

## WHERE IS SHE?

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The genesis of this paper developed as I was reading Luce Irigaray's *je, tu, nous*. In it she describes visiting a museum near Venice. I use her words to tell the story.

In the museum there is a statue of a woman who resembles Mary, Jesus's mother, sitting with the child before her on her knee, facing the observer. I was admiring this beautiful wooden sculpture when I noticed that this Jesus was a girl! That had a very significant effect on me, one of jubilation - mental and physical. I felt freed from that cultural truth-imperative which is also practised in art: a virgin-mother woman and her son depicted as the models of redemption we should believe in. Standing before this statue representing Mary and her Mother, Anne, I felt once again at ease and joyous, in touch with my body, my emotions, and my history as a woman. I had before me an aesthetic and ethical figure that I need to be able to live without contempt for my incarnation, for that of my mother and other women.<sup>1</sup>

Aware of the tradition of horizontal violence that divides women from each other and cognisant also of the dearth of female notions of divinity, majesty or even identity that exist within the Judaeo/christian tradition, which has had such a penetrating effect on social, cultural and religious 'truth-imperatives', I was curious about the statue that had effected such a profound impression on Luce Irigaray. I had searched, to no avail, within the Anglican traditions of both Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand for such a symbol. Consequently, in this paper I intend to explore the construction of the Virgin as she is re/represented by the Anglican Church. Using the deconstructive and reconstructive strategies of H el ene Cixous I will analyse a fourteenth century altar piece of the Annunciation painted by Simone Martini, and then suggest how Mary can be used to affirm, rather than deny and oppress, the multiplicity of differences between women.

Luce Irigaray's reflections caused me to analyse reflexively my own experience of Mary from my Anglican perspective.<sup>2</sup> An examination of both the *Australian Prayer Book*,<sup>3</sup> and *A New Zealand Prayer Book, He Karakia Mihinare o Aotearoa*,<sup>4</sup> uncovered hints of a rich tradition of Marianism that has been quasi-obliterated from the theology of Anglicans. Paul Tillich, in noting the absence of The Virgin Mother from Protestantism, suggested that some of the feminine symbols from Catholicism were needed to be adopted by Protestants to provide some semblance of symbolic symmetry which is overwhelmingly masculine.<sup>5</sup> I posit that this balancing must occur in a way that is positive for women. It is detrimental if the Virgin Mary continues to be constructed as Rosemary Radford Ruether has suggested, as 'the complementary underside of masculine domination'.<sup>6</sup>

Using examples from the calendar of *An Australian Prayer Book*, it is possible to demonstrate how Mary has been constructed as always already existing, denied agency in her own life and how, in many respects, she is both 'dehumanised and desexed'.<sup>7</sup> From the doctrine of the annunciation to her bodily assumption into heaven Mary is constructed as something other than an ordinary woman.

Throughout the collects and readings that celebrate the 'Annunciation', Mary is constructed as a passive receiver of the will of God. In the 'sentence for the day' she acquiesces obediently to impregnation with the divine Logos. Her perpetual virginity excludes her from being an active participant in the consummation of the act which was carried out mysteriously by the Holy Spirit.

Mary's passivity is further emphasised by the Fathers of the Church insisting that her child was born without all the pain and blood normally associated with the expulsion of a baby through the birth canal. Like a surrogate mother, Mary is appropriated, in Anglicanism anyway, as a vessel used by the Father to produce the son. A more sinister underlying misogyny is apparent in the hymn of praise, an English translation of which is repeated during the service of morning prayer. Speaking of Jesus it notes,

When you became man to set us free:  
You did not disdain the virgin's womb.<sup>8</sup>

Other versions use 'abhor' rather than 'disdain'. I wonder what there is to disdain about the warm, nourishing, enveloping, folds of uterine tissue that welcome an embryo and expel a baby? As Simone de Beauvoir astutely claimed:

while the Christian Church consigns its God to an ignominious death on the cross it is prepared to spare him the indignity of being born.<sup>9</sup>

Analysis, by feminist scholars, has highlighted the way negative concepts regarding the sexual and reproductive functions of women's bodies have been prioritised by early male philosophers and theologians. The 'binary logic'<sup>10</sup> which privileges seminal fluid while equating menstrual blood and the uterus with pollution is a socially situated process of creating and reproducing meanings that persists today in churches which insist on the perpetuation of such misogynistic concepts.

However, Mary's involvement in the myths which surround the Christian story did not finish with the birth of her child. Throughout her life she is constructed in such a way as to be denied agency. In the most detailed account of the crucifixion, the writer of the Gospel of John, consistent with tradition, reports that Jesus, without consultation, gives her away to 'the disciple he loved'.<sup>11</sup> We are not told whether Mary actually went and lived in the 'place' that the disciple had made.

After being portrayed as spending her life being told what to do Mary is denied the experience of dying instead being sentenced to a state of dormition and passively, 'assumed' into heaven. A cursory glance at the dictionary definition of the Latin 'dormir' includes 'in a state resembling sleep, torpid, inactive, undeveloped, inoperative'.<sup>12</sup> The depiction of Mary's swaddled soul, in the twelfth century mosaic of her dormition from the church of La Mártorana, Palermo, further signifies her perceived powerless state.

It can be explained that the construction of Mary as 'other' in these myths and the misogyny surrounding the birth process, is directly related to the very specific socio-historical-cultural position of women. Unfortunately some of that cultural heritage has been maintained throughout the last two millennia and still serves to impact on women's lives today. In shaping women's lives men have, as John Spong details, 'defined, circumscribed and idealised' women into an impossible ideal status of female perfection.<sup>13</sup>

The emphasis on this ideally constructed or stereotypical woman spills over into the twenty-three women saints that the Anglican Church of Australia euphemistically lists in the calendar to be honoured on Saints Days and Holy Days throughout the year.<sup>14</sup> Of these twenty three women, eight references are directly attributable to Mary, five in relation to her virginity, (one as the impossible

virgin/wife of Joseph) and three to her motherhood role. She is honoured for all the things that are done to her outside of her control - her 'immaculate conception', 'birth', 'purification' (from what?), 'annunciation', 'visitation', 'virginity' - and her relation to a man as 'wife' of Joseph, (although he hardly seems a significant actor in the myth) and 'mother' of Jesus.

Of the remaining fifteen women mentioned motherhood, martyrdom and celibacy all figure prominently. Only Abbess Hilda of Whitby breaks the mould. She is celebrated for being a 'controversialist', although her tendency for original thought and autonomous action is obviously palliated by her celibacy. As Julia Kristeva reports in her celebrated text, *About Chinese Women*, [u]niversalist as it is, Christianity associates women as well with the symbolic order, but only on the condition that they maintain their virginity. If they don't, they may expiate their carnal pleasure by some sort of *martyrdom*.<sup>15</sup>

Since our religion and culture are inseparably bound in the logic and history of Judaeo/Christianity,<sup>16</sup> it is not enough for women, in post-Christian fervour, to refuse to enter a church, and decline to accept the sacraments in the belief that we have escaped the stranglehold of religion on our lives. From American, a century ago, Matilda Joslyn Gage, believing that the church provided the ideological catalyst for the subjugation of women, argued that 'no single feminist concern was as important as organised religion'.<sup>17</sup> I believe that this is still the case today. As Luce Irigaray explains,

... we are all imbued with the many Greek, Latin, Oriental, Jewish and Christian traditions ... particularly through the art, philosophy, and myths we live by, exchange and perpetuate, often without our realising.<sup>18</sup>

French feminists,<sup>19</sup> springboarding from the ideas of Lacan, Derrida, and others, offer us an analysis of the socio-symbolic system which features a binary logic that allows some things to be said and others to be silenced by the Law of the Father. Some French feminists offer not only a deconstruction, but a reconstruction of the myths from a woman centred perspective. Hélène Cixous manages, in her reading of myths, to deconstruct and reconstruct concurrently which has the advantage of bridging the abyss that occurs when deconstruction is detached from reconstructive activity.

Using Simone Martini's painted altar piece of the Annunciation, in

conjunction with H  l  ne Cixous' deconstruction of 'God's Word', I provide a reconstructive reading of both the painting and the myth. In 'Sorties',<sup>20</sup> H  l  ne challenges the patriarchal, metaphysical, biblical notion that

In the Beginning was the Word:  
the Word was with God  
and the Word was God.<sup>21</sup>

From her own experience of living in a multilingual family listening to the musical quality of the multiplicity of languages she heard in the streets of her birth place, Algeria, H  l  ne re-constructs her own woman centred creation myth by insisting that in the beginning is milk and Mother's Voice.<sup>22</sup> The emphasis is irrefutably on Mother's Voice, and not Mother's Word. In H  l  ne Cixous' myth 'the resonance of fore-language', the VOICE of the mother is captured and ensnared by the WORD of the "God", "Father", "He" of Judaeo/Christian monotheism which appropriates the voice's formless flow of breath and splits it into a language system that serves to separate, polarise, elevate or oppress. H  l  ne's agenda is to move from having to seek recognition from the Father who is used to legitimate all institutions and authority. She seeks to provide ways for women to rethink values, to redefine sexuality, and to profoundly alter the way we think, and the concepts and the language that we use. In short she advocates that a 'revolution of the symbolic' is needed to bring 'woman' into existence and recreate social relationships.

H  l  ne's rewriting of the 'In the beginning' myth in relation to the divine Logos, with which Mary was impregnated at the time of the Annunciation, shatters the patriarchal mythical paradigm. From the absences and gaps, a new reading of the John text, in conjunction with the annunciation myth is possible.

In Simone Martini's, construction of the Annunciation,<sup>23</sup> the 'Word Made Flesh', the Divine Logos, penetrates the ear of Mary. The voice of the angel Gabriel executes the aural impregnation of the archetype woman with the 'Logos spermaticos'.<sup>24</sup> With the power imbalance that exists between God and a young Jewish woman, Mary's construction as acquiescing voluntarily to being impregnated with the divine Logos must be questioned. The act of impregnation carried out by the angel Gabriel catapults Mary into the order of patriarchal reality. Her elevated position, as constructed by the church, creates an hierarchy of

dualisms and provides an impossible role model to which women can aspire.

The binary opposites of man/woman which H  l  ne Cixous clearly demonstrates create a privileged status for men and an oppressed position for women are in reality:

man  
woman.<sup>25</sup>

This binary logic provides the hierarchical division between men and women and, within Christianity, the father/son affiliation is elevated to sacramental reverence while the mother/daughter relationship is marginalised almost to extinction. The annunciation does more than emphasise the God/man, woman hierarchy. Its binary logic of:

son/daughter  
virgin/whore  
wife/spinster  
mother/childlessness  
obedient/wilful  
celibate/sexual  
heterosexual/lesbian

also provides the 'conceptual orthopedics',<sup>26</sup> that justifies horizontal violence between women. The Annunciation attempts to seal Mary's place, and by analogy the position of all women, in the socio-symbolic system. Silenced within the prisonhouse of phallogocentrism her, and our, sexual behaviour, passivity and obedience are expected - even demanded.

Fortunately the social-symbolic order, by which I mean the structural as well as the symbolic perspectives of language,<sup>27</sup> is not totalitarian and from around the margins, between the slips and fissures the socio-symbolic system is interrupted and subverted. Deconstruction and reconstruction dare to talk from 'the crucible of personal experience',<sup>28</sup> through the silences, the lacunae allowing escape from the 'prisonhouse' of phallogocentrism. Mircea Eliade believed that by knowing the myth it is possible to 'live' the myth.<sup>29</sup> For those tired of 'living the myth', H  l  ne Cixous' analysis invests women with a way to resist the voiceless, impotent, negative representation of ourselves and other women. Through the gaps, creative use of symbols can 'birth' new meanings and new readings can

emerge.

A crucial need in this revision is a dynamic reintroduction of the power of mother's voice in a 'resonance of fore-language' that dissolves the dualisms that constitute the 'Law of the Father'. Attempting to dissolve the dualisms used to justify oppression wherever it occurs is not a new enterprise. It was in Marina Warner's notable text, *Alone of All Her Sex*, where I discovered that, from the apocryphal *Book of James*, the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception first became known and a cult of St Anne, mother of Mary, was fostered during the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.<sup>30</sup> This movement, manifesting most particularly in Northern Europe, attempted to elevate Mary to a position of unequaled purity roughly identical to that of her child. To achieve this Mary needed to be born without the perceived stain of original sin - in other words without the intervention of a single spermatozoa - and the concept of the Immaculate Conception was birthed.

This doctrine could not be developed without a matrilineal line being created for Mary and it was this mother/daughter relationship that so excited Luce Irigaray and which dares to speak to us across the abyss of naming. The Immaculate Conception immediately situates Mary in a genealogy which necessarily includes her Mother and grandmother. It reverses the silencing of the mother's voice, brings the old woman into existence, and gives Mary back her body and her childhood. She can be seen as not always already created, but as living and growing and having relationships with other women.

In the first half of the fifteenth century Collette Boilet, a Poor Clare who died in 1447, had a revelation which revealed the genealogy of Christ. This statue of Collette's revelation depicts great grandmother Esmeria, grandmother Anne and mother Mary holding the Christ child.

Within forty years of Claire's revelation, a Confraternity of the Immaculate Conception was well enough established to commission a painter of the stature of Leonardo da Vinci to depict the Immaculate Conception. Other artists were to be captivated by the concept and added to the genre of depictions of a rich mythology of strong women who had agency in their own lives and who are central to the narrative.

Unfortunately this burst of gynocentric activity did not endure. Neither did it invade the rest of christendom. It was not until 1854 that Pope Pius IX proclaimed the Virgin Mary the Immaculate Conception, putting an end to a 'prolonged and epic struggle within the Catholic Church'.<sup>31</sup> But by then any gynocentric enthusiasm had long since been

extinguished by forces unleashed by the Inquisition and the Reformation.

Although in the Anglican Church of both Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand the 'Conception' is listed in the calendar to be remembered there is a marked silence regarding St Anne and her daughter. The chance to celebrate the mother/daughter relationship is once again bypassed in preference for the revered father/son. There is in the silencing of the mother/daughter relationship an abyss of naming which constitutes a serious religious crisis that is scarcely being discussed, much less addressed at this time.

The time has long since passed for the differences between women to be acknowledged and celebrated. By loving the 'Old Woman' and having women write the history of the humiliating lives of female ancestors, highlighting the triumphs and tribulations that they achieved and endured, and re/membering them in liturgies, creates a 'new insurgent',<sup>32</sup> that carries out indispensable ruptures and transformations in women's history.

Women need to feel, as Luce Irigaray suggests, once again at ease and joyous, in touch with our bodies, our emotions, and our history as women. We need to be presented with aesthetic and ethical figures so that we can live without contempt for our incarnation, for that of our mother and for other women.<sup>33</sup> For Luce Irigaray, Anne and Mary, mother and daughter, provided the key that opened the prison door.

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#### REFERENCES

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23. An example of this is Simone Martini's painted altar piece The Annunciation, Uffizi Gallery, Florence, 1333. Cited in Hodge and Kress, Social Semiotics (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988).
24. Thanks to Zoe Sofoulis who suggested the 'Logos Spermaticos' signifier.
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