SARA MAITLAND AND MICHÈLE ROBERTS:

RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY IN CONTEMPORARY BRITISH WOMEN'S FICTION

Caroline Guerin

Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of English, The University of Adelaide
December 1995

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ABSTRACT

This thesis argues that the fiction of Sara Maitland and Michèle Roberts makes a major contribution to contemporary British women's writing, a contribution which has until now been largely under-estimated by its critical audience. It demonstrates this through an exploration of the interconnections between literature, religion, psychoanalysis and feminism in their work, focusing primarily on Maitland's *Daughter of Jerusalem* (1978) and *Virgin Territory* (1984), and Roberts' *The Visitation* (1983), *The Wild Girl* (1984) and *The Book of Mrs Noah* (1987). Chapter One outlines the cultural and literary traditions from which Maitland and Roberts emerge, with special attention paid to their better-known contemporaries, Edna O'Brien and Margaret Drabble, and to Jane Gardam's work which is situated in bordering terrain. Chapter Two examines *The Wild Girl* in relation to discussions of dualism and binarism in feminist theology and French feminist theory. Chapter Three compares representations of Christ in *The Wild Girl* and *Virgin Territory* with those found in Julia O'Faolain's *Women in the Wall* and Iris Murdoch's *Nuns and Soldiers* to indicate Maitland's and Roberts' contributions to the project of refiguring Christ in ways that make him more relevant to today's Christian women. Chapter Four focuses on *Virgin Territory* which invokes a Lacanian/Kristevan framework in its depiction of the autonomous virgin. Chapter Five explores the implications of the biblical Visitation for contemporary women and notions of sisterhood as they are represented in Maitland's and Roberts' long fiction, especially *The Visitation.* Chapter Six examines the religious and spiritual dimensions of motherhood in relation to *Daughter of Jerusalem.* Chapter Seven analyses Roberts' study of motherhood which uses the ark as a symbol of feminine creativity in *The Book of Mrs Noah.* Chapter One provides a context for Maitland's and Roberts' work; Chapters Two and Three take up some general issues about the relationship between Christianity, Christ, sexuality and women; Chapters Four and Five focus on women's roles as daughters and sisters; and Chapters Six and Seven centre on the theme of motherhood.

DECLARATION

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university, and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference has been made in the text or notes.

I consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being made available for photocopying and loan.

4/7/96

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to take this opportunity to gratefully acknowledge the support and advice I have received from my supervisor, Dr Michael Tolley, and other members of the Adelaide University English Department who have read and commented upon early drafts of my work, including Prof Penny Boumelha, Dr Rosemary Moore, and Robin Eaden, as well as Dr Russell McDougall of the University of New England.

Special thanks also to Dr Heather Kerr of the Adelaide University English Department for her enthusiastic and patient guidance through the last stages of this project.

I would also like to thank my husband Roger for his loving encouragement throughout the process of research and writing.

ABBREVIATIONS

I have used the following abbreviations to refer to primary sources in the text:

Margaret Drabble	*The Millstone* (1965)	*M*
	Jerusalem the Golden (1967)	*JG*
	The Needle's Eye (1972)	*NE*
	Realms of Gold (1975)	*RG*
Jane Gardam	*God on the Rocks* (1978)	*GR*
	Crusoe's Daughter (1985)	*CD*
Sara Maitland	*Daughter of Jerusalem* (1978)	*DJ*
	Virgin Territory (1984)	*VT*
Iris Murdoch	*Nuns and Soldiers* (1980)	*NS*
Edna O'Brien	*The Country Girls* (1960)	*CG*
	Girl with Green Eyes (1962)	*GGE*
	Girls in Their Married Bliss (1964)	*GMB*
	A Pagan Place (1970)	*PP*
Julia O'Faolain	*Women in the Wall* (1975)	*WW*
Michèle Roberts	*A Piece of the Night* (1978)	*PN*
	The Visitation (1983)	*V*
	The Wild Girl (1984)	*WG*
	The Book of Mrs Noah (1987)	*BMN*

INTRODUCTION

This thesis argues that the fiction of Sara Maitland and Michèle Roberts makes a major contribution to contemporary British women's writing, a contribution which has until now been largely under-estimated by its critical audience. It demonstrates this through an exploration of the interconnections between literature, religion, psychoanalysis and feminism in their work, focusing primarily on Maitland's *Daughter of Jerusalem* (1978) and *Virgin Territory* (1984), and Roberts' *The Visitation* (1983), *The Wild Girl* (1984) and *The Book of Mrs Noah* (1987). Chapter One outlines the cultural and literary traditions from which Maitland and Roberts emerge, with special attention paid to their better-known contemporaries, Edna O'Brien and Margaret Drabble, and to Jane Gardam's work which is situated in bordering terrain. Chapter Two examines *The Wild Girl* in relation to discussions of dualism and binarism in feminist theology and French feminist theory. Chapter Three compares representations of Christ in *The Wild Girl* and *Virgin Territory* with those found in Julia O'Faolain's *Women in the Wall* and Iris Murdoch's *Nuns and Soldiers* to indicate Maitland's and Roberts' contributions to the project of refiguring Christ in ways that make him more relevant to today's Christian women. Chapter Four focuses on *Virgin Territory* which invokes a Lacanian/Kristevan framework in its depiction of the autonomous virgin. Chapter Five explores the implications of the biblical Visitation for contemporary women and notions of sisterhood as they are represented in Maitland's and Roberts' long fiction, especially *The Visitation.* Chapter Six examines the religious and spiritual dimensions of motherhood in relation to *Daughter of Jerusalem.* Chapter Seven analyses Roberts' study of motherhood which uses the ark as a symbol of feminine creativity in *The Book of Mrs Noah.* Chapter One provides a context for Maitland's and Roberts' work; Chapters Two and Three take up some general issues about the relationship between Christianity, Christ, sexuality and women; Chapters Four and Five focus on women's roles as daughters and sisters; and Chapters Six and Seven centre on the theme of motherhood.

The fiction of Sara Maitland and Michèle Roberts is located at that point where literature, religion, psychoanalysis and feminism all intersect. While this is true of much contemporary British women's writing, it is in the work of Maitland and Roberts that we have the opportunity to see the most detailed and thorough-going analyses of this fertile ground. Their contribution to contemporary British women's writing becomes apparent when it is read in this light. While critical attention has been focused on writers such as Margaret Drabble and Edna O'Brien whose work also explores questions of religion and spirituality in relation to contemporary women, I believe that Maitland and Roberts provide a more illuminating analysis of these issues in their fiction because of their engagement with a range of feminist theories.

Both Maitland's and Roberts' work has received mixed responses from reviewers, depending on whether or not the critic is sympathetic to feminist ideology.[1] This has had the effect of trivialising and "ghettoising" their writing to some extent in the past, and, while the canvassing of feminist issues is certainly very important to Maitland's and Roberts' work, I believe that it needs to be read from religious and psychoanalytic perspectives also in order to fully appreciate the depth and scope of its analysis of the influence of religion on Western culture in general, and more specifically the influence of Christianity on women's subjectivity within British culture. Although this fiction has reached a degree of popularity through the mass media and publishing initiatives, including the appearance of Roberts' *Daughters of the House* on the 1992 Booker Prize Shortlist, it has not yet received the sustained analysis that it deserves.[2] When read in terms of feminism, religion and psychoanalysis it becomes clear that Maitland's and Roberts' fiction

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1 For example, while Valentine Cunningham refers to the "narcissism and narrowness" of *The Book of Mrs Noah*, Helen Birch describes it as "playful, allusive and challenging" (Cunningham, *Observer*, 24 May 1987, 25; Birch, *New Statesman*, 22 May 1987, 27).

2 A few critical studies include brief discussions of their work: Flora Alexander's *Contemporary Women Novelists* (London: Edward Arnold, 1989); Olga Kenyon's *Women Novelists Today: A Survey of English Writing in the Seventies and Eighties* (Brighton: Harvester, 1988) and *Women Writers Talk: Interviews with 10 Women Writers* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1989); and Paulina Palmer's *Contemporary Women's Fiction: Narrative Practice and Feminist Theory* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989) and *Contemporary Lesbian Writing: Dreams, Desire, Difference* (Buckingham and Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1993). Further references will appear in the text.

provides us with a significant commentary upon many of the central concerns of our times, bringing together a number of the prevailing ideologies and articulating their meanings for contemporary Western culture in original voices. The points of contradiction between the discourses of feminism, religion and psychoanalysis (for example, the humanist desire for spiritual and psychic "wholeness" of religious discourses is undermined by the insights postmodernism and feminist psychoanalysis offer about subjectivity, yet that desire maintains its force) provide a creative tension in their writing, particularly in Roberts' *The Wild Girl* and *The Visitation*, and Maitland's *Daughter of Jerusalem*.

In her study of women and religion in contemporary fiction, *Lilith's Daughters*, Barbara Hill Rigney claims that there is "an urgency in contemporary fiction in general, but especially in that written by women, to fill [the] spiritual and psychological gaps"[3] left by the ontological breakdown of the modern world in which all the givens about our place in relation to each other, society as a whole, God and the universe, are no longer certain. This is as true of contemporary British women's writing as it is of the particular works Rigney examines; indeed, the historical connection between politics and religion in Britain, where the head of the Church is also the head of State, gives this search a specific inflection in the British context. Thus, the religious dimension of the political issues raised by feminism is recognised by many British women writers, creating an unusually rich source of fiction exploring the relationship between women and religion (and Christianity in particular) and feminist politics.

Much of contemporary British women's writing attempts to fill, or at least explain, the spiritual and psychological gaps to which Rigney refers, and does so through an exploration of religion, psychoanalysis and feminism. Although individual writers place different emphases on each of these elements and interpret them in a wide variety of ways, it is here that many of Britain's major women writers see fit to seek answers to important and fundamental questions about subjectivity, language and the nature of "truth" (or what humanists would refer to as "the nature of existence and the human condition"), in an

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3 Barbara Hill Rigney, *Lilith's Daughters: Women and Religion in Contemporary Fiction* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982) 6.

attempt to make some sense of our world. Like Rigney, I will explore the ways in which contemporary women writers attempt to revise traditional religious concepts in their fiction. However, while Rigney focuses on archetypal figures and situations (and organises her study around the figures of Christ, Mary and Eve, and the situation of "The Garden"), I will range beyond that to include some of the other issues raised by feminist theology, philosophy and psychoanalytic theory as well, such as the importance of dualism and binarism in our understanding of identity and subjectivity. Also unlike Rigney, I will address some of the feminist reworkings of psychoanalytic theory. Margaret Drabble's *Realms of Gold* is the only novel which is discussed by both Rigney and myself, and Rigney does so only briefly in the final pages of her book. My primary focus, however, is on the long fiction of Maitland and Roberts.

What serves as "religion" for the writers examined in this thesis encompasses organised faith, individual spirituality, and current theological debate. It includes individuals' deeply held convictions about morality and truth, as well as their most intense and personal experiences of being; it includes both the personal and social aspects of faith, belief and morality. In fiction this takes a variety of forms ranging from psychological studies of the inner spiritual life of characters (Sara Maitland's *Daughter of Jerusalem;* Michèle Roberts' *Visitation*) to women's lived experiences of organised, formal religion (O'Brien's *Country Girls* trilogy; Jane Gardam's *Crusoe's Daughter*; Sara Maitland's *Virgin Territory*) to mystical moments which transcend the ordinary world (Julia O'Faolain's *Women in the Wall*; Michèle Roberts' *Wild Girl*). I also include here what Carol Christ describes as spiritual experiences of "awakening" or "surfacing" which are "more the emergence of what is known but suppressed than the radical turning around or adopting of an alien world view implied by the conventional term [conversion]" and "open the protagonist to the experience of great cosmic powers which ground her newly felt sense of her own power",[4] such as Sara Maitland explores in *Virgin Territory* and Margaret Drabble in *Realms of Gold.*

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4 Carol P. Christ, "Margaret Atwood: The Surfacing of Women's Spiritual Quest and Vision", *Signs* 2.2 (Winter 1976): 325.

What serves as "psychoanalysis" for these writers ranges from conventional psychological portraits of the workings of a character's mind (as Edna O'Brien, Margaret Drabble and Jane Gardam use in their writing) to the importation of the psycho-linguistics of French feminism (which Maitland and Roberts employ). Narrative and psychoanalysis have been linked from the beginning of Freud's discussion and publication of his insights into the workings of the human mind, and the novel has frequently been used as a medium for exploring the significance of complicated, often unconscious, motivations in human behaviour through characters' actions. As psychoanalysis develops into a more and more complex and diverse theory, many fiction writers incorporate these varied insights into their work, often by interweaving realism with fantasy. Narrative form and genre will be discussed in further detail in Chapter One in relation to the contemporary context of Maitland's and Roberts' work, as well as the implications of the mixture of discourses which frequently characterises the writing of women exploring politico-religious questions.

The "feminism" in contemporary British women's writing ranges from an interest in defining the position of women in society and the political rhetoric of the women's liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s to sophisticated philosophical theorisation. Novels are used to articulate the general conditions of women living in a phallocentric society, as well as to offer positive role models of women's capabilities.[5] As the theoretical base of feminism becomes increasingly sophisticated, so too have the questions and answers it posits, and writers working from a feminist perspective begin to deal with the gaps and silences in masculinist thinking, exploring ideas about difference and multiplicity, psychic formation, linguistics and the privileging of rationality over non-rationality. This development of feminist theory is reflected in the novels under discussion here; while O'Brien, Gardam and Drabble are mainly concerned with images of women in

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5 By "phallocentrism" I refer to the dominant mode of Western thought which places the phallus at the centre of representational systems, accepting the masculine as the norm and privileging the symbol of the phallus as signifier of authority. In Maggie Humm's words: "[Phallocentric] describe[s] the way society regards the phallus or penis as a symbol of power, and believes that attributes of masculinity are the norm for cultural definitions" (*The Dictionary of Feminist Theory* [London and New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989] 163). Elizabeth Grosz describes this in more detail in *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1989) xx.

society, Maitland and Roberts use the language as well as the theoretical sophistication of later feminism.

Thus contemporary British women's writing offers a diverse array of approaches to the meeting-point of literature, religion, psychoanalysis and feminism. We see Jane Gardam's studies of the contemporary significance of the figure of Eve and original sin; Edna O'Brien writing about women's experiences of their own sexuality in relation to Irish Catholicism; Margaret Drabble developing a spirituality based on domesticity; Iris Murdoch depicting a meeting between an ex-nun and Christ; Julia O'Faolain exploring eroticism against the background of a sixth-century Gallic convent; Jeanette Winterson's portrayal of lesbianism versus fundamentalist fanaticism; Ellen Galford's *Fires of Bride*, at the heart of which is a story of Jesus Christ's twin sister; Lorna Mitchell's *The Revolution of Saint Jone* which critiques the dualism of conventional Christianity and offers androgyny as the ideal; and Michelene Wandor's excursions into the female experience of Judaism. Yet all of the writers discussed here are, ultimately, interested in feminine sexuality and religion.

My main concern in this thesis is to examine some of the novels by Sara Maitland and Michèle Roberts with particular reference to the ways in which they deal with some of the issues raised by feminist theology, since it is here that they most clearly embrace literature, religion, psychoanalysis and feminism simultaneously. "Feminist theology" encompasses a wide range of subjects, including critiques of the dogma and teaching of organised religions, explorations of metaphysics and linguistics, reworkings of the significance of pagan goddesses and witchcraft, and examinations of the spiritual and religious implications of the peace and ecology movements. Central to all of these, however, are the insights that feminist theory brings to our understanding of the nature of human existence and the experience of being, of faith (whether it be in God, good or oneself) and morality. In Mary Daly's words: "The women's liberation movement is a spiritual movement because it aims at humanization of women....At its core it is spiritual in the deepest sense of the word, because it means the self-actualization of creative human potential in the struggle against oppression".[6] It is also a fundamentally political project in that any

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6 Mary Daly, "The Spiritual Dimension of Women's Liberation", *Radical Feminism*,

invocation of feminism draws attention to the power relationships between men and women.

I do not intend to advance the ideas of feminist theology myself, but to establish Maitland's and Roberts' use of these ideas in their fiction. Thus, in the context of this thesis, my central interest in feminist theology is in the critiques it offers of Christianity and the relationship of women to the Church, since this is the dominant organised religion of contemporary Britain.

Christianity has been criticised as a bastion of patriarchy which oppresses women at its most fundamental level, for, "If God in 'his' heaven is a father ruling 'his' people, then it is in the 'nature' of things and according to divine plan and the order of the universe, that society be male-dominated" (Daly 261). Given this state of affairs, a feminist interrogation of Christianity clearly leads to an entirely new understanding of God and the place of women in the world. Central to this program of change is the notion that "Man is made in God's image"; under the scrutiny of feminism the gender bias of this fundamental Christian belief is revealed. It becomes apparent that a patriarchal version of Christianity creates God in *man's* image. If God is no longer limited to masculine qualities but encompasses every possibility, and *all* human beings are made in God's image, then Christianity can be seen to encourage women as well as men to fulfil their potential to become fully human by expressing every dimension of themselves. It is then a travesty of humanity to limit women to their traditionally subordinate role in relation to men. Mary Daly discusses the idea of God as a verb which refers to our "becoming". From a very different perspective, Luce Irigaray also develops the notion of God as a verb, as the goal of an infinite becoming in reaching towards our own ideal or perfection, which we must live out in order to "generate the divine in us and between us".[7] According to this, then, it is our responsibility to become godlike, which is, in turn, to become fully human; that is, god is a projection of perfect humanity. In many of the novels under discussion in this thesis,

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ed. Anne Koedt et al. (New York: Quadrangle Books, 1973) 263-64. Further references will appear in the text.

7 Luce Irigaray, *Divine Women*, trans. Stephen Muecke, Occasional Paper No. 8 (Sydney: Local Consumption Publications, 1986) 3.

spiritual reaching toward the infinite is seen in terms of the desire to become, the necessity of becoming, fully human by living out the image of God as our ideal of perfect humanity.

Christian feminists have voiced a wide range of criticisms regarding the Church, from denouncing the image of God as male, to calling for the ordination of women in the established denominations. Sexist language is deplored, and takes on special relevance in this context, since Christians believe that God is the Word, and Christ is the Word of God made flesh. Feminist theologians have also critiqued the philosophical notion of dualism which informs Christian doctrine regarding the existence of an immortal soul trapped within the material body. They see Western culture continuing to struggle against what is termed a "hierarchical dualism" which perceives women in association with nature, the body, sex and sin, and men in association with the far "preferable" qualities of spirit, mind, intellect, reason, morality and goodness. Dualism views the world in terms of binary opposites (mind/body, day/night, man/woman, right/wrong, heaven/hell, good/bad), and in Western culture each pair of binary opposites is organised in terms of a positive and a negative side; the positive is both privileged and given authority over the negative, hence the term "*hierarchical* dualism" (dualism is discussed in more detail in Chapter Two). Although not a committed Christian myself, I believe that Western culture, and women's perceptions of themselves within that culture, are inseparable from the all-pervasive influence of Christianity. This remains the case today, despite our own time's being referred to as a "post-Christian era" by many social commentators. Thus it is not until we understand the role that Christianity plays in our cultural representations of women that we can begin to overcome the damaging and negative aspects of that influence.

I look at Maitland and Roberts alongside each other because they have collaborated together on several writing projects as well as contributing to the same anthologies of women's writing on various occasions. As members of the Feminist Writers Group they put into practice their shared commitment to a non-hierarchical collective model of work. The group, which also included Valerie Miner, Zoë Fairbairns and Michelene Wandor (Wandor's name regularly comes up in relation to both Maitland and Roberts), published a collection of short stories in 1978 entitled *Tales I Tell My Mother*. The success of this

project was followed up with another volume of short stories, *More Tales I Tell My Mother*, published in 1987. While the first collection focuses on the daily experiences of women attempting to live as independent entities in a male-dominated world, the second volume is much less explicit in its emphasis on feminist politics. Another collection the following year, *The Seven Deadly Sins*, edited by Alison Fell, included stories by Maitland, Roberts, Fairbairns, Kathy Acker, Leslie Dick and Agnes Owens, with illustrations by Amanda Faulkner. Maitland's abiding interest in retelling biblical and fairy tales, and reinterpreting the significance of mythological figures, continues throughout this period. Roberts' preoccupation with her own French heritage is central to the later stories, reflecting a change in the focus of her work from the "personal is political" style of writing favoured in the 1970s to a more internal and personalised approach to character. The result is a more fully developed characterisation in which the rather flat, stereotyped characters of the earlier work are filled out with a psychology and individuality of their own.

Despite this change in emphasis, however, Maitland and Roberts share a continuing commitment to and faith in the impact of feminist writing in the world outside their own fiction. This is demonstrated in their contributions to collections of essays such as the book Maitland edited in collaboration with Jo Garcia, *Walking on the Water* (1983), which provides a place for women to discuss their experience of spirituality from a feminine (and feminist) perspective. These essays range from statements affirming the importance of the peace movement as of specific concern to women, to the complications of Christian feminists searching for a sense of sisterhood with Third World women. Roberts' essay in this collection (Maitland's contribution is the introductory essay) examines her own attempts to come to terms with the Catholicism of her childhood and her desire to experience the spiritual life in a way which is unfettered by the restraints of institutional religions. Maitland and Roberts both contributed to Michelene Wandor's book, *On Gender and Writing* (1983), in which a number of women writers were invited to discuss their attitudes to their own work. Ursula Owen's book, *Fathers: Reflections by Daughters* (1983), is yet another collection to which both Maitland and Roberts contributed.

More importantly than their collaboration on specific writing projects, for my purposes

at least, Maitland and Roberts share an explicit interest in women and their relationship to Christianity and the Church. I have chosen to focus on their long fiction, despite other critics' opinions that Maitland's and Roberts' strengths lie in other genres. Maitland herself is convinced that the short story is her own most appropriate medium ("I much prefer my short stories to my novels....I think that both *Telling Tales* and *Book of Spells* are far more accomplished and, if I am allowed to say so, important than the novels"[8]), and the reviewers of her work generally tend to agree with her. In 1974 three of her short stories were published in the fifth of the Faber *Introduction* series. Her first solo collection of short fiction was published in 1983 under the title *Telling Tales*; a further volume in 1987, *A Book of Spells,* confirmed her place in contemporary British writing. The collection *Women Fly when Men aren't Watching* (1993) brings together some of her best short fiction, including both previously published and new stories. In Roberts' case, her poetry has generally found a more positive critical reception than her fiction. In 1982 she published a collection of poems, *Touch Papers*, with Judith Kazantzis and Michelene Wandor. This was followed in 1986 with a solo collection entitled *The Mirror of the Mother* which is praised as being "intellectually passionate—passionately lyrical" by Michael Horovitz in *Punch*.[9] In 1987 she won the Sotheby's Prize in the Arvon International Poetry Competition with a poem entitled *Psyche and the Hurricane*, which subsequently paved the way for a volume of the same name published in 1991. The influence of the poetry-writing can be seen in Roberts' prose, which can be, at times, too heavily symbolic; however, it is not entirely opaque, and rewards the thoughtful reader. But it is in their long fiction rather than their poetry or short stories that Maitland and Roberts provide the most detailed and sustained exploration of the relationship between women, sexuality and Christianity. It is here that they engage with specific debates within feminist theology, but do so poetically,[10] using the discourses available to them in fiction

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8 In correspondence to me dated 18 July 1988.
9 Michael Horovitz, *Punch*, 12 November 1986, 80.
10 Maitland writes about these issues in a more traditionally theological discourse in *A Map of the New Country: Women and Christianity* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983) and *A Big-Enough God: Artful Theology* (London and New York: Mowbray, 1995).

to explore the relevant theoretical concepts.

In order to place Maitland and Roberts in their own cultural context, I shall refer to some novels by Jane Gardam, Edna O'Brien and Margaret Drabble, who also attempt to grapple with that set of social, cultural and religious values to be found in Britain since the 1960s. Muriel Spark's novels are not considered in detail here because, although her work seems an obvious choice for a discussion of British women writing about Christianity, it does not display any particular interest in the issues as they affect women especially; indeed, much of it was published before the women's movement became a powerful social force in the late 1960s. The difference in her approach can be seen in her treatment of the Job figure used in *The Only Problem.* Whereas Drabble uses Job as a feminine figure whose lot it is to suffer and endure (for example, in *The Millstone*, Rosamund Stacey explains, "I was reared to believe that the endurance of privation is a virtue" [*M* 111], and on giving birth to her daughter, says, "Like Job, I had been threatened with the worst and, like Job, I had kept my shape" [*M* 142]), Spark sees Job as representative of humanity in general. So, while Drabble, Gardam and O'Brien may not identify themselves or be identified by others as important feminist thinkers, their work *is* primarily concerned with the experiences of women, and is thus a helpful background to understanding the contributions made by Maitland and Roberts in this field. More briefly I shall discuss *Nuns and Soldiers* by Iris Murdoch and *Women in the Wall* by Julia O'Faolain (although they do not display an explicit interest in feminist theology as such, the subject matter in these particular novels is relevant to this thesis). A brief venture into the work of some other writers of the same generation as Maitland and Roberts, although not the central focus of my discussion, fills out the picture further. This last group includes Michelene Wandor and Aileen La Tourette (who, together with Maitland and Roberts, form what could perhaps be described as a new "school" of writers), Ellen Galford and Lorna Mitchell. Jeanette Winterson is also of interest in this context as her novels display a concern with many of the same issues as Roberts and Maitland, but she does not appear to have worked with them on any specific projects thus far, except to contribute to the collection *Walking on Water* which was edited by Sara Maitland and Jo Garcia, and to

which Wandor and Roberts also contributed. The other writer one might expect to find alongside those already mentioned is Marina Warner, but I have not introduced discussions of her fiction into this thesis. While I have found Warner's theoretical writing useful in this particular context, the fiction engages with myth in a very general way rather than with Christianity itself, and thus lies beyond the scope of what I have room for here.

Although there are many British women writers of fiction exploring issues related to feminist theology, there do not appear to be as many theorists publishing in the area as exist in the US. Thus in this thesis it has been necessary to use the work of both US and British feminist theologians and theorists to inform my understanding of the issues surrounding women and religion. Indeed, the leading British feminist theologians and theorists such as Marina Warner, Linda Hurcombe, Monica Furlong, Una Kroll, and Sara Maitland herself are clearly familiar with and informed by the work of US writers, particularly Mary Daly, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Carol Christ, Judith Plaskow, Naomi Goldenberg, Gayle Graham Yates, Letty Russell and Elaine Pagels, referring frequently to their work in the process of developing their own analyses. Whether this greater output by US scholars reflects more formalised study of feminist theology, or simply more opportunities to publish in the US context is not clear, but there does appear to be a greater influence of US feminist theology on British writing than vice versa.

Interconnections between Literature, Religion, Psychoanalysis and Feminism

The theoretical framework for this thesis draws on feminist interpretations of literary, theological and psychoanalytic theory, and is based on the premise that literature, religion, psychoanalysis and feminism all interconnect and that each can be used to enlighten the others. While the subject matter is not identical, there are large overlapping areas of these four broad fields: literary works frequently employ religious images and symbols, even if they are not directly concerned with religious or spiritual themes, and religious texts are often perceived in some senses as literary works and subjected to literary analyses; psychoanalysis has much to say about the nature of religion and the psychological needs it

serves (indeed, the word "psychoanalysis" is derived from "psyche" which means "soul"); psychoanalytic criticism offers us specific interpretations of the possible meanings of literary works and the functions of literature; and feminism critiques literature, religion and psychoanalysis, offering us both revealing insights into their traditional/conventional practice and developing them in new directions. Thus I wish to use the terms "feminist theology", "religion", "psychoanalysis" and "feminism" in their broadest senses in order to open up for exploration the richness and complexity of contemporary British women's writing around these ideas; each writer discussed has her own particular way into the issues surrounding these subjects and her own specific understanding of these terms.

As mentioned earlier, psychoanalysis has always existed hand in hand with narrative. Freud himself writes about his own case histories as being generically similar to short stories. In the introduction to the discussion of the case of Fr. Elisabeth von R. he writes: "it still strikes me myself as strange that the case histories I write should read like short stories and that, as one might say, they lack the serious stamp of science".[11] He is also reported to have discussed with Wilhelm Stekel his urge to write novels: "In my mind, I always construct novels, using my experiences as a psychoanalyst; my wish is to become a novelist—but not yet; perhaps in the later years of my life".[12] It is this focus on story-telling that characterises psychoanalysis itself. In the opening of Part One of "The Clinical Picture", Freud explains that he begins treatment "by asking the patient to give me the whole story of his [sic] life and illness",[13] and this focus on telling one's own story continues to hold a position of primary importance in contemporary psychoanalytic practice. In disturbed patients these narratives are disorganised, and it appears that mental health is connected with the ability to tell a coherent story of one's life. This emphasis on coherence privileges a humanist (somewhat masculinist) urge towards unity which is at

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11 Sigmund Freud, "Studies on Hysteria", *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 2 (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1968) 160.

12 *The Autobiography of Wilhelm Stekel*, ed. E. Gutheil (New York: Liveright Publishing Co., 1950) 66, quoted in Patrick J. Mahony, *Freud as a Writer* (expanded edition) (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987) 9.

13 Quoted by Steven Marcus in "Freud and Dora: Story, History, Case History", *Representations: Essays on Literature and Society* (New York: Random House, 1975) 275. Further references will appear in the text.

odds with the more experimental storytelling of many feminist writers which revels in disrupting just such singular versions of truth, drawing our attention to the differing narratives required in different discursive sites.[14] Nevertheless, the successful end of psychoanalysis, "com[ing] into possession of one's own story" in "a final act of self-appropriation, the appropriation by oneself of one's own history" (Marcus 278), is also one of the goals of narrating women's lives in feminist theology. While feminists might not always seek the unity and coherence of traditional psychoanalysis, they do desire the freedom to tell their own stories in their own language.

From the beginning, then, psychoanalytic practice and theory has been linked to narrative and storytelling, and has been used to illuminate literary texts. The analysand's own account of his/her story can be treated as a literary text, and the insights gained from psychoanalytic practice can be applied to literary texts. Like feminist literary criticism, psychoanalytic literary criticism is a continually evolving field, and has become more complex and sophisticated since Alan Roland lamented the generally reductionist psychoanalytic criticism practiced up until the 1970s in his article, "Toward a Reorientation of Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism".[15] A great many critics have used psychoanalytic theory to illuminate particular works of literature, and this critical perspective has been turned back on psychoanalytic theory itself. In "Freud and Dora: Story, History, Case History", for example, Steven Marcus analyses the "Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria", or "Dora's Case" as it has become known, as an exemplary piece of modernist writing and even claims that Freud developed a new genre in the process of writing his case histories. It is partly the shared dependence on language itself in both psychoanalysis and literature that allows this cross-fertilisation between the two.

For Maitland and Roberts, psychoanalytic literary theory and criticism are central to writing about the meanings of identity and subjectivity, as well as (at least partially)

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14 Sidonie Smith discusses the differing discourses required in differing situations in some detail in *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987).

15 Alan Roland, "Towards a Reorientation of Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism", *Psychoanalysis, Creativity, and Literature: A French-American Inquiry*, ed. Roland (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978).

informing their understanding of religious impulses. The storytelling which is so important in psychoanalysis is also of primary significance to Christianity (which maintains that God is the Word and Christ is the Word of God made flesh). The Bible is, after all, a collection of stories about the history of the Jewish race and the story of the life of Jesus and his followers; narrative theology takes up this aspect of Christianity in its "appreciation of the central role of narrative, story-telling, and story-enacting in handing on traditions and teaching virtue".[16] The recorded stories of saints' lives further contribute to the body of traditional Christian writing, and during the Reformation it became customary for converts to present "confessions" of their path to conversion on entry into many of the new sects. This strong tradition of storytelling acquires particular relevance in relation to the confessional writing of the early women's movement, those novels, frequently semi-autobiographical, which describe a young woman's dawning realisation of the oppression she experiences within a patriarchal society and her consequent "conversion" to feminism. Roberts' *A Piece of the Night* (1978) is a prime example of this genre, as are Rita Mae Brown's *Rubyfruit Jungle* (1973), Lisa Alther's *Kinflicks* (1976) and Marilyn French's *The Women's Room* (1977).

A Piece of the Night, Michèle Roberts' first novel, provides us with a useful example of the confessional mode of feminist literature which seeks to record the hitherto largely silent voices of women in Western culture. It explores the dislocated sense of self experienced by Julie Fanchot, French woman educated in England, dutiful daughter and

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16 Joseph A. Komonchak, Mary Collins and Dermot A. Lane, *The New Dictionary of Theology* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1987). The concepts of narrative theology are developed by Stephen Crites in "The Narrative Quality of Experience", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 39.3 (1971): 291-311, and Michael Novak in *Ascent of the Mountain, Flight of the Dove* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), although the title "narrative theology" is not used by either of these writers themselves. Crites writes about "fundamental narrative forms" which he calls "sacred stories, not so much because gods are commonly celebrated in them, but because men's [sic] sense of self and world is created through them....For these are stories that orient the life of people through time...to the great powers that establish the reality of their world" (295) (feminist theologians would add that *women* also have stories of their own which orient them "to the great powers that establish the reality of their world"). Novak describes the religious dimension of creating one's own story and inscribing it with meaning which attempts to answer the "fundamental religious questions...Who am I? and Who are we, we human beings under these stars?" (46). Further references to Crites will appear in the text.

sexual woman, mother and lesbian. The novel is clearly semi-autobiographical in its focus on a woman whose divided loyalties to her French and English heritages results in a confused understanding of self. Roberts herself acknowledges the importance of her own life in shaping her fiction, explaining that "The books came out of my life. I wrote one novel [*A Piece of the Night*] about a woman becoming reunited with her mother and with her lesbian lover, at a time when these were issues for me".[17] The critics reviewing *A Piece of the Night* divided into two camps, those who wanted to hear the confessions of women and those whose interests were not served by the publication of such confessions. *A Piece of the Night* was the first book of original fiction published by the Women's Press. The novel was joint winner of the Gay News Book Award in 1979, but its reception in the mainstream critical press was rather less encouraging. Valentine Cunningham in *New Statesman* called it "a runaway chaos" which relied upon "flatly generalised" characterisation and "language that tends to jargon".[18] Blake Morrison writing for the *Times Literary Supplement* acknowledges that the narrative voice is articulate, but has little else positive to add. Pointing to the negative aspects of this genre, Morrison writes: "Confession...has currently a 'special value' for women and a special importance in women's literature: it is a means of sharing, declaring, daring to say 'I'. But it is not a mode which readily endears itself to outsiders".[19] I think that the novel has some merit in being representative of its time and painting an evocative picture of a specific social, cultural and political milieu; it includes some fine lyrical passages and vivid descriptions, despite other occasions of rather overwrought prose, giving the novel an unevenness and uncertainty which reveals the author's inexperience. The characters are far from fully developed, and, as Morrison points out, Roberts does appear to write for a specific audience who will identify with a book which describes their own experience.

Confessional writing of the kind typified by *A Piece of the Night* serves two primary purposes: firstly, it absolves the confessor from guilt relating to previous unenlightened

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17 Roberts, "Write, She Said", *The Progress of Romance: The Politics of Popular Fiction*, ed. Jean Radford (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986) 232.
18 Valentine Cunningham, *New Statesman*, 3 November 1978, 590.
19 Blake Morrison, *Times Literary Supplement*, 1 December 1978, 1404.

behaviour and beliefs; and secondly, it aims to convert the reader to the new "faith" ("This book changes lives" was a popular sales pitch). It is a form which grew out of the consciousness-raising groups of the 1960s and 1970s in which women learnt to tell their own stories in their own words, thus articulating their own version of reality.[20] Confessional writing often relies upon a commonsense assumption that there is a relationship between life and art which makes it possible for literature to reflect the "life" of the author, and then actively to influence and shape the lives of its readers.[21] Roberts asserts that "To some extent the stories we read *do* shape us" (*Women Writers Talk* 155). It is a genre which rejects the isolation of the text as advocated by New Criticism, insisting instead on recognising the cultural, social and political context of literary works, as well as the educational possibilities of fiction (and marks a return to the traditional use of the novel as a moral teaching). While O'Brien's, Gardam's and Drabble's realist texts rely on just such a representational relationship between literature and life, more experimental writing indicates, in its mixture of discourses and narrative strategies, that rather more is needed to convey adequately the shifting subjectivity of fictional characters, simultaneously recognising the complexity of attempting to portray human subjectivity, and the symbolic nature of writing (in the sense that Saussure and Derrida have indicated). Maitland and Roberts straddle both camps, sharing a belief in the connection between art and life and the usefulness of fiction in the feminist project, but acknowledge and accept postmodern insights into the problematic nature of any art which attempts to be representational.

During the first years of the second wave of feminism, confessional writing facilitated

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20 Carol P. Christ, "Feminist Studies in Religion and Literature: A Methodological Reflection", *Beyond Androcentrism: New Essays on Women and Religion*, ed. Rita M. Gross (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1977) 37-38. Further references will appear in the text.

21 Carol Christ argues for the connection between literature and life in her article, "Feminist Studies in Religion and Literature", as well as citing Florence Howe, "Feminism and Literature" and Fraya Katz-Stoker, "The Other Criticism: Feminism vs. Formalism", *Images of Women in Fiction: Feminist Perspectives*, ed. Susan Koppelman Cornillon (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1973) 326; Carolyn Heilbrun, *Toward a Recognition of Androgyny* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973) x; Ellen Moers, *Literary Women: The Great Writers* (New York: Doubleday, 1976) xiii; and Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977) 11 in support of her argument.

what was perceived as the necessary articulation of the experience of women which was required to understand women's lives and situations. Further, it was thought that only when such an understanding is established that women could take the further step of developing their own spirituality (just as psychoanalysis posits that it is necessary to be able to articulate one's own story as the first step towards psychic health). Carol Christ, an American feminist theologian, explains why it is important for women to tell their own stories:

> Without stories she cannot understand herself. Without stories she is alienated from those deeper experiences of self and world that have been called spiritual or religious. She is closed in silence. The expression of women's spiritual quest is integrally related to the telling of women's stories. If women's stories are not told, the depth of women's souls will not be known.[22]

While there is some overlap between the social and spiritual quests which are central to feminist fiction, Carol Christ distinguishes the social quest, with its move from alienation to reintegration with society, from the more interior journey of the spiritual quest which focuses on discovering the self in relation to the cosmic powers of the universe ("Feminist Studies" 40). The transformation from victimhood to power is described as an awakening or surfacing, a new awareness or consciousness of the woman's spiritual power and validity.

In her book *Evidence on Her Own Behalf: Women's Narrative as Theological Voice*, Elizabeth Say argues for the spiritual and theological value of women's stories, focusing on the genre of the novel in particular. While her project is theological rather than literary, the reverse of my emphasis here, I have found her comments on the connection between women's narratives and theology very helpful. Say claims that "women first gained a public voice through the novel" which they used "as a vehicle for moral expression and argument" (although I will argue in Chapter One that, rather than beginning with the late eighteenth-century novel, this has been a dominant concern, even a motivating force, in

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22 Carol Christ, *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1980) 1.

British women's writing for centuries), and that contemporary women continue to use "the novel as a primary means of moral and theological expression" (which supports my focus on Maitland's and Roberts' novels instead of their short fiction and poetry in this study).[23] She also points out that literature is a moral discourse which needs to be read in its historical and cultural context, as does theology. That is, it is necessary to recognise the ideology informing both literature and theology, and the explicitly feminist content of women's writing in this genre makes its agenda clear:

> women's narratives constitute both a moral discourse and a ground for theology. They challenge normative judgments established by the patriarchal tradition as to how human beings should be in the world. They propose an alternative vision of reality, and the very nature of the critique they presuppose is a moral issue. They are a theology for the same reason. (Say 123)

Maitland most obviously points to these qualities in women's stories in *Daughter of Jerusalem* where she juxtaposes biblical stories with tales of the lives of contemporary women, thus encouraging us to read the stories of today's women in the same way as we are used to reading the Bible, the officially sanctioned Christian text. Roberts' novel *The Wild Girl* is presented as an alternative gospel, with the suggestion that its "truth" is as valid as that of the other gospels. However, all of Maitland's and Roberts' novels draw on the stories of women's lives to evolve their own truths and moral viewpoints, with the recognition that "truth" is shifting and subjective. At every point they "challenge normative judgments established by the patriarchal tradition as to how human beings should be in the world". Their "alternative vision of reality" (the woman's story) is given centre-stage, but our own cultural context means that we as readers are aware of these stories being juxtaposed against the patriarchal "norm" of the usual story or perspective that is presented in this space. We are thus witness to new versions of what constitutes virtue and goodness in terms of this alternative "moral discourse", as well as the nature of "truth" in this alternative theology.

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23 Elizabeth A. Say, *Evidence on Her Own Behalf: Women's Narrative as Theological Voice* (Savage, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 1990) 5. Further references will appear in the text.

Gayle Graham Yates sums up the spiritual importance of women's storytelling about their own lives: "the narrative of women's lives demonstrates women's ability to reach moral resolution through the telling and interpreting of their stories, factual and imaginative, individually and collectively."[24] Once this has been achieved, women can begin creating new ways of perceiving themselves, reinforcing their visions with "intentional mythmaking" (Yates 64). It is here then that narrative theology and women's confessional writing intersect. It is also the point at which psychoanalytic theory appears again, not only to provide insight into what it means to tell one's own story, but also in its contribution to our understanding of the power of myths in our lives.

Psychoanalytic interpretations of myths view them as narratives of the unconscious, seeing this as the reason for their continuing power in culture. Indeed, Freud believed that the Greek myth of the Oedipus story holds the clue for understanding the basis of human psychic formation as we know it. Since then many theorists have argued for the view of myth as psychology projected into the world, for example, Richard Caldwell in his book *Origin of the Gods* traces the parallels between Greek originary mythology and the structures of the unconscious.[25] Adam's and Eve's experiences in the Garden of Eden can be analysed as a story of individuation and separation from the mother, as well as a tale about gendered subjectivity (Roberts draws on this imagery in *The Visitation* which I discuss in more detail in Chapter Two). Although we may no longer believe in the literal truth of these stories, they continue to act as powerful metaphors of our unconscious lives. Further, such psychoanalytic interpretations make it possible for us to perceive that biblical and mythological stories operate in similar ways in our own lives (on one level, at least). Stephen Crites claims that: "Traditional myths, stories dominated by timeless archetypes, have functioned in this way: by taking a personal and historical time up into the archetypal story, they give it a meaning which in the end is timeless, cosmic, absolute" (Crites 308). In the same way, biblical stories can be seen to project the basic "truths" of religious faith

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24 Gayle Graham Yates, "Spirituality and the American Feminist Experience", *Signs* 9.1 (Autumn 1983): 64. Further references will appear in the text.

25 Richard Caldwell, *The Origin of the Gods: A Psychoanalytic Study of Greek Theogonic Myth* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

into the world; the specific reality of historical characters and incidents becomes submerged by the greater, timeless, meanings invested in the stories. Such myths have the effect of validating particular models of being and behaving, encoding specific moral patterns and practices.

Feminist theologians and writers extend the boundaries of "myth" to include a much wider range of traditional stories than just Greek and Roman mythology, perceiving that other traditional stories can operate at deep levels in both describing and shaping human experience in culture. For example, Madonna Kolbenschlag, in her book *Kiss Sleeping Beauty Good-Bye: Breaking the Spell of Feminine Myths and Models*,[26] analyses the psychological and sociological significance of traditional fairy tales with an eye to revealing the ways in which they operate as myths in our unconscious lives. Feminism offers us a means of unravelling these representations of women and femininity, she maintains, allowing women to achieve the personal and social autonomy which is necessary before they are free to find religious and spiritual fulfilment. Anne Cranny-Francis explains that, by creating "a feminist reading position; that is, a position at which the contradictions within the text are explained if the reader sees them from the perspective of a feminist discourse", such myths can be used to convey alternative messages.[27] Thus feminism can be a positive force which allows the rewriting and revising of patriarchal myths from an alternative perspective, shifting the emphasis to accommodate women's own stories about female experience and creating new myth-models by which to live. In the case of fairy tales, Cranny-Francis explains that: "Feminist fairy-tale writing concentrates on revising traditional fairy-tales to reveal the ideological content they encode, particularly their construction of a patriarchal reading position" (Cranny-Francis 197). Jack Zipes investigates feminist fairy tale rewriting in the Introduction to *Don't Bet on the Prince*.[28] Here we see that the most common strategies employed in such projects include the

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26 Madonna Kolbenschlag, *Kiss Sleeping Beauty Good-Bye: Breaking the Spell of Feminine Myths and Models* (New York: Doubleday, 1979).

27 Anne Cranny-Francis, *Feminist Fiction: Feminist Uses of Generic Fiction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990) 205. Further references will appear in the text.

28 Jack Zipes, ed., Introduction, *Don't Bet on the Prince: Contemporary Feminist Fairy Tales in North America and England* (New York: Methuen, 1986). Further references will appear in the text.

portrayal of a "heroine who actively seeks to define herself" which in turn "determines the plot" (Zipes 14), the use of comedy to indicate "the farcical side of sexist expectations in classical fairy tales" (Zipes 15), the substitution of female characters' wisdom and intelligence for magic "to rearrange society according to a more nurturing moral concept and to attain independence for women and mutual respect" (Zipes 16). In creating alternative "reading positions" for interrogating the stories that make up our cultural heritage, be they fairy tales, Greek myths or biblical stories, women writers can also create new, liberating, meanings for those stories. They argue that, instead of passively accepting myths as eternal prescriptors, women can actively engage in "intentional mythmaking" and so change our perceptions of ourselves and the world at the deepest levels of our psyches.

For Christians, Christ himself is the most important figure upon whom they are to model themselves. Although they might see him as rather more than a "myth-model", Christian feminists have perceived the importance of reinterpreting the meaning of Christ's life as a model by which Christians should live; this direction in theological studies was marked by the publication of Leonard Swidler's article, "Jesus was a Feminist", and William E. Phipps' book, *Was Jesus Married?*.[29] In shifting the emphasis in accounts of events recorded in the gospels, different aspects of the stories are accentuated, allowing new meanings to emerge. Thus Roberts depicts a sexualised Christ in *The Wild Girl*, and Maitland transforms the meaning of menstruation from a sign of Eve's curse to an indication of Christ's compassion in the story of the woman with the issue of blood (fictional representations of Christ in this project of re-visioning are the subject of Chapter Three). Maitland also retells many biblical stories in *Daughter of Jerusalem*, her alternative vision of reality presenting us with new interpretations of the meanings of these archetypal stories.

Maitland and Roberts explore Jewish and Christian imagery, as well as a range of other mythologies, to glean useful images of women and representations of femininity to include

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29 Leonard Swidler, "Jesus was a Feminist", *Catholic World* 212.1270 (January 1971): 177-83; William E. Phipps, *Was Jesus Married? The Distortion of Sexuality in the Christian Tradition* (New York and London: Harper and Row, 1970).

in their writing. Particularly useful is Greek mythology, and Demeter/Persephone and Athene are given the central position in women's psyches. They are figures whose paganism allows them to be powerful in ways that the Virgin Mary cannot be. Although there is considerable rewriting of Mary as a positive role model, the women of Greek myths can be conjured out of imaginative desire (and psychological need) more easily than Mary can with the baggage of centuries of submission to Church teaching attached to her name. There is, however, a sense in Maitland's and Roberts' work that one must tread a little lightly in relation to Mary in order to avoid sacrilege. This is announced fictionally in *Arky Types*: "Mary is a real, not a myth figure for me".[30]

Feminist retellings of biblical stories, fairy stories, and Greek and Roman myths as contemporary fables and allegories employs conventional patriarchal forms with the purpose of subverting them and creating a space for women in a system which has previously excluded their own version of reality. On the one hand, it can be argued that even by referring to these myths and stories which are so overlaid with patriarchal meanings, writers perpetuate their influence, in that the retellings invoke the original versions against which they are set (for example, this is the kind of criticism that Patricia Duncker makes of Angela Carter's re-imagining of fairy tales, focusing on what Duncker perceives as her inability to break out of masculine discourses of desire—the erotic continues to be conceived in terms of "domination, submission and possession"[31]). On the other hand, it is also possible to argue that, since these stories already have a powerful (albeit sometimes unconscious) place in our psyches, they are not only effective starting points, but also that they need to be modified. It is not so much that these stories contain some core of absolute truth, but that they do contain elements that allow them to be rewritten in order to be useful to the feminist project. To this extent, then, Maitland and Roberts are both interested in the remnants of Christian and other traditional stories which continue to affect us today as myth operating in our lives, and how they can be rewritten for positive ends. As Roberts states:

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30 Sara Maitland and Michelene Wandor, *Arky Types* (London: Methuen, 1987) 72.
31 Patricia Duncker, "Re-Imagining the Fairy Tales: Angela Carter's Bloody Chambers", *Literature and History* 10.1 (Spring 1984): 7.

> Women are moving out of that period of modernism when the preoccupation was with the breakdown of language and form, the breakdown of the authorial self into a new confidence. We are in a postmodernist, confident phase; we are putting the bits together again, working with the fragments, the splits and breaks and making new myths. (*Women Writers Talk* 166)

Thus, myths are the stories which reflect our most deeply-held (religious) beliefs about reality and a projection into the world of our unconscious desires. In actively taking a hand in creating these stories, contemporary British women writers attempt to make space for different ways of becoming, opening up the possibilities for different values and moralities, which in turn allow women to be fully human.

In the following discussion of contemporary British women's writing, I share Barbara Kiefer Lewalski's approach in that "My method in this study is deliberately eclectic, in accordance with my belief that these texts need to be situated within many contexts—biographical, historical, literary, theoretical".[32] Feminism offers me a framework in which to place such readings, and I also employ the close textual analyses of formalism. Lawrence Buell's concept of the text as a "sociogram", that is, "a microcosm or refraction of its era", reflecting in some sense the issues of concern in the wider world, has also been helpful.[33] For example, I take it that Maitland and Roberts represent the culture and ideas of the women's movement of 1970s and 1980s London in their texts. I want to look at women's writing rather than men's, at their attempts to find solutions rather than detailed analyses of how oppression occurs, and I choose to focus on the theological, religious and spiritual issues raised in these texts. Formalist readings have proven to be useful in my analysis of novels by Jane Gardam, Edna O'Brien and Margaret Drabble, novelists whose works are used here to establish a context for Maitland's and Roberts' work, since they all write from positions within contemporary British culture and all explore the issues surrounding women, sexuality, religion and spirituality. I emphasise psychoanalytic

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32 Barbara Kiefer Lewalski, Introduction, *Writing Women in Jacobean England* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1993) 10.

33 Lawrence Buell, "Literary History as a Hybrid Genre", *New Historical Literary Study: Essays on Reproducing Texts, Representing History*, eds. Jeffrey N. Cox and Larry J. Reynolds (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993) 222.

readings rather than materialist ones in my discussion of Maitland's and Roberts' writing because their work alludes to and actively engages with the contemporary debates surrounding psychoanalytic theory.

CHAPTER ONE

RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY IN CONTEMPORARY BRITISH WOMEN'S WRITING:

A Context for Maitland and Roberts

Sara Maitland and Michèle Roberts are the contemporary equivalent of a long (but only recently unearthed) tradition of literary Englishwomen whose subject has been religion.[1] In the twentieth century the intersection of religion with politics and feminism becomes a particularly pressing matter for British women writers. This chapter will establish the preoccupation with religion and spirituality which marks contemporary British women's writing and the forms which are employed to approach this subject, discussing some of Jane Gardam's, Edna O'Brien's and Margaret Drabble's novels as examples of the "mainstream" context which Maitland's and Roberts' more experimental work writes both to and against.

The ideological upheaval accompanying the theories developed by Marx, Darwin and Freud, as well as two world wars and an economic depression, profoundly affected British society at the same time as its empire was declining and its king had abdicated in order to marry a divorced woman (gossip columnists now question Prince Charles' capacity to reign under the shadow of adultery, as well as general discussion about the future of the British monarchy). Here we see a period of ideological and political instability coinciding with a vigorous debate of religious questions by women writers, and those with an interest in the women's movement see these issues in the political light of feminism. An awareness

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1 The tradition of women's writing and publishing on politico-religious matters is evident in the collection of essays edited by Margaret Patterson Hannay entitled *Silent But for the Word: Tudor Women as Patrons, Translators, and Writers of Religious Works* (Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1985); in Patricia Crawford's essay "Women's Published Writings 1600-1700" in *Women in English Society 1500-1800*, ed. Mary Prior (London and New York: Methuen, 1985); in Isobel Grundy's and Susan Wiseman's collection *Women, Writing, History 1640-1740* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1992); and in Isobel Armstrong's "'A Music of Thine Own': Women's Poetry—an Expressive Tradition?", *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993).

of the significance of religion for the political concerns of the women's movement in Britain is particularly marked in the second wave of feminism gathering force in the late 1960s and 1970s, as witnessed by the number of women writers taking up the issues of feminist theology in their fiction. This operates on a number of levels and in varying degrees of sophistication, particularly as feminist theologians have continued to develop the arguments over time. Issues which have caught the attention of the public in recent years have been the ordination of women in the traditional denominations and the sexuality (particularly homosexuality) of the priesthood. The different approaches to religious issues by mainstream writers such as Edna O'Brien, Margaret Drabble and Jane Gardam, as well as the more experimental writers like Maitland, Roberts and their less "mainstream" contemporaries, indicate the rich material this field provides for fiction writers. Along with a recognition of the oppression and marginalisation of women comes a need to establish just how it came about, and the impact of religion on culture is examined in this context. Further, feminism demands an integration of the personal and the political, and feminist theology looks at the public implications of individual belief. This approach to writing is at odds with the conventional literary education Maitland and Roberts both received which maintained that "politics and great writing cannot go together".[2] Nevertheless, Maitland herself claims (and I would claim the same for Roberts) "a fundamental leaning towards justice and equality"[3] in her work; combined with a political approach to Christianity this allows them to bring together feminist politics and religious questions in literature in ways which recall the politico-religious literary works of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century women (referred to in Footnote 1).

Experimental contemporary British women's writing is frequently marked by its mixture of discourses and genres. To some extent this is a product of the feminist philosophy which seeks to disrupt patriarchal and phallocentric conventions. French feminism in particular deliberately moves between theoretical and poetic discourses, blurring the boundaries between what are perceived as artificial, phallocentric

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2 Sara Maitland, "A Feminist Writer's Progress", *On Gender and Writing*, ed. Michelene Wandor (London: Pandora Press, 1983) 19.

3 Maitland, *The Guardian*, 21 September 1983, 18, quoted in Flora Alexander, *Contemporary Women Novelists* (London: Edward Arnold, 1989) 80.

constructions. For example, Julia Kristeva's philosophical works range widely across disciplines and genres within individual pieces, and it is in her article "Stabat Mater", which examines the continuing influence of Christian representations of motherhood through the image of the Virgin Mary, that the mixture of discourses is most obviously presented.[4] Comprising two texts placed in parallel so that they can be read simultaneously (at least in theory), the conventionally theoretical discussion (emanating from the symbolic order) is juxtaposed with its poetic or "semiotic" counterpart. The writing of Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous constantly demonstrates the movement back and forth between theory and poetry, often hovering in the space between; Irigaray's "Divine Women", *Speculum of the Other Woman* and *This Sex Which is Not One*, and Cixous' *La Jeune Née* (written with Catherine Clément) and "The Laugh of the Medusa"[5] are meditations, prophetic visions, philosophy, poetry and political manifesto all at once, exploring new writing practices as part of an interrogation of sexual difference.

The proliferation of science fiction, speculative fiction,[6] utopian and fantasy writing by women since the 1970s is also part of this experimentation with mixed discourses (for example, see the work of Joanna Russ, Marge Piercy, Ursula LeGuin, Angela Carter, Monique Wittig and Doris Lessing, who mix discourses with varying degrees of complexity). As Kate Lilley explains:

> Utopian writing has become a privileged formal and theoretical domain for feminist women, in ways that explore and frequently erode the distinctions between "primary" and "secondary", "creative" and "critical", "theory" and "practice". Such

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4 Reprinted in Julia Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986).

5 Luce Irigaray, *Divine Women*, Occasional Paper No. 8 (Sydney: Local Consumption Publications, 1986); Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (1974; Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985); Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke (1977; Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985); Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *La Jeune Née*, trans. Ann Liddle, *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, eds Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (1980; Brighton: Harvester Press, 1985); Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa", trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1.4 (Summer 1976): 875-93.

6 "Speculative fiction" is a term Gerardine Meaney uses in relation to Lessing and Carter in particular. It asks "what if?" and explores "the interaction of alienating or unfamiliar elements with cognitive or familiar ones" (Meaney, *(Un)Like Subjects: Women, Theory, Fiction* [London and New York: Routledge, 1993] 228).

> writing shares an experimental and analytic drive; a desire to subvert those categories and boundaries which guarantee disciplinary, discursive and sexual hygiene, by licensing exchange between the arts and sciences, the "irrational" and the "rational", the fantastic/abnormal and the natural/normal.[7]

These texts engage in social, religious and political critiques on a number of levels. The novel is particularly suited to experimentation of this kind; not only does its form have clearly established generic conventions against which the author can play, but it also allows room for extended explorations of specific themes. Paulina Palmer writes that, for contemporary British women writers of long fiction who explore the intersection between religion, culture and feminist politics, such as Jeanette Winterson and Ellen Galford,

> Experimentation with genre is linked...to the rejection of the direct methods of political protest employed in the 1970s and early 1980s and the utilization, instead, of strategies reflecting impulses of pleasure and play....as an alternative form of protest and resistance...[8]

Further, "By juxtaposing contrary discourses, value-systems and story-lines, [contemporary feminist writers] question the unitary representation of subjectivity and culture, and rupture the apparently seamless web of the realist text" (Palmer 100). Winterson's *Oranges are Not the Only Fruit* (1985), for example, "rework[s] traditional modes of writing such as fantasy, the fairy tale and the romance" (Palmer 99) as it undermines the credibility of the evangelistic fundamentalism it describes from the outcast lesbian's perspective. Galford's *Fires of Bride* (1986) is another example of a text which "creates an original interplay of discourses, interweaving materials drawn from such varied and apparently incompatible sources as Scottish myth, Gothic romance and lesbian theory" whilst employing the "conventional Gothic form of box within box of interlocking narratives" (Palmer 105, 106) to interrogate the contemporary significance of notions such as the sex and gender of Christ, the spiritual importance of the witch-midwife, and Celtic

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7 Kate Lilley, "Blazing Worlds: Seventeenth-Century Women's Utopian Writing", *Women, Texts and Histories: 1575-1760*, eds Clare Brant and Diane Purkiss (London and New York: Routledge, 1992) 102.

8 Paulina Palmer, *Contemporary Lesbian Writing: Dreams, Desire, Difference* (Buckingham and Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1993) 98. Further references will appear in the text.

mythology.

Maitland and Roberts also mix varied, sometimes contradictory, discourses, employing both realist and non-realist modes in approaching the complex network of ideas created by the intersection of religion, psychoanalysis and feminism. They explore many of the same concerns in their short fiction and poetry, but it is in the longer works that the subtleties of particular issues are worked out. In using some of the conventions of the realist novel, such as unified, coherent characters, a social world which attempts to mirror the "real" world, plots which provide choices and outcomes for characters that are possible within the "real" world, Maitland and Roberts attempt to write about issues which have relevance to the lived experience of their readers. Yet they also break many of the conventions, introducing mythical, biblical and dream material alongside realism, disrupting the chronological order of events, and weaving a number of narratives together, "muddling around the categories".[9] By doing so, they are no longer tied to conventional representations of women's experience, but are free to redefine it in greater complexity which takes into account the dreams and desires of those women. This combination of realism and "non-realism" (it doesn't always fit easily into the categories of either "magic realism" or "fantasy") allows Maitland and Roberts to reflect upon the experiences of women in the "real" world and to take into account the importance of the psychological conditions of women's existence, indicating the importance of the inner life for the outer social and political conditions of our world. The realist mode is employed in order to examine social issues, in keeping with the convention of the novel as a genre focusing on the individual in society; in order to understand the role of the unconscious in those social issues, both Maitland and Roberts find they must introduce new narrative strategies. Realism doesn't allow a full investigation of the unconscious, tied as it is to a belief in the unified, coherent self which can be traced in the rational world. Like Winterson who uses fantasy in order to make it possible to write about subjectivity as multiplicity (Palmer 101), Maitland and Roberts are obliged to devise alternative prose styles in order to introduce the

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9 Sara Maitland and Michelene Wandor, *Arky Types* (London: Methuen, 1987) 71. This epistolary novel is itself an example of the mixed discourses I am referring to here, hence my use of a quotation from a work of fiction as if it were literary criticism.

realm of dreams and desires.

Maitland has explored a wide variety of forms and styles ranging from biography, fiction, fable, surrealism and social realism to theology and political debate. She explicitly describes the mixture of discourses in her work when stating that "Writing both fiction and nonfiction is a policy now; I would like to find a form that would bring the two modes together as theology once did and as the Women's Movement now struggles toward".[10]

Roberts' interest in narrative technique and form is present in all her work, too, from the allegorical and fabulous short stories to the novels with their complex time structures and intertwined story lines. Roberts experiments with style, form and narrative technique throughout her work in order to explore the limits of storytelling and shifting subjectivity. In *The Progress of Romance* she describes her conflicting desires to write, on the one hand, about wholeness and the healing of the split self, and on the other hand to exploit the subversion of traditional forms available to today's writers: "I could never write a completely traditional romance, because my mad anti-humanist self would rise up and subvert it; I can't write only in an anti-narrative post-modernist way because that denies the romantic and religious part of me".[11] In an interview a few years later, she claims that women writers in general have found a new way of resolving the manifestation of that "romantic and religious part" as a "yearn[ing] for unity":[12]

> Women are moving out of that period of modernism when the preoccupation was with the breakdown of language and form, the breakdown of the authorial self into a new confidence. We are in a postmodernist, confident phase; we are putting the bits together again, working with the fragments, the splits and breaks and making new myths.[13]

This renewed interest in plot and storytelling continues to manifest itself in the subversion of chronological narrative, with her most recently published stories and novels exhibiting

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10 Maitland, *Contemporary Authors New Revision Series*, Vol. 13, ed. Linda Metzger (Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1984) 343.

11 Michèle Roberts, "Write, She Said", *The Progress of Romance: The Politics of Popular Fiction*, ed. Jean Radford (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986) 230.

12 Roberts, "Questions and Answers", *On Gender and Writing*, 67.

13 Roberts, *Women Writers Talk: Interviews with 10 Women Writers*, ed. Olga Kenyon (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1989) 166.

the structures of interwoven, plaited storylines to which she refers in the same interview (*Women Writers Talk* 171). Roberts employs two radically different and contradictory conceptual categories which grow out of the differing epistemological and philosophical traditions informing humanism and postmodernism. The tension is between concepts of the individual and the subject. Roberts, like Maitland, is torn between a faith in self-determination, freedom of choice, the exercise of individual will and the privileging of coherence and wholeness; and perceptions of a world governed by ideology and exterior determining structures, a perspective which focuses on subject positions and the unconscious, an acceptance of fragmentation and incoherence.

Maitland's and Roberts' writing is characterised by the tension between the conventions of realism and the rule-breaking of non-realism. This echoes the tension between an interest in the individual in society, and an awareness (informed by psychoanalysis) that we are individuals with unconscious minds, as well as a desire to explore the idea that we are religious or spiritual beings with souls. Their work is also located within the tension caused by attempting to write about the "real" world in the full postmodernist knowledge of the problematic nature of using language to "reflect" that world. Roberts' writing in particular is clearly informed by the current debates surrounding feminist theory, psychology and semiotics. Roberts herself says: "I'm influenced by all the contemporary debates on e.g. postmodernism, structuralism & post-structuralism, French feminisms, which I've followed & engaged in for my own purposes as a writer as well as a political being".[14] However, this theoretical approach to language and subjectivity sits uneasily with her characters' attempts to find "wholeness" in their newly-established identities.[15] It is in mixing a range of discourses that we see Maitland and Roberts using "the novel's capacity both to *represent* women's experience and to *redefine* the premises of representation".[16] It is through their interests in psycholinguistic and postmodernist theory

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14 Letter from Roberts to me dated 4 January 1990.

15 Helen Birch is one of the few reviewers of Roberts' work to comment on this aspect of the novels, and she does so in relation to *The Book of Mrs Noah* (*New Statesman*, 22 May 1987, 27-28) and *In the Red Kitchen* (*New Statesman and Society,* 30 March 1990, 40).

16 Joanne S. Frye, *Living Stories, Telling Lives: Women and the Novel in Contemporary Experience* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1986) 16.

that Maitland and Roberts can continue to explore and expand the ways in which literature can be used to define and represent women, and how it can be the place in which new (believable) outcomes for women can be created. It is precisely this interweaving of realism and non-realism, the plaiting of the discourses of psychoanalysis, religion and feminism, that allows Maitland and Roberts to explore their interest in the individual psyche with its social implications. For example, Roberts' examination of the significance of binary thought and dualism within the Christian tradition in *The Wild Girl* moves between a view of human beings in which the physical and spiritual complement each other and are integrated to create a sense of "wholeness" in the individual, and gestures towards deconstructing the oppositions between male and female, body and soul, gestures which appear to be informed by the thinking of writers such as Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous. *The Visitation* also reveals a tension between a desire for psychic wholeness and an awareness of the impossibility of ever achieving it. *The Diary of Mrs Noah* is perhaps the most successful of Roberts' attempts to negotiate the complex and contradictory terrain of memory and subjectivity. Maitland's *Daughter of Jerusalem* juxtaposes biblical stories with a contemporary narrative in order to explore representations of motherhood in Christian culture, while invoking Kristeva's contributions to the psychological needs governing this area. In *Virgin Territory* Maitland personifies the symbolic and semiotic orders in the shape of the Fathers of Patriarchy and a preverbal infant respectively, and the central character must negotiate a difficult path between their demands as well as exist in the ordinary, everyday world as a coherent subject. These attempts to engage with postmodern theories of writing and French feminist philosophy alongside social realism and a humanist interest in the religious and spiritual are not always successfully integrated—indeed, they contain so much that is at odds with one another that it would seem that they can never be reconciled, nor would that be the point; instead, in Maitland's and Roberts' writing the relationship between these discourses is always posited as provisional and tentative rather than fully worked out. An awareness of postmodernism, psychoanalysis and French feminist philosophy problematises any writing about the religious and spiritual, but doesn't entirely extinguish the desire for spiritual and psychic wholeness. For Maitland and

Roberts this intersection of a range of discourses provides fruitful and productive contradictions.

As with Margaret Drabble, one of Maitland's and Roberts' main themes is the possibility of salvation. Their work suggests that redemption lies in reinterpretations of the construction of femininity and the meaning of womanhood which are based on women's own experiences of their lives instead of male versions of truth. The further outcome of these new representations of women's lives and truths might be a transformation of the world into a more just and humane place in which to live. As Maitland explains, "I'd say that the underlying conviction of my work is that people, through grace and love, can learn from the past and transform the future of this or any society".[17] There is a faith in the capacity of writing to affect the world beyond the text itself, in the ability of literature to reflect, influence and shape its readers' lives and thoughts to some extent (as I have already described when discussing the nature of "confessional writing" in the Introduction).

The novels of Jane Gardam, Edna O'Brien and Margaret Drabble reflect some of the concerns of contemporary British women writers who are examining religious issues in relation to women, but (mostly) rely on conventional social realism in their work, rather than the mixing of discourses which other more formally experimental writers associate with this subject matter.[18] These three writers provide us with the opportunity to see different expressions of Christian belief operating in the British context: Gardam looks at both fundamentalist Protestantism (in *God on the Rocks*) and "High Church" Anglicanism (in *Crusoe's Daughter*); O'Brien uses the background of Irish Catholicism in her novels; and Drabble is concerned, at least initially, with fundamentalist Protestantism. These three writers also offer us a variety of responses to the problematic nature of women's relationship to Christianity, from Gardam's attempts to find a way in which women can

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17 Maitland, *Contemporary Authors*, Vols 69-72, ed. Jane A. Bowden (Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1978) 394.

18 After the *Country Girls Trilogy* O'Brien goes on to experiment with different narrative strategies and voices, moving towards more "introverted monologues, reminiscences, and reconstructions [in] the later works" (*Contemporary Novelists*, ed. Lesley Henderson, 5th ed. [London and Chicago: St James Press, 1991] 704. Further references will appear in the text.). Gardam and Drabble do not rely on strictly conventional realism, either, but this is certainly the dominant mode in their writing.

redefine themselves whilst remaining part of the church, to O'Brien's rejection of the church as always damaging to women in its overwhelming insistence on the image of woman as Eve (which is only heightened, in her view, by the image of the Virgin Mary), to Drabble's movement beyond Christianity towards the development of a spirituality based upon maternity and domesticity representing a form of revitalised paganism.

Critics have discussed the religious and spiritual aspects of Drabble's novels, commenting on the significance of the Puritan background which informs them, and many have discussed their relevance to contemporary feminism.[19] Until now, however, very little has been written about the religious and spiritual aspects of O'Brien's and Gardam's fiction. Critics have focused on O'Brien's explorations of guilt, loneliness and despair as her female characters attempt to negotiate the problematic areas of love and sex, while Gardam's work has received very little critical appraisal at all beyond the reviewers' columns.[20] My contribution to the critical body is to draw out the elements of their work which demonstrate that it belongs to a tradition of British women's writing which is concerned with religious and spiritual matters.

The following discussion of Gardam's, O'Brien's and Drabble's works will examine the ways in which they represent in fiction the debates concerning women, sexuality, spirituality and religion. They clearly have some interest in contemporary discussions of feminism, even though they might not identify themselves as "feminists", and in this they provide a mainstream contemporary context which Maitland and Roberts write to and against. While O'Brien and Drabble hold almost canonical status within women's writing in English literature, Maitland and Roberts represent an alternative approach to the questions surrounding women, sexuality, spirituality and religion.

Gardam, O'Brien and Drabble do not engage with the psycholinguistic, philosophical

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19 Drabble's work has been examined by feminist critics frequently, often only to be criticised for not demonstrating sufficient commitment to the feminist cause. Flora Alexander discusses this aspect of the critical reception in *Contemporary Women Novelists*, 24-29.

20 One of the very few exceptions is Russell McDougall's "A Novel Atlas: Tradition and the Individual Text of Crusoe's Daughter", *(Un)common Ground: Essays in Literatures in English*, eds Andrew Taylor and McDougall (Adelaide: Centre for Research in the New Literatures in English, Flinders University Press, 1990) 118-134.

writings of the French feminists, nor do they particularly invite such an approach, so I have not attempted to analyse them in relation to those theories. Instead, for these novels I employ a more "gynocritical" approach along the lines described by Elaine Showalter.[21] The following chapters which focus on Maitland's and Roberts' contributions to the debates surrounding women, sexuality, spirituality, religion and theology (and include some discussions of novels by Julia O'Faolain, Lorna Mitchell, Ellen Galford and Iris Murdoch for comparison), will refer to the concepts espoused by the French theorists because Maitland and Roberts do appear to be engaging actively with those ideas.

An Uneasy Reconciliation: Jane Gardam's *God on the Rocks* and *Crusoe's Daughter*

This section traces Jane Gardam's discussions of the problematic relationship between women and the Christian Church through thematic and close readings of *God on the Rocks* (1978) and *Crusoe's Daughter* (1985), her most explicit explorations of the nexus between sexuality and religion. I conclude that she attempts to establish an uneasy reconciliation between women and the Church. Gardam presents a view of Christianity from the perspective of female characters who must negotiate a path between the conflicting images of woman as Eve and woman as the Virgin Mary. Her work reflects a liberal feminist questioning of traditional Christian teaching, which is political in the sense that any investigation inspired by feminist thinking about power relations between the sexes is, but that is the extent of its political engagement. Gardam gestures towards postmodern notions of intertextuality and suddenly switches to interview mode and non-realism in the final pages of *Crusoe's Daughter*, but on the whole relies on conventional realism. She does not interweave discourses, nor does she exploit feminist reworkings of psychoanalytic theory, in the ways that Maitland and Roberts do.

The central characters in *God on the Rocks* and *Crusoe's Daughter*, Margaret Marsh and Polly Flint, must learn to understand their own positions in relation to both their identities as women and the image of woman presented to them by the Church. For Polly it

21 Elaine Showalter, "Toward a Feminist Poetics", *Women's Writing and Writing about Women*, ed. Mary Jacobus (London: Croom Helm, 1979) 22-41.

is a quest that plunges her temporarily into a psychotic oblivion. She emerges from this purgatory with a new knowledge of her self which allows her to reconcile the apparently conflicting demands of Christianity and her own nature as woman. Margaret witnesses the dilemma of establishing alternative understandings of the nature of woman in the face of Christian representations of woman from her standpoint as a child who only partially understands what is happening around her.

Polly Flint, the central consciousness and narrator of *Crusoe's Daughter*, warns us that, "I became wary of God there [in the yellow house]. Oh very wary, indeed" (*CD* 19). We are immediately aware of the problematic nature of God, but have yet to discover its particular significance for women. Polly's emotional isolation is reflected by her physical isolation in the yellow house which stands alone on the wild marsh. Orphaned Polly is taken in by a group of devoutly religious women, her mother's two sisters, Mary and Frances, and their impoverished companion, Mrs Woods. Charlotte, the housekeeper, maintains the outward signs of piety (she goes to the servant's service at the local church), but does not share the other women's preoccupation with Christianity. The life of the yellow house is centred on religious duty. Polly, who is always described by the aunts as being a very *good* child, learns that she must take care of that goodness.

The crisis comes when Polly refuses to be confirmed, and, as readers seeing these events through her eyes, we too are led to question the meaning of confirmation and, by association, organised Christianity. Polly's rejection of formal Christianity culminates in a vision of an angel on her way to church one Sunday a few months later. Her angel takes the form of a "huge gold man" shining "with comprehension and strength and I [Polly] knew that he loved me and was on my side" (*CD* 30, 31). The angel becomes a personification of the love for which Polly yearns and gives her the courage to assert her own identity. She realises that the Church cannot offer her the connection with others, the love, for which she longs. Instead, the image Polly carries with her from church is "That awful giant crucifix with the dead body and the blood-drips all carved in wood. And that ghastly face with the thorns all hung over one eye" (*CD* 32). We see that the centrality of suffering, punishment and death in Christianity, its life-denying dimensions, are anathema

to the young girl whose life is already very constricted. The angel offers her a positive image of love that accepts the life-giving role of woman.

Polly's renunciation of the Church coincides with menarche: she is depicted as instinctively rejecting the Christian Church's representation of woman. Having announced that she will no longer attend church services, Polly is sent to her room in disgrace, but is filled with confidence and a sense of power at the same time: "I looked at them both [Mrs Woods and Aunt Mary] as the angel's ankle-wings and golden soles passed up into the clouds, staining them for a moment with radiance. Then I smiled at Mrs Woods, for I was suddenly unaccountably happy and quite without a sense of sin" (*CD* 34). Moments later Polly is witness to the sign of the original sin: menstrual blood. She recognises that she should be ashamed of this blood, and in a feeble protest "accidentally" smashes the little china mandarin (symbol of patriarchal authority in the household?) who is "still staring with distaste" at the sight of the bleeding Polly (*CD* 35). Until now, Polly has represented the (Romantic vision of) prelapsarian consciousness of innocent childhood; the clouds are stained with radiance, not corruption, and she cannot comprehend the blood stain as the signal of the end of this Edenic vision.

This scene links woman and original sin, menstruation and the crucifixion. Christian doctrine teaches that the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden is the beginning of mortality. In order for the human race to survive, woman must bring forth children in pain, and menstruation is the sign that her body is now the site of reproduction. Feminists understand the necessity of transforming the popular perception of menstruation as "dirty" into a natural event which should be celebrated as a sign of the creative power of healthy women. Feminist theologians point out that menstruation, when it is perceived as a sign of the curse placed on sinful Eve, can become a significant factor in the oppression of women in Christian cultures. In the biblical story of the woman with the issue of blood we see the general condition of women taken to its extreme. The torment of the woman who menstruates continuously, and the horror with which she is perceived by those around her, bring to our attention the devastating consequences of this attitude to menstruation (Sarah Maitland retells this story in *Daughters of Jerusalem*, which is discussed in Chapter Six).

The traditional interpretation is that, in order to counteract original sin and make eternal life possible again, Christ is sent by God to be crucified: Christ's blood must be spilt because woman bleeds.

A similar construction of woman is presented in Gardam's earlier novel, *God on the Rocks*. Margaret Marsh is the daughter of a devout member of the Primal Saints, a nonconformist, fundamentalist church which rejects the pleasures of the flesh. Margaret's mother, Elinor, is a convert to the Primal Saints, and the family home is bathed in an atmosphere of pious fervour.

It is from her mother, who embodies both the virgin mother Mary and the sexually experienced woman, and Lydia, a sexualised Martha (or Mary Magdalene and Martha rolled into one), that Margaret learns about the complications of women and their sexuality. The opening pages of the novel build up a picture of female sexuality and fertility, firstly through the maternal images of Elinor breast-feeding her new baby, and then through Lydia on an outing with Margaret. The reactions of the men on the beach to Lydia's appearance, and the heat of the day, add to the novel's atmosphere of latent sexuality. Lydia and Margaret walk to the woods, and the natural sensuality of this Edenic scene is heightened when Lydia removes her shoes, stockings and corset, enjoying the freedom of releasing her body from its artificial restraints. Seeing this, Margaret responds with a confused, fearful disgust which turns to violence:

> Lydia's eyes were closing. A big round flower, Margaret thought, climbing the sycamore. A big pudding of a flower. A big pudding on a dish. A big sticky pudding, juicy like an apple pudding. Fat and hot and squidgy like an eiderdown-pudding, she thought looking down at uncorseted outspread Lydia. Think I'll jump on her. Squelch and squish. (*GR* 11)

Margaret equates the signs of sexuality with the sensuality of eating rich, luscious food (the apple is incorporated into a pudding in this domesticated Eden). Unable to articulate her confusion, she translates her fear into something she is more accustomed to being denied (the Saints advocate plainness in cooking as part of their asceticism). She equates eating and sexuality in a relation between oral and sexual gratification which suggests the infant's

attachment to the maternal breast. Margaret's hostility, at least in part, reflects her anger at the infantile sexual gratification denied her by the now forbidden breast, especially given her displacement by the new baby brother at the mother's breast.

Margaret is allowed some insight into the knowledge that sex and religion are linked through the Fall from Grace and original sin. Mr Drinkwater paints a nest of snakes instead of the beautiful scene before him: "he had just been showing how awful things could be—how the house could be strangled up by snakes. He knew that poisonous things could stand side by side with heaven. The creature in the wicker box, in all her horror, had lain looking at the apple tree and the deep blue sky" (*GR* 67). We see Margaret learning about the snake in paradise. The sexuality of which she is so afraid is represented here by the phallic snakes and the wizened, ancient creature in the wicker box whom Margaret expected to be a baby, the product of that sexuality, and whose aging indicates the punishment of mortality. The apple tree and blue sky, potentially peaceful images of heaven or paradise, are overshadowed by their association with the knowledge of sexuality Eve gains from eating the apple at the serpent's suggestion. The house, representing the human soul being overwhelmed by the threat of carnality posed by the snakes, is also connected with the first (original) sin that leads finally to the destruction of the Marsh family, for it is the home of Mrs Frayling, mother of Mrs Marsh's first love, Charles.

Mr Marsh is the mouthpiece through which we hear the Church's doctrine concerning sexuality as damning evidence of original sin. In a parody of Christ preaching on the shores of Galilee, Marsh preaches regularly on the rocky seashore to the unconverted, hence the title of the novel. Alternatively, the title means that God is "on the rocks," that the faith Marsh preaches is in imminent danger of destruction, which does occur when Marsh gives in to the sexual temptation Lydia presents. Margaret has just returned from her second visit to the Frayling household, and Marsh angrily forbids both Elinor and Margaret to associate with "unbelievers." Rebellious at last, Elinor informs her husband that she is "sick of goodness" and "this hell-fire rubbish" (*GR* 96-97). The quarrel leads into a scene in which Marsh declares his desire for Lydia, and Margaret witnesses "her father's small, irreproachable, bank manager's hands moving desperately, quickly, darting,

rubbing about over Lydia's big silk back" (*GR* 100). This betrayal of Lydia's trust, his marriage vows and the Saints' teachings is met by Elinor's flight from the house into Charles Frayling's bed. The moral structure represented by the family at the outset of the novel has collapsed.

In her semi-autobiographical novel, *Oranges are Not the Only Fruit* (1985), Jeanette Winterson explores some of the same territory as *God on the Rocks*. *Oranges* examines the life of Jeanette growing up in a fundamentalist Christian household in northern England, and humorously exposes the hypocrisy and contradictions associated with this extreme version of Christianity. The chapters of the book take as their titles the books of the Old Testament, and Jeanette's story is narrated alongside biblical tracts, fables, myths and legends, this mixture of discourses indicating the child's unquestioning acceptance of all these stories as equally valid. Her mother instils in her daughter the expectation that Jeanette will become a missionary, a plan which is shattered when the girl falls in love with another woman and discovers "Unnatural Passion". Jeanette loses the support of the previously admiring congregation and is forced to leave her home and community. Here, female sexuality is represented in its most "sinful" form (at least, according to Jeanette's church). Jeanette is expelled from the Edenic innocence in which she had grown up. Her expulsion into the world of adulthood and sexuality is seen as a necessary and positive event, but there remains a lingering desire for the lost religious passion and absolute love of God experienced in her childhood.

To return to *Crusoe's Daughter*, Polly learns about the sign of original sin, menstruation, from the greasy, horrible Charlotte, whose version of their "common female doom" alarms Polly, teaching her disgust for her own female body. For Polly, these frightening facts seem to be linked to the secret bag of mouldy crusts hidden under Charlotte's bed in the attic: "The idea of Charlotte. These bits of cloth. Where did she put hers? Oh unspeakable. Were they in the bag with the crusts?" (*CD* 36) The crusts come to represent the dark secret of woman, a gothic image of the "mad woman in the attic" whose feminine sexuality threatens to bring chaos and collapse to the ordered, civilised world. The bag of crusts can also be interpreted as the positive image of woman as nurturing

mother twisted into the image of rotting carnality or the stale, dried out shell of a body built to be that nurturing mother but never fulfilled as such.

The only occasion on which Polly speaks to Charlotte's illegitimate son Stanley (she does have a sexual secret) results in an argument during which Polly's French book is thrown into the fire and burnt. It is perhaps significant, given what follows, that it is a *French* book, since all things French are popularly supposed by the British to be overtly sexy. Its foreign language is also important because Polly, as a woman, speaks about the world in a different "language" from her male counterparts, and in this respect, Polly stands as a representative woman.

The burning of the French book signals the onset of a fever accompanied by delirious visions of "an eternal argument to do with French books, flames, wickedness, flames, angels, flames, crucifixions, blood, flames, and footprints in the sand" (*CD* 47). The delirium experienced by Polly is indicative of a deeper confusion about the nature of her place in the scheme of things, and foreshadows the purgatory ahead during which she must pay for the sin of being born female. Polly is forced to recognise the connections made by patriarchal Christianity between the flames of eternal hellfire, the blood of menstruation and the blood of Christ, and her relationship to these things as a woman.

The footprints in the sand are a symbol of both her desolation and a tentative promise of hope of the presence of some other being who will help. Polly identifies with Robinson Crusoe because she believes herself to be metaphorically marooned on a desert island, cut off from the rest of the world in the yellow house on the marsh. This isolation is, more generally, the condition of existence for all women marginalised in a patriarchal society.

The footprint also recalls Polly's encounter with Theo Zeit on the beach; in her blackest moment of despair and rebellion against the image of woman offered to her, Theo provides Polly with the possibility of a warm and accepting friendship by his simple recognition of *Robinson Crusoe* to which Polly has fled for comfort. It turns out to be a false offer, however, and the footprint in the sand is easily washed away by the incoming tide of Polly's gradual acquisition of knowledge about the realities of the world. Polly's response to her confusion about her own identity as a woman is to reject the world, life and her own

life-giving potential as a woman. She buries herself in the sterile, life-denying task of translating *Robinson Crusoe* through a haze of alcohol.

The novel presents the lot of woman in Christian culture as extremely problematic. The paradoxical image of Mary the virgin mother is set against the image of Eve the sexual woman, leaving women in Christian cultures with an impossible choice. For Polly, the task of negotiating this dangerous territory seems overwhelmingly difficult. None of the possible role models depicted in the novel successfully finds a path through these contradictory demands: Polly's own mother disappears after fulfilling the biological component of maternity, thus failing to provide the nurture desperately needed by her child; the unmarried aunts who take over Polly's care provide for her material needs, but offer none of the warmth of motherly love; and Charlotte is prevented by the aunts from nurturing her own son. The father figures in the novel are also absent or inadequate, from Theo who sends his children away from Germany to the safety of Polly's care in England, to Polly's own father who abandons her to the care of the aunts. The only exceptions are Alice, Polly's maid/companion, and her husband, the schoolmaster Selwyn Benson, whose marriage implicitly affirms the value of life, sexuality and procreation and is used in the novel to provide a note of optimism. Eventually Polly takes up the role of nurturing mother in relation to Theo's children as well as in her job teaching in Selwyn's school, but none of this is possible until she is menopausal and the question of bearing children of her own is no longer relevant. The novel leaves us with a sense that, although there is a path through the maze of motherhood and sexuality within Christian cultures, it is a difficult one that is rarely successfully traversed.

Love and religion are inseparable for Polly. She recognises this as a human desire to construct fictional and "real life" loves as gods: "quite often people confuse their fictional heroes with God. As they confuse their human lovers" (*CD* 223). If Polly is to reject the Christian Church and the image of woman presented by it, she must replace God (and the love offered by God) with some human substitute. Theo's name means "god", and it turns out that Polly's "angel" was a reflection from his telescope. He offers Polly salvation through his children when they come to live with her, allowing her to play out her

unfulfilled maternal urges.

This is only a partial answer to Polly's needs, however. Robinson Crusoe himself, whose name is also a clue to aid our understanding of the novel, is the most important "god" in Polly's life. The cross of crucifixion with which his name is associated warns us that Polly's salvation is not to be read as entirely secular in nature, and she who has never bestowed or received maternal love longs for the perfect love that Christ ideally offers the faithful.

The Robinson Crusoe we see here is an imaginative creation of the fictional Polly's mind, and the novel's concerns with the writing of fiction reinforce this aspect of the text. Polly projects her desire for survival and redemption onto the Crusoe of her imagination, then internalises the answers she herself provides for her idol; Polly, whose name suggests Crusoe's parrot, finds that she can "parrot" Crusoe's solutions. It is crucial that Polly's source of sustaining love comes from inside herself. Instead of looking beyond herself to an "Other" transcendent being, Polly supplies her own answer—which amounts, in the end, to a positive self-love. In the final moments of the novel Crusoe and Polly merge into one unified being; Polly appears to have found peace at last.

Polly tells us that it is Alice's marriage that saves her, but the fusion of Polly and Crusoe indicates that we are to see that Polly is her own salvation. Alice, the Christ figure in the novel, forces Polly back into the mainstream of life, but Polly must find her own resurrection within herself. It does not matter whether she really saw an angel, or that Crusoe may not be the god she would like him to be; Polly uses her vision imaginatively to help her survive and eventually to work her own salvation, as does Anne Cavidge in Iris Murdoch's novel, *Nuns and Soldiers* (which is discussed in Chapter Three). Both Edna O'Brien's character Cait in the *Country Girls* trilogy and Margaret Drabble's character Rose Vassiliou in *The Needle's Eye* also need to learn to incorporate their vision of God into themselves instead of seeking the love of a transcendent "Other". For Polly, any reality beyond the angelic vision is incidental and unnecessary. What is important is that the vision leads to a positive understanding of oneself and one's position in the scheme of things.

Finally, Polly finds herself attracted to the Christian Church which she had resolutely rejected in her youth. Sitting in the church, she explains, "I had grown, the past year, to love this music. To love the church, to begin to take part in this particular kind of song" (*CD* 198). The song to which Polly refers is the sound of the women preparing the church for the Sunday service, and represents the song of human life. Instead of acquiescing to the Church's image of woman, and thus colluding in her own oppression, Polly has forged a new identity for herself and can now be reintegrated with human society.

Polly thanks "God that from my purgatory with the works of old Defoe I had emerged with a sense of God and resurrection" (*CD* 198). The resurrection to which Polly refers is the awakening into a new identity and sense of herself which she has refined and purified in the purgatory of her despairing alienation from life, somewhat similar to the awakening or surfacing of which Carol Christ writes.[22] More generally, this recovery foretells the resurrection of all women in that "the narrative of women's lives demonstrates women's ability to reach moral resolution through the telling and interpreting of their stories, factual and imaginative, individually and collectively";[23] this creation of a new image of woman is offered as the potential source of liberation from traditional associations with sex and sin for all women in Christian cultures. The novel suggests that it is through a new vision of themselves that women can at last resurrect their true identities, an appealing (if not thoroughly convincing) program for salvation.

Despite the respective hells that Polly, Margaret in *God on the Rocks* and Jeanette in *Oranges are Not the Only Fruit* have experienced, all have emerged with a sense of the greatness of God which maintains its own integrity, notwithstanding the failings of the human beings who aspire to preach God's message. While Jeanette is left with a nostalgic longing for the all-consuming religious passion of her childhood, and recognises that the love of mortals is no match for the absolute love of God, Polly and Margaret have an understanding of God at work in the world and God in themselves which sustains them.

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22 Carol P. Christ, "Margaret Atwood: The Surfacing of Women's Spiritual Quest and Vision", *Signs* 2.2 (Winter 1976): 325. Further references will appear in the text.

23 Gayle Graham Yates, "Spirituality and the American Feminist Experience", *Signs* 9.1 (Autumn 1983): 64.

In Gardam's novels we are left with the sense that human beings can never entirely destroy Christ's message of love; some truth at the core of fallible human interpretations and representations of that message survives. While Gardam does not hesitate to draw our attention to the problems associated with Christianity in our society, and particularly the conjunction of women, nature, body, sex and sin, she by no means rejects Christianity out of hand. Instead, she depicts a Christianity in which the message of love at its core can be a relevant and potentially empowering force for women today. This is a rather more optimistic view of Christianity than O'Brien and Drabble depict, and, in its attempts to find a positive outcome, is aligned with the constructive critiques offered by Maitland and Roberts.

Woman as Eve: Edna O'Brien's *Country Girls* Trilogy and *A Pagan Place*

The Church's representation of women is an ongoing concern for contemporary British women writers, explored by mainstream and experimental writers alike. Edna O'Brien is no exception, and her novels are also concerned with the issues surrounding women, sexuality and Christianity, this time in the context of Irish Catholicism. In the novels on which I will focus in this section (*The Country Girls* [1960], *Girl with Green Eyes* [1962] and *Girls in their Married Bliss* [1964], which together comprise the *Country Girls* trilogy), O'Brien's political engagement lies more in her interest in Irish nationalism and English imperialism than with feminist politics. Like many of Muriel Spark's works (which also focus on religious and spiritual questions), the *Country Girls* trilogy was written prior to the time when the second wave of the women's movement gathered force, so does not benefit from the lengthy debates about women and religion which have followed during the 1970s and 1980s. However, unlike Spark's, O'Brien's texts are marked by the centrality of female characters and their relations with men, and a concern with the Christian repression of women and female sexuality; so, although I have decided not to examine Spark's writing in this discussion, I will look at some of O'Brien's. Since her work has reached almost canonical status and drawn the attention of feminist critics, it is appropriate to use O'Brien's writing here as a precursor to Maitland's and Roberts'

fictional representations of the effects of Christian doctrine on the lives of British women.

This discussion of the *Country Girls* trilogy will show how O'Brien represents the effects of the doctrine of original sin on the lives of women, on their images of themselves and the ways in which they experience their sexuality, with particular reference to one character, Cait, and her attempts to express her sexuality and to find romantic love in the world. Like Gardam, O'Brien is uncomfortably aware of the awkwardness and complexity of attempting to negotiate a path between the conflicting images of the virgin mother and the sexual woman. However, O'Brien does not make conciliatory gestures towards Christianity in the way Gardam does; instead, she dismisses Christianity as ultimately damaging to women.

The Country Girls trilogy explores the awakening sexuality of two girls, Cait and Baba. The characters learn about love and sex against the background of Irish Catholicism in a world of poverty, violence and ignorance. Cait and Baba question the values of their society and endlessly attempt to find romantic love amongst the mess of moral and sexual depravity which confronts them at every turn.

This horror and oppression is not confined to the Irish context, of course. Antonia White's quartet, comprising *Frost in May* (1933), *The Lost Traveller* (1950), *The Sugar House* (1952) and *Beyond the Glass* (1954), focuses on the middle-class Roman Catholic childhood and womanhood of Nanda Gray/Clara Batchelor, daughter of an English convert. White exposes the brutality beneath the "civilised" veneer of middle-class life and explores the part that religion plays in this. I shall use the *Country Girls* trilogy rather than White's novels in this study as a counterpoint to Protestant attitudes, however, since O'Brien's work, like Gardam's and Drabble's, is influenced by the ideology of the 1960s which leads into the second wave of feminism. White engages with the ideas of the first wave of feminism, and represents an earlier generation. Unfortunately, there is not room here to do more than refer briefly to her work.

The degree to which Catholicism informs and governs perceptions of the world in Irish society is made clear in *Girl with Green Eyes*. It is presented as a pragmatic faith that accepts the harsh realities of life on one level, and at another seeks to transcend the horror

of brutality and poverty by outwitting the bad luck allotted by fate. It is also a version of Catholicism that accommodates the people's continued attachment to pagan superstition. For example, Cait and Baba visit a fortune-teller: "At Donnybrook Church we got out of the bus, and as we had never been in that church before, we nipped in for three wishes. Two women who were filling lemonade bottles with Holy Water from a tub inside the door, directed us to the fortune teller's house" (*GGE* 68). Cait's lover, Eugene, describes it as "Stone Age ignorance and religious savagery" (*GGE* 179).

Throughout the trilogy, Cait uses religion as her frame of reference in describing her lovers. She describes Mr Gentleman as her "new god," admiring "That look of his which was half sexual, half mystic" (*CG* 65, 174); on kissing him she reports that "for a few minutes my soul was lost" (*CG* 99). From this point on, it appears that Cait effects a neat substitution of romantic love for religion. She stays overnight with him and the following morning is the first Sunday she misses Mass. Superficially this does not appear to be a big issue for her, as she explains in relation to her proposed trip to Paris with her lover: "A few little things worried me. I had to ask for the week off....Also I had stopped going to Mass and Confession and things. But most of all, I hadn't enough underwear" (*CG* 178). However, as readers we are aware that Catholic dogma has a much stronger hold on Cait than she realises. On an unconscious level she is shown to have absorbed Church teachings which are now an integral part of her own psyche. We see that her fear of sex reflects an internalisation of the concepts of original and mortal sin. Cait cannot enjoy the free expression of her sexuality if she believes that such actions will lead to eternal damnation; neither can she accept that sex is really anything other than sinful, since it is so closely associated with the Fall from Grace. Her ambivalence is clear in *Girls in Their Married Bliss* when she falls in love once again. On one of her first encounters with the new man, he talks of the apple blossom in Kent, and, when they decide to sever their relationship (which is never consummated), he says, as she expects, "that they must not meet for a while, that they must suffer it...that they must cling to the seeds of their love and spit out the unpleasant but necessary pips", and Cait comments, "More apple images" (*GMB* 31). Cait understands this to be a confirmation of what she has always secretly

known but does not consciously acknowledge, that is, that sexual love is sinful; to give in to temptation is to repeat Eve's sin of eating the apple from the tree of knowledge.

Cait attempts to resolve this dilemma by constructing her lovers as gods and saints, even as Christ, in a deification of human lovers that recalls Simone de Beauvoir's description of "The inextricable confusion between man and God":[24] Mr Gentleman's "face still had that strange holy-picture quality that made me think of moonlight and the chaste way he used to kiss me" (*GGE* 92); Eugene's face "reminded me of a saint's face carved out of grey stone which I saw in the church every Sunday" (*GGE* 13) and his "black pullover...gave him a thin, religious look" (*GGE* 37). This imagery leads the reader to an awareness of Cait's efforts to substitute her lovers for her God and can be understood as an attempt to reconcile her sexual appetite with her Christian upbringing, an attempt to play both the madonna and the whore. Like Polly in *Crusoe's Daughter*, Cait uses this strategy to avoid confronting her own sexuality. If her lovers are physical manifestations of God on earth, God made flesh, then Cait can construct herself as the Bride of Christ, or, in other words, the chaste nun. Thus she can transform her passion from a carnality which will lead her to hell into a pure emotion which will deliver her into the kingdom of heaven. She creates an uneasy situation which is a reversal of the nun's, giving her secular love a religious framework instead of using the religious as a focus for unacknowledged sexual passion. (The connection between Christ and sexuality comes under further scrutiny in Chapter Three of this thesis.)

O'Brien's more formally experimental novel, *A Pagan Place* (1970), which is narrated as a monologue in the second person, explores again the awakening sexuality of a young girl against a background of Irish Catholicism. The anonymous narrator's adored older sister returns home to their village and it transpires that her promiscuous life in the city has resulted in pregnancy, bringing shame and humiliation on the family. The narrator perceives sexuality as a sign of depravity, and, in response to the moral and physical danger it poses, resolves to become a nun in order to avoid her destiny as sexual woman. To this extent, Christianity provides some way for its followers to deal with the

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24 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. H.M. Parshley (1949; London: Jonathan Cape, 1968, rpt 1972) 633.

unnameable primitive fears symbolised by the ring of trees, the "pagan place" of the title, on the margins of the village and "civilised" society. Lynette Carpenter describes the relationship between the paganism represented by the ring of trees and Catholicism as it is presented in the novel: "The narrator fears the place because it is dark and secret, unknown. Catholicism, on the other hand, with its countless rules and rituals, offers the narrator a vision of order to counter the unknown. It offers her a code of moral absolutes to counter the general instability of her life".[25] However, Catholicism in this context does not have any more or less valid religious truths to reveal than any other belief system; instead, it is seen to be "comparable to a pagan mythology but more elaborate" (Carpenter 272-73).

All of O'Brien's early novels describe the undercurrent of primitive fears related to sexuality, revealing this as a problematic area (especially for Irish Catholic women), but certainly don't condone it as an appropriate response to human sexuality. Roman Catholic teaching provides a focus and framework for these fears, and the girls absorb knowledge of sexuality alongside a religious education which is founded upon notions of original sin. We see that the girls internalise this information and grow into young women with a fear of themselves as "daughters of Eve", a fear of their own sexuality as the source of damnation. Although some of the novel's women outwardly reject this attitude towards their own bodies, their behaviour reveals otherwise. Baba, for example, responds to this background by becoming promiscuous, even though it brings her little pleasure or peace of mind. In contrast to Cait, Baba appears to have an easy conscience in relation to her own sexuality and does not seem to be afraid of connecting the Church and sex. In *Girls in Their Married Bliss* she describes her lover as having "a low preacher's voice. Dead sexy" (*GMB* 59). Yet her brazen flouting of the Church's authority seems to be just as much a response to its repressive presence as Cait's fear is a reaction to it.

Cait's life is dominated by fears: she is afraid that her mother will die while she is at school (and she does); she is afraid that Eugene will be her damnation, and her choice to ignore the church bells summoning the faithful to Mass in favour of accompanying him to

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25 Lynette Carpenter, "Tragedies of Remembrance, Comedies of Endurance: The Novels of Edna O'Brien", *Essays on the Contemporary British Novel*, eds Hedwig Bock and Albert Wertheim (Munich: Max Heuber Verlag, 1986) 272. Further references will appear in the text.

his home instead, suggests that we are to perceive this as a possibility. Cait reveals that hell is her second greatest fear (*GGE* 125); her greatest fear is never explicitly named, but we can assume it is sex, with fear of her father, symbol of a repressive patriarchy whose most powerful organ is the Church, running a close third. Eugene embodies all of these fears, for he represents the site of Cait's sexual desire which, she believes, will ultimately send her to hell, and he is the older male, thus an image of the patriarchal father, imposer of religious and secular law. Cait's use of religious imagery in relation to Eugene can be seen as a charm to keep those fears at bay, yet it is by necessity an ineffective charm since it is drawn from the religion which, according to this reading of the novel, collaborates in her oppression. Knowing that her relationship with Eugene will inevitably become a sexual one before there is any possibility of their marriage, she says, "I knew that I was about to do something terrible. I believed in hell, in eternal torment by fire. But it could be postponed" (*GGE* 58). Given this belief, it would seem that she insists on fulfilling the destiny that she unconsciously believes awaits her as the embodiment of original sin.

Cait's father intervenes in her illicit relationship with Eugene under pretence of his fears for Cait's soul. Cait returns to Eugene, however, arriving at his home to the greeting, "You look as if you've been through Purgatory" (*GGE* 118). This separation from her god-substitute parallels the separation from the Christian God she believes she will experience if she goes on with her current lifestyle and which, she believes, she deserves. It is a purgatory which restores her to her god, but it is not enough to redeem her; she cannot escape the brutality and depravity of her origins in "the swamp fields, the dun treeless bogs, the dead deserted miles of country with a grey ruin on the horizon: the places from which she derived her sense of doom" (*GMB* 177). While she might have previously hoped that Eugene as god will be her salvation, she now realises that she is permanently consigned to hell. We are shown the Catholic view through Cait's eyes; no penance in purgatory will ever allow her to be a pure convent girl because Cait genuinely believes herself to be corrupted and damned simply because she is a woman, a daughter of Eve. Cait desires the comforting reassurance of attending Mass, complaining that "I could feel the goodness going out of me" (*GGE* 161). Her return to church appears to be an attempt

to recapture the supposed purity and innocence of her childhood, but, as she explains to Eugene, "I was never really a convent girl" and recalls "the sky-blue Holy Picture on which Baba wrote the dirty thing that got us expelled from the convent" (*GGE* 162). The novel suggests that it is the same "dirty thing" that got all humankind expelled from Eden.

Cait's nostalgic longing for that paradisal innocence is echoed in the closing pages of the trilogy. Separated from her husband, she finds herself (in a parody of sexual liberation) in bed with a stranger. Cait thinks to herself, "how nice if women could become the ribs they once were, before God created Eve. How gentle, how calm, how unheated, how noble, to be simply a rib!" (*GMB* 186). However, she realises that this foolish dream has no place in reality, and also that "sleeping with a man was unimportant. A nothing, if nothing in the way of love preceded it" (*GMB* 188). Cait is no longer afraid of herself and her sexuality and it is in this revelation that redemption lies. In this sense, the "myth of love, a female salvation myth",[26] as Carol Christ calls it, is revealed as a destructive force in women's lives which traps its believers in a state of dependency upon men. It is not until Cait frees herself from the state in which she confuses men and God that she can hope for spiritual liberation. The novel suggests that this is the lesson for all women caught in a patriarchal version of Christianity: that they cannot be free until they abandon faith in a masculine God.

Although the novel does not present Cait as entirely resolving the inner conflict in relation to her identity as a sexual woman, she eventually acknowledges that she is as worthy of love and happiness as anyone else. She plans to leave London with her son, Baba and Baba's baby and escape to some uncomplicated paradise. This is a somewhat unsatisfactory ending to the trilogy because it dodges the central question of whether or not Cait has succeeded in her search for freedom and love, but we must recognise the progress she has made: although she continues to be "addicted to love", her defiance of the Church means that she is no longer obsessively guilty about her own sexuality. We are left with an image of the destructive power of the Church's construction of woman which is internalised by women in Christian cultures, and encouraged to agree that women must

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26 Carol P. Christ, *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1980) 64.

struggle to identify themselves as valuable human beings in their own right instead of perceiving themselves as the embodiment of evil. In the *Country Girls* trilogy O'Brien leaves it at that, but Maitland and Roberts go further in their analyses of women as daughters and mothers within a Christian culture.

The Spirituality of the Domestic: Margaret Drabble's *Jerusalem the Golden*, *The Needle's Eye* and *Realms of Gold*

Margaret Drabble's interest in British women's experience of religion and spirituality means that her work provides a useful context for Maitland's and Roberts' writing. Drabble has a high profile as one of Britain's most widely read novelists, and has attracted a great deal of critical attention. Any discussion of women and religion in contemporary British women's writing would be incomplete without reference to her contribution to the field. Drabble's work, like O'Brien's, has been taken up by feminist critics, often to accuse her of not exhibiting sufficient commitment to feminist ideals. Drabble herself maintains that she sees women's issues as fundamental to human justice, but doesn't align herself with the feminist movement. She writes: "[My novels are] not directly concerned with feminism 'because my belief in justice for women is so basic that I never think of using it as a subject'" (*Contemporary Novelists* 254). She doesn't accept that this is a political project (although feminists wouldn't agree that she could so blithely dismiss such responsibilities), but rather sees herself as a "social historian" (*Contemporary Novelists* 255).

Many of Margaret Drabble's novels are set against a background of English fudamentalist Protestantism. Rather than the original sin which dominates the novels by Gardam and O'Brien discussed above, the main concern we can see emerging in Drabble's novels is the development of new religious expressions which grow out of the life experiences of women, with a particular emphasis on the spirituality of the maternal and domestic. In her entry for *Contemporary Novelists*, Margaret Drabble declares that her primary concerns in writing are "privilege, justice and salvation" (*Contemporary Novelists* 254). It is the last, salvation, which is of particular interest in a discussion of women and

religion, although it is impossible to separate salvation from the other questions of privilege and justice in Drabble's work. In her first novels salvation is clearly related to a religious world view, but in her later work salvation of the individual is as much a social concept as a religious issue. However, the terms of salvation are, throughout, based on life, love and the inevitability, and even rightness, of death. In its focus on the meaning of grace and the nature of goodness, Drabble's work shares similar concerns with Iris Murdoch's novels, though it does so from a less sophisticated philosophical stance. This section will focus on *Jerusalem the Golden* (1967), *The Needle's Eye* (1972) and *Realms of Gold* (1975), the novels which engage most directly with the question of salvation in a religious and spiritual framework.

Jerusalem the Golden is the story of Clara Maugham, a girl who manages to break out of the narrow-minded existence of a lower middle-class Midlands home into what she considers to be "life" with all its complexities, excitements and suffering. Although hers is a family which no longer maintains a commitment to the Wesleyan chapel-going of her ancestors, the morality of that heritage continues to affect her response to the world. In much the same way that Cait and Baba of the *Country Girls* trilogy are unable to shake off the legacy of a culture steeped in Catholicism, Clara is shown to carry with her the remnants of spiritual meanness bequeathed by her family's chapel-going past:

> [Clara's mother] had long since dropped any pretence to faith of any kind, and now considered all religious observation as ridiculous frivolity. However, she maintained the moral impetus of her early years, although she had quite cast off its derivations and turned her back upon its fraudulent source; the narrow fervours and disapprovals were there, but their objects had subtly altered over the years. (*JG* 29)

Clara balks at the "meanness and the lack of love" (*JG* 28) she finds in her mother's world, and resolves to seek a greater generosity of spirit elsewhere.

Clara finds the seeds of her imagined other world in the evocative language of Christianity, and by doing so implicitly rejects her mother's opinion of religion. It is through this poetry that she gains access to the broad, liberating world of passion and beauty for which she longs. Above all, Clara wants to be part of a world in which life

itself is celebrated. She has a sense of herself as one of the Elect, one of the few chosen to escape the narrow, life-denying existence of Northam and the heritage of her Calvinist and Wesleyan ancestors. In this novel, being one of the Elect means that she can escape the spiritual deprivations of her situation, whereas in Drabble's later novels, in particular, *The Needle's Eye* and *Realms of Gold*, the unsought privilege of being one of the chosen carries with it a responsibility to others that is not present here to the same degree.

Clara's salvation, as she sees it, comes in the form of her lover, prophetically named "Gabriel", the archangel who takes Clara into the heaven she seeks. Like O'Brien's Cait, she is seduced by the female salvation myth of romantic love. The illicit liaison provides Clara with the complication and passion she believes will save her from the meanness of spirit embodied by her mother. However, it is when Clara recognises that her relationship with Gabriel is not the only source of salvation that she is capable of recognising her mother's true identity, and thus learns that salvation is equivalent to maintaining her own identity. Clara discovers that, in constrast to Gabriel's privileged situation which allows room for the expansion of the soul, it is the narrowness of Mrs Maugham's straitened circumstances that have served to shrivel her capacity for a spiritual life. Clara realises that her mother's aspirations and hopes as a girl were identical to her own, and in this sense she really is her mother's daughter, but must also acknowledge that survival is by no means guaranteed. Clara resolves to survive, she will place herself at the centre of the energy and vitality of life, and the novel ends on an ambivalent note that, in its desperate repetition of her determination, recognises the tenuous nature of such a resolution.

Clara's saving grace is that she has learnt that it is only through developing her own moral structure that she can discover her own identity, which is, in effect, her salvation. Like Polly in *Crusoe's Daughter*, she must find her salvation within herself, not in an "Other". Clara succeeds in entering a "Jerusalem" which reverberates with the energy of a morality which embraces both vice and virtue, but most importantly, she believes she is now connected to life itself in opposition to the life-denying morality of Northam. Although *Jerusalem the Golden* is a traditional novel of a girl reaching womanhood, a female *bildungsroman*, it does raise some of the more contemporary issues which are to be

elaborated later in *The Needle's Eye* and *Realms of Gold.*

The Needle's Eye re-examines the preoccupation with a life-denying morality which advocates self-denial and self-sacrifice and the desire to escape one's past as we have seen in *Jerusalem the Golden.* Rose, the central character, is brought up in an atmosphere of censorious, puritanical religious fanaticism on the one hand (from her nanny Noreen), and the hypocrisy of her wealthy parents on the other.

The eponymous biblical text—"It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God" (Matthew 19:24, Mark 10:25, Luke 18:25)—marks Rose's moment of enlightenment. She attends a sermon in which the preacher takes the point of view that this is in fact a metaphor based on a Hebrew phrase for a gate in the walls of Jerusalem, and thus the expression means that, although it is difficult for the wealthy to enter heaven, it is not impossible. We see through Rose's eyes that life on these terms is "endless prevarication and shuffling and squeezing and self-excusing and trying to cram oneself into grace without losing anything on the way" (*NE* 85), and vows that she will never possess anything she fears to lose. Thus Rose's life is ruled by "an ancient orthodoxy, a modern heresy: she believed in faith as well as in works, she believed that giving is not simply for the benefit of the receiver" (*NE* 89). She seeks to ally herself with the dispossessed of whom Noreen speaks. To this end she marries Christopher Vassiliou who represents the opposite of Noreen and the family, and is at the same time one of those on whose behalf Noreen campaigns: "Noreen, grim, evangelical, life-denying, pinched and priggish and retreating, and Christopher, beautiful, dirty, seedy...clever, sharp, and foul and bitter, demanding, taking, deceiving, getting" (*NE* 90). Rose looks to Christopher as the Christ who will be her salvation in much the same way as O'Brien's and Gardam's characters attempt to create their lovers as the gods who will save them.

However, Christopher takes the parable of the talents as his creed. He represents the capitalist ideal, whereas Rose works to divest herself of materialism through acts of charity and sacrifice. Their relationship is a source of pain and anxiety to both parties, and threatens to be Rose's damnation instead of her redemption.

Rose attempts to build her own "Jerusalem the Golden". Her acts of charity on both a large and small scale, of financial, spiritual and emotional donations, all contribute to this new world: "she had faith, she built up brick by brick the holy city...it was very slow, but gradually the ideal and the real merged and swam together" until Rose finds herself in a home which provides her with a "visionary peace" (*NE* 63). The domestic sphere becomes the focus of spiritual life, an idea that is developed further in *Realms of Gold.*

Valerie Grosvenor Myer, who reads Drabble's novels as an exploration of the continuing influence of the puritan tradition in contemporary Britain, points out that the puritan heritage is split between Rose and her lover, Simon Camish, in *The Needle's Eye.*[27] Like Clara Maugham, Rose and Simon both seek to rid themselves of their pasts and to create themselves anew, but neither really succeeds. While Simon comes to terms with the world he had previously attempted to shrug off, Rose is finally defeated by her heritage. In his relationship with Rose, Simon learns to understand the message of the eye of the needle. Simon reassesses his attitude towards the dispossessed, the poor in spirit of Rose's area of London; Rose teaches him to recognise that these people have an "inexplicable grace" of their own (*NE* 164). Simon's insight is summarised in a new proverb or moral dictate which the novel endorses: "Those that have may not reject those that have not" (*NE* 219).

At first Rose appears to have escaped the wealthy capitalism of her parents. While Christopher is fighting for legal custody of their children, Rose has a vision of abandoning them to him in order to travel to Gbolo, the African country to which she had disastrously donated money for a school (the school burns down soon after erection). Again like Clara Maugham, Rose perceives herself to be one of the elect chosen for the difficult path of passing through the eye of the needle. Eventually Rose abandons the vision instead of her children, recognising renunciation of the children to be a pointless sacrifice. In doing so, she condemns herself to the loss of her personal vision of heavenly grace. She takes Christopher back and their life becomes comfortable and prosperous. She looks back "with bitter regret to those exhausting days of peace" in which she had "a spiritual calm that

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27 Valerie Grosvenor Myer, *Margaret Drabble: Puritanism and Permissivenesss* (London: Vision Press, 1974) 46-47.

it had been a crime to lose" (*NE* 394). Rose must now live

> in dispute and in squalor, for the sake of charity and of love. She had ruined her own nature against her own judgement, for Christopher's sake, for the children's sake. She had sold for them her own soul...the price she had to pay was the price of her own living death, her own conscious dying, her own lapsing, surely, slowly, from grace, as heaven (where only those with souls may enter) was taken slowly from her, as its bright gleams faded. (*NE* 395)

In her study of *The Needle's Eye*, Ellen Cronan Rose uses the insights into religion offered by feminist theologians, and Mary Daly in particular, to understand Rose Vassiliou's position.[28] She starts from the supposition that patriarchal religion (such as traditional Western Christianity) relies on a dualistic structure which posits God as Other, and goes on to show that the result is a framework which creates a yearning for transcending the self in order to reach communion with that God. Rose Vassiliou, especially in her role as a woman within Christianity, must find a way of responding to her religious desires "in which religious experience is not a relationship between her self and a personification of transcendent Otherness, but a realization of the creative potential for Being within her self" (Rose 82). This is the lesson that Gardam's Polly and O'Brien's Cait must learn, but is taken up even more fruitfully by Michèle Roberts in *The Wild Girl* (which will be discussed in Chapter Three).

Rose attempts to create a place for herself on the boundaries of this patriarchal construction of being in renouncing materialism and capitalism. Ellen Cronan Rose suggests that the reason for Rose's apparent failure at the end of the novel is that Rose, in returning to Christopher, continues to seek transcendence in renunciation and self-denial instead of celebrating her own being as a revelation of the Christian belief that humans are made in God's image.

This is not a complete answer to the problems posed by the novel, however. Rose Vassiliou does attempt to confront the selfish materialism of modern society, and achieves a degree of grace in the process. She loses that sense of peace when she abandons the

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28 Ellen Cronan Rose, *The Novels of Margaret Drabble: Equivocal Figures* (London: Macmillan, 1980). Further references will appear in the text.

program of sacrifice she had set herself, but does not seem to find spiritual grace in the return to the bosom of her family. Paradoxically, in giving up the life of self-denial, Rose embarks upon the most difficult renunciation she has yet set herself.

The novel finally shows us that the difficulties of surmounting one's history and heritage are almost always overwhelming.[29] The problem of determinism is raised by Joanne V. Creighton in her study of Drabble's novels.[30] Creighton explores the significance of two apparently conflicting religious philosophies which influence Drabble's thinking and are reflected in the novels: "The belief taught at Margaret Drabble's Quaker school in a 'light of God' in everyone, in the efficacy of good works, is undercut in Drabble's thinking by a residue of Calvinistic belief in a deterministic universe where some are blessed and others damned" (Creighton 19). *The Needle's Eye* in particular struggles with this conflict. Rose is presented as believing in the efficacy of good works and appears to be capable of perceiving grace in the dispossessed, yet in the end Simon Camish and Rose do not sever themselves from the past and create themselves anew.

The novel presents us with an apparent contradiction: we are simultaneously shown the necessity of recognising the suffering of others and of responding with a generosity of spirit to that suffering, and the uselessness of attempting to alter it in the face of a predetermined fate. The novel closes on a note of cautious optimism which accepts the suffering of the world as good simply because it is part of the world. Mary Hurley Moran suggests that the underlying philosophy of all of Drabble's novels is that to achieve a state of grace requires a willing submission to the forces of fate, family and nature.[31] On these terms, Rose does maintain some sort of grace, because she does submit to her fate and remains true to her own nature in sacrificing all that is most dear to her, most importantly,

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29 John Hannay comments on this at length in his book, *The Intertextuality of Fate: A Study of Margaret Drabble* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1986).

30 Joanne V. Creighton, *Margaret Drabble* (London: Methuen, 1985). Further references will appear in the text.

31 Mary Hurley Moran, *Margaret Drabble: Existing Within Structures* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983) 16. Moran discusses the forces at work "shaping and determining human beings' lives. These include a metaphysical force, or fate; nature; and the family. All of these forces operate to keep a person from being able to act completely freely and rationally. Furthermore, they contribute to the formation of identity: one is not free to become what one will, as existentialists hold, for there are aspects of identity that are nonrational and atavistic". Further references will appear in the text.

giving up her desire for self-sacrifice. However, the novel does not question the appropriateness of the ideal of self-sacrifice for women, colluding with the representation of the "good woman" in Western culture as she who exists only to serve others (advocating as role models the Virgin Mary or Martha figures rather than Eve or Mary Magdalene). Although self-sacrifice *can* be interpreted as an active attempt to claim autonomy, it is also damaging and is thus an unsuccessful route to independence. In Chapter Four I discuss similarly self-defeating attempts to claim autonomy in relation to anorexic starvation and other suffering inflicted on the body in the name of spiritual discipline. It is not until *The Realms of Gold* that Drabble creates a female character who has the strength and independence to fulfil the role of prophet rather than finally succumbing to self-sacrifice as Rose does.

The Realms of Gold continues to use the puritanism of northern England as a background, but also moves towards a new possibility of spiritual awareness for its characters. It develops a religious consciousness that is linked to maternity as a spiritual force which grows out of similar representations of maternity in some of Drabble's earlier novels such as *The Millstone* and *The Waterfall*. In *Realms of Gold* blood ties are seen to link people not only to each other, as Rosamund of *The Millstone* comes to recognise, but also to their own pasts in the ancestral line. Family identity is also seen to be firmly rooted in a sense of place, and the imagery of household gods and domestic ritual is used to highlight this in the novel. The connection of individuals to their families, to the physical world around them, and thus to their own natures and fates, also makes *The Realms of Gold* the best example of Mary Hurley Moran's thesis of the structures explored in Margaret Drabble's novels, namely, "a metaphysical force, or fate; nature; and the family" (Moran 16).

Frances Wingate, the main character in *The Realms of Gold,* feels "like a prophet, a wanderer" in her search for the ancient desert city of Tizouk in Africa, a quest which reflects her search for identity and an understanding of her own place in the scheme of things both physical and spiritual (*RG* 11). She is used in the novel on one level as a prototype of the "liberated woman" projected by Drabble, as the independent woman who

successfully runs her family and career single-handedly (falling for what would now be termed the destructive "superwoman syndrome"). Frances Wingate is not an entirely successful figure in the novel, reliant as she is on the chance of good fortune for her wealth and unfailing energy. Frances is also a visionary who has the power to see a new future for society; her occupation as archaeologist acts on a symbolic level to describe this dimension of her purpose in the novel as she excavates the apparently lifeless desert to discover the possibilities of truth beneath the surface. Frances shares this imaginative force with Rose Vassiliou in *The Needle's Eye* whose powerful visions also affect the material world and dictate her actions. Both characters believe their visions can change the world, and see themselves as the prophets chosen to ring those changes. Unlike Rose, however, Frances is more interested in her own experiences than the issues affecting society at large (and, unlike Rose, does not seek self-sacrifice as the key to fulfilling her vision).

The image of Frances as archaeologist reflects on the Persephone-Demeter myth.[32] Frances and her relative, Janet Bird (who is certainly not "free as the birds"), "represent two different stages in the female quest. Janet is the Persephone figure at the beginning of the [female] quest [for freedom and liberation], in the descent-into-the-underworld stage", while Frances "is both Demeter, who rescues Persephone, and the ascended Persephone" (Moran 10). Moran goes on to point out that the excavation images used in relation to Frances indicate her role as rescuer of Janet from the underworld. As we shall see, Frances' capacity as a "mother" to bring Janet metaphorically to life, to wrench her out of her living death into the light of day, is related to her own redemption in which spiritual renewal leads to a celebration of life and love, part of which is the life-giving force of female sexuality.

Frances examines her relationship to the landscape, focusing on the East Midlands from which her family originated, and which, as an adult, she suspects of souring the soul. That sourness manifests itself as a self-destructive, life-denying urge and is the very thing that Frances, like Clara Maugham, needs to escape; a reinterpretation of her own identity relies on her ability to transform that sourness. She must turn her archaeologist's skills onto

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32 Judy Little, "Humor and the Female Quest: Margaret Drabble's *The Realms of Gold*", discussed by Moran, 10.

herself: "archaeology....seek[s] a Utopia in the past, a possible if not an ideal society. We seek golden worlds from which we are banished, they recede infinitely, for there never was a golden world, there was never anything but toil and subsistence, cruelty and dullness"(*RG* 124).

At first Frances looks to her Jewish lover, Karel Schmidt, the Christ figure in the novel, for salvation from the life-denying madnesses of her family. However, the novel insists that the salvation Frances must seek lies in a renewed understanding of her own identity in relation to her origins, the family and the landscape which have moulded her. This path will eventually lead her to a celebration of life in the face of ultimate annihilation in death. Karel's whole-hearted love is at most the catalyst for her move towards this understanding of herself.

Frances attempts to dig up her own past in an effort to understand her identity. She makes a journey to her grandparents' home, the garden of which takes on an Edenic quality in Frances' imagination; she remembers that "it was like paradise, like the original garden" (*RG* 105). Indeed, Barbara Hill Rigney perceives Frances as a contemporary Eve representing the possibility of female autonomy and power which this archetypal figure offers when viewed from a feminist perspective.[33] Frances perceives the mythic quality of the landscape with a nostalgia born of her current dislocation, and as readers we are offered a vision of alternative possibilities.

In the womblike security of this Edenic garden, Frances has the courage to peer into the murky depths of the natural world. The ditches, "which seemed so unnatural and threatening elsewhere, were a source of delight when close enough to the safety of the cottage" (*RG* 106). Joanne Creighton interprets the ditch as a central image in the novel, an image which reflects the Darwinian determinism at play here: "Out of the mud and slime of the ditch her family has crawled in its slow ascent to a higher life" (Creighton 86). The Darwinism invoked in the novel undermines the Edenic vision of an earlier golden age, revealing it as a fantasy, its reality having status in the psychological realm rather than the

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33 Barbara Hill Rigney, *Lilith's Daughters: Women and Religion in Contemporary Fiction* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982) 98. Further references will appear in the text.

physical. It is this vision to which the "realms of gold" of the title refer.

As readers we realise that Frances' ambivalent feelings about the landscape of her ancestors must be clarified before she can be redeemed from the anxieties and madnesses that have dogged her family. She witnesses:

> A field full of people, only—women and children, in a bare ploughed field. Stooping and bending under the large sky. They had baskets, they were filling the baskets. What were they doing, in that bare field? There were no crops, there was nothing. Small children stooped, women in head scarves stooped, like an ancestral memory. (*RG* 121-22)

The vision soon resolves itself into an everyday event: they are clearing stones from the site of the new school playing fields. The scene of "forced labour, of barrenness, of futility, of toil, of women and children stooping for survival, harvesting nothing but stones" haunts Frances as a vision of the human condition (*RG* 122). She perceives a cruel joke in which the promised loaves of bread turn out to be cold stones, a metaphor for the substitution of meaninglessness in the place of sustaining love. Frances is on a journey into her own ancestral past of "meaningless labour" and "pointless rural toil" (*RG* 122). Her own spiritual health requires that she surface from the damaging effects of her family's ditchwaters and embrace the positive aspects of the awakening atavistic forces in her life in a renewed understanding of her place in relation to others. Although she is presented as always having had some knowledge of this, the novel traces her gradual realisation of the significance of family which bonds her to the past, present and future, as well as tying her to a particular location. She undergoes a "surfacing" or "awakening" of the kind described by Carol Christ in relation to Margaret Atwood's work, which also recalls Polly's experiences of spiritual growth ("Margaret Atwood" 325).

The imagery used in the novel indicates that, in attempting to understand her relationship to the past, Frances instinctively resurrects the rituals of survival from earlier pagan times. This reflects a strand in contemporary feminist theology which draws on a nature-based spirituality which recognises the potential power of mother earth images for today's women. As Angela West points out in her article "A Faith for Feminists" in

Walking on the Water: Women Talk About Spirituality:

> [goddess cults] attempt to revive the rites of the Great Goddess who is believed by some to underlie the beginnings of all civilisation. The cultist's aim is to return to the old religion of witchcraft, the earth-centred nature-oriented worship that venerated the Goddess as a source of life...In this woman-centred worship they claim to find appropriate symbols of women's strength, power and divine potential.[34]

While I do not claim that Drabble is advocating such radical reforms as the goddess cults, I do think that *Realms of Gold* owes something to the kind of thinking which seeks to revive those spiritual attitudes of the past which can be used to the advantage of women in our own times. Drabble appears to be more interested in an approach which allows space for both women and men to enjoy their spirituality, whereas the Goddess worshippers often seem to exclude the masculine in their focus on the mother and the feminine. Although Drabble's vision is centred on maternity and domesticity, it also values the masculine influence (it is a maternity "balanced" by paternity, a domesticity which encompasses the whole heterosexual family). One method of realising this vision is to revive a perception of the world which, instead of focusing exclusively on elements of nature, animates the objects of everyday life into echoes of the domestic gods of one's ancestors. For example, Frances washed her jersey "and piled it in a neat little heap on top of the bulb of the reading lamp, where it steamed gently, like a little household god" (*RG* 123). Descriptions of domestic labour using this pagan imagery propose a link between Frances and her ancestors, between the men and women of today and their forebears, suggesting a sacred bond between past and present.

The connection between domestic labour and the spiritual life is made more explicit through the experiences and perceptions of Frances' cousin, Janet Bird. Janet's life is governed by the same gruelling boredom and repetitive meaninglessness that dominates the lives of those in Frances' ancestral vision (*RG* 134), a patterning which establishes

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34 Angela West, "A Faith for Feminists", *Walking on the Water: Women Talk About Spirituality*, eds Jo Garcia and Sara Maitland (London: Virago, 1983) 73-74. Ellen Galford's *Fires of Bride* (1986), which I will discuss in Chapters Three and Six, is a satirical investigation of these ideas in fiction.

connections between the individual characters in the novel and between the characters and their pasts.[35] Considering the meaningless collection of objects gathered by brides overcome with "some tribal insanity" in setting up their own homes, she wanders past the local department store of which the "window was like an altar, a shrine to matrimony" (*RG* 130). Janet's vision of marriage is depicted in mock-religious terms: "Stuck about with silver forks and new carving knives, as in a form of acupuncture, the woman lays herself upon the altar, upon the couch, half-numb" (*RG* 130). Yet these "useless indestructible relics" do not offer salvation, or even a therapeutic effect, as suggested by the acupuncture and psychiatrist's couch; these trappings of a system which perceives marriage as a religion in itself are perceived by Janet as the instruments of self-denial and human (or more specifically, female) sacrifice. Marriage and domestic labour on these terms become images of hell, and the family imagery used in Christianity does nothing to soothe this. Janet must re-evaluate the natural world which she distrusts, just as Frances must do, to locate a vision of the glory of God and the source of a powerful identity for herself. The blood tie with her child teaches Janet the significance of blood which ties her to other members of her family as well, and, ultimately, to life itself.

Janet is emotionally disconnected from those around her, and, in the process of defining her place in the world, attempts to link herself with her ancestors by making a pilgrimage to her eccentric Great-Aunt Con Ollerenshaw, who is also a misfit in the family. The Con she eventually meets is a witch-like recluse, and it is her witchiness that attracts Janet as much as their blood relationship. The scene in which Janet and her baby make their pilgrimage to Con takes on mythic proportions. The garden and path are overgrown as if Janet were entering another world through a magical labyrinth, the world of her ancestral memories, perhaps, or Jung's collective unconscious. A black bird, this witch's familiar, swoops on Janet; she brings a gift of suitably named Black Magic chocolates as an offering. She leaves with a sense that "she had bought herself off, she had offered a bribe of chocolates, and it had been accepted. She had placated an ancient spirit, a spirit of blood" (*RG* 289). Life here is lived on two levels, those of the everyday and the religious,

35 See Flora Alexander, *Contemporary Women Novelists*, 22, where she discusses Cynthia Davis' examination of the patterning of key images in the novel.

which need to be integrated in order to make sense of our place in the world. In the process, the witch-like crone is transformed into the wise old woman.

Great-aunt Con represents a link with both the natural world and the family for Janet (it is in this sense that she is "constant"), but more importantly, she is a reflection of Janet's own nature. Janet is the witch of the current generation, and she gains a power of her own in linking herself to the witchy Con. Janet is seen to move through a process of spiritual awakening into a new understanding of herself and her place in relation to others, affirming her own powerful identity, just as Carol Christ describes in relation to Margaret Atwood's work ("Margaret Atwood" 325). She works her magic on dinner guests when she boils water over a gas camping stove:

> They all watched, spell-bound, for the water to bubble, as though watching the process of boiling for the first time....It was not the coffee they wanted, it was the magic of the process, it was not the triumph of the process but the magic of it, not the will and the domination but the secret invocation... (*RG* 168-69)

Even more powerfully, Janet performs a secret rite after the guests have left and her husband retired to bed. She plays with a candle which becomes a symbol of steadfast loyalty and faithfulness to herself, invoking the powerful and independent women of her family, the "witches" she imitates. The phallic image of the candle represents the pure flame of life and vitality which Janet claims for herself. Despite her confusion about sex, most of the satisfying and fulfilling moments of her life are related to maternity and her son, and she pledges an allegiance to the (at least superficially) irrational optimism of human nature which seeks to perpetuate itself through generations of reproduction.

Frances moves into Con's house after the old woman's death, symbolically assuming for herself Con's power, which is presented as the ability and courage to accept and follow one's own nature. The inheritance which both Janet and Frances are bequeathed is an affirmation of their own identities. They also inherit an understanding of their connection with their ancestors' endurance (both their ability to endure hardship and their enduring influence in the present), and the promise embodied in future generations. Janet especially moves from a state of isolation to one of connection with others in the process of

rediscovering Con.

Frances takes up residence in Con's house, indicating that we are to understand that location is as important as blood in this sense of identity which is derived from family ties; the novel suggests that it is necessary to have a home as the fixed point from which a family goes out into the capricious and potentially dangerous world. The importance of place in family identity is represented in one of the final passages:

> when Karel was doing some repairs he found walled up in a cupboard three shoes—a man's, a woman's, and a child's—with a small porridge bowl. Ollerenshaw shoes, dating from the mid-nineteenth century. He took them to the Museum, and found that the practice of shoe burial, if not exactly of shoe sacrifice, was not uncommon, and that such discoveries were occasionally found associated with other offerings—knives, coins, on one occasion a couple of slaughtered chickens. (*RG* 357)

Shoes, symbol of fertility, protection and prosperity, act as a physical reminder of an ancient survival ritual in which ancestral gods are appeased; here, the little shrine also indicates the continuing presence of the past in our world. Although her own body is a manifestation of her ancestors' continuing influence in the world, by living in their landscape Frances is shown to be more clearly aware of that influence.

The burial of Con (significantly the opposite of her own work, the excavation of the entombed past, through which she attempts to understand the world) provides Frances with an insight into the significance of life and death which the novel endorses. A harmony between person, nature and place is portrayed in an appealingly lyrical evocation of mellow contentment. However, Frances recognises, at her nephew Stephen's cremation following his despairing suicide, that the apparent beauty and rightness of Con's burial is "an utter, utter irrelevance"; she realises that "All ritual is a hollow mockery" (*RG* 351).

Yet Frances herself cannot succumb to the despair that overwhelmed Stephen. Finally she learns to accept the empty annihilation of death, and even to celebrate life in the face of it. The novel suggests that to have the courage to continue in the face of meaninglessness is, paradoxically, enough reason to celebrate life and to give it some significance. Frances'

childhood insights into a God who "had done it all for fun, for joy" come to fruition at last (*RG* 107).

The Realms of Gold signals a departure from being permanently trapped in the life-denying puritanism examined in Drabble's previous work and a move towards a more "natural" religion based on the rituals of survival in everyday life. Ellen Cronan Rose discusses the way in which *The Needle's Eye* rejects patriarchal religion; I think that it is here in *The Realms of Gold* that we see an alternative being suggested, however tentatively. Although this aspect of the novel is not taken up again in later works, it is important as a culmination of Drabble's explorations into religious and spiritual questions. The reliance on household gods in *The Realms of Gold* suggests that this new understanding of religion focuses more specifically on the everyday experiences of women, tying religion to their own lives instead of always being separated from some "other" and alienating supreme being. Certainly, a religious consciousness that is directly tied to one's native land is in a sense more "natural" than Christianity which developed in the Middle East and was superimposed on Anglo-Saxon and Celtic culture. Drabble retains the association of women and nature which informs patriarchal Christianity, especially in her celebration of maternity and blood ties; however, she places a new value on that association in an attempt to transform it into a redemptive force in human experience. The importance of kinship and ancestral ties in Drabble's revitalised paganism places women at the centre of the religious and spiritual life in their procreative role. However, her vision of a spirituality which connects the individual to his or her family and the natural world is one which tries to be as relevant and revitalising to men as it is to women. Drabble attempts to present a vision of salvation for all humankind in *Realms of Gold*, but many of her readers may not be persuaded by her optimism. The movement away from what she presents as the life-denying puritan tradition is initially appealing in its optimism, yet the conservatism underlying the notions of family, and the unproblematised approach to the location of that family, could well be alienating to readers who are not middle-class, white, Anglo-Saxon and heterosexual.

The writing of Jane Gardam, Edna O'Brien and Margaret Drabble exhibits an interest in the issues surrounding women, sexuality and Christianity, and thus provides the mainstream, almost canonical, context for Sara Maitland's and Michèle Roberts' more experimental (and more explicitly politically-motivated) writing. The following chapters will discuss the ways in which Maitland and Roberts use the insights of French feminist theory, psychoanalytic theory and experimental literary techniques in taking up the questions surrounding women, sexuality, religion and spirituality.

CHAPTER TWO

DUALISM AS THE SOURCE OF OPPRESSION:

Michèle Roberts' *The Wild Girl* and *The Visitation*

Feminist theologians and philosophers have carefully analysed the dualism and binary oppositions at work in Western thought, and perceive this dualism to be "in its primary form a gender dualism whereby women are identified with nature, body and the natural realm, which are all considered to be inferior to the transcendent male spirit".[1] The writings of the French feminists Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous, as well as Elizabeth Grosz's explications of Irigaray's texts, are particularly helpful in highlighting the ways in which binary oppositions and dualistic thought work in Western, phallocentric culture. Many of the most influential feminist theologians have also commented on this aspect of our culture, attributing its pervasiveness to its central role in Christian doctrine. In this chapter I will examine Michèle Roberts' attempts to unsettle the dichotomous structures of phallocentric thought in *The Visitation* (1983) and *The Wild Girl* (1984). Both novels are located in the tension between humanism and postmodernism, positing that the most significant message of Christianity is the necessity of undoing dualistic thought before human beings can fulfil their potential to reflect "God's image", yet continually acknowledge the problematic nature of this deconstructive project. I use insights borrowed from French feminist thought because Roberts herself claims that she has been interested in these debates: "I'm influenced by all the contemporary debates on e.g. postmodernism, structuralism & post-structuralism, French feminisms, which I've followed & engaged in for my own purposes as a writer as well as a political being".[2] This chapter details the main debates about dualism within feminist theology, then discusses Roberts' use of these ideas in her attempts to destabilise mind/body and male/female dualism, the first through bringing together body and spirit in a desire for "wholeness", the second through

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1 Angela West, "A Faith for Feminists?", *Walking on the Water: Women Talk About Spirituality*, eds Jo Garcia and Sara Maitland (London: Virago, 1983) 70.

2 Letter from Roberts to me dated 4 January 1990.

androgyny. This chapter also looks briefly at androgyny and dualism as they are presented in two other contemporary British novels, Julia O'Faolain's *Women in the Wall* (1975) and Lorna Mitchell's *The Revolution of Saint Jone* (1988).

Dualism is an effect of the series of binary oppositions which characterises Western thought and culture, and places those pairs in a hierarchical relationship to each other. Hélène Cixous announces in "Sorties": "Thought has always worked by opposition...by dual, *hierarchised* oppositions".[3] Dualism divides the world into opposing factions of good and evil—mind/body, right/wrong, day/night, light/dark, heaven/hell—which are extended to separate man from woman.[4] "The problem", writes Elizabeth Grosz, "with the oppositional structure (which [Nancy Jay in her article 'Gender and Dichotomy'] represents as a relation between A and -A) is that it is frequently represented as if this were a reciprocal relation between two autonomous terms, that is, a relation of *difference* (represented by the relation between A and B), a relation that is neither mutually exhaustive, nor composed of one term and its negation".[5] It means that one term of the binary pair is seen as the norm, and the other is defined in relation to it, never as an independent other; in the case of gender, the feminine is described as identical, opposite or complementary to the masculine, that is, the masculine is used to define the feminine (Grosz 105). That binarism elides the middle ground between the poles of dichotomous opposition is significant for women if we live in a phallocentric culture, that is, a culture mediated by a representational system for which the phallus is the ultimate signifier (as Lacan argues). A feminist analysis of binarism, alert to the gaps and silences of phallocentrism, reveals that femininity is seen only *in relation to* masculinity, as "a lack or absence of the qualities characterising masculinity", since it relies upon only "*one* model of

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3 Hélène Cixous, "Sorties", *La Jeune Née*, trans. Ann Liddle, *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, eds Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (1980; Brighton: Harvester Press, 1985) 90-91.

4 Toril Moi points out that Cixous' analysis of what she calls "patriarchal binary thought" leads to an association of femininity with death (*Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* [London: Methuen, 1985] 104-05); Christianity does the same when it associates woman with Eve, the body, and the Fall from Grace into mortality.

5 Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1989) 106. Further references will appear in the text. Jay's article appeared in *Feminist Studies* 7.1 (1981).

subjectivity, the male, by which all others are positively or negatively defined" (Grosz 105). It is based on sameness, not allowing for any difference which does not relate to itself. The difficulty for women is that this gives them no opportunity for self-representation, as they are always and only seen in relation to men, the male, the masculine, the phallus.

There is some debate concerning exactly when mind/body and other dualistic thought patterns became part of the *Christian* consciousness. Rosemary Radford Ruether claims that Christianity developed at that historical moment when all religions were facing a sense of alienation from reality.[6] She argues:

> For the first two millennia of recorded history, religious culture continued to reflect the more holistic view of society of the neolithic village, where the individual and the community, nature and society, male and female, earth Goddess and sky God were seen in a total perspective of world renewal. The salvation of the individual was not split off from that of the community; the salvation of society was one with the renewal of the earth...("Motherearth" 46)

Ruether goes on to explain that, during the first millennium BC,

> this communal world view of humanity and nature, male and female, carried over from tribal society started to break down, and the alienations of civilization began to reshape the religious world picture. This change was partly aggravated by the history of imperial conquest that swept the people of the Mediterranean into larger and larger social conglomerates where they no longer felt the same unity with the king, the soil or the society. ("Motherearth" 47)

The result was a people alienated from the land and nature, alienated, finally, from the body itself. Ruether maintains that, "every religion in antiquity—Babylonian, Canaanite, Persian, Greek and Jewish—passed from a naturalistic to an otherworldly religious hope in the period from approximately the sixth to the second centuries BC".[7] The result was a

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6 Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Motherearth and the Megamachine: A Theology of Liberation in a Feminine, Somatic and Ecological Perspective", *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, eds Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979) 46. Further references will appear in the text.

7 Ruether, "Misogynism and Virginal Feminism in the Fathers of the Church",

"dualistic doctrine of being" ("Misogynism" 151). In this context, the world-affirming biblical doctrine of Judaism was confronted with the beginnings of the people's desire to flee from the world to spiritual redemption. At the same time as the new religion gained a footing, ideas about the nature of existence changed.

Others believe that dualism was absorbed into Christianity at a later date. Sara Maitland refers to dualism as an "ancient Christian heresy",[8] explaining that the first Christians lived within a culture which had not recognised the split between mind and body, a concept which has become more important in later Christianity. Classic Judaism was more concerned with people living together in a harmonious community than in the question of the afterlife. Thus, the first Christians, imbued with such cultural values, may have understood God's incarnation as Christ as an affirmation of the goodness of matter. She claims that dualism was incorporated into the Christian consciousness by the Romans when they adopted the new religion, who had in turn inherited the Greek philosophy separating the body from the soul, making it an integral part of their own world view.

Whichever account we finally accept, the resulting philosophical, psychological, cultural, social and political conditions we face today are profoundly influenced by patterns (and habits) of dualism and binarism. Ruether describes this situation:

> All the basic dualities—the alienation of the mind from the body; the alienation of the subjective self from the objective world; the subjective retreat of the individual, alienated from the social community; the domination or rejection of nature by spirit—these all have roots in the apocalyptic-Platonic religious heritage of classical Christianity. But the alienation of the masculine from the feminine is the primary sexual symbolism that sums up all these alienations. The psychic traits of intellectuality, transcendent spirit, and autonomous will that were identified with the male left the woman with the contrary traits of bodiliness, sensuality, and subjugation. Society, through the centuries, has in every way profoundly

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Religion and Sexism: Images of Woman in the Jewish and Christian Traditions, ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974) 151. Further references will appear in the text.

8 Sara Maitland, *A Map of the New Country: Women and Christianity* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983) 19.

> conditioned men and women to play out their lives and find their capacities within this basic antithesis. ("Motherearth" 44)

In Christianity, the soul becomes a person's purest being trapped in the body, bound to the imperfections of this world and all that condition entails for human beings. The "weaknesses" of the flesh become an element of life which Christians must fight against in order to secure a place in heaven. As Monica Furlong suggests, "The Christian church...never lost the idea of a dramatic split at the heart of experience....The split, and the agony it produced, seemed to appeal more to the Christian imagination than a sense of the unity of the world". [9] This perception of human experience in terms of a split between spirit and body persists "despite a belief in a God who became human, of spirit becoming incarnated in flesh, and of the consequent sacramental understanding of a world in which matter showed forth the divine" (Furlong 3). The consequences of this split are described by Rosemary Radford Ruether:

> This assimilation of male-female dualism into soul-body dualism in patristic theology conditions basically the definition of woman, both in terms of her subordination to the male in the order of nature and her "carnality" in the disorder of sin. The result of this assimilation is that woman is not really seen as a self-sufficient, whole person with equal honor, as the image of God in her own right, but is seen, ethically, as dangerous to the male. ("Misogynism" 156-57)

Dualism separates the self from all that is Other, and in so doing it creates the conditions which lead to oppression; the self is placed on the positive side, and everything on the (other) wrong side becomes inferior (we have evidence of this in sexism and racism). This "perverse need to create 'the Other' as object of condemnation [is] so that those who condemn can judge themselves to be good".[10] Mary Daly discusses the "us and

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9 Monica Furlong, *Thérèse of Lisieux* (London: Virago, 1987) 3. Further references will appear in the text.

10 Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (1973; Boston: Beacon Press, 1974) 60. Further references will appear in the text.

Daly's work represents the earlier stages of this debate. It has since been criticised by more recent feminist works which see it as simply inverting the binary opposites she seeks to dismantle; see, for example, Moira Gatens, *Feminism and Philosophy: Perspectives on Difference and Equality* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991) 79-84. Feminist discussions of otherness and alterity have become considerably more complex since Daly's work, too, particularly in Luce Irigaray's

them" attitude created by dualistic systems in her early article, "After the Death of God the Father: Women's Liberation and the Transformation of Christian Consciousness".[11] Daly later felt compelled to leave the Church in order to develop her theological work, but, although she herself may no longer sympathise with the views expressed in this article, the piece continues to be relevant to discussions about women and Christianity. In Daly's thesis, feminism offers a way out of the exploitation of all oppressed groups: "The consciousness raising which is beginning among women is evoking a qualitatively new understanding of the subtle mechanisms which produce and destroy 'the other,' and a consequent empathy with all of the oppressed" ("After the Death" 61). Implicit in the dualism discussed here is a hierarchical arrangement of binary polarities. Carter Heywood quotes Beverly Harrison on this topic: "we go from *duality*...to *dualism*, from *difference* to *subordination and subjection*".[12] Heywood goes on to explain that "Accordingly, dominant-submissive relations become normative for human life" (Heywood 70). In a patriarchal society, when man is the controller of power and allies himself with God, woman is placed on the side of the Devil. Woman, the dark temptress, daughter of Eve, is associated with sinful carnality. Marina Warner explains the situation of women when they are identified with the flesh in her book, *Alone of All Her Sex*: "For as childbirth was woman's special function, and its pangs the special penalty decreed by God after the Fall, and as the child she bore in her womb was stained by sin from the moment of its conception, the evils of sex were particularly identified with the female".[13] Sex becomes an activity to be despised, dragging the mind and soul down into the realm of the body and all that which a Christian must strive to reject.

Christian feminists aim to redress the imbalance in which the female is reviled and held

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writings. However, by referring to the ideas put forward by Daly as part of her project of rewriting patriarchal religion, I want to point to the importance of these ideas within the field of feminist theology.

11 Daly, "After the Death of God the Father: Women's Liberation and the Transformation of Christian Consciousness", *Womanspirit Rising*, 61. Further references will appear in the text.

12 Quoted by Heywood, "Ruether and Daly: Theologians Speaking and Sparking, Building and Burning", *Christianity and Crisis* 39.5 (1979): 70. Heywood does not document her sources in this article. Further references to Heywood will appear in the text.

13 Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (1976; London: Picador, 1985) 57.

responsible for the Fall of Man. Ruether envisions a new Christianity influenced by feminism as one in which the feminine and maternal worlds are no longer perceived as the source of evil. She writes: "its salvation myth will not be one of divinization and flight from the body but of humanization and reconciliation with the earth" ("Motherearth" 52). She believes that we need a Christianity which "seeks to reclaim spirit for body and body for spirit in a messianic appearing of the body of God" ("Motherearth" 52).

Dualism is the central theme in Michèle Roberts' novel *The Wild Girl*, a fictionalised account of Mary Magdalene's gospel. Roberts informs us at the beginning of her novel that she has chosen to collapse the various Mary figures mentioned briefly in the gospels (Mary Magdalene, Mary of Bethany and the prostitute who anoints Jesus' feet with oil), into one composite character in the manner which has formed the tradition of centuries. The result is a complex character who becomes the vehicle of an examination of a number of the issues discussed by feminist theologians today. As a feminist interpretation of the life of Jesus Christ, *The Wild Girl* provoked some shocked and angry responses from the general public. In an interview with Olga Kenyon, Roberts says: "Quite a few [readers] wrote to me upset that I'd connected the divinity of Jesus with sexuality....and tried to get me prosecuted for blasphemy. I got letters saying 'You'll burn in Hell and I'm very glad'".[14] Other readers and reviewers were more encouraging. Emma Fisher, for example, writes, "Michèle Roberts is intelligent and passionate; by her rich use of symbols and metaphor she transforms feminist cliché into something alive and moving".[15]

Mary is our first person narrator (apart from in the final paragraph which is taken over by her granddaughter), so we see all of the events from her point of view; in the process, she puts rather more of herself into this gospel than we are accustomed to seeing of the other authors of the New Testament. In setting out to write a version of the gospel from a woman's perspective, Roberts also enters the discussions about women's need to reappropriate their own voices in order to tell their own stories. As readers we are clearly encouraged to approach this "alternative vision of reality", *The Wild Girl*, as both a "moral

14 Michèle Roberts, *Women Writers Talk: Interviews with 10 Women Writers*, ed. Olga Kenyon (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1989) 153-54. Further references will appear in the text.

15 Emma Fisher, *Times Literary Supplement*, 26 October 1984, 1224.

discourse and a ground for theology", to borrow Elizabeth Say's words, while always, inevitably, referring back to the authorised gospels of the New Testament which it critiques (however obliquely). We are presented with an alternative perspective which claims to be as valid and truthful as any other. Indeed, it is presented as an attempt to "set the record straight", as a more complete account than the official versions, despite its pointedly subjective nature. Mary writes: "I am telling the truth, my truth, as fairly as I can" (*WG* 70).

Mary focuses on what she believes to be the crucial aspect of Christ's message: a desire to unsettle the rigid divisions of dualism which, as we have already seen, some blame for the barrier between men and women. Through Mary's story, and her depiction of Christ and his teachings, Roberts too sets out to explore ways in which the habits of dualistic thought might be deconstructed, although she never lets go of what she recognises as the impossible dream of "wholeness" which would also be undone if the deconstructive program were to be followed through to the end. Jesus is presented as being different from other men from the moment Mary lays eyes on him. This is partly owing to his power over his companions, but also to the feminine nature of his gestures. Mary is disconcerted by this femininity, and further confused by his offer to help Martha with the "women's work" by clearing the table after dinner. Although this may sound like a rather banal example of "women's lib" polemic being evoked, in the text it acts as a prophetic moment foreshadowing a radically new understanding of gender in culture. Not only is Jesus stepping over the rigidly defined boundaries between men's and women's work, but he also attempts to unseat the fixed binary opposition between male and female, between the masculine and the feminine, stepping out of the limiting definitions of dualism.

Throughout *The Wild Girl*, Jesus is seen to confront the hierarchical dualism which places woman in association with the body as being inferior to man and the spirit. Rather than simply upending the existing hierarchical dualisms, the lesson is to value women, the feminine and the body, not to detract from the masculine or the spirit. The novel urges us to perceive the physical and spiritual aspects of existence as part of a continuum of human experience rather than as opposites. The novel suggests that the result of this program for

change will be a "wholeness" of being which can be understood to be the true meaning of the belief that humans are made in the image of God, yet as readers we must remain sceptical of this dream. It is here that the novel reveals a tension between its commitment to postmodern notions of subjectivity and a yearning for the humanist belief in wholeness. While on the one hand it appears to be informed by feminist philosophy and psychoanalysis in its attempts to problematise (if not successfully deconstruct) binary oppositions and an awareness of the unconscious, it also reaches out towards humanist notions of the spiritual life and the complementary nature of the sexes, apparently longing for a psychological and spiritual "wholeness" which it elsewhere implicitly (through the feminist and psychoanalytic discourses it invokes) acknowledges as being impossible. As Roberts writes elsewhere: "Being a socialist, a very critical, radical, feminist socialist, means...chucking out the humanist myth that says wholeness is possible....[but] I catch myself writing, or wanting to write, about a woman achieving wholeness".[16]

The tension between Christian humanist and postmodern discourses is ongoing throughout *The Wild Girl*. An example of the attempt to destabilise binarism occurs when Jesus applauds Mary's attempts "to join the male to the female inside herself, and to break down the boundaries between what is above and what is below, and what is inside and what is outside, and to become whole" (*WG* 61-62). Again, Jesus says, "I, Christ, came to repair the separation [of the inner man from the inner woman] and to reunite the two and to restore life and health to those in danger of dying of this sickness of the soul" (*WG* 110). The deconstructive process of dismantling dualistic structures which place male and female in opposition is here presented as the path to spiritual "wholeness", an outcome which is at odds with that same deconstruction. Mary's sexual relationship with Jesus is framed in terms which suggest Irigaray's notion of an exchange between the sexes which approaches the divine (which will be discussed further later on in this chapter): "the mingling of my body with that of Jesus was a revelation of the divine", yet this statement occurs only a few sentences after her reflection on "God as the unity seething in all things"

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16 Roberts, "Write, She Said", *The Progress of Romance: The Politics of Popular Fiction*, ed. Jean Radford (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986) 229. Further references will appear in the text.

(*WG* 160). Mary explains the significance of their sexual relationship: "In the beginning, there was a unity, and so there were no words. Creation began. First of all, one made two. And so it takes two to make one" (*WG* 123). The wordless "unity" suggests the preverbal Lacanian/Kristevan imaginary or semiotic,[17] but the reunion of the complementary male and female alludes to a humanist concept of the sexes; the novel is driven forward by the humanist search for spiritual fulfilment, its chief concerns being for the individual soul and its relationship to God, but invokes anti-humanist discourses in allusions to Lacanian and Kristevan psychology, and gestures towards Irigaray's discussion of binarism in Western thought and her concept of a sexual ethics. Roberts comments on these conflicting desires in her writing in *The Progress of Romance*: "I could never write a completely traditional romance, because my mad anti-humanist self would rise up and subvert it; I can't write only in an anti-narrative post-modernist way because that denies the romantic and religious part of me" ("Write, She Said" 230). This attempt to combine apparently disparate discourses echoes the mixing of discourses characteristic of women's writing on politico-religious matters in previous centuries, as I noted in Chapter One. Here it might be read as part of the project of disturbing binary oppositions motivated by a feminist politics which seeks to undermine phallocentric thought, but could just as easily be interpreted as evidence of a severely limited understanding of what is at stake in postmodernist thought.

The final pages of *The Wild Girl*, however, suggest that Roberts is aware of and prepared to accept the contradiction between knowing that wholeness is an impossible dream, and yet continuing to desire it. After the four dream visions that encapsulate her understanding of Jesus' teachings, Mary awakes:

> There was no mother. There was no unity. The dream of harmony shattered into pieces like an earthenware jar thrown across the floor of my room. A clay envelope broken, the edges of true words jagged and sharp, incomprehensible. And no healing unguent inside to flow out and heal me. Just odd words in pieces. Fragmented memories and desires. (*WG* 179)

17 These terms are discussed in Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller, intro. Leon S. Roudiez (1974; New York: Columbia University Press, 1984) esp. chapters 2, 5 and 6. However, the ideas are continually developed throughout her writings.

Mary acknowledges that the harmonious union with the mother is no longer available to her. The semiotic chora (the "clay envelope") is split and she must live within the fragmented, jagged knowledge of the symbolic, plagued as it is by loss and incompletion. But the desire for the blissful fullness of the preverbal continues.

One strategy used by Roberts in attempting to unsettle dualism in *The Wild Girl* lies in Mary's acceptance of all forms of experience and communication. She doesn't privilege the rational over the non-rational or the spiritual over the physical. Mary frequently describes and interprets her dreams and visions in this gospel, indicating that we are to value intuitive understandings of unconscious needs and the inner, spiritual life; but she also appreciates the lived "reality" of the events she experiences, the importance of the people encountered and their relationships with each other. Thus her gospel mixes a range of discourses in a manner typical of women writers attempting to find their own voices (as discussed in Chapter One); a straightforward realist narrative allows her to report the historical account of her life with Jesus, but she also needs to analyse the spiritual message of his life, to describe her own mystical visions and their meanings, and to develop a theology based on this understanding as she recalls her life. *The Wild Girl* is Roberts' attempt to mix discourses in a manner similar to that described by Sara Maitland in relation to her own aims as a writer: "Writing both fiction and nonfiction is a policy now; I would like to find a form that would bring the two modes together as theology once did and as the Women's Movement now struggles toward".[18] As narrator Mary moves in and out of a range of discourses as required, one moment the social commentator, next the prophet, and shifting yet again to the voice of intellectual reason. All combine to build a world view which works to unsettle dualisms, the text acting as a metaphor for this non-hierarchical perception of the world which doesn't privilege one discourse over another, rationality over non-rationality, mind over body, or male over female, but instead regards them as different dimensions of a single entity which is not necessarily always coherent, but fraught with the internal contradiction of continuing to seek "wholeness" in the knowledge that it is an impossible dream. Most of the time the text relies on a humanist framework which accepts

18 Sara Maitland, *Contemporary Authors New Revision Series*, Vol. 13, ed. Linda Metzger (Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1984) 343.

the existence of a spiritual and religious dimension of being, but gestures towards postmodern theories of subjectivity and feminist analyses of phallocentrism over and over again. It requires that we accept these shifting modes of writing in order to follow the complicated path it weaves in negotiating the complex, contradictory territory where feminism, religion, spirituality and psychoanalysis intersect.

The focus of this project is the mind/body dualism which permeates Christianity, and Mary's developing theology as a disciple of Jesus mediates it to us. Part of the rejection of the mind/body split in Mary's version of the life of Jesus is his construction as a sexual being as well as a spiritual being.[19] Mary records Jesus' praise for the way she loves him with both her body and soul, and Jesus gently chides Simon Peter for his asceticism. The first occasion on which Jesus' responses to Mary are described in sexual terms occurs on his return to Bethany where Lazarus lies in his tomb apparently dead: "He held me against him and I smelt his sweat and his hot skin. His tongue gently exploring my mouth was one of the sweetest and sharpest pleasures I have ever known, and he held me more tightly as he felt me opening to him" (*WG* 41). This scene picks out in stark contrast the difference between the lifeless Lazarus and the physical vitality of Jesus, affirming the importance of the body and sexuality. For Mary, too, a liberating re-evaluation of her own sexuality takes place; instead of perceiving herself as a degraded prostitute, she now regards herself as a woman capable of bestowing pleasure and great love on others. The employment of her body for physical pleasure is reinterpreted in positive terms, and her

19 The question of the sexuality of Jesus has been raised in several other contexts, both in literature and in theology. It has been discussed as part of the feminist theological debate for some time, and was the subject of William E. Phipps' influential works, *Was Jesus Married? The Distortion of Sexuality in the Christian Tradition* (New York and London: Harper and Row, 1970) and *The Sexuality of Jesus: Theological and Literary Perspectives* (New York and London: Harper and Row, 1973). In literature, two of the most well-known publications dealing with this question are Nikos Kazantzakis' *The Last Temptation* and D. H. Lawrence's novella, *The Man Who Died* (originally published as *The Escaped Cock*). Lawrence's portrayal is vastly different from Roberts' in its *raison d'etre*. Most importantly, Lawrence's Christ discovers his sexuality *after* resurrection when he learns the importance of physical touching, declaring, "This is the great atonement, the being in touch" (*The Short Novels*, Vol. 2 [London: Heinemann, 1956] 44), instead of issuing the traditional warning, "Touch me not". Thus, his sexuality appears to be a rejection of the Christian message, since he had denied that aspect of himself during his preaching life. Roberts, on the other hand, demonstrates that the sexual relationship between Christ and Mary Magdalene is an integral part of his message.

sexuality is now linked to spiritual values.

Jesus explains this new understanding of sexuality: "Mary loves me completely...body and soul. Our kisses demonstrate that we are lovers of each other and lovers of God, nourishing each other, conceiving and giving birth between us to God" (*WG* 58), and later, "Between us, and inside each other, we bear witness to the fullness of God" (*WG* 82), bringing to mind Irigary's concept of "generat[ing] the divine in us and between us".[20] In the novel this image of giving birth to God plays a double role: on the one hand, an image drawn from the experience of women places a higher value on that experience, while on the other, it is important that it is an image intimately associated with the physical body. Grace for the women disciples consists (at least partly) of "the courage to acknowledge our capacity to carry God inside us and to give birth to God in our preaching and songs" (*WG* 70). Although this results in a continued association of the woman and the body, it is tied to the spiritual, and is no longer a source of humiliation. Further, the image of giving birth to God does not stand in isolation, but is only one of a series of descriptions of the human experience of God. Mary describes the joyful, celebratory nature of her sexual relationship with Jesus (once again resonating with Irigaray's work, this time her vision of "an alliance between the divine and the mortal, in which a sexual encounter would be a celebration"[21]), and refers to him as her husband at the time of his crucifixion. Here there is no privileging of the mind or soul over the body; instead, both are presented as being equally valuable and sacred because they are part of being human. This focus on the sacredness of humanity also resonates with Irigaray's call for gods that are made in our (women's) own image as the ideal of "our perfect becoming" in her recommendation that "all women...should imagine a God for themselves, an objective and subjective place or path for the possible assemblage of the self in space and time...a unity of nature and spirit" (*Divine Women* 8; this aspect of Irigaray's work provides a focus for my discussion in Chapter Three). Although similar images of the sexuality of Christ are developed elsewhere by other

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20 Luce Irigaray, *Divine Women*, trans. Stephen Muecke, Occasional Paper No. 8 (Sydney: Local Consumption Publications, 1986) 3. Further references will appear in the text.

21 Irigaray, "Sexual Difference", *The Irigaray Reader*, ed. Margaret Whitford (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991) 174.

writers, Roberts appears to be influenced by the debates emanating from Irigaray's contributions to this field, even if she does not draw directly from Irigaray's publications, and explores similar concepts here.

Julia O'Faolain's novel, *Women in the Wall*, which precedes Roberts' exploration of the issue, is also concerned with the sexuality of Jesus in a dualistic context. As with *The Wild Girl*, it has its origins in historical fact, and builds a fictional world around that basic information in order to explore specific themes and ideologies. Unlike *The Wild Girl*, however, *Women in the Wall* does not explicitly advertise a feminist political agenda, but its concentration on the feminine perspective means that it is relevant to this discussion of women and religion.[22] It comes to rather different conclusions about the significance of dualism and androgyny, and frames it in different terminology, giving us the opportunity to highlight what a specifically postmodern feminist perspective brings to this debate. *Women in the Wall* is set in violent sixth-century Gaul and is based on the remnants of chronicles surviving from that period which refer to the life of St. Radegund. The novel focuses on the Holy Cross Convent and its founder and spiritual leader, Radegunda, a passionate woman who seeks to subdue the desires of the flesh through flagellation and deprivation. Radegunda's zealous devotion to Christ results in a decision to abandon her mortal husband, choosing a "Mystical Bridegroom" in Christ instead, thus hoping to exchange physical pleasure for spiritual fulfilment.

Radegunda has a mystical experience in which Christ visits her as the fulfilment of her spiritual desire. However, the scene is constructed in overtly sexual terms, and the imagery used undermines what Radegunda believes her purpose to be: at the same time as claiming to seek an existence which is entirely in the spirit, she responds to Christ with her body. The violence with which she protests a denial of the body only serves to affirm the importance of the body. Radegunda's attempts to deny the body in her response to God

22 Sylivia Townsend Warner's *The Corner that Held Them* (1948; London: Virago, 1988), and Muriel Spark's satirical *The Abbess of Crewe* (London: Macmillan, 1974), come to mind here as other novels by widely-read British women writers which also explore the life of women in convents. Both of these books, however, focus on the political and economic aspects of this life rather than on the spiritual lives of the nuns themselves. So, although they are potentially interesting for discussion in relation to *Women in the Wall*, the themes diverge too much from my subject to be included here.

are doomed to failure, and the imagery used in the passage reveals her unacknowledged awareness of the impossibility of the task she has set herself. The body/soul dualism to which she subscribes is inadequate to describe the human condition; the novel suggests that Radegunda must learn that the body and soul are so intimately intertwined as to be inseparable. The novel presents her experience as one which offers us a means by which the opposites of dualism might be reconciled rather than disrupted; there is no sense of the problematic nature of seeking "wholeness" here which is introduced in *The Wild Girl.* Radegunda's explicitly sexual response to the mystical appearance of Christ acts as confirmation of the totality of being, and thus we see that her "enlightenment" forces her to recognise that the body and soul are one, even though she is dismayed by the realisation that "the carnal was...intimately entwined with the spiritual" (*WW* 200). The novel thus affirms the complementary nature of body and soul, and male and female by association.

In *Women in the Wall*, then, Christ is represented as a husband and lover, the one who offers redemption for both the spiritual and the physical aspects of being, and as such is presented as the solution to the fragmented experience of the world when it is constructed in dualistic terms. Radegunda's experience of Christ as cosmic lover can be interpreted as a profound demonstration of the "true" meaning of Christianity if his incarnation is seen as the healing of a dualistic split at the very heart of experience.[23] While *Women in the Wall* points to some of the issues surrounding the meaning of Jesus' life in relation to dualistic thought but doesn't make this its focus, *The Wild Girl* takes up these questions in a self-conscious effort to disrupt the binary opposition of mind and body.

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23 Nancy Topping Bazin and Alma Freeman relate mystical experiences to the reconciliation of the opposites of male and female and ties this to an androgynous conception of human beings, explaining that androgyny is associated with the

> mystical moment or a sense of oneness with God, the moment of vision or revelation, orgasm, manic ecstasy, and the aesthetic experience. These are moments of psychic wholeness, moments in which individuals feel they have been in touch with timelessness, God, the Eternal, the underlying Reality, The Perfect, The Round...[These experiences] are associated with androgyny because they imply a momentary reunion with the original androgynous Feminine from which the masculine and feminine were born.
>
> ("The Androgynous Vision", *Women's Studies* 2.2 [1974]: 186.)

While this gives us some insight into the nature of mystical experiences as O'Faolain is attempting to describe here, there is little in the text to suggest Radegunda's movement towards an eternal feminine principle. On the contrary, she abandons the feminine in favour of an androgyny which results in sexlessness and a denial of the feminine.

The Fall from Grace is central to the project of reinterpreting the dualism of Christianity and Western thought in *The Wild Girl.* Some feminist theologians believe that the Fall from Grace refers to loss of the unified totality of being; the primary Fall is understood as a division of the sexes into "two mutually antagonistic poles of being, masculine and feminine".[24] It is a view which suggests that in Christ we see a reintegration of opposites, a reconciliation of the male and female, of the carnal and spiritual (as distinct from Irigaray's position which seeks to deconstruct such binary oppositions). Jesus as God made man, the Word Incarnate, is framed as a conjunction of supposed "opposites". *The Wild Girl* engages with this debate when Mary tells us of her Creation dream in which the first part of God to emerge out of Chaos is Sophia, or Wisdom, the feminine aspect of the universe. Sophia gives birth to a son who represents the masculine side of God. Unfortunately, this son is under the mistaken impression that he had created himself in his perfection, forgetting that he too was born of God. For this reason, Sophia names him Ignorance, "And his children became the adversaries of the fullness of God and of the full knowledge of God" (*WG* 79). It is these children who later drive Adam and Eve out of Paradise. Jesus analyses the significance of Mary's dream as a "warning about the consequences of ignoring God....The children of Ignorance perpetuate a false creation, a world in which one side of knowledge is stifled, in which barriers are set up between man and woman, body and soul, civilization and nature" (*WG* 82). That is to say, the world represented to humans after the Fall is one which relies upon the divisions and separations of dualistic structures. It is also significant that the God being proposed here is very importantly feminine as well as masculine, Mother as well as Father. To embrace both the masculine and feminine in God is a symbolic act which questions those divisions between man and woman, between body and soul, between civilization and nature (marking the point where they are meaningless), and becomes one of the keys to salvation in Mary's gospel.

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24 Margaret Ann Franklin, ed., Introduction, *The Force of the Feminine: Women, Men and the Church* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1986) xiii. The idea that the Fall from Grace is equivalent to the original division between male and female is not new, as this might suggest; William Blake, for example, used this notion in his work.

Mary reveals her meeting with the risen Christ to the other disciples and interprets his message to them. She explains that the result of the Fall from Grace is that death came into being, but that

> Death, far from being a disaster, has become a necessity. Through our human life, Soul enters Matter and becomes fused with it. Our task, as part of matter, is to allow the spirit to enter us, to fill us, and to shine forth. The body is the mirror of the soul, and *through* the body, not by denying it, we enter the other world, the world of eternity which coexists with this temporal, fleshly one. (*WG* 108-09)

Salvation requires that we understand that "The body is the mirror of the soul", since the body is the medium through which we regain Paradise. If we are to reject the world view of the children of Ignorance, as the dream recommends, then we must accept our full humanity, celebrating it as a reflection of a God who is our ideal of perfection.

The betrayal of this vision occurs when Peter denies women a role in the priesthood. Instead, he assigns them the role of mystics who can teach and prophesy only within the carefully prescribed limits which in fact relate very closely to the role women normally played in relation to their families at the time the early Church was being established. Mary holds Peter responsible for what she considers to be a misrepresentation of Christ's message, his interpretation clearly marking out the divisions between men and women, "the separation re-enacted that Jesus had come to heal" (*WG* 134). At this point she projects into the prophetic mode, speaking to her wider audience of readers and condemning all the future generations of Christians who allow this separation to continue.

Jesus discusses the nature of resurrection with his disciples, distinguishing between the miracle of raising the dead Lazarus and the resurrection and eternal life to be found in the Kingdom of Heaven. When he claims that "The body-self shall be raised up...all the human bodies that have suffered and been degraded shall win back their dignity" (*WG* 70-71), Jesus suggests that resurrection of the body entails reinstating the body to its former role as being equal to the spirit, that is, an abandonment of the hierarchical dualism which denigrates the body. However, it is a metaphorical raising of the body rather than a literal resurrection of the physical body, and a parable about a mirror encircled with pearls is used

to illustrate this:

> The pearl lies concealed under a skirt of shell, that in turn lies buried in the depths of the sea. The kingdom of heaven is like a pearl, which is hidden in each of you, and which you must seek, and find. Then will the resurrection arrive. (*WG* 73)
>
> And the pearls around the mirror...are like a necklace of souls, like disciples linked together in the knowledge of God. Be like this mirror and like these pearls, like the moon reflecting the sun. Reflect the light of God and know God's darkness too. Turn yourselves towards God. Seek for the pearl, and become whole. Then are you resurrected. Then will you have eternal life. (*WG* 75)

According to Mary's gospel, it is within the capability of each and every one of us to seek the "wholeness" which unites the body and soul in a more complete reflection of the image of God. This is one of the points in the novel where the reader wonders what this might mean in a feminist context; as we listen to the voice of a woman narrator, we ask what it might mean for women "to become whole". Perhaps this desire for wholeness can also be read as a desire for a definition of sexual difference which doesn't rely on a binary opposition between male and female, but uses the otherwise excluded middle ground, a definition of sexual difference in which women and men are able to represent themselves "wholly" or "completely" in their own terms. Thus the definition of woman, in particular, is to be "resurrected" into a new life. The image of the double-sided mirror suggests that woman must no longer be seen simply as man's reflection, but must instead be defined in her own terms. Grosz puts this idea succinctly in her explication of Irigaray's *Speculum of the Other Woman*: "We live in a resolutely *homosexual* culture, a culture based on the primacy of the male, the *homme*, who can function only with others modelled on himself, others who are his mirror reflections" (Grosz 107). If this is so, then *The Wild Girl* opens the possibility that Christ's preaching against dualism is a call to smash the mould of phallocentrism in order to allow both men and women to become fully human.

Set against such deconstructive readings, however, is a desire for "wholeness" which operates within a more humanist framework. Mary describes how her own experience before meeting Jesus has taught her to be suspicious of the dualistic divisions imposed on

interpretations of life by some people around her. She has yearned for a unity of experience since she was a child, instinctively aware of some unnameable loss:

> When I was a child I knew, before anyone told me, that I had a soul, that I was part of something far larger than myself, though I could not express or understand this. I was both part of the cosmos and separate from it. Feeling that I was in some way connected to a mystery beyond myself brought the knowledge that it had slipped beyond my grasp, that I had lost it. (*WG* 12)

Visions of this unity recede from her consciousness when Mary grows into a young woman. However, she is in some way compensated by a gift for creating songs which unite the physical and spiritual. Mary remembers her mother making a special bread, and "as I watched her I felt she was God beating the copper air with a spoon and making the hills ring as her wrist danced" (*WG* 13). Her desire to become part of this image leads Mary to break the eggs she collects, and she is subsequently beaten by her mother for such foolish wastefulness. This beating is incorporated into the beating of the bread and acts as the catalyst for Mary's mystical song: "The rhythm of the spoon and the slaps went on echoing on my flesh and in my heart, drumming on my tongue until I found I was singing a song whose words and music I did not know" (*WG* 13). Mary rebels against the punishment imposed upon her by her mother as the representative of "civilised" adult society. The trance allows her to recapture the childhood sense of her own connection to God and all of creation in what her mother describes as "pagan" words and music. Mary's song signifies a return to an instinctive understanding of the nature of being which is generally lost upon growing up and adopting the forms of organised patriarchal religion. The novel makes clear that, for Mary (and, the novel suggests, for everyone else, too), patriarchal religious structures separate humans from their god instead of providing a path of access to god.

Mary learns to hide her songs but continues to have mystical experiences which have their source in what she perceives as a profound understanding of human origins. During the day on which she is to meet Jesus for the first time, Mary enters a trance which foreshadows Christ's message:

> The universe breathed in and out and I dissolved in it, no longer I. There was no I to know that I was not there....This world shimmered and danced and changed constantly, and I, the not-I, was part of it, and understood it, and was it....I did not think. God thought me. I was a thought passing through God's mind. I was both centre and periphery; the world contained me, and I contained the world. And there was no I to know this. (*WG* 29-30)

This larger vision of unity in which Mary becomes God could be understood as a religious interpretation of the psychological desire for reunion with the mother. This is somewhat different from the fantasy of reunion with the mother represented by the Eden myth in that Mary's experience is based on the loss of identity instead of a dream of paradise which constructs the infant as being actively aware of the pleasure of reunion with the mother. In the conjunction of feminism and religion, this desire for completion could perhaps be answered by a union with God the Mother. However, the terms in which Mary's mystical visions are phrased also invite comparison with Julia Kristeva's reworkings of Lacan on the imaginary/semiotic and symbolic orders. Mary goes on to explain that "it seemed to me that to speak, to put words together in patterns and lines, was to accept a crudity and rawness that mocked the beauty, now incomprehensible, of the world I had dwelt in briefly and was now exiled from" (*WG* 30). In entering the symbolic order of language, in speaking, the infant loses the "wholeness" of the preverbal *jouissance* enjoyed briefly before awareness of lack or separation from the mother.[25] Mary's ability to recall at least a memory of the repressed semiotic from the margins of consciousness aids the project of unsettling the distinction between the conscious and unconscious minds, the rational and the non-rational.

For Mary, the significance of the salvation offered by Christ rests precisely in his

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25 For discussion of *jouissance* see Jacques Lacan, "The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious", *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (1966; London: Tavistock Publications, 1977) 319-24, and Julia Kristeva, Chapter 3, "The Virgin of the Word", *About Chinese Women*, trans. Anita Barrows (1974; London and New York: Marion Boyars, 1986) 25-33, as well as Roudiez's glossary in his Introduction to Kristeva's *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine and Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980) 15-16.

ability to disrupt such dualistic divisions. As I've quoted earlier, she reasons that "In the beginning, there was a unity, and so there were no words. Creation began. First of all, one made two. And so it takes two to make one" (*WG* 123). This would seem to be an opportune moment at which the novel could further develop the Kristevan/Lacanian motif in the idea of the original dyadic being as the mother and foetus; however, the focus is, instead, on the question of gender as the site of the primary binary opposition. The novel advocates the abandonment of dualistic thinking, but suggests that some sort of reconciliation of male and female is possible, and posits this as the path to redemption. The scene resonates with Irigaray's notions of a celebratory lovemaking which allows a genuine exchange between the sexes to occur:

> Every age in history has invented, invents and will invent copious names for all the forms of the partners in the couple. Body and soul. Woman and man. Darkness and light. Matter and spirit. Nature and culture. Death and life. She and she. Devil and God. In another light, there are only two names, one for him and one for me. But this meaning, of *him* and *me*, will change, and will continue to change. (*WG* 123)

This is the message Mary preaches to the disciples on her return from encountering the resurrected Christ. She emphasises that the state of grace to which Christians must aspire is one which reunites the body and soul, the male and female, the good and bad, in order to restore human beings to their original wholeness and thus bring them closer to reflecting the image of God in which they are made:

> The Fall was necessary. Soul entered time. Eternity entered matter and creation. Our bodies allow us to long for God. But the man and woman within us have become separated and exiled from each other. Only if a man or a woman, in this life, now, not after death, becomes complete again, and attains the fullness of his or her former self in paradise, can he or she experience eternity and the Kingdom. The separation of the inner man and the inner woman is a sickness, a great wound. I, Christ, came to repair the separation and to reunite the two and to restore life and health to those in danger of dying of this sickness of the soul. (*WG* 110)

Mary imitates Christ's use of the image of marriage to describe the reunion of both parts of

the self which is necessary in regaining paradise. The image of marriage is, of course, somewhat problematic from the feminist perspective, with its cultural and historical baggage of female oppression. However, I think that, in this context, Roberts is attempting to overcome such associations; the marriage between Mary and Christ is presented as the ideal for the new society, and focuses on the equality and interdependence of their relationship. The relationship of "marriage" is seen as an alternative to binary opposition. Mary explains that being a Christian means going deep into oneself in order to find the lost part of the self; for women this means recovering the male in themselves, for men a rediscovery of the female within them. Resurrection consists of resurrecting that other part of the self. In this respect the novel again seems to invoke Irigaray's work, this time her vision of a new relation of sexual exchange based on an image of the divided atom which allows a "double desire" or "a double loop where each can go towards the other and return to him/herself" (Grosz 175, quoting Irigaray, *L'Ethique de la difference sexuelle* [1984] 16-17).

The necessity of embracing both poles of a binary opposition as well as all that lies between the poles is stressed by Jesus in the parable of the pearl-encircled mirror described above: "You see the back of the mirror...dark, and solid? The darkness is necessary, so that the light can shine. If the face of the mirror reflects the light and reflects God, so the back of the mirror is God's darkness. The shadow matters. Never forget that. Without death, there is no life" (*WG* 74). Mary claims that dualistic thinking must be abandoned before Christians can approach eternal life in God. This is, in effect, to recover the lost "knowledge of the Mother" (*WG* 111). In accepting a patriarchal God, Mary believes, her people have lost the female part of God, and with it the understanding of the importance of embracing both the masculine and the feminine in themselves, putting in its place a consciousness divided by dualism.

The final chapter of Mary's gospel is devoted to the narration of a series of dreams which summarises this revitalised version of the Christian message. The first dream is set in Paradise and enacts the Fall from Grace into time and history. Ignorance, the son of Sophia depicted in Mary's dream of Creation, chases Adam and Eve through the gates of

Paradise out into the world, all the while thrusting a double-edged sword between them so that "When they turned their heads to look for one another, or tried to take hold of each other's hands, there was only enmity there, the glistening blade which whistled through the air and hurt them" (*WG* 165). From this point Adam and Eve are divided; it is now the fate of male and female to be set in opposition as a result of losing the wisdom of Sophia, the knowledge of the Mother.

The second dream depicts Mary searching for the lost Mother, and in the process she is exposed to the consequences of the Fall into patriarchy. The greatest horror she witnesses is the burning of witches. This episode is chosen to represent the depravity to which humans can descend as a result of the fear created through division and ignorance. It is particularly condemnatory of a dualism which creates a hierarchy in which woman, passion and the body are allied with evil.

Next we see a hall of judgement in which women are banding together to judge the patriarchy for its crimes against women. The dualism which creates woman as Other to the male norm is held responsible for this ill-treatment of women:

> Your fear of difference, of the dangerous Other you have invented, is so great that you mutilate us to fit us to your pattern. You mutilate our bodies and cut out the part of us which reminds you of yourself, or you mutilate our spirits, cutting out our desire and our intelligence because you think those things are male. (*WG* 171)

Mary joins the women in their accusations and all turn to the man in the dock with the verdict that he should be killed. The man turns out to be Jesus, naked and vulnerable, who pleads that he is searching for his bride. The women believe that Jesus can be sacrificed to expiate the sins of all men, but Mary is forced to recognise the futility of rejecting the male and seeking revenge for the crimes committed against women. Instead, she realises that a more positive response to the oppression of women is to accept the masculine, and that men must accept the feminine in turn.

Finally, Mary dreams a prophetic warning of the fate of Jerusalem. In an apocalyptic scene we see the horrifying results of "God split in two" (*WG* 177) in which the Mother is as dreadful as her son, Ignorance, in her unbalanced state. The dream ends on a positive

note, however, with a vision of a new Mother whose son, Jesus Christ, recognises her as part of God in the same way that he himself is part of God. This birth is the start of a new era in which male and female, body and soul, light and dark, are no longer posited as rigid, hierarchised binary opposites.

Mary's dreams confirm her position as a mystic who has broken through the barriers of dualistic thought. She no longer subscribes to a division between rational and non-rational thought, mixing the discourses of dream, vision, prophecy, theology and historical analysis, creating visions of the world which are located in the "excluded middle ground" between the poles of binary oppositions. This section of the novel recalls the seventeenth-century women writers who published their own visions and prophecies as their entry into the politico-religious debates of the period; through the voice of Mary Magdalene, Roberts too appears to be engaging with the religious and political debates raised by those contemporary feminist theorists for whom the questions surrounding sexual difference are intimately connected to dualistic habits of thought.

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Androgyny is often posited in feminist fiction and theory as an alternative to sexual identity created in the dualist mould, as it is in *The Visitation*. It is a subject which has been of interest to many feminists since Virginia Woolf's discussion of androgyny, and not least to feminist theologians. Androgyny is sometimes seen as a means of avoiding the problems of sexism (as, indeed, Elaine Showalter believes is the case with Woolf herself, for whom a "serene androgyny" represented "an escape from the confrontation with femaleness or maleness", that is, an opportunity to divorce herself from her femininity, to unsex herself);[26] at other times it is perceived as a reconciliation between the masculine and feminine, as Carolyn Heilbrun argues in her influential book, *Toward a Recognition of Androgyny*.[27] Heilbrun describes the implications of androgyny: "Androgyny suggests a

26 Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977) 282, 289.

27 Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Toward a Recognition of Androgyny* (1964; New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973). Further references will appear in the text. I am also

spirit of reconciliation between the sexes; it suggests, further, a full range of experience open to individuals...it suggests a spectrum upon which human beings choose their places without regard to propriety or custom" (Heilbrun x-xi). Heilbrun makes a distinction between androgynes who exhibit both masculine and feminine qualities in their psychological make-up, and the hermaphrodite who embodies both male and female physical and sexual characteristics. It is the psychological and social aspects of the individual which is of interest in my own discussion, hence my use throughout of the term "androgyny". In their study of androgyny in literature, "Sexchanges",[28] Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar are at pains to point out that the qualities assigned to masculine and feminine are arbitrarily constructed within society. If we accept this arbitrariness, then we also accept the possibility of changing the categories, or abandoning them altogether as artificial and inappropriate; the result is a new understanding of what it is to be human. Ruether, however, rejects the notion of androgyny because it arises from dualistic thinking in that it seeks to unite two halves, calling instead for a new system of relationships "which is not competitive or hierarchical but mutually enhancing".[29] This approach shares much with specifically deconstructionist attempts to seek the "excluded middle" of the binary opposition of masculine and feminine. The ideal, then, is to encompass both masculine and feminine (A *and* B) in an expression of full humanity, as Irigaray and Kristeva advocate (though each does this in different ways).[30]

In an attempt to establish a radical new Christianity, feminists look to the biblical stories

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indebted to the special issue of *Women's Studies* 2.2 (1974) for my understanding of some of the feminist debates surrounding androgyny.

28 Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, "Sexchanges", *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*, Vol. 2 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

29 Ruether, *New Woman/New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation* (Minneapolis: Seabury Press, 1975) 26.

30 Grosz explains the basic difference between Irigaray's and Kristeva's models:

> Kristeva leaves unresolved the question of whether the two sexes would thus be fundamentally the same, each split, divided, disunified, but the same in their internal divisions. In Irigaray's model, by contrast, each sex may have a negative and positive pole, or masculine and feminine attributes, but they must mean different things. The plus or minus, the masculine or feminine cannot be universalised independent of sex but must be always sexually specific. What women consider to be plus or minus, or masculine or feminine, cannot be the same as for men. In other words, there are always (at least) two sexual symmetries. (Grosz 175-76)

of creation and find there important material to support their belief in the equal importance of both male and female. Following a well established tradition, they prefer to concentrate on the first chapter of Genesis rather than the second: "Then God said, 'Let *us* make man in *our* image, after *our* likeness'...So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; *male and female created he them*" (Genesis 1:26-27: emphasis added). In this account God is at first referred to in the plural, suggesting a dyadic being who is both male and female, mother and father, instead of just a male figure reflected in the image of Adam, as the second account appears to describe. Mircea Eliade documents the history of ideas in which the first account of creation in Genesis is thought to refer to an original androgynous human, with the second account describing the splitting of that double, dyadic being into male and female.[31] This first division is seen as physical but not spiritual; male and female continued to support each other in a mutually dependent, symbiotic relationship until the Fall from Grace. Norman O. Brown also describes the tradition of original androgyny:

> cabalistic mysticism has interpreted Genesis 1:27...as implying the androgynous nature of God and of human perfection before the Fall. From cabalism this notion passed into the Christian mysticism of Boehme, where it is fused with the Pauline mysticism of Galatians 3:28—"There can be no male and female; for ye are all one in Christ Jesus".[32]

Elaine Pagels deals with the question of androgynous creation from the perspective of an explicitly feminist theologian in her essay "What Became of God the Mother? Conflicting Images of God in Early Christianity".[33] She refers to the gnostic texts which abound in both male and female imagery for God, which in turn has profound implications for Christians who believe that humans are created in God's image; men and women must be equal if they were both formed as direct reflections of the nature of God. Whether we

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31 Mircea Eliade, *The Two and the One*, trans. J.M. Cohen (1962; London: Harvill Press, 1965) 102-04.

32 Norman O. Brown, *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1959) 133. Further references will appear in the text.

33 Elaine Pagels, "What Became of God the Mother? Conflicting Images of God in Early Christianity", *Signs* 2.2 (Winter 1976).

finally accept the first or second story of creation reported in Genesis, Phyllis Trible reminds us that male and female came into being simultaneously because the distinction between them was impossible before both existed.[34]

We can, then, interpret the Fall from Grace as, in one respect, a division of the sexes. In this context, Norman O. Brown quotes Berdyaev's *The Destiny of Man* (1948) in which it is argued that the first human was created as "a complete, masculinely feminine being", and thus, "Original sin is connected in the first instance with division into two sexes and the Fall of the androgyne, i.e., of man as a complete being" (Brown 133). Feminism adds to this analysis, positing that the divisions established between men and women have resulted in a hierarchy in which men dominate women. Instead of being equally and mutually dependent upon one another, men and women have entered a competitive power struggle. Rationalisations of this situation draw on the second story of creation and claim that, since man was created first and woman subsequently created for the sole purpose of being his helper, then woman should be subordinate to man.[35] The result of eating from the tree of knowledge is that "the grace of complementariness is transformed by sin into a self-centred resentment of each one's incomplete nature, of each one's desire to be complete without the other".[36] Some Christian feminists interpret the description of physical separation as a metaphor for the relationship between the sexes in general, and the categories of gender in particular, and believe that, in order to become closer to God, as we were before the Fall, a reintegration of the masculine and feminine is necessary for a return to grace.[37] It is proposed that in Christ the divided nature of human beings can be

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34 Phyllis Trible, "Eve and Adam: Genesis 2-3 Reread", *Womanspirit Rising*, 77.

35 This justification for the inequality of men and women is based on what is now believed to be a mistranslation. William Phipps explains that: "In that story [the story of Eden] *azar* is unfortunately often rendered 'helper'. The English term is usually associated with a subservient position, but throughout Jewish Scriptures *azar* refers to either a superior or an equal—never to an inferior" (*The Sexuality of Jesus* 56).

36 Edward Morgan, "Implications of the Feminine and Masculine in Pastoral Ministry", *Force of the Feminine*, 173.

37 The Jungian notion that each personality contains both feminine and masculine aspects comes to mind at this point. However, Jung's theories have been brought into question by many feminists who believe his work on archetypes leads to the confirmation of stereotypes. Unfortunately there is not room here to explore the issues on both sides of the debate. Naomi R. Goldenberg provides an interesting and informative discussion on the problems associated with Jungian theories in her article "Jung after Feminism", *Beyond Androcentrism: New Essays on Women and*

reunited, bringing together the best qualities of both masculinity and femininity.

Mary Daly, the radical American theologian, deals with the problem of the division between men and women in *Beyond God the Father*. She explains 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" (*Beyond God* 50). Daly argues that our real salvation lies in the possibility of healing the divided self; for women, it is that self divided between one's own consciousness and the internalised attitudes of the dominant cultural group. The androgyne thus comes to represent "a buried treasure, a centering vision of wholeness that might enable women and men to move beyond the deformed symbiosis of male power and female submission".[38] A fusion of feminism and Christianity is thus offered hopefully as the path towards the "excluded middle" ignored in structures of binary opposition. In summarising Daly's position, Gayle Kimball states: "To merge feeling and thought, the personal and political, to develop women who are full persons, adds to universal human becoming and thereby fulfills the Biblical promise that men and women are made in the image of God. That will be the Second Coming".[39] While Daly believes this Second Coming to be an event which will take place at some unidentifiable time in the future, feminist Christians interpret it as a promise of Christ's life, although it is as yet unfulfilled. It is, of course, a vision that accepts the possibility of spiritual and psychic "wholeness" as a relatively unproblematic concept in itself.

In *The Wild Girl* Mary is lauded for her attempts to "join the male to the female inside herself, to break down the boundaries between what is above and what is below, and what is inside and what is outside, and to become whole" (*WG* 61-62). This, Jesus says, is the

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Religion, ed. Rita M. Gross (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1977) and "A Feminist Critique of Jung" in *Signs* 2.2 (Winter 1976): 443-49. Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza also refers to the difficulties associated with too enthusiastic an embrace of Jungian theories of the feminine in her article, "Feminist Spirituality, Christian Identity, and Catholic Vision" reprinted in *Womanspirit Rising*. Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi also uses Jungian ideas in her article, "The Politics of Androgyny", *Women's Studies* 2.2 (1974): 151-60, but does not address the associated problems of stereotyping.

38 Carol P. Christ, *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1980) 81.

39 Gayle Kimball, "From Motherhood to Sisterhood: The Search for Female Religious Imagery in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Theology", *Beyond Androcentrism*, 263.

path to spiritual fulfilment, "For every man who will make himself female will enter the Kingdom of Heaven" (*WG* 60). He is seen to be working actively to overcome the divisions between men and women, encouraging men to accept the female in themselves and women to accept the male in themselves as they learn to question the opposing structures of dualism in their lives. It is only by disrupting these barriers, according to Mary's gospel, that both men and women can find wholeness and enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

Androgyny supplies an answer to the confusion and initially unidentified yearning experienced by Helen, the heroine of Roberts' previous novel, *The Visitation.* Helen and her twin brother Felix experience a psychological paradise in their mother's womb; the twins are constructed as the archetypal Adam and Eve. On expulsion from the Edenic womb, Helen and Felix are divided by their respective sexes. This loss is crucial in Helen's understanding of herself. She continually longs for reunion with her male counterpart and develops an ambivalence towards her own sexuality. Her inability to continue working as a writer is presented as the outward manifestation of her psychic and spiritual sickness. In order to write, Helen "always feels she has to cancel her body out, become pure mind. Genderless, transcendent, like a man" (*V* 99). Caught in the trap which posits the male as the norm and makes masculinity look as if it is not gendered at all, Helen slides back and forth between the desire to be feminine and the desire to be masculine, groping for the "excluded middle" or some point at which the tension is balanced. Helen's inability to write reflects her inability to construct herself as male; she faces the age-old problem of women writers who dare to trespass on the province of men. Freud referred to this when he described the neurotic's fear of "writing, which entails making a liquid flow out of a tube on to a piece of white paper"; the ink coming out of the pen is eroticised and correlated to semen coming out of the penis.[40] Now we recognise that this crippling metaphor of the pen as penis reveals the taboo on women seizing the authority to write their own stories, to name their own experience in their own words

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40 Sigmund Freud, *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 20 (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute, of Psychoanalysis, 1968) 90.

(Virginia Woolf's claim to unsex herself in order to write comes to mind again in this context). Helen is confronted by the problematic nature of the woman writer, apparently little closer to resolving the dilemmas which faced her sisters in previous generations (as discussed in Chapter One). She has yet to establish a "speaking...position in the middle of the binaries (the so-called position of the 'excluded middle'), affirming both poles while undoing their polarisation" (Grosz 132). Instead, Helen can be seen to be taking up the role of the hysteric (with effects very similar to Freud's paralysed neurotic) as excessive mimic as it is acted out by Irigaray: "the conversion of her passivity into activity by taking on, in the most extreme forms, what is expected, but to such an extreme degree that the end result is the opposite of compliance" (Grosz 138). This apparent compliance is really an attempt to achieve autonomy. Helen's paralysis in confronting the blank page can thus be understood as the extreme edge of the passivity assigned to women in phallocentrism, the extreme response to the silence enjoined on women wishing to write. But it is also a damaging strategy for Helen herself, as it usually is to the hysteric, and so she must negotiate a more successful path through the minefields of writing and sexual difference.

And yet Helen is not at all sure of her own position within the binary structure of gender, seeing herself as both too masculine to be properly feminine, and too feminine to satisfy her longings to be masculine. As a teenager standing beside the traditionally feminine, petite Viv, Helen "feels like a man in disguise" and wonders, "What must it feel like to be a real girl" (*V* 29). But later Helen attempts to represent herself in more masculine terms; she cuts off her long hair, that symbol of feminine beauty, and submits to having her pubic hair shaved, in order to please her lover Steven whose fantasy is to make love to a boy. This scene is echoed in what appears to be a dream sequence in which Felix shaves the pubic hair of a prostitute called Helena, and indeed, the relationship with Steven has incestuous overtones which are used to highlight Helen's desire for reunion with her male twin.

Clearly, then, we are to interpret Helen's desire for the male half of her self as also being a desire for reunion with her twin. There is some tension here, however, because she yearns for the paradise of the womb, identifying that bliss with her twin rather than

with the womb itself (the womb being, of course, a metonym for the mother); she longs for reconnection with her twin/complementary other in order to recreate the *jouissance* of connection with the maternal semiotic in which there is no Other. The wholeness she seeks might be described as that of the "phallic mother",[41] but at this stage of her development it appears to Helen that the only path to wholeness lies in finding another person who will complement her own qualities, filling in the gaps of her own being. While her memory of the perfect partner is Felix, the lost twin, Helen shies away from Steven's offer of the dangerous pleasures of incest (pleasures which also resonate with her incestuous desire for the mother). In fact, Steven is so close to Felix in Helen's mind, despite her inability to recognise this consciously at first, and so similar to herself, that the novel introduces some doubt as to whether he exists outside Helen's imagination at all. The scenes featuring Steven often have a dreamlike quality, induced in part by, but not fully explained by, the languid, tropical heat of Thailand.

We are encouraged to perceive the horror associated with tabooed incest in an incident in which Helen chops up a deformed carrot: "It was really two carrots, but they had grown twined around each other so tightly that they were inseparable. Monstrous, she silently shrieked, and whacked at the coupled carrots" (*V* 138). The twin(n)ed carrots symbolise her desire for Felix which is transformed from a psychological to a sexual relationship once their sexual difference divides them. Helen's response indicates an unconscious knowledge that any sense of completeness must be found within oneself rather than in a dependent, symbiotic relationship with another.

Having rejected the love offered by Steven, Helen chooses next a man who would appear to be her exact opposite. George is a large, burly man, and it is not until Helen sees him with his new girlfriend, Anna, that she realises he could never have answered her needs. Together, George and Anna swing in perfect rhythm: "They are the original

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41 This is a term introduced by Freud which refers to the child's pre-oedipal fantasy of the omnipotent, sexually neutral mother. The "phallic mother" is perceived as complete, lacking nothing, by the child who as yet has no concept of castration. Elizabeth Grosz defines her thus: "The phallic mother is the fantasy of the mother who is able to grant the child everything, to be its object of desire, and in turn, to be the subject who desires the child as her object" (*Feminism and Psychoanalysis: A Critical Dictionary*, ed. Elizabeth Wright [Oxford: Blackwell, 1992] 314-15).

hermaphrodite, these two lovers formed back into one again; they have found, each of them, their other half that has been lacking for so long" (*V* 136). That they are described as an "hermaphrodite", the being who exhibits the biological characteristics of both sexes, instead of the masculine and feminine psychological qualities of the androgyne, is significant, given the discussion of these terms in the feminist theory with which this text engages. As readers we find ourselves urging Helen to seek the latter in her search for fulfilment, for it is the androgynous vision as Heilbrun describes it which is presented here as Helen's salvation.

Finally, Helen finds the right man for herself, Robert, who "balances" her femininity without overpowering her identity. Once in a relationship like this, Helen is sufficiently secure to allow herself to recognise that she can only ever find wholeness within her own being. Instead of attempting to alter her to fit his own needs, Robert simply responds to her as she is (if "Helen" is a thinly disguised portrait of Michèle Roberts herself, then perhaps it is not surprising that the "Robert" of her *surname* offers her that connection with the father, the Other, the male half). This is presented as being enormously liberating for Helen, and she at last discovers that

> The twins lodge simply, deep inside her, as images of different parts of herself, as needs for different sorts of activity. She begins to smile with delight at this recognition of what makes herself: wholeness dependent on twin capacities and twin needs. Out of the tension, the meeting between the two, she forms the synthesis of who she is today. (*V* 175)

Helen's new knowledge is symbolised by the moment in which she peers through a glass door at Felix and finds her gaze resting on her own image in place of his face. Clearly the two halves are herself. Janice Raymond's words could have been written for this very situation: "Through the insights of feminist theology, androgyny allows us to lay claim to the other in us".[42] Although Roberts says that she prefers the word "bisexual" (Kenyon 172), I will continue to use the term "androgyny" which indicates the wider debates with which this novel engages. The novel suggests that women can find both the

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42 Janice Raymond, "Beyond Male Morality", *Women and Religion,* eds Judith Plaskow and Joan Arnold (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1974) 124.

feminine and the masculine other within themselves, as well as the maternal. While the focus is on the androgynous vision, there is some exploration of the significance of the mother; the theme of motherhood is taken up in a more complex manner in Roberts' later novel, *The Book of Mrs Noah.*

Instead of unsexing herself in order to write, as Woolf advocated, Helen must embrace both the masculine and feminine in her own nature to create the psychological "wholeness" projected by Heilbrun. On discovering this wholeness within herself, Helen is once again able to write. Instead of perceiving herself as a half creature alienated from the mother and cut off from her complementary other, she has moved to a position of independent self-fulfilment. The novel advocates a complementarity of the sexes within each individual, falling into the trap of binary thought which I discussed earlier in this chapter: identity is still seen in terms of opposing structures of masculine and feminine, even though they are no longer tied to the male and female respectively. Despite its gestures towards psychoanalytic theory and French feminisms, *The Visitation*, like *The Wild Girl*, is torn between postmodern and humanist concepts of gender, and articulates a continuing longing for wholeness.

Lorna Mitchell in *The Revolution of Saint Jone* and Julia O'Faolain in *Women in the Wall* also explore the concept of androgyny in a religious context as an answer to the desire for wholeness. In *Women in the Wall*, the concepts of androgyny and hermaphroditism (O'Faolain does not distinguish between the physical and psychological in the way that Heilbrun suggests) are explored through the male voice of the young prince Clovis who discusses the desirability of each person's expressing both the masculine and feminine in themselves. He explains his tutor's ideas to Radegunda, beginning with the anatomy of the womb.

> The womb...consists of seven cells or pockets. Men are born in the three right-hand ones which are warmer...women are born in the colder side: the left. Hermaphrodites are born in the middle cell and they....though in some ways monstrosities, are in others the most perfect of humans, being conceived in the most temperate and balanced heat....Mentally...we should all strive to be

hermaphrodites. (*WW* 220-21)

Radegunda is impressed by the theory. However, her pleasure is not in the presence of both aspects of humanity, but because she believes "the ideal human being is sexless" (*WW* 221). She determines to "breed masculine faults out of you [Clovis] without breeding feminine ones in" (*WW* 221). She herself is observed by the nuns around her to be growing more masculine (or less feminine) as she withdraws into her private dialogue with Christ; her concern is in cancelling out both masculine and feminine qualities rather than valuing both. She believes that sex and gender are a threat to her religious life, and she wishes to destroy them in order to exist on a purely spiritual plane. Instead of accepting both the carnal and mental aspects of her nature, she denies her body. After Christ reveals himself to her as the long awaited bridegroom, and she discovers physical evidence of sexual intercourse, she is, to her confusion, forced to recognise that the carnal and spiritual cannot be separated. Despite her constant struggle to subdue her physical self, she experiences God's love through the senses of the body and, more explicitly, as a woman. Reversing the patterns established by Cait in O'Brien's *Country Girls* trilogy and Polly in Gardam's *Crusoe's Daughter*, Radegunda has replaced her husband with God as a male figure (Christ), in the hope of clearing the way for transcendence of the dualities operating in her world.

It is difficult to establish whether or not Radegunda's proposed solution to the problem of sexuality is to be interpreted as a successful way of dealing with the dilemma. Although she is independent from all men, indeed, from all other people, she could also be construed as mentally unstable by an unsympathetic observer. Her mysticism removes her from the concerns of the material world, and, in doing so, the criteria used in the ordinary world of mortals are no longer relevant. She may imagine that she has transcended the dualities of male and female in unsexing herself, but she has also left behind the dualities of reality and imagination, sanity and madness, the spiritual and the physical. This, then, is the result of not confronting one's femininity, and recalls Virginia Woolf's own unhappy and psychologically unstable life.

Lorna Mitchell's science fiction novel, *The Revolution of Saint Jone*, is set in the

remote, isolated Yukey Islands on which a Krischan mission has been established. Jone Grifan, a priest of the Church of the Rational Cosmos, arrives at the mission and sets about indoctrinating the "ethnics" in the supression of carnality. The novel is to some extent a critique of Christianity, concentrating on the split between the body and the rational mind. The ethnics, who are trapped in a carnal state and reproduce via sexual intercourse, are caught in a social situation which emphasises the division between the sexes. The Krischan saints, on the other hand, reject all forms of carnality, and in turn are almost oblivious to any differences between the sexes. Set in constrast to both positions is Yalida, the androgynous singer, who preaches a middle path of sexuality which is based on tenderness and love rather than on the lust and violence characteristic of sex in the ethnic community. Jone Grifan, whose name identifies her first with the courageous Saint Jone who dressed and behaved as a man, and secondly with the mythical griffin which symbolises alertness, enlightenment and carnal passions,[43] is eventually won over to Yalida's philosophy. Yalida, who is neither male nor female and therefore not subject to the hatred of the gender divide, becomes the mouthpiece for a more tender expression of sexuality. It is through her songs that Jone learns the difference between the anger and fear of carnality and the joy of sexual love between equals. Jone's revolution takes the form of dismantling the barriers which divide her world into the polarities of male and female, love and lust, the physical and the spiritual.

For both Yalida in *The Revolution of Saint Jone* and Radegunda in *Women in the Wall* androgyny is an escape from the conflict between male and female rather than some kind of reconciliation of the two. In contrast, Roberts' novels advocate embracing both male and female, the spiritual and the physical, in an attempt to transform dualistic thinking. Roberts herself maintains that: "it's the *play* between the two sides that interests me, not some static state of rising above them" (Kenyon 172). Thus "opposites" are no longer seen in tension, but as reverse sides of a coin, intimately entwined and reliant upon each other for existence, or as points along a continuum. In this context, androgyny implies a version of completion in its acceptance of both the masculine and the feminine in oneself; in the process,

43 Gertrude Jobes, *Dictionary of Mythology, Folklore and Symbols* (New York: Scarecrow Press, 1962) 690-91.

androgyny becomes the means of deconstructing the dualisms imposed on humans' experience of themselves and their world. Within the terms of a feminist Christianity, acceptance of Christ is posited as the means of access to the knowledge of diversity and difference in humankind. This entails rejecting dualistic thinking, stepping into the excluded middle ground between the poles of binary opposition, and a recognition of the male and female as mutually dependent and mutually respectful entities. Roberts' novels engage with a vision of a spiritual revolution which potentially profoundly alters our perceptions of ourselves and the world around us, and therefore the way we live in the world; this includes holding on to the dream of wholeness, while simultaneously acknowledging that such "wholeness" can only ever be tentative and provisional. However, many readers would not to be persuaded by Roberts's vision, finding that her project of weaving together the contradictory discourses of postmodernism, French feminism and psychoanalysis on one side, and religion and humanism on the other, is fundamentally untenable. Even though Roberts herself appears to be prepared to accept the clashes between the various discourses she invokes, others may find it considerably more disabling. Instead of reading these contradictions as joyfully anarchic in their disregard for patriarchal rationality, they might well interpret it as evidence of a severely limited understanding of what is at stake in positions such as Irigaray's and Kristeva's.

CHAPTER THREE

REPRESENTATIONS OF CHRIST:

Women in the Wall, Nuns and Soldiers, Virgin Territory and *The Wild Girl.*

One of the most pressing concerns for feminist theology is a reinterpretation of what the figure of Jesus Christ himself might mean for women. As a manifestation of God, he stands as the role-model, the "ideal of perfection, of becoming"[1] for Christians. Contemporary British women writers also grapple with this issue in their fiction, and this chapter examines representations of Christ in Sara Maitland's *Virgin Territory* (1984) and Michèle Roberts' *The Wild Girl* (1984) in comparison with Julia O'Faolain's *Women in the Wall* (1975) and Iris Murdoch's *Nuns and Soldiers* (1980), with brief discussions of Ellen Galford's *Fires of Bride* (1986) and Hilary Bailey's *Hannie Richards* (1985), against the background of Irigaray's notion that women must create their own gods in their own image. These novels demonstrate that the Christ figure can be perceived, and even rewritten, as being more sympathetic to the concerns of women than the patriarchal God of traditional Christianity has been in the past. This is the case whether or not the novels display an explicitly feminist agenda.

Julia O'Faolain's *Women in the Wall*, Iris Murdoch's *Nuns and Soldiers*, and Sara Maitland's *Virgin Territory* all take the opportunity to examine representations of Christ through the eyes of nuns. Radegunda, the spiritual leader of the Holy Cross Convent in *Women in the Wall*, experiences a visitation from Christ; Christ also appears to Anne Cavidge, a nun who has recently left her order, in *Nuns and Soldiers*. While Sister Anna of *Virgin Territory* does not have an actual vision or visitation, she rejects traditional representations of Christ in favour of a new construction informed by her revitalised understanding of Christianity and her own identity. *The Wild Girl* by Michèle Roberts offers a "first-hand" construction of Christ from Mary Magdalene's point of view.

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1 Elizabeth Gross, *Irigaray and the Divine* (Sydney: Local Consumption Publications, 1986) 12.

The Wild Girl is a fictional account of Mary Magdalene's gospel set around the time of Christ's life, and Julia O'Faolain's novel, *Women in the Wall*, focuses on the lives of nuns in a sixth-century Gallic convent, as I have discussed in Chapter 2. *Nuns and Soldiers*, on the contrary, is set in contemporary London and France. Anne Cavidge, the only "real" nun of the title, exists on the periphery of the main action of the novel (which takes place on several fronts with interwoven storylines), but is central to our understanding of the novel since she represents the powerlessness of characters aligned with the forces of good in this world.[2] She has recently left her convent and returned to the world where she is recontacting old friends, particularly the recently widowed Gertrude who had been Anne's best friend at university. Gertrude is seeking a new husband, and falls in love with a hapless and ineffectual young man named Tim, while the Count attempts to catch her romantic attention. Anne does not become enmeshed in the web of love affairs and alliances that her friends and acquaintances weave, largely because they are incapable of seeing her as part of the ordinary world; instead, she is marked off as a nun who has no need of and no place in personal relationships. For them, she ceased to exist as an ordinary person on entering the convent. Although Anne has lost her faith in a personal God, the concept of Jesus continues to hold significance for her. Jesus appears to her in the ordinary, mundane setting of her own kitchen one day, and she converses with him at some length.

Virgin Territory is also set in contemporary London, and traces the experiences of Sister Anna who is forced to re-examine her identity and reasons for being when one of her sisters in their South American convent is raped. She travels to London on the pretext of spending some time studying in the British Museum. Her relationships with the radical lesbian, Karen, and a brain-damaged child, Caro, are crucial in catapulting her into a situation in which she must come to terms with her construction of herself. In the course of a nervous breakdown, she realises that, despite the asexual life she has apparently chosen, she must accept that she *is* a woman and at odds with the patriarchal world in

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2 Elizabeth Dipple, *Iris Murdoch: Work for the Spirit* (London: Methuen, 1982) 325 ff. Further references will appear in the text.

which she lives. It is essential for her to examine what Christ means to her in the feminised understanding of Christianity which follows from her conscious battle to understand her own identity as a woman.

Although *Virgin Territory* and *The Wild Girl* are the only two of the four novels which are explicitly informed by feminist ideology, it is appropriate to examine all of them from the perspective of feminism which demands a reappraisal of Christianity. Although Murdoch and O'Faolain are not operating within explicitly feminist frameworks and make little of gender and sexual politics as such, their representations of erotic encounters between women and Christ point the reader towards a consideration of these passages which asks: What is the significance of Christ *for women*? What does the *woman's* experience of Christ tell us about Christianity? How is that different from what *men* might gain from a Christophany? How does the combination of sex and religion impact on *women*? Thus, although Murdoch and O'Faolain do not engage actively with feminist theology and philosophy to the extent that Maitland and Roberts do, such feminist scholarship offers helpful critical tools in developing an understanding of the broader significance of the passages in question.

I have found Irigaray's work particularly helpful in illuminating the representations of Christ in these novels, particularly her discussion of the kinds of gods that women need in order to liberate themselves from the oppression of phallocentric thought. I am not suggesting that Irigaray is a feminist theologian, however; her interest is in the philosophy informing religious and theological debate, rather than the specific issues debated in theology. Nevertheless, as Elizabeth Grosz explains, for Irigaray, "To have a goal or purpose, to project into an unknown future is to have a religious attitude. God is the perfection, the ideal, end or goal of an infinite becoming".[3] In other words,

> God is, for Irigaray, the ideal or perfected self-representation of a desiring subject. At the same time as representing a future path, a kind of temporal horizon for women's existence, God is also a name for an infinite space, a space which, in

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3 Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1989) 153. Further references will appear in the text.

> other terminology, is the *cosmos*. In order for woman to find/make an identity for herself, she must situate herself (and be situated by others) within a natural or terrestrial order as well as a cosmic or celestial order....Within the constraints of meaning provided by available representational systems, however, the subject needs some conception of the cosmos, and of her place as subject and object within it. (*Sexual Subversions* 180-81)

Further, "it is not adequate simply to rely on received formulas of worship which affirm a male-defined God. The task for women is not to include themselves within a pre-existing image of God but to find a God for themselves" (*Sexual Subversions* 153).

For all of the women in the novels under discussion here, traditional representations of Christ have proved to be inadequate. They are obliged to construct new images of their saviour, and each woman must create her own Christ. This is precisely what Luce Irigaray advocates in *Divine Women*:

> How could our God be imagined? Or our god?...If there is not just *one*, how will we choose among them to conceive our perfect becoming?...all women, except when they remain submitted to the logic of the essence of man, should imagine a God for themselves, an objective and subjective place or path for the possible assemblage of the self in space and time...a unity of nature and spirit, a condition of the homeland and of sainthood. Only a God can save us and guard over us. The feeling or experience of a positive, objective and glorious existence for our subjectivity is necessary for us. Such as a God who helps and guides us in our becoming, who holds the measure of our limits—women—and our relation to the infinite, which inspires our endeavours.[4]

Grosz explains that, "In her [Irigaray's] view God represents the possibility of a perfection, an ideal, goal and trajectory for the subject, but only on condition that this God is one's own" (*Sexual Subversions* 160). In the novels under discussion here, Radegunda creates a Christ who offers her the possibility of reconciling the dualities of body and soul;

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4 Luce Irigaray, *Divine Women*, trans. Stephen Muecke, Occasional Paper No. 8 (Sydney: Local Consumption Publications, 1986) 8.

Anne Cavidge develops a Christ who is human to the core; Sister Anna's Christ affirms the independence of the virgin from the patriarchal Fathers. Mary Magdalene alone manages to learn all of this from the Christ she calls husband. Despite the differences between these representations, all of these women are empowered by their revitalised interpretations of what Christ and Christianity mean for them.

Part of this energising of the women is owing to the erotic component of their responses to Christ. This has the effect of affirming their sexuality and existence as women in positive terms, instead of rejecting their sexuality as evil. All four confront difficulties in their relationships to Christianity because of their identity as women who are associated with Eve and the evils of the body; the alternative role of virgin mother in emulation of the Virgin Mary is, by definition, impossible. They need to fashion a Christ who accepts their total identity as both spiritual and sexual beings, reflecting their own ability to accept themselves as such.

In *Women in the Wall*, Radegunda's Christ appears before her as the culmination of an episode in which she has been pleading for union with him. Until this moment, her life in the convent has been devoted to the mortification of the flesh in an effort to quell physical desire, to deny the body until it is utterly subdued and submissive to the spirit. Radegunda's hatred and fear of the body is indicative of the body/soul dualism which pervades patriarchal Christianity in general. Radegunda has internalised a dualistic intepretation of her own role in the scheme of things; the result is that she despises her body and herself as woman. She wishes to shed the body altogether in death and exist in the "pure" realm of the soul, seeking union with God in heaven.

Fire becomes the metaphor for the process of purging which is required to fit her for eternal union with Christ. She begs for "the great blaze of your glance which, when you turn it on me, will burn out the husk of my body and draw my soul to you" (*WW* 172). Fire is a useful image here not only because of its association with penance paid in purgatory, but also because, as the phoenix legend suggests, it destroys the material, physical object, thus setting the "spirit" free. Radegunda's mystical experience is described throughout in images of fire, and images of light are used to represent innocence and a

knowledge of truth through enlightenment:[5]

> She thought of him and she thought of the force flowing from her to him, speeding hotly through space, burning with the speed of its passage, burning with the heat of his presence as it approached him: the source of all light and power. Light, she thought, burning, and, opening her eyes, saw the air furry with a red glow....[She] saw herself as a receptacle waiting for light, a lamp waiting for the oil and the wick and the tingling, searing flame. (*WW* 173)

As the imagery develops, its form moves from the purifying effects of fire to the passion it represents. The fire images in this passage indicate not only the purity sought by Radegunda, but also the passion with which she seeks it, a passion which is at odds with that search and foreshadows the decidedly sexual nature of the Christophany to follow. This becomes more explicit in the passive image of herself as a lamp awaiting lighting; Radegunda's perception of herself as a "receptacle" waiting to be filled with "oil and the wick" can be interpreted as an image of a vagina awaiting penetration and ejaculation. The "tingling, searing flame" then becomes a description of female orgasm. This construction of herself as passive receptacle echoes the Aristotelian notion of woman as the passive partner in reproduction who simply provides a womb in which the male can deposit sperm in order for the foetus to develop. It certainly replicates the dualistic structure of woman as passive in contrast to man as active.

The whole scene is depicted in red and black; the fire glows red in the dark night which is a dark night of the soul as well as the literal night on which these events take place. As Radegunda's passion reaches its peak, she burns one thigh with coals from the kitchen fire. She goes on to heat a metal monogram of Christ until it is red hot, then brands her other thigh with the image.

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5 Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, who is not generally considered to be overly dramatic or masochistic in her interpretation of the religious life, describes her own mystical experiences in similar language: "I felt myself suddenly wounded by a shaft of fire so ardent that I thought to die of it...it seemed that an invisible force was plunging me wholly into fire" (quoted by Vita Sackville-West in *The Eagle and the Dove* [1943; London: Cardinal, 1988] 147). O'Faolain takes the conventional imagery used in such situations but extends it to make her point about Radegunda more explicit.

The imagery used here undermines what Radegunda believes her purpose to be. While she claims to seek an existence which is entirely in the spirit, she responds to Christ with her body, her violent protests against the body indicating its importance to her. The very act of branding herself with the monogram of Christ is a physical marker of a spiritual relationship. Radegunda's attempts to deny the body in her response to God are doomed to failure, and the imagery used in this passage reveals her unacknowledged awareness of the impossibility of the task she has set herself. The body/soul dualism to which she subscribes is inadequate to describe the human condition; the novel suggests that Radegunda must learn that the body and soul are so intimately intertwined as to be inseparable. Radegunda's experience offers us one means by which the opposites of dualism might be reconciled in a humanist version of "wholeness" along the lines discussed in Chapter Two. Her explicitly sexual response to the mystical appearance of Christ acts as confirmation of the totality of being, and thus Radegunda's enlightenment forces her to recognise that the body and soul are one.

The entire passage dealing with the Christophany can be read as a metaphor of sexual experience; it is not by chance that Radegunda always refers to Jesus Christ as the "Bridegroom". As the tension builds towards its climax, Christ appears as a "disturbingly seductive" young man (*WW* 176). At this point, Radegunda recognises the sexual nature of her passion, experiencing "a surge of the old sensual tides which had so humiliated her when she was married to Clotair" (*WW* 176). In an obvious symbol of sexual intercourse, the "young man's hand plunged deeply into her wound" (*WW* 176). Radegunda reaches orgasm as a result: "Her wound was not hurting but was responding in spite of herself and with rapturous relish to a gratification which seemed to be a brew of all those perceptible to the bodily organs" (*WW* 176). Given Radegunda's identification with Eve and her consequent attitude to the body before the Christophany, it is not surprising that her wound becomes an image of the vagina. In this construction, the bleeding vagina is a wound which signifies the torn relationship between humankind and God, since menstruation is a sign of the curse placed upon all women on Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden.

It is not clear how we are to read this episode in the novel. Radegunda, in making this

unconscious identification between the wound and vagina, may be subscribing to the image of herself as evil, sexual woman; alternatively, she may be understood as reclaiming her body in a positive construction of herself as sensual, passionate woman (an explicitly feminist text might direct the reader more here; a self-consciously postmodern text might make more of this opportunity to step out of the binary opposition between mind and body). On the one hand Radegunda is energised by her vision of Christ "as though a wave of power had poured from the Bridegroom into herself, a wave so intense that it had penetrated her inmost soul and merged it with the divinity" (*WW* 177). However, she is unsure about the identity of her visitor, suspecting that he might in reality be the devil tempting her instead of Christ: "She had had doubts about the celestial origin of her vision. Its human effects were so real" (*WW* 182-83). This suggests that Radegunda continues to be trapped in a world view which separates the body from the soul, the human from the divine, since her doubts are chiefly owing to the effects of this mystical experience in her everyday life and she has not learnt the lesson (endorsed by the novel) that this Christ teaches. Later, the narrative point of view moves away from Radegunda, and the reader sees her through the eyes of other characters as strangely disconnected from others and bordering on madness. Her Christ eventually warns: "You may be asked to do things which may seem strange or shocking: to violate your own cloister and undo your own work" (*WW* 183). That her vision leads to her own destruction would appear to indicate that she denies her own value. The allusion to Mary Magdalene (she "wiped his feet with her hair and promised to do whatever he wanted" [*WW* 183]) also points to a renunciation of the body and sensual pleasures in a traditional use of this image. Her realisation that "the carnal was, to her dismay, intimately entwined with the spiritual" (*WW* 200) appears to be further evidence of her confusion in relation to the construction of herself as a sexual woman seeking spiritual fulfilment.[6] While she does acknowledge this connection between the body and soul, she does so with dismay and seems not to accept its validity willingly, or even genuinely to believe it. As readers, we are encouraged to accept this

6 In this context, see Dorothy H. Donnelly, "The Sexual Mystic: Embodied Spirituality", *The Feminist Mystic and Other Essays on Women and Spirituality*, ed. Mary E. Giles (1982; New York: Crossroad, 1989).

revelation of "wholeness" as one of Christ's central gifts.

Radegunda distrusts the identity of her visitant, suspecting he is the devil when he first arrives. While Radegunda is eventually convinced that it is Christ who comes to her, the reader is left in some confusion. The "evidence that she had indeed been made love to" (*WW* 177) suggests the possibility of a human lover, perhaps the young Prince Clovis who is hidden in the convent. However, since the rest of the novel, apart from Ingunda's obvious insanity towards the end of her period as an anchoress, is firmly grounded in historical reality, there is an indication to read this episode as a literal interpretation of events. Although Radegunda's own sanity is questionable, it is possible to interpret the visitation as at least as genuine as those experienced by other medieval mystics. The powerful conjunction of mysticism and sexuality in this scene remains central to our understanding of Radegunda's psychology and the novel's exploration of the forces at work in medieval Christianity. As I have pointed out in Chapter Two, Radegunda's Christ is represented as the husband and lover here; as cosmic lover he supposedly overcomes the fragmentation caused by a dualistic world view.

The relationship between the sexual and the spiritual is explored in all four of the texts under scrutiny here.[7] Anne Cavidge of *Nuns and Soldiers* responds to her Christophany with a certain amount of sexual excitement, although it is of a distinctly more muted nature than we see in Radegunda's case. When Jesus (as Anne always calls him during the passage) first appears to Anne, she is afraid, but is simultaneously "filled with a thrilling passionate joyful feeling that passed through her like an electric current" (*NS* 290). Later, this response is experienced in a more explicitly sexual framework: "she was suddenly

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7 A similar theme can be found in the earlier text, *Robert Elsmere*, by Mrs Humphry Ward. On the death of her husband, Catherine has a vision of Christ which is immediately followed by Robert's last words. Catherine mistakenly believes Christ has come to collect her, while Robert relives the moment in which their first child was born and "he thanked God because her pain was over" (*Robert Elsemere*, 24th ed. [1889; London: Smith, Elder, and Co., c.1940] 604). Stephen Prickett points out that this episode affirms human love on one level, although he goes on to explain the complexity of the position offered by this final scene ("Biblical Prophecy and Nineteenth Century Historicism: The Joachimite Third Age in Matthew and Mary Augusta Arnold", *Journal of Literature and Theology* 2.2 [September 1988]: 220, 222. Catherine both mistakes Christ's purpose and rejects her saviour, choosing human love instead of the divine plan; Robert maintains his commitment to humanity (and the humanity of Christ) in his last moments.

shaken with a great shock of love so that she quaked...She was filled with urgent desire almost as if she would seduce him" (*NS* 292). Like Radegunda, Anne Cavidge is depicted as a woman who enjoyed an active sexuality before taking vows of celibacy as a nun, but her sexuality is treated as a considerably less powerful force than Radegunda's is in *Women in the Wall.* While it is clearly important in her response to the visitation of Jesus, it is not the only focus of her experience. Her role in the novel is more importantly as an embodiment of the "good life" than as a sexual woman (her old friend Gertrude claims this territory).

Anne's vision is closely linked to her love for the Count, a Pole who is unaware of her love for him. His attentions are focused on the recently widowed Gertrude, who is also Anne's best friend. From contemplating the meaning of the visitation two days later, Anne moves directly to a revelation of her dreadful worldly love for the Count. She cannot understand how she can love both Christ and the Count simultaneously, and, like Radegunda, wonders whether or not the visitation was from Christ or the devil.

Anne also shares with Radegunda the sense of herself as corrupt and impure. She pleads with Jesus: "I want to be made clean like you promised, I want to be made innocent, I want to be washed whiter than snow" (*NS* 293). Jesus points to the kitchen sink and instructs her to go ahead and wash there. She soon recognises the futility of her actions, and we as readers are warned that there are no magical answers to the problems confronting humanity. The literal, material interpretation of Jesus' promise of washing clean reveals the intrinsic artificiality of traditional constructions of Christianity. Instead, Anne must look to herself for salvation and truth. Her vision takes place on the plane of ordinary experience, and this is in itself the message she must learn from this historical Jesus (as opposed to the Mystical Bridegroom Christ Radegunda envisions). Although the "true" significance of the vision is not yet apparent to her, she has faith that it will declare itself eventually. All she can do is wait patiently for comprehension; in the meantime she worries for her sanity, since she has enough insight to recognise that visions of Jesus can be indicative of madness.

Jesus is presented in *Nuns and Soldiers* as a colourless figure (in both the literal and

metaphorical sense—his personality is not what is usually considered to be "colourful") casually dressed in yellowish-white shirt and trousers; he has blond hair and "the pallor of something which had been long deprived of light, a shadowed leaf, a deep sea fish, a grub inside a fruit" (*NS* 290). This secret grub who has been deprived of light symbolises a disease at the heart of Christianity; it is the Christ whose ordinariness has been hidden by the established Church. This secret Christ could undermine the rotten structure of oppression, since he embodies the key to a new understanding of Christianity that does away with magic and the supernatural in a return to the ordinary human world. The grub image is juxtaposed with the potentially more positive images of the shadowed leaf and the deep sea fish, suggesting that this Christ is not entirely negative, but that he poses a threat in only *some* quarters, namely, the established patriarchal Church. The mysterious shadowed leaf and deep sea fish, when brought into the light of day and made known, turn out to be a positive image of growth in the natural world, Christ as the tree of life, and the familiar fish symbol of early Christians, respectively, indicating that this revised version of Christ continues to be closely related to the Jesus of the gospels. However, this Christ is characterised not by the whiteness of purity and innocence, but the off-white of fallible, ordinary humanity. He is not depicted as a vibrant, bearded, masculine saviour, but as a gentle, rather powerless and slightly effeminate being: "The mouth was thoughtful and tender and the eyes large and remarkably luminous" (*NS* 290). It is his ordinariness that surprises Anne, and she responds to him as to a normal human being whom she has loved for some time.

Anne's response is significant in that it points directly to the humanity of Christ. She meets a man rather than a mythical being, and this is precisely his message; he informs Anne that she must not look for any magical salvation, but must accept the realities of the human condition. Anne's conventional search for Christ's wounds as proof of his identity is brushed aside as irrelevant by this Jesus who rejects the notion that suffering is the path to redemption, instead drawing attention to the final reality of death. He explains that, "Yes, pain is a scandal and a task, but it is a shadow that passes! Death is a teaching. Indeed it is one of my names" (*NS* 291). We realise that Jesus' message can, and must, be

expressed and understood in ordinary human terms.

Anne suddenly switches to an archaic form of expression at this point, stating that "Thou knowest, Sir...that I have not visited Israel" (*NS* 291). This statement is confirmation of her belief in his godly omniscience and acts in place of viewing the stigmata as proof of his identity. The introduction of a non-contemporary mode of expression also indicates the archetypal nature of her exchange with Christ. She goes on to ask if there really is salvation, to which Christ answers, "Oh yes," but he says it "almost carelessly" (*NS* 291). He is warning Anne that salvation is not the momentous event she believes it to be, and in fact goes on to tell her that she must rely on herself as her own saviour. All the advice he can offer is "Do right, refrain from wrong" (*NS* 292). He then shows her the universe in a pebble, warning her of the smallness and insignificance of the world. I am indebted here to Elizabeth Dipple who examines this scene in detail in her book *Iris Murdoch: Work for the Spirit*, pointing out that, ironically, Anne quotes directly from *Revelations of Divine Love* by Julian of Norwich. Anne is set in opposition to Julian, since her Christ reveals the importance of the particular, while Julian's revelations are all in terms of the general case. Dipple explains:

> Julian remarks how she was given no Showings [of Christ] of the particular, but everything for the general case, explaining the nature of Christ's redemption of the human soul. In every way opposite to Anne's Showing, Julian's reflects a community of shared belief and an utter certainty of divine reality through the images of Christianity. Julian's Christ, unlike Anne's, says that he will do all things in order to make all things well, including one last mysterious miracle....Julian's Christ is above all a being of action and responsibility, and he encourages a human resting on his divine power to perform what looks impossible to the human mind. Julian's message of reassurance...states that faith in Jesus is enough; Anne's Christ on the other hand is quizzical and non-authoritative.
>
> (328-29)

Dipple goes on to point out that, for Anne, the miracle which will "make all things well" must originate from her own energy and being, and that she herself must be responsible for

her own salvation. Just like Polly in Jane Gardam's *Crusoe's Daughter* and Cait in Edna O'Brien's *Country Girls* trilogy, she cannot rely on an "Other" to provide it for her.

Anne and Julian are both shown the smallness of the cosmos by Christ, although Julian's Christ had used a hazelnut instead of a pebble. However, they interpret this sign differently; while this knowledge makes generalisation easier for Julian, Anne finds she must concentrate on the details of the particular in order to come to some understanding of the nature of goodness. I think that this also points to the conclusion of the book in which Anne recognises that she must arrive at her own interpretation of what Jesus means to her, that she must create her own particular Jesus if he is to be of any use to her. Further, she must recognise that this new interpretation may not have any significance beyond her own experience.

It occurs to Anne that the confusion of her earthly love for the Count and her spiritual love for Jesus might be some sort of trick played upon her by the God in whom she no longer believes, that it might be the dark night of the soul, the spiritual suffering predicted by her abbess. Although Anne immediately discounts this possibility, the novel as a whole is not so quick to abandon the notion of game-playing gods in the background. This creates a sense of some ordering force in the world, but at the same time distinguishes that force from Anne's Jesus, adding to our perception of his ordinary humanity. The pebble which Jesus hands her and from which she draws comfort is quite possibly one of the stones Anne collected from the beach, one of the stones that she had imagined being "like counters in a game played by some god" (*NS* 107). These "counters" become important clues for Anne in her search for the true nature of reality, guiding her in her first step towards understanding. This sense of Olympian gods manipulating the lives of mortals in a game played for their own amusement is emphasised by the magical events surrounding the beautiful pool at the base of the rock which Tim calls the "Great Face," and in the closing pages of the novel in which Victoria Mount discloses her interference in the lives of Tim and Gertrude during a conversation with Manfred.

Anne realises that mere mortals can never hope to understand the whole game, and must therefore be content to do what good they can in their own corner of the overall plan:

> Anne picked up a stone. They were so similar, yet so dissimilar, like counters in a game played by some god. The shapes, very like, were never exactly the same. Each one, if carefully examined, revealed some tiny significant individuating mark, a shallow depression or chipped end, a short almost invisible line. Anne said to herself, what do my thoughts matter, what do their *details* matter, what does it matter whether Jesus Christ redeemed the world or not, it doesn't matter, our minds can't grasp such things, it's all too obscure, too vague, the whole matrix shifts and we shift with it. What does anything matter except helping one or two people who are nearby, doing what's obvious? We can see so little of the great game. Look at these stones. My Lord and my God. (*NS* 107)

This revelation is followed immediately by the crucial scene in which Anne is almost drowned, which represents, in effect, her time of penance in purgatory. The pebbles from the moment described above become totems for Anne, representing not only individual human beings and their lives, but also charms which she can hold in her hand and from which she can extract comfort. In giving her the pebble she herself may have picked up on the beach, we recognise that Jesus directs Anne to trust her own heart and intellect in her search for truth; the pebble symbolically reinforces his words and acts as a constant reminder that salvation is a matter of the mundane elements of everyday life combining in a manner that empowers the most ordinary of human beings. The novel endorses the lesson she learns: we must look to ourselves for salvation instead of to the non-existent God. On these terms, then, Christianity is ultimately concerned with humanity rather than magical resurrection.

Anne is finally left with a vision of Jesus as "a failure, a pathetic deluded disappointed man who had come to an exceptionally sticky end" (*NS* 500). This potentially discouraging characterisation of Jesus Christ is in fact empowering for Anne in the Murdochian existentialist world where God is dead. In a scene which resonates with Carol Christ's description of a spiritual awakening or surfacing which "open[s] the protagonist to the experience of great cosmic powers which ground her newly felt sense of her own

power",[8] Anne realises that "There was no God, but Christ lived, at any rate her Christ lived, her nomadic cosmic Christ, uniquely hers, focused upon her alone by all the rays of being" (*NS* 500). This "nomadic" Christ is no longer trapped within the limiting definitions imposed by the conventional Church. He now embodies the realities that all human beings must recognise; Anne has learnt that death is inescapable, but that is not a reason to despair (just as Frances Wingate in Drabble's *Realms of Gold* must also recognise). Instead, the vulnerability of the human condition requires that we attempt to do what good we can in the face of meaninglessness and insignificance, and that the value of humanity lies in the uniqueness of each and every person. Anne's version of a new Christ is an affirmation of her own unique value and goodness in a world where God has become Good.[9]

Anne's revitalised vision of Christ is relevant to her precisely *because* he is defeated by death; his humanity is truly human, and thus he can offer some comfort to other humans. A saviour who escapes the final reality of death is of no use to ordinary mortals who must confront the harsh reality of annihilation. It is this genuine identification with the human condition that makes Anne's Christ capable of offering her salvation. In a world without God, salvation is the ability to confront the inevitability of death without searching for some kind of magical loophole. In the face of death and the meaninglessness of existence,

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8 Carol P. Christ, "Margaret Atwood: The Surfacing of Women's Spiritual Quest and Vision", *Signs* 2.2(Winter 1976): 325.

9 The concept of redefining Christ occurs in several of Murdoch's novels as a matter of concern to both men and women as a consequence of their living in a world in which "God is dead". Often the Christ-like figure takes the form of a character who embodies "the good life", thus offering a path to salvation for others. Eugene Peshkov in *The Time of the Angels* is one such character. His identification with an icon of the Blessed Trinity indicates his connection with the forces of good and points to his opposition to the evil Carel Fisher. Tallis in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* is also an embodiment of good in his world, and plays Christ to Julius King's Satan in a battle of good against evil. Stuart Cuno in *The Good Apprentice* perceives himself as a saviour, explicitly identifying himself with Christ in being "apprenticed to goodness" (*Good Apprentice* 138). All of these characters emphasise the importance of the humanity of Christ, showing us that the human capacity to love with simplicity is more important than some magic ritual of salvation. I have explored these ideas further in relation to Murdoch's work in "Iris Murdoch—A Revisionist Theology? A Comparative Study of Murdoch's *Nuns and Soldiers* and Sara Maitland's *Virgin Territory*", *Literature and Theology* 6.2 (June 1992).

the moral imperative of Good continues to make sense of life. As readers we recognise this, despite Anne's inability to articulate her thoughts, because she believes that all she can do now is attempt to help those around her in however small a way. Having earlier lost her w/Way (her direction in life and the Way offered by traditional representations of Christ), she has rediscovered a path to salvation through this new understanding of the Christian message. Thus Anne manages to return a semblance of order to her life, and the novel ends on a positive note which, despite its appearance of endorsing a traditional interpretation of Christianity, must be read differently in the light of what has gone before. Stepping into the snowy night, she looks upwards: "It looked like the heavens spread out in glory, totally unrolled before the face of God, countless, limitless, eternally beautiful, the universe in majesty proclaiming the presence and the goodness of its Creator" (*NS* 504-05). Anne's sense of peace and well-being in this passage is not owing to her belief in God, but can be attributed to her calm acceptance of the absence of any plan or overseeing Creator (she thinks the heavens *look as if* they are spread out before God, not that they *are*). Beauty and goodness can exist here without any meaning beyond themselves. Although Murdoch's is not a feminist text as such, Irigaray's feminist program of movement towards the divine fits comfortably with Anne's particular vision of Christ which allows her to discover her own subjectivity in relation to the cosmos. We could see this Christ as "the ideal or perfected self-representation of a desiring subject" (Anne), who "represent[s] a future path, a kind of temporal horizon" and "a name for an infinite space, a space which, in other terminology, is the *cosmos*" (*Sexual Subversions* 180). It would follow then, that "In order for [Anne] to find/make an identity for herself, she must situate herself (and be situated by others) within a natural or terrestrial order as well as a cosmic or celestial order....Within the constraints of meaning provided by available representational systems, however, the subject needs some conception of the cosmos, and of her place as subject and object within it" (*Sexual Subversions* 180-81). The novel finishes with Anne's thoughts turning to America and the open-ended future that lies ahead, indicating her willing confrontation with and faith in the unknown New World in which the traditional Christian God no longer exists. Instead, she creates Christ in her own human image as the

new god. Her new understanding of Christ and Christianity makes this resolution not only possible, but also desirable, for it is through this self-generated image that she constructs her own being as a desiring subject.

The Wild Girl also constructs a Jesus Christ who is undoubtably human, albeit an extraordinary person. On first meeting the man who will dramatically alter her perception of herself and the world, Mary is struck by the energy and vitality of this initially unattractive man: "He seemed to me quite ugly, with a lined face and a big nose, a slightly hunched back. Then I became aware of his energy that poured from his eyes and his wide mouth, from the set of his long limbs" (*WG* 33-34). From the beginning, Mary recognises that he is different from other men she has met. He is a charismatic being in both the religious and lay senses, one of those upon whom God has conferred power and a man whose powerful personality draws others to him. Mary explains to Jesus' mother that her spirit is moved by him because "God is so powerfully present in him" (*WG* 65).

Mary describes the Jesus she loves as a visionary to whom others can expound their dreams of change, and as a teacher who offers his pupils new ways of naming their oppression. He is a prophet of social change who proposes liberation for all who suffer under any form of oppression. As I have pointed out in Chapter Two, the particular salvation Jesus offers in this novel lies in understanding that social equality is impossible until the hierarchical dualism which divides male from female, and raises the male above the female, is abolished.

In *The Wild Girl* we see a complex Jesus who is conciliatory and peace-loving on the one hand, but on the other he is a revolutionary prepared to confront an oppressive regime. He attempts to reconcile differences between his followers, offering friendship and affection unselfishly to all who need him and comforting those in distress. The man who speaks in a voice "ringing with authority" (*WG* 110) is also capable of cheerful playfulness. In the course of the day he enters Jerusalem to declare his mission publicly, we witness "the warrior king of the afternoon transformed again into the brother and friend" (*WG* 87). In the Garden of Gethsemane later that same day, he is once more transformed this time into a frightened child: "—I'm frightened, Mary, he whispered: you

were right to be frightened for me, even though I know there is no going back. My enemies want me killed....He cried like a child, as though it were a relief to him to admit his fears, he who was always so strong for the rest of us" (*WG* 92). It is moments such as this which emphasise the humanness of this construction of Jesus, which in turn makes it possible for Mary and the other disciples to love and trust him, and to believe his message. It is important that this compelling, peace-loving man is capable of anger and fear; it is his vulnerability that makes him human. Mary describes the exhausted man returning from itinerant preaching who evokes her love and pity: "He was thinner, almost gaunt, and stooped with tiredness. His face was brown with walking in the fierce spring sun, and I saw how his feet were covered with dust, how there were raw red blisters on both big toes where the sandals had chafed. Tenderness rose up in me" (*WG* 41). Mary greets him and the embrace that follows offers us the first indication of the sexual attraction between Mary and Jesus. Mary is prompted to wash his feet, dry them with her hair and anoint them with oil. In her version of events, this is an act of genuine love, a love which is only possible because of Jesus' human vulnerability. The inclusion of a sexual dimension in this representation of Jesus serves to emphasise his human fallibility.

The portrait Mary Magdalene creates of Jesus, whom she calls "husband," depicts him as a human and sexual rather than a divine being.[10] Although he refers to God as his "Father," Mary interprets this as a metaphorical relationship. His sexuality and vulnerablity go some way to constructing him as human, and Mary provides alternative explanations for the miracles traditionally attributed to the divine Jesus, all of which contribute to the undermining of the notion that he is the son of God. Instead, Jesus' power is rooted in the relevance of the message of liberation for the oppressed he preaches which appears to have a fundamental truth for his followers. While we are left in a state of uncertainty about his relationship to God, there is no doubt that his message of social reform based on a revolution of the spirit is directly relevant to the human condition.

The humanness of this portrait of Jesus (God made man) seems to be gesturing

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10 See note 19 in Chapter 2 for a discussion of Christ as sexual being in other literary contexts.

towards Irigaray's concept of the new gods we need to set up as representations of "the ideal, end or goal of an infinite becoming" (*Sexual Subversions* 153), that is, the model of perfect humanity to which we aspire. This in turn seems to be very close to the idea that Christians ought to base their lives on the model offered by Jesus. In *The Wild Girl* a notion of divinity is created through this utterly human Jesus who is constructed as the embodiment of ideal, perfect human being. Unlike traditional (patriarchal) representations of Christ, this depiction of Jesus which is informed by feminist theology and philosophy also engages with sexual politics. The relations between men and women represented by Jesus and Mary suggest a sexual ethics which echoes that of which Irigaray writes in *Divine Women.*[11] She suggests that erotic passion between two different, autonomous sexes, neither of which is reducible to the other, opens us to the realm of God, immanence and transcendence. It allows for a renegotiation of alterity, rejecting "hom(m)osexual"[12] culture in favour of new relations of exchange between autonomous sexed subjects. The movement towards the ideal or perfection of one's own God or divine becoming includes the passionate exchange between the sexes. Thus, "The link uniting or reuniting masculine and feminine must be both horizontal and vertical, terrestrial and celestial....this link must forge an alliance between the divine and the mortal, in which a sexual encounter would be a celebration".[13] In *The Wild Girl* we see an attempt to depict an "authentic" exchange between the sexes which is in itself an approach towards godliness.

Virgin Territory returns to the wildness and sado-masochism witnessed in *Women in the Wall*. Sister Anna undergoes a nervous breakdown during the course of the novel as she attempts to come to terms with her own sexuality. Her internal battle takes the form of a struggle between the voices of the Fathers, the symbol of the patriarchy under which Anna lives, the voice of Caro, the brain-damaged child who represents an anarchic rejection

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11 I am also indebted to Elizabeth Grosz's interpretations of Irigaray for my understanding of the issues at stake here. See *Irigaray and the Divine* and Chapter 5, "Luce Irigaray and the Ethics of Alterity", *Sexual Subversions*.

12 This term is introduced in Irigaray's *This Sex which is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke (1977; Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), esp. 171-72 in the chapter entitled "Women on the Market".

13 Irigaray, "Sexual Difference" in *The Irigaray Reader*, ed. Margaret Whitford (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991) 174. Further references will appear in the text.

of the Law of the Father (or a positive embodiment of the semiotic, to use Kristeva's term rather than Lacan's), and Anna's own personality.[14] Kristeva's terminology is generally used by feminist literary critics to place a positive value on the semiotic, whereas Lacan's equivalent, the Imaginary Order, is placed in a considerably more male-oriented system. It is helpful to use Lacan's ideas here, however, to understand the significance of the role of the Fathers in the novel, and because Kristeva's theories are, to some extent at least, derived from Lacan's work. The novel itself appears to be informed by an understanding of the theories proposed by both Lacan and Kristeva. I shall discuss the psychoanalytic allusions in this novel in more detail in Chapter Four.

Anna has been a dutiful daughter of the patriarchy all her life, accepting the psychological baggage implied by Christianity within that system, including a fear and distrust of the body, especially the female body. By following the rules imposed by the patriarchal Fathers, Anna believes she will be protected from evil, particularly the evil represented by her femininity (as in *Women in the Wall*, we are again invited to examine the consequences of the mythology associated with the received story of Eve for women in Christianity). The rape of her sister religious in South America seems to Anna to be proof that, regardless of how carefully she observes the rules of the Fathers, and despite a rigorous denial of herself as woman, the Fathers do not side with the daughters.

Although Anna does not experience a theophany of Christ, she does come to a new understanding of the significance of Christ, creating a new interpretation of her own. Sister Anna's quest for truth is framed specifically in terms of her sexual identity in this

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14 Julia Kristeva discusses the idea of the "semiotic" in much of her work, but especially in her doctoral thesis which was published in English as *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller, intro. Leon S. Roudiez (1974; New York: Columbia University Press, 1984) and in the article "Women's Time", published in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986) esp. 198-200.

The texts which I have found most useful in understanding Lacan's position are Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (1966; London: Tavistock Publications, 1977), and *Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis*, trans. with notes and commentary by Anthony Wilden (1968; Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981). I have also found Elizabeth Grosz's *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990) and Bice Benvenuto's and Roger Kennedy's *The Works of Jacques Lacan: An Introduction* (London: Free Books Association, 1986) helpful in understanding Lacan's ideas.

self-consciously feminist text. Part of Anna's decision to become a nun includes the pointed choice of Christ as her bridegroom instead of marriage to a human husband. As with Radegunda and Anne Cavidge, Anna's choice is partly motivated by a desire to deny her own physical being as a woman. It is a choice made at an age when the complications of the outside world, and especially the complications of sexual relationships, appear to be too unwieldy and dangerous to be contemplated. Instead, Anna flees to the supposed safety of the cloister. In response to the violation of that sanctuary in the form of the rape of her sister religious, Anna is forced to reassess her identity in the light of her womanhood. In this explicitly feminist text, the rape is seen as a political attack by men on a woman, and its wider implications of patriarchal oppression of women are examined, which in turn leads Anna to reassess her own place in relation to the Fathers of the patriarchy. In comparison, O'Faolain's *Women in the Wall*, which is not an overtly feminist novel, does not use the metaphorical rape of Ingunda to explore sexual politics. Part of the process of breaking down the identity Anna has created for herself as a nun is an awakening of her own sexuality, and the mixture of violent sadistic and masochistic responses this evokes in her psyche. Eventually, however, she manages to overcome the difficulties she has in accepting herself as a sexual being, and fashions a new representation of Christ which is in accord with her renewed understanding of herself as a woman.

Anna borrows the unicorn symbol from traditional constructions of Christ in the process of developing her individual interpretation of Christianity. It is the emphasis on the chaste purity of a Christ who is attracted to the virgin which appeals to Anna: "The unicorn would only drink milk from the virgin's breast. Virginity tamed the ferocity of that purity. He laid his head on her lap, sniffing the strange woman-smell. Virginity could tame the wild excesses of his lust....The unicorn was unique and was male" (*VT* 145). Anna is tempted to identify with the asexual virgin who attracts the unicorn Christ at first, but eventually realises that she cannot fulfil her own potential if she insists on denying the sexual dimension of being. When the time comes to choose the symbol of her reinterpreted Christ, Anna chooses the fish over the unicorn: "she did not want a unicorn nuzzling her breast. She did not want to have to capture the Christ, but to have him capture her. This

was not the hour of the unicorn" (*VT* 201). She does not see herself in the active role of taming the wild unicorn; like Radegunda, Anna believes that she needs to adopt the traditionally feminine role of passivity in relation to Christ. Anna needs a Christ of the spirit who will enter into the centre of her being and become an intrinsic part of her self. The unicorn always maintains a separate identity, whereas Anna needs a symbol for Christ which emphasises the existence of the living God that is inside her before she can believe in her own power to control her destiny. In this sense, Anna locates her own god within herself, and learns to perceive her own divinity in the terms suggested by Irigaray for whom "it is not adequate simply to rely on received formulas of worship which affirm a male-defined God. The task for women is not to include themselves within a pre-existing image of God but to find a God for themselves" (*Sexual Subversions* 153).

In her last great battle with the Fathers, Anna declares her alliance with a new interpretation of Christ which takes its energy and identity from the fish that symbolises the spiritual aspect of existence. It is, however, a spirituality based on women's experience of living within a patriarchy, a spirituality which is firmly rooted in a consciousness of the reality of sexuality. Anna cries out to the Fathers:

> 'I have chosen another: the mark of the fish is upon me, I am branded in his love. The fish tail undulates on my flesh; the virgin's son, the virgin's lover will protect me.'
>
> 'Oh no; the son is on our side.'
>
> 'Wrong wrong. The virgin's son is not on the side of the Fathers. The virgin's lover is on the side of the lesbians.' (*VT* 214)

Anna is empowered by her recognition of the possibility of a new construction of the son of God; she actively chooses a woman-identified Christ, a Christ who accepts women for what they are and protects them from the threat of the Fathers.

Anna deliberately defies the Fathers in making this decision: "I belong to Jesus...not to you. The husband will protect the wife from her father" (*VT* 195). It is the first time she can believe in her own choices outside the will of the patriarchy. Her fear of punishment at the hand of the Fathers is overruled by a faith in her own strength and value, a strength that

is derived from a Christ who loves and values her for what she is, allowing her to be defined in her own terms.

It is essential to Anna that her Christ be identified with women because her quest for knowledge of herself is in reality a search for her own identity as a woman. Central to her understanding of herself is her sexual identity and, as a "bride of Christ," she is obliged to find some means of interpreting the significance of Christ in relation to this new construction of herself. She maintains the historical maleness of Jesus Christ, but allies him with the feminine.

In order to give her revitalised image of Christ some permanence, and to indicate her commitment to this vision, Anna is tattooed with the symbol of the fish. For Anna this traditional symbol for the spiritual Christ represents her continued allegiance to Christ, but it is a reinterpreted Christ who affirms the strength of the virgin mothers and daughters who exist independently of the Fathers. Sister Anna's tattoo plays the same role in her spiritual quest as the monogram of Christ with which Radegunda brands herself. Both need to give their spiritual lives some physical reality. Anne Cavidge has a similar branding mark which results from brushing the sleeve of Jesus' shirt; her finger is burnt by this contact and does not heal. These individual brands act as indelible reminders of each woman's unique relationship to her own Christ.

Mary Magdalene's physical reminder of Jesus takes the form of bearing his child, a daughter who forces Mary to recognise her bond with humankind and thus maintain her commitment to spiritual and social reform in the manner she learnt from Jesus. Perhaps Roberts is here gesturing towards discussions which posit that the alterity of maternity opens up the possibility of an ethical stance? Irigaray's contribution to such debates is central, as Elizabeth Grosz explains:

> the other, whether male or female, is always understood as a variation of the sameness of self. Irigaray wishes to explore the conditions needed for and the space occupied by a subject considered as female. What kind of alterity would a feminine subject presume? This, for Irigaray, is the fundamental question of ethics, a consequence of the self's necessary confrontation with the other. The other is a

> necessary condition of subjectivity. The other makes possible the subject's relations to others in a social world; ethics is the result of the need to negotiate between one existence and another. Ethics is thus framed by and in its turn frames the subject's confrontation with the other. (*Sexual Subversions* 141)

This is then linked to Levinas' thinking, in which "maternity represents the paradigm of what it is to be an ethical subject: subjectivity is the openness or susceptibility to the other's call, a response to the other's existence. The mother gives herself up to the other's needs" (*Sexual Subversions* 146). Thus, it could be argued that Mary learns the full significance of Christ's message only upon becoming a mother, that this is her becoming, and that the ethics of alterity reveal the divine.

Each of the women characters in the novels under discussion here is obliged to create her own Christ. In *The Wild Girl* Mary Magdalene presents her version of the gospel without overtly analysing its significance for Christian women today. Her representation of Christ is implicitly a feminised view, and this is given as the reason for her ultimate exile from the mainstream of the early church. Radegunda's search for enlightenment appears to lead finally to her destruction, while Anne Cavidge and Sister Anna are able to create new images of Christ which make it possible for them to retain their faith in him. Both of the nuns who succeed in re-imaging Christ are named for Anne, mother of the virgin Mary and source of salvation, indicating their capacity to create the source of salvation, albeit a radically new version of it. This is precisely what Luce Irigaray advocates too in *Divine Women*: "all women, except when they remain submitted to the logic of the essence of man, should imagine a God for themselves, an objective and subjective place or path for the possible assemblage of the self in space and time" (*Divine Women* 8). The desire is for "a God who helps and guides us in our becoming, who holds the measure of our limits—women—and our relation to the infinite, which inspires our endeavours" (*Divine Women* 8). The paths of becoming which these gods represent are based on undermining the dualities of body and soul (Radegunda's Christ); a revaluing of the human (*Nuns and Soldiers*); and an assertion of the independence of the virgin from the patriarchal Fathers (*Virgin Territory*). *The Wild Girl* endorses all of these paths as the spiritual fulfilment

offered by Christ's message.

Radegunda, Anne Cavidge, Sister Anna and Mary Magdalene all experience a spiritual growth in reaction to their renewed visions of Christ which is tied to the erotic component of their responses to him as an embodiment of masculinity. This affirms their sexuality and existence as women, instead of rejecting their sexuality as evil in the terms of the dualism which informs patriarchal Christianity and Western thought. All four characters confront difficulties in their relationships to Christianity as women embodying Eve's sin, the only alternative being the impossibility of virgin motherhood. They need to fashion a Christ who allows acceptance of themselves as both spiritual and sexual beings. Irigaray's comments on the possibility of an ethics of sexual difference offers an interesting insight into the eroticism of these re-presentations of Christ if we see them as confrontations between a subject and her Other which demand negotiation. She suggests that the movement towards divine becoming includes the passionate exchange between the sexes. Thus, "The link uniting or reuniting masculine and feminine....must forge an alliance between the divine and the mortal, in which a sexual encounter would be a celebration" ("Sexual Difference" 174). Salvation exists, at least in part, in salvaging the sexual dimension of being in these texts. However, it is almost exclusively a heterosexuality in relation to Christ that is explored in these texts, apart from *Virgin Territory*'s ambiguous image of him as the "virgin's lover [who] is on the side of the lesbians" (*VT* 214). These texts, whether or not they express an explicitly feminist ideology, are concerned with exploring the significance of past constructions of a male Christ and the legacy we have to deal with now. But it is also possible to read this as developing a concept of woman as desiring subject, and the ethical implications of her negotiation of the confrontation with the other.

The texts which introduce a female Christ seem to do so in ways which, rather than radically rewriting the meaning of Christ, merely invert the traditional structures. While this is useful in pointing out the gender politics at stake, it offers little in the way of a program for altering the relations between the sexes or a new concept of the meaning of God. Hilary Bailey's novel, *Hannie Richards: The Intrepid Adventures of a Restless Wife*,

offers an attempt to go beyond the depiction of a male Christ, albeit in a fairly superficial manner. In one of her adventures, Hannie is required to smuggle a child out of Ethiopia under orders from the Vatican. On completion of the mission she discovers the little boy is in fact a girl, and a black girl at that, who claims to be Christ, but Hannie resigns herself to the knowledge that this information is likely to be hushed up by those in power in the Church. Bailey uses this twist at the end of the story to surprise and amuse her readers, at the same time as drawing attention to the assumptions made about gender and race roles in the Christian world.

Ellen Galford's novel *Fires of Bride* provides a more detailed fictional study of a female Christ. At the centre of the novel is an ancient convent dedicated to Saint Bride, a pagan goddess appropriated by the Fathers of the Church in the process of Christianising northern Scotland. The Sisters of Saint Bride are unconventional by medieval standards, openly flouting the hierarchical structure favoured by the orthodox church and making no differentiation between lay-sisters and enclosed nuns. Mhairi, the medieval counterpart for the contemporary Maria in the outer frame structure, enters the convent as a novice and is given the task of transcribing the ancient *Book of Bride*. This book recounts the story of Jesus' twin sister who was whisked away from her family at birth. A series of illustrations depicts her life story:

> *The second plate.* The virgin holds her swaddled baby, the edge of its tiny halo resting on her shoulder....In the left-hand corner, the purple-cloaked woman from the first plate is seen passing through a low doorway, carrying a second well-wrapped infant in her arms.
>
> *The third plate.* Still carrying the bundled child, the old woman rides through a cloudy sky on the back of a giant seagull.
>
> *The fourth plate.* A small girl picks wildflowers inside a circle of tall, jagged stones. She is barefoot, raggedly dressed, but crowned by an ornate silver and gold halo, jewel-encrusted. The old woman, still wrapped in purple, looks on, standing on a flat-topped stone table that might be a primitive shelter, or an altar.
>
> • (*Fires of Bride* 119-120)

We learn that Cailleach, the setting for the novel, is the place to which Jesus' twin sister was brought by the old crone, and the convent has been built on top of the sacred site depicted in Plate Four. Mhairi consigns a copy of the book to the care of her married sister when the bishop threatens to destroy all editions of the *Book of Bride* in an attempt to eradicate all remains of pagan heresies. The sister promises to keep the book, telling no one but her daughter of the secret.

The convent is ruined, but the knowledge of "Saint Bride and the Stepdaughter" continues to be passed on from mother to daughter for many generations. Saint Bride, the old crone, comes to represent the power of women in all its forms, and stands as an icon to comfort women in moments of distress. While this is to some extent the role of the Virgin Mary for Christian women, Saint Bride is a much more accessible and human figure than Mary, and is therefore more relevant, and more real, to the island women. Thus, the feminised version of the nativity and life of Christ is narrated as an affirmation of the significance of women and the feminine. Women's sexuality is explored in this context through the island's lesbian doctor who is the resident witch and midwife. It is a depiction of independent women in touch with the powerful forces of nature, reproduction and faith in themselves (with a refreshing touch of gentle satire), but is cruder in its examination of the theological issues at stake in a recreated Christ than the works by O'Faolain, Murdoch, Roberts and Maitland.

With the key to an "authentic" subjectivity at last in their acceptance of themselves as both spiritual and sexual beings, Radegunda, Anne Cavidge, Sister Anna and Mary Magdalene are free to proceed to the next stage of their lives. Radegunda discovers a wild energy which she throws into political intrigue, resulting in the violation and destruction of the convent. The Christophany appears to lead to her downfall, and as readers we wonder whether this is because she cannot wholeheartedly embrace the vision of herself as both carnal and spiritual which this new Christ offers.

Anne Cavidge and Sister Anna, in contrast, are sustained by their renewed images of Christ. Until her visitation from Jesus, Anne Cavidge had been immobilised, living in limbo after leaving the security of her convent. She is activated by the event; Jesus' advice

that she is her own salvation provides her with the power to go forward into the new world (which signifies not only America, but also a place in which there is a new understanding of the significance of love and goodness in a world without God). Her victory takes the shape of release from an omnipotent Christ or God. That Jesus can be an ordinary man defeated by forces beyond his control gives Anne the energy, hope and faith she needs to venture into the unknown. Her image of a cosmic Christ who is hers alone and who will travel with her through life, leaving behind the historical Jesus of human defeat, is ultimately empowering, providing her with faith in the significance of her conception of the good life.

Sister Anna discovers a calm confidence in herself and her future with the construction of Christ as the woman's ally against the patriarchal Fathers. Although she remains uncertain about the life which awaits her, Anna has managed to recover her own identity, and the new Christ symbolised by the fish is partly responsible for facilitating this faith in herself. Like Anne Cavidge, she must travel into the world leaving her home behind, but taking her own internal Christ for company.

As a disciple of Jesus Christ, Mary Magdalene learns to perceive the world in an entirely new way. She is liberated from what she had previously perceived as the degrading life of a prostitute and becomes a Christian preacher. While she no longer feels shame at her past activities in this re-evaluation of the body, she is also freed from her dependence on men in her role as provider of sexual gratification. In reinterpreting her own identity as a valuable, worthwhile being in her own right, she becomes capable of passing on that message of salvation.

In the process of examining these representations of Christ, I am struck by the similarities between the explicitly feminist and "non-feminist" texts (or at least, those which do not explicitly engage with feminist theory). All rely on the creation of unique, individual Christs to answer the needs of individual characters. Although Maitland and Roberts invoke French feminism in their texts quite directly, O'Faolain's and Murdoch's novels also benefit from being read in the light of these theories. Must this lead us to believe that theorists like Irigaray have nothing new to say after all, or that they are not

operating in particularly feminist frameworks? Or can we conclude that traditional representations of Christ do not serve women well, and that what these texts really have in common is that they are all investigating representations of a *male* Christ from the perspective of specifically *female* characters? Erotic and sexual aspects of their being must be included in this meeting of the sexes, therefore, and consequently some engagement with the issues of sexual politics is inevitable. This would place the apparently opaque or esoteric writings of Irigaray in a more central position, giving her work a wider significance than that with which it is generally credited.

In the novels examined here, then, the nuns/disciples in question create new representations of Christ in order to clarify their own relationship to a version of Christianity which values the female and the feminine. The crisis of faith undergone by each character is intimately connected with her identity as a woman in a religion which can be seen to denigrate the female in particular, and sexuality in general. The conjunction of feminism and theology provides us with the tools necessary for understanding that the most important aspect of all four representations of male Christs is that they make it possible for these characters to recognise themselves in a positive light as women in relation to Christ and Christianity, and as such are more capable of fulfilling their potential and living out their lives in "the image of God".

CHAPTER FOUR

THE AUTONOMY OF VIRGINITY:

Sara Maitland's *Virgin Territory*

Sara Maitland's novel *Virgin Territory* (1984) explores the significance of Christianity's patriarchal value system in relation to women, focusing on both its religious and psychological dimensions as the central character, Sister Anna, struggles to understand the contradictions and violence she finds within the Christian Church. Although it was published after Maitland's *Daughter of Jerusalem* (1978), I will discuss it first as it focuses on the single woman as an autonomous being, a theme which I will go on to discuss in relation to Roberts' *Visitation* (1983) in Chapter Five. In this chapter I argue that, in contrast to the view of dualism presented in Roberts' *The Wild Girl*, Maitland's *Virgin Territory* explores the idea that the dualism at work in Christianity can be perceived in a positive light in that it allows a place for independent autonomous women in its valorisation of the virgin, revealing ways in which a dualistic rejection of the body and sexuality can be seen as the path to freedom. This is linked to pre-Christian images of Amazon women and the warrior maidens of Greek myth. I also read the novel in terms of the structures of the Imaginary or semiotic and Symbolic Orders elaborated in Lacanian and Kristevan pyschoanalytic theory, and the consequent relationship between language and subjectivity.[1] A brief comparison between *Virgin Territory* and Julia O'Faolain's *Women in the Wall* (1975) sheds further light on the construction of the identity of the nun as sexual being.

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1 The texts which I have found most useful in this context are Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (1966; London: Tavistock Publications, 1977), and *Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis*, trans. with notes and commentary by Anthony Wilden (1968; Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981). I have also found Elizabeth Grosz's *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990) and Bice Benvenuto's and Roger Kennedy's *The Works of Jacques Lacan: An Introduction* (London: Free Books Association, 1986) helpful in understanding Lacan's ideas. For Kristeva's reworking and development of these concepts, see Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller, intro. Leon S. Roudiez (1974; New York: Columbia University Press, 1984) and the article "Women's Time", published in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986) esp. 198-200.

Virgin Territory is built around a series of conflicts; Anna's world is divided between the parents (both the Mothers and the Fathers) and the child Caro, the Church and her own doubts, the primeval and civilised. The novel engages with Kristevan readings of Lacan in its use of the voice of Caro (representing the semiotic or Imaginary Order) and the voices of the Fathers (representing the Symbolic Order). Tensions between these pairs of opposing forces create a situation in which Anna must make choices and thereby define and assert her identity. Because she is a nun, her identity is inextricably linked with her religious beliefs, thus a redefinition of her identity necessarily entails a re-examination of her belief in Christ and the fundamental concepts of self as they are represented in Christianity. The compelling voices of the patriarchal Fathers building to a crescendo contrast vividly with the quiet moments of peace in between, creating a convincing pattern of suspense and release. Although at times the book is overwritten, the voices generally allow the reader to enter Anna's consciousness and follow her obsessive guilt. The novel's publication met a mixed critical reception: while Sheila MacLeod in the *New Statesman* claimed it is "Not a novel for heterosexual atheists",[2] Janice Eidus in the *New York Times Book Review* praised this "lush and evocative novel" with its "original voice and great artistic control".[3] *Virgin Territory* is framed by the traditionally novelistic narrative structure of the social *bildungsroman*, and adds to it the parallel narrative of a spiritual awakening or surfacing, a coming into being of the kind described by Carol Christ, an emergence into knowledge which "open[s] the protagonist to the experience of great cosmic powers which ground her newly felt sense of her own power".[4] Because she is a nun, her identity is inextricably linked with her religious beliefs, thus a redefinition of her identity necessarily entails a re-examination of her belief in Christ and the fundamental concepts of self as they are represented in Christianity. Because she is a woman, she must confront the issues surrounding her existence as a woman in the Church: is she an independent woman because she is tied to no mortal man? How can she reconcile her existence as a woman with the Church's distrust of the female body? What is the significance of the patriarchal

2 Sheila MacLeod, *New Statesman*, 21-28 December 1984, 52.
3 Janice Eidus, *New York Times Book Review*, 29 June 1986, 24.
4 Carol Christ, "Margaret Atwood: The Surfacing of Women's Spiritual Quest and Vision", *Signs* 2.2 (Winter 1976): 325. Further references will appear in the text.

Fathers in her life as a woman?

The distrust of the body, and of the female body in particular, which the dualism accompanying Christianity can be seen to perpetuate as I have shown in Chapter Two, is central to a nun's concept of self. As women who have renounced their sexuality in favour of the spiritual life, they appear to be faithfully following the dictates of patriarchal Christianity which insist that the body is inferior to the soul. However, as *Virgin Territory* and *Women in the Wall* both demonstrate, sexuality is not so easily left behind, and an ambivalence towards the body and chastity result. While the nun might appear to escape the interference of the patriarchal world in a life of independence reminiscent of the autonomous Amazon, she can also find herself punishing her own body in response to an internalised fear of the female.

Through the centuries, the convent life has offered women, who have generally been marginalised in patriarchal society, an opportunity to withdraw from that society, and in doing so create a separate world in which they occupy the central position. Nunneries can thus provide "a room of one's own" (to use Virginia Woolf's phrase), a place where women can exercise their talents and abilities, unfettered by the responsibilities of family life.[5] Here women can hope to exist as pure, spiritual beings, denying the physical body. Exploring the attraction of women to ascetic forms of Christianity, Ross Kraemer claims that, "Ascetic Christianity, in fact, offered women a new measure of worth which involved a rejection of their traditional sociosexual roles".[6] In this way, rejection of the physical body and hatred of sexuality can have its positive side. Rosemary Ruether suggests that the asceticism advocated by the early Church provided women and men with a new equality: "Christ, founder of the new virginal humanity, had made [women] equals to men in the eschatological humanity that transcended this historical condition".[7] As Clark and

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5 Fatima Mernissi describes a similar "woman-space" for Moslem women in the saints' shrines in her article, "Women, Saints, and Sanctuaries", *The* Signs *Reader: Women, Gender and Scholarship*, eds Elizabeth Abel and Emily K. Abel (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), indicating that the need for a sanctuary from the patriarchal world is not confined to Christian women.

6 Ross S. Kraemer, "The Conversion of Women to Ascetic Forms of Christianity", *Signs* 6.2 (Winter 1980): 301.

7 Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Mothers of the Church: Ascetic Women in the Late Patristic Age", *Women of Spirit: Female Leadership in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*, eds Rosemary Ruether and Eleanor McLaughlin (New York: Simon and

Richardson point out in their introduction to *Women and Religion: A Feminist Sourcebook of Christian Thought*, the virginal life was particularly appealing because it freed women from the demands of married life, including (in the past, at least) its constant pregnancies, thereby providing women religious with a certain amount of independence.[8]

The advantages of this lifestyle, removed as it was from the constraints of child-bearing and direct male domination, were very tempting to many women. Janice Raymond points out: "As a consecrated state that legitimated an 'unhusbanded life', virginity carried the germ of female independence, integrity, and intimacy that would give women freedom from men and male dictates".[9] The opportunity to repudiate the female body, and thereby escape the denigration accompanying the female condition, was also welcome. However, the solution was not as permanent as it might at first appear. It did not confront the problems of the female condition which continued to be present: as Chrodechilde in *Women in the Wall* recognises, "the convent and life there was lived at one or more removes from reality" (*WW* 303). The enclosed religious life merely allowed the nuns to disregard their femaleness, protecting them by allowing them to ignore their bodies instead of forcing them to confront the realities of being female. In this way, the haven created by the convent walls can become a trap. Nuns may live in a separate, closed community, but they are not entirely free from the rest of society, and outside realities soon impinge on their lives. Both *Virgin Territory* and *Women in the Wall* explore the reactions of nuns when the sanctuary of the convent is violated.

In *Women in the Wall*, Fortunatus, a priest, comes to the Holy Cross Convent and eventually seduces the abbess Agnes. Her awakened sexuality, and the resulting pregnancy, destroy Agnes' peaceful life; she finds that she has much less control over her life than she had believed. The female condition is shown to be one of being dominated by forces beyond women's control and Agnes is obliged to recognise her vulnerability in the face of biology, forced to acknowledge that she remains susceptible to many of the

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Schuster, 1979) 72.

8 Elizabeth Clark and Herbert Richardson, eds, Introduction, *Women and Religion: A Feminist Sourcebook of Christian Thought* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977) 7.

9 Janice Raymond, *A Passion For Friends: Toward a Philosophy of Female Affection* (London: Women's Press, 1986) 74.

problems faced by women on the outside. Even the anchoress Ingunda (illegitimate daughter of the abbess Agnes) is not safe from the outside world. Being enclosed in the wall does not shut out the world and her memory continues to be full of the horrors and evils of the world. Finally, Ingunda is wrenched out of seclusion and murdered during the sacking of the convent. In a symbolic rape, one of the soldiers "thrust his scramasax into the slit" (*WW* 321) before dismantling the wall and pulling Ingunda out of her cell; the protective barriers erected between the nun and the sinful horrors of the world of the flesh are stripped away. This scene can be read also as a birth experience: Ingunda is wrenched from the security of the womb into the realities of a female life. *Virgin Territory* recalls the history of the violation of women in the name of God in the new world instead of the old: "The maidens of Caxos, the chosen women, the chaste and honoured daughters of the Inca state, had been raped in their sanctuary by men who claimed allegiance to Christ and travelled with the blessing of the Church" (*VT* 41). For Ingunda the anchoress and the sanctified virgins of Caxos, safe refuge for female bodies is shown to be a deceptive illusion, forcing the reader to recognise that the nun cannot escape her identity as female.

That Ingunda perceives her cell as both womb and tomb works in this particular context to indicate the inextricable link between birth and death. This in turn forces the reader to realise that it is womanhood itself, the capacity for regeneration and reproduction of human beings, that is the trap, according to the logic set up by the Christian interpretation of Genesis and the Fall from Grace. Earlier in the novel, Radegunda speaks of the stink of "sex and death: the double curse God inflicted on man when he threw him out of Eden. Fallen Man is subject to death and so must reproduce himself by sexual means" (*WW* 36). The womb is the site of new life, and the necessity of its existence is a physical reminder of death and the tomb which awaits all mortals. Ingunda's hole in the wall becomes an allegory of the body as a trap for the soul.

Distrust of the body and the perception of sexuality as a punishment from God leads to an acceptance of violence being inflicted on the female body by both women themselves and men. The nun's lot has traditionally been one of physical discomfort, reflecting an internalised distrust of the female body and its relationship to Eve's sin. Physical abuse of

the female body is also perpetrated by the women themselves. Attitudes of hatred and disgust become internalised, and nuns have learnt to punish themselves for their ultimate sin, namely, that of being born female. Flagellation, "taking the discipline", and the denial of bodily comforts were considered to be appropriate forms of behaviour. Subjection to extreme cold and starvation have been commonplace in convents over the centuries. Starvation in particular, although not a central concern of the novels examined in this thesis, is an important issue in relation to women and their attitudes towards their bodies and is thus deserving of some discussion, however brief. Starvation is particularly appropriate for nuns since food can be seen as a symbol of the female body, the first source of food for all human beings. If feeding and nurturing is associated with the female, denial of food can be seen to reflect a denial of the female condition. The level of starvation that has sometimes been imposed on nuns in the past (by themselves or by their superiors) was so extreme that amenorrhea resulted, which could be welcomed as a blessing to those denying their femininity and sexuality, since menstruation was perceived as evidence of Eve's curse.[10]

From the earliest days of Christianity, believers have sought forms of suffering as part of their religious life. The idea of repaying Christ for his sacrifice, coupled with an intense fear and hatred of the body, created a situation in which some believed good could be achieved by denying fulfilment of desire. Judith Van Herik discusses the French philosopher and mystic Simone Weil and her ideas from a feminist perspective in her article "Simone Weil's Religious Imagery: How Looking Becomes Eating".[11] For Weil, the experience of hunger for food symbolises all desire and longing, thus depriving the body of food is a sacrifice of self-will. Instead of following Eve's example and eating the fruit, contemporary women can look at the fruit but not succumb to the temptation of eating it. According to Weil, desire itself can be purified; first, one must not satisfy it, and second, one must focus attention on that desire. The hunger is what is real, and is therefore to be

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10 Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (1976; London: Picador, 1985) 75.

11 Judith Van Herik, "Simone Weil's Religious Imagery: How Looking Becomes Eating", *Immaculate and Powerful: The Female in Sacred Image and Social Reality*, eds Clarissa W. Atkinson, Constance H. Buchanan and Margaret R. Miles (1985; London: Crucible, 1987). Further references will appear in the text.

loved. We must accept "the void", as Weil calls it, and thus transmute desire. Herik relates this theory to attitudes towards dominance and submission. Weil believed that "Human love makes one a tyrant or puppet; eater or food" (Herik 270). The eater (or lover), in fulfilling desire, destroys the object of that hunger, the food (or beloved). The only way to resolve this dilemma is to remain hungry. The appropriateness of the food imagery in Weil's work can be understood in terms of her female identity. Women are identified with food and nurture in Western culture, and are also the victims, or food, of an oppressive patriarchy. Food and starvation soon became important symbols for women religious, and the imagery continues to have significance in our own time.

In her article, "Fast, Feast, and Flesh: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women",[12] Caroline Walker Bynum discusses the central symbolic importance of food in Christianity. She reminds us that Christian theology "taught that the redemption of all humanity lay in the fact that Christ was flesh and food" (Bynum 16), thus it is that Christians celebrate their salvation in Christ through the Eucharist. According to Bynum's argument, women, who feed their children with their own bodies, identify closely with a God who does the same. This in turn becomes a path for acceptance of the female body, since the women's own feeding from their bodies reflects God's actions. Bynum takes this interpretation further:

> Woman's jubilant, vision-inducing, inebriated eating of God was the opposite of the ordinary female acts of food preparation or of bearing and nursing children. But in another and, I think, deeper sense, the eating was not a reversal at all. Women became, in mystical eating, a fuller version of the food and the flesh they were assumed by their culture to be. (Bynum 16)

The Eucharist may thus be seen to provide an affirmation of the significance and importance of women within the Christian religion. Paradoxically, oppression is used as the path to freedom; women's physical bodies, through their role as providers of food, unite them with Christ and identify them with his suffering.

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12 Caroline Walker Bynum, "Fast, Feast, and Flesh: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women", *Representations* 11 (Summer 1985). Further references will appear in the text.

The conjunction of violence and sexuality can create a situation in which desire is turned around and becomes the tool of aggression between men and women, resulting in the act of rape, as we see in both *Women in the Wall* and *Virgin Territory*. Ingunda experiences rape secondhand; her foster-sisters fall victim to lustful soldiers during the civil war. When Ingunda visits them afterwards, her foster-mother, furious at the injustice of the nuns living their safe convent life in which they are protected from the horrors of war, discloses the secret of Ingunda's identity as "the abbess's bastard" (*WW* 239). This news causes a dramatic alteration in Ingunda's perception of herself and leads, eventually, to her decision to become an anchoress. Complicating her stunned reaction is the realisation that she can never acknowledge her true mother. Ingunda is shocked by the knowledge that this woman whom she loves and admires is damned because of her own existence, and believes that the only way she can save her mother is to offer herself as a martyr, to sacrifice her own life in order that her mother may gain eternal life through reconciliation with God. This retreat into a living death is the ultimate rejection of female sexuality, the opposite of celebrating woman as the creative source of life (the latter of which we see, for example, in Maitland's *Daughter of Jerusalem* and Roberts' *Book of Mrs Noah*, both of which will be discussed in the following chapters).

Sister Kitty in *Virgin Territory* also gains greater insight into her identity after being raped. As a nun she recognises that it is the vow of chastity that distinguishes her from other women: "All over the world, with and without choice, women lived in poverty and obedience, but her virginity was the mark of her profession and a core of her identity" (*VT* 9). She must lose her virginity before understanding its importance; that her body has remained untouched by men and her sexuality untested has been essential to her identity. The experience of rape is accompanied by a vision of a white unicorn disappearing into the distance, the traditional image of purity and chastity, leaving her forever. Rape marks her loss of innocence in that it forces her to realise that her habit does not provide immunity from the problems confronting all women in relation to their bodies.

The rape in *Virgin Territory* is used to examine a variety of possible responses among the nuns at Santa Virgine (a rather ironic name under the circumstances). The nurse who

examines Sister Kitty responds with curiosity about the act of sexual intercourse and wants to learn more about it, "she had wanted to know how it felt, and if somewhere she had missed something" (*VT* 11). Sister Pauline, who had been with Sister Kitty during the rape and been knocked unconscious during the attack, feels neglected when concern is directed towards the rape victim rather than what she considers to be her own more serious physical injuries. Sister Jo, the sister-in-charge, feels guilty and responsible, upset that she cannot protect her women adequately. Others respond with anger at "their impotence, their vulnerability, their inability to defend themselves" (*VT* 15). Sister Anna, who at first appears to be unaffected by the event, proves to be thrown into greater confusion than any of them. Her whole world crumbles, and the focus of the novel is her necessary re-examination of her existence and identity in the light of this new appreciation of her own vulnerability. She may be sworn to chastity but this does not alter the fact that she is a woman with a female body and sexuality.

Part of the confusion experienced by the nuns in *Virgin Territory* in relation to the rape is owing to their responses to the physical body itself. The rape has faint connotations of fulfilling a hidden desire to punish the body, given the trouble that body is to the faithful. The devout have long been known to inflict violent punishments upon themselves as testimony to their love for God. Sara Maitland attempts to understand this phenomenon in her article "Passionate Prayer: Masochistic Images in Women's Experience".[13] She blames the move away from the original spirit of Christianity into dualism for this condition: "The source of salvation gradually shifted from faith in the power of the resurrection to copying the death of Jesus" ("Passionate Prayer" 130).

Identification with Christ's suffering became more and more important to Christians as they struggled with their ambivalent feelings about the body, experiencing the desires of the flesh yet despising those desires. To give up the earthly life in martyrdom became the highest vocation in the Christians' view, a calling which Maitland interprets as evidence of a masochistic tendency. However, times changed and Christianity was accepted as the

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13 Sara Maitland, "Passionate Prayer: Masochistic Images in Women's Experience", *Sex and God: Some Varieties of Women's Religious Experience*, ed. Linda Hurcombe (New York and London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987). Further references will appear in the text.

official religion of the Roman Empire, making it more difficult for Christians to be martyred in the cause of their faith. Women experienced this change in a specific manner, according to Maitland:

> Increasingly enclosed within the home or the convent, women were obliged in a specific way to inflict the desired martyrdom on themselves....From a lack of practical alternatives as much as anything else, women who desired perfection were obliged to internalize their desire and martyr themselves. They had to make their lover, or whatever name they chose to personify their inner passion (bearing in mind that it had to be a male personification) if it was to be 'of God' both the instrument and the object of that martyrdom. ("Passionate Prayer" 131)

She goes on to explain that this was possible because women were caught in a "classic double bind"; not only were women themselves allotted a negative value, but society also placed "a highly charged positive value...on heterosexuality and on personal love, personal passion, for Jesus" ("Passionate Prayer" 132). The latter, Maitland claims, was sealed by the notion of Romantic Love in which powerlessness and humility before the beloved was prized. The family imagery of Christianity (God the Father, Mother Church, the individual soul as Bride) accentuated the love relationship between the women and Christ. Further, the lover of Christ is totally powerless, because "an aspirant lover of Christ cannot criticize her beloved for anything because he is God and therefore perfect. If he is cold, unfaithful, withdrawn, it must be her fault" ("Passionate Prayer" 135). She is undeserving of that love, but may be redeemed through it if the lover cares enough to "whip her into shape" so that she does become good and deserving. She can only become deserving if she is punished for her innate wickedness originating in Eve's sin: she is guilty and must pay. Suffering is then relished as God's punishment which will eventually lead to redemption once she has expiated that original sin.

It is precisely the ambivalence surrounding sexuality and violence which creates the guilty sexual excitement exploited in Maitland's *Virgin Territory*. Sister Anna is struggling with doubts about her faith and cries out to God to bring her back into the fold:

> Dear God, come and get me out of here. Please. Name your price and I'll pay

> it....Punish me. Make me good....I need forcing, God, I need you to force me. Make me, break me, make me good and acceptable again.
>
> She craved it suddenly, physically, her belly melting, wanting, warming; greedy for her own humiliation, her own rape. (*VT* 52-53)

Finally she begs God: "Rape me chaste" (*VT* 53).

The suffering takes on an erotic aspect when it is perceived as a physical manifestation of Christ's love. Grace is possible if Christ (God made man) allows the woman to suffer and thus purify herself. Susan Griffin takes up this interpretation and extends the movement from Christ's crucifixion through female desire for punishment to the degradation of women in pornography in her book *Pornography and Violence.*[14] She shows how hatred of the female body, condoned by the Church, has made pornography possible, and draws a parallel between the Christian and the pornographer.

Maitland demonstrates how images of Christ as romantic lover, the domestic metaphors for God and the Church, and martyrdom as imitation of the crucifixion can come together in an internalised sado-masochism in which the woman plays the roles of both humiliated and humiliator, degraded and degrader.[15] Simone de Beauvoir offers an explanation of the attraction and satisfaction provided by such sado-masochistic fantasies:

> In the humiliation of God she sees with wonder the dethronement of Man; inert, passive, covered with wounds, the Crucified is the reversed image of the white, bloodstained martyr exposed to wild beasts, to daggers, to males, with whom the little girl has so often identified herself; she is overwhelmed to see that Man, Man-God, has assumed her role. She it is who is hanging on the Tree, promised the splendour of the Resurrection. It is she: she proves it; her forehead bleeds under the crown of thorns, her hands, her feet, her side, have been pierced by unseen iron. (de Beauvoir 639)

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14 Susan Griffin, *Pornography and Silence: Culture's Revenge Against Nature* (London: Women's Press, 1981) 68 ff.

15 I follow Maitland's lead here in using the term "sado-masochistic" in relation to a single individual. Maitland writes: "I have called this spiritual disease sado-masochism precisely because the woman so afflicted acts out both roles herself. She has internalized the sadist who is her beloved other, her own projection and her one hope of salvation. He is the lover who loves her pain and she offers it to him humbly and ecstatically" ("Passionate Prayer" 137).

This image of female suffering can become an image of glorification when it is seen to imitate Christ's suffering. The nuns we see in *Virgin Territory* and *Women in the Wall* exhibit the mortification of the flesh which occurs as a consequence of the absorption of these attitudes by women.

The terrible tortures Rose of Lima, the patron saint of South America, inflicted upon herself, the "disciplines", are introduced into *Virgin Territory*. This passage appears shortly after Anna has been considering her own need for self-discipline. As a teenager she had enquired of her confessor if "taking the discipline" might help her, but had since been taught to regard such behaviour as an unnecessary reminder of the flesh. She admits that "She had longed though, an adolescent longing, for the drama of it she supposed" (*VT* 88). Although she refers to this yearning in retrospect as an "adolescent longing", she continues to desire some sort of physical punishment from God. It is not until she attains a much deeper understanding of her spirituality *and* sexuality that she can make some sense of these desires. Maitland is more explicit in her analysis of these ideas in "Passionate Prayer": if God lets you suffer, then he must love you enough to allow you to expiate your sins through that suffering. She sums it up as: "you can repent and repent and repent, but you cannot amend...so you must be punished, you even want to be punished. It's exciting. Jesus loves you" ("Passionate Prayer" 137). "Discipline" takes on a double meaning in this context. It is used to refer to mortification by penance as it is in the religious sense, and also to describe order, control and obedience exercised over oneself. The two interpretations are somewhat confused in Anna's mind, and self-discipline becomes a means of penance in some respects. She believes she needs discipline, but it is not clear which sort of discipline she means; the reader can only assume that she wants both. To punish herself with "the discipline" requires the sort of self-control she also needs to concentrate on her research project.

Rose of Lima's biography and the details of the mortifications she inflicts upon herself in response to despising the body provide the impetus for the friendship which is formed between Anna and Karen. Ironically, it is through this relationship that Anna discovers the pleasures of the flesh. As a nun, Anna has taken Christ as her spiritual husband,

sublimating physical desire in religious fervour. She moves from what is almost total unawareness of her sexuality, a response to denying that which is not spiritual in her own identity, to an intense absorption with the needs and desires of her body. In the process of spiritual enlightenment as it is played out in this novel, Anna learns to accept all of herself and to take responsibility for that self.

Anna is freed from any obligation to take an earthly lover when she accepts Christ as her spiritual husband and master. The result is not a total freedom, however; the relationship that exists between mortal men and women is mirrored in the marriage with Christ, but domination and submission are experienced even more intensely within the mystical marriage. God becomes the ultimate master to whom Anna, like all nuns, must give up her entire will. In her confusion, Anna longs to debase herself before him in order to prove herself worthy of his love. By torturing her flesh, by punishing her body, she can demonstrate her denial of self in deference to God's wishes (O'Faolain constructs Radegunda's self-mutilation in a similar manner). Paradoxically, the result of this behaviour is that she takes power over her self and her life: such painful disciplining of herself requires self-discipline. Monica Furlong describes the same pattern of submission and subversion as the achievement of Thérèse of Lisieux:

> If there is no choice in life, no way out of the trap, then only one response is left; the religious trick is to turn it from masochism into love....[one can believe that] this bout of pain is the purest piece of luck. In other words that it is the will of God. By such an act of surrender the unbearable pain of crucifixion is transmuted into the joy of resurrection. The far side of the coin, the opposite side from the face of pain, is the face of joy.[16]

Thérèse, Radegunda and Anna are all presented as believing that they are denying their own wills, but as readers we realise that we are witnessing the way in which painful submission can be used to assert one's own identity. Being capable of torturing one's flesh in this way is really a means of taking control over life.

Although Sister Anna doesn't actually inflict the pain on herself with red-hot branding

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16 Monica Furlong, *Thérèse of Lisieux* (London: Virago, 1987) 135.

irons as Radegunda does, she does choose to be tattooed with the knowledge that such a branding will require some physical suffering. The choice is a symbolic act reflecting her total rebellion against the Fathers, and her alliance with Christ and the principles of love and equality espoused in the earliest days of the Church. She achieves purification through pain, but it is on different terms from the purification the Church Fathers have taught her to desire. Anna defiantly claims her autonomy in the face of the traditional Church through this act of violence.

Radegunda and Anna both take control over their own lives through violent acts; both have internalised the traditional Christian attitudes towards the female body, but are able to transform it into a powerful weapon which can be used for their own ends. Instead of losing all sense of their own identities, each woman asserts her self, thus gaining some sort of autonomy within a system that denies them any true independence. It is a strategy for expressing the self which calls to mind Irigaray's discussions of the hysteric whose paralysis also reflects an extreme acquiescence with social demands that she be passive.[17] Taken to its endpoint such passivity becomes the opposite of compliance, becoming instead an active assertion of the self. Extreme submission can be an assertion of one's will, just as extreme passivity can be an active assertion of one's subjectivity.

The mythological and psychological importance of the Amazons underlies Maitland's imaging of the independent woman striving to find a place in a patriarchal world (*Virgin Territory* opens against the background of the Amazonian jungle, pointing to the significance of the legend for the sisters at Santa Virgine). As a symbol of powerful women who live independently of men, the Amazons can be a positive model for today's women. The Amazons embody conflicting ideals, however, as both Wm. Blake Tyrrell and Marina Warner make clear in their studies of the significance of the warrior women myths.[18] As virgins they are "symbols of the most blissful eroticism" (*Joan of Arc* 207) in their promise of fruitfulness, but also represent dangerous subversion of the patriarchy in

17 Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1989) 138.

18 Wm. Blake Tyrrell, *Amazons: A Study in Athenian Mythmaking* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984); Marina Warner, *Joan of Arc: The Image of Female Heroism* (1981; London: Penguin, 1983). Further references will appear in the text.

their freedom and autonomy; as women they are allied with life, reproduction and the maternal body, but as warriors they deal in death; they exhibit both masculine and feminine qualities. They can be seen to affirm "sexual difference and male superiority" (*Joan of Arc* 218) in the act of abandoning the female model and assuming the male role; alternatively, the Amazons offer the possibility of female access to the freedoms associated with the male social position, as Julie Wheelwright shows.[19]

Within the Christian tradition, the Amazon as independent virgin is tamed and moulded into the form of the virgin mother Mary. While this image of woman can be detrimental to contemporary women (I discuss this further in Chapter Six), by concentrating on its reverse side, the virgin mother can be interpreted as a symbol of female autonomy also:

> The message of *independence* in the Virgin symbol can itself be understood apart from the matter of sexual relationships with men. When this aspect of the symbol is sifted out from the patriarchal setting, then "Virgin Mother" can be heard to say something about female autonomy within the context of sexual and parental relationships.[20]

In this passage, Daly indicates the importance of what I call "psychological virginity", that state of mind which allows a woman to see herself as independent of men but is unrelated to her physical virginity. Penelope Washbourn, in urging women to use the Virgin-Goddess as a "myth-model" for their own lives, concentrates on the aspect of virginity which allows a woman to be "one-in-herself" so that "she is not dependent psychologically on anyone outside herself".[21] Beatrice Bruteau builds on this concept, taking it into the realm of the religious:

> virginity is intended to represent and to express not a premarital condition, or an abstinence from sexual relations, or any type of moral purity. These factors may themselves be symbolic of the quality which I feel is the heart of the Virgin image:

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19 Julie Wheelwright, *Amazons and Military Maids: Women Who Dressed as Men in the Pursuit of Life, Liberty and Happiness* (London: Pandora Press, 1989).

20 Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (1973; Boston: Beacon Press, 1974) 85.

21 Penelope Washbourn, "Differentiation and Difference—Reflections on the Ethical Implications of Women's Liberation", *Women and Religion*, eds Judith Plaskow and Joan Arnold (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1974) 134.

> the non-duality of Being, the undifferentiated character of Pure Existence, the Infinite, the Transcendent. The Virgin is that Infinite Being which is beyond all categories...[22]

Thus the conjunction of the images of the virgin mother and the goddess, both of whom "had no need of a consort", can be reinterpreted: "women can use the model of the goddess as independent and complete in her own being and...the Virgin as a symbol for unity and oneness coupled with the concept of the Mother as creative multiplicity".[23] As well as providing the key to the ability of this image of the virgin mother to survive despite its confusing and contradictory messages, this also suggests the importance of chastity and the existence of convents for Christian women.

In her book, *The Gospel According to Woman*, Karen Armstrong argues that the virgins of the Church have been replaced (to some extent) by the modern feminist. She points out that both identities are marked by their independence and self-sufficiency:

> Sixteen hundred years of sermons propagating the theology of virginity and sixteen hundred years of devotion to virgin saints put the ideas and images of both independence and autonomy for women deeply into the Western consciousness. Women today still strive after...independence....They may not realise that they have a good deal in common with the virgins of Catholic legend and history, and that they continue to live according to the old virginal mythology. Like the virgins of old, they are seeking equality with men.[24]

She sees contemporary women following in a natural progression from their predecessors.

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22 Beatrice Bruteau, "The Image of the Virgin Mother", *Women and Religion*, 100. Phyllis Chesler also acknowledges the importance of the Amazon and goddess myths, commenting that: "To the extent to which American or Western women desire a more harmonious, tribal, collective, spiritual, and ritual existence, and are willing to forgo certain modern values and technologies to achieve it, then Amazon societies are probably better models for women than are male-initiated models of 'primitive' societies" (Phyllis Chesler, *Women and Madness* [1972; San Diego: Harvest/HBJ, 1989] 288. Further references will appear in the text.). Her interest in the subject is different from the theologians', however, in that she uses this model for more general social revolution rather than personal transformation.

23 Gayle Kimball, "From Motherhood to Sisterhood: The Search for Female Religious Imagery in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Theology", *Beyond Androcentrism: New Essays on Women and Religion*, ed. Rita M. Gross (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1977) 262.

24 Karen Armstrong, *The Gospel According to Woman: Christianity's Creation of the Sex War in the West* (1986; London: Pan Books, 1987) 121.

Although the reasons for the Church's encouragement of virginity may be offensive to today's feminists, particularly because of its hatred of female sexuality, it is possible to perceive that a positive force has developed out of this model for women.

In *Virgin Territory* the nuns who are committed to the virginal life discover enormous freedom in the virgin jungle. Maitland uses the traditional association of women with nature, but does so with de Beauvoir's qualifications, that is, that in the natural world which has not been moulded by men, women are free to be themselves.[25] Anna and her friend Sister Kate holiday together in the Amazon basin, finding there an ambivalence towards the overwhelming fecundity of the jungle which foreshadows Anna's later confusion in relation to her own sexuality: she is attracted and repelled by both the voluptous sensuality of the jungle and her responses to Karen. Sister Kate later takes up arms in the role of warrior maiden, assuming the violence of male power in her fight for social justice. If "Artemis belongs to the wild, to the forest outside Athena's polis",[26] then Sister Kate plays Artemis to Anna's Athena, images which take on further significance when it becomes clear that Anna must shift her loyalties from the father to herself and her sisters (in this context Athena is named as the primary example in Greek mythology of the daughter who identifies with the father rather than with the mother).

The virgin forest becomes an image of the virginal women themselves, reflecting their strength and independence. The description of the forest is quoted from Nor Hall's *The Moon and the Virgin*: "The virgin forest is not barren or unfertilised, but rather a place that is specially fruitful and has multiplied because it has taken life into itself and transformed it, giving birth naturally and taking dead things back to be re-cycled. It is virgin because it is unexploited, not in man's control" (*VT* 23).[27] In taking all responsibility for themselves into their own hands, the nuns see their own claim to chaste virginity as a path towards a creative freedom. The sense of fertility gone mad in the jungle reflects their own freedom to be wildly creative; giving up the role of reproduction in marriage does not mean giving

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25 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. H.M. Parshley (1949; London: Jonathan Cape, 1968, rpt 1972) 359. Further references will appear in the text.

26 Marina Warner, *Monuments and Maidens: The Allegory of the Female Form* (1985; London: Picador, 1987) 279.

27 Nor Hall, *The Moon and the Virgin* (London: Women's Press, 1980).

up female creativity.

Lilith too represents the autonomous woman, and as such has been taken up by many feminists looking for a symbol of female independence in traditional religious mythology. The Conference of Women Exploring Theology in June 1972 used the image of Lilith and Eve making friends as a reflection of the strength of sisterhood, inventing a new myth from the old one (the rewriting of this story is explored further in Chapter Five). In retelling the stories of the Garden of Eden, Michelene Wandor emphasises the independence of Lilith, Adam's first wife, who "'transgressed' by refusing to be a submissive wife" as the cover of the Journeyman edition of *Gardens of Eden* explains. In "Lilith takes tea with the Lord" she declares:

> I want to be my own jealous God, you see
>
> for the irony is,
> I am made only too well
> in thine image, the
> image of a jealous God (see Psalm 35)
>
> 'the meek shall inherit the earth'?
>
> I have not learned meekness from watching you...
>
> you say you will hover over me
> your wings
> giving me protection
> I've got news for you
> I'm allergic to feathers [28]

The sentiments expressed in this poem are similar to those in Maitland's first novel, *Daughter of Jerusalem*, in which the central character, Liz, learns to be too much like her own father and claims her independence from him in the way he has taught her to do. It is the voice of a modern feminist, yet the attitudes it embodies come from centuries-old ideas about the possibilities open to women. Despite patriarchal oppression of women, some women have always desired autonomy, and that desire is now being realised by feminists.

Anna's coming of age requires that she examine her own identity in the light of these images of the virgin. This is reflected in an absorbing struggle in Anna's mind which is

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28 Michelene Wandor, "Lilith takes tea with the Lord", *Gardens of Eden: Poems for Eve and Lilith* (London: Journeyman/Playbooks, 1984) 38-39.

represented by the Fathers and Caro, the battle of "grown-up civilisation against childhood anarchy".[29] She hears the voices of both in her head during her London visit, a time in which she is attempting to reassess her life and identity in response to the rape of her sister nun in Santa Virgine. Maitland constructs the novel around a framework which reflects that of Lacanian psychology, and it is useful when examining this novel to name the voices in terms of this theory of psychological development. The Fathers can be understood as the personification of the "Name of the Fathers" or "Law of the Fathers",[30] the social authority embodying the mores of patriarchy, which is represented by the Symbolic Order of language; Caro can be read as the voice of the pre-social, anarchic child who exists within the Imaginary, that is, the child who has not yet entered the Symbolic Order of language.[31] Anna is pulled in both directions, existing in the tension between apparent opposites; although she will always be influenced by both, she must finally allow one or the other to dominate.

The concept of "Father" comes to represent a range of ideas and social forces in Maitland's novels. On the most literal level, the biological father is seen as the head of the family, but is also constructed in terms of the domestic hierarchy sanctioned by the Church and reflecting the hierarchy of Heaven. He is a figure of authority and power, possibly a tyrant, who is also a source of love, loyalty and protection. It is this ambivalent portrait of the father that Sara Maitland draws of her own father, albeit in terms of the Old Gods: "emotional, excitable, passionate, the administrators of a deeply partial justice, jealous of their prerogatives, zealously prejudiced in favour of their own, vengeful and dangerous

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29 Sara Maitland, "Two for the Price of One", *Fathers: Reflections by Daughters*, ed. Ursula Owen (London: Virago, 1983) 37. Further references will appear in the text.

30 This concept is discussed in "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis" (otherwise known as the "Rome Discourse"), *Écrits*, 66-67, and "On a Question Preliminary to Any Possible Treatment of Psychosis", *Écrits*, 199, 218-19. However, while Lacan uses the term "Name of the Father", I use Toril Moi's phrase "Law of the Father" which includes Kristeva's insights into this concept and is more pointed about the significance of the "Name" (Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics* [London and New York: Methuen, 1985] 99, and *The Kristeva Reader*, 215-16).

31 For the purposes of the novel, Maitland is forced to describe Caro's influence in terms of a voice using language which can be understood by Anna. Thus, the pre-verbal child communicates with Anna's consciousness through words, an anomaly which is not overcome in the novel since the novel itself relies on the written word as its medium for communication.

when crossed, and delightedly generous when pleased by services rendered" (*Fathers* 35). Fathers are well represented in the imagery employed by the Church. The parish priest called "Father" by his flock is responsible for teaching his parishioners moral right and wrong while passing on the Word of God. As the religious authority in a community, this Father can wield enormous power. It is a power invested in him by the Church Fathers, those scholars whose teachings still carry weight in the Church today, and much of which is refuted by feminists. However, the Fathers of the Church, the priests, and fathers who place themselves at the head of the family in Christian households, all derive their authority from God the Father (another concept which has come under close scrutiny from feminists). In *Virgin Territory* the Fathers are employed as manifestations of the principle of patriarchy, of father-rule. The novel also implements the notion of the Fathers of Patriarchy, the mythical originators of the patriarchy whose presence extends from the past into our lives today. These are the Fathers whom Lacan invokes, at least in part, when referring to the "Name of the Father". They symbolise the social forces and power of the patriarchy: civilisation, socialisation, language and communication, in short, all that is implied by the "Symbolic Order".

For Anna, the physical embodiment of the voices of patriarchy exist in her own biological father and the priests she calls "Father" in the Roman Catholic Church. Although Anna had believed that her biological father supported her cause in this battle between her own self and the voices of the patriarchy, she soon learns otherwise. The person whom she had considered to be the "one safe good strong man who knew and loved her" (*VT* 44) is soon conflated with other aspects of the patriarchy which oppresses her.

Anna's father visits her in London, and she finds herself doing all she can to please him (and thus to please the Fathers in her head) in order to earn his approval and forgiveness. She makes flirtatious attempts to tease and please him; ironically, Anna the nun is prepared to revert to the role of desirable, sexual woman if it will gain her father's approval. Paradoxically, Anna is, at the same time, aware of becoming a child again in his presence. This is reflected in the language she uses with him: "Even her vocabulary altered, became

infantilised in his presence" (*VT* 45). Again we are reminded of the importance of language in the creation of subjectivity and identity when Anna speaks as a child, as her father's obedient daughter, instead of the independent grown woman she is now. She manages to appease the Fathers and is rewarded for being "a good girl, a good daughter" (*VT* 49) by the peaceful absence of their voices in her head, at least for a time. Soon, however, Anna symbolically rejects her duties and obligations to them by vomiting up the lunch paid for by her father. Clearly her father and the Fathers represent the same forces at work in her life.

Having failed to satisfy her obligations to her biological father, Anna attempts to earn forgiveness from her spiritual father, the priest. Her formal confession leads to another direct confrontation with the Fathers, the priest being a physical, human manifestation of their power.

Anna first becomes aware of the voices of the Fathers on her return to the Mother House (the Mothers here, it becomes clear, side with the Fathers against the daughters). She realises that she is entirely at the mercy of the Fathers, a product of their demands on her: "Sr. Anna was Pallas Athene, the virgin created by the Fathers. A creation of the Fathers and virgin only because they liked it that way. She was at the beck and call of the Fathers who ranted in her head, in her dreams and in her private spaces" (*VT* 32). She recognises that her subjectivity and identity are entirely of their making, that she has little or nothing of herself that is defined apart from them. Her subjectivity doesn't exist until she leaves behind the chaos of undifferentiated experience and enters the Symbolic Order, the Law of the Father; it is in this sense that she is a creation of the Fathers. Maitland creates Fathers who have the ability to build order out of chaos; in other words, the Law of the Father provides a system (language) for understanding the world. The undifferentiated experience of the preverbal, anarchic infant is organised within the Symbolic Order in which the ability to distinguish "I" from everything else marks the first acceptance of the grown-up, social world. To an important extent, subjectivity and identity are seen to be constructed in language; consequently, the disintegration of identity and the subject-self is

associated with the loss of language.[32] An awareness of this dependence on language for both subjectivity and identity is expressed when Anna resolves to be "The Fathers' daughter, sprung to life fully armed on the emanation of *the Father's Word*, armed against darkness and chaos" (*VT* 147 emphasis added). This passage also draws together the Greek and Judeo-Christian strands of Anna's heritage, alluding to both Pallas Athene, Zeus' warrior daughter, and the Christian God whose word is believed by Christians to have created our world out of chaos.

Maitland draws on Greek mythology in her exploration of the possible representations of woman, moving beyond the Judeo-Christian tradition to indicate the extent of the patriarchal tradition in Western culture. The figure of Pallas Athene as the image of the favoured daughter is one role a woman can adopt in response to these very human gods; that the gods are so human means that this is a pattern that can be more easily played out in mortal families. The father becomes the embodiment of the patriarchy in each family; the good daughter must play by the Father's rules in order to maintain her identity and gain his approval. If she is to be the beloved father-identified daughter, she must be like Pallas Athene, "goddess of peace and war, fully armed and always calm, never foolish, never in love, never a child, never naughty, never in the wrong" (*Fathers* 40). She must be civilised, not the anarchic infant of preverbal experience; she cannot succumb to the rejection of the father implicit in the figure of Artemis. If she can do and be all this, the Fathers promise, "We will take care of you. We will say, 'This is our beloved in whom we are well pleased.' If you behave we will protect you" (*VT* 33). In return for pledging her allegiance to her father (and therefore to patriarchy, the Symbolic Order and the Law of

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32 Lacan elaborates these ideas throughout his work, but especially useful is the "Rome Discourse", *Écrits*, 30-113, concluding that:

> The psychoanalytic experience has rediscovered in man the imperative of the Word as the law that has formed him in its image. It manipulates the poetic function of language to give to his desire its symbolic mediation. May that experience enable you to understand at last that it is in the gift of speech that all the reality of its effects resides; for it is by way of this gift that all reality has come to man and it is by his continued act that he maintains it. (106)

Julia Kristeva continues this discussion in much of her work, but especially in her doctoral thesis which was published in English as *Revolution in Poetic Language*, and in the article "Women's Time", published in *The Kristeva Reader*, esp. 198-200.

the Father), the daughter receives his protection. The Fathers run "a protection racket—the Godfathers" (*VT* 89), as Anna says.

This "protection racket" operates as a double blackmail. Maitland describes it in her article on fathers: "if you are good I will cherish you *and* if you are bad I will punish you" (*Fathers* 40). Punishment takes a variety of forms in this context; for Anna it is the mental torment of the voices in her head forever berating her for her disobedience. The psychological torture transforms into physical punishment as she hears them say she needs order and discipline and licking into shape. The association of women with the body is brought to bear once again, and Anna later uses rape as a metaphor for the Fathers' punishment of the daughter. She prays in the words of John Donne: "For I, Except you enthrall me never shall be free, Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me" (*VT* 52-53). In begging for punishment at the hands of the Fathers, Anna agrees to accept their rules and be squashed into the mould they have prepared for her. In return she longs for their protection and love. Maitland reminds us that it is this "paternal love which a deeply anti-woman society uses to control its uppity women" (*Fathers* 41).

The "protection" offered by the Fathers is protection from the state of chaotic undifferentiation which the infant experiences before entering the Symbolic Order of language. Thus it is protection from loss of subjectivity and disintegration of the self; it is protection from what lies behind the identity created for Anna and all women within patriarchy, namely, the female self. In adopting as her own the language of a literary "Father" in the shape of John Donne, Anna indicates her willingness to obey the Fathers' rules in order to receive their protection.

Anna swings between the desire to please the Fathers and the necessity of asserting her own identity. She begins to rebel against the Fathers and in doing so starts to lose her grip on language, the sign of her acceptance of the Law of the Fathers. As she questions the role they have chosen for her, she loses the order they impose on her consciousness by giving her an identity in language: "If she was not a nun there were no words" (*VT* 34). Anna cannot remember the words of hymns, and biblical references become confused. We realise that this is to be read as the Fathers' withdrawal of their protection in anger at her

questioning, and that their words can no longer be counted on for comfort. She hears the Fathers say, "It is harder to enter the Kingdom of Heaven than for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle" (*VT* 40), leaving out the reference to *a rich man*, and later, "Come to us all you who are heavy laden and we will *make* you rest" (*VT* 89 emphasis added). Anna acknowledges that "The quotations that were supposed to sustain her kept going wrong and there was no certainty" (*VT* 89), recognising this shifting reality as the first step towards a disintegration of her personality as madness threatens to overwhelm her.

The Fathers warn Anna that "We hold all things together....Without us there is nothing, nothing but chaos, a watery chaos that you will drown in", and she is "frightened of the disintegration, of the formless void....If she was not a nun, who was she? With what voice could she speak, could she answer their accusations?" (*VT* 33-34). Annihilation of the self is the result of rejecting the Law of the Father and the Symbolic Order of language it offers. The "watery" chaos is an echo from the womb where the child floats in the amniotic fluid, unaware of the differentiation awaiting him or her on the outside. Anna realises that she must return to this previous state if she alienates herself from the Fathers.

It is just this state that Caro represents for Anna. Anna first comes into contact with Caro when, in response to her confessor's advice that she should become involved in voluntary work in the community, she answers a call for help from a member of the congregation. She takes part in a rehabilitation program for Caro, a brain-damaged infant. It is ironic that Anna's contact with Caro, who is closely associated with the womb, water and undifferentiation—in short, all that is outlawed by the Fathers—is a direct result of the advice she receives from the priest, whom she calls "Father" and represents the authoritarian, patriarchal Fathers of the Church and social law. Caro comes to represent opposition to all that the Fathers symbolise: the preverbal, anarchic state of the Imaginary. So the advice from her priest leads Anna to precisely the place where she can find some answers, perhaps suggesting that the Church is directed by forces greater than its individual mouthpieces.

Anna is first aware of Caro's voice when the infant's entry into the world is described. This monologue introduces the major elements of Caro's influence on Anna. Her journey

along the birth canal is analogous to the voyage of the explorers to the New World, the world of South America from which Anna herself has just returned. Images of travelling across the oceans, of being "Rocked between the promontories of her mother's hip bones" (*VT* 54), establish the connection between the dark chaos of both Caro's world and the world of the South Americans. Caro's unfulfilled need for love is declared; the mother's betrayal and desertion of the daughter is foretold. Caro "does not yet know who she is or where her boundaries are" (*VT* 56), that is, her experience is as yet undifferentiated and she therefore is not a subject.

Caro is described by her father, Stephen, in terms of the two extremes of traditional stereotypes of women as madonnas or whores; she is the "witch...who had enchanted him, but she was also the princess who had to be rescued from her enchantment" (*VT* 62). Anna also needs some sort of imagery to help her understand Caro, and describes her as a child under a spell which turned her into a fish: "Her body flopped and flapped like a fish out of water, limp, heavy and twitching. If they could only find some way to return her to the dark pool she had come from, she would become graceful again, graceful and powerful and swift. She used her arms like flippers" (*VT* 64). Her image of Caro foretells the source of Anna's cure and salvation. Water is traditionally associated with woman, and the fish represents Christ; together they suggest that it is through a woman-identified Christ, the fish swimming gracefully in its natural medium, that Anna ultimately finds the key to her redemption. Everyone wants to mould Caro into some shape that will be more suited to the Fathers' tastes and their idea of the dutiful daughter willing to accept the Law of the Fathers. By remaining in the undifferentiated anarchy of wordless infancy, Caro remains free of the Fathers' influence, representing an alternative position outside their framework.

Anna is aware of both the similarities and differences between herself and Caro, who mutters to her: "I have chosen the dark. Why should I come out and be made over by them. We are the same, Sister Anna, you and I, Sister Anna....We are both locked up. But you don't dare come down here into the dark and set us both free. We go together, you and I, Sister Anna, we are very alike" (*VT* 65). It is the anarchic child with whom Anna identifies and whom she longs to be, the child who plays in the dark places unafraid

to defy the Fathers. Anna compares her own soft, white body, which has always been used to implement the Fathers' will, with Caro's tough, hard limbs which have grown strong resisting attempts to mould her into the dutiful, lovable daughter. Although Anna tries to believe she is Caro's opposite, she yearns for the freedom Caro symbolises for her. Anna reveals her desire when, in talking about Caro and the pain of freedom, she finds herself analysing her own position: "During the Chinese revolution they tried to free women's feet, the ones that had been bound. They ripped the bandages off them but it was worse: they died of the pain. The binding may have been caging to start with, but it had become protection for them" (*VT* 68). The image of bound feet could apply just as well to the restrictions Anna places on her own life as they do to her theory that Caro refuses to leave the protection her damaged brain offers.

While Caro represents the dark, chaotic child who does not please the Fathers, she also represents the unrestrained anarchist who is free from and beyond the power of the Fathers. It is this second aspect which Anna finds so attractive. Caro sings of the blissful *jouissance*[33] she is capable of experiencing in her preverbal state, in which lack, and therefore desire, has no meaning:

> My play is delightful anarchy. Not for learning, for taming, for training, for ordering, not for decorum and deportment. But for joy and kaleidoscopic light shattering and reforming in the depths of unmade stars. Leap high or fall deep, the void is the same and drifting down or up there is no difference. Floating and swimming and otter-dancing on the unconfined waters that are chaos. Come swim, sing, play, dance, float with me. It is against time and order, it is for joy and lightness. (*VT* 152)

This seems to be just that state which Lacan describes as the Imaginary, and which Kristeva in turn associates with the female and maternal as the "semiotic". It is also the

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33 For discussion of *jouissance* see Lacan, "The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious", *Écrits*, 319-24, and Kristeva, Chapter III, "The Virgin of the Word", *About Chinese Women*, trans. Anita Barrows (1974; London and New York: Marion Boyars, 1986) 25-33, as well as Roudiez's glossary in his Introduction to Kristeva's *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine and Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980) 15-16.

state which Anna (and all adults) give up on becoming dutiful sons and daughters who obey the Law of the Father, that is, on learning language and accepting the rules of socialisation. Anna perceives this loss in terms of the loss of the playful child within herself: "An abortionist, a back-street abortionist, she had aborted the child inside herself. The child who would allow her to play, to be cuddled and be loved", but "The Fathers did not care for that child" (*VT* 65). The violent, sordid image of a back-street abortionist reflects Anna's horror at this destruction, reinforced by her use of a metaphor which is abhorrent to her as a Roman Catholic to describe the pain and betrayal of her rejection of this part of herself.

In her search to re-establish her own identity, Anna realises she must rediscover the child in herself, for it is only when all aspects of her self can be given equal credibility and importance that they can be integrated. The split identity desired by the Fathers represses this early self and does not allow her (or any dutiful daughter) to express, or even recognise, what we are to understand as her "true" self. Anna needs to recontact that part of herself which has been repressed, but to whom can she turn for help in this search? Certainly not the Mothers.

Mothers can be relied upon for treachery, or so it would seem from Anna's very limited experience of them:

> Her own [mother] had run away. She had known only fathers. Lots of fathers. Mothers she did not know about; not about how they can hold you in the dark places of the night. Mother Superior and Mother Church of course, and Holy Mary Mother of God, but all of them very wedded mothers, mothers who were on the side of the Fathers, not on the side of the children. (*VT* 35)

Her last comment holds the key to our understanding of Anna's perception of mothers. All of the mothers ally themselves with the Fathers when they accept the rules of language and socialisation, just as Anna herself does. The mothers are "in the pay of the Fathers" (*VT* 72) and can be trusted by the Fathers to fulfil their wishes; the mothers hand over the daughters in the penultimate act of betrayal, denying the playful, anarchic child her freedom from the Law of the Fathers. (The ultimate treachery is that the Fathers, having been

handed the daughters, do not protect them, but allow the consecrated virgins to be raped.) Caro accuses the mothers:

> The mothers hand us over into the slavery of the Fathers....The mothers desert the daughters. They sell us to the Fathers, over and over again. They run away. They keep silence. They explain and apologise. They protect the Fathers from the anger of the daughters. Where are the mothers? They are busy gnawing through the cord so they can sell us off, and their price is cheap. (*VT* 218)

Clearly the daughters can expect only treachery from the mothers they themselves will become.

In her essay, "Two for the Price of One", Maitland defines the position held by the Mothers:

> In a sane society the power of the Mother inside would protect the daughters from the unleashed power of the Fathers, would balance the Fathers with their own power, and we could receive our fathers' love without being broken by it....[But] the Mother in my head says, "Serve the father and the children; protect the father from what might scare him in the mother; don't ask for too much for yourself, and be contented". So she cannot counterbalance the power of the father, but only further it. (*Fathers* 41)

Anna's own mother is condemned in an allusion to Kleinian psychology as "a Bad Mother, a Bad Wife" (*VT* 78), who fulfils the child's worst fears and does not return. Her mother abandoned the family of daughters to their father.

Fiona, too, rejects her daughter Caro, "admiring the golden son who had replaced the dark daughter" (*VT* 225). Although Anna attempts to continue in Fiona's place on the side of the daughter and the anarchic infant, she is afraid of what that commitment to the daughter might mean; but she is also afraid of what withdrawing that commitment might signify: "What would happen if Demeter lost interest in Persephone, if she just left her in the Kingdoms of Hell? What would happen when the mother no longer searched for the maiden, but handed her over finally to the power of the underworld?" (*VT* 148). To become one of the traitors is also to condone her own betrayal by her own mother. It

means she must give up all claim to that anarchic state of the preverbal child and make her own alliance with the Fathers who will in turn betray her (and all of the other dutiful daughters) regardless of that allegiance.

Yet there is some hope for the daughters: there are some mothers who are also sisters. Anna's Mother Superior, although condemned as an ally of the Fathers, does provide Anna with the freedom to confront her doubts and form her own conclusions and solutions. Anna's guide in working through these conflicts is Karen, the only woman whose presence can keep the Fathers' voices at bay. Karen offers love and acceptance of all that Anna is. She creates a path through the Fathers to a space for women, a space built on the love of the Good Mother. Anna learns to recognise the consolation which can be given by the loving mother: "She wanted to be warm and still and safe. She wanted to be wrapped in a soft blue blanket with a satin edging, wrapped warm and held close. She wanted a mother" (*VT* 146). The memory of the security of childhood and the *jouissance* of the preverbal Imaginary or semiotic in relation to the mother's body provides Anna with a way out of her confusion.

A new freedom from the power of the Fathers can be found in a place created for women by themselves. This is what Karen offers when she demands: "come with me to a high place and I will show you all the glories of the world. Come into the woman-place with me" (*VT* 145). In an allusion to the Temptation of Christ, Karen, as a Satanic figure, tempts Anna and offers her a reward for going against the will of (God) the Fathers. It is, however, a modified Satan that she represents, since, although the offer must be rejected in the end, Anna never condemns her outright. Anna's final letter to her expresses both love for and a sense of duty or obligation to the woman who became her friend and revealed forgotten aspects of Anna's identity. Most importantly, Karen reintroduces her to her sexual self, that part of her which has been absolutely forbidden within the rules by which she lives as a nun. This is particularly significant when we realise that Anna is, to some extent, associated with Eve, who is similarly tempted, but, unlike Jesus, succumbs to Satan's wiles. Anna is tempted by Karen, who takes the role of the serpent, to resist the demands of the Fathers, the authoritarian figures replacing God in this version of the story

of the Fall from Grace. Karen offers an alternative identity for Anna which constructs her as a sexual being, thereby strengthening the association with Eve, who in turn has been constructed as a dangerously sexual being within the traditional patriarchal Church.

The metaphor goes a step further; just as Eve ate the forbidden apple of knowledge and recognised her own nakedness, Anna seeks knowledge of her self in tasting sexual love. Fall from Grace for both Anna and Eve means gaining new knowledge about their identities. Anna's search for self is parallel to her search for scholarly knowledge, both of which have been denied women to a large extent in the past. Anna meets Karen, her tempter, in the reading room of the British Library, a place which becomes a symbol of the power of knowledge, especially that knowledge held by the patriarchs which, until recently, has been almost exclusively the domain of men. Karen, who does have access to this body of learning, uses it for her own purposes rather than those of the patriarchs, and, in doing so, creates her own "woman-place" in the world of men. In the context of this novel which is structured around a Lacanian/Kristevan framework, the "woman-place" suggests a space which allows the return of the repressed Imaginary or semiotic into the symbolic, a space which allows the marginalised feminine and maternal to take up a central position. It is presented with a refreshing optimism that encourages us to believe that this is a feasible answer to the struggle against phallocentrism.

Karen offers Anna the freedom symbolised by the Visitation (an event which is perceived by many Christian feminists as a crucial moment in the history of Christianity) because Mary and Elizabeth are not only mothers, but also sisters in spirit. The recognition and identification between Mary and Elizabeth is interpreted as the model of sisterhood to which Christian women should aspire (the significance of the Visitation is discussed further in Chapter Five). Mary and Elizabeth, mothers who proclaim their freedom in sisterhood, can be constructed alternatively as the Good Mothers who will not betray the daughters. Although Anna interprets Mary as a traitor of the daughters within the traditional Church ("Holy Mary Mother of God...[a] very wedded mother...on the side of the Fathers" [*VT* 35]), an alternative view is presented in the novel. It is in recognition of sisterly love that Anna gives Karen a print depicting the moment when Mary and Elizabeth lean towards each

other, "empowered by each other singing the songs of freedom" (*VT* 188).

It is through this image that the origins of Christianity can be seen as, if not woman-centered, then at least based on the values of the feminine and the maternal, of loving, nurturing and protecting, and it is here that Anna finally finds her salvation. She learns that "God is Father. Even more, God is mother" (*VT* 230). It is this link which can overcome the barrier between the daughter and her true self, which can allow the daughter to range freely in the space between the Fathers and the children, unconstricted by the tyranny of the Fathers, undiminished by the ignorance of the children. The daughter can, in this woman-place, develop as an adult on her own terms rather than those dictated by the Fathers.

Anna chooses a woman-identified Christ, the Christ who loves the Virgin, the Virgin Mary his mother and the virgin daughters who keep themselves separate from the Fathers and all other men. She chooses a Christ who is on the woman's side against the Fathers, defying the Fathers in making this decision: "I belong to Jesus...not to you. The husband will protect the wife from her father. I don't belong to the Fathers. I belong to Christ who feeds and loves me" (*VT* 195). Jesus can be her saviour because he is the man who does not become a Father. Although he is a son and retains the favour of the Father, he does not assume the authority and power of the Fathers (at least, not in this construction—he may be an equal in the Trinity, but in the context of this novel he is still the son who conforms to the Father's desires. He is the mediator between the daughters and the Fathers).

The Christ Anna chooses is the one she calls upon in conjunction with the mother: "Hail Mary full of Grace, pray for us sinners now and in the hour of our death. Jesus, son of God, have mercy on me a miserable sinner" (*VT* 198). This Christ is part of the mother, grown from her flesh and born of her body. He shares the love of the mother and protects the sisters of his virgin mother, the virgin daughters of other mothers. He is also the virgin's lover, the husband of the nun. It is this which makes it possible for Anna to accept him as her protector, for she herself has taken vows as a Bride of Christ upon entering the convent.

The unicorn becomes a symbol of this construction of Christ: "The unicorn was male purity, it was the Christ who loved the Virgin. The unicorn who loved virgins had a virgin

mother" (*VT* 146). The unicorn retains its association with chastity and virginity (which are also the signs of the nun), as well as being a sign of purity. Sister Katherine Elizabeth, whose rape represents the ultimate betrayal by the Fathers of their daughters (since they demand that the daughters sacrifice all claims to a sexual life and become chaste virgins, yet do not protect those daughters from rape), learns to identify with the unicorn who "comes to her dancing down the trail of the bright stars, seeking with love the milk from the breast of this pure virgin" (*VT* 237).

Anna chooses the tattoo of the fish, the symbol of Christ, to label herself as his wife, allying herself with Christ and the virgin mother instead of pledging herself to the Fathers, and in this act enters a woman-place that alliance creates. The virgins can be strong on their own; they do not need the support of the Fathers. Anna has learnt this through Karen and recognises it in Karen's friends: "They asked for no special tolerance and space, they took it. They had moved the centre into their own place" (*VT* 139-40). Anna also experiences a woman-place with Caro during the delivery of Fiona's second child: "in the glow of Caro's rage and the power of Fiona's contractions, here in this women-place the Fathers were vulnerable, vulnerable to her anger" (*VT* 213). It is her last great battle with the Fathers, and this time it is on more equal terms; Anna can fight with some knowledge of herself as valuable outside the rules of the Fathers. She has discovered that there is a place where women count on their own, not merely as the dutiful daughters of the Fathers symbolised by Pallas Athene.

Throughout the novel we have seen Anna shedding layers of her identity and re-examining her life and beliefs. One of the first steps in renouncing the role of nun is the replacement of her habit with a black tracksuit which is more appropriate for her new lifestyle, although her benefactor is amused to discover that "It looks terribly clerical!" (*VT* 77). It is, however, an important change for Anna because her habit "had become something to cling to, a sign that she was a nun, a bride of Christ. Without it she was lost, nothing clear or defined any more" (*VT* 76). Her appearance is a physical reminder, for both herself and others, of her faith and loyalties. It also signals that hers is both a spiritual and a social awakening, since the habit is read in terms of both.

As Anna makes the voyage of self-discovery, she is pulled in contradictory directions. The demands on her come from the Fathers, Caro and Karen, and she must choose one course to follow. Stephen and Fiona alone ask for little change in her, "not for the transformation and revolution that Karen required, not for the disintegration that Caro pleaded, not for the perfection that the Fathers demanded" (*VT* 155). But Anna knows that the choices lie between the Fathers, Caro and Karen; she must confront the difficulties in her current situation and decide which path to follow.

Until now she has spent her whole life trying to please the Fathers, attempting to live up to their ideals of perfection, and realises it is impossible for her to succeed and maintain her own identity at the same time. Similarly, Karen offers her an alternative, but it is still not Anna's own identity; it is really just another mould created by someone else into which she can fit herself. Anna follows Caro into oblivion, finding some comfort there, but recognises that it is not a final solution for an adult; Caro represents a disintegration of the self and subjectivity rather than a viable alternative.

Fiona, in discussing the events inside a butterfly chrysalis, could be explaining the process Anna must undergo to re-establish her identity: "There's a total disintegration inside, complete, all the cells break down....They break down into nothing and then they reform into a butterfly....It seems like a tiny proof of resurrection" (*VT* 69). Anna must hit rock bottom, lose her self in madness, before she can re-emerge in her new form, resurrected in new life. She must reject the identity created for her by the Fathers in language and society, and in doing so cannot avoid losing her self for a period. If she does not please the Fathers they will punish her by driving her insane. The Fathers warn her, "You are crazy. Bad. Mad. They rhyme, they are the same" (*VT* 216). They are the same in the Fathers' framework because the inevitable consequence of being bad and not abiding by the Law of the Father is madness, if loss of language constitutes loss of subjectivity in this Lacanian framework.

The Fathers demand negation of the self and one's will, providing their own model of identity in its place. Nuns, the consecrated virgins, are taught to deny their own will; the cross upon which Christ was crucified symbolises this for them: "The cross is 'I' crossed

out, ego eliminated" (*VT* 196). Anna will have to undergo an annihilation of self before she can recreate a new identity, but this time she will not assume the identity offered by the Fathers.

Anna knows this disintegration is necessary and recognises its imminence. In entering Karen's world of women she realises she is on the brink of destruction, "where the centre cannot hold and chaos is come again. The great pit that Caro invited her into was here, here at her feet, the plunge so easy now into not-ness, insanity, collapse" (*VT* 173). Taking that plunge away from the Fathers and into the woman-place will destroy the self that she has at present, yet it is here in the protection of women that she finally discovers a space in which to locate herself. She learns to allow the child in herself room to play: "a child in her was released whom she had not even known existed. Not the dark child that is Caro, but a happy new little girl who wants to play and play and have someone to play with" (*VT* 118-19). It is akin to the spiritual awakening or surfacing that Carol Christ describes in that Anna reconnects with a sense of herself which has long been suppressed, the forgotten child within, and which leads to a renewed understanding of herself in relation to the "great cosmic powers" ("Surfacing of Women's Spiritual Quest" 325) encapsulated in the image of a woman-identified Christ symbolised by the fish.

Anna's contact with both Caro and Karen, the two characters with related names who both challenge her identity, forces her to develop a new understanding of herself. She must re-enter the Imaginary in which she had no identity, rid herself of the Fathers' model, and create a new self in the light of her knowledge of the woman-place. In this way, it is as though Anna has finally acheived a special wisdom. The playful child dancing in freedom is reminiscent of Sophia, the embodiment of Wisdom, who dances before God in the Book of Proverbs. This wisdom, however, is created in defiance of God the Father, instead of for his pleasure:

> She must go back to the womb and be born again in the power of the spirit. She must go back to the beginning to the place that Caro has invited her, not trying to graft the formlessness on but stripping naked to meet it. She must go back to the dark damp belly....She will go to the headwaters and float down the great river

> until she comes to the land of the mothers and she will stay there and learn to be a grown-up woman. (*VT* 231)

Anna does not lose everything in taking up this challenge; she retains her faith in Christ, albeit a radically reinterpreted Christ. In her new self-knowledge, she embraces a woman-centred Christianity and a woman-identified Christ.

Barbara Hill Rigney points out that one of the innovations introduced by feminist writers is the use of a female Christ figure because "they recognize that women who are oppressed because of their sex often tend to identify themselves with those aspects of Christ which are traditionally associated with the feminine: the essential victim, the eternal sufferer, the innocent scapegoat sacrificed for the sins of an entire world".[34] Maitland takes up a similar idea in her exploration of the internalised hatred of the body which results in self-mutilation, but goes beyond the situation in which women are "impaled on the cross of self-sacrifice" (Chesler 31). Instead of accepting that this must always be the case, Anna is provided with the means of changing her concept of herself through a new understanding of Christ's significance in her own life.

Making her confession in a conventional Roman Catholic church, Anna "accepted the forgiveness flowing in blood and water from the side of the virgin's son and in milk and sweetness from the breasts of God" (*VT* 232). God assumes a feminine aspect in this reference to Clement of Alexandria's image of the "breasts of God".[35] Christ's body becomes closely identified with the female, and in this context the traditional symbols of Christ's suffering take on a peculiarly feminine aspect. The blood shed for the redemption of humankind reminds us of the menstrual blood symbolising Eve's curse, and thus shifts the emphasis from curse to forgiveness; being woman is no longer a cause for shame, nor a barrier to redemption. Blood is now interpreted as the means of purification, absolution and salvation through a woman-identified Christ.

Anna finds her own identity only after she has managed to collapse the patriarchal

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34 Barbara Hill Rigney, *Lilith's Daughters: Women and Religion in Contemporary Fiction* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982) 12.

35 Elaine Pagels, "What Became of God the Mother? Conflicting Images of God in Early Christianity", *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, eds Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979) 116-17.

structures operating in her world. Most importantly, she must transcend the Lacanian opposition of the Imaginary and the Symbolic Order to destroy the self created within the Law of the Father and discover a new self in a woman-centred or woman-defined world which allows the semiotic to surface. For Anna this is a spiritual experience, but it is not a mystical one in the same way that the transcendence of dualism is for Mary in another of Maitland's novels, *Daughter of Jerusalem.* Anna's voyage of self-discovery brings her a deeper understanding of her religion, but is also interpreted in terms of her social coming of age, since she learns as much about her relationship to other people as she does about her religious beliefs. Like Mrs Noah in Michèle Roberts' novel, *The Book of Mrs Noah*, Anna must reconcile herself to living in a world of language which requires obedience to the Law of the Father, but she needs to learn to do so in a manner that allows her to remain true to her own identity as a woman.

Although Maitland borrows the framework of the Imaginary/semiotic and Symbolic Orders from Lacan and Kristeva, she does not follow through with the full implications of this abstract theory of determining structures. Instead, she also explores questions of agency and autonomy which are at odds with such constructions, since hers is a feminist project which requires some political engagement with the world beyond the text. Alongside gestures towards postmodern concepts of the novel, Maitland continues to invoke the traditional use of the novel as a vehicle for examining the individual in society. Like Roberts, she is caught between postmodern and humanist discourses, borrowing from both in the politico-religious project of reimagining Christianity in feminist terms.

CHAPTER FIVE

SISTERHOOD AS CHRISTIAN FEMINIST IDEAL:

Michèle Roberts' *The Visitation*

Michèle Roberts' novel, *The Visitation* (1983), explores the significance of sisterhood as both a feminist and a Christian ideal. Roberts explores the tensions and love between women as they attempt to define their differences from and similarities to each other. This chapter will show how she draws on the discussions of sisterhood which surrounded the earliest days of the women's movement. It also reveals how a discussion of sisterhood against the background of the Visitation emphasises that, because of its loving acceptance and tolerance of others, sisterhood can be understood as an integral part of the Christian message. I will also discuss Maitland's use of the Visitation in *Virgin Territory* (1984) and *Daughter of Jerusalem* (1978).

The Visitation was accorded a warmer reception in the mainstream press than its predecessor, *A Piece of the Night* (1978), Roberts' first novel. Marion Glastonbury's review states that Roberts' prose "deserves to be approached...with meditative care" in order for the reader to enjoy this "elaborate lyrical sequence";[1] Laura Marcus praises the writing as "full, resonant" with the qualification that it is "at times overcharged";[2] and John Kerrigan's review for the *London Review of Books* states that "narrative fragmentation lends the text a complex coherence".[3] The subject matter is more palatable for the mainstream press than *A Piece of the Night*, admittedly. Although the dialogue is employed to polemicise on behalf of feminism at times, the novel as a whole is wary of oversimplifying the issues it explores. It is a more mature piece which reworks many of the same themes as *A Piece of the Night*, but is a more accomplished novel overall. The central character, Helen Home, is, like Sister Anna of *Virgin Territory* and Julie Fanchot of *A Piece of the Night*, another young woman struggling to find her own identity in relation

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1 Marion Glastonbury, *New Statesman*, 22 April 1983, 28.
2 Laura Marcus, *Times Literary Supplement*, 27 September 1985, 1070.
3 John Kerrigan, *London Review of Books*, 16-29 February 1984, 22.

to others in her search for "wholeness". As a twin seeking her other half, Helen is prey to a sense of dislocation which cannot be resolved until she recognises the importance of establishing her own psychological and emotional independence. The themes of sisterhood, female autonomy, and androgyny dominate, with questions relating to creativity and writing taking second place (these issues are explored more fully in the later novel, *The Book of Mrs Noah* [1987]).

Christianity has always held its own model of sisterhood in the Visitation, but its value as such was submerged under the traditional interpretation of the event as a celebration of the sanctity of the Virgin Mary and the conception of Jesus:[4]

> And Mary arose in those days and went into the hill country with haste, into a city of Juda; and entered into the house of Zacharias, and saluted Elisabeth. And it came to pass that, when Elisabeth heard the salutation of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elisabeth was filled with the Holy Ghost: and she spake out with a loud voice, and said, Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb. (Luke 1: 39-43)

Feminists recognise that the importance of the Visitation lies in its depiction of sisterhood also, in its portrayal of female friends lovingly supporting and sustaining each other in the face of marginalisation and alienation from the mainstream/malestream society. The Visitation, then, can be seen to symbolise the ideal Christian relationship between women. The notion of sisterhood as a bonding between women which focuses on the commonality of women became one of the major precepts of the early women's movement; in the theological context it is interpreted as an important source of spiritual and emotional support for women. It is especially significant because it is a source of strength that women can provide for and by themselves, outside the realm of male dominance.

Michelene Wandor's description of a women's consciousness-raising group in the earliest days of the women's movement reveals what has been a common attitude expressed by women about other women in the past: Susan says, "I really used to hate women. Well,

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4 James Hall, *Hall's Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art* (London: John Murray, 1974) 337. Further references will appear in the text.

I distrusted them really", to which Anne replies, "I thought simply that men were more exciting than women....As soon as men came in the entire atmosphere changed. It was as though the serious business only started when they were around".[5] These comments reflect the manner in which women have been convinced that they themselves are second class citizens and who are, therefore, anxious to ally themselves with the more powerful men in their world. The result is jealousy and rivalry between women who believe they must protect any access to power that they have managed to acquire. Mary Daly writes: "as in the case of all oppressed groups, women suffer from a duality of consciousness. We have internalized the image that the oppressor has of us and are therefore divided against ourselves and against each other by self-hatred. We can only overcome this by bonding with each other".[6]

However, women have overcome this generalised distrust and formed very close friendships with each other throughout history, as Janice Raymond in her book *A Passion for Friends,*[7] and Elizabeth Abel in her article, "(E)Merging Identities: The Dynamics of Female Friendship in Contemporary Fiction by Women"[8] both point out, modifying Daly's bold statement that sisterhood is "the bonding of those who have never bonded before" ("Spiritual Dimension" 265). What is new is the way in which feminist women are bonding together in a consciously pro-woman way in our own times with an awareness of the political implications of such relationships. Janice Raymond, who perceives sisterhood as a revolutionary force, coined the term "Gyn/affection" to describe the ideal relationship she envisages between women, meaning by this "that women affect, move, stir, and arouse each other to full power" (Raymond 9).

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5 Michelene Wandor, "The Small Group", *The Body Politic: Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement in Britain 1969-1972*, ed. Michelene Wandor (London: stage 1, 1972) 109.

6 Mary Daly, "The Spiritual Dimension of Women's Liberation", *Radical Feminism*, ed. Anne Koedt et al. (New York: Quadrangle Books, 1973) 266. Further references will appear in the text.

7 Janice Raymond, *A Passion for Friends: Toward a Philosophy of Female Affection* (London: Women's Press, 1986). Further references will appear in the text.

8 Elizabeth Abel, "(E)Merging Identities: The Dynamics of Female Friendship in Contemporary Fiction by Women", *Signs* 6.3 (Spring 1981). Further references will appear in the text.

Louise Bernikow pinpoints the quality which distinguishes female friendships from their traditional male counterparts: "[Men] are shoulder to shoulder. Female friends are more often eye to eye. It is the creation of 'us' that is important, we *two*".[9] It is this identification between women that is a source of positive power. Elizabeth Abel maintains that, "Through the intimacy which is knowledge, friendship becomes a vehicle of self-definition for women, clarifying identity through relation to an other who embodies and reflects an essential aspect of the self" (Abel 416). The affirmation of that reflection of the self in an other can provide women with the courage to believe in themselves and their hopes and aspirations. Women friends help women to create their own woman-identified selves which are not defined in relation to men. Identification with the other instead of seeking complementarity is important in this respect because it chooses to focus on the commonality of women instead of their differences, which in turn can be used to create a solidarity between women.

Abel also indicates the "affinity with the analytic relationship" (Abel 419) which is frequently found in women's friendships, and I would add to this the similarity between the consciousness-raising groups of the early women's movement and group psychotherapy. As Abel hastens to make clear, while these "relationships generate understanding through intimacy and the collaborative construction of meaning from experience" (Abel 419), there is not a clear differentiation between the role of analyst and patient in women's friendships; instead, women bonding together in genuine interest in and respect for each other and themselves take both roles at different times in response to their own and each other's needs. Unlike the analytical relationship, women's friendships provide the opportunity for women themselves to become the source of authority regarding their own thoughts, feelings and situations[10]—in short, they define their own identities in this environment. Further, the bonding between women in this context occurs beyond the male gaze, creating a space specifically reserved for women in the process.

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9 Louise Bernikow, *Among Women* (New York: Harmony, 1980) 119.
10 Hester Eisenstein, *Contemporary Feminist Thought* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1983) 37.

The move towards a woman-centred approach to life, as opposed to the desire to establish an androgynous vision which denies the differences between men and women such as I've described in Chapter Two, is an important force in the liberation of women. In her introduction to *The Future of Difference*, Hester Eisenstein explains that the concept of sisterhood took on particular significance when feminists recognised the "ideological and political conviction that women were more unified by the fact of being female in a patriarchal society than we were divided by specificities of race or class".[11] While it is essential to acknowledge the differences of race, class and sexuality that divide women, it is also useful to be aware of the experiences of womanhood that women share in a patriarchal or phallocentric world and the particular oppression and suffering that accompanies a female body in a male-dominated world. It is with this in mind that Letty Russell interprets sisterhood as "learning to affirm oneself and one's sister in her aspirations, whatever the divergence of race, language, geography, ideology, and tactics, which provides a key to humanization".[12] The ramifications of sisterhood on these terms are indicated by the Radicalesbians' statement: "It is the primacy of women relating to women, of women creating a new consciousness of and with each other, which is at the heart of women's liberation, and the basis for the cultural revolution".[13] In this sense, sisterhood inspires women with a radically different vision of the future which affects all human beings.[14]

Sisterhood is equally important to feminists dealing with questions of religion, as Daly makes clear:

> 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

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11 Eisenstein, Introduction, *The Future of Difference*, eds Eisenstein and Alice Jardine (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1980) xvii.

12 Letty M. Russell, *Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective—A Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974) 140. Further references will appear in the text.

13 Radicalesbians, "The Woman Identified Woman", *Radical Feminism*, 245.

14 Even the titles of Robin Morgan's anthologies of writings from the women's movement, *Sisterhood is Powerful* and *Sisterhood is Global*, bear witness to the primacy of the bonding between women in the feminist cause.

> fact that women are beginning to overcome the divided self and divisions from each other.[15]

Letty Russell takes the significance of sisterhood further, explaining that "this can lead us to be not only *pro-woman* but also *pro-human*" (Russell 144) and it is this which transforms sisterhood from being merely a supportive network of friendship into a powerful force for revolution. Liberation and self-actualisation thus go hand in hand. Sisterhood is the means by which women can learn to perceive themselves as fully human instead of seeing each other as corrupted, flawed copies of the male norm made in God's image. Looking into the face of a woman friend, women can begin to see themselves as the norm for each other, which in turn can lead to questioning whether or not they are, after all, made in God's image every bit as much as men. In deciding that they are made in God's image, Christian feminists argue, women see themselves as fully human. Thus, the recognition of women as fully human carries with it the potential for an entirely new understanding of what it is to be human.

Gayle Kimball traces the development of the concept of sisterhood as a focus for Christian feminists in her article "From Motherhood to Sisterhood".[16] The article examines the female religious imagery used by the predecessors of contemporary feminists, for example, the American women of the nineteenth century such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, Aimee Semple McPherson and Kathryn Kuhlman who "conceived a religious value system based on motherly virtues of love and self-sacrificing service" (Kimball 259). The work of Charlotte Perkins Gilman acts in some ways as a transition from this emphasis on an idealised motherhood which is replaced, at least to some extent, by an interest in sisterhood today. Kimball shows that contemporary feminist theologians are now more concerned with the "affirmation and acceptance of self" than "self-sacrifice" in the name of motherhood (Kimball 262), which in turn paves the way for recognising sisterhood among

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15 Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (1973; Boston: Beacon Press, 1974) 133. Further references will appear in the text.

16 Gayle Kimball, "From Motherhood to Sisterhood: The Search for Female Religious Imagery in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Theology", *Beyond Androcentrism: New Essays on Women and Religion*, ed. Rita M. Gross (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1977). Further references will appear in the text.

women. Margaret Drabble's character Rose Vassiliou in *The Needle's Eye* is a model of the self-sacrificing mother, while Frances Wingate in *Realms of Gold* represents the affirmation and acceptance of self which can accompany motherhood. While some feminist theologians do continue to find the concept of motherhood useful in the development of women's spiritual lives, they employ a radically reinterpreted image of the mother figure in their work, as I will discuss in Chapter Six. The acceptance of self which accompanies the bonding of sisterhood reflects the "movement toward the becoming of whole human beings" ("Spiritual Dimension" 263) which Mary Daly advocates for women.

Daly attempts to define what it is that creates the sense of community between women, and what it is that makes that community of sisterhood different from other groups and alliances. One of the most significant aspects is that sisterhood

> brings us into the deepest possible community. It is the community that is discovered, rather than "formed", when we meet others who are on the same voyage. There is, then, a "covenant" among us, *not* in the sense of an agreement that is *formed* and precisely formulated, but in the sense of profound *agreement that is found*....The covenant is the deep *agreement* that is present within the self and among selves... (*Beyond God* 159)

Daly's description is framed in poetic and religious terms, and relies upon an idealised commonality between women that denies any differences that may be found between them; the core of her argument is echoed in Plaskow's more prosaic account of a similar bonding of women in sisterhood.[17] In "The Coming of Lilith" Plaskow describes the experience of a group of women who met at a conference in 1972 for the purpose of "do[ing] theology communally" (Plaskow 198).

As a starting point, the group identified what they termed the "yeah, yeah" experience, the response to another's story which the listener recognises as describing some sort of truth about her own situation, that is, the moment at which sisterhood comes into being

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17 Judith Plaskow, "The Coming of Lilith: Toward a Feminist Theology", *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, eds Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979). Further references will appear in the text.

(although the language and ideas are somewhat dated now, the model of sisterhood broke down significant barriers between women, clearing the path for futher, more complex, analysis of woman's place in the world). Plaskow lists three important aspects of this experience. First, it operates on both the personal and general dimensions; in affirming one's own womanhood in saying "yeah, yeah", one also affirms womanhood in general. Secondly, the experience is "deeply personal and intensely political. I affirm myself as a woman, but only as I enter into a new, and hitherto silent, community. In saying yes to myself...I open the possibility of seeing other women as persons and friends" (Plaskow 201). Finally, Plaskow asserts that "sisterhood, more than an experience of community, *is* a community. It is a place where women can...begin to understand, and thus begin to overcome, their common oppression. It is a place where women can begin to act out their new sense of wholeness" (Plaskow 202). The women's movement, because it has allocated time and space for women to voice their experiences, to tell their stories and to describe their feelings in consciousness-raising groups, has therefore created a situation in which the recognition of sisterhood is possible. This then allows for the possibility of women coming to an understanding of themselves which culminates in the awareness of the self as "a total person...whole, integrated, free, fully human" (Plaskow 203), an experience which has generally been denied women in the patriarchal Church. Although this does not necessarily have to be placed in a religious context, the process of reaching a state which transcends previous definitions of woman is analogous to a religious journey, and the sense of community is sometimes expressed in new rituals and symbols which can be interpreted as the religious dimension of the transformed identity of women bonded together in sisterhood.

As part of the task of reinterpreting Christianity, some feminists have attempted to rewrite the Lilith myth, as I have mentioned in Chapter Four. Although such rewritings keep the old myths alive in that the new story must evoke the orthodox interpretations, they can also offer powerful insights into those stories. In an example described by Judith Plaskow, rewriting the story of Lilith and Eve serves two purposes: firstly, in retelling an ancient myth from the patriarchal religion, it is possible to maintain some continuity with

the established heritage and cultural identity, and secondly, it encapsulates some of the values of sisterhood in symbolic form. Feminist rewritings can present a bond between Eve and Lilith, instead of the traditional division between them, as a possible model for the ideal relationship between women. For Plaskow it is important that the revised story brings the two characters together because "Lilith by herself is in exile and can do nothing. The real heroine of our story is sisterhood, and sisterhood is powerful" (Plaskow 206). The new myth tells of the relationship which develops between the two wives of Adam, the first who is too independent and the second who soon learns to appreciate the strength that independence brings her. Eve grows curious about Lilith, discovering that the very idea of another woman who demands her own independence requires that she question her own situation. She sets out to find Lilith:

> "Who are you?" they asked each other, "What is your story?" And they sat and spoke together, of the past and then of the future. They talked for many hours, not once, but many times. They taught each other many things, and told each other stories, and laughed together, and cried, over and over, till the bond of sisterhood grew between them. (Plaskow 207)

The scene links their newly-discovered friendship to the women's movement in its resemblance to a consciousness-raising discussion in a women's group. The two women continue to meet until they have transformed themselves into beings who are capable of reclaiming their rightful place in a new world. The story closes with the men awaiting their return: "And God and Adam were expectant and afraid the day Eve and Lilith returned to the garden, bursting with possibilities, ready to rebuild it together" (Plaskow 207). The women are vibrant with energy and vitality, embodying the slogan that "sisterhood is powerful".

Unlike the Lilith myth, the Visitation is a specifically Christian symbol of sisterhood. Traditionally, the Visitation is used as an image of the sanctity of the Virgin Mary and the conception of Jesus. In "rewriting" this event, feminists shift the focus onto the relationship between the women themselves so that the Visitation comes to represent the moment of recognition of what women have in common, an affirmation of the value of

women, and is a central metaphor for the relationships between women in a Christianity informed and reinterpreted by feminism. The Visitation is a moment of realisation and revelation of the strength of women together, and Sara Maitland and Michèle Roberts employ all of these connotations when using the Visitation in their novels.

Sister Anna, the central character in Maitland's *Virgin Territory*, presents her friend Karen with a print by the artist Kathe Kollwitz which depicts the Visitation. In this particular interpretation of the event, Mary and Elizabeth are represented as "two strong women leaning on to each other's arms" (*VT* 168), following the Renaissance tradition which generally shows the women embracing (Hall 337). Although each woman has a strength of her own, they both benefit from the friendship of the other. For Anna, the Visitation is a moment of love and affirmation between two women who recognise and celebrate the bond that ties all women together. They are both women on the margins of their society, representatives of all the women who have been placed at the margins of patriarchal societies, and must therefore strengthen their position in a solidarity of sisterhood with other women.

The Visitation is also a religious event, signalling the very beginnings of Christianity which draws "its authority from the belly of a peasant woman, a curious inspired child bride who had believed that her pregnancy would set the captives free" (*VT* 73-74). From this then develops a liberation theology which interprets Christianity as a religion offering freedom to all the oppressed of this world. The fact that the first liberation is that of Mary and Elizabeth, two women who appear to have no place in their society yet find a common connection, indicates the space within Christianity for feminists. The liberation of women from patriarchal oppression is linked to all types of oppression, be it racial, sexual, class-based or ideological, since in all of those groups women are at the bottom of the hierarchy, leaving the black working-class woman in the very worst position of all.[18]

Karen interprets the Kollwitz print in political rather than religious terms. She claims that "the Visitation is [the] ultimate Dyke moment...when two women get together and in

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18 This situation is brutally summed up in the slogan "Woman is the nigger of the world".

love proclaim their freedom, they sing that the personal is the political and from their love will come freedom for all the world" (*VT* 168), but again, the reader is aware of the nexus between the women's movement and liberation theology.

Thus, the Visitation holds the same symbolic significance for Anna and Karen, the difference is simply in terms of their approach to life. While Karen lives in a political world, Anna's world is bound by the confines of her religion. The emphasis in the novel is thus able to slide between religious and political discourses, pointing to the political nature of Christianity when it is viewed through the frame of liberation theology, and to its validity for women when perceived from a feminist perspective. As Flora Alexander states, Maitland's "approach to Christianity is political in that she finds in it 'a fundamental leaning towards justice and equality'".[19] This passage brings into focus the politico-religious program which underlies the novel, recalling the forces which motivated other British women writers in previous centuries.[20]

Maitland retells the incident of the Visitation in *Daughter of Jerusalem.* In this account we are made aware of how "Too much not exactly like everyone else" (*DJ* 53) Mary and Elizabeth really are. They are constructed as archetypes of women who live on the extreme margins of female experience. Elizabeth is created as the ageing, barren wife who has become the village laughing-stock. It takes Mary, a woman in many ways her antithesis (too young, too fertile, husbandless), to recognise and value Elizabeth's true nature and identity, and to perceive that identity as a reflection of her own being. Despite their apparent differences, these two women have a great deal in common, and it is because of this that they are able to offer each other the same sort of recognition and affirmation that members of the women's movement can offer one another; the biblical women and their contemporary counterparts can experience a mutual response to one another by virtue of a love and tolerance born of sisterhood.

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19 Flora Alexander, *Contemporary Women Novelists* (London: Edward Arnold, 1989) 80.

20 Refer to Chapter One for further details about the intersection of politics and religion in British women's writing.

The wider significance of the Visitation is echoed in the Magnificat, "the love song that unites her [Mary] not just to Elizabeth but to all the other difficult women everywhere and everywhen" (*DJ* 53). The Visitation is used quite pointedly in this context to link the women's movement with liberation theology. That "The mighty are cast down, the humble exalted. The hungry are filled, the proud smashed and the slaves freed" (*DJ* 53), indicates the direction in which Mary believes this new religion will move. Just as the women's movement is concerned with the problems of the oppressed everywhere and works towards their liberation, Christianity can be seen to supply some answers for the weak and downtrodden members of the human race. Mary and Elizabeth can be viewed as the first Christian feminists, and on this level hold great significance for contemporary Christian feminists looking for historical role models in the process of reinterpreting their religion.

Michèle Roberts' *The Visitation* is deeply concerned with the relationships between women and the effects of those relationships on an individual woman's identity. Both Roberts and Maitland draw on the theorising and experience of female friendship of the early women's movement in writing about fictional friendships, creating in the process an image of sisterhood which acknowledges the destructive feelings of possessiveness, jealousy and anger between women, as well as the sustaining power of the love which can exist between women friends. The result is a somewhat idealised view of sisterhood, but is nevertheless a powerful model of the possibilities available to women. *The Visitation* examines the emotional and spiritual development of its central character, Helen, tracing the separations and bonding relationships with both men and women which form her sense of self. The novel focuses on Helen's relationships with her twin brother Felix and her mother Catherine as the most influential relationships she must negotiate in order to determine her own subjectivity. Discovering sisterhood frees her to separate from the "other", but also allows her to remain connected to the "other" (she must achieve separation and individuation from the mother and brother, but yearns for connectedness ever after), since it offers identification with another (a woman friend) who is both like and not-like herself. In this sense the novels suggests that sisterhood can provide a supportive framework to ease the pain of separation from the mother. Sisterhood offers a rather more

positive notion of the "other" than Jane Gardam and Edna O'Brien invoke in the novels discussed in Chapter One; in *The Visitation* it is much more a case of supportive affirmation than transcendence of the self which is sought.

The first major separation Helen experiences occurs at the moment of birth when she and her twin brother are expelled from the womb. The account echoes the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden; indeed, the first section of the novel is entitled "Genesis" and is accompanied by an epigraph quoting Genesis 1: 26-27: "Then God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness...in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them". Here the origins of life are seen in terms of the separation and division of what was originally a dyadic or androgynous being. The womb represents the Garden of Eden in which there is no differentiation of male and female, a Paradise which is disrupted by the Fall into another world, in which birth is an allegory of the Fall from Grace. It draws a parallel between the mother and God, between the womb and Paradise,[21] so that the expulsion from the womb is equivalent to the expulsion from Eden, and marks the moment in which the male is divided from the female, in which the original human is split in two and Adam and Eve are created.

When the unborn child first becomes aware of the other being living in the womb, she cannot clearly differentiate between the other's face and her own. Instead, she sees the face as a mirror of her own; the Other is constructed as part of herself instead of as a separate

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21 It is interesting in this context to note Una Kroll's essay, "A Womb-Centred Life", published in *Sex and God: Some Varieties of Women's Religious Experience*, ed. Linda Hurcombe (New York and London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987). She discusses her experience of living within "the womb of God" (94) an image which is derived from the notion that both men and women are created in God's image: "I was learning to love myself as God loved me...as a woman with a womb, as a woman 'created in the image of God' who was 'like' God and bore God's image in the whole of her being, including the whole of her sexuality" (93). Not only does the image of the womb affirm her own being as a woman, but it also provides a sense of security in God's love.

In relation to the womb as paradise, Rosemary Ruether explains that:

> a desire for fusion with the mother [exists] in order to recover the primal sense of unity and bliss that preceded the shock of birth. This primordial bliss and unity of the self with its maternal matrix is the source of the religious images of paradise....the differentiated self can finally transcend its separate and polarized self-definition to enter the higher unity symbolized by heaven and the new Jerusalem. (*New Woman/New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation* [Minneapolis: Seabury Press, 1975] 153.)

entity. With the expulsion from this state of total fusion and harmony comes a gradual recognition of difference, a realisation and division which are caused by the mother's body. It is at moments such as these that the influence of French feminist theory surfaces; the passage in question suggests that the split, because of its association with the mother's body that represents the semiotic *chora*, marks the first step towards entering the symbolic order and thus the formation of subjectivity.[22]

As children, Helen and her brother Felix are "Always together. Identical. Equal" (*V* 11). They are twins, a pair, the same, until Felix learns the importance of sexual identity and parades his penis before Helen. Suddenly Helen is forced to recognise a major difference between them, a difference which separates and divides her from her twin. In this instance it is the male who gains knowledge initially, the Adam figure who eats the apple of knowledge first, although he gains only partial knowledge at this stage.

The idea of difference is treated in both positive and negative terms, a source of joy as well as sorrow. Helen and Felix enjoy the special treat of staying overnight at their grandparents' home, a "treat...based on difference" (*V* 12). The strangeness is attractive, especially since each can rely on the familiarity of the other's body for comfort in this new environment. That comfort is gradually eroded as they grow less absorbed in each other and more aware of and involved in the world beyond, but, nevertheless, this positive experience of difference lays the groundwork for Helen's eventual acceptance of herself as separate and different, yet complete and valuable in her own right.

For Helen, one of the significant moments in which she recognises the negative effects of difference occurs one Saturday afternoon. Although she does not really understand the import of her statement, she lies to the family about her reason for being late home from a hockey match, explaining that "A man made me go with him" (*V* 8). The response of her parents and grandparents shocks her and leads to a frightening illumination of the divisions between men and women:

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22 Kristeva outlines these concepts in *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller, intro. Leon S. Roudiez (1974; New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), esp. chapters 2, 5 and 6. However, the ideas are continually developed throughout her writings.

> The family has suddenly divided itself into two camps, male and female, and so far she [Helen] has hung onto her ignorance of the rules governing entry into the latter....She moves away from the tea-table and the circle of deck-chairs which suddenly have re-formed, divided into opposite, separate rows. Why has she never noticed? Blue deck-chairs for the men, red ones for the women. (*V* 9)

The red chairs for women prefigure the red blood associated with women's menstruation, the onset of which will mark Helen's awareness of her own place in the gender system of a post-Edenic world. Unthinkingly and unknowingly on her part, Helen's ignorant reference to sex sets in motion the inevitable series of events which will force her separation from childhood to an understanding of herself as woman and therefore "other" in a society which divides the sexes and constructs the male as the norm, a move into knowledge which parallels Eve's ignorant apple-biting and consequent knowlege of human sexuality.

Helen is forced to realise that her place is with the women in this divided society when she passes her eleven-plus examination but Felix fails. Helen's love for Felix encompasses the desire to protect him from his father's wrath at this failure, but discovers that she is powerless to intervene in the relationship between father and son: "Bill Home's disappointed ambition for his son will be expressed to Felix in private, will exclude both her mother and herself as unimportant. It began long ago, the special training for manhood that Felix receives. Helen has failed too, by passing when Felix hasn't" (*V* 16). The gap between the twins widens at this point. Helen does not quite understand why she is treated differently from her brother in this situation, but is, all the same, subject to the gender conditioning which is part of her social development. The patterns of alliance shift and we see Helen placed alongside her mother and separated from her brother by forces beyond her control.

The final severance of male from female occurs for Helen at menarche. Her first period marks the point at which there is no turning back to the innocence of childhood, a bleeding which signifies a psychological and spiritual wound not easily healed. At the conclusion of a family visit to an elderly spinster, Helen's mother discovers bloodstains on Helen's skirt:

> —But look at the state you're in, exclaims her mother: redcurrant stains all down the back of your skirt.
>
> She seizes her daughter by the arm.
>
> —That's not fruit stains. Oh Helen, lowering her voice out of concern for the listening males: what a time to choose to begin. (*V* 24)

The connection here between fruit and blood alludes to Eve eating the apple of knowledge, her consquent recognition of sexuality, and the curse of menstruation placed upon her as punishment. The journey home is uncomfortable for Helen, not least because Felix withdraws from her: "Felix, cocooned away from her in his comic and a silence he will not break...reclines in a far corner" (*V* 25). It is at this point that the Fall is complete; Helen is now fully woman, separated from men by her sexuality, bearing the sign of that removal from Paradise. Instead of the violent wrench we might expect menarche to be after her obstinate resistance to any knowledge of sexuality, Helen resigns herself to accepting this final break from childhood as inevitable. She appears to have been defeated by the forces of nature and society, obliged to acknowledge her identity as woman.

Roberts deals with menarche as trauma in *A Piece of the Night* also. Here, the central character, Julie, begins menstruating while on holiday with her family. Her mother has previously described menstruation to her, an explanation that is followed by a nightmare in which she, Julie, is caught in a house fire to which her mother is oblivious. For Julie, the idea of becoming a woman is equivalent to being consigned to the fires of Hell; clearly, menstruation is perceived as a threat and is associated with Eve's curse.

For Julie, too, menarche marks her separation from the men in her family. She is sharing a bed with her younger brother, Claude, when she begins menstruating. From then on, the sleeping arrangements are altered; Julie must sleep beside her mother, the father and son sharing the other bed. Barriers must now be erected between the girl who has become a woman and the men: "Julie must now begin to lock the bathroom door against the cries and kicks of her former companion, her hurt and uncomprehending brother. Nor must she mention to her father that she is bleeding" (*PN* 47-48). It is in many ways horrifying and frightening, but has its compensations: "That night Julie is

content; her mother sleeping only six inches away means that blood can be used after all to deny their separation" (*PN* 48). She may be separated from her brother, the representative of maleness, but she is now able to join the sisterhood of women. It is the access to sisterhood that her new identity as woman allows which redeems that identity for Helen, too, and provides a spiritual healing on the loss of her twin, her other half.

Helen must now establish a new identity for herself as a woman. On her travels in Asia as an adult, her lover Steven gives her a little blue figurine of an oriental fertility goddess which becomes a symbol for her of the female creativity to which she aspires. The goddess has the power of a religious symbol and is revered for her female creativity, her power over fertility and reproduction. Helen's horror at discovering the sculpture has been shattered (albeit in a dream) suggests the importance of this talisman for her in her own life. That such a figure exists is, to Helen, a reassurance that it is possible for a woman to be powerful in her creativity; however, in this instance the female fertility goddess is represented with "a flattened body like a boy's" (*V* 82), indicating Helen's desire for the ambiguity of androgyny at this stage of her development. That the sculpture and what it represents can be shattered is an indication to Helen that her own desire for an androygynous identity might also be smashed. The destruction of the goddess points to the need for Helen to construct an identity for herself from within herself instead of looking to either the male or other cultures and religions for her models (and she does ultimately identify her self from within).

The blue-green of the goddess figurine is linked to the "bluey-green double-petalled flower" which transforms into a butterfly in another of Helen's dreams (*V* 92). The flower, image of life and fertility, points to the importance of female creativity; the butterfly is used here as a symbol of resurrection (as it is also used by Maitland in *Virgin Territory* [*VT* 69]), foretelling Helen's own salvation to come. Together these images suggest that Helen's saving grace will be her acceptance of herself as a woman whose wholeness will come from within her own being.

On waking from her earlier dream of destruction, Helen discovers that she is crying, "as though she's been grabbed by her feet and swung upside down in the air and smacked

soundly to make her bawl and breathe" (*V* 38). This birth image serves to emphasise the significance of the mother goddess of fertility. Through her dream Helen is born into the knowledge that she must separate from the mother, and also from the male companion (George, at this stage of her life), to find an identity of her own.

Helen's life revolves around three primary relationships with women: her mother, grandmother, and friend Beth. The first of these, her mother, presents Helen with a complex array of reactions and responses from the very beginning. The mother's body is held responsible for the initial split between Helen and her twin brother, blamed for the disruption of harmony within the womb. Her mother's body is also Helen's original source of nourishment, but never satisfies her needs, which is also related to Helen's being a twin (in order to breastfeed both babies, Catherine Home is under strict instructions with regard to how long and how often she may feed the infants): "The first word she [Helen] utters is *more*....She strains for the forbidden breast, crying and red-faced, she gulps too eagerly, too fast, and chokes. She distrusts this food, this thin, short-lived love given too abruptly and taken away too soon" (*V* 153). As far as Helen is concerned, the breast is always withdrawn before she is satisfied, setting up a pattern of intense longing and unfulfilled desire which continues throughout her life. Helen's ambivalence towards her mother continues until she is able to heal her own spiritual wounds.

As a child Helen adores her mother, is always eager to please and impress her with demonstrations of her talents in order to earn her love. While Catherine often discusses openly her pride in Helen's abilities and achievements, she remains rather remote from Helen. Catherine is described as a beautiful, capable, confident woman; to Helen she is a goddess. One of the rare occasions on which Helen has her mother all to herself occurs during a night drive through France. Helen entertains her mother as she drives, her brother and father asleep in the back seat. Catherine decides to pass through the city of Chartres so that Helen can see the famous cathedral:

> Her mother is a huntress, Artemis who gives her the grey dawn like a pelt slashed with ribbons of blood; she gives her the vast plain, flower-strewn, before the city...Her mother is the cathedral stooping over her, its vaults and arches her strong

> thighs and arms, its rosy windows her eyes and breasts. Helen prays to her inside herself: thank you. (*V* 56)

The suggestion here is that the relationship between Helen and her mother is one of goddess and faithful handmaiden. Artemis is simultaneously the "giver and protectress of life and destroyer of life" (Jobes 131), invoking the nurturing and murderous figure that the infant loves and fears as the Good and Bad Mother of Kleinian psychology. Catherine is the powerful huntress at the same time as she is the protective cathedral. Roberts uses this alliance of images of the Church and Christianity[23] with ancient Greek myth to suggest a timelessness which increases the sense of Catherine's almighty power and unreachable remoteness.

Catherine is presented as a loving mother, but is usually too busy and preoccupied to spend much time with her daughter; the demands on her time make it impossible for her to give Helen the enormous amount of affection and attention Helen desires. Instead, she must share her love between all members of the family. On marrying her husband, Bill Home, she has become the central figure in the home; in taking his name she has also taken on the role of homemaker, responding to the needs of her husband and of the children of that marriage. In her disappointment at having to share her mother's love, Helen, as a young woman, withdraws from her mother.

In contrast to Catherine, Grandmother Home is the ever-indulgent, constantly available source of love in Helen's life. Helen devours the comforting, nourishing meals provided by her grandmother, absorbing along with the food a sense of being cherished and valued. Grandmother Home gives the children her undivided attention when she babysits, creating a scene of cosy domesticity as she stokes up the fire, arranges the twins around her and proceeds to relate epic stories. As the female searching for her missing male half, Helen is more responsive to her paternal grandmother than her mother. Unconsciously she identifies too closely with her own mother for comfort, and must erect barriers between them in order to create in independent identity for her herself; at the same time, Helen's

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23 No strong associations with Saints Catherine of Alexandria or Siena are conjured up to extend the picture of Christian imagery here, however.

unresolved primal anger at her mother's supposed withdrawal of love and nurturance from the infant is the source of possible violence. It is not until she has succeeded in establishing her own identity that Helen can allow herself to respond openly to her mother. In the meantime, however, Grandmother Home provides a safe haven for Helen, a home which can always be relied upon. Helen perceives her grandmother as "that longed-for beach on to whose breast she crashes like an angry sea" (*V* 101). Helen must be her own shore, but earns temporary respite from this knowledge; the vast, undirected sea of emotion at the centre of her experience finds a course to follow in relation to the grandmother. Grandmother Home fulfils the role of mother, but does so at one remove; she is both like and unlike Helen—she is the woman who reflects Helen's own femaleness, and she is the link to the male world in bearing the paternal name. Her grandmother also takes on a priestly role in Helen's life as the person to whom she can confess her sins and find absolution in love because she knows she is safe in revealing her worst side to this woman who guarantees unconditional love.

Helen's goodness is affirmed by her grandmother during a discussion of what the afterlife might bring. Grandmother Home assures Helen that "Heaven is us together here now" (*V* 111). It might be a severely qualified heaven, since Grandmother Home is often concerned by the direction in which Helen's life appears to be heading, but the novel suggests that a relationship based on unconditional love is the closest we can hope to get to a true heaven. Grandmother Home provides her granddaughter with access to a heaven defined in these terms, and in response Helen desperately wants to be her grandmother's Christ, resurrecting her in this life instead of bestowing eternal life in an intangible heaven.

The grandmother is strong in this love and becomes for Helen the "white-haired warrior, indefatigable voyager" (*V* 116). This description of the grandmother which uses language reminiscent of Anglo-Saxon kenning suggests that Helen is finally reaching a point from which she can develop her own identity within her own culture and heritage in contrast to her previous search for symbols in Asian cultures. Helen is beginning to realise that she must find her answers within herself and her own world. In drawing together the images of Catherine as the powerful, autonomous huntress Artemis and Helen as the sea

which the grandmother can voyage across, the closeness of the women themselves is made apparent. As she takes on the virago persona, Grandmother Home becomes a representative of the power to which women can have access through their love for each other and the bonds of sisterhood.

Much of the feminist discussion of female friendships links them to the mother-daughter relationship. As Adrienne Rich points out, "Before sisterhood, there was the knowledge—transitory, fragmented, perhaps, but original and crucial—of mother-and-daughterhood".[24] Psychologists such as Nancy Chodorow and Jane Flax have found object-relations theory useful in their attempts to understand the relationships between women. The specific qualities of the mother-daughter bond become apparent when viewed through the Oedipal triangle formed between mother, father and infant: while the boy child must separate himself from the mother, the girl may maintain that primary identification to a later age. However, this can be problematic: "Because she does not give up her preoedipal bond with her mother, the girl maintains her earliest relational mode of primary identification and continues to experience permeable ego boundaries and to define herself relationally" (Abel 417). Close bonds with other women can thus be interpreted as attempts to recreate the relationship with the mother later in life.[25]

Roberts' work appears to be influenced by this debate. For Helen, the identification of mother and daughter is played out between herself and her mother (who represents the frustrations and angers of this dependence upon another for self-definition) and her grandmother (with whom Helen makes a more positive identification). This pattern is not quite as neat as it at first appears, however, because it is Helen's *paternal* grandmother with

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24 Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: Norton, 1976) 225.

25 I am indebted to the following texts for my understanding of the issues involved: Elizabeth Abel's "(E)Merging Identities: The Dynamics of Female Friendship in Contemporary Fiction by Women", *Signs* 6.3 (Spring 1981); Nancy Chodorow, "Gender, Relation, and Difference in Psychoanalytic Perspective", *The Future of Difference*; Chodorow, "Mothering, Object-Relations, and the Female Oedipal Configuration" *Feminist Studies* 4.1 (February 1978); Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978); Jane Flax, "Mother-Daughter Relationships: Psychodynamics, Politics, and Philosophy", *The Future of Difference*; Flax, "The Conflict between Nurturance and Autonomy in Mother-Daughter Relationships and within Feminism", *Feminist Studies* 4.2 (June 1978).

whom she identifies more willingly, reflecting the theory that a girl child turns to the father as a model in order to separate herself from the mother and create her own identity. Helen must also look outside the family to fulfil her "desire for identification", recognising instinctively that "women friends...play a crucial role in relaxing ego boundaries and restoring psychic wholeness" (Abel 418). Thus Helen's friendships with women outside her family allow her to recreate the relationship with the mother in its most positive aspects, so that "Identification in friendship becomes a means of mutual recognition instead of an obstacle to objectivity, and interpretation turns into a self-reflexive enterprise as each psyche gains definition through relation to the other" (Abel 421).

Helen's closest friend is Beth whom she first met in her earliest days at university. Her initial impression of Beth is that of "an archangel on a mission" (*V* 39). Beth retains the upper hand in their relationship, as this image suggests, maintaining a position of strength and power over Helen which she does at times appear to abuse (at least, she abuses her power according to Helen's perception of events, but as readers we see Beth's version of events, too). Just as Helen feels betrayed by her mother's supposed lack of love, she believes Beth is also treacherous.

The two young women share an attic flat and are teasingly referred to by friends as "the old married couple" (*V* 60). The novel does not state explicitly whether or not they have a lesbian relationship, but there is certainly an erotic element in their friendship. In this context, Paulina Palmer points out that "since all relationships exist in a state of flux and may be described as to a degree sexual in basis, the categories of the 'erotic' and the 'non-erotic' frequently overlap".[26] Helen and Beth share everything until one day Helen discovers Beth's contraceptive device left out on a shelf and realises Beth has a lover, and is therefore forced to recognise that Beth has her own secrets and close relationships with people other than herself. This is the first of what Helen perceives as a series of betrayals that leads to their estrangement. It is followed some time later by an incident in which Beth apparently seduces Helen's boyfriend Steven (the reader is left in some doubt as to the

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26 Paulina Palmer, *Contemporary Women's Fiction: Narrative Practice and Feminist Theory* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989) 130.

reality of Helen's interpretation of events: the embrace between Steven and Helen may be an imaginary representation of their ability to respond enthusiastically to each other, and Helen's subsequent nervous collapse places the reliability of her story in further doubt). A further betrayal occurs when Beth leaves the women's movement in favour of joining the Communist Party, thereby rejecting Helen's commitment to the women's movement as a valid response to the problems of her world. Although these events create a distance between the women, they do not result in a complete break; the bond between the women is stronger than outside influences.

One of the most important aspects of the relationship for Helen is the fact that Beth allows her time to talk and listens attentively to what she needs to say. Helen is unable to take this for granted: "She looks at Beth, hardly daring to believe she is allowed to go on, take up this much time" (*V* 56). In her other relationships she has never been permitted to express herself fully, always attempting to mould herself into the shape she believes the other desires of her. The pattern of unfulfilled need established in the first few months of life continues to manifest itself; now, however, love is expressed in time and effort devoted to understanding her instead of feeding her, nourishing the soul and psyche rather than the body. Beth values Helen's intensity and enjoys the way in which Helen will always confront her, forcing her to face her own decisions, questioning her assumptions. They have always been sparring partners, bouncing ideas off each other in order to sort out their own beliefs, working through their differences and similarities in a process towards self-definition. Their friendship is rooted in profound similarities of experience that superficial differences cannot annul.

Helen's relationship with Beth is placed in juxtaposition to her love affair with George. Helen is subordinate to George, believing herself powerless to express her needs or hold his love, insecure in her relationship with him as he competes against her for control of the relationship. Helen is excluded from George's inner life, just as she has always been excluded from the world of men. In opposition to this, the love between Beth and Helen is rooted in a mutual recognition of the importance of sisterhood and the desire to respond to each other's needs instead of the desire to have one's own needs satisfied (the latter is what

George wants from his relationship with Helen). We are shown that the most important aspect of the friendship is each woman's understanding and affirmation of the other party.[27] Helen confesses her depression and inability to write; in response Beth assures her that she sympathises, despite being unable to help. For Helen, "Beth's words of recognition are the most unexpected and delicate of caresses....a loving witnessing of how she feels" (*V* 81-82). It is the same response Elizabeth and Mary offer each other, a simple recognition and affirmation of identity in a loving sisterhood.

Although this moment deliberately echoes the biblical Visitation, Beth's announcement of her pregnancy receives a less than enthusiastic response from Helen. In fact, Helen's first reaction is anger directed at what she interprets as Beth's smugness which has the effect of placing Beth in line with all the other women she knows who are "pleased as punch with themselves for putting it [pregnancy] off till their thirties, pleased as punch for deciding eventually to do it" (*V* 109). Instead of being Helen's very special friend, Beth is now lumped together with all the other women who are at a different stage of their lives from Helen, excluding her from their experience. Helen loses sight of what it is that she and Beth have in common in their experience of being women and is unable to identify with her friend as an ally. Helen's anger is a response to what she perceives as Beth's attempt to deny their commonality.

On further consideration, Helen realises she is envious of her friend, and that, to her surprise, she too would like to be pregnant. She conjures up "Images of a daughter named Lilith" (*V* 110), her choice of name referring to the values of sisterhood symbolised by a Lilith reinterpreted in feminist terms. Thus, Helen's desire for pregnancy reveals her desire to remain within the community of women by joining them in motherhood, thus re-establishing her commonality with women in general and providing her with the means of recreating the mother-daughter bond in becoming a mother herself.

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27 Paulina Palmer points out that the friendship between Beth and Helen is rather one-sided. I think this can be attributed to the narrative technique employed in the novel whereby the story is told from Helen's point of view and focuses on exploring her psyche during a period of crisis.

Helen's desire for her own child is modified by the sense that, on a practical level, she is not a suitable candidate for motherhood, at least, not yet: "How could I possibly have a baby? Helen thinks. To have a baby you're supposed to be married....Unless you're the Virgin Mary, better not be a single mother" (*V* 115).[28] She does not fulfil the socially established requirements of a mother; more importantly, she is not yet sufficiently developed as a fully formed woman complete in her own right.

It is only in the company of women that Helen finds she can be completely herself, and feels no need to make excuses for her failings to fulfil the patriarchal requirements of ideal womanhood. On a visit to the Turkish hammam in Paris she finds a "woman-place" where she, along with all the other women, can unashamedly be herself: "Here, with no critical, classifying, dividing male eye upon their bodies, the women are relaxed, whole, belonging only to themselves....she lets go of language and thought and becomes all her senses, enriched, newly alive" (*V* 77). Helen and Beth recapture some of this when they go to the Hampstead Heath pond to bathe one night. On that occasion they are interrupted by a peeping tom. Instead of being afraid, Beth confronts him and he is scared off. However, the spell is broken by this male intrusion on their female space, and the women realise that the park surrounding them is full of the sinister and threatening shapes of men. The sense of freedom to be themselves in the pond and at the hammam is repeated by the women in Helen's women's group on removing their clothes to enjoy the hot summer sun in the garden: "They wail theatrically: their skin is pallid and pimply; their waists are flabby and slack; their breasts droop. This ritual of humorous complaining over, they forget about their bodies....They lounge in comfortable positions, bellies and thighs allowed to swell and spread, voluptuous" (*V* 156). Here they are identified on their own terms, not those imposed by a patriarchal society that wants to keep them under control. In creating their own place, they also create their own identities as women. Helen recognises the importance of a sisterhood which makes this woman-identified place and self possible, and echoes the kind of woman-place developed in Maitland's *Virgin Territory* which I have

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28 Allusions to the Visitation are not extended to the degree that Helen perceives herself as the Virgin Mary!

discussed in Chapter Four. Helen's own well-being depends on having access to such a community of women. When Robert asks what sustains her, she replies, "My work. And the love of women friends" (*V* 154).

In acknowledging the importance of her relationships with women friends, Helen takes a step towards reconciliation with her mother, which is, in turn, a step towards acceptance of her own identity as a woman. Her grandmother constantly tells Helen how to live her life, offering brisk, practical advice on marriage and health, but it is not until the old woman dies that Helen realises that "she never allowed her mother to address her with similar words, how she kept her at bay, ran to her grandmother instead, used the older woman as buffer, as refuge" (*V* 112). Helen must now take some responsibility for the distance between herself and her mother, and in doing so is at last capable of drawing nearer to her mother, overcoming the fear of being swallowed up by her mother if she gets too close, of losing her own subjectivity in proximity to the maternal body. It is a sign of Helen's growing sense of self that she can allow herself to affirm her commonality with Catherine as representative of the female roles of both mother and woman, and simultaneously retain a sense of her own subjectivity, individuality and difference from her mother. Helen notices herself becoming more like her mother as she grows older, hearing herself echo her mother's advice, and "is amused to recognise her growing identification with Catherine's practical attitude, resisted for years" (*V* 81). As a gesture of reconciliation and identification, Helen stays up late on a visit home so that she can speak to her mother alone. She has grown her hair long as part of a bargain with her grandmother: "She said she'd write down her life story if I grew my hair", explains Helen (*V* 57). She asks her mother to "Put up my hair for me...show me how to put it up like yours" (*V* 57). Helen and her mother are both pleased by this display of affection and Helen's desire to emphasise the qualities they have in common. It is a moment of closeness which is grounded in their bond as mother and daughter, and in their common womanhood, which is accentuated by the focus on hair in this scene, the traditional symbol of female beauty in male terms.

The final reconciliation between Helen and her mother follows Grandmother Home's funeral. They are drawn together in their grief for the woman they both loved. As Helen prepares to return to London, her mother piles up gifts of food which Helen willingly accepts. The scene acts as a metaphor of Helen's forgiveness for the denial of love and nourishment she experienced as a hungry baby. Her earlier rejection and vilification of her mother is forgotten in this moment of mutual happiness.

In accepting her relationship with her mother, Helen also acknowledges her own place in the world of women. She has gradually learnt that her identity is affirmed by her love for and friendships with women. She also believes that there is more in common between her mother and grandmother and her other women friends than there is to separate them. The novel posits that it is through the sustaining love of women that Helen can heal her own ailing spirit and psyche. We are encouraged to see that women's wisdom and the power they embody are a result of their relationships with each other; they form one undivided group which crosses generations. First Helen notices that she is starting to use her mother's words, then she hears more of her mother's advice from Beth's mouth:

> —For heaven's sake, she [Beth] hisses: take care. I'm not too sure I like the look of him....Take care, Catherine Home repeats anxiously, every time Helen reports, somewhat agressively, that she's met a man she likes: you might get hurt. Her mother's solicitude, based on archetypal knowledge, annoys her, and Beth's, based on actual experience, even more. (*V* 139)

Helen uses the metaphor of the witches' coven to describe the bonds between women and the power it bestows upon them.[29] Her own women's group becomes impregnated with the love she receives from the other women in her life, and the power she gains from the group is inseparable from the power she gains from the women in her family: "There are a

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29 This metaphor reflects a strand of feminist writing, of which Mary Daly stands at the fore, which seeks to revitalise the derogatory terms used for women, providing them instead with new, positive meanings. Historical studies inspired by a feminist vision have revealed alternative interpretations of the witch hunts in the middle ages as particularly violent misogynistic attacks on women. In reappropriating the notion of witches and transforming them into symbols of female power, feminist writers such as Roberts work towards the revision of the images of women created in our culture.

lot of witches now, meeting in groups....and somewhere, hovering about, the spirit of her grandmother, the feeling of Beth" (*V* 157). We see that it is the strength of sisterhood which empowers them, not a supernatural magic, and it is the commitment to each other which weaves spells through their lives. The magical power they spark off together creates a woman-place where they may express themselves honestly. The spells heal the psyche, creating powerful, whole women, who in turn become midwife and mother to the new women who are born in sisterhood. Helen's grandmother appears to her in a dream in the form of a witch who holds the wisdom of women's experience over the centuries. Her cave is womblike, hung with red silk, warm and dark. Here Helen begs to be healed, displaying the rash which flares up every time she attempts to write. Her grandmother warns her that she must admit to everything inside herself before she can hope to overcome the problem. Helen ponders the significance of her rash:

> —Red bumps...red marks....I must write a good novel. Only I am frightened, because what I need to write about will tear the seamless garment of goodness and sexlessness I have worn so long. To mark. To brand and to burn. To burn at the stake. Sexual women, independent women, are witches, and will be burnt at the stake. It is dangerous, what we are doing, practising witchcraft, and we will be punished for it. Marks on my skin. The Word is made flesh. Each red bump a little red mouth shrieking with longing and rage, each red bump a little female hill, swollen, pulsating and hot with desire. (*V* 102)

Helen's fear is that she will be punished if she reveals her inner self. All her life she has attempted to live up to the expectations imposed by others so that she will earn their love, afraid to express her real self in case that love will be withdrawn. In order to write honestly she must expose what she considers to be her "true" self, and in taking such an independent action risks public censure. She is afraid that, by defining herself in her own way, by naming herself and her desires in a manner which runs counter to the patriarchal society in which she lives, that she will ally herself with the witches who also chose their identities independently of the social norm. If she does this, she will be cast out of society just like other witches.

Despite this fear, Helen is compelled to react against the self which is defined for her by that society. The marks on her body are visible symbols of the rage within, rage at being unable to express her desire as a sexual woman. At this stage she is incapable of admitting her desire even in the safety and security of her grandmother's loving presence for fear of repudiation. However, her grandmother does force her to recognise the nature of that desire, even though she cannot give it verbal expression.

It is not until Helen revisits the scene of her transformation from child to woman that she fully understands the significance of her desire for the mother. In the Fourth Visitation, she has accompanied her friend Beth to Gettering Park which turns out to have previously been the home of her mother's friend Miss Gettering, the scene of her first menstrual period.

Helen has reached this point in her development after a series of necessary losses and disappointments. The First Visitation in Autumn opens with Helen in a state of decline as her relationship with George falls apart. Beth visits her in London and they attempt to re-establish the close friendship of their university days. However, the spell that had held them together in the past has been broken, as Helen is forced to acknowledge in her dream: "They are twin mermaids, the sea slapping at their tails which dangle into the water. Only now, when they are together again after such a long separation, when they hold their mirrors up to one another and gaze therein, they have to recognise their difference" (*V* 91). This scene echoes the opening of the novel which recalls the experience of the womb. There, each twin acts as the mirror of the other as they swim in "their underwater cave" like "a mirror with fins" (*V* 3). References to mirrors at such moments indicate the influence of Lacanian psychology which underlies the text, particularly the notion of the "mirror phase" in psychological development.[30] It is in looking into the faces of her twin brother and her "twin" friend that Helen must establish her own subjectivity in recognising that she is both like and not-like them, exchanging the fullness of the Imaginary in which all is present for the empty world of representation and desire in the Symbolic Order.

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30 Lacan outlines the notion of the "mirror phase" in Chapter One of *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (1966; London: Tavistock Publications, 1977).

The Second Visitation in the dead of winter serves to widen the gap between Helen and her friend with Beth's announcement of her pregnancy. During this period Helen's grandmother dies, marking the loss of another woman with whom Helen identifies closely. It is also the turning point for Helen as she comes to understand her own desires.

The rejuvenation of the Spring Visitation brings new hope for Helen. This section provides us with a further explanation of the disruption of Helen's friendship with Beth in centring on the hermaphroditic figure. We learn of Beth's supposed seduction of Steven, but, given the dreamlike quality of this scene in which Helen faints and neither Beth nor Steven refer to their own actions, it would appear that the importance of this episode lies in its warning against the incestuous desire for the twin. Helen had aimed to join herself inextricably with Beth as a substitute for her lost brother (who, as the twin with whom she shared the womb, stands as the symbol of the lost mother or womb), just as she continues to do with Steven and George, moulding herself to fit into the spaces they allow her to fill. Thus we can interpret Beth's treachery in severing the relationship with Helen as an attempt to save Helen from the folly of attempting to fulfil herself through another, whether it be male or female.

It is not until she meets Robert, the man who allows her to be herself, that Helen can understand the necessity of finding that other half within herself. In the full bloom of the Summer Visitation, Helen learns that she must realise her own potential independently of others. Sisterhood provides her with an affirmation of the identity she is in the process of discovering. Beth's presence in the Fourth Visitation indicates Helen's final recognition of the direction her search must take. Helen relives the events which took place at Gettering Park and finally learns what the Fall from Grace means for her.

This final scene once more echoes the opening of the novel, again using the story of the Fall as an allegory of the development of the human psyche, and echoes Lacanian/Kristevan terminology. In a convincing mixing of discourses, Roberts moves into a visionary mode while continuing to ground her writing in realism in order to accentuate the allegorical nature of this passage. The garden, which represents the Garden of Eden, also symbolises the womb, for "Paradise is the mother's body" (*V* 172), and

Helen's own unconscious. Living in paradise is equivalent to living in the preverbal state the infant experiences before he or she can differentiate between self and other. The garden in which Helen wanders is a physical representation of this state: "All its divisions are blurred, flower beds [sic] merging into one another...weeds no longer distinguishable from cultivated plants. The path...is indistinct, blurring into the flower-beds [sic]" (*V* 170). This paradise is also "fatherlessness, the time before language; it is not-separation and not-speech" (*V* 172).

It is a state which cannot continue forever and desire for knowledge soon intrudes:

> Eve eventually feels desire, feels curiosity. Expelled from paradise by her own longing to explore and name the world, she knows that she must dwell forever in the place outside, no leaving-present except to be cursed as body, evil, putrifaction, death and whore; no puberty rite except that which other women can give her: the stumbling into speech and writing so that she can mourn. (*V* 172)

As the infant girl learns to differentiate the elements of her world, as the mythical Eve seeks knowledge of her world and eats the apple, paradise is torn apart. Using a Lacanian/Kristevan framework, the novel shows that the ancient myth retells the drama played out in the human psyche as individuals learn to speak, entering the Symbolic Order as the maternal *chora* is split. The ability to speak and write is dependent upon loss of the perfection of paradise in the Fall into language. We see how desire is created in the repression of the unconscious, which Helen experiences as "a hole in the heart of her, a place of loss, a gap crying out to be filled" (*V* 172). That is, the real world of the Imaginary in which all is constantly present has been replaced by the symbolism of words and the infant becomes a subject.

For Helen this split is further manifested as the experience of being rent asunder from her twin brother. Her walk through the garden, in which she relives the Fall or splitting of the *chora*, reveals two stone statues which stand as symbolic representations of her loss. The first is of Adam and Eve. They are sculpted as "two lovers, entwined in one another's arms, so closely interlinked that they seem to be one" (*V* 170), but their faces are those of Helen and Felix. We are encouraged to interpret this as the state of perfection when all is

as we desire, the "masculine and the feminine so tightly joined that they are inseparable" (*V* 171). It is a state that will inevitably, and must, be destroyed in the course of time when the masculine and feminine will be split apart and placed at opposite poles.[31]

The second statue is of the lost twin brother. Here he is presented as Steven, Helen's perfect lover of long before, whom she was forced to reject in order to protect them both from the dangerous sin of incest. The symbolic significance of incest in this case is that it looks to another being for fulfilment. For Helen, the twin represents the fullness and presence of the semiotic experienced in the mother's womb; to desire one's lost twin is to desire the loss of subjectivity gained in the Symbolic Order. In a scene reminiscent of the Narcissus myth, Helen peers into the pool of tears she has wept and discovers her true identity as a woman, recognising that there is no return to the united paradise before the Fall; instead, a new redemption is necessary.

Helen has spent all of her life since this Fall from Grace travelling, searching for her identity like Eve walking the earth beyond the bounds of Eden. It is an archetypal journey; Helen winds her way through the labyrinth, afraid that she herself might be the minotaur lurking there, but Theseus-like braves danger. Her own name ties her to Theseus who kidnapped the Helen of Greek myth. Her friend Beth plays Ariadne as "she holds the threads of Helen's words that she unwinds like a ball of string...and she tugs gently sometimes, so that Helen knows she is there, so that she knows she will find her way back from her chaos and will not be lost" (*V* 170). Helen and "Ariadne", both victims of Theseus's greed and desire, discover a new power in sisterhood, just as we have seen in rewritings of the Eve and Lilith stories. Beth's sisterly love lends Helen the necessary strength and courage to continue the search for her self.

It is this companionship of sisterhood that is most important for Helen: "The last thing she dared hope for was female companionship on her journey, a woman walking with her and watching over her. She didn't know that women liked and trusted one another" (*V* 169). Helen learns to have faith in herself through the love women offer her, providing her

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31 Margaret Ann Franklin, ed., Introduction, *The Force of the Feminine: Women, Men and the Church* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1986) xiii. This concept was discussed in Chapter Two also.

with the nourishment she needs in order to gain the strength to find her own identity. Beth listens to Helen's cries for help and answers her needs, responding to her desperate pleas for understanding. Helen realises that "This is the precious gift another woman gives her, taking her words in, wanting to be fertilised by words. This is their loving labour, performed with one another, and it brings forth children, a mutual pregnancy, as they embrace and listen to each other, and the words inside them leap for joy" (*V* 173). We are shown that it is this sisterhood which empowers women and offers hope of redemption. This allusion to the Visitation in connection to the impregnation of women by each other draws attention to the links between the virgin mother and female autonomy and independence which I have discussed in Chapter Four. The Holy Spirit which impregnates Mary is interpreted as the love between women in this allusion to the Visitation. The expression of that sisterly love, which Mary and Elizabeth share, causes not a child but words this time to leap in the "wombs" of Helen and (Eliza)Beth.

The novel suggests, with its oblique references to Lacanian/Kristevan psychology, that Helen's identity and subjectivity rely on her discovery of a position in which both words and the non-verbal interact. Thus, although her subjectivity is created in language, and she must necessarily obey the Law of the Father in order to use that language, the semiotic is also allowed to surface. The words leaping in her womb offer an image of interaction between the symbolic and the semiotic/maternal. Helen's image of herself as a vast, angry sea is a symbol of her consciousness; the expanse of water represents her conscious mind which is forever disrupted by the movement of the unconscious, or repressed semiotic, beneath the surface.

It is the combination of both forces which allows Helen to resume her role as a writer, as one who successfully embodies both the language of phallocentrism and the Symbolic Order, and the creativity radiating from the maternal *chora*. The strength Helen derives from sisterhood enables her to overcome the writer's block which has paralysed her work. As she learns to embrace both the conscious and the unconscious, the symbolic and the semiotic, her creative use of language returns. She is resurrected through sisterhood,

developing in the process a self-confidence which accepts the contradictions and paradoxes built into her personality, and which she can identify as her "real" self.

The Visitation can be used in the feminist context as the moment at which the importance of sisterhood as a Christian ideal is first recognised. It is the first step in a long journey which leads ultimately to redemption, to a new understanding of the self within the framework of the new religion. This new identity is one in which women are no longer perceived as half creatures separated from their mate or complementary other after the Fall from Grace. It is through the support of others who are both like and not-like oneself that women can negotiate a path through conflicting desires and needs to fulfil their own potential. Sisterhood is thus used to represent the site of interaction between religion, feminism and psychoanalysis in the novels of both Roberts and Maitland; the importance of a loving sisterhood is also seen by many feminist theologians to be one of the most powerful messages women can gain from Christianity.

CHAPTER SIX

THE SPIRITUAL AND RELIGIOUS DIMENSIONS OF MOTHERHOOD: Sara Maitland's *Daughter of Jerusalem*

In previous chapters I have explored images of the single woman, the autonomous virgin and the loving, supportive sister, as they are represented by Maitland and Roberts; woman as mother is the focus of the final two chapters of this thesis. Sara Maitland's first novel, *Daughter of Jerusalem* (1978), examines representations of mothers and motherhood in Western culture with specific reference to the part that Christianity has to play in this context. It juxtaposes the story of a woman living in contemporary London with retold biblical tales of women. In this chapter we see how Maitland uses the narrative strategies of retelling and juxtaposition to reveal the means by which Christianity has mediated our understanding of mothers and motherhood. At the same time, Maitland points to feminist reinterpretations of images of mothers and motherhood. This chapter also investigates the psychological needs which are met by these representations of the mother and the emotional investment we have in such images of woman.

Sara Maitland's first novel, like Roberts', was a prizewinner; *Daughter of Jerusalem*, published as *Languages of Love* in the USA, was chosen for the Somerset Maugham Award in 1979. The critics' responses were mixed, however, ranging from describing the book as an "extremely intelligent and enjoyable first novel"[1] to criticisms of its containing "Too many garrulous, naive attacks on sexist institutions".[2] While one reviewer applauds its "overwhelming concern for the contemporary situation" (Kennedy 1404), another complains that it "take[s] rather too seriously the obligation to explore contemporary obsessions and developments".[3] Like Roberts, Maitland does attempt to evoke a particular lifestyle and social group, but I think that both writers use the London feminism of the

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1 Susan Kennedy, *Times Literary Supplement*, 1 December 1978, 1404. Further references will appear in the text.
2 Hermione Lee, *Observer*, 22 October 1978, 35.
3 John Naughton, *Listener*, 16 November 1978, 659.

1970s and 1980s as a background against which to explore issues with a wider significance. *Daughter of Jerusalem* examines the construction of motherhood in Western society and explores how this feeds into debates about the images of women created within Christianity which continue to influence our lives today. Underlying this discussion is the context of specifically British culture, where the head of State is also the head of the Church, giving Maitland's politico-religious project an urgency which it might not have in other locations. However, her use of biblical stories in this novel points to the archetypal roles available to women which pervade our society, and suggests ways in which women might adopt these models as positive images of femininity and womanhood. Thus, the novel operates on the levels of the specific and individual, as well as the archetypal and symbolic. It also combines the discourses of feminist polemic and theology within the framework of fictional explorations of Judeo-Christian stories.

Traditional constructions of the "good" woman are closely allied to the "good" mother in Christian culture, and are derived, at least in part, from images of the Virgin Mary. The Madonna is usually presented as the ideal woman and mother, self-sacrificing, free from sin, and offering perfect love; further, she is disembodied, allied with the spiritual, not the carnal. It is a model of woman to which feminists object, partly on the grounds that it is impossible for ordinary mortals to be both virgin and mother, thus "real" women can never live up to social expectations of what the good woman is supposed to be. If the "good woman" model is founded on an impossibility like this, women will by necessity fail, and so appear to deserve the denigration which has become their lot within Christianity. While this image of the asexual mother has been criticised for its damaging effects, Western culture has been profoundly affected by the images of woman represented by Christianity, and vestiges of those attitudes remain in our society today. As Adrienne Rich writes:

> Throughout patriarchal mythology, dream-symbolism, theology, language, two ideas flow side by side: one, that the female body is impure, corrupt....[Alternatively], as mother the woman is beneficent, sacred, pure, asexual, nourishing; and the physical potential for motherhood—that same body with its bleedings and mysteries—is her single destiny and justification in life.

These two ideas have become deeply internalized in women...[4]

The promiscuous, openly sexual woman is rarely seen as motherly; sexuality has been divorced from mothering in the Judeo-Christian tradition, despite the obvious physical link between them (Jane Gardam, too, raises the issue of this split between biology and nurture in *Crusoe's Daughter* in relation to motherhood). However, instead of abandoning motherhood as the site of spiritual and religious experience, many feminists have attempted to reclaim it, reinterpreting the significance of motherhood in more liberating terms for today's women, and it is this with which Sara Maitland engages in *Daughter of Jerusalem.*

In the early days of the women's movement, female biology and women's role as mothers were perceived as the source of female oppression.[5] Thus it was possible for Shulamith Firestone to write in 1971: "The heart of woman's oppression is her childbearing and childrearing roles".[6] Firestone maintained that the inequality between the sexes resulting from the division of labour between men and women rested ultimately on woman's capacity for reproduction; she welcomed the possibility of artificial reproduction as the means by which women could escape the drudgery and bondage of giving birth to and raising children, freeing them to take their place in the public arena alongside men. Other feminists recognised that this was rather too simple an answer to the problem. Adrienne Rich criticises Firestone for being "so eager to move on to technology that she fails to explore the relationship between maternity and sensuality, pain and female alienation" (Rich 174).

The explorations of motherhood from an emotional and psychological perspective which followed the publication of Firestone's statement point to the considerably more complex issues at stake. Dorothy Dinnerstein's book, *The Rocking of the Cradle, and the*

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4 Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: Norton, 1976) 34. Further references will appear in the text.

5 I am indebted to the introduction to the history of motherhood in the women's movement by Selma Sevenhuijsen and Petra de Vries in "The Women's Movement and Motherhood", *A Creative Tension: Explorations in Socialist Feminism*, ed. Anja Meulenbelt et al., trans. Della Couling (London and Sydney: Pluto Press, 1984).

6 Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1971) 81.

Ruling of the World (1976),[7] emphasises the anger an infant experiences in his or her disappointments related to what are perceived as failings on the part of the mother, such as the necessary withdrawal of the mother from the child which must take place in order for that infant to establish his or her own identity. Since this mother is also traditionally female, that infantile anger is translated into an adult distrust of all women.[8] Nancy Chodorow in *The Reproduction of Mothering* asks "Why do women mother?".[9] Her thesis is that gender is constructed largely through the psychological development of an individual in relation to the mother, who, again, is almost always female. In becoming mothers themselves, women can reproduce and relive the joy they experienced as infants in relation to their own mothers. The work of Dinnerstein and Chodorow is summed up by Hester Eisenstein: "In a sense, then, Dinnerstein saw female mothering as a source of rage, while Chodorow saw it as a seductive locus of connectedness and intimacy".[10] For these theorists, the oppression of women is founded on the psychological difficulties associated with the female mother, which leads to conclusions such as "no fundamental change in the situation of women can be achieved without full male participation in early child care" (Dinnerstein 89), and "Any strategy for change whose goal includes liberation from the constraints of an unequal social organization of gender must take account of the need for a fundamental reorganization of parenting, so that primary parenting is shared between men and women" (Chodorow 215). While the work of Dinnerstein and Chodorow marks a move from the total rejection of mothering to a re-evaluation of the positive potential of motherhood, it continues to be problematic. Janice Raymond points out in *A Passion for Friends* that "What both Dinnerstein and Chodorow tell us is that once more men will be

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7 Dorothy Dinnerstein, *The Rocking of the Cradle, and the Ruling of the World* (1976; London: Souvenir Press, 1978). Also published as *The Mermaid and the Minotaur*. Further references will appear in the text.

8 I use "mother" in this context to refer to the person who is primarily responsible for taking care of the child, that is, the person who performs the role of mother, not the biological mother.

9 Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978). Further references will appear in the text.

10 Hester Eisenstein, *Contemporary Feminist Thought* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1983) 95. I am also indebted to Ann Snitow's article "Thinking about *The Mermaid and the Minotaur*", *Feminist Studies* 4.2 (June 1978) for my understanding of Dinnerstein's book.

the saviors".[11]

Alongside this debate runs a thread in accordance with Adrienne Rich's celebration of motherhood as a source of female power and joy, of motherhood as a component of women's religious or spiritual lives. Rich writes about this aspect of motherhood in both her poetry and in her more theoretical work, *Of Woman Born*. It is, however, a radically different appreciation of motherhood from that traditionally found in Western culture, reflecting the insights of those who have recognised the dangers of sentimentalising the pleasures of mothering, and acknowledging the confusing contradictions our society creates in its representations of mothers.

Some contemporary feminist theologians focus on the reconstruction of images of motherhood from almost forgotten religions based on worship of the Mother Goddess. These goddesses are powerful symbols of fertility and protection, which, according to some feminist theologians, the Virgin Mary replaced in the minds of pagan converts to Christianity. Elizabeth Gould Davis' book, *The First Sex*, states that:

> The church seemed doomed to failure, destined to go down to bloody death amidst the bleeding corpses of its victims, when the people discovered Mary. And only when Mary, against the stern decrees of the church, was dug out of the oblivion to which Constantine had assigned her and became identified with the Great Goddess was Christianity finally tolerated by the people.[12]

Although Davis' book is somewhat unreliable as a scholarly source (even Adrienne Rich, who admires the aims of the work, admits that it is "at times inaccurate, biased, unprofessional" [*Of Woman Born* 91]), the concept itself has important ramifications for feminists.[13] Davis claims that the principle of the Mother Goddess is intrinsic to human needs, and is set in opposition to the "artificial" gods presented to the people by the patriarchy:

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11 Janice Raymond, *A Passion for Friends: Toward a Philosophy of Female Affection* (London: Women's Press, 1986) 52.

12 Elizabeth Gould Davis, *The First Sex* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1971) 243-44. Further references will appear in the text.

13 For example, Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (1973; Boston: Beacon Press, 1974) 92.

> the ancient race...were goddess worshippers and were woman-oriented, regarding the Female Principle as the primary one and femininity superior to masculinity. This last concept the new people could not endure, and in the process of humbling femininity they at the same time overthrew the female deity and set up in her place a male-dominated hierarchy of gods and goddesses. The reason, therefore, for the artificiality and rootlessness of the Olympian gods, as of the Jewish and Christian God, is that they are *contrived*—deliberately invented by patriarchs to replace the ancient Great Goddess. Thus the only reality in Christianity is Mary, the Female Principle, the ancient goddess reborn. (*First Sex* 245-46)

It is through this correlation, then, that Davis argues for Mary's identification with a much greater force than the apparently domestic image presented within Christianity.

Rosemary Radford Ruether briefly examines the concept of Goddess religions in early societies in her article, "Motherearth and the Megamachine".[14] She describes the place of Motherearth in the world view before the existence of dualistic thinking which dominates Western society today, and traces the changes from ancient religious rites based on the understanding of a world in a constant state of rebirth and renewal, through the alienation introduced with dualism, to the need for a reinvention and reinterpretation of those paradigms in today's world.

The rediscovery of societies in which the Mother figure was worshipped as the representation of fertility has generated a burgeoning of research and writing by feminist scholars. Carol Christ examines the significance of this movement in her article, "Why Women Need the Goddess: Phenomenological, Psychological and Political Reflections".[15] She claims that the goddess is an important symbol for women who are working to overcome the "devaluation of female power, denigration of the female body, distrust of female will, and denial of the women's bonds and heritage that have been engendered by

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14 Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Motherearth and the Megamachine: A Theology of Liberation in a Feminist, Somatic and Ecological Perspective", *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, eds Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979) 46-47.

15 Carol P. Christ, "Why Women Need the Goddess: Phenomenological, Psychological and Political Reflections", *Womanspirit Rising*. Further references will appear in the text.

patriarchal religion" ("Goddess" 286).

As the women's movement has gained momentum, its spiritual aspect has also matured, and women are attempting to find ways of redefining their position in the spiritual and religious dimensions of life as well as in the political, social and economic arenas. Many of those concerned with this aspect of feminism believe that religious symbols can play a significant role in this transformation. Christ accepts Clifford Geertz's theory that "religious symbols shape a cultural ethos, defining the deepest values of a society and the persons in it" ("Goddess" 274). If we accept this, then the symbol of the Mother Goddess potentially holds the power to elevate the importance of women in both their own minds and in the overall social structure. It is the creativity and life-giving powers of women which are celebrated in the symbol of the Mother Goddess, a creativity which refers to the birth of children, but is not confined to the natural world; the Goddess is also "creator of all the arts of civilization, including healing, writing, and the giving of just law" ("Goddess" 281), so the Mother Goddess can be a significant figure for all women, regardless of whether or not they bear children as biological mothers.

For some women the association of the Mother Goddess with ancient rites has been revitalised in contemporary "witchcraft". Starhawk (Miriam Simos), for example, describes the basis of her religion in terms of the wholeness and unity of people and their environment:

> The craft is earth religion, and our basic orientation is to the earth, to life, to nature. There is no dichotomy between spirit and flesh, no split between Godhead and the world. The Goddess is manifest in the world; she brings life into being, *is* nature, *is* flesh. Union is not sought outside the world in some heavenly sphere or through dissolution of the self into the void beyond the senses. Spiritual union is found in life, within nature, passion, sensuality—through being fully human, fully one's self.[16]

Starhawk uses the symbols of moon and earth to reflect the nature of woman and the

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16 Starhawk, "Witchcraft and Women's Culture", *Womanspirit Rising*, 263. Further references will be included in the text.

Mother Goddess; she values independence of will, emotion, and, above all, love. Starhawk emphasises that it is important within the contemporary context that women take from the previous witchcraft only that which is useful to them today; there are no authoritarian rules to be followed. She interprets the new religion as one path by which a "transformation of our culture away from the patriarchal death cults and toward the love of life, of nature, of the female principle" ("Witchcraft" 268) can be achieved.[17] Hers is a somewhat problematic position in its essentialist stance which places women once again on the side of nature and the body; it is also sexually exclusive in its valorisation of the feminine principle which appears to leave little space for negotiating an authentic exchange between the sexes of the kind proposed by Irigaray.

The theme of the ancient goddess's transformation into a Christian figure is taken up in fictional form by Ellen Galford in her novel *The Fires of Bride* (1986) which I referred to in Chapter Three. The novel is set on the imaginary island of "Cailleach" in the "Utter Utter Hebrides". The island is named for the Great Goddess who created it and "lends it the name of one of her spare incarnations....The Crone, The Old Woman" (*Fires* 9). The original inhabitants worship the triple goddess Bride, Brigantia, Bridget, "who brings them poetry, smithcraft and the skills of midwifery" (*Fires* 10). In time this goddess gives way to another; in the Christian era Bride "signed on as a saint" (*Fires* 110). A convent is built on the island and the Sisters of Saint Bride maintain a perpetual fire in her honour. They also keep alive the secret knowledge of Jesus' twin sister. The novel abounds in references to witchcraft and its relationship to both the natural and the supernatural worlds. The island's doctor who delivers the babies is also the resident witch, acting as a reminder of the alliance between midwives and witches. The legacy of Bride the ancient goddess continues to influence the life of the islanders to the present day; although they may not openly worship the goddess, they are still susceptible to her influence. Although it is written in a gently satirical vein, the novel does not entirely discard the positive role that the

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17 As I have discussed in Chapter One, Margaret Drabble's novels, and *Realms of Gold* in particular, can also be seen to be attempting a move away from the deathly influence of Christianity towards a revitalised paganism which focuses on the positive, life-affirming images of motherhood and domesticity.

goddess might play for contemporary women as a representation of the feminine principle.

For those feminists who wish to remain within the Christian Church, new interpretations of their own religion are necessary. One of the most important changes is a rejection of purely male imagery for God. They believe that male imagery is largely reponsible for what they see as the human construction of a male god. Elaine Pagels documents the existence of both male and female God imagery in the early Christian Church and laments its disappearance in her article "What Became of God the Mother? Conflicting Images of God in Early Christianity".[18] Her sources are the gnostic gospels left out of the New Testament we have today, the *Secret Book of John*, *Wisdom of Faith*, the Gospels of the Hebrews, Philip, Thomas and Mary Magdalene. Mother imagery for God also appears in the writings of Julian of Norwich, as well as the more "respectable" or mainstream Church fathers: Clement of Alexandria, accepted as an orthodox Christian, uses both masculine and feminine imagery in his characterisation of God: "the Word alone supplies us children with the milk of love, and only those who suck at this breast are truly happy....for this reason seeking is called sucking; to those infants who seek the Word, the Father's loving breasts supply milk" ("God the Mother" 116-17). In a much later age, St Anselm of Canterbury and St Bernard of Clairvaux again invoke feminine imagery for God, as Marina Warner reminds us in *Alone of All Her Sex*.[19] Maitland, too, addresses the problem of human imagery used to help us understand the nature of God:

> The early Christian theologians were unanimous in their recognition that God was "without qualities"—it was incorrect to ascribe to the Divine human qualities such as maleness. This has always been the orthodox teaching of Christianity. In seeking, however, to talk about God and trying to represent our identity with God it has always been permissible to use anthropomorphic imagery or analogies.[20]

Feminist theologians today believe that images of God the Mother can be used to balance

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18 Elaine Pagels, "What Became of God the Mother? Conflicting Images of God in Early Christianity", *Womanspirit Rising*.

19 Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* (1976; London: Picador, 1985) 196.

20 Sara Maitland, *A Map of the New Country: Women and Christianity* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983) 170.

God the Father and, in the process, rebuild for themselves an acceptable place for women in Christianity.

The figure of the Mother holds an important place in the spiritual lives of women, both as a symbol and as part of their own experience.[21] Many feminists believe that it is through the Mother that women can develop a new understanding of themselves and their religious lives, regardless of whether they remain within the Christian Church or reject Christianity in favour of the older constructions of the Mother Goddess religions.

The mother figure in Christianity is embedded in a network of family imagery which draws on the traditional constructions of God the Father, his son Jesus Christ, and Mary the Virgin Mother (although the Virgin Mary does not have as much importance in Protestant Christianity as she does in Roman Catholicism). On one level, this emphasises the human side of Christianity, based as it is on the life and teachings of "God made man". It provides a framework and image of Christianity which relates to the lives of believers and mediates its relevance to them and their situation.

The domestic imagery of Christianity also answers important psychological needs in the faithful. Julia Kristeva discusses this briefly in her book *In the Beginning Was Love: Psychoanalysis and Faith.*[22] After examining the creed espoused by Christians, she claims that it "embodies basic fantasies that I encounter every day in the psychic lives of my patients" (*In the Beginning* 39-40). Kristeva includes a discussion of the significance of the virgin mother in this context. She maintains that the apparent contradiction between the paired states of virgin and mother fulfils a basic human desire: the child needs a mother, yet has difficulty accepting the male role in its own conception. The child wants to have access to a mother who stands alone, whose love is not sought after by a rival in the form of a "husband" or father of her child. The virgin mother also counterbalances the otherwise overpowering image of paternity in Christian imagery. Further, the figure of the virgin

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21 See, for example, Una Kroll, "A Womb-Centred Life", *Sex and God: Some Varieties of Women's Religious Experience*, ed. Linda Hurcombe (New York and London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987).

22 Julia Kristeva, *In the Beginning Was Love: Psychoanalysis and Faith*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987). Further references will appear in the text.

mother allows the child to ignore a basic, fearful fantasy, that of being "supernumerary, excluded from the act of pleasure that is the origin of its existence" (*In the Beginning* 42). Thus, the virgin mother allows us to avoid the question of procreation.

Finally, Kristeva asserts that "More than one mother has been sustained in narcissistic equilibrium by the fantasy of having a child without the aid of a father" (*In the Beginning* 42). If she can love the child which is grown from her body alone, she can legitimately love herself through this child which is herself. Kristeva goes on: "Yet female hysterics, frequently touched by paranoia as well, relish the not-so-humble role of the virgin mother who is the 'daughter of her son', mother of God, queen of the Church, and to top it all off the only human being who does not have to die (even her son must endure the cross)" (*In the Beginning* 42). It is clear, then, that the concept of the virgin mother holds some appeal for both the child and the woman who is to become the mother, providing us with a clue to the reasons for its usefulness to, and therefore acceptance by, women.

Kristeva examines the concept of motherhood in further detail in her article "Stabat Mater".[23] Here she concentrates on the construction of motherhood in Christian cultures, relating it in particular to the importance of motherhood in the creation of identity in the individual. Sara Maitland deals with similar issues in her book, *Daughter of Jerusalem*, but, like Chodorow and Dinnerstein, emphasises the effects of our concept of motherhood on the woman who is to be the mother, rather than on an individual's relationship to his or her mother. Maitland's novel reflects an awareness of the debates surrounding motherhood at the time of its writing and publication, and highlights a return to the celebration of motherhood while at the same time acknowledging the problems associated with it, such as the lack of autonomy mothers experience in Western culture, the essentialism which is invoked in focusing on the biological aspects of womanhood, and the temptation to associate woman with the body and nature under the guise of such celebrations of motherhood. *Daughter of Jerusalem* also relies upon some of the traditional associations of motherhood, for example, the coming birth as a promise of new beginnings.

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23 Julia Kristeva, "Stabat Mater", *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986). Further references will appear in the text.

Daughter of Jerusalem is the story of a young woman, Liz, and her unfulfilled desire to become pregnant. Although there appears to be no physical impediment, she does not ovulate and therefore does not conceive the longed-for child. The desire to procreate takes on the proportions of an obsession, and her struggle with infertility becomes the centrepoint of her life, raising as it does urgent questions about her identity, for if she cannot conceive a child is she really a woman? Kristeva, admittedly speaking from her Continental Catholic discursive location, points out that "we live in a civilization where the *consecrated* (religious or secular) representation of femininity is absorbed by motherhood" ("Stabat Mater" 161), drawing our attention to the underlying suggestion that any woman who is not a mother is in some way failing as a woman. Maitland's novel questions the assumption that the physical ability to bear children is the single most important facet of being female, of being a woman.[24] Does a woman who has had a hysterectomy still have a valid claim to that label? What about post-menopausal women? What about lactating mothers in whom ovulation is suppressed? Yet motherhood remains a crucial element in our construction of femininity, and Liz, being part of this civilisation, cannot ignore it, despite the fact that she identifies herself as a feminist, and believes, at least on the conscious level, that there is more to being a woman than childbearing.

Liz experiences further difficulties in living up to the expectations of being a good woman and mother in a Christian society which sets up the virgin mother, Mary, as the perfect role model, a model which a mere mortal woman cannot possibly emulate, but which she must attempt to match. Liz is torn between the two sides of this image, desperate to become a mother and simultaneously to retain her metaphorical virginity as a free, independent woman in the tradition of the Amazons, an image which Maitland explores in *Virgin Territory*, as I have discussed in Chapter Four.

Her gynaecologist suggests that Liz is willfully supressing ovulation in response to mixed feelings about her own sexuality and identity. As a child whose parents would have preferred a boy and could not have a second child after the birth of Liz (whose entry into

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24 Adrienne Rich addresses similar problems from a more theoretical perspective in her book *Of Woman Born*, particularly in Chapter 9, "Mother and Daughterhood", section 9.

the world severely damaged her mother's womb); as a thin, flat-chested woman with a boyish figure; as a formerly promiscuous, radical feminist who is now married to an ex-homosexual, Liz is susceptible to her doctor's psychological analyses of "Profound Gender Identity Repulsion", "Role Expectation Confusion", even Liz's own sarcastic contribution, "Penis Envy". She is furious at her doctor and the implications of his accusations. However, the plot encourages us to be a little sceptical about Liz's protestations, showing us that it is possible to interpret Liz's failure to become pregnant, despite her apparent desire and attempts to do so, as ambivalence about gender identity, since pregnancy can be interpreted as indubitable evidence of femaleness and femininity. Liz later acknowledges that the doctor has taken the place of God or the Virgin Mary in the fertility rites enacted by herself and her contemporaries. Both require absolute faith in their abilities to fulfil desires for pregnancy if their magic is to work at all. Liz remembers a childhood visit to the Black Madonna at Monserrat whose "special providence [it was] to bring fruitfulness to Catholic marriages" (*DJ* 91).[25] Yet the Madonna does not always answer the prayers of those who make the pilgrimage to her shrine; in parallel Dr Marshall, the gynaecologist, is also capable of witholding his blessing: "His magic was no more potent than the Virgin Mary's. Her faith was not strong enough; she was not a believer; she was not humble enough; she was not obedient enough; she was not loving enough" (*DJ* 92).

Liz and Ian "seek out the mage to manipulate their moon signs and show them the way through the dark maze", but find that his "spells and moral incantations" (*DJ* 87) are not strong enough to overcome the "curse" which has been placed upon them. Fertility is still seen to be bound up with faith, magic, power and mystery; although the god has changed, the responses are the same. Women have simply exchanged pilgrimages to the chapel for pilgrimages to the fertility clinic.

The connection between faith and fertility becomes clearer on reconsidering the

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25 Muriel Spark's satirical short story, "The Black Madonna" published in *The Go Away Bird with Other Stories* (London: Macmillan, 1958), portrays an "upwardly mobile" young white couple who pray to a Black Madonna for a child. When the child is born with a black skin, their liberal values are tested, revealing their deep-seated racial intolerance. Liz's assumptions and beliefs about herself are also tested in connection with the confronting image of the Black Madonna.

traditional alliance of the witch and midwife. The awesome mystery of birth endows the midwife with special powers:

> Childbirth was locked deep in women's ancient knowledge. Knowledge was power. The local midwife might be despised, pointed out for a witch, treated with suspicion and calumny, but they needed her. In the springtime she made white magic...her lovepotions and binding spells....The summertime was the priest's, putting the seal on what she had already created, closing the mouths of the gossips with a Latin Benediction which sounded little different from the spells with which she had opened the thighs....Muttering over the huge bellies she could bring out what she chose, from that darkness: life or death, heaven or hell. (*DJ* 75)

The association between the witch/midwife and the priest described in this passage indicates the religious and spiritual aspects of fertility and pregnancy in the lives of women. There is an unbroken chain connecting the witch/midwife to the Virgin Mary to the fertility clinic doctor. The image of the witch is redefined in this process, however, taking on a positive aspect which she did not own in phallocentric, patriarchal constructions.

Liz, who is "midwife" to the creativity of others in her role as literary agent, wants to claim some of this power for herself. She imagines herself as a "scheming conniving witch" (*DJ* 75) arranging for her husband, Ian, to conceive a child with Amanda (the woman whom Liz encouraged to write a book on, ironically, natural childbirth). Despite being a modern woman of the 1970s, the image of herself as "spell-spinner" still holds sway in Liz's imagination; pregnancy, fertility and childbirth remain an area of human experience which is not completely explicable in rational terms. In *Puffball* (1980) Fay Weldon engages with similar images of the witch-midwife and her continuing presence in the lives of contemporary women, indicating that elements of the ancient religions, the age-old fears and the power invested in fertility are still with us. Weldon's comic novel explores the idea that the fate of each woman lies in her own body, and that body ties her to the natural world and the fate of all women throughout the ages; comedy is employed to heighten our awareness of the discrepancy between the sophisticated, rational modern beliefs symbolised by the Londoners and the power of magic which manages to undermine

and disrupt the lives of those who are "above such nonsense". *Puffball* tells the story of Liffey, a young woman whose dream of living in a country cottage is realised, and her new neighbour, Mabs, the daughter of a herbalist reputed to be a witch. Although sceptical about her mother's power, Mabs believes it is possible to use the knowledge of herbs to influence events. The novel is named for the fungus shaped like a pregnant belly and is set below Glastonbury Tor. Weldon draws on associations of the Tor with the awe-inspiring mysteries characterising the Nature worship of earlier times. Events in the emotional lives of Mabs and Liffey are reflected in the activity in the sky above the Tor; thunderstorms echo the conflicts in Mabs's mind as she jealously observes Liffey take what she considers to be her own place in the fertility cycle. Although Mabs does not take the name witch for herself, she employs her mother's knowledge to wreak revenge on Liffey and claim the power of pregnancy and motherhood for herself. Mabs is a woman caught between worlds; she is a contemporary woman who knows the power of the old magic, and she is a mother whose place is about to be usurped by younger women approaching the prime of their fertility. Weldon binds the themes of fertility, witchcraft and Nature together with rich imagery to indicate how we might interpret their interconnectedness.

The witch-midwife image is used in *Daughter of Jerusalem* to indicate that Liz's problem goes deeper than gender confusion or rejection; it is closely related to social, political and religious constructions of the feminine and maternal. We are shown that Liz's ambivalence is directed towards not only the choice between male and female and the corresponding power distribution, but also the choice between virgin and mother. Despite what Liz herself interprets as independent, nonconformist behaviour, as readers we recognise that she is a character who must have the love and approval of others to secure her own happiness. It is through her efforts to become a mother that we are shown how women can experience the pressure of social expectations based on the impossible combination of virgin and mother if they are to continue being the recipients of that love and approval. Liz can find no way of achieving the states of virgin and mother simultaneously, which creates a block preventing her from achieving her heart's desire. Instead, she unconsciously suppresses ovulation, thereby avoiding a choice between virgin

and mother.

Virginity has been discussed in some detail in Chapter Three in relation to *Virgin Territory*, so I do not intend to examine the concept as a whole here. What interests me in relation to *Daughter of Jerusalem* is the significance of the apparently mutually exclusive states of virgin and mother. Kristeva points out in "Stabat Mater" that "It would seem that the 'virgin' attribute for Mary is a translation error, the translator having substituted for the Semitic term that indicates the socio-legal status of a young unmarried woman the Greek word *parthenos*, which on the other hand specifies a physiological and psychological condition: virginity" ("Stabat Mater" 163). Thus the problems of Christian women have been exacerbated. It is important to note, however, that virginity can be both a physical and a psychological state in this context. Like Sister Anna of *Virgin Territory*, Liz sides with the "totally male identified" daughter Athena who springs fully formed from the father's head, the virgin warrior who "casts the deciding vote in favor of father right over mother right".[26] She has spent most of her life trying to please her father, yet has also expended an enormous amount of energy establishing her independence from him.

Liz tells a story of her battle against sexist teachers at school who would not allow her to study woodwork. Considering the incident in later life, Liz interprets it in a new light:

> The whole thing had not been a fight of principle, but an infantile desire to humiliate the grownups....The fight had been against her mother and for the love of her father. Not a blow for women, but a use of the most despicable female wiles to score off another woman. It had been an attention-getting gambit, a crude weapon in the war to gain her father's love. (*DJ* 14)

Her father had wanted a son, and had substituted his daughter instead, so that Liz must be Athena the asexual virgin in order to fulfil this role for him. The love between Liz and her father climaxes during their summer holiday in Spain alone together. Soon after, however, it changes. Liz learns her father's lessons so well that she turns against him, betraying his love and trust:

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26 Ruether, *New Woman/New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation* (Minneapolis: Seabury Press, 1975) 38.

> He had taught her to be clever and impudent; to use her wits against the adult world; he had wanted her to think for herself, to be original, not to conform; to believe in her own righteousness against the standard of this world. Why should he hate her for learning her lesson so well? They had fought...They mocked each other in public, and scourged each other in private: each believing that the other was the Judas, theirself the Christ. (*DJ* 102-03)

(The description of the relationship between father and daughter depicted here is very similar to the relationship outlined in Maitland's essay, "Two for the Price of One",[27] which is presented as an autobiographical piece.) Liz leaves home for Oxford and eventually decides to have sexual intercourse with her boyfriend as an act of defiance against her father. By losing her virginity she can free herself from her father, but not necessarily tie herself to another man in his place. That is, the physical act symbolises her release from the father and recreation as psychological virgin, the autonomous woman or Amazon figure. During the night on which this occurs, Liz's father has a massive heart attack which results in his death. Forever after Liz knows she is responsible for her father's death: she broke his heart.

Liz is attracted to the virgin role as both guardian of paternal power and as free, independent woman. The latter is clearly indicated by her commitment to the women's liberation movement which provides her with the freedom she desires. As a young woman she refuses to be bound to one man, promiscuously roving from bed to bed. Although the concept of the virgin as autonomous woman is useful to Liz in her life leading up to the moment at which the novel begins, once she has decided to become a mother, she has difficulty reconciling the conflict between the two states. As a feminist she fears the loss of the freedom she values as an independent woman but cannot have as a mother responsible for young children, a fear which is crystallised in the act of disembarking from the bus:

> She watched a young girl in a pencil skirt and high, high heels trying to hop on to the bus. But her difficulties were as nothing compared to those of a woman with

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27 Sara Maitland, "Two for the Price of One", *Fathers: Reflections by Daughters*, ed. Ursula Owen (London: Virago, 1983).

> two small children and a very obvious pregnancy. If ease in getting off buses was a symbol of anything it was that she came off best staying as she was: blue-jeaned, young, liberated. (*DJ* 5)

While it is important for Liz to maintain her independence and "virginity", she cannot ignore the urgent desire to have a baby of her own; it becomes "a lust" (*DJ* 6). One of the basic precepts of feminism is the "right to choose". The abortion issue is important on these grounds, but equally so is the right to choose pregnancy and motherhood. *Daughter of Jerusalem* explores the belief that there need not be a conflict between feminism and mothering, that it should be possible to reconcile the virgin and mother.

Before Liz can effect this reconciliation between virgin and mother, however, she must resolve her guilty relationship with the father she believes herself to have betrayed. Since her father is dead, she plays out the incestuous scene with her employer, Tony, an authoritative, masculine figure in her current life. The day after a violent argument with her husband Ian, Liz breaks into tears in the office: "[Tony made] Motherlike noises; he kissed the top of her head, soothing her like a child with a hurt knee. His solidness comforted her like her father had done. Big men both of them....She was beginning to indulge herself, here with this daddy" (*DJ* 158). They proceed to make love and Liz describes her experience as "drowning in lust" (*DJ* 159). She gives herself over to sexual desire and thoroughly satisfies her appetite for this male body, enjoying sex with this forbidden man in whom both mother and father are represented. Although she realises that she could find satisfaction in this sort of sex, she needs to interpret the act in what is to her a morally admissible manner: "It was important that he too should consent to the imposture, that he should acknowledge that he was the Father, not the Lover. The wise king, not the younger son who wins the maiden. The good friend, not the adored adulterer" (*DJ* 160). Liz cannot accept that she would prefer his quasi-incestuous, Oedipal love all the time; her loyalty must remain with her husband, Ian, who is as eager for them to have a child as she is, and to whom she has committed her life and love. However, the incident with Tony provides her with an important release, a catharsis which then allows her to reassess her identity and desires.

The episode with Tony is followed by a scene in which Liz makes love with Ian. It stands in stark contrast to the previous experience; Ian behaves almost as a child in relation to her body rather than the masterful, compelling lover represented by Tony: "He fed from her flesh, from her nipples, he was her child....He was her baby....She patted his back as she had seen other mothers do" (*DJ* 163). Instead of playing the child herself, as she does with Tony, Liz is forced into the adult role of mother. While the connotations of incest continue, Liz takes on a more powerful role in this situation.

For the first time in many months, Liz is pleased to see the evidence of menstruation after the events surrounding those few days and prays to God, "Let that dark blood flow" (*DJ* 164). Images of blood, water and washing weave through the novel, establishing the importance of cleansing, purgation and reward. Earlier in the novel, the blood of menstruation is perceived as evidence of barrenness, a reminder of the curse placed on Eve:

> She [Liz] watched the blood discolour the water and could not stop wondering what she was being punished for. She wiped the sink clean and wondered how she could be cleaned, how she could repent and prove her repentance. She could not repent, she had forgotten the formula, her hair was too short to wipe feet with.
>
> (*DJ* 40)

This reference to the biblical text in which Mary Magdalene washes and wipes the feet of Jesus foreshadows the reinterpretation of blood as cleansing agent when it is taken up again at the end of Chapter Seven of the novel, in which Maitland indicates the importance of Christ's ability to wash away sins and stains on the hearts and souls of his followers, just as Mary Magdalene washes away the dust from his feet. Mary Magdalene realises that all is forgiven, that she is accepted without reservation in Christ's love. She believes that there is no need to pay penance to purify herself, that "There was no need to wash away the past" (*DJ* 193). Her own tears of relief and joy in accepting Christ's love are all the washing necessary.

Blood can be seen as evidence of the curse of Eve, and as such has come to play an important role in the lives of women within Judeo-Christian cultures. For centuries women were treated as untouchable, unclean outcasts while they were menstruating. The effect of

this law on the lives of women is seen at its most poignant in the story of the woman with the issue of blood. Maitland retells this story in *Daughters of Jerusalem*, describing the cruel isolation and alienation from society experienced by the woman, her shame, embarrassment, and, finally, her courage. She wonders if the bleeding is a result of the fear she feels in response to her betrothed's demanding kisses, "promising", she worries, "more than they could ever fulfill [sic]" (*DJ* 140). Her anxiety is for the love she desires but does not believe any man will ever be able to satisfy. To her joy, however, she learns that the love she needs is offered by Christ, who possesses a tenderness and sensitivity which is considered unmanly in his culture, but which makes him a "whole" person in the woman's eyes. In this context "wholeness" means that he encompasses both the masculine and the feminine, a humanistic version of "wholeness" which is very similar to that portrayed by Roberts in *The Wild Girl* and *The Visitation*. On touching the hem of Christ's robes the woman with the issue of blood realises that the bleeding has suddenly ceased. She believes his power to perform such a miracle is based on love, a love originating in his "wholeness":

> Had she bled because no man would allow her near him? Had she bled because what she had felt in men had been bad and wild and dangerous and the blood kept them all away, kept her safe in her aloneness?
>
> But the manhood she felt in the Teacher was yearning and tender and sharing....Would the bleeding never have begun if the men had not wished to put a separateness between themselves and the women they feared? (*DJ* 141)

The woman realises that "if bleeding were necessary he would bleed for her" (*DJ* 141). The text suggests that she recognises intuitively that the significance of blood will be reinterpreted in Christianity, that Christ's own blood will be spilt to reverse the curse placed on humankind during the expulsion from Eden, that his blood will wash away the sins of the world.

It is this new interpretation of blood as cleansing, purifying agent that the nuns celebrate on Shrove Tuesday: "[the nuns] strip themselves of the pride they have in their starched white wimples and their Christian virtue. There, naked before their priest-servant,

the blood of the Lamb washes them clean again; makes them whiter than snow" (*DJ* 170). Menstruation indicates the same restoration of purity to Liz after her sexual encounter with Tony. She reinterprets the flowing blood as a reprieve, a forgiveness this month, rather than the sign of failure which it has become for her: "She was washed in the blood of the lamb, the unborn lamb in her gut which had forgiven her, cleansed her and restored her....She was forgiven, freed, liberated in the bleeding" (*DJ* 191). Blood not only indicates a wound; it is also the predecessor of healing. Having bled for long enough, Liz finally begins to restore the wounded self which had been torn between virgin and mother.

Woven into Liz's thoughts is the annual purification of the Goddess Hera, reminding us of the need for forgiveness and renewal, for fresh beginnings:

> A blood-letting, a purging. Once a year the Goddess Hera and her nymphs came down to the fountain of Canathus in Nauplia—and there the Queen of Olympus shook off her clothes and was bathed by her handmaidens in that icy water. In the fountain, bubbling sweetly into the pool below, surrounded by ferns and small trees, an oasis in the deserty uplands, she washed away all the impurities of the year and was restored again in her full virginity. (*DJ* 170)

This ritualised bathing not only provides the signs of forgiveness and renewal, but also suggests fertility with its promise of new life and fresh beginnings. The scene is an image of fecundity, centred as it is on lush growth in the midst of the surrounding desert, focusing on water in contrast to the surrounding desert as the essential life-giving element, the traditional symbol of fertility.

Liz has been educated in the Church's imagery of washing and cleansing of heart and soul. Although they have been useful to her in the past and aided her understanding of herself, she turns now to the mythology of the ancient Greeks and then looks further back into religious and spiritual history. When she observes her friend Alice's waters breaking in the early stages of labour (water which is later contrasted with the salty tears of sterility shed by herself and Ian), she realises that the magic offered by Christ and the Church is no longer sufficiently powerful for her needs:

> The body, she was patiently taught, is the temple of the Holy Spirit. This was the

> water from the inner temple; she would be purged, healed, would obtain the powerful magic from Alice, would glut herself on the water and say Alleluia, Alleluia. Fertility charms did not come from the wounds of that ascetic purity which Christ had poured out on the cross; she did not believe in his magic anymore. But this mingled blood and water, from the source of fertility, that had to be believed. (*DJ* 207)

Liz, recognising that she must look to an older religion with stronger magic, is now the postulant learning from the high priestess who holds the key to pregnancy. She desperately wants to be initiated into the "sacred cult of motherhood" (*DJ* 56), imagining that the women who are already mothers will show her the way "if they believed her a true seeker after the tiny baby-god they would lead her through the rites and she could enter the domain" (*DJ* 217).

The symbol of water is given a rather more light-hearted treatment in the novel's last image of Liz and Ian. The puppy, which Ian has given her as a Christmas present, urinates on Liz, signifying a final washing and cleansing of guilt and bitterness. Liz is at last reconciled to motherhood on her own terms and believes she may now be pregnant.

The novel is structured to reflect the nine months of a human pregnancy, each chapter representing one month. It begins in April, the traditional month of fertility when the northern Spring is at its height, and follows the months and seasons through until December, the dead of winter, which, instead of symbolising an end, marks the promise of a new year and the beginning of the Christian era with the birth of Jesus. By imposing a pattern borrowed from the natural world, Maitland pre-empts the outcome of the story; it unfolds as Liz develops a new understanding of the powerful forces of nature at work in her world which is endorsed by the novel. Gradually Liz learns that she must trust the ancient goddesses of fertility, whose magic is buried in the rhythms of the physical world.

Yet Liz is a "Daughter of Jerusalem", as the title tells us, and as such inherits the culture and mythology of the Judeo-Christian tradition. In a strategic mixing of discourses which is typical of British women writing about politico-religious matters (as I have argued in Chapter One), Liz's contemporary story is related against a background of biblical tales

about women and fertility, pregnancy and barrenness, stories of the power of women and their friendships and hatreds. Each chapter is divided into two sections, the first employing a realist mode in relating Liz's story and the second retelling the tales of biblical women in a narrative voice which suggests their timeless, archetypal status. The stories deal with one or more of the novel's three main themes: fertility, wholeness and love. The juxtaposition of contemporary and ancient stories indicates the centrality of motherhood in the lives of women throughout the ages, which also has the effect of tying women together in their shared heritage, focusing on their commonality despite the fact that some of the stories include descriptions of the jealousies and hatred which divide women.

Maitland weaves together biblical stories, Greek mythology and contemporary discourses in *Daughter of Jerusalem.* Liz and her friends stand as contemporary versions of the archetypal women which inhabit the Bible and Greek mythology. Yet the biblical and Greek stories are themselves retold in the pages of *Daughter of Jerusalem,* simultaneously invoking and undermining the traditional stories as Maitland attempts a feminist imitation and subversion of patriarchal discourse. This in turn offers us a metaphor for the relationship of feminism to the Christian Church which Maitland appears to advocate, since this retention of patriarchal myths and archetypes could be interpreted as a conciliatory gesture, and Maitland certainly appears to encourage us to continue an engagement with Christianity and the Church. But it is a Christianity that desperately requires renegotiation on feminist terms. A shift in emphasis achieved by the creation of a feminist reading position reveals that the patriarchal stories from the Bible and Greek mythology, although problematic, hold useful images of women and the patterns of their behaviour which can aid the feminist project.

Chapter One of *Daughter of Jerusalem* concludes with a retelling of the conception of Christ. Mary is presented as an "unconventional" girl. Although she is constructed as a Mother allied with the Fathers in *Virgin Territory*, a rather different representation is offered by Maitland here. Mary interprets her womanhood and sexuality in an unusual and original manner for her historical period. It is closely linked to her understanding of herself as a whole, unified being, needing no complementary male half for completion: "That

purely conscious, unalienated woman who can so assent with the entirety of her person, needs no biological intrusion between her desire and its fulfilment. She needs no moment of enclosure" (*DJ* 28-29). She overcomes the "clever dualisms" of the Greeks and brushes aside the "guilt", "legalism" and "very male God" of the Jews (*DJ* 29). It is because of her undivided self, her "wholeness", that she can give her assent fully when the time comes to accept the impossible: "It was an assent to the totality of herself, to a womanhood so vital and empowered that it could break free of biology and submission, any dependence on or need for a masculine sexuality—that furrow in which the crop of women's sex has been held to be rooted" (*DJ* 30). We are shown that it is her confidence in her own being which gives her the strength and power to go beyond all she has been taught to find a spiritual life in union with her God:

> She unrooted her desire and carried it as far as it would go; carried it beyond mind and logic higher and higher to the throne of the living God, to the source of light, to the infinite word....The gap between cause and effect is destroyed for ever; eternity penetrates time, without rape. She speaks her assent and Will takes on new meanings. (*DJ* 30)

The novel indicates that Mary has found a totality of being, a wholeness and unity which culminates in the act when "Assent becomes the moment of conception" (DJ 30). Here the conception is reinterpreted as the ultimate fulfilment of female sexuality, rather than an asexual or anti-sexual event.

This ability to assent, to submit with one's whole being is again referred to in relation to conception and Liz's own guilt at not being able to give herself over totally to another's will. Maitland uses a particularly sexist model to describe the way in which Liz imagines the moment of conception: "the sperm penetrate, he gives, she receives, the two are bonded by her submission, his penetration" (*DJ* 139). It would seem that conception is the ultimate submission of the woman, submission of both body and will, and the gender politics of female submission to male dominance is inscribed onto the moment. It is not until Liz is able to submit herself willingly to Tony's embraces, giving up her whole body and mind to him, that she resolves her anxiety about gender identity, virginity and motherhood; only

then is she free to conceive the child she so desperately desires, which leaves the reader with the impression that all Liz needs is a powerful man to take charge and rescue her. While Maitland suggests that spiritual fulfilment in motherhood is possible only on condition that the woman is capable of submitting her will to another, able to commit her whole self to the child in love, there is also some confusion about how this fits into a feminist project. Maitland is treading on dangerous ground in these passages, and is not altogether successful in her attempts to re-imagine female passivity in relation to God's plan. Mary's submission to a male God who impregnates her is all too familiar as the "good woman" who conforms to the patriarchal will; although she appears to rebel against the patriarchy in which she lives, she replaces the Fathers of her society with a transcendent God the Father. Further, the nature of Mary's "wholeness" is never clearly spelt out, suggesting that it is more a fantasy state than a possible reality, despite its attractive appeal. Like Roberts, Maitland examines postmodern concepts of the self (for example, the role of the unconscious in Liz's ability to conceive, the problematic relationship between gender and biology), but continues to hold onto the dream of wholeness. The novel endorses "wholeness" as the goal we ought to work towards.

Once Mary has achieved the "conception of will and faith and love" (*DJ* 51) she breaks the news to the only person who can understand, her relative Elizabeth (for whom the contemporary Liz is named and whose stories are in many ways parallel).[28] The Visitation affirms the value of these two women who are "Too much not exactly like everyone else" (*DJ* 53). Mary is disliked by the other village women because she "had always held herself above them, so abstracted and silent and unattractively opinionated, so uninterested in the vital petty concerns of village life" (*DJ* 52). Elizabeth is pitied and feared as a barren woman. She is isolated from the concerns of most other village women through not having shared the experience of motherhood; her life has not developed in a way the others can understand. Now that she claims to be pregnant at this late age, she is "dismissed as insane, the moon madness from which childless women suffer when it is too late for hope

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28 The significance of this episode in relation to sisterhood was discussed in more detail in Chapter Five.

and they know they will have to go down to their graves with the barely concealed mockery and scorn echoing across the barren desert of their flesh" (*DJ* 52). Although Elizabeth and Mary are alienated from the rest of the village, together they support each other, each gaining confidence and power from the other in a sisterly love.

Landscape and garden imagery are frequently employed in the novel to link the female body with the natural world. Liz notices "the rocky protrusion of her hip bones" (*DJ* 31) and considers "the whole terrain" of her body (*DJ* 32). Mary, mother of Christ, explains her sexuality in terms of a pilgrimage across the land:

> sexuality goes beyond the moment of genital receptivity, goes inward and inward, along the path that men try to follow with their ejaculation, to where the children grow. Where the promised land of soft, white hills and warm, damp, flowering valleys, flowing with milk, is prepared for the traveller. The pilgrim who has pushed his way through oceans and deserts [comes] to the sunlit land where all wants are supplied. (*DJ* 29-30)

The barren womb is represented as a desert, a stark image reflecting the blank, unused spaces of the body and the desolation of the infertile woman. Liz is acutely conscious of what she perceives as the parallel between her own body and the unproductive sand of the desert when she describes her own womb as "a desert that swallowed seed and gave back no return" (*DJ* 218).

Yet the desert holds the potential to bloom and become a hive of activity when the rain comes. By the end of the novel, Liz believes that, in her own case, "the desert has rejoiced and blossomed as a rose" (*DJ* 230). Water symbolises the blessing which creates new life in the desertlike womb that can be transformed into a bountiful garden producing its own "rich fruit" (*DJ* 19, 57). The womb is described as "that magic organ—the Garden of Eden and the seat of madness" (*DJ* 71). These two images draw us back to the significance of Eve in the construction of the feminine within Christian cultures, as well as pointing to the power of the womb and woman as mysterious and terrifying; the woman is to be denigrated as hysterical to reduce that power. In response to these age-old fears, feminists reappropriate the symbols of the feminine and provide new, positive associations. The

novel returns to the Garden of Eden myth, but this time associates woman with the beauty of the natural world rather than its wild, uncultivated and uncivilised aspects; Liz discovers the intricate delicacy of the female body in her search for motherhood in terms of her own identity. One of the tests examining her womb for deformities reveals the fallopian tubes: "at the end of the tubes there was a sudden burst into flower: delicate tendrils of light, like seaweed" (*DJ* 72). Another test, this time a microscopic inspection of her cervical mucus, discloses another secret garden:

> The most beautiful pattern: elegant like ice on a windowpane; irregular fernish fronds crystallised on the glass plate. Her mother had once had a pot of miniature ferns—it had stood in a pot on their dining-room window-sill. She had looked at it often, entranced by the delicate tendrils, the careful tracery against her nose, dampness clinging to it, moss embedded round the base. And here again, the same tangling... (*DJ* 188)

Gradually Liz learns to appreciate the beauty of her female body, recognising it as something to be nurtured rather than satisfying its needs as quickly and efficiently as possible, minimising the extent to which it is allowed to interfere with her freedom and independence. The image of her mother's fern also links Liz to her mother in their common womanhood, foretelling the resolution of their relationship as the novel draws to its close. Through the use of imagery drawn from the natural world, Maitland powerfully reflects Liz's reinterpretation of her identity in relation to her body.

Pregnancy arriving too late to restore a supposedly barren woman to the fold of "ordinary" women is reintroduced with the story of Sarah and Hagar, retold by Maitland at the end of Chapter Three. Sarah, unable to have her own child, chooses Hagar to bear a son on her behalf. She carefully plots the seduction, becoming almost witchlike as she exerts her power over her husband, Abraham, and Hagar, weaving her spell through their lives. Finally, she is outwitted by Abraham's God, a male god who has never answered her prayers. Sarah laughs ironically at her folly, realising she was mad to have believed she could get her own way "in a world where even God is a man and on the other side" (*DJ* 83). Her story underlines the fact that a barren woman is one of the most powerless

members of the ancient Jewish world. For Sara the fertility which would have been a blessing if bestowed in youth, is now "a final twist of spite" (*DJ* 81). She chose to make her own arrangements for having a child, using Hagar, who is almost like a daughter to her, as surrogate mother. She does not assent to the second birth, treating this untimely pregnancy as a punishment for having taken affairs into her own hands. She hates Isaac and feels that he is not really her son at all, since she did not consent to the pregnancy. We are reminded that motherhood is more than simply a biological experience. It is inextricably bound up with the emotional, psychological and spiritual lives of women, with their self-images and their identities.

The story of Delilah at the end of Chapter Four is used to explore the importance of both strength and vulnerability in a man. Just as the woman with the issue of blood recognises the significance of both qualities in Jesus, Delilah finally understands that it is this combination which she loves in Samson, a realisation which increases her sense of her own treachery. At first she despises him for his softness, which seems to her to contradict his physical strength and his wisdom, preferring brutality in men. As soon as she has betrayed him, however, she realises that "his softness, his willingness to share everything with her, even his weakness, his passions, his uncertainties; those were the things that a man should have, those were the things that were better than battle honours, which he had too" (*DJ* 111). Delilah learns through Samson that the traditionally masculine and feminine qualities should not be divided between the sexes; women and men are equally in need of both toughness and tenderness. It is this complexity in a person that is to be valued, which makes a person worthy of being loved. In the same way, Liz recognises that it is because Ian encompasses both masculine and feminine qualities that he can be her saviour, that is, the person for whom she is prepared to accept the pain which accompanies love. It is only when she meets Ian that Liz breaks out of the cycle of promiscuous sex, a cycle which the novel depicts as the means by which Liz avoids commitment to any one person.

The courage of Delilah (albeit misguided bravery) is echoed in the story of Jael who murders Sisera, the enemy of her people. The power Jael discovers in this act is affirmed by Deborah, reminding us of the strength Elizabeth and Mary find through their friendship.

Jael must find the courage for violence inside herself, and, on discovering it, realises she can be strong as well as weak, submissive and powerful at the same time; she learns that she is not confined to the attributes conventionally assigned to women as "feminine". At moments like this Maitland clearly urges her readers to embrace a psychological androgyny along the lines suggested by Heilbrun and Daly in an attempt to achieve the "wholeness" she recommends.[29]

In contrast to the stories of love and friendship between women, Maitland retells the tale of the sisters Rachael and Leah who hate each other. Although Rachael is brave and beautiful, it is the ugly Leah who has been blessed with two strong sons. Leah is, therefore, redeemed in the eyes of her society which values women primarily for their ability to produce sons. Leah's sons find mandrake roots, the plants which contain the magical power to bring fecundity to barren women, and Leah uses them to humiliate the sister of whom she has always been jealous. The noble Rachael is reduced to tearful begging in her need for the roots in the hope of finally bearing a child, again reflecting the centrality of fertility and reproduction in this society.

Finally the stories come full circle, and in the December chapter Maitland describes the birth of Christ. The nine months of pregnancy, during which many aspects of fertility have been examined in the nine chapters of the novel, have passed. Mary reflects on the meaning of her experience, realising it is not quite as she imagined at first. "She has unified herself, going out through the dichotomies and dualisms of body, soul, mind; of heart and tongue" (*DJ* 248), but instead of now reaching the end of that experience, she is aware of yet another beginning. Now that she has transcended the barriers set up by her culture, Mary knows that her achievement has paved the way for more. As readers we are encouraged to share her recognition that the new life brings a fresh start, signifying a spiritual renewal of the world; Christ brings a new message with his life and death. His birth marks the beginning of a new order; his death creates the possibility of eternal life for those who believe in him.

The ancient stories from the Judeo-Christian heritage used in the novel provide us with

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29 See Chapter Two for further discussion of androgyny.

clues to aid our understanding of Western culture's attitudes to fertility and motherhood. The spiritual and religious lives of women in these stories are closely connected with reproduction, whether they can or cannot provide sons to maintain the existence of the tribe. Any power to which they have access is determined by their sexual attractiveness to men (and hence the likelihood of becoming pregnant), or their marriageability (which is also primarily for the continuation of the race). The most vulnerable members of this society are those who are unable or unsuitable to become mothers, such as the woman with the issue of blood and Mary Magdalene, and it is this last group that Christ is shown to protect; through love for the outcasts he restores their self respect.

A discussion of motherhood raises the question of biological essentialism. Maitland refers to the debates on this issue in her novel, but her verdict is not clear. While Liz is warned against the dangers of "biological mythology" (*DJ* 32), she does associate pregnancy with the uniqueness of woman, and her identity is closely linked with her body and its fertility. There is some engagement with the sorts of distinction between biology and social construction made by Irigaray in her use of the term "morphology" rather than "anatomy", that is, the social, historical and psychic inscriptions placed on the body within culture.[30] In the final reckoning, pregnancy, fertility and motherhood are seen in *Daughter of Jerusalem* as basic elements in the social construction of woman, and, while they do not describe the whole woman, it is a construction which can be taken up by women and reassessed in positive terms to their own advantage. With these reservations in mind, then, the experience of motherhood can be seen to provide women with the means to overcome the isolation of their individual lives, connecting them with all women throughout time and allowing them to be part of a "universal" female experience which goes beyond the physical and biological. The concept of motherhood reinterpreted in a politico-religious framework is offered as one path by which women can transcend the limitations of individuality and the ordinary, creating a possibility of reaching out to the realm of the religious and the spiritual.

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30 Elizabeth Grosz's glossary in *Sexual Subversions* provides a useful explication of the importance of using the term "morphology" (Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists* [Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1989] xix).

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE ARK AS SYMBOL OF FEMALE CREATIVITY:

Michèle Roberts' *The Book of Mrs Noah*

In *The Book of Mrs Noah* (1987) Michèle Roberts attempts to rewrite the meaning of the Flood and the Ark in relation to female creativity, exploring this in terms of pregnancy and reproduction as well as writing. It is her fictional discussion of the spiritual significance of motherhood. While Maitland's novel about motherhood, *Daughter of Jerusalem*, focuses on a Christian framework, Roberts employs the mythological symbol of the ark to suggest a more archetypal understanding of the representations of motherhood in Western culture. This chapter will trace the links Roberts makes between the maternal body, desire, language and writing with reference to the French feminist psychoanalytic theory which appears to inform her work. It is here that Roberts clearly brings together ideas about literature, psychoanalysis and religion. This chapter will also discuss briefly Sara Maitland's and Michelene Wandor's *Arky Types* (1987) and Jeanette Winterson's *Boating for Beginners* (1985).

The Book of Mrs Noah can be seen as part of a widespread interest in rewriting and retelling the myths of Western culture from a feminist perspective. In directing attention to the problematic aspects of some traditional stories, feminist writers can highlight the tension between patriarchal and feminist discourses. As I mentioned in the Introduction, the project of rewriting can be criticised for perpetuating the influence of patriarchal myths in that it must always invoke the stories it reworks. For example, Angela Carter's rewriting of fairy tales, which influence the style and motivation of some of Maitland's short stories in particular, has been criticised for the ways in which it "amplifies and re-produces rather than alters the original, deeply, rigidly sexist psychology" it explores.[1] However, for those feminists who wish to remain part of the Christian Church, the

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1 Patricia Duncker, "Re-Imagining the Fairy Tales: Angela Carter's Bloody Chambers", *Literature and History* 10.1 (Spring 1984): 6.

reworking of biblical tales can allow them to reconcile their religious faith with their commitment to feminism in bringing together apparently disparate discourses. Often this rewriting is performed by describing incidents from the perspective of a woman who takes part in those events, but whose story is relegated to the margins in orthodox accounts. Thus we have Eve describing her version of events in Eden, Mary Magdalene's "gospel" and Mrs Noah's account of the building of the Ark and the Flood.[2]

The story of Noah's Ark and the Flood has proved to be particularly fertile ground for rewriting. Alan Dundes' book, *The Flood Myth* (1988) indicates the extent to which the Flood story has been retold throughout history the world over.[3] The story of the Flood is used by Maitland and Wandor in their collaborative effort, *Arky Types*, and by Jeanette Winterson in *Boating for Beginners*. Both works are examples of fiction which is self-conscious of its status as an artificial construction in language, and the consequent possibility of modifying that construction in order to give it more relevance to women's experience.

Sara Maitland's *Arky Types* is an epistolary novel written in collaboration with Michelene Wandor, a member of the feminist writers group to which Maitland and Roberts both belonged. This book intertwines a variety of narrative threads and discourses ranging from the contemporary writers dealing with their publishers, to the archetypal Mrs Noah and Mrs Vicar, to the stereotyped fables of Winnie the worm and the radical lesbian separatist tortoises, Armorelle and Gertrude. The authors appear as characters in the novel, Mrs Noah and Mrs Vicar (representing the Jewish and Christian heritages respectively),

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2 For example, Michelene Wandor's collection of poems, *Gardens of Eden: Poems for Eve and Lilith* (London: Journeyman/Playbooks, 1984), is a fascinating rewriting of Genesis in which Eve gradually learns to assert her independence through her friendship with Lilith. Penelope Farmer's novel, *Eve: Her Story* (1985; London: Abacus, 1986), is a less successful attempt to retell the story of Eden; it lacks the positive power and vitality of Wandor's text, despite its similar aims. A number of Australian women poets attempt shorter rewritings of the Eden myth, as evidenced by the collection *The Penguin Book of Australian Women Poets*, eds Susan Hampton and Kate Llewellyn (Ringwood: Penguin, 1986).

Another strategy employed by feminist writers is to substitute female for male characters in fictional reworkings of traditional stories. Hilary Bailey, for example, creates Christ as a girl in her novel, *Hannie Richards, or, The Intrepid Adventures of a Restless Wife* (London: Virago, 1985). (I have referred to this book briefly in Chapter Three.)

3 Alan Dundes, *The Flood Myth* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

and is clearly an attempt to draw attention to fiction as writing rather than a realistic portrayal of truth. The levels of reality become more and more confusing and obscure as the novel progresses, indicating the artifice and arbitrary nature of language and writing in a postmodern world; it also demonstrates the mixing of discourses which is typical of British women writers exploring politico-religious issues, as I have argued in relation to other texts in Chapter One. *Arky Types* is "deft, funny and fluid"[4] as the reviewer for *Listener* attests, although it does continue to write to an audience who will be familiar with the jargon of gay liberation and the women's movement. There is an exclusive element in the writing which results from "a little too much mutual backslapping in the footnotes referring to each other's earlier books",[5] but I think that, overall, *Arky Types* manages to remain witty and entertaining while exploring the creative process and the use we make of stereotypes and archetypes in explaining ourselves and the world.

Michèle Roberts' novel, *The Book of Mrs Noah*, also experiments with a feminist retelling of the Flood myth. As with Roberts' other works, it also received mixed responses from reviewers. Helen Birch acknowledges the novel's uneven writing which is sometimes "too self-conscious to be really rich" but admires the way in which Roberts "is one of a very few contemporary feminist novelists who engage with and reform the theories of the academy in her work".[6] Valentine Cunningham, on the other hand, accuses the novel of "narcissism and narrowness" despite "having a few bubble-pricking voices",[7] and Anna Vaux in the *Times Literary Supplement* states that: "For the most part Roberts' devices are so dry that they fail to inspire warmth, and generate a language so private and confessional that it rarely extends beyond self-indulgence or wishful thinking".[8] I think it is one of her most interesting works in its formal experimentation which weaves together a number of narrative voices and discourses in its attempts to implement the theories of *l'écriture féminine*.

While relying on some of the traditional associations of the Flood and the Ark, Roberts

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4 Anonymous, *Listener*, 5 November 1987, 31.
5 Carole Mansur, *Punch*, 4 November 1987, 80.
6 Helen Birch, *New Statesman*, 22 May 1987, 27.
7 Valentine Cunningham, *Observer*, 24 May 1987, 25.
8 Anna Vaux, *Times Literary Supplement*, 24 July 1987, 801.

creates Mrs Noah as a librarian who preserves women's stories, and the Ark becomes an archive of female experience. In an interview with Olga Kenyon, Roberts explains: "The idea of the ark came to suggest to me both a woman's body and a storehouse for old books which I love....Ideas around arks, archives, the pregnant body, came together".[9] The novel is written in a form resembling that of a diary, albeit a diary of the unconscious. Its outer framework depicts Mrs Noah diving into the canals of Venice, entering the element which is traditionally associated with the feminine, the womb and the unconscious. The dream sequence which follows examines the traditional mythical status of the ark, eventually taking the myth further in order to reveal its psychological connotations in the world of the unconscious. Instead of the murky depths we might expect, Mrs Noah discovers spiritual enlightenment in this place between waking and sleeping, between life and death, and reveals her dream of a new identity for women. The movement between realism and the non-realist world of dreams and the unconscious reveals the mixing of discourses which frequently marks British women's writing about politico-religious matters, as I have mentioned in Chapter One. Here the realist mode is further interwoven with retellings of biblical and mythical stories, and all combine to investigate French feminist theories which, in turn, transgress the boundaries between poetry, theory, philosophy and polemic.

Mrs Noah herself becomes an ark on this journey to spiritual awareness and self-knowledge. First, however, she is required to descend into a Hell which explores the pain and suffering inflicted on women throughout the ages, but which also provides her with the capacity to re-evaluate the strength of women who have been able to bear that oppression. At the end of the novel we are shown that Mrs Noah can be returned to conscious life only by her husband who saves her both physically, by rescuing her from the canal, and emotionally, by giving her the child she desires, indicating the necessity of reconciliation between the male and the female worlds. Just as there is a suggestion that Liz in *Daughter of Jerusalem* needs to be saved by a man, so too there is in relation to Mrs Noah, but here it

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9 Michèle Roberts, *Women Writers Talk: Interviews with 10 Women Writers*, ed. Olga Kenyon (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1989) 160.

is on rather different terms: Mrs Noah needs a man in order to become a mother, but she has a strong sense of herself as a woman beyond the role of mother.

Mrs Noah considers various imagined constructions of the Ark throughout Western history, realising that none of them will help her to recognise her Ark when it arrives. She expects "a huge seed, tossed along by the waters, carrying its cargo of new life", or "a bestiary, of beasts domestic and fabulous" (*BMN* 17), it might be a series of allegories, a coffin, a coracle, a sieve, a cradle or a nuclear shelter. Although her Ark is to be a revised version of the Ark described in patriarchal history, it continues to rely on the traditional associations of the Ark as a place of sanctuary, an asylum associated with the feminine principle and rebirth. It is a refuge which provides protection for the seeds of survival of women's secret knowledge, the womb from which salvation will spring. Thus it is written both to and against the traditional patriarchal discourses around the Ark metaphor; as with Maitland's use of biblical and mythical stories in *Daughter of Jerusalem*, here we see patriarchal discourses brought into focus in order to be modified rather than abandoned.

The story is structured around Mrs Noah's desire to become the "arkivist", that is, the archivist who preserves women's stories. To this end, she creates the Ark of Women, providing a "room of their own" for all those women who have not been heard in the patriarchal world. Mrs Noah outlines the purpose of this revised version of the Ark:

> [it] has been founded by an international committee of sibyls in order to guard and encourage women's creativity. Every woman who has ever lived has deposited here her book: her story or novel or collection of poems or autobiography....all the stories, from past present and future, are here, rubbing shoulders in the dark....The Ark is not only an archive: it is a rest-home that swims, a workshop that floats, a bubble of temporary retreat for women who need time to write away from their families and domestic cares. (*BMN* 20)

Finally, the Ark is a place where women come "to free their imaginations, to learn to play again, to destroy" (*BMN* 21).

To this Ark Mrs Noah invites five sibyls who reflect various aspects of woman, and at the same time represent five different types of women writers to be found in contemporary

Western society, who in turn represent different aspects of woman as a whole. There is the Babble-On Sibyl, charming wife who wants to be loved by everyone, who wants to be a "real woman" and whose husband considers her little hobby, writing, as an amusing sideline; the (politically and ideologically) Correct Sibyl, "the old pro, famed among her friends for her capacity to stick at it rigorously, to write her thousand words a morning come what may, to produce a meaty piece of social-realist fiction every two years" (*BMN* 30); the Deftly Sibyl, who desperately needs to escape an oppressive marriage in order to expend her energy writing, free from the demands of husband and children, instead of exhausting herself in anger; the Re-Vision Sibyl who struggles against poverty to bring up her daughter alone, writing stories for women's magazines to augment her social security payments; and the Forsaken Sibyl, rejected by the woman she loves and attempting to establish an alternative focus for her emotional sensitivities. Stories are related by the sybils during the course of the diary, but it is never clear exactly who is telling which story. In part, this plaiting together of the stories and narrative voices points to the close relationship between all of the sibyls who are different dimensions of a "universal woman", despite being presented as individual characters. They all represent women who are dissatisfied with their lot, pulled as they are between conflicting loyalties to themselves and those around them; they all know the pain of loss and emptiness in their struggle for fulfilment through writing.

All of the sibyls have a "truth" to reveal about the experience of being woman, and all are encountering a crisis in relation to their ability to disclose that truth. The voyage on the Ark allows them to confront this problem and deal with it, freeing them to continue writing. In this setting, then, writing becomes a metaphor for women's creativity, and as such takes on a deeper significance as the stories unfold.

The sibyls themselves have varying expectations and desires in relation to what the Ark can be for them. Each one hears the call of Mrs Noah when she is immersed in water, the feminine element, or associated with the idea of the Flood. The Correct Sibyl lies in the bath, free from the demands of her children, and imagines that "she is the Ark, plunging through rain and oceans" (*BMN* 36). For her the Ark represents liberation from

responsibilities to everyone but herself, and a freedom from the dualities of patriarchal civilisation. "Lapped in wetness and warmth", floating in the element traditionally associated with women, she "joins two worlds" (*BMN* 35), disregarding the divisions of experience she is normally obliged to maintain. It is as though she returns to the womb, no longer subject to the Symbolic Order in which consciousness is split, and the Ark is closely allied with the maternal body in this construction of experience.

The connection between the Ark and the mother's body is touched upon throughout the novel. One female character remembers: "My first Ark is our mother's body, the womb I shared with [my twin sister] Margaret" (*BMN* 155). Mrs Noah internalises the Ark as she compares her seasickness with morning sickness: "If it were a baby heaving up and down in me, doing a sort of dance, I wouldn't mind" (*BMN* 53). The foetus becomes an Ark buffetted by the waves of amniotic fluid. Mrs Noah has a double vision of the Ark; it is at once an image of the womb, and simultaneously the foetus inside that womb. The Ark is a symbol of birth and of rebirth, a symbol of the security inside the womb, and also the promise of pure, new beginnings as it floats on the floodwaters of the womb.

The Ark has been used as a sign of the Church in Christian tradition, a symbol which is extended beyond orthodox interpretations in *The Book of Mrs Noah* through the story of the medieval Cistercian nun; here Roberts develops the triangular relationship between the Ark, the Church and the womb:

> The little basilica is blown like a bubble in stone, rounded and airy, swelling upwards, suspended, caught. It holds me. I can play in it, roll around in it, pray in it, dance in it, sleep. God is born here. This place enables God to be born: crouches, squats, pushes God out, embraces God. These bricks are woven together to make God's basket, God's Ark.
>
> This church is the woman's body, where God begins. (*BMN* 122)

Here the Church *is* the womb, the site where God and life are to be found over and over again. It is the place of security and the joy and freedom that entails, a comfort which takes one back to the unencumbered delight of direct experience of the mother's body. The Church is the place in which she can recreate the fantasy paradise she imagines existed for

the prenatal infant. Although this is more harmonious and peaceful than the *jouissance* described by Lacanian and Kristevan psychology, connotations of that term as it has been taken up by feminists are helpful in this context: "Women's *jouissance* carries with it the notion of fluidity, diffusion, duration....a giving, expending, dispensing of pleasure without concern about ends or closure".[10] This state is also seen in this context to be akin to the mystic's experience of God.

The Re-Vision Sibyl dreams of gliding easily through the water, totally relaxed in the company of "a bunch of friends" (*BMN* 35) on the Ark. The comforting security offered by this dream of sisterhood on the Ark of Women brings to mind the traditional association of the Ark with the feminine principle and therefore the maternal body or womb. The sense of safety in the company of women friends and the proximity of their female bodies could be understood as an echo of the infant's blissful experience of the womb. Thus the Ark of Women can be seen to recreate the reassuring security of the womb, a place in which experience is determined by the feminine and the maternal. This construction of the Ark as a safe "woman-space" is reflected in the story of the "unmarried woman", the nun, who perceives her abbey as "an Ark of Ladies sailing towards salvation" (*BMN* 112). She comes to value the sisterhood offered by women in a convent to the extent that she longs to become a Beguine, a member of a community of holy women who are "lovers of God and sisters to each other, bound by no vows, submitting to no rule except that of friendship" (*BMN* 116).

The Deftly Sibyl also discovers her freedom in water, swimming contentedly and powerfully in the public pool. Later in the public showers she watches the bodies of the other women and enjoys the beauty of the infinite variety of female bodies: "They're nymphs...or mermaids, swimming around the Ark" (*BMN* 37). She feels "gently amorous" (*BMN* 37) towards them, and is immediately shocked and annoyed at her response. This association of water and the feminine is linked in her mind to a comforting eroticism reminiscent of Nancy Chodorow's descriptions of the preverbal infant's blissful

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10 Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, Introduction 3, *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, eds Marks and de Courtivron, trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen (1980; Brighton: Harvester Press, 1985) 36, n. 8.

response to the maternal body, before the Deftly Sibyl remembers that this is, according to her adult consciousness, inappropriate.

The Babble-On Sibyl shares the liberating experience of swimming through water and discovering there a forgotten pleasure in the power and beauty of her female form. She imagines the joy of being able to "live on an Ark, to dive off it daily into this sparkling sea, to drop down through it to that iridescent bed" (*BMN* 39). It is important for her, however, to share her delight with her husband Neil, rather than opting for the freedom of being unattached to family as the other sibyls have done.

For the Forsaken Sibyl, it is not so much a desire to be free from attachments as a need to find an alternative to loving women. She needs to create a new psychic space in which to live, and does so by reinterpreting the message of the rainbow which accompanies the Flood:

> [The Forsaken Sibyl] stopped painting at puberty, when she grew frightened of colours. That red Flood swept her towards the knowledge of death. All the colours got mixed up, no boundaries betweeen them, blurred into each other and lost their names, a dark smear on the palette. She wanted to enter the dance of colours, to go beyond the severe line traced by others' words around that white space, her female body, to explode it. That way lay madness. So she drew back, stopped painting, used words instead, unravelled the wild complex whole into limping lines of words that belonged in time and space and could only say one thing at a time. (*BMN* 38)

Menstruation, the "red Flood", is experienced as restriction and constriction; suddenly she is contained by her culture's construction of woman. Her freedom to choose and develop an identity of her own is denied expression in this representation of the sexually mature woman as Eve, tempter of man and bringer of death. The Forsaken Sibyl forfeits her ability to revel in the freedom of her self and succumbs to the pressures of the "phallogocentric order", confining her self-expression to the Symbolic Order in obedience to the Law of the Father; she feels compelled to abandon the wild energy of paint in deference to the flood of menstrual blood and attempts to use the Father's tools (words)

instead, turning from painting to writing.

Now she decides to "learn to live in the rainbow. To find the end. She wants rain. An Ark" (*BMN* 38). The Flood of menstrual blood is no longer a punishment (Eve's curse); it is the purifying force which washes away evil in her new vision. Now, however, evil is seen to be that which separates her from her own creativity and discovery of her identity as woman. In this enlightened state, the Forsaken Sibyl reinterprets the covenant symbolised by the rainbow as a promise to herself to allow her female creativity full expression in her search for self-knowledge. That she uses images of rain and the Ark, that her identity is to be revealed in this acceptance of water, draws on the traditional associations of water with fertility and the feminine principle, as well as resurrection and spiritual rebirth, baptism and the unconscious. It is the primary element of identification for the infant floating in the undifferentiated amniotic sea in the mother's womb. The Flood allows the Forsaken Sibyl to regain access to her female self and creativity.

Mrs Noah re-examines the notion of the Flood as a purifying agent sent by a patriarchal god to annihilate a corrupt world in her journey through Genesis. She returns to the first world, Atlantis, the city lost beneath floodwaters, also called "the house of memory and of forgetting" (*BMN* 64). It is a repository of the collective unconscious of Western culture. Here she finds a woman-place dominated by a sexuality of multiplicity and autoeroticism. It is a voluptuous sensuality in which the feminine consciousness reigns in opposition to the unity of "phallic single-mindedness",[11] a chaotic world of undifferentiation and the wild pleasures of *jouissance*. Over this scene, the patriarchy, represented by the Gaffer (who calls himself the Word of God but is renamed by Mrs Noah as the "one who makes gaffes" [*BMN* 54]), is seen to have laid a grid of narrative "so that it can be read in descending lines from left to right" *(BMN* 67) in order to "make a clear design, slot incident onto a discernible thread" (*BMN* 68). This means of organising and describing experience is revealed as an artificial construction of phallocentrism and is placed in opposition to the feminine perspective which allows for greater fluidity and flexibility and

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11 Ann Rosalind Jones, "Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of *l'Écriture féminine*", *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory*, ed. Elaine Showalter (New York: Pantheon, 1985) 365.

encourages multiplicity rather than a single, unified interpretation. Roberts herself reflects this feminine perspective in *The Book of Mrs Noah* by relating many versions of the story of woman's experience in a patriarchal world, and by examining the Ark metaphor from a variety of directions which all lead, ultimately, to the same point. Mrs Noah, too, posits an alternative method of organising knowledge, in her case as a librarian creating a means of accessing the library's holdings; she determines to start at the centre and radiate outwards in all directions, using a crystalline structure rather than a hierarchical one: "I design a classification system that puts Woman at its centre and allows her to relate to anything under the sun" (*BMN* 132).

Within the underground world of unbridled sexuality, Mrs Noah must confront the reality of the Mother, the inevitable consequence of one aspect of female sexuality and the source of human life. The Mother is perceived as the woman who is no longer free: "A woman entering pregnancy is entering time, and history, process whirling her inexorably towards the moment of giving birth, that long road of mothering, her life altered irrevocably and utterly, no going back", she is "tied down; committed, as to prison" (*BMN* 68). She ponders the notion that perhaps this is why the delivery is known as a "confinement". The Mother is the embodiment of all the confining contradictions facing women who are defined by a patriarchal world. It quickly becomes apparent that, in the current set of social mores, women can never win, that they must always be torn between contradictory choices and identities. The fate of woman is determined by a culture which, from the outset, constructs her failure, imprisoning her in expectations she can never fulfil. The Gaffer's "novel", the Bible, gives woman a choice between Eve and the Virgin Mother, both of which are unsatisfactory models for women in that they deny women the possibility of finding their own voices. Instead, an identity is imposed upon them from outside.

An alternative to this imposition of voice or identity is described in a rewriting of the Daphne and Apollo story from a pre-Christian era. Mrs Noah tells the tale as an initiation ritual to enter the ranks of the sibyls. She commands women to listen to the creaking of the laurel tree, "the laurel named as Apollo's sign (the male poets are crowned with laurel

leaves)" (*BMN* 52), the tree which imprisons the woman Daphne within. The laurel becomes an emblem of woman confined within the laws of a patriarchy. By listening carefully, women can transcribe something about the nature of the female condition. Daphne is thus transformed once again; she is transmuted into the "fierce priestess of women's mysteries" (*BMN* 52), and "Every month they [her followers] repeat the rite, chewing on the tough laurel to release the fierce spirit, to find their power, express it; hunting for images and tales, dipping their fingers in blood and painting their mouths, then singing" (*BMN* 53). There is a suggestion here that, just as the Forsaken Sibyl has seen fit, the monthly blood rite, the periodic menstrual flood, is reinterpreted as an affirmation of womanhood instead of signalling the curse placed on Eve in response to that first act of "corruption" which finally led to an evil world, the extent of which could be controlled only by another Flood. To reclaim their voices as poets and storytellers is to seize the power to create their own identities as women. The first step in this reappropriation of a voice is to reinterpret the significance of menstruation, that irrefutable evidence of mature womanhood, to understand it as a source of strength instead of shame.

The rhetorical strategies by which Roberts sets out to reappropriate the Flood myth, and along with it the female voice, are at once more complex and more obvious than her attempt to reappropriate Mary Magdalene's "gospel" in *The Wild Girl*. In the process of retelling the story of the Flood, Roberts borrows many of the traditional elements as well as reinterpreting the significance of the symbols traditionally used to tell that story, for example, the Ark and the rainbow take on new meaning as the *The Book of Mrs Noah* unfolds. In *The Wild Girl*, Roberts follows the basic outline of the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Mary Magdalene acts as a mouthpiece for feminist ideology, providing us with an account of the life of Jesus from a woman's perspective. At times Roberts takes the opportunity to polemicise on the feminists' behalf, but on the whole *The Wild Girl* follows a conventional narrative structure which chronologically traces the events it describes. Thus it is a version of the gospel informed by feminism, and in this way is a reappropriation of the Christian message.

The Book of Mrs Noah, in contrast, is more like a collection of short stories strung

loosely together on the thread of Mrs Noah's journey, using a spiritual pilgrimage as a framework in a structure reminiscent of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Unlike *The Wild Girl, The Book*'s association with the biblical source exists on a symbolic rather than narrative level. Instead of retelling the story of the Flood and Noah's Ark as it appears in Genesis (in the way that Timothy Findley does in *Not Wanted on the Voyage* (1984), for example), Roberts is much more concerned with the psychological significance of the myth. The closest we get to the biblical story is the Wanderer's account of her life; as her story unfolds we gradually realise that she is the original Mrs Noah.

The Wanderer's story provides us with a fairly straightforward example of the appropriation and reappropriation of stories (and with them, of voice, identity and language) which serve as a basic premise for *The Book*. Here we learn of the Wanderer's dreams warning of an imminent flood and the means by which she and her family can be saved from destruction. When she tells her husband about these dreams, he appropriates her intuition and knowledge, repeating her information in his own terms in an attempt to make it his own:

> —If your God is serious, I say: and he really intends to destroy us all with a great flood, we could escape if we built a boat with a roof. A house that could float....a covered wooden shelter that could go with the storm and ride it, that might save us.
>
> —I'll go and ask God what he thinks, Jack says.
>
> He comes back next morning.
>
> —God is willing for us to be saved, he announces: since we are less wicked than the rest of mankind. What we have to do is to build a big wooden Boat with a roof and go into it with our sons and their wives and all our animals and livestock.
>
> (*BMN* 74-75)

The Wanderer's husband is thus constructed as a blatant plagiarist, deluding himself that his wife's ideas are his own property. By rewriting this story, Roberts reappropriates that knowledge, reclaiming it for all women.

A similar strategy is employed in retelling the story of creation. The Gaffer's novel, the

Bible, is criticised by the sibyls, and he constructs an alternative version which focuses on the power of the mother instead of the father's authority. The same events occur, but their significance is moderated by the presence of the mother. The power of mythmaking is passed back and forth between men and women throughout *The Book*, indicating the appropriation and reappropriation of language and identity which has constituted the human condition since time began.

Jeanette Winterson subjects the Bible to a similarly literary analysis in *Boating for Beginners*. It uses a more conventional narrative structure than *The Book* (and, for that matter, Maitland's and Wandor's *Arky Types*), but it too explores the nature of writing and fiction, particularly in relation to the mythmaking which contributes to the development of a cultural identity. The novel frequently alludes to works of fiction outside itself, and treats the Bible in the same vein as other works of fiction. Noah is depicted as a fundamentalist preacher who is writing a bestseller about the Flood in conjunction with his lover, the romance writer Bunny Mix. He records building an Ark of gopher wood, explaining that:

> we're creating a text full of mystery and beauty and we're supposed to be a simple civilisation....How can we say, "And God spake unto Noah and told him to build an ocean-going ark from fibre-glass with a reinforced steel hull"? It reads like an enthusiast's magazine, not the inspired word of God. Gopher wood is much more poetic.[12]

The concluding pages of the novel, which borrow directly from Genesis, are read in the light of this discussion and debates of a similar nature that occur throughout the text. The reader has suspended disbelief during the previous pages, with the consequence that the Bible is now interpreted on the same level of reality as that which went before. Having witnessed Noah's struggle to create the text, we are not prepared to give the biblical text any more or less credibility than we are willing to apportion the fictitious Noah himself. Once again we are reminded of the arbitrary nature of all constructions within language, the effect of which is to free us to create new myths in place of those which are no longer relevant.

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12 Jeanette Winterson, *Boating for Beginners* (1985; London: Methuen, 1988) 137.

The Wanderer's story is central to *The Book of Mrs Noah*'s concerns with the relationships between the Flood, blood, water, the female body and the Ark. It is inspired by a desire on the part of the sibyls to fill in some of the gaps left in the Gaffer's patriarchal version of world history. The Wanderer is a woman belonging to one of the nomadic tribes of Israel and describes the harsh realities of her life through connecting images of blood and water:

> Linked together by our need for water, my people are also linked by blood, the ties of kinship which separate us from the other nomads wandering this harsh world. Blood is spilled when we defend our claim to pitch camp at a particular watering hole, a particular spring....We offer blood sacrifices of lambs and kids. (*BMN* 71)

She goes on to explain that "Blood also separates women from men" (*BMN* 71). While she herself recognises that this monthly sign of difference is something of which she can be proud, she soon learns that it is believed to be a source of humiliation in her society.

In the midst of this desert existence spent travelling from oasis to oasis, the Wanderer begins to understand her life as a "long thirst" *(BMN* 71). She imagines "Fresh water trickling over my dry tongue, loosening it to prayers and songs" (*BMN* 71). She discovers for herself a god who accommodates the fluidity of these prayers: "I flow out of myself and become pot, hide, fish, earth, leaf. I worship the creation of the world day by day by letting myself become part of it, by working. God is in my hands as they scrub, wring, knead, scour, caress, sew, carve. I act, I create, and God pours through me" (*BMN* 72). This is in direct contrast to her husband's god who is "a mighty father in the sky" (*BMN* 72), the traditional Jewish Yahweh, a god who demands the flow of sacrificial blood in his terrible power, an image of death rather than life. The Wanderer (whose name indicates that she is not fixed but fluid), thirsts for the life-giving feminine element, suggesting her desire for and identification with a metaphorical mother's milk, a longing for reconnection with the feminine and maternal.

From their opposing views of God, both the Wanderer and Jack discover that the earth is to be flooded and realise they need to build an Ark if they are to survive. The Wanderer learns of the imminent deluge through two dreams in which the earth is symbolised by a

pregnant woman:

> The earth appears to me as a woman groaning and arching in labour....Her waters breaking are a great flood. For nine months she has carried the seed of new life safely inside her, letting it float on her waters. Now it rushes out on a flood-tide of water and blood, while she heaves and shouts....Jack and I and our children are there too, swimming on the waters inside her belly until we are ready to be born.
>
> (*BMN* 74)

The female body is the Earth Mother, her womb the Ark in which life is sustained. The floodwaters from which life is to be reborn is akin to the amniotic fluid; in this text it provides the possibility of spiritual rebirth in the process of washing away old corruptions, purifying the human race of its past excesses.

After nine months aboard the Ark, new life is born. During the voyage the Wanderer has strengthened her convictions concerning the nature of God and develops a new vision of life. She learns to recognise the sisterhood she shares with her daughter-in-law Sara and moves from an attitude of hostility to a position of loving respect as she discovers the inner strength and dignity of the younger woman. Together they reorganise life on the Ark in preparation for the new civilisation awaiting them. When they strike land again, the Wanderer rejects the death cult of Jack's God, choosing instead to worship the living God. Although both Jack and the Wanderer believe the rainbow is a sign from their respective Gods, they interpret its message quite differently. While Jack understands the rainbow to be an indication of his God's pledge of alliance with mankind and man's "dominion over all the animals and birds, over all the fruits of nature, over the fish that swim in the seas" (*BMN* 85), to the Wanderer it is a sign that they must move on from an outdated world view. She recognises the necessity of achieving some sort of equality between all creatures and condemns her husband's response. Instead, she "dream[s] of a harmony between all created things, a state of peaceful growth, of unity and kindness and no killing" (*BMN* 87). For the Wanderer, the rainbow acts as an umbilical cord between the people and their mother, the earth, which "links our new life to our old one, ties heaven to earth, knots us to God" (*BMN* 86). The image of the umbilical cord emphasises her move towards a

feminised world view which focuses on birth and continuity. It is a world which requires change and flexibility. The Wanderer advocates that all people must take water as their model; they must be fluid, "flowing past each other in peace" (*BMN* 82). She senses that humankind needs a world in which there are no strict rules and expectations confining individuals and denying them the opportunity to discover their own natures for themselves.

One of the most important aspects of the Wanderer's vision that sets her apart from the world envisioned by her husband is her rejection of killing. She proclaims that blood sacrifices are inappropriate in the light of the death and destruction that have already been perpetrated on earth in the name of God. Having been graced with rebirth after the annihilation of the inundation, the Wanderer believes that a constant renewal is necessary to maintain the cycle of life.

The Wanderer's perspective is placed in opposition to the Christian option of a single rebirth into eternal life, a vision shared by the contemporary Mrs Noah who reaches an awareness of it whilst gazing at a sixteenth-century painting:

> The rope of cherubs is the rainbow, arching, in all the rainbow's colours, entwined with the white clouds, around the Madonna and her Child, enclosing them.
>
> So the rainbow signifies the rebirth of humanity. Not just once, as the Old Testament has it; or twice, as the New Testament commentators argue; but over and over again....But perhaps renewal has to be achieved repeatedly, by each of us, by each community. The divine child has to be born, with labour and struggle, in each of us: the discovery of how to create a world of freedom and justice, how to live fully, how to stop hating and killing, how to prevent the planet from being blown up. (*BMN* 101)

The Ark is assigned a new importance in this revitalised mythology; it becomes a symbol of the endless cycle of creativity signified by the maternal body and the circle of the womb. The contemporary Mrs Noah parodies the Eucharist, reinterpreting it as the blood bond between mother and child: "Eat this spoonful for me, darling. This is my body and my blood. Do this in memory of me. The blood and body of the mother nourish the child inside. That is the true holy communion" (*BMN* 102). We are directed towards a new

understanding of a spirituality which rejects the death cult of Christianity depicted in this construction in which the patriarchal religions are seen to worship death (and recalls the life-denying versions of Christianity depicted by Margaret Drabble which I discussed in Chapter One). Within Christianity the Ark has been used to represent the Church itself which holds the germ of eternal life, and has also been interpreted as a symbol of the Virgin Mary's body which bears the seed of everlasting life through the agency of Christ. However, both of these representations seek a life after death, the only access to that eternal life being mortality. Thus the novel suggests that the Wanderer's enlightenment is a specifically feminine spiritual response, an awareness resulting directly from the experience of the maternal body which is ineluctably connected with the endlessly cyclical nature of birth, growth and death.

Seen in relation to the enlightened vision of the Cistercian nun, that the Church is "God's Ark" and is also "the woman's body, where God begins" (*BMN* 122), the connections made by the Wanderer between the Ark, the womb and God become clearer. Her dream of the earth as a mother whose womb protects the Ark, and her experience of God flowing through her in the course of her everyday life, both point to a conception of the female body as an image of God. The relationships between the womb and the Ark, the view of the Ark as the foetus floating on the amniotic floodwaters of the womb, symbol of new life, and the Ark as the womb itself which holds that seed of life, together form an image of God. Like the womb/Ark symbol, God is experienced as embracing and surrounding the world as well as being inside that world, as both a protective envelope and irreducibly integrated with the elements of that world.[13] This metaphor of God as womb is further strengthened by an understanding of God as the ultimate source of life. It is a concept of God which draws on Mary Daly's notion that the word "God" should be used as a verb,[14] indicating a dynamic process of constant change and rearrangement, encompassing all possibilities in endless renewal.

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13 See Una Kroll, "A Womb-Centred Life", *Sex and God: Some Varieties of Women's Religious Experience*, ed. Linda Hurcombe (New York and London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987) for an extension of this idea.

14 Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (1973; Boston: Beacon Press, 1974) 33.

The metaphor of the Ark as womb leads to a revitalised interpretation of woman made in the image of God. *The Book of Mrs Noah* insists that we recognise a reappropriation of Genesis in which God is described as creating man in the "image of God", that "male and female created he them". Woman is seen to be just as much a reflection of God as is Man. The novel attempts to persuade us to conceive of God in a new totality which is reflected in the female body. The creative, protective, loving God who gives life in a motherly mode is clearly represented in traditional patriarchal constructions of "Woman as Nurturing Mother". In complementary contrast, God and the maternal body also exhibit the powerful, destructive forces of the universe.[15] In women, this is evident in the violent pain and suffering of childbirth. The flood of her waters breaking sweeps away all obstructions in the path of new life in imitation of the Flood sent by God to purge the world in order to begin life afresh. To embody all of this is to reflect all aspects of God; it is also to fulfil the potential of a humanity made in God's image.

There is a danger here of privileging the female over the male, of simply reversing the patriarchal structures so strenously criticised by feminists, and thus continuing to perpetrate the same crimes against humanity feminists have attempted to dismantle. However, *The Book of Mrs Noah* narrowly escapes this fate if it is seen to be a construction set up as a counterbalance to the patriarchal case that *man* is made in the image of God. It is a means of posing an alternative reflection of God to which women can relate in order to fulfil their humanity, but is not constructed as the only possibility for humanity. This is what Mary Daly refers to when she calls for the Second Coming and the liberation of all humanity.[16]

Mrs Noah's Advent is her arrival at an understanding of her coming into being and reaching her full humanity. She describes her journey to self-discovery through the metaphor of a child's Advent calendar: "Each day I pull open a new door or window....Inside each one I find an image printed: a lamb, a star, a shepherd's crook, a bunch of grapes, an angel. And so on through the month. When at last I open the door marked 25 December I find the Child inside" *(BMN* 63). Mrs Noah must peer through the

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15 See, for example, Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Womanguides: Readings Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985) 9.

16 Daly, "Beyond Christolatry: A World Without Models", *Beyond God the Father.*

doors and windows of her own soul to find that Child which represents knowledge of herself as Woman.[17] It is not until she understands this that she opens the possibility of fulfilling her human potential in a revitalised construction of what the Second Coming predicted in Christianity might really entail. The novel ends where it began, about to repeat the cycle it has just completed as Mrs Noah begins to write her story. This time, however, she is interpreting her dreams and visions with the benefit of hindsight and from the vantage point of pregnancy. The structure of *The Book* thus imitates the cyclical nature of birth and death, of menstruation and pregnancy, reflected in the experiences of the female body.

One aspect of Mrs Noah's Advent is related to the pregnancy she has coveted throughout the journey. In the "realistic" dimension of her diary we have witnessed her attempts to persuade Noah to agree to their having a child. By the conclusion of the Ark voyage she has achieved her goal and is now pregnant. Thus, she becomes a reflection of God in the manner which has been developed through the Ark metaphor, and the novel suggests that it is thus that she approaches her full potential as a human being who is "made in God's image".

However, the pregnancy itself exists on a metaphorical as well as a literal plane. Mrs Noah has discovered her creativity as a whole of which only one aspect is the capacity to reproduce. She also establishes her ability to express herself in creative writing. In doing so, she symbolically reclaims the voice of Woman, giving birth to a new concept of the female self. No longer content to remain silent, she reclaims her identity in reclaiming her voice. All of the sibyls need to write in order to establish their identities as a reality; to be unable to write, to be voiceless, is to lack identity.

Mrs Noah's ancient counterpart, the Wanderer, discovers her own voice and realises that it is imperative that she rename her world in life-affirming words in opposition to the patriarchal cult of death; in the process of taking the power of naming she defines her world in her own terms, from her own perspective. In order to ensure that her vision is passed

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17 I use the representative term "Woman" here instead of the individuals suggested by "women" because the book is working towards a concept of a "universal woman" in its attempt to define the commonality of women.

on from generation to generation, the Wanderer invents writing. She draws pictures in mud bricks as an aid to memory, using them to build a new world and endowing her vision with permanency. She explains the purpose of writing to her daughter-in-law, Sara, sharing her vision of a new reality with the younger woman whom she has come to regard as the heir of the new world.

Writing thus becomes a symbol of that creativity which is intimately linked to woman's identity. In this way, writing and speech are reappropriated by women. Instead of accepting that the Symbolic is the domain of the authoritative male, Woman can take her place beside him and reclaim language for her own ends. No longer silenced by the Law of the Father, Woman can at last voice her own identity and subjectivity, an important appropriation because it is within the Symbolic Order that identity and subjectivity are created in the first place, according to Lacanian and Kristevan theories.

Roberts herself is deeply concerned about the importance of women finding their voices in a society which discourages them to do so, writing against the remaining vestiges of the silence enjoined on modest women through the centuries. Roberts states in an interview: "My writing generally is fueled by the fact that I am a woman. I *need* to write in order to break through the silence imposed on women in this culture".[18] It is through taking the power of naming and of using the language themselves that women can create their own identities and play a role in the public world.

In *The Book of Mrs Noah* the importance of being able to write one's own story, and therefore one's own identity, is introduced in the tale of the illiterate Meg Hansey. The man who proposes to tell Meg's story describes his intentions thus:

> My idea is to combine the sensational details of popular novels and broadsheets with the sober nature of religious confessional tracts. I want to tell a woman's story. I want to create a woman's voice. Of course I have to invent Meg's style. In real life she's not got much of a way with words, bless her. I polish up what she tells me; I give it a shape; I make her up. You have to. (*BMN* 192-93)

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18 Michèle Roberts, *Contemporary Authors*, Vol. 115. ed. Hal May (Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1985) 380.

The male author absorbs what he sees as his right and duty to create an identity for the woman, despite the fact that she is capable of speaking with her own voice, telling her own story in her own words. The writer moulds her to fit his concept of what he believes the wronged woman should be, providing her with the patriarchy's authorised version of her identity.

To be able to write is to be able to articulate desire with some sort of permanency. Roberts draws on her own formulation of a simplified version of Kristeva's explication of the relationship between desire and language[19] in which desire is created at the moment the maternal *chora* is split and the infant enters the Symbolic, thus acquiring access to language. It follows that the use of language necessarily entails a gap, a lack, which makes desire possible. This desire need not be a negative force, however; it can be a source of energy and joy. Mrs Noah's journey into the self leads at last to the realisation of the connection between language and the mother: "Writer. Mother. Two words I have linked through this voyage on the Ark, this arc of stories, a distance of so many nights, such longing. This long twist of words spun out of loss" *(BMN* 275). Writing and using language can then be interpreted as an activity which opens out the possibility of desire, anticipation and excitement. The desire experienced in language, and in breaking the rules of language, can, in its most positive light, be used as a means of approaching the *jouissance* associated with the maternal and the feminine.

The Forsaken Sibyl rediscovers this joy in relation to writing, finding that the recognition and acceptance of desire is the path to creativity. For her, resolution comes in the form of being able to write, of finding her voice, once more. She realises that:

> Writing is like meditation: you focus, concentrate on the breath going in and out of the body, accept the stream of images passing through. You record them, then play and pare. Not only must you let yourself be a conduit for that flow of images moving from outside to inside and then out again, crystalline and dancing; you must

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19 The text which is of particular interest here is Kristeva's *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine and Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980).

> translate it, anchor it in your own bodily existence in society and history, bring all of yourself to bear on it as you search for metaphors. (*BMN* 208)

Desire and pleasure are interwoven in both language and the body; they cannot be separated from each other. The novel suggests that, for woman to voice her identity, to articulate her subjectivity, she must inscribe her body in the text. Mrs Noah finally acknowledges that "This is the house of language. The house of words. Here, inside the Ark, the body of the mother, I find words" *(BMN* 273). I think that it is precisely this, rather than a simple inversion of patriarchal discourse, which the French theorist Hélène Cixous attempts to describe in her manifesto for *écriture féminine*. In "The Laugh of the Medusa" Cixous declares that:

> Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies —for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text —as into the world and into history —by her own movement.[20]

She claims writing for women in order to break out of the silence that has been imposed upon them. This achieved, the difference between her use of language and that of men is obvious, according to Cixous:[21]

> She doesn't "speak", she throws her trembling body forward; she lets go of herself, she flies; all of her passes into her voice, and it's with her body that she vitally supports the "logic" of her speech. Her flesh speaks true. She lays herself bare. In fact, she physically materializes what she's thinking; she signifies it with her body. In a certain way she *inscribes* what she's saying, because she doesn't deny her drives... (Cixous 251)

This occurs, according to Cixous, because of woman's closeness to the mother in their common womanhood, and thus woman can write in the "white ink" of the mother's milk;

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20 Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa", *New French Feminisms*, 245. Further references will appear in the text.

21 It can be argued that Cixous slips from the cultural construction of the feminine to the biological female, as Toril Moi points out in *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London and New York: Methuen, 1985) 113. Although she begins by discussing "feminine writing", which can be found in the work of men and women, this soon becomes closely allied with the female body.

that is, she has constant access to the maternal body.[22] She suggests that it is the economy of desire that is set up in the woman's relationship to the maternal body that acts as a source of creativity and which profoundly influences her sexuality. *Écriture féminine* would then be derived from and inspired by the pulsations of this libido and could thus be seen as a direct expression of the female body.[23] Cixous makes her appeal to women by explaining that "Oral drive, anal drive, vocal drive—all these drives are our strengths, and among them is the gestation drive—just like the desire to write: a desire to live self from within, a desire for the swollen belly, for language, for blood" (Cixous 261). More simply, Madeleine Gagnon envisages an inscription of the female body in the text by which "All we have to do is let the body flow, from the inside; all we have to do is erase...whatever may hinder or harm the new forms of writing; we retain whatever fits, whatever suits us".[24] Both Cixous and Gagnon rely on the notion that it is her sexuality which defines woman and states her difference from man, therefore it is through the expression of her sexuality that she can rediscover her own identity. Further, *écriture féminine* constitutes a program for political change; in Ann Rosalind Jones' words, "to write from the body is to re-create the world" (Jones 366).

The ideas explored by Cixous in her search for a definition of woman have been criticised for their apparent biologism and essentialism. The theory of *écriture féminine* is shot through with many problems, not least of which is that it makes sweeping generalisations about woman that take no account of racial, cultural, social or individual specificities, and seems to continue to participate in the dualism which posits male and female as opposites, and female continues to be defined in terms of the male. More sympathetic readers, such as Gerardine Meaney, interpret Cixous' work as a deliberately transgressive strategy which deconstructs and disrupts "traditional and conventional

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22 Cixous does not address the problematic relationship between the woman and her mother, ignoring the frustration and anger which can be part of that relationship, as the work of psychologists such as Dorothy Dinnerstein indicates.

23 Such attempts at recording a direct response to experience must still be mediated by (unreliable) words, which casts doubt on the success of the project of inscribing the body in the text. However, Roberts' text experiments with these ideas in an attempt to discover ways in which this theory might be put into practice.

24 Madeleine Gagnon, "Corps I", trans. Isabelle de Courtivron, *New French Feminisms*, 180.

categories", unravelling "the linguistic bases of opposition, certainty and gender".[25] However ambiguous or open to misreading Cixous' own texts might be, it is still possible to read *The Book of Mrs Noah* as an attempt to put these problematic theories into practice; although this leads at times to overwriting, the novel retains its experimental interest.

The "pleasure of the text", to borrow Barthes' phrase, becomes a generalised pleasure in answer to a primal desire. Reading and writing provide a path to reliving the *jouissance* of the infant. Mrs Noah explains: "I sit in the Bodleian, the pages of books raining through me. Books are food: I open my mouth and am filled and snort like a baby. Reading is joy felt in the body. I feast at a banquet, can feed uninterruptedly, pleasure flowing through me in wave after wave" *(BMN* 210). Later she decides that "the pleasures of sex are like those of reading: you hunger, you yearn, you open up, you swallow, you take it in. The body, the book" (*BMN* 244). The sensual imagery used, along with its suggestion of orgasm, explores both the physical and pyschological effects of desire fulfilled in the pleasure of the text. Roberts describes a similar experience in her own life:

> I started to see my own habit of voracious reading of novels, my need to tear into them and devour them, as my aggressive need for the absent maternal breast, my rage at its absence compensated for by the fantasies provided in the novels. On another level, the mother *is* lost in patriarchal culture; I don't believe that little girls can get proper mothering in a world that is based on the power and status of fathers. Reading a novel compensates for two losses, two griefs: the loss of the actual breast every baby has regularly to experience; and the loss of the nurturing mother that little girls in particular experience. The loss of any symbol of the power of the female.[26]

By signifying books as food and sex in *The Book of Mrs Noah*, the nurturing role of the maternal body is inextricably linked to the writer, thereby carving out a place for the woman writer and creating the possibility of inscribing the female body in the text.

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25 Gerardine Meaney, *(Un)Like Subjects: Women, Theory, Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993) 58.

26 Roberts, "Write, She Said", *The Progress of Romance: The Politics of Popular Fiction*, ed. Jean Radford (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986) 227-228.

The Book of Mrs Noah traces the links between desire, sexuality, the female body, creativity and writing in the attempt to discover a means by which the female body might be inscribed in the text. The Ark/womb obliquely makes the connection between the woman and writing by focusing on her creativity. When writing becomes the representation of that creativity, woman appropriates words and language and also the capacity to create her own identity.

Finally, the novel reveals this appropriation as woman's inevitable right and responsibility:

> Creation starts here, in the Ark. Love actively shapes the work. My mother nourishes me with words, words of such power and richness that I grow, dance, leap. But the purpose of the Ark is that I leave it. The purpose of the womb is that I be born from it. So that when I'm forced to go from her, when I lose her, I can call out after her, cry out her name. I become myself, which means not-her; with blood and tears I become not-the-mother....Cutting the cord, she gives me speech. Words of longing for that world I've lost, words of desire to explore this absence-of-her. I must go further into absence, and find more words.
>
> Ark. Imagination. Body. Home. Book. (*BMN* 274)

It is the mother's role to send her infant into the world of language in which s/he is separated from the maternal body, but in the process bestows the gift of language with which the infant can articulate desire for the mother. It is not until the child is divided from the mother that s/he can experience the lack, and therefore the desire, which ultimately results in the acquisition of language. Instead of interpreting the split of the child from the mother as a signal that the mother works in collusion with the father, it is rewritten as an inevitable consequence of the human condition in society. It is necessary for the child to lose the mother in order to achieve his or her full humanity. Instead of constructing themselves as the victims of the Law of the Father, women can claim for themselves the power of language.

This approach to the question of woman's relation to language would appear to be an answer to Monique Wittig's analysis in *Les Guérillères:*

> The women say, the language you speak poisons your glottis tongue palate lips. They say, the language you speak is made up of words that are killing you. They say, the language you speak is made up of signs that rightly speaking designate what men have appropriated. Whatever they have not laid hands on, whatever they have not pounced on like many-eyed birds of prey, does not appear in the language you speak. This is apparent precisely in the *intervals* that your masters have not been able to *fill* with their words of proprietors and possessors, this can be found in the *gaps*, in all that which is not a continuation of their discourse, in the zero, the o, the perfect circle that you invent to imprison them and to overthrow them.[27]

In *The Book of Mrs Noah* the circle becomes the womb, an "o" that circumscribes completeness and fulfilment. Mrs Noah refuses to be silenced, to accept a position in the gaps and intervals left for women in a "man-made" language. Instead of allowing the language to poison her, to kill her, to annihilate her identity, she reappropriates that language and places herself at its centre.

In rewriting the Ark story, Roberts attempts to rewrite the position of Woman in culture and the feminine in language. The far-reaching effects of breaking the silence imposed on women in this culture become apparent in the process of reinterpreting just one myth from the feminine perspective. It is not simply a case of retelling a story, but a profound reinterpretation of the culture from its fundamental beliefs and premises, a resignifying which radically alters our perception of the world in its conjunction of religion and spirituality, psychoanalytic and literary theory, and feminist politics.

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27 Monique Wittig, *Les Guérillères*, quoted by Xaviere Gauthier in *New French Feminisms*, trans. Marilyn A. August, 163.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has examined some of Sara Maitland's and Michèle Roberts' fiction in order to reveal its importance as some of the best writing by contemporary British women in print today. Like much contemporary British women's writing, it is located at that point where literature, religion, psychoanalysis and feminism all intersect. Until recently, critical attention has been focused on writers such as Margaret Drabble and Edna O'Brien whose fiction also explores questions of religion and spirituality in relation to contemporary women. However, I believe that Maitland and Roberts provide a more illuminating analysis of these issues in their fiction because of their engagement with a range of feminist theories, and it is in their work that we see the most detailed and thorough-going analyses of the influence of religion on Western culture in general, and more specifically the influence of Christianity on women's subjectivity within British culture. When read in terms of feminism, religion and psychoanalysis it becomes clear that Maitland's and Roberts' fiction provides us with a significant commentary on many of the central concerns of our times, bringing together a number of the prevailing ideologies and articulating their meanings for contemporary Western culture in original voices. In this sense, then, it attends to what Barbara Hill Rigney describes as "an urgency in contemporary fiction in general, but especially in that written by women, to fill [the] spiritual and psychological gaps"[1] left by the ontological breakdown of the modern world in which all the givens about our place in relation to each other, society as a whole, God and the universe, are no longer certain.

I have argued that the conjunction of religion and politics is important motivating force in British women's writing, and that Maitland and Roberts represent the most compelling contemporary manifestation of this abiding concern, but are by no means unusual in their interest in such matters. Politico-religious writing by British women has frequently been marked by its use of mixed discourses, and this is typical of Maitland's and Roberts'

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1 Barbara Hill Rigney, *Lilith's Daughters: Women and Religion in Contemporary Fiction* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982) 6.

writing too, which moves between realist and non-realist modes in undertaking to represent in fiction the conflicting demands of a Christian humanism and postmodern feminism. The sometimes unresolvable tension between the religious and spiritual impulses versus the insights of psychoanalysis, between characters conceived as individuals and as subjectivities, results in formal experimentation which weaves together the voices of today's women with those of the Bible and Greek mythology in telling and retelling the traditional and contemporary stories of Western culture. Maitland and Roberts use their novels to "challenge normative judgements established by the patriarchal tradition as to how human beings should be in the world", to borrow Elizabeth Say's words, shaping an "alternative vision of reality" in the "moral discourse" of women's narratives.[2]

Maitland and Roberts both explore the persistent questions posed by the implications of dualism and binarism for Western culture, drawing on the deconstructive approach of French feminism in particular and its focus on sexual difference as the site on which binarism operates at its most oppressive. Working from the premise that a dualism which separates mind from body and male from female serves a phallocentric order which marginalises and oppresses women, denigrating them as the embodiment of corrupt nature, Roberts' novel *The Wild Girl* presents the view that dualism distorts the original Christian message. Roberts advocates a positive reclaiming of the body through her depiction of the sexuality of Christ, and portrays a yearning for "wholeness" which equates with "living out the image of God", despite acknowledging that the insights of postmodernism and psychoanalysis suggest that this is an impossibility. Maitland takes a rather different tack in *Virgin Territory* where she suggests that there may in fact be some advantages for women in the rejection of the body in that it frees them from sexual ties and reproduction, allowing a measure of autonomy to women in its valorisation of virginity. Roberts posits a psychological androgyny as an answer to the difficulties posed by sexuality in *The Visitation*, pointing towards a deconstruction of sexual difference.

One of the central concerns for women writing about Christianity is the concept of original sin, which is lamented by Jane Gardam and Edna O'Brien as the root of women's

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2 Elizabeth A. Say, *Evidence on Her Own Behalf: Women's Narrative as Theological Voice* (Savage, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 1990) 123.

troubles in its depiction of woman as evil. In Maitland's and Roberts' fiction it is reconceived as a metaphor of psychological development, providing an opportunity to bring together theology, psychoanalysis and feminist politics. Original sin is interpreted as the representation of a Fall into language through which we lose the Paradise of the womb. It is the moment marking awareness of sexual difference, of insertion into the phallocentric, patriarchal order.

Maitland's and Roberts' fiction, as well as that by other contemporary British women writers (most notably, Julia O'Faolain and Iris Murdoch), reveals the inadequacy of traditional interpretations of Christ for contemporary women. As the "antidote" to original sin, the incarnation of God can be seen to work against the body/soul dualism of patriarchal versions of Christianity. His humanity is emphasised in new depictions of Christ, and we are shown the necessity of creating one's own vision of Christ.

Sisterhood and motherhood are also examined from the perspectives of feminist theology and psychoanalysis. Roberts claims that Christianity has always held its own image of the ideal relations between women in the Visitation, an image of sisterhood based on mutual tolerance and acceptance between women. Motherhood is seen as the creative counterpart of this depiction of women, in Maitland's *Daughter of Jerusalem* as the reappropriation of women's own stories and voices, and in Roberts' *The Book of Mrs Noah* in terms of women's writing and intentional mythmaking.

Given the restraints of space in a PhD thesis, only five novels have formed the focus of this study, but Maitland's and Roberts' short stories and poetry would reward similarly detailed discussion. A further analysis of Maitland's and Roberts' contribution to contemporary British women's writing should include the short stories published in *Tales I Tell My Mother* (1978) and *More Tales I Tell My Mother* (1987), which contain contributions from both Maitland and Roberts, as does the collection *The Seven Deadly Sins* (1988). Maitland's short stories are also published in *Weddings and Funerals* (1984) written in collaboration with Aileen La Tourette, and the solo collections *Telling Tales* (1983), *A Book of Spells* (1987) and *Women Fly when Men aren't Watching* (1993).

Roberts' solo poetry publications are *The Mirror of the Mother* (1986) and *Psyche and the Hurricane* (1991), and she has also published a collection of poems written with Judith Kazantzis and Michelene Wandor entitled *Touch Papers* (1982). Her solo collection of short stories, *During Mother's Absence* (1993), includes work published between 1988 and 1993. This list is not exhaustive, and it would be important to trace the short stories and poems published individually elsewhere as well.

Maitland and Roberts have both published other novels also and, although the emphases are different in them, they too need to be analysed in order to establish their contribution to contemporary debates. Roberts' *In the Red Kitchen* (1990) explores spiritualism and clairvoyancy in Victorian Britain. It does not include overt feminist polemic, which perhaps accounts for the opinion that this novel "marks a departure...from the ghetto of what some patronizingly term 'women's fiction', into the mainstream".[3] However, it does continue to explore the same preoccupations with the constrictions placed upon women in a male-dominated world in the various voices it employs. Flora Milk, the medium, speaks as a representative of all women, allowing the ghostly spirits of the past to break out of the silence imposed upon them by patriarchal culture. The spirits also act as reflections of parts of Flora herself which she cannot name, the woman who is split between madonna and whore and finds herself paralysed by hysteria. Although the novel sets up expectations of offering an answer as to the authenticity of mediumship, it fails to persuade one way or the other.

This was followed by *Daughters of the House* (1992), which was placed on the Booker Prize Shortlist, and was winner of the W.H. Smith Literary Award. These awards mark a move into mainstream acceptance and will perhaps result in more critical attention for her work as a whole. *Daughters of the House* reworks many of the themes addressed in the previous novels, such as the cultural (and attendant psychological) differences between the French and English, the meanings of Catholicism and spirituality for women, the growth of young girls into womanhood, and family relationships of love, rivalry and secrecy. Like previous works, it also weaves together a number of voices, plots and time schemes to

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3 Louise Doughty, *Times Literary Supplement*, 6 April 1990, 375.

reflect the shifting subjectivities it investigates, moving between realism and non-realism.

Roberts' most recent novel, *Flesh and Blood* (1994), displays her continuing interest in storytelling, and the first narrator invokes Scheherezade as a model. It uses a range of narrative voices, presenting both masculine and feminine perspectives, taking us back through time then returning us to the "present" of the framing narrative. Again, the focus is on stories of love and sexuality, family relationships, Catholicism and madness. The crossing between England and France which marks much of Roberts' writing is characterised here as a gender crossing. The intertwining narrative voices and stories suggest that we are to read subjectivity in terms of performativity here, perhaps along the lines suggested by queer theory which seeks to move beyond categories and the binary thinking which posits two distinct genders.

Maitland's novel, *Three Times Table*, which appeared in 1990, explores the mother-daughter relationship between three generations of women living together. Again, her interest in myth and fable is apparent, this time with the added exploration of the effect of the new physics on religious thinking. It clearly demonstrates Maitland's interest in the interweaving of varied discourses. Once again, the reviews were mixed, ranging from the *New Statesman* reviewer describing it as "original and compelling",[4] to the criticisms of its allegedly disappointing retreat into fantasy at the end and its implementation of inadequately digested new scientific theory.[5]

Home Truths (1993), the most recent novel, appears to draw on autobiographical material in its depiction of a large, middle-class family gathered in Scotland on holidays. It explores class privilege, family relationships, and investigates what it is that constitutes "normality". It returns to the religious and spiritual concerns of the previous works in juxtaposing Christianity and the Church with African spirituality and myth in its questioning of how we fit into the world.

Maitland's most recent publication, *A Big-Enough God: Artful Theology* (1995), is a theological rather than fictional work.[6] It explores the relationship between contemporary

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4 Rebecca O'Rourke, *New Statesman and Society*, 6 April 1990, 40.
5 Janet Barron, "Stuff the Magic Dragon", *Listener*, 12 April 1990, 27.
6 Sara Maitland, *A Big-Enough God: Artful Theology* (London and New York: Mowbray, 1995).

physics and the nature of God, arguing that the more we understand about the material universe, the more God is revealed to us (an interest which is also reflected in *Three Times Table*, although there the theological issues take a back seat). Instead of seeing the advances of science as undermining religious faith, she maintains that science supports the notion of God as the creator of heaven and earth. In this playful yet serious discussion, Maitland's voice as a fiction writer is barely submerged beneath the surface of theological debate, and the reader is aware of the important conjunction of literature, feminism, religion and spirituality which marks all of her writing.

Other publications which would be interesting to consider in further discussion of Maitland's and Roberts' work, but which lie outside the scope of this thesis, include two recent volumes of essays by Australian women, *Claiming Our Rites: Studies in Religion by Australian Women Scholars* (1994), and *Freedom and Entrapment: Women Thinking Theology* (1995), which indicate the current directions in Australian feminist theology.[7] Here, too, the connections between literature, myth and language, religion and spirituality, and feminism are explored. The writers of the pieces included in these books draw on the debates explored in North American, British and European feminist theology, articulating their implications for the Australian context. The works here suggest that comparisons between Maitland's and Roberts' fiction and that of their Australian contemporaries could be illuminating.[8]

Feminist theory, too, is a burgeoning field and has moved on considerably from the debates which appear to have informed Maitland's and Roberts' early writing. A further study of their work would reward a reassessment in the light of these new developments. For example, the discussion of dualism and binarism, and the relationships between the mind, body and subjectivity, has been rethought, bringing the material body back into

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7 Morny Joy and Penelope Magee, eds, *Claiming Our Rites: Studies in Religion by Australian Women Scholars* (Adelaide: The Australian Association for the Study of Religions, 1994); Maryanne Confoy, Dorothy A. Lee and Joan Nowotny, eds, *Freedom and Entrapment: Women Thinking Theology* (Melbourne: Dove, 1995).

8 For example, the methodology of Elaine Lindsay's "A Mystic in her Garden: Spirituality and the Fiction of Barbara Hanrahan" in *Claiming Our Rites* might offer new approaches to such discussions, as might Veronica Brady's "Every Christian in Her Own Place: Women's Writing and Theological Understanding" in *Freedom and Entrapment.*

focus. Rosalyn Diprose's book, *The Bodies of Women: Ethics, Embodiment and Sexual Difference*, is an example of the kind of philosophical rethinking which engages with the importance of the relationship between mind and matter.[9] It directs our attention to the ways in which the bodies of women must be taken into account in any ethical or moral consideration, positing sexual difference as the central ethical concern. This approach to sexual difference must inevitably have some impact on the way we interpret religious and spiritual issues in fiction, as well as the moral and political responsibilities raised by feminist interrogations of those issues.

Elizabeth Grosz, whose work I found useful in understanding French feminism in this study, has offered the Möbius strip as a possible model for the mind/body relationship in her book, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism.*[10] This rethinking of the mind/body relationship leads to a new set of questions about the texts discussed in this thesis: how would Roberts' discussions of androgyny in *The Wild Girl* and *The Visitation* be read differently, given that Grosz maintains that sexual difference is a condition of subjectivity, necessarily linked to a sexed body in space? While this approach would be consistent with depictions of the sexuality of Jesus and the insistence that mind and body cannot be separated in *The Wild Girl*, it might look for ways this is represented as flows and fluidities instead of fixed qualities. How would the importance Grosz places on cultural, racial and historical specificity alter our reading of Roberts' attempts to reimagine Mary Magdalene, or Maitland's retelling of biblical stories in *Daughter of Jerusalem*, in a late twentieth-century British feminist framework? How can we understand the concept of sisterhood, given that any attempt to generalise or universalise the condition of women is called into question? Grosz develops a new approach to the mapping of the body onto the psyche and the inscription of the psyche on the body. Using these ideas, how might we reinterpret the ways in which culture is inscribed on the body (for example, Sister Anna's fish tattoo in *Virgin Territory*, or Radegunda's self-branding in *Women in the Wall*), and how could we reassess the ways in which meaning is attributed to bodies in the texts?

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9 Rosalyn Diprose, *The Bodies of Women: Ethics, Embodiment and Sexual Difference* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).

10 Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1994).

Judith Butler takes up the debate over binarism, too, and critiques some aspects of the French feminism and psychoanalysis I have used in this thesis in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*.[11] As an alternative to the constructionist approach to gender offered by psychoanalysis, she suggests that gender should be read in terms of performativity. From such a position, the narrative techniques employed by Maitland and Roberts might be reinterpreted. The interweaving of numerous voices in the retelling of age-old stories in the texts could perhaps be read as different performances of the same subject, as it moves in and out of various discourses.

The increasing influence of queer theory (a field to which Butler has contributed significantly), also needs to be taken into account in a further reassessment of Maitland's and Roberts' work. This too would require a different reading of androgyny in the texts. Maitland's and Roberts' work explores the shifting, transitive nature of sexual identity, and readings through queer theory might make more of the importance of transgression than I have here. As Eve Sedgwick explains, queer theory illuminates our understanding of the range of sexual identities, as well as "rendering those culturally central, apparently monolithic constructions [of heterosexual identity] newly accessible to analysis and interrogation" in its refusal to reconfirm "the self-evidence and 'naturalness' of heterosexual identity and desire".[12] It challenges our understanding of identity and "category" politics, moving beyond binary notions of gender.

All of these developments would inevitably raise new questions about the texts I have discussed in this thesis. Perhaps such questions will be even more fruitfully taken up in relation to Maitland's and Roberts' more recent texts in order to establish whether or not they are engaging directly with these particular theoretical developments, or moving in different directions altogether. The publication of new theoretical works, as well as Maitland's and Roberts' continuing publication of literary texts, means that this study is by no means exhaustive. Rather, I have demonstrated in this thesis the importance of Maitland's and Roberts' place in contemporary British writing. Their work brings together

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11 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990).

12 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Queer and Now", *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993) 9.

some of the major concerns of contemporary British women's writing—literary theory, psychoanalytic theory, religion and spirituality, and feminist politics—in a manifestation of the contemporary thinking which recognises this as a problematic conjunction. Nevertheless, it does so with a depth of analysis and insight that I believe is unmatched by other writers of their generation. This thesis marks the beginning of the detailed critical attention which Maitland's and Roberts' writing clearly deserves.

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