

**Redeeming Sexual Difference:  
*Stigmata, The Messenger* and Luce Irigaray's Bleeding Woman**

**Luciana Ugrina**

*Abstract*

The 1999 film *Stigmata* foregrounds the difficulties and hazards involved in representing a woman as a Christ figure, and the necessity of imagining new ways of understanding gendered identity within Christianity. *The Messenger: The Story of Joan of Arc* (1999) similarly confronts the female body in an attempt to reconfigure the relationship between femininity and the sacred. Considering both films alongside the psycholinguistics of Luce Irigaray surfaces the “bleeding woman,” a figure of lack who paradoxically underwrites and secures that which excludes her – a masculine symbolic. Building on Tina Beattie’s assertions that the sacramentality of the female body in orthodox Catholicism is nonexistent – a result, she argues, of an underdeveloped theology of gender and embodiment – I explore if a way beyond the essentialist predicaments of sexed identity in Christianity might be found in Irigaray’s understanding of the divine.

*To affirm in full positivity the existence and capacities of (at least) two sexes – the project of sexual difference – is to acknowledge two things: first, the failure of the past to provide a space and time for women as women, with the consequence that all forms of prevailing practices and forms of knowledge represent the interests and perspectives of only one sex. Second, linked to this recognition is the necessity, in the future, of providing other ways of knowing, other ontologies and epistemologies that enable the subject's relation to the world, to space and time, to be conceptualized in different terms . . . Irigaray understands this as a becoming beyond the one, beyond the phallic, a becoming in which the all-too-human is understood as the all-too-patriarchal, and the future is beyond recognition, beyond the dualities of the sexes as we know them today and as they existed in the past.<sup>1</sup>*

Elizabeth Grosz, “The Force of Sexual Difference”

[1] The 1999 film *Stigmata* (Rupert Wainwright) dramatizes the experiences of a female stigmatic and Christ figure: Frankie Paige is an ordinary twenty-three-year-old woman who receives the wounds of Christ’s passion. In the course of portraying Frankie’s physical and psychological trial, *Stigmata* illuminates the tensions between the ordinary and the extraordinary, immanence and transcendence, body and spirit. The sometimes contradictory, sometimes cooperative demands of the body and the spirit present a paradox, one that is very much about sexual difference. Considering *Stigmata* alongside the psycholinguistics of Luce Irigaray foregrounds the difficulties and hazards involved in representing a woman as Christ, and the necessity of imagining new ways of understanding gendered identity within Christianity. What emerges quite strongly is the question of female sacramentality and women’s roles –

an issue currently prominent in the Catholic church with regard to the exclusively male priesthood. One of the central arguments barring women from the priesthood involves their supposed inability to symbolize or image Christ, and thus act *in persona Christi* in the Mass. Though it is an ambivalent film, *Stigmata* surfaces moments that cast doubt upon prevailing views of gender in Christianity, which are often based on a reductive biologism or a rigid two-gender model. Like *Stigmata*, *The Messenger: The Story of Joan of Arc* (Luc Besson, 1999) confronts the female body in an attempt to reconfigure the relationship between femininity and the sacred. *The Messenger* figures the female body as an obstacle, especially in an unusual scene where Joan of Arc transforms into a sort of priest. Both films invoke the “bleeding woman,” a figure of lack conceived as a support rather than as autonomous, who paradoxically underwrites and secures that which excludes her – a masculine symbolic.

### Spectacular Transformations

[2] *Stigmata* chronicles the meeting of Frankie (Patricia Arquette) and Father Andrew Kiernan (Gabriel Byrne). Kiernan is sent to Brazil by the Vatican to investigate the miraculous events surrounding the death of Father Alameida, a priest and stigmatic who discovered a lost gospel thought to record the actual words of Jesus. Set in Pittsburgh, Rome, and Belo Quinto, a village in southeast Brazil, *Stigmata* engages several seemingly discordant pairings: the rural and the industrial-modern; the mundane and the spectacular; the profane and the sacred; humanness and the divine. The most prominent of these oppositions is embodied by Frankie, who receives a rosary from her traveling mother – what seems to be an ordinary souvenir from Belo Quinto – and soon after becomes a stigmatic. In scene after scene of violent imagery she re-experiences the wounds of Christ during his passion: the flagellation, the crowning with thorns, the nailing to the cross. Here we have, then, a troubling illustration – a woman who images Christ.

[3] The problems posed by a female Christ figure evoke all the contradictions and opportunities that questions of immanence/transcendence, particularity/universality put into play. Significantly, these predicaments are mirrored in recent non-theological discussions about gendered subjectivity. Much has been written on the limits and possibilities posed by feminist theoretical frameworks that emphasize the particular, such as those shaped by poststructuralism, and others that conceive of the category “woman” in part through claims to the universal, such as sexual difference feminism. The work of Judith Butler, for example, exemplifies a poststructuralist framework in which gendered identity is viewed as unfixed, and thus freed from the binary; by contrast Luce Irigaray and Elizabeth Grosz argue that questions of ontological sexual difference might help usher in a culture of differences.<sup>2</sup> Though often conceived as conflicting, I want to argue that these projects are not radically dissimilar but rather coextensive and cooperative. Questions of “sexual difference” are often construed as essentialist, but the work of Irigaray and Grosz helps to distinguish between a sexual *binary*, and the more promising and useful notion of sexual *difference*. Such a distinction salvages both the category of woman and feminist politics – which are not guaranteed and often threatened when applying a “pure” or “high” poststructuralist lens alone – without reifying the category of woman, thus allowing for differences to flourish.

[4] Like many contemporary popular films, *Stigmata* navigates these tensions of the universal and the particular through what I call the spectacular transformation – dramatic, highly charged moments that depict ontological metamorphoses where the shifting out of one gender category into something new (occasioned in this case by the depiction of a female Christ figure) involves an extraordinary spectacle.<sup>3</sup> In *Stigmata* the spectacular transformation occurs in jarring, disorienting scenes when Frankie experiences crucifixion. These moments of terror (on a subway train, in the bathtub, at a nightclub) feature Frankie's screams (and other unidentified shrieking), violent thrashings, open wounds, the horrified cries of onlookers, and perhaps most predominantly, the limitless flow of blood. Despite attempts to fashion Frankie into a Christ figure, these sequences reinforce the conceptualization of femininity in terms of embodiment alone. In other words, an element of transcendence – spiritual or otherwise, achieved through a heroic perseverance to move beyond one's circumstances – is absent. This becomes particularly clear as the true source of Frankie's stigmata is revealed.

[5] *Stigmata* is not all spectacle, however. The death and funeral of Father Alameida in Belo Quinto, recent Marian apparitions, and a statue that weeps tears of blood are set against the backdrop of hundreds, perhaps thousands of Brazilian faithful who have gathered to pray, seek healing, and witness these extraordinary events; they are the poor, the sick, the blind, and the paralysed. These faithful are contrasted with the ostensibly secular urban dwellers among whom Frankie walks, yet *Stigmata* works to establish a parallel among these throngs, among Frankie – an ordinary, struggling woman – and the thousands of ordinary, struggling poor in rural Brazil. In this way Frankie seems to image Christ, or at least index the body of Christ conceived as the people of God. This association is literalized in a pivotal scene depicting Frankie's transcription of a divine message – what turns out to be Father Alameida's revolutionary translations. The surfacing of this message attracts a demonic presence that seeks to destroy Frankie through a satanic possession involving whippings, stab wounds, and copious blood. Having recently befriended Frankie, Father Kiernan comes to her aid and transports her to the lodgings of Father Durning, a local priest. Frankie wanders to the adjoining church where she sees an elaborate depiction of the Calvary scene, dominated by a large crucifix. Marked by wounds on her forehead and wrists, she is dwarfed by this imposing panorama. Here again we have a transitory meeting of the ordinary and the extraordinary that converges in the person of Frankie, who mirrors Christ wound for wound – the camera moves from Christ's crown of thorns to Frankie's slashed forehead, from Christ's nailed hands to Frankie's bandaged wrists. Frankie seems to image Christ in ways that move beyond the spectacularized violence of earlier scenes; but the stronger emphasis of Frankie's corporeal, sexuate femaleness, ambivalently represented in terms of a perverse maternity, precludes her from fully occupying the role of stigmatic/Christ figure. Indeed, Frankie's suspicion that she may be pregnant coincides with a surreal sequence in which a woman veiled in blue, uncannily resembling both Frankie and the Virgin Mary, holds a crying infant wrapped in red swaddlings. The woman offers the baby to her, and as Frankie approaches she drops the baby into oncoming traffic. This episode, like many others in the film, bears the marks of the supernatural and is perhaps demonically induced (which Father Kiernan confirms is common for stigmatics), for when Frankie rushes to the scene the baby and the woman are

nowhere in sight. Later Frankie learns that she is not pregnant, but perhaps may have been – a mystery that remains unresolved in the film.

[6] The dilemma posed by Frankie's female status is the stumbling block that *Stigmata* wants to overcome, but cannot – in part because the film seems more intent on utilizing showy special effects and editing, but also because the film inevitably engages Catholicism's own internal contradictions regarding the relationship between holiness and the female body. It is not entirely surprising, then, that the quandaries of sexual difference, embodiment, and the maleness of Christ are alleviated in a neat resolution through a series of narrative devices: we learn that Frankie is an accidental stigmatic, having attained her status not because of her proximity to God or through suffering extraordinary trials of faith – signs that have traditionally marked the “true” stigmatic. Rather, Frankie channels the soul of the recently deceased Father Alameida, the beloved Belo Quinto priest and stigmatic who translated the lost gospel. It is Father Alameida's rosary, stolen and later sold at a tourist market, that Frankie receives from her mother. The rosary carries Father Alameida's soul and transfers it to Frankie, such that Frankie's stigmata do not emerge from her own sacred corporeality; instead her body is a sort of receptacle or backdrop against which Father Alameida might continue his mission. The male inflection of Frankie's voice in these scenes underscores her function as a mouthpiece.

### **Female Sacramentality and the Bleeding Woman**

[7] The channelling function of Frankie and her association with a perverse maternity can be understood in terms of Tina Beattie's assertions that the sacramentality of the female body in orthodox Catholicism is nonexistent; women occupy the space of non-being. In *New Catholic Feminism: Theology and Theory*, Beattie navigates the thorny, often paradoxical doctrine that subtends the traditional male priesthood and the sacrament of the Eucharist, finding there a homoeroticism that renders the female body obsolete – a result, she argues, of an underdeveloped theology of gender and embodiment in which femininity and the female body are conceived in ways that enable man's transcendence, to the exclusion of woman's transcendence. However, this state of affairs did not always define Catholicism, for Beattie points to early patristic writers and mystics who questioned ancient philosophy's privileged masculine subject. In spite of this, “from Gregory to Balthasar, western man in his ancient and modern incarnations never has been entirely at home in the Catholic Church.”<sup>4</sup> Beattie discerns in such discomfort an explanation for the production of femininity within Christianity in deeply reductive terms – as pure immanence (opposed to masculinity's transcendence), as nature (versus masculinity's language and culture). These demarcations require that masculinity struggle, in an adversarial sense, against that which it is not, against the constant threat of incursion by femininity. This resistance is visible in Father Kiernan, who is continually tempted throughout the film – by prostitutes who linger at the outskirts of the Vatican, and most especially by Frankie. During her demonic possession, Frankie attempts to seduce Kiernan; in his refusal of her advances, Kiernan not only triumphs over temptation but defends himself against all that femininity is, and thus delineates his maleness – a maleness that is still rendered unstable and ambiguous by the very sexual hierarchies that underwrite his status as a priest. In this way Kiernan rises above his corporeality.

For Frankie this option is not available, for she functions as the very ground against which masculinity might reach holiness, the coarse reality of fleshly existence that must be transcended. Situated alongside this injunction to repudiate femininity is the impulse to occupy or inhabit woman, in order to mediate the homoeroticism installed by the same exclusionary mechanisms that sideline women. That Frankie is also the site from which Alameida issues his prophetic pronouncements is uncannily echoed in Beattie's evaluation of the ways in which Catholicism (here she includes Roman Catholicism, Orthodox Christianity, and to some extent High Anglicanism) evokes a profound unease in the male subject: "Catholic man seeks his home – seeks to make 'her' his home, not only in order to crawl back inside her womb, but in order to become her, to evict her and colonize her body, the better to legitimate the forbidden love he feels for the bridegroom."<sup>5</sup>

[8] Beneath these psychodynamically-fraught layers of ambivalence, *Stigmata* uncovers a register of violence that differs markedly from the rest of the film; it is conveyed most clearly through the framing of Frankie's stigmatic suffering against a statue in the Belo Quinto church that weeps tears of blood. This statue, a likeness of the Virgin Mary, is revered by the local people and thus draws the attention of Father Kiernan, sent to Brazil by the Vatican to investigate the appearance of Mary on the side of a building near Belo Quinto. Not unlike Frankie's channelling function, the statue's miraculous tears of blood are shown to originate with Father Alameida (the statue begins to weep on the day of his death). Both Frankie and Mary, then, are stigmatics by proxy, mouthpieces for an "original" messenger who transmits the true teachings of Jesus. In these fragments, so very brief one might miss them amid the spectacular violence, both Mary and Frankie are similarly conceived in terms of an iconographic, maternal femininity marked by tears and the flow of blood. In several scenes the image of a bleeding Mary (relatively unusual in the compendium of Marian images) mirrors the blood that falls across Frankie's face. Conveyed through an emphatic crosscutting, Mary and Frankie are meant to be taken as doubles, as a feminine pair. The bleeding that occurs in these twinned scenes is now presented as a gendered bleeding, specific to women. Juxtaposed against Alameida's occupation of Frankie, this bleeding is no longer a supernatural novelty. It is a brief exposure of woman's position as lack in relation to holiness and the divine, symbolized by blood that is not the result of true stigmata but rather the result of a violence. It is perhaps the film's most trenchant revelation, for it reveals that if a woman cannot image Christ – despite even the best intentions – it is due to this dimension of unacknowledged violence, where a sexual binary obscures the nuanced possibilities of sexual difference.

[9] *Stigmata*'s moments of violence and blood bring to mind the experiences of another bleeding woman – those of the female analysand of Luce Irigaray's "Belief Itself." A critical reading of Freud's famous little Ernst and his consoling *fort-da* game (and of Jacques Derrida's reading of this scenario), the essay meditates on sexual difference, risk, and belief by means of a distinctly Christian framework: Christ, God the Father, the Eucharist, angels, and devils all figure prominently. The central motif involves a female patient in psychoanalysis who reveals to Irigaray (herself an analyst) an unusual, recurring event: "At the point in the mass when they, the (spiritual) father and son, are reciting together the ritual words of the consecration, saying, 'This is my body, this is my blood,' I bleed."<sup>6</sup> Irigaray reads this woman's

bleeding, clearly imbued with religious imagery, in terms of little Ernst's game (which on the surface has nothing to do with God or religious belief): the boy's anxious desire to master concealment (*fort*) and reappearance (*da*), perhaps due to his mother's absence, is evidenced in the predictable throwing and retrieval of a toy spool tied to a string. Irigaray links the two accounts by surfacing the dimensions of belief inherent in the *fort-da* game: "The most important *fort-da* – as you know, even, or especially when you refuse to believe it – refers, past the mother's presence, in the mother, beyond-veil, to the presence of God, beyond the sky, beyond the visual horizon."<sup>7</sup> The appeal of *fort-da*, then, lies in the simulation of a wholeness or a completeness, a union with God – but one that is controlled and without risk.

[10] In tying together these narratives, Irigaray demonstrates that the object of belief is not neutral but deeply gendered. That is, Irigaray asks us to consider who underwrites belief, what is sacrificed in producing the illusory consolations of extrasymbolic plenitude symbolized by the child's game. She suggests that Ernst's reassuring compulsion, perhaps like all language games, involves the controlled manifestation of a presence that is in actuality no presence at all: "Ernst, the son, believes perhaps that, in his first language game, he holds his mother. She has no place there. She subsists before language as the woman who gives her flesh and blood, and beyond language as she who is stripped of a matrix/womb."<sup>8</sup> Irigaray is clear that this chimera of the mother depends on a silent, unacknowledged, indeed violent denial of the true otherness of woman – of her autonomy, a state of being distinct from functioning as a support for masculinity. Thus the mother, the woman whose true difference has not yet been allowed to flourish, bleeds. Juxtaposing little Ernst's ritual of belief with the sacrificial aspects of the Roman Catholic Eucharist in which Christ's self-sacrifice atones for humanity's sin, Irigaray offers an explanation for the female analysand's curious bleeding: "[T]he stake in the game is split between him and her. Both of them bleeding, the one openly, the other secretly . . . Together he and the Father organize the world, bless the fruits of the earth, identify them with their body and blood, and in this way effect the communion between the units of the people that have been neutered, at least apparently."<sup>9</sup> Here Irigaray draws a connection between Ernst's induction into the masculine symbolic, underwritten by the excluded feminine, and those aspects of Christianity that do not attend to the sacredness of the female body. The result of this repudiation of femininity is the literal sacrifice of women: "No one must see that it is they, the wives and mothers, who are being offered up in communion here, who effect the communion, that, like the earth and its fruits, it is the body and blood especially of virgin women that are being sacrificed to that intermale society."<sup>10</sup>

[11] Read against Irigaray's "Belief Itself," *Stigmata*'s bleeding woman signifies something other than a female approximation of Christ. Frankie's bleeding, especially when viewed alongside Mary's bleeding, and in light of Frankie's inability to embody holiness, announces that the sexual indifference of much Christian doctrine and theology – its neglect of the gendered aspects of immanence and the continual alignment of femininity with the body alone – prevents women from acquiring a sacramentality that might allow something like their imaging of Christ, an imaging that would transform doctrine and theology concerning women's roles in the church and beyond. Such an imaging also has the potential to initiate deeper discussions regarding church teachings on homosexuality and reproductive rights.

Returning to Irigaray's analogy, the masculinist aspects of violent sacrifice embedded in dominant understandings of the Catholic communion might be replaced with a view of the Eucharist that integrates more deeply the implications of sexual difference in all of its embodied-ness and immanence – notions not inconsistent with the sacrament. Christ's death, then, involves not so much a masculine sacrificial atonement for humanity's sin as it does a redeeming faithfulness to his (and our) incarnation. Irigaray suggests something similar when she questions the meanings assigned to Christ's violent death. She insists that "[t]he cross signals the way that certain powers refused [Christ's] message. Christ's own responsibility for the crucifixion is limited to his being faithful to his incarnation."<sup>11</sup> In being true to his corporeality, his gendered corporeality, Christ redeems not only humanity in a general sense, but also sexual indifference – the hierarchical binary and its fictions.

### Angels and Saints

[12] *Stigmata's* bleeding women suggest that such an understanding of sexual difference (where one sex is no longer sacrificed for the other) actually participates in the project of undoing the hierarchical male-female binary, and thus is not so easily cast aside for its presumed essentialism. Sexual difference, then, is an antidote to theologies of indifference. But what *is* difference in this context? When advancing sexual difference in this way, it is important to emphasize that it is not essentialism; it does not claim some "natural," unyielding characteristics for men and women. In fact, Irigaray's use of this concept resists identifying beforehand a specific content with regard to what femininity and masculinity will be like in a culture of true sexual difference. Rather, sexual difference is the precondition for autonomy – for that which enables true encounters with the other – and for what Irigaray frequently references as "becoming." Elizabeth Grosz describes this in almost utopian terms: "Sexual difference is that which has yet to take place, and thus exists only in virtuality, in and through a future anterior, Irigaray's preferred tense for writing, the only tense that openly addresses the question of the future without pre-empting it in concrete form or in present terms. Sexual difference does not yet exist, and it is possible that it has never existed . . . sexual difference is entirely of the order of the surprise, the encounter with the new . . . it is an event yet to occur, an event strangely out of time, for it does not have a time: and it is clear that its time may never come."<sup>12</sup>

[13] Frankie's final transformation gestures to the future-oriented quality of Irigarayan sexual difference – almost. In the film's climactic scenes, Father Kiernan and his colleagues seek to prevent the corrupt Cardinal Houseman from destroying Father Alameida's groundbreaking translations. Houseman arranges for an exorcism of the evil spirit that possesses Frankie, hoping to thereby suppress Father Alameida's radical translations once and for all. During the course of the violent exorcism, a fire erupts; it is presumably set by the demon that exits Frankie's body. Semi-conscious and weeping tears of blood, Frankie becomes engulfed in flames, but Father Kiernan arrives and takes her to Father Durning's garden. Although it is left ambiguous in the original cut, Frankie dies and is reborn in the director's alternate ending. Cloaked in a white sheet and no longer bleeding, she is a new sort of creature – a luminous angel. Shot in a dissolve, Frankie slowly moves among the garden's life-sized statues of St. Francis of Assisi

and the Virgin Mary. The camera situates Frankie with these holy figures in such a way that an association emerges among St. Francis (himself unconventionally gendered), Frankie (her name a version of “Francis”), and the Virgin Mary.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, a bird flies to Frankie and rests in her hands; the pose is similar to the St. Francis statue. All three are somehow human, and yet not. This mystery and inscrutability, however, eventually succumbs to a virgin/whore dichotomy. Where Frankie was once a temptation for Father Kiernan, now, at the edge of death, she is a desexualized angel. When Frankie and Father Kiernan kiss just before she dies, it is as if Kiernan himself inaugurates her newfound ethereal purity, signifying his triumph over sexual temptation and perfidious femininity. But in “Belief Itself,” Irigaray indicates that the angel is beyond all binaries, including the virgin/whore binary. She situates them in Ernst’s *fort-da* game, envisioning them as coming from the beyond, from the place of plenitude that Ernst yearns to master. The angel is in many ways similar to Irigaray’s “sensible transcendental” – airy and luminous yet substantial, angels embody (in ways that reconceive embodiment) immanence and transcendence at once.<sup>14</sup> Through the angel (or rather angels, for Irigaray conceives them most brilliantly and suggestively in a couple), Irigaray gestures to the as-yet-unimagined, perhaps unimaginable flourishing of identity that might occur with the advent of true sexual difference. Invoking the two cherubs in Exodus who are positioned on either side of the ark of the covenant, facing one another, the paired angels are “neither like nor other, they guard and await the mystery of a divine presence that has yet to be made flesh.”<sup>15</sup> Framing a becoming that is contingent upon some unseen, transcendent Other, these angels are “of a different sex,” and yet at the same time they function as exemplars of how masculinity and femininity, men and women – conceived, mysteriously, as both alike and different – might exist as both fleshly and divine, in ways that exceed the phallogocentric symbolic: “Between them the flesh holds back and flows forth before any mastery can be exercised over it, or after a *fort-da* far more sophisticated than the reel, a *fort-da* of the possibility of presence and of sharing in something divine that cannot be seen but can be felt, underlying all incarnation.”<sup>16</sup>

[14] For Irigaray this sense of true sexual difference is not a rigid codification of sex norms but rather the precondition to a dazzling scenario, illustrated by two angels whose simultaneous difference and similarity creates the conditions for prodigious possibilities to emerge. Ruminating on the contours of a divinized gender through the figure of Joan of Arc, Marina Warner also calls upon the angel: “Joan was using male apparel to appear sexless, rather than male, to appear not-female, rather than female. She was not in disguise – everybody knew that she was Joan la Pucelle, the magic virgin. Female in body but not in spirit – her dress signified her abjuration of the weakness of femininity, both physical and spiritual. Her predecessors in this denial of gender were the angels, who in representations of her time were highly androgynous in appearance.”<sup>17</sup> Though Warner aims to envision how divinized gender might be conceived, she reinscribes the same sexual indifference that Irigaray warns against in her own invocation of angels. For Irigaray sameness (here, androgyny) must be paired with difference: in the case of the angels, they are neither the same nor other. Like *Stigmata, The Messenger: The Story of Joan of Arc* (1999) considers sexual difference alongside religious transcendence through the representation of another unconventional female figure – the woman warrior. The film is a re-telling of the popular historical account of Joan of Arc, a French girl from the small village of Domrémy who, dressed in

military garb and fully engaging in battle, led English-occupied France to victory during the Hundred Years' War. The film fictionalizes for Joan a traumatic past whose far-reaching consequences extend deep into her being in ways that are analogous to *Stigmata's* handling of corporeality and femininity. Like *Stigmata's* replication of orthodox Catholicism's ambivalent culture/nature, mind/body binaries, *The Messenger* similarly evacuates the possibility of a female sacramentality; here it is through the profound irrationality of madness. In both cases, women are too close to their bodies to achieve transcendence. Indeed, *The Messenger's* Joan is immersed in her psychic dysfunction, initiated by a childhood ordeal. The film conjures a traumatic scene in which the young Joan witnesses her older sister's murder and rape by a soldier during an attack on their village by the English. This event, graphically presented, is the defining catalyst that transforms the girl into the warrior. Like Frankie Paige's transformations, Joan's do not move her beyond the confines of sexual indifference. Overwhelmed by unyielding binaries of past and present, rationality and insanity, her dramatic re-invention is attributed to madness rather than a self-inaugurated ascension beyond binary femininity.

[15] Situated against these intractable binaries is the brief intimation of a female genealogy, the repression of which is coextensive with the film's pronounced depiction of violence. Considering Luce Irigaray's attention to female genealogies, Luisa Muraro cites the trial of Joan of Arc as exemplary of the erasure of women's relatedness, conceived both horizontally and vertically. She identifies in the trial "a renewed attack on the ancient female genealogies (which still survived underground) by the triumphant religion of the father."<sup>18</sup> Muraro's reading of the trial highlights Joan's reproduction of ancient female genealogies through the Church's officially sanctioned channels, specifically through her devotion to St. Catherine and St. Margaret.<sup>19</sup> This tension between the representation of female genealogies and the religion of the father is borne out in *The Messenger*; but it competes with another, more encompassing narrative strand that maps Joan's religiosity in terms of her psychic distress. On one level the film reworks simplistic conceptions of faith that are opposed to (masculine) reason – faith as a manifestation of (feminine) passivity, unquestioned and unmediated. Here the model for authentic belief is not a presumably gentle and acquiescent femininity (as it sometimes appears in Victor Fleming's 1948 *Joan of Arc*, for example). Joan's spiritual struggle is fraught with doubt and conflict. Yet running alongside this consideration of gender and faith – itself often reductive and one-dimensional – are glimpses of female genealogies and their possibilities, brief fragments that are overwhelmed in the end by the larger narrative drive that emphasizes Joan's psychic imbalance.

[16] Prior to her sister Catherine's murder and rape, Joan is portrayed as a carefree and innocent girl. After a visit with her local priest in confession Joan is joyful and euphoric, for the priest confirms the authenticity of her heavenly voices. Joan's connection to nature and the cycles of life is firmly established as she prances ecstatically through fields of poppies and lavender, runs with a flock of sheep, splashes through a creek. These scenes contrast sharply with the dark austerity of the confessional, and with the violence of war that abruptly follows: a band of English soldiers has set fire to her village, plundering and murdering. Through a crack in the closet door where she hides, Joan watches as English soldiers storm their home. In a deeply disturbing sequence a soldier seizes Catherine, stabs her through

the stomach, and rapes her. Soon afterward, Joan's psychic trauma turns into revenge, as evidenced in her next confession to her priest where she expresses hatred for the soldiers. In an attempt to comfort Joan and redirect her grief, the priest suggests that God took her sister because one day she herself may be called to serve God in a special way. From this point forward Joan's goal of driving the English out of France is her constant obsession.

[17] Signalling her metamorphosis from girl to warrior, Joan cuts her hair. The scene is perhaps paradigmatic of many cinematic female transformations in which the removal of one's formerly "feminine" locks coincides with a radical shift in gendered subjectivity.<sup>20</sup> Occurring years after her sister's death, the scene is imbued with Joan's psychic imbalance: crazily grabbing at chunks of hair in a fit of rage, she shears them off with her sword. The next day on the battlefield Joan's histrionic, hyperbolic warriorhood is on display; eyes bulging, shrieking madly, she leads the soldiers into battle. Her faith (signalled earlier by the ebullient nature scenes, for example) is subsumed and dispersed by the film's commentary on violence and grief: it becomes one aspect of a larger story in which trauma and anger are cast in terms of psychic dis-ease, the result of one individual woman's tragic experience of violence. This transformation from conventional femininity to something unconventional (not unlike the spectacular transformations in *Stigmata*) is presaged by one of the film's more memorable sequences involving Joan's intense religiosity. After her sister has been buried, Joan asks her parents to take her to a priest, of whom she asks permission to receive the Eucharist rather than wait until the age appointed by the Church. Later that night Joan secretly escapes to the church alone. She approaches the altar, opens the tabernacle, and removes the chalice into which she pours the wine. Raising the chalice to the crucifix above her, she pronounces her own words of consecration – "I want to be at one with you now" – and consumes the wine, its contents spilling brightly red over her face. This scene, in effect, depicts a female celebrating the Mass. Joan's "I want to be at one with you now" opens out the meaning of the Eucharist in ways similar to Irigaray's critique in "Belief Itself"; here the male twosome is no longer primary, and sacrifice is refigured within the terms of sustenance and nurturing. In its critique of Catholicism's exclusively male priesthood, *The Messenger* suggests that one source of Joan's anger might be external to her, rooted in the violence with which women in the symbolic – in this case, the symbolic of the official Roman Catholic Church – are excised from both the altar and from the celebration that occurs between and among men. On one level, Joan rages against one particularly devastating event: the rape and murder of her sister. But on another level her fury is a response to the ways in which mother, daughter, and sister are subject to separation and evisceration, a series of violent exclusions that register historically in countless ways. Nevertheless, this image of Joan at the altar is firmly located within the film's overarching exploration of Joan of Arc's fictionalized mental imbalance. Joan's private celebration of the Eucharist does not establish a female sacramentality that exceeds the familiar equation of femininity with irrationality. Her urgency in praying over and consuming the wine conveys an impulsiveness and a lack of reverence that further marginalizes femininity from the sacred. When the wine runs down Joan's face and neck, not unlike blood – positioning Joan as another bleeding woman – we cannot help but remember the previous scenes' violent deaths, presumably the source of Joan's insanity. This alignment of femininity and insanity, like the emphasis of Frankie's status as all-too-fleshy woman, blocks the

possibility of a female sacramentality. *The Messenger's* linkage of the past with Joan's present-day adult transformations results in the circumscription of femininity, and simultaneously depicts Joan's religiosity in terms of madness – thereby forestalling any redefinition of the bonds among mothers, daughters, and sisters.

### **Sexual Difference and Beyond**

[18] But even if Joan's presumed insanity did not predominate in *The Messenger*, its exaltation of a female-centred, nature-based religion – which represents the film's somewhat meagre efforts to establish a female sacramentality – threatens to succumb to essentialism. Cynthia Eller describes the dangers of such a position, arguing that the often-celebrated but historically dubious notion of a matriarchal prehistory in which women were once the centre of social organizations, honoured as priestesses for their fertility and for imaging the Goddess, only to be supplanted by a patriarchal takeover, is most likely historically inaccurate.<sup>21</sup> One might read a similar dynamic running through *The Messenger*: Joan's moments of joyful spiritual transcendence are strategically framed against the lush backdrop of northern France in spring, with Joan presiding at the centre of this fertile splendour. This is very much a nature-based spirituality, one that is deemed superior to Catholicism's perceived legalism. It recalls current-day gynocratic and feminist ecological movements such as Wiccan and pagan spiritualities, aspects of which tend to overlap with the matriarchal prehistory myth. Eller cautions against an uncritical acceptance of such associations, for they tend to reiterate the radical separateness of masculinity and femininity and consign female identity to the finite realms of fertility, childbearing, mothering, menstruation, and closeness to nature. While many feminists valorize and celebrate these spheres, for Eller feminist matriarchalists fall into the trap of "difference feminism," which views women's roles and functions as special and distinct from (perhaps better than) those of men: "[T]o the extent that a woman becomes the embodiment of 'the feminine,' she gains an archetypal identity but loses a human one."<sup>22</sup>

[19] Returning to "Belief Itself," one might categorize Luce Irigaray's thoughts on the bleeding woman as emerging from within a matriarchalist perspective. After all, the female analysand's hemorrhaging is intimately associated with her reproductive organs; and Ernst's chimerical mother, judging from Irigaray's words, seems something of an archetypal figure, for she "subsists before language as the woman who gives her flesh and blood." Complicating these paradoxical claims is the relatively recent emergence of women's ordination movements in the Catholic church, which to some degree (perhaps unavoidably) echoes the language of feminist matriarchalists. For instance, despite Tina Beattie's criticism of "Catholic man," she argues that a rich resource for transformation lies within the Catholic tradition, in part due to its attention to materiality and embodiment: "What was thoroughly disavowed by Protestantism was the sacramental, gendered imagery associated with Catholicism, including its sacramental priesthood, its potent devotion to the Virgin Mother of God, its organic, maternal ecclesiology, and its lavish devotional language of spiritual fecundity and desire."<sup>23</sup> Beattie proposes a "maternal priesthood" that would "give corporeal expression to that which is currently repressed, hidden and denied in the expression of Catholic spirituality, thus liberating a new form of sacramental energy

that derives its communicative power from the liturgical expression of what is negated and denied in our social interactions.”<sup>24</sup> Beattie does not hesitate to assert that the female priest will differ from the male priest; she will be a maternal priest but not necessarily an archetype: “She is not the Mother, just as he is not the Father. She does not need to be a mother, any more than he needs to be a father. She is a sexual body, a graced body, enacting a presence beyond herself.”<sup>25</sup> Here, the way beyond sexual difference and all of its essentialist predicaments might be found in a sort of detour or excursion *through* sexual difference, toward a culture in which differences might flourish.

[20] In light of Eller’s caveat and Beattie’s promising maternal priest, *The Messenger’s* version of a female priest reinscribes the exclusions that it ostensibly aims to overcome. However, the bleeding woman – or girl, in this case – once again surfaces as paradigmatic of a rhetorical violence. From an Irigarayan perspective this scene is perhaps appropriate for its failure to envision a suitably effective female priest (not unlike *Stigmata’s* failure to imagine a female stigmatic), and for foregrounding instead the bleeding woman. This turn *toward* sexual difference might seem like a step backward. But Irigaray believes that if sexual indifference is to be eliminated, we must first acknowledge that the bleeding woman exists. Embracing certain well-intentioned strategies without this acknowledgement – such as modeling female priests upon a male model of priesthood – may further entrench women’s non-being.<sup>26</sup> In “Equal to Whom,” Irigaray seems to dismiss altogether the possibility of priesthood for women: “[W]hat interest can women have in being disciples or priests at all? The important thing is for them to find their own genealogy, the necessary condition for their identity.”<sup>27</sup> Irigaray’s understanding of such a genealogy seems to resemble what Eller categorizes as a dangerous myth. Consider Irigaray’s language: “In the beginning divine truth was vouchsafed to women and passed on from mother to daughter. These ages of the divine accompanied the fertility of the earth, its flowers and fruit, and did not dissociate the human and the divine, body and mind, the natural and the spiritual.”<sup>28</sup>

[21] It is a tricky matter to take these words at face value, for Irigaray’s understanding of sexed identity – like Beattie’s maternal priest – goes beyond the essentialist leanings of matriarchalist feminism in anticipating (somewhat prophetically, in Irigaray’s case) both the possibilities and the limits of poststructuralism, and the need to remain with – and in some cases, return to – the question of sexual difference. Indeed, she has stated that “[s]exual difference is one of the major philosophical issues, if not the issue, of our age.”<sup>29</sup> In her later works Irigaray increasingly links this attention to sexual difference with divinity, suggesting provocatively that “God” or “a god” is required in order to posit a gender. In “Divine Women,” Irigaray writes that “[h]aving a God and becoming one’s gender go hand in hand. God is the other that we cannot be without.”<sup>30</sup> But this God is not the traditionally masculine God the Father; rather, “[a] *female* God is still to come.”<sup>31</sup> Penelope Deutscher helps contextualize Irigaray’s preoccupation with female genealogies through an explanation of her notion of this female divine. Irigaray extols the possibilities of female genealogies as the means by which women might navigate both body and spirit, immanence and transcendence, and thereby throw off the tomb of language that identifies them with their corporeality alone. Deutscher describes Irigaray’s understanding of a female genealogy or “feminine genre” as “the collective of feminine identities in an open-ended process of becoming.”<sup>32</sup>

For Irigaray, the idea of a feminine genre is interchangeable with a feminine divine; such a divine functions as an infinite horizon against which women might situate themselves so as to promote non-appropriative relations with the other. Deutscher illustrates this scenario: “Any woman would always be involved concurrently in self-other and in self-divine relations. She would always be situated on both axes, horizontal and vertical . . . Any relationship a woman has, either with another woman or with a man, would be mediated by the field of her relations with other women.”<sup>33</sup> In this way, Irigaray’s female genealogy is the precondition to transcendence, “occurring between men and women in a culture of sexual difference.”<sup>34</sup>

[22] This account of sexual difference, where women are positioned as both finite and infinite by means of their feminine genre, is another way of speaking of the divine: sexual difference and the divine are interchangeable. In fact, Deutscher depicts Irigarayan sexual difference in terms of wonder and mystery; it substitutes for man’s wonder in contemplating God. This sense of an almost willed not-knowing is in line with Irigaray’s ethic of non-appropriative, non-narcissistic relations with the other. It brings to mind the future-oriented angels of “Belief Itself,” who illustrate a utopian mode of gendered self-other relations. Perhaps this is the defining element missing from matriarchalist feminism: a recognition of sexual indifference that simultaneously envisions the possibility of a future in which difference and sexed identity – body and spirit, self and other – exist in ways that we cannot yet imagine.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> This quote is taken from Elizabeth Grosz’s essay “The Force of Sexual Difference,” in *Sex, Breath, and Force: Sexual Difference in a Post-Feminist Era*, ed. Ellen Mortensen (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006), 9.

<sup>2</sup> See for instance Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999) and Elizabeth Grosz’s *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005). An early essay by Grosz is also helpful: “Sexual Difference and the Problem of Essentialism,” *Inscriptions* 5 (1989), [http://humwww.ucsc.edu/Cultstudies/PUBS/Inscriptions/vol\\_5/ElizabethGrosz.html](http://humwww.ucsc.edu/Cultstudies/PUBS/Inscriptions/vol_5/ElizabethGrosz.html).

<sup>3</sup> I examine the spectacular transformation more closely in my dissertation, *Spectacular Transformations: Sexual Difference, Feminist Theory, and Popular Cinematic Representation* (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Tina Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism: Theology and Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 130. In this passage Beattie cites Virginia Burrus’s work on early patristic theology. See *‘Begotten, Not Made’: Conceiving Manhood in Late Antiquity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> Beattie, 130.

<sup>6</sup> Luce Irigaray, “Belief Itself,” in *Sexes and Genealogies*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 25-26.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 46-47.

<sup>11</sup> Luce Irigaray, “Women, the Sacred, Money,” in *Sexes and Genealogies*, 77-78. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza also critiques the Christian doctrine of atonement in which Jesus is a sacrificial victim. See *Jesus, Miriam’s Child, Sophia’s Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 97-128.

<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, “The Force of Sexual Difference,” in *Sex, Breath, and Force: Sexual Difference in a Post-Feminist Era*, ed. Ellen Mortensen (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006), 9-10.

<sup>13</sup> For more on St. Francis’s unconventional gender identity, see Phyllis Mack, “Feminine Behavior and Radical Action: Franciscans, Quakers, and the Followers of Gandhi,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 11, no. 3 (1986): 457-477.

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<sup>14</sup> The sensible transcendental signifies the ways in which corporeal, gendered bodies might announce a new way of being both material and divine; spiritual transcendence is achieved in and through the body. See Irigaray's *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993) 129.

<sup>15</sup> Irigaray, "Belief Itself," 45.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. Penelope Deutscher argues that in spite of Irigaray's own tendency to prioritize the male-female pairing, this very heterosexual scenario might be de-emphasized so that the homosocial and the homosexual are also viewed as sites of difference. See pages 139-141 of "The Impossible Friend: Traversing the Heterosocial, the Homosocial, and the Successes of Failures," in *A Politics of Impossible Difference: The Later Works of Luce Irigaray* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002).

<sup>17</sup> Marina Warner, "Introduction: Joan of Arc: A Gender Myth" in *The Trial of Joan of Arc* (Worcestershire, England: Arthur James, 1996), 27-28.

<sup>18</sup> Luisa Muraro, "Female Genealogies," in *Engaging with Irigaray: Feminist Philosophy and Modern European Thought*, ed. Carolyn Burke, Naomi Schor, and Margaret Whitford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 319.

<sup>19</sup> Though not mentioned in Besson's film, the transcript of Joan's trial reveal her "voices" to be those of St. Catherine and St. Margaret. For a verbatim transcript of the trial, see *The Trial of Joan of Arc* (Worcestershire, England: Arthur James, 1996).

<sup>20</sup> Other films that feature this sort of hair-shearing transformation include *V for Vendetta* (Andy Wachowski and Larry Wachowski, 2005) and *G.I. Jane* (Ridley Scott, 1997).

<sup>21</sup> Cynthia Eller, *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Won't Give Women a Future* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000).

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>23</sup> Beattie, 127. Indeed, "Protestant man" is not an improvement: "Protestant man and his Enlightenment successor were male through and through, with no explicit need of a feminine other to express their (homo)erotic desire for Christ. In a form of Christianity focused resolutely on the Word of God with every trace of divine presence and activity purged from the created world, in which taste, touch, smell and sight yielded to the sense of hearing alone, the sexual body became a site of moral rather than sacramental significance, ordered towards marriage but not oriented towards God in its abundant and unruly desire" (ibid., 127).

<sup>24</sup> Beattie, 303.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> In *When Women Become Priests: The Catholic Women's Ordination Debate* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), Kelley A. Raab describes the problems encountered by female priests ordained in the Episcopal church, situating the example of the Episcopal church as a sort of precursor to what might occur in the Catholic church. Though women have been ordained in the Episcopal church in the United States since the 1970s, the role of priest continues to be perceived as "male." Female priests, for example, are not given the same tasks as male priests and often are not accepted by parishes. Though it is beyond the scope of this essay, further attention might consider the ways in which contemporary efforts to ordain women as priests in the Catholic church (such as those currently undertaken by Roman Catholic Womenpriests, whose efforts are unrecognized by the official church and often result in excommunication) result in practices that avoid the equation of "priest" with "male," while also resisting a sexual binary.

<sup>27</sup> Luce Irigaray, "Equal to Whom?" trans. Robert L. Mazzola, *differences* 1, no. 2 (1989): 70.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>29</sup> Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 5.

<sup>30</sup> Luce Irigaray, "Divine Women," in *Sexes and Genealogies*, 67.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Deutscher, *Impossible Difference*, 97.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.