Clarissa Dalloway's Body: Transformations of Christian Concepts of Femininity and Maternity in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*

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Abstract

The myth of the Virgin Mary, closely connected with the predominant image of woman as madonna in the nineteenth century, seems to have infiltrated Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. The concepts of virginity, and the reduction of the female body to certain limited parts: the nourishing breast, the ear of understanding, and the tears of lamentation, are qualities attributed to Clarissa Dalloway. Woolf, however, offers her criticism of these Christian notions concerning the female body: she links virginity with power, reverses maternity to its opposite function and ascribes an erotic character to mysticism. At the same time, she very dexterously escapes offering any alternative patterns.

Περίληψη

Ο μύθος της Παρθένου Μαρίας, στενά συνδεδεμένος με την επικρατούσα εικόνα της γυναίκας ως Παναγίας στο δέκατο-ένατο αιώνα, είναι ένα θέμα που διατρέχει το μυθιστόρημα της Βιρτζίνιας Γούλφ, *Mrs. Dalloway*. Οι έννοιες της παρθενίας, και της συρρίκνωσης του γυναικείου σώματος στο στήθος που θρέφει και συντηρεί στη ζωή, στο αυτί που ακούει και συμπάσχει με τον πόνο του μαρτυρίου, και στα δάκρια που θρηνούν το μαρτύριο, χαρακτηρίζουν την Clarissa Dalloway. Παρ' όλα αυτά, η Γούλφ ασκεί την κριτική της στην παραπάνω Χριστιανική αντίληψη γύρω από το γυναικείο σώμα: συνδέει την έννοια της παρθενίας με τη δύναμη, αντιστρέφει την έννοια της μητρότητας, προσδίδει ερωτικό χαρακτήρα στον μυστικισμό, ενώ την ίδια στιγμή, αποφεύγει επιδέξια να προτείνει εναλλακτικές λύσεις.

> But often now this body she wore (she stopped to look at a Dutch picture), this body, with all its capacities, seemed nothing—nothing at all.

Is Clarissa Dalloway a modernist madonna, a pagan Goddess, or a mermaid/enchantress? If no clear answer can be given to this question, these are certainly crucial issues upon which Woolf ruminates throughout her novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*.

The Christian philosophy accorded with, or rather, reinforced the nineteenth-century image of the woman as a subservient, domestic animal, a household nun, and, more importantly, as an eternal procreator of life. The Victorian image of the woman encapsulates a fundamental thesis of Christian dogma: the dichotomy of the female body into two opposed functions, virginity and maternity. "Many civilizations have subsumed femininity under the Maternal, but Christianity in its own way developed this tendency to the full", Julia Kristeva argues (101). The female body exists only as a maternal body; it is present only in reference to its maternal function.

Recurrent allusions to the ascetical, the maternal-virginal, the ominously lustful, or macerated and victimized body, indicate that Christian myths have infiltrated Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. Woolf's personal aversion to organised religion, inherited most probably from her agnostic parents,[1] as it is manifested in a series of letters written between 1930-35 to her religious friend, Ethel Smyth, renders her preoccupation with religious matters in *Mrs. Dalloway* an issue of particular interest.[2] The ways in which the book is inserted in Christian ideology are as interesting as the ways in which they challenge it. The present study aims at examining Virginia Woolf's uses and modulations of the Christian myth of the Virgin Mary in *Mrs. Dalloway*. More specifically, it aims at focusing on three main issues concerning the body of the Virgin Mary in relation to Clarissa Dalloway's body: virginity, her absent breast, and finally, her ear of understanding.

In Woolf's first descriptions, Clarissa Dalloway's monastic, nunlike semblance is clearly emphasized. Her daily life is spent in a pure, holy locus, resembling the inside of a church: "The hall of the house was cool as a vault" (MD 42); her own room is a secluded cell in the upper part of the house where she can live undisturbed: "So the room was an attic; the bed narrow" (MD 46). Moreover, her daily retreat from worldly affairs to her secluded attic, is likened to that of the life of a saint: "She felt like a nun who has left the world and feels fold round her the familiar veils and the response to old devotions" (MD 42); "Like a nun withdrawing, or a child exploring a tower, she went upstairs" (MD 45).

Clarissa Dalloway's appearance seems to accord with her monastic attitude in life. Her elongated body: "she had a narrow pea-stick figure; a ridiculous little face, beaked like a bird's" (MD 14), her upright tension: "She advanced, light, tall, very upright" (MD 17), "Clarissa sat very upright; drew in her breath" (MD 66), and a peculiar coldness, frigidity, woodenness, and ironness, all suggest Byzantine hagiographies, and fifteenth-century Flemish paintings. These traits are stressed throughout the novel: "That was herself—pointed; dartlike; definite" (MD 55); "This coldness, this woodenness, something very profound in her ... an impenetrability" (MD 91); "She seemed contracted, petrified ... . She was like iron, like flint, rigid up to the backbone" (MD 97); "She was straight as a dart, a little rigid in fact" (MD 116).[3]

Woolf's first attempt to describe Clarissa's body is interrupted by a parenthetical allusion, a device often used by Woolf, which enables her to achieve the synchrony of two actions. The allusion to the "Dutch painting" which Clarissa stops to look at while Woolf is defining her body (MD 14), far from being accidental, reinforces Clarissa's image; the severity, plainness, and asceticism of the figures in fifteenth-century Flemish paintings harmonize with her woodenness and uprightness.

Yet, the painting is not defined; neither its title, nor its painter are specified. The obscurity of the picture, which may range from a fifteenth-century Jan van Eyck or Roger van der Weyden, to a seventeenth- or eighteenth-century Rubens or Rembrandt, allows Woolf to suggest a whole period in painting. She is referring to Dutch painting, which at its rise in the early Renaissance subtracts the body from its natural characteristics by elongating the figures, reducing their depth, and rendering them two-dimensional, inflexible and unapproachable, and ends up, two centuries later, in the apotheosis of the flesh, the corpulent, spherical, and massive bodies.

The allusion to the whole Dutch period reflects Clarissa's oscillation between two antinomial concepts: the extinction of her body ("this body she wore [she stopped to look at a Dutch picture], this body with all its capacities, seemed nothing—nothing at all" [MD 14]) on the one hand, and the re-definition of her body as virginal and breastless ("feeling herself suddenly shrivelled, aged, breastless", MD 45) on the other hand. Dutch painting and Christianity at this point converge, and echo Clarissa's dichotomized body: both

take the body away only to give it back defined through patriarchy.

The most striking resemblance perhaps that Mrs. Dalloway's body bears to the body of the Virgin Mary is her virginity ("she could not dispel a virginity preserved through childbirth which clung to her like a sheet", MD 46), a trait which, even though attributed to Mary by accident, becomes her most characteristic quality.[4]

Christian philosophy insists on Mary's abstention from any sexual activity. As the mother of God, Mary herself had to be immaculate and undefiled, surpassing any corruption connected with the base, inferior, and profane flesh. Women's reproductive function not only predominates over their sexual pleasure: *"Why must the maternal function take precedence over the more specifically erotic function in woman?"* Luce Irigaray wonders (64), and interprets the notion of the virgin mother as woman's deprivation of any sexual pleasure: "she is undoubtedly a mother, but a virgin mother .... Granting her a certain social power to the extent that she is reduced, with her own complicity, to sexual impotence" (30). Women's bodies are eliminated, they are non-existent as long as they are not related to the maternal function.

At a first reading, Clarissa's virginity would suggest her identification with the nineteenth-century "Angel in the House" (the phrase comes from Coventry Patmore's frequently quoted poem of 1854), whose slaughter Woolf will triumph over several years after in her essay "Professions for Women" (a paper read to the Women's Service League in 1940, published in 1942)[5] Mrs. Dalloway would seem to be a modern version of the "Angel in the House" image, which had borrowed many characteristics from the "madonna" ideal.

Virginity, a characteristic trait of the Virgin Mary, which she "alone of all her sex" managed to preserve, became in the nineteenth century an ideal which all women were supposed to strive to achieve. If the nineteenth century glorified the woman as a domestic animal, as "The Angel in the House", described by Woolf in 1940 as the "utterly unselfish", "intensely sympathetic", "immensely charming" woman who "excelled in the difficult arts of family life", and "sacrificed herself daily" (DM 150), Christian conceptions of femininity and maternity reinforced this pattern. The holy mother of Christ, her paradigmatic subservience to her Son and to God, above all, her purity which was preserved throughout her life, became an archetype to be imposed on all women by

nineteenth-century ideology. The Virgin Mother's body served as a matrix for innumerable nineteenth-century "angels", or "modern Madonnas", who strove to remain pure and who proclaimed total obeisance and surrender to husbands, fathers, brothers and sons—to patriarchy.[6]

The theme of Mary's immaculate conception, however, apart from its mysticism, had become by the nineteenth century a subject of discourse among Christian philosophers, who from the thirteenth century onwards started borrowing Aristotelian principles in order to provide an exegesis to it. According to Aristotle's *On the Generation of Animals,* the woman contributes her flesh to the conception and birth of the child, whereas the man contributes his spirit. It is the body of the mother, her menstrual blood, that provides the matter, the body of the child; the semen of the father enlivens, vitalizes, breathes life into this inanimate matter. Thus, although the role of the woman in reproduction seems to be an "all-important" one, it is debased into a mere "animal" function, as compared to man's "spiritual, noble, and infinitely superior" role (Warner 40).

The woman in Christian ideology, in other words, is bereaved of her sexuality—she conceives through a spiritual impregnation—and is endowed with a base, fleshly, inferior body, as it is defined by patriarchy. The pattern of the Virgin Mary, though, posed an insurmountable difficulty: maternity and virginity were—and are—incompatible. The body of the woman suffered a schism as it was called upon to be fecund and productive, while remaining virgin and undefiled.[7]

Two facts concerning Clarissa, however, distance her from the "Angel in the House", and restrain her from sanctification: her declared agnosticism ("not for a moment did she believe in God" [MD 43]), and, more importantly, the fact that her virginity is rendered an act of conscious choice ("She had gone up into the tower and left them blackberrying in the sun" [MD 70]). Her conscious denial of a male-centred sexuality imposed on her by patriarchal ideology, along with her inability to perform her wifely duties (characterized by Woolf as a "failure" on her part), render Clarissa's virginity a far more complex issue.[8]

Mrs. Dalloway's virginity is sharply contrasted to her power to arouse fleshly desire in others. Peter Walsh, once a rejected lover of Clarissa's, is still deeply attracted by her (his short visit to her after many years rejuvenates him: "He had not felt so young for years" [MD 78], and urges him to run after an "extraordinarily attractive" woman he sees in the

street); Miss Kilman, dedicated to religion, finds it difficult to control the flesh after her encounter with Mrs. Dalloway ("[Clarissa] had revived the fleshly desires" [MD 194]). Rather than being a sign of mere modesty, chastity and shame, as Christianity defines virginity, Clarissa's virginity seems to be related to the ancient Greek and pagan notion of virginity as a sign of power and autonomy (Warner 47-48).

The word "failure", however, which characterizes Clarissa as a wife who repeatedly fails to perform her duties to her husband ("suddenly there came a moment ... when, through some contraction of this cold spirit, she [Clarissa] had failed him [her husband]. And then at Constantinople, and again and again" [MD 46]), is ambivalent. It could be interpreted either as Clarissa's conscious choice to reject men, and remain single, impenetrable and unconquered, like a pagan or classical goddess (as she has done in her rejection of Peter Walsh, who would exploit her physically and emotionally), or as a negative appraisal of her *actual inability* to conform to the pattern of "normal" sexuality. Virginity in Mrs. Dalloway's case seems to imply both power and failure, and the text makes no attempt to resolve this contradiction.

The ambivalence of Christian philosophy concerning the female body is evident not only in the maternity/virginity dualism prescribed to women, but in the functions this philosophy ascribed to women's bodies.

What is it of the female body, the body of the mother, that remains? Through which parts of her body does Mary perform her services to her son and her duties as a mother? The ear, the tears, and the breast, according to Kristeva (108). The ear of impregnation, the ear of understanding; Mary's sexual organ is transplanted to her ear, as it is through her ear that Mary conceives after receiving the message from the Archangel. Her tears lament the death of her son. Her breast performs the function of lactation, feeding and giving life, and is the most popular part of her body, as visual representations of the Holy Mother and Child testify.

How does religious painting represent the female breast, one of the most erogenous parts of the woman's body? It seems that Christian ideology was confronted with a dilemma: to annihilate a part which is fully erotic, and thus purge the image of Mary of any fleshly association, or to acknowledge the existence of the breast and its nourishing function. Extermination of the flesh would signify the denial of maternal duties, whereas acceptance of the breast would indicate assent

to the woman's bodily existence, and her degradation to her base nature.

The problem was solved by accepting the maternal/nourishing function of the breast, while at the same time denying its erotic power. In Byzantine iconography of the Holy Mother and Child, Mary's body, shrouded and concealed by meters of cloth, seems to be almost obliterated. Representations of the Mother sitting and breast-feeding the child at that period are very rare (Καλοκύρης 151).[9] The breast in such cases is depicted as a separate part of the body, springing out of the innumerable folds of Mary's garment in a very unnatural position—high up to the extreme left of her body, very near the shoulder, almost emerging from the armpit (See Fig. 1). I say *the* breast—for Mary is in possession of only one breast.

Christianity has eliminated the second, usually the right, breast of Mary as superfluous. Mary's erotic breast seems to have been her homage paid to her being donated the *other* breast. The woman's body is clearly halved, as the two breasts of Mary are meant by Christianity to perform two functions: nourishment, and the experiencing of sexual pleasure. Mary's chest has swelled on only one side, while the other remains either totally flat, or considerably diminished and atrophied compared to the one that exists. In her discussion of early Renaissance religious painting, Margaret Miles points out the fact that "the covered side of Mary's chest is perfectly flat ..., while the exposed breast is round and ample", as well as that "the cone-shaped breast from which the child is nourished is not actually a part of Mary's body, but an appendage" (204). This is clearly indicated in Figure 2, in which Mary, while begging her Son to have mercy on a group of sinners at which she is pointing with her right hand, exposes her breast to him, holding it with her left hand as a separate part of her body, an objectified part, a mere metonymy, with no fleshly hypostasis.

Clarissa's visual resemblance to both the Byzantine and the early Renaissance madonnas converges also at this point of the representation of the female breast. The only difference is that Woolf deprives Mrs. Dalloway of both her breasts: the one that nourishes, and the one that experiences sexual pleasure. Mrs. Dalloway refuses to play her maternal part, the conventional female role imposed on her by English society in the mid twenties, "Now all that Clarissa had escaped *unmaternal* as she was" (290, emphasis added). Her body clearly fails to perform both her maternal and her wifely duties;

> ... she [Clarissa] knew, and felt it, as she paused by the open staircase window which let the blinds flapping, dogs barking, let in she thought, feeling herself suddenly shrivelled, aged, *breastless*, the grinding, blowing, flowering of the day, out of doors, out of the window, out of her body and brain which now failed. (MD 45, my emphasis)

Clarissa's contracted inner cosmos is distanced in this passage from the swelling outside world. This is emphasized through the antithesis between orgasmic activity, the forces of life, the fertility of the universe, and Mrs. Dalloway's frigidity.

Clarissa's erotic breast appears at only one point in the novel, as a recipient of Peter Walsh's suffering. It is her breast that can receive Peter's imperceptible shivering, and heal his wound. Peter's agony is metaphorized by Woolf as "plumes like pampas grass in a tropic gale in her breast" (MD 69), causing a moment of erotic ecstasy, a moment of illumination, which Clarissa immediately expunges with the third conditional: "If I had married him, this gaiety would have been mine all day!" (MD 70). By rejecting Peter Walsh's love and proposal of marriage, Clarissa selects a life of celibacy and seclusion concerning her body. With this decision she consciously rejects both prescribed functions imposed on her female breast: the erotic and the maternal.

Being unmaternal, Clarissa manages to escape "the softness of motherhood; its egotism too" (MD 284, an egotism so clearly illustrated in the figure of Mrs. Ramsay in *To The Lighthouse*). Near the end of the book, Clarissa distances herself from the conformist notion of maternity as it is represented by the guests at her party. The way the issue of maternity is raised throughout the novel discloses the absurdity of the philosophy which matches motherhood and virginity. Clarissa is an unmaternal, virgin mother (her daughter, Elizabeth, is closer to her father, her dog, and to Miss Kilman, than to her mother); Lucrezia Smith is a motherless wife desiring to become a mother, but prevented from this since her husband, Septimus, believes that copulation is filthy (MD 134); Sally Seton, Clarissa's adolescent love has abandoned her revolutionary and liberal nature for the sake of getting married to a merchant from Manchester and becoming the mother of "five enormous boys" (MD 261), one more reference to the antithesis between the fertility, the abundance, anything that swells and

Clarissa's frigidity. Mrs. William Bradshaw is depicted by Woolf as equally possessive and voracious, having a son at Eton, incessantly boasting about him. Conversation in Clarissa's party is centred around male progeny, to the extent that Peter Walsh exclaims "everybody in the room has six sons at Eton" (MD 289).

Clarissa tends to identify instead with Miss Kilman, a religious fanatic, unmarried, Elizabeth's spiritual mother, who teaches Elizabeth history and initiates her into Christianity. In an extraordinary, rivalrous relationship between the two women, Woolf manages to match two contrasting notions, maternity and its rejection as both a sexual and a social option.

The character of Miss Kilman is treated by Woolf with exceptional ruthlessness: "The infliction of her unlovable body which people could not bear to see. Do her hair as she might, her forehead remained like an egg, bald, white. No clothes suited her. She might buy anything. And for a woman, of course, that meant never meeting the opposite sex. Never would she come first with anyone" (MD 195). "Dressed in a green mackintosh coat" which worn by her year in year out has become part of her skin—her actual skin (MD 16), the figure of Doris Kilman clearly echoes Woolf's description of her religious cousins, equally hateful to her, the green, "gorged caterpillars", as she calls them, the ugly women who sweated:

> Unbaptised as we were, our religious friends, some cousins in particular, the daughters of Fitzjames, rasped and agonized us as children by perpetual attempts at conversion. As they were ugly women, who sweated, I conceived a greater hatred for them than for anyone. (L4 322)

> Then as to Christianity and egotism. How you religious caterpillars (quoted from [John] Webster) make my gorge rise! ... Lord! How I detest these savers up of merit. These gorged caterpillars. My Jew [her husband, Leonard] has more religion in one toe-nail—more love in one hair. (L5 321)

Despite their mutual hatred the two women are mysteriously close:[10]

> and suddenly ... the gilt rim of the Sir Joshua picture of the little girl with the muff brought back [to Clarissa]

> Kilman with a rush; Kilman her enemy. That was satisfying; that was real. Ah, how she hated her—hot, hypocritical, corrupt; with all her power; Elizabeth's seducer; the woman who had crept in to steal and defile (Richard would say, What nonsense!). *She hated her; she loved her.* (MD 266, my emphasis)

Emily Jensen attributes Mrs. Dalloway's hatred and love towards Miss Kilman to the latter's ability "to love women" (evident in her feelings towards her student, Elizabeth), and to "defy the heterosexual norms that inhibit Clarissa" (175). The colon separating the two conflicting emotions indicates, according to Jensen, the "equivalence of the two" (Jensen 175).

By reference, again, to a picture, Woolf manages to throw light on the two women's mysterious connection. The allusion to Reynolds's picture "Lady Caroline Scott as 'Winter' " (Fig. 3), dated 1777, which portrays a rather innocent, naive child, alone in a frozen wood, brings to mind the Little Red Riding Hood tale. The ignorant, credulous creature in the picture, resembling Little Red Riding Hood in the story, wolfed down by the Big Black Wolf, is standing exposed to the observant gaze of a dog on her left, whose intentions cannot be clearly defined as it cranes its neck to look at the girl, and a little robin on her right, that will be a powerless witness to a violent scene in case the dog attacks the girl. The theme of this picture—the unprotected, ignorant girl, the potentially dangerous dog, and the bird incapable of assisting the child (Clarissa's face, let us remember, has been described by Woolf as "beaked like a bird's", MD 14)—along with its *potential* tragedy remind Clarissa of Miss Kilman as she looks at the picture in the middle of her party.

Defined by patriarchal society as a monster-woman ("stand she did, with the power of taciturnity of some prehistoric monster armoured for primeval warfare" [MD 190]), abnormally large ("Her large hand opened and shut on the table", MD 199, "The thick fingers curled inwards", MD 200), with virile characteristics, Miss Kilman's sole consolation is not religion, which strives to control and extinguish the flesh, but *food:* "Sometimes lately it had seemed to her that, except for Elizabeth, her food was all that she lived for" (MD 195). Miss Kilman, incorporating the adverse of the maternal ideal, of the mother who freely offers her breast to her child, and who transforms her body into a niche for the comfort of her baby, will satisfy her insatiable

hunger only when she succeeds in devouring Elizabeth. The Virgin's bare breast, providing the "milk of paradise", is replaced in the novel by an enormous mouth. The female breast performs no more the functions of "nourish[ing], shelter[ing], and sustain[ing] human life" (Miles 205), but absent as it is in the novel, it is transformed into a dangerously voracious mouth.

The mother does not give; the mother takes. Miss Kilman is the "other" madonna, the reverse side of the Virgin Mary's image. Bearing an "ugly, clumsy", "unlovable" body (MD 194, 195), Doris Kilman is actually experiencing birth the other way round in her celibate body. As Elizabeth rises to go and desert her in the Army and Navy stores, she is "drawing out, so Miss Kilman felt, the very entrails in her body, stretching them as she crossed the room" (MD 201).[11]

The entrails of her body, stretched out like an umbilical cord, fasten her body to Elizabeth's body. The parts of mother and child are inverted in Miss Kilman and Elizabeth's relationship. Woman is no more "subjected to her biology" (Warner 205), enslaved in her eternal role as the nourisher of her child according to Mary's paradigmatic example. Miss Kilman tries to achieve a birth the other way round, as she desires to engulf Elizabeth, gulp her down, incorporate her into her body: "If she could grasp her, if she could clasp her, if she could make her hers absolutely and forever and then die; that was all she wanted" (MD 200).

Access to Woolf's earlier drafts of *Mrs. Dalloway* has revealed the fact that the body of Clarissa was bisected by Woolf in the process of writing the novel (see, for example, DiBattista 27-28). Originally, it was Clarissa who committed suicide at the end of the novel; later, Woolf creates a new character from Clarissa's rib, Septimus Smith, and adds a new, parallel plot to the novel. In the final version it is Septimus Smith who commits suicide.

But what is the meaning of the story of Septimus's volitional death? Does Woolf rewrite the story of the Crucifixion in a modern setting? Septimus Smith, being the victim of the First World War, of the indifference of the modern war machine, and of the brutality of early twentieth-century medical practice, seems to be playing the part of a modern Christ, victimized by people's hatred and atrocities.[12] If Septimus, much like a martyr, experiences his body "macerated until only the nerve fibres [are] left" (MD 102-103), Clarissa, performing the part of Mary, experiences his

death in her body: "her dress flamed, her body burned" (MD 280).

The former image leads to the second function ascribed to the body of the Virgin Mary, that of lamenting the death of her son. "Nothing justifies Mary's anguish at the foot of the cross unless it is *the desire to feel in her own body what it is like for a man to be put to death,* a fate spared her by her female role as source of life", Kristeva notes (110, emphasis added). Has Mrs. Dalloway's flaming body then achieved completeness and perfection, the culmination of her desire by experiencing so intensely the death of Septimus in her body?

This final fusion of the two bodies and genders, the mother's and the son's, the man's and the woman's, not only brings us back to the initial merging of the two characters in one, but it also echoes medieval notions of the fusion of two genders. Medieval "theology, natural philosophy and folk tradition", Caroline Walker Bynum informs us, "mingle the male and female in their understanding of human character and human physiology" (162). This tension though attempts to equate the two genders by defining the female in terms of the male. Women's reproductive organs are seen "just as man's turned inside out" (Bynum 186); the woman's body is defined as the imperfect imitation of man's.

Although this notion of the female body is evident in Mrs. Dalloway, Woolf does not seem to be satisfied with this solution. She very dexterously transposes the problem of Clarissa's culmination to another plane: Clarissa's connection to women, dating as far back as her adolescent past involving Sally Seton, up to her present experiences with women who confess to her, and also with the old woman in the house opposite hers.

What is it that connects Clarissa to Miss Kilman, despite their hatred, or Clarissa to the old woman in the house opposite to whom she feels very close, without having met her and without knowing anything about her? These relationships seem to be related to Clarissa's adolescent experience with Sally Seton, "an Edenic, female-centred world anterior to heterosexual bonds", as Elizabeth Abel defines it (34). Sally's "extraordinary beauty", her darkness and her large eyes (MD 48), are deeply contrasted to Miss Kilman's repulsive body. It is Sally's momentous kiss on the lips that initiates Clarissa into the sexual world, Sally's body running naked along the passage that makes Clarissa tremble with joy, and experience a feeling as strong as a religious apocalypse:

> Then came the most exquisite moment of her whole life passing a stone urn with flowers in it. Sally stopped: picked a flower; kissed her on the lips. The whole world might have turned upside down! the others disappeared; there she was alone with Sally. And she felt that she had been given a present, wrapped up, which as they walked (up and down, up and down), she uncovered, or the radiance burned through, the revelation, the religious feeling! (MD 52-53)

The most important moment in Clarissa's life is compared to a religious feeling, and the most important moments in her grown-up life are likened to religious mysticism. Clarissa's moments of vision, of "sudden revelation" are connected with the little confessions that women make to her occasionally, which clearly incite sexual feelings; "she did undoubtedly then feel what men felt" (47).

Retired from the world of earthly delights, Clarissa, in the manner of a confessor, transforms the act of confessing into an erotic experience. Clarissa's "moments of illumination" clearly echo the early Christian concept of the sexual nature of confession. At a time when sex was forbidden in open discourse, a whole discourse around sex was born, a "scientia sexualis" as Foucault names it (58). Christians in the Middle Ages were obliged to confess at least once a year all their sins without omitting the minutest detail from their narration. Sex, being the "privileged theme of confession" (61), was transformed into discourse; not the sexual act itself, but the telling of the sexual act became the focal point of sexuality in the West (Foucault 57-64).

Clarissa's breastless body has been reduced to an ear; the ear of hearing and understanding human passion. Her sexual body, like Mary's, has been replaced by the ear of understanding (Kristeva 114). But her own passion can be articulated only in male terms. Excitement and infatuation exist only because they can be ascribed to men. Thus, although the validity of many of the Christian notions concerning the female body has been questioned in *Mrs. Dalloway*—virginity is linked with power, maternity is reversed to its opposite function, mysticism acquires an erotic character—Virginia Woolf is still accepting and promoting traditional patriarchal patterns that ascribe a secondary role to the female body. Clarissa's final appearance with her "silver-green mermaid's dress" (MD 264) at her party, her final metamorphosis into a

mermaid "[she] stood there looking as if her body had merely put forth, of its own accord, a green frill" (MD 270) is rather disorientating. The fairy-tale element introduced at this point evades the crucial question posed at the beginning of the book concerning Mrs. Dalloway's body. Her inspiring presence in the final scene of the novel is not in the least convincing:

> What is this terror? What is this ecstasy? [Peter Walsh] thought to himself. What is it that fills me with extraordinary excitement?
> It is Clarissa, he said.
> For there she was. (MD 296)

Clarissa's body remains mysteriously powerful. It seems that although Woolf raises her oppositions to the role prescribed by Christianity to the woman's body, that although she alters the myth of the madonna, she offers no clear solution to the enigma of Clarissa's body, a body that inspires terror, ecstasy and excitement, but remains always at the level of mystic experience. Clarissa Dalloway's body remains a mystery.

Notes

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[1] Although an agnostic, Julia Stephen, Virginia's mother, was the impersonation of the female angel in the house, the perfect madonna image. Combining the rare virtues of "beauty, grace, maternity and goodness", Julia Stephen was chosen by the painter Burne-Jones as his model for the madonna in his painting "Annunciation", Ellen Bayuk Rosenman informs us (7).

[2] "Leonard and I have been discussing God and Ethel; with the not expected pursuit that Ethel survives and God—no —God, we say, God is merely a—a what?—our English is going—is miazma [sic] a word?" (L4 321), "Why is Christianity so sad? ... Oh how I loathe religion" (L5 319-20), "About religion; isn't it a sixth sense? I didn't assert; I only lack" (L4 181).

[3] It is true that Clarissa's "dartness" and "pointedness", traditionally phallic images, suggest another kind of energy as opposed to the "petrified", stone images. Woolf emphasises the latency of this energy, though, rather than its manifestation.

[4] The translator of the Bible probably added a new meaning to the Semitic word for "virgin", which originally referred to the "social-legal status of an unmarried girl" (Kristeva 101). The Greek word "parthenos" refers not only to a woman's unmarried status, but also denotes a woman who has never had sexual intercourse. Regardless of whether this was the translator's unintentional, unpremeditated mistake, the trait of virginity was fully incorporated into Indo-European Christianity.

[5] "I turned upon her ["The Angel in the House"] and caught her by the throat. I did my best to kill her" (DM 151).

[6] Virginia Woolf's sensitivity to names, as Isobel Grundy's article, " 'Words Without Meaning—Wonderful Words': Virginia Woolf's Choice of Names", has shown, leaves no doubt that the proximity of her name, "Virginia", and the word "virginity" can't have escaped her (etymologically, they have the same Latin root: *virgo,* virgin).

[7] In their attempt to reconcile these two contrasting notions concerning the body of the "angel", philosophers of the period, like Auguste Comte (1798-1857), went as far as to suggest the "exploitation of artificial insemination as a means of keeping women as close to the madonna ideal as possible, while still allowing them to fulfil their function as mothers", Bram Dijkstra informs us (19).

[8] Maria DiBattista has indicated the dual nature of Clarissa's virginity: virginity as failure, symbolized by her narrow bed; and virginity as "an exclusively feminine symbol of freedom and integrity", as she interprets Clarissa's moment of gazing into her mirror and her experiencing a conversion of the different aspects of herself into one "diamond", "a unifying centre" (38-39).

[9] Margaret Miles in quoting Victor Lasareff points out the Byzantine origin of the *Virgo lactans* image, which was later adopted by the Italian painters in the early Renaissance (193, note 1). My own references to visual representations of the Madonna feeding the child, have been restricted to Byzantine and early Renaissance paintings, as Mrs. Dalloway's ascetic figure converges in these patterns.

[10] Miss Kilman's first name, Doris, ironically deriving from the Greek "Dorothea", meaning gift from God, suggests also, and most probably has the same root with, the word "Dorian", an ancient Greek mode in music (characterized by simplicity and solemnity, according to *The Oxford Universal Dictionary*), and accords with Clarissa's ascetical and severe figure. Her name suggests also "Dora", Freud's analysis of a case of hysteria, a case of diversion from the "normal" sexual patterns. The patient was Ida Bauer, whom Freud rechristened with the middle-class name Dora, out of revenge to her, as some feminist critics have argued, because she had the courage to walk out on him, and refuse to succumb to the "rationality of [the] patriarchal order" (Showalter 160).

[11] Cf. the image of the snake "choked with a toad in its mouth" in Woolf's last novel, *Between the Acts;* "The snake was unable to swallow; the toad was unable to die. A spasm made the ribs contract; blood oozed. It was birth the wrong way round—a monstrous inversion" (BTA 75).

[12] Several critics have agreed that Septimus is an expiatory victim. According to Suzette Henke, he is the "Christ-figure sacrificed for the sins of mankind—for cruelty, egotism and authoritarian brutality" (140); Jean O. Love characterizes him as the "scapegoat, the victim, the saviour of mankind" (147).

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Abbreviations

BTA *Between the Acts*. 1978. London: Panther Books, 1985.
DM *The Death of the Moth* . London: Hogarth Press, 1981.
L4 *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*. Vol. 4, 1929-1931. Eds. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautman. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1978.
L5 *The Sickle Side of the Moon: The Letters of Virginia Woolf, 1932-1935*. Eds. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautman. London: Chatto and Windus, 1982.
MD *Mrs. Dalloway*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1985.

Fig 3. Lady Caroline Scott as "Winter"
by Sir Joshua Reynolds, 1777.