

MAID IN  
GOD'S IMAGE

*In Search of the Unruly Woman*



VERENA WRIGHT

Saint Mary's Press®

Thank God for unruly women like Verena Wright and for her positive and stimulating book. Parishes could well skip sermons on Sundays from time to time and read out chunks of it instead.

Bruce Kent

A well-researched and reflective account of the position of women in ecclesiastical and secular society, in the past and present. Verena Wright, wife, mother and 'unruly' woman, uses literature, her own experience and other sources to discern and tell the story of women's status in church and state. Verena loves the church and is familiar with the Bible. She has a remarkable insight into the gospels and reveals hidden meanings which are convincing and inspiring. Parts of the New Testament indicate the inferior status of women in the first century. Jesus' attitude is different. He values and appreciates women's friendship, their qualities and dignity. I fervently hope this book will be read widely by men as well as women and by those who have power in church and state.

Mary Kelly, nds, Sion Centre for Dialogue and Encounter

Effective feminist writing at its best is informative, well-researched, thought-provoking without being aggressive and persuasive through its use of reason. This book is all these things, besides being the product of a deep understanding of English literature and beautifully written. It is invaluable for the general public and should be required reading for all sixth-formers and university students.

David Forrester

This is an important book which takes a lot of intellectual risks. It is profoundly innovative in the way it brings together debates about the feminine and the sacred, and it challenges those perceptions of religion which are rooted in traditional, patriarchal views. It interrogates a range of written and cinematic texts in order to bring into focus those elements of female experience and culture which are usually silenced and repressed. It will, I suspect, become required reading in the field of gender and religion, even for those who may not accept its premises.

Professor Sue Harper, University of Portsmouth

First published in 2008 by  
Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd  
1 Spencer Court  
140–142 Wandsworth High Street  
London SW18 4JJ

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Published in the USA 2008 by Saint Mary's Press.

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written permission of the publisher, Saint Mary's Press, Christian Brothers  
Publications, 702 Terrace Heights, Winona, MN 55987-1318, [www.smp.org](http://www.smp.org).

Printed in the United States of America

7020

ISBN 978-1-59982-012-5

Designed and produced by Sandie Boccacci

Front cover image: *The Gaze of the Eternal Mother* by Donald  
Moorhead. Back cover image: Immaculate Heart of Mary by Pietro  
Annigoni; used by permission of the Claretian Missionaries, Hayes,  
Middlesex. Design by Judy Linard.

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*The outsider will say, 'in fact, as a woman, I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world.'*

Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas*

*There is no hidden poet within me, just a little piece of God that might grow into poetry. And a camp needs a poet, one who experiences life there, even there, as a bard, and is able to sing about it.*

Etty Hillesum, *Etty: A Diary 1941–43*

*'Your woman she never fix up your hair?' was clearly a question for Sethe, since that's who [Beloved] was looking at. 'My woman? You mean my mother? If she did, I don't remember. I didn't see her but a few times out in the fields ... by the time I woke up in the morning she was in line. If the moon was bright they worked by its light ... She must of nursed me 2 or 3 weeks – that's the way the others did. Then she went back in the rice and I sucked from another woman whose job it was. So to answer you, no I reckon not. She never fixed up my hair nor nothing ... one thing she did do, carried me behind the smokehouse ... opened her chest front and lifted her breast and pointed under it. Right on her rib was a circle and a cross burnt right into her skin. She said, 'This is your ma'am, I am the only one got this mark. The rest dead. If something happens ... and you can't tell by my face, you can know me by this mark' ... I didn't understand it then. Not till I had my own mark.*

Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



This book owes so much to the ideals and influence of family and school. With their enthusiasm and curiosity for life and a thirst for learning denied to their class, my parents John and Gwendoline stimulated and encouraged my lifelong fascination with language and story, justice and social commitment. Their trust in possibility and opportunity was realised in my treasured school experience with the sisters of Sion in London. Marriage and motherhood brought the excitement and joy of sharing with Tanya, Adrian and Rebeqa their growing-years of enquiry, discovery and challenge; for their laughter, their teaching and support I am deeply grateful.

Many others have given generously in encouragement, expertise and time; my thanks go to:

- the dynamic lecturing team on the innovative Cultural Studies degree at Portsmouth in the late 1970s; in stimulating questions about institutions, culture and society, they gave me the resources to develop understanding and further enquiry about ‘the way things are’. Geoff Hemstedt of Sussex University was both a support and an inspiration in taking intellectual risks. I hope he would have been pleased with what is here.
- the students who took up the challenge and enlivened the *Unruly Woman* module at Portsmouth; and those women who dared to walk through the doors at New Road for *Mainly for Women* and shared their stories, wisdom, strength and the joy of opening to their own creativity and knowledge (often silenced by past attitudes).
- old and new friends in HMP Kingston for the warmth of their welcome, the courtesy of their friendship and their readiness to share insight, experience – and a good laugh!
- the wonderful women of Glanmire who listened and shared; and Beverly, Elizabeth Frances and Suzanne, who brought their ideas and trust to that experimental seminar one summer’s evening in Christchurch, New Zealand.

- the staff at the Women's Library London for their knowledge and supportive guidance on suffrage material, including the Catholic Women's Suffrage Society (later St Joan's Alliance) archive.
- the staff at Hayes Library who painstakingly followed up an obscure enquiry about a painting hanging in a local church.
- Tim Buckley and staff at Redemptorist Publications, where I gained valuable experience in developing reflections for 'people in the pews'.
- the National Board of Catholic Women, for introducing me to the wide-ranging and knowledgeable work for church and society that is done by women nationally and internationally; and for their friendship and encouragement, especially from Angela Perkins, to be involved in various activities, including the NBCW newspapers, *Catholic Woman* and *Catholic Omnibus*, where I was able to try out some of the ideas explored in this book.
- the team at Darton, Longman and Todd for their constant support and readiness to overlook and deal with the shortcomings and quirky approach of a learner in the writing trade. Special thanks go to Virginia Hearn, who as Commissioning Editor was always ready to run with my wildest ideas and pull them into shape; and who never lost sight of the project, applying her expertise as literary midwife to bring this book into the public domain.

VERENA WRIGHT

## PREFACE



# MORE TO THIS THAN MEETS THE EYE

I never expected feminism to bring me back to Christianity – or rather bring me to Christianity in a different and deeper way. It was as though I had to discover the world through a critical investigation of the effects of women’s history, in order to appreciate the revolutionary message of Jesus’ good news for the poor, and its radical implications for a world locked in a comfort zone of injustice and conflict. More than that, I needed to move towards intellectual and emotional maturity before I could understand the deep message of Jesus’ invitation to life in its fullness. My experience as a mother and mature student gave me that opportunity; it also gave me a sense of my ‘upside-down’ life – a continuing experience of being on the margins, not quite fitting, whether as mature student juggling motherhood and study, or divorced mother teetering on the church threshold, confused about my faith identity. Yet always something suggested that it was important to hang on in there, to trust and stay open to the creative tension that is at the roots of positive change.

I see now that my formative experience of Catholicism in the 1960s gave me an understanding of both the prophetic and the conservative role of the Church, its identity and wider social influence. From a fairly conventional beginning in a devout, loving family rooted in Irish immigrant spirituality, I moved as an 11-year-old ‘scholarship girl’ to a convent school that presented me with a very different understanding of the Church, and its gifts and contradictions, particularly for women. The school intake included girls from various faith backgrounds, and the nuns who ran it were from a French order. I came to see this as significant in their openness to the winds of change, challenge, doubt and uncertainty provoked by the Second Vatican Council. As senior students, that experience was both intellectual and practical. We were actively

encouraged in class to debate the issues and implications for change in the Church, but we also witnessed the sisters struggling to embrace new ideas in their worship and habits – the latter quite literally, as we all adjusted to seeing their floor-length skirts rise to the knee and their veils reduce, to reveal fringes and wisps of side-hair, the sisters at the mercy of our giggles and wild speculations! That, together with the constant example of capable women running a large institution and driving cars and vans at a time when few women were on the roads, meant that, despite conventional strictures on sexual modesty and careful conduct towards boys (who could be excited by girls who ‘flaunted’ themselves!), the encouragement to self-fulfilment as women engaging our talents for the social good was positive and inspiring. This powerful experience of Church was very different from the brutal hell-fire sermons and narrow attitudes of my traditional Irish Catholic parish. It has, I see now, remained a constant for me throughout my life-spiral, each time being revisited from a different perspective of experience and new knowledge.

One of the advantages of age is that it’s possible to identify patterns of personal development. For instance, I can now link the disparate events that ‘happened’ to me and see their fuller significance. They have become synapses: unforeseen connections informed by later experience and knowledge, which in turn produce new ideas and new connections. My synapses include: travel on the London Underground; a convent education; learning as a mother with and through children; 20 years as a single woman following 20 years of marriage; feminism and the awakening to Christianity; a wide variety of teaching experiences (women’s studies, university degrees, (male) prison inmates, adult education); and travel to New Zealand, where six months’ life as an exile down under offered different ways of being and seeing.

### **Map-reading**

The London Underground: as in any subway system, life happens concurrently above and below, but knowledge of London is different in terms of contiguity, awareness of signposts, important sites and distances. For example, while I am travelling on the Underground from Oxford Circus to Leicester Square, you are shopping in an Oxford Street store, say, or working in a Bond Street office and vice versa. Each of us has a different story and image of ‘London’, but we share a knowledge that the life going on below ground affects life above (as people move to and fro). As I lived my

girlhood story, travelling daily to school from south to west London, that literal sense of sub-text gave me an enduring awareness that knowledge is always more than what is visible, surface-evident. The effects of the 7th July bombers' underground activity (tracing a cross of movement on the map) are a tragic example of the significance of the unseen in the story of 'above and below'.<sup>1</sup>

The Underground map is a representation – not of London's geography, but of routes of movement and connection that enable travellers to 'read' their journeys. The colours on the map are arbitrary signs – not symbols – of those routes. However, the Underground system itself has become for me, through that early experience, a symbol of sub-text, a deeper reality – a way of understanding surface truth from a different perspective. Reading the two together with new eyes encourages different connections of meaning about London. This has given me insight into the complexity of all texts and how different meanings can emerge through readings that attempt to go 'underground'. So for me, there is always 'more to this than meets the eye'.



## DIFFERENT WAYS OF SEEING

*Our big mistake was teaching them to read. We won't do that again.*

Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*

### **The challenge of Christianity**

My starting point on this journey of exploration is the premise that the current state of things is unsatisfactory and unjust. There is a need for radical change from the individualist ethos and patriarchal structures of contemporary Western society. Injustice, abuse, conflict, self-harm and lack of psychic nurture are evident in individual and community life, with particular resonance in women's experience. How have these structures come about? What resources exist to counter and challenge such a status quo?

Christianity is rooted in challenge. It questions an uncritical acceptance of 'this is how it is'. At the moment in Luke's gospel where her cousin Elizabeth recognises Mary as 'the mother of my Lord' (the unborn Messiah), Mary's pregnant, prophetic voice expresses, in her 'Magnificat' song, the revolutionary outcome of Jesus' message for the poor.

He has pulled down princes from their thrones and exalted the lowly. The hungry he has filled with good things, the rich sent away empty. (Luke 2:52–53)

In his ministry, Jesus constantly provokes debate on religious and social customs that institutional authority sees as unchangeable. Often his debate is with individual women – itself a challenging action in a culture where women, patriarchal handmaids, were at best socially invisible, at worst taboo. In these conversations, the relational overcomes the hierarchical. Jesus is seen to be disturbed, refreshed and surprised by the direct democratic, but nonetheless

faith-filled, address of women like Mary at Cana (John 2:1–12), Martha and Mary at Bethany (Luke 10:38–42; John 11:1–12:2), the Samaritan and Syro-Phoenician women (John 4:5–42; Mark 7:24–30), the haemorrhaging woman in the crowd (Luke 8:43–56). The Cana miracle, for instance, depends on Mary's alert reporting of the wine situation. Jesus, acknowledging her perspective, takes collaborative action; thus, her knowledge is recognised and shared for the common good.

Given the radical message of the gospels and the Genesis 1 assertion that both women and men are made in God's image, the Church is well placed to challenge residual patriarchal ideology, as well as contemporary consumerist values; to offer a prophetic voice for change and also resources for spiritual and social nourishment and growth. Despite this, however, the institutional Church is often complicit rather than prophetic, buying into and reinforcing prevailing norms.

### **The challenge of feminism**

So how can we reflect upon institutional knowledge and common assumptions about modern society that seem to support injustice? How can we, like Jesus, challenge the status quo, provoke debate on common-sense assumptions and develop constructive criticism of accepted sources of institutional knowledge – including the Church? It seems to me that a feminist perspective, which both values and validates female experience, is a key resource for questioning social norms. It can also usefully draw on – as well as contribute to – a Christian understanding about coming to fullness of being (John 10:10), at both individual and shared levels of being human.

From personal and professional experience, I have discovered the significance of women's *positionality* and gendered social voice. Over the years, other women have described similar responses. Aware of being misread, unheard, criticised for 'irrelevant' knowledge, it sometimes seems that we are speaking a different language. This has motivated my desire to share ideas from literary criticism about the way we, as listeners and readers, use story to understand, adopt or subvert social conventions and attitudes. In this book, I offer ways of reading that have led me to question received meanings and come to a deeper knowledge about society, the Church, and my place within both. I want to encourage different ways of seeing, grounded in women's positionality – that is, the varied but shared experience of being female in a patriarchal society.

Society and individual identity is defined through dominant institutions (medical, legal, scientific, religious etc.) and represented in cultural practices that include fiction, film and popular entertainment. What is the potential of these media for either reinforcing the established order or stimulating new ways of understanding? Can fiction, particularly in forms that represent the everyday world, provoke an openness to the feminine dimension as valid authority – a source of wisdom, spiritual nourishment and social resource?

In themed chapters relating to the feminine dimension, I have selected a number of exemplary texts, including short stories, gospel stories and novels (*Jane Eyre*, *Lord of the Flies*, *Carrie*), to explore a reading method that opens up the form and content of story and its underlying social context.<sup>1</sup> It may seem an arbitrary selection, and Stephen King's horror story particularly obscure. But I hope to show that it functions as a means of identifying repressed social attitudes towards women and gives access to women's bodily experience and knowledge of the feminine dimension. As I suggest below, literary texts can say more than the linear storyline, so my selection is based on the potential for decoding an 'underground' sub-text of symbolic narrative – a reading that investigates the effects of women and/or the feminine as agents of change or disruption in the fictional world – what I refer to as the unruly woman factor.

The reading method then, focuses on devices that reveal links of meaning that challenge or subvert the dominant narrative authority connected to the wider social world of which the text is a part. For example, the title of this book plays with the words 'made' and 'maid'. The visual pun device draws attention to the way everyday words (and sounds) can be used to challenge and subvert ('maid' may seem archaic, but we still use it for weddings, domestic employment and the hospitality industry – and of course for Mary as 'handmaid'). So the phrase 'Maid in God's Image', while evoking the clear meaning of the Genesis 1 declaration that both women and men image God (Genesis 1:27), also gives ironic comment on institutional church practice that, contrary to Genesis 1, has marginalised or ignored the value of the maid's voice, encouraging attitudes that are still identifiable today – in negative stereotypes, gendered language and popular images. And this has occurred despite Jesus' raising of women in public affirmation, as well as their valuable ministry activity in the house-churches of early Christianity (acknowledged by Pope Benedict

XVI in his address 'Women of the Early Church', 14 February 2007).

Hence the need for a resource to interrogate and discover silent knowledge that can challenge conventional attitudes in society and Church; that can provide prophetic energy for Christian action in the world through a valuing of the feminine. This is where literary texts come in. Writers and storytellers play with words and narrative devices to set up plot lines, complex meanings and potential for connotation. Moving away from an idea of the author's intention and control of meaning as central, it seems to me that both writing skill and reading pleasure lie in interactive play – in how the text sets up a conversation space for author and reader. Despite the diversity of available media, many people still enjoy reading fiction; for me, much of the enjoyment comes from sharing this conversational play with the author. Here, in the reading process itself, ideas and experience come together to make meanings – about the story, and about the world in which the conversation takes place.

I offer here readings developed with different groups over a number of years. It has been a stimulating, provocative and highly rewarding interactive experience – full of discovery and appreciation of coding patterns and symbolic meanings that can, I suggest enhance knowledge and understanding, as well as reading pleasure.

### **Reading realism**

Realist fiction constructs a possible world for the reader. In everyday life, medical, scientific, legal, religious and educational words and phrases express and define norms of behaviour and knowledge. In stories, these patriarchal institutional codes are dominant; they assert narrative authority by reproducing assumptions and social conventions about female experience. For instance, the opening sentence of Kate Chopin's 'The Story of an Hour' (written in 1899) asserts a specific meaning based on 'common knowledge' – that is, that it relates to a medical condition:

Knowing that Mrs Mallard was afflicted with a heart trouble, great care was taken to break to her as gently as possible the news of her husband's death.

But writers and storytellers can also use codes and devices such as ambiguity to disturb and challenge the apparent security of meaning, and subvert a sense of the normal. So the selection of a word

like ‘heart’ (with connotations of romance, courage, emotion) sets up the possibility for other meanings to develop in the story – in this case, from Mrs Mallard’s internal perspective as human being, rather than by her defined cultural identity as respectable wife in the late nineteenth-century American South.<sup>2</sup> The reading is thereby opened up to marginal or silent voices, so as to assert a deeper reality, which the dominant narrative voice excludes or does not recognise. For example, in the gospel story of Jesus feeding the people with loaves and fish (Matthew 14:13–21), it is clear that the figure of five thousand is incorrect if we follow Matthew’s throw-away aside, ‘to say nothing of women and children’ (Matthew 14:21). The ‘Feeding of the More than Ten Thousand’ might be more accurate, yet ‘Five Thousand’ has become the common title of this central miracle story, and even the author seems unaware of the contradiction – since women don’t count. In this way, patriarchal coding authorises groups like women and children to be marginalised and excluded from history, an attitude perpetuated through the use of residual patriarchal language today.

To begin with then, here is a reading of a short story that depicts the role and categorisation of women in a patriarchal society in an undefined past time. Here, Christianity is the established state authority, pronouncing on, but not including women in its knowledge and decision-making. Karen Blixen’s ‘The Blank Page’ is about two groups of women: nuns who live and work in a busy convent, growing flax and producing fine bedlinen; and noblewomen, whose destiny is to marry and produce heirs for royal and noble families.<sup>3</sup> The storyteller tells of a public ceremony that follows the wedding night, where a woman’s virginity is ‘proven’ by displaying the stained bed sheet. One sheet, however, is ‘blank’ ...

### **‘The Blank Page’**

The ‘coffee-brown, black-veiled’ woman, fulfilling her maternal inheritance as oral storyteller, sets up guidelines for ‘reading’ her tale:

Where the story-teller is loyal, eternally and unswervingly loyal to the story, there in the end silence will speak ... Where the story has been betrayed, silence is but emptiness ...

Who then ... tells a finer tale than any of us? Silence does. And where does one read a deeper tale than upon the most perfectly printed page of the most precious book? Upon the blank page ... We ... the old women who tell stories, we know the story of the blank page. But we be somewhat averse to

telling it, for it might well, amongst the uninitiated, weaken our own credit. (p. 126)

In this way, a seemingly straightforward story about nuns engaged in the manufacture of bedlinen cloth for royal and noble weddings, is complexified by an intricately woven pattern of stories within stories. These feature groups of women defined by their sexual roles in relation to men: nuns and noblewomen, wives and spinners. Symbolism is used to challenge established (male) authority, knowledge and 'truth'. The tale meanders through history, biblical reference and legend. Just a few paragraphs before the end, it reaches its highpoint: ritual examination of the wedding-night sheet, 'proving' – or 'disproving' – a bride's virginity. The judgement is reinforced through the custom of returning the sheets to the convent, where they are framed and displayed. Over time, visitors study the different shapes of hymeneal bloodstain for their 'messages', reading and interpreting them as fulfilment of omens, signs of the zodiac, or 'pictures from their own world of ideas: a rose, a heart, a sword – or even a heart pierced through with a sword' (p. 129).<sup>4</sup>

The ritual's meaning seems clear: state officials confirm a hierarchical order in which women – both brides and nuns – are silent, virginal and subject to society's conventions. The Chancellor's post-wedding-night pronouncement: 'Virginem eam tenemus' ('We hold her to be a virgin') is a confident definitive statement of 'truth', authorised knowledge from a male perspective: blood = virgin; no blood = not a virgin. The reality is of course quite different: the presence or lack of bloodstain could be due to any number of factors. Absence of blood does not definitively mean loss of virginity: the bride may have slept elsewhere in the room, her hymen may already have broken, say during physical exercise; the bridegroom may have been impotent, but (as in the biblical story of the woman 'taken in adultery') not considered part of the process! It may even have been a political act: the bride may have resisted giving evidence, thus refusing to 'play the game'.

This ritual may have disappeared from contemporary experience but the cultural resonance endures, supported by innovations in medical technology and expertise. In Britain, for example, 'virginity repair' is now available on the NHS. A doctor who pioneered 'hymen reconstruction' in the Middle East accounts for what he says is an 'insatiable' demand: 'because in some cultures they like to see that the woman will bleed on the wedding night.' Thus patri-

archal authority is upheld: women can play the game by falsifying ‘evidence’ of virginity, though at a cost – physiologically and financially.<sup>5</sup> In New York, the Laser Vaginal Rejuvenation Institute advertises ‘Laser Hymenoplasty’ that can ‘repair the hymen as if sexual relations had never occurred ... [the Institute] is sensitive to the needs of women from all cultures that embrace these particular issues because of cultural, social or religious reasons ... [the operation] can be performed in conjunction with other cosmetic surgeries’.<sup>6</sup>

Through the threading pattern set up by the storyteller in ‘The Blank Page’, the reader is encouraged to raise questions about the authority of the state proclamation, and listen for silent speech within the description of the community of women ‘readers’ who visit the gallery. We hear how,

in days of old ... a long stately, richly coloured procession wound its way ... to the convent. Princesses of Portugal ... now queens or queen-dowagers ... archduchesses or electresses ... proceeded here on a pilgrimage which was by nature both sacred and secretly gay. (p. 129)

And then comes the invitation to go deeper: it happens that,

just as ... when a sheet of paper is being burnt, after all the other sparks have run along the edge and died away, one last clear little spark will appear and hurry along after them – a very old high-born spinster undertakes the journey to Convento Velho ... [before entering] ... she looks round to see the view widen on all sides; slowly, slowly a row of recollections passes through the small venerable skull-like head under its mantilla of black lace, and it nods to them in amicable recognition. (p. 130)

The spinster – a different, more objective reader, neither nun nor princess – passes along the row of canvases in the gallery, each with a nameplate and a story to tell and ‘set up in loyalty to the story’. One canvas, however, stands out: there is no name inscribed and ‘the linen within the frame is snow-white from corner to corner – a blank page’ (p. 131). The storyteller praises the ‘unswerving loyalty’ of the royal parents who might not otherwise have included it. It is this sheet to which we, with the spinster and all the ‘categories’ of women, are drawn: in front of the blank page: ‘... old Princesses of Portugal – worldly-wise, dutiful, long-suffering queens, wives and mothers ... their noble old playmates, bridesmaids and maids-of-

honour ... old and young nuns, with the Mother Abbess herself, sink into deepest thought' (p. 131).

The contemplative silence of this final sentence urges a rereading of the whole story, sends us back to a deeper level, questioning the certainty of norms and categories – challenging the authority of asserted truth and 'self-evident' meaning.

Logic suggests that if the blank sheet carries multiple meanings, then the other (stained) sheets don't necessarily signify virginity: the bloodstains could come from other sources such as menstrual flow or a cut, either from the bride herself, her husband, a servant or a friend (it could be in the women's interests to collaborate and give the institutional authorities what they want and expect, so as to avoid punishment and preserve sexual freedom). Other meanings suggest themselves – the text is open-ended and full of possibility, speaking of women's experience and knowledge. 'Blind' establishment authority is undermined.

The deeper story of the nuns also challenges cultural expectations. As women, both nuns and noblewomen signify cultural purity. However, the description of the nuns' 'labour-hardened virginal hands' (p. 127) refutes the passive, pious, other-worldly stereotype. These women are economically active, working within their convent as farmers, manufacturers, archivists and curators. The noblewomen's future, however, is prescribed – their dependent sexual labour within marriage requiring them to produce progeny and security for their husbands' lineages.

Because the title alerts us to its significance in the story, the 'blank page' sheet takes the reader beyond *linear* narrative. The frames themselves are individual 'stories', hung in series like the pages of a book or even shots in a film. Together, they form a new story that includes meaningful silence in a montage of interacting images which question authorised knowledge.

So we have our model – our reading guide: it encourages us to look for patterns running through a text in non-linear formations; to identify silent voices that speak when symbols or key-words are brought together to entertain and challenge the reader in a complex dance of meanings. As we move through the book, this model will open up each text to voices that can complexify and subvert dominant meanings. Such reading, I suggest, can stimulate reflection beyond the text and provoke change in attitude and perspective.

It seems to me that the challenge of this way of reading and of feminist criticism more generally is to seek validity for the feminine

aspects of human being and establish social balance, in the Church and the world – in working for the common good. So I want now to explore in some detail the various ways in which the concept of femininity is used and understood, and how this impacts on women's everyday experience.