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Ciphers in the Text:
The Problems and Promise of Women's Biblical Fiction

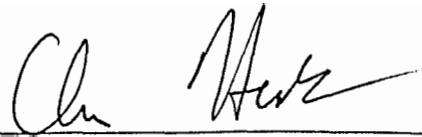
by

Beth Lonvick Cheuk

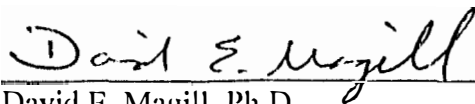
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Master of Arts in English

Longwood University

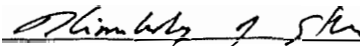
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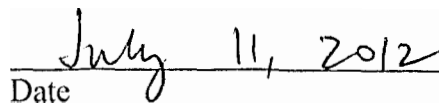
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Acknowledgments

For patience and ping pong, I thank Thea and Wesley Cheuk, who before my eyes have grown in wisdom and stature but could not possibly grow further in favor. I appreciate the support and space provided by my broader network of colleagues, family, and friends. Chene Heady, David Magill, and Kimberly Stern formed an exemplary committee, always accommodating, collegial, efficient, encouraging, and helpful. And for decades, my walking and talking partner Michael Cheuk has prompted insight, provoked thought, and suggested interesting reading, all of which appear in this thesis. In the spirit of gender neutrality, I say to him: Many have done excellently, but you surpass them all.

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The Bible as Hypotext: Problems and Promise

The biblical patriarchs have long occupied the minds and hearts of the faithful, and their stories have retained a prominent, if fading, role in western culture. However, a glance at bookstores and best-seller lists indicates that publishers, novelists, and readers have grown less concerned with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob than with Sarah, Rebecca, or Leah. Fiction delving into the lives of biblical women has become big business for both inspirational and secular publishers. In addition to novels focusing on the matriarchs, we can now read about Esther, Miriam, Mary Magdalene, or the women in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Mary. These books represent the biblical women who are prominent enough to be named; beyond that, we can also learn about the unnamed queen of Sheba, Job's wife, or the woman at the well. Even more imaginatively, we can also see biblical history through the eyes of hypothetical women such as the sister of Ezra, the cousin of Nehemiah, or the friend of Esther.

This fiction arises for many reasons – to glorify God or indirectly glorify men, to place honorable wives alongside the honorable husbands of the Bible, to explore the lives and culture of biblical women, or to quite consciously depose the men and masculine dominance of the text. These many retellings and re-imaginings of the Bible make at least minor alterations to the story and bring some measure of attention to women, countering the way that scriptures often silence and minimize them. All of these very different rewritings of the Bible reflect a struggle on the part of contemporary writers to understand how or even if women can productively inhabit the old, old story.

The rise of woman-centered biblical fiction parallels and piggybacks off of the development of feminist theology. Feminist scholars have written much about the Bible

in the last decades, both recovering the stories of women in particular and challenging sexist interpretations of the text as a whole. Yet this womanist revision encounters at least two obstacles. First, by challenging the traditional interpretation of this problematic text, are feminists in fact upholding it? Considering this question, Terry Wright describes “a necessary ambivalence” produced when scholars simultaneously critique and reassert what Alicia Ostriker calls the “ur-text of patriarchy” (Wright 25, *Revision* 27). Secondly, no matter how transformative the scholarship, will people outside the academy feel its influence? Many scholars describe their encouraging experiences in directing groups of lay-readers; yet they are also aware that feminist biblical interpretation is still a marginalized specialty rather than a prevailing approach. Certainly there are many women who read on their own or participate in groups that explore woman-centered Judaism or Christianity or other, more specifically feminist spiritual traditions such as neo-paganism. In addition, there are progressive congregations that worship with gender-neutral language and a heightened attention to biblical women. Yet as Adri Goosen notes, even the most developed presence of the Feminine Divine in the Bible, the wisdom figure of Proverbs known as Sophia, is not widely known to “the average man or woman on the street” (77 n9). Similarly, though most believers would acknowledge that God is not strictly male, a majority of denominations resist emphasizing the Bible’s female imagery or its logical extension, feminine nomenclature such as mother. While important and perhaps armed with an *eventual* ability to impact lived theology, academic insights rarely have an immediate, widespread effect on churches and congregants.

Enter biblical fiction. We will see that it has no easy answer for the “necessary ambivalence” of resisting yet reinscribing old patterns, yet it definitely accesses and

impacts a broad audience. By opening the eyes and touching the hearts of millions of readers, fictional retellings participate in our cultural dialogue about women and the Bible. Combining the intellectual and spiritual resources of theology with the imaginative and affective powers of fiction, woman-centered biblical fiction raises a number of questions, such as whether the Bible is ultimately too patriarchal to be useful as a resource in more progressive life and literature, or whether the Good Book sends bad messages about women and their sexuality by limiting females to a few rigid, sometimes frigid, roles. On the one hand, the creative license of fiction should enable these texts to reclaim the rich narratives of the Bible, stripped of any dated, damaging ideology. On the other, the Bible has a weight and authority that has shaped not just individual lives but gender roles themselves, and its influence will not be easily shed. The three retellings we will consider – *The Red Tent* by Anita Diamant, Francine Rivers' *Redeeming Love*, and Katherine Paterson's *The King's Equal* – have much in common. They are written by contemporary American women who have built vast followings established at least in part on their willingness to imaginatively explore a text to which they accord both religious and narrative value. All three writers believe that women's scriptural stories deserve attention, whether they sense that this is a realization or usurpation of the Bible's intent. Whether they appear to subvert or uphold scriptures, the three retellings offer an interpretive lens that makes possible what might be considered a surprisingly nuanced and supple approach to the gender politics of the sacred text. Long considered a monological document by theoreticians, devotees, and detractors, the Bible instead offers multiple voices with varying views of gender and sexuality. Multi-voiced documents themselves, these three retellings remain marked in varying degrees by the louder, more

limiting voices of the Bible even as they make changes to the source text that can nudge their many readers toward a more fully transformative view of scripture and gender.

In this light, these books are an important part of our religious dialogue. In fact, Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza argues that imaginative explorations are not the by-product of feminist theology but one of its many strategies. She writes, “From its inception, feminist interpretation has sought to actualize biblical stories in role-play, storytelling, bibliodrama, dance, and song,” focusing on “wo/men [who] are silenced or not present at all” and asking “what if” questions (148-149). She acknowledges that such artistic methods are “not primarily accountable to the standards of the academy or the church” (maintainers of hegemony), but, presuming an activist stance, they advance what she believes to be more important than scholarly or religious orthodoxies: a commitment to “liberation movements of wo/men for justice and well-being” (161). Of course, not all scriptural retellings reflect liberation theology. But whether progressive or conservative, biblically-inspired fiction is not merely narrative, but narrative theology.

In keeping with their theological content, these writers often mine the resources of academic research and feminist hermeneutics. These strategies can be simple, such as Naomi Graetz’s first step of naming and consequently elevating these often anonymous women (11). An emphasis on names and the power to identify and bless – often associated with Adam and the patriarchs – arises frequently in the fictional texts we’ll examine. Other feminists have developed their own tools of feminist reading, beginning with Ostriker’s three bedrocks. Two are hermeneutics of suspicion and indeterminacy, in other words, reading resistantly and with the sense that there is never a “correct” interpretation, there can only be another, and another, and another” (*Revision* 122). The

last is a hermeneutics of desire, when “the reader finds in the text what she wants it to say” (122). Ostriker reminds readers that this feminist strategy of willful reading merely acknowledges what *all* Bible interpreters do unconsciously. While *The Red Tent* is mostly guided by suspicion, and arguably *The King’s Equal* is primarily undergirded by a desire to view the Bible through the lens of gender neutrality, indeterminacy is a hallmark of how all three writers find new meanings and perspectives in old texts.

Aside from reading strategies, another resource that women often employ in their reevaluation of the Bible is the polytheistic tradition in which early Yahwism was situated, now reconsidered, as Graetz suggests, “in a favorable light” (11). Novels of this vein restore female elements of the divine that were rejected during the Bible’s redaction. *The Rent Tent* is representative of this type of religious fiction, drawing on extra-biblical religious and historical resources, and minimizing the Bible’s theology and authority.

Finally, feminist revision often emphasizes women’s bodies and sexuality, walking a line between reaffirming that “anatomy is destiny” and liberating a sensuality which has often served masculine purposes. Ostriker observes that the “Hebrew Bible usually locates a female’s value in her sexuality and procreativity” while “in the New Testament, ... [it] resides in a woman’s asexuality. In her capacity to be non-sexual, hence spiritual” (*Revision* 125). These two views of women are roughly aligned with Rosemary Radner Reuther’s articulation of a sexual dualism in early (and enduring) Christian thought, which sets a hyper-available whore, drawn from Eve, against the virginal Madonna. In response to this male-crafted dichotomy and its associated wariness of female sexuality, many feminists suggest that women should reclaim the right to control and define their sexuality in multiple, not binary, ways (129). However, as we’ll

see in *The Red Tent* and *Redeeming Love*, an acknowledgment of woman's desire and physicality can reaffirm dated ideas of biological essentialism and sexually dangerous women. These novels' reframings of women's sexuality indicate the inherent challenges that arise when women retell the Bible, showing how alterations can liberate *and* limit.

In addition to the strategies of feminist scholarship, revisionist biblical fiction has resources – such as imagination, discussed above – from outside the academy. For instance, fiction frequently communicates affectively, and while *The King's Equal* does fully not fit this description, *Redeeming Love* and *The Red Tent* clearly do. Scholars have noted that in both of those novels, readers are not required to “leap to the symbolic level;” Anita Gandolfo suggests that in Rivers' novel, the “absence of the need to interpret ... enables the reader to be more affectively involved” (Blackford 81, Gandolfo 69). Although *The King's Equal* is the least “romantic” of the three, all three narratives are centered on courtship and marriage. These writers' use of the romance novel perhaps appropriately aligns the genre's overwhelmingly female audience with woman-centered texts and ideology, but a heavy dose of sentimentality also projects stereotypical notions of women as emotional. Even the genre and tone of gender dialogue can reinforce tropes.

These changes in genre and tone are examples of how retellings use a wide array of narrative tools, which have been carefully delineated by Gérard Genette in *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*. Though Genette is a scholar and theoretician of intertextuality more broadly, *Palimpsests* particularly examines the various changes in setting, tone, focalization, theme and more in hypertexts, works in which an author intentionally retells a prior narrative, or the hypotext. While Genette does not systematically address how these alterations impact gender, he does attend to

these novelists' basic strategy of shifting focus from one character to another, which, in the case of these stories, is from men to women. These shifts alone, Genette argues, "inevitably entail profound alterations of the text and of narrative information; hitherto unknown chapters would crop up [T]he transfocalization here would afford opportunities of responding to questions left unanswered by the gaps in the hypotext, such as 'While this is happening to Y, what is becoming of X?'" (287; irresistible chromosomal reversal is mine). We will consequently examine not only how these women interpret the hypotexts, but also how narrative tools support their interpretations.

Despite all of these tools, whether academic or literary, some feminists and academicians would say that a biblical retelling cannot fully escape its patriarchal past. They might suggest that the Holy Book is beyond revision, hopelessly and forever marked as a site of hostility toward women both in its original words and in its subsequent interpretation. Generally, feminists agree that the Bible was written, edited, and interpreted by, for, and about men; that it eliminates, silences, and pushes women to the periphery of its stories and theology; and that, when present, its women serve male agendas. This understanding – held not only by feminist theologians, of course – manifests itself in a scholarly skepticism of the positive value of biblical allusion. For instance, a number of critics question why the generally feminist writings of Katherine Paterson should be heavily indebted to – and limited by – biblical models and narratives.

Yet a simple dismissal of the Bible as literary resource discounts its "multi-voiced texts and interpretations," which can offset its problematic passages and cultural connotations (Schüssler Fiorenza 37). Furthermore, as Schüssler Fiorenza reminds us, we cannot disregard the text because it "still has great power in the lives of many wo/men;"

despite its limitations, the Bible offers “wellsprings of justice and visions of sacred life-giving power” (64, 2). Similarly, other scholars focus on “the surprising strength of the woman characters” in its pages (Wright 25). Any reading of the text as monolithically anti-woman must account for these women’s lively presence; any reading of the text as monolithically pro-woman must account for these women’s regular disappearance and frequent absence. Consequently, many feminists take a middle ground in which they acknowledge that the Bible offers women both problems and promise, and that its interpretation has been more damning than its content. Revisionist feminist theology – the perspective which informs this thesis – opts not to reject the Bible but to scrutinize its texts and reform its interpretation and associated ideology.

The works of fiction we will explore are aligned with revisionist feminist theology to the degree that they imaginatively reconsider scriptures and place women at the center of the narratives. The three texts reflect at least a tenuous commitment to the Bible and at least a respectful willingness to revise the text. Anita Diamant’s *The Red Tent* displays the most suspicion to the hypotext, actively revealing its injustice toward women. Like the more scholarly writings of Schüssler Fiorenza, the novel exposes the Bible’s “poison,” and accords with the intent “to place on all biblical texts the label: ‘Caution! Could be dangerous to your health and survival!’” (Schüssler Fiorenza 37). In addition to Diamant’s almost total condemnation of the biblical record, the text’s emphasis on the Goddess tradition suggests an affinity with post-biblical theologians like Carol Christ. *The Red Tent*’s wariness of the Bible and its embrace of extra-biblical resources represent the more radical end of revisionist feminist theology. Toward the conservative end, Katherine Paterson’s *The King’s Equal* demonstrates an awareness of

the text's limitations for women but sidesteps them by crediting the Bible with a gender neutrality that is welcoming to all. This attitude aligns well with the scholarship of Tikva Frymer-Kensky, who argues that the earliest biblical texts are marked by a "radically new concept of gender" that articulates "the essential sameness of the sexes" (*Wake* 121, 143). Frymer-Kensky suggests that this gender neutrality was not matched by the surrounding culture and was quickly offset by later, sexist biblical writings and interpretation. Even so, she asserts that the texts "remained to be rediscovered by an age that could understand and appreciate the biblical metaphysics of gender unity" (143). Finally, Francine Rivers' *Redeeming Love* represents an even more conservative tradition, an evangelicalism that shows suspicion toward feminism and academia instead of the Bible. Many evangelicals would resist the label "feminist" and most would shy from the sort of gender-neutral God-talk that pervades many progressive congregations. (Try counting the overwhelming number of He's that refer to God the Father in *Redeeming Love*.) Yet as we will see, the novel still deserves a place on the continuum of revisionist feminist theology even if it seeks to uphold and not challenge the Bible. Despite their placement on the reformist spectrum, all of these texts make important alterations to biblical narratives and theology, even as they sometimes uphold its logic.

Just as the three books have varying attitudes toward the Bible and conventional theology, they also project divergent and sometimes shifting understandings of gender. These complicated portrayals can be read as a reflection of the "many different voices" of both feminism and the hypotext (Schüssler Fiorenza 59). For instance, most of *Redeeming Love* supports a complementary understanding of gender, with the men often acting as head of household and the women learning from them, protected by them, and

working alongside them as helpmeets. More negatively, at times, it reinforces tropes of sexually dangerous women. Yet in other ways, the novel affirms women's desire as well as their roles as strong leaders of families and ministries. The *Red Tent* rejects the Bible's constructs for women as silent reproducers and helpers, but it reinscribes a gynocentric essentialism that ironically draws from both past and current thinking about women. At first glance, *The King's Equal* shows a woman who welcomes household tasks and male control; yet this same woman becomes leader of a nation, and her domesticity is less a hallmark of femininity than holistic leadership, a standard applicable to women and men. In addition, her "virtues" such as self-sacrifice and humility do not mesh well with secular feminism, but when seen through Paterson's dual lenses of Christianity and gender neutrality, such apparently problematic behaviors become contextualized. These complex, sometimes shifting portrayals of gender trouble the simplistic assumption that scriptural antecedents enforce a monolithic femininity, but they also raise the question of whether and how these hypertexts can fully escape their ancient patterns of male control.

The texts also vary in the degree to which they move away from such patriarchal passages and interpretation. However, even the "problems" of these retellings raise opportunities to reflect on the relationship between feminism and the Judeo-Christian tradition and the complexity of gender itself. The problems of these retellings also merit special attention because while no one text unqualifiedly "solves" all of these issues, all three feature moments of great possibility for feminist readers by tapping into the self-corrective voices of scripture. In doing so, each retelling creates a greater imaginative space for considering the Bible, moving us away from problems and toward promise.

The Red Tent: Multiplicity Trapped in the Binary

With forty-eight weeks on *The New York Times* bestseller list, Anita Diamant's *The Red Tent* is the most well-known recent retelling of the Bible. The novel has overwhelmingly pleased readers and largely satisfied critics for transforming Dinah, often seen as a victim, into a heroine who not only overcomes her adversity but also exposes her meta-adversary: namely, the biblical patriarchy that so often silences and subjugates women. Demonstrating her awareness of this meta-adversary, Dinah describes herself as a "voiceless cipher in the [biblical] text" whose memory became "dust" when "the chain connecting mother to daughter was broken and the word passed to the keeping of men" (1). *The Red Tent* reclaims the power of storytelling for women, rejecting the "holy book" and its male-crafted story that "seems to say I [Dinah] was raped and ... my honor was avenged" (1). In place of the Bible's account, Diamant recovers the historical Dinah, reflecting the thinking of feminist theologians such as Ita Sheres. As part of this effort, the novel offers Dinah and other women the central place in the text, the power of narration, and a well-being grounded in either pre- or extra-Yahwist frameworks. Yet even as this feminist vision empowers women, it also reinstates a problematic essentialism and depends on a framework of binary logic. These binaries – making claims about the superiority of women to men, polytheism to monotheism, and Egypt to Yahwist Canaan – are ironically more strict and simplistic than the Bible itself. In relying on and exacerbating the biblical framework of binary categorization, the novel maintains and vigorously reinforces patriarchal economies.

Either through direct narration or oblique references, the novel explores the lives of Jacob, his four wives, and his thirteen children, including references that date back to

Jacob's grandparents, Sarai and Abram. In many ways, Diamant relates the "facts" of Genesis, but she foregrounds women and practices a hermeneutics of suspicion. The silent Dinah becomes narrator, and, aware of how she has been (mis)recorded in the Bible, she sets the record straight. Following feminist theologians, Diamant challenges biblical narratives, striving to restore "them to their truth.... [S]uch a restitution presupposes that one should ... be able to contest [the original] explanation – i.e., his version of the motives – by referring to another version that could legitimately and victoriously be invoked against it" (Genette 320). For this other version, feminists like Sheres recreate the "initial," "unredacted" stories of women such as Dinah (137, 133). According to Sheres, "Accounting for irregularities in the text and placing it within a wider historical and cultural framework, it is plausible to view Dinah in a completely new light" (137). These sources and inspirations become at least as important as the Bible, so that by intent, *The Red Tent* (like all retellings) channels more than one hypotext.

In addition to the influence of feminist theologians, the novel mirrors the ideas of Hélène Cixous, which challenge male discourse and the way it encodes dualistic thinking about the normalcy of men and the inferiority of women. Cixous writes that "the future must no longer be determined by the past ... I refuse to strengthen [past limits and discourses] by repeating them, to confer upon them an irremovability the equivalent of destiny" (875). Similarly, Diamant refuses to grant "irremovability" to biblical narrative, its past interpretations, and its frequent suppression of women. The novel's rejection of historic binaries deriving from male/female and phallogocentric theology is in keeping with Cixous' desire for true images of women that can surface after an "upheaval when every structure is for a moment thrown off balance" (879). In addition, the novel shares with

Cixous an insistence on women's voices and bodies, which have often been silenced or sullied in religious writing and thought. Cixous writes of male writing such as the Bible as a site "where woman has never *her* turn to speak – this being all the more serious and unpardonable in that writing is precisely *the very possibility of change*, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures" (879, emphasis in original).

In many ways, the indirect influence of Cixous is empowering in this novel – Dinah uses her turn to speak not merely to narrate, but to prophesy – judging others, interpreting the past, and seeing into the future. She speaks not only on her own behalf, but she tells the histories and evokes the voices of her "mothers," Leah, Rachel, Bilhah, and Zilpah. She also speaks into the future, directly addressing the readers of today, "women with hands and feet as soft a queen's, ... hungry for the story [of women] that was lost. You crave words to fill the great silence that swallowed me and my mothers and my grandmothers before them" (3). Breaking the women's silence in the male text, *The Red Tent* embraces "the very possibility of change," striving to serve as a springboard to subvert the biblical social and cultural structures that have long been shaped by men. Within the outlines of the patriarchal epic, then, Diamant focuses on Dinah's mothers, who, along with an area midwife who joins their household, form a "matriarchal village" that exists among but mostly apart from men (Blackford 76). This female community evokes a Cixous-approved utopia. As Toril Moi writes, "Confidently assuming that change is both possible and desirable, the utopian vision takes off from a negative analysis of its own society in order to create images and ideas that have the power to revolt against oppression and exploitation" (20). The utopia is most vividly symbolized in

the red tent, where the women gather for a monthly three-day menstrual retreat to welcome the new moon. In keeping with Cixous, the women embrace their femininity and their fertility, learning about their bodies, talking about their desires, and honoring their Near-Eastern deities. The women's individual stories – not only their differences in personalities, but their unique views of Jacob, their different yet generally powerful sexual experiences, and their favorite goddesses – honor the multiplicity that arises in Cixous' thinking, as when she writes that “there is ... no one typical woman... [W]hat strikes me is the infinite richness of their individual constitutions: you can't talk about a female sexuality, uniform, homogenous, classifiable into codes” (876). This rich, embodied femininity that speaks and writes to supplant the male narrative is the element of *The Red Tent* to which approving readers and critics have most strongly responded.

Yet Cixous is not without critics, some of whom have charged that her elevation of the value and fluidity of feminism and her association of masculinity with rigid logocentrism rely on essentialism. The novel must answer to the same charge. At times, the novel ascribes to women a nature quite free of yesteryear's burdens. Although the women live within their separate sphere, their abilities rise above the merely domestic to the managerial, the enterprising, and the healing of “men, women, and even beasts” (65). Long excluded from religious leadership in the Judeo-Christian traditions, here women are at the center of religious experience, which is tied closely to their sexuality and fertility. Yet as critics of Cixous have pointed out, this connectedness to the body and maternity has often been used to limit, not free, women. It is ironic that while feminists have decried Hebrew Scriptures' emphasis on women's procreativity, in *The Red Tent*, “[t]he women are preoccupied with fertility,” whether they are mothers or midwives

(Blackford 76). In the same way that a focus on maternity can rely on age-old understandings of the nature of women, many of the female qualities explored in *The Red Tent* appear on Cixous' list of qualities traditionally attributed to women within patriarchal binary thought. These include: moon (which governs the women's bodies and their religious rituals), emotion (many of the women are intensely emotional and experience strong jealousy, especially in regard to their husbands and sons), mother (relying on a vision of women as nurturers; furthermore, women who do not menstruate are prohibited from entering the red tent), and pathos (at the end of the novel, while Dinah is pleased to learn that she has been remembered, she understands that it is because her story is "too terrible to be forgotten" [317]). Even if this is a strategic use of essentialism that makes calculated decisions about what "view of nature [will] advance the struggle for women's empowerment," it is a flirtation with modes of thought that have historically been devastating to women, ideas established by traditional interpretations of the same Bible she seeks to revise (Jones 44).

Furthermore, critics of Cixous charge that in relying on essentialist thought, she simultaneously decries yet reinforces binary logic; we see that same tension at play in *The Red Tent*. Diamant offers a vision of wholeness for women, a *shalom* based on establishing community, reaffirming embodied experiences, and reclaiming a place of privilege within goddess theology. Yet in the novel, this vision of female wellness rests on a framework of interrelated binaries. The chief of these is female/male, which in turn relies on gynocentric polytheism/ phallogocentric monotheism. Finally, after the decline of the women's culture, Egypt becomes a positive foil to (Hebraic) phallogocentric

monotheism. These binaries do not originate with Diamant; instead, she is reversing some of the foundational ideas of the Bible to create freedom and wholeness for women.

Perhaps the chief of these binaries is female/male. As befits a novel celebrating the universal sisterhood, the pages feature strong, admirable women. True, at times they criticize or gossip, grow jealous or cold-hearted, all examples of how Diamant sometimes relies on past imagery for women. Yet for the most part, the novelist creates a collage of women who excel relationally, sexually, professionally, spiritually, or in Dinah's case, all of the above. Interpersonally, Dinah is beloved of her mothers in Canaan and later finds a rich community in Egypt. In both places, she finds well-documented sexual satisfaction, no longer a rape victim but an agent who partners first with the Prince of Shechem and later with her Egyptian husband. Professionally, she is "the finest midwife in Egypt;" her admiring friend says that she "has the goddess's love of children, shows the compassion of heaven for mothers and babies [and] is as clever as she is tall" (281, 266). Finally, "she carries the mark of money and luck. She dreams with great power and sees through lies" (262). Diamant plants flaws in these characters, but the women grow to redeem themselves. For instance, despite her "splendid arrogance," Leah is sisterly enough to do "something extraordinary" – she gets "down on her knees" to plead Jacob to rescue her abused step-mother (2, 85). Similarly, though prone to jealousy and disappointment in the face of Leah's hyperfertility, Rachel channels her suffering into midwifery: "The imperious beauty became a tenderhearted healer in the service of mothers" (48). Drawing from both negative and positive past tropes (of jealousy towards women or nurture to children) as well as new ideas (sexual autonomy, professional accomplishment), Diamant establishes women who are flawed but developing in spiritual maturity.

The character of Ruti appears to challenge this sweeping sense that the women who follow the Goddess will excel and grow. Purchased as Laban's slave and wife, Ruti does join the red tent, but Leah and Rachel "kept themselves apart from her," in part because she "was the mother of their son's rivals, their material enemy" (63). Following the pattern described above, the sisters eventually repent of their coldness to Ruti, but their kindness comes too late to transform her life. Far offsetting the resources of the red tent are the cruelty and disrespect of Ruti's husband and sons. In addition to further establishing the multiplicity of women, Ruti serves not as an indictment on the limits of the red tent, but as a cautionary tale of what happens to women without its protection.

Women need such protection because within the novel, men are dangerous (unless they live in Egyptian areas). Having said this, readers are initially supposed to like Jacob, a "tall," "broad-shouldered," and "handsome" man "with a talent for animals" (108, 85, 21). His years as his mother's favorite gave him a sensitivity (rare to men) shown in "gifts that proved how well he had come to understand Laban's daughters" (21). He's a good lover to his wives and an affectionate father to his sons, teaching them the ways of the wild and the stories of El, his early Yahwist god. However, unlike the way that women triumph over their flaws, men succumb to theirs. The predominant flaw among these men in Canaan is a lack of respect for women. We see this in Jacob: Only once in her life does Dinah recall her father saying her name or offering her a "real smile" (92). Similarly, when Dinah's fiancé Shalem and his father come to negotiate the marriage, Jacob "could not quite conjure up the image of Dinah's face" (194). In addition, despite his early interest in his wives' deities, Jacob grows increasingly distrustful of their practices. Eventually, he destroys the women's idols, an act which not only symbolizes

suppression of the women's spirituality and freedom, but also foreshadows his sons' violent revenge. As patriarch, Jacob is ultimately responsible for the sack of Shechem, and his subsequent, cowardly escape essentially kills Rachel, who "died on the highway" and was "buried hastily and without ceremony at the side of the road" (208). To the end of his life Jacob expresses no remorse; when Dinah asks Joseph if their father expressed deathbed repentance either for her sake or for his own honor, her brother replies, "He said nothing of you. Dinah is forgotten in the house of Jacob" (312). It is true that the text repeatedly insists that Dinah's brother Reuben is "kind" and "gentle" and that "if Reuben or Judah [had] come for" Dinah in Shechem, things "might have happened" differently (192). However, Reuben's one statement considering the validity of Dinah's relationship does not counter the slaughter to come, and Dinah includes all of her brothers in her curse: "The sons of Jacob are vipers.... The sons of Jacob will each suffer in his turn" (207). Dinah's homogenous grouping of all her brothers, from the kind Reuben to the mean-spirited Levi and Simon, reinforces the novel's blanket treatment of men.

While much of Jacob's downfall can be attributed to his increasing attachment to Yahwism, most of the men of the Holy Land are far worse, regardless of their respect for El. Laban is a mean-spirited, woman-beating, wife-raping, daughter-molesting drunkard. The text does offer the tepid possibility that Laban possessed "perhaps some forgotten better self," but this is offset by how his daughters "despised him for a hundred reasons" (45, 20). Similarly, several nameless Canaanite men rape, mutilate, and leave for dead the female messenger Werenro (253-254). Describing her tormentors, she simply says they were "Canaanite men like any others, filthy and stupid" (253). Finally, out of self-interest, Dinah's brothers Simon and Levi destroy the city of Shechem, the house of

Jacob, and the apparent future of Dinah. Interestingly, the actions of Simon and Levi are the only ones mentioned in the biblical narrative; the others are Diamant's additions. Her supplement to the Bible's portrayal of the men of this narrative is "wholly prepared to substitute for – that is, to displace and therefore to erase – that which it completes" (Genette 202). The strident Zilpah maintains a conviction that men are "hairy, crude, and half human," and one could argue that the text upholds this thinking (13).

This binary of women's superiority to men is expressed in even comical ways: Within this world, Rachel smells like water and Leah smells like yeast, but the men simply smell (9, 12). After spending a few weeks with her mint-scented grandmother in an all-female enclave, Dinah returns to her family only to (re)discover that "My brothers, my father, and all of the other men had become impossibly crude and brutish. They grunted rather than spoke, scratched themselves and picked their noses, and even relieved themselves in plain sight of the women. And the stink!" (167).

In addition, consider the gendered portrayals of first sexual experiences. For the novel's followers of the Goddess tradition, the most important ritual is the Opening, during which mothers break their daughters' hymens with an idol to celebrate menarche. This act is also a young woman's first sexual experience, in which she "marries (bleeds into) the earth" (Blackford 79). The Opening is orchestrated by mothers who celebrate the daughter by putting kohl on her eyes and perfume on her forehead. They fill her with wine, feed her, massage her, dance, and sing. It is an orgy of feminine support, an "ancient covenant" (174). While some of the Canaanite daughters-in-law and Jacob see it as an abomination, the reader, like Dinah, is supposed to be "perfectly happy" (173). Consider by contrast the novel's portrayal of men's first sexual experiences when it

describes “boys having their way with the ewes, who bleated pitifully and bled;” earlier we learn that Laban, too poor to hire a prostitute, occasionally finds “his way up the hills to bother the flocks, like some horny little boy” (31; 20). Again, we see stark differences in how the novel describes the culture of women and men.

However, this superiority of women to men is not so much biological as religious or cultural. It is connected to and reliant on other binaries: chiefly, that polytheism and polytheistic cultures (both women who worship goddesses and Egyptians who follow their own pantheon) are superior to monotheism, whose spiritual and social practices are decried. As soon as Dinah enters Egypt-influenced areas, she finds men who are “noble” and “perfect,” or “the soul of kindness” – plus, they smell good, too (249, 183, 273). Similarly, Canaanite women who do not follow the Goddess receive less flattering portraits. For instance, rather than understanding the beauty of the Opening, they are “shocked by the ritual,” clinging instead to traditions such as a mother running into a honeymoon tent “to snatch the bloodstained blanket” to prove bridal virginity (174). It is unclear why Diamant does not similarly distinguish the behavior of men in Canaan who follow El from that of those who follow polytheistic traditions, instead lumping them all together as dangerous and animalistic. In this sense, the text upholds the Cixousian binary of a fluid, varied femininity against a monolithic masculinity. This cultural concept of enlightened womanhood and brutish manhood is connected to the novel’s depiction of religion, which again aligns women with multiplicity and men with monotheism.

Consequently, let us consider Diamant’s articulation of female and male spirituality, or gynocentric polytheism and phallogocentric monotheism. As part of its reclamation of a broader history and culture, *The Red Tent* evokes a pre-monotheistic era,

when presumably Rachel, Leah, and Jacob would have lived. In doing so, Diamant offers a “dizzying variety” of Near-Eastern goddesses upon which her female characters can draw (Polaski 51). These deities are not an invention but a recovery of a rich spirituality that preexisted and coexisted with early Judaism, though the redacted Bible condemns such practices. Vladimir Tumanov notes that Diamant embraces even “abominations”: “Combining the cult of Ashera and the use of high places, Diamant appears to challenge the implacable biblical point of view” (146). Within the novel, women have direct access to these goddesses, partially shown in the ways that Sarai, Rebecca, and Zilpah serve, officially or casually, as priestesses. Even more important, the novel depicts an everyday sense of women honoring and living with their favorite goddess: “Rachel was loyal to Gula, the healer. Bilhah’s grain offerings were made to Uttu, the weaver. Leah had a special feeling for Ninkasi, the brewer of beer” (90). In addition to the “images of a Divine Feminine” that these goddesses present, Goosen notes that readers encounter “priestesses, female celebrants and various sacred rites in which women actively feature” (87). Such elements correct the ways that women are often on the periphery of scriptures and religious practice and provide a glimpse of how reversing binaries can be an important first step to destabilizing them, offering “readers the ideological distance needed to view the patriarchal practices and paradigms ... with suspicion” (36).

Although the varying goddesses have unique abilities that typically focus on elements of culture-building, in *The Red Tent* they also form a composite vision of the Feminine Divine. Goosen ably explains that a rich diversity of uncodified, personal imagery is meaningful even as the figures merge. This “Great Mother” ties the women to nature, celebrates their bodies, and blesses their powers of fertility, focusing on

menstruation, the vagina, pregnancy, and birth. As Goosen argues, “[W]hereas women are marginalised in male models of religion which exclude the female body, in this new model of the sacred, it is men who find themselves on the margins and ‘in the dark’, based on their lack of a female body and experience. As the elderly Dinah observes near the end of the novel, ‘What can a woman tell a man about babies and blood?’ (Diamant 297)” (Goosen 104-105). This emphasis on the “sacred and mystical” female body offsets centuries of Judeo-Christian disregard for woman’s corporality as unclean and shameful (Schantz 4). Viewed positively, feminine desire and reproduction are redeemed, in the words of Julia Kristeva, as “the ultimate sacred,” the point at which life-giving and meaning-making converge (14). In this process, “women are called upon to offer their desire and their words,” both of which have been squelched in the biblical tradition that often focuses its attention on women’s power to give life while reserving for men the power to make meaning (14). However, viewed negatively, the novel’s emphasis on the body reinforces biological essentialism and the notion of women’s calling as procreators. In either case, by combining the biological, the sexual, and the spiritual, Diamant aligns the polytheistic tradition and the women who follow it with life and meaning.

Theoretically, men have access to this religious plurality; Frymer-Kensky states, “Men as well as women discussed and worshipped the goddesses of ancient Sumer” (*Wake* 12). In keeping with this idea, the novel suggests that other men of the region do not “serve the god of Jacob” and presumably follow a polytheistic tradition (93). Yet the novel does not portray a significant or positive expression of male paganism. Unlike the women’s empowerment by the goddesses, the superstitious Laban “shivered before the power of any god,” including the family idols and Jacob’s El (93). His spiritual

immaturity is further shown when we learn that his household idols “soothed him the way a full breast soothed a cranky baby” (90). Jacob occasionally honors goddesses in times of need, but this emphasizes his own poor faith in El rather than welcoming him into polytheistic worship. Other than Laban and Jacob, the novel makes no references to men’s interest in the pagan tradition of Canaan. This reinforces the unilateral portrayal of men in the Holy Land; it also reaffirms the novel’s connection of gender and religion, suggesting that the life-giving, plural resources of the Goddess are the domain of women.

By contrast, the novel’s primary image of male spirituality is Jacob’s relationship to El. The god of Jacob requires the dangerous, phallic mark of circumcision and is associated with sacrifice, exile, and death. El’s legacy includes the “terrible story” of the near-sacrifice, or binding, of Isaac, which is condemned in two ways (61). First, Zilpah focalizes the episode, concluding, “What kind of mercy is that, to scare the spit dry in poor Isaac’s mouth? Your father’s god may be great, but he is cruel” (62). Second, though an old man, “Isaac stuttered, still frightened by his father’s knife” (62). Even the positive stories of El are tainted with violence: “In the south, Abram had done great deeds – killing a thousand men with a single blow because El-Abram had given him the power of ten thousand” (136). Women are the judges of this new god, and they tell us that he is “the god of thunder, high places, and awful sacrifice. El could demand that a father cut off his son – cast him out into the desert, or slaughter him outright” (13). As Blackford notes, “The female perspective criticizing Jacob’s worship comes in every shape and size; how could you take a new infant, at risk of death, and put him under the knife? How could you take a lamb, the product of so much careful husbandry, and kill him without eating him?” (78). By aligning El with senseless death and the Goddess with life and

meaning, Diamant creates gendered traditions, establishing gynocentric polytheism as superior and the worship of El as “strange” and “alien” – in a word, other (13).

Diamant’s understanding of the superiority of gynocentric polytheism to phallogocentric Yahwism is most clearly shown in spiritual experiences: Women have positive encounters with the divine, while men are often damaged by them. Dinah herself has several strong spiritual experiences, often relating to water. The first occurs when her family moves to Canaan, at one point crossing a river. Dinah enters the water nervously but soon realizes, “The water held no threat, only an embrace I had no wish to break.... Here was something holy” (112). The midwife Inna validates the experience by deeming Dinah “a child of the water. Your spirit answered the spirit of the water” (112). Scholar Jessica Schantz validates the experience differently, calling it “a form of *mikveh*,” a Jewish ritual used here to signal the novel’s blessing of the “matrilineal heritage of the Jewish people.... Diamant is reclaiming that heritage by providing Dinah, and not Jacob, with spiritual initiation” (7). Similarly, after Dinah has a vision of a water animal, Inna says, “I told you water was your destiny. That is a very old one, Taweret, an Egyptian goddess who lives in the water and laughs with a great mouth. She gives mothers their milk and protects all children.... It must be a sign of luck, little one” (173). Whether they echo Jewish or Egyptian spirituality (or both), since each of Dinah’s experiences relates to water, they are self-validating, and Inna’s response is affirming (“a sign of luck, little one”). The second vision is further confirmed when Dinah becomes a midwife (concerning the giving of milk to mothers) in Egypt (Taweret does, in fact, figure in Dinah’s later life). Throughout the novel, Dinah and her mothers find guidance or insight

through unexplained voices, powerful dreams, and ancient songs. Empowered to make meaning, the women interpret visions, anticipate the future, and even pronounce curses.

By contrast with the helpful, meaningful, and affirming (if not tame) spirituality of women, men's religious experiences are often questionable and dangerous. On the surface, the novel appears tolerant of male spiritual encounters. Dinah learns that Jacob "spoke with the El of his fathers, morning and evening.... Jacob was sure that the future of his sons would be blessed by this One" (81). This description seems benign if androcentric, emphasizing that El's blessings are available to sons only. Yet unlike the women's experiences that are upheld throughout the novel, we learn that Jacob's spiritual messages are wrong: his sons receive not blessings, but curses. His other dreams are similarly undermined, questioned, or reassigned to Dinah, such as his vision of angels ascending and descending a ladder (see Diamant 267). Jacob says that God "called him back" to Canaan through dreams, but the same paragraph suggests that Jacob's decision to return was as informed by news from traders as much as by visions from God (88). Furthermore, even his relatively "joyful" dreams can also be "ferocious," "fiery," and "fierce;" elsewhere, we see that they can be near-fatal (87). Diamant retells Jacob's wrestling match with an angel-like figure, a pivotal moment in Genesis that crowns him as "the anointed one who has been named by God" (Riswold 143). In the novel, however, Jacob emerges from the experience not as victor but nearly-dead victim, not as one who saw God but as one attacked by a wild boar. Just as with God's dealings with the young Isaac, the encounter leaves lasting damage: "The confident man had become tentative and cautious" (123). In similar fashion, his son Joseph's famously outsized dreams are not mentioned in the novel, and his abilities to discern others' dreams are minimized, as

when a gossip says, “Any half-wit magician ... could have interpreted that one” (288). Joseph’s own assessment of his family’s spiritual legacy is negative. When summoned back to his father’s deathbed in Canaan, Joseph hesitates to gain his father’s blessing (or curse) for his sons: “I fear for them with such a birthright. They will inherit tormenting memories and strange dreams” (304). These dreams – far more haunting than helpful – reflect the way that meaning-making is a tradition of gynocentric polytheism, while men’s dubious, dangerous experiences are more fitting to phallogocentric monotheism.

So far, we have seen how *The Red Tent*’s logic connects women with the Goddess tradition and men with Yahwism, upholding one as a varied, significant, life-affirming way of life, and the other as a singular path of violence, void of meaning. When the rise of monotheism threatens the women’s freedoms and traditions, the novel offers another exemplar in place of the red tent: Egyptian culture. In doing so, Diamant reverses a well-known biblical binary, the view of the Hebrews as God’s chosen people, superior to their Egyptian captors. Other critics have argued that Diamant compares “the brutal, nasty, and strife-ridden Hebrew male” with “non-Israelites who are nothing short of perfect” (Sofian 103; Scolnic qtd. in Schantz 2). Schantz dismisses such concerns as defensive postures of those who are not fully open to feminist midrash. However, she doesn’t dispute the disparity; she simply suggests that Diamant’s negative portrait of Hebrew men is well-deserved in light of the events of the novel (2). Even if this is true, the novel’s unilateral condemnation of Hebraic culture is striking. We have already seen that both the narration and the wives condemn the men and cultural practices of Canaan. Still a third perspective reinforces this wholly negative view: Egyptian-influenced people repeatedly describe Yahwist men and practices as “barbarian” and “not like civilized people” (281, 288). For

instance, the Hebrew practice of infant circumcision is decried as the idea of a “madman,” while the Egyptian custom of delaying the procedure until puberty makes it “a merry enough time” (288, 201). When Dinah stiffens in response to her son’s observation that the people from Canaan are barbarians, he doesn’t soften his statement about her countrymen. Instead, he calls her the exception: “Oh Ma, not you... You are not like the rest of them” (281). From every source – the narration, Jacob wives’ perspective, and the comments of the Egyptians, we see an impulse to negatively generalize Hebrew men and their culture.

Aside from her contrasting portrayals of masculinity and culture in the two countries, Diamant shows a more open environment for women in Egypt, a description grounded in historic fact since ancient Egypt allowed an unusual degree of gender equity. Among the “wonders” Dinah notices there “was the way women ate together with men” or how both sexes garden side-by-side (229, 234). In addition, while spirituality is not central to this part of the novel, the men and women of Egypt seem equally at home in their pantheon. With her relative freedom, Dinah eventually moves freely about the city, and she and her second husband form a two-income family with shared domestic tasks that serves as “an image of equality,” a portrait vastly different from Dinah’s relationship with her father and brothers back in Canaan (Blackford 79).

These are the interrelated binaries on which rests Diamant’s utopian vision of femininity. While critics have not explored the text’s comprehensive reliance on binaries, many have observed their individual effects. Believing that Diamant dishonors Judaism, Simone Lotven Sofian decries how the novel makes “benevolent Goddess worship” superior to Yahwism and holds up “civilized Egypt” against misogynist Israel (103).

Adrienne Leveen protests the novel's development of heroines who are more interesting than its "crude, simplistic caricature(s)" of the patriarchs (100). The novel's advocates do not find the reversals problematic. As Terry Wright argues, "Diamant's novel overturns this [celebration of the patriarchs], retelling the story in such a way as to make the men appear foolish and the women heroic..., which male readers may well resist.... But ... they are simply learning what generations of women-readers have experienced in the male-centred narrative of the Book of Genesis" (131). Wright sees Diamant's strategies as following an "eye-for-an-eye" approach to correcting the hypotext. Yet a closer examination suggests that Diamant does not merely reverse these binaries; by turns, she hollows out their complexities or replaces them with more starkly dualistic models.

To see how Diamant simplifies what is already simplistic (as all binaries are), let's begin with female/male. It is present in the Bible from the first chapter of Genesis, when we learn, "male and female created he them." The women and men of the Bible clearly occupy different roles, though at least in some passages, scholars disagree on whether this is a prescriptive or descriptive articulation of gender within the surrounding culture. Either way, if we are looking for a sense that, to use Zilpah's phrase, women are "half human," we will not find it in Genesis. Even feminist critics of the Bible like Sheres note that "though the text is of a patriarchal orientation, all of its significant women seem to be quite powerful, even if that power is of a 'domestic' sort" (22). She and others have observed that scriptural women (sometimes) foil men's plans and have (some) decision-making power, such as how Rebecca has sole say about whether to marry Isaac, how she directs Jacob to thwart his father's plans to bless Esau, or how Jacob confers with Rachel and Leah before they decide to leave Laban. Despite the Bible's male-centeredness, the

presence of a female with “a lively and formidable personality” is common (Ostriker *Revision* 40). While the women within these generations (Sarai to Dinah) often behave “badly,” exhibiting jealousy, cruelty, disbelief, and trickery, the heroic men of these texts – the very fathers of Israel – demonstrate these same qualities. As James Kugel writes of Jacob, he is “the national hero. Yet in reading the first part of his story, early interpreters could not but be a little disturbed by Jacob’s behavior” (199). Frymer-Kensky interestingly asserts that in pre-exilic writings, the “biblical image of women [in interiority, not in social roles] is consistently the same as that of the men. In their strengths and weaknesses, in their goals and strategies, the women of the Bible do not differ substantially from the men” (*Wake* 121). The appearance of Dinah’s episode in scriptures is another example of how depictions of men are not superior to those of women, since the text’s “studied neutrality” does not justify her brothers’ rage and arguably condemns it (Kugel 233). Possibly, the valorization of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob derives as much from a celebratory reading than from the text, which is famously willing to show the warts of its highlighted heroes and its hidden heroines. None of this denies the male centrality and control of the Bible or the male-dominated culture that it reflects, but the way that *The Red Tent* glorifies women while denigrating men stresses essential differences in gender to a far greater degree than what we find in Genesis.

Another example of replacing ambiguity with uniformity is Diamant’s contrast of pre-Israeli culture and Egypt. The binary of Egypt vs. Israel also stems from the Bible, where the Israelites’ escape from their enslavers is the climactic moment of the Hebrew Scriptures. Certainly, the Bible has a strong awareness of the “other,” the foreigner, the gentile. For example, both ancient and modern interpreters have speculated that the

foreignness of the prince who partnered with Dinah was what made their marriage reprehensible to the biblical mindset. Yet unlike Diamant's consistent condemnation of Israelites, Hebrew Scriptures offer a more complicated portrait of Egypt and other "aliens." True enough, at times, as in Dinah's story, foreigners are treated with hostility, and Egypt in particular bears special scrutiny for persecuting the Hebrews with infanticide and enslavement. However, the Bible also prescribes hospitality to the alien, and for generations before their enslavement, the Israelites found Egypt to be a haven and a site of relative prosperity (a portion of the Genesis account omitted from *The Red Tent*, which shows only Joseph and Dinah escaping Canaan). This sense of Egypt as a refuge informs the episode of Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus fleeing there for safety (Matt. 2). And just as it is surprising to find problematic men in an androcentric text, there is abundantly critical treatment of Israel in this nationalistic text. As with the dichotomy of female/male, one strategy that the *The Red Tent* employs for creating stark binaries is by hollowing out the more complicated portrayals of the Bible.

In her treatment of spirituality, Diamant sets aside the Bible and its suppression of the Goddess tradition and women's spiritual experiences. She rejects the biblical account when it does not align with her evocation of ancient feminist spirituality, such as women's interactions with Yahweh (the wrong god) or episodes relating to fertility (the realm of a goddess, not a god). In this, she follows scholars who believe that narratives, roles, and responsibilities of the goddesses were ultimately transferred to Yahweh. Feminist theologians like Ostriker view this as a "cover-up" that camouflages "erased female power," but just as in the discussion of gender portrayals, scriptures do depict women experiencing the divine on at least a limited scale (*Revision* 30). Examples from

the time of *The Red Tent* include when God talks with and rescues Hagar and her son in the desert, or when Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah take concerns about fertility or pregnancy to God. In the redacted Bible, though God unapologetically makes covenants only with men, God also visits, listens to, and remembers women. In other words, while Yahwism is extremely committed to defining itself “in absolute opposition to paganism,” it is *not* committed to aligning itself solely with men (36). Its divisions along the lines of gender are unequal but porous. As we have seen, feminist theologians often reject such half-measures. Yet it is ironic that Diamant’s replacement for Yahwism is even more dualistic, both asserting the superiority of polytheism over Yahwism *and* creating a stark gender divide. Even a scholarly proponent of the Goddess tradition like Carol Christ suggests that if feminist spirituality is to be meaningful, its theorists and practitioners must “develop holistic modes of thinking, ... transforming the classical dualisms of spirit and nature, mind and body, rational and irrational, male and female, that have structured the worldview we know as western thought” (*Rebirth* xiv). Diamant’s evocation of the Goddess tradition might simply reverse polytheism/Yahwism, but its added gender divisions are more dualistic than the biblical framework that she rejects.

Consider, for instance, the visitation of Sarah and Abraham when angels predict the birth of Isaac to the elderly, barren couple. The Bible’s telling is certainly subject to charges of sexism: Abraham directly interacts with the angels, while Sarah stays in the domestic sphere preparing a meal. Symbolically and literally, the tent mitigates her access to the divine. Even so, Sarah enjoys a degree of power, since her skeptical laughter about her ability to bear a son not only affirms her sexuality (“After I am waxed old shall I have pleasure?”), but also provides a name for Isaac, which means laughter (Gen.

18:12). In addition, Sarah's laughter attracts God's attention and initiates dialogue directly between her and God. Ostriker notes, "Sarah takes initiative, she has agency, she has speech, and above all it is quite clear that Isaac is *her* son" (*Revision* 40). On the other hand, Ostriker's larger point is that women like Sarah are eliminated from biblical narratives once they threaten male power or outlive their usefulness, an example of how the Bible "contains" strong women in two ways – both featuring and limiting them.

However anti- or pro-woman this narrative might be, Diamant discards it and reshapes it in the Goddess tradition. She rejects the post-covenantal name of Sarah, upgrades Sarai's status to pagan priestess, and reassigns the action to a goddess: "Innana loved Sarai so well that the goddess came to her in the terebinth grove at Mamre and gave her a healthy son in the extremity of her life" (136). Admittedly, this far briefer than the fuller narrative of the Bible. Even so, it is striking that in her effort to eliminate androcentrism, Diamant has eliminated the male altogether. Genette notes, "The simplest [way to abbreviate a hypotext], but also the most brutal and the most destructive to its structure and meaning, consists then of suppression pure and simple" (229). This sense of suppression as "brutal" applies both to the elimination of feminist spirituality from the Bible and to the way that Diamant strips men of their "spiritual inheritance" in the novel (Schantz 6). It is entirely understandable that Diamant rejects a doctored-up inclusion of women and illustrates how women's stories have been excised from the Bible. It is less clear why her imaginative recovery of the authentic story is even more strongly divided along gender lines or why vibrant female spirituality cannot appear alongside equally rich expressions of male religion. Ironically, while protesting the silencing of women's experiences, Diamant silences or impugns men's, as here with Abram and elsewhere with

Jacob and Joseph. It is also ironic that in creating a nostalgic view of this slightly older past, Diamant has recreated – even more starkly – the very patriarchal binaries she and others have opposed in the Bible. If the Bible is an ancient, largely patricentric text that is no longer helpful unless we look at it critically and imaginatively, why is this even more ancient, entirely matricentric framework helpful without critical evaluation?

And yet perhaps there is a vein of the novel that does offer critical evaluation. Despite the novel's surface adherence to one-dimensional portrayals and dichotomies, there are moments of tension that trouble these simplistic frameworks as well as any simplistic message about women and feminism. Regarding the female/male binary, two ambiguous figures undermine blanket assertions about "good" and "bad." Readers can debate whether Esau is the one good man in Canaan – generous, sensitive, and forgiving; or whether he's just one more man who allows violence toward women by not preventing his wife and daughter's exile. Similarly, readers can decide whether Rebecca is beneficent, cruel, or both. Is Werenro right to be "finished with Rebecca's arrogance" or is Dinah right to honor her (254, 163)? These two complicated characters, who are hard to place on the spectrum of "good" and "bad," deconstruct the novel's own logic, revealing the impossibility of categorizing all the men or women of a given culture.

Aside from troubling Diamant's handling of gender, Rebecca also raises questions about whether polytheism really is superior to Yahwism. She is a symbol of the power that the Goddess tradition offers women, but she uses that power in ways that mimic the hierarchical nature of the Judeo-Christian tradition, placing her nameless, uniformed acolytes in subservient, domestic positions (150). Blackford notices that both El and the maternal deities are "terrible," though one's power is assigned to death and the other life

(77). The two traditions also share rituals performed on sex organs (circumcision of a boy's penis, the breaking of a young woman's hymen) as well as harsh treatment of children. Rebecca's exile of her granddaughter on religious principles parallels the binding of Isaac, especially when the girl is carried away "strapped onto the back of a donkey, like an offering not yet dead" (158). The novel justifies or celebrates the challenging, even violent traditions of the Goddess while condemning the nearly identical traditions of El. In these ways, we see the tensions in the novel: At times, it upholds the Goddess tradition as both uniformly "good" and relatively "better" than early Yahwism, and at times it reveals that such judgments are at best simplistic or arbitrary.

One final example of the tensions within the novel appears in the treatment of Egypt and Israel. The novel asserts that while in the golden days of the red tent and in idealized Egypt, gender equity reigned, either in the separate spheres of pre-Yahwism or in the free mingling of men and women in Egypt. These two environments, the novel suggests, kept patriarchy at bay, yielding prosperity, relative freedom for women, and a lot of good sex. The novel posits that the rise of Yahwism unleashed patriarchy and its associated "violence, cruelty, misogyny, intolerance, and xenophobia" (Sofian103). However, even in the idyllic portions of the novel – the days of the red tent and the years in Egypt – sexism abounds but is treated as the natural order. Within the time of the red tent, for instance, the wives must manipulate Jacob to get what they want and need because they lack the power to act more directly. Food, sex, and violence are the women's main sources of capital, and even so, one woman gets sold and another molested. Yet of this era, the text says, "There followed many good years. The rains came in season, and the water was sweet and abundant" (45). Similarly, patriarchy is still

a reality in Egypt. In Memphis, Dinah's son attends an academy "where the sons of the most powerful scribes received their training and commissions;" it is a male-driven world where a mere "shard of limestone" signed by the right man can cement one's "status as a person of importance" (231, 270). In light of such patriarchy, Diamant's portrayal of idealized Egypt and the "fantasy of the red tent" as places of safety and wholeness for women seems suspect and at odds with her feminist intentions (Blackford 81).

We might infer that some of this ambiguity is the trace of the sacred hypotext from which Diamant draws. But the concept of trace in this instance is even more complicated than usual. One could certainly argue that the multi-voiced ambivalence of the Bible is itself an echo of the older, original texts and oral traditions that came together to create it. Just as there is no one message that the Bible offers about women (but instead numerous veins of thought), perhaps there is no one message about women or feminism in *The Red Tent*. But the biggest trace that marks the novel is its inability to escape one of the foundational logics of the Bible, that men and women should be categorized by their essential differences. Diamant often redefines these female essences more positively than has church tradition, but she still accepts the framework of female/male and a mindset that is eager to sort the world into Jew/Gentile, clean/unclean, and more. Such a reliance on biblical logic proves Carol Christ's point that sometimes feminists unknowingly accept the assumptions of male-oriented thinking and consequently "forfeit the opportunity to think as boldly and as creatively as we might" (*Changes* 12).

On the other hand, Diamant's strategy of reversing binaries is at least initially and perhaps lastingly productive. Exposure is the first step of deconstruction, and Diamant exposes much. She reveals injustice, questions the "normalcy" of androcentricism, and

explores avenues for women to reclaim a place within the biblical narrative and spirituality at large. As Graetz reminds us, “traditional midrashim about Dinah ... often ... condemns the victim....With legitimate midrash like this, it is easy to see why women feel a need for midrashim of their own” (166). If by reading this novel, women begin to see their connection to the divine differently and consequently perform differently (whether in terms of spirituality or femininity), then the text truly has the potential to be transformative. And in fact, the overwhelming response to this novel both in terms of sales, in the impassioned ways that women talk about it, and in the ways that it has inspired women to create a real-life red tent movement, suggests it has been transformative (see Blackford and Welser). In a different way, this power of transformation is part of what troubles the novel’s critics, who fear that the novel will in some ways supplant the “complexity and enigma” of the original text (Leveen 101).

However, if Cixous has at times participated in binary systems of logic, she has also exposed them as inherently phallogocentric. In maintaining a binary (even through its reversal), we fail to change the preexisting conditions, upholding the existing hegemony. In other words, binaries are a patriarch’s game. Extending this analogy, consider a scene in which Dinah recalls playing with her brothers: “[T]hey would join us on the ground, tossing a pebble into the air to see how many stones we could pick up with the same hand. It was our favorite game until I could pick up ten stones to their five. Then my brothers declared it a game fit only for girls and never played again” (77). Dinah’s obvious victory is hollow because instead of acknowledging her success, the boys marginalize her endeavor. They do not take the opportunity to reconsider their sister’s identity or their commonalities with her. In the same sense, a flipped binary will

always be beholden to the theoretically-down-but-actually-still-entrenched-dominator to cede the battle. Feminism as explored by Diamant is little more than the schoolyard taunt, “Girls rule and boys drool,” which is satisfying until it is drowned out by its immediate re-reversal. If there is no re-reversal, there is a shrug of dismissal, which we see in the predominately female readers (and literary critics) of this book and in Blackford’s experience that the novel alienates her male students (84). Or finally, the schoolyard taunt might be greeted with the sort of violence that, while usually latent, upholds all binaries.

Returning to the image of Dinah and her brothers, another way to explain Diamant’s feminist strategy is to say that she is playing a zero sum game. Whatever gains she creates for women (such as Dinah’s powerful dreams and spiritual experiences), she must take away from men (such as Jacob). Diamant reinforces an economy of scarcity – with finite supplies of spiritual resources like emotional health, access to the divine, legitimate models of spirituality, and basic respect. In this sense, it is an appropriate feminist agenda to hoard all of the emotional and spiritual well-being for women; and yet it is a self-defeating agenda because the grab for these scarce resources will continue. Cixous suggests that the way to disarm these patriarchal capitalist structures is not through reciprocal commerce or even struggle, but through gifts and generosity, celebrating the “exchange that multiplies” (893). If a novelist could model a way in which women and men perform spiritual abundance – a plenitude of well-being, a shared wealth of experiences, and respect for all who deserve it, then perhaps not only women but men might see themselves in it and begin to perform and thereby create an economy of abundance, not only in an idealized Egypt but even in a problematic Canaan.

Redeeming Love: Simplifying God, Complicating Gender

In *The Red Tent*, we considered a text that represents the question, “How can feminism solve the problem of the Bible?” Now we turn to one that might pose the opposite question, “How can the Bible solve the problem of feminism?” The shelves of Christian bookstores abound with such novels, outnumbering *The Red Tent*, its precursors, and its imitators. These authors aim not to subvert the Bible, but “to bring the truth to those trapped in lies and darkness” (Rivers 467). For some evangelicals, one of these lies is feminism itself; another might be that the inspired, inerrant Word of God needs revision. We might expect, then, to find faith-based renderings of the Bible to be palimpsests that maintain the events, tone, and gender roles of the ancient hypotext. Perhaps such novels exist. However, a reading of the extremely popular *Redeeming Love* by Francine Rivers suggests that even a novel that desires to uphold traditional theology and gender roles demonstrates the subversive power of a retelling. Rivers simultaneously accentuates and downplays patriarchy; yet even as these conflicting forces ultimately maintain the Bible’s ambivalence about gender, the novel still unsettles its hypotext by changing and downplaying the character of God.

Redeeming Love retells the story of the prophet Hosea, who at God’s command marries a prostitute to illustrate how God’s people “hath committed great whoredom, departing from the Lord” (Hos. 1:2). Although the narrative of Hosea is ambiguous, it remains a story of a man’s attempt to direct a woman’s behavior. God says, “Go, take unto thee a wife of whoredom,” and Hosea “went and took Gomer” (1:2-3). At the root of these brief sentences is the idea that man is the subject and woman is the object. While Rivers resets this story during the California gold rush, she leaves this principle

untouched in plot and grammar. God's language in the novel echoes the Bible; the King James' "Go, take...." has only been slightly altered to "Go back and get Angel" (79). Hearing these words is a devout farmer named Michael Hosea. Within weeks of spotting the prostitute Angel, Michael obeys God's command by taking and marrying her. Although during those weeks, Angel repeatedly rejects the farmer's offers for a better life, Michael is able to accomplish God's will because his appointed bride, in a failed suicide attempt, provoked a near-fatal beating from her keeper. When Michael learns that Angel is almost dead, he enters the saloon, purchases her from the madam of the house, stages a wedding, and transports her to his farm. In this way, Michael's actions mimic Hosea's (taking, purchasing, and marrying a sexually impure woman), faithfully replicating, or transposing, the biblical template of male action and female passivity.

At times, Rivers appears to challenge or soften this model, as when Michael says to Angel, "I want to marry you before we leave together" (100). This statement seems marked by parity – the groom does not compel the marriage, and Angel is not an object but a compound subject who will "leave together" with Michael. However, this asserted equality is undermined in a number of ways, the most significant of which is Angel's inability to move or remain conscious. Furthermore, despite Michael's statement that "we leave together," he and others frequently refer to Angel, like Gomer before her, as an object, as when Michael insists, "I'm taking her with me" (99). In addition, when Michael says "I want to marry you," he actually means, "I'm *going* to marry you," since he has already called the preacher to Angel's bedside and appropriately does not require the words, "I do." Finally, Angel's participation in the wedding is passive: After being commanded to "Just say yes," she "felt someone slip a ring on her finger. Her head was

raised gently, and she was given something bitter [laudanum] to drink” (100). Drifting on a “sea of pain and quiet voices,” Angel cannot identify the men who control her body and marriage, although the text specifies that “Lucky [a female friend] took her hand” (100). Lucky later clarifies that it was Michael who “put his mother’s wedding ring on” Angel’s finger, but on the whole, the scene’s passive construction both objectifies Angel and refrains from blaming Michael or the preacher for acting too forcefully, since they are not directly depicted as the subjects who control Angel. The narration effectively suggests not that Michael inflicted marriage upon Angel, but that marriage “happened” to her. The novel’s egalitarian language and passive syntax camouflage Michael’s overpowering behavior, but even so, Rivers’ transposition maintains the Bible’s pattern of male control.

As Adri Goosen writes of another Rivers novel, “[A]s long as Rivers remains true to these male-biased ‘facts’ . . . , she is keeping her female protagonist neatly within the design of the original male narrators and reiterating . . . perspectives which reflect stereotypical ideas about women and make them serve patriarchal ideals and interests” (42). When the novel replicates these “male-based ‘facts,’” its model of male dominance not only maintains but even surpasses the Bible’s. Written from several perspectives and voices and drawing from prose, prophecy, and poetry, the Book of Hosea does not offer a clear-cut narrative for Gomer and Hosea (Hos. 1-3). Interpretations of the marriage plot vary; frequently it is distilled to an initial wedding, followed by Gomer’s return to other men, and finally a renewal of the marriage, though even these plot points are debated. Similarly, depending on how one translates the Hebrew, Gomer is called either an unfaithful wife or a prostitute. Following Hosea 1:9, some believe that one of Gomer’s children was not fathered by the prophet; following 2:5, others believe that none were.

Feminists might interpret Gomer's behavior as "control over her own body," while moralists typically label it "rampant promiscuity" (Exum 104). In every case, Rivers chooses the most patriarchal path, the one that reinforces male dominance and the stereotype of the wayward and morally dubious woman. Angel is a "cold and cynical" prostitute, and the faith-based novel naturally associates prostitution not with autonomy but with promiscuity (Rivers 65). While the novel does not depict Angel becoming pregnant by another man after marriage, it does portray her repeatedly attempting to escape the relationship. In other words, despite Michael's good intentions and provisions, Angel is unfaithful by leaving four times, mimicking a chronically adulterous Gomer.

In addition to accentuating Angel's infidelity, Rivers heightens Hosea's control of Gomer. In the hypotext, the prophet does seek and reclaim her, either by alluring or purchasing her (2:14 and 3:2). It is difficult to determine whether Hosea "merely" threatens or actually executes strong actions such as publicly stripping his wife, removing her provisions, or blocking her way. It is even hard to know whether those actions should be attributed to Hosea since the words appear in God's own voice in chapter two, and there is no accompanying narration in Hosea's voice that clarifies whether and how these ideas were accomplished. In interpreting the book, then, Rivers has options ranging from gentle enticement to harsh domination. As above, when Rivers' language of equality masked actions of control, here Rivers edits out the angriest elements of Hosea 2 and instead emphasizes the promise to "speak comfortably," or tenderly, to Gomer (2:14). Yet despite surface niceties such as Michael's declarations of love and gentle demeanor, he upholds or exceeds Hosea's control. The intended reader of this novel celebrates his combination of tenderness and familial authority and will excuse even his strongest

behavior. However, resistant readers view his conduct through a darker lens of control. For example, when Michael teaches Angel, one reader might see him as nobly imparting wisdom, while another views the same actions as indoctrination. He instructs her in everything from Bible stories and hymns to skills such as starting a fire and cooking to the proper way of thinking about sex, nature, and marriage. Perhaps most significantly, under his tutelage, she stops believing that she is in bondage and instead feels bonded. Similarly, traditional readers embrace Michael's sensitivity to Angel and her needs, but suspicious readers will note that Michael constantly sees and monitors; he reads Angel's mind, intuits activities he does not even observe, and anticipates her departures. Finally, readers who advocate male headship and shepherding are pleased to see Michael protect Angel and their marriage; they will also note that in the face of extreme provocation, he is typically gentle and restrained. Resistant readers will decry how Michael repeatedly tracks down and retrieves Angel, as when, after locating her in a brothel, he "shoved her roughly.... He grabbed her arm and yanked back so hard, she cried out in pain" (193). Both sets of readers will agree that Michael educates her in a new way of thinking and behaving, observes her conduct closely, and enforces limits. If Teresa Hornsby and others have asserted that God – acting through Hosea – demonstrates "an obsessive desire to possess" when pursuing Gomer once or twice, then Michael Hosea surpasses his namesake through his vigilant monitoring and retrieval (116). Anyone who would deny Michael's paternalistic dominance should consider how the novel would read if one male kept another on his farm without consent and in the face of repeated attempts to escape.

Perhaps this emphasis on Michael's protection of Angel derives not from its hypotext, but from its architext, the genre of the romance novel, which can feature

“decidedly traditional” gender roles and narratives of male rescue – and even force (Christopherson 442). As recently as 2005, Matthew Kapell and Suzanne Becker argued that the inspirational romance “has at its masthead the preservation of Western patriarchy” (152). In particular, Michael’s combination of strength and tenderness serves in “evangelical novels, [as] the definition of true masculinity” (Blodgett 139-140). Whether this hyper-affirmation of male control is indebted to the Bible or derived from the romance novel, it is an example of what Genette calls an aggravation that “carries to extremes ... the truth of the hypotext” (359). In this way, even without an intent to challenge the Bible, *Rivers* exposes its reliance on masculine authority.

So far we have seen how *Rivers* has amplified patriarchy by exaggerating Michael’s leadership within the biblical plot. Next, we’ll see how emphasizing Angel’s victimhood – in other words, altering the prostitute’s motivation – is also problematic. Yvonne Sherwood notes that throughout time the Book of Hosea has been considered a “problem text” that defies readers’ expectations since among other difficulties, it offers “fleshy” descriptions of a defiantly willing prostitute and then makes either the prophet and/or God complicit in this sin (12, Georges Brillet qtd on 34). Biblical interpretation that has historically viewed female sexuality as problematic can easily categorize Gomer as an over-available woman (as in the Madonna/whore syndrome that Rosemary Ruether identified); but why would God issue the “bizarre command” to associate with such a woman (33)? Even if one reads the passage in the metaphorical sense of proving God’s faithfulness in the face of infidelity, Hosea’s relationship with Gomer has provoked “[s]tatements of bewilderment” in both early midrash and contemporary scholarship (11). Sherwood notes that “diluting or devising an elaborate apologetic” for Gomer’s behavior

are strategies that critics have used to confine this unruly woman and this problematic text; if Gomer is not so sinful as she appears, or if the entire book is merely metaphorical, then the passage becomes more palatable (20). Following this same strategy, Rivers shows what Anita Gandolfo calls “generosity” in providing “a heart-wrenching backstory for Angel” (71, 146). Sold into the sex trade as a girl, Angel has unsuccessfully tried to escape prostitution ever since, a framing that allows readers to look past the “sordid details of Angel’s life” by focusing on her “psychic wounds [which] prevent her from accepting Michael’s unconditional love” (146, 70-71). On the one hand, feminists can celebrate this effort to rehabilitate a negatively portrayed biblical woman, yet while sympathetic, this backstory limits Angel’s agency. She is a passive prostitute, and even her attempts to escape this life are ineffectual, part of the pattern of thwarted plans that recurs during and shortly after her time with Michael. Jan Blodgett suggests that in evangelical romances, the heroine gains “considerable independence” only after she submits to God, which for Angel occurs a mere thirty-six pages before the novel ends; consequently, she lives more than four hundred pages without self-determination (86).

The difference between Angel and Gomer is best seen in their post-marital returns to prostitution. Angel leaves Michael not to return to the sex trade but to reclaim her earnings so she can build “her own little cabin in the woods” and live alone (183). Then a fire destroys her plans for independence: “All her prospects were gone. She had no gold, no clothes ... no food, and no place to stay” (191). When a man offers her the chance to resume prostitution, “[h]e knew she couldn’t say no” (191). The only glimpse of autonomy is that Angel negotiates a better deal before she heads to her new room, which is soon “filled with silent screaming” (192). Summarized by the phrase “she couldn’t say

no,” this episode is one more example of the novel hindering Angel’s independence. It reads as both a cautionary tale (“Why didn’t I stay with Michael?”) and an example of how Rivers saves Angel from the blackest sins, since it’s clear that the pimp shares in the blame and that Angel would avoid prostitution if she could (191). Contrast Angel with Gomer, who returns to the trade after considering “the rewards that my lovers have given me,” including wine and oil, silver and gold, earrings and jewels (Hos. 2:12, 8, 13). For this and other reasons, Hornsby views Gomer as a “prosperous and independent prostitute” rather than a victim (116). Certainly, Gomer’s declaration, “I will go after my lovers” suggests greater autonomy than “she couldn’t say no” (Hos. 2:5). The Book of Hosea does not provide a resolution for Gomer’s life; we do not know whether she finally chooses to return to prostitution or the prophet. If a novelist were to maintain Gomer’s autonomy by showing her first choosing prostitution and ultimately choosing the prophet, one could honor the woman’s agency and still offer her religious redemption; whether one could then find a religious publisher and audience is questionable. Gandolfo’s sense that Rivers shows “generosity” is fair; Rivers intends to make a much-maligned biblical woman more wronged than wrong. But in changing the prostitute’s motivation so starkly, Rivers again exacerbates the Bible’s limitations for women.

And even as Rivers protectively frames Angel’s prostitution, she also uses the Bible to invoke the danger of seductresses like Gomer, singling out Delilah, Eve, Jezebel, Salome, and others. Through this association, the novel asserts that Angel is both wronged *and* wrong. As Michael tells her, “If Rahab ... [and] Bathsheba ... belonged [in God’s plan], I think there’s a place for you” (228). Another negative reference occurs late in the novel when Angel names her refuge for prostitutes the “House of Magdalena,”

drawing on a disputed classification of Mary Magdalene as fallen woman; although Magdalene is upheld as repentant, there is still the reminder that she was once (theoretically) sexually sinful (171). Most unexpectedly, Michael asserts that God was able to use the Virgin Mary *despite* the fact that she became pregnant outside of marriage, without mentioning that it is God's own spirit that impregnated her (228). Especially when contrasted with "[s]weet, sensible virgin girls from good families," such references use the Bible to introduce an element of misogyny, reinforce the Madonna/whore dichotomy, and offer a wariness of female sexuality (452).

Just as the novel's negative expressions of femininity are based on selected biblical models of sexuality, some of its positive articulations of womanhood rely on limited scriptural pronouncements about maternity. Such teachings and attitudes emphasize the importance of childbearing to family life, social standing, and even women's salvation. Anticipating the birth of a new sibling, Miriam tells Angel, "It's a woman's reason for being, isn't it? Our divine privilege: to bring new life into the world and nurture it" (355). The idea that maternity is "what being a woman is all about" is never directly challenged in the novel, and even the longsuffering Michael prays, "God, Why? ... Will I never beget even one on my wife?" (Rivers 361-362). Once again, Michael's grammar belies how viewing women's purpose as procreation serves to objectify them. The value of childbirth is also upheld when Angel equates her longed-for fertility with wholeness, or when the narrator states that although Michael says that Angel's barrenness doesn't matter, "both of them knew it did" (362). It is further underscored by Angel's miraculous healing; some fifteen years after her forced sterilization, her fertility is restored to allow for a wholly happy ending.

Up to this point, we have considered how Rivers transforms the Book of Hosea and other biblical concepts. Her fidelity to the scriptures is exactly what we would expect to find in evangelical fiction. Yet as Genette argues, there is no retelling without altering, and in transposing the narrative, she has fixated on gender inequality just as any feminist might; in doing so, Rivers arguably exposes the Bible's patriarchy. However, in converting 2 pages of text into 450 pages of a novel, she must do more than retell the story; she must also expand and extend it with "episodes that are extraneous to the initial theme but ... invest it with its full ... religious significance" (Genette 264-265). Rivers' embellishments do reinforce the text's religious significance, but, interestingly, they also introduce a gender equity that at least partially offsets her transposition's sexism.

To examine Rivers' amplifications, let's begin by revisiting Michael when he takes, marries, and retrieves Angel. According to more than 1,000 Amazon.com postings, 89 percent of the novel's reviews award it a full five stars, reporting in their comments that they view Michael as an apt iteration of the prophet Hosea and consequently, an inspiring vision of God's mercy and protection. However, a few readers perceive him differently, voiced in an Amazon.com review by "Miss Smartypants." She acknowledges, "You're supposed to ... believe that this is just like how God pursues us," but then she details how "Rivers molests the true message of the Biblical story." In keeping with feminist perspectives, her reading argues that "Michael Hosea should be locked up" and is a "controlling, manipulative nightmare of a man." She specifically cites Michael's abduction of the drugged young woman, and how he "wants to change her identity." In this reading, Michael's pursuit of Angel is criminal and her eventual love for her abductor is a benign case of Stockholm Syndrome. The intended reader of the novel

celebrates Michael's mercy, but like Zilpah of *The Red Tent*, the resistant reader asks, "What kind of mercy is that?" (Diamant 62).

In response to Miss Smartypants, other readers post that detractors are out to undermine the novel with "biases" and a poor "understanding of the context" (Whitney). Consider, then, the words of a commentator who cannot be accused of such intentions: Angel herself. Realizing that Michael ruined her suicide attempt, Angel notes that "she'd failed again.... Rather than be free, she was in bondage to another man.... Hosea was the one man she had wanted most to avoid, and now he owned her.... Her utter dependency on him chafed bitterly.... Angel felt a trap closing in on her [, not] a two-story brothel, but it was a trap nonetheless" (Rivers 109). Throughout the first sections of the novel, Angel makes such assertions, recommitting herself to a desire to live independently and calculating the money she needs to repay Michael "hour for hour, day for day" for his ministrations (114). Echoing Miss Smartypants, Angel tells Michael, "You don't have any idea who and what I am other than what you've created in your own mind" (150). Although the reader correctly predicts that Angel will later recant most of these opinions, their very appearance problematizes a monolithic understanding of Michael's care for Angel. And aside from Angel's assertions that Michael's tenderness can torment, the supposedly neutral narrator acknowledges, "His gentle voice was like salt on her wounds," an assessment that is never retracted (151).

Furthermore, Rivers herself shows qualms about unadulterated male control, since she devotes fifty pages to contextualizing the taking of Angel, an action that in the Bible requires just two verses. Before Michael carries Angel out of the saloon, he has spent all his money visiting her, not for sex but in attempts to persuade her to marry him. When

she refuses, he is flummoxed, praying, “What am I doing back here [in the brothel]? I’ve tried. You know I have. She doesn’t want what I’m offering. What am I supposed to do? Drag her out of here by her hair?” (76). He is aware that women are not merely objects – under ordinary circumstances, Michael cannot simply drag Angel out; he can only make offers, not orders; and Angel can make choices based on what she wants. To rationalize the taking of Angel, Rivers brings her to the point of death to mandate her removal, repeatedly insists that Michael “was doing God’s will,” and earnestly clarifies that he has no intention of sleeping with his wife “until it means something more ... than work” (114-115). In contextualizing, Rivers replicates male dominance even as she questions whether it would be acceptable without her “excuses and extenuations” (Genette 356). In other words, Rivers’ embellishments to the text acknowledge that the Bible has a problem, whether that problem is a lack of information (how did Hosea take Gomer?), a problem of patriarchy (can we unqualifiedly endorse Hosea taking Gomer?), or both.

Perhaps the biggest challenge to a model of male control, however, comes from Michael. Just as Angel eventually rescinds her earlier views about her “bondage” to Michael, he also repents of how he treated Angel. At God’s prodding, when Michael anticipates that Angel is planning her fourth escape, he allows her to leave so she can live independently. Despite pressure from friends, for the rest of the novel, he refuses to locate her, contact her, learn about her activities, or retrieve her. The novel’s explanation is that Angel needs space not because Michael was wrong to be controlling, but because he was right in the ways that he had “given her everything,” “filled her to overflowing with his love,” and “taken her back and forgiven her” (365). God reminds Michael of the command, “You shall have no other gods before me,” and while Michael knows that he

himself has not violated this edict, he agrees when God informs him, “You became hers” (383). While the text does not state that Michael’s initial control over Angel was wrong or ineffective, the narrative implies that it ultimately outlived its usefulness. Although Angel learns much under Michael, her spiritual growth eventually plateaus, as God suggests when commanding Michael to let her go: “Would you have her hang on her cross forever?” (363). Once free, Angel enters into a fruitful phase of her life and, most importantly to the purposes of the novel, comes to forgiveness and faith. Feminists can debate whether the always-didactic Michael “giving” Angel her independence is true freedom, or whether he was merely teaching her in a different way, but ultimately, the complete manner in which Michael cedes control over Angel’s future suggests the former. Within the augmentation sections of the novel, the dissenting commentary (such as Angel’s protests or Rivers’ contextualization) and the countervein of the narrative (when Michael sets aside a strategy of supervision for a course of autonomy) critique the model of male control found in the transposition of the biblical narrative. This “counter-hegemonic discourse” is similar to the “textual self-correction” that Adriane B. Leveen identifies within the Bible’s narrative of the rape of Dinah and her brothers’ retaliatory sacking of the city of Shechem (Bartkowski 395, Leveen 95). It shows one way that the augmentations of the novel express a very different view than the transposition.

Another element is that the embellishments feature a spectrum of approved models for marriage, not merely ones in which the husband exerts prominent leadership within the family, rendering judge-like pronouncements. These diverse exemplars for marriage within the novel substantiate sociologist John T. Bartkowski’s claim that “household authority and spousal decision-making are in fact the subject of debate within

conservative Protestant circles” (394). The most conservative marriage is that of Michael and Angel’s neighbors, shown in the way that “if John Altman said, ‘Go,’ Elizabeth and Miriam would” (261). However, this male headship is mitigated by a “respectful camaraderie”: “John Altman was clearly in charge . . . , but it was clear he was not held in fear by his wife and children” (244, 240). In addition to classic male headship, both Christian fiction and nonfiction often promote models that “are more egalitarian and emphasize the mutual submission of husband and wife to each other” (Christopherson 442). Several families in the novel are more egalitarian, with one scene referring to the “agitated tones” of male-female negotiations or when one wife requires an explanation of her husband’s behavior: “I really must ask, Jonathan. What were you doing in a place like that?” (298, 421). Similarly, Michael demonstrates joint decision-making; when he contemplates selling some land to the Altmans, he tells Angel, “I wanted to discuss it with you before mentioning it to him” (260). Although this quote suggests that both John and Michael are the leaders of their families, there is a greater degree of shared ownership and decision-making within the Hosca family. While all these marriages still operate within a model of male headship, such authority is – even at its most conservative – tempered by gentleness, and at its most progressive, marked by shades of parity.

The last marriage we’ll consider is progressive enough to be unexpected within an evangelical novel. In a reversal of Michael’s marriage to Angel, Miriam Altman finds a benign way to incapacitate the man she loves, arranges for a minister, and then orders him to marry her, all with the simple justification that she realized they loved each other and “I just got so tired of waiting” (409-410). Before and during their marriage, Miriam argues with Paul, often in defense of Angel: “Miriam lifted her head. She wasn’t going to

sit silent while he violated her friend” (424). When Paul resists her “reprimanding” him in his own house, Miriam’s anger mounts: “Then it’s only your home now, even though we’re married?... I suppose I’ve no right to my own thoughts or beliefs...?” (424). She later commands her husband to find Angel in San Francisco, which he patently opposes. Even though she resorts to raging, weeping, and begging, she is also “insistent,” telling him, “I want you to go, Paul... It has to be you” (440). Paul’s own summary places Miriam as subject and himself as object: “Why did you ever send me on this mad quest?” (441). However, her plan is marked by wisdom, not madness; like Michael, Miriam has the power to see and the desire to save. In addition to contesting her husband, Miriam challenges her father, the traditional patriarch John Altman. Angel notices the “constant arguing” between the father and daughter; and instead of accepting her father’s decision to move the family to Oregon, Miriam appears undaunted, telling Angel: “You’re as bad as Mama. We’re not packed and rolling yet,” while she concocts “plans of how to prevent her father’s exodus” (244, 261). Furthermore, while Christopherson notes that many evangelicals view nontraditional families as a “necessary evil,” there is no criticism of Miriam’s challenges to her father or husband (441). The epilogue simply mentions that this family – like Michael and Sarah’s, and presumably like the Altmans’ and the others’ – “prospered” through time (463). Ranging from the most conservative (Miriam’s parents) to the most progressive (Miriam’s and Paul’s), these varying marriages are typical of contemporary religious literature, acknowledging more latitude in relational models than we see in Rivers’ initial evocation of Hosea’s control over his wife.

If these diverse marriages are one way that we see greater equity in the augmentation sections of the novel than the transposition, another is the presence of

several strong female characters, including Miriam Altman. Aside from her marital leadership, the novel celebrates Miriam's (mildly) expressed sexual desire, which partially motivates her to propose to Paul. (This acknowledgment that even "virgins from good families" experience desire slightly troubles the Madonna/whore dichotomy raised elsewhere.) Discussing the challenges that a one-room cabin presents for intimacy, she says, "When I get married, my husband and I are going to build a loft for the children, and we're going to have a nice cozy bedroom next to the kitchen" (328). Her statement combines many of the novel's assertions – that wives should have a say in how they live; that spouses work together to build their lives; that sex is intended for marriage and crowned by children; and that within these boundaries, desire is encouraged. Such an endorsement of feminine desire is not only attributed to Miriam; it is one of the many lessons that Angel learns from Michael. If such female sexuality falls short of some feminists' ideals, it is even so more normalized and endorsed here than commonly attributed to the Christian tradition and in the transposition sections of the novel.

A very different model of female agency is Susanna Axle, a friend and patroness to Angel after she leaves Michael and starts life anew in San Francisco. Although Gandolfo rightly argues that in *Redeeming Love* and similar novels, "the female protagonist comes to know God principally from the example of the male," it is Susanna who ultimately leads Angel to salvation, teaches her about prayer, and encourages her to find her God-given purpose (71). As a result, Angel and Susanna are inspired to begin a ministry that provides education and job training for prostitutes. This ministry is a feminist undertaking; in fact, it serves as a "red tent," a female-only space that provides refuge and community while broadening the agency and options of women. When

Susanna's father understands that his daughter has been called to this ministry, he initially views her decision as a loss: "He wanted his girl married and settled with children of her own... He wanted her to be more like Priscilla and less like himself" (438). However, seeing the "sparkle" in Angel and Susanna as they discuss their plans, he realizes, "They were both so beautiful, it was hard to look at them. Light shining in the darkness" (438). In this passage, the father initially views Susanna as "his girl," subject to what "he wanted" – marriage and motherhood, as endorsed in Rivers' transposition. However, within moments, Mr. Axle recognizes the "real, lasting value" of a more masculine ("like himself") yet still "beautiful" womanhood (438). Although in this scene the women appear through Mr. Axle's gaze, Susanna does not seek his opinion or permission; similarly, when Angel decides to return to Michael, she transfers authority for the school to Susanna without consulting anyone, male or female. Blodgett notes that women's accomplishment in Christian fiction is usually celebrated when heroines "balance independence with submission" and when they value "family life above all else" (155, 140). Susanna, who "remained at the House of Magdalena until her death," does neither (Rivers 463). Such a celebration of women's accomplishment outside the bounds of marriage and maternity is a remarkable complement to the more traditional view of exemplary women offered in the biblical transposition. The two visions – one of subordinate wife- and motherhood, and one in which women seek out their own husbands or forsake marriage altogether for other rewarding enterprises – are held side by side.

In short, the novel is a site of much ambivalence, an example of the "odd disjunctions and creative accommodations" that Blodgett finds to be emblematic of Christian fiction and its "growing accommodation to feminism" (139, 86). Quoting Judith

Stacey, Bartkowski notes that individuals – and in this case, an individual text – “can simultaneously embrace both a patriarchal and an egalitarian family structure” (406). Christopherson suggests that these tensions are created by evangelicals’ mix of accommodation and resistance to secular ideas such as feminism, but he clarifies that what appears as accommodation (such as the abundance of strong female characters in Christian fiction) might actually be resistance (demonstrating that women should derive strength from God, not men). I have argued that the text is divided largely along the lines of conservative views forwarded in the biblical transpositions (which convey what Rivers believes to be the authoritative teachings of scripture about gender) and more progressive attitudes in the author’s own embellishments. In this way, this text might provide an example of a breakdown between “the prevailing gender *attitudes* and the actual *practice* of gender” (Bartkowski 406, emphasis in original). For these and other reasons, inspirational fiction in general and this novel in particular exhibit changing and conflicted thinking about men and women. Whether *Redeeming Love* is genuinely confused about gender, whether Rivers attempts to correctively insert modern parity alongside ancient patriarchy, or whether she quite literally (yet perhaps unwittingly) invokes the imprimatur of the Bible to advocate greater equity, are all possible interpretations. In any case, the novel’s narrative strategies of aggravating sexism in the transpositions and inserting equity in the augmentations create a stasis that maintains – and acknowledges – the hypotext’s ambivalence about gender.

Such ambivalence is especially concentrated in a few passages. For instance, throughout the novel, Michael claims the Adamic power to name and identify Angel: “I’ll call you by what I see. Mara, embittered by life; Tirzah, my beloved who stirs a fire in

me” (151). However, Angel limits his power by protecting the name her mother gave her: “The only thing she had left was her name, and she had never told anyone what it was” (64). At the book’s end, Angel has the power to reveal her true name (Sarah), while Michael claims the authority to identify her as the biblical matriarch, a “barren woman who conceived a son. His beautiful, cherished wife who would someday give him a child” (462). Similarly, the novel is also conflicted about the biblical figure of Ruth, who is both denigrated for sleeping “at the feet of a man she wasn’t married to, on a public threshing room floor,” and honored as the namesake of one of the Altman girls (228). In addition, as we’ll see in the conclusion, Ruth’s actions – the same ones criticized by Michael – are approvingly imitated by Miriam when she proposes to Paul.

Finally, Angel herself is the site of greatest ambiguity. Her last departure from Michael is ordained by God and models “a higher quality of love: sacrifice” (448). It both establishes a lasting ministry and makes Michael “stronger now than he ever was” (425). Yet in the end, Angel returns to her husband embodying two figures from the Gospel of Luke, the repentant prodigal son and the (presumably sexually) sinful woman who washes Jesus’ feet with her tears and hair (Luke 15 and 7). Unlike the forgiving father who runs to the prodigal, Michael “stood very still” as Angel nears while stripping her clothing like so many “layers of pride ... until she was humbled by her own nakedness” (459-460). Michael does eventually cover her, robe-like, with his shirt, but not before Angel “sank to her knees. Hot tears fell on his boots. She wiped them away with her hair” (461). While the prodigal son cannot complete his confession, Michael gives Angel time to consider, “Oh, what had she done to him in denying her love, in turning away? She had played God and done what she had thought best for him, and all she had done was cause

him pain” (461). Despite this initial condemnation of her decision to build a life without her husband, the novel’s epilogue suggests that Michael and Angel eventually endorse her extramarital accomplishments, since “[a]s long as she was physically able” Angel “returned for one week each year to the House of Magdalena” (463). As an evangelical, Rivers might want to deny the ambivalence of the Bible, but her writing retains its trace.

Consequently, it would be simplistic to say that the novel is a total “failure of revisionist potential” (Goosen 42). Perhaps unintentionally, the novel is subversive on a number of levels. Goosen identifies the first method of resistance: “[evangelical] novels are indeed engaging in social commentary or biblical critique merely by the fact of their existence. By offering stories about biblical women, they are in effect acknowledging that these stories are absent from the original biblical narrative” (37). Echoing the way Anita Diamant depicts Dinah’s treatment in Genesis, Gandolfo describes Gomer as “simply a cipher... absent of specifics” (146). If Gomer were simply a cipher, it would be an adequate feminist endeavor to “create the character” (146). Yet Gomer is not unknown; she is one of the many “bad women” of the Bible. Whether professionally or interpersonally, she is sexually impure. For an evangelical like Rivers to take on such a longtime scapegoat for rehabilitation is remarkable.

We have seen that Rivers’ clean-up of Angel into an unwilling prostitute is problematic. However, in other ways, Rivers’ reconsideration of the figure taps into its subversive potential. This is most clear when she directly raises questions about Gomer, as when Michael considers, “Was Gomer ever redeemed by her husband’s love?... But what about Gomer, Lord?” (213). Similarly, Angel speculates: “Maybe she had a Duchess who had her money, too. Maybe the prophet had driven her half-crazy the way

this farmer was driving her crazy. Maybe she just wanted to be left alone. Did the prophet ever think of that?" (134). The prophet does not appear to have thought of that, but feminist scholars certainly have, and for their efforts, they have been labeled subversive or even heretical. Such commentary provides an alternative to Goosen's supposition that texts cannot question androcentrism while remaining "true to male-biased 'facts'" (42). Even within the prescribed bounds of the narrative (and even without an obvious intent to disrupt it), Rivers demonstrates how one can question the ur-text from within.

Yet there are key ways in which Rivers feels free to diverge from the "facts" of the Bible. The number of divergences from the Bible is surprising— she changes setting, perspective, narrative devices, plot points, religion, motivations, and more. Genette notes that such disparities in a retelling can amount to a "betrayal" even if "there is no evidence pointing to a deliberate and fully conscious intention" (193). Betrayal is too a strong word here, but it does suggest the subversive power of even well-intentioned alterations. Perhaps the most destabilizing of these changes is the transvaluation of Gomer, a minor figure who is discarded after she proves that even in the face of infidelity, God remains faithful. In the novel, however, Angel is elevated to "the most developed character" from page one through the epilogue (Gandolfo 146). Genette notes that the promotion of one character "inevitably and logically demotes" another (349). When Diamant promoted women in *The Red Tent*, she demoted the patriarchs; here, Rivers demotes the Almighty. In the Book of Hosea, God is the primary character, alternating between rage and mercy for fourteen chapters. In *Redeeming Love*, God remains important but becomes quiet, limited to approximately fifty very brief statements of comfort or challenge. In subtracting the words of God, Rivers reduces the presence and power of the character and

perhaps the voice of patriarchy itself. In fact, formerly the story's subject was God; woman appeared as an object, a tool for establishing the faithfulness of God. Now the subject is a woman and God is the object; God's faithfulness is a tool used to redeem the woman. Such a change is, if not a betrayal, at least feminist-approved tinkering.

Rivers not only demotes but also limits the character of the divine, specifically excising God's rage. Certainly, God still makes challenging demands such as telling Michael to marry a prostitute or forgive "seventy times seven." Yet there is no anger or judgment, and absolutely no threats to "publicly humiliate," as when God says in Hosea, "Now I will expose her genitals in the sight of her lovers and no one shall rescue her from my hand" (Exum 104, including her own translation of Hos. 2:10).

Rivers might argue that any changes she has made in the story follow a strategy of translation known as dynamic equivalence, that is, that she has not converted elements of the biblical narrative word-by-word, but idea-by-idea, communicating the crux of the story. Pointing out the challenges of the "complex," "obscure," and "metaphorical" Book of Hosea, Gandolfo credits Rivers with presenting the "essence of its Biblical source" (69, 148). In "Why I Wrote *Redeeming Love*," Rivers explains, "[T]he Book of Hosea ... [is] a deeply moving story of His passionate love for each of us – unconditional, forgiving, unchanging, everlasting, self-sacrificing" (467). This encapsulation of Hosea's marriage with Gomer (illustrative of God's relationship with the nation of Israel) has been handed down along these lines in part because the Bible itself provides such interpretive cues (see Hos. 2:23) and in part because this portrait of Hosea's God reconciles well with the "unconditional, forgiving, unchanging, everlasting, self-sacrificing" God that most believers worship. In effect Rivers takes what she – and many

others – have long believed to be the spirit of the original text; she simply offers the modern reader a different means of reaching that insight.

However, Walter Brueggemann and others suggest that such a reading of Hosea is incomplete, an example of how an interpretive community can read a complex text and extract a simple message. Instead, he argues that Hosea yields “a full characterization of God” that accommodates neither ancient nor contemporary orthodoxies (5). Similarly, Yvonne Sherwood calls the alternately angry and merciful words of Yahweh “schizoid utterances;” she notes that many scholars have devoted energy to controlling God’s “shifting moods” in their efforts to conclude that “hate and annihilation are erased by the operation of grace” (236-237). In response to this interpretive consensus, Brueggemann concludes that the Book of Hosea’s words of mercy and forgiveness (which Rivers and the Christian tradition emphasize) “are not uttered, however, except in a context of brutal rhetoric that lingers in the ears of Israel and that is not erased by the subsequent utterance of graciousness” (16). Following this reading, Rivers may practice dynamic equivalence, but she is faithful to her interpretative community’s reduction of Hosea, not to the Bible itself; and her characterization of God is similarly reduced. One could argue that Rivers is not only rehabilitating the character of God, but the entire narrative of Hosea, replacing it with one that better fits her (and most believers’) view of the Bible. In suppressing the problematic elements of Hosea in favor of a simplistic narrative of God’s mercy, Rivers modifies the text “solely for its own good, in order to tailor it to an aesthetic code that is admittedly alien to it but sees itself quite innocently as the best possible code, indeed as the only valid one” (Genette 317). While wary of *Redeeming Love*’s oversimplification, Gandolfo suggests that “the average Christian, relying on reading alone, would be more

likely to be inspired by the novel than its Biblical source” (69). This is true in part because of the Bible’s “technical difficulties,” but perhaps more importantly, the novel also addresses Hosea’s theological difficulties (70). In other words, the book both simplifies the character of God and complicates the nature of gender.

Though no one will confuse the two novels, in both *Redeeming Love* and *The Red Tent*, Rivers and Diamant retrieve women from the fringes of the Bible and elevate them to the center of their novels. Unrelatedly, both authors portray a flattened view of Yahweh, with Diamant focusing on what Brueggemann calls the “brutal rhetoric” and Rivers, the “utterances of graciousness.” Because Diamant depicts only the rough edges of Yahweh, she has been criticized for failing to show proper respect to the original text or its god. Rivers shows a kinder, gentler deity and follows a larger trend toward domesticizing God; consequently, her alterations are celebrated as conveying “a more powerful sense of God’s redeeming love than the actual book of Hosea” (Gandolfo 70).

This reduction of God is nothing new and not the terrain of women -- if God exists, how can the limitless, the eternal, and the spiritual be contained in mere *logos*? Beyond the flattening of God to create a text, the interpretation of that text or that deity has historically veered toward the simplistic, with one theology correcting the last’s misperceptions. People have proclaimed that God is body, that God is spirit, that faith justifies, that faith without works is dead, that God is angry, that God is love, and through it all, that God is male. These writers join a long tradition of those who would know God and consequently flatten the divine into a human construct. However flawed these novels might be, however much we might wish to see a greater nuance and complexity that better mirrors the Bible itself, it’s good to see women engaged in the conversation.

The King's Equal: The Tensions of Christian Feminism

Although internationally award-winning and acclaimed, Katherine Paterson's writing has been widely and contrastingly criticized. By turns narrowly Christian or broadly heretical, morally ambiguous or overly didactic, her work is especially debatable to feminists. Some believe that Paterson's Christian feminism allows her characters the "freedom of unique, individual responses," while others feel shut out from her "ideologically unacceptable" writings, and still others contend that her "feminist ideology deconstructs itself" and upholds patriarchy (Smedman 230, Huse 109, Trites 44). Some speculate that "continually referencing older writing [such as the Bible] binds an author too firmly into hierarchies that silence women's ... experience" or that scriptural imagery cripples both Paterson's characters and her own imagination (Huse 112, McGavran 124-5). In short, many critics believe that Paterson's trademark biblical allusions taint her otherwise feminist writing with the stain of biblical patriarchy. Retelling a number of biblical stories, *The King's Equal* offers an opportunity to explore this very issue. After all, the initial arc of the fairy tale is about whether the entrenched male leader can "find a woman he would admit was his equal in every way" (9). This question gets to the heart of the charges against Paterson and the Bible: Will her texts, or the scriptural texts, allow a woman who is a man's equal in every way? By augmenting biblical narratives about women and by utilizing a gender-neutral lens for other scriptural episodes, Paterson grafts together and defamiliarizes several key images, creating a strong female character in the fairy tale and expanding space for women in the Bible. Yet as in the other retellings we've considered, these changes are marked by an apparent ambivalence, which in this text, highlights differences between Christian and secular feminism.

As we will see, the fairy tale evokes a considerable number of biblical narratives and images, calling our attention to many sources of feminine imagery. However, in addition to their individual impact, Paterson grafts these images together to amplify one another and intensify the presence of women within the Bible. Originated by Jacques Derrida, the metaphor of grafting is a frequently cited image of intertextuality, referring to the insertion of one text in another, “a calculated insemination . . . through which the two texts are transformed, deform each other, contaminate each other’s content, tend at times to reject each other, or pass elliptically one into the other and become regenerated” (355). This understanding of mutual transformation and renewal is true of all the texts we’ve examined. Yet here, I refer to the sense of grafting in which a single tree of a narrative can hold the limbs of multiple texts, bringing their variety in close proximity. Writing of the basic motivations for authors who rely on intertextuality, Genette refers to its “specifically creative function, whereby a writer leans on one *or more* preceding works to construct that which will give expression to [her] thought or [her] artistic sensibility” (395, emphasis and pronouns mine). While *The Red Tent* and *Redeeming Love* each “leaned on” primarily one book of the Bible to construct the author’s theological sensibility, in *The King’s Equal*, Paterson pulls in a host of images and narratives that give joint expression to her conviction that the Bible is marked by “‘welcoming and approaching’ language” (qtd in Smedman 204). Using a hermeneutics of desire, Paterson chooses to read – and write – a Bible in which one strong woman reinforces and nurtures another. Returning to the image of grafting, we can also consider the horticultural technique’s historic use: offering support to the branches of a fruit-bearing tree that, while valuable, lacks a strong root system of its own. In addition, the

host tree often imparts hardiness or resistance that the initial plant might have lacked. By creating a host narrative for these valuable but perhaps underrooted and often assailed images of women in the Bible, Paterson allows them to thrive in a new environment.

The grouping of these varied biblical narratives in one new story also creates a sense of defamiliarization; instead of following one well-known episode, we find elements of many that have been woven together. Defamiliarization is a strategy often embraced by feminists. As Schüssler Fiorenza writes, defamiliarization transforms “a text or an idea that is ‘common sense,’ the rule, usual, and familiar” into something “unusual, unfamiliar, unexplainable, alien. One can either change the biblical text or its immediate context, or place the text into a different reading situation” (157). Changing the gender of the forgiving father or reclaiming the role of herder for women makes us reconsider these previously fixed images; resetting the narratives into an imaginative realm removes both the limitations of a patriarchal culture as well as the blinders with which we approach these oft-told tales (whether these blinders cause us to read the Bible defensively, reflexively, or resistantly). Encountering these narratives outside of the Bible, its interpretation, and the ancient culture in which it was conceived, we can agree with Frymer-Kinsky that “the biblical text itself, read with nonpatriarchal eyes, is much less injurious to women than the traditional readings of Western civilization. There is much to recover in the Bible that is not patriarchal” (*Studies* 167). Through defamiliarization, this simple fairy tale goes a long way to recovering these empowering elements.

With this theoretical framework in place, let us turn our attention to the primary biblical echo in *The King's Equal*, the Book of Esther. Esther is an emblematic figure for the question of female equity, since she, like Paterson's female characters, has a mixed

record with feminists, some of whom believe that Esther develops into a strong female agent, while others think that she never becomes fully or lastingly independent. By giving the peasant-queen Rosamund skills that are not primarily associated with physical beauty, and by authorizing her to act and rule more forcefully than the biblical queen, Paterson augments the character and narrative of Esther, building on the hypotext's strengths.

The fairy tale begins with the impending death of a wise, beloved king, who understands that his vain son – while handsome, rich, and educated – lacks the maturity and empathy to be a true leader. Consequently, the old king's blessing (though the son perceives it as a curse) is that the prince will rule the country but cannot wear the crown until he marries a woman who is his equal in beauty, wealth, and intelligence. Thus begins the search for a wife, which, as in Esther, fans out “over the lands and across the seas” (Paterson 13). The criteria for the women mark a point of departure in Paterson's retelling. In the Bible, the gathered women are sexual objects, selected because they meet the conditions of youth, beauty, and virginity – and all this *before* they undergo a year-long beauty regime. The women's hope of success is to be so attractive and sexually memorable that the king will request them again by name (2:14). Susan Niditch notes that while Esther is largely passive in this selection process, she “already hints” of the agency that she will demonstrate later in the tale (36). In this way, Esther's rise to queen is not merely a matter of beauty; it comes about because Esther “knows enough to take good advice” and to “find favor” with the eunuch who provides her special attention and guidance (35-36). However, even if the biblical plot is advanced by Esther's social intelligence, it remains reliant on viewing women as objects of beauty and sexuality.

In *The King's Equal*, the criteria for potential queens deemphasize sensuality and give Rosamund more power in the selection process. Here, the candidates must not only be beautiful, but also rich and intelligent, the last of which receives the most emphasis. Another difference between the two sets of criteria rests on Paterson's theme of "the importance of right perception" (Schmidt, *Paterson* 128). Seeing rightly, the candidate Rosamund is able to redefine the judge Raphael's criteria, shifting from outer to inner beauty, material to interpersonal riches, and academic to social intelligence. The Book of Esther depicts a beauty competition in which women are controlled by the male gaze; *The King's Equal* downplays beauty in favor of Rosamund's right perception, which in turn exposes the inadequacy of Raphael's self-centered gaze.

It is also important to compare how Esther and Rosamund enter this competition. The Bible simply notes that Esther "was brought also unto the king's house," with its passive construction mirroring Esther's apparent lack of agency (2:8). Contrast this with Rosamund's decision to present herself before the prince's councilors. She demonstrates her awareness of her country's difficulties under the reckless rule of Prince Raphael, expresses a wish to help ("If only I could"), and ponders the wolf's plan for her to go, with all its freight: "Rosamund grew solemn. The idea of going to the capital and making such an extravagant claim frightened her. But she ... determined to make the journey" before she left and "made her way" (33, 32, 36). Compared with Esther's passive appearance in the harem, Rosamund controls her own life: She understands the plight of her people and the need for a savior; she weighs the risks involved and determines to go.

Mitigating this sense of agency is the fact that it is the (male) wolf's plan for Rosamund to make the journey, expressed most fully when he orders her: "Now go" (36).

This, plus Rosamund's earlier submission to her father's instructions, is akin to the biblical text, which three times points out that Esther follows the instructions of men (2:9, 15, and 20). Similarly, when Rosamund first appears to the councilor, she explains, "I have been sent to your house," a passive construction not all that different from the way that Esther "was brought" to the king's palace. Furthermore, while Rosamund does not submit to the total makeover of a year-long beauty treatment, she does accept from the wolf a magic circlet which, according to the book's illustrations, alters her workclothes into royal garb, and changes at least her hairstyle and possibly her face. Rosamund's decision is more fully her own than Esther's, but it is still made at the urging and guiding of a male, and it still requires some sort of cosmetic clean-up. In elements such as these, we see the ambiguity that some critics believe to undermine Paterson's feminism.

Next, Rosamund appears before a royal councilor, who is overwhelmed by her beauty and "hardly dared to hope" that she might save him from the prince's promised wrath for failing to find a queen within a year (38). However, the councilor is honest: "I must warn you ... the prince is a very hard man. If he does not accept you as his equal, I cannot promise that any of us will escape with our lives" (38). At this point, Rosamund must decide whether to risk her life by approaching the prince, which she does without hesitation: "I am not afraid Neither should you be" (38). Rosamund's confidence primarily rests on three sources of power: her magic circlet, her mother's blessing that pronounced her "to be a king's equal," and the mysterious wolf who sent her on this challenge (34). But certainly much of her conviction is born from the initial decision she made when she weighed the plight of "her loving father and all the people who were suffering" against her own fears, and "determined" to go (34).

Rosamund's willingness to sacrifice herself (like Esther before her) can be read as one of the ways that Paterson's reliance on scripture "reinforce[s] traditionally sexist values in what seems to be a silent support for the patriarchy" (Trites 43). As Schüssler Fiorenza notes, True Womanhood "is a spirituality of self-alienation, submission, service, self-abnegation" (26). This raises the question: Is Rosamund's behavior gendered, or does it adhere to the values of sacrifice and humility, epitomized for Christians like Paterson in the self-emptying model of Jesus? On her own, Rosamund's acts might be problematic for both secular and religious feminists. But alongside Rosamund's concern for others, we must consider the example of her father, who previously demonstrated that he "loved her more than his own life" by sending her and all of his own provisions to the wilderness so that if the prince's "agents should come, at least, you and the goats will be saved" (32, 23-24). Since he also risks himself for others, we can accept that Rosamund's selflessness is not part of a limiting script for women, but a challenging command for all believers. Similarly, Rosamund can be quite self-effacing, another quality marked as damaging to women. For instance, even though others disagree, she describes herself as "neither very beautiful nor very clever" (33). However, given that Raphael eventually joins her in modesty ("I have also learned that I am not as handsome or clever or wealthy as I once thought"), these statements communicate the biblical value of humility, regardless of the characters' sex (62). In this way, we see that Paterson's feminism, as Smedman argues, is one in which "accords with ... feminist reform" of Christianity even as "the model always before her is the Bible" (201, 231). Even so, Paterson's retellings demonstrate her willingness to reconsider much of the Bible, especially in light of her conviction that God – and God's commands – are beyond gender (230).

Rosamund's choices to appear before the councilor and the prince should be viewed alongside Esther's resolution to approach the king. As we have discussed, both women's decisions are informed by an immediate threat to their people and are made in the face of possible death. Both women act at the urging and persuasion of males, although they are at least empowered to consider the associated risks and make their own decisions about how to proceed. And once the women undertake the rescue of their people, they both become more active. Esther orders Mordecai to gather Jews for fasting, and the text says, "So Mordecai went his way, and did according to all that Esther had commanded him" (4:16-17). Similarly, when Rosamund appears before the councilor, she authoritatively tells (but does not order) him, "[Y]ou are to take me to the prince" (38). Later she issues commands to Raphael, her father, and the entire kingdom (46).

Most significantly, the two women think on their own to craft and execute a plan that will succeed. In both cases, the guiding males offer only vague plans: Mordecai simply suggests that Esther risk herself by approaching the king and begging for her people (4:8), while the wolf merely provides the magic circlet and tells Rosamund to present herself at the palace (33). Esther's plan involves hosting two elaborate banquets to set the stage for pleading on behalf of her people. This plea can be seen in multiple ways: On the one hand, the favor she's garnered and her skillful use of the banquets have evoked from the king three promises to grant any request "to the half of the kingdom" (5:3, 5:6, 7:2). On the other hand, her plan rests on her domestic and sensualized role as hostess of the banquet. Furthermore, despite repeated assurances that her requests will be granted, she displays abject humility, most vividly when she asks the king to reverse the edict pronouncing the destruction of the Jews: Esther "fell down at his feet, and besought

him with tears” (8:3). True enough, Esther assumes great risk in approaching the king, and possibly her humility masks her skillful manipulation of the king in a way far more sophisticated than Mordecai appears to have envisioned. Yet even if Esther expertly uses the tools at her disposal, those tools hardly seem empowering today.

Like Esther, Rosamund is initially humble when she meets the prince, responding to his observation of her beauty with “If you say so, my lord” and acknowledging that her intelligence is for the prince to decide (42). However, she soon takes control by laying down a challenge: “But I do know one thing that no one else knows” (42). Within minutes, her wisdom and wordplay win over the councilors, who proclaim her the king’s equal in every regard, as well as Raphael, who “holds out his hand to her” (44). She accomplishes all this without any reference to domesticity, sexuality, or pleading, and although she is there to be interrogated, she leads the conversation and even asks one of the questions. Gary Schmidt aptly notes that Paterson reverses the convention of a “female character ... attempting to prove her equality with the male character” by giving Rosamund control over the conversation (*Paterson* 128). Esther draws on traditionally “feminine” powers of sensual and emotional manipulation, which is quite different from Rosamund, whose maneuvers for control are more gender-neutral or even traditionally “masculine;” even so, both women succeed in changing the minds of the male rulers.

From here out, Esther’s record is more mixed. The text is quite clear that acting with Mordecai and alone, Esther gains influence over the king and authority over her people (8:1-2, 9:12-13, 9:29-32). Yet at the end of the book, the narrative energy is overwhelmingly behind the rise of Mordecai as a leader, as in 9:4: “For Mordecai was great in the king’s house, and his fame went out throughout all the provinces: for this

man Mordecai waxed greater and greater.” The concluding chapter does not even mention Esther, instead focusing on “the greatness of Mordecai” (10:2).

This is the most significant point of departure between the stories of Esther and Rosamund. In *The King's Equal*, Rosamund herself is the one to wax greater. To the prince's outstretched hand and assumption that “you shall be the queen of the realm and my wife,” we have this response: “But Rosamund did not take his hand. ‘I shall be glad to be queen of the realm ... but I'm afraid I cannot be your wife, because by your own admission you have declared ... me more than equal to you’” (44-45). Prince Raphael is furious, but similar to Haman in the Book of Esther, “he knew that his own foolishness had been his undoing” (45). When he asks how he might win her, now-Queen Rosamund exercises her control: “I am not sure ... but perhaps there is a way” (45). She sends him into the wilderness (from which, unbeknownst to anyone, she has just come) to go take care of three goats for a year. She instructs him to return with the goats “alive and well. If in that time you have become in every way my equal, then you and I will be married and rule the realm together as king and queen” (46). The text notes that “Rosamund hardly let Raphael out of her sight before she went to work” as queen, righting the wrongs that he had inflicted and becoming a ruler such as the “realm had never known” (47). Rather than waning into the background as Esther, Rosamund maintains her position as queen and administrator through the book's end. Interestingly, while Esther and a number of other biblical women are promised requests “up to half the kingdom,” Rosamund – in arguably the most peaceful coup d'état in literature – procures the entire kingdom.

For readers familiar with Esther, the biblical account hovers in the background of much of *The King's Equal*. For the most part, Paterson omits or recasts weaker elements

of the Esther story (in which Esther is made a sexual object, in which her actions rest on domestic or sensual ploys, or in which she resorts to begging and crying) while drawing on and augmenting Esther's strengths as a biblical wisdom figure, tactician, and leader. While the trace of passivity rests on Rosamund during the first half of the narrative, she grows into a full agent who retains her power for the remainder of the fairy tale.

In addition to Esther, *The King's Equal* grafts in the widow of Zarephath and Elijah. When we first meet Rosamund, to protect her family's assets from Prince Raphael's ruinous policies, she takes a goat and her two kids to a "pasture far away in the mountains" (24). There, she and the goats fare well until winter, when her food dwindles. On the day when her grain jar is all but empty, a wolf appears, attacking one of the kids. Rosamund runs with staff in hand to save the goat but quickly notices the wolf's "sad and hungry eyes" (28). She invites the wild animal to share with her and the goats the last of the grain so that they may "die as friends" (28). When the wolf begins to talk, she realizes that "he was not an ordinary wolf" (32). "From that time on, each time she thought the jar had been emptied, the wolf asked, 'Are you sure?' and each time Rosamund raised the lid, there was a handful of grain to be divided among the friends" (31).

This retelling serves to develop the powers and prophetic role of the wolf more than Rosamund. Even so, as with Esther, Paterson uses the strengths of an already-known biblical woman and enlarges them in her own telling. For instance, the Bible specifies that the widow was commanded by God to share, and that she learns of God's promise to replenish the flour and oil even before she agrees to feed Elijah (1 Kings 17:9, 13). These stipulations do not minimize the widow's faith and hospitality, which have long been celebrated. However, Rosamund's willingness to act without God's command and

without even supplication from the wolf strengthens her character. In addition, the widow extends hospitality to a stranger, an admirable but commonplace edict in Hebrew culture; Rosamund welcomes a potentially threatening enemy as a friend, revealing a compassion that sees beyond his violence to his need. Paterson takes the already admirable qualities of the widow and enhances them by giving Rosamund more volition (to choose to help the stranger) and more courage (to face her poverty with charity and to offer assistance to an enemy). These small changes yield significant enlargements to the woman's character.

Paterson goes beyond altering this text to embellishing it, using scriptural silence as an opportunity to imagine the women's interiority. While the widow's character is ambiguous (we do not learn her response to the miraculous provisions, for example), Paterson seizes the opportunity to elaborate. Before Rosamund understands the miracle of the replenishing grain, she believes that she, the goats, and the wolf face death. Even so, her words and actions – such as inviting the wolf into her home or singing songs rather than wallowing in sorrow – give insight into her character. The wolf speaks to Rosamund of her kindness and wisdom, and he promises that they “will not go unrewarded” (28, 29). Paterson takes the relatively blank slate of the widow's character and makes additions, giving Rosamund an emotional maturity – a wisdom – that directs her actions.

This wisdom is the defining quality of the third well-known biblical female that Paterson uses to characterize Rosamund: the “virtuous woman” as described in Proverbs 31. Just as Rosamund proved herself more than equal to the prince's demands, she similarly exceeds the criteria of Proverbs 31: She is trusted not only by her eventual husband, but also by his councilors and even the entire country (v. 11); she worketh willingly with her hands (baking bread) even after she has earned the right as queen to

forsake such activity (v. 13 and 27). Her courage in facing the threatening wolf surely meets or surpasses the admonition to gird “her loins with strength” (v. 17). She lays “out her hands to the poor” when sacrificing her own food for her goats, and when later confronted with the wolf, she acts out Proverbs 25:21: “If thine enemy be hungry, give him bread to eat.” Chapter 31 also refers to the woman’s business skills in buying land and selling cloth, and while Rosamund does not engage in these activities, certainly the ways that she assesses the plight of the country, restores balance to the land, and spreads prosperity should establish her administrative acumen. Perhaps most strikingly, she opens her mouth in wisdom (v. 26). Wisdom is one of the first qualities the wolf observes in her, and it is apparent in both her ability to gain the throne and in her leadership as queen. Even more, she speaks in proverbs throughout the book, as when she tells her father “Isn’t it better to share hunger with one you love than to feast alone?”, a question whose sentiment and parallel construction evoke the book of Proverbs (24). Continuing with Proverbs 31, the chapter concludes with verse 29: “Many daughters have done virtuously, but thou excellest them all,” which Rosamund exceeds by not merely besting the previous contestants for the crown but even the judge of the competition, the prince himself. While the original virtuous woman of Proverbs 31 is not merely the stay-at-home paragon that feminists dismiss and that fundamentalists embrace, Rosamund surpasses her standards. As Paterson did when editing the character of Esther or embellishing the widow of Zarephath, she evokes a familiar female image from the Bible and exceeds the figure’s own high ideals, linking virtue to wisdom, spiritual insights, and intellectual agency.

This third figure, the virtuous woman, is not just “any” woman from the Bible. Like Esther, the virtuous woman is a wisdom heroine in the company of Deborah, Judith,

and other biblical females whose lives and leadership are marked by spiritual maturity. An extension of this type of character is the personification of wisdom, sometimes called Sophia; Wisdom is the clearest articulation of the Feminine Divine in the Bible. Often associated with the Spirit, she is a primary image of God for many feminist theologians. Schüssler Fiorenza writes, “Both word meanings, that of capability (wisdom) and that of female personification (Wisdom), are crucial for articulating a feminist biblical spirituality” (23). While Rosamund does not function as an image of God in *The King’s Equal*, she clearly operates from this tradition. Schüssler Fiorenza’s list of the hallmarks of “walking in the ways of Wisdom” reads like a brief character sketch of Rosamund: “Truthfulness, fidelity, kindness, honesty, independence, self-control, doing justice” (28). In addition, Wisdom does not merely focus on historic models of femininity, but she also encompasses the craft of building and navigation, or the arts of justice and leadership. “She transgresses boundaries, celebrates life, and nourishes those who will become her friends. Her cosmic house is without walls and her table is set for all” (27). By drawing on this biblical resource, Paterson evokes a strand of spirituality that has proven powerful in the lives of women – and in the creation of Rosamund’s strong character.

In addition to joining together and aggrandizing well-known biblical women, Paterson finds female spaces in scriptural roles that are attributed to men. For instance, Rosamund’s actions evoke the image of the shepherd, often considered a male occupation. As Riet Bons-Storm writes, “It is clear: in the eyes of many a practical theologian, a shepherd is obviously male,” an assumption that has shaped our ideas not only about the shepherd but also the pastorate (9). While shepherds appear throughout the Bible, Rosamund guarding her goats most directly evokes David using his slingshot to

defend his father's herds against lions and bears (1 Sam. 17:36) or Jesus's parable of the good shepherd who protects the flock from wolves even at the cost of his own life (John 10:1-16). With staff in hand, Rosamund leaves the safety of her shack and rushes to confront "a giant wolf with one of her [nanny goat's] babies in his powerful jaws" (26). Rosamund is willing to lay down her life for her friends like the good shepherd. In fact, she accosts the wolf with the words, "How dare you hurt my friend," which have the relational feel of the good shepherd who knows her flock by name (John 10:3). By way of contrast, when Raphael later encounters the wolf under identical circumstances, he, too, rushes out to save the kid but calls out, "That's my goat" (49). Where the good goatherd Rosamund sees a friend, the hireling Raphael sees a possession. The designation of hireling is even more apt after the wolf extracts the confession that the goats actually belong to Rosamund, and Schmidt notes that Raphael makes clear his own self-serving motivation when he runs out "cursing Rosamund" ("Paradigm" 278).

By evoking the good shepherd, it might seem that Paterson goes beyond altering texts about females by inserting a female presence into a masculine role. However, the Bible itself has already done so by depicting several shepherdesses, namely Rachel as well as Zipporah and her sisters (Gen. 29:9, Exod. 2:16-17). These women not only protect their sheep from threats, but the Bible also documents their courage in standing up to both man and God (as when Rachel stole the idols from Laban or when Zipporah rescues Moses from God's assault). Bons-Storm notes that because of the scarcity of female biblical shepherds, "It is not easy for women to image the Good Shepherd," but Paterson, relying on a reading of abundance and a hermeneutics of desire, demonstrates how it can be done (9). By reconsidering the role of herder, *The King's Equal* recovers a

source of biblical female imagery and in the process ascribes to Rosamund not only the courage of David and love of Jesus, but also the boldness of Rachel and Zipporah.

Paterson makes a similar move when she uses another parable of Jesus. In this case, she does not retrieve an occupation considered to be masculine; she re-genders a character known to be male, the father of a wayward son. Just as the reference to Elijah speaks primarily about the wolf, this allusion to the parable of the prodigal son mostly addresses Raphael. Even so, the Luke 15 passage is also known as the parable of the forgiving father, and placing Rosamund in this role develops both her character and the ways that Paterson manipulates biblical texts. Briefly, the prodigal Raphael, having “wasted the abundance” of his father’s goodwill, his own education, and the well-being of his country, is sent “into a far country” by Rosamund (Luke 15:13). There, the wolf and goats befriend and educate Raphael, and when the year is over, the wolf directs him to return to the palace according to Rosamund’s instructions. Raphael “trembled when he heard these words, for as much as he longed to see Rosamund, he was afraid to face her” (58). By now, Raphael is changed – in humility, in roughened appearance, in attachment to community, and more. “He knew that he looked like a goatherd, so he did not present himself at the great front door but went around to the kitchen” (59). His understanding that he is better suited to the servants’ entrance mimics the prodigal son’s intention to return as a hired hand. Yet unlike the father in the parable, Rosamund (who is baking in the kitchen) neither sees him from a great way off nor runs to greet him. In fact, when Raphael opens the door, she exclaims, “Ah, Raphael! Has a year gone by so quickly?” (61). And rather than interrupting Raphael’s words of contrition, Rosamund hears out his confession that he remains unequal to her. Only when he turns to leave does she hold out

her hand and call (in the imperative), “Wait. Don’t go” (62). While Schmidt argues that “their conversation is a series of exchanges” between equals, they are equals only after Rosamund declares them so once she has evaluated Raphael’s changes (“Paradigm” 279). Even more than the biblical father, Rosamund retains her dignity and authority to judge.

It’s easy to draw parallels between the prodigal and the prince in these and other details of the text. Harder is knowing what to make of Rosamund as the not-so-easily-forgiving father. The regendering of this important figure is especially significant in light of Smedman’s assertion (concerning a different work by Paterson) that “[t]his parable is central to all those feminist theologians striving to diminish the hold of patriarchy on institutional and popular imagination (and structures) stemming from the literalization of father as a metaphor for God” (207). Though Rosamund is not cast as God, a feminine presence in this role is at a minimum playful or surprising and at maximum calculated or subversive. However, as with the case of the good shepherd, Paterson is not on entirely new ground in making the father a female. Luke chapter 15 tells a suite of related stories; in the verses that precede the parable of the lost son, we find a woman who has lost a coin, and who, like the father, searches and celebrates. As she does with a female good shepherd, Paterson to some degree stretches beyond the traditional imagery of the Bible to create a new role for women. But in other ways, she reminds readers that the Bible has always offered a multiplicity of images of God, both male and female.

Even so, casting Rosamund as the father quickly becomes problematic. While Christians have celebrated the radically merciful and self-abasing response of the forgiving father, a woman who waits and watches for a returning, once-selfish lover, who throws herself at him and celebrates his return even before observing significant evidence

of change, could hardly be new or inspiring to feminist readers. Less merciful but more satisfying is the portrait of Rosamund as one who has made good use of her year, who takes time to evaluate the returned prodigal, and who – at the proper moment – extends grace. Paterson navigates the tricky waters of creating space for women in a time-honored parable while establishing that, like the forgiving father, Rosamund possesses practical and moral authority, tempered by mercy. In reclaiming male roles for women, it's important to note that, as with her selection of the virtuous woman, Paterson has not chosen “any” or “ordinary” images for reconsideration. Within Judaism and Christianity, the relational models of God as father, shepherd, and king are beloved, foundational, and enduring – not to mention unquestionably male. In keeping with a hermeneutics of indeterminacy, Paterson's evocation of the female herder, her placement of a woman in the father's role, and the story's argument that Rosamund is (at least) the king's equal offer possibilities for how we can reimagine other historically male images of the Bible.

While the textual evidence of the book points to gender equality, a few questions remain, not in the least the title of the story itself, *The King's Equal*. The title seems to uphold masculine primacy, designating woman as the “other,” who must prove herself. Yet Rosamund exerts very little effort doing so. She makes no permanent or significant modifications to her appearance or character. (The one exception would be initially wearing the magical circlet, although she sets it aside as soon as she takes over the government and does not put it on again.) Aside from her brief verbal battle with the prince, she does not strive to prove herself and in fact, other than growing in confidence and autonomy, her basic qualities do not change, a point reinforced by the way the text tells us that Rosamund was “cheerful and industrious and kind” both as goatherd and

queen (23, 47). While her beauty was a precondition for her success, she seems perfectly unaware of it through the book's end – and it remains unclear whether her beauty is external or internal (61). She neither exploits femininity nor mimics masculinity. After Rosamund's beauty is acknowledged as the first requirement of the queen, gender is irrelevant as she passes the second and third hurdles of wealth and intelligence.

On the other hand, while Rosamund makes no modifications, Raphael undergoes a year's worth of metaphorical "beauty treatments" in order to prove himself the queen's equal. He leaves his home and forsakes wealth, shelter, and security to strive to become her equal. Furthermore, his path to equality is marked by traditionally feminine activities – baking, singing, dancing, and fostering relationships marked by interdependent friendship rather than hierarchy. Twice Raphael assumes one more traditionally feminine role: supplicant. First, he begs the wolf to admit him into the animals' community; second, he submits to the queen for her evaluation of his worthiness. And yet by learning kindness, community, and connectedness to the land, Raphael grows into the equal not only of Rosamund but also his late father, a wise and beloved ruler. The title *The King's Equal*, then, is not about masculine primacy, but about meritocracy.

It is important to note that Raphael's "reeducation" is not punitive, and that he is no more emasculated by gaining artificially-designated feminine skills than Rosamund is defeminized by gaining a broader skill set than Esther's tears and sensuality. As Anna Altmann argues, Paterson has created a "deeply feminist" fairy tale that does not merely invert the male/female binary but creates a "new vision" in which "[n]either sex nor gender ... is essential" (185). If feminist readers are troubled by the fact that after rising to the top of the country, Rosamund returns to the kitchen, rolls up her sleeves, and sidles

up to the oven with a song on her lips, then we should remember that women pursue freedom so that they might choose, whether the scepter or the stove, or in Rosamund's case, both. Rosamund's return to the kitchen should also be read as part of Paterson's theme (evinced here and in other works) that people – especially leaders – should not lose touch with the needs of everyday life or the rhythms of nature. This is particularly evident in Raphael's reeducation, when he learns “all the things that Rosamund had known how to do – to make a fire, to grind flour, to bake bread. And when spring and summer came – to gather roots and berries and wild grain, and to dry grass for the coming winter [for the goats]” (56). Similarly, at the book's end, we see that both the king and the queen make annual pilgrimages to the wilderness, reconnecting not only with friends but with the land. Consequently, we see that baking, for instance, symbolizes not prescribed femininity but holistic leadership. This model of leadership (and theology) draws from feminist thinking by virtue of emphasizing eco-stewardship, eschewing class hierarchy (even the rulers have callused hands), and advancing gender neutrality. More evidence of gender parity can be found in the reconciliation of Raphael and Rosamund, when Schmidt notes that their interactions are not marked by a grasping for superiority, but by a mutual submission (“Paradigm” 179). After the two are married and crowned at the book's end, we sense that their mutual equality lays a good foundation for Rosamund's earlier stipulation that they will “rule the realm together as king and queen” (46).

By one other measure, however, Paterson will not get off so easily. If this book celebrates mutual equality, why is Rosamund the only developed female character? There is no mention of the prince's mother, and Rosamund's mother has been dead some time. Admittedly, her mother possesses the power of blessing, an action that in the Bible is

typically reserved for the patriarchs. Schmidt notes that the mother's blessing for Rosamund mirrors the king's blessing for Raphael in pattern, power, and content; furthermore, both blessings are reiterated and continue to shape the narrative (*Paterson* 124). Yet while six male characters have "speaking parts," no other woman in the entire tale personally utters a word. Nine would-be queens come and go silently; the wives of the councilors weep as they anticipate their husbands' pending imprisonment. Schmidt argues that *The King's Equal* explores communities, to which feminist critics could rightly ask, "Where are the women of these communities?" A feminist wary of Paterson's reliance on scriptural subtexts might posit that the Bible's emphasis on male leaders indirectly undermines Rosamund. However, Roberta Trites, who notes Paterson's "mixed messages about feminism," concedes that the "strong female protagonists of [her] novels ... operate within a network of female relationships" (41). If *The King's Equal* is an anomaly in this regard, perhaps the biblical women who hover in the background of this fairy tale (Esther, Wisdom, or the widow of Zarephath) are in some ways Rosamund's peers and mentors. Their ethereal presence, however, may not satisfy, especially given that in this defamiliarized setting, most readers will not recognize the references.

The manner in which recognizing the Christian framework of this fairy tale suddenly populates the text with additional women is a good example of how different interpreters experience Paterson's feminism. One reader sees a lone woman; another recognizes a faint but rich female community. One reader sees yet one more self-effacing, self-sacrificing woman; another sees a model of Christian virtue. One reader sees Rosamund sent to her potential death by a male god-figure; another sees divine guidance. I do not suggest that faithful readers have "right perception" by virtue of their

theoretical biblical literacy or spiritual wisdom. In fact, Catholic theologian Schüssler Fiorenza rejects any religious text or teaching that singles out women for isolation, self-abnegation, or manipulation. If humility, sacrifice, and guidance were gendered within this text, it would be one more Christian allegory that, however new, simply reinforces old ideas. Yet reformist feminist theologians are convinced that religious frameworks need not be anti-woman and that indeterminate scriptures are always subject to revision. As Smedman notes, “In her fiction ... Paterson is working out the meanings of many Bible stories, including but not limited to the stolen birthright, the mother hen, the good Samaritan, the good shepherd, the beloved disciple, and the prodigal son” (205). These reworkings – especially when informed by gender neutrality – can redeem religious qualities and narratives that have historically been used to suppress women. When humility, for example, becomes equally laudatory for both women and men, the quality perhaps still merits scrutiny but should no longer be automatically condemned. Or when an image of God is as likely to be a hen as a wolf, one need not reflexively reject a male iteration of god as sexist. Those who contend that Paterson’s use of biblical antecedents are inevitably harmful for women should attend to the particularities of her writing. Assuredly, there are times when she uncritically perpetuates biblical patterns that do not support agency for women. The fact that Rosamund operates without (embodied) female support in a man’s world is one such example. But as we have seen in this fairy tale, by grafting, defamiliarizing, augmenting, retrieving, or inverting biblical narratives, Paterson provides models for how we can regain, not give up on, stories of the past.

The Bible as Hypotext: Unrealized Potential

While it's easy to focus on these texts' diverging approaches toward the Bible, ranging from tempered vitriol to unmeasured veneration, the three retellings have much in common. By virtue of their existence, they assert that biblical women's stories are undertold and their perspectives, deserving of attention. When they evoke varied models for women, the tales suggest that the Bible's more familiar female roles, such as helpmeets or seductresses, have been overemphasized in ecclesiastical tradition and are inadequate to describe women's experiences. All three alter biblical narrative to allow their heroines to exceed the standards and limitations of the hypotext, acknowledging these limitations. The tensions between male and female authority found within the texts show awareness of and opposition to the male control that is the normative backdrop for biblical narrative. In sum, regardless of the authors' stated beliefs and intents, these texts resist the Bible's patriarchy, especially as exacerbated by historic interpretation.

However, as we have seen, this resistance is uneven. While the retellings, through different avenues, offer greater agency for women, they are also marked by dualistic, essentialist thinking, or they replicate narratives of women as hapless yet still dangerous, or they situate strong women in a world where men are normative and God is male. We might initially conclude, then, that biblical hypertexts can never escape the sexist underpinnings of their hypotext; however, even as these retellings pinpoint areas of problem, they also model strategies of promise. After all, if binary thinking about gender, stifling roles for women, and rampant androcentrism are hallmarks of the Bible, so are gender neutrality, varying models of femininity, and hundreds of women whose names or narratives have survived in the text. Patriarchal tendencies may be the most visible and

prominent element of the text, but even according to a skeptical reader like Alicia Ostriker, the Bible is “a radically layered, plurally authored, multiply motivated composite, full of fascinating mysteries, gaps, and inconsistencies, a garden of delight to the exegete” (*Revision* 62). One need not – and often should not – heed the loudest person in the room when there are other voices to consider. These multiple meanings and voices make the Bible an example of how “a great text can, unbeknown to its author, predict and anticipate some of its future metamorphoses” (Genette 372). Although the counter-voices to patriarchy are sometimes mere traces in the hypotext, they inspire and authorize their augmentation in these retellings even if those later metamorphoses upend or supplant the predominant strands of the ur-text. Celebrating the Bible’s polyvalence does not eradicate the challenges it presents for women and other readers; yet plumbing its resources can provide the self-correction that Adrienne Leveen has identified. Just as all three retellings demonstrate an awareness of the Bible’s patriarchy, the way that all three texts draw from lesser-heard voices of Scriptures acknowledge the hypotext’s multivocality when at times it might seem that both devotees and detractors of the Bible tend to flatten its polyvalence. If we consider the fissures of the retellings we have explored, we can see that there is nothing insurmountable about any of the specific obstacles that problematize their feminist intentions, ranging from gender dualism, androcentrism, a gendered Yahweh, or a broad foundation of male control.

For instance, in *The Red Tent*, we saw how dualist thinking and a reliance on essentialism – even if the text ascribes positive value to the feminine nature – reinforced the perception that the Bible portrays an unequivocal gender binary. Parts of *Redeeming Love* also traded in this sort of thinking, sometimes depicting men as leaders and women

as helpers. Such ideas about the nature of women or accepted female roles are deeply ingrained in the hypotext and its entrenched interpretation; in this light, they seem impossible to overthrow. Yet *The King's Equal* draws upon additional, broader biblical roles for women that complicate the male/female dichotomy often attributed to the Bible. We saw this in the characterization of Rosamund as a herder, occupying a role frequently staffed by men but also filled by women such as Zipporah and Rachel.

Similarly, even as *The Red Tent* and *Redeeming Love* reinforce traditional roles such as mother, seductress, and helpmeet, they, too, recover expansive yet disregarded roles for biblical women that violate expected gender norms. Consider the prophetess, a vital tradition in both testaments, with a fairly long list of women who claimed the role, including Anna, Deborah, Elizabeth, Huldah, Miriam, Noadiah, and the daughters of Philip. Clearly, evangelical readers will not approve of how Diamant revives this role by depicting Rebecca and Dinah as prophetesses empowered by the Goddess. Even so, while the deity on whose behalf these women prophesy has changed, there is biblical precedent for how they interpret current events, anticipate the future, and pronounce judgment. Similarly, *Redeeming Love* also recovers passed-over roles for women when Angel and Susanna begin a ministry. In doing so, they follow in the path of early Christian leaders, including the deaconess Phoebe or women such as Chloe, Lydia, and Nympha, all heads of households or leaders of house churches. These women's presence in the Bible has sometimes been contested by conservatives who prefer either to translate "deaconess" as the less official "servant," or to question the rendering of these ministers' names, substituting, for instance, Junias (m) for Junia (f). While Rivers' evangelical community has sometimes struggled with such articulations of female leadership – and while even in

more progressive denominations, these women do not typically receive the attention they deserve – *Redeeming Love* illustrates and blesses the underemphasized tradition that they represent. In this way, as in *The King's Equal* and *The Red Tent*, Rivers' novel reclaims biblical roles for women that have sometimes been neglected or suppressed. Offering an antidote to the more limiting roles for women that are usually associated with the Bible, this attention to wider models of femininity complicates dualistic thinking about gender.

In addition to troubling sexual dichotomies, these retellings also bypass such dualisms by disregarding or reversing gender. Paterson models the strategy by recasting Rosamund as the forgiving father. Genette argues that sometimes a simple “change of sex suffices to upset and sometimes cast ridicule upon the whole thematic intent of the hypotext” (298). In Paterson's case, the change of sex upholds the thematic intent of the hypotext and instead challenges our culture's emphasis on gender differences. In keeping with Genette, Schüssler Fiorenza suggests that altering gender in the Bible can suggest new meanings as well as serve as a litmus test for sexism (157). If, as with the prodigal son in *The King's Equal*, the narrative retains its meaning and power with a woman as head, then perhaps it upholds Frymer-Kensky's thesis that much of the Bible supports gender unity, with men and women sharing the same goals, behaviors, and attitudes and beholden to the same edicts. On the contrary, if a change in gender does cast ridicule on the hypotext and its theme, then it will serve a useful purpose of exposing sexism.

Both *The Red Tent* and *Redeeming Love* provide similar examples of how looking beyond gender can uphold the Bible's intent but offset traditional male-female logic. For example, in *The Red Tent*, we see that Dinah not only takes on the often male task of prophecy but also reenacts the story of one particular prophet, Jonah. Like Jonah, Dinah

sees herself as an adversary to evil people; Jonah opposed the sinful citizens of Ninevah while Dinah rejects her own family of murderous men. Neither Jonah nor Dinah desires to see the wicked receive mercy, and both board a ship at Joppa to flee “the presence of the Lord” (Jon. 1:3). They find themselves in raging seas, singled out as the causes of the storms. There, the stories diverge: While Jonah is willingly tossed overboard, Dinah’s guardian’s sword “kept them from laying hands on me and tossing me into the waves” (214). Jonah of course is swallowed and vomited by a whale and then sent back to Ninevah, where he unwillingly serves as an instrument of God’s grace even as he nurtures his anger. Dinah, however, is a more successful Jonah, managing to get away from Yahweh and leave her people under judgment, where they remain until the end of the novel. In the Bible, God repeatedly asks the prophet, “Doest thou well to be angry?” At the end of the novel, Dinah sets aside most of her anger and makes a bare peace with her problematic tradition, accepting a family ring and finding solace in knowing that her untarnished memory lives on in her niece’s storytelling. It is unclear whether Jonah or Dinah “doest well” to be angry, but Dinah’s inhabitation of this well-known story opens up ways for women to find room in it. Jonah could just as easily have been a woman, and this imaginative retelling redeems a male-only story for all people.

As discussed above, for some conservative readers and writers, placing women in male roles is problematic. Conservatives should consider, then, why the strategy has not raised red flags in the writing of Francine Rivers. In *Redeeming Love*, the role of prodigal son is twice played by a woman, first Angel’s mother and then Angel herself. Similarly, when reminding Michael that Angel needs to find forgiveness, God says, “Would you have her hang on her cross forever?” (368). Although arresting, this image does not place

Angel in the role of Christ; in the Gospels, Jesus hangs on the cross not to receive but to offer forgiveness. Instead, the phrase more aptly places Angel in the role of the repentant thief hanging alongside Christ. In Luke's Gospel, the criminal confesses both his own guilt and Jesus' innocence, receiving in reply the promise, "To day shalt thou be with me in paradise" (23:43). Angel, then, could be read as the thief, aware of her sin, but lingering on the cross before her eventual welcome into grace. Or perhaps she represents early martyrs or devotees who practice self-mortification. Though women have been both martyrs and ascetics, throughout history, the image of one on the cross has predominantly been masculine. Here, however, it is strikingly feminine. In Rivers' assertion that stories about men also speak truths about women, we see that both liberal and conservative readers of the text attribute a neutrality or plasticity to the Bible's use of gender that is not limited by the text's frequent reliance on categories like male and female.

The logic of categorization is present from the first stories of the Bible when God creates by dividing and separating light from darkness or water from land, and it recurs in such classifications as Jew/Gentile or clean/unclean. In the Gospels, this logic informs the parable of sorting sheep (good) from goats (bad). As scholars note, scriptures display a keen awareness of the limits of categorization, expressing a special antipathy for those animals, people, and practices that resist sorting, including shellfish, Samaritans, and homosexuality. As seen above, by disregarding or complicating categories, retellings can disarm such dualistic logic, trumping what is often seen as the Bible's predominant view of gender. True to their multivocal nature, however, both testaments also feature a countervein of thought that eradicates pat categories, as when scriptures speak of "all flesh" instead of men or women, when the prophet Joel anticipates that God will pour out

the same Spirit on men and women, when Jesus treats Samaritans with dignity, when Peter is told to eat unclean foods, or when Paul declares, “there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ” (Galatians 3:28). Although articulated and focalized by men (from Joel to Paul), this alternate logic can be a powerful encouragement – and for those who need it, an authorization – to “relativize the dualistic gendered rhetoric of the text in favor of a radical egalitarian reading” (Schüssler Fiorenza 158). Consequently, we see how these writers’ evocation of broad roles for women and gender-irrelevant readings of scripture can disrupt traditional sexual dichotomies (whether established in the Bible or in church culture); instead, these retellings tap into an alternate strand of scripture that endorses gender neutrality. These hypertexts also defamiliarize the ancient passages for a fresh reconsideration and destabilize the Bible’s male-centeredness.

This androcentrism is reflected in a number of ways, beginning with the most basic level that within the Bible, men are more numerous, more frequently named, and more commonly the focus of narratives. As we have seen, the fact that these variously motivated novels give attention, voice, and interiority to women begins to address this problem. Just as an overemphasis on men’s stories in the Christian lectionary and in educational curricula exacerbates the problem of the disproportionate attention to men in the Bible, this current swing toward women’s stories in popular literature can partially offset the hypotext’s androcentrism. We have also seen that grafting together the stories of women can amplify their presence, as seen in how *The King’s Equal* evokes a number of biblical women within a single tale. Similarly, *The Red Tent* highlights several generations of matriarchs in addition to drawing from the prophetess tradition. Joined together, these women’s narratives create a strong female presence in the traditionally

male epic. *Redeeming Love* focuses primarily on the Book of Hosea but also incorporates the prodigal son, the sinful woman, multiple allusions to other biblical women, and an extended treatment of Ruth. At times, the power of grafting works against women in *Redeeming Love*, which creates a composite image of women as sexually dangerous by referencing one “Jezebel” after another. Yet the novel offsets these negative images (of temptresses) with positive models (like ministers), creating an interesting space for reconsidering femininity. Even when focusing on the oft-denigrated women of the Bible, the acts of calling them by name and evoking their stories help move women from the periphery to the center of scriptural narratives and our collective sense of who the Bible is “about.” Although some fictional accounts of biblical-era women are inventions – imagining cousins, friends, or wives not mentioned in scriptures or period records, most are based on at least momentary biblical references such as a greeting in an epistle that acknowledges a woman’s leadership, or a story in which a woman is mentioned, if not named. Of course we can wish for more; feminists like Ita Sheres can rightly view these references without a substantiated record as evidence of inattention to women or even actively erased female accomplishment. Yet, once again, even if the Bible’s predominant mode is to focus on men, the text’s multivocality offers promising glimpses of women. These allusions to women’s lives, if underemphasized, are still present in this text even when at times – as with the Dinah episode – there is no compelling reason for their presence, and given the damning nature of the narrative, plenty of reasons for their absence. In other words, despite the Bible’s preoccupation with the lives and leadership of men, attending to women’s stories is not (always) an addendum to scriptures, but rather the amplification of a quiet voice that has not always received attention.

Androcentrism is also present in biblical texts in their celebration of a god made in the image of man. As noted earlier, even progressive believers are often more comfortable with masculine or gender-neutral language than with feminine imagery, and many conservatives endorse a male-aligned god. In this spirit, *Redeeming Love* unqualifiedly and repeatedly refers to the divine as Father, Lord, and He. On the contrary, *The Red Tent* openly addresses the perception of many feminists that the Bible portrays a phallogocentric Yahweh by recovering goddess imagery that many scholars agree to have been scrubbed from the scriptural record, with only traces remaining in the Bible itself. While progressive and conservative readers will disagree as to whether this is a legitimate approach to exploring alternatives to an androcentric god, recovering trace elements of womanhood is a bedrock strategy for feminists, whether those distant, partially erased signals communicate about humans or deities. Perhaps surprisingly, *The King's Equal* also identifies the God-like, androgynous wolf as male when the removal of nine pronouns (and a “sir”) could have made this figure gender-neutral. I call this surprising because as Paterson herself asserts in *Images of God*: “Although the English language makes us choose either masculine or feminine pronouns when we speak of persons, it is not appropriate to confine God to human gender” (53). Elsewhere in *Images of God* and her fiction, Paterson explores biblical language describing God as hen, pregnant or birthing mother, feminine spirit, and housewife; other rich imagery appears in both testaments. While these images are largely biological and related to gestation, childbirth, or nursing, they are at least specifically female. Attending to this previously existing but typically ignored language is a good example of what inspired Ostriker to write, “I have been repeatedly astonished by the degree to which the Bible exceeds the doctrines that

have been built upon it” (*Nakedness* xii). The charge that the Bible describes a coherently male god is perhaps less a matter of the biblical record than our unwillingness to embrace the less prominent but still substantive female imagery the text already offers.

So far, we have seen that when writers heed the quieter voices of the Bible, the text itself offers self-corrective resources to combat gender dualism, a preoccupation with men, and a male-aligned god. Yet the model of masculine control – seen in both the Bible’s individual episodes and in its larger metanarratives – will not be so easily displaced. Although the retellings offer powerful examples of female autonomy, the vestige of male control still lurks in all three hypertexts, perhaps following a pattern that Ostriker has noticed in the Bible. She observes that in moments and for seasons, strong women appear before they fulfill a purpose of reestablishing male control. Even in the stoutly gynocentric *Diamant* novel, while male control diminishes throughout the tale, it remains a reality from beginning to end. The women’s stories are said to start with Jacob’s arrival, their jostling for access to their husband controls their mutual relations, and their concern for their sons dictates how they treat others. The slaughter of Dinah’s husband and the men of his city occurs in part because he paternalistically dismisses her concerns about his imminent circumcision. Later, her life is controlled and protected by a series of men: first her uncle-in-law, then a friend’s son, and finally, her second husband. True, she grows in boldness and autonomy as the novel progresses, and her relationship with her second husband, as noted earlier, in many ways serves as an image of equality. Yet it is also true that he continues to teach and counsel her, showing her how to swim and revealing the significance of her mother’s ring, as Dinah describes: “I puzzled over its meaning and prayed for a dream to explain its mystery, but it was Benia who gave me

the answer” (318). Her behavior toward him is not reciprocal; she acts not as his guide or sage, but housewife: “I had strength enough for my house and to care for Benia” (319). Of course, the novel contains many scenes that show how, in Diamant’s words, “I wanted Dinah and all of the women in my story to be active agents in their own lives, not passive pawns or victims” (“Red Tent FAQ”). However, these continuing signs of male guidance show the challenges of escaping patriarchal patterns – and the reinforcing readings that have come down to us – even when the author’s express intent is to do so.

On the other hand, perhaps the multivocality of the Bible (and the novel itself) makes it equally hard to *uphold* patriarchal patterns even when the author’s express intent is to do so. *Redeeming Love* is a text sprung from a conservatism that purportedly supports the model of male headship, yet in the novel, we see women by turns controlled and controlling. In Angel’s life, we see her first almost imprisoned by Michael; then, establishing a successful ministry without him; third, repenting of her abandonment of him; fourth, making peace with a dual role as (primarily) mother and (occasionally) minister; and finally, following her husband in death “within a month” of his passing (464). As in *The Red Tent*, it is hard to extract a unified message about male authority. Such tensions are also present in *The King’s Equal*, though it must be acknowledged that male control, while not repudiated, appears only in the first parts of the fairy tale and is replaced first by female control and eventually by the shared authority of the queen and king. For instance, at the beginning of the story, Rosamund’s father has the power to send the girl away for her own safety; however, once she matures, Rosamund then exercises the authority to send for her father. The fairy tale shows three exemplars for governance: the beloved dying king, the unsurpassed Queen Rosamund, and the prosperous,

cooperative reign of Raphael and Rosamund. In other words, maturity and wisdom are far more important markers for leadership than gender. This is the most coherent argument about self-determination that we find in the retellings; yet even so, it appears in a setting where, with the exception of Rosamund, men do all the (unmediated) talking.

Despite these shortcomings, the three retellings do suggest two strategies for overcoming this pattern of masculine power, both of which rely on imagination. For instance, we saw that by creatively augmenting the character of Esther, Paterson was able to offer Rosamund greater control and resist the original narration that limits Esther's autonomy and ultimately transfers interest away from her to Mordecai. Diamant uses this same strategy in her treatment of Rachel, who already models a fair degree of agency. For instance, in both Genesis and the hypertext, we find the episode of Rachel taking the family idols when she and her family leave her father. Feminist scholars acknowledge that the biblical account depicts Rachel's trickery as a bold and well-executed move. However, in *The Red Tent*, her decisions and authority are aggrandized, shifting even more control to her. The novel tells us that the removal of the idols was risky, but "Rachel had some claim to them. In the old days ... it was the unquestioned right of the youngest daughter to inherit all the holy things" (90). Furthermore, to search for the idols, Laban must enter the women's red tent, where *he* is the nervous outsider and she is in control. Consequently, instead of hiding her secret, Rachel stares boldly into her father's eyes as she states, "I took them, Father. I have all the teraphim.... [They] bathe in my monthly blood.... *Their magic has turned against you. You are without their protection from this time forward*" (118). Instead of the male control that we expect from the Bible, we find Rachel overpowering Laban with authority derived from history ("in the old

days”), territory (she is in the red tent), community (the women surrounding her have previously agreed to her plan), body (her blood, which in his eyes contaminates the idols), and spirituality (she controls the idols and their loyalty). As with the augmenting of Esther, this strengthening of Rachel does not come at a cost to Laban – in both scriptures and the novel, he walks away empty-handed, never to be heard from again.

We see this same strategy in *Redeeming Love*, which in a minor episode retells the story of Ruth. In Hebrew Scriptures, the mother-in-law Naomi directs the young widow Ruth to sleep at the feet of their relative Boaz in order to call to his attention both Ruth and his responsibilities to her. Waking, Boaz commends Ruth and agrees to marry her if a closer relative will not satisfy the duty. Ruth’s “fast” behavior – described in the novel as sleeping “at the feet of a man she wasn’t married to, on a public threshing floor” – is a rare combination of shocking and dutiful, assertive and submissive (228). But for all the boldness of the plan, Ruth follows both the dictates of her mother-in-law and the prevailing paternalistic culture; without a kinsman-redeemer, Ruth will fail to give her dead husband a descendant, and she will remain one of the powerless, poor widows of her time. Within scriptures, Ruth does have some self-determination; she chooses to stay with her mother-in-law instead of returning to her people, and she is brave and successful in following Naomi’s directions. But her agency is limited by the implied sexuality of her appeal, by her role as a follower of another’s plan, and by her overall position of powerlessness. It is perhaps surprisingly “feminist” that Naomi crafts a plan for her and her daughter-in-law’s survival, but ultimately, the men of the story decide their fates. The original story’s complexities match neither the ancient binary of male/female nor our more modern binary of pro-/anti- woman. Rivers’ retelling of the story, however, is

perfectly clear. Miriam Altman is not powerless, poor, or submissive; she controls this episode and her life. Rather than following an older authority, she convinces her skeptical parents of her plan. And instead of relying on Paul for social redemption, she is in charge, especially when she withholds the naked sleeper's clothes until she extorts a (willing) yes from him. While Michael finds it unseemly that the biblical Ruth would enter a public space to be with a man, it's even stronger for Miriam to break into a *private* space and spend unchaperoned time at a bachelor's bedside. Finally, Miriam does not act out of any sense of duty except to her own desires for a husband and sexual partner. As with Paterson's treatment of Esther, Rivers has dropped the traditionally feminine elements of the tale (duty, dependence, submission) and emphasized the commonly "masculine" elements of surprise, assertiveness, and self-determination. Yet like Boaz, Paul emerges appearing honorable and pleased with the marital arrangements, another example of how strengthening women's roles within biblical narratives can skirt male control without diminishing men. Significantly, Miriam is one of the few women in the novel with full autonomy; she has the power to openly influence both her father and husband plus the authority to make decisions in her life, perhaps offering a model for how fictionalized biblical characters can find a full agency that doesn't eventually prop up male authority.

The second strategy for avoiding systemic male power is to exit the system. Arguably, the gender neutrality that we examined earlier can destabilize sexualized hegemony, but by changing the time or setting of the story, novels can create new spaces that are potentially free of such structures. Admittedly, following historian Joan Kelly, some theologians advocate for recovering women's contributions to biblical history within their own timeframe and location. While this goal is laudable, one of the areas of

agreement among feminist theologians is that the Bible “came into being” in patriarchal and hierarchical cultures (Schüssler Fiorenza 9). For modern fiction-writers to reconsider the Bible while recreating the sexist settings from which the text emerged makes the task of creating autonomy for women all the harder. Consequently, resituating the biblical narratives in sites that are neutral or advantageous to women can be a useful first step in countering androcentrism. As Goosen notes in her application of the work of Ann Cranny-Francis, the creation of utopian settings can serve as one of “the most noteworthy ‘estrangement’ techniques” for denaturalizing patriarchy (56). While Goosen applies this concept to the women-only sanctuary of the titular red tent, the idea is perhaps even more relevant in *The King’s Equal* and *Redeeming Love*, which are set in cultures where both men and women have access to respect and power. While “once upon a time” often conjures male kingship, Paterson taps the fairy tale’s other-worldly possibilities, creating a realm in which women and men can rule together. And while the wild west eventually succumbed to cultural norms of male headship, for most of *Redeeming Love* it is a world where might makes right, even if the mightiest is the Duchess whose brothel-saloon governs not only those who work for her but also the economy of the town. In addition, as Genette notes, “one can hardly transfer an ancient story to modern times without modifying some of the action (the stab of a dagger will become a pistol shot, etc.)” (311). In *Redeeming Love*, a spacio-temporal change forced the reconsideration of whether it is acceptable for a man to simply “take” a woman. In this way, changing the setting can serve as another filter by which we can pinpoint sexist elements of the Bible.

Augmenting characters beyond the dictates of the text, regendering them, or resituating them in new times and settings requires a creative license that is typically

deemed off-limits by people who revere the authority of the Bible *or* the academy. Yet from its inception, this sacred text has been told and retold, which is to say altered and realtered, interpreted and reinterpreted. The varied history of biblical readings suggests that regardless of hermeneutics, the Bible remains pregnant with polyvalence. Scholars point out that images of Jacob wrestling with the angel or the persistent widow prevailing upon the judge illustrate how the Bible endorses a bold stance toward its authority.

But the Bible does more than authorize the reconsideration of its stories; it also models this process. A number of narratives are retold in the Bible, not only in the sense of Chronicles and Kings documenting the same history, or the four Gospels recording similar biographies of Jesus. Within Hebrew Scriptures, Abraham self-protectively calls Sarah not his wife but his sister – twice – before Isaac repeats the trick. We also find the story of creation told differently in two separate, full accounts, plus still other references in Psalms. Much of the Christian Testament reads as a reworking of the Hebrew Scriptures, with Joseph's life serving as a type for the narrative of Jesus, or elements of the Exodus providing a model for the Christian account of salvation. In addition, these retellings are often marked by the same imaginative license that is often deemed inappropriate for fiction or scholarship. For instance, Jesus' biography not only retells the life of Joseph but augments his power from dream-interpreter to miracle-worker. Some retellings play fast and loose with gender, such as four stories that show God's agents raising the dead in the context of familial relationships: In Hebrew Scriptures, the son of the widow of Zarephath is restored to his mother, just as a son returns to his Shunammite parents; in the Gospels we see a daughter restored to her father Jairus, and a mother-in-law to Peter (Price). These retellings are fixed in certain elements but fluid in gender, age,

nationality, and class. Finally, in virtually all of these retellings, time and space have been altered, as with the appropriation of the Exodus in Egypt as a model for salvation in Israel. As throughout this essay, we find a strand of the Bible that authorizes even the most imaginative reworkings of its narratives to yield new meanings.

Yet as we have also seen, despite their many strategies and resources, these feminist revisions win ideological battles but lose the greater war for female equality. Since autonomy seems “winnable” on the level of narrative, perhaps there are glass ceilings for women not only in society but in our own shared imagination, both shaped by structures that have rendered implausible the idea of full agency for women. As Schüssler Fiorenza writes, even feminists who are aware of the Bible’s limitations have still internalized them; consequently, their own readings of Scriptures must be viewed with suspicion (141). True enough, the predominant voices of the text have helped form and continue to limit our attitudes about gender. Yet if history is any guide, the question of which valence will prevail is more fluid than fixed. For instance, for centuries, “Slaves, obey your masters” was considered the primary word on human trafficking until the Bible became an important liberation text. Such reversals are fueled by many of the same strategies of imaginative, informed, skeptical, and experiential readings that feminists embrace. Each of these popular retellings helps shape public perception of what the Bible says, perhaps gradually and at times unwittingly pushing us away from those elements that have limited women and toward those that liberate. Armed with recent scholarship, a host of narrative techniques, and the imaginative spirit of Wisdom, may women and men have eyes to see the text anew, interpreted for the benefit of everyone. In this way, if there is a glory to be found in the Bible, “all flesh shall see it together” (Isaiah 40:5).

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