

INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.

Bell & Howell Information and Learning
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346 USA
800-521-0600

UMI[®]



Université d'Ottawa • University of Ottawa

Deathbeds and Destruction:
Representations of Female Intimacy in Western Religion and Film

© by Peggy Schmeiser

Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for a
Ph.D. in Religious Studies With a Specialization in Canadian Studies

Thesis Supervisor: Professor Naomi R. Goldenberg

University of Ottawa
Ottawa, Ontario

Defended: January 29, 1999



National Library
of Canada

Acquisitions and
Bibliographic Services

395 Wellington Street
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Bibliothèque nationale
du Canada

Acquisitions et
services bibliographiques

395, rue Wellington
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Your file Votre référence

Our file Notre référence

The author has granted a non-exclusive licence allowing the National Library of Canada to reproduce, loan, distribute or sell copies of this thesis in microform, paper or electronic formats.

The author retains ownership of the copyright in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque nationale du Canada de reproduire, prêter, distribuer ou vendre des copies de cette thèse sous la forme de microfiche/film, de reproduction sur papier ou sur format électronique.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur qui protège cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

0-612-45192-5

Canada

Abstract

This thesis argues that popular films convey religious ideology about female gender and therefore warrant consideration within the field of women and religion. Feminist theory in religion examines how western religious texts reflect anxiety about female relationships between mothers and daughters, friends, and lovers. Drawing on current scholarship in the areas of religion, gender, popular culture, and film, I demonstrate that ancient correlations between female bonding and tragedy or danger are perpetuated in the present through two movie genres, "chickflicks" and lesbian thrillers.

In Chapter One, I examine the representation of female intimacy in ancient religious texts to demonstrate the following: (1) Intimate female relationships are seen as disruptive to male hegemony; (2) Relationships between mothers and daughters end in tragedy and are subsequently forgotten; (3) Women's friendships occur under dire circumstances that often leave at least one woman abused, dead, or forgotten; and (4) Female sexual intimacy is typically associated with ill or violent women.

In Chapter Two I explore the importance of film for the study of religion in Canada. Challenging distinctions between so-called "sacred" and "profane" cultures, several theorists argue that popular culture produces and conveys religious ideology within contemporary society. In particular, I emphasize the importance of examining cinematic representations of gender and sexuality within a religious context.

Chapter Three analyzes two recent film genres that present women's relationships as key narrative features. Although chickflicks depict seemingly empowered heroines who bond to combat exploitation and abuse, the victories are ultimately short-lived. The typical death and debilitation of female characters in films such as *Terms of Endearment* (1983), *Steel Magnolias* (1989), *Fried Green Tomatoes* (1991), *Thelma and Louise* (1991), and *Boys on the Side* (1995) reaffirm religious views of female intimacy as a personal and social hazard. In lesbian thrillers, female sexual intimacy is further associated with evil, murderous characters. In films such as *Basic Instinct* (1992), *Diabolique* (1996), and *Bound* (1996), "psychodykes" perpetuate religious anxieties about the supposed social dangers of women's sexual liaisons.

In the concluding chapter, I integrate psychoanalytic and film theories to analyze the popularity of chickflicks and lesbian thrillers amongst female audiences.

Acknowledgements

Various individuals and agencies contributed to this dissertation. First, I wish to thank the members of my examination committee, Dr. L.J. "Tess" Tessier, Dr. Kenneth Melchin, Dr. Peter Beyer, and Dr. Marie-Francoise Guédon, for their support and enthusiasm. Their careful readings and insightful comments will guide my continuing investigation of religion, gender, and film.

I also thank the Department of Classics and Religious Studies at the University of Ottawa for encouragement and financial assistance. Scholarships awarded to me by the School of Graduate Studies and Research enabled me to continue my academic pursuits. I am grateful to the Lambda Foundation for its recognition of this project as well as to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for a Doctoral Fellowship during my final stages of work. In addition, grants offered by the Academic Development Fund at the University of Ottawa allowed me the benefits of presenting and discussing my research at international conferences.

My thoughts on religion and film have emerged from numerous conversations with colleagues and friends. It is an honour to be among the first students enrolled in the Collaborative Doctoral Program in Canadian Studies at the University of Ottawa. Seminar meetings demonstrated the value of interdisciplinary discussion. I am also grateful to my students in the Women in Cinema course held in the Spring of 1998 at Nipissing University. Their insights and hard work were an inspiration.

Presentations and audio-visual demonstrations of my work were facilitated by the skilled and patient staff in the Media Production Section at the University of Ottawa as well as Elgin St. Video in Ottawa. I thank Katrina Weggel, Jamie Schmeiser, Dennis DeRooy, Patti Seguin, Jan Cheney, and J.L. Bazinet for their technical and moral support at crucial times.

This work would not have been possible without the encouragement that I received from my family, particularly my mother and my sister. I am forever grateful! Finally, I extend my thanks to my supervisor, Dr. Naomi Goldenberg, who has been present throughout this great adventure.

Table of Contents

Abstract

Acknowledgements

Introduction	7
Terminology	8
Structure of the Argument	10
Contribution to Current Scholarship	23
Chapter One: The Representation of Female Intimacy in Ancient Religious Texts	32
The Inherent Tragedy of Women	32
Mothers and Daughters	39
Friends	47
Lovers	56
Synthesis	81
Chapter Two: The Religious Dimensions of Popular Film	85
Religion and Popular Culture	86
Religion and Film	100
Synthesis	115
Chapter Three: The Perpetuation of Religious Ideology in Cinematic Depictions of Female Intimacy	117
Chickflicks	117
Synthesis	138
Lesbian Thrillers	142
Synthesis	166
Conclusion	172
Appendix: Film Details	180
Bibliography	184

Every woman who has ever loved a woman
You oughta stand up and call her name
Mama-sister-daughter-lover
Every woman who has ever loved a woman
You oughta stand up and call her name

Bernice Johnson Reagon -

To speak the truth, I never yet knew a tolerable woman to be fond of her own sex.

- Jonathan Swift

Introduction

Inspiration for this study is owed in part to the Morisset Library at the University of Ottawa. A while ago, I went to consult a publication regarding the representation of female homosexuality in film. Searching the shelves, I discovered the scarce relevant materials sandwiched between books about depictions of genocide on one side and axe-wielding psychopaths on the other. Overlooking the alphabetical explanation for this arrangement - Holocaust/Homosexuality/Horror - I was initially offended. Later, I realized it was an appropriate reflection on the topic that forms the basis for my research. This thesis demonstrates that in western religion and film, women who love other women usually face one of two fates. Either they are victims of tragedy or they are sources of dread and evil. As the Library of Congress cataloguing system so aptly suggests, female intimacy is typically situated in western culture alongside suffering and terror.

This thesis argues that contemporary popular films depicting female intimacy as dismal and horrific constitute an important area of investigation for the field of women and religion. Through several recent publications, feminist scholars have begun to examine how western religious texts reflect anxiety about women's relationships. Focussing on ancient Greek, Roman, Jewish, and Christian writings, theorists highlight how women's bonds are typically presented as tragic and threatening to social order. As this current investigation illustrates, ancient religious anxiety about female alliance is perpetuated in modern culture through two movie genres, "chickflicks" and lesbian thrillers. Drawing on current scholarship in the areas of religion, gender, popular culture, and film, I will

demonstrate the importance of addressing cinematic representations of female intimacy within feminist discourse about religion.

Terminology

Throughout this investigation, I use the expression *female intimacy* to denote all close relationships between women. Within this category and study, I therefore include bonding between mothers and daughters, friends, and lovers. Justification for this seemingly broad classification is twofold. First, all of the religious and film mythologies addressed in this study have developed within the context of patriarchal hegemony. My research shows that religious writers and filmmakers in western culture present the multiple forms of female alliance as having dire consequences. Thus, while it is not my intention to conflate diverse relationships between women into one category, within patriarchy, they evidently pose a common concern for male authors. In this sense, my investigation assumes and affirms Adrienne Rich's observation that *all* intense relationships between women appear "profoundly threatening to men."¹

Secondly, I incorporate a broad interpretation of female intimacy to avoid the theoretical quandary characterizing efforts to categorize sexual versus non-sexual relationships between women. Several theorists outline the impossibility of employing terms such as *lesbianism* to denote female sexual experiences transculturally and

¹ Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1976), p. 226. Elsewhere, I also make brief reference to studies by Ruby B. Rich. Because of the prominence of Adrienne Rich's work in my text, I will use "Rich" for all subsequent references to her work and R. Rich for Ruby B. Rich.

transhistorically. Bernadette Brooten argues that the ancient Greek term *tribades*² indicates an early awareness and identification of erotic orientation among women.³ Nevertheless, ancient understandings of female homoeroticism differ from current perceptions. Ann Pellegrini and Christine Downing⁴ explain that within an ancient context, "lesbian" refers to "something or someone characteristic of the Greek isle of Lesbos,"⁵ or "to fellatio not to female homosexuality."⁶ Further, writers who presumed sex involved phallic penetration between an active and passive partner often failed to acknowledge even the possibility of sexual intimacy between women.⁷ Inaccuracies in translation as well as cultural nuances thus impede exact understandings of ancient references to women's relationships.

² *Tribades* is the plural form of *tribas*.

³ Bernadette Brooten, *Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 5. Brooten explains that her work refutes Michel Foucault and David Halperin's commonly accepted claim that the conception of "homosexuality" as a characteristic of persons only developed within the last century.

⁴ Elsewhere, I also make brief reference to two studies by Marymay Downing. I will use "Downing" for all subsequent references to Christine Downing's work and M. Downing to indicate Marymay Downing.

⁵ Ann Pellegrini, "There's No Place Like Home? Lesbian Studies and the Classics," in *Tilting the Tower: Lesbians Teaching Queer Subjects*, ed. Linda Garber (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 73.

⁶ Christine Downing, "Lesbian Mythology," *Historical Reflections* 20, no. 2 (Summer, 1994): 170.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 171-172.

The following examination of film images demonstrates that current narratives also challenge commonly held assumptions about women's intimate relationships with one another. In several movies, heroines display sexually suggestive affection for their supposed female friends. Familial relations, such as that between an aunt and niece, also traverse sexual boundaries. As my investigation suggests, the ambiguous nature of female relationships can be interpreted as one of the major sources of male anxiety about women.

I concur with Downing's conclusion that it is more advantageous to address the "many forms that women's love of women has assumed"⁸ in lieu of more confined approaches. Following Brooten's example, I employ the more ambiguous and hence less restrictive term *homoeroticism* in place of "homosexual" to describe sexual love between women.⁹ The words *lesbian* and *dyke* are used to refer to contemporary instances in film in which female homoeroticism is regarded as a character trait of particularly aggressive women. Where I refer to a specific author's work, I respect their choice in identifications unless otherwise indicated.

Structure of the Argument

My argument for a religious consideration of female intimacy in film is developed in three sections and incorporates several disciplinary approaches. I begin with a survey of recent publications in women and religion that pertain to the representation of women's

⁸ Ibid., p. 171.

⁹ Brooten, *Love Between Women*, p. 8.

relationships in western religious texts. Because my examination concentrates primarily on films produced within the United States, I am mostly concerned with examining connections to their ancient mythological predecessors in Greek, Roman, Jewish and Christian traditions. My survey of available early writings in Chapter One reaffirms feminist assertions about the anxiety evoked by female intimacy in ancient times.

Several scholars indicate that references to relationships between women, whether as mothers and daughters, friends or lovers, are scarce in western religious texts. Rich asserts that "the cathexis between mother and daughter - essential, distorted, misused - is the great unwritten story."¹⁰ Mary Hunt argues that throughout history, women's friendships have seldom been accorded any value.¹¹ Downing's survey of Greek texts demonstrates that sexual intimacy between women was in many cases not even imaginable for male writers.¹² Both Rich and Downing conclude that male ignorance of women's bonds in religious texts testifies to the challenge they likely posed to male authors.¹³

In order to understand religious apprehension about female intimacy, male distrust of women's overall experience must be foregrounded. Chapter One begins with a consideration of religious assumptions about women's inherent wickedness and warranted

¹⁰ Rich, p. 225.

¹¹ Mary E. Hunt, *Fierce Tenderness: A Feminist Theology of Friendship* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), p. 43.

¹² Downing, "Lesbian Mythology," p. 171.

¹³ Rich, p. 226; Downing, "Lesbian Mythology," p. 175.

suffering. Rosemary Ruether provides examples of several ancient myths that present women as the primary source of evil in the world.¹⁴ Margaret Miles demonstrates that throughout history, female suffering and pain are justified as beneficial treatments for women's inherent disabilities.¹⁵ Ruether and Rich's analyses show a historical correlation between motherhood and suffering. The work of these and other theorists lays a foundation for understanding religious condemnation of most female experiences, including relationships between women.

The analyses of Downing and Broten are essential to my interpretation of the disparagement of female intimacy in ancient traditions. Although Downing's primary aim is to recuperate positive models for women's love for one another, her reading of Greek myths consciously exposes the tragic and frightening nature of women's relationships in Hellenist traditions.¹⁶ Her study of Demeter and Persephone provides insights into the tragic depiction of mother/daughter bonds. Her exploration of personal and communal relationships among goddesses, nymphs, and humans demonstrates the overall danger associated with female alliances.

¹⁴ Rosemary Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983).

¹⁵ Margaret Miles, "Violence Against Women in the Historical Christian West and in North American Secular Culture: The Visual and Textual Evidence," in *Shaping New Vision: Gender and Values in American Culture* (The Harvard Women's Studies in Religion Series, 5), ed. Clarissa W. Atkinson, Constance H. Buchanan, and Margaret R. Miles (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1987), pp. 11-29.

¹⁶ Downing, "Lesbian Mythology," p. 176. Also see Christine Downing, *Myths and Mysteries of Same-Sex Love*, Paperback ed. (New York: Continuum, 1991).

Downing's findings are further explored in Brooten's recent book *Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism*.¹⁷ Examining religious, medical, and astrological texts, Brooten's study provides the most comprehensive analysis of ancient Greek, Roman, and Jewish writings about female sexual relations. Brooten interprets early Christian condemnation of female homoeroticism in terms of the socially dominant attitudes of its broader cultural milieu. More specifically, Brooten argues that (the biblical writer) Paul's condemnation of female same-sex relations derives from his and his contemporary's emphasis on gender differentiation and hierarchy. Because *tribades* were perceived to behave like men, they potentially blurred the gender boundaries on which male superiority is based. For this reason, female homoeroticism, like female intimacy in general, is viewed as a powerful threat to social stability and order.

My examination of female intimacy in Chapter One draws heavily from the work of Downing and Brooten. In addition, I incorporate Phyllis Trible's work on Hebrew texts,¹⁸ as well as Mary Rose D'Angelo and Mary Hunt's analyses of female friendship in Christian traditions.¹⁹ My presentation of the work of these and other scholars in Chapter One provides an overview of current feminist scholarship about the representation of female

¹⁷ Brooten, *Love Between Women*. Also see Bernadette Brooten, "Paul's View on the Nature of Women and Female Homoeroticism," in *Immaculate and Powerful: The Female in Sacred Image and Social Reality*, ed. Clarissa W. Atkinson, Constance H. Buchanan, and Margaret R. Miles (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), pp. 61-87.

¹⁸ Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

¹⁹ Mary Rose D'Angelo, "Women Partners in the New Testament," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 6, no. 1 (1990): 65-86; Mary E. Hunt, *Fierce Tenderness*.

intimacy in religion. In so doing, I lay a foundation for considering the perpetuation of dominant religious themes in western popular culture.

Chapter Two explores various scholarly approaches to the religious dimensions of film. First, I examine how popular culture produces and conveys religious ideology within contemporary society. Several theorists, including Kelton Cobb and Thomas Luckmann, argue that popular media perform religious functions as public sites for the articulation and discussion of meaning.²⁰ Challenging perceived distinctions between so-called "sacred" and "profane" realms, these academics encourage scholars of religion to look beyond traditional texts and institutions. In his study of Canadian scholarship, Roger O'Toole argues for a greater incorporation of methodologies such as Luckmann's. As he argues, identifying the foci of popular devotion and commitment illuminates overlooked manifestations of religion operative within secular culture.²¹

Of the diverse "social forms of religion"²² addressed by theorists, films are considered particularly powerful conveyors of ideology and ethics. As primary sources of current mythology, popular movies are understood to fulfill the traditional role of synagogues and churches. Two publications, *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth and*

²⁰ Kelton Cobb, "Reconsidering the Status of Popular Culture in Tillich's Theology of Culture," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* LXIII, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 53-84; Thomas Luckmann, *The Invisible Religion: The Problem of Religion in Modern Society* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1967).

²¹ Roger O'Toole, "Some Good Purpose: Notes on Religion and Political Culture in Canada," in *Models and Myths in Canadian Sociology*, ed. S.D. Berkowitz (Toronto: Butterworths, 1984), pp. 75-109.

²² Luckmann, p. 50.

Ideology in Popular American Film, edited by Joel W. Martin and Conrad E. Ostwalt²³ and *Seeing and Believing: Religion and Values in the Movies* by Margaret Miles²⁴ highlight various approaches for analyzing religious functions of the cinema. Recognizing the basis for religious thought and expression in human relationships, Miles' work is particularly useful for addressing the religious significance of gender and sexuality in film narrative. My review and analysis of these works lay a foundation for understanding the diverse ways that current films convey ancient religious anxiety about female intimacy to millions of attentive congregations.

Chapter Three presents a religious analysis of two recent film genres that present women's relationships as key narrative features.²⁵ Through depictions of female intimacy as tragic and horrific, chickflicks and lesbian thrillers perpetuate and reinforce fear about women's commitments to one another. The first genre may be regarded as a variation of the "woman's film" of the thirties and forties.²⁶ Typically, these films target female

²³ Joel W. Martin and Conrad E. Ostwalt, eds., *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth and Ideology in Popular American Film* (Boulder: Westview Press, Inc., 1995).

²⁴ Margaret Miles, *Seeing and Believing: Religion and Values in the Movies* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996).

²⁵ Because my focus is primarily on popular films as conveyors of religiosity, I am not examining the use of female homoeroticism in pornography. For an interesting discussion of the religious significance of pornography, see Marymay Downing "Pornography as a Subject for Religious Studies: New Directions for the Field of Women and Religion," Diss. University of Ottawa, 1993.

²⁶ For an excellent discussion of the characters and themes featured in the early "woman's film," see Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies*, 2d ed. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987).

audiences by placing a woman's quest for happiness as the central theme.²⁷ While earlier genres usually focussed on one female protagonist, current chickflicks tend to depict heroines bonding with other women in response to failed and often violent relationships with men.

Feminist film scholars have noted the recent rise of seemingly empowered female characters in conjunction with current feminist advancements as well as backlash.²⁸ Although female audiences have been encouraged by seemingly realistic portrayals of independent heroines who find solace with one another in a misogynous world, the victories of these heroines are ultimately short-lived. Like their predecessors in earlier women's films, modern heroines learn that it is "only through renunciation and sacrifice that they achieve their ultimate goal."²⁹ Inevitably one or more female protagonists die or suffer from physical debilitation due to illness or abuse. The tearjerker endings that characterize this genre perpetuate ancient myths that present female intimacy as tragically crippling and life-threatening. Thus far, the significance of these dramas has been overlooked by theorists of religion and film.

²⁷ Susan Morrison, "Pearl, Hilda, Thelma & Louise: The 'Woman's Film' Revisited," *cineACTION* 30 (Winter 1992): 49.

²⁸ Elayne Rapping's articles "Hollywood's New 'Feminist' Heroines" *Cineaste* XIV, no. 4 (May 1986): 4-9; and "Liberation in Chains: 'The Woman Question' in Hollywood" *Cineaste* XVII, no. 1 (1989): 4-8, provide overviews of many films depicting the undermining of supposed feminist heroines. According to her analysis, these films can be interpreted as part of a broader cultural backlash against recent feminist advancements.

²⁹ Morrison, p. 49.

During the last two decades, chickflicks have depicted a variety of tragic relationships between women. While religious themes of sacrificial motherhood produced successful early films such as *Mildred Pierce* (1945)³⁰ and *Stella Dallas* (1937), mother-daughter separation due to illness has been the subject of many recent successful releases. The award-winning *Terms of Endearment* (1983) as well as *Steel Magnolias* (1989) depict the agony of mothers when their daughters die. In *Beaches* (1988), best friends are separated by the early death of one who leaves behind a young daughter. *A Thousand Acres* (1997) centres around the tense drama of sisters who are sexually molested by their father after the death of their mother. At the film's conclusion, one of the sisters also dies, leaving her own daughters in the care of her sibling. The only sequel made within this genre, *Evening Star* (1996) presents the mourning mother of *Terms of Endearment*, now a grandmother, dying in the presence of extended family.³¹

Several recent films present the separation of defiant female companions due to death from disease or suicide. In addition to the loss of friends in *Beaches* and *Evening Star*, *Fried Green Tomatoes* (1991), *Thelma and Louise* (1991), and *Boys on the Side* (1995) all present women's failed relationships with men, their subsequent bonding with

³⁰ Only the first reference to a specific film will include the year of its release. Information regarding directors, producers, country of origin, and running times is presented in the Appendix.

³¹ The science-fiction film, *Alien 3* (1992) begins with the death of a daughter adopted in the previous episode. For an analysis pertaining to religion and the previous two films in this series, see Janice Hocker Rushing, "Evolution of 'The New Frontier' in *Alien* and *Aliens*: Patriarchal Co-optation of the Feminine Archetype," in *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film*, ed. Joel W. Martin and Conrad E. Ostwalt (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995), pp. 94-118.

women, and their tragic annihilation shortly after. The inevitable link between female intimacy and tragedy is reinforced through films such as *The Color Purple* (1985), *The Joy Luck Club* (1993), and *Bad Girls* (1994) in which women are brought together by the pain and threat of male abuse. Alternatively, *Passion Fish* (1992) and *Muriel's Wedding* (1994) present female bonding in response to social and sexual isolation due to women's physical disabilities.

In only rare instances does the representation of female bonding in popular women's films include a sexual component. Some theorists maintain that Hollywood tends to tone down lesbian eroticism even when a film derives from a story with explicit lesbian content.³² Nevertheless, indications of female homoeroticism make it to the screen, usually through looks, quick embraces, or kisses. Homoerotic overtones are present in several chickflicks including *Fried Green Tomatoes*, *Thelma and Louise*, *Bad Girls*, *Boys on the Side*, and *Muriel's Wedding*. As the tragic depictions of bodily suffering and death in these films confirm, female intimacy, whether familial, friendly, or erotic, is typically the precursor or effect of women's intense suffering and hardship.

While chickflicks sometimes project female homoeroticism onto debilitated characters, another genre of popular films presents female sexual intimacy as a pastime of crazed demonic killers. I have chosen to label the second genre of films "'lesbian' thrillers" because of their depiction of murderous psychodykes. Many of these narratives

³² See Jennifer Ross Church, "The Balancing Act of *Fried Green Tomatoes*," in *Vision/Re-Vision: Adapting Contemporary American Fiction by Women to Film*, ed. Barbara Tapa Lupack (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1996), pp.193-209. Also see Rebecca Bell-Metereau, *Hollywood Androgyny*, 2d ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 251.

are reminiscent of a broader cinematic genre featuring *femmes fatales*. Perceived by theorists as the product of male anxiety over their loss of personal and social control,³³ these female antagonists are typically presented as aggressive career women who threaten the nuclear family, socially and physically.³⁴ In lesbian thrillers specifically, the violent and murderous behaviour is presented as even more insidious as the attribute of females who also pursue sexual encounters with other women. Unlike their predecessors in classic *film noir*, current villainesses often escape a "punitive resolution" and can be perceived as even more dangerous.³⁵ Although psychodykes are one of the most popular representations of villainesses in recent films, their social and religious significance has not yet been sufficiently addressed.³⁶

³³ James Maxfield, *The Fatal Woman: Sources of Male Anxiety in American Film Noir, 1941-1991* (Cranbury, New Jersey: Associated University Presses, 1996), p. 10.

³⁴ For a good discussion of similarities and differences between *film noir* and contemporary films, see Amelia Jones, "'She Was Bad News': Male Paranoia and the Contemporary New Woman," *Camera Obscura* 25-26 (1991): 297-320.

³⁵ Haskell, p. 374.

³⁶ Because virtually all of the women depicted in these films seduce men and often more men than women, it is somewhat misleading to label them "lesbian." I nevertheless employ this term because of the homoerotic subtext in these films. In addition to their crimes, the lesbian exploits of these antagonists convey patriarchal instability. It is therefore not the specific orientation of female characters that is of narrative significance. Rather, it is the way that lesbianism is used to signify a disruption in male hegemony. The role of lesbianism in subverting patriarchal and narrative structure is developed in Lynda Hart, *Fatal Women: Lesbian Sexuality and the Mark of Aggression* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994) and Judith Roof, *Come as You Are: Sexuality and Narrative* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996). Hart's work is examined in Chapter Three of this study.

Recent years have provided a plethora of lesbian thrillers to confirm the perpetuation of historical male anxiety over female sexual intimacy. During the last decade, lesbian vampires reemerged in the horror film *The Hunger* (1983).³⁷ Released a few years later, *Black Widow* (1987) depicts female obsessions between an investigator and her homicidal suspect. Another horror picture, *The Kiss* (1988), warned audiences that nieces should not kiss their aunts with their eyes closed for fear of catching a deadly curse.

The beginning of this decade was marked by the release of *Thelma and Louise*, a controversial film about two heroines who attempt to outrun the law after shooting a would-be rapist. In *Mortal Thoughts* (1991) two women are more faithful to each other than to the spouses they kill. A web of murderous female lovers produced intrigue in the box office hit *Basic Instinct* (1992). *Poison Ivy* (1992) cautions female audiences about manipulative girlfriends, while *Single White Female* (1992) warns about the hazards of obsessive female roommates. *Fun* (1993) depicts one day in the life of teenage girls who meet, cuddle, discuss make-up, and then butcher an elderly woman. *Heavenly Creatures* (1994), based on a true story, shows teenage female lovers murdering one of their mothers. A journalist remarked that the murderous lovers, Eu and Mi, featured in *Butterfly Kiss* (1994), make the earlier *Thelma and Louise* look like Avon ladies.³⁸

³⁷ The seductive female vampire appeared as early as 1936 with *Dracula's Daughter*. It has been the most popular characterization of lesbians ever since.

³⁸ T.S. Warren, "Butterfly Kiss," *XPress*.

During the last three years, audiences have been inundated with images of the lethal effects of female relationships, often between women who "get away with it." In *Wild Side* (1995), a call-girl escapes with her new lover after they plan the death of the latter's husband. As the intimacy between two women grows in *La Ceremonie* (1995), they murder the family of one of their employers. *Dolores Claiborne* (1995) presents the lethal revenge of intimate female friends on their husbands. *Sister, my Sister* (1995) combines incestuous eroticism and murder. *I Shot Andy Warhol* (1996) depicts the story of Valerie Solanis, a self-identified lesbian, killing the artist in real life. Hollywood's modern rendition of *Diabolique* (1996)³⁹ sees the return of murderous mistresses more committed to each other, yet equally as lethal. *Bound* (1996) reveals that lesbian lovers are so powerful and cunning they can even take on and beat the mafia. Unfortunately however, psychodykes are often the victims of their own sordid affairs as reaffirmed in this year's *Wild Things* (1998). The successful depiction of female homoeroticism amongst murderous women has clearly proved itself a profitable enterprise.

My analysis of lesbian thrillers points to the historical tendency to equate female homoeroticism with a breakdown of male hegemony. As a product of primarily male imagination, these women demonstrate that within patriarchy, a lesbian is ultimately an "outlaw."⁴⁰ Lynda Hart's work traces the figure of the lesbian criminal back to nineteenth

³⁹ The Hollywood release in 1996 was a re-make of the original French film of 1955. The final resolution is significantly altered in the second version. Subsequent textual references to *Diabolique* will refer to the 1996 version unless otherwise indicated.

⁴⁰ Mary Hunt, "Lovingly Lesbian: Toward a Feminist Theology of Friendship," in *A Challenge to Love: Gay and Lesbian Catholics in the Church*, ed. Robert Nugent (New York: Crossroad, 1983), p. 137.

century discourses that view both crime and desire as male prerogatives. Women who partake in such activities are subsequently perceived as not female, but rather, by exclusion, male.⁴¹ Downing and Brooten's studies of ancient religious texts testify to the long-standing dread of women who are perceived as behaving like men. Through its disruption of gender categories, female sexual intimacy has always posed an intolerable threat to patriarchal power.

Chapter Three thus illustrates how filmmakers, like earlier religious writers, use images of women either as destroyed and pitiful or as destroyers that must be annihilated to cope with the perceived dangers of female intimacy. While it is beyond the scope of this presentation to consider all of the above chickflicks and lesbian thrillers in depth, cinematic trends are highlighted through readings of *Terms of Endearment*, *Steel Magnolias*, *Fried Green Tomatoes*, *Thelma and Louise*, *Boys on the Side*, *Basic Instinct*, *Diabolique*, *Bound* and *A Question of Silence* (1982). These films will be addressed in relation to others that similarly reflect the hazards associated with female bonding. Because of the extreme controversies surrounding *Thelma and Louise* as well as its overlap of both film genres, it forms the largest part of my analysis. However, as powerful conveyors of religious ideology about women, all of the above films warrant intensive interrogation within the field of women and religion. By depicting female intimacy as crippling and life-threatening, popular films remind audiences that in patriarchy, women's appropriate place is with men and under their control.

⁴¹ Hart, p. 14.

In my concluding chapter, I discuss the popularity of these movies amongst female audiences. Integrating the psychoanalytic theories of Nancy Chodorow I analyze the female pleasure derived from images of women together on screen. I also highlight how "reading against the grain" enables women to rethink traditionally sexist themes to their own end. In so doing, I further demonstrate how investigations of popular films contribute to discourse about female intimacy in the field of women and religion.

Contribution to Current Scholarship

This study incorporates and expands scholarship currently occurring in several disciplines including religious studies and film studies. My analysis of female intimacy in film is premised on the convictions that first, gender is fundamental to religious systems and secondly, that films convey religious ideology. While scholars of religious studies have generally tended to deny or overlook the religious aspects of secular culture, film theorists have in turn seldom considered religion as a basic component of media production. In demonstrating how these two producers of mythology converge on topics related to gender and sexuality, this investigation delineates new trajectories for several fields.

Context Within Religious Studies

Within the broad field of religious studies, my research contributes to recent discourses about the religious significance of gender, the religious function of popular culture, and the study of religion in Canada. In his book entitled *God's Phallus and Other*

Problems for Moses, Masculinity, and Monotheism, Howard Eilberg-Schwartz asserts that "gender is not just another subject that intersects with religion, but is central to the work religion accomplishes."⁴² His work highlights how biblical texts are grounded in male anxiety about the homoeroticism implied by men's love for a male God. Naomi Goldenberg further interrogates masculinity by arguing that through religion, men attempt to be women.⁴³ She suggests that male directed rituals and doctrine that displace women's agency and creativity attain authority as "parts of a generalized mythology of gender that is believed because it is continually encountered and performed in a variety of venues and fragmented contexts."⁴⁴ Goldenberg thus encourages scholars to consider how "the sets of discourses and social practices that we recognize as religious have been and continue to be primary constructors of our ideas about gender."⁴⁵ Both Eilberg-Schwartz and Goldenberg underline how male notions about gender and sexuality underpin ancient religious texts. My work contributes to this discourse by demonstrating how male anxieties about female gender give rise to religious condemnation of women's relationships.

⁴² Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, *God's Phallus and Other Problems for Moses, Masculinity, and Monotheism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), p. 6.

⁴³ See Naomi Goldenberg, "What's So Funny About Paternity - Theological Subversion in the Clichettes' Rendition of 'Having My Baby'," unpublished lecture presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion, Washington, November 21, 1993; and Naomi Goldenberg, "A Theory of Gender as a Central Hermeneutic in the Psychoanalysis of Religion," in *Hermeneutical Approaches in Psychology of Religion*, ed. Jacob van Belzen (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997).

⁴⁴ Goldenberg, "What's So Funny About Paternity."

⁴⁵ Goldenberg, "A Theory of Gender as a Central Hermeneutic." p. 66.

Recent work in the area of women and religion emphasizes how male control of female sexuality forms a central theme in western religion and culture. Scholars such as Rosemary Ruether, Mary Daly, and Margaret Miles provide analyses of religious assumptions about the inherent evil and inferiority of female gender and pursuits.⁴⁶ Scholars such as Downing and Brooten demonstrate how the desire to control female sexuality is reflected in male religious writings about female intimacy.⁴⁷ While Goldenberg regards male efforts to be women as a major impetus in religions, Brooten shows that women who supposedly appropriate maleness through relationships with other women are condemned. My investigation directs discourse in women and religion to consider how popular films reinforce religious ideology about female gender and sexuality. Films projecting images of debilitated and dangerous women constitute contemporary religious texts that warn about the supposed implications of women's relationships.

Only recently have scholars begun to analyze the prevalence of religious ideology about women within popular culture. These studies encompass diverse topics including

⁴⁶ See Ruether, pp. 159-192; Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation*, Paperback ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), pp. 44-68; Miles, "Violence Against Women."

⁴⁷ In addition to the work of Downing, Brooten, Hunt, and D'Angelo, several other publications explore themes pertaining to religion and female intimacy. These include Judith Plaskow's *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism From A Feminist Perspective* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1990); Judith A. Kates and Gail Twersky Reimer, eds. *Reading Ruth: Contemporary Women Reclaim a Sacred Story* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994); Sonia Zylberberg, "Woman to Woman: Relationships in the Hebrew Bible," Diss. Concordia University, 1997; and most recently, L.J. Tessier's *Dancing After the Whirlwind: Feminist Reflections on Sex, Denial, and Spiritual Transformation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997).

popular music, videos, literature, and newspapers.⁴⁸ In addition, scholars focus on the relationship between religion and depictions of women in film, although Miles' *Seeing and Believing* is the only publication that offers extensive reading in this area. With regard to female intimacy specifically, Miles addresses three films, *The Long Walk Home* (1990), *Daughters of the Dust* (1992) and *Thelma and Louise* in terms of female bonding, race, and violence.⁴⁹ Elsewhere, film theorist Lucy Fischer explores links among mythological figures such as Lilith and the Furies, and the depiction of women's violence in *A Question of Silence*.⁵⁰ Lisa Tyler offers a valuable reading of *Steel Magnolias* in terms of the Demeter-Persephone myth.⁵¹ While the above studies contribute to my analysis through their discussions of the relationship between religion and popular representation, the religious dimensions of women's portrayal in films remain largely undertheorized.

By presenting female intimacy in film as a relevant area of religious investigation, I contribute not only to discourse about religion and gender, but about religion and film as

⁴⁸ Studies in this area include Naomi Goldenberg's analysis of Paul Anka's music in "What's So Funny About Paternity"; Marymay Downing's examination of religious imagery and Madonna in "For Her, Or Against Her? The Power of Religious Metaphor," *Limited Edition: Voices of Women, Voices of Feminism*, ed. Geraldine Finn (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 1993), pp. 62-86; Susan Gubar's study of the Demeter-Persephone myth in western literature in "Mother, Maiden and the Marriage of Death: Women Writers and an Ancient Myth," *Women's Studies* 6 (1979): 301-315; and Miles' work on media treatment of women in "Violence Against Women."

⁴⁹ Miles, *Seeing and Believing*.

⁵⁰ Lucy Fischer, *Shot/Counter-shot: Film Tradition and Women's Cinema* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989), pp. 282-300.

⁵¹ Lisa Tyler, "Mother-Daughter Myth and the Marriage of Death in *Steel Magnolias*," *Film Quarterly* 22, Issue 2 (April-June, 1994).

Source: <http://www.epnet.com/cgi-bin/epwno...ecs=10/reccount=15/startrec=1/ft=1>.

well. While my work affirms theorists' increasing recognition of the religious role of the cinema in secular culture, I expand this discussion to include a consideration of the influence of religion on depictions of female relationships specifically. By presenting sexuality as a key ideological theme of current films, my examination broadens scholars' awareness of the diverse issues that are "theologized" through popular culture.

Through its discussion of gender, culture, and film, this investigation makes a contribution to the overall study of religion in Canada. In his sociological study of Canadian religiosity,⁵² O'Toole argues that secularization demands new methodologies for examining the role and function of religion in contemporary culture. As O'Toole explains, Canadian religious studies should adopt a more structuralist-functionalist approach to religion and examine the cohesive elements in a social system. In particular, scholars should look for the social forces that bind culture through providing guidelines for human actions.⁵³ O'Toole emphasizes the merits of Luckmann's approach to social forms of religion which has thus far been insufficiently utilized in Canadian scholarship.⁵⁴

My work on female intimacy in film is premised on Luckmann's view of religion as a pervasive force in secular culture. Taking O'Toole's cue, I consider Luckmann's emphasis on the religious role of media to be foundational for assessing Canadian religiosity through film imagery. Although my investigation focuses primarily on American cinema, this in no way undermines its contribution to an analysis of religion in Canada.

⁵² O'Toole, "Some Good Purpose."

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

Ninety-seven percent of the films viewed in Canada are foreign, and of these, Hollywood productions entertain the widest audience.⁵⁵ My study thus expands the field of religious studies in Canada to address the ways that religious ideology about gender is disseminated in this country through the consumption of American popular mythology.

Context Within Film Studies

While scholars of religious studies have typically been wary of the relationship between religion and popular culture, film criticism has almost entirely overlooked the significance of religion in their analyses.⁵⁶ Martin and Ostwalt remark on the absence of references to religion in film criticism, even in the indexes of their general studies.⁵⁷ Along with numerous other disciplines, film studies erroneously view "religion as a peripheral phenomenon in contemporary social organization."⁵⁸ While it is relatively early to determine the impact of the emerging field of religion and film on overall media studies, my examination of female intimacy contributes in several ways to the study of women and film.

At present, there is no feminist analysis addressing the overall representation of female intimacy in film. Studies of earlier melodramas and *femmes fatales* focus on film presentations of women who for the most part, act alone. The second edition of Molly

⁵⁵ "Canada at the Movies," *Canada and the World Background* 60, no. 4 (1995): 1-4. Source: <http://www.epnet.com/cgi-bin/epwlu...ecs=10/reccount=18/startrec=1/ft=1>

⁵⁶ Martin and Ostwalt, pp. 2-3.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 2.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 2.

Haskell's well-known *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* erroneously suggests that unlike television, the movies of the eighties provide no images of "the special quality of women's relationships on a day-to-day working, or living, basis."⁵⁹ Fischer provides readings of female friendship and sexual relationships in a few specific films from the early eighties,⁶⁰ but more recent trends remain unexplored. In recent years, Elayne Rapping has noted an increase in images of empowered heroines paralleling the second wave of feminism, yet fails to analyze the cultural bases of these depictions.⁶¹ Only short reviews acknowledge the recent trend of female bonding and these too ignore the deeper question of historical motivation.

Several studies address depictions of lesbianism in film, yet none of them explores their connections to female intimacy in general, nor the narrative significance of religion.⁶² One of the most popular studies of the disparaging treatment of homosexuality on screen is Vito Russo's *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies* which was recently

⁵⁹ Haskell, p. 377.

⁶⁰ Fischer, pp. 216-268.

⁶¹ See Rapping's two articles, "Hollywood's New 'Feminist' Heroines" and "Liberation in Chains."

⁶² While Hart's study addresses the popular correlation of lesbianism with aggression, it completely ignores the religious preoccupation with this same equation. Interesting film studies of themes pertaining to lesbian representation include: Andrea Weiss, *Vampires and Violets: Lesbians in Film* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992); Martha Gever, John Greyson, and Pratibha Parmar, eds., *Queer Looks: Perspectives on Lesbian and Gay Film and Video* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1993); Yvonne Tasker, "Pussy Galore: Lesbian Images and Lesbian Desire in the Popular Cinema," in *The Good, the Bad, and the Gorgeous: Popular Culture's Romance with Lesbianism*, eds. Diane Hamer and Belinda Budge (San Francisco: Pandora, 1994), pp. 172-183; and Tamsin Wilton, ed., *Immortal, Invisible: Lesbians and the Moving Image* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

made into a documentary.⁶³ Unfortunately however, broad studies such as this tend to regard lesbian relationships as a subcategory of gay homosexuality. In so doing, these examinations overlook the specific threats posed by female intimacy within patriarchal culture. Just as Brooten exposes the inconsistent treatment of male and female homoeroticism in ancient texts,⁶⁴ so too, my investigation argues for a recognition of the unique challenges evoked by female bonding in film.

While male bonding is foundational to patriarchal culture, female bonding is seen as subversive on and off screen. Although gay homoeroticism challenges the heterosexist dimensions of western culture, male and female intimacies are not synonymous, nor are they treated as such by dominant culture. There is currently no film genre that depicts male bonding as a counter to patriarchal hegemony. When men murder on screen, they are not presumed to be gay; when women kill, they are usually depicted with lesbian inclinations. Although censorship codes tend to regard all homosexual representations as offensive,⁶⁵ depictions of gay and lesbian relationships in film bear little resemblance to one other.

This investigation does not contribute to women's history *per se*. Rather, it bears "witness to male constructions of female [intimacy] and homoeroticism."⁶⁶ Downing's

⁶³ Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies*, Revised ed. (New York: Harper&Row, 1987).

⁶⁴ Brooten, *Love Between Women*, p. 361.

⁶⁵ Russo, pp. 26-38.

⁶⁶ Brooten, *Love Between Women*, p. 25.

poignant observation about the limitations of ancient texts is still as relevant for today's mythological sources.

What is directly available reflects male perspectives, communicates male fears and fantasies, guilt and longing: men's surface denial of sexual gratification that is not phallus-centred, their deeper dread of women's original and originating power and self-sufficient independence of men.⁶⁷

This examination demonstrates that ancient religious condemnation of female intimacy is fundamental to the contemporary multibillion dollar business of film production. While they do not generally reflect women's own perspectives, both ancient and current "religious" texts are significant for "women's history insofar as they [shape] the culture in which women [live]."⁶⁸ This investigation is therefore of relevance to anyone interested in exploring women's experiences as they live and love together under patriarchy.

⁶⁷ Downing, "Lesbian Mythology," p. 176.

⁶⁸ Brooten, "Paul's Views," p. 79.

Chapter One

The Representation of Female Intimacy in Ancient Religious Texts

Western religious myths and traditions provide numerous examples of the supposed tragic and destructive nature of female intimacy. Feminist scholarship in religion highlights how male anxiety about women's close relationships is reflected in ancient dread, annihilation, and denial of such alliances in religious writings. Female bonding between mothers and daughters, friends, and lovers is typically viewed as unnatural, immoral, and threatening to social order. In western religious writings, women's lives and relationships are characterized by hardship and condemnation in order to ensure the primacy of patriarchal rule.

The Inherent Tragedy of Women

Mythological apprehension about female relationships is best understood in conjunction with broader religious assumptions about women's inherent evil. Depictions of women's actions as obstructing and inferior to male spiritual pursuits presume inherent female deficiencies. While myths about Pandora and Eve reflect male associations of women with original sin and hardship, the story of the Virgin Mary suggests that female self-sacrifice restores humanity. Presuming a divinely ordained link between womanhood and suffering, religious writers present anguish as an inevitable component of all female experience.

Women as Bearers of Evil

In her book *Sexism and God-Talk*, Ruether demonstrates how several western myths "have scapegoated women as the primordial cause of evil."⁶⁹ The myth of Pandora, from Hesiod's *Work and Days*, presents women as the source of wickedness and disharmony in the world. As Ruether recounts, Zeus sends Pandora, a female endowed with grace, treachery, and a "box full of troubles" to punish "mankind" when Prometheus steals fire from the gods.⁷⁰ Ruether explains the misogynous attitudes underpinning the myth.

Before the coming of Pandora, humanity lived in a paradisaal state, "free and secure from trouble, and free from wearisome labour, safe from painful diseases that bring mankind to destruction." Pandora lifts the lid from the box and unleashes all manner of evil and troubles upon mankind.... For Hesiod, Pandora stands for woman herself as a bane upon males, without whom they would live a happy and blessed existence.⁷¹

As Ruether explains, women's responsibility for hardship in the world is a key theme in Jewish and Christian conceptions of reality. According to Jewish folklore, Adam's first wife Lilith refused to submit to him. Lilith then "fled into the desert, there becoming a source of all kinds of evil and dangers to family life."⁷² Although many ancient thinkers

⁶⁹ Ruether, p. 165.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 166.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid., p. 168. It is significant that while religious folklore depicts the isolation of the demonic Lilith, feminist re-writings present Lilith's refusal of patriarchy and her subsequent friendship with Eve as the origin of women's solidarity. See Judith Plaskow, "The Coming of Lilith: Toward a Feminist Theology," in *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in*

interpreted the Genesis story in which women seduce angels and produce demons as signifying female origins of evil,⁷³ Pauline theology points to Eve as proof of women's disruption and subordination in Christianity.⁷⁴ According to Miles, "the creation of Eve *after* Adam is repeatedly cited as 'proof' of women's inherent need to be controlled by men."⁷⁵ Further, as the one who tempts Adam with the forbidden fruit, Eve is scapegoated as the cause of Adam's fall and consequently, that of all humanity.

Ruether explains that because of Eve's transgression, "all women, as her daughters, [are] guilty for the radical impotence of 'man' in the face of evil."⁷⁶ According to Tertullian, women are even the cause of divine suffering and deserve the harshest punishment.

*You are the Devil's gateway. You are the unsealer of that forbidden tree. You are the first deserter of the divine law. You are she who persuaded him whom the Devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God's image, man. On account of your deserved punishment, that is, death, even the Son of God had to die.*⁷⁷

Myths about Pandora, Lilith, the birth of demons, and Eve lay a foundation for regarding women as generally dangerous and the enemies of good social order.⁷⁸

Religion, eds. Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), pp. 198-209.

⁷³ Genesis 6:1-4.

⁷⁴ Ruether, p. 167.

⁷⁵ Miles, "Violence Against Women," p. 16. Italics added.

⁷⁶ Ruether, p. 167.

⁷⁷ Miles, "Violence Against Women," p. 19.

⁷⁸ Ruether, p. 168.

Mythological assumptions regarding female wickedness and debauchery contribute to male anxiety about female intimacy in several ways. First, these myths

reveal a tremendous fear of women's suppressed power, which...overthr[ows] original paradisaal conditions and introduce[s] disease, mortality, hard work, and frustrating struggle for survival in place of what was ease and happiness in the midst of spontaneous plenty.⁷⁹

It is women and their unsupervised actions that destroy humanity's perfect state. Secondly, as Ruether explains, these myths correlate women with "carnality and finitude, which debase the 'manly' spirit and drag it down into sin and death."⁸⁰ Women's association with body and nature frames them as serious threats to men's efforts to purify themselves spiritually.⁸¹ Thirdly, men justify "the continued repression and subjugation of woman, as 'punishment' for her primordial 'sin'."⁸² Because women are the bearers of evil, it is God's will that they be subject to male control.

The Glorification of Women's Suffering

Religious mythology about the evil of female deeds legitimates western assumptions about the necessity for women's struggle and sacrifice. Miles explains that women's punishment and suffering are usually depicted as beneficial for a woman's own sake. She asserts that "the bottom line of patriarchal order is the use of violence toward and even

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 169.

⁸¹ Miles, "Violence Against Women," p. 19.

⁸² Ruether, p. 169.

murder of the ruled for their protection."⁸³ For example, witches were slowly burned to encourage awareness and repentance for their sins.⁸⁴ Ruether reaffirms that men's ongoing efforts to control women are evident throughout history, from witch hunts and murder to contemporary psychotherapy.⁸⁵

Rich and Ruether trace the glorification of female suffering to women's wickedness as it relates to their maternal capacity. In her groundbreaking study, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, Rich asserts that "the identification of womanhood with suffering - by women as well as men has been tied to the concept of woman-as-mother."⁸⁶ Ruether argues that theological emphasis on the male spiritual realm has ensured that everything sustaining physical life, particularly reproduction and motherhood, is viewed as a bearer of death and decay.⁸⁷ In this scheme, women's bodies implicate them not only in evil and sin, but also in pain.

The biblical creation myth establishes mothers' suffering as part of the divine vision for humanity. Because it is Eve's action that causes the Fall, women will henceforth suffer and live as inferior beings:

⁸³ Miles, p. 17.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 22.

⁸⁵ Ruether, p. 170.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 168.

⁸⁷ Ibid., pp. 79-80.

To the woman He said: "I will greatly multiply your sorrow and your conception; in pain you shall bring forth children; your desire *shall be* for your husband, and he shall rule over you." (Genesis: 3:16)⁸⁸

The effects of the association of motherhood with punishment cannot be overstated. Male writers, who claim to speak for God, dictate that it is "the religious duty of women to accept the burden of guilt"⁸⁹ and suffering. Daly remarks that this myth projects a malignant image of "the 'nature' of women that is still deeply embedded in the modern psyche."⁹⁰

The believed benefits of women's pain are reflected in historical religious and medical texts that forbid the alleviation of labour pains for *women's own sake*.⁹¹ During the middle ages, midwives were burned for easing the pain of childbirth.⁹² The discovery of anaesthesia in the nineteenth century evoked further theological debate. Rich explains:

the clergy attacked anaesthesia as "a decay of Satan, apparently offering itself to bless women; but in the end it will harden society and rob God of the deep earnest cries which arise in time of trouble for help." The lifting of Eve's curse seemed to threaten the foundations of patriarchal religion; the cries of women in childbirth were for the glory of God the father. An alleviation of female suffering was seen as "hardening" society...⁹³

⁸⁸ Biblical citations are from *The New King James Version*, unless otherwise indicated.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 49.

⁹⁰ Daly, p. 45.

⁹¹ Rich explains that Romans followed the Hebrew example of regarding such suffering as retribution. Labelling it "*poena magna* - the 'great pain'", Romans alluded to the alternative meaning for *poena* as punishment or penalty (p. 156). The theological importance of this "punishment" has endured throughout western history.

⁹² Rich, p. 128.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 168.

The Virgin Mary best conveys the inevitable and even noble quality of maternal suffering. Although Catholic emphasis on the Immaculate Conception and perpetual virginity of Mary sidestep any possibility of labour pains during the birth of the Christ,⁹⁴ Mary's anguish throughout her son's life is a basic tenant of Christian theology. As the most perfect example of the sacredness of women's submission and self-sacrifice ("Let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1: 38)) Mary epitomizes the "patriarchal feminine."⁹⁵

Through her Magnificat, Mary suggests women acquiesce and take joy in their "blessed" inferior stature.

For He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant;
for behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed (...)
His mercy is on those who fear Him (...)
He has put down the might from *their* thrones, and exalted *the* lowly...
(Luke 1: 48, 50, 52)

Mary's lowliness and suffering is both the cause and effect of her privilege as the Mother of God. Although she is blessed and in this sense removed from the realm of other women, her sacrifice and suffering serve as a symbol of women's obligation. Miles argues that through a "fainting but dignified Virgin at the foot of the cross, the physical and spiritual suffering of women is shown as one of the primary ways for women to follow Christ."⁹⁶ Christian imagery teaches that women's anguish is beneficial not only "for their

⁹⁴ According to the Doctrine of Immaculate Conception, Mary is not tainted by original sin. As the New Eve, she would presumably not be subject to God's punishment.

⁹⁵ Ruether, p. 149.

⁹⁶ Miles, "Violence Against Women," p. 21.

own souls; it is their suffering that qualifies them to be effective intercessors for others."⁹⁷ Images of Mary's anguish, Assumption, and Coronation encourage women's "patient suffering in this life" through promises of otherworldly recompense.⁹⁸

As the above examples demonstrate, western religious traditions have conceptualized women's lives in terms of wickedness and pain. Within patriarchy, women are depicted as the primary source of evil, whose anguish is the product of their divinely determined inferiority. The misogynous nature of patriarchal mythologies reflects male anxieties about female gender. Construed as a crippled, reprehensible state that wreaks havoc on the world, female nature is a lethal contaminant that must be controlled and destroyed to avert further contagion.

Within this context of male paranoia and projection, the danger of female bonding is immense. Viewed as a challenge to male control and authority, female alliance is presented as dangerous to "good" social order. In western mythology, ancient writers mitigate male anxiety by depicting female intimacy between mothers and daughters, friends, and lovers as unstable, painful, and fatally hazardous.

Mothers and Daughters

Despite the primacy of the mother/daughter bond in women's lives, it is almost entirely ignored in patriarchal myths. Its absence in mythology is reflective of its overall discouragement in women's lives. As Rich explains, within the context of women's overall

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

estrangement from one another in western culture, "the loss of the daughter to the mother, the mother to the daughter, is the essential female tragedy."⁹⁹ Not surprisingly, the only prominent western myth about a mother and daughter bond focuses on the anguish of their separation. From the myth of Demeter and Persephone, women learn that mother and daughter relationships are inevitably confronted with misfortune and grief. The tragic themes of this myth as well as the subsequent suppression of western celebrations for mothers and daughters clearly suggest that male writers were uncomfortable with acknowledging the intense power of this relationship.

Demeter and Persephone

In an article entitled "Mother, Maiden and the Marriage of Death: Women Writers and an Ancient Myth," Susan Gubar recognizes the Greek goddess Demeter as "the central mythic figure for women."¹⁰⁰ As the earth mother, Demeter is most identified in relation to her daughter Persephone,¹⁰¹ to whom she is clearly devoted. From the beginning however, Demeter and Persephone's relationship is scarred by a tragic circumstance. Downing relates how Demeter was separated from her own mother at birth and subsequently longs "to have a daughter to whom she might give the maternal devotion she herself never received"¹⁰² Enlisting the aid of her brother Zeus, Demeter conceives

⁹⁹ Rich, p. 237.

¹⁰⁰ Gubar, p. 302.

¹⁰¹ or Kore.

¹⁰² Downing, "Lesbian Mythology," p. 181.

and gives birth to Persephone who becomes the object of all her devotion. As Downing suggests, Demeter "chooses to be a single mother, solely responsible for her daughter's upbringing."¹⁰³ It is a relationship of "fusion" that Demeter hopes to maintain forever, free from male interference.¹⁰⁴

In Homer's poem, Persephone is playing in a meadow when she is abducted by Hades.¹⁰⁵

And now let me sing
Demeter,
that awesome goddess,
with her beautiful hair, her
and her daughter
with slender feet,
whom Aidoneus
carried away,
and Zeus,
who sees far,
in his deep voice,
allowing it,
far away from
Demeter...¹⁰⁶

Hades takes Persephone to the underworld and rapes her. A grief stricken and bewildered Demeter is left to wander the earth disguised as an old woman.

As Downing recounts, Demeter's grieving is briefly abated when she meets Baubo,

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., pp. 181-182.

¹⁰⁵ or Aidoneus.

¹⁰⁶ Homer as cited in Marilyn Arthur, "Politics and Pomegranates: An Interpretation of the Homeric Hymn to Demeter," *Arethusa* 10, no. 1 (1977): 10-11.

an aged dry nurse who succeeds in making her smile through lewdly exposing her vulva.¹⁰⁷ Later in the Homeric hymn, Demeter also cares for a male child, Demophon, during her period of sadness. Arthur points out that Demophon serves as a "substitute for the lost Persephone" and Demeter's attempt to immortalize him constitutes "an attempt to restore the ruptured symbiotic unity" with her daughter.¹⁰⁸ Later however, Demeter throws the child and unintentionally kills him.¹⁰⁹ Although the exposed Demeter now reestablishes her divine nature, she nevertheless continues to mourn the loss of Persephone and refuses to address the famine resulting from her grief.

In Homer's account, both female and male characters attempt to propitiate Demeter. Through an all-night festival or *pannychis*, women try to re-create female solidarity and alliance with Demeter in her grief.¹¹⁰ The perpetrators of the original crime, Zeus and Hades, also attempt to persuade both Demeter and Persephone to address human starvation. Before the mother and daughter are finally reunited, Hades manipulates Persephone into becoming his wife, thereby assuring her return to the underworld.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁷ Downing, "Lesbian Mythology," p. 182.

¹⁰⁸ Arthur, p. 22.

¹⁰⁹ Arthur, p. 23. Arthur notes that the Second Vatican Mythographer's version depicts Demeter killing the child in rage (1977, p. 23). Goldenberg offers an interpretation of Demeter's ill treatment of Demophon in terms of maternal rage in "Sightings of Maternal Rage and Paternal Love in the Homeric 'Hymn to Demeter'," in *The Long Journey Home: Re-visioning the Myth of Demeter and Persephone for Our Time*, ed. Christine Downing (Boston: Shambhala Publications Inc., 1994), pp. 248-253.

¹¹⁰ Arthur, pp. 26-27.

¹¹¹ Various versions differ on whether or not Persephone was forced into this alliance or succumbed to Hades persuasion (Arthur, 1977, pp. 28-29).

Together again, Demeter and Persephone reaffirm their love.

They spent
the whole of that day
with hearts united,
and they warmed
each other's hearts
with many gestures
of affection,
and her heart stopped
grieving.¹¹²

Returning to her true empowered state, Demeter gives the gifts of agriculture and the religious rite.¹¹³ However, the intimacy between Demeter and her daughter is forever scarred. Persephone must now spend part of each year away from her mother in the underworld. As further detriment to women, the ensuing "world order is organized under male dominion"¹¹⁴ as represented through the symbol of lightning in Homer's hymn.

That's where they live,
these sacred
and venerable goddesses,
near to Zeus
who enjoys the lightning.¹¹⁵

¹¹² Homer, as cited in Arthur, pp. 30-31.

¹¹³ The "religious rite" refers to the Eleusinian mysteries, described by Rich as "Demeter's supreme gift to humanity, in her rejoicing" at Persephone's return. For further discussion of these rites, see Rich, pp. 237-238; Arthur, p. 32; and Carol P. Christ, "Why Women Need the Goddess: Phenomenological, Psychological, and Political Reflections," in *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, eds. Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), p. 286.

¹¹⁴ Arthur, p.33.

¹¹⁵ Homer, as cited in Arthur, p. 31.

In the introduction to her study of Demeter and Persephone, Gubar highlights how feminists have approached the myth with great ambivalence. For many, the story emphasizes women's commitments to each other amidst patriarchal betrayal. In her examination of the Homeric Hymn to Demeter, Arthur identifies three distinct instances of female devotion. These include Demeter's uplifting experience with Baubo, the women's festival to appease Demeter,¹¹⁶ and the reunion of the goddess with her daughter.¹¹⁷ These moments of solidarity surrounding Demeter's tragedy convey a powerful sense of intimacy between mothers and daughters, as well as friends. Arthur argues that the Homeric hymn therefore provides a female perspective in its resistance to the shift from matriarchy to patriarchy.¹¹⁸ For this reason, Arthur and others interpret Demeter's story as reflecting the positive struggle of all women within patriarchy. For many, Demeter is a symbol of female power, life, and fertility.¹¹⁹

Gubar indicates that not all responses to the myth of Demeter and Persephone are as joyous. On one hand, female writers have clearly shown a particular fascination with the myth through their own exploration of female psyche. Yet as Gubar argues "no other mythic figure has been reviled by modern feminists more than she and her daughter."¹²⁰

¹¹⁶ Arthur indicates that in other accounts, Nymphs and Graces also join with mortal women in an unsuccessful attempt to comfort Demeter.

¹¹⁷ Arthur, p. 30.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p.8.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 302-303.

¹²⁰ Gubar, p. 302.

For many feminists including Simone de Beauvoir, the myth reinforces images of female passivity, masochism, and self-renunciation.¹²¹

In her edited collection, *The Long Journey Home: Re-Visioning the Myth of Demeter and Persephone for Our Time*, Downing suggests that the primary concern of this myth may not be the joy, but rather the tragedy surrounding the intense bond between a mother and daughter. It is particularly striking that the myth of Demeter and Persephone envisions their intimacy as the origin of intense hardship. Demeter's ordeal over her daughter's abduction and rape is intensified by her supposed excessive maternal devotion. Further, her anguish causes despair for many through the great famine. The resolution establishes male governance over the earth and the relationship between the two goddesses. Demeter and Persephone epitomize the "griefs and losses that seem to be an *inevitable* corollary of motherhood"¹²² within patriarchy.

Suppressing the Mother/Daughter Bond

The misfortunes of the mother/daughter bond are reflected not only in its relative absence in western mythology, but also in its subsequent suppression throughout western history. While Rich describes the relationship between a mother and a daughter as the greatest overlooked story, she and Carol Christ further argue that patriarchal writings and culture alienate women from one another. What Christ observes of literary writings also applies to religious texts: "Men have written the stories, and they have written about

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Downing, *The Long Journey*, p. 182. Italics added.

women almost exclusively in their relations to men."¹²³ In so doing they have taught women not only to overlook the relationship between mothers and daughters, but also to be wary of them.

Christianity celebrates the father's relation to the son and the mother's relation to the son, but the story of mother and daughter is missing. So, too, in patriarchal literature and psychology, the mothers and the daughters rarely exist. Volumes have been written about the Oedipal complex, but little has been written about the girl's relation to her mother. Moreover, as de Beauvoir has noted, the mother-daughter relation is distorted in patriarchy because the mother must give her daughter over to men in a male-defined culture in which women are viewed as inferior. The mother must socialize her daughter to become subordinate to men, and if her daughter challenges patriarchal norms, the mother is likely to defend the patriarchal structures against her own daughter.¹²⁴

In Jewish tradition, great emphasis is placed on the relationship between mother and son, to the detriment of mothers and daughters. Rich explains that "Jewish traditional lore has it that a female soul is united with a male sperm, resulting in, of course, a 'man child'."¹²⁵ Like Christ, Rich's work highlights how mothers and sons appear as "the eternal, determinative dyad"¹²⁶ in western culture. The historic prevalence of forced female infanticide likely furthers women's disassociation with daughters, real or potential.¹²⁷ In the patriarchal economy, mothers and daughters are of little importance except as reproducers of male heritage.

¹²³ Christ, p. 285.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Rich, p. 226.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid., pp. 226-227.

Both Christ and Rich emphasize the uniqueness of the Demeter and Persephone myth as the best well-known western account of an intimate mother/daughter bond. Further, it was the basis for a "religious mystery of Eleusis, which constituted the spiritual foundation of Greek life for two thousand years."¹²⁸ Rich indicates however, that the ritual has not survived and "there is no presently enduring recognition of mother-daughter passion and rapture."¹²⁹ There are thus multiple tragic dimensions to the mother and daughter relationship in western culture. The formative story of Demeter and Persephone is marked by male imposed separation, sadness, and later restrictions. Celebrations of their relationship have subsequently disappeared from religious life. What remains in Jewish and Christian texts regarding mothers emphasizes their guilt, punishment, and suffering. Rich argues that the absence or derogatory treatment of mothers and daughters by male writers indicates the anxiety it must have evoked. "Like intense relationships between women in general," she writes, "the relationship between mother and daughter has been profoundly threatening to men."¹³⁰

Friends

Just as there are limited references to mother/daughter bonds in western religious texts, so too, discussions of women's friendships are scarce. In *Fierce Tenderness: A Feminist Theology of Friendship*, Mary Hunt suggests that in patriarchal culture, "women

¹²⁸ Ibid., p. 237.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid., p. 226.

are nonbeings. So women's friendships with women are easy to ignore."¹³¹ In her introduction, she writes that

it would be interesting to begin [her] analysis with a review of the theological literature on the topic of friendship. But as Sallie McFague understated, the concept of friend is "found in the tradition, though sparingly..." Unfortunately these sources only distract since they are rooted in patriarchal worldviews that systematically pass over the particular experiences of women.¹³²

References that remain include the myths of Pallas Athene, Hagar and Sarai, Jephthah's daughter and early Christian missionaries. These models of female friendship are as disheartening as those of all women's bonds. Like mother/daughter bonds, women's friendships are usually marked by tragedy and despair and their relevance denied in western religious celebration.

Pallas Athene

Within Greek mythology, Athene, the goddess of war, is seldom thought of in terms of her relationships with women. As Downing explains, Athene appears to defy her own femininity and identify more with men including those who battle with female warriors.¹³³ And yet, Downing argues, Athene strongly associates herself with females, including nymphs and maidens. Her most intimate early companion is Pallas, who oversees Athene's education. Unfortunately, their close friendship is eclipsed by tragedy.

According to Downing's account, the two girls are practising fencing when Athene

¹³¹ Hunt, *Fierce Tenderness*, p. 43.

¹³² Ibid., p. 2.

¹³³ Downing, "Lesbian Mythology," p. 186.

unintentionally kills Pallas. However, as Downing details,

the fault is Zeus'; he had happened to look down to watch their sport and, mistakenly thinking his daughter threatened by her friend's thrust, intervened and upset the delicate balance of their parrying.¹³⁴

Athene is grief stricken at the death of her close companion. Taking her lost friend's name as part of her own, Pallas Athene is thus "twice woman, herself and the beloved friend of her childhood."¹³⁵

Downing further explains that the significance of Athene for studies of early female bonding is reflected in the numerous festivals dedicated to her. Not only were many of the festivals reserved for women only, they were sometimes also associated with Demeter and Persephone, two other symbols of female love.¹³⁶ Downing indicates how the emphasis on womanhood within these rituals was troubling to some.

In the mysterious nocturnal *Arrhephoria* young girls underwent an initiation by the goddess and her priestesses into the mysteries of their female sexual identity. The *Skira* was another of the rare occasions when women could leave their secluded quarters and assemble together. In celebrating this ritual they even left the city to carry a statue of Athene to a sanctuary dedicated to Demeter and Kore on the road leading toward Eleusis. There they, not the priests, took charge of the ceremony, of the purifications and sacrifices. This ritual of inversion--in which the city goddess, left the city, in which women take power--was deeply unsettling to men, as evidenced by Aristophanes making this festival the setting for a scene depicting women plotting to seize political power.¹³⁷

¹³⁴ Ibid., p. 187.

¹³⁵ Downing, *Myths and Mysteries*, p. 208.

¹³⁶ Downing, "Lesbian Mythology," p. 187.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

Zeus is a key figure in Athene's fatal intimacy with female figures. Not only is he the male perpetrator that separates Athene forever from her slain playmate, Zeus is also the one who divides Athene from her own mother, Metis, the goddess of wisdom. Zeus acquires his own wisdom by swallowing her. Downing highlights how Athene then "refuses to identify with a mother swallowed up and silenced by the father, by patriarchy."¹³⁸ Athene's supposed rejection of her feminine and potentially vulnerable nature is surely attributable to the tragic loss of both her mother and closest friend to male execution.

Hagar and Sarai

References to female relationships are extremely rare in Biblical traditions. Three of these relationships, including that between Sarai and her Egyptian slave-girl, Hagar, focus on the birth of sons.¹³⁹ According to the Genesis myth,¹⁴⁰ Sarai is unable to conceive children and instructs her husband Abram to go to Hagar. After Hagar conceives, she is abused by Sarai and flees into the desert. At the direction and assurance of Yahweh, Hagar returns to Sarai and her son Ishmael is born. When Sarai conceives and bears her own son Isaac, she demands that Hagar be sent away so as to not interfere with Isaac's inheritance. At the advice of Yahweh, Abraham sends Hagar and her son away into the wilderness.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ The other biblical relationships between women oriented around the birth of sons are that between Naomi and Ruth in The Book of Ruth and that between the Virgin Mary and her sister Elizabeth related in Luke 1:39-56.

¹⁴⁰ See Genesis 16:1-16 and Genesis 21:9-21.

The narration of Sarai and Hagar can hardly be representative of female intimacy except as a tragic display of betrayal and injury. Although "there is nothing in the text to suggest that Hagar and Sarai were at odds with each other before the issue of motherhood became a major concern for Sarai,"¹⁴¹ Sarai's subsequent treatment of Hagar suggests great cruelty and suffering.¹⁴² In *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*, Phyllis Trible suggests that Hagar is one of the "first females in scripture to experience use, abuse, and rejection."¹⁴³ This mistreatment originates in her relationship with another woman for whom "Hagar is an instrument, not a person."¹⁴⁴ As proof of this alienation, Trible points out, Sarai never speaks Hagar's name nor does she address her directly.¹⁴⁵

In *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, Delores Williams argues that "taken from the perspective of the slave woman Hagar, it can be interpreted as an instance clearly illustrating the right of ownership and domination patriarchal law provided for one class of females (such as Sarai, the slave holder) over

¹⁴¹ Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, 2d ed. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1996), p. 17.

¹⁴² Williams indicates that Hagar may have originally had special favour with Sarai: "Hagar was a virgin when she was made to lie down with Abram. Female slaves, especially those owned by slave masters, were often rented out as concubines by their masters. Obviously, Sarai had not allowed such a fate to befall Hagar" (p. 17).

¹⁴³ Trible, p. 9.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

another class of females (such as Hagar, the slave)."¹⁴⁶ "Like many other Black women," Hagar does not experience solidarity with female companions, but struggles against poverty alone with her belief in God.¹⁴⁷ Both Williams and Tribble expose how this story of Hagar and Sarai is riddled with diverse oppressions that cause severe hardship for Hagar.

Jephthah's Daughter

The Book of Judges relates a relatively unknown story of a nameless female referred to only in relation to her father Jephthah. A great warrior, Jephthah defends the Jewish people against the tyranny of the Ammonites. During the course of the battle however, Jephthah loses faith in Yahweh's benevolence and enlists Yahweh's aid through a binding contract.¹⁴⁸ If Yahweh ensures Jephthah's victory, Jephthah will sacrifice the first being that greets him upon his return. Jephthah is victorious and arriving home, is met first by his daughter. He scolds her for the burden she has laid upon him for he feels obliged to fulfill his promise. His daughter submits to the horrific sacrifice, making one request.

She said to her father, "Let this thing be done for me: Let me alone for two months, that I may go and wander on the mountains and bewail my virginity, my friends and I." So he said, "Go." And he sent her away *for* two months; and she went with her friends, and bewailed her virginity on the mountains. And it was so at the end of two months that she returned to her father and he carried out his vow with her which he had vowed. She knew no man. And it became a custom in Israel *that* the daughters of Israel went four days each year to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite. (Judges 11:37-40).

¹⁴⁶ Williams, p. 18.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 33.

¹⁴⁸ Tribble, p. 97.

As both Tribble and Jewish scholar Norma Baumel Joseph indicate, the text raises deeply troubling questions: When Jephthah makes his vow to Yahweh, does he foresee a human sacrifice?¹⁴⁹ Why does Yahweh not intercede and prevent the sacrifice as happens for Abraham and Isaac? Is it because it is a daughter, not a son, being offered on this occasion?¹⁵⁰

The story of Jephthah's daughter is a story of female bonding and tragedy. Tribble states that this death "defies all categories of the natural and the expected." It is premature, violent, and denies her the heirs needed to ensure her remembrance. Further, it is premeditated by a father who makes his intentions known to his daughter.¹⁵¹ In their readings of this myth, Tribble and Joseph not only emphasize the atrocity of Jephthah's (and Yahweh's) action, but also the daughter's response. Acknowledging the ill-fate she feels obliged to accept, Jephthah's daughter turns to her female companions for consolation. For two months she will mourn alone with them. With great eloquence Joseph affirms the tale's moral adage for female readers: "I've got a crisis. Give me my women!"¹⁵²

The time that Jephthah's daughter and her female friends spend together may constitute the first women's support group in history. Tribble suggests that it is with her

¹⁴⁹ Tribble, p. 97.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 102. This issue is also raised by Joseph in *Half the Kingdom*, Dirs. Francine E. Zuckerman and Roushell N. Goldstein, Studio D, NFB, (1989).

¹⁵¹ Tribble, p. 104.

¹⁵² Joseph, *Half the Kingdom*.

friends that Jephthah's daughter makes "meaning for herself...In the company of other women who acknowledge her tragedy, she is neither alone nor isolated."¹⁵³ Despite the sacrifice that follows, both Tribble and Joseph look to the story's more positive resolution. Each year, women gathered for four days to remember Jephthah's daughter and mourn her loss. Through this ceremonial gesture, the saga mitigates "though it does not dispel, its own tragedy."¹⁵⁴

As is the case with so many women in mythology, the significance of Jephthah's daughter's fate has been forgotten in later patriarchal traditions. Joseph iterates the importance of reestablishing female commemorations, particularly this one, for future generations.

Where is it today? What happened to it? We don't know. If I were to talk about new rituals I would say here's the beginning. We need to say there's a time of year, once a year, that the Jewish calendar has to say, "This is Women's Day...this is the beginning of women remembering women." I would say "Here's our biblical authority. Here's our legitimacy. Now let's go create ritual. We have the basis. It was lost to us. Let's at least recover it."¹⁵⁵

The western neglect and denial of women's bonds intensify the tragedy already characterizing accounts of female intimacy in ancient texts. During her last few days, Jephthah's daughter's intimacy with her companions was undoubtedly marked by sadness, mourning, and fear. Her fate is similar to that of other female figures in religious mythology. Women's friendships are inevitably subject to male prerogative, and linked to

¹⁵³ Tribble, pp. 104-105.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 107.

¹⁵⁵ Joseph, *Half the Kingdom*.

misery and despair. The solace that is evident in these bonds is hardly compensatory. At most, it is a poultice for perpetually open wounds.

Early Christian Sources

In her study entitled "Women Partners in the New Testament," D'Angelo situates Christian biblical references to women's relationships within the context of early missionary work. She interprets the relationships between Mary and Martha, Syntyche and Evodia, and Tryphaena and Tryphosa as paralleling the commitments between missionary couples usually consisting of a husband and wife. For many women, their partnerships with other women could provide an alternative to traditional family life.

For such women, partnerships in the mission would have consecrated female friendship as a means to supply the support, protection and intimacy lost in the disruption of familial bonds and the rejection of marriage. In this context, the choice of women to work and live together rather than with a man emerges as a sexual as well as a social choice.¹⁵⁶

While the early Christian mission condoned the rejection of marriage for the mission, D'Angelo stresses the hardship that these women would have nevertheless faced. She cites Brooten's study of early Christian condemnations of female homoeroticism that derived from concerns over gender transgressions. As D'Angelo argues, female missionary couples "raised the spectre of the unnatural woman who plays the role of the man."¹⁵⁷ Such behaviour was judged harshly and can perhaps account for the obscuring of female relations in early Christian texts.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁶ D'Angelo, p. 83.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 84.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., pp. 72-85.

In the end, discerning the exact nature of women's connections in early Christianity is virtually impossible. "The New Testament provides neither blessings nor models for women's mutual commitments, but only mutilated relics."¹⁵⁹ Their friendships are rarely acknowledged in early Christian sources or else subject to hardship and scrutiny. Subsequent traditions forget them entirely.

Lovers

D'Angelo's work indicates that early religious writers were concerned about the possible transgression of physical boundaries between women. Judith Plaskow asserts that "the desire to control female sexuality is the chief source of male anxiety about women."¹⁶⁰ While religious writers tend to restrict discussions of female bonding to situations involving their suffering and death, dread of female liaisons further intensifies when the intimacy is sexual. Recent scholarship in women and religion demonstrates that despite an overall scarcity of ancient references to female homoeroticism, early Greek, Roman, Jewish and Christian writers were nevertheless aware and fearful of sexual relations between women.

Within patriarchal religion and culture, female homoeroticism is viewed by male authors as dangerous for both women and social order. Brooten claims in her study of the Roman period that literary sources reveal great disdain toward female homoeroticism.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 85.

¹⁶⁰ Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai*, p. 174.

"Monstrous, lawless, licentious, unnatural, and shameful - with those terms male authors throughout the Roman Empire expressed their disgust for sexual love between women."¹⁶¹ In virtually all ancient accounts, female homoeroticism is either deemed impossible or else ascribed to aggressive and reprehensible women.

Examinations of ancient depictions of women's relationships necessitate an understanding of the authors' worldview. Brooten explains that sexual relations in the Roman world were governed by strict gender classifications. For ancient writers, sexual relations were reflective of a social hierarchy that consisted of an active male and a passive female.¹⁶² In this context, active and passive were the fundamental identity categories and while men could be either, women could only be passive. In cases of female homoeroticism, the Greek word *tribas* was employed, sometimes for both women, but often for just the presumed active, masculine partner.¹⁶³ Further, although we currently tend to rely on dualistic classifications of individuals as heterosexual or homosexual, ancient cultures recognized a number of orientations derived from factors such as one's sexual role (active vs. passive) as well as the gender, age, and social status of his or her partner.¹⁶⁴ Within the context of their unique societies, male writers both reflected and perpetuated particular understandings of female sexuality.

¹⁶¹ Brooten, *Love Between Women*, p. 30.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

Sappho

Many studies of female love in ancient Greece begin with the writings of Sappho. Her poetry from the sixth century BCE is the earliest female testament available.¹⁶⁵ The primary subject of her poetry is her controversial love of women. Within the ancient world, she had great notoriety, although as Brooten explains, this fame was accompanied by an "almost obsessive preoccupation with her erotic inclinations."¹⁶⁶ Pellegrini highlights the folly of this mode of inquiry. "To say of Sappho, for instance, that she was a "lesbian" is correct in the geographical sense only; the facts of her personal biography - was she or wasn't she? - have been much debated from classical antiquity onward and remain much in doubt today."¹⁶⁷ Nevertheless, the myths surrounding her life as well as her poetry reveal a great deal about ancient attitudes towards women's love for one another.

Downing explains that little is actually known of Sappho's life. She was a recognized poet from Lesbos and young women would live with her for various periods of time.¹⁶⁸ In ascertaining the nature of her relationships with other females, most theorists look to her writing.

The poems present Sappho as associated with a circle of women companions to some of whom she was passionately attached and some of whom she regarded as rivals. In the nineteenth century, she was most often viewed as having been a teacher in a girl's academy or the high priestess of a women's cult, a *thiasos* - a description put forward by scholars who valued

¹⁶⁵ Downing, *Myths and Mysteries*, p. 216.

¹⁶⁶ Brooten, *Love Between Women*, p. 34.

¹⁶⁷ Pellegrini, p. 73.

¹⁶⁸ Downing, *Myths and Mysteries*, p. 217.

her poetry and made her into a priestess to protect her from being seen as a lesbian seductress. But as more recent scholars have noted, the word *thiasos* does not appear in Sappho's poetry nor in ancient descriptions of her relationship to her circle. Instead Sappho used the word *hetairai* to speak of her companions, a term that connotes a close bond "in which one sleeps on another's bosom."¹⁶⁹

Both Downing and Brooten document various male responses to Sappho's work. Greek writers either ridiculed her or focussed on what they deemed her masculine nature.¹⁷⁰ Early biographies indicate ancient accusations about her "immorality" and "'shameful love' for women."¹⁷¹ Downing cites a Hellenistic writer who states: "Sappho was a whorish woman, love-crazy, who sang about her own licentiousness."¹⁷² Condemnation of Sappho's love for women has continued throughout history and even overshadowed acknowledgements of other women's creative endeavours.¹⁷³

Alternatively, some writers have attempted to restore Sappho's reputation through a denial of her potential homoerotic exploits. Most notable of the attempts is the myth that developed around Sappho's supposed love for a man. In Ovid's "Letter of Sappho to Phaon" and other literary works, Sappho's life and desires are depicted as leading to a dramatic end. Having fallen deeply in love with the handsome ferryman, Sappho ceases

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 218.

¹⁷⁰ Brooten, *Love Between Women*, p. 34.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., p. 35.

¹⁷² Downing, *Myths and Mysteries*, p. 220.

¹⁷³ Brooten, *Love Between Women*, p. 36.

to love women.¹⁷⁴ Brooten and Downing indicate that according to a Hellenist tradition, Sappho ended her life by leaping off the White Rock of Leukas "in despair over her unrequited love" for handsome Phaon.¹⁷⁵

This tragic conclusion to Sappho's legacy is significant to this study for two reasons. First, as Downing iterates, it constitutes a "clear attempt to imply that Sappho *must* in the end have turned to the love of men."¹⁷⁶ In this sense, the effort is made to cover up any possibility of sexual intimacy between women. Secondly, as Brooten suggests, this denial on the part of male authors demonstrates an inability to "accept the love for women expressed in Sappho's poetry as healthy and normal."¹⁷⁷ For Brooten, writers focussing on Sappho during the Roman period, reflect what was occurring more broadly, that is "an increased attention to and vehement rejection of sexual relations between women."¹⁷⁸ Thirdly, the emphasis on Sappho's suicide situates her as another instance of a destroyed "lesbian" in mythology. Sexual relations as well as any form of bonding between women clearly posed a problem for ancient male authors. Physical female intimacy could not exist without being eliminated through tragedy and death.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 38-39.

¹⁷⁵ Downing, *Myths and Mysteries*, p. 217; also see Brooten, *Love Between Women*, pp. 38-39.

¹⁷⁶ Downing, *Myths and Mysteries*, p. 217.

¹⁷⁷ Brooten, *Love Between Women*, p. 41.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 36.

Iphis

Downing and Brooten also recount a tale from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* to further demonstrate the male crisis evoked by female sexual relations. In this myth, two girls from Crete¹⁷⁹ fall in love and plan to marry. One of them, Iphis, has spent her life masquerading as a boy, because of her mother's choice to deceive her husband who threatened to kill any daughters. When the father arranges for his supposed son Iphis to marry Ianthe, the complications escalate. Ianthe and Iphis are deeply in love, yet as Brooten explains,

Iphis now bemoans her predicament, saying that the love she possesses is "unheard of," and even "monstrous." If the gods wished to destroy her, she bewails, they should have given her a "natural woe," one "according to custom." Among animals, females do not love females, she says, and, in her despair, she wishes she were no longer female. Iphis knows that she should accept herself as a woman and seek what is in accordance with divine law and love as a woman ought to love. And yet she loves Ianthe, though knowing that "nature does not will it, nature more powerful than all." It is against the background of the tragedy of freakish circumstances- against divine will, against nature, against custom, unheard of - that the reader is relieved when Isis intervenes and changes Iphis into a boy, making the marriage possible.¹⁸⁰

Like Brooten, Downing notes how Ovid's story presents a supposedly happy resolution.¹⁸¹ Yet the tale reveals great tragedy surrounding the experience of female intimacy. Iphis is unaware that sexual intimacy between women is possible even though

¹⁷⁹According to Judith Hallett, the tendency to "hellenize" female homoeroticism is indicative of elite Latin "authors' refusal to accept female homoeroticism as Roman and as real" (Brooten, *Love Between Women*, p. 43). Brooten explains that this "foreignness" could also be implied through the use of "Greek loanwords" such as *tribas* within Latin texts (Brooten, "Paul's View," p. 68).

¹⁸⁰ Brooten, "Paul's View" p. 66.

¹⁸¹ Downing, "Lesbian Mythology," p. 170.

she feels this longing. Ianthe is never made aware that it is another girl with whom she shares great love. In this myth, sexual desire between females is "acknowledged but not the possibility of fulfilment."¹⁸² The normalcy of heterosexual love is reinforced through this tale by averting any intimacy between the two girls.

Amazons, Maenads, and Nymphs

In several instances, Greek mythology refers to female-only communities that display intense bonding and sexual involvement amongst members. As accounts of Amazons, maenads, and nymphs demonstrate, these gatherings of women were a source of considerable anxiety for men. While the warrior-like Amazons formed permanent societies "at the far edge of the inhabited world,"¹⁸³ maenads and nymphs gathered under more temporary festive arrangements. According to Downing, female gatherings were acknowledged as having a sexual dimension and male intrusion was violently prohibited.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Ibid., p. 177. Also see Phyllis Chesler, "The Amazon Legacy." In *The Politics of Women's Spirituality: Essays on the Rise of Spiritual Power Within the Feminist Movement*, ed. Charlene Spretnak (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1982), pp. 97-113. Chesler reports how Greek and Roman historians, geographers, and philosophers, as well as sixteenth and seventeenth century Spanish explorers described Amazon-like women in Africa, Europe, and North and South America. Explorers returned with "'astonishing' tales of female warriors, queens, and priestesses and with the insistent reports, given by natives, of a legendary Amazon state - often just beyond the next river or mountain or, more often, in a region that the guide-informant was afraid to explore" (p. 98).

¹⁸⁴ Downing, "Lesbian Mythology," pp. 176-179.

In her discussion of lesbian mythology, Downing asserts that it is easy to see "how the Greek myths about the Amazons express male dread of female power."¹⁸⁵ Amazons are presented as a society of "women who threaten men and engage in war against them."¹⁸⁶ Phyllis Chesler indicates that their name may be a translation of "Amazosas" meaning "opposed to man."¹⁸⁷ They lived independently of men, both socially and sexually, joining them only once a year for the purpose of procreation.¹⁸⁸ Male children would be maimed, enslaved, killed or returned to fathers.¹⁸⁹

Several images convey the aggression, violence, and abuse associated with Amazons. From early ages, their rebellious nature is signified through a scarring of their own body. Downing explains that the name is also thought to signify "without a breast" in reference to the "legendary Amazon practice of searing off the right breast of their female children so as to enable them to become more proficient archers."¹⁹⁰ Amazons were often depicted with spears aimed at male genitalia.¹⁹¹ In Greek tradition, overpowering the Amazons was a powerful symbol of male supremacy. Several tales depict

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 176.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Chesler, p. 103.

¹⁸⁸ Downing, *Myths and Mysteries*, p. 190.

¹⁸⁹ Chesler, p. 104.

¹⁹⁰ Downing, *Myths and Mysteries*, p. 190.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

celebrated Greek heroes testing their manhood against the fearsome Amazon warriors, seducing them, abducting them, raping them, [and] stealing the belt which represents their virginity, their independence of men...To master the Amazons sexually was seen as an essential part of challenging their monstrous claim to live as self-sufficient women.¹⁹²

Downing and others affirm that Greek battles with Amazons signify the beginning of male rule.¹⁹³

Surrounding the myth of Amazons is the tragic tale of women's subordination as an inevitable conclusion in male fantasy and historical accounts. J. J. Bachofen writes in his discussion of Amazons, that it is an original

assault on women's rights that provokes her resistance, which inspires self-defence followed by bloody vengeance.... The sense of degradation and fury of despair spur her on to armed resistance, exalting her to that war-like grandeur which, *though it seems to exceed the bounds of womanhood*, is rooted simply in her need for a higher life.¹⁹⁴

Despite the warranted nature of their resistance, Amazon women are justifiably suppressed according to male writers. It is a resolution that Bachofen himself finds reasonable since their warlike nature exceeds the "bounds of womanhood." The defeat of the warrior-like Amazons plays a powerful role in assuring both ancient and modern men that they alone can rule.

¹⁹² Downing, "Lesbian Mythology," p. 177.

¹⁹³ Downing, *Myths and Mysteries*, p. 190.

¹⁹⁴ J.J. Bachofen, *Myth, Religion, and Mother Right: The Selected Writings of J.J. Bachofen*, Paperback ed., translated by R. Manheim (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1973), pp. 104-105. Italics added.

The ongoing significance of Amazons within the male psyche is revealed even more profoundly in Bachofen's consideration of Penthesilea. Downing explains that when Achilles murders Penthesilea, the Amazon warrior queen, he falls in love and possibly makes love to her corpse.¹⁹⁵ Bachofen suggests that Penthesilea, "weary of her heroic Amazonian grandeur, which she can sustain only for a short time," suddenly "recognizes the higher strength and beauty" of Achilles.¹⁹⁶ Reflecting on Bachofen's work, Downing reports:

After describing Achilles' necrophilic passion, Bachofen concludes: "What this signifies is that the woman willingly bows down to the man who gives her back her natural vocation. She realizes that not warfare against man but love and fertility are her calling...The enemy's victory restores her true nature." How bizarre, how perverted, how unrecognizably turned around this reinterpretation is. The stories are not about Amazons falling in love with heroes...¹⁹⁷

Bachofen's analysis of Amazon myths as signifying the shift "from hostility to alliance"¹⁹⁸ signifies the perpetuation of male dread of women who live apart from men. Such women are deemed the enemy in patriarchal culture, as that which threatens to undo proper social order. Living in communities of sisterhood, Amazons are viewed as aggressive women who must be subdued. As mythological figures, they denote danger to men and the threat of chaos within society. They must be imagined by old and recent male authors as inevitably restored to their supposedly true subordinate nature. As

¹⁹⁵ Downing, *Myths and Mysteries*, p. 191.

¹⁹⁶ Bachofen, p. 130.

¹⁹⁷ Downing, *Myths and Mysteries*, p. 191.

¹⁹⁸ Bachofen, p. 130.

Bachofen reads it, these tragedies restore "the natural relationship that had been so violently upset by the Amazons" themselves.¹⁹⁹

Chesler suggests that there are two central themes in Greek myths about Amazons. "First," she writes, "there is the theme of women sacrificing and killing men."²⁰⁰ Secondly, there is "the ultimate male triumph over such female acts: by slaughtering and defeating the Amazons in battle, or by converting them to male-worship..."²⁰¹ Myths of Amazon hostility and defeat gave rise to particular social histories. Girls were raised to forego "masculine" qualities for "feminine" in order to become wives and mothers. Chesler concludes that men's accounts of these females constitute both "phobic male denials and hasty, guilty admissions."²⁰² In the final analysis, Amazons constitute nothing (more nor) less than a "universal male nightmare."²⁰³

Although viewed as the most dangerous, Amazons are not the only female communities perceived to threaten male power in Greek mythology. Dionysian maenads form a temporary community called a "thiasos" in isolation from their husbands and children.²⁰⁴ Downing explains that the women share in ecstatic rites that display sexual components as well as hostility towards men.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 131.

²⁰⁰ Chesler, p. 106.

²⁰¹ Ibid., p. 107.

²⁰² Ibid., p. 98.

²⁰³ Ibid., p. 97.

²⁰⁴ Downing, *Myths and Mysteries*, p. 193.

We know that the maenads are usually shown carrying a thrysus, a fennel stalk topped by a pine cone, which on vase paintings they sometimes aim at male genitals (much as the Amazons were imagined aiming their spears).... this hardly suggests sexual longing for a male penis but rather aggression against this emblem of male power.²⁰⁵

During what Pentheus calls their "shameless orgies" the women become violent if men intrude.²⁰⁶ As Downing explains, crazed maenads were thought to "kill their own children, tear wild animals apart, [and] eat raw flesh."²⁰⁷ Men view them as more "terrifying than the Amazons - for they live in their own midst."²⁰⁸ In the ancient Greek imagination, women who focus even briefly on the company of other women are a dreadful force.

A fear of female gatherings is reflected in ancient accounts of nymphs. Although there is no evidence of young women's initiation by older women in ancient Greece, it is known that girls were sent to Artemis' temple prior to reaching marrying age.²⁰⁹ Downing writes that the word "nymph" refers both to minor deities who accompanied the goddess Artemis, as well as young women who danced in her honour in all-female environments. These females appear as "more innocent and serene than the maenads," although male intrusion is still "met with violent response."²¹⁰ Like the maenads and Amazons, there is a sexual component to bonding between nymphs that contains elements of danger and

²⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 194.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., pp. 193-194.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 195.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., pp. 195-196.

²¹⁰ Ibid., p. 197.

tragedy. Downing explains that although they dedicate their independence and virginity to the goddess, "almost every myth about such a nymph describes her being pursued and raped by a god (or dying in the attempt to escape his pursuit)."²¹¹ Women's intimacy sets the stage for male abuse. Female communities are inevitably viewed as affronts on men whose attacks appear justified in ancient religious writings.

Callisto and Artemis

In the myth of Callisto and Artemis, sexual intimacy between females is acknowledged as well as its fatal hazards. According to Downing, Artemis rejects the world of men and is often in the company of nymphs. Callisto was Artemis' favourite companion. Although Callisto is devoted to the goddess, she is nevertheless tricked by Zeus when he disguises himself as Artemis and makes sexual gestures towards her. When Callisto realizes the deception, she resists him and is raped. Now pregnant, Callisto is banished by Artemis who blames her for her own misfortune. Callisto's suffering is intensified when Artemis changes her into a beast, thereby silencing her in her grief.²¹² Downing asserts that the sexual relationship between Callisto and the goddess is evidenced through Callisto's eagerness for Zeus' disguised advances. Yet the female love is harsh. Despite the intimate bonds she shares with her female nymphs, Artemis is cruel in her punishment of those she loves most.²¹³

²¹¹ Ibid., p. 180.

²¹² Ibid., p. 198.

²¹³ Ibid., p. 211.

The brutal quality of Artemis' affection for other females is particularly striking when one considers the favour she enjoys with Amazons and women in general. Despite her threatening nature, Artemis is considered a model for female love.²¹⁴ For Artemis, her virginity "is a defiant claim that her sexuality is her own, not possessable by any man."²¹⁵ She fatally punishes male presence as evidenced when she changes Actaeon into a stag to be devoured by his hounds.²¹⁶ Yet the story of Callisto demonstrates that Artemis' wrath is not solely directed towards men. Following her rape, Callisto is afraid to tell Artemis what has transpired for fear of the castigation she inevitably receives. As a model of women's love, Artemis is also a symbol of the fear and danger associated with female bonding throughout Greek mythology.

Other Greek and Roman Sources

Brooten's comprehensive study of Greco-Roman writers illuminates several other instances of ancient acknowledgement and contempt for erotic love between women. In addition to their pervasive hostility towards Sappho's love for women, several ancient thinkers discredit female desire in texts that influenced later religious writings.

The earliest Greek references to female sexual intimacy are found in Plato's *Symposium*.²¹⁷ In this dialogue, Plato speaks of women's love for one another in terms of

²¹⁴ Ibid., p. 210.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ Brooten, *Love Between Women*, p. 41.

"hetairistriaí," beings consisting of two female halves. For Plato, these creatures parallel other original beings that consisted of two male or alternatively male and female halves. Brooten explains that in Plato's teaching, a person seeks a partner of the gender to which she or he was originally attached.²¹⁸ While the *Symposium* clearly suggests that "same-sex love is as natural and normal as love between women and men,"²¹⁹ Plato's *Laws* do not. In this later work, love between women is regarded as "contrary to nature" and the result of a loss of control.²²⁰ Brooten indicates that the reason for these contradictory opinions in Plato's writings is uncertain. Later Greek writings from the Roman period unfortunately tend to emphasize negative assumptions about the masculine and shameful nature of erotic interactions between women.²²¹

Within classical Latin literature, Roman writers portrayed female homoeroticism as "futile, monstrous, masculine, and foreign."²²² Brooten cites an example from Seneca the Elder who presents a fictitious legal case involving murder. When a man comes home to find his wife in bed with another female, he kills them both. The presentation of the case suggests that if it were a male adulterer, the murder could not be condoned. However, in circumstances involving two *tribades* the violence is justified.²²³

²¹⁸ Ibid.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ Ibid., pp. 41; 50-57.

²²² Ibid., p. 42.

²²³ Ibid., p. 43-44.

Brooten also presents the work of Latin writers who associate female homoeroticism with abnormal bodily conditions. Seneca the Younger's writings suggest that women "who have taken on masculine behaviours, now suffer from such masculine diseases as baldness."²²⁴ Although he views the changes as psychological, these diseased women supposedly rival men in their lust, drinking, wrestling, and vomiting. For the poet Phaedrus, *tribades* were the mistaken result of Prometheus' drunkenness. Intoxicated, the Greek demigod accidentally puts male sexual organs on female bodies. Brooten cites Judith Hallett who regards this last example as the epitome of Roman efforts to masculinize, hellenize, and anachronize female homoeroticism.²²⁵

Another disturbing account of sexual contact between women occurs in the writings of Martial. Brooten remarks how Martial's epigrams to Philaenis, "*tribas* of the very *tribades*,"²²⁶ conjure images of the diseased women described by Seneca the Younger. Philaenis is presented as particularly aggressive to "both boys and girls, the latter of whom she, 'quite fierce with the erection of a husband,' batters eleven in a day."²²⁷ In addition, she likes sports and "engages in the pleasure of being whipped by a greasy teacher."²²⁸ Brooten also notes Martial's reference to a woman he identifies as "a fututor (m., 'fucker')

²²⁴ Ibid., p. 45.

²²⁵ Ibid., p. 46.

²²⁶ Martial, as cited in *ibid.*, p. 46.

²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ Ibid.

.... [whose] 'monstrous lust imitates a man'.²²⁹ In addition to illustrating the vulgar nature of Martial's descriptions, Brooten's work draws attention to his sadomasochistic references that are intended to amplify the "monstrous" horror.²³⁰

Early "Scientific" Writings

Brooten's examination of astrological and medical texts demonstrates how ancient male thinkers critically assessed female sexual relations. She explains how their scientific goal was to outline the causes, proper treatment, and meaning of a behaviour that they already perceived to be abnormal and deviant. Because scholars generally regard astrology and religion as overlapping fields within the Roman context,²³¹ there are similarities in their assessment of same-sex desire. Further, several theorists argue that "medical theory intersected with and influenced early Christian views of the body."²³²

According to astrological literature, human personalities and what might be considered "sexual orientation," are determined by the placement of planets, stars, and zodiac signs.²³³ Brooten notes that most Roman references to female homoeroticism are found in astrological writings that unfortunately reinforced ancient norms regarding gender and sexual behaviour.²³⁴ Dorotheos' writings label female homoerotic acts unnatural and

²²⁹ Ibid., p. 47.

²³⁰ Ibid., p. 48.

²³¹ Ibid., p. 117.

²³² Ibid., p. 144.

²³³ Ibid., p. 140.

²³⁴ Ibid., p. 115.

the women who partake in them, "licentious - even though the stars cause this behaviour."²³⁵ Vettius Valens interprets *tribades*, those "servile, perpetrators of filth,"²³⁶ as suffering from a diseased condition .

Several astrologists, including Ptolemy, condemn what they perceive as women assuming an active male role.²³⁷ For Dorotheos of Sidon, the position of Venus gives rise to same-sex desire and particular configurations lead to more evil forms of gender transgression.²³⁸ Firmicus Maternus, as well as his contemporaries, judged female homoeroticism as "transgressive of gender boundaries" and as such, "morally contemptible."²³⁹ Brooten's survey of Roman-period astrologists demonstrates how astrologists' condemnation of female homoeroticism as sick and evil was consistent with broader social assumptions about active and passive gender roles.

Brooten's examination of the medical diagnosis and treatment of same-sex behaviours demonstrates the long-term history of viewing female intimacy as pathological.²⁴⁰ Diagnosing female homoeroticism as deviant sexual behaviour,²⁴¹ ancient

²³⁵ Ibid., pp. 122-123.

²³⁶ Valens, as cited in Brooten, "Paul's View," p. 70.

²³⁷ Brooten, *Love Between Women*, p. 126.

²³⁸ Ibid., p. 120.

²³⁹ Ibid., p. 132.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 173.

²⁴¹ Ibid., p. 144.

medical texts prescribe two treatments for women afflicted with this "disease."²⁴² In the first instance, *tribades* are regarded as "women who suffer from a chronic disease of the soul that the physician should treat by mind control."²⁴³ As the physician Soranus explains in *On Chronic Diseases*,

women who are called *tribades*...pursue women with an almost masculine jealousy, and, when they are freed from the disease or temporarily relieved, they seek to accuse others of that from which they are known to suffer, (then, in their baseness of spirit, worn out by their two-fold sexuality), as though often ravished by drunkenness, they, bursting forth into new forms of lust that have been nourished by shameful custom, rejoice in the outrage to their own sex.²⁴⁴

Brooten interprets Soranus' use of the word "shameful" to indicate his moral condemnation of the condition, while "outrage" implies that *tribades* are rapists who bring "shame upon all womankind."²⁴⁵ Further, these women are presented as "sex addicts" who "live lives that are out of control."²⁴⁶ Brooten notes that it is the women who actively pursue other women that are viewed as masculine and hence diseased.²⁴⁷

Soranus' second treatment is "the surgical removal of part of a woman's clitoris if it is 'overly large,' a condition that he correlates with unrestrained sexual behaviour."²⁴⁸

²⁴² Ibid., p. 140.

²⁴³ Ibid., p. 146.

²⁴⁴ Soranus, as cited in Brooten, *Love Between Women*, p. 150.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 156.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 154.

²⁴⁷ Brooten, *Love Between Women*, p. 151.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 162-163.

Brooten emphasizes that the clitoridectomy is recommended not in response to any physical discomfort a woman may experience, but rather, for the purpose of "maintaining social structures. A woman who possesses the physical means by which to penetrate another person is unacceptable in a culture that conceives of the sexually active role as properly restricted to males."²⁴⁹ Brooten suggests that Soranus' concern over penetration is most discernible if he is referring to intercourse between two women because the main concern remains the appropriation of the active male function by a woman.²⁵⁰ Despite the apparent contradiction in Soranus' two texts (i.e. in the first, tribades suffer from a disease of the mind which must be controlled, while in the second, surgery is recommended) Brooten highlights how both texts present the central concern as the woman's active, and therefore masculine, sexual desire.²⁵¹

According to these ancient medical treatises, women who challenge social convention through homoerotic behaviour are pathological and therefore subject to excessive medical treatment. Brooten shows how both astrological and medical interpretations informed religious writings.²⁵² Their assessment of female homoeroticism

²⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 163.

²⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 167.

²⁵¹ Ibid., p. 170.

²⁵² Ibid., pp. 144-146. Brooten cites the work of Aline Rousselle and Michel Foucault who also argue that medical thinking contributed to Christian understandings of female sexual intimacy.

as masculine, diseased, and evil shaped the "frameworks of thinking to which early Christian's responded."²⁵³

Jewish and Christian Biblical Sources

Although the text of Leviticus prescribes the death penalty for the "abomination" of anal intercourse between males, the Hebrew Bible contains no prohibitions against homoerotic relations between women.²⁵⁴ Brooten indicates that it is in the Roman period that Jewish writers show an increased interest in female same-sex relations. A rabbinical commentary called the "Sifra," extrapolates Leviticus 18:3 ("You shall not walk in their [Egyptian and Caanite] statutes") to include a prohibition against the same-sex marriages that were practised in Egypt and Canaan.²⁵⁵ The Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds discuss whether female sexual activity would disqualify women from becoming priestly wives.²⁵⁶ Despite the insights provided by these sources, the overall scarcity of Jewish texts pertaining to female homoeroticism leaves many questions unanswered. Brooten cites Rachel Biale's suggestion that the lack of sources may be attributed to "the lack of an explicit biblical prohibition, to the fact that 'no actual intercourse' is involved, or to the rabbis' lack of access to women's life experiences."²⁵⁷ While available sources are critical

²⁵³ Ibid., p. 145.

²⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 61.

²⁵⁵ Ibid., pp. 64-65.

²⁵⁶ Ibid., pp. 66-67.

²⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 69.

of women's sexual relations, the general absence of them reinforces the hypothesis that it posed great anxiety for Jewish writers.

Paul's Letter to the Romans

Brooten situates her analysis of the writings of the Biblical writer Paul within the context of an overall increase of male interest in female homoeroticism during the Roman period. Her study indicates that Paul's condemnation of same-sex relations differs "from all other ancient Jewish discussions of female homoeroticism in that he alone sees it as worthy of death."²⁵⁸ In his Letter to the Romans, Paul addresses the evil nature of homosexual acts and those who partake in them:

Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man - and birds and four-footed beasts and creeping things. Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves, who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. For this reason God gave them up to vile passions. For even their women exchanged the natural use for what is against nature. Likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust for one another, men with men, committing what is shameful, and receiving in themselves the penalty of their error which was due. And even as they did not like to retain God in *their* knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting; being filled with all unrighteousness, sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil-mindedness; *they are* whisperers, backbiters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, undiscerning, untrustworthy, unloving, unforgiving, unmerciful; who, knowing the righteous judgement of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them. (Romans 1: 22-32)

²⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 64.

Brooten's analysis of Paul's teaching demonstrates that his writing is best understood in light of concurrent social attitudes about gender. If early Christians such as Paul "had not condemned sexual relations between women within a gendered framework of active and passive, natural and unnatural, then they would have been unique in the Roman world in so doing."²⁵⁹ Brooten justifies her interpretation through recourse to another of Paul's texts, 1 Corinthians 11: 2-16. Together, these writings reveal Paul's concern that a "correct order of creation" be maintained through "sex roles and gender polarity."²⁶⁰ Brooten argues that Paul's approach parallels ancient descriptions of *tribades* in that he regards female homoeroticism as an "improper crossing of boundaries, a blurring of the categories of male and female."²⁶¹

Brooten explains that Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians links gender differentiation with a divine or natural order of existence. Stating that "the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman *is* man, and the head of Christ *is* God" (1 Cor 11: 3) Paul provides strict instructions about gender appearances. Brooten points out that this biblical passage emphasizes how

women and men should not look the same. For Paul, this is a theological issue. The reasons for gender polarization in dress are that the man is the head of the woman, just as the head of the man is Christ....There is a difference between woman and man, a difference that implies woman is to be oriented to her head, to man...²⁶²

²⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 2.

²⁶⁰ Brooten, "Paul's View," p. 72.

²⁶¹ Ibid.

²⁶² Ibid., p. 76.

Paul's basis for strict gender differentiation is a natural hierarchy derived from the divine order of creation. In exchanging "natural relations for those contrary to nature" gender differentiation and hierarchy are obscured.²⁶³ Brooten therefore concludes that Paul's condemnation of female homoeroticism illustrates his inability to accept "women experiencing their power [by taking on the active male role] through the erotic in a way that challenged the hierarchical ladder: God, Christ, man, woman."²⁶⁴

Paul's disapproval of sexual love between women is severe. While "Holiness" for Paul "implies abstention from forbidden sexual intercourse,"²⁶⁵ "same-sex love constitutes impurity and a dishonoring of one's body."²⁶⁶ Not only are intimate acts between women unnatural, those who partake in them are evil, malicious and murderous. According to Romans 1: 32, it is God's righteous judgement that deems these women worthy of death. Brooten is correct in claiming that Paul's (and his contemporaries') teachings on female gender and sexuality have echoed in religious and popular thought through to the present.²⁶⁷

Other Early Christian Writings

Several Christian writers emphasize that female homoeroticism is abnormal

²⁶³ Ibid.

²⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 78.

²⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 74.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 73.

²⁶⁷ Brooten, *Love Between Women*, p. 302.

and warrants punishment. Clement of Alexandria thought that by "engaging in sex for a reason other than procreation, these women violated nature."²⁶⁸ In order to avert homoerotic encounters within monastic life, Augustine of Hippo insisted that nuns always travel in groups with three or more members as designated by the prioress.²⁶⁹ Many, such as John Chrysostom present a contradictory analysis, describing "homoeroticism as both a sin and a disease."²⁷⁰

Brooten's examination of Christian writings from the patristic era demonstrates a perpetuation of Greco-Roman themes regarding the evil of female homoeroticism. Early apocalyptic writings depict God's wrath aimed at those who engage in homoerotic behaviour. In *The Apocalypse of Peter*, women who have sexual relations with other women are envisioned as casting "themselves down from a high overhanging cliff, whereupon their tormentors force them to go up again and be cast down again."²⁷¹ In a somewhat reminiscent manner to Sappho's "Leukadian cliff story,"²⁷² their final experiences are marked by torture and suffering. Brooten further adds that *The Acts of Thomas* and *The Apocalypse of Paul* present homoerotic evildoers suffering in pits and rivers of fire.²⁷³ Like their predecessors, Apocalyptic writers were deeply troubled by female sexual

²⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 336.

²⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 351.

²⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 346.

²⁷¹ Ibid., p. 306.

²⁷² Ibid., p. 39.

²⁷³ Ibid., pp. 309-314.

intimacy and endeavoured to prevent such relations from threatening divine human order. By presenting female sexual intimacy as unhealthy or sinful, early Christian writers reinforced the dominant religious ideology overshadowing the ancient world.

Synthesis

With male condemnation of female intimacy so prevalent in ancient texts, it is hard to imagine that there could be any exception, let alone a prominent one. For many women, the biblical story of Naomi and Ruth testifies to women's strong commitments to one another. According to the Book of Ruth, Naomi is past childbearing years when her husband and two sons die. Alone with her two daughters-in-law, Naomi tells them to return to their own kin. One of them departs, but the other remains. When Naomi again suggests she leave, Ruth implores:

Do not press me to abandon you,
To turn back from following you.
Wherever you go, I shall go.
And wherever you find rest, so shall I.
Your people shall be my people,
And your God shall be my God.
Where you die, I shall die,
And there I shall be buried.
Thus may YHWH do to me,
And thus may YHWH add
If even death will separate me from you. (Ruth 1: 16-17)²⁷⁴

²⁷⁴ As translated and cited by Rebecca Alpert, "Finding Our Past: A Lesbian Interpretation of the Book of Ruth," in *Reading Ruth: Contemporary Women Reclaim a Sacred Story*, eds. Judith A. Kates and Gail Twersky Reimer (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994), pp. 91-96.

Rebecca Alpert argues that this myth resonates with feminists and lesbians in search of role models. "Ruth and Naomi have a committed relationship that crosses the boundaries of age, nationality, and religion."²⁷⁵ In marrying a man of Naomi's kin, Ruth is able to secure resources to sustain her and Naomi. For women, Ruth and Naomi's commitment is one between family, friends, and possibly lovers.²⁷⁶ Yet as Alpert explains, other readers deny the intensity of Ruth and Naomi's bond.

When other scholars and commentators look at the Book of Ruth, they fail to see what we see. They are sure that Ruth means only to dedicate herself to Naomi's God. They are convinced that the important love relationship is the one between Ruth and Boaz. They can't imagine that there is a theme of love between women written between the lines.²⁷⁷

Perpetuation of the denial of Naomi and Ruth's intimate female bond is evidenced in contemporary religious celebrations. In an ironic twist, Ruth's confession of devotion is often cited at heterosexual weddings. Although the story of Naomi and Ruth is often appropriated to signify the devotion of a husband and wife, Alpert knows that stressing the myths' lesbian overtones is likely to "distress some readers."²⁷⁸ It is also ironic that despite the apparent positive resolution to Naomi and Ruth's story, the one cinematic rendition of it in *Fried Green Tomatoes* ends with the tragic death of one of the characters. As a potential symbol of women's love, the Book of Ruth has been treated with the same denial that inevitably characterizes western accounts of strong women committed to one another.

²⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 93.

²⁷⁶ Ibid., pp. 93-95.

²⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 95.

²⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 95.

Ancient religious writers were unable to envision any love between women as stable, socially beneficial, or worthy of celebration. In place of the honour that could be accorded to female intimacy, male writers left a legacy of horror and hatred. Like women's lives in general, female intimacy is depicted in ancient texts as a source of evil and the cause of their anguish. The cumulative impression of male religious references to women's relationships is staggering.

In summary, according to Greek sources, the mother and daughter bond is too intense and must be weakened by rape, kidnapping, and limited visitation rights. In patriarchal traditions in general, the relationship is superfluous and does not warrant recognition or celebration of any kind. Female friends, according to Greek sources, kill each other (albeit unintentionally). In biblical sources, they abuse each other along race and class lines, mourn and willingly participate in their own death, and/or get erased by religious traditions that scrutinize and deny their contribution.

Female lovers are by far the most repressed lot of the intimate bandits. The one female Greek author who expresses her love for women is heterosexualized by men who claim she killed herself over an unrequited male love interest. A Greek female is changed into man so that she can fulfill her love for another girl. A goddess who rejects men destroys her nymph lover for being raped by a god. Communities of women who sexually love one other are presented as murderous manhaters whose rape and death are sold as self-defence tactics. Elsewhere, Greek *tribades* are viewed as freaks of celestial mishap, monstrous lusty rapists who assume male attributes, or diseased and in need of mind and body altering treatments. Christian writers condemned these women to death as part of

God's goodwill mission. The punishment does not stop there however. In the next life, these women suffer endless torture through fire and perpetually jumping off cliffs.

As an exception, Naomi and Ruth remind readers of the predominant tendency among ancient writers to discourage and annihilate women's relationships. Although Ruth must marry to ensure their livelihood, their union signals a hope that there are "other female worlds of love and ritual to be discovered"²⁷⁹ in ancient texts. At present, the limited available sources paint a dismal picture. Despite her efforts to establish an ancient heritage of women's love for one another, Downing's assessment is resigned and echoes in the pages of this investigation. "The commitment of women to women is represented as intolerable to men; that it might be represented as succeeding - even in myth - is therefore impermissible."²⁸⁰

Religious themes stretch far beyond ancient writing. Miles argues that secularization has not rejected "but rather taken over many ancient religious judgements about the role and value of women."²⁸¹ Through popular film imagery, secular culture perpetuates the anxiety about women's intimate bonds found in early religious texts.

²⁷⁹ D'Angelo, p. 86.

²⁸⁰ Downing, *Myths and Mysteries*, p. 198.

²⁸¹ Miles, "Violence Against Women," p. 16.

Chapter Two

The Religious Dimensions of Popular Film

Despite criticism from sceptical colleagues, many theorists acknowledge the religious dimensions of secular culture. Analyzing a variety of social phenomena including sports, theatre, music, and shopping malls, scholars of religious studies probe popular media and pastimes to determine what is held most sacred within North America. Typically, spiritual movements are defined in opposition to the materialism and idolatry of the mundane realm. Yet as several authors argue, the popularity of artistic creations lies in their ability to reflect the "anxieties and longings"²⁸² of a culture. Some theorists suggest that it is secular imagery that now confers the "powerful moods and motivations which were once solely the province of religious thought and practice."²⁸³ Religious studies scholars interested in representation and meaning should consider "secular mythology - for it is here that, paradoxically, contemporary images with what might be termed 'religious power' can now be found."²⁸⁴

²⁸² Miles, *Seeing and Believing*, p. x.

²⁸³ Naomi Goldenberg, "Reflections on Religion and Culture," unpublished lecture presented at the Annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, Washington, November, 22, 1993.

²⁸⁴ Ibid.

Religion and Popular Culture

For several decades, theorists in religious studies have criticized their colleagues for focussing too heavily on traditional forms of religious expression. In his article entitled, "Reconsidering the Status of Popular Culture in Tillich's Theology of Culture," Cobb develops a theological argument for expanding religious investigations beyond traditional texts and institutions. Acknowledging the restrictive and inconsistent nature of Tillich's interpretations of culture, Cobb nevertheless models his approach on the theologian's distinction between a "theology of culture" and a "theology of the church."²⁸⁵ Cobb argues that Tillich's work offers a strong argument for a theological consideration of popular culture, particularly when juxtaposed with the writings of the theologian Ernst Troeltsch and cultural theorist John Fiske.

According to Cobb, Tillich developed two theologies of culture which were distinguishable by the authority each accorded to the Christian paradigm. Tillich argued that the word of God is not to be understood solely in relation to Church history and culture.²⁸⁶ Rather, he writes, the word of revelation "can be in everything in which the spirit expresses itself."²⁸⁷ Cobb indicates that Tillich's theology here employs a systematics that investigates spheres of culture, including art, "for the unconditioned present in them."²⁸⁸ In Tillich's earlier theology of culture, there was an expectation that God would speak more

²⁸⁵ Tillich, as cited in Cobb, p. 55.

²⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 58.

²⁸⁷ Tillich, as cited in Ibid.

²⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 57.

directly to the church from outside it.²⁸⁹ Cobb emphasizes Tillich's view that human religion is just one witness of the ultimate, and in some periods, "not the most effective in expression and symbolism."²⁹⁰

Cobb observes an evolution in Tillich's theology of culture in his shift from culture as a positive source of revelation about divine reality, to regarding it as a "negative disclosure" of the human predicament.²⁹¹ In this later interpretation, culture contributes to human understanding of the divine by exposing the ambiguity of human experience. "Wherever human existence in thought or action becomes a subject of doubts and questions," Tillich writes, "there culture is religious."²⁹² Music, philosophy, law, and painting can therefore be counted as religious expressions because they evoke questions about "the limits of human experience."²⁹³ Yet, as Cobb points out, Tillich views culture as incapable of answering the questions it poses. Alternatively, it must accept a Christian response.²⁹⁴ In other words, Tillich's later theological analysis of culture regards Jesus Christ as "the central reality of divine revelation."²⁹⁵ While religious substance can still be located in a culture's search for the sacred, "it cannot be discerned without the clarifying paradigmatic norm of...Christian symbols."²⁹⁶

²⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 62.

²⁹⁰ Tillich, as cited in Ibid., p. 59.

²⁹¹ Ibid., pp. 62, 64.

²⁹² Tillich, as cited in Ibid., p. 60.

²⁹³ Ibid.

²⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 61.

²⁹⁵ Ibid.

²⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 63.

Although both of Tillich's theologies of culture recognize the revelatory power of material culture, he nevertheless restricted his attention to products of the elite strata. Cobb attributes Tillich's neglect of popular culture to his close association with the Frankfurt School of Social Research that interpreted popular culture as a social tool for maintaining class privilege.²⁹⁷ In this view, popular culture such as sports, television, and movies manipulate mass psychology and distract people from the unbearable conditions of their lives. Ultimately, it "reconciles people to their unhappiness" and "depletes the reserves of energy that might otherwise further one's social transformation."²⁹⁸ Through kitsch, a simple art form that presents "the beautiful minus its ugly counterpart,"²⁹⁹ products of mass culture cater to insecurities. By contrast, the Frankfurt School and Tillich privileged avant-garde art as the cultural site of revolutionary consciousness.³⁰⁰

Cobb notes that the Frankfurt School influenced not only Tillich's views of culture, but also his choice of subjects.³⁰¹ In his later work, Tillich writes that "standardized communication through radio, movies, press, and fashions tends to create standardized men who are all too susceptible to propaganda for old and new totalitarian purposes."³⁰² For Tillich, genuine art should be critical and absorb one "into the dialectical ambiguity

²⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 71.

²⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 70.

²⁹⁹ Ibid.

³⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 71.

³⁰¹ Ibid., p. 73.

³⁰² Ibid., p. 72.

of the beautiful and the disturbing."³⁰³ He also reserves the title "bearers of utopia" for those "who have sufficient power of being to achieve advance."³⁰⁴ Despite Tillich's disregard for anything non-elite, Cobb nevertheless endeavours to recuperate his writings into a workable theology of popular culture. To further this objective, Cobb appeals to Ernst Troeltsch, one of Tillich's most significant inspirations, and John Fiske, a current cultural theorist.

Although Troeltsch was subject to many of the same influences as Tillich, he recognizes a religious dimension to popular expressions. As Cobb explains, Troeltsch's work acknowledges "the unpredictable convergence of sources that erupt from time to time and produce a new cultural synthesis (a 'secret which the theologians call revelation')."³⁰⁵ Amongst the great thinkers and prophets that Troeltsch believes give rise to these revelations, he includes "the brooding pondering, longing, and criticizing masses."³⁰⁶ As Cobb explains, it is Troeltsch's position that religious standards and impulses can best be understood through data "found in the products of popular culture."³⁰⁷ In contrast to Tillich's apprehension regarding the revelatory power of mass culture, Troeltsch recognizes its relevance to understanding "the values and ideals that guide a culture's development."³⁰⁸ While Cobb understands Tillich's inclination to integrate Christian norms in his theological

³⁰³ Ibid.

³⁰⁴ Tillich, as cited in Ibid., p. 72.

³⁰⁵ Troeltsch, as cited in Cobb, p. 74.

³⁰⁶ Cobb, p. 74.

³⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 75.

³⁰⁸ Ibid.

interpretation, Cobb concludes that these standards must also be coordinated with those originating in the "pondering" masses.³⁰⁹

Cobb's own "theology of culture" incorporates cultural criticism and theology. Fiske challenges the view that popular culture is "a commodity that drops on the masses from above."³¹⁰ Rather, these products provide "the *resources* out of which subordinated people *produce* [a] popular culture...that may be resistant and contradictory to the interests that initially manufactured them."³¹¹ Defining popular culture as "the active process of generating and circulating meanings and pleasures within a social system," Fiske emphasizes not the products of popular culture but their use.³¹²

Integrating Fiske's approach with Tillich's methodology offers insights akin to Troeltsch's theological reading of popular culture:

Seeking in the texts of popular culture the ultimate concerns that are expressed in them, a reading of popular culture from above renders a relatively simple ultimate concern of the powerful maintaining their privilege. Read from below, however, the appropriated texts will disclose an ongoing wrangling of ultimate concerns and genuine eruptions of intimacy demanding that cultural forces be reordered and moral injustices rectified. Again we return to the Troeltschian appreciation for the complexity and multitude of voices that belong to a vital and always forming cultural synthesis.

All of which is to suggest that much can be learned about the total situation of a culture's deeper allegiances from an examination of its magazines, television viewing habits, popular novels, fashions, lawncare, broadcast news media, car industry, billboard hits, cinema, favorite pleasure destinations, and state-of-the-art technologies.³¹³

³⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 76.

³¹⁰ Ibid., p. 77.

³¹¹ Ibid., p. 97.

³¹² Fiske, as cited in Ibid., p. 77.

³¹³ Ibid., pp. 78-79.

Cobb's inclusive approach recognizes that popular culture discloses "fundamental anxieties and longings"³¹⁴ that reflect and inform a cultural theology. Cobb concludes that any aspects that functions to attract, repel, activate, or alter "the way people value reality"³¹⁵ should be addressed by a theologian of culture. These include, he argues, the images and stories that "claim sustained attention from movie-makers, and the further use to which they are put by their audiences."³¹⁶ Cobb's writing highlights how cinematic themes can and do reflect the theological convictions of a culture. As representations of fundamental values and concerns, films warrant theological consideration as religious texts.

Cobb's theological approach to religion and popular culture is complemented by religious analyses occurring in other fields, including sociological examinations of secularization. In an article entitled "Some Good Purpose: Notes on Religion and Popular Culture in Canada," Roger O'Toole examines several sociological approaches to religion in current Canadian life. While sociologists of religion continue to focus primarily on institutional religions, O'Toole points to secularization as the dominant theme in the western world.³¹⁷ Citing Bryan Wilson's definition of secularization as the process whereby

³¹⁴ Ibid., p. 79.

³¹⁵ Ibid., p. 80.

³¹⁶ Ibid., p. 80.

³¹⁷ Ibid., p. 76. In *Seeing and Believing*, Miles challenges assumptions about secularization of American culture, arguing that recent statistical evidence shows a marked increase there in church participation.

"religious thinking, practice, and institutions lose social significance,"³¹⁸ O'Toole outlines three responses to the current decline in organized religion.

Approaches to secularization vary according to various understandings of religion. For those who restrict themselves to institutional definitions, culture is viewed as less or nonreligious.³¹⁹ Others regard secularization as the dawn of a new religious consciousness better adapted for future social concerns.³²⁰ The alternative, and most developed perspective in O'Toole's scheme derives from a functionalist approach to religion. Scholars of this third school regard religion as a social universal that "binds men together and provides the basic cognitive, evaluative, and expressive guidelines for the stable operation of the society."³²¹ The functionalist approach is based on the premise that

while religion is a social phenomenon, society is also a *religious* phenomenon, and that if a society exists, it must therefore, *ipso facto* possess a religion. In this sense, religion is viewed as a social universal, the source of the most general guidelines for human action and the means by which societies hold together.³²²

This method looks for the "functional alternatives" to declining traditional religion in modern industrialization.³²³ The task for scholars of religious studies is to therefore determine the "grounds of meaning" and "cohesive agencies in social systems."³²⁴

³¹⁸ Wilson, as cited in O'Toole, p. 76.

³¹⁹ O'Toole, p. 90.

³²⁰ Ibid., p. 85.

³²¹ Roland Robertson, as cited in O'Toole, p. 86.

³²² O'Toole, p. 86.

³²³ Ibid.

³²⁴ Ibid.

O'Toole cites Will Herberg's examination of the "American Way of Life" and Robert Bellah's study of "civil religion" as examples of functionalist approaches to religion in current society. For Herberg, traditional religion appears secondary alongside the "*real* religion of American society", that is, the "American Way."³²⁵ In his formulation, secularization has led to an understanding of religious belonging in terms of American identity. As the framework for both overarching unity and the crucial values of American existence, "the American Way of Life is the operative faith of the American people."³²⁶

For Bellah, American civil religion pertains to those aspects of American culture that build up "powerful symbols of natural solidarity" and mobilize "deep levels of personal motivation for the attainment of national goals."³²⁷ Civil religion is distinct from traditional religion, with its "own prophets and its own martyrs, its own sacred events and sacred places, its own solemn rituals, and symbols."³²⁸ Nevertheless, in Bellah's view, American civil religion borrows much from Christianity "in such a way that the average American (sees) no conflict between the two."³²⁹

Herberg and Bellah's approaches provide an opportunity to consider the profound religious significance of popular culture. Within their religious configurations, the heroes

³²⁵ Ibid., p. 87.

³²⁶ Herberg, as cited in O'Toole, p. 87.

³²⁷ Bellah, as cited in O'Toole, p. 87. Also see Carolyn Marvin and David W. Ingle, "Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Revisiting Civil Religion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* LXIV, no. 4 (Winter 1996): 767-780, for their analysis of nationalism as the most powerful religion in the United States.

³²⁸ Ibid.

³²⁹ Ibid.

or *stars* of a society may be viewed as signifiers of cultural devotion. Examinations of cultural pastimes, including the consumption of mass media and particular film genres, reveal the mythologies and symbols deemed most sacred within a society. Bellah's observation that civil religion succeeds through co-opting traditional religious themes and imagery is particularly relevant to this investigation. Nevertheless, academics have thus far been reluctant to apply their theories to an analysis of Canadian religiosity.³³⁰

O'Toole's study of functionalist approaches to religion and culture foregrounds the theoretical contributions of Luckmann's study entitled *The Invisible Religion: The Problem of Religion in Modern Society*. Arguing that traditional churches represent only a particular form of institutionalized religion, Luckmann's work encourages scholars to investigate what he considers the social forms of religion within culture.³³¹ These, he contends, are active whenever an individual transcends his or her biological nature through the construction of meaning.³³² As O'Toole explains, Luckmann essentially identifies "the religious with the human."³³³ Through his focus on the social construction of "objective morally binding, all-embracing 'universes of meaning',"³³⁴ Luckmann directs religious examinations to the everyday priorities of individuals.³³⁵

³³⁰ O'Toole, pp. 87-88.

³³¹ Luckmann, p. 53.

³³² Ibid., p. 49.

³³³ O'Toole, p. 89.

³³⁴ Ibid.

³³⁵ Luckmann, p. 78.

While institutional forms of religion have predominated through much of western history, the pattern has shifted in modern times. With urbanization and industrialization has come institutionalized specialization that tends "to 'free' the norms of the various institutional areas from the influence of the originally superordinated 'religious' values."³³⁶ As a result, the "relevance of the values institutionalized in church religion, for the integration and legitimation of everyday life"³³⁷ diminishes in modernity. Because individuals are the determiners and consumers of both personally and socially relevant systems of meaning, religious institutions compete with profane agencies in marketing models of ultimate or religious significance in modern society.³³⁸

Luckmann's work encourages scholars to look beyond institutional forms of religion in order to assess "the universal form of the religious function...diffused in society."³³⁹ As official models of religion become increasingly incongruent with the immediate priorities

³³⁶ Ibid., p. 39.

³³⁷ Ibid.

³³⁸ Ibid., pp. 102-104. Also see Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1969). Despite his criticism of various aspects of Luckmann's theory, Berger shares his colleague's recognition of the significance of consumerism for understanding religion in modern society. Berger regards secularization in terms of a competition between religious and non-religious rivals seeking to define reality most effectively for a consumer society. The "pluralistic situation," Berger writes, "is, above all, a 'market situation.' In it, the religious institutions become marketing agencies and the religious traditions become consumer commodities"(138). With the introduction of consumer preference in the religious sphere, "religious contents become objects of fashion" (145-146). The influence of traditional religious systems is therefore ultimately threatened by other systems such as nationalism and feminism that may be perceived as more personally and socially relevant. As Berger concludes, "religious traditions have lost their character as overarching symbols for the society at large, which must find its integrating symbolism elsewhere" (153).

³³⁹ Luckmann, p. 78.

and experiences of everyday life in modern society, scholars must address the cultural "systems that have an overarching, sense-integrating function in contemporary life."³⁴⁰ Luckmann argues that religious themes are currently taken up by "secondary institutions which expressly cater to the 'private' needs of 'autonomous' consumers."³⁴¹ For Luckmann, modern institutions which currently market models of ultimate significance include syndicated advice columns, *Playboy* magazine, and popular music. In the absence of "official" models, cliques form around "the 'construction' and stabilization of 'private' universes of 'ultimate' significance."³⁴² In his interpretation of Luckmann's work, O'Toole states that popular cultural products are designed "specifically for the 'religious' needs of their consumers [and] must themselves be regarded as religious in nature."³⁴³

In the final chapter of *The Invisible Religion*, Luckmann argues that the theme of sexuality "assumes a crucial function in the 'autonomous' individual's quest for self-

³⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 91. See Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, ed. Michael Banton (London: Tavistock, 1966), pp. 1-46. In many ways, Luckmann's sociological approach is complemented by Geertz's anthropological perspectives. Geertz's definition of religion is now classic: "a religion is a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic" (4). According to Geertz's understanding of meaning, "sacred symbols function to synthesize a people's ethos...and their world-view - the picture they have of the way things in sheer actuality are, their most comprehensive ideas of order" (3). Geertz concludes that the importance of religion lies in "its capacity to serve, for an individual or for a group, as a source of general, yet distinctive conceptions of the world, the self, and the relations between them" (40).

³⁴¹ Ibid., p. 104.

³⁴² Ibid., p. 106.

³⁴³ O'Toole, p. 89.

expression and self-realization."³⁴⁴ By permitting "an enlargement of the private sphere beyond the solitary individual," Luckmann argues, sexuality "may serve as a form of self-transcendence."³⁴⁵ Sexuality thus plays what Luckmann considers a unique "role as a source of 'ultimate' significance for the individual."³⁴⁶ As Luckmann concludes, the prominence of themes relating to self-expression and self-realization is evidenced by the extensive consideration it receives in popular media.

Luckmann's work lays a foundation for examining popular culture as a social religious form catering to the "ultimate" needs of consumers. O'Toole suggests that secularization requires methodologies such as Luckmann's for assessing the status of religion in current society.³⁴⁷ Luckmann's work highlights the role of diverse social forms in the production of religious themes and models. It therefore encourages scholars to consider the multiple non-institutional religious sites where meaning is circulated.

Recent scholarship in religion and popular culture examines a variety of social pastimes and products oriented around coherent "universes of meaning." In his famous article "Baseball Magic,"³⁴⁸ George Gmelch demonstrates the belief system underpinning American baseball through an analysis of its rituals, taboos, and fetishes. Gmelch's study demonstrates how gestures such as eating particular foods before games, refusing to wear

³⁴⁴ Luckmann, p. 111.

³⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 112.

³⁴⁶ Ibid.

³⁴⁷ O'Toole, pp. 89-90.

³⁴⁸ George Gmelch, "Baseball Magic," in *Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion: An Anthropological Study of the Supernatural*, 2d ed., eds. Arthur C. Lehmann and James E. Myers (Mountain View, California: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1989), pp. 295-305.

certain numbers, and collecting old bats denote belief in the magic of ritualized actions.³⁴⁹ While Gmelch's work illustrates the religious qualities of athletic pursuits, David Chidester explores the religious dimensions of baseball in terms of its social role in American society.³⁵⁰ He argues that the "church of baseball" is "a religious institution that maintains the continuity, uniformity, sacred space, and sacred time of American life."³⁵¹ Using a theoretical model of religion as church, Chidester proves that a sport such as baseball can be a functional religion with its "orthodoxy and heresies, its canonical myths and professions of faith, [and] its rites of communion and excommunication."³⁵²

Chidester incorporates other theoretical models to investigate the religious dimensions of cultural products such as Coca-Cola and "Rock 'n' Roll." Highlighting Mark Pendergrast's work on Clifford Geertz, Chidester demonstrates how Coca-Cola constitutes a fetishized or sacred symbol that evokes "long-lasting moods and motivations."³⁵³ As evidence of its sacred power Pendergrast cites a company executive, who claims that Coca-Cola has entered the lives of more people "than any other product or ideology,

³⁴⁹ Ibid., pp. 295-298.

³⁵⁰ David Chidester, "The Church of Coca-Cola, the Fetish of Coca-Cola, and the Potlatch of Rock 'n' Roll: Theoretical Models for the Study of Religion in American Popular Culture," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* LXIV, no. 4 (Winter, 1996): 743-765.

³⁵¹ Ibid., p. 745.

³⁵² Ibid., p. 748. Also see Morris R. Cohen, "Baseball as a National Religion," in *The Faith of a Liberal* (New York: Henry Holt, 1946 [originally published 1919]). O'Toole also refers to an attempt to integrate Luckmann's theoretical model into a consideration of Canadian hockey in Tom Sinclair-Faulkner, "Hockey in Canada: A Puckish Reflection on Religion in Canada," in *Religion and Culture in Canada*, ed. Peter Slater (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1977).

³⁵³ Geertz, as cited in Chidester, p. 749.

including the Christian religion."³⁵⁴ Chidester's broad understanding of religion also encompasses what he considers the gift-giving of Rock 'n' Roll performances. For him, the delivery of particular songs parallels potlatch ceremonies in the Pacific Northwest.³⁵⁵ Chidester's analysis of popular products such as baseball, Coca-Cola, and rock music demonstrates how religious phenomena may include "somewhat unfamiliar or profane forms."³⁵⁶

In her article, "Thoughts on the Status of the Cyborg: On Technological Socialization and Its Link to the Religious Function of Popular Culture,"³⁵⁷ Brenda Brasher argues that popular media is the primary source of religious meaning today. Recognizing "contemporary bodily and social reality as a hybrid of biology and machine,"³⁵⁸ Brasher sees the "cyborg" as a "key interpretive symbol for the human self."³⁵⁹ As "imaginative admixtures of humans and machines,"³⁶⁰ cyborgs and the popular culture in which they occur can provide viable ethical models in place of traditional religions that are now inadequate for addressing modern concerns.

³⁵⁴ Pendergrast, as cited in *Ibid.*, p. 750.

³⁵⁵ Chidester, p. 744.

³⁵⁶ O'Toole, p. 89. Also see Ray B. Browne, ed., *Rituals and Ceremonies in Popular Culture* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1980). This collection of essays explore diverse ritual activities including sports, architecture, eating and fashion.

³⁵⁷ Brenda Brasher, "Thoughts on the Status of the Cyborg: On Technological Socialization and Its Link to the Religious Function of Popular Culture," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* LXIV, no. 4 (Winter 1996): 809-830.

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 811.

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 815.

³⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 809.

According to Brasher, humans are becoming "borged"³⁶¹ and must increasingly "reconfigure the bits and bites of mass-produced culture into popular culture faiths."³⁶² This is evidenced, Brasher argues, in the religious devotion with which people respond to media narratives and celebrities such as Oprah or Seinfeld. As Brasher writes, humans treat

their fictional or quasi-fictional scenarios as a base for determining behavioural norms and creating new visions of community. I suggest that these cultural transactions constitute a form of religion; that for a select group of cyborgs' human-technical interactions constitute the social origins of much of their morality; and that, as a result, America's diverse religious marketplace now incorporates a plethora of distinct popular culture faiths alongside its more traditional religions.

The eclectic popular culture religions cyborgs are assembling are unlike any others. They have no priestesses or priests, no canon, no creation story; but they do have sacred images, sacred music, and sacred theology.³⁶³

Brasher's recognition of the religious function performed by popular media and narrative provides an opportunity for considering the role of films as religious texts in contemporary society. In the expanding field of religion and popular culture, no popular medium has received more scholarly attention than the cinema.

Religion and Film

The field of religion and film is currently informed by numerous publications that incorporate diverse methodologies and perspectives. Investigations of religion and film emphasize how movies convey religious ideology and values in contemporary culture.

³⁶¹ Ibid., p. 816.

³⁶² Ibid., p. 821.

³⁶³ Ibid., pp. 821-822.

Some scholars direct their studies towards expanding the definition of religion to include the cinema. Through their presentation and resolution of human predicaments, relationships, and personal ordeals, films are thought to fulfill the instructive role of all religious movements. Most publications in the field aim to expose the roots of popular narrative in biblical mythology and thus highlight explicit and implicit film depictions of traditional religious themes. Despite their diverse methodologies, scholars in this area all start from the premise that "secular" film narratives warrant consideration as religious texts.

In his article entitled "Cinema, Religion, and Popular Culture,"³⁶⁴ Darrol M. Bryant argues that film, like all historical art forms, connects humanity with sacral powers and resonates "in the deepest aspirations of the culture in which it emerges."³⁶⁵ For Bryant, the religious significance of film is best understood in terms of the fulfilment of technological civilization's alchemical dream:

...in the cinema, the "stuff" of everyday life can be taken up and magically transformed; base metals are turned into gold. At the same time, the culture gains a certain immortality for itself by lifting its own contents - persons, objects, ideology - beyond the flux of every day to the permanence of the filmed image. In the cinema, then, we have confirmed the popular belief that the everyday world we endure, itself shaped by technological civilization, is capable of achieving its noble but hidden dream: the transmutation and deification of the world.³⁶⁶

³⁶⁴ Darrol M. Bryant, "Cinema, Religion, and Popular Culture," in *Religion in Film*, eds. John R. May and Michael Bird, pp. 101-114. (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1982).

³⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

Bryant's work is grounded in the notion that art expresses and reshapes the deep loyalties and longings of a culture. While other scholars view secularization as a decline in religiosity, Bryant challenges the false dichotomy between "religious" and "secular" culture. He notes that the word *culture* comes from the Latin "*cultus*, meaning worship" suggesting that all cultures are by definition in a constant state of devotion. With its lack of focus on a transcendent otherworldly realm, secular culture worships itself.³⁶⁷ For Bryant, film is the primary site of this modern religiosity.

Paralleling Luckmann's recognition of diverse social religious forms, Bryant contends that "cinema is a form of popular 'religion'."³⁶⁸ The evidence for this lies in its role for personal and social development.

As a form of popular religious life, movies do what we have always asked of popular religion, namely, they provide us with archetypal forms of humanity - heroic figures - and instruct us in the basic values and myths of our society. As we watch the characters and follow the drama on the screen, we are instructed in the values and myths of our culture and given models on which to pattern our lives.³⁶⁹

In this manner, Bryant argues, the "act of going to the movies is a participation in a central ritual of this culture's spiritual life."³⁷⁰ Through the cinema, we join in collective learning and honouring of our most fundamental social values.

Bryant's work suggests that the method filmmakers use to present subject matter greatly influences our understanding of people and experience. In other words, films

³⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 105.

³⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 106.

³⁶⁹ Ibid.

³⁷⁰ Ibid.

"instruct us as to *how we are to regard*"³⁷¹ various aspects of our social life. In this manner, films, like religions, project worldviews that either affirm or criticize cultural phenomena.³⁷² The settings and narratives of films present particular people and behaviours as the evil protagonists that must be eradicated for good social order. Scapegoating is often fundamental to religious ideology. Bryant's work shows that scapegoating also contributes to a film's success. Popular media, particularly movies, are the religious sites where the "primordial longing of humanity to participate in the lives of the gods (the power-filled figures who overcome disorder)"³⁷³ can be fulfilled. Film narratives can be seen as contemporary religious mythology that invite us to identify and celebrate with the gods as they work to eliminate our presumed social villains.

Bryant writes that film is the most significant of all popular religious forms. Like other variations of 'religious' art, films connect us with the core of our cultural anxieties and aspirations. It is through the screen that "we discover both new and familiar images of humanity that call forth in the viewer an expanded sense of what is possible"³⁷⁴ and desirable. Unlike other art forms, film imagery appears uniquely realistic and compels acceptance and belief.³⁷⁵ "The cinematic form can establish an immediate rapport with its audience;" Bryant writes, "it can seduce us to set aside disbelief and enter with a high

³⁷¹ Ibid. Italics added.

³⁷² Ibid., p. 108.

³⁷³ Ibid., p. 106.

³⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 104.

³⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 103.

degree of identification into the lives of the characters on the screen and their story."³⁷⁶

Bryant's view that film is the most effective expression of religious sentiment in contemporary culture is expressed by several other theorists.

In the introduction to their edited volume, *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth and Ideology in Popular American Film*, Joel Martin and Conrad Ostwalt argue for a recognition of the fundamental religious nature of film. Their work is based on the premise that "'religious' longings and values pervade"³⁷⁷ public spheres, including the cinema. Although films are usually associated with enjoyment and escapism, they are also a forum for discussions about what a culture holds most sacred. Martin and Ostwalt argue that

film is an extraordinarily popular medium today, but films do much more than simply entertain. Films, as with other cultural forms, have the potential to reinforce, to challenge, to overturn, or to crystallize religious perspectives, ideological assumptions, and fundamental values. Films bolster and challenge our society's norms, guiding narratives, and accepted truths. In short, films can and do perform religious and iconoclastic functions in American society.³⁷⁸

Martin and Ostwalt's tripart approach to religion and film recognizes movie-viewing as the "key means for millions of Americans to grapple with religious issues, mythic archetypes, and fundamental ideological concerns."³⁷⁹ The essays comprising *Screening the Sacred* are situated within three broad categories that correspond to methodological approaches current within religious studies, namely, the theological, the mythological, and

³⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 104.

³⁷⁷ Martin and Ostwalt, p. vii.

³⁷⁸ Ibid., p. vii.

³⁷⁹ Ibid., viii.

the ideological.³⁸⁰ Each approach is distinguished by its notions about the nature and function of religion.

Martin and Ostwalt suggest that a theological approach focuses primarily on institutional forms of religion. Scholars of film and theology are those who examine traditional religious texts and doctrine, particularly of Judaism and Christianity. Theologians thus try to relate ideas about God to "modern and post-modern contexts, translating teachings about such things as the covenant, sacrifice, Incarnation, fallibility, and justice into modern categories or critiquing society in their light."³⁸¹ It therefore follows, Martin and Ostwalt explain, that a theological approach to film concentrates on revealing how movies express classic religious themes through their narrative and visual imagery.

Several publications testify to filmmakers, audiences, and theologians' interest in the ability of film to convey traditional religious sentiment. Ronald Holloway observes that many early films were oriented around religious themes, "exploiting the favorite legends of the deities," and reproducing the passion story of Christ.³⁸² In *Explorations in Theology and Film: Movies and Meaning*, Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz explore how "the thinking of Christians (their theology) is...in part informed by their cinemagoing."³⁸³ Martin and Ostwalt argue that even though popular culture appears "thoroughly secular, [it] continues

³⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 6.

³⁸¹ Ibid.

³⁸² Ronald Holloway, *Beyond the Image: Approaches to the Religious Dimension in the Cinema* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1974), p. 26.

³⁸³ Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz, eds., *Explorations in Theology and Film: Movies and Meaning* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), p. 2.

to wrestle with Christian claims, symbols, and expectations."³⁸⁴ These and other studies demonstrate how many films re-present classical biblical myths and values.³⁸⁵

Martin and Ostwalt maintain that the theological emphasis on biblical traditions can lead to limited interpretations of film narratives. If they rely heavily on allegorical interpretation, critics' "first impulse is to link modern cultural expressions to scriptural antecedents."³⁸⁶ This ethnocentric approach is potentially too restrictive, particularly when critics "look for 'Christ' figures around every corner in order to impart Christian teaching."³⁸⁷ Such a theological approach may overlook other religious dimensions in film narrative and imagery.

The second religious approach to film outlined by Martin and Ostwalt focuses on the mythological nature of film. This approach does not limit itself to institutional or monotheistic notions of religion. Rather, a mythological analysis looks more generally at what Mircea Eliade and Joseph Campbell consider the human quest for contact with the "sacred."³⁸⁸ Scholars working from this perspective regard religion as a universal that "manifests itself through cross-cultural forms, including myth."³⁸⁹ Myths reflect the assumptions and aspirations of a culture and sustain societies by providing models for

³⁸⁴ Ibid., pp. 8-9.

³⁸⁵ Also see John R. May, ed., *Image and Likeness: Religious Visions in American Film Classics* (New York/Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1992); and John R. May and Michael Bird, eds., *Religion in Film* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1982).

³⁸⁶ Martin and Ostwalt, p. 9.

³⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 15.

³⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 9.

³⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 6.

living. Popular media such as film are viewed by many scholars as the chief religious source for overarching mythological "texts" within "secular" society. Arguing that "archetypal myth thrives as never before,"³⁹⁰ through the cinema, Martin and Ostwalt cite Eliade's work on myth and culture:

A whole volume could be written on the myths of modern man, on the mythologies camouflaged in the plays he enjoys, in the books he reads. The cinema, that "dream factory," takes over and employs countless mythical motifs - the fight between hero and monster, initiatory combats and ordeal, paradigmatic figures and images...³⁹¹

According to Martin and Ostwalt, film mythology enables "human beings to connect with their psychological and religious depths, aspects of their world not normally accessible by the conscious mind."³⁹² Through popular cultural myths, they write, people have contact with "great foundational forces, powers that generate and govern the world... By telling us who we are and why we are here, indeed, anything is here, and why it is this way as opposed to some other way, these stories shape us profoundly."³⁹³ Through characters, plot, and setting, popular films can put virtually entire cultures in contact with perceived "universal truths," thoughts, and emotions.³⁹⁴ Martin and Ostwalt argue that a mythological criticism of film provides an overview of the values, beliefs, and desires of a society, that is, the religious profile of a culture.

³⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 66.

³⁹¹ Eliade, as cited in Conrad and Ostwalt, p. 9.

³⁹² Martin and Ostwalt, p. 66.

³⁹³ Ibid.

³⁹⁴ Ibid., pp. 66-67.

While mythological criticism allows for a recognition of the religious undercurrents within film that might be overlooked by a theological approach, it too has its limitations. In its consideration of mythic archetypes, this criticism fails to address the way in which ideation and power are socially derived from the cultural environment in which they occur.³⁹⁵ Martin and Ostwalt write that "myth critics focus on our psychological quest for meaning but tend to ignore the way meaning is always politicized and historicized."³⁹⁶ Thus, this approach does not provide insights into the cultural relationships that foster and perpetuate particular mythological images and denigrate or exclude others.

In contrast to theological and mythological approaches to religion, an ideological analysis examines religion in relation to the historical, social, and political influences operative within a given culture. This third approach to religion focuses on how "religion legitimates or challenges dominant visions of the social order."³⁹⁷ The significance of an ideological criticism of religion and film is best understood through an analysis of ideology itself. Challenging the popular belief that it is possible to live without ideology, this new scholarship argues that "ideology is not excessive or optional but is a necessary part of the process through which human beings come to know their social worlds."³⁹⁸ Citing Louis Althusser, Martin and Ostwalt explain that through representations of images and myths, ideology allows people to think about the social order, moving them toward a particular

³⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 10.

³⁹⁶ Ibid.

³⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 7.

³⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 120.

"vision of reality and their relation to it."³⁹⁹ Due to a perceived decline in the authority which religion wields over the ideology of mass culture, contemporary ideological critics tend to ignore the issue of religion in their debates. Martin and Ostwalt point out that religious symbols are diffused throughout culture, a fact that calls for careful examination of the dynamic between religion and ideology in film imperative.⁴⁰⁰

An ideological criticism of film emphasizes the way in which cultural expressions have social effects on current categories such as race, class, and gender.⁴⁰¹ Critics of this school would argue that "culture and art do not transcend politics,"⁴⁰² but rather, they shape and are shaped by it. Unlike the mythological approach which emphasizes universal symbols without any contextual analysis, ideological critics examine how "a specific cultural expression reinforces or undermines the structure of power relations in a given society at a particular time, not how such an expression fulfills a universal need for meaning."⁴⁰³

Martin and Ostwalt write that although ideological criticism of film casts new light on the power relations operative within films, it risks placing too great an emphasis on one aspect of religion while ignoring others. Thus, these critics can, in Martin and Ostwalt's view, erroneously concentrate "so tightly on politics that they end up treating religion

³⁹⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid., pp. 120-121.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid., p. 10.

⁴⁰² Ibid.

⁴⁰³ Ibid.

simplistically."⁴⁰⁴ Because these critics can forget the complex nature of religion, Martin and Ostwalt wonder whether they are even practising religious studies.⁴⁰⁵ They thus regard this method as limited due to its heavy emphasis on politics and its failure to boldly respond to the "spirit spiritually."⁴⁰⁶

While Martin and Ostwalt's study provides a structural basis for interpreting the religious dimensions of films, several contradictions and limitations must be noted. Martin and Ostwalt's scepticism about the religious relevance of ideological analyses of films reveals discrepancies in their theoretical work. In their introduction, they acknowledge the narrowness of their methodology, suggesting the need for a fourth type of criticism that would synthesize the three approaches they present.⁴⁰⁷ However, an approach that integrates what they categorize as theological, mythological, and ideological criticisms would likely perpetuate the overly restrictive views they maintain regarding religion and the field of religious studies.

Martin and Ostwalt state that while religion is more than film, film too, is more than religion.⁴⁰⁸ They thus make the claim that "little is to be gained by examining every film in relation to religion" and feel justified in the exclusion of films like *Police Academy* (1984) from their analysis.⁴⁰⁹ Their criteria for identifying religious phenomena and the religious

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 11.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 12.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 7.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 4.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid.

significance of films are unclear. If they exclude films that lack explicit religious imagery, they fail to address the diverse forms that religion may assume. Their judgement of particular approaches (i.e. ideological) as less appropriate to the field of religious studies further suggests a preconceived, yet unexplained, understanding of the scope of "religious" phenomena influencing their work. Their criticism that ideological scholars fail to "respond to the spirit spiritually"⁴¹⁰ suggests a theological bias. In their discussion of secularization, Martin and Ostwalt argue that "secular" imagination may be considered "religious" if it continues to present "human beings in relation to awesome, *nonhuman powers of creation...*"⁴¹¹ Apparently, their analysis of religion and film is grounded in a narrow theological view of the "religious" as only those phenomena oriented toward transcendent and otherworldly dimensions.

Martin and Ostwalt's apparent correlation of religion with spiritual connections to nonhuman powers is contradicted by their discussion of broader approaches to religion in culture. In their conclusion they write that perhaps film could be regarded "like some secular religion, complete with its sacred space and rituals that mediate an experience of otherness."⁴¹² In their consideration of theological approaches, they acknowledge the work of literary theorists such as Wesley Kort who suggest that all narrative structure may be regarded as religious because they orient readers to a transcendent realm beyond

⁴¹⁰ Ibid., p. 12.

⁴¹¹ Ibid., p. 67. Italics added.

⁴¹² Ibid., p. 156.

immediate experience.⁴¹³ In addition they recognize the work of Catherine Albanese who suggests that "films might act like sacred religious stories"⁴¹⁴ because they provide cultural meaning. Despite the apparent biases and contradictions in their outline of theoretical approaches to religion and film, Martin and Ostwalt's volume nevertheless encourages a consideration of the diverse and complex ways that films operate religiously in culture. Their study reinforces the argument that films are powerful agents in the transmission of religious ideology in so-called secular culture.

Contrasting Martin and Ostwalt's efforts to maintain a "spiritual" approach to film, Margaret Miles incorporates a broader approach to the religious dimensions of film. In her book, *Seeing and Believing: Religion and Values in the Movies*, Miles dissociates herself from those who either deplore the irreverence of Hollywood or laud its depictions of Christian morality.⁴¹⁵ Rather, Miles focuses on the contemporary values circulated through movies. Miles' work is based on the premise that contemporary films provide religious meaning in the same way that religious institutions did previously. Recognizing the correlation between visual imagery and religious faith, Miles views the cinema as "continuous with a long tradition in which images have been used to produce emotion, to strengthen attachment, and to encourage imitation."⁴¹⁶ In contemporary culture, Miles sees popular media as the key distributor of religious sentiment. The point of her study is

⁴¹³ Ibid., p. 16.

⁴¹⁴ Ibid., p. 156.

⁴¹⁵ Miles, *Seeing and Believing*, pp. xii-xiii.

⁴¹⁶ Ibid., p. 3.

to acknowledge that the representation and examination of values and moral commitments does not presently occur most pointedly in churches, synagogues, or mosques, but before the eyes of "congregations" in movie theaters. North Americans - even those with religious affiliations - now gather about cinema and television screens rather than in churches to ponder the moral quandaries of American life.⁴¹⁷

Despite her intention to reach beyond traditional definitions, Miles nevertheless dedicates a significant portion of her investigation to the depiction of religious movements on screen. Her greatest contribution to discourse about religion and film is her analysis of values and relationships as religious signifiers. Miles argues that religion is based primarily on human relationships. "Defining religion in this way," she argues,

means that relationships and practices between people in faith communities, as well as attitudes toward those outside the group require scrutiny. Thus, understandings of race, class, and sexual orientation are not accidental or incidental to religious perspectives but, as *a concrete way religious perspectives are articulated*, are central to religious values.⁴¹⁸

Asserting that "understandings of relatedness underlie religious beliefs, narratives, and institutions,"⁴¹⁹ Miles directs scholars to consider cinematic depictions of personal and social interaction.

Like other religious forms, films pose questions and challenges that are fundamental to human existence. Miles explains that film depictions "contain images and characters that enable us to discuss the perennial religious question, 'How should we live?'"⁴²⁰ In order for individuals to flourish, a just society is required. "And achieving a just

⁴¹⁷ Ibid., p. 25.

⁴¹⁸ Ibid., p. 15.

⁴¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 14-15.

⁴²⁰ Ibid., p. 182.

society," Miles writes, "will entail changing the consistent, cumulative verbal and visual representations of people, attitudes, and lifestyles that the media widely circulates."⁴²¹ For Miles, an examination of the religious dimensions of the cinema is therefore an ethical pursuit. As films probe the bases for human experience, so too, scholars must interrogate cultural self-representations through popular media. Films provide insights into "the pulse of a society, its interests and longings, its fears and anxieties."⁴²² As representations of the most "intimate and private confrontations of values,"⁴²³ films convey the religious ideology at the heart of western culture.

Miles' work renders examinations of the depiction of relationships in film imperative within the field of religious studies. Through film narratives and characters, values are expressed and assigned in accordance with broader cultural standards. As a religious studies scholar, she examines film because it "provides an index of the anxieties and longings of a large audience."⁴²⁴ Cinematic representations of "relatedness - among individuals, within families, communities, and societies,"⁴²⁵ are relevant to any investigation of religion and culture. Miles cautions that "religious scholars ignore this contemporary cultural 'text' at the cost of failing to engage the pressing concerns of this historical moment."⁴²⁶

⁴²¹ Ibid., p. xiv.

⁴²² Ibid., p. xv.

⁴²³ Ibid.

⁴²⁴ Ibid., p. x.

⁴²⁵ Ibid., p. 14.

⁴²⁶ Ibid., p. x.

Synthesis

Analysis of the relationship between religion and film is grounded on the premise that western popular mythology conveys and determines valued tenets of North American culture. Theorists such as Kelton Cobb provide an argument for incorporating the narratives and images of popular media into theological reflections. This approach enables theorists to remain open to diverse expressions of sacred and moral beliefs within culture. Contemporary sociological thinking about Canadian culture explores current manifestations of religion outside of traditional institutions. Luckmann's view of the "religious" as those processes that enable individuals to derive meaning directs attention to diverse popular forums. Such theories recognize that for many western people, religion has moved beyond an affiliation with churches, synagogues, and mosques. As consumers and devotees of diverse passions including sports, fast food, music, and T.V., contemporary individuals derive significant inspiration and values from the products of secular culture.

Films occupy a privileged position in culture. As the magical culmination of diverse technological aspirations, the cinema projects awe-inspiring adventures into people's mundane lives. Films constitute sacred texts in our culture not only because their narratives are often grounded in familiar religious precepts, but also because they allow for public articulation of meaning and values. Despite apparent discrepancies in their theoretical structure, Martin and Ostwalt provide a provocative overview of diverse ways that films perform religiously. Miles' interpretation of religion as the effect of social interactions underlines the religious relevance of gender representations. Her work,

combined with that of other scholars, provides a framework for considering the religious relevance of female intimacy in film.

The following chapter will continue to argue that the relationship between religion and film is multidimensional. Cinema itself may be regarded as a popular form of religion that caters to different denominational tastes. Particular film genres may be discerned through their adherence to specific religious themes. Individual narratives may be religious insofar as they explicitly or implicitly present a modern rendition of an ancient religious myth. Religious symbols and imagery are sometimes utilized in set and costume designs. Alternatively, viewers may derive religious meaning when none was intended. My examination of chickflicks and lesbian thrillers in Chapter Three will demonstrate the numerous ways that film and religion intersect in culture.

Chapter Three

The Perpetuation of Religious Ideology in Cinematic Depictions of Female Intimacy

Chickflicks and lesbian thrillers present seemingly empowered women who bond together and defy social norms. As many theorists observe however, women who live independently from (or in opposition to) men seldom prosper in western narrative. Films that feature women's commitments as mothers and daughters, friends, and lovers inevitably fall back on ancient religious conventions that reinforce the status quo. Themes of wickedness, punishment, and suffering ultimately overshadow the lives of heroines and villainesses who stray too far from traditional patriarchal mores.

Chickflicks

In her discussion of the typical "woman's film," Anca Vlasopolos argues that the appeal of this genre lies in its familiar association of women with guilt, suffering, and redemption.⁴²⁷ Focussing on what she considers the genre's "mythic dimension,"⁴²⁸ Vlasopolos outlines the relevance and appeal of women's film narratives in a predominantly Christian culture. Typically, she explains,

⁴²⁷ Anca Vlasopolos, "The 'Woman's Film' Genre and One Modern Transmutation: *Kramer vs. Kramer*," in *Women and Film*, ed. Janet Todd (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1988), p. 116.

⁴²⁸ Ibid.

Eve transgresses by intruding in masculine territory, either by her behaviour - polyandrous, sexually aggressive, sexually adventurous - or by her ambition for a career, for power, or for worldly goods that can be used to manipulate men rather than to nest. Eve falls and begins her suffering. Her travail appears as inner turmoil and/or...societal censure. Eve is redeemed from the brink of catastrophe by reintegration into society, which follows her refeminization. Reintegration sometimes takes place only after the female hero's death, since *death in many a woman's film is the only acceptable path to regained respectability*.⁴²⁹

Vlasopolos' position highlights the religious underpinnings of popular women's films through their preoccupation with women's evil and suffering. Like Eve, a female character's transgressions warrant her climactic chastening. In patriarchal culture, a heroine's sins consist primarily in her defiance of the sex-role stereotyping that sustains male power.⁴³⁰ A woman's *active* pursuit of fulfilment of her desires defies her religiously ordained passive role as the object of male control and *gaze*.⁴³¹

Women become suspect through a variety of behaviours including challenging their own or their daughter's transition to marriage and motherhood, working outside the home, pursuing extramarital affairs, and seeking other women's intimate company, socially or sexually. Under these circumstances, women must be punished to restore correct order. While popular women's films present a variety of contexts for their heroines' exploits, their

⁴²⁹ Ibid. Italics added.

⁴³⁰ See Daly, p. 125.

⁴³¹ Several theorists explore the positioning of women as the objects of male gaze. For good overviews of the theoretical issues involved, see John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (New York: The Viking Press, 1972); Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. Patricia Erens (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 28-40; and Mary Ann Doane, "Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator," in *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. Patricia Erens (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 41-57.

resolutions share a common ominous theme. Vlasopolos observes that in women's films,

the primarily male screenwriters, directors and producers of these films made sure that the full weight of societal judgement would crush these independent spirits by having them come to a bad end, showing them to be unprincipled and sexually voracious, or denying them their children or their children's affections, until the women paid their dues in deep and prolonged suffering. Many of the heroes died of mysterious illnesses...⁴³²

Through diverse plots and dialogues, female characters show audiences what is acceptable and what is not. Nowhere are these messages clearer than in depictions of women who try to sustain close relationships with other females.

Whether as mothers and daughters, friends, or lovers, women on screen warn audiences about the fatal consequences of their relationships. While Vlasopolos' work demonstrates how women's films are inherently religious through their emphasis on female sinfulness and guilt, several films emphasize these themes through their explicit refiguring of ancient narratives. E. Ann Kaplan writes that through its overt and covert religious imagery, the "cinema is as responsible as anything for perpetuating the oppressive patriarchal myths."⁴³³ A look at several chickflicks demonstrates that any form of female intimacy is subject to destruction.

Mothers and Daughters

In her book, *Lives Together/Worlds Apart: Mothers and Daughters in Popular*

⁴³² Vlasopolos, p. 117.

⁴³³ E. Ann Kaplan, "The Case of the Missing Mother: Maternal Issues in Vidor's *Stella Dallas*," in *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. Patricia Erens (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 127.

Culture, Suzanna Danuta Walters highlights the contribution that religious mythology has made to film configurations of women's relationships.⁴³⁴ In particular, she argues that the myth of Demeter and Persephone is central to understanding contemporary depictions of mothers and daughters. While Walters is critical of efforts to assign universal truth to particular myths,⁴³⁵ she recognizes the continuance of mythological themes in current western films. She argues that in both ancient myths and contemporary blockbusters, "the narrative of mothers and daughters has largely been portrayed in terms of conflict and the ambivalent struggle of separation."⁴³⁶

Several films released during the eighties reflect the thematic suffering of mothers and daughters. Amongst Walters' references is *Terms of Endearment*, "most assuredly the (contemporary) 'classic' mother/daughter film."⁴³⁷ Tracing the relationship between Aurora Greenway (Shirley MacLaine) and her daughter Emma (Debra Winger), *Terms of Endearment* presents the "repetitive cycle of mutual need and denial"⁴³⁸ that characterizes many recent depictions of the mother/daughter bond. Hailed as a feminist production for its depiction of Aurora as an independent, sexually active older woman and Emma as a younger defiant adulteress, this film nevertheless reiterates traditional themes about women's bonding.

⁴³⁴ Suzanna Danuta Walters, *Lives Together/Worlds Apart: Mothers and Daughters in Popular Culture* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1992).

⁴³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁴³⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

⁴³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

Through dialogue and plot, *Terms of Endearment* reinforces stereotypes and provides a predictable tearjerker ending. Throughout the film, much of the dialogue between mother and daughter revolves around their relationships with men. Aurora is critical of Emma's marriage and perpetually involves herself in her daughter's affairs. It is through sexual involvement with her neighbour (Jack Nicholson) that Aurora becomes a better mother.⁴³⁹ Ultimately however, it is Emma's illness that both enhances and destroys their mother/daughter bond. By the film's end, Emma has died of cancer and Aurora is restored to her familial role with a man in her life and grandchildren to mother.⁴⁴⁰ The "terms of enmeshment"⁴⁴¹ that are the bases for this film culminate in the unabated mourning of a mother over the tragic loss of her daughter.

It is ironic that one reviewer "hated *Terms of Endearment* the most when the grief-stricken Aurora embraces her longtime servant Rosie (Betty R. King) who shares her misery."⁴⁴² That grief and employee commitment carried well into the next decade when the sequel *Evening Star* continued the legacy of female bonding and terminal illness. In an article entitled "A Whole New Bowl Game," Marion Ross who plays the maid in *Evening Star* states that the film is "a love story between Aurora and Rosie."⁴⁴³ Unfortunately, like other chickflicks, the happily-ever-after ending to this romance leaves both of them dead.

⁴³⁹ Ibid., p. 204.

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 203-204.

⁴⁴¹ Ibid., p. 141.

⁴⁴² Pauline Kael, "The Current Cinema," *The New Yorker* (Dec. 12, 1983): 150.

⁴⁴³ Marion Ross, as cited in Jess Cagle and Ann Thompson, "A Whole New Bowl Game," *Entertainment Weekly*, Issue 354 (Nov. 22, 1996): 43-47.

Source: <http://www.epnet.com/cgi-bin/epwno...ecs=10/reccount=15/startrec=1/ft=1>.

Mother and daughter separation, female bonding, and gut-wrenching tragedy combine in another successful star-studded chickflick, *Steel Magnolias*. In this film, women again struggle with the loss of a dearly loved daughter and friend. M'Lynn Eatenton (Sally Field) is angered and bewildered by her daughter Shelby's (Julia Roberts) neglect of her severe diabetic condition. When Shelby announces she is marrying, moving away, and having a child, M'Lynn is distraught over the risks that the separation and pregnancy pose for her daughter. On several occasions, she discourages her daughter's marriage and maternal wishes. The film shows M'Lynn caring for Shelby during seizures, providing her with a kidney, and finally holding her hand as she dies from diabetic complications. At the film's conclusion, M'Lynn is left surrounded by males (her husband, sons, and grandson) to mother. Several women from the local community, Truvy (Dolly Parton), Ouiser (Shirley MacLaine), Annelle (Daryl Hannah), and Clairee (Olympia Dukakis), constitute M'Lynn's support network, primarily through their meetings at Truvy's beauty salon. Throughout the film, the tragedy is balanced by the women's slapstick comedy. Following a humorous resolution to M'Lynn's anguish over her daughter's death, Truvy reassures her and the audience that "laughter through tears" is many women's "favourite emotion."

In an article entitled "Mother-Daughter Myth and the Marriage of Death in *Steel Magnolias*," Lisa Tyler examines the similarities between the play/film and the myth of Demeter and Persephone. Although the modern rendition is based on the true loss of the playwright's sister due to diabetes, for Tyler, it is the story's connection to the ancient

Greek tragedy that "make it so resonant [and] that evoke such powerful emotional response."⁴⁴⁴ Tyler's analysis of *Steel Magnolias* demonstrates the enduring and marketable nature of an ancient religious myth correlating motherhood with suffering.

Several images and dialogues from *Steel Magnolias* conjure images of the ancient relationship between Demeter and Persephone. For Tyler, the film's title alone suggests the innocent flowery imagery associated with Persephone prior to her abduction from the meadow. Similar yet stronger allusions to the myth are made throughout the film including the parting scene between mother and daughter after the wedding. Pinning a corsage to Shelby's pink dress, M'Lynn tells her daughter that it's not a good-bye, because she will be back "now and then." Just as Persephone returns once a year, so too Shelby visits her mother on holidays.⁴⁴⁵

Like Demeter, there is no joy for M'Lynn when her daughter marries. The film suggests that Shelby was convinced into the marriage by Jackson (Dylan McDermott). When she tells him she doesn't want to marry him because she shouldn't have children, he agrees dishonestly that they will adopt or "buy kids." In the Greek tragedy, Hades persuades Persephone to marry him by giving her the pomegranate to eat. The fruit's association with "male and female fertility deities makes it an ideal symbol" for their union.⁴⁴⁶ Persephone's marriage allows Demeter only occasional opportunities to see her

⁴⁴⁴ Tyler.

⁴⁴⁵ *Terms of Endearment* also depicts the separation of a mother and a daughter due to marriage. Despite Aurora's disapproval, Emma marries an unfaithful husband and moves to another city.

⁴⁴⁶ Arthur, p. 29.

daughter. Just as Persephone's abduction and marriage result from betrayal by her father Zeus and Hades, so to it is Shelby's marriage and eventual pregnancy, both celebrated by her father and husband, that kill her. The assertion of patriarchal rule jeopardizes both Persephone and Shelby who are taken from their mother's care. Both Demeter and M'Lynn suffer guilt and outrage over the harm that men inflict upon their daughters.

Tyler draws parallels between the depictions of men in both the ancient Greek and film dramas. The treachery of Hades and Zeus in Homer's "Hymn to Demeter" is reflected in the violent and cruel imagery connoting maleness in *Steel Magnolias*. Numerous references are made to men bearing arms in wartime, at carnivals, or to frighten animals. Jackson comes from a family in which you "either shoot it, stuff it, or marry it." And the groom's cake, presented in the shape of an armadillo with red insides, looks like "an autopsy." The significance of these comical yet frightening portrayals is summed up in the women's cynicism over marriage and about men in general. As Tyler suggests, Ouiser's words are prophetic: "Men are the most horrible creatures, honey. They will ruin your life, just mark my words."

By contrast, the female characters in both the Demeter/Persephone myth and *Steel Magnolias* serve as empowering forces for women, on and off screen. Through the *pannychis*, women try to comfort Demeter through dancing and festivity. As Tyler observes, the films reflect this support through the gathering of M'Lynn's female friends at her daughter's grave site. Paralleling the older woman Baubo's efforts to comfort Demeter through laughter, Clairee forces M'Lynn to smile in response to her outrageous suggestion that she hit Ouiser. The parallel between the female characters in these two stories is

firmly established by the films' final scene. On Easter Sunday, at the time that Persephone returns to her mother, Anelle gives birth to a child she names Shelby. With a sombre air, the women remark that "life goes on."

Despite their tragic narrations, most popular women's films conclude with an everyone-lives-happily-ever-after motif.⁴⁴⁷ The popularity of this theme as a finale to devastating loss signifies a contentious issue in the Greek myth about Demeter and Persephone as well as recent films. The resolutions, if they can be called that, are not happy endings, but "mere compromise."⁴⁴⁸ Demeter and Persephone's relationship is in the end, subject to male conditions. Annis Pratt observes that the myth presents a mother and a daughter suffering to be together yet always under the "threat of rupture and sexual violence."⁴⁴⁹ For many, these narratives are reminders of women's seemingly inescapable subjugation under patriarchal rule.

Through their depictions of illness, chickflicks convey an inevitable bleakness overshadowing women's lives. Depictions of strong resistant heroines entertain female audiences at a high price. As Vlasopolos argues, "we have come to regard the necessity of physical and spiritual destruction as extraneous to [the] characters, as merely part of the Hollywood formula."⁴⁵⁰ It is this, she asserts, that moves us to tears.

⁴⁴⁷ Ironically, this sentiment is often conveyed through reference to children who have lost their mothers (*Terms of Endearment*, *Steel Magnolias*, *Beaches*, *A Thousand Acres*).

⁴⁴⁸ Annis Pratt, "Demeter, Persephone, and the Pedagogy of Archetypal Empowerment," in *The Long Journey Home: Re-visioning the Myth of Demeter and Persephone For Our Time*, ed. Christine Downing (Boston & London: Shambhala, 1994), p. 150.

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁰ Vlasopolos, p. 117.

Those of us who are women, moreover, recognize in the inflexible formula the diehard traditions and attitudes that to a greater or lesser extent still constrict our lives. This awareness, rather than female sensibility, is the reason that our handkerchiefs are wetter at the end of these films.⁴⁵¹

Images of women's attempts at independence followed by their resubordination allow film mythologies to reassert patriarchal religious ideals regarding social order. In chickflicks, intense mother and daughter bonds are inevitably destroyed to both their detriments. In their renditions of an ancient Greek myth, popular women's films reaffirm ancient views of mother and daughter relationships as sources of tragedy and conflict.

Friends (and Lovers?)

The last two decades of filmmaking have produced a number of female buddy films that depict bonding between women despite (and often in response to) social condemnation of their behaviour. In virtually all cases, the bonding between heroines is scarred by dire circumstances that leave the women suicidal (*Between Friends*, *When Night is Falling* (1995)), abused (*The Color Purple*, *Bad Girls*), disabled (*Muriel's Wedding*, *Passion Fish*), dead (*Beaches*, *Fried Green Tomatoes*, *Thelma and Louise*, *Boys on the Side*, *Evening Star*), or any combination of the above. Through various plots, these films present a monolithic view of the evil and tragic circumstances surrounding women's friendships. Consistently, these films present female bonding as the result of hurtful relationships with men. Their relationships with women are subsequently seen to perpetuate or intensify their ordeals.

⁴⁵¹ Ibid.

Of the numerous popular dramas, *Fried Green Tomatoes*, *Thelma and Louise*, and *Boys on the Side* constitute a trilogy with overlapping plots, resolutions, and actresses. Together they provide a telling overview of the controversial nature of this genre and its ultimate dependence on religious conventions. In these films, women reject threatening circumstances with malicious men and kill abusive male characters. Although these seemingly feminist films convey a sense of female invincibility, the heroines inevitably die as a result of illness or suicide.

Fried Green Tomatoes tells the story of four women whose lives are changed forever through their close relationships with other women. Over a series of visits at an old age home, Ninny Threadgoode (Jessica Tandy) recounts to her new friend Evelyn Couch (Kathy Bates), a romantic story that occurred decades previously in Ninny's hometown. Through flashbacks, audiences learn about the loving relationship between Idgie Threadgoode (Mary Stuart Masterson) and Ruth Bennett (Mary-Louise Parker). As Evelyn grows discouraged with workshops advising her to wear cellophane to put the "zest" back into her marriage, she turns increasingly to Ninny for inspiration. With her multicoloured socks, blue sneakers and purple hair, Ninny provides Evelyn with empowering tales of Idgie's tomboyish antics and Ruth's enduring charm.

Identifying herself as "Towanda, the amazing Amazon woman," Idgie courts Ruth using a variety of tactics. Through terrorizing the local minister, pilfering trains to feed the poor, charming bees to get honey for those she loves, and teaching Ruth to "lighten up" by drinking and gambling, Idgie sells herself as a virtuous "righter of wrongs." When Ruth marries an abusive man, Frank Bennett (Nick Searcy), Idgie is heartbroken. The two are

reunited after Ruth becomes pregnant, her mother dies, and she sends for Iddie to come and rescue her. Together, Ruth and Iddie run the Whistle Stop Café and raise Ruth's child.

Like so many popular women's films, *Fried Green Tomatoes* has its mix of drama and comedy. When Frank tries to kidnap his son, he is hit over the head from behind and his body subsequently disappears. When his truck is found, Iddie and her hired hand, Big George (Stan Shaw), are charged for murder and later acquitted. Soon after, Ruth develops cancer. In a tragic scene, Iddie weeps over Ruth's dead body. At the film's conclusion, it is revealed that it was the cook (Cicely Tyson) who killed Frank, and Iddie who decided he should be dismembered, barbecued, and served to customers at the café.⁴⁵² As Ninny concludes at the end of her story, "the truth's a funny thing sometimes." Under a setting sun, Evelyn asks Ninny to come live with her.

Fried Green Tomatoes is a touching testimony to female intimacy. One review notes that as "a drama about strong, giving, funny women, *Fried Green Tomatoes* seems plucked from the same patch" as *Steel Magnolias*.⁴⁵³ As one of the top video rentals in 1993,⁴⁵⁴ it is considered by many, the most sacred text in the chickflick canon. Its popularity seems to partially derive from its association with familiar religious myths.

⁴⁵² The murder and eating of Frank Bennett in *Fried Green Tomatoes* is reminiscent of the Greek myth in which Procne's husband Tereus rapes his sister-in-law. As retribution, Procne murders her son and serves him for dinner to his father.

⁴⁵³ Rita Kempley, "Fried Green Tomatoes," *The Washington Post* (Jan. 10, 1992). Source: http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-s...reentomatoespg13kempley_a0a28a.htm

⁴⁵⁴ Church, p. 193.

Through the relationships between Ruth and Idgie as well as Ninny and Evelyn, *Fried Green Tomatoes* makes explicit and implicit references to the biblical story of Ruth and Naomi. In the film version, when Ruth decides to leave her husband, she sends Idgie a letter that includes her mother's obituary and an underlined passage from the Book of Ruth (1:16):

And Ruth said: whither thou goest, I will go; where thou lodgest, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people...

From that moment on, Ruth and Idgie never leave each other's side. Together they raise a son just as Naomi and Ruth do in the biblical story.

Women form a family a second time in the film. When Ninny leaves the old age home, she discovers that her house and all of her family and friends are gone. Despairingly, she cries to Evelyn: "I don't quite know what to do...it's the first time I can remember when I don't have a soul to look after..." Like Naomi, she has been left abandoned late in her life. Evelyn, who has already prepared for this moment, insists that she and Ninny live together as family. Together they walk down the road where Ruth and Idgie had previously lived. Like the earlier biblical version, observers marvel at the devotion that these women express to one another.

Although the film is regarded by most viewers as a "warmhearted, uplifting story,"⁴⁵⁵ it nevertheless reminds audiences of the bittersweet taste of women's love. Lest one be distracted by the film's comical and touching exchanges in Ninny and Evelyn's closing

⁴⁵⁵ Kelli Pryor and Sharon Isaak, "Women in Love: Hollywood Has It Both Ways With *Fried Green Tomatoes*," *Entertainment Weekly* (Feb. 28, 1992).
Source: <http://www.epnet.com/cgi-bin/epwno...cs=10/reccount=12/startrec=11/ft=1>

moments, there too, reference is made to the enduring yet thwarted love of Ruth and Idgie. At Ruth's grave, Evelyn finds a new card that bears the inscription: "I'll always love you, the Bee Charmer." Idgie's mourning over the death of her closest companion persists.

Although *Fried Green Tomatoes* was awarded best feature film by GLAAD (the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation), many viewers were disappointed by the movie's failure to explicitly acknowledge the sexual dimension of Ruth and Idgie's bond.⁴⁵⁶ Fannie Flagg's original best-selling novel, *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café*,⁴⁵⁷ included several overt references to Idgie's romantic involvement with Ruth and other women. Several theorists observe that it is not surprising for Hollywood to cover up homoerotic affections between women, "even when the literary source presented the main relationship as lesbian."⁴⁵⁸ As Rebecca Bell-Metereau indicates, Hollywood often puts great effort into establishing the heterosexuality of potentially ambiguous relations.⁴⁵⁹ Church suggests that *Fried Green Tomatoes* achieves this goal by emphasizing the femininity of Ruth and Idgie and showing the easy acceptance and support their relationship receives from family and friends.⁴⁶⁰ Many regard this as a strategic move by the filmmakers to assure the film's success.⁴⁶¹ If this is the case, it testifies to the enduring dread and denial of female sexual intimacy in the minds of producers and consumers.

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁷ Fannie Flagg, *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1988).

⁴⁵⁸ Bell-Metereau, p. 251. Also see Pryor and Isaak.

⁴⁵⁹ Bell-Metereau, p. 251.

⁴⁶⁰ Church, pp. 198-201.

⁴⁶¹ Kempley, "Fried Green Tomatoes."

Female bonding, murder, and tragedy are the basic narrative features of another successful, yet controversial film, *Thelma and Louise*. Also released in the early nineties, the story of these two women running from the law delighted, frightened, angered, and vindicated diverse audiences. While many reviewers regarded it as "a very entertaining female buddy film,"⁴⁶² others noted that audiences "seemed to leave the theater in something of a daze."⁴⁶³ Many still credit the film for its "pioneering spirit"⁴⁶⁴ in depicting "the downright truth"⁴⁶⁵ of women's lives. Yet critics continue to dismiss *Thelma and Louise* on several grounds including its supposed lack of ethics. A particularly scathing review suggests that the film is a "small-hearted, extremely toxic film, about as morally and intellectually screwed up as a Hollywood movie can get."⁴⁶⁶ While it is beyond the limits of this investigation to examine all the contentious issues raised by the film, a brief narrative analysis illuminates its significance to this study of female intimacy. With its incorporation of themes such as temptation, guilt, punishment, and redemption, *Thelma and Louise* is permeated with religious ideology.

⁴⁶² Linda Lopez McAlister, "Thelma and Louise," for "The Women's Show," WMNF-FM, Tampa, Florida.

Source: <http://www.inform.umd.edu/EdRes/To...ilmReviews/thelma+louise-mcalister>

⁴⁶³ J. Leo, "Toxic Feminism on the Big Screen," *US News & World Report* 110, Issue 22 (June 10, 1991): 20.

Source: <http://www.epnet.com/cgi-bin/epwno...cs=10/reccount=48/startrec 41/ft=1>

⁴⁶⁴ Fred Bruning, "A Lousy Deal For Women - And Men," *Maclean's* 104, Issue 32 (Aug 12, 1991): 9.

Source: <http://www.epnet.com/cgi-bin/epwno...cs=10/reccount=48/startrec=21/ft=1>

⁴⁶⁵ Richard Schnickel, "Gender Bender," *Time*, Vol. 137, Issue 25 (June 24, 1991).

Source: <http://www.epnet.com/cgi-bin/epwno...=10/reccount=335/startrec=291/ft=1>

⁴⁶⁶ abstract for J. Leo.

Thelma and Louise tells the story of two women, a mistreated housewife, Thelma Dickinson (Geena Davis) and a waitress, Louise Sawyer (Susan Sarandon). Leaving behind husband and boyfriend, they take a weekend vacation together in Louise's car. On the first night, Thelma becomes intoxicated at a country bar and is nearly raped by the man with whom she has been drinking and dancing. When Louise rescues Thelma from the assault, she fatally shoots the would-be rapist. In their effort to outrun the law, Thelma and Louise confront several obstacles brought on by men they meet on the road.

The heroines mostly face their misfortunes with humour. When their money is stolen by a hitchhiker that Thelma has invited to her hotel room, the formerly sheepish housewife robs a store at gun point. After being harassed by a "disgusting," unapologetic truck driver, they blow up his phallic-shaped tanker. When the two outlaws lock a whimpering police officer in the trunk of his car, they warn him to be good to his wife or she might turn out like Thelma. A striking scene depicts a fleet of cruisers in pursuit of the women's convertible. Metamorphosing into "butchess Cassidy and the sundance lady," Louise and Thelma appear increasingly invincible. A shocking and horrific conclusion depicts Thelma and Louise at the edge of a canyon surrounded by police cars and helicopters. The heroines kiss before driving off the cliff.

Sympathy for the women's plight in this film is evoked in several ways. During the attempted rape, Thelma passes from an innocent naive woman clad in white frills to a bloody and battered casualty of violence. Thelma's first experience of supposedly good sex with the hitchhiker ends in betrayal. Through the officers investigating the case, it is revealed that Louise has already experienced some form of assault, presumably rape, for

which there was no retribution. When Thelma suggests that they can clear themselves if they go to the police and explain what happened, Louise knowingly and prophetically warns, "We don't live in that kind of world, Thelma." As they pass further into the desert, the barren landscape becomes a metaphor for their decreasing options.

In general, responses to *Thelma and Louise* are gender determined.⁴⁶⁷ While female audiences tend to enjoy the resistance and freedom characterizing the heroine's flight from authority, male reviewers are generally outraged by its perceived male-bashing. Richard Johnson describes it as "degrading to men, with pathetic stereotypes of testosterone-crazed-behaviour."⁴⁶⁸ John Leo charges that it's the work of the "most alienated radical feminists. All males in this movie exist only to betray, ignore, sideswipe, penetrate or arrest our heroines."⁴⁶⁹ *Time* is quick to point out that defensive criticisms are not limited to male writers. Sheila Benson is cited as describing the film's depiction of fierce revenge and sadistic behaviour as even too strong for feminists.⁴⁷⁰

Most feminist criticism of *Thelma and Louise* targets the portrayal of the women's characters and their relationship. For example, Alice Cross questions the portrayal of Thelma as "pathologically bimbo."⁴⁷¹ Following the brutal attempted rape, she immediately invites a man to have sex in her hotel room. As Pat Dowell notes, Thelma "even seems to

⁴⁶⁷ Miles, *Seeing and Believing*, p. 142.

⁴⁶⁸ Richard Johnson, as cited in Schnickel.

⁴⁶⁹ Leo.

⁴⁷⁰ Schnickel.

⁴⁷¹ Alice Cross, "The Bimbo and the Mystery Woman," in "Should We Go Along For The Ride? A Critical Symposium on *Thelma and Louise*," *Cineaste* XVIII, no. 4 (Dec. 1991): 33.

get smarter after going orgasmic, a venerable tradition in Hollywood."⁴⁷² In addition, Thelma spends their limited cash on tiny bottles of Wild Turkey and robs a gas station in front of cameras. When Thelma attempts to sympathize with Louise's previous assault, Louise is angered and Thelma whimpers an apology for having raised the subject. Cross thinks that the depiction of women in *Thelma and Louise* constitutes an "old story artfully disguised to look like something new."⁴⁷³

The same "old story" that informs *Thelma and Louise* carries a familiar foreboding. Dowell argues that Thelma and Louise are not so much heroines for female audiences but warning signals about the ultimate "impotence of women."⁴⁷⁴ She is particularly critical of the film's portrait of raped women as "somehow damaged goods, who, however valiant, rarely survive the fadeout."⁴⁷⁵ One critic's praise for the film's boldness about the women's relationship nevertheless exposes the film's overall tragic nature:

The screen is then filled with an image that occurs regularly in daily life but is never depicted in art or entertainment - the coming together of two raped women. "I'm not sorry that son of a bitch is dead," says Thelma finally. "I'm just sorry it was you who did it and not me." Then they kiss. Then they die.⁴⁷⁶

⁴⁷² Pat Dowell, "The Impotence of Women," in "Should We Go Along For The Ride? A Critical Symposium on *Thelma and Louise*," *Cineaste* XVIII, no. 4 (Dec. 1991): 29.

⁴⁷³ Cross, p. 34.

⁴⁷⁴ Dowell, p. 28.

⁴⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁴⁷⁶ Sarah Schulman, "The Movie Management of Rape," in "Should We Go Along For The Ride? A Critical Symposium on *Thelma and Louise*," *Cineaste* XVIII, no. 4 (Dec. 1991): 35.

It is the death of Thelma and Louise that is the most contentious issue amongst feminist writers. Here the religious dimensions of the film are rendered most apparent. For many, their death is an inspirational event of sacrifice and transcendence. Scholars suggest that "like Christian martyrs,"⁴⁷⁷ Thelma and Louise are "divested of all their worldly goods, and...worldly fears"⁴⁷⁸ as they depart their oppressive conditions. For Linda Lopez McAlister, their death has more spiritual value than their potential escape to Mexico could offer.

These two ordinary women who have turned out to be so remarkable achieve liberation of a much more profound sort. They achieve what the existentialist philosophers call transcendence...It is an extraordinary resolution that ennobles Thelma and Louise.⁴⁷⁹

Susan Morrison suggests that the cinematography encourages a theological reading:

For Thelma and Louise, self-determination is more important and more emancipatory than life itself. The look they exchange before they drive off the cliff is one of happiness, not despair. In death, they achieve the freedom of self-determination that was denied them in life...immediately afterwards, clips from earlier scenes are projected while the credits are rolling, clips which show Thelma and Louise very much alive and well. What these devices accomplish is to enable the protagonists to transcend the limitations of mortality in a kind of heavenly assumption...⁴⁸⁰

While some regard the conclusion to *Thelma and Louise* as a liberating gesture, others view it as typical recompense for women who resist patriarchal authority. Miles is critical of efforts to frame Thelma and Louise as "martyrs who believed they would be

⁴⁷⁷ Miles, *Seeing and Believing*, p. 143.

⁴⁷⁸ Mary Cantwell, as cited in *ibid*.

⁴⁷⁹ McAlister, "Thelma and Louise."

⁴⁸⁰ Morrison, p. 53.

instantly reborn in a heaven of glorious reward."⁴⁸¹ She emphasizes that "despite the film's 'cheery, jokey air'...Thelma and Louise die."⁴⁸² Miles illuminates how the tragic depiction of Thelma and Louise is best understood in conjunction with western Christian preoccupations with women, sin, and danger. Women who act on their desires are typically punished. The film reminds audiences that "gender roles, heterosexism, and legal constraint and punishment are firmly in place."⁴⁸³ Like earlier religious texts, *Thelma and Louise* shows that "the cost of [female] freedom is self-destruction."⁴⁸⁴

Diverse themes from popular women's films come together in a more recent film, *Boys on the Side*, in which death again serves as the resolution for a heroine's transgressions. Released by the same director as *Steel Magnolias*, *Boys on the Side* incorporates typical genre features including female bonding, murder, a roadtrip, and terminal illness. Robin (Mary-Louise Parker) and Jane (Whoopi Goldberg) meet when they decide to share the drive to California in Robin's van. Along the way, they stop to visit Jane's friend Holly (Drew Barrymore) who is being assaulted by her boyfriend. A battle ensues among all four and the women succeed in binding and gagging Nick (Billy Wirth). Unaware that he has sustained fatal injuries from Holly's blow with a baseball bat, the women depart. Down the road, they learn of Nick's death, but continue westward. Soon after, it is revealed that Jane is a lesbian mourning several failed relationships and that

⁴⁸¹ Miles, *Seeing and Believing*, p. 144.

⁴⁸² Ibid.

⁴⁸³ Ibid., p. 143.

⁴⁸⁴ Richard A. Blake, as cited in Miles, p. 144. Brackets added by Miles.

Robin has contracted HIV from a relationship with a bartender in New York. When Robin becomes ill, the three decide to settle in Tucson, Arizona.

Jane and Robin's relationship grows increasingly intimate. Holly is charged with murder and, following a dramatic scene in which Robin testifies to the intense bonds that women share ("like speaks to like"), is sentenced to a jail term. As Robin's illness progresses, she and Jane confess their love for each other. The film does not show any explicit sexual exchanges between the women and the nature of their relationship is never clearly defined. In keeping with the love-'em-and-die motif, the final scene features Jane staring longingly at the empty wheelchair that once held the now dead Robin.

One critic remarked that *Boys on the Side* is "an engagingly acted, likable, fried green *Thelma and Louise*."⁴⁸⁵ Jane's suggestive announcement to her travelling companions that she "ain't goin' off no cliff," is ironically overridden by Robin's eventual deadly fall. In a review entitled "The Road to Sisterhood is Wet and Wearing Thin," Barbara Shulgasser notes the film's ability to "cover several varieties of minorities and underdogs."⁴⁸⁶ Like other chickflicks, the "atmosphere for dealing with prejudice and suffering is carefree, but the emotions are bitter sweet."⁴⁸⁷ Everyone in this predictable chickflick is struggling desperately, despite the humour.

⁴⁸⁵ Rita Kempley, "Boys on the Side," *The Washington Post* (Feb. 3, 1995).

Source: http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-s...s/boysonthesiderkempley_c00799.htm

⁴⁸⁶ Barbara Shulgasser, "The Road to Sisterhood is Wet and Wearing Thin," *San Francisco Examiner* (Feb. 3, 1995).

Source: <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/arti...archive/1995/02/03/WEKEND2383.dtl>

⁴⁸⁷ Mick LaSalle, "Love, With 'Boys on the Side' Breakthrough Women's Film," *San Francisco Chronicle* (Feb. 3, 1995).

Source <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/arti...cle/archive/1995/02/03/DD57029.DTL>

Synthesis

Various religious themes underpin popular women's films. In particular, the genre highlights the punishment that awaits women who transgress patriarchal rules through their intimate relationships with other women. In these film's, women bond together in their refusal of marriage, rape, spousal abuse, and physical assaults. Subsequently, they die. Through these fatalistic depictions, chickflicks remind audiences of ancient associations of women's intimacy, pain, and retribution. An analysis of these films in terms of their depiction of illness, their marketing strategies, and their racist representations further reveals their inherent religious themes.

The significance of the thematic use of death as penance for woman's sins is particularly striking when compared with cinematic depictions of male illness. In their examination of current men's melodramas, Viveca Gretton and Tom Orman illustrate how contrasting disease narratives in men's and women's films are reflective of the patriarchal ideology driving their production.⁴⁸⁸ While it is usually kind and compassionate women who succumb to disease and death in contemporary women's films, in male melodramas, illness becomes the supervening event that favourably alters the personalities of repressive and manipulative male protagonists.⁴⁸⁹

Intended to address feminist concerns by "pleading for a kinder and gentler masculinity",⁴⁹⁰ films such as *Regarding Henry* (1991) and *The Doctor* (1991) incorporate

⁴⁸⁸ Viveca Gretton and Tom Orman, "Regarding Men: Disease and Affliction in Contemporary Male Melodrama," *cineACTION*, 26/27 (Winter 1992): 114-120.

⁴⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

⁴⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

ill health to enable male characters to repair deteriorating families and become more humane in their professional lives.⁴⁹¹ Yet women remain strictly marginalized in these films as the so-called "feminization" of the impaired male hero "equates the feminine to a paradigm of the castrated male" and the focus becomes making good fathers out of bad ones.⁴⁹² As Gretton and Orman conclude, the male body's ability to overcome affliction in male melodramas is a metaphor for the reestablishment of patriarchal norms.

By contrast, female melodramas are intended to represent challenges to the patriarchal status quo by portraying women who gather together for support or protection in a misogynous and alienating world. By showing the crippling and fatal effects of illness in these heroines' lives, these representations convey an ominous warning about female intimacy. Unlike male melodramas in which the reunified male body signifies the reestablishment of male authority,⁴⁹³ the female body in women's films is foregrounded as a signifier of women's oppression and ultimate destruction. When women bond to combat exploitation, Morrison asserts, the majority learn that there is "no place for an active, independent woman"⁴⁹⁴ in patriarchal society.

Winnie Tamm suggests that the most significant stories in a society are those that provide a sanction for the social order.⁴⁹⁵ Through the death and marginalization of the

⁴⁹¹ Ibid., pp. 115; 119.

⁴⁹² Ibid., pp. 115-116.

⁴⁹³ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁴ Morrison, p. 49.

⁴⁹⁵ Winnie Tamm, "Embodied Spiritual Consciousness: Beyond Psychology." Unpublished essay presented at the conference "Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and Religion: Two Days of Theory Building" held at the University of Ottawa, March, 1991.

female body, current women's films remind audiences of what Carole Pateman calls the "sexual contract,"⁴⁹⁶ that is, the male right to have access to female bodies.⁴⁹⁷ As Terry Castle affirms in her book *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture*, "western civilization has been haunted by a fear of 'women without men' - of women indifferent or resistant to male desire."⁴⁹⁸ Popular literary fantasy has dealt with this threat through disembodiment or "vaporizing" lesbians, that is, making them into ghosts that can be exorcized.⁴⁹⁹ When there are two female characters who love each other, Castle concludes, "one woman or the other must be a ghost, or on the way to becoming one."⁵⁰⁰

Considering the extent to which heroines die in chickflicks, it is interesting how the advertizing for these films markets them as otherwise. Through their deception, the marketing strategies for popular women's films reinforce Michel Foucault's claim that a social power's "success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanism."⁵⁰¹ The distributors for *Steel Magnolias* suggest on the video cover that it is "full of life" and a "tribute to the power of love." *Fried Green Tomatoes* is presented as the story of "a friendship that defied all obstacles" and "a devotion that couldn't be broken." The

⁴⁹⁶ Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), p. 1.

⁴⁹⁷ Tamm.

⁴⁹⁸ Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 5.

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 6.

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 34.

⁵⁰¹ Foucault, as cited in David Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Toward a Gay Hagiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 51.

promotional poster for *Thelma and Louise* offers perhaps the most striking misrepresentation: "Someone told them to get a life so they did." Ironically, *Boys on the Side* which combined so many of the "I'll-die-for-you" narrative features was presented as a celebration of "the art of survival." Through such uplifting and "lively" advertisements, these films reinforce the religious ancient view that it is through women's sacrifice and suffering that life is restored.

It is interesting that in those films in which relationships between women cross racial boundaries, illness itself is racially marked. In four movies, *Passion Fish*, *Fried Green Tomatoes*, *Boys on the Side*, and *When Night is Falling*, women of colour are depicted caring for afflicted white women. Although women's films have shown the debilitation of women of colour in the context of their relationships with each other, in films in which black and white women are together, it is only the latter who suffer physically or die. In this way, popular films perpetuate racist thinking that nurtures conflict between black and white women. As bell hooks explains in *killing rage, ending racism*, sisterhood between black and white women has only been possible when white women have surrendered their "longing to engage in 'mammification'" and black women have been divested of internalized racist thinking that has often led to their assuming the role of caretaker or "mammy."⁵⁰² Through depictions of black service and white dependence, black women's leadership capacities continue to be undermined by popular women's films.

Current film mythology incorporates a variety of methods to convey ancient ideals about female gender and sexuality. Seemingly empowered heroines who resist patriarchal

⁵⁰² bell hooks, *killing rage, ending racism* (New York: Henry Holt, 1996), pp. 221-222.

dictates belie the inherent misogyny of the texts. Ultimately, female relationships are destroyed so that patriarchal order can be restored. The following section highlights how female sexual intimacy not only leads to the destruction of heroines, but of others as well. Psychodolkes warn audiences about the lethal exploits of women who desire other women a little too much.

Lesbian Thrillers

In her examination of women who murder in film, Lucy Fischer cites the criminologist Meda Chesney Lind to demonstrate the long-standing horror of female violence.⁵⁰³ Lind's study of female offenders traces the contemporary fear of aggressive women to the Hebraic myth of Lilith. As a night demon who eats children and seduces men, Lilith signifies the dangers associated with women who refuse to submit to men.

The fear of the defiant woman is as old as the history of male domination and has necessitated the creation of...figures...to serve as warnings to all women that those who defy male authority suffer ignominious consequences.⁵⁰⁴

Fischer remarks that the most significant effect of these villainous figures may not be the fear they evoke, but rather, the obedience they encourage in women.⁵⁰⁵

Several film theorists have analyzed film depictions of female wickedness in terms of the *femme fatale*. A key feature of 1940's *film noir*, the *femme fatale*'s allure is linked to her enigmatic nature signified by her sensuality. One theorist explains that the "fatal

⁵⁰³ Fischer, pp. 282-283.

⁵⁰⁴ Meda Chesney Lind, as cited in *Ibid.*, p. 283.

⁵⁰⁵ Fischer, p. 283.

woman" is "an extremely attractive woman who deliberately tries to lead men to their destruction; she is composed of equal parts of seductive beauty and malice."⁵⁰⁶ With sexuality "spread out over the body, signified by all of its parts," the *femme fatale* counters male "mastery and control."⁵⁰⁷ Mary Ann Doane interprets the appeal and destruction of the *femme fatale* in psychoanalytic terms:

The *femme fatale* is an articulation of fears surrounding the loss of stability and centrality of the self, the "I," the ego...[she] is a function of fears linked to the notions of uncontrollable drives, the fading of subjectivity, and the loss of conscious agency...the *femme fatale* is situated as evil and is frequently punished or killed. Her textual eradication involves a desperate reassertion of control on the part of the threatened male subject. Hence, it would be a mistake to see her as some kind of heroine of modernity. She is not the subject of feminism but a symptom of male fears about feminism.⁵⁰⁸

Doane's definition highlights three issues that are key to interpreting the recent prevalence of homicidal women on screen. As cultural understandings of sexual difference shift, the *femme fatale* is an articulation of male concerns about power. Secondly, she must ultimately be destroyed to restore patriarchal hegemony. Thirdly, though she may appear to personify female empowerment through traits such as professional ambition, sexual independence, and resistance to authority, her destruction suggests that her fearsome power is limited and merely a conjecture of frightened male egos.

⁵⁰⁶ Maxfield, p. 9.

⁵⁰⁷ Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 102-103.

⁵⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

Unlike the earlier *femme fatale* whose power was not "subject to her conscious will,"⁵⁰⁹ contemporary villainesses are regarded as the evil instigators of reprehensible violence. In her article, "'She Was Bad News': Male Paranoia and the Contemporary New Woman," Amelia Jones analyzes the plethora of accountable "bad" women in recent films. Depicted as sexually alluring and ambitious, the career women in films such as *Fatal Attraction* (1987) and *Presumed Innocent* (1990) inevitably warrant "punishment and/or annihilation by the patriarchal system [they] so overtly transgress."⁵¹⁰ Like Doane, Jones interprets these female characters as male responses to current fluctuations in gender formulations. These recent films, she explains,

are structured by what Alice Jardine has called "male paranoia" - the fearful response of patriarchy to the loss of boundaries endemic to the condition of subjectivity in contemporary, so-called postmodern American life. Their...narratives are, on closer look, distorted by projected anxieties provoked by the postmodern collapse of traditional rules governing sexual difference. Male paranoia is a defence aimed at rebuilding the subject/object dichotomy that threatens to dissolve as more and more women (and men for that matter) take on both masculine and feminine roles.⁵¹¹

Jones' analysis reemphasizes the apparent feminist quality of these films through their depictions of seemingly "liberated" women. Yet as she argues, the eventual destruction of these women's lives through death or reinscription in traditional roles reveals that perpetual male anxiety overshadows the narratives. Like the earlier genres of women's films, these movies "work to defeat the independence of the female

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 2.

⁵¹⁰ Amelia Jones, p. 297.

⁵¹¹ Ibid.

protagonist,"⁵¹² but now the terms are slightly modified. In an era in which many women are pursuing professional advancement, these films may be regarded as "post-feminist" articulations that "designate the self-induced failure of feminism."⁵¹³ In other words, recent films depicting the annihilation of powerful as well as dangerous females suggest that women themselves are now "responsible for the retreat from, and backlash against, feminist ideals."⁵¹⁴

Not only are these "bad" women presented as the foe of both men and women, they also threaten society by blurring the boundary between masculinity and femininity. Anxiety over this transgression is evidenced in the negative response to *Thelma and Louise*, a film that may be considered part of the lesbian thriller genre. In their analyses of *Thelma and Louise*, Rapping and Miles attribute public outcry primarily to male concerns about the disruption of gender norms. While other popular women's films maintain or increase the femininity of their characters (*Fried Green Tomatoes*, *Boys on the Side*), *Thelma and Louise* projects a radical masculinization of the heroines. The metamorphosis is symbolized by their increased aggression and "tougher" appearance.⁵¹⁵ As Rapping argues, negative responses to the film can be understood as part of a "political backlash against the real gains of feminism fuelled by those for whom changes in gender power

⁵¹² Ibid., p.298.

⁵¹³ Ibid.

⁵¹⁴ Rapping, as cited in Jones, p. 299.

⁵¹⁵ See Hart, p. 72.

relations means a serious loss of privilege and power."⁵¹⁶ Miles interprets *Thelma and Louise* as a lesson on the "painful consequences that occur when gender relations go awry."⁵¹⁷ Women who display masculine tendencies, on and off screen, must be punished to reassert patriarchal hegemony.

In her analysis of female aggression, Hart argues that crime as well as desire convey masculinity in western culture.⁵¹⁸ She interprets recent celluloid depictions of lesbian killers as reflections of social correlations between two assumed signifiers of maleness. On screen, both violence and desire for women represents the non-feminine, that is, masculine, realm. Through their double blurring of gender categories, lesbian criminals are a poignant representation of patriarchal subversion. During the last two decades of feminism, their portrayal and suppression in films have proved particularly profitable with mainstream audiences.

Although the popular depiction of violent lesbians made its debut several decades ago, it is only recently that a discernible genre of lesbian thrillers has emerged. In a recent article, film theorist Ruby Rich exclaimed:

I can't help announcing the arrival of a trend that may well be the cinematic follow-up to lesbian chic: the murderous maybe lesbian couples who bond their affections with blood. When girls love each other this much watch out-*someone will have to die*. It's a new genre, updating the old movie-lesbian

⁵¹⁶ Elayne Rapping, "Feminism Gets the Hollywood Treatment," in "Should We Go Along For The Ride? A Critical Symposium on *Thelma and Louise*," *Cineaste* XVIII, no. 4 (Dec. 1991): 31.

⁵¹⁷ Miles, *Seeing and Believing*, p. 140.

⁵¹⁸ Hart, p. 4.

trope of suicide and converting depression into the outer-directed rage of a more assertive age.⁵¹⁹

In actuality, R. Rich's announcement in the mid-nineties came somewhat late in the evolution of licentious "lethal lesbians."⁵²⁰ By then, women who desired other women had committed numerous crimes, together and alone.

Thrillers released over the last two decades depict women who desire other women murdering a variety of "innocent" characters. The victims include husbands or male partners (*The Hunger*, *Black Widow*, *Mortal Thoughts*, *Basic Instinct*, *Butterfly Kiss*, *Wild Side*, *Diabolique*, *Bound*, *Wild Things*), female lovers (*The Hunger*, *Basic Instinct*, *Butterfly Kiss*, *Wild Things*), mothers (*Heavenly Creatures*, *Butterfly Kiss*), families (*La Ceremonie*), a niece (*The Kiss*), friends (*Single White Female*, *Poison Ivy*), an elderly woman (*Fun*), and an artist (*I Shot Andy Warhol*). Contrasting the images of well-integrated lesbians on television (*LA Law*, *Ellen*), films warn about the violent dangers of female sexual intimacy.

Of the multiple cinematic narratives featuring lesbian psychopaths, some stand out as particularly revealing configurations. In two of them, *Basic Instinct* and *Diabolique*, the participation of several female "heroines" in the murder of male characters suggests if anything "overkill."⁵²¹ Nevertheless, through depictions of cunning and calculated executions, these films demonstrate the frightened determination of filmmakers to present lesbian liaisons as *the* social hazard.

⁵¹⁹ Ruby B. Rich, "Lethal Lesbians," *Village Voice* 40, Issue 17 (April 25, 1995). Italics added.

Source: <http://www.epnet.com/cgi-bin/epwno...cs=10/reccount=59/startrec=21/ft=1>

⁵²⁰ Ibid.

⁵²¹ Hart, p. 128.

When *Basic Instinct* was released in the early nineties, gay and lesbian organizations protested its depiction of lesbian characters. Set in San Francisco, the plot revolves around Detective Nick Curran (Michael Douglas), who is also called "Shooter" for having accidentally killed two tourists while on cocaine. When a former rock star is murdered, Nick is brought in to investigate and finds himself caught in a web of murderous female lovers. The immediate suspect is the rock star's (sort of) girlfriend, Catherine Trummel (Sharon Stone) who writes horror novels depicting murders exactly as they occur in real life (sometimes before, sometimes after). At the beginning of the film, Catherine has written two such books, one about a child who murders his parents (Catherine's parents died in a boating accident) and the other about a rock star murdered in bed (featured in the opening scenes of the film). Further, the rock star was murdered with an ice pick (as was her counsellor at Berkeley). As Nick's investigation proceeds, Catherine writes her next best-seller about a cop who "falls for the wrong woman."

Nick's obsession with Catherine is undeterred by her harem of psychodykes who also have numerous dead bodies hiding in their "closets." The most significant woman to Catherine is her lover, Roxy (Leilani Sarelle) who killed her two younger brothers while she herself was still a juvenile. Her other close friend and eventual lover is Hazel Dobkins⁵²² (Dorothy Malone) who murdered her husband and children with a kitchen knife she received as a wedding gift. Thirdly, there is Dr. Beth Garner who attended Berkeley with Catherine and may or may not still be sleeping with her. Beth's husband was murdered

⁵²² Interestingly enough, the name 'Dobkins' can translate as 'to betray family.' (dob=betray, kin=family)

several months previously. Prior to the film's revelation of these details, Beth is cast as the police department's "shrink" who is also sleeping with Nick while she assesses his recovery from drugs and alcohol. Among the four women, there is a total of eleven murdered men and children, for which no one is doing time. While Nick makes occasional derogatory remarks about Catherine's choice in "friends," he is nevertheless lured by her glamour, sexual prowess, wealth, fame, and mystery. He and Catherine become lovers as she researches him for her book.

The body count increases as the plot unfolds. Roxy herself is killed by Nick after she tries to run him down, presumably out of jealousy over Catherine. A police officer who seems to know too many of the wrong people is shot in the head in the same manner as Beth's husband. Nick's friend and police partner, Gus, is stabbed in an elevator with an ice pick as detailed in Catherine's new book. When Nick finds Beth near Gus' body, he presumes she is the murderess and fatally shoots her. Several items found in a nearby stairwell, as well as in Beth's apartment, suggest her obsession with Catherine and her guilt as a copycat killer. While Catherine anguishes over the deaths of those she loves, she becomes increasingly involved with Nick. Agreeing to "fuck like minks" and "live happily ever after" (while skipping the "raise rugrats" phase) Catherine and Nick are shown in the final scene together. The closing shots reveal an ice pick under the bed that Catherine has, for the moment, opted not to use.

Although gay activists hoped to thwart box office returns by revealing that Catherine was the one "whodunit," their strategy was ineffectual for the most part. Not only is the film

flawed in its failure to definitely identify the killer,⁵²³ but if it is Catherine, this announcement is hardly a revelation. As one reviewer remarks, the promotional "spooky-blue poster that features Stone with her fingernail-claws dug into Douglas' vulnerable back,"⁵²⁴ suggests as much. What is of real concern for filmmakers and audiences is not so much "whodunit," but "how it's done."⁵²⁵ In *Basic Instinct* it's done with excessive heterosexual sex, phallic imagery, and correlations of homicidal tendencies with lesbian eroticism.

Gender power struggles clearly shape the film's depictions of primarily heterosexual sex. In the opening scenes, the murdered man apparently "got off" before "he got offed". The killer and Catherine (perhaps one and the same) like to tie men up in bed. Catherine unnerves a room of male investigators by exposing her vagina. Nick subsequently rapes Beth to reassert his masculinity. Nick and Catherine cannot seem to decide who should be on top. In the final scene, his embrace and marriage proposal replaces her intention to kill him.⁵²⁶

⁵²³ See Hart, pp. 124-134.

⁵²⁴ Cynthia Fuchs, "Basic Instinct."
Source: <http://www.inform.umd.edu/EdRes/To...s/FilmReviews/basic-instinct-fuchs>.

⁵²⁵ Ibid.

⁵²⁶ Surprisingly, little analysis has been done on the parallel gender representations in *Basic Instinct* and Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. Both films were shot in San Francisco and focus on a male investigator's obsession with the female he is investigating. In *Basic Instinct*, Nick has been relieved of his duties because of his addictions and his killing bystanders. In *Vertigo*, Scottie has stopped working because of the fear of heights that leads to the death of two people. Nick is obsessed with Catherine; Scottie falls for Madeleine (Kim Novak). Not only do Catherine and Madeleine fix their hair identically, their similarity is suggested through parallel scenes in which the investigators return home through the streets of San Francisco to find the women waiting on their doorsteps.

Because of its emphasis on heterosexual characters and sex, many reviews refute protestors' claims that *Basic Instinct* is harsh on lesbians. Two mainstream writers suggest that queer audiences should not be offended since, in their view, the film depicts heterosexuals as "equally offensive."⁵²⁷ Another reviewer argues that Catherine is the "most sympathetic character in the movie."⁵²⁸ Most reviewers charge that the film is not really about lesbians since at least three of the female characters (Catherine, Beth, and Hazel) have sex with men as well as women. One columnist argues that "though officially a bisexual, Catherine is more a sexual omnivore. She would make [out with] a houseplant if she thought it would do anything for her."⁵²⁹ These writers suggest that *Basic Instinct* is

Both Catherine and Madeleine are revealed as other than what they appear. In *Vertigo*, a woman has been hired by a man to pretend to be his wife Madeleine. When Judy, disguised as Madeleine, fakes suicide, she covers the real murder of Madeleine by her husband. When Scottie meets the real Judy on the street, her similarity to Madeleine arouses his obsession and he buys her clothes to make her up like his lost love. Judy, who loves Scottie, willingly goes along with this second charade.

While *Vertigo* presents a castrated male's voyeuristic pursuit of a fetishized object, in *Basic Instinct*, both men and women exert control over their desired object. In the latter film, Catherine is obsessed with Nick and it is she who probes and shapes Nick's experience through the writing of her next book. Whereas *Vertigo* depicts Scottie's realization of the deception followed by Judy's subsequent death, *Basic Instinct* leaves Nick oblivious to Catherine's intentions to kill him, yet in control of her, at least temporarily. Nevertheless, both films present reunified male subjects. Nick is cleared of any wrongdoing in the women's deaths and Scottie overcomes his fear of heights. (For an excellent discussion of psychoanalytic approaches to classic Hollywood films including *Vertigo*, see Laura Mulvey's article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.")

⁵²⁷ Roger Ebert, "Basic Instinct," *Chicago Sun-Times* (March 20, 1992). Source: <http://www.suntimes.com/ebert/ebert-reviews/1992/03/746912.html>; also see Desson Howe, "Basic Instinct," *Washington Post* (March 20, 1992). Source: http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-s...deos/basicinstinctrhowe_a0aeaf.htm.

⁵²⁸ Fuchs.

⁵²⁹ Rita Kempley, "Basic Instinct," *Washington Post* (March 20, 1992). Source: http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-s...s/basicinstinctrkempley_a0a2a8.htm.

either devoid of lesbians or quite liberal in its presentation of them as no worse than anyone else.

Despite the reviewers' praise for the supposed egalitarian nature of *Basic Instinct*, imbalances do exist in the film's treatment of lesbian and heterosexual characters. The plot revolves around Nick's sexual obsession for, and domestication of, Catherine. Describing his sex with Catherine as the "fuck of the century," he presumes that Roxy (or "Rocky" as he refers to her) is threatened by him as opposed to other men who have previously slept with Catherine. Speaking to Roxy "man to man," he presumes to know what Catherine wants better than anyone else. After date-raping Beth and sleeping with Catherine, he makes Beth defensive by asking if she "still like[s] girls." While no other man "penetrates" Catherine's emotions, Nick seems to easily replace the love she seems to initially only feel for women. It is particularly telling that each time Nick kills one of her female lovers (first Roxy, then Beth), Catherine immediately asks to have sex with him. In the final scene, he has convinced her to settle down with him.

Although heterosexuals, bisexuals, and lesbians are all depicted as killers in *Basic Instinct*, the gendering of sexual and criminal categories is revealing. The film depicts a multitude of male characters, all presumably heterosexual and protectors of the law. By contrast, all of the women sexually desire other women and are framed as violent murderers.⁵³⁰ While in fact not all of the heterosexual characters are despicable, homoerotic behaviour is the pastime of psychopaths. In its depiction of lesbian desire as

⁵³⁰ Even though they are not definitively proved guilty of criminal behaviour, the plot suggests that either Catherine or Beth (and very likely each) is a murderer.

the attribute of demonic murderesses, *Basic Instinct* reiterates ancient religious themes about the personal and social hazards of female sexual intimacy.

In an article entitled "Cruisin' for a Bruisin': Hollywood's Deadly (Lesbian) Dolls," Chris Holmlund argues that the presentation of female gender in *Basic Instinct* is also marked by anxieties about race.⁵³¹ The production includes only one African American speaking part, and its "settings are predominantly or exclusively white."⁵³² What Holmlund finds most striking is the film's obsession with *female* whiteness. In contrast to Beth's dye-job, Catherine's "do" is true. As Holmlund explains, this has profound significance for the racially motivated resolutions of the characters.

Indeed, so hysterically does *Basic Instinct* insist that whiteness equals blondness that Sharon Stone's exposure of blonde pubic hair can perhaps be taken as "proof" of her racial, not just sexual, superiority. And I am tempted to suggest, further, that Roxy and Beth die not just because they are lesbian and bisexual, respectively, but also because their roots are showing. According to the visual logic of this film, Beth certainly deserves to die: though she used to bleach her hair, she has become the film's only brunette.⁵³³

Basic Instinct's privileging of white murderesses draws attention to the general lack of women of colour in lesbian thrillers. Hart notes that "given the history of white culture's association of women of color with licentiousness and dangerous hypersexuality, one would think that representations of the sexually/violently aggressive woman would include

⁵³¹ Chris Holmlund, "Cruisin' for a Bruisin': Hollywood's Deadly (Lesbian) Dolls," *Cinema Journal* 34, no. 1 (Fall 1994): 31-51.

⁵³² *Ibid.*, p. 39.

⁵³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 39-40.

at least a fair share of women of color."⁵³⁴ But they do not. Hart accounts for this in several ways. First, she argues, a large portion of this genre's fantasy lies in discovering "the sexual rapaciousness and hence violence hidden 'within' these women's appearance."⁵³⁵ The fantasy is therefore only sustained if the character is not already visibly threatening. Because "the fetishization of skin color renders the lesbian of color already marked as a 'terrifying presence'," it is a white woman who is likely to "appear as an ambivalent figure who is both pleasuring and terrifying."⁵³⁶

Lethal white lesbians signify white supremacist attitudes in two other ways. The lesbian is traditionally understood by dominant western culture as the enemy of patriarchy. As the "enemy *within*'...[she is] racially marked to mirror the white supremacists' own imaginations of the other within *themselves*."⁵³⁷ Further, with only rare exceptions, all of the women depicted are childless. In this way, they signify fears about the annihilation of the white race.⁵³⁸ White lesbians and women of colour "are intimately associated with one another in the white masculine imaginary as figures who constitute serious threats to the reproduction of white men."⁵³⁹ Their close proximity to each other is a terrifying prospect. Hart argues that the division between lesbians and women of colour is most effectively

⁵³⁴ Hart, p. 115.

⁵³⁵ Ibid., p. 109.

⁵³⁶ Ibid.

⁵³⁷ Ibid., p. 116.

⁵³⁸ Ibid.

⁵³⁹ Ibid., p. 117.

maintained by constructing the 'lesbian' as only white.⁵⁴⁰

In a Hollywood remake of the original French film, *Diabolique*, Sharon Stone reappears as another blonde lipstick-psychodyke, again accompanied by white female accomplices. In this case, it is the blonde who loses out. As more of a "whosegonnagetit," than a "whodunit," *Diabolique* presents a series of conspiracies among a schoolmaster, Guy (Chazz Palminteri), his mistress Nicole (Stone), and his wife Mia (Isabelle Adjani). Following fairly close to the original story, the second version presents Mia suffering from a heart condition and aware of Guy and Nicole's affair.

The first half of the film focuses on the enactment of the two women's plan to kill the verbally and physically abusive Guy. With threats of divorce that would leave Guy penniless, Mia lures him to Nicole's house where the two women drown him in a bathtub. Transporting his body back to the school the next morning, they dump him in the algae-covered swimming pool to make it appear that he stumbled in while drunk. When the body fails to surface after a day, and subsequently goes missing, Mia becomes increasingly traumatized. When items pertaining to the murder start showing up (Guy's sunglasses, photos of the women transporting the body, Guy's dry-cleaned suit), Mia's health declines rapidly.

At this point, the Hollywood *Diabolique* diverts from the original. The more recent film introduces a female detective (Kathy Bates) who tries to solve the mystery of Mia's missing husband. Nicole grows increasingly infuriated as Mia naively offers clues to the detective who talks obsessively about her efforts to quit smoking. When Mia receives a

⁵⁴⁰ Ibid.

written message that Guy is alive and coming after her, she runs to the bathroom where she is shocked to see Guy rising, like Lazarus, out of the bathtub. Mia suffers a heart attack and falls to the ground. As Guy removes plastic eye coverings and dries off, Nicole comes rushing into the room for the closing scenes.

The later *Diabolique* conveys stronger feminist overtones than the original. In the French film, the mistress clutches Guy and declares their freedom from his menacing wife. At this point, the original male detective appears out of the shadows and arrests them both. The original resolution suggests that the wife may not in fact be dead, but still secretly lurking in the halls of the school.

While lesbian relations between the wife and mistress are implicitly applied in the original, it is an explicit romance in the second. When Nicole rushes into the washroom, it is to halt Guy from killing Mia. When Nicole and Guy discover Mia is still alive, a fight ensues that works its way down to the schoolyard. Nicole embeds a rake in Guy's head as he tries to kill the two women. They overpower and drown him in the swimming pool. The female detective then comes out of the bushes and punches Mia in the mouth so she can claim self-defence when her husband's body is found. Now aware of Nicole's original plans to deceive her, Mia ends their relationship. In the final scene, Mia walks into the school, a heartbroken Nicole cries in the pool, and the detective lights up a cigarette.

While reviewers were unanimous in their scathing criticisms of the remake, its revised incorporation of feminist and lesbian themes is striking. In both films, the women's bond is ultimately destroyed by the cunning betrayal of the mistress. Rarely does a woman attempt to kill her female lover for a man. In the second version however, the

mistress changes her mind when the wife expresses her love. Female solidarity is emphasized through the final joint effort to murder the abusive husband. While the lesbian relationship between the wife and mistress is overt, the detective most accurately fits the dyke stereotype. With her stocky build, short flat hair, plaid shirts, suit jackets, and aggressive demeanour, she is the least feminine of the three. Together they are a remarkable example of the man-hating lesbians so prominently featured in recent Hollywood releases.

Throughout *Diabolique*, numerous religious references remind audiences that evil and sin are the underlying narrative motifs. The film's title, "Diabolical," or "from the devil," suggests the depth of the transgressions depicted. While it is not clearly determined who or what is ultimately evil, the mistress' betrayal is the key narrative deception. Until the bathroom scene, the women's commitment appears understandably towards each other. The mistress' deception of the wife is rendered more horrific by her preference for the revolting, murderous husband. Evidently, the lesbian relationship was merely a manipulative ploy to deceive the victim. Nicole's betrayal of Mia demonstrates that lesbian lovers are more treacherous than abusive husbands.

Mia is presented as an ex-nun who greatly fears God's punishment. When more evidence of her murderous act surfaces, Mia calls in a priest for absolution and penance. Nicole angrily accuses her of buying indulgences with her money. The two women later meet to discuss their strategy in front of an altar. Numerous crosses and religious statues are illuminated by ominous lightning strikes. Through the film's imagery, audiences know that God monitors the evil deeds of desirous women.

In an even more recent "twisted, girl-meets-girl-and-falls-in-love-thriller,"⁵⁴¹ lesbian heroines are smart enough to beat the most powerful social symbol of patriarchal control. *Bound's* depiction of a butch and femme team outwitting the mob is a rare cinematic moment in which "lesbian lovers are the heroes and get away with it."⁵⁴² Violet (Jennifer Tilly) and Corky (Gina Gershon) meet in the building where Violet lives with her *Mafioso* boyfriend named Caesar (Joe Pantoliano). When Violet seduces Corky, they devise a scheme to escape together with two million dollars of laundered money. Through a series of murders and betrayals, the plot climaxes with a showdown amongst the three characters.

The climax of *Bound* pleased diverse viewers, including female and lesbian audiences. One reviewer wrote,

Corky and Vi aren't just wily double-crossers, they're feminist icons drunk on their own sense of empowerment. When he realizes he's been double-crossed [Et tu, Brute?], Caesar confronts Vi: "What did she do to you?" he demands. "Everything you couldn't," Vi fires back.⁵⁴³

When Caesar naively suggests he knows Violet better than she knows herself, she fires back again, this time literally. Caesar falls bleeding into spilled white paint. This time, the girl gets the girl, and the money.

⁵⁴¹ Bruce Walker, "Bound," Washington Post (Oct. 4, 1996). Source: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-s...le/longterm/review96/boundwalk.htm>

⁵⁴² Linda Lopez McAlister, "Bound," For "The Women's Show" WMNF-FM Tampa, Florida (Oct. 19, 1996). Source: <http://www.inform.umd.edu/EdRes/To...udies/FilmReviews/bound-mcalister>

⁵⁴³ Rita Kempley, "'Bound' For Gory," Washington Post (Oct. 4, 1996). Source: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-s...le/longterm/review96/boundkemp.htm>

Despite *Bound's* popularity with women as well as men, McAlister sees no "way in which this film could be characterized as a feminist film."⁵⁴⁴ She argues that the lesbian subtext adds nothing to the central plot. Interestingly, the original movie was written with a man in Corky's role⁵⁴⁵ McAlister argues that the depiction of female lovers situates the film within a recent popular genre and nothing more:

...there is a certain revenge factor that it shares with a lot of recent feminist or feminist-themed films where women have the chance to get back at the men who have made them miserable...By using their wits, their guts, their criminal experience, and by trusting one another, the lesbian lovers in this film walk away with the money, the revenge, and one another while the most patriarchal of all institutions (except perhaps the Church) gets its richly deserved comeuppance.⁵⁴⁶

McAlister's observations signal an important issue regarding this genre's challenge to religious ideology and patriarchal society in general. In the last two decades of films featuring women who desire each other and kill, there is usually retribution for the women's deeds. Typically, lesbian thrillers are resolved through the imprisonment (*Diabolique* (1955), *Black Widow*, *Mortal Thoughts*, *Fun*, *Heavenly Creatures*, *Butterfly Kiss*, *I Shot Andy Warhol*) or the death (*Dracula's Daughter*, *The Hunger*, *Thelma and Louise*, *Basic Instinct*, *Single White Female*, *Butterfly Kiss*, *La Ceremonie*, *The Kiss*, *Poison Ivy*) of at least one of the female transgressors. In many respects, *Basic Instinct's* final installation of Catherine into heterosexual family life can be interpreted as an annihilation of her transgressive nature along with her companions. In contrast to these subdued villainesses

⁵⁴⁴ McAlister, "*Bound*."

⁵⁴⁵ "*Bound*," *Lesbian Flicks*.

Source: <http://www.geocities.com/WestHollywood/Heights/8306/bound.html>

⁵⁴⁶ McAlister, "*Bound*."

however, several more recent films depict women getting away as supposed victors, against men, society, and the religious ideology that figures them as passive and inferior.

While recent configurations of lesbian "heroines" raise hopes of a new era in female representation, they may nevertheless signify the perpetuation of ancient sexist ideals. *Dolores Claiborne*, *Wild Side*, *Diabolique*, *Bound*, and *Wild Things* all depict women with explicit or implicit lesbian liaisons who, although they lead to the ruin of others, nevertheless make it "freely" to the final credits. In so doing, they represent what Haskell terms the "crazies" of the last two decades.⁵⁴⁷ In an appealing fashion they, unlike their *femmes fatales* predecessors, escape "the punitive resolution of the *film noir*; the endings they produce [are] untidy and their power [isn't] neutralized by the end of the film."⁵⁴⁸ As signifiers "of a refusal - or inability - to live by the old rules,"⁵⁴⁹ they resonate with female viewers. However, R. Rich is wary of their role.

The notion of the lesbian killer beckons, seductive in its mix of desire and disaster, exhilarating in its announcement of a new screen presence. Yet there's still a shadowy downside to watch out for: the unwitting return of the stereotype of lesbian desire as pathology, plain and simple. And that, after the '90s euphoria around these sleek new heroines diminishes, may ultimately prove to be a very old-fashioned concept.⁵⁵⁰

Although the (non)resolutions of current lesbian thrillers may appear to offer an optimistic outlook on women's defiance, both Haskell and R. Rich warn of the negative

⁵⁴⁷ Haskell, p. 374.

⁵⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 373.

⁵⁵⁰ R. Rich.

connotations these configurations carry. *Thelma and Louise*, written by a woman, also incorporates men's fears about resistant women and presents a defiant resolution that many female viewers find pleasing. For male audiences however, the film reinforces fears of violent revenge.

The social danger conveyed through the failure to subdue defiant women is powerfully expressed in another female-authored film *A Question of Silence*. Also directed by the screenwriter, this controversial film presents three women who brutally murder an "innocent" male owner of a woman's clothing store. Having never met before the killing, the heroines featured in *A Question of Silence* demonstrate the shared aggression and anger that is feared to erupt when women come together under patriarchy. The comprehensibility of their rage is reinforced through the character of a female psychiatrist, Dr. Janine Van Den Bos (Cox Habbema) who is hired by the court to presumably establish the women's insanity. When she interviews the incarcerated women, Janine begins to identify with their circumstances and scrutinizes her own life. At the film's conclusion, Janine reports to the astonished and angered male judges that she finds all of the murderesses of sound mind.

Audience identification is directed towards the character of Janine as she tries to determine the motivations and details surrounding the murder. Unlike Janine however, the audience is allowed glimpses of the three women's experiences, both before and during the killing. Christine (Edda Barends) is presented as an oppressed housewife with a

husband who regards her as a table for his dishes.⁵⁵¹ Until near the end of the film, Christine remains silent.⁵⁵² By contrast, Annie (Nelly Frijda) is a boisterous waitress in a diner with male customers who harass her. She lives alone, does not miss her husband or daughter, and fills the scenes with her unrestrained laughter. Andrea (Henriette Tol) is an intelligent, underpaid secretary who works in a company that ignores her knowledge of economic affairs. Along with the professionally accredited Janine, the four women are intended to represent diverse aspects of women's life experiences.

When the shopkeeper catches Christine shoplifting a sweater, she defiantly takes the stolen item back from his hand and puts it into her bag. As women in the store become aware of the commotion, they draw closer. When the owner again tries to retrieve the clothing, Andrea and Annie move in on opposite sides. In a murder scene that Fischer describes as a "ceremonial performance" with ritual overtones,⁵⁵³ the three women, calmly and without emotion, kill and disfigure the man with heels, broken glass, an ashtray, and a hanger. Following the scene, all of the women leave the store, and the unknown witnesses do not appear again until the murder trial.

Although the killing is loosely based on the true story of a housewife who murdered a shop owner,⁵⁵⁴ Fischer interprets it as "encod[ing] a broader social drama."⁵⁵⁵ As she

⁵⁵¹ See Linda Williams, "A Jury of Their Peers: Marleen Gorris's *A Question of Silence*," in *Multiple Voices in Feminist Film Criticism*, eds. Diane Carson, Linda Dittmar, and Janice R. Welsch (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), p. 435.

⁵⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 435. In fact, the original Dutch title referred to the "silence of Christine M."

⁵⁵³ Fischer, p. 292.

⁵⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

explains, the film suggests that "the murder is the culmination of years of oppression within patriarchy, and that the victim is merely a societal 'scapegoat'."⁵⁵⁶ As a scapegoat, Fischer argues, the man "stands for the sins of patriarchy" as symbolized through the mutilation of his genitals.⁵⁵⁷ The underlying motif of women's *universal* frustration and aggression is reflected in an earlier scene depicting the psychiatrist pretending to slice her husband's body open in a manner replicated during the murder scene.

By the time of the trial, intense relationships are established among all of the female characters. Christine finally speaks to the psychiatrist, and Annie's humour haunts and enlivens Janine's professional and private life. Janine's relationship with Andrea is the most intimate and challenging for her. When Andrea accepts money to have sex with a man following the murder, Janine is obsessed with determining whether or not she had an orgasm. As Janine probes for information regarding Andrea's sex-life, the accused turns the inquisition back towards the psychiatrist's own sexual preferences. In a particularly erotic scene, Andrea and Janine are standing close together in a room. As Andrea passes her hands just above the surface of Janine's entire body, the two remain silent and fixated. The spell is only broken when a man enters the room, excuses his interruption, and leaves.

Women's solidarity is strongly affirmed during the courtroom scene. The four women who were present during the murder attend the trial in silent support of the accused. When all seven make eye contact, Janine realizes their connection. During Janine's argument with the court over the relationship among gender, economics, and the

⁵⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 293.

women's defiance, one of the judges states that the male sex of the shopkeeper is irrelevant to the crime. At this suggestion, the court proceedings are disrupted by Christine's laughter. Her mirth spreads to the other murderesses and eventually to the four women who witnessed the killing. Janine can no longer control herself and joins in the hysterics. As the unruly women are removed from the courtroom through separate doors, they exchange intimate parting glances in an expression of female solidarity. In the final scene, Janine is shown with the four witnesses on the courthouse steps, as her husband urges her to get into their car.

For Fischer, the courtroom scene testifies to the mythical nature of *A Question of Silence*. As she and Linda Williams observe, the prosecutor's remark that the shopkeeper's body looked like it was attacked by a "high heeled army of Furies" is no coincidence.⁵⁵⁸ Fischer explains that in Greek mythology, the Furies are depicted as three ugly hags whose role is to avenge harm brought to kin.⁵⁵⁹ "When called upon to act, they hounded their victim until he died in torment."⁵⁶⁰ In Williams account of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, the Furies are subsequently "sold out" by Athena who "sweet-talks" them into the earth where they become the Eumenides, or "kindly ones."⁵⁶¹

In several ways, the endings of both *A Question of Silence* as well as *Thelma and Louise* offer defiant revisions of the Greek myth. Although no scholar has yet compared

⁵⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 294; also see Williams, p. 438.

⁵⁵⁹ Fischer., p. 294.

⁵⁶⁰ Harris and Levy, as cited in Fischer, p. 294.

⁵⁶¹ Williams, p. 438; also see Fischer, p. 294.

these two films, they share significant similarities in their characters and resolution. While Christine and Thelma are subjected to identical treatment by their husbands, Annie and Louise are both extraverted single waitresses. Just as Thelma transforms into a stronger, more self-aware individual who proposes her and Louise's suicide, so too it is the silent Christine whose defiant laughter disrupts the criminal hearings. Both of these films begin with an act of revenge, yet neither resolution suggests the comfort of the kind Eumenides.

While the Greek writers got "rid of the unsightly raucous Furies by stage-managing a quiet exit...into the bowels of the earth,"⁵⁶² Thelma and Louise, as well as Christine, Annie, and Andrea go defiantly. The death of Thelma and Louise automatically precludes their submission to male control. And as Fischer explains, *A Question of Silence* offers no "reassuring denouement; [when] the women exit the court in defiance, [there is] no sense that they will ever become 'the kindly ones'."⁵⁶³ In this way, both of these female authored narratives repudiate the resolution of traditional mythology.

Films that present women's tenacious resistance nevertheless perpetuate ancient religious paradigms. Fischer writes that *A Question of Silence* and *Thelma and Louise* were released at a time of feminist agitation. These periods are generally characterized by social fears of an increase in female crime.⁵⁶⁴ A film like *A Question of Silence* "lambastes and incarnates such prejudices."⁵⁶⁵ Male outcries against *Thelma and Louise*

⁵⁶² Williams, p. 439.

⁵⁶³ Fischer, p. 294.

⁵⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 300.

⁵⁶⁵ Ibid.

and *A Question of Silence* demonstrate how their narratives and resolutions are symbols of "man's 'worst fears coming true'."⁵⁶⁶ Ironically when men stand up to confront the filmmaker of *A Question of Silence*, they are usually silenced by the laughter of women viewers in the manner depicted in the courtroom scene.⁵⁶⁷

Angry responses to persistently defiant female characters show a continuance of social anxiety about women's unsuppressed behaviour and/or its depiction. When a woman escapes "punitive resolution," she is still "out there." The heroines thus appear as Lilith figures, who are perceived to wreak havoc on men and children, beyond male control. As R. Rich warily acknowledges, women's intimate bonding is usually linked to pathology and danger. It is a "very old-fashioned [religious] concept"⁵⁶⁸ that continues to haunt gender representations through to the present. While films like *Dolores Claiborne*, *Wild Side*, *Diabolique*, *Bound*, and *Wild Things* present the "freedom" of murderous lesbians, they persist as a threat to patriarchal order. Lesbian thrillers powerfully suggest that female sexual intimacy is a social hazard that is impossible to contain.

Synthesis

In her examination of sources for contemporary correlations of lesbianism with violence, Hart refers to various nineteenth century configurations including the invert in

⁵⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁷ Fischer, p. 300.

⁵⁶⁸ R. Rich.

psychology and the female offender in criminology.⁵⁶⁹ Her examination highlights century old efforts to isolate and contain deviant women. For Hart, the lesbian poses a social threat by obscuring the gender distinctions upon which patriarchal culture is based. As her investigation reveals, the threat that lesbians are understood to pose to modern male hegemony is a continuation of religious fears articulated long ago.

Hart's study of the sexologist Havelock Ellis outlines his efforts to scientifically isolate lesbians from so-called "normal" passive women. Previous efforts to restrict lesbians to a category of the presumed lower races, the working classes, and the criminally deviant allowed the displacement of women's sexual deviance onto females already excluded from white upper-class conceptions of womanhood.⁵⁷⁰ However, despite great effort, Ellis was unable to find any biological differences between inverts and heterosexual women. As Hart explains, Ellis was forced to conclude that the invert's "'masculine element,' what marks her off from the normal woman, may consist 'only in the fact that she makes advances to the women to whom she is attracted and treats all men in a cool, indifferent manner'".⁵⁷¹

Sexologists assumed that the invert could not be a normal woman, because a normal woman was considered man's opposite. As the opposite of the normal woman to whom she is attracted, Hart explains, the invert "became man's double."⁵⁷² As a not-real

⁵⁶⁹ Hart, p. xi.

⁵⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 3.

⁵⁷¹ Ellis, as cited in Hart, p. 7.

⁵⁷² Hart, p. 8.

woman, the lesbian serves as a site for the displacement of women's aggressive, that is, masculine, behaviour.⁵⁷³ Yet in so doing, the invert disrupts the heteronormative scheme that figures women as passive. Hart explains that Ellis' establishment of a congenital basis for homosexuality "introduced the invert as a criminal, not against nature, but against society."⁵⁷⁴ He subsequently documented numerous instances in which lesbians killed in circumstances where there was no evidence of insanity. Their violent behaviour was regarded as merely typical for inverts.⁵⁷⁵

Hart's study connects the congenital invert of sexology to the female offender of nineteenth century criminology. While Ellis sought to distinguish the female invert from the normal woman, Caesar Lombroso, the father of criminal anthropology, aimed to distinguish the supposedly born female offender from normal passive females. Like Ellis' invert, Lombroso's offender is not a real woman. Not only does she approximate the dress and behaviour of a man, she is devoid of maternal affection.⁵⁷⁶ As Hart indicates, Lombroso viewed such a woman as "more like a man, even a normal man, than she is like a normal women."⁵⁷⁷ For Lombroso, as well as for Ellis, a female was only a woman if she did not transgress a "sexual boundary" (as in the case of the invert) or perform "extraordinary acts of violence" (like the female offender).⁵⁷⁸ Hart asserts that just as

⁵⁷³ Ibid., p. 9.

⁵⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 10.

⁵⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 13.

⁵⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁸ Ibid.

"desire always verifies masculinity, whatever the subject's sex, so does crime. And they are historically inextricably linked."⁵⁷⁹ "The congenital invert and the born offender," she writes, "marked the limits of cultural femininity. And they did so" together.⁵⁸⁰

Sexology and criminology both contributed to current heterosexist correlations of lesbianism with female criminality. Viewing the invert and the female offenders as masculine served to reinforce the heterosexual matrix premised on assumptions about women's passivity and inability to engage in such behaviour.⁵⁸¹ Yet, as Hart explains, the presence of "masculine" qualities within a woman challenged man's "exclusive claim to masculinity."⁵⁸² It also countered assumed linkages between biology and gender, such that the social systems were rendered unstable by her existence. This role of the lesbian in both reinforcing and destabilizing social order, meant that the actively desiring woman had to "enter history as a 'criminal'."⁵⁸³

For Hart, contemporary female characters who murder together demonstrate "the dominant culture's underwriting of lesbianism when the violence of women enters representation."⁵⁸⁴ Hart's analysis illustrates how anxiety about female homoeroticism is portrayed even in films that don't depict explicit sexual intimacy between female criminals. Hart and others suggest that films such as *Thelma and Louise* expose a lesbian

⁵⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 14.

⁵⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 13.

⁵⁸¹ Ibid., p. 17.

⁵⁸² Ibid., p. 8.

⁵⁸³ Ibid., p. 17.

⁵⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 67.

undercurrent through their overt and often inappropriate efforts to deny it.⁵⁸⁵ Through Thelma's immediate sexual encounter after nearly being raped and Jimmy's unexpected visit to Louise, the film reaffirms the women's heterosexual connections.⁵⁸⁶ The kiss that occurs at the film's conclusion was not scripted, but rather of Sarandon's initiative. In a later interview, she staunchly refutes any suggestion regarding its sexual connotations.⁵⁸⁷

Interestingly, responses to films about female murderers reveal fears regarding "real" women's sexual commitments. Hart documents how reviewers tried to assure audiences that *Thelma and Louise* was not a literal representation of women's attitudes, and that, in fact, the performers and writers "basically like men."⁵⁸⁸ Through reviewers' attempts to "restore cultural confidence in real women's passivity," the message was implied that "real women would not act like Thelma and Louise."⁵⁸⁹ Hart states that "by the rule of substitution, only men can act like Thelma and Louise...[and] when we speak of women who are somehow 'really men,' we conjure the spectre of the invert."⁵⁹⁰ Films that depict female sexual intimacy signify a disruption of patriarchal hegemony that must continually reassure itself of real women's passivity. Isolating lesbianism to the masculine realm thus stabilizes heteronormativity.

⁵⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 75; also see Dowell, p. 29; and Miles, *Seeing and Believing*, p. 146.

⁵⁸⁶ Hart., p. 75.

⁵⁸⁷ Taken from an interview with Susan Sarandon in the film, *The Celluloid Closet*.

⁵⁸⁸ Ruth Walker, as cited in Hart, p. 73.

⁵⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 74.

⁵⁹⁰ Ibid.

Miles and Brooten emphasize that male anxiety over women's potential approximation of masculinity influenced western religious writing. Miles affirms that western culture is shaped by the religious recognition of "self-shaping desire and intentional agency" as male prerogatives.⁵⁹¹ In this climate, "women who have dared to desire, and who have acted out their desires as unmarried women, or simply as women of accomplishment have usually encountered scorn, misunderstanding, and often, violence."⁵⁹² What male authors always fear is that gender socialization will be "compromised and subverted."⁵⁹³

Miles' claims regarding ancient and current gender anxiety resonate with Brooten's study of early Christianity. Brooten concludes that what concerned religious writers most about female homoeroticism was its implication that women assumed the masculine role in sexual relations. Like modern inverts and female offenders, *tribades* challenged the gender prescriptions on which western patriarchal culture is based. Through its disruption of western hierarchies that figure women as passive, female sexual desire terrorizes western mythology and writings from the past to the present.

⁵⁹¹ Miles, *Seeing and Believing*, p. 136.

⁵⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 137.

⁵⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

Conclusion

In the fall of 1997, I presented my research on lesbian thrillers at the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion.⁵⁹⁴ During the presentation, I showed numerous slides to illustrate the intimate bonding and gruesome violence that characterize depictions of women in this genre. In the discussion that followed, a prominent theorist of religion admitted that despite the violence that is associated with lesbian affairs, she nevertheless finds many of the films enjoyable to watch. For her, as well as most women in the room, images of aggressive and sexually independent heroines provide inspiration in a world that typically suppresses and silences lesbian experience. It was a familiar response. On other occasions when I have shown a video presentation of the death of heroines in popular women's films,⁵⁹⁵ the audience has been sombre, yet touched. Later, they too are puzzled by the pleasure they derive from these images.

Psychoanalytic theories on the bond between mothers and daughters provide insights for interpreting the allure of chickflick tragedies for female audiences and screenwriters. In her book, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the*

⁵⁹⁴ Peggy Schmeiser, "Sites of Destruction: The Cinematic Fate of the Lesbian Body," unpublished lecture presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion, San Francisco, November 24, 1997.

⁵⁹⁵ Peggy Schmeiser, "The Marginalization and Destruction of the Female Body in Popular Women's Films," unpublished lecture presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion, New Orleans, November 24, 1996; and "Deathbeds and Destruction: The Fate of the Female Body in Popular Women's Films," unpublished lecture presented at the 37th Northeastern Anthropological Association Meetings, Montebello, April 12, 1997.

Sociology of Gender, Nancy Chodorow argues that the symbiotic mother-child relationship is that which "all people who have been mothered want basically to recreate."⁵⁹⁶ For women, this means that adult female relationships provide opportunities for "resolving and recreating the mother-daughter bond."⁵⁹⁷ Because feminine gender is also marked by the process of becoming like the mother, images of female bonding and suffering in popular women's films allow female viewers to identify with heroines who both mother and are mothered by other women.

Various theorists affirm the maternal comforts that are derived from cinematic experiences. Women's films usually include several scenes depicting heroines mothering other women, interspersed with close-ups of their faces. In her study of mythology, Downing argues that "all close bonds between women inevitably conjure up memories and feelings associated with our first connection to a woman, the all-powerful mother of infancy."⁵⁹⁸ As Diana Fuss affirms in her study of film, women derive special pleasures from face-to-face encounters with "a shimmering, luminous, reconstituted image of the mythic Mother."⁵⁹⁹ Regardless of her sexual orientation, the female spectator who views a close-up of a woman's face "(re)-experiences a homosexually inflected" maternal

⁵⁹⁶ Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1978), p. 201.

⁵⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

⁵⁹⁸ Downing, "Lesbian Mythology," p. 183.

⁵⁹⁹ Diana Fuss, as cited in Mary Desjardins, "Meeting Two Queens: Feminist Filmmaking, Identity Politics, and the Melodramatic Fantasy," *Film Quarterly* 48, no. 3 (Spring, 1995): 31.

connection.⁶⁰⁰ Experiences and depictions of close female connection allow women to regain what is described as the "physical and emotional intimacy [women] enjoyed with their mothers and that they, unlike men, cannot get from heterosexual relationships."⁶⁰¹

While chickflick images of female intimacy are directed toward the pleasure of female viewers, lesbian thrillers depict a harsher, more disturbing quality to women's sexual liaisons. Although this investigation demonstrates the latter genre's typical annihilation of lesbian experience through the imprisonment or death of deviant characters, at least some feminists respond enthusiastically to these narratives. While several positive responses to *Thelma and Louise* have already been noted, *Basic Instinct* too holds pleasure for women. One lesbian lawyer found the film inspirational.

Rather than picket *Basic Instinct*, I would act on the information given in the film by purchasing an ice pick at K-mart for \$3.69. I'd hang it on my belt loop as a symbol of empowerment and a reminder of the fantasy of a world where women are rich, powerful and victorious.⁶⁰²

She further adds that she is in favour of films about lesbians killing men because "such portrayals *should* leave women feeling powerful."⁶⁰³ Linda Lopez McAlister, a theorist of gender and film admits her own approval of films such as *Basic Instinct*, despite their obvious offenses:

⁶⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁰¹ Naomi R. Goldenberg, *Resurrecting the Body: Feminism, Religion, and Psychoanalysis* (Paperback revision of *Returning Words to Flesh*, 1990), (New York: Crossroads, 1993), p. 81-82. Also see Chodorow, pp.199-209 for a psychoanalytic discussion about the bond between a mother and daughter.

⁶⁰² Martha Ertman, "Following Her 'Basic Instinct'," *Washington Blade* (Jan. 5, 1992).

⁶⁰³ Ibid.

Well nobody can accuse me of being politically correct, because, wouldn't ya know, I liked this film! Yes, it is misogynist, and yes, it expresses revulsion and disdain for anything but heterosexual coupling - at least those are the prevalent attitudes of the main male characters in the film with whom the audience is presumed to identify. BUT, it is also a film with enormous potential for alternative and indeed subversive interpretations. That's the way I was reading it, and there's such an open invitation to do this...[in *film noir*] deadly women had to die for breaking the laws of the fathers, but they gave us our best experience to date in Hollywood films of strong powerful women who controlled themselves as well as others.⁶⁰⁴

Recent feminist film criticism recognizes that female spectators often derive positive meaning and empowerment from conventional film narratives through "reading against the grain."⁶⁰⁵ Incorporating this strategy enables viewers to benefit from a text that originally intends their exclusion. Jacqueline Bobo explains this process in her study of Black female spectators.

An audience member from a marginalised group (people of colour, women, the poor, and so on) has an oppositional stance as they participate in mainstream media. The motivation for this counter-reception is that we understand that mainstream media has never rendered our segment of the program faithfully....Out of habit, as readers of mainstream texts, we have learned to ferret out the beneficial and put up blinders against the rest. From this wary viewing standpoint, a subversive reading of a text can occur. When things appear strange to the viewer, she/he may then bring other viewpoints to bear on the watching of the film and may see things other than what the film-makers intended. The viewer, that is, will read "against the grain" of the film.⁶⁰⁶

⁶⁰⁴ Linda Lopez McAlister, "Basic Instinct," for "The Woman's Show," WMNF-FM, Tampa, Florida.

Source: <http://www.inform.umd.edu/EdRes/To...lmReviews/basic-instinct-mcalister>

⁶⁰⁵ Patricia Erens ed., *Issues In Feminist Film Criticism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. xx.

⁶⁰⁶ Jacqueline Bobo, "The Color Purple: Black Women as Cultural Readers," in *Female Spectators: Looking at Film and Television*, ed. E. Deirdre Pribram (New York: Verso, 1988) p. 96. For more on Black female spectators and the oppositional gaze, see bell hooks, *reel to real: race, sex, and class at the movies* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

By reading against the grain, "oppositional" viewers including lesbians, create alternative meanings for films and narratives that depict their experience derogatorily. Although films such as *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953) and *Personal Best* (1982) employ female and lesbian bodies for male titillation, they nevertheless provide content for subversive readings. As Lucie Arbuthnot and Gail Seneca demonstrate, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* stands as a feminist text if one views it as a celebration of "women's pleasure in each other."⁶⁰⁷ Through their analysis of the intimacy between Lorelei (Marilyn Monroe) and Dorothy (Jane Russell), Arbuthnot and Seneca highlight how the narrative and imagery partially deny male pleasure while affirming an enduring closeness between the two heroines.⁶⁰⁸

Personal Best which starred "beautiful, scantily clad women in (hetero)sexualized motion" ends with the dissolution of the featured lesbian couple and a reestablishment of heterosexual norms.⁶⁰⁹ Yet as Elizabeth Ellsworth argues, reading against the grain allows female viewers to derive pleasure from the overt lesbian eroticism. As the first prominent

⁶⁰⁷ Lucie Arbuthnot and Gail Seneca, "Pre-Text and Text in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*," in *Issues In Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. Patricia Erens (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 113.

⁶⁰⁸ For a strong feminist critique of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, see Maureen Turim's article, "Gentlemen Consume Blondes," also in *Issues In Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. Patricia Erens (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 101-111.

⁶⁰⁹ Elizabeth Ellsworth, "Illicit Pleasures: Feminist Spectators and *Personal Best*," in *Issues In Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. Patricia Erens (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 188.

depiction of a lesbian relationship by Hollywood,⁶¹⁰ this film evidently prompted women such as Ellen, both the real and fictitious one, to come out.⁶¹¹ All depictions of female intimacy, regardless of their intended insult, offer opportunities for subversive and empowering interpretations.

It is not my intention in this investigation to disparage the secondary gains that may be derived by female audiences who view women forging primary relationships with other women in patriarchal society. What this investigation does demonstrate is that these depictions usually occur over women's dead bodies. Ancient and contemporary mythology typically presents female intimacy as crippling and life-threatening. Women who refuse to conform to religious gender prescriptions are still subject to cultural condemnation and punishment. Through thematic social destruction of and by women who love one another, the message is clearly conveyed: women together are a deadly combination in which they themselves are the primary victims. Though they may find comfort in one another during their struggles is evident. Yet as Tribble remarks, "sad stories do not have happy endings."⁶¹²

The central tenet of this thesis is that popular films perpetuate ancient religious ideology about female gender and therefore warrant consideration within the field of

⁶¹⁰ Ibid., p. 187.

⁶¹¹ In the "coming out" television episode, Ellen Morgan (Ellen Degeneres), implies humorously to her therapist that if she had not watched *Personal Best*, she might not have been lesbian.

⁶¹² Tribble, p. 2.

women and religion. I have developed this argument by first establishing the scope of current scholarly work pertaining to female intimacy and religion. Secondly, by demonstrating that popular films have religious dimensions, I laid a foundation for a feminist analysis in the context of religious studies of two film genres focussed on women's relationships. By analyzing the depictions of female intimacy in chickflicks as well as lesbian thrillers, I show how religious condemnation of female intimacy is furthered by homophobic and racist depictions of heroines who are both destroyers and destroyed. Female intimacy, whether between mothers and daughters, friends, or lovers, is portrayed in male dominated mythologies as threatening to patriarchal social order. Religious, film, racial, and gender theories are all furthered through this investigation's exploration of the diverse ways that popular media reinforce ancient mythological precepts.

Downing warns that without positive initiatory models and myths, "we go painfully astray."⁶¹³ Religious and film mythology often provides women's first glimpses of female intimacy, and as I have demonstrated, these depictions are sadly misleading. Chickflicks seldom offer realistic portrayals of heroines coping with increasingly devastating illnesses such as breast and lung cancer or heart disease. Lesbian thriller depictions of murderesses who engage in homoerotic behaviour perpetuate stereotypes of lesbians as pathological and belie their true struggle for social support and recognition. These films thus represent the realm of patriarchal fantasy that looks to benefit from the false depiction of female intimacy as a primary cause of personal and social malaise.

⁶¹³ Downing, "Lesbian Mythology," p. 199.

In her book on women, crime, and punishment, Ann Jones relates the story of a literature student who, depressed by the western narratives she was studying, asked, "Isn't there anything a woman can do but kill herself?" To lighten the mood, Jones replied, "She can kill somebody else."⁶¹⁴

⁶¹⁴ Ann Jones, *Women Who Kill*, Revised ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), p. xiii.

Appendix: Film Details

BAD GIRLS 100min/colour

1994/Jonathan Kaplan/Twentieth Century Fox/USA

BASIC INSTINCT 127min/colour

1992/Paul Verhoeven/Tri-Star Pictures - Corolco Pictures - Le Studio Canal/USA

BEACHES 123min/colour

1988/Garry Marshall/Touchstone Pictures/USA

BETWEEN FRIENDS 100min/colour

1983/Lou Antonio/Robert Cooper Films/USA

BLACK WIDOW 103min/colour

1987/Bob Rafelson/Twentieth Century Fox/USA

BOUND 108min/colour

1996/Andy and Larry Wachowski/Dino De Laurentiis Prod. - Gramercy Pictures - Spelling Films/USA

BOYS ON THE SIDE 117min/colour

1995/Herbert Ross/Le Studio Canal+ - Regency Enterprises - Alcor Films/USA

BUTTERFLY KISS 88min/colour

1994/Michael Winterbottom/CFP - Dan Films/USA

THE CELLULOID CLOSET 102min/colour

1995/Rob Epstein and JeffreyFriedman/Brillstein-Grey Entertainment/USA

LA CEREMONIE 111min/colour

1995/Claude Chabrol/MK2 Productions - Prokino Film Production/France

THE COLOR PURPLE 152min/colour

1985/Steven Spielberg/Warner Bros./USA

DAUGHTER'S OF THE DUST 114min/colour

1991/Julie Dash/Geechee Girls - American Playhouse/USA

DIABOLIQUE 114min/black and white

1955/Henri-Georges Clouzot/Vera Films - Filmsonor/France

DIABOLIQUE 107min/colour

1996/Jermiah S. Chechik/Warner Bros. - Marvin Worth Productions - Morgan Creek Productions/USA

THE DOCTOR 125min/colour

1991/Randa Haines/Silver Screen Partners IV - Touchstone Pictures/USA

DOLORES CLAIBORNE 131min/colour

1995/Taylor Hackford/Castle Rock Entertainment - Columbia Pictures Corp./USA

DRACULA'S DAUGHTER 70min/black and white

1936/Lambert Hillyer/Universal Pictures (aka MCA/Universal Pictures)/USA

EVENING STAR 129min/colour

1996/Robert Harling/Rysher Entertainment - Paramount Pictures/USA

FATAL ATTRACTION 119min/colour

1987/Adrian Lyne/Paramount Pictures/USA

FIRST WIVES CLUB 102min/colour

1996/Hugh Wilson/Paramount Pictures/USA

FRIED GREEN TOMATOES 130min/colour

1991/Jon Avnet/Universal Pictures/USA

FUN 105min/colour

1993/Rafal Sielinski/Greycat Films - Neo Modern Entertainment - Neo Modern/USA

GENTLEMEN PREFER BLONDES 91min/colour

1953/Howard Hawks/Twentieth Century Fox/USA

HEAVENLY CREATURES 99min/colour

1994/Peter Jackson/Wing Nut Films - Fontana Productions - Miramax/New Zealand

THE HUNGER 97min/colour

1983/Tony Scott/MGM (aka MGM-UA)/USA

I SHOT ANDY WARHOL 106min/colour

1996/Mary Harron/Goldwyn/USA-Great Britain

JESUS OF MONTREAL 119min/colour

1989/Denys Arcand/Gerard Mital Productions - Maxfield Products Inc./Canada - France

THE JOY LUCK CLUB 135min/colour
1993/Wayne Wang/Hollywood Pictures/USA

THE KISS 101min/colour
1988/Pen Densham/Tri-Star Pictures - Astral Film Enterprises/USA

THE LAST TEMPTATION OF CHRIST 164min/colour
1988/Martin Scorsese/Universal Pictures (aka MCA/Universal Pictures) - Cineplex
Odeon Films/USA

THE LONG WALK HOME 97min/colour
1990/Richard Pearce/New Visions Pictures/USA

MILDRED PIERCE 11min/black and white
1945/Michael Curtiz/Warner Bros./USA

MORTAL THOUGHTS 104min/colour
1991/Alan Rudolph/Columbia Pictures Corp. - New Visions Entertainment - Polar
Entertainment Corp. - Rufflen Films/USA

MURIEL'S WEDDING 104min/colour
1994/P.J. Hogan/Alliance/Australia

PASSION FISH 135min/colour
1992/John Sayles/Atchafalaya Films/USA

PERSONAL BEST 124min/colour
1982/Robert Towne/Geffen Pictures/USA

POISON IVY 89min/colour
1992/Katt Shea Ruben/MG Entertainment - New Line Cinema/USA

POLICE ACADEMY 95min/colour
1984/Hugh Wilson/Warner Bros./USA

PRESUMED INNOCENT 127min/colour
1990/Alan J. Pakula/Warner Bros. - Mirage - Paramount Pictures/USA

A QUESTION OF SILENCE (DE STILTE ROND CHRISTINE M) 96min/colour
1982/Marleen Gorris/Sigma Films/Netherlands

REGARDING HENRY 107min/colour
1991/Mike Nichols/Paramount Pictures/USA

SINGLE WHITE FEMALE 107min/colour
1992/Barbet Schroeder/Columbia Pictures Corp./USA

SISTER, MY SISTER /89min/colour
1994/Nancy Meckler/NFH Productions/UK

STEEL MAGNOLIAS 118min/colour
1989/Herbert Ross/Tri-Star Pictures/USA

STELLA DALLAS 105min/colour
1937/King Vidor/Goldwyn/USA

TERMS OF ENDEARMENT 132min/colour
1983/James L. Brooks/Paramount Pictures/USA

THELMA AND LOUISE 128min/colour
1991/Ridley Scott/MGM/USA

A THOUSAND ACRES /colour
1997/Jocelyn Moorhouse/Via Rosa Prod. - Prairie Films - Propaganda Films-
Touchstone Pictures - Beacon Communications/USA

VERTIGO 128min/black and white
1958/Alfred Hitchcock/Alfred J. Hitchcock Prod. - Paramount Pictures/USA

WHEN NIGHT IS FALLING 96min/colour
1995/Patricia Rozema/Alliance/Canada

WILD SIDE 96min/colour
1995/Donald Cammell/Wild Side Productions, Inc. - Nu Image/USA

WILD THINGS 107min/colour
1998/John McNaughton/Mandalay Entertainment/USA

Bibliography

- Alpert, Rebecca. "Finding Our Past: A Lesbian Interpretation of the Book of Ruth." In *Reading Ruth: Contemporary Women Reclaim a Sacred Story*, edited by Judith A. Kates and Gail Twersky Reimer, pp. 91-96. New York: Ballantine Books, 1994.
- Arbuthnot, Lucie and Gail Seneca. "Pre-Text and Text in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*." In *Issues In Feminist Film Criticism*, edited by Patricia Erens, pp. 112-125. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990.
- Arthur, Marilyn. "Politics and Pomegranates: An Interpretation of the Homeric Hymn to Demeter." *Arethusa* 10, no. 1 (1977): 7-47.
- Bachofen, J. J. *Myth, Religion, and Mother Right: The Selected Writings of J.J. Bachofen* (Paperback ed.). Translated by R. Manheim. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1973.
- Bell-Metereau, Rebecca. *Hollywood Androgyny*, 2d ed. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993.
- Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. New York: The Viking Press, 1972.
- Berger, Peter L. *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*. New York: Doubleday and Co., 1969.
- Bobo, Jacqueline. "The Color Purple: Black Women as Cultural Readers." In *Female Spectators: Looking at Film and Television*, edited by E. Deirdre Pribram, pp. 90-109. New York: Verso, 1988.
- "Bound," *Lesbian Flicks*.
Source: <http://www.geocities.com/WestHollywood/Heights/8306/bound.html>
- Brasher, Brenda. "Thoughts on the Status of the Cyborg: On Technological Socialization and Its Link to the Religious Function of Popular Culture." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* LIX, no. 4 (Winter, 1996): 809-830.
- Brooten, Bernadette. "Paul's View on the Nature of Women and Female Homoeroticism." In *Immaculate and Powerful: The Female in Sacred Image and Social Reality*, edited by Clarence W. Atkinson, Constance H. Buchanan, and Margaret R. Miles, pp. 61-87. Boston: Beacon Press, 1985.
- _____. *Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996.

- Browne, Ray B., ed. *Rituals and Ceremonies in Popular Culture*. Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1980.
- Bruning, Fred. "A Lousy Deal For Women - And Men." *Maclean's* 104, Issue 32 (Aug 12, 1991): 9.
Source: <http://www.epnet.com/cgi-bin/epwno...cs=10/reccount=48/startrec=21/ft=1>
- Bryant, Darrol M. "Cinema, Religion, and Popular Culture." In *Religion in Film*, edited by John R. May and Michael Bird, pp. 101-114. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1982.
- Cagle, Jess and Ann Thompson. "A Whole New Bawl Game." *Entertainment Weekly*. Issue 354 (Nov. 22, 1996): 43-47. Source: <http://www.epnet.com/cgi-bin/epwno...ecs=10/reccount=15/startrec=1/ft=1>.
- "Canada at the Movies," *Canada and the World Background* 60, no. 4 (1995): 1-4.
Source: <http://www.epnet.com/cgi-bin/epwlu...ecs=10/reccount=18/startrec=1/ft=1>
- Castle, Terry. *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993.
- Chesler, Phyllis. "The Amazon Legacy." In *The Politics of Women's Spirituality: Essays on the Rise of Spiritual Power Within the Feminist Movement*, edited by Charlene Spretnak, pp. 97-113. Garden City, New York: Anchor Press Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1982.
- Chidester, David. "The Church of Coca-Cola, the Fetish of Coca-Cola, and the Potlatch of Rock 'n' Roll: Theoretical Models for the Study of Religion in American Popular Culture." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* LXIV, no. 4 (Winter, 1996): 743-765.
- Chodorow, Nancy. *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1978.
- Christ, Carol. "Why Women Need the Goddess: Phenomenological, Psychological, and Political Reflections." In *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, edited by Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow, pp. 273-287. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979.
- Church, Jennifer Ross. "The Balancing Act of *Fried Green Tomatoes*." In *Vision/Re-Vision: Adapting Contemporary American Fiction by Women to Film*, edited by Barbara Tapa Lupack, pp. 193-209. Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1996.

- Cobb, Kelton. "Reconsidering the Status of Popular Culture in Tillich's Theology of Culture." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* LXIII, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 53-84.
- Cross, Alice. "The Bimbo and the Mystery Woman." In "Should We Go Along For The Ride? A Critical Symposium on Thelma and Louise." *Cineaste* XVIII, no. 4 (Dec. 1991): 32-34.
- Daly, Mary. *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation*, Paperback ed. Boston: Beacon Press, 1985.
- D'Angelo, Mary Rose. "Women Partners in the New Testament," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 6, no. 1 (1990): 65-86.
- Degeneres, Ellen, The "Coming Out" Episode (April 30, 1997).
- Desjardins, Mary. "Meeting Two Queens: Feminist Filmmaking, Identity Politics, and the Melodramatic Fantasy," *Film Quarterly* 48, no. 3 (Spring, 1995), 26-33.
- Doane, Mary Ann. "Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator." In *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*, edited by Patricia Erens, pp. 41-57. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990.
- _____. *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis*. New York: Routledge, 1991.
- Dowell, Pat. "The Impotence of Women." In "Should We Go Along For The Ride? A Critical Symposium on Thelma and Louise." *Cineaste* XVIII, no. 4 (Dec. 1991): 28-30.
- Downing, Christine. *Myths and Mysteries of Same-Sex Love*, Paperback ed. New York: Continuum, 1991.
- _____. "Lesbian Mythology." *Historical Reflections/Reflexions Historiques* 20, no. 2 (1994): 169-199.
- Downing, Marymay. "Pornography as a Subject for Religious Studies: New Directions for the Field of Women and Religion," Diss. University of Ottawa, 1993.
- _____. "For Her, Or Against Her? The Power of Religious Metaphor," *Limited Edition: Voices of Women, Voices of Feminism*, edited by Geraldine Finn, pp. 62-86. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 1993.

- Ebert, Roger. "Basic Instinct." *Chicago Sun-Times*. (March 20, 1992). Source: <http://www.suntimes.com/ebert/ebert-reviews/1992/03/746912.html>.
- Eilberg-Schwartz, Howard. *God's Phallus and Other Problems for Moses, Masculinity, and Monotheism*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1994.
- Ellsworth, Elizabeth. "Illicit Pleasures: Feminist Spectators and *Personal Best*," in *Issues In Feminist Film Criticism*, edited by Patricia Erens, pp. 183-196. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990.
- Erens, Patricia, ed. *Issues In Feminist Film Criticism*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990.
- Ertman, Martha. "Following Her 'Basic Instinct'," *Washington Blade* (Jan. 5, 1992).
- Fischer, Lucy. *Shot/Counter-shot: Film Tradition and Women's Cinema*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989.
- Flagg, Fannie. *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1988.
- Fuchs, Cynthia. "Basic Instinct."
Source: <http://www.inform.umd.edu/EdRes/To...s/FilmReviews/basic-instinct-fuchs>.
- Geertz, Clifford. "Religion as a Cultural System." In *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, edited by Michael Banton, pp. 1-46. London: Tavistock, 1966.
- Gever, Martha, John Greyson, and Pratibha Parmar, eds. *Queer Looks: Perspectives on Lesbian and Gay Film and Video*. Toronto: Between the Lines, 1993.
- Gmelch, George. "Baseball Magic." In *Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion: An Anthropological Study of the Supernatural*, 2d ed., edited by Arthur C. Lehmann and James E. Myers, pp. 295-305. Mountain View, California: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1989.
- Goldenberg, Naomi R. *Resurrecting the Body: Feminism, Religion, and Psychoanalysis* (Paperback revision of *Returning Words to Flesh*, 1990). New York: Crossroads, 1993.
- _____. "What's So Funny About Paternity - Theological Subversion in the Clichettes' Rendition 'Having My Baby'." Unpublished lecture presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion, Washington, November 21, 1993.

- _____. "Reflections on Religion and Culture." Unpublished lecture presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion, Washington, November 22, 1993.
- _____. "Sightings of Maternal Rage and Paternal Love in the Homeric 'Hymn to Demeter'." In *The Long Journey Home: Re-visioning the Myth of Demeter and Persephone for our Time*, edited by Christine Downing, pp. 248-253. Boston: Shambhala Publications Inc., 1994.
- _____. "A Theory of Gender as a Central Hermeneutic in the Psychoanalysis of Religion." In *Hermeneutic Approaches to the Psychology of Religion* (International Series in the Psychoanalysis of Religion, 6), edited by Jacob van Belzen, pp. 65-84. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997.
- Gretton, Viveca and Tom Orman. "Regarding Men: Disease and Affliction in Contemporary Male Melodrama." *cine ACTION* 26/27 (Winter 1992): 114-120.
- Gubar, S. "Mother, Maiden and the Marriage of Death: Women Writers and an Ancient Myth." *Women's Studies* 6 (1979): 301-315.
- Half the Kingdom*. Dir. Francine E. Zuckerman and Roushell Goldstein. Co-produced by Kol Ishah Productions Inc. and Studio D, National Film Board of Canada, 1989.
- Halperin, David. *Saint Foucault: Toward a Gay Hagiography*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Hart, Lynda. *Fatal Women: Lesbian Sexuality and the Mark of Aggression*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994.
- Haskell, Molly. *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies*, 2d ed. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987.
- Holloway, Ronald. *Beyond the Image: Approaches to the Religious Dimension in the Cinema*. Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1974.
- Holmlund, Chris. "Cruisin for a Bruisin': Hollywood's Deadly (Lesbian) Dolls." *Cinema Journal* 34, no. 1 (Fall 1994): 31-51.
- hooks, bell. *reel to real: race, sex, and class at the movies*. New York: Routledge, 1996.
- _____. *killing rage, ending racism*. New York: Henry Holt, 1996.

- Howe, Desson. "Basic Instinct." *Washington Post*. (March 20, 1992). Source: http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-s...deos/basicinstinctrhowe_a0aeaf.htm.
- Hunt, Mary E. "Lovingly Lesbian: Toward a Feminist Theology of Friendship." In *A Challenge to Love: Gay and Lesbian Catholics in the Church*, edited by Robert Nugent, pp. 135-155. New York: Crossroad, 1983.
- _____. *Fierce Tenderness: A Feminist Theology of Friendship*. New York: Crossroad, 1991.
- Jones, Amelia. "'She Was Bad News': Male Paranoia and the Contemporary New Woman" *Camera Obscura* 25-26 (1991): 296-320.
- Jones, Ann. *Women Who Kill*, Revised ed. Boston: Beacon Press, 1996.
- Kael, Pauline. "The Current Cinema." *The New Yorker* (Dec. 12, 1983): 149 - 154.
- Kaplan, Ann E. "The Case of the Missing Mother: Maternal Issues in Vidor's *Stella Dallas*." In *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*, edited by Patricia Erens, pp. 126-136. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990.
- Kates, Judith A. and Gail Twersky Reimer, eds. *Reading Ruth: Contemporary Women Reclaim a Sacred Story*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1994.
- Kempley, Rita. "Fried Green Tomatoes." *The Washington Post* (Jan. 10, 1992). Source: http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-s...reentomatoespg13kempley_a0a28a.htm
- _____. "Basic Instinct," *Washington Post* (March 20, 1992). Source: http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-s...s/basicinstinctrkempley_a0a2a8.htm.
- _____. "Boys on the Side." *The Washington Post* (Feb. 3, 1995). Source: http://www.washingtonpost.com/wps...s/boysonthesiderkempley_c00799.htm
- _____. "'Bound' For Gory," *Washington Post* (Oct. 4, 1996). Source: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-s...le/longterm/review96/boundkemp.htm>.
- LaSalle, Mick. "Love, With 'Boys on the Side' Breakthrough Women's Film." *San Francisco Chronicle* (Feb. 3, 1995). Source <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/arti...cle/archive/1995/02/03/DD57029.DTL>

- Leo, J. "Toxic Feminism on the Big Screen." *US News & World Report* 110, issue 22 (June 10, 1991): 20.
Source: <http://www.epnet.com/cgi-bin/epwno...cs=10/reccount=48/startrec 41/ft=1>
- Luckmann, Thomas. *The Invisible Religion: The Problem of Religion in Modern Society*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1967.
- Marsh, Clive and Gaye Ortiz, eds. *Explorations in Theology and Film: Movies and Meaning*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997.
- Martin, Joel W. and Conrad E. Ostwalt Jr., eds. *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth and Ideology in Popular American Film*. Boulder: Westview Press Inc., 1995.
- Marvin, Carolyn and David W. Ingle. "Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Revisiting Civil Religion." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* LXIV, no. 4 (Winter 1996): 767-780.
- Maxfield, James F. *The Fatal Woman: Sources of Male Anxiety in American Film Noir, 1941-1991*. Cranbury, New Jersey: Associated University Presses, 1996.
- May, John R. and Michael Bird, eds. *Religion in Film*. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1982.
- May, John R. ed. *Image and Likeness: Religious Visions in American Film Classics*. New York/Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1992.
- McAlister, Linda Lopez. "Basic Instinct." For "The Woman's Show," WMNF-FM, Tampa, Florida.
Source: <http://www.inform.umd.edu/EdRes/To...lmReviews/basic-instinct-mcalister>
- _____. "Thelma and Louise." For "The Women's Show," WMNF-FM, Tampa, Florida.
Source: <http://www.inform.umd.edu/EdRes/To...ilmReviews/thelma+louise-mcalister>
- _____. "Bound," For "The Women's Show" WMNF-FM Tampa, Florida (Oct. 19, 1996).
Source: <http://www.inform.umd.edu/Ed Res/To...udies/FilmReviews/bound-mcalister>
- Miles, Margaret R. "Violence Against Women in the Historical Christian West and in North American Secular Culture: The Visual and Textual Evidence." In *Shaping New Vision: Gender and Values in American Culture* (The Harvard Women's Studies in Religion Series, 5), edited by Clarissa W Atkinson, Constance H. Buchanan, and Margaret R. Miles, pp. 11-29. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1987.

- _____. *Seeing and Believing: Religion and Values in the Movies*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1996.
- Morrison, Susan. "Pearl, Hilda, Thelma & Louise: The 'Woman's Film' Revisited." *cineACTION* 30 (Winter 1992): 48-53.
- Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." In *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*, edited by Patricia Erens, pp. 28-40. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990.
- O'Toole, Roger. "Some Good Purpose: Notes on Religion and Political Culture in Canada." In *Models and Myths in Canadian Sociology*, edited by S.D. Berkowitz, pp. 75-109. Toronto: Butterworths, 1984.
- Pateman, Carole. *The Sexual Contract*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988.
- Pellegrini, Ann. "There's No Place Like Home? Lesbian Studies and the Classics." In *Tilting the Tower: Lesbians Teaching Queer Subjects*, edited by Linda Garber, pp. 70-82. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Plaskow, Judith. "The Coming of Lilith: Toward a Feminist Theology," in *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, edited by Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow, pp. 198-209. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979.
- _____. *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism From a Feminist Perspective*, Paperback ed. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991.
- Pratt, Annis. "Demeter, Persephone, and the Pedagogy of Archetypal Empowerment." In *The Long Journey Home: Re-visioning the Myth of Demeter and Persephone For Our Time*, edited by Christine Downing, pp. 149-154. Boston & London: Shambhala, 1994.
- Pryor, Kelli and Sharon Isaak. "Women in Love: Hollywood Has It Both Ways With *Fried Green Tomatoes*." *Entertainment Weekly* (Feb. 28, 1992).
Source: <http://www.epnet.com/cgi-bin/epwno...cs=10/reccount=12/startrec=11/ft=1>
- Rapping, Elayne. "Hollywood's New 'Feminist' Heroines" *Cineaste* XIV, no. 4 (May 1986): 4-9.
- _____. "Liberation in Chains: 'The Woman Question' in Hollywood" *Cineaste* XVII, no. 1 (1989): 4-8

- _____. "Feminism Gets the Hollywood Treatment." In "Should We Go Along For The Ride? A Critical Symposium on Thelma and Louise." *Cineaste* XVIII, no. 4 (Dec. 1991): 30-32.
- Rich, Adrienne. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1976.
- Rich, Ruby B. "Lethal Lesbians." *Village Voice* 40, issue 17 (April 25, 1995).
Source: <http://www.epnet.com/cgi-bin/epwno...cs=10/reccount=59/startrec=21/ft=1>
- Roof, Judith. *Come as You Are: Sexuality and Narrative*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996.
- Ruether, Rosemary. *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1983.
- Rushing, Janice Hocker. "Evolution of 'The New Frontier' in *Alien* and *Aliens*: Patriarchal Co-optation of the Feminine Archetype." In *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film*, edited by Joel W. Martin and Conrad E. Ostwalt, pp. 94-118. Boulder: Westview Press, 1995.
- Russo, Vito. *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies*, Revised ed. New York: Harper&Row, 1987.
- Schmeiser, Peggy. "The Marginalization and Destruction of the Female Body in Popular Women's Films." Unpublished lecture presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion, New Orleans, November 24, 1996.
- _____. "Deathbeds and Destruction: The Fate of the Female Body in Popular Women's Films." Unpublished lecture presented at the 37th Northeastern Anthropological Association Meetings, Montebello, April 12, 1997.
- _____. "Sites of Destruction: The Cinematic Fate of the Lesbian Body." Unpublished lecture presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion, San Francisco, November 24, 1997.
- Schnickel, Richard. "Gender Bender." *Time* 137, issue 25 (June 24, 1991).
Source: <http://www.epnet.com/cgi-bin/epwno...=10/reccount=335/startrec=291/ft=1>
- Schulman, Sarah. "The Movie Management of Rape." In "Should We Go Along For The Ride? A Critical Symposium on Thelma and Louise." *Cineaste* XVIII, no. 4 (Dec. 1991): 34-35.

Shulgasser, Barbara. "The Road to Sisterhood is Wet and Wearing Thin." *San Francisco Examiner* (Feb. 3, 1995).

Source: <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/arti...archive/1995/02/03/WEKEND2383.dtl>

Tasker, Yvonne. "Pussy Galore: Lesbian Images and Lesbian Desire in the Popular Cinema." In *The Good, the Bad, and the Gorgeous: Popular Culture's Romance with Lesbianism*, edited by Diane Hamer and Belinda Budge, pp. 172-183. San Francisco: Pandora, 1994.

Tessier, L.J. *Dancing After the Whirlwind: Feminist Reflections on Sex, Denial, and Spiritual Transformation*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1997.

Tomm, Winnie. "Embodied Spiritual Consciousness: Beyond Psychology." Unpublished lecture presented at the conference "Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and Religion: Two Days of Theory Building" held at the University of Ottawa, March, 1991.

Trible, Phyllis. *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984.

Turim, Maureen. "Gentlemen Consume Blondes." In *Issues In Feminist Film Criticism*, edited by Patricia Erens, pp. 101-111. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990.

Tyler, Lisa. "Mother-Daughter Myth and the Marriage of Death in *Steel Magnolias*." *Film Quarterly* 22, issue 2 (April-June, 1994).

Source: <http://www.epnet.com/cgi-bin/epwno...ecs=10/reccount=15/startrec1/ft=1>.

Vlasopolos, Anca. "The 'Woman's Film' Genre and One Modern Transmutation: *Kramer vs. Kramer*." In *Women and Film*, edited by Janet Todd, pp. 114-129. New York: Holmes & Meier, 1988.

Walker, Bruce. "Bound," *Washington Post* (October 4, 1996). Source: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-s...le/longterm/review96/boundwalk.htm>

Walters, Suzanna Danuta. *Lives Together/Worlds Apart: Mothers and Daughters in Popular Culture*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1992.

Warren, T.S. "Butterfly Kiss" *XPress*.

Weiss, Andrea. *Vampires and Violets: Lesbians in Film*. New York: Penguin Books, 1992.

- Williams, Delores S. *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, 2d ed. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1996.
- Williams, Linda. "A Jury of Their Peers: Marleen Gorris's *A Question of Silence*." In *Multiple Voices in Feminist Film Criticism*, edited by Diane Carson, Linda Dittmar, and Janice R. Welsch, pp. 432-440. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994.
- Wilton, Tasmin, ed. *Immortal, Invisible: Lesbians and the Moving Image*. New York: Routledge, 1995.
- Zylberberg, Sonia. "Woman to Woman: Relationships in the Hebrew Bible," Diss. Concordia University, 1997.