

**“Not a Prayer except Ourselves”: Christian Theological Feminism in the Poetry of  
Frances Harper, Emily Dickinson, Vassar Miller, and Sharon Olds**

by

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## Abstract

Luce Irigaray proposes the possibility of an ethical society in which woman is no longer subjugated to man's concept of her identity but has an identity of her own. As Irigaray and other theological feminists have pointed out, a key tool for the support of Western patriarchy is a Judeo-Christian concept of God created by man in man's own image. The fact that women are believed to have had little or no influence in shaping the dominant concept of the divine in Western thought is both a symptom and a product of the fact that women have been marginalized in Western society. Prompted by Luce Irigaray's feminist critique of Christianity and Alicia Ostriker's examinations of biblical revision in women's writing, this project offers a comparative look at Christian theological feminism as it appears in the works of four United States women writers. The dissertation first explores some of the trends in prose by theological feminist in the twentieth century. It then explores ways that similar critiques appear in the poetry of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Emily Dickinson, Vassar Miller, and Sharon Olds.

Through close analyses of poems selected for their subject matter, this dissertation examines ways that the poetry of Harper, Dickinson, Miller, and Olds responds to traditional Christian rhetoric, reinterprets the Bible for feminist purposes, and attempts to redefine a space for the feminine within a framework of Christian theology. This project will also discuss how these poets propose the existence of a female divine through images of feminized nature and divine maternity, and how they try to create spiritual communities of women by reconsidering the relationship of the maternal and the divine

and by attempting to recover female genealogies. The central questions this project seeks to answer are what difficulties have these U.S. women poets encountered with the Christian divine, how have they attempted to revise concepts of the Christian divine to resolve those difficulties, and how does their rhetoric about the divine place them within the tradition of theological feminism?

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## **Chapter One:**

### **Christian Theological Feminism**

Many women writers have used prose to directly challenge the use of Christianity to support the continued subjugation of women. However, this project examines such challenges in the works of women poets, Frances Harper, Emily Dickinson, Vassar Miller, and Sharon Olds. As Julia Kristeva argues, poetic language is an automatic challenge to the symbolic order. Poetic language with its ability to encourage acceptance of the plurality and slippage in meaning is one step closer already to achieving a revolution in thinking. Therefore, this project will concentrate on a selection of women poets who have dealt considerably with the subject of the divine whether they challenge the authority claimed by man in traditional Christian discourse, question the acceptance of God as man, or propose a new divine. The poets who will be the main focus of this study will be American women whose work arises out of a Judeo-Christian background.

This chapter will begin with a review of prominent feminist theorists' specific critique of Christian traditions. This will include a review of the writings of Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and Mary Daly who represent a more polemic response to Christianity. In addition, this chapter will review the works of some less polemic Christian feminist theorists such as Rosemary Radford Ruether, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Sylvia Schroer, and Elizabeth Johnson. Following the review of the feminist theorists' prose writings, this chapter will provide a brief description of the upcoming chapters of this project which will support the central argument of this project: that the



women poets dealt with in this project are enacting feminist responses to Christian traditions in their poetry in ways that justify their categorization as Christian theological feminists.

There is a long tradition of criticism examining responses to Christian practice and scripture in the works of women writers. In *Feminist Revision and the Bible*, for example, Alicia Ostriker examines responses to the Bible in the works of American women writers. This dissertation does similar work by seeking connections between some of the prominent critiques of Christianity<sup>1</sup> by women identified primarily as feminist theorists and critiques by four important American women poets. This project is not an attempt to argue for or against a particular orthodoxy. The goal here is to demonstrate the importance of considering these different genres— theory and poetry— comparatively rather than in isolation from each other. Comparing theorists and poets who develop feminist critiques of Christianity and noting their similarities reveals a much broader theological feminist tradition. From considering the theorists and creative writers comparatively, patterns emerge in the ways these writers respond to Christianity that are in many ways suggestive of the same concerns about women’s relationship to the divine in Christianity.

Of the feminist theorists who respond to Christianity, there are those like Luce Irigaray, Simone de Beauvoir, and Mary Daly who argue either for a rejection of Christianity or a radical upheaval of its tenets and applications. Then there are those such

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<sup>1</sup>The term Christianity is used throughout this text to indicate the religion derived from the life and teachings of Jesus. The term Christianity is very broad and encompasses a vast plurality of group and individual perspectives on the subject of Jesus Christ and his teachings. In light of that fact, this project is confined to explicating the perspectives of theorists and poets and does not attempt to advance any claims about the nature or character of Christianity itself other than to point out the futility of attempting to make definitive claims about its essential character.

as Rosemary Radford Ruether, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, and Elizabeth Johnson who—instead of proposing a rejection or revision of Christianity—are interested in maintaining the basic structure of traditional Christianity while recognizing that there are opportunities for that structure to be read as patriarchal<sup>2</sup> rather than gender neutral. They attempt to read existing Christianity in ways that uncover, recover, or interject the voices and experiences of women into Christian scripture and practice. This chapter will identify and clarify the relevant points of both these groups of theorists' arguments about Christianity. Subsequent chapters will delve more fully into comparisons of their arguments about the Christian divine with those of American women poets.

### **Radical Christian Theological Feminism**

The work of prominent theological feminist Luce Irigaray will be at the foreground of this chapter. Her work is the primary inspiration for this exploration of feminist responses to Christianity in American women's poetry. In *Je, Tu, Nous: Toward a Culture of Difference*, Irigaray points out that woman's role in Western society has been defined by her usefulness to man. She argues that woman's role has been, "constituted from outside in relation to a social *function*, instead of to a female identity and autonomy." Furthermore, she asks, "fenced in by these functions, how [can woman] maintain a margin of singleness for herself, a margin of determinism that would allow her to become and remain herself?" (1993b, 72). That social function, according to Irigaray, is the role of wife and mother; both positions make women dependent upon men. In other words, according to Irigaray, women do not have access to autonomy because men

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<sup>2</sup> The term patriarchal is used throughout this dissertation to indicate a system of power in which a particular society is governed by men and power passes from father to son and by-passes female heirs. It further indicates a situation of inequality between the sexes in which women have little or no access to power.

occupy the most prominent positions of power, society operates based on a philosophical and literary tradition from which women have been actively excluded and effaced, and families are expected to operate as though the father's heritage is most important.

Woman, in this situation, Irigaray argues, is conceived of only in reference to and subordinate to man's identity.

In *Sexes and Genealogies*, Irigaray provides a psychoanalytic reading of Christian tradition and demonstrates the impact that Judeo-Christianity has had on the role of women in Western society and in Western thought. She argues that God "helps [man] to define his gender" (1993c, 61). The Christian concept of God as male provides Western man with an ideal masculinity by which to measure his own identity. The masculine trinity allows man, according to Irigaray, a community of males and divine affirmation of his identity. Women are offered no such community or divine affirmation by Christian tradition. The only valuable place for women within this tradition, the idealized mother, isolates her from other women and limits her identity to a biological function.

It is, therefore, understandable that it is women who will need to take the first steps in destabilizing the concept of God that has been established by men. For Western men it is easy to believe that (1) they benefit individually from the continuance of a patriarchal order and (2) the prevalent system of power is natural. As Irigaray points out, the Judeo-Christian concept of God affirms these beliefs. Women, on the other hand, occupy a position from which it is easier to observe the incongruities and dangers of Western patriarchal thought and from which there is more impetus to challenge them. Their experiences are more consistently and overtly disturbed by this system in that it is women who are denied access to power and it is women whose voices are silenced and

whose perspectives are excluded from dominant intellectual and philosophical discourse, as Irigaray claims in *This Sex Which is Not One*.

Irigaray's view of the role of God as a set of qualities which humans strive to attain underpins her argument that women should develop a female divine. She argues in *Sexes and Genealogies* that a female divine would be for women,

This margin of freedom and potency (*puissance*) that gives us the authority yet to grow, to affirm and fulfill ourselves as individuals and members of a community, keep it for us. As an other that we have yet to make actual, as a region of life, strength, imagination, creation, which exists for us both within and beyond, as our possibility of a present and a future. (1993c, 72)

According to Irigaray, men have that "region of life, strength, imagination, creation" in the male divine of Christianity. Women do not, she argues, and are, therefore, left "in our infancy, in our bondage, slaves to male paradigms and to the archaic powers" (1993b, 72). Women in the Christian tradition have only a male divine to use as a source of values, and, according to Irigaray, this means that women are limited to aspiring to male values which they can never fully realize because they are not men.

The male divine is just one of the points of Christianity which Irigaray would like to see women question and revise. Irigaray argues that certain troubling sexist ideas (that woman is only useful as a vessel for man's seed, that woman is the source of evil, that woman is further removed from the divine than man<sup>3</sup>) are taken from Judeo-Christian scripture and from interpretations of that scripture by clergy and theologians. Irigaray

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<sup>3</sup> She is perhaps thinking of texts, for example, such as Saint Augustine's "Of the Works of Monks" in which he argues that while men are made in God's image, women, "in the sex of their body" are not made in the image of God and "therefore they [women] are bidden to be veiled" (524).

argues that these sources dictate woman's position in relationship to man and her relationship to God. Irigaray charges Christianity with perpetuating sexual inequality and with keeping women from realizing their autonomy.<sup>4</sup> She says in *Je, Tu, Nous* of what she terms "The duty to bear children, to be silent, to be in attendance but off on the side," that,

all this wounds the flesh and the spirit of women, and there is no representation of that sacrifice. In fact, it [the sacrifice of their autonomy in domestic subservience] is doubled in the duty women have to believe and to be practicing believers. Dogmas and rites appear as substitutions and veils that hide the fact that women's carnal and spiritual virginity is being sacrificed and traded. The sons are separated from their mothers and from the women who love them out of duty to their Fathers. (1993b, 47)

Irigaray claims that women in the West give up their identities in order to serve men, and women are encouraged to do this by Christian theology. This passage contains the primary concerns of Irigaray's writings on spirituality and sexual difference: that women are subservient to men, that women have lost a female genealogy, and that Christianity encourages these situations. In much of her work she outlines specific steps women must take to correct these problems.<sup>5</sup> She argues that women must reconsider traditional or

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<sup>4</sup> Irigaray speaks in general terms about patriarchal power, the West, and Judeo-Christian tradition. However, this dissertation does not advance the argument that these general terms should collapse the plurality of societies, texts, and perspectives encompassed in those terms. Again, the goal here is to understand the theorist's critique for the purpose of determining to what extent she is in conversation with other writers on these topics.

<sup>5</sup> In "Women and Spirituality in the Writings of Irigaray," Marie-Andrée Roy summarizes what Luce Irigaray claims women must do in order to achieve a society of sexual equality and what Irigaray views as the problems of sexual inequality in Western societies and how she claims religion works to support these problems. Roy's summary is useful to this dissertation as it identifies clearly and succinctly the key

patriarchal interpretations of scripture, recover female genealogies, rescue the woman's body from relegation away from the divine, and develop a female divine.

In her chapter in *Sexes and Genealogies* entitled "The Neglect of Female Genealogies," Irigaray argues that women have lost touch with a matriarchal genealogy that would connect them to each other. This missing genealogy would create a community in which women's experiences, bodies, and connection to the divine could be acknowledged and celebrated and where they could develop values outside of male paradigms. Irigaray warns women that they should not opt for a gender neutral or androgynous position. "A woman denies her sex and gender in doing this," she claims (1993b, 21). Irigaray blames what she calls the "between-men cultural world" of Western society for this tendency for women to deny their own sexual identities and also to deny their relationships with other women.

Irigaray also argues that women should revise traditional interpretations of religious doctrine and scripture. Irigaray claims that Christianity supports the privileging of men over women in Western society and gives men texts to use as support for the oppression of women. These texts are able to work the way they do, according to Irigaray, not only because men believe in them, but because women are encouraged to

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theological feminist arguments in Irigaray's work that are important to the examination of the poets to come. To summarize Irigaray's claims about the relationship between religion and sexual inequality in the West, Roy says there are "two foundational elements of [Irigaray's] thought on spirituality: her critique of the patriarchal system and her model of sexual difference" (13-14). Roy adds, "In Irigaray's view, we are living in a patriarchal order that dominates and exploits the earth and abuses creation. The patriarchal domination of man over nature affects relationships between men and women" (15). Roy goes on to say that "Irigaray argues that the passage to patriarchy took place when the honouring of the blood ties with the mother was outlawed" (15). Roy provides a list of three of the four important tasks women must undertake, according to Irigaray, to solve these problems and reach the goal of a sexually equal society. Roy writes that, "three ways in which the spirituality that marks out her [Irigaray's] texts is developed [are] the affirmation of female genealogies, the redefinition of traditional religious concepts and the development of a culture of the breath." This last is Irigaray's concern for women to appreciate their bodies rather than ignoring or devaluing them (14). A fourth task suggested by Irigaray is that women claim a female divine.

believe in them as well. Again, Irigaray claims that one problem with Western<sup>6</sup> theology is its male God. Another is the narrative of the conception and birth of Jesus. Irigaray argues that both of these ideas serve patriarchal power. She says in “Divine Women,”

Our theological tradition presents some difficulty as far as God in the feminine gender is concerned. There is no *woman* God, no female trinity: mother, daughter, spirit. This 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. The most influential representation of God in our culture over the last two thousand years has been a male trinitary God and a virgin mother: a mother of the son of God whose alliance with the father is given little consideration. (1993c, 62)

Irigaray believes that the Christian narrative, in which Mary gains importance only by giving birth to a male God’s male child, limits Mary to a biological role in submission to males and excludes her from the possibility of transcendence. Irigaray views Mary’s relationship to God as symbolic of and supportive of women’s relationships to men in the West. This story suggests that women are secondary to men, argues Irigaray, and can only please the divine by becoming mothers, bearers of men’s children.

Irigaray also sees the trinity of Christianity as patriarchal. She says that “the Father [God] is not single. He is three. The virgin [Mary] is alone of her sex. Without a daughter or a love between them, without a way of becoming divine except through her son: God-man” (1993b, 62). Irigaray argues that, not only does the male-God-female-

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<sup>6</sup> Irigaray seems to identify Christianity as the primary religious tradition that influences Western thought. Therefore, she often speaks of “our” Western religious or theological tradition in general while making it clear from the details of her argument that her subject is specifically Christianity or, more broadly, Judeo-Christianity.

vessel narrative relegate women to the body, but that the all-male trinity of Christianity also contributes to devaluing women by giving men the possibility of a community and genealogy while denying this to women<sup>7</sup>. These parts of Christian scripture—the stories of Mary and Jesus—are among those that Irigaray hopes women will challenge.<sup>8</sup>

Irigaray also argues that women must re-value their own bodies and, by re-valuing them, come to an appreciation of their particular sexual difference.<sup>9</sup> In *Sexes and Genealogies*, Irigaray argues that the beauty of women’s bodies should be reclaimed from the role it plays as merely an object of man’s desire. Women are the agents, according to Irigaray, in allowing their bodies to be used as objects in service of patriarchal power and against the cause of female autonomy. She goes on to say that,

The body’s splendor has rarely been used as a lever to advance self-love, self-fulfillment. Maternal beauty has been glorified in our religious and social traditions, but womanly beauty for centuries has been seen merely as a trap for the other. [. . .] Female beauty is always considered a *garment* ultimately designed to attract the other into the self. It is almost never perceived as a manifestation of, an appearance by a phenomenon expressive of interiority-- whether of love, of thought, of flesh. We look

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<sup>7</sup>It should be noted that Irigaray’s reading of these theological points is interpretive and metaphorical. Their presence here does not exclude other possible interpretations, metaphorical or literal readings of the scripture involved.

<sup>8</sup>More moderate theorists and poets address this problem in Christian theology. As discussed later in this chapter, theorists like Rosemary Radford Ruether suggest that the male trinity is not exclusively male in character.

<sup>9</sup>This task is what Roy calls “the development of a culture of the breath.” Roy explains Irigaray’s claims about women’s love for their bodies in the following way: “The body is understood [by Irigaray] as the site of the spiritual, to be cultivated, like the divine temple. The practice of breathing, of yoga, of cultivating the perceptions/ and of reading ancient and contemporary texts about yoga and also tantric texts, all have enabled Irigaray to understand that ‘the body is the site of the divine’ (Irigaray 1999b:83)” (Roy 17-18).



at ourselves in the mirror to *please someone*, rarely to interrogate the state of our body or our spirit. (1993c, 64-65)

Revaluing the female body, she argues, has the potential to counteract the idea that the female body separates woman from the divine.

Finally, Irigaray argues that women must discover a female divine that will serve as an ideal for women. Irigaray specifies that women should not create a female goddess as an object of worship. She argues that women should not remake God in their own image as she claims men have done. She argues that women should *become* divine women. That is, they should recognize the divine in themselves and themselves in the divine that already exists. Irigaray writes,

I am far from suggesting that today we must once again deify ourselves as did our ancestors with their animal totems, that we have to regress to siren goddesses, who fight against men gods. Rather I think we must not merely instigate a return to the *cosmic*, but also ask ourselves why we have been held back from becoming *divine women*. (1993b, 60)

Again, Irigaray warns against the creation of a female goddess that would be merely artificial. Irigaray believes that women do not need to create a female goddess external to themselves a goddess to be worshipped as an idol as some New Age philosophies have done. Instead, she assumes already the existence of a divine that is universal and accessible to women as well as to men if only women seek it out and cast off the training which, she believes, teaches women that they are not worthy of the divine and can only hope to approach the divine on the periphery through their service to men.

Women, according to Irigaray, must reclaim their access to the divine in order to gain equality. She claims that “Man is able to exist because God helps him define his gender (*genre*), helps him orient his finiteness by reference to infinity” (1993b, 61). Man’s access to the divine and continued dominance over religious discourse is, she argues, what currently creates the inequity between the positions of women and the positions of men in the west. Therefore, she says,

In order [for women] to become, it is essential to have a gender or an essence (consequently a sexuate essence) as *horizon*. Otherwise, becoming remains partial and subject to the subject. When we become parts or multiples without a future of our own this means simply that we are leaving it up to the other, or the Other of the other, to put us together. To become means fulfilling the wholeness of what we are capable of being. Obviously, this road never ends. Are we more perfect than in the past? (1993b, 61)

As explained earlier, Irigaray sees man’s exclusive access to the divine as offering him a divine ideal to which he can aspire. The male divine as a goal, she argues, allows men to validate their existence and become subjects. She believes that women need a divine female to serve as a horizon for women, so that women have their own ideal for which to strive rather than seeking the divine only through men. This is why, according to Irigaray, women must reconsider their divinity, and challenge Judeo-Christian representations of the relationship between women and the divine.

Irigaray’s tasks are all connected. The search for the divine feminine, for example, is linked to the recovery of female genealogies. As she puts it,

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*. [. . .] If I am unable to form a relationship with some horizon of accomplishment for my gender, I am unable to share while protecting my becoming. (1993c, 62)

She suggests that the divine feminine would serve as a horizon or goal for each woman. Just as she argues that women must have a feminine divine in order to be independent from men, she also argues that women must have the female divine to remain independent from, yet connected to, each other. Autonomy from each other facilitates a connection between women and a celebration of female genealogies because, Irigaray argues, without appreciating the divinity of herself and achieving her own becoming, the individual woman would not be able to celebrate the accomplishments of her sisters and foremothers. Without a female divine, she argues, women cannot achieve subjectivity and cannot celebrate the subjectivity of other women.

Feminist writer Mary Daly shares Irigaray's negative critique of Christianity and even more vehemently argues that Christian theology should be challenged. Both Irigaray and Daly argue that women need to critique the options available to women within a religious and moral framework. Like Irigaray, Mary Daly argues that the male divine of Christianity is detrimental to sexual equality and must be rejected by women in search of a female divine which better represents and speaks to women. She argues also in favor of establishing female genealogies and reconsidering and challenging sexist interpretations of scripture.

Like Irigaray, Mary Daly argues for a community of women as a challenge to patriarchal Christianity. She calls this female genealogy and community “sisterhood.” She explains that “Sisterhood, then, by bonding of women against our reduction to low caste is Antichurch” (133). While Irigaray seems to advocate recovery of female genealogies for their potential to help women appreciate their value and sacredness, Daly goes further to suggest that recovery of female genealogies helps to bolster women to fight against sexism. She says that sisterhood,

is the evolution of a social reality that undercuts the credibility of sexist religion to the degree that it undermines sexism itself. Even without conscious attention to the church, sisterhood is in conflict with it. There are, of course, other movements in contemporary society that threaten organized religion. In the case of other movements, however, it is not sexism that is directly under attack. The development of sisterhood is a unique threat, for it is directed against the basic social and psychic model of hierarchy and domination upon which authoritarian religion as *authoritarian* depends for survival. This conflict arises directly from the fact that women are beginning to overcome the divided self and divisions from each other. (Daly 133)

In fact, Daly argues, the mere existence of sisterhoods of women, connections between and communities of women across generations and disciplines, is warfare against the patriarchal system of power. Irigaray is not quite so adversarial.

Again, like Irigaray, Daly is interested in women challenging patriarchal interpretations of scripture. According to Daly, an important concept that must be

questioned is the idea that woman is responsible for the evil of humanity, and she credits the Genesis narrative of the fall of humanity with supporting this concept. She states that “As long as the myth of feminine evil is allowed to dominate human consciousness and social arrangements, it provides the setting for women’s victimization, by both men and women” (Daly 48).

According to Daly, the Genesis story, in which Eve and Adam partake of the forbidden fruit and are then banished, places the blame on the woman for the presence of human sin in the world. In suggesting that women re-read scripture that has been used to support sexual inequality, Daly re-reads the Genesis text to suggest liberating possibilities. She writes,

I have suggested that the original myth revealed the essential defect or ‘sin’ of patriarchal religion—its justifying of sexual caste. I am now suggesting that there were intimations in the original myth—not consciously intended—of a dreaded future. That is, one could see the myth as prophetic of the real Fall that was yet on its way, dimly glimpsed. In that dreaded event, women reach for knowledge and, finding it, share it with men, so that together we can leave the delusory paradise of false consciousness and alienation. (67)

According to Daly, both men and women should reconsider the importance they place on this narrative which makes childbirth (according to Daly, the only way in the Christian tradition that a woman can hope to be near or in the service of the divine) a punishment, so that, even in that role, woman is far from attaining any sense of her own relationship to the divine. The narrative of the fall is a prime example of the kind of religious text that,

according to Irigaray, must be re-evaluated and critiqued for how it supports patriarchal religion. To re-evaluate it has the potential to move people toward a more feminine-inclusive construction of the divine. Daly says, “In ripping the image of the Fall from its original context, we are also transvaluating it. That is, its meaning is divested of its negativity and becomes positive and healing” (67). She goes on to say that,

The healing process demands a reaching out toward completeness of human being in the members of both sexes—that is, movement toward androgynous being. For women, this means exorcism of the internalized patriarchal presence, which carries with it feelings of guilt, inferiority, and self-hatred that extends itself to other women. It means recognition that women are in a real sense possessed by demonic power within the psyche—the masculine subject (‘male chauvinist pig’) within—that reduces the self as an object. Ejection of this alien presence means affirming that ‘female is beautiful,’ not in the sense of accepting patriarchy’s models and imposed standards for evaluating females, but in the sense that women are discovering and defining ourselves. (Daly 50)

Daly wants women to value their embodied (and otherwise) difference just as Irigaray does. The two agree that women should not only reconsider the gendered concept of God, they should also critique scripture, religious texts which are used along with the male representation of the divine to support patriarchy.

Julia Kristeva seems to agree with both Luce Irigaray and Mary Daly that certain points of Judeo-Christian theology are in need of reconsideration by women. Kristeva specifically implicates the legend of Mary in the problem of sexual inequality. She claims

that the image of Mary plays a symbolic role in the disavowal of the mother's body that coincides with the acquisition of language and paternal power.<sup>10</sup> Both daughters and sons, according to Kristeva, must give up the mother.

In theology, Kristeva argues, the semiotic is the maternal presence that is excluded from the divine in favor of the dominant conception of the masculine Father God. The symbolic is the exclusive realm of that Father God. Irigaray argues that Christian theology and the story of Mary dictates to women that they must be mothers in order to please God, which, she argues, limits women's possibilities. Kristeva also suggests that the idealization of Mary as the only female example near the divine is a limiting example. She further argues that the theological model mirrors the psychoanalytic model of the development of the subject in which the mother is rejected and the mother is viewed as having no power. So not only does the idealization of the role of mother offer women few choices, it also confines them away from the divine.<sup>11</sup>

### **Moderate<sup>12</sup> Christian Theological Feminism**

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<sup>10</sup> Kristeva writes from a psychoanalytic perspective. She believes that the mother is disowned by her child at the moment her child enters into the symbolic order and becomes a speaking subject.

<sup>11</sup> Both Kristeva and Irigaray cite Cartesian dualism as the source of this division. René Descartes does not explicitly state that women are associated with the body and are thereby separated from the divine. However, Descartes argues that the body is separate from the mind and that the mind is "a cogitating thing" whereas the body simply perceives sensations and is fallible (197). Susan Bordo in *The Flight to Objectivity* argues that Cartesian dualism "may also be described in terms of separation of the *maternal*—the immanent realisms of earth, nature, the authority of the body—and a compensatory turning toward the *paternal*— for legitimization through external regulation, transcendent values, and the authority of law" (58). She says also that, "The Cartesian reconstruction of the world is a 'fortda' [*sic*] game — a defiant gesture of independence from the female cosmos, a gesture which is at the same time compensation for a profound loss," the loss of the maternal (106). Genevieve Lloyd concedes in "Reason as Attainment" that "The most thoroughgoing and influential version of Reason as methodical thought was the famous method of Descartes. Something happened here which proved crucial for the development of stereotypes of maleness and femaleness, and it happened in some ways despite Descartes's explicit intentions" (71). So while Cartesian dualism is often charged with establishing the exclusion of women from public intellectual and spiritual activity, it is not his theory but its cultural context and implications that are responsible.

<sup>12</sup> The use of the term "moderate" here and elsewhere in this dissertation should be understood in a relative sense. The theorists who propose revising the interpretation of Christian scripture or the concept of the Christian divine and its relationship to women may be considered radical, daring, and transgressive. However, these women (Ruether, Fiorenza, Johnson, Schroer, and Engelsman) do not propose a more

Those more aggressive feminist criticisms of the relationship between Christianity and patriarchy hardly encompass all of the writings on the subject of women, sexism, and Christianity. Critiques of gender and Christianity are not limited to those texts typically classified as feminist and are not all by women writers. The Catholic publisher Newman Press, for example, published *Woman is the Glory of Man* in 1966 in response to the second wave feminism of the sixties. The book attempts to add to the discourse on Christianity and women by suggesting that Christian scripture presents an egalitarian view of gender relations.<sup>13</sup> Such writers represent only some of those who have dealt with questions of sexual equality in Christianity without proposing a move beyond Christianity as Irigaray, Daly, Kristeva, and de Beauvoir have done.

Like Mary Daly and Luce Irigaray, Yves Congar has critiqued the holy trinity of Christianity. Congar concludes that the trinity is less sexist than it might seem because of the role played by the figure of Mary. In his examination of the Holy Spirit, Congar discusses the link between the image of Mary and the Holy Spirit in Catholicism. He says, “Mary has also been called the ‘soul of the Church’—this title has also been applied to the Holy Spirit” (164). He cites Bernardino of Siena who wrote in *Divinum illud munus* that “All grace that is communicated to this world comes to us by a threefold movement. It is dispensed according to a very perfect order from God in Christ, from Christ in the Virgin and from the Virgin in us” (163-64).

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dramatic rejection of Christianity and, instead, remain professors of their faith while working within it to propose change. This fact makes them arguably less radical or daring than those theorists who advocate a rejection of Christianity.

<sup>13</sup> The attempt is somewhat compromised by such essentializing and dualistic claims the text makes, such as “The fact remains, none the less, that the feelings and emotions of the two sexes vary greatly in form [. . .] For a man’s emotions to be aroused he must have strong sensations. And then his reaction will be intense. Woman’s emotivity, on the other hand, is so delicately attuned that she reacts to the slightest impressions” (15).



Congar argues that “There is a deep relationship between the Mary, the mother of God, and the Holy Spirit. That relationship derives from the mystery of salvation, the Christian mystery as such” (164):

The part played by Mary is situated within the part played by the Holy Spirit, who made her the mother of the incarnate Word and who is the principle of all holiness and of the communion of the saints. Mary has a pre-eminent place in the Christian mystery as a model of the church and of universal intercession. (164)

Congar is one of several who have attempted, through explorations of the Holy Spirit and the Madonna, to find a female presence among or associated with the divine entities that are the focal point of Christian mythology and worship. These attempts are not necessarily feminist though they often seem to be a response to feminist critiques of Christianity. They are an attempt to answer questions raised throughout the history of Christianity about whether or not the Christian divine privileges men and excludes women. The goal in these writings seems to be to eliminate the need for a complete overthrow of Christianity and to suggest that there is a place for the feminine in the Christian divine.

Many moderate theological feminists who are discussed in this chapter seem motivated by the same desire to respond to allegations of sexism in Christianity as the more radical theorists. However they do so without advocating a move beyond Christianity. Rosemary Ruether, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Silvia Schroer, Elizabeth Johnson, Phyllis Trible, and Joan Chamberlain Engelsman produce critiques of the potentially patriarchal implications of Christianity and the role that Christianity plays in

the oppression of women in Western societies. All of these women acknowledge that there are ways that Christian scripture and the Christian concept of the divine can be interpreted as damaging to women and they acknowledge that these sexist interpretations have been applied to the continued subjugation of women. Instead of rejecting Christianity or suggesting that women should find alternatives beyond Christianity, these theorists find ways to re-read scripture and Christian rhetoric and suggest ways of reforming the understanding of the Christian divine.

Rosemary Radford Ruether agrees with Irigaray, Daly, and Kristeva's assertions that Christianity has been applied in support of patriarchal power. Ruether opens her article, "Sexism and God-Language" with the generalized criticism that Christian monotheism is patriarchal in its effacement of the feminine from the divine. She argues that "Male monotheism reinforces the social hierarchy of patriarchal rule through its religious system in a way that was not the case with the paired images of God and Goddess" which preceded Christianity (151).<sup>14</sup> Ruether argues,

Whereas ancient myth had seen the Gods and Goddesses as within the matrix of one physical-spiritual reality, male monotheism begins to split reality into a dualism of transcendent Spirit (mind, ego) and inferior and dependent physical nature. Bodiless ego or spirit is seen as primary, existing before the cosmos. (151-152)

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<sup>14</sup> Ruether believes that Christianity's privileging of the masculine is very different from pre-Christian understandings of the divine. As she puts it, "Male monotheism has been so taken for granted in Christian culture that the peculiarity of imaging God solely through one gender has not been recognized. But such an image indicates a sharp departure from all previous human consciousness . . . [her ellipses]" (152). She argues that the strictly male God is artificial and unnatural and in need of reconsideration.

“Thus,” says Ruether, “the hierarchy of God-male-female does not merely make woman secondary in relation to God,” it also “gives her a negative identity in relation to the divine.” According to Ruether, women are relegated to a secondary role in Western society because women are associated with the body while men are associated with the mind, and the mind is privileged side of that dichotomy. Men are, therefore, made to appear more God-like than women.

Therefore, Ruether argues, “Feminist theology must fundamentally reject this dualism of nature and spirit” (161). She argues that the association of the mother with the body and the association of the father with the transcendent spirit should be challenged. “Feminists must question,” she says,

the overreliance of Christianity, especially modern bourgeois Christianity, on the model of God/ess as parent. Obviously any symbol of God/ess as parent should include mother as well as father. Mary Baker Eddy’s inclusive term *Mother-Father God*, already did this one hundred years ago. Mother-Father God has the virtue of concreteness, evoking both parental images rather than moving to an abstraction (Parent), which loses effective resonance. (160)

Ruether argues for a revision of the conceptualizations of the Christian divine as exclusively male. She argues that the divine should, instead, be reconsidered as inclusive of both the male and the female. This is similar to Irigaray’s call for a female divine except that, rather than suggesting a replacement of the male Christian divine, Ruether suggests a broader understanding of the Christian divine that looks back to scripture to uncover evidence of the feminine aspects of the divine.

Ruether challenges the argument of some other feminist theologians who say that the Father God of Christianity is distant and oppressive. She views the deity of the Judeo-Christian tradition as inherently liberating. She reads scripture to argue that the Father God is one who cares for the oppressed. She says, “Yahweh is unique as the God of a tribal confederation that identifies itself as liberated slaves” (155). She cites scriptures in which this deity comes to the aid of oppressed peoples. Furthermore, Ruether argues that the prophets of Yahweh “continue the tradition of protests against the hierarchical, urban, landowning society that deprives and oppresses the rural peasantry” (155). According to Ruether, Yahweh is a liberating and egalitarian God rather than a patriarchal God. Ruether equates a deity which privileges one group over another and encourages gender and racial hierarchies with patriarchal oppression (155).

The God of the Old and New Testament, she says, is frequently represented as challenging to patriarchal authority rather than supporting it. She says, “The God of Exodus establishes a relationship with the people that breaks their ties with the ruling overlords” (156). Turning specifically to Christianity’s concept of the divine, she argues that the Father God that Jesus is said to speak of in the New Testament revises the idea of the paternal and oppressive God with which so many feminists respond negatively.

Ruether goes on to say:

It has been often pointed out that Jesus uses a unique word for God. By adopting the word *Abba* for God, he affirms a primary relationship to God based on love and trust; *Abba* was the intimate word used by children in the family for their fathers. It is not fully conveyed by English terms such as *Daddy*, for it was also a term an adult could use of an older man to

signify a combination of respect and affection. But is it enough to conclude from this use of *Abba* that Jesus transforms the patriarchal concept of the divine fatherhood into what might be called a maternal or nurturing concept of God as loving, trustworthy parent? (156)

According to Ruether, the concept of God as this type of father figure has liberating possibilities. She explains, “The early Jesus movement characteristically uses this concept of God as *Abba* to liberate the community from human dominance-dependence relationships based on kinship ties or master-servant relationships” (156-157).

Ruether also argues that the language with which God is spoken about in mainstream Christianity is in need of feminist revision. She argues that mainstream Christianity too often represents God as male, oppressive, and distant. She challenges this representation saying that God is biblically represented as caring for oppressed people and that this suggests that God has a multi-gendered identity. Ruether reads the narratives of God freeing particular groups from oppression as a representation of God as a “liberating sovereign” who, according to her, is matriarchal rather than patriarchal in his acceptance, love, and protection of his chosen people. Ruether offers the term “God/ess” as a substitute for the current way of naming the Christian deity. She intends the new term to represent a gender inclusive understanding of the divine that reflects the Judeo-Christian deity’s connection to pre-Christian deities and what she believes to be the Christian deity’s encompassing of both masculine and feminine qualities.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Elizabeth Shillington takes issue with Ruether’s argument. To Ruether’s suggestion in “Sexism in God-Language” that women worship both “God of the Exodus and God/dess as Matrix,” Shillington says, “Yet I found it difficult to harmonize the two when the former is so overwhelmingly present and the latter so minimally in the Church” (4-5). In other words, Ruether’s argument that the Christian God is meant to be understood in dually-gendered terms also depends upon ignoring the male body in which that God is so often encased and ignoring the biblical texts that represent the Christian divine not as the nurturing and

Like Irigaray who believes that language will be the tool for change, Ruether wants Christians to speak about God in female as well as male terms. She uses as an example of gendered metaphors for God and God's relationship to humanity which she finds in the Bible. Ruether cites Luke 13:18-21 and Matthew 13:31-33<sup>16</sup> and Luke 15:1-10<sup>17</sup> in which, Ruether claims, God is described through the use of metaphors of women engaged in various activities that are traditionally associated with the women's roles. She continues discussing the biblical metaphors and explains why she feels they imply a non-patriarchal, non-sexist characterization of God,

First, the images of male and female in these parables are equivalent.

They both stand for the same things, as paired images. One is in no way inferior to the other. Second, the images are not drawn from the social roles of the mighty, but from the activities of Galilean peasants. It might be objected that the roles of the women are stereotypical and enforce the concept of woman as housekeeper. But it is interesting that the women are never described as related to or dependent on men. The small treasure of the old woman is her own. Presumably she is an independent householder. Finally, and most significant, the parallel male and female images do not picture divine action in parental terms. The old woman seeking the lost coin and the woman leavening the flour image God not as mother or father

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liberating character which Ruether associates with the anti-patriarchal but rather as vengeful, mighty, angry, violent, and distant from humanity.

<sup>16</sup> These sections of Luke and Matthew use the metaphor of a woman making bread to describe God's work in creating heaven. Matthew reads: "Another parable spake he unto them; The kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three measures of meal, till the whole was leavened."

<sup>17</sup> This passage from Luke compares God's concern for lost members of his flock to a woman's concern for a lost coin. The woman searches her house as, it is suggested, God would search to find and regain the lost sinner.

(Creator), but as seeker of the lost and transformer of history (Redeemer).  
(159)

Ruether acknowledges that the scripture she examines is limited. “The preceding Biblical traditions may not be adequate for a feminist reconstruction of God/ess,” she writes, “but they are suggestive.” Ruether further argues that no language adequately represents the divine. Therefore, she says “If all language for God/ess is analogy, if taking a particular human image literally is idolatry, then male language for the divine must lose its privileged place” (159). Ruether suggests that people find new ways of speaking about the divine, in addition to her term “God/ess,” that are more inclusive of female experience.

Several theological feminists<sup>18</sup> whose work has been challenged attempt to revise dominant patriarchal understandings of the Christian divine by arguing that God, although decidedly male, does possess some characteristics which are typically feminine. This argument is intended to demonstrate that the Christian God does not, in fact, have to be read or interpreted as patriarchal.

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza is another theorist who, like Ruether, advocates a moderate approach to theological Christian feminism. She is not in favor of the radical rejection of traditional Christianity that Irigaray and Daly propose. However, she is also not in favor of taking the stance of Ruether, who attempts to rationalize the potentially patriarchal and oppressive implications of Christianity by suggesting that the traditional

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<sup>18</sup> Susanne Heine critiques the feminine qualities argument not so much for its essentialist implications but for its reactionary nature. She backgrounds it by agreeing with those who suggest that there is something troubling about a male God for women. Heine write “There is no doubt that male designations of the divine qualities and modes of action predominate in the biblical text. Accordingly the feminist concerns for a feminine image of God seem a little forced, especially where they use the feminine gender of a word for their arguments” (28).

male divine should merely be reinterpreted as either both male and female or as transcending gender entirely. She argues that, “A feminist hermeneutics cannot trust or accept Bible and tradition simply as divine revelation. Rather it must critically evaluate them as patriarchal articulations” (1995, x).

Like Ruether and unlike Irigaray, Daly and Kristeva, Fiorenza argues that the Christianity is not inherently patriarchal. Yet she does argue that Christianity is interpreted and practiced in patriarchal ways by the dominant church, so that Christianity is used as a tool to support sexism. Fiorenza argues that Christian theological feminists should take an objective approach to reconsiderations of those aspects of Christianity that have been used to justify the oppression of women. Fiorenza’s goal is the development of a new feminist hermeneutics of the Bible that is based in women’s experiences. In *Bread Not Stone*, she says,

Feminist theology begins with the experiences of women, of women-church. In our struggle for self-identity, survival, and liberation in a patriarchal society and church, Christian women have found that the Bible has been used as a weapon against us but at the same time it has been a resource for courage, hope, and commitment in this struggle. Therefore, it cannot be the task of feminist interpretation to defend the Bible against its feminist critics but to understand and interpret it in such a way that its oppressive and liberating power is clearly recognized. (1995, x)

Fiorenza argues that biblical scripture has the potential of being interpreted in ways that can be “oppressive” and in ways that can be “liberating.” The tasks, she says, are to acknowledge the potentially oppressive uses of scripture without viewing them as



essential qualities of Christianity and, at the same time, to uncover and amplify the anti-sexist applications of scripture.

Fiorenza, who approaches the critique of Christianity from a Catholic perspective, also disagrees with the treatment of Mary as idealized mother. In Catholicism more so than in other traditions of Christianity, Mary takes on an air of divinity for many parishioners. Fiorenza finds this troubling because, as she says in *Discipleship of Equals*,

First, the myth of the virginal mother justifies the body-soul dualism of the Christian tradition. Whereas man in this tradition is defined by his mind and reason, woman is defined by her “nature,” i.e., by her physical capacity to bear children. Motherhood, therefore, is the vocation of every woman regardless of whether or not she is a natural mother. However, since in the ascetic Christian tradition nature and the body have to be subordinated to the mind and the spirit, woman because of her nature has to be subordinate to man. (1993, 74)

Fiorenza believes that the emphasis on Mary in Catholicism does not provide a positive place for women in the church, because it inspires church followers rather than its leaders. “Yet,” she argues, “although this powerful aspect of the Mary-myth affected the souls and lives of the people, it never had any influence upon the structures and power relationships in the church” (1993, 73). In other words, while individuals may be daily inspired by the divine feminine image of Mary, the church maintains its support of patriarchal power and continues to exclude the feminine from language about the divine.

Silvia Schroer also argues that Christianity is not inherently patriarchal. She believes that reinterpreting scripture will recover the feminine that has been obscured by

patriarchal interpretations and religious practices. Her primary claims concern the female origins of the figure of Jesus. While many feminists take issue with the fact that the Christian divine is represented as having chosen a male body in which to be born on earth, Schroer argues that close reading of the Bible reveals that Jesus represents a plural gender identity. Schroer argues that “*Hokmā*” or Sophia, personified wisdom,

can be developed as an equal-ranking female image of God, interchangeable with the male God-image, standing alongside and, at the same time, critically correcting that image without calling monotheism into question. In addition, there is a biblical tradition that identifies her with Christ, who is neither male nor female. And within the Trinity Sophia can alternatively assume the place of the Holy Spirit. (40)

Schroer makes the case that the Sophia figure of the Old Testament became the Christ figure in the New Testament. She believes that acknowledging Christ as Wisdom and, therefore, as originally female, provides a way out of the problematic relationship between women and the paternal divine. She says, “Personified Wisdom [. . .] joins transcendence to the female, God to human experience, theology to everyday reality, the woman teacher to the teaching, the creatrix to the principle of creation” (40). Schroer reasons that a divine with female qualities is liberating for women because it disrupts the fixation on the masculine as divine.

Elizabeth Johnson, like Fiorenza and Schroer, is a moderate theological feminist, one who does not reject Christianity. In *The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, and in *She Who Is*, Johnson attempts an objective assessment of some of the trends in theological feminist discourse. Johnson is among the theorists who do not

advocate a complete disavowal of Christianity as patriarchal, but who do not want to gloss over the potentially patriarchal implications of Christianity or the patriarchal practices of the Christian church. Johnson agrees with Schroer's assertions about Sophia, saying that "the typical stereotypes of masculine and feminine are subverted as female Sophia represents creative transcendence, primordial passion for justice, and knowledge of the truth" (1992, 165).

In *She Who Is*, Johnson offers an assessment of the trend in theological feminism to argue that the Christian paternal God should be interpreted as having feminine qualities and that this should be a means of viewing that male deity as not supporting patriarchal power, Johnson writes.

A critical issue underlying this approach is the legitimacy of the rigid binary system into which it forces thought about human beings and reality itself. Enormous diversity is reduced to two relatively opposed absolutes of masculine and feminine, and this is imposed on the infinite mystery of God. The move also involves dubious stereotyping of certain human characteristics as predominantly masculine or feminine. (1997, 49)

Johnson points out that this argument has non-secular implications as well. To argue that a God who is nurturing is inclusive of the feminine suggests that nurturing is only a feminine quality or a quality belonging to women. As Johnson puts it,

Even as debate waxes over the distinction between sex and gender, and about whether and to what extent typical characteristics of men and women exist by nature or cultural conditioning, simple critical observation reveals that the spectrum of traits is at least as broad among concrete,

historical women as between women and men. In the light of the gospel, by what right are compassionate love, reverence, and nurturing predicated as primordially feminine characteristics, rather than human ones? Why are strength, sovereignty, and rationality exclusively masculine properties? (1997, 49)

Johnson is among many who have raised questions and concerns about the feminine qualities argument. The idea that it should be recognized that the Christian God is often imbued with feminine, “maternal or nurturing” qualities is shakily dependent upon essentialized ideas of what is feminine and maternal.<sup>19</sup>

In her chapter “Critique of Speech about God,” Johnson looks at both the efforts to present God in more masculine and patriarchy-serving terms and the theological feminist responses to the patriarchal terms. Johnson claims,

The precise ideal from the world of men that has provided the paradigm for the symbol of God is the ruling man within a patriarchal system. Divine mystery is cast in the role of a monarch, absolute ruler, King of Kings, Lord of Lords, one whose will none escape, to whom is owed total and unquestioning obedience. This powerful monarch is sometimes spoken of as just and harsh, threatening hell fire to sinners who do not measure up. But even when he is presented as kindly, merciful, and

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<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth Shillington articulates this problem saying, “In their honoring of the female body, practitioners of women’s spirituality have often been accused by others in the feminist movement of ‘essentialism’ the belief that women have an innate feminine essence rooted in their biology that is natural and unchanging. Essentialism has often, unfortunately, been equated with biological determinism, a view that has long been used to oppress women by relegating them solely to a reproductive role. Biological determinism has denied women equal access to higher education and professional work, in addition to casting men in the role of warlike aggressors” (14).

forgiving, the fundamental problem remains. Benevolent patriarchy is still patriarchy. (1992, 34)

Johnson goes on to critique the patriarchal imagery used to depict the Christian God as “an old white man with a white beard.” She examines Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel image as a primary example of this (34). “Imagery of the Trinitarian God most often consists of an older white-bearded man,” she says, “a younger brown-bearded man, both Caucasian, and a dove. The power of these and other images as they give rise to thought insures that metaphysical descriptions of the divine nature also betray an androcentric bias” (34-35).

She criticizes Thomas Aquinas on whom she places some of the blame for the fixation on God as male-embodied. According to Johnson, Aquinas “notes that the Scriptures attribute to God the Father what in our material world belongs to both father and mother, namely the begetting of the So,” however Aquinas chose to argue against any notion that this indicated a gender transcendent God. As Johnson puts it, Aquinas, nevertheless argues that God cannot be spoken of on the analogy of mother for God is pure act, whereas in the process of begetting, the mother represents the principle that receives passively. This assumption and its attendant androcentric presuppositions permeate the classical philosophical doctrine of God as well as the specifically Christian doctrine of God’s Trinity. (1992, 35)

Johnson agrees with Mary Daly and Luce Irigaray that the many images of the divine as male have a significant influence on understandings of gender in Western society. “Patriarchal God symbolism functions,” she says,

to legitimate and reinforce patriarchal social structures in family, society, and church. Language about the father in heaven who rules over the world justifies and even necessitates an order whereby the male religious leader rules over his flock, the civil ruler has domination over his subjects, the husband exercises headship over his wife. If there is an absolute heavenly patriarch, then social arrangements on earth must pivot around hierarchical rulers who of necessity must be male in order to represent him and rule in his name. (36-37)

Irigaray argues that a male God serves as a transcendent ideal for man and excludes woman from having the possibility of transcendence. Johnson agrees that male-dominated power structures are created by men with the support of the male-created male divinity “to the exclusion of women by a certain right, thanks to their greater similarity to the source of all being and power” (36-37).

Johnson argues that the representation of God as male is inherently flawed because God is ultimately assumed to transcend humanity and, therefore, human biology and sexuality. She explains,

This dissonance sounded by the fact that this supposed similarity [between men and God] lies in sexual likeness, while God is taken to be beyond all physical characteristics, is not noticed. Exclusive and literal imaging of the patriarchal God thus insures the continued subordination of women to men in all significant civic and religious structures. (36-37)

“In sum,” Johnson claims, “exclusive, literal patriarchal speech about God is both oppressive and idolatrous.” (40).

Johnson agrees with the dominant theological feminists' responses to patriarchal religion that argue that language is the tool for a revolution in imaging the Christian divine. She says,

One effective way to stretch language and expand our repertoire of images is by uttering female symbols into speech about divine mystery. It is a complex exercise, not necessarily leading to emancipatory speech. An old danger that accompanies this change is that such language may be taken literally; a new danger lies in the potential for stereotyping women's reality simply by characterizing God as nurturing, caring, and so forth. The benefits, however, in my judgment, outweigh the dangers.

Reorienting the imagination at a basic level, this usage challenges the idolatry of maleness in classic language about God, thereby making possible the rediscovery of divine mystery, and points to recovery of the dignity of women created in the image of God. (45)

Revising slightly what she has said about the feminine qualities argument, Johnson argues that recognizing feminine traits in the divine, while potentially damaging to feminist work, can be useful. "A minimal step," she says, "toward the revision of patriarchal God language is the introduction of gentle, nurturing traits traditionally associated with the mothering role of women. The symbol of God the Father in particular benefits from this move." (47)

Johnson explains those benefits:

Too often this predominant symbol has been interpreted in association with unlovely traits associated with the ruling men in a male-dominated

society: aggressiveness, competitiveness, desire for absolute power and control, and demand for obedience. This certainly is not the Abba to whom Jesus prayed, and widespread rejection of such a symbol from Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud onward has created a crisis for Christian consciousness. But it is also possible to see God the Father displaying feminine, so-called maternal features that temper 'his' overwhelmingness. (47-48)

Again, Johnson warns against "the legitimacy of the rigid binary system into which it forces thought about human beings and reality itself. Enormous diversity is reduced to two relatively opposed absolutes of masculine and feminine" (48).

However, patriarchal and women-absent rhetoric is not always and exactly inherent in biblical texts. According to Phyllis Trible, much of the use of religious literature for support of the suppression of women has to do with interpretations of the texts. Feminists such as Trible have attempted to provide other possible readings of the Bible that suggest that women have a larger role in holy life. They also argue, as Ruether does, that the feminine is integral to the divine of Christian mythology. Trible examines biblical passages that speak of God with metaphors of the mother's body. Trible cites Psalms 22:9-10 which states, "But thou art he that took me out of the womb: thou didst make me hope *when I was* upon my mother's breasts. I was cast upon thee from the womb: thou art God from my mother's belly." This passage suggests an acknowledgment that the speaker is God's subject throughout his life. Trible argues that it is not necessarily to be read as a suggestion that God is feminine or that the feminine is



divine. Tribble suggests that the womb is being privileged here as the site of the creation of life.

Tribble also cites other passages in which God is associated with the womb. There is Jeremiah 1:5, for example, in which “the Lord” says to Jeremiah, “Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee.” There is also Job 10:18-19 in which Job in his misery says to God, “Wherefore then hast thou brought me forth out of the womb?” and Job 31:15, which reads, “Did not he that made me in the womb make him? And did not one fashion us in the womb?”

Tribble says of these passages,

The imagery of this poetry stops just short of saying that God possesses a womb. Clearly, however, Yahweh bears Israel from its conception to its old age. God conceives in the womb; God fashions in the womb; God brings forth from the womb; God receives out of the womb; and God carries from the womb to gray hairs. From this uterine perspective, then, Yahweh molds life for individuals and for the nation Israel. Accordingly, in biblical traditions an organ unique to the female becomes a vehicle pointing to the compassion of God. (Tribble 38)

Tribble sees this as a metaphorical linking of God to a feminine principle. She does not argue that God is actually a woman. In her discussion of the womb as a motif in the Bible, Tribble brings up the way that the book of Genesis and the Adam and Eve myth have been used to support misogyny. Tribble’s study highlights biblical passages that reveal a concern on the part of some Biblical writers with the feminine and the maternal.

Further, it reveals a concern for sexual difference. This concern, according to Tribble, leads to a vigorous effacement of woman from the divine.

Joan Chamberlain Engelsman describes what she calls the “return of the repressed” feminine dimension of the divine in three areas of Christianity—, Ecclesiology, Mariology, and Christology. Of the reemergence of the feminine in the church, Engelsman says, “There are three important feminine motifs in Ecclesiology: the church as Wisdom, the church as Mother, and the church as the Bride of Christ” (133).

Engelsman gives the story of the Shepherd of Hermas as an example of the representations of the church as Wisdom. “In this treatise,” she says, “the church is described as established in God’s wisdom and providence: it is said that her home is in the east; that she sits on a throne; and that she holds the book of heaven and is its revealer” (133). Engelsman states that the “various motifs and literary devices are similar to those in Wisdom literature of the Jews and evoke the image of Sophia contained therein. Engelsman argues that biblical parables demonstrate that “the church has taken over the teaching function of Sophia” (134).

Engelsman argues also that Mariology evidences the reemergence of the repressed feminine in Christianity though she argues that reverence for Mary has always existed in Christianity. She says,

Whatever powers and attributes were ascribed to her were given to her because she played such a preeminent role in her son’s life. In other words, it would be fallacious to assume that Mary was introduced into Christianity extraneously and at a late date. On the contrary, she appears

from the time of the Gospels as an integral part of the Christian mystery and as part of God's plan for the salvation of the human race. (122)

Engelsman argues that later the role of Mary became even more important.<sup>20</sup> Miracles were attributed to her. Of these, Engelsman claims,

First was the story of Mary's own miraculous conception. Second was the belief in her perpetual virginity. Third was the description of her bodily assumption into heaven after her death. The other two Mariological motifs dramatize the importance of her relationship to her son. (122)

Like Sylvia Schroer, Engelsman discusses the reemergence of the feminine in Christianity through language about the feminine dimensions of Christ. She agrees with Schroer that elements of the personification of wisdom in the Old Testament became the male Christ in the New Testament. She says, "Sophiology was an important component of Biblical Christology in that qualities of Sophia were ascribed to Jesus" (140).

Engelsman interprets the transformation of Sophia to Jesus as evidence of the concerted effort to erase the feminine from the divine.

Engelsman makes her case for the (re)appreciation of the feminine dimensions of the divine among Christians. She argues that

The recognition and elaboration of a feminine image of God should affect the image of real women reflected in Christian anthropology. Such an explication would act as an antidote to the notions of masculine preeminence. Furthermore, it could give women a sense of dignity

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<sup>20</sup> There are some who argue against the reverence for Mary. Yves Congar claims that this attitude toward Mary has been criticized due to the fact that it suggests a polytheistic interpretation of Christianity. He writes, "The criticism [ . . . ] is made mainly by Protestants and can be summarized as follows: Catholics attribute to Mary what really belongs to the Holy Spirit, and, in extreme cases, they give her a place that should be occupied by the Paraclete" (163).

previously unknown and provide support for their requests for ordination and full participation in the priesthood. In addition, an image of God with both masculine and feminine dimensions would dramatize the *intrasexual* harmony of the divine which human beings could emulate in their own *interpersonal* relationships. (156)

She believes that “This new consciousness” once clearly articulated and practiced will have the effect of enabling human beings “to recognize that certain presumed philosophical truths or givens concerning the nature of woman and/or the feminine are neither true nor given” (150). Obviously, then, this re-acknowledgement of the repressed feminine in Christianity would have implications for the secular world as well as for the Christian world.

Fiorenza, Ruether, Johnson, Tribble, Schroer, and Engelsman all call for similar steps toward challenging the patriarchal implications of the male God of Christianity. An alteration in language<sup>21</sup> about God is at the top of their lists. Ruether and Tribble argue that those biblical metaphors that involve women’s bodies and women’s experiences should be acknowledged. Schroer argues that the male figure of Jesus has its origins in a female character which should also be acknowledged. Fiorenza argues that the potential for sexism in the Bible should be acknowledged, that the image of Mary which some would find to be a suggestion of female divinity is too limiting for women, and that women should celebrate their own experiences and reconnect with each other to heal the wounds created by patriarchal interpretations of Christianity. All of these theorists leave

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<sup>21</sup> In part of his 1983 address to the Catholic Theological Society of America, David O’Hanlon discussed the influence of the women’s movement on Christianity. His argument stems from his realization “that the gender we use in addressing God does make a difference” (5). He argues that language about God up to that point had “suffered from one-sidedness, and that, consequently, “the qualities which have developed in ourselves, in our culture, and in our churches have been too one-sidedly masculine” (6).

intact the Christian idea that God was manifested as a physically male person. While some of the more radical theological feminists see this detail as having primary and insurmountable importance, the moderates find ways to accommodate it while speaking of liberation for Christian women.

As this rhetoric clearly demonstrates, the doctrines of Christianity lend themselves to patriarchal uses, to assaultive feminist critiques, and to more moderate feminist revisions. The theorists discussed in this chapter are just some of the more well-known figures who have engaged in written explorations of and response to the sexist implications of Christian traditions.

This project proposes that these types of feminist responses to Christianity take different forms, and that both the arguments of the more polemical theorists—Irigaray, Kristeva, and Daly— and the arguments of the more Christian moderates—Ruether, Fiorenza, Schroer, and Johnson— can be placed within the same tradition of feminist responses to Christianity as the arguments and considerations expressed in the poetry of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Emily Dickinson, Vassar Miller, and Sharon Olds. The following four chapters of this dissertation explore how these four author's poetry respond to attitudes about the role of women in relationship to the divine, the role of the body, the character of God in relationship to the human individual, and the patriarchal lineage of the Christian trinity.

Chapter two examines the work of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper. In such poems as “The Slave Mother,” “Ethiopia,” “The Syrophenician Woman,” “Saved by Faith,” and *Moses: A Story of the Nile*, Harper engages in direct reinterpretations of biblical scripture

and makes connections between the maternal body and God in her poems that present a theology that is both antisexist and antiracist. Chapter two will focus on the dually political and religious poetry of Harper and explain how Fiorenza's urgings toward a concept of the Christian God that takes into account women's experience and that represents God as liberating speaks directly to Harper's use of Christianity in her writing. As chapter two will demonstrate, Harper represents the experiences of the oppressed and women in direct relation to the divine.

Chapter three examines the work of Emily Dickinson. Dickinson is also part of the tradition of feminist responses to Christianity. Chapter three will examine Dickinson's critiques of the Christian divine. The chapter will also examine ways that Dickinson posits revisions to that divine. At times Dickinson advances a closer connection between the divine and humanity, suggests a female dimension to the divine, and challenges, through her Christological poems, the dichotomy of the spirit and body which supports the privileging of the masculine and the relegation of the feminine away from the divine.

Chapter four examines the poetry of Vassar Miller. Vassar Miller also grapples with the dichotomy which has been placed between the body and the spirit or the divine. Miller's work sometimes expresses an acceptance of the idea that the body distances the human subject from the divine and sometimes argues that the body is the means through which humanity can connect with the divine in Christological poems such as "Fantasy on the Resurrection" and "Reverent Impiety." In poems about her mother such as "Lullaby for My Mother," Miller also suggests a shared place for both the transcendent father and a transcendent mother which Ruether suggests is the true nature of God.

Chapter five examines the poetry of Sharon Olds. Sharon Olds challenges the abjection of the maternal body in such poems as “Prayer.” Olds also explores female genealogies, connections between herself, her mother, and her own daughter in such poems as “After 37 Years My Mother Apologizes for My Childhood” and “For My Daughter.”

All of the poets in this project touch on themes in the works of the more moderate theorists. Frances Harper, Emily Dickinson, Vassar Miller, and Sharon Olds all write from Christian backgrounds. Harper demonstrates much less ambivalence toward Christianity than Dickinson and Miller. However, eventually all of the poets suggest ways that the relationship between women and the Christian divine can be thought of that anticipate, reflect, or join in conversation with the theological feminists prose writers.

## Chapter Two:

### “God Shall Bend Unto Her Wo”: Frances Harper’s African American Feminist

#### Liberation Theology

Upon her dark, despairing brow,  
Shall play a smile of peace;  
For God shall bend unto her wo,  
And bid her sorrows cease.

—from “Ethiopia,” (1854) Frances Harper

This excerpt of her poem “Ethiopia” demonstrates some of the typical elements Frances Ellen Watkins Harper’s poetic work. In “Ethiopia” and other poems, Harper repeatedly connects the Christian divine to the lives of African Americans, women, and mothers. Chapter one of this project identified some of the major trends in theological Christian feminism including Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and Mary Daly’s desire that women revise biblical traditions and interpretations of Christian scripture and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s theology of liberation that involves recovering from scripture an understanding of the Christian divine that opposes oppression. In poems such as “Saved by Faith,” “The Syrophenician Woman,” and *Moses: A Story of the Nile*, Harper appropriates scripture and reinterprets it for a feminist purpose. In these poems, as well as in “The Slave Mother” and “Ethiopia” Harper presents a Christian divine which is not divorced from the maternal and which disrupts patriarchal power.



This chapter will explain how Harper's poems "The Slave Mother," "Ethiopia," "The Syrophenician Woman," "Saved by Faith," and *Moses: A Story of the Nile*, advance a concept of a liberating God who is responsive to the needs of women and the oppressed. This chapter will also examine how these poems reveal what can retroactively be called Harper's theology of liberation which suggests freedom for women and the enslaved, in a way that anticipates the claims of theological feminist Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza who, in *Bread not Stone*, argues that feminist theologians "must develop a new interpretive paradigm that can take seriously the claim of liberation theologians that God is on the side of the oppressed" (58). This chapter will also examine ways that Harper calls attention to the female presence in the Bible and uses the figure of Christ to make both feminist and black liberation theology arguments, which links her work to the Christological arguments of Joan Engelsman and Silvia Schroer.

Any examination of Frances Harper's poetry would reveal that most of her work is political. Like many nineteenth-century literary women, Harper used her poetry, fiction, and non-fiction writings to advance the social reform movements in which she was involved. As an African-American woman born into a free Baltimore family in 1825, Harper saw herself as writing for the public good. She was involved in the anti-slavery movement, the temperance movement, the movement to improve education for African Americans, and the nineteenth-century women's movement. Her poetry reflects, at different moments, all of these concerns.

It is important to consider Harper in her historical context because her literary output was influenced by and serves as evidence of the notions about gender in the nineteenth century. Contradicting the commonly-held notion that women in the

nineteenth century were restricted to the private sphere,<sup>22</sup> Shira Wolosky argues that, “women in the nineteenth century are ‘public’ in fundamental ways—that is, specifically in republican senses of the term as committed to the common good—and that this recognition is both supported by and vital to reading American women’s poetry” (665).<sup>23</sup> This argument is important especially when considering Harper as a potential feminist theological critic. Harper and other women of the nineteenth-century commandeered readings of the Bible and critiques of Christian practices for the purpose of furthering political causes (feminism, abolitionism, temperance, etc.). Wolosky says of “the major minor poets” (among whom she includes Harper), “public address makes up a large part of their work and also their strongest poetry.” Wolosky says, “most of the women poets of the century similarly combine private meditations (although even these often have a public dimension, reflecting on the common life of women) with poems of public intention” (683).

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<sup>22</sup> Barbara Welter’s well-known essay “The Cult of True Womanhood,” for example, argues that the ideal woman in the nineteenth century was to content herself with confinement to domestic duties, exercising influence on the morality of the community only through her roles as wife and mother. Welter’s argument seems confined to the dominant cultural understandings of womanhood and so pertains mainly to the lives of free European-American women in the nineteenth-century. The lives of African-American women and the expectations placed on them were complicated by slavery, racist perceptions, and other factors which distinguished their lives from the lives of European-American women.

<sup>23</sup> Wolosky’s text challenges the longstanding definitions of “private” and “public” in the discourse on the roles of men and women in the nineteenth-century. She argues that, “*Public* through the republican tradition(s) has a specific and positive content. It is essentially defined as devotion, commitment, and contribution to the common good.” She goes on to say that “In liberal discourses, privacy as self-ownership and self-determination” is a prerequisite for participation in the public sphere which means that privacy and autonomy are of utmost importance as they are necessary for an individual to be able to act for the common good. However, Wolosky contrasts the liberal with the republican discourse and claims that, “in the republican tradition, [. . .] the public realm has priority, as the ultimate end of human activity” (667). Citing Hannah Arendt, Wolosky defines the public realm “as coming into being wherever citizens come together to negotiate, debate, acknowledge, and promote ‘what is communal,’<sup>23</sup> where the citizen is ‘concerned with the world and the public welfare rather than with his own well being’ (1954, 245)” (Wolosky 667). Based upon this definition, Wolosky argues that, “it is women in nineteenth-century America who are, in effect, committed to the public realm. The areas of women’s involvement in the nineteenth century, their activities and their writings—including their poetry—reveal women to be pursuing and involved in the public good, devoted to and responsible for ‘public’ affairs in the republican sense of concern for the common good—a public dimension denied and veiled by the variant uses of the term” (668).

Harper's use of the private experiences of women as well as readings of biblical texts to make public appeals about her various political causes is not unique to her work. As Katherine Bassard says, African American writers frequently "have exhibited a wide range of approaches to biblical material and to the issue of the Bible's authority, from orthodox Christian readings to radical revisionist appropriations" (Bassard 114). Katherine Bassard contextualizes Harper by comparing some of Harper's specific strategies—her (re)reading of scripture and of Christ—with those of other African-American writers and finds that Harper's is one of many African-Americans who used scripture and writing about scripture to argue about slavery and the predicament of African Americans.<sup>24</sup>

Patricia Liggins Hill argues that Harper must also be considered among African-American protest writers. Hill comments on the link between Harper's poetry and the oral protest poetry of African American writers in the twentieth century. Both, Hill says, rely on "direct imagery, simple diction, and the rhythmic language of the street to reach the masses of black people" (60). More specifically, Hill notes,

Harper relies on vivid, striking imagery, simplistic language, and the musical quality and form of the ballad to appeal to large masses of people, black and white, for her social protest. Moreover, she, like the new black poets, embraces an 'art for people's sake' aesthetic, rather than a Western Caucasian aesthetic assumption, 'an art for art's sake' principle. In her

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<sup>24</sup> In her article, "Private Interpretations: The Defense of Slavery, Nineteenth-Century Hermeneutics, and the Poetry of Frances E. W. Harper," Bassard "trace[s] the development and dissemination of the proslavery hermeneutic in order to locate African Americans within the textual field of racial 'scriptures' in the nineteenth century." Bassard contextualizes Harper's anti-slavery theology as part of a larger tradition of scripture-based writing on slavery.

poem ‘Songs for the People’ which is her closest statement on aesthetics,  
Harper makes this point clear [. . .] (60)

One reason that Harper’s poetry has not received as much critical attention of some of her contemporaries may be this heavy rhetorical motivation behind its creation as well as its early nineteenth-century sentimentality. There is little innovation in the style of Harper’s poetry. Harper’s efforts seem to have been devoted to using popular and traditional methods and forms to make her political arguments more accessible to her nineteenth-century audience. The quality of Harper’s work is not the focus of this chapter, but some of the qualities which made her work less popular in the twentieth-century and late nineteenth-century are the qualities which make her work appropriate for this project. She is a protest poet who used emotional appeal and biblical paraphrase to make arguments about women and God to further her abolitionist and feminist causes.

The preceding discussion of the contextual considerations of Harper’s work demonstrates the fact that Harper is the focus of this chapter should not suggest that she is unique in her utilization of scripture and poetry for political and rhetorical ends, either as a woman or as an African-American poet. However, Harper’s work provides an excellent example of a nineteenth-century poet who writes within a tradition of Christian theology but turns against the patriarchal assumptions about God and emphasizes a concept of the Christian divine which serves that end.

### **God and the Suffering Mother: “The Slave Mother” and “Ethiopia”**

In “The Slave Mother,” Harper describes a mother and child being sold at a slave auction to appeal emotionally to free people, women in particular, on behalf of the

enslaved mother.<sup>25</sup> Harper's poem asks the audience to imagine the scene and empathize with the suffering of the mother on the auction block whose child is about to be taken from her. The poem provides vivid detail. The first stanza of the poem invites the reader to hear the mother crying out for her child. Harper writes,

Heard you that shriek? It rose  
So wildly on the air,  
It seemed as if a burden'd heart  
Was breaking in despair. (1-4)

The second stanza asks the reader to imagine how the mother's gestures convey her agitation:

Saw you those hands so sadly clasped—

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<sup>25</sup> This and many of Harper's poems are among a large amount of abolitionist poetry produced during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Harper's abolitionist poetry was similar in style to the other works of that genre. The use of sentimentality that is apparent in "The Slave Mother" and "Ethiopia" is representative of the sentimentality typical of abolition poetry. In his introduction to the anthology *The Poetry of Slavery*, Marcus Woods cites the work of Wylie Sypher (*Guinea's Captive Kings: British Anti-slavery Literature of the XVIIIth Century*. New York: Octagon, 1969) who argues that abolitionist poetry was substandard. Woods says, "Sypher requires an art of slavery which will confront the historical facts, the records of events and atrocities, head on. He wants poems which deal with the horrors encased in the slavery archive in the main text not in a scholarly apparatus." Instead, says Woods, "Sypher goes so far as to see in abolition verse not only the distortion of historical truth, but the abuse of humanistic ethics, summing up that 'many a versifier . . . addressed not the humanity of the reader but his sentiment. Thus anti-slavery poetry was often ethically as well as aesthetically hollow'" (xiv). Sypher objects to the use of emotional appeal of the kind that Harper uses in "The Slave Mother" especially. Woods agrees with Sypher to some extent (xiv-xv). He says, "There remains an attitude among literary scholars and theorists that there is no point studying slavery verse because its sentimentality and flat occasionality render it aesthetically worthless" (xix). To the criticism that antislavery poetry represents imagined rather than real experience, Wood says, "It is, however, the very fancifulness, the fictionality, the distortion, the superimposition, of an imagined narrative and an imagined ethical scenario, which make the fictions of slavery so very important. It is not enough to say that slavery poetry, some of which was hugely successful in its day in terms of sales and critical reception, is no longer to our taste because it does not fit current conceptions of historical truth, real testimony, or artistic quality. History is never what happened, but what a given society decides it wants to believe has happened. Art has no intrinsic value outside that value which a given culture decides to give and take away at a given time, and this give and take is not a stable or rational phenomenon" (xix-xx). As Sypher's text focuses on British literature he would not have considered Harper's poetry in his assessment. One could argue that Harper's poetry both to the sentiment and the humanity of the reader. She asks her audience not only to sympathize with the slave mother but to see the realities of the slave mother's suffering in order that her audience might be inclined to act on her behalf.

The bowed and feeble hand—  
The shuddering of that fragile form—  
That look of grief and dread? (5-8)

In the third stanza, Harper continues asking her readers to *see* the mother's experience and to identify with her suffering:

Saw you the sad, imploring eye?  
Its every glance was pain,  
As if a storm of agony  
Were sweeping through the brain, (9-12)

These first three stanzas invite the reader to be present at the scene and to experience emotionally the trauma that the practice of selling family members away from each other inflicts upon the victims. The poem is an indictment of this practice and of slavery, and the method Harper uses—inviting the readers to witness the scene and feel the mother's feelings—encourages the readers to indict slavery for its crimes. Harper offers the mother's body to her readers as a symbol of slavery's damage. The poem's abolitionist argument is dependent upon the audience's emotional response to the poem's subject. To want to end slavery, the audience must want to end the woman's suffering and to make certain that such scenes are not repeated.

Harper seems to understand that representing the suffering of a mother is a particularly effective way to make a pathos-driven argument. In the fourth stanza, she writes,

She is a mother, pale with fear,  
Her boy clings to her side,

And in her kirtle vainly tries,  
His trembling form to hide.

That the victims are a mother and her child and the primary victim “is a mother” are facts intended to evoke the utmost sympathy from a nineteenth-century American reader who would see women and children as most vulnerable and defenseless and who would view the bond between mother and child as sacred. The poem vilifies slavery as the culprit which violates the sacred mother-child bond. The poem seeks to move audience members to act to end future violations.

Harper’s poem, “The Slave Mother,” can be read as an allusion biblical text, in this case the New Testament narrative of the crucifixion. Harper’s poem is set at a slave auction and depicts the image of an enslaved woman who is about to have her child sold away from her. The image of the enslaved mother being deprived of her child evokes the narrative of Mary being deprived of her son as she watches him die on the cross. The Passion is often retold to inspire Christians to empathize with Jesus’s suffering, so that they will be motivated to appreciate the sacrifice and behave better as a result. Harper’s passionate scene is told also to inspire empathy and a subsequent change in behavior. This suggested parallel between the separated mother and son of the poem and the separated mother and son in the Bible is reinforced by Harper’s wording. The fifth stanza of the poem reads,

He is not hers, although she bore  
For him a mother’s pains;  
He is not hers, although her blood  
Is coursing through his veins! (17-20)

In the biblical Jesus and Mary narrative, Jesus does not belong to Mary either. Mary is the physical vessel through which Jesus is born into the world, so he has her “blood,” but, according to such scripture as Matthew 1:18, Mary’s is impregnated with God’s child by the Holy Ghost.<sup>26</sup> Jesus “is not hers.” He belongs to God and to the people whose sins his death is supposed to absolve.

In the sixth and seventh stanzas of the poem Harper again evokes the narrative of Jesus. The enslaved mother’s relationship is described in a way that allows a comparison between this mother-child relationship and the relationship of Mary and Jesus:

He is not hers, for cruel hands  
May rudely tear apart  
The only wreath of household love  
That binds her breaking heart.

His love has been a joyous light  
That o’er her pathway smiled,  
A fountain gushing ever new,  
Amid life’s desert wild. (21-28)

Mary is Jesus’s mother, but Jesus is said to be God’s son. Mary is merely the vehicle by which Jesus is brought to the people. Jesus, again, does not belong to Mary just as the boy does not belong to his enslaved mother. The child of the slave mother is property and, within the parameters of slavery, the child belongs to someone other than his mother. At the end of his life, Jesus is taken from his mother by those who crucify him,

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<sup>26</sup> Matthew 1:18 reads, “Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost.”



so “Cruel hands” separate both mother and child bonds. This again suggests links between the mother in the poem and the sacred mother of Christian scripture, which suggests a connection between the enslaved mother and the Christian divine just as there is a connection between Mary and the Christian divine.

In the next stanza, Harper suggests that the boy’s voice has been as a source of joy for the mother:

His lightest word has been a tone  
Of music round her heart,  
Their lives a streamlet blent in one—  
Oh, Father! Must they part? (29-32)

Harper encourages another comparison between the poem’s literal subject and the suffering of the Christian ideal mother and child pairing. Just as the words of Jesus are said to have comforted many people, the words of the boy at auction have comforted his mother. Harper’s text subtly encourages readers to see the slave mother’s bond with her child as sacred and deserving of preservation by reminding readers of the separation of Mary and Jesus.

Harper’s use of the mother as symbol of piety and upholder of God-given duty was in accord with the traditions of her time. The nineteenth-century American perception of womanhood included what Barbara Welter’s well-known article, “The Cult of True Womanhood” argues, the qualities of piety and domesticity as among those offered as aspirations for nineteenth-century women. Ajuan Maria Mance also writes,

True women were distinguished by their sweet acquiescence, pious

humility, and moral virtue. Those qualities were widely perceived as inherent to woman's nature, and the popular media of the period presented them simultaneously as evidence of women's predisposition toward domesticity and as an ideal to which all adult females should aspire. (2)

Many agree that nineteenth-century womanhood, or at least idealized nineteenth-century womanhood, was defined by sacred duties to God and the family. Ann duCille points out in "The Cult of True Black Womanhood" that enslaved African-American women did not have the same access to that ideal as European-American women. Katie Geneva Canon also notes that African-American women during the period of slavery were excluded from the aspirational ideal of true womanhood. She writes, "At the crux of the ideology that Black women were an inferior species was the belief that Black women, unlike White women, craved sex inordinately" (49). The construction of African-American women as hypersexual was part of attack on their bodies that also included the frequent disruption of her domesticity. "The Black woman," as Cannon says, "lived with constant fear, and most of the time she had to endure the reality of having her husband and her children sold away from her with the likelihood that she would never see them again" (49). Enslaved African-American women's motherhood was frequently infringed upon by slavery.

Many abolitionist writers appealed to their audiences' assumptions about femininity, frequently arguing that slavery was unjust partly because it did not allow enslaved women the right to their own bodies and the right to domesticity, true piety, and moral virtue.<sup>27</sup> Harper is not offering a radical perspective on womanhood. Instead, she

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<sup>27</sup> Clenora Hudson-Weems argues that womanist theory "has an opposite agenda than feminism. Feminism is for white women and asserts their right to work outside the home. Womanism is for Black women in

harnesses the feminist and liberationist possibilities of the dominant construction. That is, she parlays the cult of true womanhood into the idea that God advocates for women and that all relationships between mothers and their children should be treated with reverence.

In “The Slave Mother,” again Harper’s poem asks the audience to imagine the suffering of an enslaved mother at auction who will soon be separated from her child by the slave trade. This poem emphasizes the parent’s status as female, as mother. The poem states of its subject that “she is a mother” in the fourth stanza and then repeats this in the tenth stanza. The fact that the main character has a maternal relationship to the child she will lose excites the emotions of the audience who would have seen the bond between mother and child as sacred. This, again, lends itself to an argument against slavery which is the reason the mother must lose her child. So the poem has a clear message about the value of women (or at least their essentialized and accepted roles in the nineteenth century) and the concern that God should have for the oppressed. The poem beseeches God—“Oh, Father! must they part?” on behalf of the mother and child. While the poem does not represent God’s response to the poem’s plea, the poem serves as a call to action to its audience, so that God will act through them to avoid the repetition of similar scenes of suffering.

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America who historically have had to work outside the home” (34). This does not take into account that feminism seeks to gain for women voices in other aspects of public life besides the world of labor (political office, literary production, etcetera) from which both African and European-American women have been excluded. “The Slave Mother” by Frances Harper argues for the preservation of the enslaved woman’s right to be domestic, to have protected her right to love and care for her own children. In this respect, Harper seems to be a womanist as Hudson-Weems defines womanism. However, this chapter is concerned with Harper’s connection to more mainstream theological feminism and the way that her poems not only argue for the connections between the divine and all women. Still, Harper is both theological feminist (in that her work supports claims about all women’s connections to the divine and claims about the nature of the divine) and womanist (in that her poetry makes claims that are applicable to the lives and concerns of African-American women and the divine).

Harper connects the suffering of the enslaved and the maternal in “Ethiopia,” one of Harper’s earliest poems. In “Ethiopia,” Harper personifies Africa<sup>28</sup> as a suffering mother who entreats God to save her and her children. God, according to the poem, will hear this woman’s pleas and will answer them by freeing her and punishing her oppressors. In “Ethiopia,” Harper suggests that the Christian God is in favor of the liberation of the enslaved. The poem begins with the image of Ethiopia, personified as female, reaching out hands to God. Harper writes,

Yes! Ethiopia yet shall stretch  
Her bleeding hands abroad;  
Her cry of agony shall reach  
The burning throne of God. (1-4)

And God, according to Harper, hears and will answer the prayers of Ethiopia, who represents all Africa. The poem continues,

The tyrant’s yoke from off her neck,  
His fetters from her soul,  
The mighty hand of God shall break,  
And spurn the base control. (5-8)

At which time,

Redeemed from dust and freed from chains,  
Her sons shall lift their eyes;

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<sup>28</sup> The biblical name for “Ethiopia” is “Abyssinia.” The name Ethiopia appears to be the Latin and Greek word meaning “sunburnt” or “of burnt face” and was a term applied to most of Africa and some other dark-skinned peoples around the world (*Oxford English Dictionary Online*). Many eighteenth and nineteenth-century American writers use the term “Ethiopia” to identify both the entire continent of Africa and the people belonging to the African diaspora. Harper seems to intend the first of these two meanings. She suggests that Ethiopia is a place of origin by figuring Ethiopia as a symbolic mother of enslaved Africans.

From cloud-capt hills and verdant plains

Shall shouts of triumph rise. (9-12)

Harper's God is not a God of oppression. Instead, Harper represents God as the liberating God later conceptualized in writings like those of feminist writer Rosemary Radford Ruether. When Ethiopia's prayers reach God, according to Harper, God will answer:

Upon her dark, despairing brow,  
Shall play a smile of peace;  
For God shall bend unto her wo,  
And bid her sorrows cease. (13-16)

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Then Ethiopia! stretch, oh! stretch  
Thy bleeding hands abroad;  
Thy cry of agony shall reach  
And find redress from God. (25-28)

"Ethiopia" represents Harper's conceptualization of the Christian divine as an advocate of the oppressed. Harper imagines a divine that "bends unto" or is moved by the "wo[e]" or suffering of enslaved African people. Harper's divine hears the prayers of the suffering mothering and acts in response to them, "redress[ing]" the agony of the symbolic mother. Harper's poem proposes that the divine will be moved to end slavery as a result of hearing the mother's suffering. Harper's concept of the divine has particularly feminist and anti-racist implications because it suggests the connection between the divine and the maternal and between the divine and African people.

While Harper makes her antislavery argument (that God is against the suffering that is caused by slavery), she also makes a feminist argument in that she emphasizes those qualities of the Judeo-Christian God that would support his accessibility to women. Harper's work posits that if God cares about the downtrodden and God cares about the common people and God is not interested in maintaining patriarchal social hierarchies, then that same God would care about the lives and liberation of women. Harper's use of Christian theology and her representation of the Christian divine as the liberating, nurturing "Abba" God about which Ruether writes serves this purpose.

In proselytizing against the oppression of African Americans, Harper suggests a challenge to any argument that women are not connected to the divine. Rather than depicting women as at the root of human evil serving out their punishment through motherhood, Harper suggests that it is men who are at the root of the evil of slavery and that motherhood is a divine duty that can be used to combat that sin. Their roles as mothers place her audience in a better position to work on behalf of the divine to make social change. Harper uses the fact that they are mothers to appeal to their sense of responsibility for the spiritual lives of their children and to suggest that they should act on behalf of other mothers who are losing their children or watching their children suffer.

Harper's arguments are very much influenced by nineteenth-century understandings of women's supposed natures. Harper utilizes one of the more positive nineteenth-century assumptions about women—that women are more spiritually innocent and could be held to higher standard of piety than men and can be held responsible for the spiritual health of her family. While this argument was connected to other more confining arguments about women (that women were better suited to

domestic life rather than public life where they might be exposed to moral and spiritual corruption, for example), Harper's use of assumptions about women's spiritual purity and divine maternity is at least a precursor to the arguments of twentieth-century feminists.

### **Feminist Liberation Theology**

Harper's arguments about maternity and the divine, although rooted in nineteenth-century assumptions about motherhood, yet foreshadow some of claims about the Christian divine in the works of contemporary moderate theological feminists. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, a theological feminist, argues that the Christian divine can be represented as standing for egalitarian principles. This divine, she says, is sympathetic to the poor and oppressed. Fiorenza argues that that version of the divine simply needs to be recovered. As Mary Grey, writer of the "Feminist Theology" chapter in *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, writes,

The third approach [to feminist biblical interpretation],<sup>29</sup> of which Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza is the most famous exponent, simply assumes that the Bible is androcentric in origin and production. Yet Fiorenza acknowledges the ambiguity of the Bible functioning in both oppressive and liberating ways in the lives of women.

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<sup>29</sup> Grey delineates "three distinct types of interpretations" within the field of Biblical Studies which, she identifies as a subset within the field of academic theological feminism. The first of these three types is "the literary-critical approach" which "focuses on the androcentric nature of individual literary units of the Bible, 'cleans them up' and tries to present them as liberating for women" (she offers Phyllis Trible as an example) (95-96). Grey argues that this approach is naïve because it "ignores the androcentric, patriarchal and oppressive context in which the entire text was produced" (96). The second approach she says, is Christological and involves reading Christ as a refutation of patriarchy (she cites Ruether among others). This approach is problematic for Grey because it "encounters the difficulty that it arbitrarily discounts large chunks of the Bible as not belonging to the inner 'liberating core'" (96). Finally, the third type of approach, as she explains in the passage quoted in the main text, is the (re)reading of the Bible to reveal its anti-sexist possibilities.

Grey cites Fiorenza's *Bread Not Stone* in which Fiorenza explains her approach to feminist liberation theology. Grey identifies as Fiorenza's claim that,

It is the task of feminist biblical hermeneutics of liberation to recover and restore women to their egalitarian position within Christian community and society through a four-pronged method of a hermeneutic of suspicion, of proclamation, of remembrance, and of creative actualization. (Grey 96)

Says Grey, "The crucial importance of reclaiming biblical traditions in the service of achieving just relations between women and men in the Church as a whole cannot be over emphasized" (96). She cites the figures of Mary and Jesus as examples of those images and tales in the Bible that symbolize the connection of the divine to humanity and to women. As Grey says, "The many strands of feminist theology tend towards imagining God as relational—the Trinity is conceived as a God in dynamic movement as the archetype for just relationality" (97).

Grey uses the terms "proclamation," "remembrance," and "creative actualization," to indicate that what Fiorenza has identified as the necessary feminist approach to biblical scripture involves, not a rewriting or rejection of the scripture, but rather an excavation of the liberating potential of scripture. In this sense, Harper's poetry remembers, proclaims, and actualizes in that it returns to traditional biblical scripture and highlights aspects of the narratives within that scripture which support a theology of liberation for women and the enslaved. "Ethiopia" and "The Slave Mother," proclaim through creative actualization. That is, Harper proclaims that God will save the enslaved African mothers and their children from enslavement. Her appeal to God in "The Slave



Mother” and her claims about God’s concern in “Ethiopia” imagine a God who cares about women and the enslaved.

### **Black Liberation Theology**

In discussing the theological feminism of Frances Harper in the context of similar discussions of writers like Dickinson and Miller, many would argue that recognizing her status as African American and not just as a woman poet is necessary. James H. Cone, professor of systematic theology, would argue that Harper’s approach to Christian theology would always be distinct from that of the other women in this study (Dickinson, Miller, Olds).<sup>30</sup> Cone writes,

It is of course possible to assume that black religion and white religion are essentially the same, since white people introduced ‘Christianity’ to black people. However, that assumption will deprive the theologian of vital insights into black religious thought forms, because it fails to recognize the significant connection between thought and social existence. (1997, 9)

In Cone’s *Black Theology and Black Power*, he defines black theology as “a theology whose sole purpose is to apply the freeing power of the gospel to black people under white oppression (1969, 31). He says it is a “theology of revolution” (1969, 32). Cone argues that African American theology “must emerge consciously from an investigation of the socioreligious experience of black people, as that experience is reflected in *black stories*” (1997, 15). Cone’s point is that the theology of African Americans must be read

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<sup>30</sup> Edward Antonio, writer of the “Black Theology” chapter in *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, seems to base his understanding of black theology solely on the writings of James Cone who, according to Antonio, who is “by far the most prominent and influential of all black theologians” who has “perhaps published more works on Black theology than any living theologian and the extent of his influence can be easily seen in the fact that many of the second generation of black theologians studied under him” (Antonio 64).

differently than the theology of non-African-Americans because, he argues, there are different concerns in each and different perspectives and experiences which are reflected in the different theological approaches.

Delores S. Williams in *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* argues that Cone ignores the particular experiences of African-American women in his claims about black liberation theology. Williams suggests that liberation theology focuses too often on the Exodus story as symbolic of God's advocacy for the oppressed. Williams argues that black liberation theology should not ignore those portions of the Bible which suggest instead a more complicated understanding of God. She says, "when non-Jewish people [. . .] read the entire Hebrew testament from the point of view of the non-Hebrew slave, there is no clear indication that God is against their perpetual enslavement" (146). Harper's black feminist theology is the kind which Williams warns against. Harper focuses on passages in the Bible which can be read as advocating liberty for African Americans including women, and she seems to ignore portions of the Bible which could suggest that God is not unilaterally in favor of the oppressed.

Harper enters into conversation with Fiorenza's feminist liberation theology in a way that supports what Cone says about the importance of reading the theology of African American writers as shaped by African experiences of struggles for freedom and fighting against racial oppression in America.<sup>31</sup> As demonstrated in poems like "Ethiopia" and "The Syrophenician Woman," Harper's theology is simultaneously

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<sup>31</sup> This should not suggest a generalized concept of one shared and singular "African American experience" although Cone's argument seems to support one. Harper's poetry happens to be shaped by the kinds of experiences to which Cone refers—those pertaining to the struggles, for example, for independence of enslaved African Americans.

feminist and specifically anti-racist. That is, while some other feminist writings might on imply a challenge to all manner of oppressive power structures including sexism and racism, Harper's poetry makes the connection between feminism and anti-racism much more clear. In this way her poetry anticipates the liberation theology of Fiorenza, who argues that imagining a God who is concerned with the poor and oppressed implies that God is both in favor of women's liberation and an end to all types of oppression. Harper not only represents a God accessible to women but to African Americans. In "The Slave Mother," "The Syrophenician Woman," "Ethiopia," "Bible Defence of Slavery," and her long poem *Moses*, Harper constructs the Christian God as one who serves, as Fiorenza and Cone suggest, the oppressed and victimized, in this case, both the enslaved African and the patriarchally-oppressed woman.

### **Harper's Feminist Christology: "The Syrophenician Woman" and "Saved by Faith"**

Rosemary Radford Ruether argues that there are many places in the Bible in which experiences of women are used to illustrate key ideas about God and the relationship between God and the divine. In Ruether's "Sexism and God-Language," the author argues that changing the language about God is the key to making Christianity less patriarchal. A change in the language about the Christian divine includes for Ruether a recovering of parables in the Bible that use women's experience to represent the divine's message or that use female metaphors to represent the divine's characteristics. Harper's paraphrase poetry does just this kind of recovery of the relationship between God and women.

In several of her poems, Harper emphasizes the connection between women and the divine by rewriting in verse certain parts of the Bible. Several of Harper's poems are

paraphrase poems, and this type of poetry is not unique to Harper. As Paula Backscheider points out in her book about poetry of the eighteenth century, “The most frequently written religious poems were paraphrases of passages from the Bible, and they were written in every poetic form and meter” (126). Backscheider says of eighteenth-century paraphrase poetry that “paraphrasing offers a number of educational advantages to the poet. Close work with diction, meter, rhyme, and structure are required, and especially where something both well known and ‘sacred’ is concerned, the poet can take few liberties” (127). While Backscheider writes about the paraphrase poetry of the eighteenth-century, the genre continued in popularity into the nineteenth century. However, Harper’s nineteenth-century paraphrase poetry utilizes a limited range of established rhythmic patterns (“The Syrophenician Woman” and “Saved by Faith” are written in tetrameter. *Moses: A Story of the Nile* utilizes blank verse) and takes some liberties with the biblical texts.

Harper’s work combines both an exegetical approach (a strict retelling or explanation of the text) and a critical hermeneutical approach (an interpretation of the text) to scripture. In other words, she sets in verse paraphrases of biblical passages that already suggest a message against oppression and, in response to those biblical texts that are potentially androcentric, Harper either ignores them or rewrites them to amplify their advocacy for women and the disenfranchised. In “The Syrophenician Woman,” for example, Harper rewrites the story of Jesus’s interaction with a woman whose daughter suffers from demonic possession. “The Syrophenician Woman,”<sup>32</sup> one of Harper’s

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<sup>32</sup> This narrative appears in Mark 7:25-30 and in Matthew 15:22-29 of the King James Version of the Bible. The comparisons between Harper’s poetry and biblical scripture rely upon the King James Version of the Bible.

several paraphrase poems, both emphasizes the liberating potential of the biblical text and revises it to heighten that emphasis.

Harper adds the woman's internal monologue to the beginning of the biblical story. The poem begins with the Syrophenician woman's thoughts:

Joy to the bosom! Rest to my fear!  
Judea's prophet draweth near!  
Joy to my bosom! Peace to my heart!  
Sickness and sorrow before him depart!

Rack'd with agony and pain,  
Writhing, long my child has lain;  
Now the prophet draweth near,  
All our griefs shall disappear. (1-8)

The biblical versions of the story, focused as they are on the experiences of Jesus rather than the woman, do not offer the woman's internal monologue as Harper does. Harper's addition to the story encourages the audience to become invested first in the experience of the woman. The opening two stanzas offer details about what the woman is feeling as she sees Jesus approach and why she feels this way. The woman feels "Joy to [her] bosom" and concern for her child who "Rack'd with agony and pain, / Writhing, long [ . . . ] has lain" (1, 6).the mother expresses hope that Jesus will be able to cure her child and take away her anguish over her child's affliction (8). Harper's rewrites suggest that the woman's and her daughter's experiences are at the center of the biblical story.

The remaining stanzas of the poem do not deviate from the biblical version of the story. Matthew 15:22-28 of the King James Version reads,

And, behold, a woman of Canaan<sup>33</sup> came out of the same coasts, and cried unto him, saying, Have mercy on me, O Lord, thou son of David; my daughter is grievously vexed with a devil. But he answered her not a word. And his disciples came and besought him, saying, Send her away; for she crieth after us. But he answered and said, I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Then came she and worshipped him, saying, Lord, help me. But he answered and said, It is not meet to take the children's bread, and to cast it to dogs. And she said, Truth, Lord: yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table. Then Jesus answered and said unto her, O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt. And her daughter was made whole from that very hour.

With the exception of her opening, Harper's retelling of the story follows closely the version of the story as it appears in Matthew, although she rewrites it in verse. In the third stanza, Harper begins to relate the exchange between the Syrophenician woman and Jesus. In Harper's poem, the story is written,

“Lord!” she cried with mournful breath,  
“Save!” Oh, save my child from death!”  
But as though she was unheard,

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<sup>33</sup> Harper probably takes her story from a combination of the Matthew and Mark versions of the story. In Matthew's version (and not in Mark's version) Jesus does not initially answer the woman, and the woman has to repeat her plea as in Harper's poem. In Mark's version, the woman only implores Jesus once before he responds. Additionally, the woman is identified as “Syrophenician by nation” in Mark's version of the story but not in Matthew's where she is said to be from Canaan. Sherman Johnson explains that Matthew may have thought of Syrophenicians (Syrians from the Phoenician coast) as descendants of Canaanites, a people Matthew may have believed were reproachable (*The Interpreter's Bible*, 441-442).

Jesus answered not a word.

With a purpose naught could move,

And the seal of woman's love,

Down she knelt in anguish wild—

“Master! save, Oh! save my child!” (9-16)

In both Harper's version of the story and the biblical version, the Syrophenician woman begs Jesus to save her daughter and Jesus's initial reaction is to ignore the woman.

Harper reiterates that Jesus does not respond to the woman. Harper leaves out the intervention of the disciples and makes more dramatic the woman's reply to Jesus's initial failure to respond. Whereas in the biblical version the disciples tell Jesus that the woman continues to “crieth,” Harper's version describes the woman “in anguish wild” pleading with Jesus in her own words or, at least, the words Harper chooses for her.

In the next stanza, Harper retains Jesus's response. In both versions of the story, Jesus denies the Syrophenician woman's request for help on the grounds that she is not a Jew:

“’Tis not meet,” the Savior said,

“thus to waste the children's bread;

I am only sent to seek

Israel's lost and scattered sheep.” (17-20)

In the biblical versions of the story, Jesus compares the Syrophenician woman to a dog. Harper leaves out this detail. In both versions of the story, the “bread” to which Jesus refers are his ministrations to the needy, and the children for whom he says these

comforts are intended for the children of Israel. Harper makes sure the reason for Jesus's rejection of the woman is clear in the way that she rewords Matthew, emphasizing the exclusivity of Jesus's mission. The mother, who is Syrophenician, is initially informed that she is not worthy of Jesus's concern.

This biblical story, and Jesus's initial refusal to help a non-Jew brings up questions about racial or cultural tolerance and openness on the part of Jesus. Sherman Johnson, in his exegesis to the book of Matthew in *The Interpreter's Bible*, claims that "Few passages in the Gospels have so insistently troubled the minds of Christian readers as this" (442). The biblical passage implies that Jesus is exclusive in his offering of love and comfort to humans. It also suggests to some that , while anyone may follow Christ, for anyone who is not ancestrally Jewish, the endeavor is futile. George Buttrick, in his exposition of Mark's version of story, claims that while some people read the passage as implying that Jesus harbors prejudices against Gentiles, others have suggested that perhaps Jesus's words are not entirely sincere, that his words may have been part of an intentionally witty exchange that includes the Syrophenician woman's response so that one can read Jesus as only facetiously representing the prejudice of other Jews which he, it is argued, did not actually accept (754-755).

Harper also seems to recognize the potential of the story to suggest an argument about ethnic difference and the divine. Her paraphrase of Jesus's response indicates that Jesus is serious in refusing the woman. His words suggest that he takes his ministrations to the Jews as an important duty. His words, "thus to waste the children's bread," also suggests that his ability to care for others is limited and that to help the woman would reduce the help he has to give to the Jews for whom his help is intended. Yet, Jesus does



decide to help the woman because of her tenacity and faith in his power to heal. For Harper to retell the story in the nineteenth century supports a liberation theology argument that God is inclined to help the oppressed, that God's love transcends or ignores national or racial boundaries, and that persistent faith (belief in God's power) is what invites God's love.<sup>34</sup>

Harper's revision of the biblical version of the Syrophenician woman's story also emphasizes the woman's gender and the role it plays in her appeal. Harper suggests the woman perseveres in her quest for Jesus to help her daughter precisely because she is a woman. Harper links the woman's willingness to humble herself to "the seal of woman's love." This suggests that there is something about a woman's love for her child that would give her a particular determination to save that child. Because of that womanly consideration for her child, the Syrophenician woman does not give up when she is told her ethnicity makes her unfit for Jesus's consideration. She responds,

"True," she said, "Oh, gracious Lord,  
True and faithful is thy word:  
But the humblest, meanest, may  
Eat the crumbs they cast away." (21-24)

The woman humbles herself, agreeing that she is unworthy and calling herself and her daughter humble and mean. However, in contrast to her words, the woman is audacious in that she dares to rebut Jesus who seems shocked by her rhetorical ability. In what is the last stanza of the poem, he replies,

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<sup>34</sup> Harper's emphasis on faith rather than works here is in contrast to some earlier canonical theologies. St. Augustine, for example, argues against the idea that "they who live most evil and most disgraceful lives, even though they continue to live in this way, will be saved and will gain eternal life as long as they believe in Christ and receive His sacraments" (55). Harper's theology seems based on the notion of a divine that is more likely to reward than to punish.

“Woman,” said th’ astonish’d Lord,  
“Be it even as thy word!  
By thy faith that knows no fail,  
Thou hast ask’d, and shalt prevail.” (25-28)

Here Harper’s story ends, although the biblical version continues on to say that the woman’s daughter is healed. The import of the biblical story is that Jesus has healed the daughter in response not only to the mother’s request but as a reward for the mother’s humility, persistence, and faith. Additionally, Harper’s version of the story begins with the thoughts of the mother and end with Jesus claiming that she will “prevail.” Harper’s choice to end her version of narrative immediately after this point has been made highlights this point about faith.

Additionally, the end of the poem emphasizes that the woman will be rewarded for her faith with God’s help. Again, the mother’s experience is made central to the poem, while Jesus’s deed in healing the child is a secondary subject and only serves as a tool to highlight the importance of faith, perseverance, and (perhaps most importantly to Harper) the mother’s access to divine mercy.

Katherine Bassard argues in “Private Interpretations” that this poem and “Saved By Faith” are subversive and anti-racist, but she says,

Harper’s application of the story [of the Syrophenician woman] to contemporary abolitionism stops short of de-authorizing the biblical account in that, rather than read ‘against the grain’ of the original

periscope<sup>35</sup>, she simply exposes to view the subversiveness inherent in its textuality. Jesus explains to the woman that his primary mission is to ‘Israel’s lost and scattered sheep,’ which seems to reify the racial/cultural hierarchy of Jew over Gentile. (140)

Bassard reads Jesus’s affirmation of the woman’s prayer in the “The Syrophenician Woman” as a subversion of that hierarchy because Jesus chooses to help her although she is not one of the people he has been sent to help. The woman, a non-Jew, has her own words given authority by the authority of Jesus who affirms them. This supports Harper’s abolitionist concerns because the divine is represented as transcending racial or national allegiances because Jesus decides to help the woman despite the fact that she is not a Jew. Harper also presents the divine as having concern for the poor and afflicted in that Jesus helps a woman who has expended all of her resources to help her daughter and is now desperate but is then rescued by Jesus from her desperation.

Harper’s reading suggests that the divine is anti-racist and an advocate of the poor. This reading is conveyed by elements of the story that already exist in the biblical versions. A reading of Harper’s poem as subversive, is not, in other words, based upon any changes that Harper makes. Bassard suggests that Harper’s choice to remain fairly true to the original text complicates an interpretation of the poem as radical revisionist poetry. However, “The Syrophenician Woman” does demonstrate that Harper made choices about the parts of the Bible she would represent in poetry, and that those choices depended upon which scriptures could be appropriated to suit her political concerns. The story of the Syrophenician woman is, in its biblical context, already anti-racist and

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<sup>35</sup> A “periscope” is a single narrative in the Bible that is distinct from its surrounding text. The story of the Syrophenician woman, for example, is a stand-alone anecdote that does not flow with the text that precedes or follows it (Just).

already connects God with the oppressed. Harper retells the text so that it can speak to the problems of her time. She does add stronger emphasis to the feminist argument in the story by making the slight change of calling attention to the fact of the woman's motherhood and her connection to her daughter, beginning the poem with her thoughts and ending with her reward so that her experience rather than Jesus's is centralized, emphasizing the link between women's roles and the divine.

Harper's "Saved by Faith" is another poem based on biblical scripture. As Bassard says, this poem "retells the periscope of the Woman with the Issue of Blood from the synoptic Gospels."<sup>36</sup> Mark 5:25-34, Matthew 9:20-22, and Luke 8:43-48 narrate the story of a woman reaching out to touch Jesus's cloak in order that she might be cured of a twelve-year chronic bleeding problem. The biblical version of the story reads in Mark:

And a certain woman, which had an issue of blood twelve years,  
And had suffered many things of many physicians, and had spent all that  
she had, and was nothing bettered, but rather grew worse, When she had  
heard of Jesus, came in the press behind, and touched his garment. For she  
said, If I may touch but his clothes, I shall be whole. And straightway the  
fountain of her blood was dried up; and she felt in her body that she was  
healed of that plague. And Jesus, immediately knowing in himself that  
virtue had gone out of him, turned him about in the press, and said, Who  
touched my clothes? And his disciples said unto him, Thou seest the  
multitude thronging thee, and sayest thou, Who touched me? And he  
looked round about to see her that had done this thing. But the woman

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<sup>36</sup> Bassard challenges Melba Joyce Boyd and Carla Peterson's claims that "Saved by Faith" is a revisionist interpretation of the Bible. In Bassard's opinion, the poem is merely a retelling and not a political or rhetorical revision (138). Both positions are valid.

fearing and trembling, knowing what was done in her, came and fell down before him, and told him all the truth. And he said unto her, Daughter, thy faith hath made thee whole; go in peace, and be whole of thy plague.<sup>37</sup>

Again, as with “The Syrophenician Woman,” Harper’s choice to represent the story in her poetry appropriates liberating and subversive messages that are already part of the original text. That is, the biblical version of the story implies that Jesus has the ability and the desire to heal the afflicted and the suffering provided that they are faithful. Jesus’s words in the story indicate that it is for the woman’s faith in his power to heal her that she is healed.

“Saved by Faith” stays closer to its biblical counterpart than “The Syrophenician Woman,” but the poem still has import for Harper’s abolitionist cause. Of the moment when the afflicted woman decides that Jesus can help her, Harper writes,

Nerv’d by blended hope and fear,  
Reasoned thus her anxious heart;  
“If to touch Him I draw near,  
All my suffering shall depart.

“While the crowd around him stand,  
I will touch,” the sufferer said;  
Forth she reached her timid hand—  
As she touched her sickness fled. (17-24)

As with “The Syrophenician Woman,” the crucial points of the story are that the woman has faith that Jesus can heal her suffering, she acts based upon that faith, and her faith is

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<sup>37</sup> This text is from the 1977 edition of *The Holy Bible* by Consolidated Book Publishers.

rewarded. She believes in Jesus's power to heal her, she acts on that belief, and Harper means her audience to understand that the woman is rewarded for her faith.

The interaction between Jesus and the suffering woman lends itself to the lesson that Jesus cares for those who are weak but who remain faithful to God. The story is about piety and submission to the divine. Harper indicates both in the body of the narrative and in the title that the poem's central argument is an advocating of persistent faith in the face of suffering. Harper anticipates the connection between continued suffering and the loss of faith, an issue which has been dealt with in the past by many Christian thinkers. Deborah Shuger's *Habits of Thought in the English Renaissance* discusses the relationship between suffering and faith in the sermons of Richard Hooker. She writes,

Hooker's first sermon, arguably the greatest sermon of the period, depicts the doubt occasioned by the experience of suffering: the fear that one is "clean crosst out of God's book, that he regards us not," and the additional dread that such feelings themselves confirm their own truth. That is, how, in a theology based on justification by faith, can such loss of faith signify anything besides condemnation. Temporal suffering is excruciating not primarily because of the material or social loss involved but because it means that one is not loved, that one has been abandoned by God. Thus, suffering causes doubt, and doubt intensifies the suffering into despair.

(70)<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Shuger uses *The Works of that Learned and Judicious Divine, Mr. Richard Hooker* (Oxford 1888; reprint, New York, 1970) as her primary source on Hooker's sermons.

Shuger explains that Hooker's sermon acknowledges the tendency to doubt God's existence, power, or capacity for compassion as the result of suffering. She goes on to explain Hooker's suggestion that the loss of faith will ensure damnation. The implication here is the argument that, in spite of suffering, one should remain faithful or risk losing God's favor.

Harper's "Saved by Faith" makes a similar argument but goes even further by seeming to promise that continued faith in spite of suffering will eventually lead to God's showing compassion and removing the source of the suffering. The poem argues that the divine cares about and responds to the prayers of the faithful who are suffering. This can be read as a symbolic message for enslaved and subjugated African Americans. The message that Jesus will end the suffering of the faithful has abolitionist implications. The enslaved in America are suffering just as the woman in the story has endured years of suffering. Harper's retelling of the biblical story suggests that the divine rewards those who are faithful by ending their suffering and will therefore reward the suffering African Americans provided they remain confident of God's power and potential compassion. Again, both the biblical version and Harper's version of the story of the woman with the issuance of blood offer this message. While Harper does not make any changes to the story that are identifiable as explicit feminist revision, her rendering of the story at all can be read as serving both a feminist and a liberationist cause. The subversive messages that Jesus cares for suffering people and that Jesus cares for women are already present in the original. Harper appropriates those already existing messages for the social reform movements in which she was active.

“The Syrophenician Woman” and “Saved by Faith” advance an Christological argument that anticipates writings about Christ in twentieth-century theological feminists’ works. Harper’s Christological poems join her representation of Jesus of Nazareth with the rhetoric of Joan Chamberlain Engelsman and Silvia Schroer who suggest that it is in reconsidering the figure of Jesus that Christian feminists and theologians can challenge patriarchy’s claim to the Judeo-Christian God. An examination of Harper’s Christology reveals connections between the Christological feminist arguments of herself, Engelsman, and Schroer. Engelsman’s Christological writings argue that the feminine has been repressed from the divine in dominant discourse about the Judeo-Christian divine. However, in *The Feminine Dimension of the Divine*, Engelsman argues that the figure of Christ in the New Testament is one way in which the feminine divine has reasserted itself (133). In Engelsman’s theology the church is “Bride of Christ” and as such “has taken over the teaching function of Sophia”<sup>39</sup> (134). Sophia is the female personification of wisdom in the Old Testament. Engelsman argues that Sophia is recast as Jesus in the New Testament, thereby giving feminine dimensions to the male divine of Judeo-Christianity. In Schroer’s *Wisdom Has Built Her House: Studies on the Figure of Sophia in the Bible*, the author argues that an Old Testament personification of wisdom is transformed into the figure of Jesus in the New Testament. Both Engelsman and Schroer argue that the figure of Jesus has female origins and female qualities and is, therefore, a place to look to recover the feminine which they believe has

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<sup>39</sup> Engelsman and Schroer both develop their arguments based upon the fact that, in the Old Testament, wisdom is personified as female. Joseph Blenkinsopp reads the personification of wisdom as female as a normative female to be contrasted with the aberrant woman (159). This would suggest that she is not a feminist liberating figure.



been excluded from contemporary discussions of the divine in patriarchal Christian theology.

In “The Syrophenician Woman” and “Saved by Faith,” Harper constructs a divine that calls to mind the theological feminist Christology of Engelsman and Schroer, who both argue that the figure of Christ in the New Testament is inherently female. The qualities which Engelsman and Schroer cite as demonstrating new Christ’s relationship to old *Hokma* (Wisdom or Sophia) are emphasized in Harper’s depiction of Christ and his relationship to human beings.

As Edward Antonio states in his article “Black Theology” in *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*,

African American theology is based, in part, upon a Christology in which the proletarian properties of Jesus are emphasized. Jesus’s low birth, his common occupation as a carpenter, and his suffering on the cross are used to align Jesus’s experiences with the experiences of African Americans who deal with slavery, disproportionate levels of poverty, and the oppression of racism and racial discrimination (Antonio 82-83).

Again, Antonio bases this primarily on the work of James Cone who agrees with the notion that a large part of black liberation theology relies upon a reading of Jesus as an advocate of the poor and oppressed. Feminist theologians such as Engelsman and Schroer add to that the notion that Jesus’s attitudes toward the poor, sick and oppressed reflect qualities that are associated with the feminine: kindness, maternal instinct, nurturing as evidenced by the many stories of his helping the poor or healing the sick. They would suggest also that Jesus advocates for women.

Harper's Christological poems, those poems in which she represents Jesus in a particular way, agree with the arguments of Cone, Engelsman and Schroer. These poems represent Jesus as caring, nurturing, and interested in the well-being of the common person rather than the elite. Harper uses the figure of Christ, usually in relationship to women, to indicate God's concern and compassion for women and the enslaved. Harper utilizes the figure of Jesus a great deal in her poems. She compares the suffering of Jesus to the suffering of the enslaved and, in particular, enslaved women. Harper's Jesus, as Bassard says, is "approachable and immanently present in her poems" (Bassard 135).

Harper emphasizes, as Bassard says, "in both poems [The Syrophenician Woman" and "Saved by Faith"], Jesus' nearness and availability to the most socially marginalized" (138). The woman in "The Syrophenician Woman" is not among God's chosen because of her status as a Syrian. The woman in "Saved by Faith" is poor, destitute, and perpetually unclean because of her constant bleeding. Both are women. Yet Jesus takes pity on both of them and they both receive his healing.

In choosing these particular stories to retell, Harper makes an argument in favor of women's connection to the divine. It is perhaps one that would seem not to need arguing as the ideal of womanhood in the nineteenth century gave women a place close to the divine. Both poems emphasize that the women are faithful and that this is the reason that Jesus helps them.<sup>40</sup> The fact that Harper chooses to focus on these scriptures depicting the relationships of women to Christ is suggestive of a feminist theological argument. Not only is Jesus shown to have particular consideration for the downtrodden and oppressed, Jesus commiserates in these poems specifically with women. The figure

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<sup>40</sup> Again, Barbara Welter notes that piety was one of the primary characteristics of a "true woman" in the nineteenth century.

of Jesus is linked to the needs of women as in Sylvia Schroer's assertion that Jesus is in fact a female entity embodied as male.

However, Harper's emphasis on the relationship between Jesus and women has further implications. For black liberation theology, these poems argue that Jesus has concern for the weak and poor regardless of national or ethnic origin as long as they are faithful. This furthers an end to African American oppression. For feminist liberation theology, the argument that Jesus does not turn from the concerns of women provided that they are faithful furthers the goal of women's independence.

### **Harper's Liberation Theology: *Moses: A Story of the Nile***

Another poem in which Harper advances her theology of African American and feminist liberation<sup>41</sup> is *Moses: A Story of the Nile*, a major work in her oeuvre. Patricia Liggins Hill writes,

Much of Harper's optimism about the black liberation struggle stems from her strong religious beliefs in Christian brotherhood and social equality. In this respect, her major religious poems deal also with the black liberation cause. One such poem is *Moses* (pp.80-88), a forty page blank verse narrative on this religious leader's life and death, which Joan R. Sherman considers to be Harper's best poem and one of considerable power." (Hill 62).

Along with other Harper critics, Hill notes that the plight of nineteenth-century African Americans is paralleled in the story of Moses and that Harper highlights these parallels in

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<sup>41</sup> *Moses* was first published in 1869. While this places the poem after the end of the legal enslavement of African Americans, critics like Patricia Hill and Maryemma Graham understand the poem to be a response to continued social, if not legal, oppression of African Americans.

her retelling (62). Melba Joyce Boyd also argues that the poem works as a commentary on racial oppression in America:

*Moses: A Story of the Nile* represents an alternative theological interpretation of the origins of Christianity. The poem criticizes the morality of the ancient slave society and thereby makes allusions to America's ruling social and economic order. It is a cultural expression of abolitionist activism during the Reconstruction and a spiritual vision for the future of a new people. (Boyd 88)

Harper is not alone in constructing this argument. Much antislavery rhetoric depended upon a connection between the people of Israel and the Africans of America. Eddie Glaude says of African-American Christian congregations that "The community recognized itself in the Exodus story [. . .]" (80). He goes on to say that "The language of nation in early nineteenth-century black political rhetoric derives, at least in part, from this rearticulation of the ideology of chosenness. African Americans reread the American political culture represented a set of common interests arrayed against particular interests: their natural right of liberty and equality against the racial order of American society" (81). African Americans saw (and have, into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries continued to see) connections between their own experiences and the experiences of the Israelites enslaved in Egypt and then liberated.

Comparing Harper's poem to other representations of Exodus as symbolic of African-American experiences, Maryemma Graham writes that "*Moses* is unusual in that throughout the entire allegory Harper never refers to race, but narrates the story in such a way as to symbolize the hope and aspirations of black people" (xli). This parallel that

Harper suggests between Moses and oppressed African Americans is the main support for the religious and moral argument for liberation that is advanced by both the poem and the scripture upon which it is based. Harper does not need to radically revise the text if she sees already the liberating potential of the narrative of Moses<sup>42</sup>. The connection that Harper makes between the Israelites and African Americans and her emphasis on women's experience creates a biblically-based argument that African-Americans and women are God's people and should be free from oppression. This argument supports and is supported by the conceptualization of the Judeo-Christian God as nurturing, protecting, and concerned for the welfare of the common people. This is the version of the Judeo-Christian divine which Ruether believes existed before the distant, cold, authoritarian, version of the divine who serves the patriarchal order keeping men in power and women in subjection to men. Ruether argues that a change in the language about God and not a complete upheaval of Christianity is what is necessary.

Harper begins *Moses* at the moment when Moses has decided to join the Israelites and help them become free. The first chapter of the poem contains a conversation between Moses and the Pharaoh's daughter, Princess Charmian, in which Moses explains his reasons for leaving to join the Israelites or, as he puts it,

[ . . . ] I go to join  
The fortunes of my race, and to put aside  
All other bright advantages, save

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<sup>42</sup> Boyd believes that Harper makes a more direct association between the enslaved Jews and the enslaved Africans in America. She says, "Moses' [*sic*] Hebrew mother played a critical role in his subversive religious and political acculturation. Likewise, Harriet Tubman, the black woman Moses, explained how her mother told her about Nat Turner's prophecy, and how God would deliver his children from bondage" (94). Boyd argues that Harper is implying a connection between the Moses figure in the Bible, and the metaphorical Moses figures who were African-American abolitionists in the nineteenth century.

The approval of my conscience and the meed

Of rightly doing. (*Moses* 1.4-8)

Harper suggests through Moses's words that joining the cause of liberation is the correct moral choice. Moses is prevailed upon by his conscience to join the Jews. He believes that joining them is the right thing to do. Harper seems to emphasize this choice to support an argument against African-American oppression. As Maryemma Graham says, "Moses is presented as having a choice, and when he decides to return to his people, he has rejected a pleasure-filled life of sacrifice and commitment to a higher goal. The temperance themes are combined here with the prevailing Reconstruction ideology of social and moral uplift" (xli). In the poem, Harper emphasizes that Moses believes that joining with the poor and oppressed Jewish people is the morally right decision. This element of the story implies that fighting for the oppressed is the correct moral path for members of Harper's audience to take during and after Reconstruction.

It is important to note that the tradition of appropriating the Exodus narrative by a people for the purpose of characterizing and validating that people does not begin with African Americans. Eddie Glaude points out that the seventeenth-century Separatist Puritans used the story of the Israelites journey from oppressive Egypt to the Promised Land as symbolic of their own journey from the religious oppression of England to settlement in North America. Glaude states that in

African Americans appropriated the Puritan use of the Exodus metaphor so that the Africans rather than the English were God's chosen people.

They also reversed this metaphor [. . .]. Puritans had viewed North America as their Canaan and England the Egypt from whence they

escaped persecution. On the contrary, African Americans viewed North America as Egyptian oppressors of God's people (46-48).

A comparison of the tradition of Puritan rhetoric of liberation and African American rhetoric of liberation reveals a markedly different understanding of the relationship between God and God's chosen people. Puritan writers often emphasized those parts of the narrative of the Israelites journey which speak to God's admonitions and prohibitions for his people. Much emphasis is placed on sin and the avoidance of sin as responsibility of the chosen. The relationship between God and the chosen was tense and fragile.<sup>43</sup> While the view of themselves as chosen seems to have offered them a certain audacity which allowed them to view themselves as superior to Native Americans and Africans in America, Puritans yet did not see themselves as guaranteed God's grace.

Harper's retelling of Moses's narrative presents a decidedly different take on the relationship between God and the chosen. The poem tends to assume that the enslaved have God's favor. There is no prohibition against sin. This is typical of other African-American appropriations of the narrative. As Eric J. Sudquist writes, "Adapting the biblical figure to their own purposes, African American portrayals often idealized the leadership of Moses [. . .] and his delivery of his people into the Promised Land" (96). Harper's retelling of the narrative does just that. In focusing the heroism of Moses and foregrounding the righteousness of his cause while downplaying the role of avoiding sin for the Israelites, Harper characterizes the divine as unquestioningly devoted to saving the oppressed from suffering.

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<sup>43</sup> See William Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation* or Mary Rowlandson's *Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson* as examples which simultaneously represent Puritans as God's chosen people and Puritans as in danger of losing God's favor through sin.

Harper's poem suggests a related argument against materialism in that Moses rejects wealth to be with his people. This supports liberation theology's claim that God is an advocate of the poor.<sup>44</sup> In the poem, Moses justifies his decision to leave the Pharaoh's house. He explains to his adopted mother the reason that he is willing to give up the privileges of the Pharaoh's household to return to his biological family:

I feel an earnest purpose binding all  
My soul until a strong resolve, which bids  
Me put aside all other ends and aims,  
Until the hour shall come when God—the God  
Our fathers loved and worshipped—shall break our chains,  
And lead our willing feet to freedom. (1.19-24)

Here Moses links his purpose and the struggle for Jewish freedom to God. Again, the poem argues that the God of the Judeo-Christian tradition, as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza argues, is a God of the oppressed rather than a God who oppresses or ignores the oppressed.

The opening of the poem speaks to one of Harper's purposes in retelling Moses's story. By foregrounding the reasons Moses gives for helping the enslaved, Harper, emphasizes the argument for Jewish freedom which serves also as a symbolic justification of the struggle for African-American freedom from oppression.<sup>45</sup> Displaying racial solidarity with the Israelites, Moses claims "I cannot live in pleasure while they

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<sup>44</sup> In *Introducing Liberation Theology*, Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, define liberation theology as having an emphasis on God's commiseration with poor people.

<sup>45</sup> *Moses* was published 1869, four years after the end of slavery. However, it is believed that Harper began work on the poem before 1865. Furthermore, based upon Harper's writings during Reconstruction (the novel, *Iola Leroy*, for example), it is clear that Harper did not think the struggle for African-Americans' freedom from oppression ended with the end of the Civil War.



faint / In pain” (35). There is an implied call to action directed at Harper’s audience.

Moses, the hero who can stand idly by while his people suffer, is presented as an aspirational example for Harper’s audience.

In addition to its argument for liberation of the oppressed, the poem also contains an argument specifically for women’s liberation through the representation of its female characters. Harper’s version of Moses’s story highlights the importance of women’s roles as transformative figures in the life of Moses. Maryemma Graham sums up an argument of Melba Joyce Boyd who noted that “*Moses* is particularly significant first because it extends the popular biblical story by incorporating the perspectives of two different women, one Egyptian and one Hebrew, both mothers of Moses” (Graham xl).<sup>46</sup> Harper revises the biblical tale to include the perspectives of Moses’s biological and adoptive mothers and his adoptive grandmother. Harper emphasizes the perspectives of these women and the importance of their moral strength. In *Moses*, the positive impact of both Moses’s adoptive mother and his biological mother are important to the success of his liberation movement. The bond between mothers and sons is important to Harper’s narrative as is the bond between wives and husbands.

In *Moses*, the ghost of Asenath, the Pharaoh’s wife, influences the Pharaoh to allow Charmian to keep and raise young Moses. In the section of chapter one in which the princess recalls her decision to adopt Moses and her father’s opposition, the poem relates,

[. . .] Dark as the thunder

Clouds of distant lands became my father’s brow,

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<sup>46</sup> Graham cites an unpublished early draft of Melba Joyce Boyd’s *Discarded Legacy* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State UP, 1994), pg. 7.

And his eyes flashed with fierce lightnings  
Of his wrath; but while I plead, with eager  
Eyes upturned, I saw a sudden change come  
Over him; his eyes beamed with unwonted  
Tenderness, and he said, “Charmian, arise,  
Thy prayer is granted [. . .]. (1.137-144)

The Pharaoh changes his mind and decides to allow his daughter to adopt Moses. It is the power of the two women—his daughter and her dead mother—which saves Moses. In the poem, the Pharaoh explains why he relents thus:

[. . .] just then thy dead mother  
Came to thine eyes, and the light of Asenath  
Broke over thy face. Asenath was the light  
Of my home; the star that faded out too  
Suddenly from my dwelling, and left my life  
To darkness, grief and pain, and for her sake,  
Not thine, I’ll spare the child.” [. . .] (1.144-150)

In focusing on the positive moral influence of wives and mothers, Harper uses the nineteenth century assumptions about the roles of women in society. Barbara Welter claims that women were expected to be more pious than men. Women were expected to impose their limited and moral influence over the more sinful natures of men, though from a modest and domesticated starting point (44). In *Moses* Harper suggests that the Pharaoh’s dead wife still has moral influence over him though it is limited now that she is dead. Thus, three women are involved in the salvation of Moses from the Pharaoh’s death

decree: his biological mother, Charmian, and Asenath. Again, Harper emphasizes the importance of the female figures in her writing of a biblical narrative.

In chapter two of the poem, Moses moves from the palace to the hut of his biological parents. When Moses returns to his biological mother, she tells him the story of how she gave him away to be adopted by the Pharaoh's daughter. This section of the poem focuses on the exemplary piety of Moses's biological mother. She then tells Moses of her and her husband's disparate reactions to hearing that Moses, whom they still thought of as their son, was preparing to abandon his heritage of Jewish monotheism and offer his allegiance to the Egyptian gods.<sup>47</sup> Moses's mother says, "When thy father Amram heard the cruel news / He bowed his head upon his staff and wept. / But I had stronger faith than that" (2.58-60). Here she calls attention to her faithfulness which stands in contrast to the despair of her male counterpart, Moses's father. She continues to tell Moses how her faith kept her from becoming as upset as her husband. She offers, as more evidence of her faith, her act of giving up her child. She recalls the scene of her sacrifice:

By faith

I hid thee when the bloody hands of Pharaoh  
Were searching 'mid our quivering heart strings,  
Dooming our sons to death; by faith I wove  
The rushes of thine ark and laid thee 'mid  
The flags and lilies of the Nile (2.60-65)

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<sup>47</sup> In Harper's version of the story, Moses is asked to pledge allegiance to Egyptian gods so that he may take full benefit of his privileges as grandson of the Pharaoh. Witnesses report this to his biological parents. The inclusion of this detail further suggests a parallel between African Americans and the Jews. Oppression of African Americans often included some pressure to renounce their cultural heritage and history. Harper advocates resistance to this pressure by depicting Moses's resistance to a similar pressure.

Moses mother indicates that she and the other Israelites were afraid for their sons. She then says that it is faith that encourages her to find a way to save her own son. Following that act, she says, her faith is rewarded because her son is returned to her when she is employed as his wet nurse:

and I saw

The answer to that faith when Pharaoh's daughter  
Placed thee in my arms, and bade me nurse the child  
For her: and by that faith sustained, I heard  
As idle words the cruel news that stabbed,  
Thy father like a sword." (2.65-70)

Moses's mother suggests that because her faith was once before rewarded by the survival and return of baby Moses, she receives the news of her son's impending conversion without becoming alarmed. Moses's father, the poem asserts, did not have as much faith as his wife. The poem and the scripture emphasize the role of Moses's mother rather than his father in Moses's narrative. Additionally, the tale of her stoic response to his conversion as well as her strength of will in the act of placing Moses on the Nile, make the argument that women can be more stoic, rational, and emotionally strong than men. As Boyd says of this section of the poem,

Harper uses the refrain *by faith* taken from the Book of Hebrews to constitute the perspective of Moses' mother. While Amram, Moses' father, had submitted to rumor, his mother *had stronger faith than that*. The implications of her refrain make an indelible statement about the

spirituality of women, whose faith seems stronger than men in the face of tragedy and treachery. (96)

Boyd argues that, “in keeping with Harper’s feminist perspective, her poetic interpretation of Exodus includes a radical presentation of Moses’ mother as the key molder of his political and religious consciousness” (80). It is important that Harper, once again, focuses on a maternal figure in relationship to the divine. Moses’s mother is a powerful figure in the text, not only because she serves as a representation of the exemplary piety women were expected to have in the nineteenth century but also because she seems to be the reason for Moses’s allegiance to his family’s cultural heritage and the reason he chooses to join his people. In this way, Harper’s suggests that women can be spiritual leaders and that one of the tasks of a spiritual leader is to advocate loyalty to one’s culture.

Although it retells an Old Testament narrative, Harper’s *Moses* also incorporates the liberation arguments associated with the figure of Jesus. In the seventh chapter of the poem, Harper writes that with lightning and thunder “did God proclaim” to the Israelites at Mount Sinai,

The central and primal truth of all

The universe—the unity of God.

Only one God.—

This truth received into the world’s great life,

Not as an idle dreamer’s speculative thing,

But as a living, vitalizing thought,

Should bind us closer to our God and link us

With our fellow man, the brothers and co-heirs

With Christ, the elder brother of our race. (7.10-18)

Harper connects the stories of Moses and Jesus. According to her version of the narrative, the Israelites at Mount Sinai are foretold about Christ, and Christ is an equalizing figure—he connects all of God’s people and connects all people to God. The fact that Jesus’s salvation is offered to all in Harper’s theology implies dissolution of social hierarchies that are based on class, race, or sex.

Christian theologians have written on the similarities of the Old Testament’s Moses and the New Testament’s Jesus. Often, Jesus is interpreted as a prophet who was prophesied in the Old Testament,<sup>48</sup> so it is not unusual that Harper would make a connection between the Moses and Jesus narratives. However, because *Moses* is a metaphor for the plight of women and African Americans in the nineteenth century, the allusion to Christ contributes to Harper’s feminist liberation theology. The poem argues that both Moses and Jesus reflect God’s concern for the oppressed. Melba Joyce Boyd argues that *Moses* “articulates in literary form the biblical story that cultivates black Christianity during slavery. Harper’s inclusion of Christ imagery inside the narrative of the Old Testament text clearly exemplified the intertwining of the two most critical biblical characters in black Christianity” (qtd. in Graham xli). As Maryemma Graham says in her discussion of *Moses*, “Lecturing and observing a newly freed black people,

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<sup>48</sup> A sermon by James Robertson, A.M. entitled *The Resemblance of Jesus to Moses Considered*, argues that Jesus Christ’s arrival is prophesied in Deuteronomy 18:15-18 which tells about the coming of a prophet. He also cites Exodus 33:11, in which he says, “Moses here foretells the coming of an eminent prophet, whom God would raise up to the Jewish nation, from the midst of themselves, who should resemble himself, and unto whom they were to hearken” (3). Robertson goes on to argue that Moses and Jesus have many similarities including, he says, their humility and the fact that they spoke for God and showed God’s power through miracles. Another sermon by Thomas Bullock, *Jesus Christ the Prophet Whom Moses Foretold*, advances the argument that the prophet whom Moses described in Acts 3:22-23 (but whom Moses does not name) is indeed Jesus.

Harper used her influence and position to argue in support of civil rights for blacks and equal rights for women” (Graham xli). As in other poems in which she retells stories about Jesus, in *Moses* the references to Jesus represent an elevation of women, the poor, and the oppressed in God’s esteem.

In *Moses*, the biological and adoptive mothers of Moses and the mother of the Pharaoh’s daughter all play pivotal roles in his liberation movement. Besides *Moses*, Harper’s poems based on biblical scripture are most often stories about women. Harper chooses to emphasize the presence and importance of women in the Bible, illustrating moral lessons and interacting with the divine.

### **Conclusion**

There is some disagreement over whether or not Harper can be read as truly feminist. Katherine Bassard argues that Harper’s poetry is not overtly subversive. Melba Joyce Boyd, in *Discarded Legacy*, argues that Harper’s poetry is feminist. Boyd says,

Frances Harper wrote about Christianity as a dissident and a scholar. In her poetry she challenges racist and sexist religious dogma with renewed faith and biblical knowledge. “The Dying Christian” is derived from a favorite hymn, and “That Blessed Hope,” “The River,” “The Syrophenician Woman,” “The Prodigal’s Return,” “Eva’s Farewell,” “The Dismissal of Tyng,” “Rizpah, The Daughter of Ai,” and “Ruth and Naomi” are based on either specific biblical passages or infused with biblical verses and a feminist interpretation of text. (88)

Bassard claims that Harper’s scripture-based poetry is not as revolutionary or subversive as some might argue. Bassard argues that, “a close comparison of Harper’s biblical

poetry with its corresponding Bible texts,” would reveal that, allowing for poetic license of character development and voice, Harper held to a literal reading of the Bible.” “Yet,” Bassard continues, “Harper’s emancipatory hermeneutics (Thiselton)<sup>49</sup> did not evolve into a private interpretation that dismantled biblical authority” (137). Harper was perhaps not inclined to dismantle traditional readings of the Bible or to question biblical authority because the Bible as a respected text offered her a powerful tool with which to bolster her arguments for social change. She appealed to a broad range of audience members (European-American men and women as well as African-American men and women who saw the Bible as an authoritative text) by assuming the authority of the text rather than asserting a radical individual interpretation.

However, Harper enters into the theological feminist conversation in multiple ways. She appropriates and paraphrases sections of the Bible for her political ends. She uses scripture to argue against slavery and the subjugation of women. She argues that the God of Christianity is a God who advocates for the oppressed. Harper’s poetry emphasizes a closer relationship between women and the divine through her emphasis on women’s experiences, particularly the experiences of mothers, and in her Christological paraphrase poems.

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<sup>49</sup> Bassard cites Anthony C. Thiselton’s “New Testament Historical Interpretation in Historical Perspective,” published in *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).



### Chapter Three:

#### “Who were ‘the Father and the Son?’”: Emily Dickinson’s Complicated Response to

#### Christian Theology

We could have done better by you  
whose lover we never tracked down  
a woman  
a man  
or at your tether’s end God maybe  
----from “Emily Dickinson Comes to the Dinner Party,” Vassar Miller

The poem, “Emily Dickinson Comes to the Dinner Party,” by Vassar Miller, expresses a common problem faced by readers and critics of Emily Dickinson’s work: Dickinson is a difficult poet to categorize. As Miller’s poem indicates, critics have developed varying opinions about the author’s private life and whether or not her poetry comments on romantic love or her feelings about God.<sup>50</sup> However, many critics do agree that much of her poetry is religious. As Paula Bennett says,

Like other major writers of her era, Dickinson was intensely, almost obsessively, concerned with ultimate questions: the nature of God, death, immortality. And like a number of these writers—Emerson, Hawthorne, Melville—she tends to locate these concerns in the isolated individuals quest for understanding. (51)

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<sup>50</sup> Paula Bennett writes that “[Dickinson’s] poetry is always in flux, a restless ever-changing medium, suited to her radically questioning, often violently untraditional, anti-masculinist needs” (48). “The result,” says Bennett, “is poems of unique linguistic power that are free to explore ideas for which nineteenth-century American ideology, grammar and spelling, made little if any room” (49).

However, as Miller's poem indicates, disagreement persists as to which of Dickinson's poems are about God and which are about other things. Additionally, of those poems identified by many critics as religious in subject, disagreement persists as to whether or not Dickinson's religious commentary is a radical or moderate challenge to Christianity, whether it is anti-Christian or pro-Christian, anti-religion or only anti-*organized*-religion, and so on. As Shira Wolosky says about the difficulty inherent in trying to understand Dickinson's poems,

Dickinson poems require the closest textual attention. They cannot easily be cited as evidence in an argument, since closer textual work almost always uncovers further readings and implications not easily resolved or subsumed into a summary statement. [. . .] It is one of the first tasks of Dickinson criticism exactly to acknowledge and consider this textual multiplicity in Dickinson's work, but less as indeterminacy or open-ended ambiguity or (only) aesthetic play than as the development and mutual confrontation between personal and cultural forces that are deeply at stake for her. (130)

Wolosky is correct to note that Dickinson's ambiguity should not be read as a lack of convictions or beliefs on Dickinson's part. Rather the ambiguity in Dickinson's work indicates Dickinson's changing perspectives and her willingness to consider multiple spiritual possibilities.<sup>51</sup> Even as Dickinson writes about the ineffable, she is herself ineffable. Elizabeth Willis reminds Dickinson readers that "it's tempting to treat the poem as a riddle we are meant to solve" when instead each of Dickinson's poems would

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<sup>51</sup> In "Tell all the truth but tell it slant-": Dickinson's Poetics of Indirection in Contemporary Poetry," Farnoosh Fathi explains how Dickinson's "indirection" and "indeterminacy" have influenced postmodern poetry.

be better approached “as a variety of experience designed to push the reader’s consciousness to the brink of concepts that the poem itself makes no claim to understand” (22). With this in mind, the explications of Dickinson poems in this chapter do not seek to ignore the multiplicities that exist in Dickinson’s work. In particular, this chapter highlights Dickinson’s multiple approaches to the Christian divine and the conflicts that emerge within individual poems, neither of which can always be summed up neatly.

Many of her critics and biographers agree that Emily Dickinson had a troubled relationship with the Christian tradition of her family and community.<sup>52</sup> This troubled relationship manifests itself in her poetry. Dickinson reacts against a divine authority that she complains is apathic<sup>53</sup> and distant from humanity. She critiques and challenges that tradition because she seems to have trouble with the nature of the divine to which she was introduced by her family’s tradition.

That concept of a distant, male God came from Dickinson’s family roots in Puritanism. Dickinson wrote in response to a religious tradition that gave power to the individual in its ideals, but also, and contradictorily, gave power to the church and the authorities of the organized religious community in the application of those ideals. It can be argued that Puritanism is somewhat subversive in that it arose as a reaction to a dominant religious ideology. As historians struggle with trying to define Puritanism—

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<sup>52</sup> Richard Sewall in *The Life of Emily Dickinson* claims that the uncertainties about Dickinson’s religious poetry are evidence that she is influenced by her father’s Puritan legacy. Sewall argues that this apparent struggle with Puritan theology is indicative of the influence of Puritan theology on Dickinson’s life. “To the true Puritan,” he writes, “denial and renunciation had meaning only as they made for the greater glory of God and the salvation of the soul. [ . . . ] the Puritan’s inner turmoil is strikingly close to what puzzles readers of Emily Dickinson’s poems today, their extraordinary shifts and changes of mood, tone, and even belief: the Puritan ‘lives inwardly a life of incessant fluctuation, ecstatically elated one day, depressed into despair the next’” (23). Sewall argues that Dickinson’s troubled relationship to the divine demonstrates an approach to Christianity that is informed by Puritanism rather than antithetical to it.

<sup>53</sup> Elizabeth Johnson uses this term in her book *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1997) to describe the type of divine being that is distant from humanity both in terms of its location and its emotional availability and that seems unconcerned about the lives of human beings.

often deciding that it cannot be defined in any concise way—one theme that emerges frequently is the argument that many strains of Puritanism can be characterized by the belief in the centrality of individual revelation and an individual’s interpretation of the scriptures. This belief was applied in different ways depending upon the sect and the location. In many cases in New England, for example, limitations were placed on a person’s right to question the local church leaders. In theory, American Puritanism was revolutionary, while in practice it often worked in favor of established authority.<sup>54</sup>

Richard Sewall argues that Dickinson’s “sturdy independence” is characteristic of rather than antithetical to the Puritan tradition she inherited (Sewall 19).

In *The Life of Emily Dickinson*, Sewall describes Dickinson’s orientation toward her father’s Puritan legacy<sup>55</sup> as somewhat polemical. He says,

She [Dickinson] knew what the massive Puritan traits<sup>56</sup> were, saw them in her family and in herself, respected them, but was critical of them throughout her life. Speaking in large terms, Tate<sup>57</sup> contended that Emily Dickinson came at the ideal time for a poet: when a once firm and mighty

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<sup>54</sup> In *Puritanism and Revolution*, Christopher Hill argues that Puritanism contained both revolutionary and conservative elements. Hill writes that “the fundamental concepts of Puritan thought *are* bourgeois.” Hill goes on to argue that inherent in the theology of William Perkins (1558-1602), to whom Hill refers as “the key figure in the systematization of English Puritanism,” was a definite class prejudice that worked against the poor (214). Hill argues that Perkins’s theology also raised the possibility that nobility as the basis for a claim to respect and power was not sufficient without faith in God. Hill writes, “The abolition of the monarchy and the House of Lords in 1649, the confiscation of Church, Crown, and Royalists’ estates, would not have been possible without such intellectual preparation” (214-215). Nicholas Tyacke states that while historians disagree as to the role of Puritanism in the English Revolution, “Historians of the English Civil War all agree that Puritanism had a role to play in its origins” (136). Like Hill, Tyacke notes that “Puritanism was the ideology of the newly emergent middle classes or *bourgeoisie*, as they are sometimes called” (136). Both Hill and Tyacke imply that Puritanism’s association with the interests of the middle class and not with the poor makes it less possible to view the religious movement as wholly anti-establishment.

<sup>55</sup> As Sewall says in *The Life of Emily Dickinson*, Dickinson’s great, great, great, great, great-grandfather on her father’s side of the family was Nathaniel Dickinson who came to New England as part of John Winthrop’s Massachusetts Bay Company of Puritans in 1630.

<sup>56</sup> Sewall summarizes these “massive Puritan traits” as “the puritan drama of the soul” (he cites Tate) as well as “sturdy independence,” “soul-torturings,” and “battles with sin and the Devil” (19).

<sup>57</sup> Sewall cites Allen Tate’s essay “Emily Dickinson” from *Collected Essays* (1932).

tradition was losing its vitality and opening for the poet new freedoms, some exalting some terrifying. This is true; and it is the source of much of the anguish, as well as the ecstasy, in many of her poems. (19)

Dickinson seems to respond to her family's tradition by returning to the revolutionary spirit of Puritanism. Many of her poetic explorations of the Christian divine reflect this. In rejecting an external moral authority in favor of a self-determined morality, Dickinson rejects the church traditions in a way that reflects what Sewall calls the "sturdy independence" of Puritanism.

Some aspects of Puritanism resisted the actual challenges of individuals to the status quo of the church-dictated moral code. One need only examine the Salem witch trials of 1692 and the banishment of such independent figures as Anne Hutchinson and Roger Williams<sup>58</sup> from Puritan settlements to note that there was a tendency in Puritan New England to speak of religious freedom and the authority of inspiration on the one hand while punishing those who challenged the leadership of their Puritan communities on the other hand. Conformity to a larger group ideology was important in seventeenth-century New England, perhaps because it helped to maintain a stable and tightly-knit community to better secure their survival in the midst of what seemed to them a wilderness.

Dickinson's poetic responses to the religious tradition of her father were complicated, shifting between defiant resistance and tentative acceptance. Additionally, the religious tradition to which she responds is itself complicated. It is important to keep these facts in mind when attempting an understanding of how Dickinson's text works as

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<sup>58</sup> Roger Williams is noted for having spoken out in favor of a separation of church and state (Morgan). Anne Hutchinson led religious meetings in her home. Both became enemies of the leadership of the Massachusetts Bay Colony because they did not acquiesce to dominant thinking.

theological feminist critique of her Christian tradition. Dickinson's theological feminism is complex. This chapter will examine poems which represent these different approaches. In "I'm ceded, I've stopped being theirs" and "'Faith' is a fine invention," Dickinson's speaker advocates rejecting traditional dogmas and developing religious independence. In "Of Course – I prayed" and "Just Once! Oh least Request!" Dickinson's speaker<sup>59</sup> criticizes the concept of the divine as distant and apathetic. In Dickinson's nature poems ("Angels in the early morning," "The Sky is low—the Clouds are mean," and "Nature—the Gentlest Mother is"), in which she posits a closer relationship between humanity and the divine and posits a female divine. In some of Dickinson's poems about the body ("I am afraid to own a Body—," "The Body grows without—," and "A single Screw of Flesh") and some of her Christological poems such as "Perhaps you think me stooping" challenge a dualist understanding of the relationship between the human body and the divine and imply a closer connection between the divine and women.

### **Dickinson's Declarations of Religious Independence**

In Dickinson's poem, "I'm ceded, I've stopped being theirs,"<sup>60</sup> the speaker asserts her independence from a traditional set of ideas, and the poem implies that tradition is religious. Paula Bennet claims that "this poem is about the soul's autonomy, about the poet's 'coming of age'" (149). The poem does imply that its subject relates to the speaker's spiritual identity. The speaker begins with the declaration, "I'm ceded, I've stopped being theirs" (line 1). This asserts the speaker's autonomy from some group who

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<sup>59</sup> Fred D. White argues that Dickinson "dramatizes the predicaments or states of mind or perceptions of imagined speakers, personae." He also says that Dickinson's "poems are relevant to the entire human sphere, not just to herself" (91). White's statements emphasize the importance of not assuming that Dickinson's work is necessarily autobiographical. Instead, reading Dickinson's work as a series of explorations and posing of questions and searching for answers seems a more responsible way of reading her poetry. Her poetry is more theoretical and less confessional in that she may often express perspectives to which she is not entirely loyal but that she merely hopes to consider or question.

<sup>60</sup> This is poem number 508 in Johnson.

she says has claimed control over her until the present moment of the poem. She has been “theirs,” but that has changed.

The speaker implies that this group includes her parents and their religious community. The speaker references her christening as a child: “The name they dropped upon my face / With water, in the country church, / Is finished using, now” (2-4). These words evoke the image of a child’s christening at which the child would officially receive both her formal naming and her initiation into the Christian community. She says that “they” are the people who christened her, and this implies that “they” are her parents and perhaps other adult figures of authority of the religious community.

The poem does not explicitly refer to the “name” the child receives. It implies that her identity as a member of a Christian faith is at issue as well and perhaps more so than the legal name given to the child during the same ceremony. By setting the naming of the child in the formal church ceremony rather than as a private decision between the parents which would usually precede the formal ceremony, Dickinson emphasizes religious identity rather than literal naming. In other words, undoubtedly the child’s name would have been selected and thereby “dropped” upon the child before the formal christening, but Dickinson’s speaker seems more concerned with the symbolism of the church naming ceremony which both confirms the child’s name and offers the child a religious identity.

Again, the speaker claims that she no longer belongs to those who originally christened her, her parents, the preacher, or the religious community. The speaker refers to her baptism into Christianity, “in the country church” where she was given her “name.” It is this Christian identity that she now casts off. Significantly, the speaker does not say that she has finished using the title she has been given. Instead, she says that *it*

“is finished using” *her* which indicates that this identity is something that has been imposed upon her by others.

In the next three lines, the speaker suggests that her reason for abandoning the old identity is that she has outgrown it: “And They can put it with my dolls, / My childhood, and the string of spools / I’ve finished threading –too—” (5-7). She argues that the old identity should be put away with other childhood things. This suggests a further critique her family’s Christian identity. The speaker implies that to keep the identity that was given to her by others would be naïve or childish. It is a sign of her maturity that she is able to put aside that imposed identity along with her childhood toys.

Adulthood and a closer connection to God give the speaker the power and perspective to choose an identity for herself. She goes on to contrast the powerlessness of childhood with her agency as an adult, saying: “Baptized, before, without the choice, / But this time, consciously, of Grace— / Unto supremest name” (8-10). She suggests a newfound power based on her understanding of the divine, what she calls “Grace.” The speaker suggests that the authority of the people who christened her has now been replaced by the authority of God which she has come to connect with directly. God seems to be the external force which encourages her transformation. She says, “Called to my Full—The Crescent dropped— / Existence’s whole Arc filled up / With one small Diadem” (11-13). She is encouraged or “called” to this new identity.

The poem ends with the speaker’s assessment of her present situation after casting off the old identity and assuming the one that she feels has been given to her by God. She says,

My second Rank— too small the first—



Crowned—Crowing—on my Father’s breast—  
A half unconscious Queen—  
But this time—Adequate—Erect,  
With Will to choose, or to reject,  
And I choose—just a Crown— (14-19).

Linda Freedman argues that Dickinson’s use of the word “just” in the last line of the poem implies limitations to her newfound identity. Freedman argues,

The language of majesty, here a “Crown” and “Diadem,” reflects a barrier as well as a nearness to God. The diadem (a crown) only represents election. It is, like the sacrament of baptism, an outward sign of inward spiritual grace. The speaker wears the mark of divinity, but the qualifying “just” opens up a space between the crown and what it represents. (30)

Freedman’s reading has merit because other parts of these last lines also indicate the limitations of the speaker’s new freedom. The speaker says that she is “erect” and “with will to choose,” which both indicate a sense of empowerment. But she also says that “this time” her faith is only “Adequate.” This word, like “just,” suggests that the speaker’s faith is provisional, tentative, and somehow less than completely satisfying. There is a sense of a lasting ambivalence toward the divine along with a conscious choice to believe despite but not regardless of that ambivalence.

In her poem, “‘Faith’ is a fine invention,”<sup>61</sup> Dickinson goes beyond advocating the questioning of tradition to exploring the idea that faith can be ineffectual or insufficient. The speaker discusses the usefulness of faith. In the text of the four-line poem, she writes,

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<sup>61</sup> This is poem number 185 in Johnson.

“Faith” is a fine invention  
When Gentlemen can *see*—  
But *Microscopes* are prudent  
In an Emergency.

The speaker suggests that faith is “fine” for some—gentlemen who “can see”— but not for others who are in an “emergency.” In an emergency, such as a crisis of faith, the speaker suggests that it would be “prudent” for one to examine evidence more closely, with “*Microscopes*,” presumably before accepting belief in that which is in need of examination. In this poem, Dickinson exhibits her lack of trust in faith without personal examination. The poet rejects the reliance on imagination as a basis for knowledge. She also rejects the reliance on the claims of others—the “Gentlemen”—as a basis for her faith. She privileges physical experience and claims that which is to be believed can be known by her only through physical evidence, sensory experience, and close examination.

This is a Dickinson poem that exemplifies the difficulty of categorizing her work as religious. The fact that the poem’s subject is “faith” may only imply a religious subject to those whose experiences cause them to associate the word with a religious context. However, the poem does not definitively suggest that its subject is religious. One can have (or not have) faith in many things besides God or a religious doctrine. The poem is explicitly about the need for evidence on which to base one’s beliefs about any subject. Still, if one follows the logic laid out by the speaker of the poem, the argument implies a commentary on religious faith. Additionally, if one takes into account the wide range of literary critics who have read in this and other of Dickinson’s poems, commentary on

religion, reading the poem as religious seems even more plausible. In any case, the poem at least implies that its subject is religious even if religion is not its only subject. As in “I’m ceded, I’ve stopped being theirs,” in “‘Faith’ is a fine invention,” Dickinson argues for independence of thought and identity, and this argument that has theological feminist implications.

In “‘Faith’ is a fine invention,” the speaker’s use of the word “Emergency,” is, for Dickinson, a characteristic use of a word with multiple meanings that adds additional layers of meaning to the poem. The word “Emergency” can mean a crisis—in this case, a crisis of “faith” it seems. However, the word can also indicate literally the *emergence* of something. This additional meaning of the word “Emergency” suggests the speaker’s growing claim to an independent religious perspective and an understanding of the divine and its relationship to herself. It is in the process of having her own knowledge of the divine emerge from concealment that a microscope would be necessary, according to Dickinson, so that she might fully examine the evidence that is her experience of the world. She suggests that careful study is necessary for those individuals who, like the speaker, are engaged in a quest for truth and to whom the truth only gradually reveals itself. In the poem, it is for “Gentlemen” who can “see” that Dickinson says faith is useful. The poem questions the authenticity of the gentlemen’s faith because Dickinson chooses to call that faith an “invention.” Her use of the word “invention” suggests that their faith is a fabrication. In other words, they have merely decided to have faith without having an objective reality upon which to base that faith.

It is important that Dickinson genders her statement about belief. The poem not only suggests that faith is useful for those who can “*see*.” It also casts those for whom

faith is fine and those who can see as “Gentlemen.” This casting comments on both gender and social class. Dickinson would have good reason to associate organized religion with the formal churches of Congregationalism. In these churches men filled all the primary leadership roles of ministers and church administrators. Those men were typically wealthy. Christian theology was produced primarily by men in elevated social positions and other people were expected to follow their lead. The one word, “Gentlemen” in Dickinson’s poem, seems to position the speaker in opposition to this patriarchal authority.

By advocating the assertion of one’s own identity as opposed to allegiance to tradition in “I’m ceded” and by questioning the value of faith without examination in “Faith is a fine invention,” Dickinson advances arguments made in the twentieth-century writing of Luce Irigaray, one of the more radical theological feminists discussed in chapter one. Irigaray encourages women to question their faith in the Judeo-Christian divine. Irigaray argues in *Sexes and Genealogies* that Judeo-Christian theology’s construct of a male God distances women from the divine. In the chapter, “Belief Itself,” she refers to this construct as “belief” and says, “what deceives some people and destroys others about belief [or faith] is the way it makes us forget the real” (1993b, 26).

According to Irigaray, faith obscures reality or truth, multiplies itself, and swallows up the other in sameness. In other words the longer people believe in some mythology, the greater the amount of power it has over them because that mythology is passed down through generations and attaches to itself the level of the importance of social history or true account (1993b, 26).

Dickinson contrasts faith with close examination and empirical evidence in “‘Faith’ is a fine invention” in the same way that Irigaray contrasts belief and truth in *Sexes and Genealogies*. Dickinson’s use of quotation marks indicates the “Faith” or belief she questions is a fabrication because she seems to quote others rather than taking that faith for granted as part of her own philosophy. Again, referring to that faith as an “invention,” albeit a “fine” one, suggests that it is a construct used to conceal truth. Dickinson’s poem anticipates Irigaray’s criticism of belief. Dickinson raises questions about belief that are similar to questions in Irigaray’s work. Irigaray asks,

Does not the fact that this belief asserts and unveils itself in the form of religious myths, dogmas, figures, or rites show us that metaphysics keeps watch over the crypt of faith? Theology and the ritual practices it demands would seem to correspond to one formulation of all that is hidden in the constitution of the monocratic patriarchal truth, the faith in its order, its word, its logic. (27)

Here Irigaray links contrived faith to patriarchal order and proposes the search for an alternative as Dickinson does in “‘Faith’ is a fine invention” Dickinson. This calls into question the basis for faith. In both “I’m ceded, I’ve stopped being theirs” and “‘Faith’ is a fine invention,” Dickinson asserts that it is important to challenge traditional dogmas and find one’s own evidence on which to base one’s faith. In this way Dickinson anticipates the theological feminist discourse of the twentieth-century in which writers like Irigaray encourage women to challenge and question dogma which she thinks serves the patriarchal power structure. Dickinson questions dogma in these poems and introduces readers to the possibility of raising their own questions.

## Dickinson's Criticism of a Distant God

In addition to questioning religious traditions, Dickinson often attributes this ambivalence to the concept of a God who is detached from humanity and nature.<sup>62</sup> In “Of Course – I prayed”<sup>63</sup> Dickinson criticizes the unresponsiveness of God. The poem begins with a question and answer:

Of Course – I prayed—  
And did God Care?  
He cared as much as on the Air  
A Bird—had stamped her foot—  
And cried “Give Me”— (1-5)

The poem's explicit subject is religious due to the direct references to prayer and God. More troublesome to determine, perhaps, is specifically what comment the poem makes about prayer and the divine.

The first line of the poem states that the speaker prays as a matter “of course.” This implies that the speaker is behaving according to the teachings of an external source or as the result of faith rather than real evidence. This calls the authenticity and sincerity of her method of worship into question. This challenge to traditional forms of worship is similar to the challenge to tradition expressed in “I'm ceded” and raises questions about

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<sup>62</sup> In *Habits of Thought in the English Renaissance*, Debora Shuger argues that seventeenth-century theologians Lancelot Andrewes and Richard Hooker resigned themselves to just such a concept of the Christian divine. Andrewes and Hooker, Shuger argues, preferred to believe that God was often distant from humanity and that God *allowed* evil and human suffering. This belief was preferable to believing either that God was directly responsible for human suffering and evil (which would threaten the notion of a good and just God) or that God was always present in human lives but powerless to stop evil (which would threaten the notion of an all-powerful God) (74-75). It is interesting that, unlike Hooker and Andrewes, Dickinson seems to find the concept of a God who is all-powerful but detached, a God who could end human suffering but chooses to ignore it much less comforting. This seems to indicate that as theologians like Andrewes and Hooker sought to solve the problem of the coexistence of human suffering and an all-power God, they left another problem (a God that is detached from humanity) for nineteenth-century Christians like Dickinson.

<sup>63</sup> This is poem number 376 in Johnson.

faith as does “‘Faith’ is a fine invention.” Additionally, “Of Course – I prayed—” examines the nature of the divine and the result of that nature on the individual’s relationship to the divine.<sup>64</sup>

To the opening question—“did God care?”—, the poem responds that both the absence of faith and the absence of God’s concern make the speaker’s prayers futile. According to the speaker, the ability of her prayers to inspire God’s concern is the same as the impact of a bird stamping its foot upon the air, soundless. The poem thus argues that, to God, the speaker’s voice is soundless and weightless. Barbara Antonina and Clarke Mossberg also argue that the metaphor expresses a father-child relationship between God and the speaker of the poem: “The image of the bird stamping her foot upon the air suggests the childish tantrum, all the more pathetic because it is so ineffective” (51). The poem suggests that God ignores the pleas of his child.

The bird cries, “‘Give Me,’” demanding something of the entity to which it speaks. The speaker does not say what it is that the bird demands or of whom, but because this phrase is part of a larger comparison between bird and speaker, it seems that the speaker’s prayers also contain demands. This detail is important because it creates alternative ways of reading the poem. The speaker may be questioning the wisdom or fairness of making demands of God, or she may be questioning the fairness of God in failing to care about those demands. If the latter, then the poem is more subversive than otherwise because the poet is then challenging either the divine itself or a human conception of the divine in which the divine is remote and aloof from human needs,

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<sup>64</sup> In *Dickinson and the Strategies of Reticence: The Woman Writer in Nineteenth-century America*, Joanne Dobson argues that this is a critique of a specifically gendered tradition. Speaking about Dickinson and this poem, Dobson says, “Raised in a patriarchal religion and trained in the precepts of that religion, she naturally projected a masculine image upon the cosmic forces she felt restricted her soul and denied the ambitions of her brilliantly comprehensive mind” (85).

desires, or suffering. If the former, than the speaker still suggests a troubled relationship between God and the human individual.

As with many of Dickinson's poetic choices, the next lines of the poem invite multiple interpretations and, therefore, create multiple layers of meaning. The lines make the statement, "My Reason—Life— / I had not had but for Yourself—" (6-7). This can be read as its own syntactic unit. However, "My Reason" could be read as a continuation of the previous unit so that the bird is demanding of God a response that would give her life meaning and keep her sane. The word reason conveys both of these meanings, which suggests that the speaker, who compares herself with the bird, is struggling to find a purpose beyond herself for her existence *and* struggling to rationalize her relationship to God. The speaker entertains the possibility of the existence of God and suggests, if the next words are to be read as a unit ("Life— / I had not had but for Yourself—") that she is alive due to God.

However, if one reads all of lines six and seven as a complete and self-contained thought ("My Reason—Life— / I had not had but for Yourself—"), the speaker claims that her reason or purpose, "Life," is owed to God. What this alternative reading adds to an understanding of the poem is that the speaker now suggests that her "Reason" is simply "Life." The speaker seems to accept that her purpose is simply to live and, in attributing her life to God ("Yourself"), she seems to make peace with the divine or to show appreciation to God for her existence. She exists because God allows her to exist.

In the final section of the poem, the speaker comments on the value of a life lived with a God that does not respond to prayer:

'Twere better Charity



To leave me in the Atom's Tomb—  
Merry, and Nought, and gay, and numb—  
Than this smart Misery. (8-11)

She says that she would rather have been left lifeless “in the Atom’s Tomb” rather than to be given life only to be ignored by God. The speaker claims that she would prefer never to have been given life, than to be born into an existence in which God seems uncaring. Throughout the poem, the speaker seems to assume the existence of the divine. She never posits that God does not respond to her prayers because God does not exist. However, the God that she assumes exists is a God who does not seem to care about her desires.

Dickinson also considered this problem of the apathic Christian God in her poem “Just Once! Oh least Request!”<sup>65</sup> This poem expresses the speaker’s anguish about the distance she feels between herself and God. The poem begins with the question,

Just Once! Oh least Request!  
Could Adamant refuse  
So small a Grace  
So scanty put,  
Such agonizing terms? (1-5)

The word “Adamant,” is the first of two instances in which the speaker compares the divine to stone in this poem. She uses what was once the name of a mythologized rock and later became a label to describe something impervious to influence or pressure.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> This is poem number 1076 in Johnson.

<sup>66</sup> According to *The Oxford English Dictionary Online*, the word “adamant” once referred to “an alleged rock or mineral, as to which vague, contradictory, and fabulous notions long prevailed. [. . .] In modern use it is only a poetical or rhetorical name for the embodiment of surpassing hardness; that which is impregnable to any application of force.”

That the God of this poem is difficult and uncompromising even in the face of human agony is reflected in the next lines of the poem. The poem continues,

Would not a God of Flint  
Be conscious of a sigh  
As down His Heaven dropt remote  
“Just Once” Sweet Deity? (6-9)

The speaker of the poem wonders if God could refuse a humble request from the poem’s speaker. Like “Of Course – I prayed—,” “Just Once!” suggests that God does not listen or respond to the speaker’s prayers.

“Just Once! Oh least Request!” and “Of Course – I prayed—” both express criticisms of a divine that is detached from humanity, governing them from above and failing to be concerned for their suffering. In these poems, Dickinson anticipates the concerns of twentieth-century theological feminist Elizabeth Johnson who in *She Who Is* discusses the desire of many women to challenge that image of a detached God. Johnson notes that western women and other people who are oppressed are especially put off by a divine that seems, according to her, detached and unwilling to intercede on behalf of the downtrodden.

Johnson claims that there has been a concerted, though not necessarily malicious, effort to represent God as apathic,<sup>67</sup> far removed from the suffering of humanity. She says that this concept of God is intended “to preserve divine freedom from a dependency on creatures that would in fact render God finite” (247). In other words, viewing God as distant from humanity preserves a sense of God that is not limited by the frailties of

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<sup>67</sup>“Apathic” is the term Johnson uses to describe the type of divine that is detached and uninvolved in the lives of human beings.

embodied humanity. A God who is detached from human sensory experience, Johnson continues, “acts not out of need or compulsion but from serene self-sufficiency.”

Another application of this perception of God, according to Johnson is that “Negating passion and vulnerability as divine qualities enables God’s universal goodness to operate without fear or favor” (247). In other words, viewing God as removed from humanity and as dispassionate enables believers to think of God as not susceptible to petty, emotion-driven actions.

There is perhaps another motivation for constructing a Christian divine who is detached from humanity. In *Habits of Thought in the English Renaissance*, Deborah Shuger argues that an apathic God helps renaissance theologians to resolve questions about God’s relationship to the presence of evil and suffering in the world. She says first,

[John] Donne’s [. . .] sermons insist on the analogy between God and king and furthermore locate the point of contact in *power*. Kings are called gods “by participation of Gods power”—a power characterized by secret decrees, *potential absoluta*, freedom from law, and the distant fearfulness of majesty. (169)

This comparison between God and king is important because it indicates a concept of the divine as absolute authority analogous to the absolute political authority that was the king. As Shuger goes on to say, “The theological corollary of royal absolutism is radical monotheism, the total concentration of power into a single figure” (169). This is the concept of the divine—distant from the common experiences of humanity and with seemingly no responsibility to care or nurture—which chafes Dickinson occasionally.

As Shuger goes on to say, this concept of God-as-king created a problem for sixteenth-century theologians because one all-powerful God suggested to them that God must be responsible not only for the good in the world but also for the evil. Shuger says that Lancelot Andrewes solves this dilemma by choosing to believe that Satan, not God, is responsible for evil (170). Shuger writes,

Like [Richard] Hooker, Andrewes prefers to limit God's immediate and active control of the world in order to guarantee His goodness. That evil exists is a given; either God does or He does not—if He does, then His love becomes problematic, if not His presence. Hooker and Andrewes create the crisis of desolation to protect the love of God. (75)

In other words, Hooker and Andrewes prefer to believe that God is often distant from humanity and allows evil to happen to humans. To Hooker and Andrewes, Shuger argues, believing that God is distant is preferable to believing either that God is responsible for evil or that evil is present and beyond God's control. This latter idea would suggest that God might not be all-powerful.<sup>68</sup>

While a concept of God as emotionally detached from humanity has its uses, Johnson argues, there is a downside to this conceptualization of the divine. Johnson points out that to consider God as transcendent of human feeling is to suggest that God is not capable of caring for humanity. She says,

This can lead to very poignant theological probing, as seen in the dilemma posed by Anselm of Canterbury. Experiencing the effects of divine mercy and yet under the sway of the notion of the impassible God, he queries

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<sup>68</sup> As noted in chapter two, Deborah Shuger concentrates on the works of Lancelot Andrewes and Richard Hooker because she considers them representative of their time period due to their wide readership and royal endorsements.

with inexorable logic: ‘But how art thou compassionate, and at the same time passionless? For if thou art passionless, thou does<sup>69</sup> not feel sympathy; and if thou does not feel sympathy, thy heart is not wretched from sympathy with the wretched; but this it is to be compassionate’ (248)

Johnson further argues that a God who lacks compassion for humanity is not integral to the Christian faith and that biblical evidence exists to support other ways of thinking about God.

In “Just Once! Oh least Request!” and “Of Course – I prayed—,” Dickinson poses her own theological feminist critique of the detached God by expressing the distress of individual speakers who experience God’s distance. But, Dickinson’s primary challenge to the divine of her father’s Christianity is not just to complain that it is distant and unresponsive and that this contributes to her sometimes tenuous faith. She also presents a challenge to that tradition by suggesting a different concept of the divine. The next sections of this chapter will explore some of Dickinson’s poems about nature and Christ. It is in these poems that Dickinson presents a revisionist response to the apathic divine in three important ways that are reflected in the concerns of the twentieth-century theological feminists. Dickinson suggests that nature is a representation of the divine and connected to humanity, thereby suggesting that humanity is connected to the divine. Dickinson also posits nature as a female divine which connects women to the divine. Additionally, in her Christological poems, Dickinson suggests concepts of the divine that remedy the notion of a distant God.

### **Dickinson’s Proposal of Nature as Response to the Distant God**

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<sup>69</sup> Johnson’s version of the quote is a minor departure from the original which uses the word “dost” rather than the word “does.”

It is important to note the diversity of Dickinson's responses to the Christian divine, so one does not get the false sense that her attitude toward Christianity was uncomplicated. In some of Dickinson's poems about nature, she supports rather than challenges a more rigid, austere understanding of the relationship between God and nature. In "Angels, in the early morning,"<sup>70</sup> Dickinson represents elements of nature as evidence of the divine. She writes,

Angels, in the early morning  
May be seen the Dews among,  
Stooping—plucking—smiling—flying—  
Do the buds to them belong? (1-4)

She describes birds drinking nectar from flowers but calls them angels. This establishes that the birds are representatives of the divine, as angels serve this function. The poem continues,

Angels, when the sun is hottest  
May be seen the sands among,  
Stooping—plucking—sighing—flying—  
Parched the flowers they bear along. (5-8)

Because the birds are messengers of the divine, the natural scene is offered as evidence of the divine world. The message these angels bring to the speaker of the poem is that the divine creator exists.

In this poem, nature is symbolic of the poet's relationship to the divine. The speaker suggests that nature is the means through which she receives messages from and about the divine. Nature represents divine power. However, nature is just the physical

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<sup>70</sup> This is poem number 94 in Johnson.

world that the divine has made for people to enjoy. Nature is not itself divine. The distance between human beings and the apathic divine is maintained, so this poem is not one in which Dickinson fully dispels that notion. The poem does, however, suggest that God is aware of humanity and is willing to indirectly communicate with human beings through nature.

In contrast to “Angels, in the early morning,” Dickinson’s “The Sky is low—the Clouds are mean”<sup>71</sup> responds more aggressively to the distant, apathic God, suggesting that nature has both human and divine qualities. Nature represents a stronger link between humanity and the divine in this poem. Dickinson represents the natural world as divine only after arguing that nature has qualities similar to those of human beings. She begins the poem by making the claim that,

The Sky is low—the Clouds are mean.

A Travelling Flake of Snow

Across a Barn or Through a Rut

Debates if it will go— (1-4)

These lines begin a list of fallible and flawed items in the natural world. She claims the commonness and indecisiveness of the sky, the clouds, and the snow. She continues,

A Narrow Wind complains all Day

How some one treated him

Nature, like Us is sometimes caught

Without her Diadem (5-8)

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<sup>71</sup> This is poem number 1075 in Johnson.

The wind is petulant and self-involved; it is concerned about how it is treated and not about how it treats others. These qualities, the poem suggests, are human qualities, and the fact that nature and humanity share these qualities connects nature and humanity.

It is in the final part of the poem that Dickinson links nature's imperfections to humanity's imperfections. That nature is "like Us," and yet still royal—only temporarily without her crown—provides comfort to the speaker that would not have been offered by a distant God. By claiming that nature is "sometimes caught" not wearing her crown, the poem claims that nature is not perfect. Additionally, by claiming that nature *has* a crown, the poem claims that nature is divine. The poem claims that human beings share with nature the quality of imperfection. This connection implies the possibility that human beings are also divine. Dickinson begins the poem in the sky, and moves lower, making a connection between the earth and heaven. Both the words "Nature" and "Us" are capitalized, which might suggest that these entities are of equal importance.<sup>72</sup>

The last line of the poem is perhaps the most compelling argument for the divinity of nature. That nature is "Without her Diadem" suggests, on the one hand, that nature is typically majestic and crowned, and, on the other hand, that nature only occasionally and fleetingly reveals her tendencies toward pettiness and indecisiveness that are, according to the poem, human traits. In pointing out that human beings are like nature and that nature is alternately with and without a crown, Dickinson suggests that humans' connection to the divine is to be had through appreciating their connection to nature and the divinity or royalty of nature. Also, the lines can be read not only as saying that Nature has a diadem that she sometimes loses, which indicates her lack of perfection, but also

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<sup>72</sup>Capitalization is just one detail in Dickinson's poetry that is part of the Dickinson code that remains uncertain. Capitalized words might indicate emphasis or they might be random. In the case of these two words in this poem, it seems unlikely that the capitalization is just coincidental.



that human beings have a diadem. The comparison suggests that humans, like Nature, are divine and yet imperfect.

In “These are the Signs to Nature’s Inns—,”<sup>73</sup> Nature is presented as accessible, nurturing, and still linked to the divine. Dickinson focuses on the accessibility of nature to nurture the needs of the soul. In this poem, nature is the extension of a divinity that forms a sharp contrast to the apathetic God that, according to Johnson, some Christians find troubling. In the beginning of the poem Dickinson writes,

These are the Signs to Nature’s Inns—  
Her invitation broad  
To Whosoever famishing  
To taste her mystic Bread— (1-4)

Dickinson figures nature as an entity that is spiritually nourishing as the body of Christ is often represented in communion rituals. Moreover, she suggests, it is welcoming to those in search of spiritual sustenance. The reference to “mystic Bread” makes the argument that the nourishment that nature can offer the individual will aid in the individual’s quest to connect with the divine. The poet indicates that nature is divine and that communing with nature allows one to commune with the divine. She argues that the “mystic Bread” provided by nature allows her to strive for a union with the divine.

The poem goes on to describe nature opening like a church to receive the needy:

These are the rites of Nature’s House—  
The Hospitality  
That opens with an equal width  
To Beggar and to Bee (5-8)

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<sup>73</sup>This is poem number 1077 in Johnson.

What the poem calls “Nature’s House” is accessible to all living things and connects all living things to each other. The “Beggar,” the poet, and the “Bee” are equalized.

“These are the Signs to Nature’s Inns—” goes beyond merely appreciating the beauty of nature. It argues that the returning cycles of nature are comforting. The poem ends with the lines,

For Sureties of her staunch Estate  
Her undecaying Cheer  
The Purple in the East is set  
And in the North, the Star— (9-12)

Nature’s character is said to be represented by both “The Purple in the East” and “in the North, the Star.” The reference to the purple sky produced by rising sun indicates the sovereignty of aNature. The reference to the North Star, a symbol of guidance and stability, in the final line of the poem indicates that “Nature’s House” which attracts the Bee and the Beggar, is serving as a spiritual guide for the speaker of the poem. The perpetually recurring cycle of life, what the poem refers to as “Her undecaying Cheer,” that the speaker sees in nature gives the speaker hope for her own spiritual renewal. The poem’s reference to the North Star and the word “undecaying” suggest that nature provides a sense of permanence and certainty that might otherwise be lacking from the speaker’s life. The speaker of the poem seems to find comfort in her belief that nature is powerful and welcoming. If viewed in comparison with Dickinson’s poems about a silent or impassive God, this poem responds to the tension between the poets desire to know the divine and her sense that the divine is unresponsive. According to “Angels, in the early morning,” “The Sky is low—the Clouds are mean,” and “These are these are the Signs to

Nature's Inns" nature allows the speaker to explore a personal relationship with the divine.

In her poem, "Some keep the Sabbath going to Church—,"<sup>74</sup> Dickinson again argues that nature is an extension of the divine. This is in contrast to the notion in "Angels, in the early morning" in which nature is merely created by the divine as evidence of the "Father" God's power. She makes this argument while challenging traditional methods of worship and attitudes about the means of achieving admission to heaven. In this poem, the speaker finds that nature speaks with God's voice. The poem begins by contrasting the speaker's way of worshipping with that of a larger Christian community. She says,

Some keep the Sabbath going to Church—  
I keep it, staying at Home—  
With a Bobolink for a Chorister—  
And an Orchard for a Dome— (1-4)

The speaker sees the singing bird as a singer of hymns and the tree branches overhead as the cathedral ceiling. While her comparisons demonstrate some reliance on knowledge of traditional church services, the speaker suggests that the most common elements of that tradition can be replicated in nature.

The speaker distances herself from established churches in favor of the spiritual guidance she finds in nature. She rejects the accoutrements of church services for the simple beauty of nature. She says,

Some keep the Sabbath in surplice;  
I just wear my wings,

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<sup>74</sup> This is poem number 324 in Johnson.

And instead of tolling the bell for church,  
Our little sexton sings. (5-8)

Again, the bird is represented as lending its voice to the service of God. In this stanza, the speaker suggests that she may be the bird or, at the least, that she considers herself akin to the bird in that she too has wings. In others of Dickinson's poems, the bird is represented as an angel or messenger who speaks not only to but also for the divine.<sup>75</sup> Here the speaker implies that she is also a messenger of the divine and that she can communicate with the divine.

The speaker finds a more immediate connection with the divine in nature than she finds in the structured church setting. She writes that in her church in nature,

God preaches, a noted Clergyman—  
And the sermon is never long,  
So instead of getting to Heaven, at last—  
I'm going, all along. (9-12)

The speaker argues that the message the churchgoers receive from the service is less pure than the message she receives from nature. In nature, God is the preacher, so the speaker receives God's message directly from the source. This is another Dickinson poem which attempts to respond to the apathetic God by suggesting, as in "These are the Signs to Nature's Inn," that nature is the link between humanity and the divine.

As Beth Maclay Doriani says in *Emily Dickinson: Daughter of Prophecy*, the poem compares "traditional forms of worship to the forms practiced by the speaker" (65).

Dickinson may be reacting against the notion that her family or community's religious

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<sup>75</sup> Dickinson makes comparisons between birds and angels in the poems "Most she touched me by her muteness (J #760), "No ladder needs the bird but skies" (J #1574), and "His bill is clasped" (J #1102) to name a few in addition to "Angels in the early morning" which is discussed earlier in this chapter.

practices were better than her own. John Cody says, “While [her family] participated in Sabbath services and imbibed the bread and wine [Dickinson] with not a few guilty misgivings, attempted to wrest comfort from her solitary communion with nature, through which “‘God speaks’ – sometimes” (139). In “Some keep the Sabbath,” Dickinson hears God speak through nature rather than hearing the interpretations of God’s message from a clergyman who could only present that message second or third hand.

In the last two lines of the poem, Dickinson makes an interesting argument about salvation. The speaker says, “So instead of getting to Heaven, at last— / I’m going, all along” (11-12). The poem argues against the notion that one must wait, suffer, and attend church regularly to obtain salvation. “Some keep the Sabbath” posits an immediate relationship between the divine and humanity through nature. As Patrick Keane writes in *Emily Dickinson’s Approving God*,

In a jocoserious, life-affirming poem looking back to Romantic and Emersonian “nature worship” and ahead to the Wallace Stevens of “Sunday Morning,” Dickinson rejects religious ritual, a formal “church,” and an otherworldly heaven in favor of an earthly paradise, a God immanent rather than transcendent, and salvation as a daily process rather than a static end state. (148)

Keane seems to base his argument on the fact that the speaker argues that one can find salvation in the welcoming and nurturing arms of nature. This takes power away from the concept of the God which is represented by the patriarchal power systems within churches and places it in the hands of individual women and men, because it argues that

one can bypass traditional church authority and commune more directly with the divine in nature.

The poem argues that God is present and “immanent” in the lives of human beings and human beings do not need to defer to churches or their authorities in order to receive God’s reward. The speaker is “going, all along” to heaven, the realm of the divine. Because the speaker has said she is “all along” on earth, at home and in nature, the poem suggests that the realm of the divine is the speaker’s garden. Therefore, to commune with the divine, the speaker only needs to spend time in her natural environment. Meanwhile, the parishioners of the church attend church so that they can meet the divine “at last,” at the end of their lives on earth. If making it to heaven or being in the presence of the divine is the goal for both the speaker and the churchgoers, the speaker’s method is a more efficient means of accomplishing that goal.

### **Dickinson’s Proposal of a Female Divine**

In the poem, “Nature—the Gentlest Mother is,”<sup>76</sup> Dickinson represents nature as female and maternal.<sup>77</sup> She also represents nature as a separate and powerful divinity rather than a mere extension or representation of the male divine. Dickinson uses this poem to suggest again that nature is both divine and nurturing in a way that the apathetic God is not. In contrast to her poems about a distant, unresponsive paternal divine, this poem suggests that nature is nurturing, responsive, and connected to humanity. The poem begins, “Nature—the Gentlest Mother is, / Impatient of no Child— / The feeblest – or the

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<sup>76</sup> This is poem number 790 in Johnson.

<sup>77</sup> Dickinson’s use of the mother to suggest nature as a divine entity is no accident. Again, it is a common literary device to attribute to nature a female or a maternal identity. Also, as many Dickinson critics have noted, Dickinson’s poetry is influenced by her relationship with and loss of her mother. Barbara Mossberg, for example, claims that “Dickinson’s emotional attachment to her mother is indicated by the value she places on the word ‘mother’” (38).

waywardest—” (1-3). Nature is represented as female and maternal. Yet she is also caring. As Dickinson says, nature is responsive to all her children, even those who are spiritually weak or those who do not believe in her.

This mother is not passive, however. She has the power to discipline her children, though she does so gently. In the next lines, the poem continues the extended metaphor of nature as a disciplining mother figure:

Her Admonition mild—

In Forest- and the Hill -

By Traveller- be heard-

Restraining Rampant Squirrel-

Or too impetuous Bird— (4-8)

The poem goes on to give praise to the mother: “How fair Her Conversation- / A Summer Afternoon— / Her Household—Her Assembly—” (9-11). Line eleven alludes to a church assembly. All of the plants and animals in the natural world, Nature’s “Household,” are her “Assembly” of worshippers. The suggestion that Nature is divine through allusions to a church continues in the next part of the poem:

And when the Sun go down—

Her Voice among the Aisles

Incite the timid prayer

Of the minutest Cricket—

The most unworthy Flower— (12-16)

The creatures and plants in the natural world are timid worshippers. Dickinson compares elements of the natural world with a church service. The implication is that all those who are part of nature or who appreciate nature are in the service of the divine. Nature's message is a divine message that puts the world at peace. In these lines, Dickinson indicates again that nature encourages those who have lost faith to speak to the divine once again. By seeming to reject organized religion in this poem and giving more importance to spiritual rejuvenation through communion with nature, Dickinson reintroduces the possibility of the female divine. The final part of the poem represents nature as a powerful maternal authority who oversees living things in nature. The poem reads,

When all the Children sleep—  
She turns as long away  
As will suffice to light Her lamps—  
Then bending from the Sky—

With infinite Affection—  
And infiniter Care—  
Her Golden finger on Her lip—  
Wills Silence—Everywhere— (17-24)

It seems here all along that the mother has been preparing her children for bedtime. They have said their prayers at her incitation, she lights the night lights, the stars, "Her lamps," and, putting a finger to her lips, she silences the world. Dickinson's representation of nature as this nineteenth century ideal domestic goddess who is kind and gentle but still



manages to keep her household in order, who is fair in two senses of the word (aesthetically pleasing and just) and who commands respect and obedience from her children is a response to the traditional masculine father God in ways that can be read as both subversive and supportive of traditional gender roles. Dickinson's speaker assumes certain innate qualities of the maternal, and she suggests that the maternal has power.

Dickinson's explorations of nature as a divine mother anticipate the writings of Luce Irigaray who argues that in order for women to free themselves from what she views as the oppressive nature of the male divine of Judeo-Christian traditions, women must explore a female divine. Irigaray argues in *Sexes and Genealogies* that "To posit a gender, a God is necessary: guaranteeing the infinite" (61). Being a woman, Irigaray might argue, allowed Dickinson only an unstable and problematic access to the male God. In Dickinson's poem, "'Faith' is a fine invention," the "Emergency" is created because the speaker is unable to identify with the father and son God of Christianity. The "Gentlemen" in Dickinson's poem can see God in their image. Women, the poem implies, do not reflect and are not reflected by the masculine divine.

Irigaray argues that men have greater access to the divine as it has been conceived in Judeo-Christian traditions. In *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, Irigaray argues that,

God is defined, by man and not by God himself. Therefore God determines himself conceptually out of man. He does not proffer his own conception, except through the mouth of man. Obviously, in certain traditions and at certain periods, God designates himself: in words, in the texts of the law, through incarnation in different modes. But in most cases,

it is man who names in the form of conceptions, and who situates God in that space as far as the generation of conception goes. (1993a, 88)

She claims that man creates a divine that affirms only man's perspective. According to Irigaray, Christian theology is dominated by the perspectives of men who affirm, in their construction of the divine and their construction of Christian doctrine, their own supremacy.

Irigaray argues that women do not have a similar relationship to the divine. Woman, Irigaray says, "lacks above all a conception that she provides for herself. [. . .] she would need to pass through man in order to have a relation, for herself, to man, to the world, and to God" (88). Again, in the poem, "Nature—the Gentlest Mother is," Dickinson posits a female divine that presents a more accepting and positive relationship with its subjects than the version of the divine that is distant and paternal.

### **Dickinson's Critique of Dualism**

In reacting against the distant divine, Dickinson also explores the relationship between the divine and the human body. In some poems she seems to accept the notion that the body's senses connect it to the mortal world and that the body encourages the individual to sin. In "I am afraid to own a Body—,"<sup>78</sup> Dickinson represents a tenuous and troubled relationship between the body and the soul and the individual who possesses both. The poem begins,

I am afraid to own a Body—  
I am afraid to own a Soul—  
Profound – precarious Property—  
Possession, not optional— (1-4)

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<sup>78</sup> This is poem number 1090 in Johnson.

In expressing her fear of existence, the speaker suggests that the soul and the body are equal to each other. Possession of both the soul and the body are bestowed or “entailed” upon the individual, and the individual views this as a grave responsibility, “Profound” and “not optional.”

When the speaker says that the ownership of a body and a soul are “precarious” she seems to refer to what is for her a troubled relationship between the soul and the body. Possession of a soul obligates her to God, and possession of a body puts her in danger of disappointing God. She says,

Double Estate—entailed at pleasure  
Upon an unsuspecting Heir—  
Duke in a moment of Deathlessness  
And God, for a Frontier (5-8)

The “moment of Deathlessness” seems to be the individual’s lifespan before the individual dies. This word “moment” suggests brevity. The speaker acknowledges that life in the mortal world is fleeting. The living individual is sovereign of only a small and insubstantial territory when it is alive. It is to convey this limited status that Dickinson uses the term “Duke.” While duke is a position of power, this position is held only for “a moment” and it is surpassed by the God’s position.

The phrasing of the last two lines of the poem encourages a direct comparison between the dukedom of the mortal existence and the godliness of the spiritual existence that follows it. The poem argues that, eventually, when the individual dies, she leaves her body behind and her spirit joins with the divine for eternity. This poem reiterates one traditional way of viewing the body and the soul; in this view the body and soul are

separate, and the soul holds a position of privilege over the body because it will outlive its partner. The “frontier” at the end of the poem suggests the expanse of the afterlife which is as set unexplored and ineffable to the living individual.

As usual, Dickinson’s attitudes about religious or spiritual subjects—in this case the relationship between the body and soul— are complicated. In other poems besides “I am afraid to own a body,” Dickinson celebrates the importance of the body. In “The Body grows without—,”<sup>79</sup> Dickinson suggests that the body is a refuge for the spirit: “The Body grows without— / The more convenient way— / That if the Spirit—like to hide” (1-3).

Dickinson suggests that the body is the temple of the soul. The body provides a refuge for the soul while the soul is in the mortal world.

Its Temple stands, always  
Ajar—secure—inviting—  
It never did betray  
The Soul that asked its shelter  
In solemn honesty (4-8)

The “Body” is simultaneously “ajar” and “secure” as well as “inviting.” This might seem contradictory as it suggests that the body is closed and locked (“secure”) and yet vulnerable to being entered (“ajar” and “inviting”). The contradiction might be resolved by considering the body as that which houses the soul and allows the soul to perceive and experience the sensations of the physical world. The body neither rejects nor confines the soul which remains free to receive inspiration from sensory perceptions and remains free to leave the body when it must. In summary, this poem represents the body as a necessary

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<sup>79</sup> This is poem number 578 in Johnson.

counterpart to the soul and not, therefore, as completely subordinate to the soul. While the body is still mortal and thus removed from the divine, it serves to protect the soul and helps the soul to perceive and experience the world. In this poem Dickinson seems to move toward celebrating the body.

### **Dickinson's Feminist Christology**

In addition criticizing the concept of the Christian divine as distant and attempting to resolve that problem—by positing nature as God or the body as divine—Dickinson explores a resolution to the conflict between faith and doubt in God's existence and God's concern for humanity through her Christological poems. Particularly in some of the poems in which Dickinson represents or discusses the figure of Christ, the Christian divine is brought into close proximity with humanity and to women and the dualistic understanding of the body and soul is disrupted.

In some of her Christological poems, Dickinson argues even more strongly that the body plays an important role in the individual's relationship to the divine. Dickinson's Christological poems often make connections between the body of Christ and the body of the poems' speakers. In "A single Screw of Flesh,"<sup>80</sup> Dickinson argues that Christ, the embodied divine, allows her some connection to the disembodied heavenly divine. She writes in the opening stanza,

A single Screw of Flesh  
Is all that pins the Soul  
That stands for Deity, to Mine,  
Upon my side the Veil – (1-4)

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<sup>80</sup> This is poem number 263 in Johnson.

To unpack this phrase, one must consider what the “screw of flesh” or the body might symbolize or “stand for.” It would seem to symbolize Jesus because Jesus is viewed in Christian theology as the incarnation of the divine. In the poem, the soul that is pinned by the “Screw of Flesh,” says the speaker “stands for deity.”<sup>81</sup>

In the poem, the commonality shared by Jesus and the speaker (the fact that they both have flesh) is that quality which “pins” Jesus to the divine and to the speaker and thus joins the speaker to the divine. The figure of Jesus has divinity in common with the divine and fleshiness in common with the speaker. However, because she is embodied and mortal, the speaker says, she cannot inhabit the realm of the divine, and therefore, can not fully know the divine. Her body is the veil which the poem refers. It separates her from the divine. The speaker suggests that the divine can see her, but that she cannot see the divine because the veil is on her side only.

In the second stanza she expresses her characteristic complaint that the divine is too distant. She says,

Once witnessed of the Gauze –  
Its name is put away  
As far from mine, as if no plight  
Had printed yesterday, (5-8)

The deity which is separated from her by the veil of her living body cannot be seen or thoroughly understood by her. Once, the speaker says, she knows that the deity and the

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<sup>81</sup> Margaret Homans reads this as referring to a lover in this poem despite the similarity between this passage and passages in other poems that refer more clearly to the divine. Homans says, “The soul that stands for deity, the lover (who elsewhere replaces God in the speaker’s unorthodox worship: ‘Your Face / Would put out Jesus’” [640]), remains connected to the speaker only by the fact of his living flesh.” She argues that later in the poem when the subject is moved away from the speaker that the lover has died. She says that “once he is glimpsed on the other side of the veil or gauze he is dead” (1983, 129). However, even Homans’s reading indicates that the lover joins with the divine in death. Reading the lover as in fact *the* divine is not too far removed from such a reading and remains closer to the words of the poem.

veil exist, she is then faced with the knowledge of her separation from the divine. The antecedent of “Its” in line six is the deity of the first stanza. Again, this deity appears to be Jesus, the divine in the flesh, who “is put away” from the speaker in the second stanza.

The speaker does attempt to remedy this disconnect between herself and the divine. In *Women Writers and Poetic Identity*, Margaret Homans claims that “A single Screw of Flesh” “begins with the notion of a dualistic boundary to be erased by a transformation in language” (128). The speaker of the poem claims to try to speak or write about the divine but says that no language can suffice in describing the divine. She says,

In tender—solemn Alphabet,  
My eyes just turned to see,  
When it was smuggled by my sight  
Into Eternity – (9-12)

As Homans argues, in this stanza, the speaker of the poem claims that she has tried to understand the divine through careful use of language, perhaps in poetry. The antecedent for “it” still seems to be the embodied deity from the first stanza. The speaker says that her eyes turn to see the divine, but the divine is taken away by her very attempts to look upon it, to understand it and describe it in language.

Homans has an interesting interpretation of this poem. As Homans argues, “The soul that stands for deity, the lover, [. . .] remains connected to the speaker only by the fact of his living flesh; once he is glimpsed on the other side of the veil or gauze he is dead” (128-129). In other words, the attempts to see the divine on the other side of the veil (or more explicitly, the attempts to describe God in language) only result in more

obfuscation and the destruction of any sense of what is on the other side of the veil.

Homans calls this the death of the divine, but it is enough to say that, in writing about the divine, the speaker of the poem comes close to understanding the divine, but she is not quite successful. Just as the speaker turns to see, or perhaps more literally, as she tries to understand the divine through writing, the divine escapes her grasp and is “smuggled” away by her “sight.” The more she attempts to examine the divine with her physical body (her eyes, her writing hands), the less likely she is to secure an understanding of the divine because her body ultimately separates her from a full union with the divine.

In presenting these various examinations of the relationship between the body and the divine, Dickinson engages with an important set of ideas in theological feminism. As indicated in chapter one, Luce Irigaray argues that women should seek out a divine feminine both internally and externally. In *Sexes and Genealogies*, Irigaray argues that women should locate this divine feminine through an affirmation of their own bodies. Arguing against the possibility that women, in an attempt to rescue themselves from the relegation to the body and away from the divine, might disavow their bodies, Irigaray says, “It is crucial that we keep our bodies even as we bring them out of silence and servitude” (19). Irigaray argues that women should appreciate the body rather than trying to distance themselves from the body in order to be accepted into the rational, masculine world. Dickinson’s explorations of the dualism of body and soul indicate that she moves toward considering the body as a means toward a connection with the divine, but “A Single Screw of flesh” suggests that she sees the body in a complicated way as both facilitating and interfering with that connection.



In some of her Christological poems, Dickinson also suggests a divine that is more connected to humanity than the distant apathic god that is removed from the physical realm. She represents Jesus as a bridge between humanity and the divine. In Dickinson's poem, "Perhaps you think me stooping,"<sup>82</sup> the speaker connects herself to the divine through Jesus. As James McIntosh writes, "Just what the speaker literally means by her own 'stooping' is impossible to say," yet one can guess that stooping refers either to humility or some kind of self-sacrifice. This seems reasonable because of the later comparison of the speaker's "stooping" to the idea that "Christ—stooped until He touched the Grave—" (3). The speaker suggests that her behavior resembles that of Christ either because he was humble until his death or because he sacrificed himself and went to his death, as the story goes, on behalf of all Christians.

The speaker suggests that in being humble and in being willing to live an austere life or in making a sacrifice of personal happiness, she is like Jesus. She compares herself to Jesus as a response to a criticism of her "stooping." She says, "Perhaps you think me stooping / I'm not ashamed of that" (1-2). The direct comparison between the speaker of the poem and Christ argues that to live a life characterized by suffering or self-denial is holy and admirable. The poem continues,

Do those at Sacrament  
Commemorate Dishonor  
Or love annealed of love  
Until it bend as low as Death  
Redignified, above? (5-8)

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<sup>82</sup> This is poem number 833 in Johnson.

The rhetorical question posed by the speaker considers whether or not worshippers of Jesus who participate in a ceremony to “commemorate” the narrative of his sacrifice are recognizing his humility and suffering. The implication is that the answer is that they are performing the latter, commemorating the love of God. This indicates then that that suffering for love of humanity is distinguished from the “dishonor” that was the other option. In other words, the suffering of Jesus is honorable. The speaker of the poem suggests that she is honorable because she represents suffering and humility comparable to that of Jesus.

Dickinson’s representation of Jesus as a bridge between humanity and the divine is not a universal interpretation. Some writers view Christ as another version of the apathetic, father God or as another piece of support for the notion that women are not as close to the divine as are men. In “The Feminist Redemption of Christ,” Rita Nakashima Brock presents an interpretation of the Christ figure that is problematic for feminists. She finds the representation of Christ as perfect, holy, and unlike other human beings as supportive of patriarchal power because it presupposes a particular standard for human existence. She says, “The continued insistence on Jesus’ human perfection as evidence of a divine presence in him removes him from the human sphere” (57). Brock has trouble with the notion of Jesus as perfect because, she argues, it implies that there is an ideal form for humanity and that that ideal form is male. Brock says, “One way patriarchy limits the possible fullness of our world is to reduce all questions to either/or” (57).<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Brock writes, “Connecting feminist images of whole, healed life in a pluralistic world—images of transformation and empowerment—with what has been presented in most traditional Christologies appears impossible. The theologians of the tradition have given us a dualistic, hierarchical Christ, a Christ who divides the world into true believers and heretics. Christ is the absolute word of God, the center of faith, and the basis for all action. This Christ is lord over all and servant to all, perfect in any form, a judgment on humanity as sinful, and a sign of everyone’s need to be saved from what is most frightening” (57). Brock argues that the Christ figure is as distant, judgmental, and supportive of the dualism which distances the

Dickinson also seems to want to stay away from the concept of Jesus as perfect, although she does not completely humanize Jesus. Dickinson presents a reading of Christ that is in opposition to the representation of Christ as an ideal human being or as a distant paternal figure. In Dickinson's Christological poems, Christ connects with humanity through the frailty of the human body. Dickinson sees Christ as divine but uses the corporeality they have in common to move herself closer to the divine. Dickinson finds a connection between the mortal and the divine which disrupts the dualistic argument that the physical and the spiritual are disconnected or at odds. In this way Dickinson seems to agree with Irigaray's argument that advancing the human connection to the divine has the potential to liberate women and men from the belief that one must denounce the body in order to commune with the divine.

Luce Irigaray argues that an affirmation of the body and a revision of the dichotomous separation of carnality and holiness is a necessary part of women recovering the divine feminine. In *Sexes and Genealogies*, Irigaray complains that, for women, the divine "has not been interpreted as the infinite that resides within us and among us, the god in us, the Other for us, becoming with and in us" (63). She says,

We women, sexed according to our gender, lack a God to share, a word to share and to become. Defined as the often dark, even occult mother-substance of the word of men, we are in need of our subject, our substantive, our word, our predicates: our elementary sentence, our basic

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human body from the holy as the father God who, in the Christian narrative, produces Christ. Brock further argues that Christ specifically implies that women's are distanced from the divine. She argues that, "Christological claims about the person of Jesus are grist for the dualistic mill that devours us. Jesus is claimed to be perfect as a man (sic). His perfection is what shows the divine presence, already understood as static perfection, to be incarnate in him. [. . .] To be worthy of God's saving grace, we must reach God through the perfection of Jesus. To be protected from evil we must become passive victims, therefore—for we cannot be perfect men" (60).

rhythm, our morphological identity, our generic incarnation, our  
genealogy. (71)

She further argues that, “A *female* god is still to come. We are not purely redeeming spirits, not pure flesh” (67). Irigaray argues that, to achieve sexual equality, western thought must change its ideas about carnality. She says in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*,

A sexual or carnal ethics would require that both angel and body be found together. This is a world that must be constructed or reconstructed. A genesis of love between the sexes has yet to come about in all dimensions, from the smallest to the greatest, from the most intimate to the most political. A world that must be created or re-created so that man and woman may once again or at last live together, meet, and sometimes inhabit the same place. (17)

She says later that “The link uniting or rewriting masculine and feminine must be horizontal and vertical, terrestrial and heavenly. [. . .] it must forge an alliance between the divine and the mortal” (17). Irigaray’s argument is in part a reaction to the notion that the human body is profane, dirty, and sinful. That notion that the body is sinful separates the body from the soul, relegates the body away from the divine, and devalues it in relationship to the soul. As Irigaray, among others, argues, that way of thinking about the soul contributes to the oppression of women whose assigned social functions (as sex objects and reproductive animals) are most associated with the carnality.

Irigaray suggests that women should celebrate their bodies. Agnes Bosanquet summarizes Irigaray’s concept of the “sensible transcendental”<sup>84</sup> thus: “Luce Irigaray’s

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<sup>84</sup> Rosi Braidotti uses the term “incorporeal materiality” to explain the concept of the “sensible transcendental.” Braidotti says that Irigaray “argues that the female subject can recognize and enact her

sensible transcendental,” Bosanquet writes, “locates divinity and carnality together, so that the divine comes to represent the accomplishment of the flesh” (1). In Dickinson’s poems the body is frequently the vehicle through which the poet experiences and explores the divine. The woman’s body is no longer abject in relationship to the divine. Instead, it is welcomed into the divine and is the woman’s means of connecting with the divine.

Irigaray suggests the transformative potential of the Christ figure in Christian theology and, in particular, the notion that he will return. She reads the narrative of the second coming of Jesus as a metaphor for the arrival of an ethical society in which women are no longer subordinate to men. She says,

“I shall return at the end of time,” says Christ, an era when the spirit will come to the bride to seal the alliance of heaven and earth. A new Pentecost, when fire—mingled perhaps with wind?—will be given back to the female so that a world still to come can be accomplished. Why should this theology or theologality of hope remain a utopia? Not an inscription in the flesh. *An utopia*. (147-48)

Irigaray makes use of the carnality of Jesus, arguing that Jesus has a body and is yet defined as divine, which demonstrates the possibility of locating of the holy and the body together. Just as the figure of Jesus in Dickinson’s poem “Perhaps you think me

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specificity by granting symbolic importance to her bond to other women as fundamental mediators between herself and the world.” Braidotti also says that “what Irigaray points out is that the portion of being that a woman is sexed female; it is sensible matter, endowed with sex-specific forms of transcendence. By advocating a feminine form of transcendence through ‘radical immanence,’ Irigaray postulates a definition of the body not only as material but also as the threshold to a generalist notion of female being, a new feminist humanity” (124).

Joanna Hodge identifies the origins of this idea. She says, “Thus Irigaray’s sensible transcendental can be seen to result from applying Heidegger’s insistence on the inseparability of the ontical and ontological to Kant’s distinction between the material or sensible and the transcendental or intelligible domains” (203).

stooping” suggests a connection between the divine and human beings, particularly women, which is based on a shared corporeality, Irigaray’s Christology also makes that argument. To this narrative, which both she and Dickinson read as implying a God who is connected to corporeal humanity, Irigaray poses the question “Why do we consider these to be the least pure of the texts, the least trustworthy? Why do we assume that God must always remain an inaccessible transcendence rather than a realization—here and now—in and through the body?” (148).

Dickinson’s Christological poems and some of her poems about the body provide an answer to this question by suggesting that the Christ figure represents a sensible transcendental, locating the divine and the body together. In so doing, the poems suggest a closer connection to the divine for women heretofore, according to Irigaray, relegated to the body and divorced from the divine. Dickinson disrupts the dualist argument that the body and soul are separate and the associated argument that women are separate from the divine. She further advances a Christian theology that suggests that God is concerned about humanity and the lives of women.

### **Dickinson’s More Acquiescent Response to Christianity**

It is important to note that not all of Dickinson’s poetry can be read as an attempt to cast aside the divine or to challenge the doctrine of her family’s religion. In fact, in some of her poems, she appears to want to reconcile herself with that tradition instead of rejecting it. Jane Donahue Eberwein presents evidence that Dickinson’s upbringing was informed by standards in the religious upbringing of nineteenth-century children as determined by the Reverend John C. Abbott’s books *The Mother at Home* and *The Child at Home*. Eberwein argues that “Abbott provided guidance for maternal care intended to

foster early piety” (2008, 6). Eberwein’s article, “‘Earth’s Confiding Time’: Childhood Trust and Christian Nurture” argues that Dickinson may have been influenced by a childhood that emphasized piety and obedience, and that, although Dickinson was at times critical in her attitude toward Christianity, her early experiences were formative. This explains the resurfacing of more traditionally pious moments throughout her poetry. There are Dickinson poems in which she figures the divine as male, paternalistic, and even detached without necessarily claiming this divine as problematic.

In “Who were ‘the Father and the Son,’”<sup>85</sup> for example, Dickinson wrote of the traditional masculine divine. She asks,

Who were ‘the Father and the Son’  
We pondered when a child,  
And what had they to do with us  
And when portentous told. (1-4)

Dickinson questions the concept of the masculine divine in its relationship to her own soul’s existence. This poem goes on to give a brief, retrospective narrative of Dickinson’s childhood experience of God and Christ as she inferred something “appalling” about them. In the third stanza of the poem, Dickinson brings us to the present of her writing.

Who are ‘the Father and the Son’  
Did we demand Today  
‘The Father and the Son’ himself  
Would doubtless specify— (5-8)

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<sup>85</sup> This is poem number 1258 in Johnson.

Dickinson acknowledges an earlier uncertainty and then claims a closer relationship to God in the moment of writing the poem and contrasts that with her lack of connection with God which she places in the past. Her present certainty about God and Jesus is contrasted with her old uncertainty about and imagined isolation from the divine. She chronicles her own spiritual journey. She has gone from feeling disconnected from this masculine God to being able to imagine direct communication with him.

God is connected to humanity. Dickinson's poem suggests that this deity can be described as male without creating feminist problems. In a poem presumed to have been written just two years before her death, Dickinson wrote,

Of God we ask one favor,<sup>86</sup>  
That we may be forgiven—  
For what, he is presumed to know—  
The Crime, from us, is hidden—  
Immured the whole of Life  
Within a magic Prison  
We reprimand the Happiness  
That too competes with Heaven.

In this poem, Dickinson first takes it for granted that humanity can communicate with God. She positions herself amongst the collective group of people who feel free to address God and ask forgiveness. The first lines of the poem show that Dickinson has ceased to question her faith in God and has become more accepting of the concept of the divine accepted by those around her.

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<sup>86</sup> This is poem number 1601 in Johnson. He gives it the date 1884.



Dickinson moves between criticizing the apathic God and suggesting alternatives to that concept of the divine through poems about nature, the body, and Christ. She moves between suggesting shame in the weakness of her faith and in proclaiming faith in the traditional God. The fact that Dickinson alters her attitude toward the paternal God does not surprise many of her critics. John Cody attributes Dickinson's changing stance toward the traditional God to the deaths of her loved ones. He writes,

Readers of Emily Dickinson are familiar with the lifelong dismay with which she struggled to keep in repair a faith that was constantly crumbling. With every loss, her faith in a benign God suffered a dislocation and had to be regulated. Her agitated vacillations from doubt to belief and back to doubt again were not the cool and skeptical celebrations of a philosopher free to play with the problem as an intellectual issue. Emily Dickinson was desperate to resolve the question once and for all, and the overwhelming need of her consciousness was to believe. (78)

This chapter has examined some of the ways that Dickinson used her poetry as a place of exploration for critiquing the tradition she was taught as a child. Many poets have found the patriarchal implications of Christian doctrine troubling and have sought to revise it in order to create a personal version with which they could live. Dickinson never seems to have explicitly claimed her struggle with Christianity to be motivated by a feminist conscience. However, the ways that she explores the religious tradition and the themes that emerge as important in her poetry suggest that she was motivated, at least in part, by the inaccessibility of the divine to women, which links her concerns with those of

theological feminists who have since argued that a division between women and the divine is perpetuated by the notion of the Christian father and son divinity that is exclusively male.

The revisions to this concept of the masculine divine that Dickinson posits and her understanding of the Christian tradition are potentially disappointing for those theological feminists—Irigaray, Kristeva, Daly—who are more critical of Christian doctrine: Dickinson does not completely dismantle the myth of the male deity. Although she does suggest an alternative female divinity in her nature poems, she reaffirms the male divinity in later poems. However, Dickinson thoroughly examines the nature of religion and the individual's relationship to God, and this is her significant contribution to feminist theology. While Dickinson leaves intact the male divine in some poems, she positions herself closer to God than any patriarchal interpretation of Christianity had placed women. She challenges the notion that women, as biological beings, are irreparably distanced from the divine by suggesting that the embodied divine Christ connects with embodied human beings. She suggests that Nature can serve as an alternative female divine authority and as a means of connecting with the otherwise distant divine. In short, she affirms and revises her own relationship to God and, thereby, encourages all women to do so, which places her work within the rhetoric of theological feminism.

## Chapter Four:

### Vassar Miller and a Culture of the Breath

Although I wander  
down hallways of my body, ghost  
prowling passages of my blood  
to my most hidden corners, still  
I know my name.

----from *Approaching Nada*, Vassar Miller

Vassar Miller's religious poetry represents different stages of thought and internal debate about the nature of the Christian God and the role of the Christian in relationship to that God. So much of Miller's poetry is religious in subject that Paul Christensen warns readers against dismissing Miller's poetry as religious sentimentality. "The emphasis on religion in Miller's poetry," Christensen says, "has deterred some readers from a full appreciation of her work. But its themes and subject are inextricably bound to her vision, and to dismiss it as doxology is to misjudge the complexity of her thought, or the ranges of her sensuality." However, he adds, "Close readings of her meditations would reveal an eccentric, even problematic relation to Christian belief" (75).

In many of her poems Miller demonstrates this problematic response to her Christian background. While this chapter will demonstrate the theological feminist themes in Miller's poetry, it is important to note that Vassar Miller approaches her consideration of the Christian divine in personal rather than political terms, but the personal becomes symbolic of the public. In other words, while Miller seems concerned

with her own relationship to the divine rather than the relationship to the divine of any larger groups, because she is both a human individual and a woman, her poetry expresses arguments that can be relevant to broader arguments about the relationship between women and the divine. In “Vassar Miller: Modern Mystic,” Frances Sage offers the following summary of the dominant themes in Miller’s poetry:

Much of it [Miller’s poetry] is religious, Christian. Unlike some imagists as Bly, Wright, or Snyder, Miller uses neither place, nature, the collective unconsciousness, or Eastern religions to reveal her religious longings or vision. She is very much a Christian poet, but her sources are more the sources of an Emily Dickinson, those personal, domestic scenes, scenes of her own isolation and experience. (Sage 19)

Like Dickinson, Miller comes from a Christian background. Miller claimed that she was influenced by the Evangelicalism she experienced when, as a child, she attended Christian revivals with her step-mother. She also claimed to be influenced by the culture of the Covenant Baptist Church that she embraced as an adult.<sup>87</sup> The Catholic tradition also figures prominently in Miller’s work. When asked by Karla Hammond why a reviewer assumed from reading Miller’s poetry that Miller was Catholic, Miller stated, “I guess Schoot<sup>88</sup> assumed that I was Catholic because I use Catholic imagery in my poetry—the Eucharist, the Host, the altar, etc. Much of my imagery is simply Biblical,”

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<sup>87</sup> Miller once told Karla Hammond that her reason for joining the Covenant Baptist Church was not theological. She said, “I joined the Covenant because I liked the make-up of the congregation, the openmindedness, the emphasis on good music and the arts. I still love the Episcopal Church, however, with its liturgy and its emphasis on the sacraments. I don’t know that the change in churches has affected my religious experiences so much as the other way around. The change was more for personal than theological reasons” (37).

<sup>88</sup>Karla Hammond refers to the comment by Webster Schoot that ““She [Miller] apparently is a Roman Catholic and her book contains extremely dense and rich religious verse”” (qtd. by Hammond 36). Hammond does not offer any other reference information for Schoot’s words, and none is offered in the bibliography to *Heart’s Invention*.

although she went on to acknowledge that, “Yes, my paternal grandfather was Catholic” (37).

In her responses to the religious traditions that influence her, Miller is more often on the more moderate or less polemical side of theological feminist discussions about the Christian divine. Miller does not advocate a rejection of the traditional male divinity of Christianity but instead explores the maternal and feminine in the traditional male God. Miller does express some more radical responses to Christianity by posing a celebration of the female body and acknowledging her female genealogy. Miller’s entrance into the theological feminist debate is not overt. She never directly critiques the patriarchal implications of a male God who is removed because of sexual identity from humanity or from women. She rarely suggests that her discord with the traditional divine is inspired by a gendered reading of scriptural interpretation. However, her ruminations about the traditional Christian divine reveal concerns and themes dealt with in the prose writings of theological feminists.

Miller’s poetry expresses a fluctuating and complicated understanding of the nature of the Christian divine and its connection to the individual woman’s connection. Her poetry frequently takes up the subject of dualism and contends with notions of the body’s role in the individual’s connection to the divine, sometimes accepting dualism between the body and the divine and sometimes challenging it. These poems have implications for theological feminism because dualism is a key subject in the patriarchal and feminist notions about women’s bodies and spirituality. That Miller complains about dualism and attempting to contest it in her Christological poems, as well as the fact that Miller explores the possibility of a female divine through recovery of a female genealogy,

means that her work contains some of the themes that can be found in the work of theological feminists.

This chapter examines Miller's approach to characterizing the relationship between the individual and the divine. Miller suggests that embodiment distances her from the divine in poems like "Resolve," "Made Flesh," "Epitaph for a Cripple." Following an examination of those poems is a consideration of the poems "Epithalamium," "Prayer against Two Perils," "Fantasy on the Resurrection," and "Reverent Impiety" in which Miller suggests that her suffering body brings her closer to the divine. Finally, this chapter examines the poems "Reluctant Confession," "Lullaby for My Mother," and "Dark Mother" in which Miller seeks a reconnection to a maternal genealogy and posits a maternal divine.

### **Miller and Dualism: The Body as a Barrier to the Divine**

One of the issues that Miller deals with most frequently in her poetry is the concept of dualism and its associated implications. Perhaps as a result of her physical disability, poems about the body make up a large part of Miller's body of work. In some of her poetry Miller reflects her troubled acceptance of the dualistic assumptions which Luce Irigaray critiques. Miller writes poetry as a response to the chaos in her world. Her preference for tight, controlled lines rather than free verse poetry is itself a religious argument. Miller associates closed form poetry with controlled morality, and closed form poetry is Miller's reaction against what she perceived to be the irresponsible religious climate of her time. As she told Karla Hammond,

It seems to me that in the sixties, with the God-is-Dead movement in theology, the human became exalted to the point of the absurd so that

every human product became holy and hence beautiful. Tin cans and toilet seats became *objets d'arts*. Words, also, didn't have to be arranged with craft, just whatever came naturally. There's a good side to this trend, of course; too much artifice stifles, the letter killeth, and all that. But enough is enough. (39)

Here Miller suggests that what is purely natural or biological is not necessarily sacred. For Miller, much free verse poetry is *too* natural and raw, and while it has potential value, it is less desirable than poetry that is formed according to rigid restrictions and controlled by the poet's intellect. This suggests an allegiance, on Miller's part, to a Cartesian respect for the mind and less respect for nature.

Miller's preference for order over chaos is expressed in the content as well as the form of her poetry. In poems like "Resolve," she presents nature as chaotic and the divine as the force which controls nature. She praises God for being a controlling force that tames the sinfulness of earth and of human beings. Miller laments what she views as her body's interference with her ability to connect with God. "Resolve" demonstrates Miller's urge to find God as an escape from the chaos of her physical existence.

"Resolve" begins with the statement that it is the speaker's imperative to seek the divine by seeking simplicity. Miller writes,

I must go back to the small place,  
to the swept place,  
to the still place,  
to the silence under the drip of the dew,  
under the beat of the bird's pulse,

under the whirl of the gnat's wing,  
to the silence under the absence of noise,  
there bathe my hands and my heart  
in the hush,  
there rinse my ears and my eyes,  
there know Thy voice and Thy face,  
until when, O my God, do I knock  
with motionless knuckles  
on the crystal door of the air  
hung on the hinge of the wind. (1-15)

The place where the poet must retreat is small, quiet, and orderly. Even the form of the lines in which she describes her destination creates a sense of order and containment. The brevity of the lines, the repeated syntax, and the anaphora emphasize organization and cleanliness rather than disorder. She retreats to the silence under even the quietest of nature's noises and then retreats still deeper to the silence beneath that silence in which she performs an ablution. She cleanses herself in preparation for her potential meeting with God:

She retreats into order, cleanliness, and away from the business of the natural world to find heaven and the divine. It is there that she says she "know[s]" God's voice and face, although, by the end of the poem, she has yet to meet God who is presumably still behind the "crystal door" and her knocking seems to have had little impact.<sup>89</sup> The poem argues that nature and the body interrupt the divine connection to humanity. The

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<sup>89</sup> This recalls Emily Dickinson's poem, "Of Course I Prayed," in which the poet represents her communications to God having as little impact as that of a bird stamping its foot upon the air. "Resolve" is one of several poems in which Miller suggests that God is apathetic.



poet believes she must escape from nature and her body must be washed before she can meet God. The fact that she must wash suggests that she thinks of the body as unclean and in need of purification.

While the divine seems yet out of reach in the poem, it is clear that Miller links the desire for order and a retreat from chaos to the search for the divine.<sup>90</sup> Associating the divine with control over nature reiterates the concern some theological feminists have had that, in Christian theologies, the soul is often represented as separate from and sovereign over the body. Many feminists connect this to the notion that the body is associated with the female while the soul or mind is associated with the male. The fact that in many poems Miller seems to privilege rationality over sensuality and order over chaos demonstrates the heavily influence of dualistic theology on her work.

Miller's religious poetry and the fact that she so often makes the body a consideration is undoubtedly influenced by the fact that Miller was born with cerebral palsy and that her body was quite literally an impairment to many things.<sup>91</sup> In her introduction to an anthology of works by disabled writers entitled *Despite This Flesh: The Disabled in Stories and Poems* (1985), Miller discusses her understanding of herself as a poet who is both religious and disabled. She suggests that piety and disability are linked by others who write about her work. She says, "Perhaps the writer assumes the

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<sup>90</sup> Miller's Catholic grandfather and her appreciation for liturgy influence her choices in poetic form. She told Hammond that "Liturgy has always seemed to me the poetry of worship, humanity's poor best for the infinite. Formal language and syntax have always been my personal struggle for order in what has often seemed my disorderly world" (38). Much of Miller's poetry is constructed in closed forms. She uses the villanelle and the English and Italian sonnet forms. Even her free verse poems are mainly tight and controlled with careful attention to sound and rhythm. In reading Miller's poetry, including her open form poems, a reader never gets the sense that she has engaged in a stream-of-consciousness approach to writing poetry. Her thoughts are carefully edited, her emotions carefully restricted.

<sup>91</sup> Cerebral palsy is a disorder which impairs the use of the sufferer's limbs and causes slurred speech. It is a degenerative illness which causes gradually increasing discomfort and pain.

ancient superstitions: the disabled is magic or superlatively gifted by God” (xv). She goes on to say,

I have often been told, “If you weren’t handicapped you wouldn’t write poetry.” What about the myriad of other poets who have no physical handicap? The afflicted one is the bait dropped in the waters of chaos to catch whatever fish of meaning may surface to take it and so let normal humanity know that, after all, everything is well. People usually feel guilty in the presence of the handicapped. Even the moderately disabled may feel guilty before the severely disabled. But if the maimed person is that way for a reason, set apart, “special,” to use the current silly euphemism, then the rest of humanity can rest comfortably. (xvi)

Miller displays irritation with the notion that the piety or concern for God that she deals with in her poetry will encourage people to read her as a stereotype of a disabled person who compensates for physical deficiencies by striving for spiritual perfection. However, she goes on to say that, “The best way for a writer to deal with any stereotype is neither to bend it nor to blast it, but to ignore it” (Miller xvii). Yet in trying to ignore the stereotype, Miller actually represents both assumptions about the disabled poet. She alternates between complaining that God has forsaken her and suggesting that her suffering body is the mark of a special connection between herself and the divine.

Often in poems in which Vassar Miller laments the distance between herself and God, she also indicates that the distance is caused by her physical body. Her body is presented as a handicap which traps her away from the divine. “Throughout her work,” Robert Bonazzi writes in “Passionate Scriptures of the Body,” “Miller invents a rich

variety of images for the rejected body” (121). The body is rejected by the divine or is presented as the divine’s motivation for rejecting the human individual. Miller seems at times to view the body as interference with the individual’s contact with God. She reinforces dualism, which includes the notions that the body and mind are separate, that the mind is privileged as the more desirable of the parts, that the mind is equated with the spirit and, as such, is the part of the human individual that can access the divine, and the body, in contrast, is removed from the divine. Feminists argue that, because of their maternity, women are relegated to a strict association with the body, and men are elevated to an association with the mind and spirit so that men have greater access to the divine. In many of her poems Miller laments the distance between herself and the divine that she represents as caused by her body, thus perpetuating, although yet questioning, dualism.

In “Epitaph for a Cripple,” for example, Miller argues that the physical body impairs the individual’s ability to commune with the divine. The poem begins with a rather unflattering picture of the handicapped body:

Feet that, floundering, go  
No way of your own will—  
Numb with eternity  
You now have gained your goal. (1-4)

At the end of the second stanza, the poet suggests that the subject has been released from the prison of the awkward body by death, the “goal” alluded to in the first stanza.

Fingers writhed from weaving  
Like crabs with claws torn loose—

You mold in your unmoving  
The perfect shape of peace. (5-8)

Miller evokes the image of a palsied and twisted body. It is when this awkward body stops moving, presumably in death, that the individual finds peace. A mystical attitude toward embodied existence is represented by the poem's statement that death is a release from the body and that release brings about enlightenment and connection with the divine. She goes on to say,

Tongue entangled in  
The ravels of confusion—  
You have learned silence soon,  
The language of precision. (9-12)

Again, Miller contrasts the awkwardness of the physical existence, represented by the entangled tongue, with the grace of death represented by silence. Miller suggests that it is in being no longer able to speak that the subject is finally able to understand and articulate the nature of the divine which she represents as the unsayable in many of her poems. The poem claims that a departure from a physical existence is necessary for an understanding of the divine. The poem also indicates that an understanding of the divine has been a concern of the dead subject. The poem ends thus:

Body, wry reproach  
To athlete mind, lie down—  
Your lubber's limbs here couch  
Graced with the state of stone. (13-16)

The activity of the subject's mind as it attempts to comprehend the divine is contrasted with the impairment of the body of the memorialized "cripple." That the body is made like stone is a fitting representation of its clumsy heaviness that reproaches the athleticism of the mind.

Miller speaks of someone whose physical disability renders the individual unable to express in word or action what he or she experiences in thought. The poem, however, is easily applied to the experience of any person wrestling with trying to understand a divine that is for all practical purposes, absent, unseeable, and unknowable. All people whose goal is knowledge of the divine, the poem argues, are handicapped by their physical bodies, and it is only after death that they can hope to see or know the nature of the afterlife or the nature of the divine. In this poem, death is described as a peaceful state, a "state of stone" that is bestowed upon the subject as an act of God's grace. Death is order which takes away the tangles of the tongue and the "ravels of confusion," controls the "floundering" limbs and frees the grace of the mind or spirit from the clumsiness of the body. The verb "graced" indicates a gift of divine origin or the divine itself so that it seems necessary to read the last line of the poem as a statement that, in death, the subject has at last been blessed and perhaps joined by the divine.

"Made Flesh" is another poem that expresses Miller's concern for order rather than chaos and her association of chaos with the natural body. In this poem geometry represents the order that Miller seeks. She begins the poem beseeching her audience,

Cleanse me in mathematics, not in blood.

Lay its chill chasteness tangent to my flesh.

A square is no Pandora's Box of dread;

A circle is circumscribed to crush. (1-4)

She alludes to the narrative of Jesus's sacrifice in which Jesus is said to have died to cleanse Christians of their sins. Miller asks that she not be cleansed by the spilled blood of the body of Jesus ("Cleanse me [. . .] not in blood") but rather by the order and structure of mathematical concepts. Mathematics, she says, is chaste and would purify her presumably unchaste flesh if they were placed against each other.

In the last lines of the first stanza, Miller indicates that the square, a geometrical shape, is devoid of the condemnation implied by the blood of Jesus. She says that it is "no Pandora's Box of dread" (3). As the story of Pandora's Box describes a receptacle for all the world's evil, and as the poem has been comparing the cleansing properties of "mathematics" and of "blood," the poem seems to indicate that the square is, again, chaste, or free of the sin explained by the Pandora story. Furthermore, the last line of the stanza suggests that the circle, another representation of geometrical shape, is "circumscribed to crush" (4). This supports the poem's argument that mathematics is cleansing. The circle is confining which excludes the potential for impurity or evil.

The poem goes on to further support the argument that mathematics is pure. She goes on to say,

Constructing angles of a polygon

Wider than worlds rouses no nation's rancor—

Spaceless geometry deprives no man

Upon the postulate, "In this sign conquer." (5-8)

Again, geometrical principles are neutral, she says. They do not threaten or create conflict on their own. They are divorced from earthly concerns. With her quotation of the

statement “In this sign conquer,” Miller references the story of Constantine who is said to have had a vision in 310 C.E. in which he saw a cross and declared to his followers that the cross and the God it represented would lead him to victory<sup>92</sup> (Grant 133). In Constantine’s story, the cross symbolizes the divine which will lead him to victory in war. In Miller’s allusion to the story, the cross is yet another mathematical configuration of lines. However, Constantine’s cross is a symbol of his success in war. In contrast, Miller’s poem argues that mathematical symbols are neutral, they “rouse[s] no nation’s rancor” and “deprive[s] no man.” For Miller the square, the circle, the polygon, and the cross symbolize peacefulness, calm, and victory over chaos.

However, Miller suggests, that humans have the potential to taint mathematical concepts which are otherwise pure:

Yet, disciplined by eye, ruled off by pen,  
Or dropped from brain to hand, no line flows straight.  
A circle may assume the loop of a chain,  
A square incarnate in the jaw hate-set. (9-12)

“No line flows straight,” she says, once it is controlled by human hands. She suggests that humanity can take what is pure and neutral and turn it into conflict (“hate”) and oppression (“the loop of a chain”). A circle becomes a chain which binds people; a square becomes an angry face. Human, earthly, embodied existence has the potential to turn order into chaos.

Finally, Miller says, “Therefore, made wood, two lines by intersection / Form the contortion of the Crucifixion” (13-14). Her commentary about the Crucifixion rests upon

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<sup>92</sup> In *Constantine the Great*, Michael Grant offers two versions of the story. In the other, Constantine receives laurels from Apollo. Grant questions the authenticity of both the panegyrist and Christian versions of Constantine’s vision.

the word “therefore.” What comes after the word “therefore” is simply a description of the cross and the body of Christ tortured to death in the shape of the cross. The word “therefore” indicates that what precedes that description is an explanation of the scene described. Continuing her commentary about human influence on the pure, Miller argues that the Crucifixion is yet another way in which humanity has demonstrated its potential for corruption. The reference to the blood sacrifice of Jesus in the first line of the poem (“Cleanse me in mathematics, not in blood”) suggests that the poem is a critique of the suffering of Jesus. The poem turns down the offer of the spiritual cleansing by the blood of Christ and suggests replacing it with cleansing by the pure symbols of mathematics. So too does the fact that the title is a reference to the figure of Christ.<sup>93</sup> The poem’s title suggests two meanings that work together in the poem’s reaction against the violence of the Crucifixion. The first is that the corporeality of Jesus is highlighted by his graphic bodily suffering, evoking empathy from embodied human beings. The second is that it is the flesh of humanity that leads to their willingness to inflict suffering on Jesus.

“Epithalamium” is another poem that deals with the body in relationship to the divine. This is a poem about a marriage, as suggested both by the title and by the content of the poem; this marriage seems at first to be between the flesh and the spirit and, later in the poem, between God and the individual. In both cases, the relationship is problematic. The opening stanza reads,

Crept side by side beyond the thresh

And throb of noise, do not come near it,

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<sup>93</sup> The title of “Made Flesh” evokes John 1:14 which says, “And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.”



But bind the bandage of the flesh  
Upon the open wound of spirit. (1-4)

Miller represents the mortal world as cacophonous and chaotic, as she does in other poems. It is filled with “the thresh and throb of noise.” She warns her audience to resist becoming enmeshed in that world (“do not come near it”). Instead, she advocates viewing corporeality as merely a “bandage” or temporary fix for the longings or “open wounds” of the soul.

In the first stanza, the body serves as a means of escape from painful longing which Miller calls “the open wound of spirit.” In the second stanza Miller suggests that the body distracts from the longing of the soul through physical sensation:

Crouched in the corner of your lust,  
Doctor your hurts till by the prod  
Of some next moment you are thrust  
Against the cauteries of God. (5-8)

God, the poem argues, rescues the individual from the sensations of an embodied existence, cauterizing nerves and healing the human being. The “lust” or pleasures of the body and the “hurts” or pains are in the third stanza referred to as the “Infection” which God arrives to remedy:

Before He burns and scars to kill  
Infection, God, who is the cleaver  
Of bone from bone to cure the ill,  
Bids you alleviate the fever. (9-12)

The union of bride and groom that is celebrated in this epithalamium seems first to be the partnership between the flesh and the spirit when in the first stanza Miller refers to the wrapping of the body around the soul. It is revealed, however, that the physical body is merely taking the place of the desired spouse. The desired spouse is the divine who separates the spirit from its body and its associated passions. Ultimately, the poem celebrates the union between God and the spirit. The partnership between God and the spirit gives agency to the individual. Not all of the power to cleave away venal experience belongs to God. The final stanza of the poem asserts this. The union between God and the spirit is interrupted by the flesh, and it is the responsibility of the human being, this poem argues, to cast away the interloper in favor of a union with the divine. This is why, as the poem says, God first bids the individual to cure her own fever.

Miller repeatedly represents the body as a hindrance to the holy. According to Claudia T. Davy, Miller's poetry attempts to accomplish two tasks: "the quest for ultimate transcendence of the flesh, and the quest for recognition, affirmation, and unification of the disparate selves of the 'speaker' who seeks this transcendence" (Davy 1). Davy describes the first of these selves in more detail, saying,

The self of the speaker is dichotomous: the dissatisfied rejected Self-of-the-Body, and the whole, triumphant Self-of-the-Spirit, or 'Bones.' The Self-of-the-Body complains. It exposes its miseries, lays them out and shows them off without embarrassment. It reshapes its pain upon the page in honest frustration, weariness, regret, or resignation, grieving over its limitations and demonstrating need while at the same time struggling to

assert intrinsic worth. Occasionally it looks wryly at the world and smiles.

(Davy 1)

Davy argues that Miller eventually manages to distance herself from the body that distances her from God. In distancing herself from the body, Davy argues, Miller brings herself closer to the divine.

Davy complicates this by suggesting that Miller may have used language about the body not to represent the literal body which hindered her from the divine but to represent an inner spiritual self that was hindered by the body. Davy claims that in *My Bones Being Wiser*, Miller's third book of poetry,

The Self-of-the-Spirit is articulated, metaphorically as "Bone." While "the mind may wander," the "eyes weep," and the "heart refuse to lift its head" (*MB* 49), the Bones are indomitable. They are revealed as straight, strong and clean, symbolizing the sublime inner person beneath a deficient fabric of flesh. They signify one who claims an identity that requires no outside affirmation. The Bones worship and sing "a triple holy"; they are "blest" and destined to "dance out the door with glory worn inside out" (*MB* 50).

(Davy 1-2)

However, the bones in the poem can also be read, and perhaps should be read as still representative of part of the physical body. They are what allow Miller to be like Christ whose suffering is dependent upon the physical body. In this reading, the bones are not metaphors; they are real bones that ache and that are Miller's means to a mystical suffering and self-denial that eventually makes her feel closer to her goal of communing with the divine.

The dualistic notion of the body and the divine that is reflected in Miller's "Resolve," "Made Flesh," and "Epithalamium" indirectly raises questions about women's bodies that are approached in the works of theological feminists. For example, Simone de Beauvoir's criticism of dualism (the belief that the body and the mind are separate) was that it privileged the mind and denigrated the body. In this system of belief, the mind and the spirit are considered closer to God and the physical is considered that which separates humanity from God. De Beauvoir finds this understanding to be particularly detrimental to the status of women in the west because, as she argues, women have been relegated to the body while men are associated with the freedom of the transcendent spirit. De Beauvoir attributes this division to the fact that women carry and give birth to children and men do not. She says in *The Second Sex* that "Men have presumed to create a feminine domain—the kingdom of life, of immanence—only to lock up women therein" (65). De Beauvoir, like many twentieth-century feminists, argues that women have been associated with corporeality because women carry and give birth to children; they are the most apparently biological of the two sexes. De Beauvoir argues that women must escape this relegation in order to free themselves from patriarchal oppression and become autonomous subjects. She says, "What they [women] demand today is to be recognized as existents by the same right as men and not to subordinate existence to life, the human being to its animality" (65).

Irigaray also argues that women, to their detriment, have come to be associated with the body and excluded from the mind because of women's reproductive roles. She argues that because women give birth, they were early on associated with the function of the body. In dualism, the mind, over which men have been given precedence, becomes

the divine spirit in religion, over which men are also given dominion. The association of men with the transcendent mind, de Beauvoir and Irigaray argue, influences and is influenced by Judeo-Christian tradition, so that the relegation of women to the body means that they will have a subordinate role in Christianity, and, having that subordinate role in Christianity will support women subordinate role's in western culture.

The dualistic poetry of Vassar Miller does not overtly make the patriarchal claims that de Beauvoir and Irigaray associate with dualism. "Resolve," "Made Flesh," and "Epitalamium" do not make overt claims in support of patriarchal power or patriarchal theology nor do they challenge the sexist implications of dualism. The appropriateness of discussing those works in this study lies in the fact that they represent Miller's awareness of the subject of dualism. Furthermore, these poems represent only a portion of Miller's attempts to respond to the notion of the divine implied by dualism, one divorced from the physical existences of human individuals. Acknowledging these responses allows for a fuller and more accurate understanding of Miller's multiple approaches to the subject of dualism. While in these three poems and several others, Miller accepts dualism, in other poems Miller deals with the problematic implications of dualism by critiquing the character of the divine suggested by dualism and by suggesting a more feminine divine.

### **Miller and the Apathic God**

By accepting, at times, a dualistic understanding of the relationship between humanity and divinity, Miller recognizes the possibility that God is distant from humanity. This is the problem of the apathic divine which, as mentioned in previous chapters, has troubled many Christians. However, this problematic image of God causes turmoil for Miller as it does, according to Elizabeth Johnson, for many Christians. One

of the effects of the concept of an apathic God, Johnson argues, is that many people feel as if that God is unconcerned about human existence. Miller represents the distance she feels between herself and God and in which she represents God as the distant, authoritarian divinity which theological feminists criticize.

In “Waiting,” Miller expresses doubt about God’s existence. Miller uses repetition to emphasize the longing for God’s communication. In the first stanza of the poem,

I leave my light burning  
on the chance that you may come.  
You have not come.  
My light burns on the blackness  
as an uprooted flower  
floats on the water. (1-6)

Miller describes her ongoing difficulty with belief in God. She uses the image of “an uprooted flower” floating on water. This and the image of the “light burn[ing] on the blackness” suggests that she is able to sustain herself, although tenuously, on mere hope or expectation of God’s arrival. Despite the light left burning like a light left on for a spouse or lover’s homecoming, God does not arrive. She also laments that this light does not provide her with proof of God’s existence. Her light or her hope and faith, she says, burns on although it is rootless and without a solid foundation. She states her situation plainly and with only a mild accusation—“You have not come”—directed at the divine. This is a plain statement of fact which helps indicate, with the other last three lines of the first stanza, an acceptance of her circumstances.

Miller repeats the basic structure of the first stanza. Each subsequent stanza also has six lines. On the page, the lines are narrow and controlled, matching the restraint in the content of the poem. In each stanza she combines longer sentences with brief, simple sentences that tend to stand out in their simplicity. The third line of the first stanza, the first and third lines of the second stanza, the third line of the third stanza, and finally the first line of the last stanza repeat the pattern of the short declarative sentence amidst longer sentences which offer explanation and more detail. The poem's content is about restraint and waiting patiently, without anger, for God. The restrained emotion of the poem is paralleled by the restrained form.

In the first stanza the shortest sentence accuses, "You have not come" (3). In the second stanza, Miller repeats this sentiment (9). This phrase, the only one repeated exactly in the poem, highlights the central conflict of the poem. A lot of meaning is contained within the short, one-line sentences. The poet speaks to a divine that has not presented proof of itself and by which she continues to feel abandoned. The first line of the second stanza, another short sentence, states simply, "I sit alone waiting" (7). In the rest of the stanza, the poet explains,

You absent, I want no other.

You have not come.

The minutes flake from the rock

Of my solitude whence

I carve your face. (8-12)

In these lines, Miller describes her religious exploration. In the absence of the divine, she has attempted to discover the nature of the divine, and she has done so in isolation. Her

carvings in the “rock of [her] solitude” are her own theological explorations it seems because she claims that these are the means through which she tries to construct an understanding of the divine. She acknowledges the artificiality of her concept of the divine. She has constructed the “face” or character of the divine, inspired by the necessity that arose from her sense of isolation. She says in this stanza that she will “leave [her] line open /on the chance that [God] may call” (13-14). This indicates an enduring hope for God’s eventual arrival.

The poem ends with the poet forgiving the divine for abandoning her. She says,

I will not blame you.

It is not you who elect the lapse of my pulse

for a leaf, the catch of my breath

for a shadow, my waiting

for no one at all. (19-24)

In this final stanza, she gives up her expectation that God will communicate with her. She also resigns herself to God’s absence and chooses not to be angry. She absolves God of responsibility for her angst saying, “I will not blame you” (19).

The speaker describes the tension and anxiety of the prolonged waiting in final part of the poem. She says,

The poem “Sick Dog” also deals with the distance between humanity and God.

This poem also suggests that the distance between humanity and the divine is a source of anxiety for the human individual, and yet the poem also does not blame God for the individual’s feeling of God’s indifference. In “Sick Dog,” the poet compares her



relationship to God with the relationship between a sick dog and its indifferent owner. She begins with a quotation and then comments on it,

“Man is the only animal that knows he must die.”

Whoever spoke thus never saw a sick dog  
baffled, bewildered,  
sniffing death in the wind. (1-4)

After the first line, Miller seems simply to suggest that the animal displays confusion about its own mortality. She seems merely to be contradicting the quoted statement. She also implies similarity between the human and the sick dog, which does not work in favor of either. Both the sick dog and the human individual are “baffled, bewildered” and only able to vaguely sense the approach of death without understanding it.

In the second stanza, Miller changes the focus of the poem away from the dog and toward human experience, specifically, to her own existence.

If I look like that, liquor is only  
lapping my brain, yet one day I will lie staring  
stupefied, stunned,  
dumb before doom. (5-8)

The poet speaks of the knowledge of her own physical deterioration and impending death almost lightheartedly. Her play with alliteration—“staring,” “stupefied,” “stunned,” “dumb,” “doom”—lightens what could otherwise be a grave thought, of the poet’s body incapacitated and silenced before death.

In the final stanza Miller repeats the comparison between herself and the sick animal and makes a critical comment about her connection to the divine. Miller writes,

Sometimes I wonder whether the sky is God's wide gaze  
embracing me as mine embraces my dog  
bowed, burdened under  
unendurable strangeness. (9-12)

The analogy that Miller makes—her sick dog is to her what she is to God— highlights Miller's sense of alienation from the divine. Here Miller describes that relationship between an apathic divine and humanity which Johnson argues is so troubling for Christians. God is imagined looking down upon the human being who, Miller implies, appears pathetic in its enslavement to its own corporeality.

Yet, the poem says, God's gaze "embraces" the individual. Although God is distant, absent, and looking upon an inferior being in an inferior state, Miller imagines that the human individual may yet be a receiver of God's affection. Kenneth Maclean, first citing Miller's own discussion of her poetry, argues that Miller's plaintive poems about the absence or detachment of God are not completely without hope. Miller, Maclean says,

Suggests [ . . . ] 'the very nature of poetry, which is war waged with the silence of misunderstanding between men, with the silence of God that Christ endured on the cross, summing up in himself our individual endurances.'" ([Miller] 5)<sup>94</sup> It is the poetic crying out against the silence, then, which imitates the crying out of Jesus from the Cross, and it is poetic "ceremony," which gives expression. (84)

So the silence and detachment of the apathic God that is experienced by the confused human follower Miller writes as the same silence and detachment Jesus is said to have

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<sup>94</sup> Maclean cites Miller's words in Howard Nemerov's *Poets on Poetry* (1966).

expressed on the cross when he cried out, “Why hast thou forsaken me.”<sup>95</sup> Miller finds similarities between the experiences of Jesus and the experiences of Christians struggling with doubt. Among her poems about the human body’s role in the relationship between the divine and human beings, those that are more positive often employ a comparison of Jesus, seen as a divine figure, to humanity.

### **Miller and Dualism: The Body as Divine**

Miller’s understanding of the relationship of the body to the divine and the relationship of nature to the divine are closely linked. However, in some poems, Miller deals only with the natural world or only with the body. Like Dickinson’s, Miller’s opinions about nature and the divine are complicated and seem to change frequently. While Miller writes about nature as unholy or as chaos that offends the divine, in other poems she presents nature as a representation of the divine. As Paul Christensen argues, in Miller’s poems,

Nature is the transcendent thing, the collective unconsciousness in many of her poems: It is, in fact, something asleep, below language and outside the range of logical category or rational grasp; it is the edenic setting of love, ‘Where flesh and spirit dance, / Shadowing, bound yet free.’ (66)

This quote he takes from Miller’s “Precision”<sup>96</sup> in which the poet suggests that nature speaks a language that is spiritual rather than biological. This approach responds to Irigaray and de Beauvoir’s complaints about dualism in that it links the biological and the spiritual and collapses the dichotomy.

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<sup>95</sup> Matthew 27:46 reads, “And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? that is to say, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?”

<sup>96</sup> The first stanza of this poem reads, “The leaves blow speaking / green, lithe words / in no man’s language” (1-3). The poem indicates that nature speaks in the ethereal tongue of the divine.

The embodiment of Jesus figures prominently in Miller's reconciliation with the body in her quest for the divine. One of the ways that Miller tries to reconcile the troublesome nature of the concept of God as overbearing, apathic father is to explore the manifestation of God in the human form Jesus as a means of connecting humanity to the divine. In "Prayer against Two Perils," Miller combines her characteristic frustration over God's distance with the acknowledgement of the traditional notion of God as paternal. She also suggests the transition that Hankins Parker<sup>97</sup> speaks of from a distant patriarch to the nurturing patriarch facilitated by the manifestation of God in the flesh.

"Prayer against Two Perils," in which Miller addresses someone she calls "father," is a "prayer" to a deity as suggested by the poem's title and other details in the poem. The fact that Miller does not capitalize "father" collapses the spiritual idea of paternal authority and the biological body of mortal man into one. The result is that the poem alludes to the figure of Jesus as a combination of heavenly father and mortal brother. Miller responds to the notion that thinking of God as paternal is inherently oppressive by suggesting that God in the figure of Jesus has the potential to connect God and humanity.

In the opening of the poem, Miller laments her lack of knowledge of the divine. She writes,

How may your poor child, father, dare surmise

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<sup>97</sup> In *What Southern Baptists Believe*, Hankins Parker writes about Baptist scriptural interpretations concerning the nature of God. He states first that "God is a *spiritual* Being." Parker explains that God is to be understood as transcendent, because "He is present at all times in every part of the universe (see Ps. 139: 7-12). Time and space do not limit Him, for He is a free omnipresent spirit." Parker also discusses the personhood of God. According to Baptist belief, he says, "God is a *Person* with all the attributes of any person but without a body except when Christ, His only begotten Son, took on a body of human flesh (see John 1:14; Phil. 2:7-8). God thinks; He speaks; He feels; He loves. God is an eternal, spiritual, *personal Being* yet with all of the qualities of infinity. God being a person brings him into the close interpersonal relationship with man" (21).

The shape of grief your death would wear, or know  
How tears, once wasted over trifles, flow  
(If storms of agony do not capsize  
Custom's old crates), or how these very eyes  
Should gaze along a road you did not go?  
But since all means are impotent to show,  
All means save one, may you not make me wise. (1-8)

In the first eight lines of the sonnet, the poet presents her questions about the nature of God and the suffering of Jesus. It is only in death, she suggests, that she can really see and know God. Since death is the one means through which she can obtain knowledge of the divine, she resists that knowledge and asks not to be made wise.

In the sestet of the sonnet, she writes,

Yet if, most erudite in pain and loss  
From measuring barefoot, jag by jag, their earth,  
You swear the lack of me deserves your bother  
Or dream such dismal desert fit to cross,  
Your blood splashed over clods of fancied worth,  
May I not make you wise, poor child, my father. (9-14)

Again, she writes about God in a way that somewhat closes the gap between God and humanity. The poet views Jesus as learned in suffering; she alludes to the narrative of Christ's sacrifice to save Christians from their sins and connect them to God. Humbly, Miller acknowledges that sacrifice which she claims closes the distance, the "dismal desert," that stands between God and humanity. In asking "May I not make you wise,

poor child, my father,” Miller expresses her desire to be worthy of the sacrifice. Miller has traded the male God that others interpret as authoritarian for a nurturing, caring, and more human God to whom she can feel connected.

In “Prayer against Two Perils,” Miller deals with her frustration about the apathetic father God. This is the way that Miller is able to develop hopefulness that she can commune with the divine without having first to die. The body and the suffering that it implies are her means of contact with God. Elizabeth Johnson claims that Jesus has the meaning he holds for Miller for a lot of Christians. She says, “In a unique way Christians confess that in Jesus who was wrongly tortured to a god-forsaken death, God has identified with the depths of human woe in order to save” (1997, 248). It is through the narrative of the divine taking on a physical existence that Miller and others can find a revision of the notion that God is distant and oppressive.

In “Fantasy on the Resurrection,” Miller represents the physical body as flawed but suggests that those flaws are crucial to the individual’s quest for communion with the divine. The opening lines of the read, “Flaws cling to flesh as dewes cling to a rose: / The cripples limp as though they would prolong, / Walking” (1-3). With that she simultaneously suggests both literal physical disability and the figurative notion that the physical body constrains the soul away from the divine. As the poem continues, Miller seems to argue that the disabled body allows for a deeper understanding of God.

The people with flawed bodies are distinguished from the “fast men” later in the poem who “never glimpse by staring” the “vision,” of God presumably, which she seeks (6). The poem ends with the linking of bodily suffering with religious awakening. In the last five lines of the poem, Miller writes:

[ . . . ] the nail-gnarled have caught Heaven  
Like a bright ball. Not in their re-knit wonder,  
But in their wounds lies Christ's sprung grace engraven—  
Not in the body lighter than word spoken,  
But in the side still breached, the hands still broken. (10-14)

Sage says of the celebration of the body in "Fantasy,"

It is as though the grace given requires the suffering, reversing the usual pattern of redemption. Just as the dew clings to the rose as it evaporates so the physical flaws cling to the flesh. Through the flaws the grace can be imagined. In some sense the flawed body is the mark of grace and thus the flaws become an enhancement like the dew on the rose. (24)

Here Sage reflects perhaps one side of the standard interpretation of the disabled poet's work which frustrated Miller. The suffering of the body is seen as a mark of God's special grace bestowed upon the suffering individual. Although Miller was frustrated by this reading, she encourages it in many of her poems about the body and Christ.

In "Reverent Impiety," as in many of the poems in Miller's 1963 collection, *My Bones Being Wiser*, Miller presents the body's relationship to the divine as governed by suffering. She alters the potentially limiting and potentially oppressive idea that the body is at odds with the spirit and with, therefore, the divine. Instead, she suggests that the body is a means through which she can commune with the divine. She begins the sonnet by denouncing forced rituals intended to demonstrate devotion to God. She claims to have something better with which to replace them. She says,

I will not fast, for I have fasted longer

Than forty days and known a leaner Lent  
Than can be kept with ceremonial hunger,  
Since life's a lengthier season to repent  
Than the brief time when spring's first winds may tease  
The ashes on the brow, when bird songs intercept  
The miseries chanted on our knees,  
And ritual tears that I such hours have wept  
Mirror a double and muddy vision  
That would not win a blessing from a priest. (1-10)

The poet alludes to kneeling in prayer, Ash Wednesday observances, and fasts as types of generally accepted demonstrations of Christian piety. However, these are things she says she will not do. This should not, however, be read as the poet denouncing the divine altogether. She views her daily life as a demonstration of piety. She argues that a whole life of suffering and self-denial is longer and more spiritually fruitful than attempts at ritual piety which yield only "muddy" understandings of the divine.

In the final lines of the sonnet, the poet states that it is specifically her suffering body which makes other contrived religious displays unnecessary. She says,

Hence, purity born from my pain's precision  
Refuses here to fast upon a feast,  
Glutted till now on sacraments of air,  
Memorials to loves that never were. (11-14)

The poet alludes to the physical pain of illness and the emotional pain of feeling spiritually abandoned. Both of these join to create a lifetime of suffering that, for Miller,



makes her closer to God than ritual could. Because the poem is written in first person and the poet refers to pain using the singular possessive, the poem suggests that the individual experience of suffering that is unique to the speaker is the means through which the speaker achieves purity. However, the poem's implications are that general suffering of other kinds and causes might also have the same application.

In "Without Ceremony," Miller again suggests that the embodied existence can serve as a means of communion with the divine. The poem begins,

Except ourselves, we have no other prayer;

Our needs are sores upon our nakedness.

We do not have to name them; we are here.

And you who can make eyes can see no less. (1-4)

As she did in "Reverent Impiety," Miller again privileges bodily suffering and despair over deliberate action that is only calculated to demonstrate possibly insincere piety. She goes on to say,

We fall, not on our knees, but on our hearts,

A posture humbler far and more downcast;

While Father Pain instructs us in the arts

Of praying, hunger is the worthiest fast. (5-8)

She argues that honest need is more important to the divine than ritualized congregational prayer. The human body is a prayer to God in its fragility and its necessity. The despair of the suffering body draws the attention of the divine. As Miller says at the end of the sonnet, "Oh Word, in whom our wordiness dissolves, / When we have not a prayer except ourselves" (13-14). The living of daily life, as in "Reverent Impiety," is a means through

which one can connect with God.<sup>98</sup> The cross, Miller says, connects all human bodies with the body of a crucified Jesus. Miller's interest in the personal experience of the divine and embodied suffering as a means to connect with the divine often is especially reflected in her Christological poems.<sup>99</sup> In these poems about Christ, Miller seems to find a connection to the divine most possible.

In responding to the concept of God as distant and austere paternal with the concept of God as suffering or embodied and, therefore, connected to humanity, Miller expresses ideas similar to in the writings of Elizabeth Johnson. Johnson raises concerns about the potential role that suffering can play in the relationship between women and the divine. She considers the possibility of women overcoming their exclusion from the divine by forming a connection with the divine based upon the shared experience of suffering. Johnson warns against this.

Elizabeth Johnson presents this argument in *She Who Is*. According to Johnson, Miller's revised image of God would satisfy theological feminists who also have difficulty with what they see as an authoritarian and distant God. However, Johnson suggests that there are problems with this suffering God image. She says,

Critics of the symbol of the suffering God, now often suggested as more adequate than the apathic God, charge that the former is simply an

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<sup>98</sup> Kenneth Maclean claims that "Without Ceremony" contains Miller's "search for poetic self-definition," and this "involves the traditionally meditative companionship with God [. . .]" (86). Miller suggests a participation in the mystic tradition. She cultivates a personal relationship with the divine that transcends her sexed body.

<sup>99</sup> Peggy Rosenthal argues that Miller's association of faith with the body is typical rather than atypical of Christian philosophy. She says that, "the particular ways Miller treats the figure of Jesus speak for certain key issues in the Christian spirituality of her time. He is known, first, deep in her own bones, 'my bones' being a her poetry's recurrent metaphor for the site of experiential knowledge. Miller was born with cerebral palsy, and the experience of living with this handicap seems to have given her a special insight into the limitations (which of course we all share in varying degrees) of life in the flesh. But rather than making her personal handicap a subject, she is more interested in mediating on how it brings her to know Jesus at her very core" (77).

anthropomorphic construction, not as worthy of attention as the more purely metaphysical idea of impassibility. (252)

Johnson argues that placing so much emphasis on suffering as a means of connecting to God is troubling. As she puts it,

Predicating suffering of God in such a way that suffering becomes a value in itself, or that God becomes essentially weak or powerless, and then holding up this model for emulation is a trap that ensnares women's struggle for equality and full humanity.

She argues that emphasis on the image of the suffering divinity as a means of allowing women to connect with the divine supports the oppression of women because it presumes that women must continually suffer (253). Johnson's argument is that if women come to believe that their only means of connecting with the divine is through the shared experience of suffering, then suffering or a continuation of women's oppression becomes a necessary element in their ability to communicate with the divine. Woman must always be victim to disease or to patriarchal power, in order to have a hope of receiving God's attention or compassion.

Despite Johnson's argument about the limitations of a divine relationship that is based on suffering, Miller's poems about God and the suffering body are still subversive. They challenge aspects of the formal church and organized religion, and by extension, the patriarchal power structures that are maintained within the church. Miller's argument that informal, personal, and private religion is better than dominant, mainstream and public religious rituals works against the patriarchal implications of Christianity. Luce Irigaray argues that the male God of Christianity gives men a holy ideal toward which

they can aspire while women are restricted from the divine. Miller privileges individual embodied religious experience which has the potential to be liberating and egalitarian because it suggests that the body, to which women have been relegated and thus trapped away from the divine according to de Beauvoir and Irigaray, is not abject. Therefore, women do not have to escape their bodies in order to be loved by God. Miller also emphasizes a personal and individual connection to the divine, devaluing the church-controlled religion which has been, in many cases, expressed in patriarchal ways.

### **Miller and the Maternal Divine**

In “Lullaby for My Mother,” Miller connects her mother to the natural world. She begins the poem to her mother by seeking a connection between the two of them. She says,

Now I would sing you at last  
a lullaby you never sang me,  
a lullaby no mother could sing:

When you are dying  
now while the days are so lovely  
I feel I could take them into my body.

Here then take them into your body  
inhale the blue sky, drink the sun  
through the tall crystal of air

while cicadas chime their long sanctus  
low in your ear—all is yours  
as it never could be until now. (1-12)

The speaker suggests connections between herself and her mother in multiple ways. She states that she will trade places with her mother to sing her mother a lullaby when the singing of the lullaby is typically the parent's role. She suggests that she understands her mother's inability to perform that role ("a lullaby no mother could sing"<sup>100</sup>). As she feels that she can take the beauty of nature into her body, the speaker offers it to be taken into her mother's body, arguing that it is only in death that her mother could fully absorb the sacredness of it.

As Christensen suggests, Miller represents nature pure and valuable. In "Allowing for Such Talk," Christensen argues that "Wilderness is many things to Miller, but chiefly it signifies fertility and innocence" (65).<sup>101</sup> Miller seems to imagine the experience of her mother's dying, offering her the appreciation for nature which the dying woman can only fully appreciate in the process of dying ("all is yours / as it never could be until now"). The cicadas' song is called a "sanctus." this suggests that the speaker sees nature as connected to the divine, because it imagines the cicadas singing praise to the divine. It is important to note that the cicadas sing into the mother's ear rather than out into the world or up to the heavens. This implies that the mother is divine, and is further emphasized by the statement to her mother that "all is [hers]." In "Lullaby for My Mother," Miller posits a recovered connection to her own maternal genealogy, she posits a celebration and

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<sup>100</sup> She is perhaps suggesting that no mother could sing her child a lullaby not to sleep but to death. The speaker is singing to her mother as she dies.

<sup>101</sup> Christensen offers a support Miller's poems "Adam's Footprint" from *Adam's Footprint* (1956) and "Love Song for the Future" from *Wage War on Silence* (1960).

sanctification of the natural world that challenges her other representation of nature as at odds with the divine, and she posits a divine mother who is connected by body to the speaker and by spirit to the divine. Note that this last argument preserves Miller's allegiance to dualism but rescues the body from the abject. The body is the means through which the daughter makes an offering to her mother of the sacred song of nature.

In "Reluctant Confession," Miller again writes about a dead mother. She begins by writing about the comfort her mother offered her:

One time I wondered what somebody meant when he wrote me,  
"The sky seems closer somehow when we lose our mothers."  
Now I know you are dead I am afraid of the stars.

I had always feared them, but I saw them through your fingers,  
though you could do nothing about deep space, its black holes  
pulsating stealthily to gobble up everything. (1-6)

The image of her mother's fingers evokes the image of a child looking at something frightening with a hand across its face, peeking through the fingers. The speaker uses this metaphor to indicate that the mother served as a filter through which the child was able to process its fear. The speaker acknowledges that mother "could do nothing" really to make the sky and space less threatening. This emphasizes the fact that the mother offered comfort rather than actual protection.

In the last two stanzas of the poem, the speaker first suggests that she preferred not to need her mother and then contradicts that suggestion. She says,

And though I did not need you, I said, nor even

want you, I thought, yet you loomed near in remoteness  
like absent God, mother and God turned true by cliché.

Dear Non-Necessity, speak with some irritation.

Tell me to wink my eye and see the heavens pushed back

Not needing the weight of your weak and restraining palms. (7-12)

About not needing her mother she says, "I said," and about not wanting her mother she says, "I thought." These phrases indicate that the speaker's assertions about her independence from her mother are unreliable and that she is aware of their unreliability. In the last stanza she beseeches her mother ("Dear Non-Necessity") to offer her comfort again. She asks her mother to tell her how to cope with her fear of the sky on her own. She wants her mother to tell her, the speaker, that her mother's comfort is not necessary. However, in asking her mother for this, she establishes that she needs her mother. Her "Reluctant Confession" is that she needs and wants her mother and, perhaps, that she needs and wants God.

In the third stanza, the speaker makes a comparison between her mother and God. The speaker argues that her relationship with her mother and her relationship with God are similar in that both her mother and God are absent. Yet, their absence makes them more near. The speaker means that the absence of her mother and the absence of the divine make them more necessary. Their remoteness increases her desire for the comfort they can offer her. She tells her mother "you loomed near in remoteness / like absent God, mother and God turned true by cliché." The cliché she seems to mean is the often-repeated phrase "absence makes the heart grow fonder." In this poem she manages to

lament the absence of her mother while simultaneously lamenting the absence, as she does in “Waiting” and “Sick Dog,” of God. In this way she posits a connection between the divine and her lost mother. She laments the absence and silence of her mother as she laments the absence and silence of God. She capitalizes, “Non-Necessity,” which indicates a reverence for the mother. She asks her mother, rather than God, the Father, to help her conquer her fear “of the stars” and “the heavens.”

In “Dark Mother,” Miller represents the forces of both death and life as maternal. Two mothers are represented in the poem. Miller begins by addressing her own mother, admonishing her for rejecting her daughter’s flawed body. “My mother,” she begins “you, when well, forgot me, your first-born / you never bore, whom no man got upon you save a dream.” After pointing her mother’s lack of mothering, Miller states,

[. . .] Nobody can  
mother us, either one, save that black mother,  
kindly, if cruel, whose arm reaches for us all  
drawing us down and down and back and back  
into her winding sheets of womb. (7-10)

Miller is joined with her mother in that they must both experience death. There is a maternal force greater than both of them which consumes and connects them. But there are few poems like these in which Miller deals with gendered spiritual experience. For the most part, she remains loyal to the Christian trinitary divine and focuses on ways to reconcile these figures with her own self.

In these poems Miller explores the maternal divine and the divine within nature. These poems are another way in which Miller expresses some of the concerns of



theological feminist writers. Luce Irigaray takes particular issue with the male trinity that serves as the divine image for Christianity and argues that the image of God as male supports patriarchal power and supports the notion that women are not divine. She says, “The (male) ideal other has been imposed upon women by men. Man is supposedly woman’s more perfect other, her model, her essence. The most human and the most divine goal woman can conceive is to become *man*” (1993c, 64). While man, Irigaray argues, can aspire to the male ideal represented by the divine, woman is excluded from the divine and trapped in her biological nature.

According to Irigaray, the Christian trinity celebrates a male genealogy and, therefore, supports male power. Irigaray argues that women should undo the separations among women created by the patriarchal implications of Christian doctrine. She says,

Innerness, self-intimacy, for a woman, can be established or re-established only through the mother-daughter, daughter-mother relationship which woman replays for herself. Herself, with herself, in advance of any procreation. This way she becomes capable of respecting herself in her childhood and in her maternal creative function. (1993c, 68)

Irigaray suggests that the reconnection of female genealogical lines responds to the patriarchal implications of the Christian trinity:

Like de Beauvoir, Irigaray argues that women should challenge the dualistic notion that the body and the divine are separate and that women are trapped in the realm of the body. She says in *Sexes and Genealogies*,

Our urgent task is to refuse to submit to a desubjectivized social role, the

role of mother, which is dictated by an order subject to the division of labor—he produces, she reproduces—that walls us up in the ghetto of a single function. (1993c, 18)

Irigaray argues that women should resist their relegation to the body and to the maternal function, to biology.<sup>102</sup> Luce Irigaray argues that women should recognize their own divine potential, celebrate their embodied experience and allow that to (re)shape their understandings of a revised divine. She also argues that women, as part of this effort, should reestablish a sisterhood or female genealogy.

She also argues that women should celebrate their bodies rather than giving in to the ideology of dualism and assuming that to become transcendent or divine they must give up their bodies. In other words, Irigaray warns women not to assume that the physical is truly apart from the intellectual and spiritual. She says, “In order to become, it is essential to have gender or an essence (consequently a sexuate essence) as *horizon*. [. . .] To become means fulfilling the wholeness of what we are capable of being” (1993c, 61). To be autonomous individuals free of patriarchal oppression, Irigaray argues, women must celebrate their whole selves not just the intellectual or the spiritual but also the physical. This is the imperative to which Marie-Andrée Roy<sup>103</sup> refers as a “culture of the breath” (14). Irigaray argues that women should celebrate rather than ignore their uniquely sexed bodies.

## Conclusion

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<sup>102</sup> However, elsewhere in her text, she is careful to qualify this claim. She *does* want women to celebrate the creative potential of the maternal role which she says all women possess. Later in this chapter, I will discuss ways that Miller celebrates the maternal role.

<sup>103</sup> In her article, “Women and Spirituality in the Writings of Irigaray,” Marie-Andrée Roy offers a summary of Luce Irigaray’s tasks for women that the theorist claims are necessary for achieving a sexually equal society.

As this chapter has explained, Miller enters Christian feminist theological discourse in complicated ways. At times, she seems to accept the very ideas—Cartesian dualism, belief in God as paternal authority— which theorists find troubling. At other times, she challenges those assumptions and presents alternatives by suggesting that God, if male, is still connected to humanity, by suggesting that the body and the natural world are not abject, and by suggesting that women have as much right to the divine and to their female heritage as men.

## Chapter Five:

### “The Mother, the Other”: Sharon Olds, the Body, Maternity, and the Sacred

The poetry of Sharon Olds deals often with the representations of the body and the divine. She presents a more aggressive challenge to the dualistic separation of the body from the divine than Vassar Miller. Olds particularly concentrates on the bodies of women and how the body figures in a woman’s relationships to other people and to the divine. As Peter Scheponik writes in his explication of the Sharon Olds’s poem, “The Pope’s Penis,”<sup>104</sup> “Underlying all of Sharon Olds’s poetry is a sense of the profound sacredness of the physical world in its infinite capacity for life and transformation” (52). Scheponik expresses the opinion of many Olds’s readers when he says, “This commitment to celebrating the physical world forms the unifying strand that binds together the entirety of Olds’s collected works” (52).<sup>105</sup>

Olds is perhaps the most radical theological feminist of the four women poets discussed in this dissertation. This chapter will examine the ways that Olds’s poetry is part of the same tradition of theological feminist responses to Christianity. The chapter begins with a discussion of “That Year,” a poem in which Olds expresses something approaching (but stopping short of) the Christological arguments readers find in the work

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<sup>104</sup> Scheponik calls “The Pope’s Penis” “a seven-line litany to physicality, tucked in the end of the first section of her collection *The Gold Cell*” and goes on to say that “Both the title and content of the poem incite speculation and recrimination” (52). Many people read “The Pope’s Penis as a mockery of the Catholic Church and not as a celebration of the body. Scheponik concedes this, but says, “Alone, ‘The Pope’s Penis’ presents little more than a visceral satire on religious patriarchy. However, amplified by a poetic principle that embraces the physical world for its myriad intricate beauties and possibilities, the poem becomes a window through which to see human sexuality anew. It invites readers to approach the unapproachable” (54).

<sup>105</sup> A review of Olds’s *The Wellspring* in *Virginia Quarterly Review* confirms that this is a dominant opinion about Olds’s work: “Perhaps no one else today writes with so acute a sense of spirit as incarnate in bodies, one’s own and those of others, children, parents, the newly born, and the dying” (137).

of Harper, Dickinson, and Miller. The chapter goes on to discuss “First Night,” “I am the Shrink’s Wife,” “Young Mothers I,” “Young Mothers II,” and “Young Mothers V,” in which Olds explores dualistic and psychoanalytic assumptions about women’s relegation to the maternal body. This chapter also discusses “The Language of the Brag” and “Prayer” in which Olds challenges those assumptions that place maternity and the biological body in subordination to the soul and separate from the divine. Finally, this chapter explores “The Sisters of Sexual Treasure,” “Why My Mother Made Me,” “After 37 Years My Mother Apologizes for My Childhood,” and “For My Daughter,” in which Olds expresses a disruption and then a recovery of her female genealogy.<sup>106</sup>

In Sharon Olds’s “That Year,” the speaker recalls the year she began to menstruate and alludes in her discussion of this experience to a murdered female classmate and, later in the poem, to the bodies of the murdered at Auschwitz during WWII. In the opening line of the poem the speaker calls the year that constitutes the setting of the poem “The year of the mask of blood” (1). In the second stanza, the speaker refers to the murdered girl and says that this year,

was the year they found her body in the hills,  
in a shallow grave, naked, white as  
mushroom, partially decomposed,  
raped, murdered, the girl from my class. (3-6)

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<sup>106</sup> With the exception of “Why My Mother Made Me,” “After 37 Years My Mother Apologizes for My Childhood,” and “For My Daughter,” most of the poems discussed in this chapter come from Olds’s first earliest book of poetry *Satan Says*. Some of her later publications may be recognizable, but as the title of this first volume indicates, it represents Olds’s radical affront to Christianity and tradition which characterizes much of the poet’s work.

In the next stanza, the speaker moves from the murdered girl to the speaker's own family experiences, her parents' separation and her experiences of domestic violence and child abuse perpetrated by her father. She says,

That was the year my mother took us  
and hid us so we would not be there  
when she told him to leave; so there wasn't another  
tying by the wrist to the chair,  
or denial of food, the head held back,  
down the throat at the restaurant,  
the shame of vomited buttermilk  
down the sweater with its shame of new breasts. (7-15)

The speaker associates her own experiences as an abused girl with the suffering of the girl who has been raped and then murdered. The year of the speaker's first period unifies these images conveying the message that the speaker identifies with the suffering of the murder victim.

In the fourth stanza, the speaker refers to her menstruation: "That was the year / I started to bleed, / crossing over that border in the night," (16-18). She argues here that this is the year that she moves from childhood into adulthood. The poem suggests that the passage into adulthood awakens the speaker to the ugly realities of the world and to human suffering because it is this year in which she loses a classmate to violent crime and in which she learns about the Holocaust.

It is in the last part of the poem that the speaker tells that this was the year she learned in school about the persecution of the Jews during WWII. She explicitly connects her suffering to theirs,

and in Social Studies, we came at last  
to Auschwitz, in my ignorance  
I felt as if I recognized it  
like my father's face, the face of a guard  
turning away – or worse yet  
turning toward me. (19-24)

The speaker admits to ignorance about what exactly the incarcerated experienced in the camp. She imagines herself an inmate of the camp and imagines that she might draw attention from one of the guards. By comparing her father's face with the guard's face, the speaker implies that her father victimized her as the guards victimized the detainees at Auschwitz. However, she recognizes her comparison of her own suffering to suffering of a much larger scale as "ignorance" which, again, suggests that she acknowledges the limits of her knowledge about that suffering.

The next image in the poem combines the bodies of all of the dead at Auschwitz into one mass and sexes that mass as female:

The symmetrical piles of white bodies,  
the round, white breast-shapes of the heaps,  
the smell of the smoke, the dogs, the wires the  
rope the hunger. (25-28)

The speaker likens the piles of bodies to breasts, thereby representing the massacre of the people as a victimization of a collective female body. In this way she further connects her own abuse, the rape and murder of her classmate, and the Auschwitz murders as examples of violence against female bodies. One might begin to think that the poem associates victimhood and suffering with a female identity.

However, the speaker goes on to note what seems to be an important difference between herself and the Jewish people:

This had happened to people,  
just a few years ago,  
in Germany, the guards were Protestants  
like my father and me, but in my dreams,  
every night, I was one of those  
about to be killed. It had happened to six million  
Jews, to Jesus's family  
I was not in—and not everyone  
had died, and there was a word for them  
I wanted, in my ignorance,  
To share some part of, the word *survivor*. (28-38)

The speaker claims that she wants to imagine a connection, albeit an indirect one, between herself and Jesus by identifying with the Jewish people and their suffering, but she is unable to make such a connection in reality. She says first her father is like the concentration camp guards in that he is Protestant rather than Jewish. She then says that



she is like her father, and, as such, she is not part of Jesus's family because she is not Jewish.

At the end of the poem, she expresses her desire to be not only part of the family of Jesus but to share the experience of those who survived the suffering. What is interesting about this wish to be in the family of Jesus as a survivor of great suffering is that it recalls and revises some of the earlier poets' approaches to Jesus, suffering, and women's relationships to the divine. Chapter two explained that Harper posits a connection between God and African-American women based upon suffering. Chapter four explained that Vassar Miller posits a connection between women and the divine and contradicts the notion that women's bodies bar them from the divine by suggesting that women suffer as Jesus suffered.<sup>107</sup> As explained in chapter three, even Dickinson writes a few poems that link individuals to Jesus on the basis of suffering. Unlike these other poets' work, however, Olds's "That Year" expresses only the speaker's wish that she can connect with the divine through suffering. The speaker does not say that she either can or does. Furthermore, she wishes that she could connect with the divine not through continued suffering but through having experienced the suffering and survived. In addition, the speaker characterizes this wish as "ignorance." Instead of joining the family of Jesus, the speaker remains "like [her] father" and associates herself with the victimizers rather than the survivors of victimization.

The approach to female suffering in "That Year" illustrates Olds's distinctiveness from the other women whose poetry is the subject of this dissertation. In this poem or any of her poems in *Satan Says*, Olds does not find that the way for a woman to make herself

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<sup>107</sup> In poems such as "Receiving Communion" and "Epithalamium," Miller argues that it is her embodied suffering which connects her to the divine.

amenable to the divine is through bodily suffering. This approach, Elizabeth Johnson argues, is a somewhat passive and therefore problematic approach, because it suggests that women's bodies can approach divinity because women are among the oppressed and, as such, are a matter of concern for a divine constructed as favoring the oppressed and the weak.<sup>108</sup> As in "That Year," Olds does not affirm victimhood or suffering as an ideal that can bring women closer to the divine. Nor does she affirm women as idealized spiritual role models—mothers. Instead, her poems assume that their female speakers do not need to accept patriarchal roles for women in order to connect with or to be divine. Olds's poetry represents the carnality of women and mothers and yet suggests that women and their bodies and bodily interactions (their sexual lives, maternity, and other biological relationships) are sacred.

### **Kristeva and Irigaray and the Maternal Function**

Before discussing more of Olds's poetry, a brief discussion of Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray's primary points about maternity, female sexuality, and the divine will be necessary so that later it will be easier to show how Olds's writing on these subjects is relevant to theological feminist theory. Julia Kristeva argues that the only space allowed for the female in the Judeo-Christian mythology of the male divine is as an idealized mother figure who gives birth to the son of the divine (and the divine himself). Mary is not herself divine, but she is allowed proximity to the divine and a degree of respect from Christians because she has given birth to the male child of a male divinity. Kristeva

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<sup>108</sup> As discussed in chapter one and chapter four, Johnson acknowledges this approach to the problem of women feeling distanced from the divine in Christianity. She also questions it, taking issue with the fact that communion with the divine through shared suffering necessitates that women, in order to commune with the divine (usually the suffering Jesus), must always be identified as victims. If women become equal members of society and are no longer oppressed or victimized, then they will lose the ability to connect with the suffering embodiment of the divine or the divine who is concerned for the weak and oppressed.

argues that both Christianity and secular society persist in the advocating of the role of motherhood for women. She argues that the ideal role for a woman in western culture is to be a mother. In this role, according to Kristeva, woman serves man by bearing man's child.

Kristeva argues that the feminine in the philosophy of Christian traditions has been compartmentalized into motherhood as its ideal manifestation, Mary. "Christianity is doubtless the most refined symbolic construct in which femininity, to the extent that it transpires through it—and it does so incessantly—is focused on *Maternity*" (235). The figure of Mary in Christianity, Kristeva argues, represents this idealization of motherhood in Christianity.<sup>109</sup> Jesus, she says, "is 'human' only through his mother [. . .] And yet the humanity of the Virgin mother is not always obvious, and we shall see how, in her being cleared of sin, for instance, Mary distinguishes herself from mankind" (236). In other words, in the parenthood of Jesus, God is the transcendent spirit while Mary represents the eminent carnality of the human being, but Mary, in order to be made the mother of a divine being, must be to some extent distanced from her carnality.

This construct reiterates the Cartesian dualism which feminists read as relegating women to the body. Kristeva claims that the mother, like all women, is relegated to the body. Humanity and divinity, she says, are separated and woman has become the bearer of humanity's humanness while man is able to escape it. Therefore, the woman's body and all the biological corporeal functions are the furthest removed from the divine, and hence abjected and considered profane. Elizabeth Gross explains clearly Kristeva's position on abjection, saying,

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<sup>109</sup> Kristeva does not focus exclusively on Christianity. She argues that this approach to maternity goes beyond the religion. She says, "This resorption of femininity within the Maternal is specific to many civilizations, but Christianity, in its own fashion, brings it to its peak" (236).

Kristeva's notion of abjection provides a sketch of that period which marks the threshold of the child's acquisition of language and a relatively stable enunciative position. In *Powers of Horror* she argues that it is only through the delimitation of the 'clean and proper' body that the symbolic order, and the acquisition of a sexual and physical identity within it, becomes possible. Abjection attests to the perilous and provisional nature of the symbolic control over the dispersing impulses of the semiotic drives, which strive to break down and through identity, order, and stability. Through abjection, bodily processes become enmeshed bit by bit in significatory processes in which images, perceptions, and sensations become linked to and represented by 'ideational representatives' or signifiers. (86)

The abjection of the body, the active and continuous attempt to distance the self from corporeality, Kristeva links to the rejection of the mother in the psychoanalytic narrative of identity formation.<sup>110</sup> In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, she writes,

As the addressee of every demand, the mother occupies the place of alterity. Her replete body, the receptacle and guarantor of demands, takes the place of all narcissistic, hence imaginary, effects and gratifications; she

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<sup>110</sup> Julia Kristeva considers the figure of the mother to be not merely a woman but a location and alternative to fatherhood as a location. Fatherhood, according to Kristeva, occupies the role of dominant importance in our society. Our culture and language is based upon patriarchal power. As a psychoanalytic critic, Kristeva asserts that language or the Symbolic is patriarchal. The maternal is an alternative to that system of order and it is repressed but always threatens to return. As Alison Ainley writes, "Kristeva posits motherhood as the site of potentially reconceptualized notions of production and reproduction, as different kinds of time, a different notion of identity. In this sense it represents a possible irruption or interruption of the Symbolic, in the conjunction of stasis and dynamism, of cyclical and monumental time with the linear time of genealogy and grammar" (Ainley 58).

is, in other words, the phallus. The discovery of castration, however, detaches the subject from his dependence on the mother [. . .] (47)<sup>111</sup>

As the subject forms its identity, the subject must distance itself from the profane associations of its embodiment (those bodily excretions which are abject). Elizabeth Gross explains, “Like her other concepts, the maternal chora and the semiotic, the abject is placed on the side of the feminine in Kristeva’s work. It is opposed to the paternal, rule-governed symbolic order” (93). So, as the subject enters the symbolic it rejects the semiotic and the abject, both of which Kristeva associates with the maternal.

Women are relegated to the maternal function and thus to the body which, according to Kristeva, excludes women from being autonomous speaking subjects. Instead the female or the mother is what is left behind when the individual seeks subjectivity. The maternal is left behind in the pre-symbolic. The maternal becomes a fantasy created to cope with the fear of the unknown semiotic. Kristeva writes in *Tales of Love*,

First, we live in a civilization where the consecrated (religious or secular) representation of femininity is absorbed by motherhood. If, however, one looks at it more closely, this motherhood is the *fantasy* that is nurtured by the adult, man or woman, of a lost territory; what is more, it involves less an idealized archaic mother than the idealization of the *relationship* that binds us to her, one that cannot be localized—an idealization of primary narcissism<sup>112</sup> (234).

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<sup>111</sup> It is at this point, when the child recognizes the separation from the mother, that the child enters the symbolic order.

<sup>112</sup> Primary narcissism, according to *The Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literary and Cultural Criticism*, “is seen as a very early, objectless condition, characterized by the absence of any sense of separation from

She further argues that the idealized mother is repressed and removed to a space beyond and before language:

The unspoken doubtless weighs first on the maternal body: as no signifier can uplift it without leaving a remainder, for the signifier is always meaning, communication, or structure, whereas a woman as mother would be, instead, a strange fold that changes culture into nature, the speaking into biology. (259)

The mother is relegated to biology, to the original drives that give rise to symbolization but are not part of the orderly symbolic. The mother, according to Kristeva, is that which must be dismissed in order for humanity to become civilized.

Because of this separation of body and spirit and the relegation of women to the body, Mary, the idealized mother of God's child, must have her sexuality sublimated so that she becomes a purified biological entity. Kristeva says of Mary's purification,

We are entitled only to the ear of the virginal body, the tears, and the breast. With the female sexual organ changed into an innocent shell, holder of sound, there arises a possible tendency to eroticize hearing, voice, or even understanding. By the same token, however, sexuality is brought down to the level of innuendo. (248)

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the world and a lack of distinction between the ID and anything that can be called an ego" (200). Sigmund Freud "describes the earliest stages of psychic growth as characterized by a state of 'primary narcissism.'" This is a time in the development of the child in which "its sexual feelings are not focused on any particular organ, but rather infuse the whole of its world, which is not perceived as distinct in any way from its body or EGO—indeed, the state of primary narcissism precedes the emergence of any distinction between ego and ID, and any direction of desire toward an object" (233). For Kristeva, primary narcissism coincides with the semiotic, as it is pre-oedipal and prior to entrance into the symbolic order.

Kristeva argues that a biological mother must be purified in order that she may be allowed to bear the Son of God precisely because the body and the fluids associated with reproduction are abject.<sup>113</sup>

Kristeva argues that Christian tradition and traditional psychoanalytic theory present the maternal function as the primary socially sanctioned enterprise for women. Women are taught that being wives and mothers is their ideal. Additionally, women, Kristeva argues, have come to be associated entirely with maternity as a biological function and that in the world of Cartesian dualism; this means that women are designated as contrary to the transcendent or the divine. That realm of transcendence is reserved for men. The Virgin Mary icon both reinforces the argument that motherhood is the highest aspiration for women and simultaneously reinforces the notion that women are biological and, therefore, not worthy of God's attention by insisting that for Mary to even have God's child, she must first be purified and de-sexed.

Luce Irigaray makes much the same argument about femininity and the maternal function:

Woman fulfills man's needs as mother, matrix, body (both living and as a container-sepulchre), nurse. Apparently man wants woman only as mother and virgin, or sometimes, rather ambiguously, as sister—but not as woman, as other gender. (121)

Irigaray argues that Mary, the virginal mother, is presented by Judeo-Christian tradition as the ideal way that women can serve God. According to Irigaray, this ideal serves

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<sup>113</sup> This theory is based on the theory in traditional psychoanalysis that a woman has a male child so that she can vicariously gain phallic power. Many psychoanalytic feminists challenge this theory and argue that motherhood as an idealized role for women is encouraged only to keep women dependent upon men for their identity formation.

patriarchal power; Mary, the emblematic woman, is important only because she gives birth to the male child of a male God. She does not have her own identity. Women have been relegated to the body and given as their only acceptable option the role of mothers.

Both Kristeva and Irigaray agree that the idealization of woman as mother and relegation of women to the body motivate a particular feminist response that should be resisted. Kristeva writes,

Now, when feminism demands a new representation of femininity, it seems to identify motherhood with that idealized misconception and, because it rejects the image and its misuse, feminism circumvents the real experience that fantasy overshadows. The result?—a negation or rejection of motherhood by some avant-garde feminist groups. Or else an acceptance—conscious or not—of its traditional representations by the great mass of people, women and men. (235)

On the one hand, Kristeva argues, some feminists are tempted to argue that women should not allow themselves to be identified with the function of maternity. On the other hand, masses of people embrace and perpetuate the traditional stereotype of woman as ideally maternal. Kristeva presents both of these approaches as problematic. In the latter, women continue to be reduced to biology and to have their worth as human beings depend upon others, male mates and children. In the former, women lose respect for their bodies in an attempt to escape exclusive association with the biological function of motherhood.

Like Kristeva, Irigaray does not think that women should avoid being associated with maternity in order to resist the relegation of women to the body. Instead, she expects



that women can find liberation in celebrating their maternal roles which she equates with a creative drive that can produce more than just children.

We also need to discover and declare 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. (1993c, 18)

Irigaray also does not think that women should respond to their entrapment in the body by disavowing the body. She expects women to celebrate their bodies:

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. (1993c, 19)

Irigaray argues that the relegation of women to the body and to the function of maternity makes them dependent upon men. She further argues that the separation of the body from the divine reduces women to inferior status in relation to men. Her remedy is not that women should attempt to distance themselves from their biology. Instead, she says, women should celebrate their bodies, not as the limited world that has been constructed by men but as one part of their complex selves that includes the embodied and the transcendent, the corporeal and the divine. Women, in celebrating their bodies, should challenge the notion that to be divine, women must be de-sexed like the “Virgin” Mary.

One other thing that Irigaray suggests is that women should reconnect a female genealogy which involves valuing their connections to women of the past and to women who are their contemporaries. Irigaray says,

We need to be careful in one other respect: not again to kill the mother who was immolated at the birth of our culture. Our task is to give life back to that mother, to the mother who lives within us and among us. We must refuse to allow her desire to be swallowed up in the law of the father. We must give her the right to pleasure, to sexual experience, to passion, give her back the right to speak, or even to shriek and rage aloud. (1993c, 18)

Olds resists both of these responses by embracing motherhood, challenging the repression and abjection of the mother, and by celebrating the functions of biology and reintroducing them to the sacred.

### **Olds and the Repressed Maternal**

“Woman,” the second section of *Satan Says*, contains the poems “First Night,” which expresses a problematic understanding of the woman’s body and “I Am the Shrink’s Wife,” which considers patriarchal and psychoanalytic constructions of motherhood in western society. The second section of *Satan Says*, “Mother,” contains the “Young Mothers” set of poems which also examine troubling traditional constructions of motherhood.

In “First Night,” the first poem of “Woman” in *Satan Says*, Olds represents the woman’s body as biological. The poem begins,

I lay asleep under you,  
still and dark as uninhabited

countryside, my blood slowly  
drying between us, the break in my flesh  
beginning to heal, open, a border  
permanently dissolved. (1-6)

The poem describes the first night of the female speaker's sexual encounter with a male lover, and the poem suggests that this union has reduced the woman to a biological entity. She is "blood" and "flesh." She equates her body with a land that has been colonized and had its boundaries "permanently dissolved." Her body is objectified and the union between the woman and her lover is summed up in the effect it has on her body.

The poem alludes to the blood flow after the breaking of the hymen. In the opening of the poem, the speaker begins an extended metaphor in which the body is figured as a land mass from which its inhabitants emigrate. She goes on to say, "The inhabitants of my body began to / get up in the dark, pack, and move" (7-8). As the poem continues, it becomes clear that these emigrating inhabitants are the post-coital fluids exiting the body:

All night, hordes of people  
in heavy clothes moved south in me  
carrying houses on their backs, sacks of  
seed, children by the hand, under  
a sky like smoke. Grazing grounds  
shifted by hundreds of miles. Certain animals,  
suddenly, were nearly extinct,  
one or two odd knobby

shapes in opposite parts of the land. (9-17)

Using a strategy that is characteristic of Olds's work, the poem presents details of reproduction and bodily relationships that might be considered off limits by other poets,<sup>114</sup> and she deals with these subjects in terms that elevate them in both beauty and importance. She acknowledges and embraces the body and its sexuality rather than romanticizing it or effacing it with euphemism. Here she refers to hymen blood, vaginal fluid and seminal fluid as,

Other forms multiplied,  
masses of deep red wings  
pouring out of nowhere. Rivers changed course,  
the language turned<sup>115</sup>  
neatly about  
and started to go the other way. (18-23)

She refers to the deep red blood shed at the rupture of the virgin hymen and the "rivers chang[ing] course," which are the seminal fluids receding out of the vagina. The speaker relates the connection between herself and her lover, not in terms of their emotional

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<sup>114</sup> Tony Hoagland defends Olds against critics Adam Kirsch and William Logan's accusations that the poet's work is too sexually provocative and deals too much with the graphic description of the body. Hoagland says, "Kirsch's distaste for the poetry of the everyday is a replay of the aesthetic battle that Williams, Pound and Eliot fought in the era of early Modernism (and which was fought again in the Fifties), about what the 'proper' matter of poetry might be. There's no need to wage that war again: contemporary high-concept verse and domestic poetry coexist comfortably" (7). Alicia Ostriker discusses the avoidance of graphic sexuality in poetry in her chapter "I Am (Not) This." She says, "Making love. Poetry. An odd combination. In postmodern, media-drenched America, eros equals pornography, both for its advocates and its attackers. Or else it equals possession, a consumer product. Many poets, and almost all critics, avoid it (except in the special category of AIDS writing, where eros equals mortality). What most contemporary critics seem to want is less body and less feeling in poetry. Less sensuousness. Less desire—these topics are so sticky, so embarrassing, so impolite, so troublesome—can't we, please, have poetry that's *clean*, with the messy and horrifying fluids and emotions scrubbed off it?" (2000, 39). She paraphrases the critics.

<sup>115</sup> When the poem says "the language turned" it is possible to read this as a reference to the symbolic. The man has colonized the woman's body. The mother-the semiotic- has been dominated by the father-the symbolic.

relationship, but in terms of the body, emphasizing the role biology. The terms in which she discusses the state of her body, equates it with natural; it is a natural landscape with living organisms moving on it and in it.

The poem goes on to embrace the raw reality of human sexuality, celebrating the human body and its connection to nature. In the final four lines of the poem the speaker becomes fully an animal:

By dawn the migrations were completed. The last  
edge of the blood bond dried,  
and like a newborn animal about to be imprinted  
I opened my eyes and saw your face. (24-27)

Not only is the speaker reduced to biology and likened to an animal, she is infantilized. She is a “newborn animal” who looks in deference to the man with whom she has copulated. The poem expresses the construction of woman as biological and as dependent on man as her superior. And yet, the poem does not present this image as negative. There is lament over the state in which the woman finds herself. She seems a willing participant in her colonization.

In “I am the Shrink’s Wife,” a poem whose title suggests that the poem could be read as a commentary on psychoanalytic theory (the title character is married to a practitioner of patriarchal psychoanalysis), Olds exposes for critique constructions of motherhood in western culture. The mother is both a source of nourishment and a source of death in this poem. The speaker of the poem is the mother. She represents herself as both well-meaning and menacing. She says,

I am the shrink’s wife, the original

mother walking around, the knife  
hanging from my hand. My skirt  
smothers you all like hen down. I have  
laid an extra film of bone  
around the egg. I am the one in the  
dream, the one who chases you, sharp  
feed scattering like shot from my final  
apron. I am the shroud, the one who  
wrings the neck laughing. I am the one. (1-10)

The mother protects “the egg” and yet threatens its annihilation by overprotecting it. She feeds and threatens to harm simultaneously. The chickens are both metaphorically her children and what she feeds her family. She feeds them and slaughters them. The mother is the harbinger of death as well as the giver of life.

That the mother in the poem troubles her children from within their dreams suggests another representation of a psychoanalytic narrative. Irigaray argues that, “The social order, our culture, psychoanalysis itself, are all insistent that the mother must remain silent, outlawed. The father forbids any *corps-à-corps* with the mother” (1993c, 14). The subject’s entrance into the symbolic order prescribes a rejection of the maternal, the semiotic, but, according to Irigaray and Kristeva, there is then the fear that the mother will return and disrupt the subject’s comfortable identity.<sup>116</sup> Olds’s speaker claims that

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<sup>116</sup> Julia Kristeva comments on this eruption of the maternal into the symbolic in *Tales of Love*. Alison Ainley says of the structure of Kristeva’s “Stabat Mater” in *Tales of Love*, “In ‘Stabat Mater’, the personal, left-hand, ‘other’ side of the text irrupts into the historical mapping of the Virgin Mary as paradigmatic mother. Textually, this double writing corresponds to the mother as a body positioned and repositioned in language, but a body with intimations of its own splitting, separation and pleasure” (58).

she is “the one in the / dream” threatening her children from within their subconscious. She threatens to harm as she nourishes (with “sharp feed), and those she nourishes, are at risk of being murdered by her. The repressed mother is an object of anxiety for her children in the poem and in psychoanalysis.

As the poem continues the dream mother reacts against being suppressed. Now, rather than threatening to annihilate her chickens, she is likened to a chicken. However, she escapes the knife she had previously used to threaten others:

In the dark corner I rock fast as a  
chicken flapping away from the knife,  
shoulders flashing open and shut,  
scissors. I am in the corner knitting,  
my needles are heated, watch yer eyes heh  
heh I am the mother you wanted to  
kill. I am biding my time with him,  
rocking, knitting, fucking, rising  
absolute in blood-spattered  
black. There is no way back. (11-20)

The mother is both threat and threatened. She is aware of the desire to confine her. She rocks in her rocking chair, knits, and mates with the father. She engages in behaviors that are expected of a domesticated woman. However, she admits to homicidal tendencies, and thereby threatens the image of the perfect mother. She refuses to be contained. The repressed mother reacts against the desire of her children to be rid of her. She fights back against their rejection and tries to impose the reality of her existence onto the scene. She

is “rising absolute” though she struggles against the realization that “there is no way back.”

That the mother threatens to return from the place of repression is the fact which causes men to enforce her continued repression, according to Irigaray. Irigaray argues that the representation of the mother as threatening is typical, especially in psychoanalytic theory. She says,

Some men and women would prefer to identify maternal power, the phallic mother, as an ensnaring net. But such attribution occurs only as a defensive mesh that the man-father or his sons casts over the chasms of a silent and threatening womb. Threatening because it is silent, perhaps?  
(1993c, 16)

And so,

Her [the mother’s] desire, the desire she has, this is what the law of the father, of all fathers, moves to prohibit: the fathers of families, fathers in religion, father teachers, father doctors, father lovers, etc. Whether moral or immoral, all these fathers intervene to censure, repress, the mother’s desire. For them, it’s a matter of good sense, good health, or even virtue and holiness! (1993c, 11)

The woman in “The Shrink’s Wife” represents precisely the woman who is relegated to domesticity and biology, cornered and controlled, fulfilling her designated role but who presents a challenge to the status quo by threatening harm to those who confine her.

Irigaray argues that western culture teaches fear of this kind of maternal resurgence. She says, “The only words we have for women’s sexuality are filthy,



mutilating words. Consequently, the feelings associated with women's sexuality will be anxiety, phobia, disgust, and the haunting fear of castration" (1993c, 16-17). Irigaray also says, "The relation to the mother is a mad desire, because it is the 'dark continent' par excellence. It remains in the shadow of our culture, it is night and hell" (1993c, 10). The speaker in "I am the Shrink's Wife," gives voice to that dark continent. The poem expresses the same theory that Irigaray and Kristeva express: that is the notion that the repression of the mother in psychoanalysis and in Christianity is damaging to women and that they must and will resist that repression as does the mother in the poem.

Although she fights back, the mother in "I am the Shrink's Wife" is not successful. This is because she fights back from a place of repression, the subconscious mind. Her realm is the realm of dreams:

The old clock on the mantel is ticking  
angry as high heels, my heart is  
clicking sharp needles, ticking you  
off. I am running through all of your dreams  
spurting gouts, every night through  
thirty dreams cackling and creaking and  
brandishing. (21-27)

In Irigaray's *Sexes and Genealogies*, the theory of the threatening maternal entity is discussed as well. She says, that "The social order, our culture, psychoanalysis itself, are all insistent that the mother must remain silent, outlawed. The father forbids any *corps-à-corps* with the mother" (14). But, she says, the mother does not remain at a distance. Because the mother is not properly dealt with but is only controlled by the tenuous

imaginary, she can return unwanted. Irigaray says, “In this way the opening of the mother, the opening to the mother, appears as threats of contagion, contamination, falling into sickness, madness, death” (15).

In the final part of the poem, Olds divides the one mother into two: the mother who protects and the mother who threatens to kill:

Protecting you from the  
one who opens her legs a smell of  
sweet as honey drifts out like music who  
says come back. I am the black  
mother of life, whirling the chicken  
before those beautiful gates of the white  
mother of death who croons come back who  
comes the way you love who says  
I need it this minute and only you  
can do it for me. (27-36)

The mother is represented as offering nourishment—dealing out death to the chicken in order to feed her children—and yet she threatens to annihilate her family and to consume them to satisfy her carnal desires. She “croons come back” threatening to reabsorb her family into her. According to Irigaray, this is the fear that is created by the repression of the mother in psychoanalysis. She claims that the mother’s desire is characterized “as a bottomless pit” (15). “The womb,” Irigaray writes, “is never thought of as the primal place in which we become body. Therefore for many men<sup>117</sup> it is variously phantasized as

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<sup>117</sup> Here Irigaray suggests that it is men in particular who construct mothers in this way. She suggests elsewhere in her texts that women often acquiesce to this construction of the maternal as threatening, so it

a devouring mouth, as a sewer in which anal and urethral waste is poured, as a threat”  
(16).

In “Young Mothers I” the mother’s role and her relegation to biology is also examined. The mother is represented as an animal in the first two stanzas:

That look of attention  
on the face of the young mother  
like an animal,  
  
bending over the carriage, looking up,  
ears erect, eyes showing  
the whites all around. (1-6)

Employing metaphor, Olds compares the worried mother, a woman so fully engaged in her role as protector of her child that she is reduced to being controlled by her basic instincts. She is relegated to the body and is not a thinking human being but rather an acting and reacting object. She is “like an animal.”

Olds goes on to consider the mother as other. The next stanza of “Young Mothers I” depicts the mother in labor producing her child. The stanza reads,

Startled as a newborn, she glances from side to side.  
She has pushed, lying alone on a bed,  
sweating, isolated by pain,  
splitting slowly. She has pressed out

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is not going against her thesis to suggest that Olds, a female poet, represents the mother in this way. Furthermore, the fact that Olds represents the mother as threatening in “I Am the Shrink’s Wife” does not mean that she necessarily agrees with this representation. She may illustrate it, as Irigaray does, only to make her readers aware of it and to expose it to critique.

the child in her. It lies, separate,  
opening and closing its mouth, its hands  
wrinkled with long immersion in salt water. (7-13)

The mother and child are shown postnatal. Rather than being joined with her infant, the mother has become other to her infant. The child “lies, separate” from its mother. Once the child is being born, the mother becomes a distinct entity, apart from the child who will join the symbolic order and the law of the father. The child opens and closes its mouth as if practicing to become a speaking subject. That stanza begins with a comparison (“Startled as a newborn”) that links mother and child and ends with the child divorced of its mother’s body, recovering from “immersion” in her world. The poem conveys a sense of loss as the mother begins to push in isolation and gives up her child to the world.

Irigaray argues in *Sexes and Genealogies* that when the subject leaves behind the maternal body in order to enter the symbolic order,

Thus the body that gives life never enters into language. Ernst,<sup>118</sup> the son, believes perhaps that, in his first language game, he holds his mother. She has no place there. She subsists before language as the woman who gives her flesh and her blood, and beyond language as she who is stripped of a matrix/womb, a veil, an enclosure or a clearing in which she might live

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<sup>118</sup> Irigaray refers to Freud’s discussion of the fort-da game played by his young grandson, Ernst. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud says, “What he did was to hold the reel by the string and very skillfully throw it over the edge of his curtained cot, so that it disappeared into it, at the same time uttering his expressive ‘o-o-o-o.’ He then pulled the reel out of the cot again by the string and hailed its reappearance with a joyful ‘da’ [‘there’]. This then was the complete game—disappearance and return.” Freud goes on to explain his interpretation of little Ernst’s game. He says, “It was related to the child’s great cultural achievement—the instinctual renunciation (that is, the renunciation of instinctual satisfaction) which he had made in allowing his mother to go away without protesting” (10).

according to the horizon of her games, symbolizations, representations.  
(1993c, 46)

The mother in “Young Mothers I” is distanced from her child who has left her and the salt water world of her womb, her body behind. The mother is “isolated.” The poem goes on to continue this consideration of the mother as other to her own child. Olds writes,

Now the mother is the other one,  
breasts hard bags of rock salt,  
the bluish milk seeping out, her soul  
there in the small carriage, the child in her  
risen to the top, like cream,  
and skimmed off. (14-19)

The mother seems to have lost that in her which was divine. Her soul is transferred to the baby leaving behind for the mother only her body which is, it seems, not the best part of her. The best part of her, the “cream” or the child has been removed.

Olds, in considering the separation between newborn and mother in “Young Mothers I,” theorizes in a way that brings to mind the work of Kristeva who considers the separation of mother and child at birth through a psychoanalytic lens. Kristeva argues in *Tales of Love* that,

A woman is neither a male nomadic nor a male body that considers itself earthly only in erotic passion. A mother is a continuous separation, a division of the very flesh. And consequently a division of language—and it has always been so. (254)

In other words, the mother occupies the realm beyond and prior to language. She is essentially an imaginary entity, according to Kristeva, which compensates for the weakness of language. So much importance is given to representative language in western culture, and Kristeva argues that much importance is given to representative language or signs in Christianity.<sup>119</sup> However, language is imperfect in that there is always a space between meaning and the sign used to represent that meaning. Kristeva argues that mother occupies that space. The imaginary mother's separation from symbolic language, Kristeva suggests, is reflected by the actual mother's separation from her child both during and after pregnancy. Kristeva goes on to write that,

Then there is this other abyss that opens up between the body and what had been its inside: there is the abyss between the mother and the child. What connection is there between myself, or even more unassumingly between my body and this internal graft and fold, which, once the umbilical cord has been severed, is an inaccessible other? My body and . . . him. No connection. Nothing to do with it. And this, as early as the first gestures, cries, steps, long before *its* personality has become my opponent. The child, whether *he* or *she*, is irremediably an other. (254-55)

This is precisely the image that is conjured up by Olds's poem: the mother lies separated from her child: "Now the mother is the other one," the poem says (14). Postnatal, the mother lies separated from the being that had once been inside and yet still separated from her own body. As Olds considers this separation that occurs when the child leaves the mother's body in "Young Mother I," the mother is reduced to the maternal function—

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<sup>119</sup> Kristeva bases this on the phrase in John 1.1 that "In the beginning was the Word" and the emphasis placed on "the Word" of the paternal God in Judeo-Christian theology. The full biblical verse reads "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

a function of mere biology—by the child’s leaving the mother’s body and taking with it, the transcendent soul. The child is the “soul,” the “cream” that has been “skimmed off,” leaving the mother behind in her body, the physicality of which is emphasized by the image of her hard breasts excreting milk.

For Kristeva, as well as for Olds (at least in this poem) the mother’s identity is characterized by separation. During pregnancy, Kristeva argues, the mother’s body is divided by the torso (the abdomen) which contains the other organism (the baby in utero) and the head and limbs of the mother ((253-54). After labor, the mother’s identity becomes a division of self and the other (the child) who was once a part of the self (the mother’s pregnant body). Both Olds and Kristeva reflect upon this separation. Kristeva argues that the mother, after the separation of birth, occupies herself with taking care of her child as a means to resolving the fracture. Kristeva goes on to say that,

A mother’s identity is maintained only through the well-known closure of consciousness within the indolence of habit, when a woman protects herself from the borderline that severs her body and expatriates it from her child. Lucidity, on the contrary, would restore her as cut in half, alien to its other—and a ground favorable to delirium. But also and for that reason, motherhood destines us to a demented jouissance that is answered by chance, by the nursling’s laughter in the sunny waters of the ocean. (255)

The “indolence of habit” and the functions of maternity after the birth of the child are the only limited remedies the mother in Olds’s poem has to bandage this fractured identity.

In the final lines of Olds's "Young Mothers I," poem, the mother is represented as tense and fearful of being completely annihilated herself, and then, in the very last moments of the poem, the mother is distracted by the cries of her child:

Now she is alert for violation,  
hearing acute as a deer's, her pupils  
quick, her body bent in a curve,  
wet rope has dried and tightened,  
a torture in some cultures.  
She dreams of death by fire, death  
by falling, death by disemboweling,  
death by drowning, death by removal  
of the head. Someone starts to scream  
and it wakes her up, the hungry baby  
wakes and saves her. (20-30)

As the child has left the mother's body and taken with it the mother's connection to the divine, the mother's focus becomes the child beyond herself. The mother's reason for being is to care for her child. It is this task which saves her from her nightmare of effacement. Otherwise, without the child's cries, the child's needs to fulfill, the mother would cease to be. She has no soul of her own, no divine presence of her own and is, therefore, not an autonomous being.

In "Young Mothers II," Olds represents again a mother who views her purpose as dependent upon the life of her child. Olds employs a mother-as-vigilant-animal- protector



metaphor, again, as she does in “Young Mothers I.” The first stanza of “Young Mothers II” states,

She is all eyes and ears for damage,  
In her loose shirt her breasts like white wolves’ heads  
sway and snarl. She does not trust anyone.  
They have torn her soul out of her body and said  
the child is the other one. (1-5)

Once again the mother lives for the child. The child’s exiting the mother’s body has removed the mother’s soul. Her connection to the divine is bound up in being a mother and caring for her child. This is the problematic construction of motherhood which Irigaray critiques in *Sexes and Genealogies*,

If women perform a duty that has been defined by the certainties of the other sex, their effectiveness necessarily remains contingent, except in a *pathos* of duty, which lacks any goal of its own, any ethical purpose. Women’s purpose and its effectiveness, assuming the purpose is fact theirs, is taken away: child and husband are taken away from women by society, the world of work by war. So women are amputated of the purpose of their action, forced to be disinterested, self-sacrificing, without ever having chosen or wanted this. (1993c, 120)

The mothers in both “Young Mothers I” and “Young Mothers II” have just this problem. Their existences are contingent upon the children to whom they have given birth, so their effectiveness as people is dependent upon heterosexual union and the bearing of man’s seed. This is the only way that woman can aspire to a link, albeit a secondary one, with

the divine just as the Virgin Mary's maternal relationship to Jesus is her only connection to the male divine.<sup>120</sup>

In the next lines, Olds again represents the mother as serving her child. Olds's "Young Mothers II" illustrates the dullness of the habitual existence of the mother:

Always a new baby to take her place,  
and now she's a lady-in-waiting again  
to a queen. Out of her mother's house  
she has fallen into her daughter's.  
She cooks little things in hot fat,  
she pushes the carriage filled with a raw roast,  
she stands outside a window and watches a childless couple  
fucking in the resinous light of a fire  
without interruption. (6-14)

The woman moves from "her mother's house" to "her daughter's" house as though she is merely property being transferred from one female relation to another. In "her daughter's house" she cooks meals and cares for the child. So monotonous is her existence, the poem suggests, that the line between the two tasks is blurred. When she cooks, she prepares "little things" in "fat." When she cares for her child, "she pushes the carriage filled with a raw roast." The poem reverses language used to speak about children and language used to speak about food preparation. The last lines in which the mother

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<sup>120</sup> Alison Ainley explains the trouble with aligning the woman with maternity even if motherhood is a purified and positive image: "The figure of the mother is traditionally associated with the embodiment with idealized virtues of forbearance, fortitude, care and patience; an equation which, under relations of patriarchy, works ultimately not as a paradigm for other ethical relations, but as a site of constraint and exploitation" (53). The maternal ideal or expectation is really a maternal trap for women. As Ainley says, the ideal mother is a passive fixture of the patriarchal home.

“watches a childless couple” having intercourse suggests that the mother longs for another kind of life in which she is free from the bond of maternity.

“Young Mothers V” also explores the relegation of women to the biological which, Kristeva argues, distances women from the divine in western thought. The poem begins with a domestic scene. The new mother is described caring for her child:

In the room with the baby, the young mother  
busies herself. It smells good.

The hands curl like nests. When she nurses  
it feels like being drunk, the swallows  
pulling at her breast, delicious, but when she

leaves the small room, closes the door,  
she is sure the baby’s not breathing. She hears  
somebody picking her lock. She sees  
the image of a baby slipping out the window.  
She drops the knife on her foot, seeing the  
baby’s dimple in the meat.

Dreading the cry, longing for the cry,  
the young mother leads what is called  
her own life

while the baby sleeps. (1-22)

Olds expresses again the notion that mother’s only purpose is to take care of the child. The idea that she has an autonomous existence is posited as suspect in the poem; the

words “what is called / her own life” indicate that the idea of the mother’s autonomy is merely a story created by those who do the calling. As in “Young Mothers I,” the mother is rescued by the child’s cries from her fear of further separation from her child and thus an end to her reason for existing.

In the next stanza, Olds expresses what Kristeva argues is the semiotic nature of the maternal. Olds says,

There is no language  
between these worlds.  
On the sill all is dark, the transformation  
rushes through her like a train in a tunnel. (20-23)

This passage reiterates what Kristeva, in *Tales of Love*, argues—that the maternal is represented by no language. She says,

Let us call “maternal” the ambivalent principle that is bound to the  
species, on the one hand, and on the other stems from an identity  
catastrophe that causes the Name to topple over into the unnamable that  
imagines as femininity, nonlanguage, or body. (234-35)

The final stanza of “Young Mothers V” reads,

Take it in slow motion, you see the young mother  
swimming over the threshold through silted air,  
the soot falling like back rice, she is  
struggling down the corridor, her own mother  
hanging on to her ankles and bearing down. (24-28)

The final image is dually the mother in labor “bearing down” to push out her child and the speaker’s mother “bearing down” on her, imposing herself and her maternal identity on to her daughter. Motherhood is not presented as a pleasant endeavor but as a trap into which the young mother is ensnared by her own mother and child.

### **Olds, Motherhood, and Corporeality**

Sharon Olds writes poetry about her status as wife and mother in which she rescues motherhood from its idealized position in Christianity, and she considers her maternity in embodied terms. However, her maternity, although embodied, is not divorced from the divine. She represents negative constructions or sexist constructions of motherhood and then calls them into question.

Many critics have noted Sharon Olds’s preoccupation with the body in her poetry. As Helen Farish says, “Sharon Olds knows the world through her body; her somatic poems challenge the reader to reexperience the world with her through the use of kinesthetic imagery” (309). In “The ‘Interfering Flesh’ and the Search for the ‘Full Life’ in the Poetry of Louise Gluck and Sharon Olds,” Farish “investigates [. . .] the negotiation of the woman poet with the devalorized female body.”<sup>121</sup> She makes the claim that,

Olds is typically read as offering an untroubled celebration of the female body pursuing its hungers until they lead to a fullness. But as with [Anne] Sexton, the complexity of Olds’ engagement with female corporeality and the struggle to forge a poetic voice capable of such embodiment is often

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<sup>121</sup> Farish states that her article is based on the premise that “the body is something ‘apart from the true self’, something apart from creativity’, and by dialectical opposition a construction specifically occupied by the feminine” (218).

inadequately assessed. For Olds the body is neither pure nature nor pure meaning. (225)

Farish makes an important point. It is a good idea to avoid an absolute classification when it comes to the poetry of any of the authors dealt with in this project and, perhaps especially when dealing with the poetry of Sharon Olds. In Olds's poems about motherhood in *Satan Says*, the author neither rejects motherhood as a fulfilling role for women nor accepts motherhood as a purified, idealized feminine role. Olds writes about motherhood—both her own mother and her own role as mother—in terms that are carnal and realistic rather than idyllic or idealized. In her approach to motherhood, Olds reflects the concerns of theological feminists Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray in her presentation of a complex understanding of motherhood and the body.

Olds does not represent an idealized sacred mother in these or any of her poems. She does not shy away from representing the corporeality and sexuality of the mother. However, this does not mean that she embraces or supports the relegation of women to the body and the related distancing of women from the divine. She explores the body on her own terms, and though that exploration takes her through some representations of the body that are similar to the representations of the body which Irigaray and Kristeva criticize in their writings she allows the body to be both sacred and carnal. Her poems like "I am the Shrink's Wife," which represent the maternal as carnal, celebrate the body and restore the mother to her carnality rather than insisting, as Christianity does, that the mother be removed from her sexuality in order to be near to the divine.

In "The Language of the Brag," Olds contends with the notion that the mother's body (not Mary, the idealized mother, but the bodies of other animalized human mothers)

is abject, discarded as filthy and odious to the divine. Olds accomplishes this by reclaiming childbirth as evidence of female power. The poem begins,

I have wanted excellence in the knife-throw,  
I have wanted to use my exceptionally strong and accurate arms  
and my straight posture and quick electric muscles  
to achieve something at the center of a crowd,  
the blade piercing the bark deep,  
the haft slowly and heavily vibrating like the cock. (1-6)

The speaker of Olds's poem expresses the desire for bodily achievement and recognition. The language here is reminiscent of the description of the father's body in "The Sisters of Sexual Treasure," in which the father's powerful, muscular body is contrasted with the mother's weak and frail body. However, unlike the speaker of "The Sisters," the speaker "The Language of the Brag" seeks to claim physical power for herself rather than experiencing it vicariously through appreciating the bodies of men.

The speaker goes on to say,

I have wanted some epic use for my excellent body,  
some heroism, some American achievement  
beyond the ordinary for my extraordinary self,  
magnetic and tensile, I have stood by the sandlot  
and watched the boys play. (7-11)

The speaker celebrates her own embodiment and intimates that she lives in a world that has encouraged her not to achieve but to wait patiently and silently while the boys play.

The speaker of the poem does achieve her feat of bodily strength and stamina in pregnancy and giving birth. The mother describes her pregnancy in graphic terms which highlight the basest biological happenings of pregnancy:

I have wanted courage, I have thought about fire  
and the crossing of waterfalls, I have dragged around

my belly big with cowardice and safety,  
my stool black with iron pills,  
my huge breasts oozing mucus,  
my legs swelling, my hands swelling,  
my face swelling and darkening, my hair  
falling out, my inner sex  
stabbed again and again with terrible pain like a knife.

I have lain down. (12-21)

It is clear that the process of carrying a child and enduring the beginnings of labor and delivery take their toll on the body of the mother. She endures much in her effort to produce the living child. As she continues into the actual birth, she also describes her labor in graphic bodily terms. She says,

I have lain down and sweated and shaken  
and passed blood and feces and water and  
slowly alone in the center of a circle I have  
passed the new person out  
and they have lifted the new person free of the act



and wiped the new person free of that

language of blood like praise all over the body. (22-28).

The “language of blood” reads as the semiotic, the representation of the repressed mother of whom the child would have to be wiped clean, in the traditional psychoanalytic narrative, in order for the child to enter the symbolic. In the poem, “they,” these other people in the birthing room who are part of the patriarchal institution that interjects itself between mother and child into the birthing room, are the ones who enforce the disavowal of the mother’s body, symbolically, by removing the child from her, and cleansing the child of the mother’s profane fluids. But Olds challenges their assumptions. The mother’s body— which is for the others abject—and its formerly profane fluids and excretions are celebrated as sacred in the poem. The fluids of the mother’s body anoint the child, and praise simultaneously its body and the divine. “The new person,” the poem says, is covered in the “language of blood like praise all over the body” (27, 28).

As the poem concludes, it becomes clear that the “boys” who played in the sandlot while the speaker merely watched are not only the boys of the speaker’s childhood. They are men who are allowed to be speaking subjects, to live in contact with life, to have embodied, sensual experiences and then to translate those experiences into creating poetry and they are men who are allowed to talk about giving birth while actual mothers are meant to feel that their birthing process is profane. As the poem continues, the speaker references male writers and compares the creation of her child—and other women’s production of their children—with these male writers’ creation of poetry.

I have done what you wanted to do, Walt Whitman,

Allen Ginsberg, I have done this thing,

I and the other women this exceptional  
act with the exceptional heroic body,  
this giving birth, this glistening verb,  
and I am putting my proud American boast  
right here with the others. (29-35)

She simultaneously uses the poem to celebrate the creation of the child and to celebrate the creation of her poetry using birth as a metaphor.

Susan MacCallum-Whitcomb and Julie Tharp, editors of *This Giving Birth: Pregnancy and Childbirth in American Women's Writing* (2000) argue that,

Through 'The Language of the Brag,' Sharon Olds redefines the birthing experience, giving voice to feelings otherwise devalued in patriarchal societies; she forcefully confirms that pregnancy and childbirth are legitimate subjects for literature; and, in doing so, she issues a challenge to a culture that has routinely used the language of birth for everyone and everything except the actual event. (1-2)

In combining birth and literary creativity Olds's commits an act of feminist revision in that she appropriates the maternal experience and the language of reproduction for women writers. MacCallum-Whitcomb and Tharp, in their introduction to *This Giving Birth*, accuse male writers and Walt Whitman specifically of appropriating from women the "language of birth" (2). They say of Whitman and his "Song of Myself,"

this nineteenth-century poet who has been praised as a great egalitarian wrote of the 'exclamations of women taken suddenly who hurry home and give birth to babes.' To his credit, Whitman asked 'What living and buried

speech is always vibrating here, what howls restrain'd by decorum' (30).  
But rather than encouraging others to listen for those muffled  
exclamations buried under patriarchal debris, or indeed stopping to listen  
for them himself, Whitman decided to speak for the 'Maternal as well as  
paternal' (36). (2)

According to MacCallum and Tharp, Whitman has enacted patriarchal power by taking upon himself the right to speak for the maternal.<sup>122</sup> They say, "Whitman did everything save letting living, breathing mothers speak for themselves. In the process he stole the language of birth, and in this he was not alone" (2). What Olds creates in "The Language of the Brag" is a feminist celebration of the profanity of childbirth and a feminist reclamation of the power of creation.

Irigaray says about men using their conception of motherhood for their own purposes,

We also need to discover and declare 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. (1993c, 18)

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<sup>122</sup> In her essay, "Claiming Our Birth-Write," Susan MacCallum-Whitcomb argues that Whitman's audacity in appropriating the language of birth can be partly attributed to Ralph Waldo Emerson's conceptualization of the American poet. She says, "Like Emerson, Whitman saw the poet as a male figure. [. . .] Whitman's poet was required to be a 'man without impediment' (Emerson 224), able not only to 'lean and loafe at [his] ease' (25) but to 'tramp a perpetual journey' (63). Freedom and mobility, therefore, remained central to his definition of the poet." MacCallum argues that women have historically not had such freedom. "Mothers," she says, "trapped in their 'shutter's room' (65) due to a different sort of conception, were left metaphorically barren" (44).

Olds reclaims that birthright by reclaiming the language of birth and she says as much in “The Language of the Brag.” She suggests in that final stanza that, in giving birth and in writing poetry about a literal giving birth, she has done what Whitman and Ginsberg have only wanted to do. She speaks collectively for mothers and claims for them their recognition as agents of creation whose act (“this glistening verb”) of creation can compare with that of male poets. As Ellen Argyros states,

In ‘The Language of the Brag,’ Sharon Olds is far more overt and audacious than Morrison<sup>123</sup> in both heroically representing childbirth and challenging her literary forefathers, Whitman and Ginsberg. Describing her own heroics of childbirth enables her to simultaneously establish a camaraderie with other American poets interested in celebrating the body and foreground the issue of gender difference as she mimics a tone of masculine bravado about how she can give birth while they cannot. (145)

Irigaray argues that, “when the father refuses to allow the mother her power of giving birth and seeks to be the sole creator, then [. . .] he superimposes upon our ancient world of flesh and blood a universe of language and symbols that has no roots in the flesh and drills a hole through the female womb and through the place of female identity” (1993c, 16). Olds’s speaker in “The Language of the Brag” heals that hole and recaptures creation for women *and* rescues the fluids of the mother’s body from abjection. Additionally, the speaker of the poem proclaims childbirth as evidence of women’s physical *and* intellectual power. As Alicia Ostriker writes of this poem,

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<sup>123</sup> Argyros’s article, “‘Some Epic Use for My Excellent Body’: Redefining Childbirth as Heroic in *Beloved* and ‘The Language of the Brag,’” explores the representations of childbirth as heroic in texts by Sharon Olds and Toni Morrison.

In “The Language of the Brag,” a poem that follows several poems describing the intensely absorbed animal life of “Young Mothers,” Olds asserts the act of childbirth as a “heroism” equivalent to phallic power (“I have wanted excellence in the knife-throw. . . . the haft slowly and heavily vibrating like the cock”) and to the creation of poems. Having lain down and passed blood, feces, water, and a new person covered with “language of blood like praise all over the body” into the world. (2000, 48-49)

As Ostriker says here, the poem compares the act of childbirth to the assertive power of phallic language and the creation of poetry. The mother can endure childbirth *and* stand up against male dominance. She can create bodies *and* poetry.

Ostriker writes, “That the poems are intended to be both transgressive and sacred is made clear” (2000, 49). Ostriker does not explicitly explain how this is made clear, but she is probably reading, among other things, Olds’s elevation of childbearing as heroism as evidence that the bearing of children is presented in the poem as a statement of the cosmic importance of maternity. Michele Lise Tarter connects the abjection of the pregnant woman back to religious doctrine in a way that helps explain why “The Language of the Brag” is *theologically* feminist rather than just feminist. Tarter argues that,

Looking at the historical reasons behind women’s silenced voices and censored texts, French feminist Hélène Cixous asserts: ‘For if there’s one thing that’s been repressed, here’s just the place to find it: in the taboo of the pregnant woman’ (261).<sup>124</sup> We might trace such a taboo back to the

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<sup>124</sup> Tarter cites Helene Cixous’s article “The Laugh of the Medusa,” published in *New French Feminisms* (Amherst U of Massachusetts P, 1980).

Judeo-Christian creation myth of Genesis: as punishment for disobediently eating from the Tree of Knowledge and thus abetting in the fall of humankind, Eve is told by a castigating God that she and all women will suffer for her sin through the curse of painful childbirth. (20)

“The Language of the Brag” represents childbirth not as a curse but as a blessing (an “exceptional / act with the exceptional heroic body”) by suggesting that the fluids of the woman cloak the child in praise of the divine, and by suggesting that the creation of a child is like the creation of poetry, of beauty.

Olds’s poem, “Prayer,” the final poem of *Satan Says*, makes a more explicit connection between the sacred and the fluids and activities of the body. The speaker begins the poem with a request, the title prayer of the poem and then moves on to recall important images:

Let me be faithful to the central meanings:

the waters breaking in the birth-room which suddenly  
smelled like the sea;

that first time

he took his body like a saw to me and  
cut through to my inner sex,

the blood on his penis and balls and thighs  
sticky as fruit juice;

the terrible fear

as the child’s head moves down into the vagina:

there is no stopping it, the huge dark  
body moving down out of me  
like the whole inside of my own body  
being pushed out;

the tremors of a cello  
running through my lips when the current of seed  
shoots through him;

her thin hand  
yellow as rosin in mine, her breath  
sawing in and out, a bread-knife:  
breathing with her, going part of the  
way with her;

the hot needle of  
milk piercing my nipple;

the bright  
sweat glazing us with resin as we move  
against each other all afternoon;

the last contraction, when the waist and legs  
slip out like a fish, and I first saw  
the gleaming sex—

let me not forget:  
each action, each word

taking its beginning from these.

“Prayer” represents a woman’s embodied and sexed experiences. The poem moves back and forth between describing sexual intercourse and describing childbirth. It moves, for example from, “the waters breaking in the birth-room” in the second line to telling how the woman’s lover “took his body like a saw to [her]” in the fifth line.

The effect that this alternating between sex and birth has is to challenge certain patriarchal assumptions about of the body and female sexuality. These assumptions are identified and criticized by Kristeva and Irigaray. For one thing, the structure of the poem challenges attempts to idealize the mother by creating a mother of the divine who is distanced from her sexuality. The poem restores the mother to her carnal, sexual body. In addition, the poem challenges the notion that the mother’s body and women’s sexuality are profane and that, therefore, women are distanced from the divine. To challenge this, the poem claims the graphic sexuality of the woman’s experience as appropriate subject matter for a conversation with the divine and by emphasizing the importance of female sexual and childbirth experiences to the origins of life.

Kristeva and Irigaray both claim that Judeo-Christian doctrine has constructed maternity as the ideal role for women by emphasizing the figure of Mary who is the mother of God’s son (and the mother of God’s incarnation. According to both critics, Mary’s access to the divine is dependent upon her usefulness to the divine as bearer of the divine seed. She is not herself divine. Again, the argument is that the mother’s body is so profaned in western thought that Mary must be distanced from her sexuality in order to be worthy of divine use. This creates a conundrum for women who are taught by the story of Mary that, on the one hand, to be of value they must be mothers who are



subordinate to fathers and, on the other hand, because they cannot escape their bodies as successfully as Mary, they can never truly engage with the divine.

By combining the imagery of sex and birth in a poem that seems to speak to the divine about the woman's role in creating life, "Prayer" suggests first that mothers need not aspire to get rid of their corporeality in order to be worthy of the divine. In some lines it is even difficult to distinguish between sex and maternity. For example, the poem contains the lines,

the hot needle of  
milk piercing my nipple;  
the bright  
sweat glazing us with resin as we move  
against each other all afternoon; (23-27)

When the mother refers to milk, she could be describing the first production of milk that accompanies the birth of the child or she could be describing the production of milk that accompanies sexual arousal, a physiological response which many new mothers experience. When she describes bodies moving against each other, she could be describing the sexual interaction between herself and her husband or the interactions between the bodies of child and mother as the child works its way out of the mother's body with the help of the mother's body. In this way the poem resists the idea that the mother's body must be purified from its sexuality.

Again, "Prayer" resists the idea that the woman's body is profane and removed from the sacred. The poem is structured as a prayer. The subject matter of this prayer is, again, "the central meanings": sexual intercourse and childbirth. Both are discussed in

vivid detail. The poem demonstrates that need not suppress the sexuality of the human body, or behave as if one does not have a body or a sexuality in order to be seen by the divine. Critic Tony Hoagland<sup>125</sup> writes of the images in “Prayer,”

to call these fundamental human experiences the ‘central meanings’ seems quite plausible for many people who have lived through them. In fact, the speaker’s suggestion that these are *the* “central meanings” seems not sexually, but *conceptually* provocative. Perhaps they are central meanings precisely because they are experiences which resist codified understanding to which we must submit. Perhaps they are central because they humble the part of human nature that would prefer to hover above experience, as a rational angel. (7)

The poem argues that the embodiment of the mother is necessary for the creation of life. As the poem says, “each action, each word / taking its beginning from these” (32-33). In “An Aesthetics of Beauty and the Somatic Poems of Sharon Olds: When Flesh Becomes Word,” Linden Ontjes argues that Olds’s poems first represent the body as beautiful and then invite the viewer to also see the presented body as beautiful. In doing this last, Ontjes says, Olds’s poems invite a comparison of the body with the sacred. As Ontjes puts it,

[. . .] Olds draws the reader into a joint act of beholding beauty. There, as Olds and reader experience on overwhelming surfeit of sensory intake, i.e. beauty, a crucial cognitive process occurs. Scarry<sup>126</sup> argues that this cognitive process leads the joint-beholders toward the sacred and the just.

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<sup>125</sup> Hoagland writes in response to Adam Kirsch, who accuses Olds of using sexually provocative images to challenge theology, Tony Hoagland says, “But Kirsch, for starters, might be missing the poet’s point: that biology is never just biology either; it is its own legitimate counter-theology.”

In such poems as “Prayer,” Olds make direct comparisons between various embodied interactions and the divine that are less overtly stated and more implied through images and language. Ontjes further argues:

First, upon viewing the generative object, here the body, the beholder experiences the conviction that the object is beauty: unique, incomparable, unprecedented. Then, the beholder experiences error: while attempting to comprehend by describing, the mind makes comparisons. How can an object compared be unique? Yet error is transcended when the mind reaches back and back for the comparison that will capture best the beautiful object and finds that it has reached the sacred. (312)

Ontjes suggests that the reader is presented with images of the bodily relations—sex and childbirth—so that these relations appear striking and “unique.” The poem invites the reader to question the relationship between the two bodily acts (childbirth and sexual intercourse) that are presented by the poem as eccentric objects of examination. Ontjes argues that the subsequent comparison is inevitable and yields the argument that the two acts have their origin in the body, yes, but also in the sacred. Ontjes says, “For Olds, knowledge of the sacred seems unlikely without knowledge of the body” (314). “Prayer” restores the mother to her sexed body and reintroduces the body to the divine. As Linden Ontjes writes about “Prayer,”

In ‘Prayer,’ Olds begins ‘Let me be faithful to the central meanings’: and moves back and forth between the physical intimacy of giving birth and having sex, using linked kinesthetic images. Both acts represent a submersion of self into the body’s ‘holy’ demands. (314)

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<sup>126</sup> Ontjes cites Elaine Scarry’s *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton UP, 1999).

The ending of Olds's poem, *Ontjes*, says "places the soul firmly in the body; a soul made all but corporeal by a linked chain of associations from vagina, to penis, to throat, to belly" (314).

### **Olds and a Female Genealogy**

The final selections of Olds's poems to be examined in chapter five are poems that deal with the relationships between mothers and daughters. As discussed in chapter one and earlier in this chapter, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva both theorize about the effects of patriarchal power on mother-daughter relationships, and the effects of disrupted mother-daughter relationships on women's relationships to the divine. Several of Olds's poems explore relations between mothers and daughters. This another way that Olds enters the theological feminist discourse.

Typically, Olds's female speakers represent contentious relationships with their own mothers. Olds has a difficult time celebrating the genealogy with the mother and expressing a positive connection to her maternal heritage. In many poems in which a daughter speaks about or to her mother, the text is fraught with tension and often anger or contempt directed at the mother.

The second poem in the "Woman" chapter of *Satan Says*, "The Sisters of Sexual Treasure," reflects the contentious relationship between mothers and daughters which, as Irigaray argues, is encouraged by patriarchal power.<sup>127</sup> Irigaray draws upon the

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<sup>127</sup> While Olds comments on the separations between mother and daughter and the disruption of female genealogies in these early poems, she does try to resolve these issues in some of her later poems. "The Talk" for example, represents a conversation between mother and daughter in which the daughter confides in the mother and the mother commiserates with her daughter.

psychoanalytic writings of Melanie Klein<sup>128</sup> to argue in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, that, as the Oedipal complex plays out for a girl,

*The little girl's anxiety about both the father's penis and the mother's revenge usually obliges her to abandon this first, feminine structuration of her libido and to identify herself, in a defensive maneuver, with the father's penis or with the father himself* [her italics]. (1985b, 54)<sup>129</sup>

Olds's poem, "The Sisters of Sexual Treasure," explores this defensiveness against the mother and the desire for the penis of the father. In doing so, the poem reflects the violence of the rift between mother and daughter.

The poem, spoken from the perspective of one of the titular sisters, describes the daughters' rejection of the mother in favor of the power of sexual freedom. The poem begins,

As soon as my sister and I got out of our  
mother's house, all we wanted to  
do was fuck, obliterate  
her tiny sparrow body and narrow  
grasshopper legs. (1-5)

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<sup>128</sup> According to Irigaray, Klein presents a revision to Freudian theory in that she argues that the girl's Oedipus complex, particularly the desire for the father's penis, is not the result of or a symptom of a desire to have her own penis but rather, as Irigaray puts it, "the desire for the intromission of the penis" (1985b, 53-54). According to Irigaray, Klein also argues that the desire for the father's penis originates earlier in the girl's development than Freud indicated. Irigaray says, "This Oedipal precocity would be accentuated owing to the fact that woman's genital drives, like the oral ones, privilege receptivity" (1985b, 54).

<sup>129</sup> Irigaray cites Melanie Klein's articles, "The Effects of Early Anxiety-Situations on the Sexual Development of the Girl," which was originally published in *The Psycho-analysis of Children* (Virago, 1989) and "The Oedipus Complex in the Light of Early Anxieties" published in *Contributions to Psycho-analysis* (Hogarth, 1950).

The speaker equates the mother's body with weakness. The mother is likened to an insect and a small bird. She is small, delicate, and fragile. What she is physically reflects the mother's lack of power in a society dominated by men.

As the speaker exits the mother's world and enters the father's, it is not merely for shock value that Olds's uses the word "fuck" to describe what the sisters do once they leave the mother's house. The word is rude, forceful, powerful, the antithesis of the mother as she is described in the poem. Unlike the mother's body, the father's body is associated with power. The poem continues,

The men's bodies  
were like our father's body! The massive  
hocks, flanks, thighs, elegant  
knees, long tapered calves—  
we could have him there, the steep forbidden  
buttocks, backs of the knees, the cock  
in our mouth, ah the cock in our mouth. (5-11)

The men's bodies and the father's body which they symbolize are more powerful than the mother's. The father has "hocks" and "flanks." He is muscular, active, and powerful. The sisters' desire to place the phallus in their mouths equals a desire to obtain the law of the father and the power of the symbolic order. To enter into the symbolic, the psychoanalytic narrative goes, the sisters must cast off or repress the maternal or semiotic. This they do by attempting to act out a rejection of the mother's cautions against sexual expression:

Like explorers who

discover a lost city, we went  
nuts with joy, undressed the men  
slowly and carefully, as if  
uncovering buried artifacts that  
proved our theory of the lost culture:  
that if Mother said it wasn't there,  
it was there. (12-19)

The “buried artifacts” to which the speaker refers and “the lost city” are the paternal realm which is discovered at the expense of the maternal. The mother is targeted as the culprit who has held the sisters away from the father. The daughters feel they must reject the mother's dictates in order to grasp the father's world and other men's bodies which represent that world and his language.

This is in keeping with Irigaray's claims about mother-daughter bonds, in that she argues that mother-daughter relationships are interrupted by the same process which relegates women to motherhood and subordinates women to men. She says,

If we are not to be accomplices in the murder of the mother we also 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. Because we have been exiled into the house of our husbands, it is easy to forget the special quality of the female genealogy; we might even come to deny it. (1993c, 19)

This comes at a moment when Irigaray argues that women should celebrate female genealogies.

The daughters in “The Sisters of Sexual Treasure,” seek to efface the mother, to “obliterate” her in exchange for the power of the male world. They live out the patriarchal psychoanalytic narrative of identity formation. Irigaray argues that,

When analytic theory claims that the little girl must give up her love for and of the mother, abandon the desire for and of her mother, if she is to enter into desire for the father, woman is thereby subjected to a normative heterosexuality, common in our societies, but nonetheless completely pathogenic and pathological. Neither the little girl nor the woman needs to give up the love for her mother. To do so is to sever women from the roots of their identity and their subjectivity. (20)

The psychoanalytic narrative is flawed, Irigaray argues, and is in need of critique. Olds’s poem exposes the narrative to critique by suggesting that there is something grotesque in the way the daughter’s figuratively murder or “obliterate” the mother and attempt to consume the father. The violence of their desire to destroy the mother’s body by embracing the father’s suggests that their actions are deviant.. The animosity which the girls exhibit toward their mother is represented as unnatural and at the expense of the self. The two daughters subjugate themselves in abandoning the mother and seeking the father in other men. The poem evokes the image of the daughters on their knees, servicing men and receiving gratification only vicariously through the knowledge that they are going against the mother’s teachings.

Irigaray argues that the system of patriarchal power in the west which forces women to become disconnected from their mothers also distances women from the ability



to celebrate a genealogy that is female and distance women from the possibility of a female divine. This, she says, creates a crisis of identity for women:

If a woman were to celebrate the Eucharist with her mother, giving her a share of the fruits of the earth blessed by them both, she might be freed from all hatred or ingratitude toward her maternal genealogy, and be hallowed in her identity as a woman. (1993c, 21)

Irigaray argues that the conflict between mother and daughter is a symptom of the relegation of women to the body and the rejection of the maternal body both of which are imposed upon the daughter from outside. In other words, she argues that the suppression of the maternal and the denial of the sacredness of the body are artificial social constructs. As Irigaray argues, these actions are enforced to maintain patriarchal power over women, and women are taught to be complicit in this.

Irigaray argues that it is important for women to resolve the separation of women from their female genealogies. Olds's "The Sisters of Sexual Treasure" depicts the neurosis that arises from the daughters' "hatred" of the mother. The sisters go "nuts" with their desire to destroy the mother and gain the power of the father. The poem calls into question the contentious relationship between mothers and daughters and invites revision of the idea that this is a natural part of identity formation.

Olds seems to attempt to reach back to heal the rupture in between herself and her female ancestry. In her later poem, "Why My Mother Made Me," though the speaker acknowledges her mother's hand in her creation, the speaker imagines herself created as a replica of her father. However, the speaker imagines also that her mother created her that way, "because she wanted exactly that, / wanted there to be a woman / a lot like her, but

who would not hold back,” (14-16). The speaker imagines that the mother has imbued her daughter with more of the father because the mother envied the father’s power: “maybe I am what she wanted to be / when she first saw him [. . .] She wanted that power” (3-8). The speaker suggests that the mother looks approvingly at the daughter as a more powerful version of herself:

I lie here now as I once lay  
in the crook of her arm, her creature,  
and I feel her looking down into me the way the  
maker of a sword gazes at his face in the  
steel of the blade. (24-28)

While the mother has made the daughter to be a female version of the father, according to the speaker, the speaker is still connected to her mother. She has she says, “that milk at the center of my nature,” the milk which is a symbol of the maternal (23). This poem offers the mother-daughter relationship an aura of sacredness. The mother is the creator. While Olds does not go so far as to claim that the mother is God or Goddess, but the poem does hint in that direction.

In “After 37 Years My Mother Apologizes for My Childhood,” the speaker forgives her mother for her dysfunctional childhood; revealing that her identity had been based on conflict with the mother and expressing uncertainty as to how to have an identity without the rejection of the mother. She says,

I could not see what my  
days would be with you sorry, with  
with you wishing you had not done it, the

sky falling around me, its shards  
glistening in my eyes, your old soft  
body fallen against me in horror I  
took you in my arms, I said *It's all right,*  
*don't cry, it's all right,* the air filled with  
flying glass, I hardly knew what I  
said or who I would be now that I had forgiven you.(17-26)

The speaker's conflict in the poem is no longer with the mother; it is with her own struggle for a self-concept that is no longer based on a rejection of the maternal. While "Why My Mother Made Me" and "After 37 Years" both appear in Olds's 1987 book of poetry, *The Gold Cell* and express a connection between their main speakers and their mothers, there is, in both poems, a lingering tension. In the former, the daughter does not identify wholeheartedly with the mother; in the latter poem, the speaker does not know what to without contention between herself and her mother.

The poems in which Olds's female speakers examine relationships with their own daughters are more positive. In Olds's poem, "For My Daughter,"<sup>130</sup> the speaker posits a connection to her daughter based on shared biology and shared sexual experience. The speaker, a mother, speaks to her daughter about sex and imagines her daughter's future experiences as like her own:

That Night will come. Somewhere someone will be  
entering you, his body riding  
under your white body, dividing

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<sup>130</sup> The discussion here is based on the version of "For My Daughter" published in Olds's *The Dead and the Living* in 2000.

your blood from your skin, your dark, liquid  
eyes open or closed, the slipping  
silken hair of your head fine  
as water poured at night, the delicate  
threads between your legs curled  
like stitches broken. The center of your body  
will tear open, as a woman will rip  
the seam of her skirt so she can run. It will happen,  
and when it happens I will be right here  
in bed with your father, as when you learned to read  
you would go off and read in your room  
as I read in mine, versions of the story  
that changes in the telling, the story of the river.

The speaker returns to her own experience, in bed with the father, and the implication is that she, the speaker, has shared the kinds of experiences with the father that she imagines the daughter sharing with her partner.

The simile linking sexual intercourse to reading in their rooms makes the connection between mother and daughter even stronger. As they both read in their rooms, they both experience sex in their own rooms with their own partners. The mother says that the differences between mother and daughter's experiences are merely "versions of the story" (15). That she says "the story" using the definite article, rather than *a* story indicates to readers that there is only one important story or central experience which the mother and daughter share.

This poem does not overtly claim the female body as sacred. However, it does, like many of Olds's graphically sexual poems, rescue the female body from the status of profane and female sexuality and biology as well. By once again making female sexual experience appropriate subject matter for poetry, the speaker makes the experiences beautiful (as Ontjes argues), cosmic, and by implication, sacred.

The argument for a genealogy of female experience also supports the argument that the embodied experiences described in the poem are sacred. Irigaray argues that recognizing female genealogies will allow women to become divine. She says,

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. We cannot love if we have no memory of a native passiveness in relation to our mother, of our primitive attachment to her, and hers to us. (1993c, 71)

Irigaray believes that Judeo-Christian theology along with psychoanalytic traditions have led to this rift between mothers and daughters and this disruption of communities of women. She argues that, without the interference of patriarchal culture, there would exist a natural affinity or "native passiveness" between mother and daughter and the daughter would not be encouraged to reject her connection to her maternal heritage. The connection between women needs to be regained so that women can counteract their relegation to the body and their exclusion from the sacred.

Olds's "For My Daughter" restores the connection between daughter and mother. First, she speaks openly about the similarities, and this act rescues biology from the abject. Second, the mother speaks adoringly of the beauty of the daughter's body, so she

creates a relationship that is supportive rather than tense or competitive. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the suggestion that the poem, by representing shared bodily experiences as beautiful, raises these bodily experiences to the level of the sacred. Olds's speakers seem unable to reconcile completely with the mother but they are able to extend the genealogy forward without reservations, suggesting a more hopeful future.

### **Conclusion**

In "First Night," "I Am the Shrink's Wife," and the "Young Mother" poems, Olds reflects on negative constructions of female sexuality and maternity which support sexist understandings of the relationship between women and the divine. Just as theorists like Irigaray and Kristeva will first explain ideas they find troubling and then suggest solutions, Olds first represents the problem and then, in later poems, suggests revisions of those images. In "The Language of the Brag" and "Prayer" Olds challenges those psychoanalytic and Christian traditions which she presents as problematic in the aforementioned group of poems. She celebrates "the culture of the breath"<sup>131</sup> and celebrates the maternal in all of its complexity. Similarly, in "The Sisters of Sexual Treasure," Olds presents the problem of the disruption of mother-daughter relationships and then reconstructs it in "Why My Mother Made Me," "After 37 Years My Mother Apologizes for My Childhood," and "For My Daughter," where she posits a healing of the rift between daughter and mother and an affirmation of female genealogies moving forward into the future.

Olds's contribution to theological feminism, at least in the poems discussed in this chapter, is her revision of the constructions of female sexuality and especially the

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<sup>131</sup> This is a phrase used by Marie-Andrée Roy in her article to refer to Irigaray's emphasis on women celebrating their bodies and their embodied connections to other women.

maternal. Luce Irigaray argues that in order for women to be autonomous individuals, they must be able to imagine a divine ideal that is female. One step toward that goal, Irigaray says, is celebrating women's bodies. As Marie-Andrée Roy says in "Women and Spirituality in the Writings of Irigaray," "The body is understood [by Irigaray] as the site of the spiritual, to be cultivated, like the divine temple" (17). Irigaray says,

Current theory, even theological theory, makes women out to be monsters of hatred and thus makes us submit to an existing order. Does respect for God made flesh not imply that we should incarnate God within us and in our sex: daughter-woman-mother? Yet this duty is never imposed upon us—quite the contrary. What a strange error in human ethics! By our culture, our religion. (1993c, 71)

She argues that women's bodies and motherhood have been treated as offensive to the divine. She goes on to say,

This error is protracted and encouraged by the spiritual technicians: the psychologists, psychoanalysts, etc. And yet, without the possibility that God might be made flesh as a woman, through the mother and the daughter, and in their relationships, no real constructive help can be offered to a woman. If the divine is absent in woman, and among women, there can be no possibility of changing, converting her primary affects. (1993c, 71)

Olds challenges both the religious and psychoanalytic narratives which Irigaray criticizes. Olds also cultivates the divine temple of the body by celebrating the most basic biological substances and activities of the human body as beautiful, by celebrating the maternal and

questioning negative representations of it, and by making an effort to recover a female genealogy, thereby recognizing the sacredness of shared female experience. Rather than locating the divine externally and then trying to make her female characters amenable to that divine through suffering, Olds suggests that the divine is already within the woman's body and its interactions with other bodies.



## **Chapter Six: Conclusion**

The first chapter of this project summarized some of the important arguments in twentieth-century feminist responses to Christianity that have been written in prose and that are typically classified as theological feminism. That chapter surveyed the work of theorists such as Luce Irigaray, Mary Daly, and Julia Kristeva who are more radical in their responses to Judeo-Christian tradition. To offer a balanced picture of the trends in feminist responses to Christianity, chapter one also inventoried some of the work of more moderate theorists such as Rosemary Radford Reuther, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Elizabeth Johnson, and Sylvia Schroer.

The second chapter of this project examined the poetry of nineteenth-century American poet Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and argued that, through representations of enslaved African-African American mothers, appeals to nineteenth-century assumptions about motherhood, and paraphrase poetry, Harper argues for a divine that cares for women and the oppressed. The third chapter of this project examined the poetry of nineteenth-century American poet Emily Dickinson and argued that Dickinson enters the rhetoric of theological feminism by also critiquing the concept of the Christian divine, by positing a female divine in nature, and by positing nature and Christ as vehicles through which human beings and especially women can form a closer connection to the divine which challenges dualistic assumptions about the connection between the body and the soul.

The fourth chapter of this project examined the poetry of twentieth-century American poet Vassar Miller and argued that Miller spent much of her work contending with dualistic assumptions that influence her own relationship to the divine and some portions of her work exploring the possibility of a female divine and a female genealogy. The fifth chapter of this project examined the poetry of contemporary American poet Sharon Olds and argued that Olds examines assumptions about the female body and its relationship to the sacred.

All four poets respond to Christian traditions in their poetry. A comparative reading of the four poets reveals yet more similarities in their concerns about Christianity. Frances Harper and Vassar Miller are traditionally pious in their approach to the Christian divine. In contrast, Emily Dickinson and Sharon Olds are often much more wary of acceptance of faith in the Christian divine. Harper seems never to express doubt, Dickinson seems to vacillate between faith and doubt, Miller expresses faith and doubt often simultaneously, and Olds seems altogether to avoid direct expression on the subject of belief in God.

All four poets deal with representations of the female body in relationship to the divine. Harper relies heavily on images of the suffering body of the enslaved African-American woman, appealing to nineteenth-century attitudes about motherhood in her conceptualization of a caring Christian divine. Sharon Olds also relies on images of the maternal body, but she challenges attempts to purify the biological body in order to break down the concept of a divine at odds with the human female body. Vassar Miller's own female and disabled body figures heavily in her poetry that ambivalently deals with the relationship between embodied human beings and the Christian divine. Like Harper and

Miller, Dickinson posits a suffering human body as a means of connecting with the embodied divine figure of Jesus Christ. It is important to note that all four poets take complex positions on the subject of the body's relationship to the divine so that their poetry is exploratory as well as rhetorical.

This project focuses on poetry because it is prompted, in part, by the work of Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, both of whom suggest that poetic language has a special relationship to feminist theory. "Poetry recalls the elements," Irigaray says, while "Our so-called human sciences and our day-to-day speech steer clear of the elements, moving forward through and with a language that forgets the matter it names and by means of which it speaks" (*Sexes* 58). For Irigaray, poetic language is less fixed and is, therefore, symbolic of transgressive thinking.

Kristeva more directly genders her claims, arguing that poetic language is the language of the repressed mother or semiotic language as distinguished from the symbolic language of the father. She suggests that poetic language is most closely associated with the semiotic or the repressed maternal because both represent the instability of the symbolic. According to Kristeva, the semiotic is the matriarchal realm that is rejected by the subject in order to enter the symbolic order. Poetic language is based in that area of unconscious, repressed, ineffable meaning, that cannot be made clear via the symbolic.

This project focuses on feminist responses to Christianity in American women's poetry not because Christianity is more in need of feminist critique than any other theology but Christianity is the religious doctrine in the west, and especially in the United States, that is most influential in supporting patriarchal power. Kristeva argues further

that the narrative of Christianity represents an analogy to the repression of the semiotic, and that poetry can recover the language of the mother. She says,

Christianity is perhaps also the last of the religions to have displayed in broad daylight the bipolar structure of belief: on the one hand, the difficult experience of the Word—passion; on the other, the reassuring wrapping in the proverbial mirage of the mother—a love. For that reason, it seems to me that there is only one way to go through the religion of the word, or its counterpart, the more or less discreet cult of the Mother; it is the “artists” way, those who make up for the vertigo of language weakness with the oversaturation of sign systems. By this token, all art is a kind of counter reformation, an accepted baroqueness. (1984, 252-253)

Kristeva argues that Christianity privileges the symbolic as the biblical “Word” and the narrative of Jesus’s suffering and sacrifice which is contained in the “Word.” Meanwhile, Christianity also promotes the image of Mary as a respite from the oppressive patriarchy of the “Word.” This dichotomy in Christianity is another manifestation of the psychoanalytic privileging of the law of the father that necessitates the rejection of the mother, and the general western privileging of the father while relegating the mother to the role of background caregiver. Kristeva says that “the ‘artists’” use the “oversaturation of sign systems.” In other words, the artist is copes with the problem of the oppressive symbolic order and the loss of the mother by exposing the insufficient nature of symbolic language and by revealing and utilizing the transience of language signs.

What Kristeva says here about the artists’ way is one of the reasons this dissertation focuses on poetry. The poets in this study, in one way or another, deal with

the slippages and inconsistencies in language not only about Christianity but also in language about the divine, and the maternal body. In “Bible Defence of Slavery,” Frances Harper challenges the use of the Bible to support oppression exposing the Bible as susceptible to unethical or patriarchal interpretations. Additionally, Dickinson, Miller, and Olds all use the ambiguity of language and the discomfort that it can cause to encourage inquiry about the relationships between the divine and the human body and between the divine and women. The ambiguities and exegetical difficulties which have been noticed in the works of these writers add to the sense of their writing as feminist responses to patriarchal power structures precisely because they imply a challenge to the notion that language, “The Word,” can be fixed or sacred.

Irigaray complains at the end of *Sexes and Genealogies* that,

On women’s part, after submitting to patriarchal churches for centuries, they have become disgusted with religion and have forgotten to consider their own divine origins. The patriarchy has separated the human from the divine but it has also deprived women of their goddesses or their divinity. Before patriarchy both women and men were potentially divine, which perhaps means they were both *social*. (1993c, 190)

This project claims, however, that things are not nearly as dismal as Irigaray believes. As this project has demonstrated, within the writings of Harper, Dickinson, Miller, and Olds can be found evidence of women’s difficulties with the traditional Christian divine and with concepts of the female body’s relationship to the divine, as well as evidence that these women suggest alternatives and create alternatives for themselves on a personal level and for other women and men on a public level. The fact that work by two of these

poets predates the writings of the twentieth-century theological feminist prose writers calls attention to the fact that the issues of twentieth-century theological feminism do not begin or end in the twentieth-century prose, but pervade throughout a significant tradition of women's writing in various genres and time periods.

The exploration of women's writing continues to reveal a rich tradition of women grappling with the patriarchal implications of Christianity across genres and time periods. This brings to mind Irigaray's call to action in *This Sex Which Is Not One*. She writes to women,

Open your lips; don't open them simply. I don't open them simply. We—you/ I—are neither open nor closed. We never separate simply: *a single word* cannot be pronounced, produced, uttered by our mouths. Between our lips, yours and mine, several voices, several ways of speaking resound endlessly, back and forth. One is never separable from the other. You/I: we are always several at once. (1985b, 209)

This project has examined how a sample of women writers use their pens to respond to, revise, and challenge traditional and often oppressive thinking about women and the divine in a Christian tradition s that continue to influence the status of women in the western world. The comparison of the work of poets and theoretical prose writers reveals that the "several ways of speaking" to which Irigaray refers have existed and continue to exist. Rather than reading feminist theology as a separate field from poetry, it is possible to see the typical issues raised by theological feminists in many different types of writing. The theorists dealt with in chapter one join with Harper, Dickinson, Miller, and Olds and

many other voices to “resound endlessly, back and forth,” forming part of a rich tradition of women’s theological feminist writings.

In her preface to *Dancing at the Devil’s Party*, Alicia Ostriker states, “Poetry can, as Conrad<sup>132</sup> puts it, make us *see*. It can also, like Rilke’s torso of Apollo, tell us that we must change our lives. From time to time, some of us believe, poetry changes the world” (ix). This project is based on just that belief, that poetry can be revealing and transformative. The theological feminist theorists whose work is summarized in chapter one are interested in revelation (of the potentially sexist aspects of organized religion, of women’s potential for divinity, of feminine qualities of the traditional Christian divine, and of the close relationships possible between women and the divine suggested within and beyond traditional scripture). They are also interested in transformation; for the more radical writers this involves an upheaval of Christianity, and for the more moderate writers this means transforming the ways in which scripture and language about the divine is utilized in the continued practice of Christianity.

The poets, Harper, Dickinson, Miller, and Olds engage in both revelation and transformation in their poetry. They reveal problematic concepts of the divine in Christianity and more liberating ways of reading the divine. They suggest possible ways of transforming the concepts of a women’s relationship to the divine either within traditional scripture or beyond it. This project does not attempt to argue that Christianity is inherently sexist; it demonstrates that the potential of Christian doctrine to support patriarchal power can be challenged both by disavowing Christianity and by revising the rhetoric of Christianity. However, what becomes clear in the study of prose and poetic

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<sup>132</sup> Ostriker refers to part of Joseph Conrad’s preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus* (1897). Conrad’s statement referred all writing, not just poetry.

feminist responses to Christianity is that the same problems are brought up repeatedly. The prevalence of feminist responses to Christianity, of which this project only scratches the surface, suggests that while dismantling Christianity may not be necessary for liberating women from patriarchal subjugation in the west, certainly approaches to the practice of Christianity seem to be important battleground in that struggle. The studies of these four poets and other similar studies illustrate that such revision is already begun and is ongoing.



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