 44).

This Catholic model of Mary is held up by Reidy as, at best, an irrelevance, and at worst a site of patriarchal control within the novel. The recitation of the rosary, led by Mr Flynn, is often used as punishment for the girls. The words they use within their prayers are dictated and mundane, ‘none of them

¹²⁸ The visitation of the title also provides the contents of a short story of the same name published by Reidy in *New Women’s Fiction 3*, ed. by Mary Paul and Marion Rae (Auckland: New Women’s Press, 1989), pp. 31-40.

looked at each other as they recited the familiar prayer' (p. 41). Even the volume of their prayer is strictly controlled by their father:

Mr Flynn barked out an instruction for Catherine to lead the first Decade.
'Hail Mary full of grace,' she began to recite in her timid voice.
'SPEAK UP,' bellowed Mr Flynn. 'We can't hear you. And I don't think the Man Upstairs can either.' 'THE LORD IS WITH THEE,' shouted Catherine. 'There's no need to shout now. Show some respect. Lord love us, I don't know.' (p.45).

Reidy's novel therefore confirms a Christian ideology in which female spirituality is obviated by male, and particularly paternal, domination of 'the Word'. As such it reflects Kristeva's suggestion that Mary serves to uphold a mythology in which divinity rests with paternal power alone: 'In the rare instances when the Mother of Jesus appears in the Gospels, she is informed that filial relationship rests not with the flesh but with the name or, in other words, that any possible matrilinearism is to be repudiated and the symbolic link alone is to last' ('Stabat Mater' p. 165).

The model for female access to 'the Word', and through it, to female spirituality provided by standard mythologies of Mary in the girls' early lives is a wholly inadequate one. It is unsurprising therefore, that Theresa and Catherine Flynn choose to look beyond Mary, finding their own models of female spirituality in the physically marked saints of their Catholic faith. As young children, Catherine and Theresa emulating the saints in gruesome games of 'Martyrs and Suffering Virgins' in which 'all their heroes were women and most of them had died horribly – their deaths caused, naturally, by men' (Reidy, *The Visitation*, p. 11). While the fate of these heroines may mark them out as negative role models, they are compared favourably in the girls' minds to the secular

figures offered by children's literature, revered as 'more beautiful than any fairytale princess and braver than Red Riding Hood, Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella or Snow White, all of whom had waited for someone to save them. Agnes saved herself by choosing to be a martyr. She suffered excruciating pain' (p. 13). The potentiality for positive female role models within a religious ethic is therefore highlighted by Reidy, bringing to the fore the possibility for women to escape the confines of patriarchal control outside the patristic word. When Catherine accidentally sets the garden on fire, having 'sacrificed' her doll Joan, her younger sister Francie prevents Mr Flynn from beating her by covering Catherine with her own body: "Francie, get *off*, will you," said her father. Francie shook her head. "You'll have to *kill* me first" (p. 50). This act of self-sacrifice radically alters the power balance within the household and 'the Flynn family was never the same again' (ibid). However, as I go on to discuss in chapter Five, the positive potential of female rebellion within female saints' lives and enacted by Francie is ultimately contained by the saints' inevitable martyrdom, and without access to 'the Word' it is this aspect of female religious lives that is stressed in the girls' lives through their Catholic upbringing. Theresa and Catherine Flynn's role models remain the physically marked female martyrs such as Mrs Flynn, whose own mother complains "Is it any wonder these girls' heads are full of masochists and martyrs?" [...] "Look at yourself for once, Moira" (p. 20). The self-sacrifice of both their mother and the female saints of their games suggests that female rebellion cannot be fully realised when it is figured through a patriarchally defined model of femininity.

Reidy's novel suggests that it is such patriarchal definitions that have rendered Mary herself an impossible role model. Marina Warner, in her seminal study of the Virgin Mary, suggests that:

in the Church's attitudes to women, the oscillation between regarding them as equal in God's eyes (endowed with an immortal soul) and yet subject and inferior to the male in the order of creation and society ("And thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee" – Genesis 3-16) has never ceased, and provides continual background interference to any discussion of the Virgin, the model of the sex, who accurately reflects this perennial ambivalence. (Warner, p. xxiv)

Reidy's acknowledgement that even the most extraordinary women fail to offer an adequate model for female empowerment within a Christian framework suggests that such models are in need of redefining *outside* such patriarchal discourse. Her novel thus utilises the equivocation already present in Christian attitudes to women to destabilise traditional presentations of Mary.

Theresa and Catherine are told, in accordance with traditional religious narratives, that Mary is 'the Queen of the Angels... more important than the Queen of England... many many times more powerful' (Reidy, *The Visitation*, p. 34). Yet, in accordance with Christian discourse, this power appears to be entirely in the hands of their ruling father. The most prized object in the Flynn household is a 'one-metre tall plaster statue of the Madonna' (p. 39). Access to this Madonna, 'swathed in a plastic bag', is strictly controlled by Mr Flynn: 'As a treat they were allowed, for two minutes at a time, to switch it on... no-one touched it without permission' (ibid). The inaccessibility of the Madonna is confirmed by her position in the household, 'dominating the lounge from her prime position on top of the mantelpiece' (ibid). The patriarchally defined presentation of Mary thus renders her inaccessible precisely because of her

preciousness. In other words, Mary's very extraordinariness, and that which causes her to be held up as a role model for women, renders her impossible to emulate. Alcuin Blamires confirms 'the Virgin Mary was not a very *convincing* trump card on behalf of her sex, precisely because the virgin birth made her unique [...] and because description of her underlined the faults implicitly considered normative in women the more admiringly it distanced her from them'.¹²⁹

Reidy highlights the impossibility for women to live up to this model of perfection in her description of Theresa's weekly confession: 'No matter how hard Theresa tried she never managed to be good for longer than a few hours at a time. She continued to commit sins without even trying' (Reidy, *The Visitation*, p. 48). However, Reidy's comic presentation of the Madonna statue in the novel undermines the authority of such patriarchal endorsements of female perfection:

The Madonna began slowly to rotate on her dais. The tiny light bulbs linked by wire which formed a halo around her head flashed on and off. There was a little square door in the middle of her chest. It opened and shut in time with the flashing halo. Inside the door was a plastic moulded heart with flames emerging from it. The heart contained a bulb. Which glowed a dazzling red. (p. 39)

Reidy therefore resists the deifying practices that colour patriarchal definitions of Mary, and which Irigaray argues cause women to 'regress to siren goddess, who fight against men gods' ('Divine Women', p. 60). This refusal is crucial to Reidy's redefinition of Mary as a God in the feminine gender. Warner, in discussing her youthful worship of the Madonna, stresses her conviction that 'in the very celebration of the perfect human woman, both humanity and women were subtly denigrated' (Warner, p. xxi). By stressing Mary's imperfection,

¹²⁹ Alcuin Blamires, *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: An Anthology of Medieval Texts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 13-14.

Reidy allows for a theology in which women are not forced to reject their own humanity in order to approach divinity.

However, Reidy does not counter the binary opposition of humanity/divinity by focusing solely on Mary's humanity. Irigaray warns that 'it is important for us to recall that events in history, that History itself, *cannot and must not conceal cosmic events and rhythms*. But all this must be done in the context of entering further into womanhood, not moving backwards' ('Divine Women', p. 60). To conceal Mary's divinity would be to likewise reject female divinity altogether and thus to become 'more alien to ourselves than we were, more in exile than we were' (ibid). Reidy instead suggests that the human and the divine can co-exist for women through re-examination of the conventions surrounding Marian myth. Theresa and Catherine's inability to achieve perfection leads them to question their eligibility to be the bearers of the divine word. When Mary herself appears to the girls in the 'visitation' of the title of the novel, Catherine and Theresa suggest that she has made a mistake: 'Haven't you landed in the wrong country? This is New Zealand, not France or Portugal... we're just ordinary girls. Nothing special' (p. 63). Such ordinariness is distinctly at odds with Mary's own miraculous appearance, which is everything the girls have been led to expect from the hagiographic texts of their childhood:

A beautiful woman wearing a long white dress and a sky-blue cloak and veil was levitating above the Flynn's lemon tree. Theresa realised the identity of their visitor immediately...the two sisters' eyes were wide with amazement. They recognized a miracle when they saw one. There was a golden glow around the woman's head. (Later Catherine said there was a chain of beads around her neck and stars on her cloak, but Theresa could remember only the rosebuds between her toes. (p. 62)

The ambiguous language of this passage suggests that this vision may not be all it seems; the use of reported speech and focus on Theresa's memory of the event subtly undermines the authenticity of the narrated vision itself. Their unconventional greeting further destabilises convention. When Mary visits the girls they attempt to greet her appropriately in 'a garbled mixture of Mr Flynn's aphorisms and half remembered phrases from the Loretto Litany and Antiphons of the Blessed Virgin [...] "Open Door to Heaven, and Star of the Sea [...] Hail Queen of Heaven, hail Mistress of the Angels"' (ibid). However, the conventional language of the Church becomes parody when mediated through the girls themselves:

[...] surely there must be a correct etiquette for such an occasion. If there was, no-one had told her. Her mind went blank. Finally, an impressive-sounding salutation came to her.
"Hail Root of Jesse," she whispered.
Neither she nor her sister had any idea who Jesse was.
(p.63)

The humour present in this passage is underpinned by a destabilising function. Catherine's mimicry of traditional church language draws attention to its pomposity, as well as its potentiality for re-vision. The fact that Mary greets them without comment on this unconventional greeting suggests that the words in themselves do not in fact matter and the possibility for a female word, marked both by its spiritual passion and its de-authorising function is established in the novel.

By destabilizing the conventional model of Marian visitations, Reidy on the one hand suggests the possibility for alternative 're-visions' of Mary. However, it is important to note that Mary's appearance itself *is* conventional and recognizably Catholic. The girls see what they expect to see. Yet such devices as

the golden glow (symbolizing the sun), stars and rosebuds are not present in the Bible and are in fact later interpretations of Mary's appearance. Although many of these devices can be found in theological literature of late antiquity and the medieval period, it is undoubtedly true that such imaginings would have been coloured by popular culture of the time. Warner confirms that Mary is 'a truly popular creation [...] a magic mirror like the Lady of Shalott's, reflecting a people and the beliefs they produce, recount, and hold' (Warner, pp. xxii-iii). As such, the Mary that the girls see can be read as typifying a popular imagination over the Biblical Mary, however assimilated in modern Catholicism it has come to be. Warner explains that the association of Mary with the Sun, moon and stars reflects a philosophical tradition in the 'hellenistic world that nurtured Christianity [in which] no comparable disjunction between the tangible and visible world of nature and the intangible and invisible world of spirit existed' (p. 255), while Thomas Erling Peterson suggests that Italian literature during the medieval period typically utilised the rose, the symbol of the virgin, to express 'wonder for some aspect of objective reality (woman, nature) and for the transcendent order underlying it (God, the Virgin, the Blood of Christ)'.¹³⁰ Thus Reidy can be read as subtly repositioning the Catholic Mary as a popular figure in which the dual aspects of the ordinary and the divine are drawn together. Furthermore, rather than simply overturning convention, in highlighting that conventional presentations of Mary are themselves drawn from a larger cultural and social milieu, Reidy radically undermines the authority of such convention, and shows Mary to be already a re-visionary figure.

¹³⁰ Thomas E. Peterson, *The Rose in Contemporary Italian Poetry* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2000), p. 6.

Irigaray insists that ‘if we resist hierarchies (the man/woman hierarchy, or state/woman, or a certain form of God/woman, or machine/woman), only to fall back into *the power (pouvoir)* of nature/woman, animal/woman, even matriarchs/women, women/women, we have not made much progress’ (‘Divine Women’, p. 60). I have already shown that Reidy destabilises the hierarchy of humanity/divinity or that of the ordinary and the divine and in so doing, suggested that Mary can be perhaps redeemed as a potential role model for women, yet Irigaray suggests that Mary herself ‘paralyzes the infinite of becoming a woman since she is fixed in the role of mother through whom the *son* of God is made flesh’ (p. 62). Thus Mary can be read, through Irigaray, as setting up the further hierarchy of divine/woman. According to Irigaray, ‘the virgin is alone of her sex... without a way of becoming divine except through her son’ (ibid). Yet I would argue that Reidy demonstrates that a reinterpretation of such readings of Mary is possible, drawing on the paradox inherent in her identification as a virgin-mother, through which the possibility for women to redefine *themselves* as divine can be identified. I argue that such divinity is figured in Reidy’s novel *through* Mary’s role as a bodily-identified woman, and not *against* it, which is shown by Reidy to be catastrophic to female identities. Furthermore, I argue that embracing the female body is shown by Reidy to be necessary in redefining female spirituality within a specifically female word.

When the girls meet Mary for a second time, she asks them ‘‘Why do you call me the Virgin when you refer to me? [...] That is not my name’ (Reidy, *The Visitation*, p. 148). In so doing Reidy highlights how suppression of the female body is held up as an actual *identity* for women. Christian polemic has long associated the female body with impurity, and particularly with sexual impurity

through patristic refiguring of Eve's 'original sin' of disobedience as sexual immorality. As Mary is the mother of Jesus it was imperative to such writers that Mary be dissociated from the female body and as such Mary is a redeeming 'new Eve', just as Christ is a new Adam. Abelard, writing at the turn of the twelfth century confirms this writing: 'the Lord restored Eve, the original of all evil, in Mary before He renewed Adam in Christ. And just as sin began from woman, so grace began from woman, and the privilege of virginity has blossomed again'.¹³¹ While Eve and Mary are therefore distinguished in virtue and sin, they are equally identified through their bodies. However, Mary's redeeming nature is firmly located in 'the privilege of virginity', itself marked as particularly physical purity within a medieval culture that labels women's bodies themselves disgusting.¹³² Thus, in a Christian context, women are fundamentally associated with their bodies, while those bodies are simultaneously suppressed by their potentiality for sin.

The emphasis on virginity for women in the Catholic church dates from the early church fathers, when Jerome first associated Mary with Eve in a letter extolling the virtues of virginity to Eustochium, daughter of the famously ascetic Saint Paula, and in it he writes 'the virtue of continence used to be found only in men [...] but now that a virgin has conceived [...] the gift of virginity has been bestowed most richly upon women'.¹³³ However, this conflation of virtue with virginity, what Warner calls 'the literal interpretation of purity as technical, physical virginity, as the closed womb, the "spring shut up," the "fountain sealed," an unbroken body, and not as a spiritual state of purity' remains prevalent

¹³¹ Abelard, 'De Auctoritate Vel Dignitate Ordinis Santimonialium (On the Origin of Nuns): Letter 6', in Blamires, p. 236.

¹³² For more on this see Alexandra Cuffel, *Gendering Disgust in Medieval Religious Polemic* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).

¹³³ Jerome, *Letter xxii*, 'To Eustochium' (21.10), in Blamires, p. 76.

today, as evidenced by identity movements such as the American teen chastity group ‘True Love Waits’ who ‘encourage moral purity’ through sexual continence and ‘The Silver Ring Thing’ (Warner, p. 63).¹³⁴ Reidy explicitly engages with this aspect of Mary by placing her in the context of a repressive 1960s Catholic culture in New Zealand. From the earliest pages of the novel, and indeed the earliest days of the girls’ lives, virginity is held up as not just an ideal sexual state, but a moral identity for the two sisters. The martyrs of their childhood games ‘preferred death to relinquishing their virginity. If an unmarried girl lost her virginity she became a “fallen woman” – a woman who had tumbled from grace’ (Reidy, *The Visitation*, p. 15).

As Catherine and Theresa Flynn grow older in the novel, their increasing awareness of their failure to adhere to patriarchal models of femininity as outlined for them by Marian role models forces them into two divergent, but familiar, paths. Reidy presents the girls as almost identical in appearance, representing the traditional twinned aspects of woman. While Theresa rebels against her Catholic upbringing, revelling in rebellion and disobedience, and later sexual promiscuity, Catherine strives towards perfection by becoming increasingly ascetic, donning the habit of a nun while still at school. As such the two girls could be read as the traditionally opposed Virgin and Whore. According to Irigaray, such identifications are inevitable when women are not ‘allowed *their own* physical, bodily beauty, their own skin, their own form(s), all this is symptomatic of the

¹³⁴ ‘True Love Waits’, *Lifeway*, <<http://www.lifeway.com/tlw/>> [accessed 5 Jan 2010]; *The Silver Ring Thing*, <<http://www.silverringthing.com/home.asp>> [accessed 5 Jan 2010]. Interestingly, while both organisations claim to promote chastity as a defence against teen pregnancy, studies have shown that chastity pledges do not ‘demonstrate a positive impact on sexual behaviour over time’ but do ‘show some negative impacts on youth’s willingness to use contraception’. Debra Hauser, ‘Five Years of Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage Education – Assessing the Impact’, *Advocates for Youth* (Washington, 2008) <http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=623&Itemid=177> [accessed 9 Jan 2010].

fact that women lack a female god who can open up the perspective in which *their* flesh can be transfigured' ('Divine Women', p. 64). The simultaneous bodily identification and bodily repression of women in Marian discourse is shown to be catastrophic to the emerging identities of the two girls in Reidy's novel.

Catherine's early vocation leads to an ambivalent and anxious desire to both maintain a physically intact body, while adhering to a theology that insists upon a manifestly physical, even sexual relationship with Christ: 'she wouldn't let them carve her body into relics when she was dead. Jesus would give her His throbbing heart aflame with love. She would take it inside herself. She would become His bride' (p. 74). The rejection of the female body alongside a simultaneous insistence upon a gendered relationship with Christ leads Catherine along an increasingly ascetic path in order to constantly affirm her spirituality. Theresa, on the other hand, unable to identify with her mother's or Catherine's religious example begins to see herself as beyond divinity altogether: 'She wanted to become a woman as unlike her mother as possible...Catherine could be the good little girl for both of them. Theresa tasted wickedness on her tongue, "*Jezebel*," she said. "*Fucking, bloody, shitty, trollop, hussy, baggage, witch, bitch, tart, slut*" (p. 82). While this litany 'lifted her spirits enormously', Theresa's inability to conform to the ideals of virgin, in this instance designating saint, or mother, designating martyr, leads her to decide 'she would become an atheist' and thus exiles herself from her own spirituality altogether (p. 82; p. 85).

However, Reidy makes it clear that Theresa's divergence from her sister's path nonetheless fails to allow for any self-identification beyond that offered by the church. It is made clear to both girls that their bodies are not in their own control: 'With jealous eyes Mr Flynn watched his daughters grow up. He waited

for disaster. He wished he could lock them up – they were too beautiful to be let loose. Someone would claim them. (p. 190). Mr Flynn’s disturbing awareness of his daughters’ physical maturation is manifested through religious polemic: ‘Your bodies are Temples of the Holy Spirit’ he told them. “Abuse them and you abuse God who lives inside them ... I want you to keep yourselves clean... And I don’t mean hygiene. I’m talking about modesty and purity. Keeping yourself pure for your husbands” (ibid). In a climactic episode, Mr Flynn asserts his supreme patriarchal control over Theresa’s body after she has been banned from seeing a male friend again:

She fled to the bathroom... When she stopped shaking she began to run a shower... The knocking started up again as she was drying herself quickly with a threadbare towel. “I won’t be long,” she called out. She hastily pulled on her knickers, but not quickly enough. His rattling on the door knob dislodged the chair, which fell to the lino with a crash. Her father burst in. She had one foot in and one out of her knickers and clutched the skimpy towel to her breasts. He strode over to where she was cowering against the shower door and wrenched the towel from her. It happened so fast she felt winded by it. She wrapped her arm protectively over her chest and stared at him shaking with fear... “I’m your father. I can look at you if I want to. You’ve got nothing to hide. Nothing I haven’t seen before.” He flicked at her breasts with two fingers. He then turned on his heel and walked out. (p. 204)

Mr Flynn’s callous, almost casual mastery over his daughter’s body can be read as a reflection of the deeply contemptuous attitudes held by the Church towards women’s bodies. However, it also reflects Irigaray’s suggestion that western representations of sexuality leave women ‘with the impossible alternative between a defensive virginity, fiercely turned in upon itself, and a body open to penetration that no longer knows, in this “hole” that constitutes its sex, the

pleasure of its own touch'.¹³⁵ For Reidy then, Theresa's virginity must literally be defended within a patriarchy that represses her own sexuality.

Reidy counters this by troubling the bodily discourses surrounding Mary herself. It is interesting to note that despite Mary's refusal of the name Virgin, Reidy's narrator continues to name her as such throughout the novel. A possible answer for this lies in Warner's explanation that the stories of the pagan goddesses from which Marian myths were drawn viewed the role of virgin very differently from that espoused by modern Christianity: 'their sacred virginity symbolised their autonomy, and had little or no moral connotation. They spurned men because they were preeminent, independent, and alone, which is why the title 'virgin' could be used of a goddess who entertained lovers. Her virginity signified she had retained freedom of choice: to take lovers or to reject them' (Warner, p. 48). Reidy's 'Virgin' then, can be read as a Goddess figure, who unequivocally tells the girls that: 'it was impossible for a woman to have a baby without the assistance of a man' (Reidy, *The Visitation*, p. 148). Her freedom of sexual choice is made clear. She tells the girls, 'the union between a man and a woman... is a wonderful thing. It has been very misunderstood. As an expression of love, rather than of power over a woman by a man, sexuality can become a gateway. A place of passage' (ibid). However, Reidy goes beyond simply sexual liberation in her re-vision of Mary. The novel offers an altogether more complicated picture of Mary that offers not only a 'woman God' but perhaps also a 'God-woman' through which a female divinity can be found (Irigaray, 'Divine Women', p. 62).

¹³⁵ Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 24.

When Mary visits the girls for a second time she is found trapped upon a roof: ‘She swung from it like a tattered rag doll stained with green slime and dirt’ (p. 139). As she falls, the girls note with wonder: ‘She bled. She was human. She perspired. They could smell it’ (ibid, p. 139). Yet Reidy refuses to make Mary entirely human: ‘Apparently, she didn’t really exist at all as a physical being, she was simply a projection of Divine Energy which was so powerful that it *seemed* as if she existed, whereas in fact her spirit was mostly away in another plane with God. Or to put it another way – it was a particular concentration of power and goodness manifesting itself as God’ (p. 147). Reidy’s representation of Mary as a bodily present, human woman, while retaining a sense of her divine, even Godly presence, allows the girls to engage with her in kind. Their feelings for her are both powerfully physical as well as intensely spiritual: ‘Their bodies and minds yearned towards the Virgin...More complicated feelings. Powerful longings which remained as yet unexpressed’ (p. 148). The almost sexual presentation of their feelings towards Mary is not, I believe, an accident. Reidy’s refusal to reject Mary’s bodily presence, blood, perspiration and all, suggests that female divinity does not and cannot lie outside women’s bodies. Yet importantly the girls ‘had reached the limits of their knowledge of language and could not find the words to describe her’ (pp. 148-9). This suggests that female divinity, when inclusive of the female body, *does* lie outside the scope of the male word. Their pre-pubescent adoration of Mary is therefore necessarily physical and is inextricably tied to the twinned repression of their burgeoning sexuality, another aspect of their lives for which they have no language. Irigaray, commenting on the lack of a female sexual imaginary in Western culture suggests that:

one would have to dig down very deep indeed to discover beneath the traces of this civilization, of this history, the

vestiges of a more archaic civilization that might give some clue to woman's sexuality. That extremely ancient civilization would undoubtedly have a different alphabet, a different language... Woman's desire would not be expected to speak the same language as man's. (*This Sex Which is Not One*, p. 25)

The lack of a specifically female language with which to speak about female sexuality within a patristic religious discourse is made abundantly clear by Reidy. In fact the novel shows that the masculinist nature of language *itself* is the locus of the control exerted over women's bodies in a religious ethic. The power of words is key to Theresa and Catherine Flynn's understanding of religion: 'already they understood the power of language. Words could wound. Heal. Transform. Transcend. Transubstantiate. Bread into flesh. Wine into blood. Sticks and stones. Broken bones' (p. 20). Yet when asking their grandmother about 'fallen women', that is to say those who do not follow the Marian roles of virgin or mother, those words name women

'a loose woman. A Fast Woman. A Woman of Easy Virtue. A Woman of Doubtful Reputation. A Scarlet Woman. A Painted Woman. One who is no better than she should be... "Wench," she read out. "Trollop, trull, tart, harlot, whore, strumpet, hooker, scrubber, cocotte, floozy, doxy, moll, temptress, vamp, Jezebel, Delilah. A Bit of Fluff. An odalisque"'. (p. 16)

That there is little distinction made in the church's eyes between women who are simply promiscuous and those who are forced into economic prostitution is suggested by their grandmother's correction: 'Oh dear, in my enthusiasm I seem to have strayed over into kept women and prostitutes. Forget about odalisques, will you, darlings' (p. 17). Theresa and Catherine's confusion about sex is dramatically increased by their grandmother 'because of the words she used when describing genitals or the sexual act. Words like *willies, fannies, twats, peckers, goolies, John Thomases, intercourse, buns in the oven, up the duff, taking*

precautions, doing it from the rear end instead of the front. The front of what? Whose rear end?' (p. 104). Furthermore, Reidy shows the corresponding suppression of female sexuality and that a language with which to talk about that sexuality is rooted in a specifically religious context. As young girls Theresa and Catherine are taught to refer to their genitals as Gene, 'a little creature quite separate from themselves who lived 'Down There', a place they must never touch because it was a sin. They didn't know why. They had to accept it' (p. 110). However, Reidy suggests that there *is* a potentiality for a female word when women cease to attempt to emulate the authority of the male word, drawing upon the playful or dualistic aspects of language which perform a de-authorising function. The euphemistic nature of the Flynn's language for sexual organs itself lies outside what could be termed the 'authorised' word, in this case medical terminology. Although the girls are taught to call their genitals 'gene', 'because they had never seen the word actually written down, they had named their vaginas Jean, a friendly name' (ibid). While in itself the renaming of their vaginas does not belie their father's prohibition of masturbation, their modification and appropriation of language does serve to remove the associations of fear and disgust from their own bodies. This suggests that only when women abandon the idea of finding their voices *within* the authority of the church can they reappropriate their own bodies. When Mrs Flynn finds she is pregnant for an eighth time she has no difficulty voicing her feelings in confession: 'I hate my family,' she admitted... The words had spilled out of her without thinking, but once they were said she realised they were true (p. 77). It is only when she is forced into the authorised language of the church that her voice is lost:

...Mea culpa, Mea culpa, mea maxima culpa. She couldn't feel it. Couldn't say it...

“For your penance... five Hail Marys and now make a good Act of Contrition.”
... Words caught in her throat. “I can’t,” she croaked.
“Have you forgotten the words?”
“No, Father.”
“What is it then?”
“I don’t feel sorry.”
(p. 79)

Likewise, Mary’s own message in support of contraception, the delivery of which is the central event of both the girls’ lives and the novel, is at first lost when it is confined by church authority. The physical description of the letter itself is marked by its authority: ‘she withdrew a long white envelope from the recesses of her cloak... The edges of the envelope were decorated with an ornate gold border. It was addressed to ‘The Holy Father, Paul VI’ in a flowing copperplate script. The envelope smelt as if it had been sprinkled with the most expensive scent in the world’ (p. 64). It is this envelope itself which convinces the girls’ parents that the letter is authentic: ‘the style of the envelope being what it was ... no harm in having a look’ (p. 69). Yet the girls themselves cannot possess this authority. ‘the Word’ as it exists for the girls at this point in the novel is simply a message to be passed to the higher power of their father, his priest, and is discarded before it reaches the ultimate authority of the Pope. At no point is the message intended *for* them. Adrienne Rich, in her article on re-vision which introduces this thesis, and which is discussed in much greater length there, suggests that ‘every woman writer has written for men, even when ... she was supposed to be addressing women (Rich, ‘When We Dead Awaken’, p. 20). The failure of Mary’s message highlights the futility of such efforts. Rich goes on ‘we have liked to think of ourselves as special, and we have known that men would tolerate, even romanticize us as special, as long as our words and actions didn’t threaten their

privilege of rejecting us according to *their* ideas of what a special woman ought to be' (ibid). Accordingly, Mr Flynn, as a good Catholic, tolerates, even worships Mary as 'both stern and maternal. He saw her also as proud, gracious and merciful. She dispensed favours to those of her subjects she considered worthy of them. She was the intermediary, the mediator' (p. 41). Yet, when her message threatens his own privilege, Mr Flynn rejects her word outright. 'snorting and exclaiming with indignation... That'll be the day... That'll be the frosty Friday' (p. 67).

Mr Flynn's invocation, and later rejection of Mary as 'the intermediary, the mediator' is important to the function and subsequent failure, of her letter, and thus of the ability of women to name *themselves* as divine. The question of authority surrounding Mary's letter is troublesome and reflects the equally ambivalent nature of Mary's own authority within traditional theological interpretations of intermediation. I suggest that Reidy utilises this ambivalence to demonstrate how the female body can be reinstated into a conception of female divinity through a troubling of Mary's role as a mother that refuses to reduce women to an idealised reproductive function. Mary's letter, as I have already outlined, is notable for its authoritative appearance. Although the contents of the letter are not detailed, it is clear that the language used within is sufficiently imposing to convince the devoutly Catholic Flynn of its authenticity. Although this in itself does not serve to trouble the authority of the Church, Mr Flynn's usurpation of Mary's word can be read as performing a destabilising function. Having steamed open the letter and disagreed with its contents, Mr Flynn rewrites it with ample access to the authorised Word: 'Education by the brothers and a lifetime of listening to Sunday sermons gave him the words for which he was

searching. He wrote about upright men, conjugal acts, moral laws, the mission of generating life, God as author of that human life, and finished off with his plea to face up to the efforts needed' (p. 68). However, the authority Mr Flynn requires to create the authenticity he recognises in the original letter is provided by Mary herself: 'He had to borrow a few phrases from the Lady's letter and tried to match the style of handwriting and sentence construction as closely as possible' (ibid). The suggestion Reidy makes here is that while the authority or power of 'the Word' may rest with man, it is entirely unclear where that power originates. Mr Flynn's usurpation of this power lies, I believe, at the heart of the issue of the novel, and that which constitutes Reidy's most radical re-vision of Mary herself.

It is impossible to talk about Mary without recourse to her identification as a mother. Indeed, to do so would be to negate the primary importance of motherhood upon women's lives, whether that is figured through motherhood itself or indeed through the societal pressures placed upon women who choose *not* to become mothers. Yet it is important to note that Mary's role as Mother extends beyond that of Jesus himself. The *Redemptoris Mater*, the mariological encyclical of Pope John Paul II, shows that for Roman Catholics at least, Mary is 'the Church's own beginning' while 'the council does not hesitate to call Mary "the Mother of Christ and the mother of mankind"'.¹³⁶ The purpose of John Paul's letter is to establish the exact nature of Mary's intercessory powers, in an attempt to resolve a longstanding theological paradox. Warner explains:

¹³⁶ Iohannes Paulus PP. II, *Redemptoris Mater: On the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Life of the Pilgrim Church* (1987), <http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031987_redemptoris-mater_en.html> [accessed 15 April 2010] (intro, 1; Part 1, 3:23). Although the *Redemptoris Mater* was not issued until 1987, and therefore after the events of the novel, it does reflect earlier teachings on Mary's role as mother and mediator, which would have been familiar to Catholics of the 1960s and 70s, such as those of Saint Louis de Montfort specifically quoted by John Paul II.

The theology of the Virgin's intercession maintains very strictly that the Virgin does not have the power to grant any boon by herself, but only intercedes with her son, who as God is the only source of salvation. But the powers of mediation attributed to her throughout Christianity are considered sovereign: the son can refuse his mother nothing. So a prayer to Mary, made in a spirit of repentance and resolve, is wonder working: and men and women gathered together to pray to the Virgin forget the distinction between direct and indirect power. (Warner, p. 286)

Reidy's portrayal of Mary in her role as an intercessor directly picks up on this troubling discourse, questioning once again whether the power that appears to rest with the church has in fact been usurped. That Reidy has chosen to combine this aspect of Mary's identity with the issue of contraception is perhaps both surprising and in other ways deeply relevant. Irigaray suggests that 'contraception and abortion raise the question of the meaning of motherhood'.¹³⁷ I argue that Reidy's re-visionary portrayal of Mary as, not simply an intercessor but also as a real woman who participates in direct action as a women's liberation activist with particular focus on the issues of birth-control and abortion, also questions the meaning of motherhood, suggesting that it is motherhood itself that has been usurped in the name of the father, and that which has denied women the ability to name themselves as divine.

Mary's appearance in the novel occurs at the time of the Second Vatican Council of the nineteen-sixties, out of which was born *Humanae Vitae*. This encyclical letter argues that banning contraception is in a woman's interests as 'a man who grows accustomed to the use of contraceptive methods may forget the reverence due to a woman, and, disregarding her physical and emotional equilibrium, reduce her to being a mere instrument for the satisfaction of his own

¹³⁷ Luce Irigaray, 'The Bodily Encounter with the Mother', in *The Irigaray Reader*, ed. by Margaret Whitford (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), pp. 34-46 (p. 37).

desires, no longer considering her as his partner whom he should surround with care and affection.’¹³⁸ In other words, the use of contraception, runs the Church argument, would reduce women to a simple vehicle for man’s base physical passions without which the correct reverence due to her as an instrument of creation may be ignored. Yet Reidy demonstrates that the joyous images of fertility inherent in the patristic privileging of motherhood are in fact the ultimate usurpation of the female body in favour of the male Word. The conflict in Theresa and Catherine Flynn’s Catholic teachings begins to trouble the girls: ‘If [Mary] was so holy and mystical how could she have produced a baby? The more the girls thought about it, the more unlikely it seemed. Had she closed her eyes while her Son was born and simply pretended it wasn’t happening to her?’ (p. 146). This is in direct contradiction to their understanding of their own mother’s experience of childbirth: ‘According to their mother, giving birth was a painful and bloody business involving stitches, the shaving of pubic hair and much panting, groaning and swearing’ (ibid). This contradiction between theological teaching and biological reality is a reflection of the deeply contemptuous views of women’s bodies held by the church and particularly evident in the doctrine of the virgin birth. Of course, the virgin birth itself is only tenuously suggested in the New Testament itself, found only in Matthew (Matthew 7.20) and as has been argued at length, may in fact rest upon a mistranslation of the Hebrew word ‘*almah* meaning a woman of marriageable age, and the Greek *parthenos* meaning

¹³⁸ Paul VI, *Encyclical Letter Humanae Vitae Of The Supreme Pontiff Paul VI To His Venerable Brothers, The Patriarchs, Archbishops, Bishops And Other Local Ordinaries In Peace and Communion With The Apostolic See, To The Clergy And Faithful Of The Whole Catholic World, And To All Men Of Good Will, On The Regulation of Birth* (1968), http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_25071968_humanae-vitae_en.html [accessed 3 March 2010]

‘virgin’.¹³⁹ As such, the virgin birth must be read in relation to its theological and social functions.

Warner explains ‘In the pre-Christian Roman empire virgin birth was a shorthand symbol, commonly used to designate a man’s divinity’ (Warner, p. 34). It is important to note that the designation of divinity here relates to Jesus himself, rather than to his mother. As such, Mary’s virginity must be read as incidental or functional in the greater task of establishing a male God. However, as explained earlier in this chapter, such symbolism was a pagan belief. In order to satisfactorily understand the reconciliation of such pagan mysticism with Judao-Christian dogma, the theological arguments surrounding the virgin birth must be read within their social context.

Judao-Christian writings on generation owe much to Aristotelian biological theory in which women provide only the vessel or the matter where men provide the spirit. Thus, Warner explains, ‘it was a deeply misogynist and contemptuous view of women’s role in reproduction that made the idea of conception by the power of the Spirit more acceptable’ (Warner, p. 47). Furthermore, Warner explains that it is the negative bodily-identification of women within Christianity that makes the doctrine of the virgin birth particularly catastrophic to women. While other non-Christian societies have demonstrated similar beliefs in a parthenogenic mother goddess ‘in their case the imbalance leaves mothers in the ascendant, while in Christianity identification of the womb with the lower, carnal order gives fathers precedence. Thus the self-same ideogram of the mother and child can be worshipped by both societies that respect and despise women for their maternity’ (ibid, p. 47). The imagery of the virgin

¹³⁹ For a lengthier discussion of this issue see Warner, pp. 19 – 20.

birth thus posits an equation in which the maternal body becomes simply a vessel for the male spirit but has no part in that spirit and thus male generative power usurps female creation itself.

In Reidy's work this insistence upon man as sole creator has the effect of reducing woman to an animalist function. Rather than being revered as a mother, Mrs Flynn's eighth pregnancy makes her the subject of revulsion: '*Monstrous*, thought Theresa. *Disgusting*' (p. 81). The disgust Theresa feels at the sight of her pregnant mother can be explained by the resentment she feels at the additional burden it places upon her as the oldest female: 'It means she was given even more household tasks' (ibid). Irigaray explains: 'the mother has become a devouring monster as an inverted effect of the blind consumption of the mother' ('The Bodily Encounter with the Mother', p. 41). The consumption of Mrs Flynn in her bodily capacity as a mother is shown to effectively silence her, given voice only through 'the Word' of the Father:

There were days when Mrs Flynn felt there was not enough oxygen in the house for her to breathe, so much of it was devoured by her husband and children. *What about me? What about me?* a tiny voice continued to nag. She forced herself to ignore the voice. She had her Duties and Responsibilities. If there was time after that she could snatch a minute for herself. A door slammed in the wind. A baby cried with teething pain. A plate shattered on the floor. Plates were always breaking in the Flynn household. "Lord, give me strength," she cried. (p. 80)

Irigaray suggests that

the problem is that, by denying the mother her generative power and by wanting to be the sole creator, the Father, according to our culture, superimposes upon the archaic world of the flesh a universe of language [*langue*] and symbols which cannot take root in it except as in the form of that which makes a hole in the bellies of women and in the site of their identity. ('The Bodily Encounter with the Mother', p. 41)

Reidy takes back this power by troubling the very concept of motherhood, refiguring Mary as an ever-changing everywoman who gives voice to women's own desires. There is no doubt in the novel that Mary *is* a mother, yet 'although she was called the Mother of God, she didn't resemble a mother' and the girls find that 'there was no category into which they could fit her' (p. 146). The Mary that the girls first meet alters dramatically through the course of the novel. The conventionally miraculous Mary of their early vision becomes much more glamorous in her second appearance. They compare her to a film star, and once they have dressed her in modern clothing, remark "You look gorgeous" [...] She looked like a model from a magazine' (p. 147). By the time Theresa attends University, Mary has transformed herself into a public speaker and feminist known as Mary Blessed and once again, her appearance is dramatically different:

Mary Blessed was seated on a blue chintz couch wearing faded flared jeans, boots, and a figure-hugging white cotton tee-shirt. Theresa gave her a tentative smile. Mary's hair had been tied back into a glossy plaited rope. Close up she looked very different from the woman who had left Chatterton so many years previously. For the first time Theresa began to doubt the identity of the woman in front of her. How could this powerful public speaker, this brave, visionary woman, be the same flawless, passive Virgin of her childhood? (p. 259)

Mary's differing appearance at different times in the girls' lives suggests that the girls in fact see a reflection of themselves and their own needs in her. Their childhood desire for a deeper spirituality leads them to Mary's miraculous aspect, the popular culture of their teens drives them to see in her the glamour that they crave, while Theresa's increasing politicization provides her with a Mary that embraces radical feminism.

The necessity for Mary to offer a mother that women need, rather than that which the church offers them, is one that the Catholic women of the novel note: “The powers that be have decided and we must obey or leave Mother Church”[...] “It’s not my *damn mother*,”[...] “A Mother would not say no to the pill” (p. 172). Yet it is remarkable that the re-visionary potential that Reidy draws upon is drawn from theology itself. John Paul II notes: ‘It is significant that, as he speaks to his mother from the Cross, he calls her “woman” and says to her: “Woman, behold your son!” (*Redemptoris Mater*, Part I 3: 24). Although the point he is making is that Mary fulfils the promise made in Genesis that ‘woman... will crush the head of the serpent’, thereby conforming to the orthodox teachings that Mary is a co-redeeming Eve, the inadvertent admission he makes is that Mary, like Eve, *does* stand for all womankind (Genesis 3.15). The important point that Reidy is making is that motherhood goes beyond the physical act of giving birth. Women’s bodies are not simply for reproducing. Irigaray suggest that:

we are always mothers just by being women. We bring many things into the world apart from children, we give birth to many other things apart from children: love, desire, language, art, social things, political things, religious things, but this kind of creativity has been forbidden to us for centuries. We must take back this maternal creative dimension that is our birthright as women. (‘Body Against Body’, p. 18)

In refusing to limit Mary’s maternity to her social and reproductive labour, Reidy presents a model of divinity through which women can begin to take back the creative power that the male word has usurped.

Reidy’s Mary then, takes back this control through a direct attack upon the most fundamental issue surrounding women’s bodies of today and one that remains contentious within the Catholic Church. At the time of writing in the

United Kingdom, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Westminster caused sensational headlines by putting forward the limited but common-sense argument for contraception: ‘when it comes to Third World poverty and the great pressure under which many women are put by men, I can see the arguments why, in the short term, [the] means that give women protection are attractive’.¹⁴⁰ The death of Pope John Paul II has led to speculation that his successor, Benedict XIV, intends to employ even firmer controls on contraception, yet a recent Gallup poll showed a massive 78% of Catholics to be in favour of its use.¹⁴¹ It is fundamental to Reidy’s theology that such debate is recognised. Towards the end of the novel Theresa and her mother attend a rally in support of change in the Church’s stance against contraception. Amongst Mary’s supporters a group of religious protesters emerge: ‘Other women around Theresa are pushing and yelling at the protesters’ (p. 267). Yet Mary admonishes them: ‘violence isn’t the answer’ (ibid). While Theresa rightly responds ‘neither is tolerance... turning the other cheek is for fools’, Reidy shows that Mary’s word *must* be a debate between women (p. 267).

If Mary can be shown to offer a mother-god to all women, ‘Irigaray suggests that ‘it is equally essential that we should be daughter-gods in the relationship with our mothers, and that we cease to hate our mothers in order to enter into submissiveness to the father-husband’ (‘Divine Women’, p. 71). The hatred that Theresa and Catherine feel towards their own mother when being asked to tidy their room appears to be out of all proportion: ‘They decided they hated her more than anyone else in the entire world, universe, galaxy’ (p. 66). Yet this seemingly insignificant episode demonstrates how Mrs Flynn’s maternal

¹⁴⁰ ‘Archbishop acknowledges ‘attraction’ of contraception’, *BBC News Online* (1 April 2010) <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/8594770.stm>> [accessed 15 April 2010].

¹⁴¹ Norman J Ornstein, ‘In Today’s Environment, Contraception Could Become a Big Issue’, *American Institute for Public Policy Research* (22 June 2005) <<http://www.aei.org/article/22740>> [accessed 15 April 2010].

relationship with her daughters is sublimated by ‘the Word’ of the Father:

“Cleanliness is next to godliness,” reminded Mrs Flynn when she stuck her head in the doorway five minutes later to check on the progress of the tidy-up’ (ibid).

Irigaray insists ‘we cannot love if we have no memory of a native passiveness in relation to our mothers, of our primitive attachment to her, and her to us’ (‘Divine Women’, p. 71). Women need, Irigaray suggests:

to find, rediscover, invent the words, the sentences that speak of the most ancient and most current relationship we know – the relationship to the mother’s body, to our body – sentences that translate the bond between our body, her body, the body of our daughter. We need to discover a language that is not a substitute for the experience of *corps-à-corps* as the paternal language seeks to be, but which accompanies that bodily experience, clothing it in words that do not erase the body but speak the body. It is crucial that we keep our bodies even as we bring them out of silence and servitude. Historically we are the guardians of the flesh. We should not give up that role, but identify it as our own, by inviting men not to make us into body for their benefit, not to make us into guarantees that their body exists. (‘Body Against Body’, p. 19)

The answer, Reidy suggests, lies in rediscovering that memory within a female word by being shared amongst women, by giving voice to the creative body that has for so long been repressed and contained. Yet there is a note of caution. When Catherine goes to live with her girlfriend Linda, and her mother, Janice, a librarian and author, she enters a world of words. Catherine originally revels in the shared experience of body and word yet she finds herself increasingly disturbed by the infinite nature of Linda’s and Janice’s conversation: ‘Catherine was exhausted by the sheer volume of words. The only time they closed their mouths was when they read. And even then they were constantly reading choice bits aloud to each other. They seemed to think nothing of talking with their mouths full. ‘If the ideas are flowing why waste time by stopping to

finish a mouthful?’ said Janice. Catherine was repelled by the bits of food she could see bobbing about inside their mouths as they talked.’ (p. 235). As Catherine’s discomfort grows Janice explains to Linda ‘I suspect she’s never been allowed to experience [...] fully before. Here, there are no limits on her. No-one to tell her what to do and think, and she’s not used to it’ (p. 237). Catherine’s ultimate rejection of Linda suggests that within a pre-existing patriarchal society, women will limit *themselves* and become, as Simone de Beauvoir notably claimed, ‘eager accomplices of their masters’ (de Beauvoir, p. 639). Catherine’s failed vocation has left her bereft of any real faith, without a God of her own and forced into an identity in opposition to that of her father’s: ‘there was no longer any choice but to create a life in defiance of him’ (p. 240). Although Reidy leaves Catherine’s quest for her own version of the truth on a hopeful note, without a female God she remains disappointingly constrained by the prevailing model of patriarchy.

The answer, Reidy suggests, lies in her most important re-vision of Mary altogether. Irigaray states that ‘If women have no God, they are unable either to communicate or commune with one another. They need, we need, an infinite if they are to share *a little* (‘Divine Women’, p. 62). I have argued that Mary can be read as a projection of this infinite, but I intend to conclude this chapter by demonstrating that Reidy’s most radical re-vision of Mary is to suggest that the God that Mary represents is a universal and unmediated experience of the divine, a keeper of ‘the Word’ through which woman *herself* can become God.

Irigaray’s theological interpretation of female divinity utilises the work of the Marxist theologian Ludwig Feuerbach, whose own theology maintains that

‘God is man, man is God’.¹⁴² It is logical therefore to suggest that a God in the feminine gender would accordingly lead to the formula ‘God is woman, woman is God’ yet the repression of all but her most basic biological and social functions has meant that that Mary’s own divinity is denied, divested as she is of ‘the Word’ at the point of birth. However, Irigaray utilises Feuerbach to reinstate the primary importance of Mary to suggest that ‘the mother of God is the keystone of theology, of the Father-son-spirit relationship. Without the mother of God, there can be no God (‘Divine Women’, p. 69). The acknowledgement of Mary’s power over the life and death of even God him- (or her-) self is central to Reidy’s message. *Humanae Vitae* explicitly denies married couples recourse to contraceptive methods which ‘either before, at the moment of, or after sexual intercourse, is specifically intended to prevent procreation—whether as an end or as a means.’ Warner explains why: ‘any man-made method [of contraception] is forbidden because it places human intercourse on the practical level of animal reproduction, and so God no longer appears to determine and intervene in the origin of every human life’ (Warner, p. 46). In other words, a ban on contraception is necessary to maintain belief in God as creator. Mary’s message in support of contraception in the novel therefore explicitly contravenes Church doctrine and troubles the very existence of God. However, it would be untrue, and unhelpful to the argument of this chapter, to suggest that Reidy *denies* the existence of a God. In fact, Mary herself explicitly refers to God. Yet the destabilising function of Mary’s actions allows for a redefinition both of who or what that God is, and how that God can be experienced. When Mary talks about God she refers to her as ‘She’, yet she also maintains that ‘she is both male and

¹⁴² Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christentums (The Essence of Christianity)*, trans. by Marian Evans (London: John Chapman, 1854), preface, p. viii.

female' and that she herself is 'a particular concentration of power and goodness manifesting itself as God' (p. 153; 147). By establishing God as both female and multiple, Reidy allows for a conception of God which does not impose a single fixed identity upon women. Conversely, Irigaray suggests that 'this "women" would amount to a kind of chaotic, amorphous, archaic multiple which, if it is ever to achieve a form, needs some representation of unity to be imposed upon it' ('Divine Women', p. 69). In bringing the multiple identities of God together in the figure of Mary, Reidy achieves such unity, providing a 'God in the feminine gender'. However, I suggest that Mary's role in the novel is more than that of a Mother Goddess replacing a Father God. I began this chapter by suggesting that Reidy re-reads Mary as a keeper of 'the Word'. I intend to conclude by demonstrating that in doing so, that word can become woman's own, through which she can finally find her own divinity.

Twice in the Bible Luke recounts instances whereof men establish their own wisdom in relationship to 'the Word', while Mary is passed over in silence. When the shepherds hear of Jesus's miraculous birth they go to Bethlehem and, on seeing him, 'understood the word that had been spoken to them' (Luke 2.17). Later in the chapter Luke describes Mary's distress when Jesus goes missing for three days and, when eventually discovered studying amongst the scholars in the temple, rejects his mother with the words 'did you not know, that I must be about my father's business?' (Luke 2.49). On both occasions Luke recounts: '[Mary] his mother kept all these words [pondering them] in her heart' (Luke 2.19;51). Reidy positions Mary as the keeper of this word by showing that she too has a voice, but she equally insists to Catherine and Theresa 'the message must come from you... You will be the mothers of the future' (p. 63). Adrienne Rich's

concept of re-vision utilises the metaphor of women being a midwife for their word and I think that it is this aspect of motherhood that Mary most vividly offers the Flynn girls, and later the Catholic women of New Zealand and perhaps of the world. The title of Reidy's novel refers to the visitation of Mary to Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist.¹⁴³ Mary's visit is occasioned when she hears that Elizabeth is six months pregnant, as prophesied by the angel Gabriel, although previously thought to be barren, mirroring her own miraculous pregnancy. Although Reidy does not specifically write about this event, the title itself evokes a sense of female sharing and of the support women owe each other in giving birth to female creation. Mary's divine aspect at the beginning of the novel alters radically to an altogether more human woman by the end, becoming not *less* divine in so doing, but by providing a *more* approachable divinity for the 'ordinary women' she wishes to reach (p. 152). In giving birth to her 'Word' in the world of these 'ordinary women', in passing on 'the Word' that she has for so long kept 'in her heart', Reidy's Mary suggests that it is in being midwives and mothers to each other, that woman can start, as Irigaray suggests, to 'be God *for ourselves* so that we can be divine for the other, not idols, fetishes, symbols that have already been outlined or determined' ('Divine Women', p. 71). Reidy's re-visionary representation of Mary offers both a female God and a model through which women can become divine, which both overturns conventional representations of Mary but also shows those representations to be already full of re-visionary potential through their popular and apocryphal origins. Yet it is in her most traditional role as mother that her most destabilising influence can be fully seen. It therefore does after all seem appropriate to allow the Church, with

¹⁴³ Luke 1.39-56.

only one slight alteration, to have a final say: ‘She acts as a mediator not as an outsider, but as a mother. She knows that as such she can point out to her Son the needs of [hu]mankind, and in fact she “has the right” to do so’ (*Redemptoris Mater*, Part I, 3.21).

CHAPTER FOUR

MARY, MARY, QUITE CONTRARY: THE TWO FACES OF RE- VISION IN DAN BROWN'S *THE DA VINCI CODE* AND MICHÈLE ROBERTS'S *THE SECRET GOSPEL OF MARY MAGDALENE*

Throughout this thesis I have examined the ways in which contemporary female authors have revised Biblical women's stories, yet in order to precisely define what feminist re-vision *is* it is perhaps useful at this point to compare it with what it is *not*. In this chapter I will compare Michèle Roberts's re-visionist image of Mary Magdalene in *The Secret Gospel of Mary Magdalene* (previously published as *The Wild Girl*) with the unacknowledged male bias of Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, a novel that purports to 'tell the *other* side of the Christ story' through a reinterpretation of Mary Magdalene's role in the early church (*The Da Vinci Code*, p. 343).¹⁴⁴ As I have discussed in the introduction to this thesis, Rich defines re-vision as 'an act of survival'. In this chapter I will identify two key aspects of feminist re-vision which enable woman's survival. Rich defines the re-

¹⁴⁴ As Mary's last name is frequently spelled both Magdalene and Magdalen, I have chosen to standardise this as Magdalene throughout in line with both Robert's and Brown's novels except where I am directly quoting different spellings.

visionary act of survival as the ‘ability to understand the assumptions in which we are drenched’ without which ‘we cannot know ourselves’ (‘When We Dead Awaken’, p. 18). The first function of feminist re-vision is thus precisely that, *re-vision*, ‘the act of looking back’ (ibid). I will show how Brown’s ‘act of looking back’ with its apparently re-visionary account of Mary Magdalene is enacted in a narrative mode which serves to confirm a univocal male authority. I will compare this with Roberts’s treatment of Biblical history which serves to trouble ‘the assumptions in which we are drenched’ by questioning the nature of history itself as ‘man-made’, highlighting the subjective nature of all historical narratives. I will then go on to show how such approaches affect the historical portrayal of women within the two novels. Rachel Blau DuPlessis suggests that ‘[g]iving voice to the voiceless and making visible the invisible are two prime manoeuvres in feminist poetics’ (p. 41). I will show how Roberts’s woman-centred novel offers a lost female perspective that serves to reintegrate women into a patriarchal history that has rendered women voiceless and invisible, empowering women to ‘know ourselves’. In contrast I will show how Brown subsumes the figure of Mary Magdalene into a male-identified dynastic tradition that repositis ‘woman’ as a vessel for male history which radically erases female historical, social and cultural presence.

It is perhaps apropos that the two novels I have chosen in order to look at the nature of re-vision should have Mary Magdalene at their centre. The Magdalene’s character and image have historically been subject to multiple re-visions, both positively and negatively identified. Mary is mentioned twelve times by name throughout the gospels. The story told through these instances shows her as one of ‘many women’ who follow Christ, ‘ministering unto him’

(Matthew 27.55; Mark 15.41). Both Luke and Mark describe Mary as having being cured of ‘seven devils’ (Mark 16.9; Luke 8.2). Mary is shown to be present at the crucifixion of Christ (Mark 15.40; John 19.25) and the resurrection (Matthew 28.1; Mark 16.9; Luke 24.10; John 20.18), reporting her vision of the risen Christ to the other disciples (John 20.18), and being disbelieved according to Mark (16.11) and Luke (24.11). Mary’s potential importance in both the ministry of Jesus and as a key witness to the resurrection distinguishes her from the other female followers of Christ. Susan Haskin notes that ‘it is immediately clear from the gospels that the evangelists are careful to name her precisely, setting her apart from the several other Marys in their texts, and in every account of the crucifixion except John’s, placing her at the head of the list of Christ’s female followers’.¹⁴⁵ Despite this, Pope Gregory the Great, writing in the sixth century, conflated Mary Magdalene with both the unnamed ‘sinner’ of Luke 7.37 and the woman ‘whom John calls Mary’, that is Mary of Bethany, sister of Martha, first mentioned in John 11.1.¹⁴⁶ Furthermore, Gregory’s association of the unnamed sinner with ‘flesh’ and ‘forbidden acts’, unmentioned in the gospels, is used to identify Mary as the penitent whore that has become traditional Church teaching.

Haskins notes how ‘Gregory’s sermons on Mary Magdalen established her fame’ during his own time, while the popularity of the homilies during the eighth and ninth centuries ensured that ‘his formulation of the composite Magdalen thus passed into homiletic literature to become stock-in-trade during the Middle Ages’ (Haskins, p. 96). The model of redeemed sinner or penitent whore that resulted from Gregory’s interpretation endured well into the twentieth century, being officially rescinded by the Vatican only in the 1969 calendar reforms which

¹⁴⁵ Susan Haskins, *Mary Magdalen: The Essential History* (London: HarperCollins, 2005), p. 11.

¹⁴⁶ Gregory the Great, *Hom. XXXIII, PL LXXVI, col. 1239.*

renamed Mary as a 'disciple' only.¹⁴⁷ While these reforms 'disentangled' the several women that Gregory identifies, effectively removing the association of Mary with that of the sinner, Katherine Ludwig Jansen notes how such re-vision itself was used to de-emphasise Mary's importance:

As of 1969 it was decreed that [Mary Magdalene] was to be venerated only as a disciple, the revised title inscribed after her name in the new calendar. In an earlier calendar reform her feast-day, which in the Middle Ages had been celebrated by a duplex, the most elaborate of all liturgies reserved for the most important saints, was reduced to a memorial, a simple remembrance. Now Mary Magdalene was to be remembered merely as one of many of Christ's disciples, a pale shadow of the complexity of her symbolic significance in the Middle Ages.¹⁴⁸

It may be that a feminist sexual politics should welcome the eradication of such 'symbolic significance', utilised in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to validate a Protestant Victorian ethic which demonised and effectively imprisoned sexually transgressive women as a social peril.¹⁴⁹ Nonetheless, the systematic erosion of Mary Magdalene's significance, indeed her very presence, has been an unremitting tradition of Catholic teaching.¹⁵⁰ Despite this, contemporary accounts of Mary Magdalene, many of them feminist in character, have more recently begun to re-examine her role, utilising the Biblical distinction of the gospels to accord her greater significance than traditional histories have previously

¹⁴⁷ 'Sacred Congregation of Rites', *Roman Calendar* (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1970).

¹⁴⁸ Katherine Ludwig Jansen, *Making of the Magdalen: Preaching and Popular Devotion in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 336.

¹⁴⁹ For more on the 'Magdalen-house' and its claim to serve the public interest see Haskins, pp. 310-324.

¹⁵⁰ For example, it is interesting to note that, despite the Vatican reforms that finally separated Mary Magdalene from the female 'sinner' in 1969, Mary is still referred to as 'the converted sinner' in John Paul II's Easter blessing in 1997. The phrase 'urbi et orbi' which such blessings are entitled, meaning 'for the city and for the world' signifies that the document is addressed to the entire Catholic world and thus perhaps reflects a widespread ongoing Catholic association of Mary Magdalene with the penitent whore while the calendar reforms simultaneously diminish her significance by reducing her veneration. John Paul II, 'Urbi et Orbi', *Papal Archive*, Easter Sunday, 30 March (1997),

<http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/messages/urbi/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_30031997_urbi_en.html> [accessed 10 Aug 2010].

allowed.¹⁵¹ Haskins notes that '[Mary's] prominent position has naturally engendered much speculation about Mary Magdalene's exact role and place within the group of women followers, but there has recently been a growing tendency to see her as its leader' (*The Essential History*, p. 11). The discovery of the Nag Hammadi texts in 1945, containing the *Gospel of Philip*, a text that appears to accord a closer relationship between Mary Magdalene and Jesus than previously believed, has led to suggestions that Mary was variously a disciple, teacher, rival to Peter, potential leader of the Christian movement, and most contentiously that Mary was in fact Jesus' wife and mother of his child.¹⁵² This last claim is at the centre of Dan Brown's novel. Although by no means exclusive to Brown, having previously been debated by a number of scholars, perhaps most famously by Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh and Henry Lincoln in *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*, from which Brown draws heavily, it is inarguably Brown's novel, *The Da Vinci Code*, and more latterly the Hollywood blockbuster of the same name that have popularised this belief latterly.¹⁵³

¹⁵¹ For example Haskins points to Aurélie Briac's *Évangile selon Marie-Madeleine* (1984), Carolyn Slaughter's *Magdalene* (1978) and Jacqueline Kelen's *Amour infini: Marie-Madeleine, Prostituée sacrée* (1982); To these can be added the following selection published within the last ten years alone: Kathleen McGowan's *Magdalene Line Trilogy, The Expected One* (2006), *The Book of Love* (2009) and *The Poet Prince* (2010); Adriana Szulczynska's *Mary Magdalene and the Conspiracy of Fools* (2008); Jennifer Chaplin's *A Song of Songs; Mary Magdalene Awakes* (2008); Ann Kagarise's *The Sinful Woman* (2005); Donna Napoli's *Song of the Magdalene* (2004); Margaret George's *Mary, Called Magdalene* (2002).

¹⁵² For scholarly discussions of Mary's role as depicted in Gnostic texts see Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, pp. 15; 84-5; Haskins, *Mary Magdalene*, pp. 33-57. While these texts discuss Mary's potential role as the 'companion' of Jesus the idea that Mary was in fact Jesus' wife is most predominantly found in popular texts. The first to popularise the notion was Donovan Joyce's dubious 'investigative' best-seller *The Jesus Scroll* (1973). While numerous other books have developed such theories, perhaps the best known are Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh and Henry Lincoln's, *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* (1982) and Margaret Starbird's *The Woman with the Alabaster Jar* (1993).

¹⁵³ Brown's dependence on Baigent *et al*'s text is best demonstrated by the infamous lawsuit filed by the authors of *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* claiming copyright infringement against Random House, Brown's publisher. Although Baigent *et al* ultimately lost their case, and Brown denied that their book had been among his primary research material, the central elements of Brown's premise are directly taken from *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*. While these claims are also found in the texts cited by Brown as his principal sources (Lynn Picknett and Clive Prince's *The Templar Revelation* (1997) and Margaret Starbird's *The Woman with the Alabaster*

Brown's novel follows Robert Langdon, a professor of 'religious symbology' who is inadvertently implicated in the murder of Jacques Saunière, curator of the Louvre Museum and leader of a secret society called the Priory of Scion. The investigation of Saunière's death leads Langdon, accompanied by Saunière's estranged granddaughter, cryptographer Sophie Neveu, on a worldwide hunt for the Holy Grail itself, pursued by the *Direction Centrale Police Judiciaire* (DCPJ), engaging along the way the assistance of British Knight, Sir Leigh Teabing. During the course of the novel the grail is revealed to be the physical remains of Mary Magdalene, along with documentation proving her marriage to Jesus Christ and the birth of their child, leading to the bloodline of the Merovingian Kings of France and ultimately to Sophie herself. Central to the plot of the novel is Brown's claim that the 'true' nature of the grail has been suppressed by the Catholic Church, represented in *The Da Vinci Code* by an albino monk, Silas, who pursues Langdon under the influence of a shady character known only as 'the teacher' until he is revealed to be Sir Leigh. The novel ends with Sophie being reunited with her lost brother and grandmother, and concludes only when Langdon finally cracks the 'code' of Mary's final resting place, under the inverted pyramid of the Louvre itself.

The sensational plot of the novel has led to an almost unprecedented level of interest in Biblical history. The novel has sold 70 million copies worldwide, making it one of the bestselling novels of the twenty-first century.¹⁵⁴ The industry

Jar: Mary Magdalen and the Holy Grail), the combination of claims that Jesus had a child with Mary Magdalene, that their descendents became the Merovingian kings of France, that this bloodline is the true nature of the grail, and that this fact has been suppressed by the Catholic Church, is only found in Baigent and Leigh's text. In addition, Prince himself drew directly from Baigent and Leigh. I therefore take *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* as the primary source for the events of Brown's novel.

¹⁵⁴ This figure is taken from *The Da Vinci Code*'s publishers, Random House, referring to copies sold. <http://www.danbrownofficial.co.uk/danbrown.asp> [accessed 28 Feb 2011]. However, Mark Lawson, writing for *The Guardian* cites a figure of almost 90 million readers, presumably taking

that has sprung up around the novel, including a plethora of popular texts and television programmes examining the ‘facts’ of *The Da Vinci Code*, a number of spoof versions and pastiches, and a seemingly unending variety of ‘Da Vinci Code tours’ offering guided visits to the locations featured in the novel, testifies to its popular reception.¹⁵⁵ Yet the interest that has surrounded, and to some extent plagued, the novel is by no means unique. The publication of Baigent et al’s text in 1982 produced similar reactions, making ‘the front pages of sundry newspapers’ as well as eliciting furious rebuttals from numerous critics, historians and prominent theologians (Baigent et al, pp. 1-2). Martin Scorsese’s 1988 film *The Last Temptation of Christ*, based on the book of the same name by Nikos Kazantzakis, which similarly portrays a sexual relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene, was the subject of violent protests and has been banned in a number of countries.¹⁵⁶ Yet while such controversy has undoubtedly contributed to the ‘hype’ surrounding both *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* and *The Last Temptation of Christ*, neither has garnered the sort of following that Brown’s novel engendered. Perhaps the reasons for this lie in Brown’s own sensational claim to be presenting factual material. Although Scorsese’s film was arguably born of his own religious convictions, its foundational text, Kazantzakis’s novel, is firmly identified as fiction. Baigent et al are at pains to point out in their

into account library loans as well. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/dec/05/books-of-the-noughties> [accessed 28 Feb 2011].

¹⁵⁵ The popular ‘historical’ or ‘investigative’ texts focusing on *The Da Vinci Code* are far too numerous to list here, the results for a simple Amazon search for history texts about the novel numbering in their hundreds. A number of television shows have also investigated the claims of the novel, including Channel 4’s *The Real Da Vinci Code* presented by Tony Robinson (first broadcast 03 April 2010) <http://www.channel4.com/programmes/the-real-da-vinci-code/episode-guide/series-1/episode-1> [accessed 28 Feb 2011]. Novels that draw on Brown include Raymond Khoury’s *The Last Templar* (2010) and Steve Berry’s *The Templar Legacy* (2006) as well as spoof novels such as *The Asti Spumanti Code* by Toby Clements (2005) and *The Marketing Code* by Stephen Brown (2006). For an example of one of the many guided tours based on the novel see <http://www.visitlondon.com/events/detail/2003762>. [accessed 28 Feb 2011].

¹⁵⁶ For further discussion of the controversy surrounding Scorsese’s film see Robin Riley, *Film, Faith and Cultural Conflict: The Case of Martin Scorsese’s Last Temptation of Christ* (Westport: Praeger, 2003).

introduction that ‘we had propounded what we explicitly declared to be no more than an hypothesis’ and ‘it was with a vision akin to that of the novelist that we endeavoured to produce our book’ (p. 7; p. 15). *The Da Vinci Code*, on the other hand, despite its fictional form, is marked by a singular claim to authority.

The novel opens with a prefatory page outlining a number of ‘facts’ central to the novel’s events. These facts include the identification of The Priory of Sion as a real secret society surviving from its foundation in 1099, the existence of ‘discovered parchments known as Les Dossiers Secrets’ which identifies a number of illustrious historical figures as members of The Priory, including the eponymous Leonardo Da Vinci, information about the practices of coercion and corporal mortification within the Vatican prelature, Opus Dei, and finally a statement that ‘all descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents and secret rituals in this novel are accurate’ (*The Da Vinci Code*, 15).¹⁵⁷ Despite Brown’s public statement that ‘*The Da Vinci Code* is a novel and therefore a work of fiction’, Daniel Candel Bormann notes that Brown’s assertion that ‘these real elements are interpreted and debated by fictional characters’ makes it difficult to ‘draw the line separating “real elements” from their appearance’.¹⁵⁸ Furthermore, contradictions in Brown’s own statements about the novel make it difficult to unravel what is presented as ‘truthful’ within the novel and what is his own fictional interpretation. Brown’s official website states, ‘the “FACT” page makes no statement whatsoever about any of the ancient theories discussed by fictional characters. Interpreting those ideas is left to the reader’. Yet when asked ‘how

¹⁵⁷ It is important to note that even that information which is stated as ‘fact’ within the novel is the subject of debate and many of the sources from which Brown draws have been shown to be questionable at best. For an example of this see: Bill Putnam and John Edwin Wood, ‘Unravelling the Da Vinci Code’, *History Today* 55: 1 (2005), 18-20.

¹⁵⁸ Dan Brown, *Q&A: An Interview with Dan Brown*, <<http://www.danbrown.com>> [accessed 12 August 2010]; Daniel Candel Bormann, ‘Ein Bild hielt uns gefangen: *The Da Vinci Code* and the *Humanae Vitae*’, *Neophilologus* 91 (2007), 333-350; 334.

much of this [novel] is based on reality in terms of things that absolutely occurred?’ during an interview for NBC Today in 2003, Brown responded ‘absolutely all of it’.¹⁵⁹

While Brown may share some of feminism’s re-visionary aims in questioning the biased nature of history, asking ‘how historically accurate is history itself?’, the claims made both within the prefatory pages of the novel and in the media serve to establish Brown as a purveyor of an alternative, but equally authoritative, history that fails to interrogate the historical paradigms he claims to hold in such contempt. (Brown, *Q&A*) Furthermore, this authoritative history is quickly identified within the novel as the preserve of men. Brown constructs a third-person omniscient narrative, establishing an unquestioned authorial voice which, despite its male subjectivity, is presented as objective authority, while the central male characters of the novel are unvaryingly associated with power and prestige. The novel’s central character, Robert Langdon, is swiftly confirmed as a man of intellectual weight. Following Langdon’s first appearance, Brown draws the reader’s attention to ‘a crumpled flyer’ which establishes Langdon as ‘Professor of Religious Symbology, Harvard University’ (p. 21). A few pages further on, Langdon’s authority is further confirmed when, in a ‘flashback’ scene, he recalls his introduction at a lecture:

Our guest tonight needs no introduction. He is the author of numerous books: *The Symbology of Secret Sects*, *the Art of the Illuminati*, *The Lost language of Ideograms*, and when I say he wrote the book on *Religious Iconology*, I mean that quite literally. Many of you use his textbooks in class. (p. 23)

Despite needing ‘no introduction’ the novel insists on providing one, establishing both Langdon’s status as an expert in ‘secret’ or ‘lost’ knowledge and

¹⁵⁹ Matt Lauer, ‘NBC Today Interview’, *Dan Brown at Transworld*, <<http://www.booksattransworld.co.uk/danbrown/interview.htm>> [accessed 28 Feb 2011].

his role as a teacher. Such inelegant plot devices reflect one of the major criticisms of the novel. Anthony Lane notes that such practices create the ‘nasty sense in “The Da Vinci Code” that [...] we are being bullied into taking its pronouncements at face value [...] [Brown] can’t stop shoving us along with jabs of information and opinion that we don’t yet require’.¹⁶⁰ This tendency to force-feed the reader information not only increases the sense of narrative authority, but also identifies Langdon and Brown himself as an influential conveyor of powerful ‘secret’ information. The didactic role that Brown assigns himself, both through his authorial interventions and his website presence, thus undermines any claim the novel may have to question historical objectivity. In fact, history is shown throughout the novel to be simply ‘hidden’ from general view, but, crucially, available through Langdon (and to some extent, Brown). Early in the novel Langdon notes that ‘most tourists mistranslated Jardins des Tuileries as relating to the thousands of tulips that bloomed here, but *Tuileries* is actually a literal reference to [...] the city’s famous red roofing tiles – or *tuiles*’ (p. 33). Later on he reflects that ‘few people realized that the four-year schedule of modern Olympics still followed the half-cycles of Venus. Even fewer people knew that the five pointed star had almost become the official Olympic seal’ (p. 61). While individual historical events may be queried within the novel, Langdon, and by inference, Brown, is thus consistently shown to be in possession of a superseding ‘truth’ that simply exchanges one authorised history for another. Furthermore, this hidden history is only available via Langdon’s (and again, Brown’s) intermediation, suggesting a hierarchy of knowledge in which the male authority passes down historical ‘truths’ to his unenlightened subjects.

¹⁶⁰ Anthony Lane, ‘Heaven Can Wait “The Da Vinci Code”’, *New Yorker*, 29 May (2006) <http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2006/05/29/060529crci_cinema?currentPage=1> [accessed 28 Feb 2011].

The novel's re-visionary status is, then, seriously undermined by its authorizing effects. Rich suggests that feminist re-vision entails a 'drive to self-knowledge' ('When We Dead Awaken', p. 18). Brown's novel, on the contrary, offers women knowledge only through submission to a univocal male authority. The central female character of the novel, Sophie Neveu, appears at first glance to be a figure of some power. As a cryptographer for the DCPJ she alerts Langdon to his status as a suspect in the murder of Jacques Saunier, enables him to escape from the Louvre and the French Judicial Police, and her own expertise provides insights throughout the novel that lead to the story's final conclusion that she is in fact the descendent of Jesus Christ. Yet despite being identified as of above average intelligence and a professional code-breaker, Sophie, the narrator tells the reader 'was not equipped to understand her grandfather's intentions, and so he had assigned Robert Langdon as her guide. A tutor to oversee her education' (p. 293). This patriarchal mediation of Neveu's self-discovery serves to define the boundaries of female knowledge in male terms. Central to Neveu's self-knowledge is the re-vision of Mary Magdalene's history, which turns out to be Neveu's own, yet such knowledge is only available to her through the guidance of the novel's male experts. Furthermore, the acquisition of female knowledge is presented by Brown in terms that explicitly call upon a literary tradition dominated by male writers. Bormann notes that 'the treatment [Neveu] receives from Teabing [...] is little more than verbal rape' (Bormann, p. 339). Teabing, another male of supreme authority, is described at first as 'totally trustworthy' and carries the weight of the British establishment. 'Sir Leigh' as Langdon is at pains to point out, lives in 'more of a modest castle than a mansion' and 'proclaim[s] his home a British Isle unto itself' (pp. 297; 298). Yet Teabing's identification as a

Knight, along with the connotations of chivalry that such a role suggests, masks a troublingly predatory attitude towards female knowledge. Having established Neveu as a 'maiden' in contrast to his Knightly presence, Teabing's discovery of Neveu's innocence in grail lore prompts a 'smile that [...] was almost obscene' and he declares 'Robert, you've brought me a *virgin?*' and admonishes 'I thought you were a gentleman. You've robbed her of the climax!' (p. 310).

The sexualised metaphor utilised throughout this section of the novel exposes a disturbingly masculinist attitude towards female knowledge, the 'climax' of Teabing and Langdon's revelation that Mary Magdalene *is* the Holy Grail. Emma Parker notes that 'Freud's description of female sexuality as a "dark continent" not only suggests mystery but also passivity by presenting the woman's body as a land waiting to be conquered'.¹⁶¹ Brown appropriates such narratives to link female sexuality with female knowledge, establishing the female mind as a passive recipient of male knowledge. Having arrived under cover of night, Neveu's mind is kept literally in the dark by Teabing's request to 'Close your eyes if you would' while asking her to describe Da Vinci's *The Last Supper* (p. 318). His 'smug' revelations about the painting situate his male authority as a conquering force over the dark continent of the female mind. Neveu's virginal mind becomes the focus for Teabing's obsessive preoccupation with grail legend while the dominating knowledge of the two men is contrasted with Neveu's passive and fearful innocence. Playing upon sexualised romance tropes, Brown counterpoints the 'rising air of academic anticipation now in both of [Sophie's] male companions' with an air of female frigidity in Neveu who responds to their knowledge with 'a little chill' (pp. 311-12).

¹⁶¹ Emma Parker, 'Sex Changes: The Politics of Pleasure in the Novels of Michèle Roberts's, *Literature Interpretation Theory*, 17 (2006), 325-351 (p. 335).

Despite Neveu's apprehension, the two men skilfully lead her through a strip-tease of narrative revelation over eight chapters in which both Neveu and the reader are brought to a series of narrative climaxes. Yet Neveu's self-knowledge is ultimately contained by male authority. Having delivered his revelations about the history of Mary Magdalene, Teabing determines that Neveu cannot know whether her grandfather was indeed a Grand Master of the Priory of Scion. He tells her 'Granddaughter or not, you are not eligible to receive such knowledge' (p. 353). This denial of Neveu's access to her own sacred family history marks the novel's central argument - that female knowledge of the divine self is to be determined solely by male authority. Knowledge of the location of Mary Magdalene's tomb, along with proof of Neveu's genealogy, is pointed to within the novel via a 'keystone', an encrypted stone marker. Neveu uses her cryptographic knowledge to discuss the concept of 'a "self-authorizing language"'. That is, if you're smart enough to read it, you're permitted to know what is being said' (p. 279). Yet the 'self-authorisation' of Neveu's search for self-knowledge, a search for her own identity, is established throughout the novel within parameters of 'worth' and eligibility that exclude her, rather than intelligence. Neveu notes 'the keystone is a *Preuve de mérite* [...] If a rising Priory *seneschal* can open it, he proves himself worthy of the information it holds' (p. 279). The fact that it is Langdon and not Neveu who ultimately holds the knowledge of the location of the tomb demonstrates that, for Brown, female history must be determined by and remain in the hands of men.

It is clear then that any surface re-visionary aims Brown claims to have are subsumed within the novel by the establishment of a univocal male authority which serves to simply replace one authorised form of knowledge with another.

Brown firmly distinguishes between ‘false’ history available to all and ‘true’ knowledge available only to the (male) initiated. Teabing notes that ‘the modern Bible was compiled and edited by men who possessed a political agenda’ and later confirms that ‘almost everything our fathers taught us about Christ is *false*’ (p. 317; p. 318). Yet this is countered by Teabing and Langdon’s own knowledge of ‘the true Grail story’ which they insist upon, backed up by the ‘real historians’ that Langdon draws from (p. 317; p. 225). Rachel Blau DuPlessis stresses that a feminist re-visionary writing practice must make the “meaning production process” itself “the site of struggle” (DuPlessis, p. 34). The guise of ‘alternative history’ within *The Da Vinci Code*, with its claims to give voice to a lost female history, is revealed in fact to be a further internalization of a legitimizing and univocal male authority that fails to question such a process. There is little, if any, room for Neveu or the reader to question or interpret the information so vigorously foisted upon them by Brown and any ‘struggle’ over meaning within the novel is quickly averted by Langdon’s (and Brown’s) authority.

Heather Walton asks if ‘the effect of offering multiple rereadings of a sacred tradition is to strengthen that tradition rather than to challenge it’.¹⁶² I have argued that Brown’s narrative mode, marked by authority and an apparent objectivity, simply strengthens a seemingly sacred tradition in which female history is ‘man-made’. Michèle Roberts’s *The Secret Gospel of Mary Magdalene* demonstrates how such traditions *can* be rewritten in ways that challenge, rather than reaffirm patriarchal authority. Jeanette King suggests that ‘Like other prophets before her [...] Roberts’s Mary Magdalene claims to be leading her listeners back to the truth’ (King, p. 105). King suggests that Roberts’s use of

¹⁶² Heather Walton, ‘Feminist Revisioning’, in *The Oxford Handbook of English Literature and Theology* ed. by A. Hass, D. Jasper and E. Jay (Oxford: OUP, 2007), pp. 543-557 (p. 555).

‘older sources’ alongside contemporary feminist perspectives enables her to posit an ‘alternative Christianity’ that draws equally upon the authority of the past (ibid). Indeed, Roberts has drawn from Biblical, and in particular Catholic, traditions throughout her work. Yet, as the daughter of a French Catholic Mother and English Protestant Father, her engagement with religious discourse is often conflicted, drawing from orthodox and Gnostic texts as well as feminist and psychoanalytic theory alongside her own experiences as a woman to create fictionalised and reconstructed narratives of female identity. One of the key elements of Roberts’s work is, therefore, the interrogation of traditional narratives about womanhood and the establishment of authority. While several of Roberts’s novels engage with Biblical narratives, including *The Book of Mrs Noah*, and *Impossible Saints* (the latter discussed elsewhere in this thesis), *The Secret Gospel of Mary Magdalene* is perhaps Roberts’s most explicit challenge towards Biblical authority. Where *The Book of Mrs Noah* offers an equally woman-centred gospel, and *Impossible Saints* redefines religious women through an examination of the patristic tradition of hagiography, Roberts’s engagement with the figure of Mary Magdalene works to trouble the foundational texts of the New Testament and with them, the authority of the Church itself.

Utilising the ‘composite character’ of traditional church teaching about Mary Magdalene, the novel follows Mary from her childhood in Bethany, not described in the Bible, where she experiences ‘trance[s] of pleasure’ in which she sings forbidden songs (p. 13). Running from ‘the authority of the men of my own village’ Mary is raped on the way to Alexandria where she is taken in by Sibylla, a ‘hetaira’ or courtesan (p. 14; p. 23). Upon her return to Bethany Mary meets Jesus and becomes first his friend and later a disciple alongside ‘several women’

including her sister Martha and Mary, mother of Jesus (p. 49). The novel describes both Jesus' ministry and accounts of the crucifixion and resurrection from Mary's point of view, and continues beyond the events of the Bible to the establishment of a female-centred community within which Mary writes her gospel, living alongside her daughter, Martha and, at this time, adopted Mother Mary.

Throughout the novel Mary is shown to challenge male authority, most notably in the form of Simon Peter, the self-proclaimed 'rock' upon which the Christian church is formed (p. 129). Yet much like Mary, who 'do[es] not want to set [her]self up as an authority over other disciples', Roberts, unlike Brown and contrary to King's reading, refuses to claim such authority for herself (ibid). First published as *The Wild Girl* in 1984, Roberts's novel is itself the subject of re-vision. Roberts's renaming of the text as *The Secret Gospel of Mary Magdalene* points to the 'lost' or secret nature of women's history, much like Brown's novel, yet the nomenclature of the novel as a 'gospel' serves to question such a designation within authorised Biblical texts. The connotations of 'truth' inherent within the term are countered by Roberts's identification of gospel accounts as the basis for a 'tradition of centuries, the spinning of stories' (Author's note). Yet unlike such accounts, Roberts's own 'spinning of stories' is shown to be subjective and conditional. Constructing a first person narrative, Roberts's Mary mimics the language of the church while subtly undermining both its male focus and claims to objective witness:

Dearly beloved sisters and brothers in Jesus Christ, here begins the book of the testimony of Mary Magdalene. She who writes it does so at the command of the Saviour himself and of Mary his blessed mother, for the greater glory of God and for the edification of the disciples who shall come after her. She wishes you to know that

everything she sets down here is the truth, *as she experienced it and as she remembers it*. She has been, and she is, a witness to that truth.’ (p. 11, my emphasis)

Roberts’s concern for the inclusion of both ‘sisters’ *and* ‘brothers’, commanded by both ‘the Saviour himself’ *and* ‘Mary his blessed mother’ allows for female knowledge of the divine to be made available to both men and women, and is as equally authorised by Jesus’s mother as it is by Jesus himself, while ‘truth’ is insistently unsettled by an emphasis on subjective experience and memory. Yet crucially, Mary remains ‘a witness to that truth’ alerting the reader to the concurrent conditionality of the witnesses Roberts mimics. Such conditionality is further emphasised later on in the novel. Mary describes her own ‘task’ in writing a gospel alongside those of others:

Others among the disciples besides myself, I know, have chosen to write a record and an interpretation of the life of Jesus. I do not want to repeat their words. In any case, I cannot. The task I have been given is to set down my own experience of revelation, to bear witness to the manner in which I received God, and received the truths that Jesus spoke. (p. 70)

Drawing on the nature of gospel writing as multiple, Mary’s insistence that she cannot repeat others’ words highlights the impossibility of any historical record to adequately represent individual experience. The notion of ‘truth’ is countermanded by the prominence given to ‘my own experience’ and ‘the manner’ in which such truths are received while the specificity of Mary’s female experience, lacking in traditional gospel writing, is stressed when she notes ‘I have been commanded to write down the truth as I, who am not Simon Peter or John or any of the other male disciples saw, and I shall do so’ (ibid).

Furthermore, the act of writing is shown to change the truth:

I am telling the truth, my truth, as fairly as I can. It is not simple, and it is not single, and the telling of it changes me

and changes it. As I set myself to remember, and to write, more and more different selves fling themselves out and dance and do not fit neatly together'. (ibid)

The multiple selves that Mary experiences through writing can be seen as an acknowledgement of the reductive nature of narrative itself. Mary admits 'Certainly, in the past I told many lies [...] I was so good at telling lies. I made my life that simple in order to live it without the pain I felt so often as a child' (ibid). This recognition of the power of words to alter the self additionally underlines how the material conditions of women's lives have been subsumed by a univocal male narrative history. Mary's 'belief and [...] prayer' that 'Our different truths, collected up and written down in books are for the use and inspiration of the disciples who come after us' is simultaneously imbued with the pathos of a readership that must acknowledge the lack of these 'different truths' in Judao-Christian histories while countering such a lack in its provision of a truth that is shown to be no less subjective than its foundational narratives (ibid).

In questioning the reliability of gospel history, Roberts further brings into question the historical presence of women within such gospels. The lack of female gospel writers in the Bible has led to a radical excision of concerns that have been traditionally termed 'female'. The invisibility of women throughout the Bible is compounded by a male perspective that eschews domestic and familial interests. Jesus' miracle of turning the water into wine is preceded in the Bible with a curious irritation at being bothered with such trivial concerns: 'the wine failing, the mother of Jesus saith to him: They have no wine. And Jesus saith to her: Woman, what is that to me?' (John 2.3-4). The domestic task of providing refreshment is thus elevated to a 'loftier' male spiritual realm, becoming a 'miracle'. Roberts utilises such episodes to recast the miraculous as

simply a masculinist rewriting of activities which, when enacted by women are cast as low-status domestic activities, or otherwise hidden from the male (and thus historical) perspective. Rewriting the miracle of the loaves and the fishes, Mary describes how ‘Martha had the disciples organized, sending us hither and thither amongst the crowd, and within what seemed only a short further space of time we were all sitting down to feast on bread and dried fish and fruit that people ran back to their homes to fetch and then to distribute’ (p. 76). She humorously notes ‘People called it a miracle afterwards. I called it good housewifery. I daresay we meant the same thing’ (ibid).

Roberts’s attention to the historically ‘invisible’ realm of housewifery works to highlight how Biblical history has been presented solely according to a male perspective that privileges spirituality over the domestic while defining such spirituality as a male preserve. Martha admonishes Jesus ‘You have been feeding our souls for hours. Now it is the turn of the body’ (p. 75). As previously noted in this thesis, the soul has been historically associated with the male, while the body is termed ‘female’. Martha’s attention to the neglected body establishes how the male realm has been elevated at the expense of the female. Furthermore, such neglect is shown to be in need of remedy. In a comical juxtaposition of the divine and the quotidian, Mary’s own spirituality is tempered by an equally pressing demand for the practicalities of life: ‘Your will be done, God, I shouted eventually. Then I went inside to make breakfast’ (p. 180).

Nonetheless, while Roberts certainly draws on this aspect of traditional women’s roles, she does not confine the women of her novel to such roles. Where Martha’s domesticity is drawn upon to highlight the devaluation of ‘women’s work’, Mary’s own ‘women’s work’ is shown to be of a spiritual nature through

the raising of Lazarus. Biblical accounts of Lazarus's resurrection tell how Jesus travels to Bethany after hearing of the sickness and subsequent death of Lazarus, brother to Mary and Martha. Finding Lazarus 'four days already in the grave' Jesus tells Martha and Mary 'Thy brother shall rise again' (John 11.17: 23). In order to perform this miracle, Mary and Martha are required to confirm their belief. Mary states 'Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died' while Jesus asks Martha 'every one that liveth, and believeth in me, shall not die for ever. Believest thou this?'. She responds 'Yea Lord, I have believed that thou art Christ the Son of the living God, who art come into this world' (11.32; 26-7).

This episode thus serves to confirm not only Jesus' ability to perform miracles and establishes him as 'the resurrection and the life', prefiguring his own resurrection, but also establishes his authority as 'Son of the living God' (11.25). Furthermore, the raising of Lazarus and Martha's confirmation of Jesus' status enables more widespread belief: 'Many therefore of the Jews, who were come to Mary and Martha, and had seen the things that Jesus did, believed in him' (11.45). The Biblical Mary and Martha are therefore central to the mythology of Jesus as a miracle worker and son of God. Furthermore, their own belief is fundamental to the establishment of his authority. Roberts's rendering of this episode undermines this mythology by reintegrating a female perspective into the male-identified setting. Mary describes how she and Martha 'nursed him between us [...] mixing the medicines our mother had taught us to prepare, forcing them down his unwilling throat, soothing him through nightmares, sponging his hot restless body with cool water' (p. 37). Yet such nursing is only part of what saves Lazarus. Mary performs her own magic, which is marked by female imagery: 'The hive receives you again, I sang: the oven receives you. Sleep, brother, and then wake.

Sleep in the mother's womb, and be reborn' (p. 40). The mixture of Christian concepts, with an emphasis on being 'reborn', the domestic imagery of the oven and the mother's womb, and allusion to matriarchal communities such as the beehive, creates a sense of the potential multiplicity of a female theology that embraces both traditional church teachings and mother-goddess religions, as well as encompassing the material aspects of women's lives.

When Jesus demands of Mary, 'Did you do this in my name, and in my Father's name?' she is forced to respond 'No [...] Your God and my God.. are the same. What I have done, I did in the name of God, who has many names' (pp. 41-2). Furthermore, Mary's magic is not presented as a superior act to Martha's housewifery. She states, 'Of course I thought my way superior, as I daresay she did hers' yet 'I didn't compete with her' (p. 31). The complementary work of the two sisters demonstrates the diversity of ways in which female spirituality can be enacted. Yet despite Mary's spiritual intervention, the societal bonds within which she lives results in Jesus being recognised as the healer of Lazarus. Mary makes Martha 'promise to tell no one of what I had done, for I feared to be arraigned as a sorceress' (p. 40). Rich suggests that 'th[e] drive to self-knowledge, for women, is more than a search for identity: it is part of her refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society' ('When We Dead Awaken', p. 18). Roberts shows how such destructiveness is primarily aimed at women. While men perform miracles, confirming their holiness, women perform only magic, casting them as unholy witches, 'sorceresses', 'prostitutes' and 'heathens' denying female power and empowerment by usurping the realms of magic, sex and religion for men (*The Secret Gospel of Mary Magdalene*, p. 40; p. 50; p. 51). Following a particularly bitter argument between Mary, Jesus and

Peter, during which Peter denies women the right to preach because ‘women are the gateway to evil and to death’ Mary’s is enabled to reject such destructiveness through an engagement with the female community within Jesus’ following, through which she gains knowledge of not only herself, but of the many conditions of womanhood (p. 62):

- I am the whore, sang the mother of the Lord: and the holy one.
- I am the virgin, I sang: and I am the mother.
- I am the midwife, she sang: and she who is sterile.
- I am the honoured one, I sang: and she who is scorned.
- I am she whose wedding is great, she sang: and I have not taken a husband.
- I am the bride, I sang: and I am the bridegroom.
- I am shameless, she sang: and I am ashamed.
- I am an alien, I sang: and I am a citizen.
- Hear of me in gentleness, she sang: and learn of me in roughness.
- I am, I sang: the knowledge of my name.
- I am the first, we sang together: and I am the last. (p. 64)

This rich passage, a duet sung by Mary Magdalene and Mary, Mother of Jesus, highlights how Roberts, in line with her use of a ‘composite character’, which utilises both authorised and the ‘extremely fragmentary’ Nag Hammadi accounts of Mary Magdalene, Mary of Bethany and the unnamed sinner of Luke 7.37, undermines the binary oppositions that have confined women. King notes that ‘the Virgin Mary [is] often seen as the antithesis of the Magdalene’ (King, p. 105). Roberts, on the other hand, blends not only the three composite Marys of tradition, but additionally includes Mary, the Mother of Jesus. Such an interpretation utilises both canonical texts and later exegesis on Mary Magdalene to portray her as both disciple *and* prostitute, while exchanging traditional roles to identify Mary herself as a ‘virgin’ *and* a ‘mother, while it is the Mother of Jesus who is a whore but also holy, serving to question how ‘the male-dominated Church split women into holy sexless mothers and bad sexy whores’ to provide ‘a

figure who challenges [...] narrow-minded certainties' (Roberts, *The Secret Gospel of Mary Magdalene*, Preface).

Despite Susan Haskins negative view of Roberts's novel that 'the studied simplicity of the Magdalen's prose style is equalled only by the simplicity of the ideas', Roberts in fact rejects the more simplistic approach that Haskins herself utilises to conclude, as Roberts sees it 'that only a toned-down Magdalen, discreet and probably celibate, will advance women's cause' (Roberts, *Independent*).¹⁶³ Instead Roberts embraces the complexity of the numerous roles in which Mary Magdalene has functioned to allow for a multiplicity of potential identities for woman. Susanne Gruss confirms '[t]hrough the presentation of these dualisms and the way they blend the reputations and alleged characteristics of both women, the "binary schemes begin to collapse and move towards open-ended play"'.¹⁶⁴ Roberts shows how it is only through experience of such multiple conditions, through the breakdown of the binary divisions that have traditionally defined women, that the 'self' can be found and female history enabled. Mary ends the novel writing her gospel from the position of:

'a daughter and a mother [...] I have been a singer of songs and a prostitute and the lover of the Lord, a traveller and an outcast and an exile. I have been proclaimed as both demon and goddess, as pagan and disciple and Jew. Now, at last, I have become an ordinary woman, settled in my home and my work, peace dwelling in me'. (p. 153)

It is important to note that Roberts recasts Mary as an 'ordinary woman'. Haskins's history of Mary Magdalene suggests that 'her image embodied the

¹⁶³ Susan Haskins, *Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor* (New York: Penguin, 1993), p. 379; Michèle Roberts, 'Book Review: Street-Walking Woman: *Mary Magdalen* by Susan Haskins', *Independent*, Arts & Entertainment, 1 August (1993) < <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/book-review--streetwalking-woman-mary-magdalen-by-susan-haskins-harpercollins-pounds-25-1458639.html> > [accessed 28 Feb 2011].

¹⁶⁴ Susanne Gruss, *The Pleasure of the Feminist Text: Reading Michèle Roberts and Angela Carter* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008), p. 61.

perceptions of every era, being refashioned again and again to suit the needs and aspirations of the times' (*The Essential History*, Preface, ix).

It is of course Mary's very extraordinariness that has enabled her image to survive within the male-dominated texts of the Bible. Yet Jane Schulenburg suggests that the extraordinariness of the women who have been present within historical narratives fails to provide aspirational role models for women who are not themselves within elite or extraordinary realms.¹⁶⁵ The 'everywoman' identity that Roberts assigns to Mary, drawing on the tradition of re-interpretation that the Magdalene embodies, allows her to act as just such a role model, representing the ordinariness of both the readers of her gospel and the many women who have been excised from history. Furthermore, it is within a community of just such ordinary people, and for ordinary people, that Mary writes her gospel. Roberts's emphasis on the need for a female history to reach all levels of society is reflected within Mary's fear that her gospel will not 'free the slaves I saw in Caesaria' (p. 155). Gruss writes, '*The Wild Girl* could easily have become a piece of straightforward feminist rewriting, a gospel from the point of view of a woman' (Gruss, p. 57). Yet Mary makes it clear that her gospel is not only for women: 'Men and women and children, we have established a wider community than our original one of only four, and we have learned to live together' (p. 157). She stresses 'All of us, men and women alike, are the ovens and wine-skins of God' (p. 158). Such concerns reflect a larger theme of the novel. King suggests that Roberts 'restor[es] the female principle to the centre the creation myth' (King, p. 108). Yet I suggest that rather than emphasising a wholly female spiritual experience, Roberts works to recontextualise female experience within an

¹⁶⁵ J. T. Schulenburg, *Forgetful of Their Sex: Female Sanctity and Society, CA. 500-1100* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 25-7.

already male-identified historical tradition to provide a more nuanced conception of Biblical notions of gender.

Drawing from The Gospel of the Egyptians, Roberts alludes to a fragmentary passage which quotes Jesus as saying ‘I came to destroy the works of the female’.¹⁶⁶ Roberts reinterprets the piece to reintegrate a female perspective to Jesus’ speech: ‘when you make the male and the female one in unity, so that the male is no longer male and the female no longer female, then will you enter the Kingdom. That is what I meant by destroying the works of femaleness. I have come to destroy the works of maleness too’ (p. 61). Yet this piece is by no means a radical reinterpretation of pre-existing Biblical teaching. Jesus’ canonical speeches reject the suggestion of ‘putting away’ one’s wife, stating ‘Have ye not read, that he who made man from the beginning, made them male and female? And he said for this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife, and they two shall be in one flesh’ (Matthew 19.4-5). Roberts’s woman-centred novel embraces such passages to reflect a potential theology that can incorporate the female *alongside* the male that is already present, albeit obliquely, within the pre-existing canon. Its assured vision warns ‘We have cut our God in two, and we have cast the female part out into the desert and have called it the devil, and we have tried to bind it and to forget it and to seal it in the abyss, where it has become dangerous’ (p. 175). Such danger is revealed to be ‘how we are willing to kill each other for the sake of an idea, for the sake of keeping a dream pure and intact’ (p. 180).

Roberts’s novel demonstrates that such ideas are just a dream; that any notion of a solely female spirituality is as dangerous as the univocal male

¹⁶⁶ Ron Cameron, *The Other Gospels: Non-Canonical Gospel Texts* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), p. 47.

religiosity that has ‘raped us countless times [...] sold us in the marketplace as slaves and concubines [...] denied us souls [...] denied us independence [...] denied us an education that includes our history [...] lied to us over and over again’ (p. 171). Any suggestion that a re-visionary female history should replace male authority with a concomitantly ‘pure and intact’ female authority is shown to be disastrous:

At that moment I was omnipotent.
-What shall the verdict be, sisters? I called out: what shall we do with the Man?...
-Let us kill all the male children.
- Let us kill all the men.
-Let us withdraw our love from them for ever.
-Let us burn all their libraries and burn their books. Let us destroy their lies and begin to tell our own truth [...] Then I saw that my book was among those about to be consumed by the flames, and also the books of many other women’. (p. 173)

Ultimately Mary is only able to complete her gospel in a ‘great tumult of soul, in this confusion, and with a divided mind’ (p. 180). Yet it is in such confusion that Roberts is able to find the potential for Mary to ‘proclaim the Word’ (ibid). The ‘baggage of doubt’ that Mary carries with her at the end of the novel does not devalue the power of her message. The novel ends ‘She who dug up and found and copied this book is the daughter of the daughter of she who wrote it [...] We have uncovered and copied and passed on what she wrote in her book, as we have passed on by word of mouth the stories and songs that came from her’ (p. 181). Rich suggests about re-vision that ‘We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it’ not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us’ (‘When We Dead Awaken’, p. 19). The ‘survival’ of Mary’s ‘stories and songs’, of women’s historical presence, are shown by Roberts to be just such an act, breaking the hold of a male history

that has erased women. Mary's 'divided mind' offers a different knowledge of the past for women: 'through her woman's body she knows the Spirit and the Word, that through her body she experiences God, and I shall pray that Wisdom may come to her and enable her to open herself, when the time is ripe, to that mystery of love which brings the Resurrection and the Life' (p. 181). Roberts's insistent intermingling of the historically separate (and gendered) spheres of 'body' and 'spirit', of 'wisdom' and 'love', unsettles such patriarchal divisions, allowing for the inclusion of a previously hidden female perspective within androcentric narratives of spirituality. Furthermore, as the ending of the novel shows, the 'secret gospel' that Roberts provides is not simply an alternative history, but the ultimate revelation of a hidden oral and written female tradition that reflects the 'secret' nature of a women's history that has been deemed to be 'lost' or simply non-existent and is only now beginning to be rediscovered through the works of feminist scholars.

If Roberts's novel points to a hidden female historical presence, empowering women to 'know ourselves', Brown's novel promises an even more emphatic focus on a 'lost' female heritage. The novel's emphasis on the 'lost sacred feminine', its promotion of 'powerful female concepts with ties to Nature and Mother Earth' and criticism of 'a Church that had subjugated women [and] banished the Goddess' suggest that the novel is touched by feminist re-visionary concerns about the survival of female agency in a religious culture that has historically erased women (p. 42; p. 61; p. 322). Indeed Brown himself suggests that 'the novel is very empowering to women', stressing how 'women in most cultures have been stripped of their spiritual power' (Brown, *Q&A*). However, I would argue that the surface traces of concern with women's rights that the novel

displays disguise a fundamentally de-historicising impetus towards female subjectivity that in fact *confirms* a spiritual ethos which objectifies and silences women.

The establishment of Mary Magdalene as a prominent figure in the early Church is central to the plot of *The Da Vinci Code*. In contrast to Roberts, who presents Mary as both a prostitute and Jesus' lover, Langdon and Teabing refute the historical tradition that casts Mary as a prostitute to argue 'Magdalene was no such thing. That unfortunate misconception is the legacy of a smear campaign launched by the early Church. The Church needed to defame Mary Magdalene in order to cover up her dangerous secret - her role as the Holy Grail' (p. 328). This 'role', later revealed to be that of Jesus' spouse and mother of his bloodline, is further explained: 'Jesus was the original feminist. He intended for the future of His Church to be in the hands of Mary Magdalene' (p. 334). Teabing's astonishing claims, confirmed as 'a matter of historical record' serve as the basis for lengthy expositions throughout the novel on 'the outcast one, the lost sacred feminine' (p. 329; p. 344). Brown thus firmly identifies through Mary Magdalene a female heritage of church leadership that has been usurped by patriarchy, resulting in a denial of female religiosity both in terms of ministry and, more fundamentally, in terms of spirituality itself. As such it can be seen as displaying similarly re-visionist concerns to Roberts's novel as 'a powerful indictment of the disavowal of the feminine in Western religious thought', suggesting a feminist stance in Brown's novel.¹⁶⁷ Indeed, Haskins' own feminist history of Mary Magdalene enacts just such a wish to, as Roberts has put it, 'recover Mary Magdalen from the male fantasists who made her the doyenne of brothels,

¹⁶⁷ Clare Hanson, 'During Mother's Absence: The Fiction of Michèle Roberts's', in *British Women Writing Fiction*, ed. by Abby H.P. Welock (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2000), pp. 229-247 (p. 235).

penitentiaries and more or less tasteful porn' (Roberts, 1993). Given such use of feminist rhetoric in Brown's novel, which uses phrases such as 'the subjugated goddess' and 'the incarceration of the sacred feminine', one might expect Brown's novel to offer a more visible history of this 'lost' and subjugated heritage (p. 349). Yet it is remarkable how little the novel concerns itself with Mary Magdalene's actual history. Apart from a brief excerpt from *The Gospel of Mary* (erroneously titled 'the Gospel of Mary Magdalene' in the novel) the novel presents Mary entirely in terms of her 'role' in the early church. This role is shown in the novel to be far from that of leader, as suggested by Teabing, but instead focuses entirely on her capacity as a vessel for the sacred bloodline of Jesus Christ.

As previously noted, Brown's website suggests that *The Da Vinci Code* 'is very empowering to women' (Brown, *Q&A*). Daniel Candel Bormann notes the ways in which 'Brown empowers both nature and woman by grafting them on to religion, the latter through the pivotal term "sacred feminine" (p. 321), which portrays women as goddesses because of their natural "ability to produce life"' (Bormann, p. 335). Throughout the novel Brown seems at pains to establish Langdon's 'enlightened' thinking on women, identifying him as an expert on 'the concept of female sanctity' (p. 42). His thinking is termed 'unconventional' and 'controversial' (p. 43). Yet Langdon's speciality is the linking of 'powerful female concepts with ties to Nature and Mother Earth' (p. 61). Kristy Maddux suggests 'All of *the Da Vinci Code's* talk about the sacred feminine and goddess worship, even if not identical to cultural/difference feminism, certainly resonates with that ideology [...] the novel's anti-feminist tendencies are a direct result of its

feminist ideology'.¹⁶⁸ This 'feminist ideology' displays similarities to the somewhat criticised work of Mary Daly which argues for 'the increasing indications that there was a universally matriarchal world which prevailed before the descent into hierarchical dominion by males' and views female qualities as those which she accuses the church of having 'attempted to steal from women – Natural, Elemental, Spiritual Power' (*Beyond God the Father*, xiv). Despite the positive elements of Daly's feminist theology, which argues passionately and convincingly about the need to break out of the moulds that Christian tradition has used to confine female spirituality, the association of women with nature, labelled within *The Da Vinci Code* as 'very sacred'(p. 321), has long been rejected by many feminist thinkers.

Simone de Beauvoir, writing in 1949, suggested 'Woman has ovaries, a uterus: these peculiarities imprison her in her subjectivity, circumscribe her within the limits of her own nature' (de Beauvoir, p. 15). The novel explicitly draws on the essentialist, antifeminist tropes that de Beauvoir discusses when Langdon expertly explains woman's 'nature' in typically authoritative fashion:

Many people incorrectly assume the male symbol is derived from a shield and spear, while the female symbol represents a mirror reflecting beauty [...] The original symbols are far simpler [...]

Λ

This symbol is the original icon for *male*.. a rudimentary phallus [...] it represents aggression and manhood [...]

V

[...] The chalice [...] resembles a cup or vessel, and more important, it resembles the shape of a woman's womb. This symbol communicates femininity, womanhood and fertility. (pp. 320-1)

¹⁶⁸ Kristy Maddux, 'The Da Vinci Code and the Regressive Gender Politics of Celebrating Women', *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 25: 3 (2008), 228-234 (p. 228).

While man is associated with physical power and active sexuality, the female becomes a passive ‘vessel’ awaiting fulfilment in fertility. Brown’s problematic association of female nature with fertility is mirrored by the novel’s emphasis on Mary’s lineage. Teabing, drawing on the dubious interpretations of Gnostic texts that line his bookcase, claims ‘Mary Magdalene was of royal descent [...] Magdalene was recast as a whore in order to erase evidence of her powerful family ties’ (p. 335).¹⁶⁹ Although it is possible to view this pseudo-historical claim as a positive affirmation of female historical presence, in line with Roberts’s novel, Vanessa Kearney’s doctoral thesis on the ‘sacred feminine’ in *The Da Vinci Code* notes ‘given the choice between revealing the secret of the Grail and destroying the Church (Teabing’s Mary –Daly-ish goal) or maintaining the Grail’s mystery, the novel chooses the latter, essentially choosing the status quo over the feminist possibilities of eradicating or radically reshaping the Catholic Church’.¹⁷⁰ While Langdon and Teabing initially conduct a quest to reveal the Magdalene’s secret, Teabing is ultimately shown to be a megalomaniacal murderer whose thirst for knowledge overrides his morality, while Langdon himself is persuaded that ‘it is the mystery and wonderment that serve our souls, not the Grail itself. The beauty of the Grail lies in her ethereal nature’ (p. 581). This essentialist need for the ‘mystery’ and ‘ethereal nature’ of woman is ultimately shown to be of greater importance to the world than the destruction of patriarchy that the novel’s anticlerical stance might suggest as the more natural outcome. This somewhat contradictory ending is perhaps explained

¹⁶⁹ The sources that Teabing is shown to own are: Lynn Picknett and Clive Prince, *The Templar Revelation: Secret Guardians of the True Identity of Christ* (1997); Margaret Starbird, *The Woman with the Alabaster Jar: Mary Magdalene and the Holy Grail* (1993); Margaret Starbird, *The Goddess in the Gospels: Reclaiming the Sacred Feminine* (1998); Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh and Henry Lincoln, *Holy Blood and Holy Grail* (1982).

¹⁷⁰ Vanessa Kearney, ‘The Sacred Feminine in the Age of the Blockbuster’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, Indiana University, 2009), p. 144.

by the revelation that Teabing's concerns, far from being the posited redemption of 'the wronged Queen', are in fact of a more dynastic nature which privileges a male royal lineage while relegating Mary to the status of vessel (p. 344):

By marrying into the powerful House of Benjamin, Jesus fused two royal bloodlines, creating a potent political union with the potential of making a legitimate claim to the throne and restoring the line of kings as it was under Solomon [...] The legend of the Holy Grail is a legend about royal blood. When Grail legend speaks of "the chalice that held the blood of Christ" [...] it speaks, in fact, of Mary Magdalene – the female womb that carried Jesus' royal bloodline. (p. 335)

The reader is pointedly reminded, along with Neveu, that 'Magdalene's child belonged to the lineage of Jewish Kings' (p. 342). Mary's own royal status is subjugated in the novel in favour of her passive role as 'the progenitor of the royal line of kings' and the historical Mary is once again rendered invisible outside her procreative role (ibid). Bormann writes, 'Naturalisation via procreation leads to de-historicisation, the silencing of women's voices [...]' Brown locates women in nature and outside culture, feminists want women to be precisely the opposite, acknowledged historical agents, social and cultural beings' (Bormann, p. 336). Brown's novel, despite its feminist claims, serves only to reify a historical paradigm that subsumes the historical presence of women in favour of patriarchal myths of femininity and male-identified dynastic concerns.

According to Pam Morris, 'one of the most fruitful areas of feminist study has been the rediscovery of a lost or unrecognised continuous tradition of women's protest, work and creativity. Her-story as well as history is being re-established' (p. 13). If feminist re-vision can be defined in any simple terms it must be the re-establishment of such traditions, the historicisation of women and the 'female' realms that they have been confined to. Dan Brown's pseudo-

feminist novel is ultimately shown to be contrary to these aims, claiming a singularly male authority over history that both posits a binary notion of femininity that stresses only the biological capacities of women, while conversely elevating women to the realm of the 'sacred feminine' that, as Bormann points out, 'threatens to objectify femininity, distance it from what is human, in this case male' (p. 338). Roberts's pseudo-gospel, on the other hand, in its refusal of complete, objective truth, its insistence on a 'divided mind', places subjectivity at the forefront, acknowledging individual experience and difference in ways that unsettle patriarchal history but also rebuild historical narratives that can and do focus on women as well as men. In Roberts's novel, as Morris suggests, 'Her-story as well as history is being re-established'. It is beyond doubt that the absence of a historical Mary Magdalene in *The Da Vinci Code*, alongside the usurpation of knowledge for male concerns within the novel has a silencing effect on Brown's female characters. Yet Ingrid Bertrand asks 'by opening their narratives to a polyphony of voices, constantly stressing the constructed nature of their narratives and by denying their stories any authority, do Roberts's [...] narrators still manage to transmit their message, or do these formerly silenced women paradoxically end up silencing themselves?'¹⁷¹ In answering this question it is worth reproducing at length Rich's statement about her own struggle to find silenced female voices:

A lot is being said today about the influence that the myths and images of women have on all of us who are products of culture. I think it has been a peculiar con-fusion to the girl or woman who tries to write because she is peculiarly susceptible to language. She goes to poetry or fiction looking for her way of being in the world, since she too has been putting words and images together; she is

¹⁷¹ Ingrid Bertrand, 'Filling In What Was Left Out: Voices and Silences of Biblical Women', in *Voices and Silence in the Contemporary Novel in English*, ed. by V. Guignery (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), p. 112-129 (p. 126).

looking eagerly for guides, maps possibilities; and over and over in the “words' masculine persuasive force” of literature she comes up against something that negates every-thing she is about: she meets the image of Woman in books written by men. She finds a terror and a dream, she finds a beautiful pale face, she finds La Belle Dame Sans Merci, she finds Juliet or Tess or Salome, but precisely what she does not find is that absorbed, drudging, puzzled, sometimes inspired creature, herself, who sits at a desk trying to put words together. (‘When We Dead Awaken, p. 21)

Roberts states the aim of the novel was ‘to dissect a myth’ yet she admits ‘I found myself at the same time recreating one’ (Author’s note). In rejecting the stereotypes of canonical literature, and of patriarchal religious discourse in particular, Roberts’s novel ends with the uncertain voice of just such an ‘absorbed, drudging, puzzled, sometimes inspired creature’. She writes of her gospel ‘I shall be sorry, I think, to finish this writing, for the manner of it has delighted me and made me feel, on occasion, that I drew as near to God as sometimes happens when I pray. It has been a labour full of as much sweetness as difficulty’ (p. 154). The myth of the woman writer as necessarily subjective and bound to the personal is a pervasive one. Yet it is in its very uncertainty, the difficulty as well as the delight of speaking, that Mary’s voice gains its own authority. Bertrand suggests that Roberts has ‘made the silences of the Bible speak [...] transforming [them] into self-conscious, subversive narrators in charge of their own stories, words and silences’ (Bertrand, p. 128). Unlike Brown’s assured narrative that silences women through its insistence on a single objective authority based on male knowledge, Roberts’s Mary allows for a multiplicity of voices that are predicated just as much in lack of knowledge as they are in experience. Mary notes ‘my words are lies if they do not manage to convey how much ignorance I have acquired as well as conviction’ (p. 162). Roberts’s

ultimate achievement lies in the acknowledgement that this is also true of the texts that she rewrites.

CHAPTER 5

MAKING THE IMPOSSIBLE POSSIBLE: RETHINKING
SANCTITY IN MICHÈLE ROBERTS'S *IMPOSSIBLE SAINTS*

The previous chapters of this thesis have attempted to explore the ways in which contemporary women writers have engaged with the women of the Bible in order to perhaps 'write' the wrongs that Judao-Christian histories have perpetuated upon these women. However, I have also suggested that such wrongs go beyond the pages of the Bible, that Biblical discourse has rendered history itself an oppressor of women that erases or marginalises female experience. In this chapter I examine how Judao-Christian discourses of gender have affected women outside the Bible, through an investigation of the figure of the female virgin martyr saint in Michèle Roberts's *Impossible Saints*. As quasi-historical women, grounded in both reality and fiction, I suggest that the figure of the female virgin martyr saint embodies a mode of femininity that is both endorsed by Judao-Christian religions as well as being inherently re-visionary in its expression of such religions. Furthermore, I argue that such figures continue to provide models for women today in both a religious and secular context that, in their popular manifestation, confine and limit female historicity, but, through the re-

visionary considerations of Roberts's novel, are shown to also contain the potential for transgressive models of gender. In order to do so I will identify the defining characteristics of the virgin martyr in traditional hagiography, and demonstrate how these endorse a patriarchal conception of gender. Alongside this I will undertake a reading of *Impossible Saints* through which I will demonstrate that Roberts's fiction can be seen as a political response to hagiographic narratives, literally 'writing' and 'righting' the wrongs done to women through patriarchal discourse. I argue that Roberts highlights how the female identity created through saintly religious discourse is associated with the body which is figured through essentialist conceptions of gender that not only render women 'other' to the standard of man, but also serve to associate women alone with the body within an exegetical mode of discourse that rejects physicality in favour of the (male) realm of spirituality. I go on to show how Roberts acknowledges that this rejection of the (inherently female) body serves to contain female sexuality, offering women only the ideal of the virgin mother and thus an impossible role model. Finally I suggest that through re-vision of the martyrdom of female saints, Roberts rejects the glorification of female death in religious discourse, exposing it as the ultimate means of containing the female body and the transgressive potential that the re-visionary female saint offers. I suggest that Roberts instead associates female bodies with women's writing to carry out the 'act of survival' that Rich has argued is the aim of re-vision.

In her subversive act of rewriting hagiographical narratives, many of which focus on female subjects but are invariably written by male authors, Roberts challenges received 'history' regarding women, testifying to the lost or silenced female point of view, 'challenging the sacredness of the gentlemanly

canon'.¹⁷² *Impossible Saints* is inspired by historical texts and events, drawing on female saints' lives in the popular thirteenth-century text, *The Golden Legend* written by Jacobus de Voragine. Roberts's engagement with such a text, produced in a period that was dominated by male religiosity, illuminates Rich's definition of the male canon as 'sacred'. St Anselm states 'the Supreme Spirit is most truly father and the Word most truly son'.¹⁷³ The 'Word' is associated with God, Jesus, and the masculine. Twenty-six years after Susan Bolotin coined the term 'post-feminist', reflecting a growing belief during the 1980s that the work of feminism is somehow complete, women are still named by men as sinners or saints, virgins or whores, through the Bible, in religious discourse, and through these apparatuses, in society.¹⁷⁴ Hagiography offers an abundance of these narratives focusing on women. Yet Jane Schulenburg warns against viewing such narratives as 'history' (Schulenburg, p. 17).¹⁷⁵ Medieval concepts of authorship centred around authority and validation of orthodoxy, and the attribution of 'facts' to authoritative sources is a common feature of hagiography, irrespective of how faithfully these sources are followed.¹⁷⁶ Hagiography of the medieval period, arguably the apogee of the tradition, consists of strict narrative convention, and

¹⁷² Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Secrets and Silence* (New York: Norton, 1980: repr. 1995), p. 33.

¹⁷³ St Anselm, *Monologium*, ed. and trans. J. Hopkins and H. Richardson, *Anselm of Canterbury*, 4 vols. (London: SCM Press, 1974) I, p. 55.

¹⁷⁴ Susan Bolotin, 'Voices from the Post-Feminist Generation', *New York Times Magazine* 17 October 1982, pp. 29-31. For further discussion of post-feminism see: T. Modleski, *Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism in a "Postfeminist" Age* (New York: Routledge, 1991); E. Wright, *Lacan and Postfeminism* (Cambridge: Icon, 2000).

¹⁷⁵ Schulenburg does, however, make a convincing argument for reading female saints' lives as 'unintentional evidence' providing broad details, or 'commonalities' about both women's actual lives as well as the perceptions of women at the time of composition, if placed within their social and historical context.

¹⁷⁶ One of many examples is that of Jacobus de Voragine's life of Saint Paula, which is directly attributed to Saint Jerome in the first line and is indeed almost entirely composed of extracts from Jerome's letter on the life of Saint Paula. However, William Granger Ryan points out that 'the "snippets" are often taken out of context, which at times obscures the train of thought. Jerome's "letter" is five or six times as long as Jacobus's chapter.' Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, ed. and trans. by W. G. Ryan, 2 Vols (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), I, p. 121.

even a cursory reading of the female saints' lives in *The Golden Legend* reveals a catalogue of stereotyped figures displaying, almost without exception, the same virtues of humility, chastity and charity, engendering the same miraculous visions and healing, even dying in much the same ways. Furthermore, while hagiography was undoubtedly a popular genre, and the figures found in hagiographical texts, to an extent, popular figures, created through an amalgamation of historical events, legend, and the social mores in which each redaction is formed, hagiographies are nonetheless *religious* texts, produced by and through the Christian church.¹⁷⁷

Thomas Heffernan states, 'the lives of the saints were sacred stories designed to teach the faithful to imitate actions which the community had decided were paradigmatic'.¹⁷⁸ The purpose of hagiography should then be seen as didactic, and in terms of female saints, prescriptive for female behaviour. As such, they can perhaps be viewed as a direct expression of Biblical conceptions of gender which, displaced from the confines of the Bible itself, are subject to 'real' world application. To bastardise Robin Morgan's famous statement then, the Bible is the theory; saints are the practice.¹⁷⁹

Michèle Roberts, as noted in the last chapter, has consistently utilised Biblical and religious figures to interrogate traditional narratives about womanhood and the establishment of authority. Furthermore, she has specifically drawn on the figure of the female saint in *Impossible Saints* as well as more

¹⁷⁷ The popularity of *The Golden Legend*, for example, was such that there are a thousand extant manuscripts (Ryan, *The Golden Legend* I: xiii). For discussion of the cultural formation of saints' lives through popular imagination see in particular chapter II of H. Delahaye, *The Legends of the Saints*. trans. D. Attwater (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1962). Jacobus de Voragine's religious concerns are suggested in his role as an archbishop and the fact that he was beatified by Pope Pius VII in 1816 and is venerated as a saint by the Dominican Order. For further details see E.C. Richardson, *Materials for a Life of Jacoopa da Varagine* (New York: The H.W. Wilson Company, 1935).

¹⁷⁸ T.J. Heffernan, *Sacred Biography: Saints and Their Biographers in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 5.

¹⁷⁹ Robin Morgan, *Going too far* (New York: Random House, 1977), p. 169.

recently in *The Looking Glass*, (2000) in which Geneviève Delange, the orphaned and illegitimate hero of the novel, rejects the stories of the lives of saints told to her in the Catholic orphanage in which she grows up in favour of folk tales told to her by the Motherlike figure of Madam Patin. Roberts's engagement with female saints, much like her engagement with religious themes in general, is therefore conflicted. They are shown, within *Impossible Saints*, to be important figures of female history, while in *The Looking Glass* they are discarded as unfavourable religious stereotypes. Nonetheless, Roberts's continued focus on the female saint, whether as orthodox expression of constrictive religiosity or iconoclastic embodiment of female transgression reflects the importance of such figures within her work and suggests that engagement with the contradictory identities offered to women by female saints is perhaps necessary to any examination of contemporary ideologies of gender. The *vita* of the female saint, through its narrative conventions, its formulaic nature, its stereotypes of passive women and powerful men, and transmission through male-dominated institutions, creates and legitimises a hierarchy of power in which the church prevails over the state, the clergy over the laity, and most strikingly, man over woman. Just as hagiography is both a reflection and progenitor of the master narrative of its culture, modern society is indissolubly interconnected to its past, the myths, legends and dogma inscribed through and upon its culture. Roberts represents hagiography in this light as a progenitor of modern sexual hierarchies in desperate need of re-examination.

The three qualities found in the descriptive term 'female virgin martyr' are key to exploring how hagiography formulates a stereotyped representation of women, yet *The Golden Legend's* female saints are often remarkable and

transgress conventional female behaviour: Saint Paula abandons her children ‘putting her love of God above her love of her children’ and subjects her body to such extreme deprivation that Saint Jerome rebukes her for it (*Golden Legend*, p. 122); Petronilla and Agnes refuse to marry against the orders of male authority, Christina refuses to sacrifice to pagan gods, breaking her father’s gold and silver idols and distributing the pieces to the poor. Marina joins a long line of female transvestite saints, living as a monk despite the Biblical condemnation of such acts as ‘abominable before God’ (Deut. 22:5).¹⁸⁰ Elizabeth Petroff states, ‘In a way all saints are transgressors, in the sense that a saint lives by excess, lives in a beyond where ordinary measure does not hold... Women Saints, it seems to be, were doubly transgressors –first, by their nature as saints and, second by their nature as women.’¹⁸¹

In rewriting saintly women, Roberts therefore points to the potential, albeit restricted, for female rebellion and empowerment in such roles. Yet the traditional narratives in which these roles are set do not constitute a literal exhortation to emulate those actions. It is scarcely credible that the medieval church should intend women to disobey male authority and undertake practices forbidden by the Bible. Jane Schulenburg shows that many hagiographical texts were biased towards an elite audience of educated female religious and noblewomen and therefore often provided examples of the elite and extraordinary only (pp. 25-7). The individual actions of saints are subsumed within the conventions and repetitions of their genre, and it is *these* that constitute the didactic aspect of hagiography. The virtues of the medieval female saint are

¹⁸⁰ For just a few examples of these saints see the various lives of Pelagia, Margaret, the Virgin of Antioch, Marina, Theodora, Eugenia and Euphrosyne.

¹⁸¹ E.A. Petroff, *Body and Soul: Essays on Medieval Women and Mysticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 161.

shown over and over to be virginity and self-sacrifice, the vice her femaleness.

‘Woman’ as endorsed through patriarchy is shown to be essentially female, essentially virgin, and essentially martyred, and it is these three central characteristics that are interrogated through Roberts’s re-visionary fiction.

Impossible Saints intersperses re-visionary *vitae* or ‘lives’ of eleven female saints taken from *The Golden Legend* as well as apocryphal sources, with the larger story of Josephine, modelled loosely on that of Saint Teresa of Avila.¹⁸² Teresa, a Carmelite nun of the sixteenth-century, was perhaps as famous for her writings as she was for her prominence as a mystic and reformer.¹⁸³ Most prominent of these writings was her autobiography *The Life of Teresa of Jesus*. Although titled in a similar way to traditional *vitae*, Teresa’s autobiography can be distinguished from standard hagiographies by its auto-biographical nature. Such unorthodoxy perhaps explains her persecution from both official offices, such as the inquisition, as well as within her own community of Carmelite nuns. Archbishop Rowan Williams suggests ‘as a woman, as a mystic and visionary, and as a reformer, Teresa was very vulnerable’ (*Teresa of Avila*, p. 42). Yet it is in her writings themselves that Teresa’s true unorthodoxy comes to light. Unlike traditional hagiographies, Teresa focuses on her bodily experiences of Christ, which she views as physical manifestations of spiritual ecstasy and it is with the body that Roberts first concerns herself in her rewriting of the female saint’s life.

¹⁸² The saints included in Roberts’s novel, other than Josephine, are: Paula, Petronilla, Thecla (taken from *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*), Christine, Agnes, Thais, Dympna, Uncumber, Marin, Barbara and Mary of Egypt. Thecla, Dympna, Uncumber and Barbara are apocryphal.

¹⁸³ For more on Theresa of Avila see Archbishop Rowan Williams, *Teresa of Avila*, 2nd edn. (London: Continuum, 2003).

Hélène Cixous suggests that ‘it is obvious that a woman does not write like a man, because she speaks with the body, writing is from the body’.¹⁸⁴ Yet the female body, like female writing, has historically been restricted. The female body has been the subject of virulent anti-feminist polemic while having most clearly defined Christian writing by men about women.

Having been convent educated, Roberts would have been well aware of the Christian tradition which associates women with the body and men with the spirit originally proposed by Aristotle and repeated by the exegetical writings of Augustine.¹⁸⁵ While Augustine does not show the vitriol against women displayed by other Church Fathers such as Tertullian, discussed in chapter One, he *does* reflect the essentialist thinking of the medieval church. His teachings about the bodily resurrection read, ‘while all defects will be removed from those bodies, their essential nature will be preserved. Now a woman’s sex is not a defect: it is natural’.¹⁸⁶ The assumption behind this assurance is that a woman’s ‘essential nature’ is *believed* to be a defect. There is no accompanying suggestion that a man’s sex will not be preserved, presumably because a man’s sex is *not* believed to be a defect. This is again taken from Aristotle who believed that women were imperfectly formed males (*De Generatione Animalium*). The suggestion here is that the ‘ideal’ woman is in fact not a woman, and Ambrose confirms this,

¹⁸⁴ Hélène Cixous, ‘Quelques questions à Hélène Cixous’, *Les Cahiers du GRIF* no. 13 (October 1976), p. 20, quoted in Stephen Heath, ‘The Sexual Fix’ in *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader*, ed. by Mary Eagleton, 2nd edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996) pp. 311-316 (p. 313).

¹⁸⁵ ‘the physical part, the body, comes from the female, and the Soul from the male, since the Soul is the essence of a particular body’ Aristotle, *De Generatione Animalium*, trans. A.L. Peck, *Aristotle: Generation of Animals* (London: Harvard University Press, 1963) cited in Blamires, p. 40. Although dating from the 4th Century BCE, Alcuin Blamires states ‘Aristotelian physiology had considerable impact from the late twelfth century onwards’ (Blamires, p. 39). For Augustine’s repetition of Aristotle see *De Genesi Ad Litteram*, PL 34:245-486. trans. J. H. Taylor, SJ, *St Augustine: The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, 2 vols., Ancient Christian Writers, no.42 (New York: Newman Press, 1982) cited in Blamires, p. 80.

¹⁸⁶ Augustine, *City of God*, trans. by Henry Bettenson, *St Augustine: City of God* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972) pp. 1057-8 (p. 1057).

writing, ‘a woman who believes hastens “unto perfect manhood, unto the measure of the age of the fullness of Christ”, lacking then her temporal name, her bodily sex.’¹⁸⁷ Only women are to discard ‘her bodily sex’, to attain, one notes ‘perfect manhood’ [my emphasis]. Here, ‘female’ is the sex, associated with the body, while male is neutral, male the standard, female the deviation, leading de Beauvoir to note ‘Eve is depicted as made from what Bossuet called “a supernumerary bone” of Adam. Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him...He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other’ (*The Second Sex*, p. 16).

The women in *The Golden Legend* are shown to conform to this notion of the ‘ideal’ female as one who has transcended her body and her ‘otherness’. The self-abasement of saints such as Paula and her daughters Blesilla and Eustochium, reflects a strict adherence to the rejection of the body in favour of the spirit in hagiographic texts: ‘Parts of her body and limbs were cold, and only the warmth of her soul kept life in her sacred, holy breast’ (*Golden Legend*, I, p. 125). Yet this body is essentially female. The self-denial characterising Paula’s *Life* centres on the stereotypically feminine. She ‘knew not herself as mother’; her face ‘which against God’s command I used to paint with rouges and whiteners and mascaras, deserves to be made ugly’ (p. 123). The bodily-identified ‘self’ that Paula is denying is an essentially female one, associated with motherhood and make-up. In revising such narratives Roberts highlights how the female identity created through religious discourse is associated with the body, and female sanctity constituted solely through a rejection of this body via austere and ascetic practices and ultimately death.

¹⁸⁷ Ambrose, ‘Expositio Evangelii Secundum Lucam’, in Blamires, p. 63.

While saints may seem to have little in common with contemporary women in the West, Caroline Walker Bynum has recognised the association between saintly practices and modern accounts of anorexia, while Jocelyn Wogan Browne points to the similarities between the self-mutilation of enclosed women and modern plastic surgery, stating ‘both practices are intelligible as responses [...] of the infinite desire to remake the body to models perceived as culturally powerful’.¹⁸⁸ The culturally powerful bodies of today are still those that repress the female body, perhaps most particularly, size-zero female celebrities. Roberts demonstrates how the practices of female saints feed into such contemporary ideologies that serve to perpetuate a ‘standardised’ form of femininity, portraying Paula and Blesilla as having so successfully transcended this ‘otherness’ as to become identical. Blesilla’s ‘likeness to her mother became pronounced. Both were so gaunt and haggard they could have been mistaken for one another’ (p. 25). Roberts, however, suggests an alternative that lies outside the prescriptive ‘norms’ of female behaviour. Eustochium, in Roberts’s rendition, becomes ‘eccentric’ and ‘opinionated’ (p. 26), leading her to reject her mother’s teachings, sell her mother’s monastery for a profit and go travelling. Eustochium thus rejects the male-authored ideal of femininity and is no longer ‘other’ to men, but to the homogenised model of femininity that Paula and Blesilla represent. I would suggest that what Roberts is demonstrating here is the positive legacy of otherness, the potential for alternative conceptions of gender.

Roberts’s suggestion that otherness can be both a positive legacy when viewed as rebellion, and a negative one when used to reject the female leads to a

¹⁸⁸ Bynum, Caroline Walker, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (California, University of California Press, 1987); Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, *Women’s Literary Culture c.1150-1300: Virginity and its Authorizations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 40.

second area of enquiry in Ambrose's statement that 'a woman who believes hastens "unto perfect manhood"' (Blamires, p. 63); that women should not only reject their femaleness, but also aspire to maleness. Accordingly, Roberts's version of the *Life* of Saint Paula sees Blesilla take her asceticism to such extremes that Jerome calls her 'his female man of God' (p. 25). Roberts's placing of the term 'female' in this phrase demonstrates the impossibility of the ideal set up by hagiographic representations of women. There can be no achievement of 'perfect manhood' for women in religious narratives that insist on their 'essential nature'. Blesilla cannot be a 'real' man of God, only a qualified one. In placing the phrase in the mouth of Saint Jerome, best known as creator of the Latin Vulgate, the version of the Bible still used today in Roman Catholicism, Roberts additionally highlights that this impossible dichotomy is one which has been specifically created through the male religious 'Word'.

Robert's recognition of the female 'ideal' as, in fact, male, demonstrates how hagiography sets up a further dichotomy of woman against woman, the 'physical' bodily-identified woman against the male-identified 'spiritual' woman. In her essay 'Sorties', Hélène Cixous exposes how the concept of the 'nature' of women is formed within a binary hierarchical opposition through which a 'universal battlefield' of male/female is created.¹⁸⁹ Cixous identifies the primary duality of active/passive wherein the woman is always passive, and the male active, but in hagiography this dichotomy goes further than merely that of man against woman. The passive female is contrasted with the active woman who is identified negatively through her sinful, usually sexual, actions. The virtues of female saints are thrown into relief by comparison with non-Christian women,

¹⁸⁹ Hélène Cixous, 'Sorties' (1975) in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, ed. by J. Rivkin and M. Ryan, rev. edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 578-84 (p. 579).

whose vices are almost entirely sexual in nature. Agatha is handed over to a procuress named Aphrodisia and her nine daughters ‘who were as lascivious as their mother’ (*Golden Legend*, p. 154). The Lives of Saints Marina, Theodora and Margaret/Pelagius all feature an unmarried girl who accuses the saint of impregnating her. Theodora is tricked into adultery by a female sorcerer, Justina is visited by a young woman, a devil in disguise, who tries to convince her that virginity is against God, and Saints Mary of Egypt and Thais were themselves a prostitute and courtesan respectively prior to conversion. The binary opposition becomes virgin/whore and saint/sinner and so the passive virtues of virginity and sanctity are held up as ‘male’ against the active whore/sinner woman.

The unsatisfactory nature of the passive, spiritual, female is shown in Roberts’s *Life of Saint Marin*. In a version remarkably similar to that of *The Golden Legend*, Marin is presented as a monk accused of impregnating a local girl. The reader, like Marin’s fellow monks, finds out only at the end of the tale that Marin(a) is in fact female. Marin surely constitutes the ‘ideal’ spiritual woman as man, held up against her counterpart, the ‘sinful’ and bodily identified girl, and yet she is rejected by the monastery and dies alone and un-nursed, venerated only when her ‘true’ female identity is discovered, rendering her ‘sin’ impossible. Roberts’s seemingly insignificant alteration of Jacobus De Voragine’s narrative in delaying the reader’s knowledge of Marin’s sex until the tale’s close draws attention to how the sanctity of women *is* contingent upon the physical body in religious narratives in a way that male sanctity is not. Where male sanctity can be achieved through any number of ways, female sanctity is, almost without exception, centred on overcoming the female body via virginity, starvation, or neglect of physical appearance. Roberts, instead, affirms the female

body. Where *The Golden Legend* shows Marin(a) as *always* female, sanctified by her adherence to maleness, despite her ‘essential’ femaleness, Robert’s presentation of her body as female only after death, proclaiming her innocence, shows that her sanctity is only possible through her female body, the very thing women are taught to deny.

Nonetheless, Roberts does not suggest an essential identification of women as bodily identified and ‘other’ against the spiritual male. That Marin passes successfully as a spiritually identified man, yet is sanctified purely by virtue of her female body serves to problematise and undermine the very notion of the binary opposition of male/female mind/body that structure religious narratives and allow Roberts to reaffirm the positive potential of ‘otherness’ to allow for multiple possibilities in a female identity unconfined by its identification as ‘other’ to maleness.

The hagiographical identification of women with the body is further stressed in the extreme focus on virginity within female saints’ *vitae*. As discussed in chapter Three, virginity remains a privileged category for women in many contemporary cultures, with youth movements having sprung up internationally to promote chastity and virginity despite having been shown not to ‘demonstrate a positive impact on sexual behaviour over time’ and more worryingly, to even ‘show some negative impacts on youth’s willingness to use contraception’ (Hauser). Taken outside the rhetoric of sexual health that surrounds such movements, the contemporary focus on virginity must therefore be seen in a moral light. Through her representation of virginity, Roberts explores how religious discourse conflates female sexuality with female morality, constituting an impossible ideal for contemporary women.

If hagiographies are educational texts presenting figures to admire and emulate, Michael Toolan's suggestion that it is the *listener* who validates narrative as 'truth' explains how they succeed in their aims.¹⁹⁰ It is women themselves who accept these figures as inspirational. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne suggests this is because 'virginity texts announce themselves as seeking to sustain professed and vowed women with a romance script where the virgin is not only the object of quest, but in part the subject, the active selector of her bridegroom, Christ' (p. 5). Thus the virgin is presented as a viable and attractive role model in any society that offers its women little autonomy.¹⁹¹ I write primarily of medieval women's lives here. However, it is also possible to see in Wogan-Browne's theory a potential explanation for the prevalence of teen-led chastity movements in the 'Bible Belt' of the USA as a response to greater restrictions placed upon women in many devoutly Christian societies. However, that this role model is set in the topoi of a romance demonstrates that it is in fact an espousal of patristic master narratives whereby no greater outcome for a woman can be imagined than self-sacrifice and marriage. The 'freedom' allowed to women in these texts is an illusion, concealing the very real repressions of the body inherent in the identity of 'virgin'.

Roberts's subjects are identified as virgins through their role as saints. Schulenburg suggests that 'for female saints, the status of *virgo intacta* was nearly a prerequisite for sainthood' (p. 127). Of all the female subjects in *The Golden Legend*, only eight are not virgins, and all end their lives chastely.¹⁹² Yet few of Roberts's saints conform unproblematically to the ideal of 'virgin'. Susan

¹⁹⁰ Michael Toolan, *Narrative: A Critical Linguistic Introduction*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 7.

¹⁹¹ For further background information on the lives of medieval women see Christine Fell, *Women in Anglo-Saxon England and the Impact of 1066* (London: British Museum Publications, 1984) or Henrietta Leyser, *Medieval Women: A Social History of Women in England 450-1500* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1996).

¹⁹² The non-virginal saints are Paula, Sophia, Mary of Egypt, Theodora, Mary Magdalene, Pelagia, Thais and Elizabeth.

Rowland sees in Roberts's first novel *A Piece of the Night* (1978) the virgin as 'emblem of the marginalized feminine [...] the virgin/whore image is elaborated as the splitting of the feminine in the symbolic system of patriarchy'.¹⁹³ This split is demonstrated in Roberts's *Lives of Thais and Dympna*.

Thais, in *The Golden Legend*, is a courtesan who is converted by Father Paphnutius, while Dympna, and her priest Gereburna, are martyred by her father after she rejects his sexual advances.¹⁹⁴ In Roberts's versions both saints exist first as a reflection of their father's increasingly sexual gaze. If 'virginity has been a figure of the struggle for identity' in Roberts's novels, both saints can be seen as attempting to form their identities through this patriarchal gaze (Rowland, p. 42). However, the inefficacy of this is demonstrated by their fates. Once Thais commits to the identity of the 'whore' offered to her by her father, engaging in sexual intercourse with him, she is imprisoned in a well. Dympna, on the other hand, rejects her father's sexual advances, remains a virgin, but also rejects the help of her nanny, Gereburna, in order to remain such, requiring her to live a feral existence in the woods.

Roberts's alteration of Gereburna from male priest to female nanny is significant here in terms of her mothering role. The great value placed upon virginity in the medieval period is seen in the thirteenth-century *Hali Meidhad*.¹⁹⁵ The author draws upon the writings of Paul and Jerome to tell women 'no one may follow him (Christ), or that blessed virgin, lady of angels and maidens' glory,

¹⁹³ Susan Rowland, 'Michèle Roberts's Virgins: Contesting Gender in Fictions, Re-writing Jungian Theory and Christian Myth', *Journal of Gender Studies*, 8:1 (1999), 35-42 (p. 37).

¹⁹⁴ Saint Dympna is not included in *The Golden Legend*. However, her *Life*, written by the canon of St. Aubert at Cambrai, dates from the same period, and as such is a contemporary text. N. Stalmans, 'Dympna' in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2004) <www.oxforddnb.com> [accessed 10 January 2011].

¹⁹⁵ For a discussion of the probable intended audiences of *Hali Meidhad* see Elaine Treharne's brief introduction to the text in Elaine Treharne, *Old and Middle English: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 293.

except virgins alone... marriage has its benefit thirtyfold in heaven; widowhood, sixtyfold; virginity with a hundredfold surpasses both.’¹⁹⁶ Although the comparison appears to be with Christ, Schulenburg explains how ‘an exaggerated emphasis was placed on chastity for women; [...] there was a heavily disproportionate admiration for female virginity’ (p. 127). In fact, the exemplar here is Mary, the virgin Mother, and thus an impossible state to which to aspire. The absences and silences of mothers in *Impossible Saints* reflect the impossibility of such a figure, and mirror Cixous’s suggestion that women are not only subjected by men in patriarchal discourse but are in fact precluded altogether by the binary opposition ‘Father/Son’ as against Father/Mother (‘Sorties’, p. 580). This again can be traced back to Aristotle who posited that procreative agency was the sole domain of men, where ‘the male provides the “form” and the “principle of the movement”, the female provides the body’ (Blamires, p. 40). Man is the ‘active’ genesis, the woman the passive vehicle, unnecessary but for her physical form, and most importantly, not in any sense the Mother. For Cixous this removal of the Mother from the equation means ‘she does not exist, she can not be; but there has to be something of her. He keeps then, of the woman on whom he is no longer dependent, only this space, always virginal’ (‘Sorties’, p. 580).

It is no wonder then, that mothers are conspicuously absent in traditional hagiography.¹⁹⁷ There is no space for non-virginal mothers in hagiographic discourse, and Roberts shows how it is this lack of mothering that leads to the

¹⁹⁶ ‘Hali Meiðhad’, trans. and ed. by Elaine Treharne in *Old and Middle English: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 293-305 (p. 299).

¹⁹⁷ While Fathers of Saints are invariably present and named, only the *Lives* of Lucy, Christina and Justina include mothers, while those of Anastasia, Mary Magdalene, Martha and Ursula are named but absent from the narrative. The mothers of Agnes, Agatha, Juliana, Mary of Egypt, a Virgin of Antioch, Appolonia, Marina, Theodora, , Margaret, Euphemia, Pelagia, Margaret/Pelagius, Thais, Elizabeth, Cecilia and Catherine are absent and unnamed.

trials each woman must overcome. In *Impossible Saints* Paula's motherly neglect of Blesilla leads to her death and Paula's own guilty self-abnegation; Christine's mother acts as bait for her wayward daughter, feigning illness to enable the doctor to imprison her; Agnes's mother does not object when she is told to throw Agnes into the street. On the contrary, 'she obeyed' (p. 143). The negative consequences of the lack of mothering function in the novel demonstrate how the non-virginal mother is rendered catastrophically impotent by religious narratives, while the most ideal of virgins, the virgin mother, is one who is necessarily absent by virtue of her impossibility, and as such, a negative role model for women.

Dympna then, is offered an alternative to the patriarchal gaze in the form of her nanny, yet this alternative is a neutered mother, one who has not given birth. In order to reject the ideal of virgin mother, Dympna thus must live alone, escaping only to live alone in the woods, hunted until death. I would, therefore, contest Rowland's suggestion that virginity for Roberts 'has been a radical virginity to contest gender prescriptions because it has allowed the feminine both sexual and religious significance' (p. 42). What Roberts shows is that *neither* identity, virgin or whore, can be satisfactory when constituted through the patriarchal gaze. In *Impossible Saints*, women's identities are shown to be only satisfactory when constituted through their own agency, in the company of other women, away from the eyes of men. Josephine, the central character of the major narrative, is only happy and aware of her own potential when living with her cousin Magdalena and allowed solitude; Mary of Egypt can only share her life with Zozimus after having spent many years alone in the desert; Petronilla is enabled to leave her husband through inviting other women into her life.

The categories of 'virgin' and 'whore' are further exposed in Roberts's novel as devices through which patriarchal master narratives confine female sexuality, and thus female empowerment. In *Impossible Saints* a medical textbook inspires Josephine to enact childbirth and she is found by her father 'lolling lasciviously on her pillows and summoning him with lewd gestures... She was drunk, half naked and in possession of a filthy book'. Yet this 'filthy book' is a medical book. Its clinical presentation of the female body with 'all the tissues and organs very precisely shown' is at odds with the physical reality of Josephine 'rolling her hips like a whore' (p. 49; p. 51). Despite her virginity, Josephine is labelled a 'whore' and thus Roberts exposes that it is female *sexuality* that is confined in the idealisation of virginity. The female body and its creative potential is identified as 'dirty' and a 'scandal' through her father's response, leading directly to her enclosure in a nunnery (p. 51). While Josephine's repression seems complete, the subversive potential of this episode lies in its utter destruction of the virgin/whore opposition, allowing for new possibilities of identification for Josephine, and indeed all women.

Roberts's troubling of the categories of 'virgin' and 'whore' additionally troubles the notion of binary categories constituting female identities. Yet Roberts demonstrates how, outside such categories, women, and their bodies, as endorsed by hagiographical narratives cease to exist at all. Where Roberts identifies the 'virgin' as a negative role model, rendering non-virginal women invisible and working to confine female sexuality, her treatment of death shows how the identity of 'martyr' absents and confines women themselves. Despite working as an often oppressive tool to control and shape women's activities, Schulenburg shows how 'the meaning of the *vitae* is not set or fixed but could be

negotiated between reader and text. These Lives of female saints provided women with “multivalent messages” and a certain flexibility in their “use” as religious symbols’ (p. 54). As already noted, hagiography *can* provide inspirational examples of female nonconformity, and while the *vitae* of female saints cannot be seen as endorsing this nonconformity, Schulenburg believes that ‘not infrequently these creative adaptations or improvisations seem to have been in direct opposition to the conventional behaviour the Church had hoped the life would inspire’ (ibid).

The saints cited earlier in this chapter as examples of transgression in *The Golden Legend* point to the potential for female rebellion and empowerment in the roles assigned to women through hagiography, but this rebellion is ultimately contained through martyrdom. I have already noted that the body has long been an object of deep suspicion in Christian discourse and the female body in particular. In the master narrative of religious discourse, women who do not ‘hasten unto perfect manhood’, that is, who do not overcome their female ‘other’ bodies are, according to Susan Rowland ‘so outside the symbolic, the system of signification, as to be dead’ (p. 37). In fact, for Roberts, not only are these women as good as dead, they *are* dead. The majority of hagiographies of female saints terminate with the death or martyrdom of the saint and accordingly each of the saints in Roberts’s novel die at the end of the tale. Yet they are not martyrs.

Martyrdom, in traditional hagiography, is surrounded by magnificence, littered with words like ‘victory’ and ‘glory’ (*Golden Legend*, I, p. 104; p. 367). As a role model for women, the martyr may not seem attractive, yet this excerpt from the *Life* of Saint Agatha shows how the role of martyr is made to seem desirable:

O holy and glorious virgin, who faithfully shed her blood as a martyr in praise of the Lord! O illustrious, renowned virgin, upon whom shone a twofold glory: since amidst harsh torments she wrought all sorts of miracles and, strengthened by support from above, merited to be cured by the apostle's visitation! So the airs bore his bride heavenward to Christ, and glorious obsequies shine about her mortal frame as the angel choir acclaims the holiness of her soul. (*Golden Legend*, I, p. 157)

Such glorification of female death remains prevalent today. The death of Diana, Princess of Wales in 1997 saw her identity being completely rewritten. Despite being reviled as an adulterer and being described four days before her death as 'taking swipes at the Royal Family, the former ruling conservative party, and even Britain itself' she was immediately labelled a 'saint' upon her death.¹⁹⁸ This Madonna-Whore identification demonstrates the continuing identification of women through patriarchal narratives. More worryingly, in the month following Diana's death, suicides of women aged 25-44 rose by more than 45%, suggesting that the martyr still functions as a viable role model for women.¹⁹⁹

The deaths of Roberts's saints, on the other hand, sometimes peaceful, often ignominious, are *not* the glamorised narratives of contemporary celebrity culture or the glorious expressions of religious ecstasy that characterise those in *The Golden Legend*.²⁰⁰ *The Golden Legend's* account of the martyrdom of Saint Agnes states '[t]he Deputy [...] had Agnes thrown into a roaring fire, but the flames divided [...] leaving the maiden unscathed. Aspasia finally had a soldier thrust a dagger into her throat, and thus her heavenly spouse consecrated her his bride and martyr [...] Her kinsmen and other Christians buried her joyfully' (p.

¹⁹⁸ CNN, August 27, 1997 <<http://edition.cnn.com>> [accessed 30 Mar 2007]; 'Born a Lady, Died a Saint', *Sydney Daily Telegraph*, 2 September 1997.

¹⁹⁹ K. Hawton *et al*, 'Effect of Death of Diana, Princess of Wales on Suicide and Deliberate Self-Harm', *The British Journal of Psychiatry: The Journal of Mental Science*, 177 (2000), 463-6.

²⁰⁰ Although celebrity culture may seem removed from devotional literature, the modern usage of the term 'hagiography' to describe idealised biographies of modern icons reveals a similarity in responses to these figures.

103). Later, ‘the saint’s parents and relatives [...] saw a chorus of angels clothed in shining gold garments, and in their midst Agnes, similarly clad and with a lamb whiter than snow standing at her right hand. Agnes consoled them: “Do not mourn my death but rejoice and be glad with me, because I now have a throne of light amidst all these holy ones’ (ibid, p. 103). This is in stark contrast with Roberts’s version of the same event: ‘she herself died at an advanced age’ (p. 148). The effect of this mundane description of death, very different from that held up by *The Golden Legend*, is to expose how hagiographic narratives present death as positive or even appealing for women. Agnes is particularly known for being martyred at a young age, only twelve years old, yet even Roberts’s extension of Agnes’ life to ‘an advanced age’ does not alter the fact that this death is distinctly less magnificent than that presented by *The Golden Legend*.

The function of this idealisation of martyrdom can be seen in the life Agnes leads in Roberts’s version, otherwise denied to her in medieval representations. After finding Agnes out alone after dark, Agnes’s father strips her naked, cuts off the hair that physically signifies her a virgin and that which covers her naked body in the Golden Legend, and throws her into the street. Yet instead of being martyred, as in the traditional narrative, Roberts’s Agnes finds work in a hairdressers, is given a red petticoat, and inspires local women to cut off their hair and dress like her until:

all the women in the town were dressed alike. You could no longer distinguish a good woman from a bad one. You could no longer be sure whether the group of women hanging around the butcher’s shop in the evening with their children, laughing and gossiping, was a bunch of virtuous wives or a bunch of tarts. (p. 148)

The Life that Roberts celebrates here is marked by transgression and a refusal of patriarchal models of female identity. Agnes’s physical appearance denies the

possibility of naming women as virgin or whore. Roberts not only demonstrates the positive potential of saintly women to inspire transgression of patriarchal concepts of gender, but in placing this event *after* Agnes dies in the Golden Legend, she demonstrates that this potential is contained through martyrdom.

Likewise, Josephine's death, which occurs in the first chapter of *Impossible Saints*, is reported by her niece, Isobel, whose witness describes a grim reality that cannot compare with the glorious transcendence described in *The Golden Legend*. Josephine dies 'in her cell, a tiny bare room in the convent of St Joseph's she had so recently founded. She lay on a bed made of packing cases nailed together, between sheets donated by friends. Eucalyptus burned in the brazier in the corner, to take away the smell of sickness. Flies tumbled about [...] (p. 5). The shabby surroundings of Josephine's death are distinctly at odds with the glamorous presentation of the martyr's death. Furthermore, Isobel, Josephine's hagiographer, later reports that this death is a lie. Isobel confesses:

I let others tend my dying aunt. She died when I was not there. I should have stayed and been brave enough to hold her hand and speak to her. Nobody held her. If she needed comfort, nobody consoled her [...] Josephine did not die in my arms as I put. That was a lie, to make myself feel better, to convince myself that I had done all for her that I could, and that she was not terrified and lonely as death approached. (p. 285)

This is not what Isobel has learned to expect from reading *The Golden Legend*:

All the stories of the saints that I had ever read declared that they died noble and inspiring deaths. The martyrs, even as they were torn to pieces by the fangs of wild beasts, uttered cries of love and exhorted each other to greater courage. While their eyeballs were poked out and their stomachs slashed open, they screamed out their faith in God. They acted as an example. (p. 286)

Her lie highlights the untruthful nature of such narratives in contrast to the painful physical reality of Josephine's death. Roberts's other saints die similarly

inglorious deaths. Thecla dies ‘frozen solid’ inside a cave (p. 95); Christine dies ‘worn out, at the age of forty’ (p. 124); Thais dies at the bottom of a well where ‘her flesh and bones rotted and disintegrated and became part of the filthy water’. Roberts’s removal of the glamour associated with martyrdom exposes it for what it is, the destruction of the body, and it is in these bodies that Roberts offers salvation. While death is presented as a glorious transcendence of the body in traditional hagiography, it is shown by Roberts to be the ultimate containment of the female saint’s transgressive nature. The body enables physical rebellion in Roberts’s re-vision.

Saint Paula’s daughter Eustochium rejects her mother’s example of self-denial, leading to her death, and instead sells her monastery and treks around the world. Petronilla’s death by starvation in protest against marriage in *The Golden Legend* is substituted with her desertion of her overbearing husband in Roberts’s tale. Agnes and Christina, both martyred at a young age in *The Golden Legend*, instead reject their families’ insistence on conventional behaviour and get physically demanding jobs, living financially independently for many years. Marin/Marina’s death in *The Golden Legend* is retained by Roberts, yet Marina intercedes after her death to enable a single mother, punished by demonic possession in *The Golden Legend*, to live independently with her daughter. Where the female saints in all these tales are punished for their transgression with death in *The Golden Legend*, Roberts’s characters are empowered through their rejection of the traditional martyr role. Roberts’s negative presentation of Saints Paula and Petronilla’s ascetic practices and extreme fasting thus rejects readings such as Caroline Walker Bynum’s that ‘women’s various food practices... [were] all means by which women controlled their social and religious circumstances

quite directly and effectively' and demonstrates that the model of self-denial for women leads only to containment of positive transgressive practices (p. 220). Where the female saints in all these tales are bodily punished for their transgression in the Golden Legend with death, Roberts's characters are empowered in active lives through their rejection of the traditional role of the martyr. Their sometimes shocking, often mundane deaths, removes the glamour associated with martyrdom and exposes it for what it is, merely the end of a life (or a *Life*) that is impossibly conflicted through traditional hagiographic texts to support patriarchy, showing that women, as endorsed in religious master narratives, are unable to achieve the male 'ideal'. They cannot attain perfect 'manhood' as they are designated essentially female; as virgins, held to a standard of maleness that in reality only applies to women; and as martyrs, contained and confined, offered liberation only in the ultimate confinement, in death.

Yet Roberts suggests that individual rejection of such roles, while empowering the women themselves, are not the only answer to the containment of female transgression. Rich suggests that the only way to refuse the identities given to women is to utilise the literature of the canon as a key to how women are named by men. The title of Roberts's novel highlights this concern. Roberts's saints *are* 'impossible saints', through their transgressions, their sexuality, their independence, but the title also suggests that saints are impossible models for women. This is perhaps because they do not really exist. In *In the Red Kitchen* Roberts suggests that historical women 'have been unwritten. Written out. Written off. Therefore I am not even dead. I never was. I am non-existent. There is no I'.²⁰¹ Accordingly, *Impossible Saints* exposes the eradication of

²⁰¹ Michèle Roberts, *In the Red Kitchen*, (London: Minerva, 1991), p. 133.

women's history and suggests that the answer to such eradication lies in women's writing. The novel opens with a description of the Golden House, a sepulchre holding the relics of saints: 'a theatre, each little gold-encrusted frame revealing the torso of a beautiful golden-haired woman [...] inside each woman a few bones' (p. 2). As a metaphorical representation of *The Golden Legend* it is clear that such metonymic reliquaries, according to Roberts, hold little more than 'a few bones'. These authorised bodies, 'saints with a history, a pedigree, who could be looked up in books and their stories checked' do not in fact contain any female flesh (ibid). The historical reality of female saints lives, like their bodies, has been tidied up, confined, and is largely missing. For Roberts, the fractured and dismembered body of the female virgin martyr represents the fragmented nature of women's writing, the silencing of women throughout history. Roberts's act of re-vision can therefore be seen as an attempt to literally put flesh on the bones of female history.

As previously noted, Roberts's Josephine 'is partly inspired by the writings of Saint Teresa of Avila' (*Impossible Saints*, Author's Note). Like Josephine, Teresa experienced visions of Christ, and authored an autobiographical 'Life' under the direction of her male confessor, and it is this Teresa, authorised by male authority, that the church is sanctifying.²⁰² Yet those same visions that sanctify Teresa, like Josephine's, led to accusations of heresy and it is this Teresa that Roberts celebrates. Bernini's famous sculpture of Teresa, controversial for her orgasmic pose, represents an episode that Theresa recounts in her autobiography in which she has a vision of an angel:

²⁰² David Hugh Farmer, 'Theresa of Avila', *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, Oxford Reference Online (Oxford University Press 2003) <<http://www.oxfordreference.com>> [accessed 25 February 2008].

I saw in his hand a long spear of gold, and at the iron's point there seemed to be a little fire. He appeared to me to be thrusting it at times into my heart, and to pierce my very entrails; when he drew it out, he seemed to draw them out also, and to leave me all on fire with a great love of God. The pain was so great, that it made me moan; and yet so surpassing was the sweetness of this excessive pain, that I could not wish to be rid of it. The soul is satisfied now with nothing less than God. The pain is not bodily, but spiritual; though the body has its share in it. It is a caressing of love so sweet which now takes place between the soul and God, that I pray God of his goodness to make him experience it who may think that I am lying.²⁰³

The bodily nature of Teresa's relationship with the divine is transgressive in both its connotations of sexuality, as well as through its direct, physical and unmediated experience of God. Theresa experiences God physically both through her body and through the act of writing. As Michael Call suggests, 'Teresa's example [could] be too easily translated into a subversive subtext of female mysticism and anti-institutionalism'.²⁰⁴ Once again, it is only once the female saint is contained in death, no longer able to speak for herself, her transgressive nature rendered safe, that she is accepted by the church as a role-model for women. Yet Roberts goes further than simply exposing such containment of transgression through martyrdom. She instead offers a new possibility.

I began this chapter with the aim of showing that Roberts's fiction can be seen as a political act in which biased assumptions made and perpetuated about women can be exposed and the binary oppositions imposed upon the identity of 'woman' problematised and deconstructed to allow for new possibilities of being for women outside traditional stereotypes. Her virgin martyrs do not conform to

²⁰³ *The Life of Saint Theresa of Jesus*, trans. by Allison E. Peers (Hawthorne: New York, 1991), Chapter XXIX, Part 17.

²⁰⁴ Michael J Call, 'Boxing Teresa: The Counter-Reformation and Bernini's Cornaro Chapel', *Woman's Art Journal*, 18:1 (1997), 34-39 (p. 36).

the stereotype of the 'saint' but nor can they be categorised as sinners. Few of them are virgins, none of them is a whore in the pejorative sense of the word, and they defy any easy categorisation. Although all Roberts's saints do eventually die, none of them is martyred for their faith. Beyond death there is no typical conclusion to the Lives of the women in the text, they go their separate ways, sometimes alone, sometimes with friends, but Roberts does not provide a 'happy ever after'. These are not whole 'Lives'. It is here that the true transgression of Roberts's novel lies. Roberts equates death, a common beginning in her novels, with the silencing of women in history. She notes that her novels 'nearly always end on an image of finding language. So the dead body in the beginning sits up and can speak at the end'.²⁰⁵

Josephine, the focus of *Impossible Saints*, ends her life, as well as her 'Life', fractured and anonymous. Her body is cut into pieces, her bones scattered around the country, and finally gathered together, minus a finger, and interred in a 'Golden Chamber' along with Ursula and her eleven thousand virgins, anonymous and unmarked. Like much of women's history, Josephine's 'history', her body, disappears into the anonymous multitude. Like much of women's history, it is incomplete, it lacks a part. Yet all trace of Josephine's history is *not* lost. Josephine has left a second self-written 'Life', a re-vision of the authorised autobiography supervised by her male confessor. This 'Life' is her legacy, left on scraps of paper, made into a rosary for her niece, Isobel. Isobel writes, 'I invent her. I reassemble her from jigsaw bits and pieces of writing; from scattered parts. I make her up' (p. 290). Like Christ's, Josephine's 'bodily' resurrection exists only on paper. She is part invention, and she is literally made up. Yet

²⁰⁵ Maria Soroya García Sánchez, 'Talking About Women, History, and Writing With Michèle Roberts's, *Atlantis*, 27:2 (2005), 137-47 (p. 140).

Josephine's missing 'part', the unfinished narrative of women's history, can be filled by women's writing. Josephine's legacy is her multiple identities, constituted through multiple narratives: Isobel's making up the main part of the novel, Josephine's authorised autobiography, composed under the authority of the church, and her fragmented, heretical, subjective history, left in her rosary for Isobel, refusing the notion of one objective 'truth' in the possible identities for women. Roberts does not offer an alternative to Christian discourse so much as rewrite the notion of 'a' Christian discourse. As Irigaray puts it, 'the issue is not one of elaborating a new theory of which women would be the *subject* or the *object*, but of jamming the theoretical machinery itself, of suspending its pretension to the production of a truth and of a meaning that are excessively univocal'.²⁰⁶ In its blend of fiction, 'fact', myth and experience, Roberts's novel is both copy and original, and potentially originator. Judith Fetterley, then, is mistaken in her belief that 'women obviously cannot rewrite literary works so that they become ours by virtue of reflecting our reality'.²⁰⁷ *Impossible Saints* begs the question 'Why not'?

²⁰⁶ Irigaray, Luce, 'The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine' (1977) in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, ed. by J. Rivkin and M. Ryan, rev. edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 570-573 (p. 571).

²⁰⁷ Fetterley, Judith, 'The Resisting Reader', in *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader*, ed. by Mary Eagleton, 2nd edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 303- 306 (p. 305).

CONCLUSION

Feminist re-writing and re-telling of the Bible has revealed two things to me: first, that the Word of God is, indubitably and irrefutably, the word of men; and second, that women's words do not come from some sacred, separate, female space. (Duncker, p. 135)

Patricia Duncker's conclusions on the effects of feminist re-vision of the Bible perhaps highlight the achievements of the contemporary women writers whose novels are included within this thesis. Although the texts underpinning their stories may be 'indubitably and irrefutably, the word of men', these novels, without exception, conclude their Biblically inspired stories with women's words. They have radically appropriated, mimicked, mocked and rewritten the male 'Word' to offer sometimes subtle, often overt, but always far-reaching renegotiations of sex and gender. Their words, indeed, do not come from 'some sacred, separate, female space', but nor do they any longer inhabit the specifically male space that has for so long restricted and silenced them. My own analysis of these novels suggests that some are more successful than others in the reconfigurations of gender that they offer; the differing feminist ideologies that are displayed within the texts mirror the divisions within feminism itself. Yet

regardless of their ultimate conclusions, the strength of these texts lies in their deviation, not from each other, but from the univocal male Word.

There can be found within these novels revolutionary reconsiderations of what it means to *be* a woman; Angela Carter's visionary rewriting of Genesis, in particular, suggests a radical potential for looking beyond the concept of a specifically female 'identity', preferring instead a cyborgian notion of 'affinity' which allows for an uncompromising rejection of historical formulations of gender, privileging 'becoming' over 'being' in reference to the gendered self, while acknowledging the need for community and, to some extent sisterhood, in opposing sexism. Where I have rejected the ultimate essentialism of Ann Chamberlin and Penelope Farmer's novels, I have also sought to highlight their re-visionary refusal of patriarchal mores that have defined women for so long. Tennant's demythologising novel, flawed and troubled in its narrative mode, is shown to be equally *troubling* in its approach to the stereotyping narratives of gender, and, while it is ultimately unsuccessful in providing any new story for the future of 'woman', it also highlights the failures of the old stories that have written woman's past.

Anita Diamant and Jenny Diski too, have taken issue with the stories of the past, reimagining the untold lives of Old Testament women who have been eclipsed by their far more famous husbands, fathers, brothers and sons. Exploring the connections between 'home' and 'family', Diski and Diamant have exposed the invisibility of women within genealogical narratives of history. Furthermore, I have shown how these two novelists explore the potentiality for new formulations of the female self through revising, not only the Biblical stories of these women, but also the patriarchally defined notions of 'home' and 'family'

that such stories reify. Finding positive potential in the identity of ‘exile’, Diamant and Diski acknowledge the multiply marginalised categories in which women are placed, fundamentally rewriting not only patriarchal history, but also a homogenising Anglo-American concept of ‘woman’. Equally interested in the concept of family is Sue Reidy’s *The Visitation*. Examining the patriarchal Catholicism of 1960s New Zealand in the wake of *Humanae Vitae*, Reidy exposes the elimination of the figure of the mother in Judao-Christian tradition. Repositing the Virgin Mary as a contemporary celebrity, Reidy offers an accessible model of divinity for women that draws on popular mythology as much as canonical representations of Mary.

Issues of popular belief are perhaps equally fundamental to the texts examined in chapter Three. Questioning the precise nature of ‘feminist re-vision’, I have contrasted two texts that offer an alternative history of Mary Magdalene. Where Dan Brown’s blockbuster *The Da Vinci Code* promises to rewrite the story of Mary Magdalene, I suggest that the unacknowledged male bias of the text instead posits the ‘sacred, separate female space’ that Duncker identifies as lying outside the aims of feminist re-vision, providing instead only a widespread but limiting configuration of femininity posing as feminism that is ultimately shown to fulfil only male interests. Michèle Roberts’s *The Secret Gospel of Mary Magdalene*, on the other hand, provides a de-authorising text that not only offers an ‘alternative’ but, in drawing on historical and non-canonical Biblical texts, troubles the very authority of the Bible itself, exposing all such texts as simply ‘alternatives’.

My final chapter goes beyond the pages of the Bible to address how the Biblical women written about in the first four chapters have been used as

continuing models for women throughout history. My analysis of Roberts's hagiographical re-vision shows how such models have served to contain transgressive female behaviour through a disproportionate emphasis on virginity and martyrdom for women. Exploring their medieval contexts, I have shown how the transgression present in such texts, despite its restricted enactment, offers positive possibilities for contemporary women that can potentially overwrite the continuing prominence of self-abnegation for women today.

Throughout this thesis I have suggested that the novels included represent a project of rewriting not only the Bible, but of reality itself. In my introduction I evoked Rich's concept of re-vision as an 'act of survival', suggesting that this could be achieved through an increasing focus on women's writing, ensuring the survival of a female literary tradition. Yet perhaps Rich's notion should be read literally. Roberts's exposition of the unequal prominence of ascetic practices for women in medieval literature also highlights the worrying prevalence of such models for women in contemporary popular culture, bringing to mind the ubiquitous size-zero fashion model and mutilating practices of plastic surgery. In so doing, Roberts's novel offers a very literal method of survival for women, rejecting notions of femininity that were perhaps inscribed in Biblical narratives but which stray all too often outside their confines to be a reality for contemporary women.

The other authors examined within this thesis also go beyond the pages of their stories to offer not only new versions of old stories but also new stories themselves, a new Eve, a new God, new concepts of 'wife' and 'mother', a new woman. It is difficult to draw any broad conclusions from the disparate effects of and strategies employed within such stories, and each chapter therefore terminates

with a more detailed conclusion of the texts contained therein. Nonetheless, it is helpful to note the similarities that can be found within these texts. The multiplicity and divergence of their voices is perhaps the most outstanding and consistent feature that these novels have in common. Many feature multiple narrators within the texts themselves, while all proffer a viewpoint that is marked by its acknowledgement of subjectivity that fundamentally troubles the univocal stance of patriarchally defined narratives of history. In so doing, these novels have not only proffered radical and liberating alternatives to such a history but have exposed the overwhelming silence imposed upon women throughout history. If any conclusions can be drawn then, it is that in 'writing' the wrongs of Biblical history, I suggest that contemporary women's writing also rights those wrongs.

It is important to note that I have not, and could not have, approached this thesis from the position of a Biblical or historical scholar. While my readings of the Bible itself, as well as apocryphal and non-canonical sources along with exegetical material, are informed by theological and historical scholarship, I have approached such material from a feminist and literary perspective and make no apologies for having so done. My interest in this project has resided in how the Bible is used today, and, beyond chapter Five, in which I make a brief foray into medieval exegesis and women's history, I have largely restricted myself to contemporary theological debates and understanding of the Bible, and literary interpretations of its text and contemporary significance. However, it is clear, even from my own limited readings of the historical position of women within a Judao-Christian tradition, that there is much scope for continued work in this area. Figures such as Julian of Norwich and Teresa of Avila have received some critical attention, yet their writings remain significantly less visible than those of their

male contemporaries. The female saints of the early church and later, who frequently lack even the limited voices of Julian of Norwich and Teresa of Avila, are even less visible. While the contemporary focus of this thesis has not allowed for extended work in this area, the significance of the writings both by and about these women beyond their solely devotional and theological contexts would be of enormous interest to the field.

Of equal interest to me has been the huge number of historical and Biblically inspired novels that have been, for a number of reasons, excluded from this thesis. Several novels that were originally intended for inclusion were ultimately excluded due to constraints of time and focus. Two that were of most interest were Jane Rogers' *Mr Wroe's Virgins* (1999) and Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* (1990). These two novels provide an examination of the effects of religious rhetoric on women in specific historical periods. *Mr Wroe's Virgins* re-imagines the possibly apocryphal story of seven women given to evangelist John Wroe in the early nineteenth century while Kingsolver's novel follows the story of an American Baptist missionary family in the Congo of the 1950s. While the characters and stories of these novels were inspirational in their engagement with religious rhetoric, the lack of specific Biblical figures within their pages meant that I was ultimately unable to include them in this work. They would, however, provide ample material for future work on the impact that religion has upon women within the broader historical context that these novels offer. There is, in addition to literature that rewrites women's Judao-Christian history, a great wealth of women's writing that re-examines historical figures that lie outside such categories, yet proffer an equally marginalised voice. Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, rewriting *The Odyssey* from the point of view of

Penelope, is the first novel in a conceived series by Canongate books of one hundred short works rewriting ancient myth. The fourteen books so far published in the series take on figures as diverse as Samson and Delilah, Theseus, Baba Yaga and Heracles, engaging with the creation of the world, oedipal complexes and the building of the Great Wall of China, while Karen Armstrong's introduction to the series, *A Short History of Myth*, highlights their continuing relevance. A wider study of women's writing on history and myth could do worse than to start here.

It is interesting to note that two of the books in the Canongate series are rewritings of the life of Jesus. Philip Pullman's *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ* (2010) offers an alternative take on Christ, while Michel Faber's *The Fire Gospel* (2008) provides a lost fifth gospel. Outside this series, C K Stead's *My Name Was Judas* (2006) also revisits the time of Christ, offering the re-visionary gospel of Judas Iscariot himself. These texts perhaps represent an increasing acknowledgment that where patriarchal history has unremittingly told only a male story, it has been only *one* story which has equally erased male difference, perpetuating a monolithic category of masculinity that in itself serves to reify sexist tropes. While I have very briefly touched upon authorial gender in chapter Four, suggesting an unconsciously masculinist narrative bias in Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, any deeper engagement with issues of masculinity has been beyond the scope of this work. However, these texts would certainly present an excellent avenue for further research on this topic.

Perhaps the most exciting area of research for me has been the interplay between ancient religion and modern science in Angela Carter's dystopian rewriting of Genesis. Yet the fact that Carter's novel is the oldest included in this

thesis suggests a disappointing lack of engagement with such themes in contemporary fiction outside the genre-specific confines of science-fiction, while the burgeoning area of Carter studies would perhaps leave little scope for any large-scale study of this aspect of Carter's work. However, such themes have recently been revisited by one of the most exciting emerging voices in contemporary fiction. Scarlett Thomas's *The End of Mr Y* (2006) offers an intriguing mixture of quantum physics, Victorian spiritualism and Derridian deconstructionist theory in its retake on the creation story, while the recent *Our Tragic Universe* (2010) rewrites the romance genre within a metaphysical journey through the afterlife that relies as much on the pseudo-scientific discourse of psychoanalysis as it does on Judao-Christian models of heaven and hell. These novels, along with Thomas's earlier works, form the basis for an examination of the construction of gender that both echoes the religious themes of this thesis while going beyond the solely Biblical formations discussed herein, and will be the topic of my own future research.

I began this thesis by questioning why it is that women don't yet 'have everything'; why gender equality remains an unfulfilled ambition. Gayle Rubin suggests that

The sex/gender system is not immutably oppressive and has lost much of its traditional function. Nevertheless, it will not wither away in the absence of opposition. It still carries the social burden of sex and gender, of socializing the young, and of providing ultimate propositions about the nature of human beings themselves. (Rubin, p. 204).

The novels examined in this thesis represent the oppositional forces that Rubin identifies as necessary to counter the ideological constructions of sex and gender, both within religious discourse, and through such apparatuses, within society itself. The ongoing project of Biblical re-vision fundamentally undermines the

monolithic categories of identity that have been placed upon both men and women. Yet, as I suggested in the introduction it can only be through continued and collective efforts that the project of rewriting meaning for women can be achieved. The novels included within this thesis, as well as those highlighted as containing potential for future work in this area, have participated in a project that, arguably, started as early as Christianity itself. The discovery of a *Gospel of Mary* (Magdalene) in 1896 suggests that the Bible is perhaps not ‘indubitably and irrefutably, the word of men’ as Duncker has claimed (Pagels, p. 22; Duncker, p. 135). Yet Mary’s single voice has been rendered silent by the overwhelmingly male voices of gospel, Biblical redaction and exegesis, theological scholarship and popular belief. From the tentative negotiations of the cloistered women writers of the early medieval period, to the strident rejections of patriarchy in the 1970s, the most successful female confrontations of religion have been marked by collectivity. It is therefore crucial that such a project continues; that contemporary women’s literature carries on opposing a reality that continues to be constructed by male voices. To paraphrase then, my ultimate conclusion must be ‘write on sisters!’

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