

EVE'S SIDE OF IT: SARAH DANIELS' BIBLICAL REVISION

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Sarah Daniels is an English playwright who has been writing professionally since the early 1980s. Her work spans a wide range of subjects including pornography, madness and modern-day reworkings of the myth of Demeter and Persephone. Daniels' work is characterized by its feminist outlook and biting humour. Her work is also remarkable for the manner in which it engages with and draws on themes and stories from the Bible. This paper looks at the intertextual dialogue between Daniels' playtexts and the Bible and the manner in which this develops into her carnivalesque examination of Christianity as a patriarchal discourse. It discusses three important aspects of Daniels' biblical intertextuality, illustrating each one with an example from a play. Thus, it explores the carnivalesque in *Ripen Our Darkness* (1981), and hybridization in *Byrthrite* (1986). In order to elucidate her practice of polyphonic interweaving of intertexts this exegesis will open out into a discussion of complimentary intertextuality using *Beside Herself* (1990). Specific aspects of Daniels' biblical borrowings have been discussed elsewhere such as Pamela Bakker's analysis of the Christian symbolism in *Beside Herself*.¹ The explicit

¹ See, Bakker, Pamela, 'A critical Analysis of the Plays of Sarah Daniels', PhD thesis, University of Sheffield, 1996. Bakker's analysis of this aspect of *Beside Herself* is covered on 144-145 and 167-168. Other works which discuss religious symbolism in specific plays include discussions of *Byrthrite* in Cousin, Geraldine, *Women in Dramatic Place and Time: Contemporary Female Characters On Stage*, London, Routledge, 1996, 92-97. Angelina, Sylvie, 'Women as Witches in Two Contemporary Plays: *Byrthrite* by Sarah Daniels and *Vinegar Tom* by Caryl Churchill', Maîtrise diss. Université de Metz, 1992. A further

analysis of biblical intertextuality in Daniels' *œuvre*, however, remains unexplored, as does Daniels' subversive challenge to her biblical pre-texts.

This reading of Daniels' plays is informed by the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, notably the important concepts of dialogism, carnival and hybridization.² The concept of the carnivalesque, however, runs throughout. Carnival is a mixing of high and low culture which subverts and inverts tradition. It has a distinctive mode of logic that, according to Bakhtin, is characterized by the "turnabout" of a continual shifting from top to bottom, profanations, comic crownings and uncrownings'.³ It is carnival's association with the subversion and parody of religious texts, ceremonies and ecclesiastical hierarchies rather than its social context that will be uppermost in this analysis. The strength of this approach is that it highlights the ways in which Daniels' dramaturgy engages with, subverts and renegotiates religion as an authoritarian and patriarchal discourse. Thus, each play as well as illustrating a different aspect of Daniels' intertextuality also presents a different perspective on women and the Church of England.

discussion of *Beside Herself* is to be found in Boles, William Clura, 'What a Bloody Family: Power, Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary British Drama', PhD diss. University of Tennessee (Knoxville), 1995.

² Bakhtin's use of the carnivalesque is explained below. Bakhtin draws on the idea of dialogue to explain the relationship that discourses have with other discourses. For a discussion of this term and how it relates to intertextuality see Todorov, Tzvetan, *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogical Principle*, trans. Wlad Godzich, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1984, pp.60-61. See also Julia Kristeva, 'Word, Dialogue and Novel', trans. Gora, Thomas, Jardine, Alice and Roudiez, Leon S., *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Art and Literature*, ed. Roudiez, Leon S., Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1981, pp.64-91. For an explanation of hybridization see, Bakhtin, Mikhail, 'Discourse in the Novel', *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Holquist, Michael, trans. Emerson, Caryl, and Holquist, Michael, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1981, p.358.

³ Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Iswolsky, Hélène, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1984, p.11.

Ripen Our Darkness and the Male Monopoly on the Church

Ripen Our Darkness, Daniels' first stage play, provides an extended allusion to the parable of Martha and Mary which conflates the two biblical figures.⁴ The play presents this allusion in the shape of the protagonist – a character called Mary and marries her to a church warden. Mary is confined to the domestic realm and the play stages her increasing frustration with the situation. The play also provides an excellent example of Daniels' carnivalesque treatment of religious hierarchies. It is Sunday and Mary has spent the day running around after her family, cooking meals, washing up and clearing away. While clearing away the game of Monopoly that features earlier on in the play, Mary picks up one of the pieces, the tank, and starts to hit it with a rolling pin while chanting in-between the blows, 'The Church Army drives you barmy'.⁵ Although Mary's frustration with the church is clear, the more complex meaning of this act is established earlier on in the scene. Mary and her husband, David, are entertaining the vicar and his wife. Mary is unable to participate fully in a game of Monopoly because she must attend to the domestic duties of clearing away and preparing tea. The Monopoly piece that Mary is seen hitting later in the scene is significant because it is the one associated with her husband, David. The allusion to the Church is juxtaposed with the allusion to Mary's husband and it is he who establishes the association of the tank with the Church Army.⁶ The allusion once determined is taken up again later on in the play in two iterative allusions to the tank.

In the first instance, the allusion is confined to a comment

⁴ Luke 10:38-42. Martha is associated with domesticity and her sister Mary, a follower of Jesus, with the contemplative life.

⁵ Daniels, Sarah, 'Ripen Our Darkness', *Plays: One*, London, Methuen, 1991, p.30.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.28.

that is comprehensible only to Mary and to the audience or reader of the playtext. In scene seven when Mary is visiting her daughter Anna, she comments, 'I became aware that something was definitely wrong when I started to beat the tank'.⁷ The reference to the hitting of the Monopoly piece becomes an allusion to the Church and an expression of Mary's unease. The second of these references occurs near the end of the play after Mary's suicide and awakening in a feminist revision of heaven. The scene occurs in Mary's kitchen where David is playing Monopoly with Roger the vicar. Mary remains offstage throughout. David decries the loss of his favourite piece – the tank – and Roger comments, 'Here use the gun. The curate in my last parish told me that when Runcie was a canon he used to play with a gun'.⁸ Mary responds from offstage, 'You know where you can poke the gun' and follows it by the dropping the tank onto the table – a gesture of frustration that echoes the one in the earlier scene.⁹

Daniels' approach here can be likened to Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque. The playful association of the Church with a board game that this allusion is based on suggests that the male monopoly on Church doctrine that it represents is itself a game. It anticipates the exemplary piece of turnabout that is executed later in the play when Mary finds herself in a feminist revision of heaven in the presence of a female Holy Trinity. Daniels' punning association of canon and gun reduces the hierarchy of the Church of England to a game. Her carnivalesque treatment of the Church can be drawn out by the choice of the game, Monopoly, and the wider social context. The play was written at a time when women were excluded from the hierarchies of the Church of England and there was a growing campaign for the ordination of women. Just as

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.44.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.71. At the time this play was première, 1981, Robert Runcie was the Archbishop of Canterbury.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.71.

Mary was effectively excluded from the game of Monopoly in the play, the Church of England at the time could be seen as very much a male monopoly.

The subversive play with intertexts reveals a dialogic quality to Daniels' dramaturgy. The intertextual dialogue between the playtext and its biblical pre-text demonstrates Daniels' subversive look at the male monopoly on ecclesiastical structures and on Christian doctrine in the Anglican Church. The female Holy Trinity that appears near the end of the play is a clear example of the kind of carnivalesque turnabout that is literally a travesty. Thus, *Ripen Our Darkness* uncrowns the male Holy Trinity and crowns a female version in its place. By exposing gender as the organizing factor, the power of the play's intertextual practice to subvert the authority of the male monopoly over the hierarchical structure of the Church is realized.

Byrthrites and Hybrids

Set in the seventeenth century, *Byrthrite* depicts witch-hunts, religious upheavals and the Civil War and couples them with twentieth century advances in the sciences, especially in reproductive technology. It also stages women's marginalization within the Church. The play's action centres on a group of women in Essex and their efforts to avoid being persecuted as witches. *Byrthrite* develops many of the techniques detectable in *Ripen Our Darkness*. Like the earlier play, it too draws on biblical themes; the 'byrthrite' of the title alluding to the story of Esau selling his birthright to Jacob.¹⁰ The allusion invites parallels with, and provides the link for two of the playtext's central themes: the persecution of women as witches and late twentieth century reproductive technology. Within this frame, both can be read as a selling of women's birthright.

¹⁰ Genesis, 25: 31-34.

One of the play's subplots in which a character, Helen, becomes a Quaker illustrates a second aspect of Daniels' intertextual practice – hybridization. This subplot not only provides an insight into Daniels' intertextual practice within *Byrthrite*, but it is also a study in miniature of the fractured nature of Christianity that is presented by her. At the start of the play Helen is married to a parson, but during the course of it she decides to become a Quaker and leaves her husband to become a preacher in her own right. The key scene is part two, scene two. It depicts an exchange between Helen and her parson husband. Much as the game of Monopoly is depicted as being incompatible with women's domestic duties in *Ripen Our Darkness*, this scene shows women's positioning as outside of the power structures of the Church. In what can be read as a startling reverse of the marriage ceremony, it also shows Helen's repudiation of her husband and the Church in favour of the emergent Quaker movement.

Symbolically, the scene occurs in the church and begins with Helen approaching her husband, the parson and respectfully wiping the font. She transgresses, however, by attempting to step up into the pulpit, a move from woman's place in the Church to an assumption of man's place. Helen is reprimanded by her husband and removes herself from the pulpit. Parson explains that his business in the church is to write history, a task that Helen, as a woman, is unsuited. He reads a section of his history that Helen responds to by observing that he had 'repeated the word evil twice'.¹¹ In one of the parson's two allusions to the scriptures he replies that 'Tis part of nature since life began with Eve'.¹² Helen questions him about his faith, and having ascertained that it is 'steady as the rock of St Peter', she announces that she can no longer stay married to him as she has become a

¹¹ Daniels, Sarah, 'Byrthrite', *Plays: One*, London, Methuen, 1991, p.382.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.382.

Quaker. Her final, subversive act, as she walks down the aisle, is to spit in the font and laugh.¹³

This scene is played against a corrupted version of the Lord's prayer spoken by the Woman Parishioner in the background:

Our father witch chart in heaven
 Hello to thy brain
 Give us this day our daily bread
 Forgive us our panes
 As we forgive those will be done
 Thy kingdom be done
 As now or never
 Lead us up to temptation
 Deliver us from weevil
 Thine be the glory every lasting son
 For ever and ever, Amen.¹⁴

As Bakhtin has documented, the corrupted prayer is a well-established form that is centuries old.¹⁵ The prayer in its corrupted state as reproduced in *Byrthrite* is more than just a parody of form; it subverts Christian discourse by creating a double-voiced hybrid. This technique of intertextual hybridization shifts the emphasis purely from God away to the land and agriculture. The line 'Give us this day our daily bread' is the only one that has been left unaltered. The reference to weevil – a beetle that is considered a threat to both crops and stored grain – continues this theme. Even the line 'Thine be the glory every lasting son' can be considered in this sense if the homophonic ambiguity of son (sun) is considered.

¹³ Ibid., pp.383-384.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp.382-383.

¹⁵ Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Iswolsky, Hélène, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1984, p.85.

Overall, the scene comprises three important elements: the turnabout implicit in Helen's treatment of the font, her exclusion from the pulpit and the corrupted Lord's Prayer. In this scene the pulpit positions the woman character as 'other' and excludes her from the power to shape discourse. Helen must look outside the Church of England, therefore, because it denies her a voice. Helen's rejection of the Church and of the parson in this scene is a carnivalesque turnabout that invites parallels with the female Trinity of *Ripen Our Darkness*. It is significant that the scene is not one of marginality and exile from Christianity, but of women's exclusion from the hierarchies of the Church of England. When Helen turns her back on the Church, she does so without abandoning God. This scene, therefore, provides instances of subversion and examples of marginality, which create dialogue with and undermine, rather than reject, Christian doctrine.

Eve's Sides of It

One of the most striking scenes in *Beside Herself* is the carnivalesque 'prelude' of a supermarket hell, populated by female characters from the Bible, almost all of them from the Old Testament. Like all the other scenes in this play, the prelude has been given a subtitle. Its subtitle, 'The Power and the Story' rewrites the glory of God by replacing it with the concept of fiction. The subtitle and its revisionary tactics provide a paradigm for the prelude, and ultimately the entire play. *Beside Herself* draws heavily on the Bible, with numerous references to biblical figures especially those cast in a negative light. Many of these biblical figures are represented on stage and all of them are women. Daniels peoples her supermarket hell with Delilah, Mrs Lot, Eve, Jezebel and Martha although Mary Magdalene and Salome are mentioned.¹⁶ The rogue intertext in this scene is the unseen figure of Lilith, who

¹⁶ All references are to the revised edition of *Beside Herself* in Daniels, Sarah, *Plays: Two*, London, Methuen, 1994.

features in the Talmud, however, *Beside Herself* contextualizes her within its biblical frame by referring to her as Adam's first wife.

In one of the most astonishing examples of Daniels' intertextual modification in her entire *œuvre*, the stories of the biblical women are re-presented by the figures themselves. With the exception of Martha, all the women onstage have transgressed the laws of their biblical fathers, husbands or lovers. The prelude is comic in tone and this contributes much to its subversive nature. We learn from Eve, for example, that the snake that was supposedly her undoing was unable to speak and that the 'forbidden fruit' was a 'ripe avocado' that tasted 'horrible'.¹⁷ The sexual aspect of Eve's fall from grace is clearly highlighted in the prelude. Eve's speech illustrates this, 'Just being. That was my crime. When *mankind* gets found out *he* points at me. *Her* fault – seducer. Made from Adam, for Adam. *His* wife and *his* daughter – legitimizer of *his* will'.¹⁸

Eve is the sole character to be carried entirely into the main body of the play (although echoes of the other biblical figures punctuate the rest of the play). She is the paradigmatic figure for Daniels' treatment of the subject of incestuous sexual abuse. During the main part of the play, Eve is literally 'beside herself', as she becomes one component of its split protagonist Evelyn/Eve. The twinning of Evelyn/Eve can be read as an expressionist depiction of the split subject. In the play's first production, this aspect was brought to the fore by dressing of Evelyn as an adult woman and Eve as a girl, indicating the origin of the lysis as Evelyn's childhood.¹⁹

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.101.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.102. My emphasis.

¹⁹ See, for example, Kellaway, Kate, Rev. of *Beside Herself, Plays and Players*, June 1990, 26. The production of *Beside Herself* to which I am referring is the Women's Playhouse Trust production, premiered at the Royal Court Theatre in London on 29 March 1990. Kellaway notes that

Lilith features in the main section of the playtext, in a modified form, as Lil, mother of Nicola and part of the team at Saint Dymphna's, the halfway house for ex-psychiatric patients where Evelyn volunteers.²⁰ Lil and Nicola provide *Beside Herself* with a subplot of incestuous sexual abuse which mirrors that of the Evelyn/Eve storyline, giving Evelyn another character to be 'beside herself' with. Lilith is an intertextual figure in her own right, found in Talmudic and Kabbalistic writings and in European art and fiction. In Jewish folklore she is a demon who tries to kill new-born children.²¹ Lil, by ignoring her daughter's accusations of sexual abuse, is guilty if not exactly of killing children, but of childhood. Lilith provides the link with the play's only other major intertext, Breughel's painting of Icarus. Bertolt Brecht has described this painting thus: 'Tiny scale of this legendary event (you have to hunt for the victim). The characters turn their backs on this incident'.²² Lil, like the figures in the painting, has turned away from someone in need of her help and consequently has lost her daughter.

The relative purity of intertextual usage in the supermarket hell of the prelude is developed in the main body of the text and fans out to include two other intertexts. These are so

Evelyn 'is dogged by the ghost of herself - a baleful girl in a frock'. An adult actress (Marion Bailey) played Kellaway's 'baleful girl'.

²⁰ Saint Dymphna is the patron saint of the mentally ill who, as we are told during part two, scene seven of the play, was forced to flee her home to escape marriage to her father. It is said that her father pursued her and, on catching up with her, decapitated her. See, Daniels, Sarah, 'Beside Herself', *Plays: Two*, London, Methuen, 1994, p.167.

²¹ See, for example, Koltuv, Barbara Black, *The Book of Lilith*, York Beach, Nicolas-Hays, 1986.

²² Brecht, Bertolt, 'Alienation Effects in the Narrative Pictures of the Elder Breughel', in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of An Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. Willett, John, London, Methuen, 1964, p.157. See also, Boles, William Clura, 'What a Bloody Family: Power, Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary British Drama', PhD Dissertation, University of Tennessee (Knoxville), 1995, pp.118-119. Boles reads the painting as a metaphor for male denial of sexual abuse.

central to the theme of incestuous sexual abuse that their relevance is explained during the play.²³ It is no accident then, that the one has been coupled with the other (a framed copy of the painting is brought to hang in Saint Dymphna's after the house is subject to the attack of vandalism). The coupling of the allusion to Saint Dymphna with the reproduction of Breughel's Icarus links the two intertexts together both on physical and metaphorical levels. Icarus replaces the shattered mirror and hides the word 'loonies' written on Saint Dymphna's walls. The painting conceals the act of violence (a metaphorical rape) just as Evelyn's fractured self, Eve, is hidden from the play's other characters. What the painting reveals and simultaneously conceals is a turning away from violence.

Turning away is something of a motif in *Beside Herself*. One of the biblical characters from the prelude is also an elaboration on this theme. The character of Mrs Lot is the wife of Lot who was unable to turn her back on her life in Sodom and as a consequence was turned into a pillar of salt. Daniels' rewriting of the story of Lot radically refocuses it, concentrating on his betrayal of his daughters:

MRS LOT: Two strangers came to our home. And a mob of pimps and racists gathered outside demanding access to them. Rather than offend the two guests who Lot had never laid eyes on before, he shouted out of the window to the mob that they could have our daughters instead, using as his sales patter, the fact that they were both virgins. This is all totally forgotten. But s'pose Lot had got his own way, I'd have been powerless to stop them.²⁴

²³ Daniels, Sarah, 'Beside Herself', *Plays: Two*, London, Methuen, 1994, p.139 and p.167. In addition to his explanation of who Saint Dymphna was, Roy also explains the significance of Breughel's painting of Icarus in part one, scene two.

²⁴ Daniels, Sarah, 'Beside Herself', *Plays: Two*, London, Methuen, 1994, p.101.

Mrs Lot highlights the implicit turning away of Lot from his daughters in a manner that compares with Daniels' own achievement in *Beside Herself*. Daniels stresses the patriarchal aspects of her biblical pre-text in this deceptively simple reformulation of her intertext. Lot's turning away from his daughters becomes the focus rather than Mrs Lot's failure to turn away.

Conclusion

Daniels' use of intertexts drawn from the Bible and from Christian tradition allow her to engage directly with the Church as a patriarchal institution, particularly where it has subordinated women and ordained men. Daniels' intertextual practice is an important aspect of her political dramaturgy as examples as diverse as the rewritten Lord's Prayer in *Byrthrite* and the supermarket hell in *Beside Herself* both illustrate. The explicit revision inherent in these instances of perspectival shift directly challenge biblical authority.

These three plays demonstrate Daniels' evolving critique of the Church as a patriarchal structure. This develops from the male monopoly of *Ripen Our Darkness* through to *Byrthrite*'s depiction of women's exclusion from the pulpit and hence from the power to shape doctrine and the seeking out of alternative ways to be heard to the much bolder technique of rewriting biblical stories from the perspective of their female figures in *Beside Herself*. Rather than rejecting Anglicanism, however, Daniels' playtexts consistently engage with and stage its structures. This is framed by carnivalesque turnabout that unsettles the hierarchies of the Church and counters its authority. Daniels' predominantly realist, feminist playtexts often incorporate Christian discourse in order to expose the Church of England's patriarchal structures and women's silencing on matters of doctrine. The explicitly revisionary techniques in all three plays, and especially in *Beside*

Herself, are interrogations of the Bible and Christianity that destabilize their patriarchal discourses and renegotiate places for women within them.