

**The Iconography of the Madonna and the American
Imagination: An Introduction—“Mary’s Song”**

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要約

アメリカ文学に現れた「聖母子」の図像学
——序：「マリアの歌」——

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ここでいう「図像学」とは絵画芸術の芸術的評価が目的でなく、「聖母子像」の持つ意味の考察を目的とする。キリスト教のイコン聖母子像は原初の地母神像、また旧石器時代の土偶で、ヴィレンドルフのヴィーナスと称せられるものなどにその原型をみることが出来る。

ところが、マリナ・ワーナー (*Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary*, 1976) や、ジェーン・シルヴァーマン・ヴァン・ビューレン (*The Modernist Madonna: Semiotics of the Maternal Metaphor*, 1989) などによれば、地母神崇拝、豊穡、慰安・介護といった女性原理が、キリスト教布教上の政治的戦略で神の慈愛と許しを表す聖母子のイコンに組み込まれる過程において、原初の輝き、すべての命の源といった地母神像が包含していた創造エネルギーが整除され、きわめて平面的・一元的イメージに変換されたという。そして、イコン聖母子の記号は女性性=母性とする図式の確立にきわめて巧妙に宗教的、政治的、文化的に操作されてきたという。

本稿はこの最も古く根源的で、強力なイメージ喚起力を持つ記号（「聖母子」）とアメリカ的想像力の関わりを検証するものである。それはまた、19世紀から現代までアメリカ文学に現れた「聖母子像」の解説を通してのアメリカ小説再読の試みでもある。まず、はじめに新約聖書「ルカによる福音書」に記されている、マリアの賛歌（“Magnificat anima mea Dominum”）の編曲——ジュリア・クリステヴァ流にいえば、インターテクスチュアリティ——ともいうべき現代アメリカ詩人（Anne Sexton と Sylvia Plath）の詠う「マリアの歌」を紹介して序論としたい。

The feminism of the late 60's and the 70's has made a great contribution for the liberation of our consciousness from "the feminine mystique" both old and new. Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976) has deconstructed the myth of motherhood fostered by our social, political, and medical institutions. She focused on the crux of *institutionalized* motherhood which "demands of women maternal 'instinct' rather than intelligence, selflessness rather than self-realization, relation to others rather than the creation of self."¹ Rich's demythologizing of the sacred calling of maternity has brought to light the dark underside of that myth and exorcised the enigma attached to the sacred image, and liberated women from the alleged burden of their vocation as nurturing and ministering angels.

Of all the instruments our socio-political, and religious institutions engineered to create *and* foster the myth of motherhood the icon of the Madonna and the Child has been the most inspiring and potent image deeply engraved both in our cultural construct and in the consciousness of woman itself. The image shares the same root with that aboriginal radiance, what Jung calls "the great mother" —the source of life and light. Ancient culture had long identified this source of all life with maternal power and creativity; the reign of the mother goddess formed the nexus of culture and civilization for thousands of years. So to institute the patriarchal religion (God the Father) within the matriarchal society of long-standing, Christianity had to incorporate the myth of Virgin Mary into the existent secular worship of Maia, the goddess of fertility, comfort, and nurturing.² Maia (the May Queen) can be seen as one of the avatars of "the great mother," the source of life and light, of which "the icon" survives in the Venus of Willendorf and in other artifacts and myths.³ Marina Warner's book, *Alone of All Her Sex: the Myth and the Cult of Virgin Mary*, published in the same year, incidentally, as Rich's *Of Woman Born*, presents an incisive analysis of the way the Catholic Church exploited Mary, the mother of Christ, for its own political expediency.

In the process of assimilation, then, the Christian icons coded "the potency of the mother-child relationship in flat, formal blocks of color meant to capture the essence of an idealized motherhood,"⁴ thus devitalizing the mother goddess's potency and the creative power of fertility, and transformed it into the symbol of divine protection and forgiveness. Like Marina Warner before her, Jane Silverman Van Buren, the author of *The Modernist Madonna* (1989), argues that the cult of Mary's immortality and "immaculate conception," which transcends the bleakness of ordinary human destiny, helped to "soften the exclusive patriarchal aspects of Christianity and Western culture."⁵

Thus the myth and the cult of Virgin Mary was instituted. Mary the innocent girl in the Annunciation story came to be worshipped *because* she was the mother of Christ through whom only she had her existence. The golden rule that the greatest act of love is to sacrifice one's life (oneself) for one's fellow being is identified with mother's love and care for the child. Mary with the suckling baby became the very embodiment of divine protection and redemption. The sublime psychological complex that one lives for

somebody else has been exploited in patriarchal culture to imprison women within the narrow confines of domesticity, "the feminine sphere," rather than encourage women to live a life of their own outside home. To quote Rich again, "[i]nstitutionalized motherhood demands of women. . . . selflessness rather than self-realization, relation to others rather than the creation of self." And Mary the Mother of God has become the *mater dolorosa* —the incarnation of the eternally suffering and suppliant mother.

Once sanctioned by the Church and the State the figure of Virgin Mary as *magna mater* or as *mater dolorosa* has inspired great artists to create memorable icons, "an image in the solid" (*OED*). The Renaissance produced such great works of art as "The Madonna of the Chair" by Raphael or Leonard's "The Madonna of Ritta" to name only a few. Similarly, the icon has inspired literary artists as well as great painters of the Renaissance to render the image in the texture of their works. Henry James's story, "The Madonna of the Future," is a story of Theobald the failed artist who only dreams of executing a masterpiece, *his* "Madonna of the Chair," while he wastes away his life and spoils that of the woman he loves. Furthermore, James uses the iconography of the Madonna in his novels, "as a major element of his craft," to borrow Tintner's phrase, so as to further his narrative aims.⁶ Or Sylvia Plath's "Winter Trees" can be a contemporary rendition of the eternally suffering and suppliant mother figure: "O mother of leaves and sweetness/ Who are these pietàs?/The shadows of ringdoves chanting, but easing nothing." Many other American writers have used the icon either explicitly like James or implicitly in their stories and novels.

This study is a "historical" examination of the iconography of the Madonna as represented in American fiction from the 19th century to our time: Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), Melville's *Pierre* (1852), Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868), Mark Twain's *Pudd'n'head Wilson* (1894), James's *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) and *The Golden Bowl* (1904), Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* (1918), Edith Wharton's *The Children* (1929), Faulkner's *Light in August* (1932), John Gardner's *Nickle Mountain* (1973), Joyce Carol Oates's *A Garden of Earthly Delights* (1967) and *Marya: A Life* (1986). Here the term "iconography" is understood to be "the study of works of art for their meaning rather than for their artistic values; likewise, "the iconography of the Madonna" used in this study means an examination of the meaning of the mother-child relationship and its relevant themes in American fiction: the myth of "the holy family" and the absent father (=the Joseph figure), and variations on these leit-motifs.

Re-reading American literature from Hawthorne onward has alerted this writer to a new realization that despite the fact the portraiture of the mother and the child has suffered critical negligence until recently, American fiction abounds in the icons of the mother and the child.⁷ And the picture of the mother and the child is as varied as the diversity of American writers. The examination of the portrayal of the mother and the child in the drama of each novel, then, may yield a few significant re-readings of the aforementioned American novels. Simultaneously, deciphering the iconography of the Madonna in American fiction will reveal diverse images of motherhood in the American

imagination which mirror the changing ideas and functions of woman spelled as mother in American society just as the icon of the mother and the child has undergone vicissitudes in its representation in the history of Western art.

I

In this general introduction to "The Iconography of the Madonna and the American Imagination," first I'd like to refer to Mary in the Biblical text and to a few variations on "Mary's Song" among contemporary American poetry, which provide a certain guideline for the ensuing discussion through the wrong end of my little telescope, as it were. Mary's response to Gabriel in the Annunciation story (Luke 1:28-38)⁸ makes most exalted and beautiful poetry we know:

And the angel came in unto her, and said, Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee; blessed art thou among women.

And when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be. And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God. And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name Jesus. . . . And Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word. And the angel departed from her.

Then follows Mary's *Magnificat anima mea Dominum* (46-55):

And Mary said, My soul doth magnify the Lord, /And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour. /For he hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden:/For, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed. /For he that is mighty hath done to me great things;/And holy is his name. /And his mercy is on them that fear him/From generation to generation. . . . /He hath holpen his servant Israel, /In remembrance of his mercy;/As he spake to our fathers, /To Abraham, and to his seed for ever.

Indeed, God has "regarded the low estate of his handmaiden" and Mary is blessed among women on condition that she humbly accepts his word. So she responds to Gabriel in that most exalted manner. As always Marina Warner questions the authorship or rather the spontaneity of "Mary's Song" and suggests that she is echoing Zacharias's *The Benedictus*.⁹ If Warner's hypothesis is valid, then Mary is literally made a "handmaiden" for the perpetuation of patriarchy which decrees the supremacy of fatherhood. Mary extols the continuity of the line of Abraham: "He hath holpen his servant Israel, /In remembrance of his mercy;/As he spake to our fathers, /To Abraham, and to his seed for ever." It is "our fathers" and "the house of David" that matter and not Mary. She is even deprived of the privilege of naming her child: ". . . And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name Jesus. . . ." For motherhood is sacred "so long as the child bears the name of a father who *legally* controls the mother."¹⁰

It must be remembered, however, that Mary wonders about Gabriel's annunciation: "... How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?" She is "troubled at his saying" and "cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be." Her doubt and wonderment is only natural, but it has been sugar-coated as in *The Magnificat* into the glorification of her motherhood which eventually has mystified what is really at issue. (Eve's curse that "in sorrow [she will] bring forth children" has been converted into an extraordinary blessing instead.)

As has been mentioned earlier the cult of Virgin Mary is part of the political engineering the Christian Church resorted to for the establishment and consolidation of its patriarchal religion and political system within the existent matriarchal culture and society. Only recently a few thinking feminists have challenged us to re-examine the whole cultural construct, which has led to the liberation of our consciousness. The emphasis has shifted from Mary's glorification of God the Father to her questioning and wonderment of such exorbitant "favour."

Now through the wrong end of the telescope "Mary's Song" appears to be quite a familiar song that touches upon the destiny of every woman. It is a song of celebration and more often than not a song of anxiety and amazement (even irritation sometimes) on the part of the latterday Mary when first confronted with the fact that she is carrying a new life in her womb. So Clara Walpole in Oates's *A Garden of Earthly Delights* "cast in her mind" as to the fate of herself and the baby whose father has deserted them. And in desperation Clara contrives to secure a Joseph for herself and her child.¹¹ Hawthorne's Hester too must have "cast in her mind" about her destiny and that of the child, and she decides to raise the child singly for the whole Puritan community to see.

And Mary's *The Magnificat* has produced a few interesting variations among contemporary American poetry. Anne Sexton's poem entitled "Mary's Song"¹² is just such an example:

Out of Egypt
with its pearls and honey,
out of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob,
out of the God I AM,
out of diseased snakes,
out of the droppings of flies,
out of the sand dry as paper,
out of the deaf blackness,
I come here to give birth.

Write these words down.
Keep them on the tablet of miracles.
Withdraw from fine linen and goat's hair
and be prepared to anoint yourself with oil.
My time has come.
There are twenty people in my belly,
there is magnitude of wings,
there are forty eyes shooting like arrows,
and they will all be born.
All be born in the yellow wind.

I will give suck to all
but they will go hungry,
they will go forth into suffering.
I will fondle each
but it will come to nothing.
They will not rest
for they are the Christs
and each will wave good-bye.

Like *The Magnificat*, Sexton's "Mary's Song" also acknowledges the line of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But unlike the Mary in the Gospels the speaker in Sexton's poem is sure of her self-identity; she is not a mere God's handmaiden; she (not God) is in control of the situation. The use of the personal pronoun "I" (not "he") dominates the entire poem. There is even a Cummings-like¹³ self-aggrandizement: "... out of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, /out of the God I AM. . . , /I come here to give birth." The poem instigates no mystery of "unnatural pregnancy;" instead it enhances the magnitude of reproduction itself, which seems to resuscitate the ancient mother goddess, the creative power of fertility rather than "magnify the Lord" as in *The Magnificat*: "There are twenty people in my belly, /there is magnitude of wings, /... /and they will all be born. /All be born in the yellow wind."

The irony of the poem consists, however, in the fact that the celebration of giving birth to a new life does not assure the mother nor her child a bright future. Instead what awaits them is a life of anxiety and suffering; the mother knows the futility of human existence that is doomed to the calamity of one kind and another: "I will give suck to all /but they will go hungry, /they will go forth into suffering." For man "is not a temple" that he used to be, "but an outhouse; "man is evil" and can kill a baby "with a casual eye."¹⁴ Sylvia Plath, Sexton's peer poet, also presents a similarly bleak vision in a poem that bears the same title. In her "Mary's Song," written in black humor, Plath overlaps the life of Christ and human destiny with a nightmare of the holocaust. Plath's "Mary's Song" begins innocently with the prospect of a joyous Sunday dinner, where the family get together. In shocking contrast, however, the poem concludes with an image of crucifixion; the "sacrificial" Sunday lamb becomes the "golden child" on the cross: "The Sunday lamb cracks in its fat. . . /It is a heart, /This holocaust I walk in, /O golden child the world will kill and eat."¹⁵ These variations on "Mary's Song" envision no promise of divine protection or redemption, thereby deconstructing the myth of Virgin Mary in which the idealized motherhood is equated with divine love and forgiveness.

II

If the new "Mary's Song" offers no paradigm for a brilliant future for humanity, the latterday Mary is also free from another kind of self-delusion. She knows that there is no "mother's recompense" for the caring and nurturing of the child, and that the process of individuation begins at the time of each new birth: "I will fondle each/but it will come

to nothing. /They will not rest/for they are the Christs/and each will wave good-bye." The picture is as gloomy as that delineated in Plath's "Winter Trees" to which reference has already been made. In the poem Plath compares procreation in both human and botanical worlds to the latter's advantage:

The wet dawn inks are doing their blue dissolve.
On their blotter of fog the trees
Seem a botanical drawing—
Memories growing, ring on ring,
A series of weddings.

Knowing neither abortions nor bitchery,
Truer than women,
They seed so effortlessly!
Tasting the winds, that are footless,
Waist-deep in history—

Full of wings, otherworldliness.
In this, they are Ledas.
O mother of leaves and sweetness
Who are these pietàs?
The shadows of ringdoves chanting, but easing nothing.¹⁶

Here too the eternally suffering and suppliant mother of the myth— "Who are these pietàs?" —is deprived of the saving grace of divine intervention and redemption. Curiously enough, Plath characterizes seeding in the botanical world as free of the sin women are heir to: "Knowing neither abortion nor bitchery, /Truer than women, /They seed so effortlessly!" Also the part the male plays in the act of procreation is appropriately that of "the winds, that are footless." And the trees (=women) are compared to the "Ledas" raped by Zeus in the form of the swan, which can be regarded as an alternative to Mary's "unnatural pregnancy." Such is *The Magnificat* sung throughout human history. It is a sad old song that repeats itself on the same theme and truth in different idioms which subvert and modify the original meaning of the myth.

To conclude this brief exploration on "Mary's Song" I'd like to examine yet one more variation on the theme. Sexton's first collection of poems, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960), contains a poem entitled "Unknown Girl in the Maternity Ward." It recounts the birth of an illegitimate child. Most poignant is the subversion made in the gender of the child. In the iconography of the mother and the child the gender of the child is never questioned because Christ is the son of God, a male child. However, in this study of the iconography of the mother and the child in American fiction the gender of the child becomes crucial for decoding the mother-child relationship in each of the novels considered because as the classic example of Pearl in *The Scarlet Letter* shows, the child more often than not happens to be a girl.

The speaker in Sexton's "Unknown Girl in the Maternity Ward" keeps watch over the child with relentless clear-sightedness, which is a redeeming factor in the grim picture of the mother and the child. For in place of maternal "instinct" now the mother's "intelligence" and her courage will provide (in its original sense of the word) for the child, if

but he has the smell of you
as well as the smell of me.

...
Your dear nylon-covered legs,
are the horses I will ride
into eternity.

Oh mother,
after this lap of childhood
I will never go forth
into the big people's world
as an alien,
a fabrication,
or falter
when someone else
is as empty as a shoe.¹⁸

In the above quoted poem there is no trace of the irritation, or rage even, expressed in Sexton's earlier poems here considered. The child is abundantly provided for: "I your greedy child/am given your breast;" it is protected and fondled in the mother's lap, which is "as good as a bowlful of clouds:" "the sea wrapped in skin, /and your arms, / roots covered with moss/and with new shoots sticking out/to tickle the laugh out of me." The child is reconciled with "the big people's world" since she is at one with herself. Nor will she falter "when someone else/is as empty as a shoe." The child will go right into eternity strengthened by a memory of the mother's lap: "Your legs that bounce me up and down, /your dear nylon-covered legs, /are the horses I will ride/into eternity."

The poem reads, then, as a celebration of motherhood and a reaffirmation of the mother-daughter tradition, "the lost tradition." It seems that in her last years the poet just needed reassurance of such mother's lap where all "of woman born" experience a harmonious self-contained bliss: "Oh mother, /after this lap of childhood/I will never go forth/into the big people's world/as an alien, /a fabrication. . . ." The poem is a tribute to all mothers in acknowledgement of the felicitous linkage between the mother and the child, of that amniotic bliss within the womb.

Contemporary variations on "Mary's Song," therefore, not only deconstruct the myth of sacred maternity by unravelling its reality but also re-assess the reciprocal relationship between the mother and the child.

Notes

1. Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1976), p. 24.
2. Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of Virgin Mary* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), p. 282-84.
3. Hayao Kawai, *Muishiki no Kohzoh [The World of the Unconscious]* (Tokyo: Chuoh-kohron, 1977), p. 72.
4. Jane Silverman Van Buren, *The Modernist Madonna: Semiotics of the Maternal Metaphor* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 127.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 127-28.

6. Adeline R. Tintner, "In the Dusky, Crowded, Heterogeneous Back-Shop of the Mind": The Iconography of *The Portrait of a Lady*. *HJR*, Vol. 7, No. 2-3. (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press), p. 140.
7. The father-son relationship has been a recurring subject since classical Greek literature onward; critical attention has also been paid to the theme.
8. The Bible here used is the King James Version.
9. Warner, pp. 8-10.
10. Rich, p. 24.
11. Keiko Beppu, "Joyce Carol Oates," *The World of Contemporary American Women Writers*. ed. Kazuko Watanabe and Michiko Naka (Kyoto: Minerva, 1984), pp. 214-20.
12. Anne Sexton, "Mary's Song," *The Death Notebooks* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).
13. E. E. Cummings' "for any ruffian of the sky" is a poem written in praise of American individualism.

...
 for any ruffian of the sky
 your kingbird doesn't give a damn—
 his royal warcry is I AM
 and he's the soul of chivalry
 ...

14. Sexton, "After Auschwitz," *The Awful Rowing Toward God* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975).
15. Sylvia Plath, "Mary's Song," *The Collected Poems*. ed. Ted Hughes (New York: Harper & Row, 1960).
16. Plath, "Winter Trees."
17. Sexton, "Unknown Girl in the Maternity Ward," *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960).
18. Sexton, "Mothers," *The Awful Rowing Toward God*.

This paper is a result of the study initiated by a research subsidy granted by Kobe College Research Institute for 1989.

(Received November 27, 1990)