

31. Caird, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine*, 293.
32. Mathias Rissi, "The Kerygma of the Revelation to John", Leonard Thompson, "Cult and Eschatology in the Apocalypse of John," 342.
33. Mbiti, "Eschatology," 180-84.
34. Caird, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine*, 55.
35. Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 31-32.
36. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 108.
37. Boring, *Revelation*, 108; Richard Baukham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, 75; Caird, *Apocalypse*, 69-72; Minear, *New Testament Apocalyptic*, 111.
38. Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 32.
39. J. S. Mbiti, "African Concepts of Christology," 54-55.
40. Mbiti, *Bible and Theology in African Christianity*, 152.
41. J. V. Taylor, *The Primal Vision: Christian Presence amid African Religion*, 64-66.
42. Dominique Zahan, *Religion, Spirituality, and Thought of Traditional Africa*, 155.
43. *Ibid.*, 17.
44. Boesak, *Comfort and Protest*, 37.

The Heroine and the Whore: The *Apocalypse of John* in Feminist Perspective

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Introduction

I grew up in a textile mill town in the southern United States.¹ Fundamentalist Christianity was heavy in the air, although I had refuge from biblical inerrancy in a small Episcopal church. There the 1928 *Book of Common Prayer* was, for too many years, without error. Copies of the experimental prayer books were hidden in the fellowship hall, and when I was a teenager, I would borrow these forbidden and much maligned texts. But the *Apocalypse of John* barely existed in our authoritative canons, and only then in sanitized and heavily edited versions of the throne room scenes or the New Jerusalem. Mostly the *Apocalypse* remained deep in the lectionary and could be easily avoided and ignored. Of course, gender roles were strictly maintained; only males could be acolytes or priests. And Paul was sometimes invoked to argue that women's heads should be covered in church. So my childhood was a complex mix of middle-range liturgical worship, allegiances to tradition, and frequent maligning of fundamentalism. Although I was taught early on that the Bible was like a fairy tale, issues of gender were never discussed.

Throughout all my training in biblical studies, from college through doctoral work, I never had a woman professor, nor did I encounter a feminist reading in the classroom. The one exception was a seminary lecture on feminist hermeneutics, and the presenter was a guest speaker, Phyllis Trible. In my other field, social ethics, I was reading numerous feminist thinkers, and feminist concerns were central. But in New Testament studies, patriarchal readings of biblical texts served as the entry point to exegesis and interpretation. I could still argue, fairly effortlessly, that even today patriarchal methods remain normative, despite a wealth of feminist readings.

Still, it seems almost unreal that only a short time ago—the Reagan years in the 1980s—I had to find a feminist path outside of my formal biblical education. I have always felt limited by the traditional, historical-critical readings that searched for “definite information”—like date, authorship, social context, meanings of symbols, and so forth. As a feminist reader of biblical texts drawing on various disciplines, I had to look far and wide for conversation partners as a means to delve deeper into the more evaluative, underlying dynamics of the text. I have learned from my partners—in particular, postmodernism, ideological criticism, and fantasy theory—that a biblical text, whether grounded in the canon or loosed from its canonical home, can be a dangerous thing. What I have found in my journey is that the *Apocalypse of John* is a multivalent text that lends itself to multiple interpretations. The result is that there are seemingly infinite *Apocalypses of John*, each one constructed according to the perspective of the interpreter. That is to say, instead of an approach that finds single answers to questions seeking information, I have discovered that there are many places from which to view the *Apocalypse*.

I have chosen here to search John's *Apocalypse* for gender issues and to read it looking for and identifying with the women characters. As John portrays them, the women of the *Apocalypse*, through their acts and demeanor, symbolize either good or evil. My fundamental questions are: What underlying patterns of gender are displayed in this text? What does it mean to read for and with women, both in and outside the text? What does the characterization of women in this text have to say to and about contemporary women? What are ways to resist this patriarchal text?

Methods: Feminism, Ideology, and Fantasy Literature

My methodology in this article is plural; I want to create a conversation among ideological criticism, feminist hermeneutics, and literary studies in fantasy literature. Ideological criticism involves reading for the values and assumptions in a text and ways in which the text exposes certain ways of understanding the world. For example, from an ideological point of view, John in the broader sense subverts the status quo of the Roman Empire, but at the same time he reinforces the status quo of gender stereotypes and roles. The *Apocalypse* can be liberating on many levels, especially if the interpreter is using a liberation or postcolonial approach. Feminist hermeneutics enables me to show other ways and approaches to reading this text, leading me to the conclusion that this text is not liberating for women (or for men who care about the liberation of women). In exploring the literary studies of the fantastic I have discovered insights into reading about “other worlds” of the magical and mythical and about how the “fantastic” has traditionally categorized women as either good or evil, but in either case inferior to men.

Fantasies of the Future: The Function of the Female in the Apocalypse

In responding to the science fiction writer Joanna Russ, Robert Scholes states, “Maybe an all-female world is the only hope for the future of the human race. It's worth considering.”²⁴ Women readers responding to the *Apocalypse of John* may well want to entertain a similar idea! Look, for example, at the roles of the female characters in the *Apocalypse*. The earth-bound females, both the prophetess Jezebel (2:20-23) and the Whore of Babylon as the symbol of Rome (17:1-19:6), are immoral and seductive, and they help the evil males in the destruction of earth. Both face destruction themselves. Although the Woman Clothed with the Sun (12:1-17) is able to function positively in bringing about a political utopia, even she appears to be left out of the utopian city of the New Jerusalem, which is represented by the Bride (19:6-10; 21:1-2). As such, the role of the female is clearly subordinate to males in the *Apocalypse*. And once female figures are used or abused by male figures in the story, either there is no further need for them in the future world of this text or else any reference to their future presence and function is omitted.

Reading the text as a woman demands reading for the gender codes in the narrative, both in terms of where women appear and where they are noticeably absent. If Joanna Russ is correct in her analysis of science fiction, there are no realistic portrayals of women there, only stereotypical “images of women.” As with science fiction, the female in fantasy literature in general is a stereotypical image. So also, in the *Apocalypse*, the images of women are blurred or they are stereotyped or they are conspicuously absent altogether. Women are either marginalized on “the edge of time” (to borrow from novelist Marge Piercy), or they are completely displaced from time.

In the enchanting and disenchanting world of the *Apocalypse of John*, the role of the female is present but displaced to subordinate roles. This displacement occurs in two spheres, the political sphere and the religious sphere. Thus, women are displaced twice; namely, they are “double-bound” to subordinate roles in both the political and the religious worlds. John's text portrays and displaces two contrasting female archetypes: the Heroine figure (queen-mother of heaven, the Woman Clothed with the Sun) and the Whore figure (Babylon-queen-mother of hell, representative of Rome). The subversive text of the *Apocalypse* subverts the status quo of the political realm and the status quo of the religious realm—the political and religious realities of the Roman Empire—but it subverts Rome without subverting or changing or challenging the typical gender relations in the culture and without empowering the “collective female.” Such a dynamic is not atypical. In fact, studies in fantasy literature and in folk and fairy tales provide interesting parallels to the apocalyptic imagination evident in John's text.

In terms of the conspicuous absence of women in the *Apocalypse*, consider the description of the 144,000 who are on Mount Zion and who bear the name of the Lamb and the name of the Lamb's Father on their foreheads. They have learned a new song, and no one else can learn that song except these men "who have been redeemed from the earth." And they are clearly males only, for the author adds: "It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins" (14:4). The 144,000 represent the whole number of the faithful, and they are men. It is not just that males alone are present but that women are explicitly excluded. Adela Yarbro Collins notices that this passage employs sacrificial language and reflects purity laws. Her point is that women's bodies are seen as negative and capable of defiling men through intercourse or the blood of menstruation. Yarbro Collins observes that this passage "assumes that the model Christian is male."³

However, she fails to make full use of the logical inference—namely, that the New Jerusalem, God's future world, will exclude females! It is not just that males are the models and women are to imitate them. Rather, in order for the candidates for heaven to remain "spotless"—indeed for heaven itself to remain spotless—women will be displaced from it. Furthermore, the 144,000 are described in this way: "And in their mouth no lie was found; they are blameless" (14:5). This description removes the power of discourse from women. It assumes that only male speech is significant. And male speech, including that of John in this passage, is depicting women as a defiling force. Male is the subject; female is the object—the object of desire that must be displaced in order for men to remain undefiled!

Thus, the subject-object split is in place, a split that places the male as subject and the female as object either of desire or violence or both. This subject-object split as male/female is the same split as the dialectic of body/mind, nature/culture. Male is the "dominant subject" of the split and is associated with mind and culture, while female is the "subordinate object" of the split and is associated with body and nature. The *Apocalypse* reinforces rather than overcomes this subject-object split. In other words, to read the *Apocalypse* is to be drawn into the author's perspective that views females as objects. In the *Apocalypse*, the narrative as "socially symbolic act" (Jameson) retains the sexual oppression and stereotypes of woman as object of violence and desire. Concerning this split, Gayatri Spivak says that in order to take the female object and make her a female subject, "The collective project of our feminist critique must always be to rewrite the *social* text so that the historical and sexual differentials are operated together."⁴ A feminist hermeneutic, therefore, does not take for granted the world of the text but rather re-reads the narrative for its gender codes. Two key questions to address this issue are: Who is the female? And what are her powers and plays in the *Apocalypse*?

A tension exists in the narrative of the *Apocalypse* between two different archetypes of the female: the Heroine and the Whore. This dialectic of archetypal material can be explained in several different ways—by the subject-object split or in terms of

dualistic, binary oppositions or by means of the concept of displacement. Spivak's concern is with the concept of difference and, in particular, of sexual difference, which is of course based upon her reading of the deconstructionist Jacques Derrida. The issue is: What is the similarity or difference between the female stereotypes in the society and the treatment of the female in the text? The female that is displaced from subject to object in the political fantasy of the *Apocalypse* is the female that reflects (mirrors or mimics) aspects of the prevailing social order (both good and evil) and of the prevailing ideology.

Fantasy theorist Lance Olson's definition of postmodern fantasy further clarifies the deconstructive mode of fantasy literature in subverting (or not) the prevailing social order:

Often fantasy begins in the realm of the mimetic, then disrupts it introducing an element of the marvelous, the *effect* being to jam marvelous and mimetic assumptions. In other words, fantasy [like apocalyptic] is that stutter between two modes of discourse which generates textual instability, an ellipse of uncertainty. Its result is the banging together of the *here* and *there* so that neither the reader nor the protagonist knows quite where he [*sic*] is. That is, fantasy is a deconstructive mode of narrative.⁵ Hence, the fantastic is a mode designed to surprise, to question, to put into doubt, to create anxiety, to make active, to make uncomfortable, to disgust, to repel, to rebel, to subvert, to pervert, to make ambiguous, to make discontinuous, to deform. It is a mode whose premise is a will to deconstruct.⁶

That is to say, fantasy subverts the current order of things by presenting something that is out of the ordinary—the fantastic or the marvelous. In this regard, the *Apocalypse* has elements of both the mimetic (in which "the way things are" is presented just as they are) and the fantastic, the supernatural, or, according to Tsvetan Todorov, the "marvelous" (in which "the way things are" is subverted by another way to see things). Clearly, by means of the visions of heaven and the image of the fantastic New Jerusalem, the *Apocalypse* subverts the "reality" of the way things are in regard to political and religious domination by the Roman Empire. But the images of the female reflect only the mimetic and not the fantastic. They simply perpetuate the way things are in the dominant society. In the case of the *Apocalypse*, the images of the female archetypes are presented in reverse, because the images are turned inside-out. That is to say, what Rome considers to be evil (Christians), the *Apocalypse* presents as good (the Heroine). And what Rome considers to be good (the Roman Empire!), the *Apocalypse* considers to be evil (the Whore). But while the political realities represented by these images are subverted and reversed, the stereotypes of female figures in themselves remain unchanged and unchallenged.

All of this is at the archetypal level of the narrative and may remain obscure to readers noticing only the surface level of the narrative. Because the *Apocalypse* simply

mirrors hidden dimensions of gender patterns in the culture, those patterns continue to remain hidden in the *Apocalypse*. Fantasy scholar Rosemary Jackson may be correct in saying, "The fantastic traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made 'absent.'"²⁷ If it is true that the fantastic exposes the oppressions that are hidden, then the *Apocalypse* falls far short of complete subversion of the social order. The political order of Rome and the religious order that supports Rome are obviously exposed and subverted, but not the gender order. Its dynamics remain hidden and unchanged from the culture to the text. The domination of male over female in the culture remains the same and is even reinforced by the *Apocalypse*. The female is still "absent," even though she is represented in both powerful and powerless modes of being and acting. She is "absent" as a subject because she remains an object, an "image of female." In this text, the female is still "other," still marginalized, still banished to the edges of the text.

Females are present in the text, but at the same time they are absent as subjects of their own lives. They are simply objects of male desire and violence. "Jezebel" is a seductive object of desire to those who follow her and are misled into "fornication." She is an object of violence to the author who prophesies that she will be destroyed (by the male god). The Heroine is an object of good desire as one who gives birth (to the messiah, no less). The Whore is an object of evil desire to those who are seduced by her purple clothes and gold jewelry and who are led to "commit fornication" with her. The Whore is an object of violence to the author who depicts the celebration of her utter desolation and burning. The Bride is an object of good desire as the wife of the Lamb. This final female image is connected with a male, the Lamb, and is described "as a bride adorned for her husband" (21:2). The Bride is woman as desired object, adorned and passive; the New Jerusalem is the image of the seductive, the object of erotic desire.

While these images make the female absent as subject but present as objects, in the end all the female figures become completely removed from the world of the story. The prophetess Jezebel and her unrepentant followers will be thrown upon a bed and will die (2:22-23). The Whore of Babylon is dethroned and made desolate and totally destroyed, as the ceremonial line proclaims: "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great!" (18:2). Even the Woman Clothed with the Sun is "banished" for protection and safekeeping to the wilderness, "to her place where she is nourished for a time, and times, and half a time" (12:14). The Bride figure (the New Jerusalem) alone is left standing, but only briefly, for she is replaced by the imagery of the city. The female—whether depicted as the cause of evil or as the cause of good in the world of the story—is nonetheless in the end erased from the text. Hence, all the females in the *Apocalypse* are victims; they remain objects either of desire or of violence, because they are all stereotyped, archetypal images of the female and not subjects—not the embodiment of power and control over their own lives or over either the real or the fantastic worlds.

The subjection and displacement of the female in the *Apocalypse* comes out of the unconscious. This unconscious is expressed in the imagined order of things in the world of the text. Imagination is not fixed but fluid. The unconscious desire for the new social and political order is very evident in the *Apocalypse*, but at the same time this unconscious desire does nothing to improve the status of women. The imaginary is ideological, and the ideology of gender types in the text is controlled by the sexual imagination of the male. The imagination that is operating in the text of the *Apocalypse* involves the image of the virginal male controlling (desiring/displacing/destroying) the female images. This is the case because of the hierarchal order implicit in the male imagination of the *Apocalypse*: first God and the Lamb, then the 144,000, after which come the good female images, followed by the evil female images, and lastly those males who are seduced by them. The desire of the true believer is to enter the heavenly city (the Bride), but there is erotic tension in this desire that involves a distancing from the female. On the one hand, entrance into the female (the Bride) is desirable. On the other hand, that entrance into the Bride exists only in the future, and it is possible only if the group of men desiring her remain sexually pure and undefiled by women!

Studies on women in traditional science fiction have shown how women are depicted as powerless in the future of the worlds imagined by males. The key is that the male remains the paradigm and subject of the future. One such study reports that women in science fiction function as sexual beings and "as appropriate rewards for the male protagonists who solve the problem. When a woman acts independently, she is evil; when she has power, it is intuitive or magical; when she has extraordinary abilities, they are the problem."²⁸ In the *Apocalypse*, in order for women to be legitimate they must be granted their magical powers from male figures, from God and the Lamb; women who act on their own are defying the male-defined gender roles for women. Hence, Jezebel and the Whore, both of whom act on their own power independent of God and of the Lamb, are destroyed. Indeed, the more telling point is that these autonomous females are used symbolically by the author of the *Apocalypse* as scapegoats for *all* the evil in society.

The female with power is both desired and feared. The unconscious (or conscious) desire for the powerful, autonomous female is very strong. At the same time, the threat of a female with power over men—power identified in the form of seduction—is feared, so feared that the reaction is violence against the female. All the females in the *Apocalypse* are erotic images with potentially erotic power over men. Hence, the male must make the female into an object, displace her, marginalize her, stereotype her, destroy her, and in the end make her completely absent. Nevertheless, the desire for the powerful female is so strong that it remains even after she is destroyed. In the *Apocalypse*, men displace women by not defiling themselves with women, yet the image of a desirable female is still implanted in their minds—because now they will enter the Bride! The desire here has been transferred from

the Whore to the Bride. Coming out of the Whore and entering the Bride is set up as a rite of *undefiled* men, yet the sexual fantasy about the Bride that remains is strong and alluring. The adorned Bride is an enchanting and erotic image that lures the 144,000 to the New Jerusalem.

There is another crucial point to be made before we look more closely at the contrasting images of the Heroine and the Whore in the *Apocalypse*. The dualistic, either/or nature of the political/religious stance in the *Apocalypse* is clear. It is either Satan or God, either Rome or the New Jerusalem. But here I want to extend this claim of dualism to the sexual images as well. The erotic, enchanting female brings either birth or death. The distinct female archetypes in the *Apocalypse* represent either birth God (rebirth in the New Jerusalem) or the way to Satan (death in the abyss).

The female images that lead to death seem to encompass many fears. Fantasy scholar Donald Palumbo makes an interesting point about the "connection between eroticism and death." In his view, our subconscious fears of the unknown (especially death) are made available to us in fantasy literature; that is, fantasy enables us to overcome death.⁹ In this regard, Palumbo believes that the concern of the fantastic with sexuality gives it "psychological appeal." He summarizes his findings: "And sexuality almost always appears as the symbolic vehicle of rebirth in the nearly ubiquitous death and resurrection motifs that suffuse great fantasy literature."¹⁰ Fear of imperialism, fear of famine, fear of disease, and fear of death itself are infused into the archetype of the seductive Whore whose erotic power over men is the most terrifying in a society that marginalizes and dis-empowers females. Females with autonomous power bring death. So, if we can overcome these females in fantasy, we can overcome our fears. Remove or completely destroy the females, and all is right with the world again.

By contrast, only those females who are connected with God, only those females adorned for the honeymoon or with wombs for use by God, that is, brides and mothers—women who have their identity by virtue of their subordination to men—are safe. These are women who are controlled by men and who do not exercise their powers on their own. Still, they too lure men, for they too are highly erotic images of desire. And the archetypes of bride and queen-mother are intended to be even more erotic, even more desirable and enchanting than the archetypes of prophetess and whore.

It is to these two contrasting images of females in the dualistic imagination of the *Apocalypse* that we now turn: the Heroine (the Woman Clothed with the Sun) and the Whore (the seductive prostitute representing Rome).

The Archetypal Heroine: The Woman Clothed with the Sun

Traditional interpretations of the Woman Clothed with the Sun in chapter 12 are so focused on the historical referent of this figure that she has almost lost her place as a

character in her own right in the story. Like the Bride and the Whore who represent cities, she has been seen as representing historical institutions, namely, Israel and the church. But what is her place in the story? And how does she compare with other female figures in the *Apocalypse*? Unlike the other female figures in the text, the Woman Clothed with the Sun has no name. Whereas the fate of the other female figures is explicitly stated, her fate is undetermined (although we assume she is safe). She is set against a formidable foe, the great red dragon, but with help (from God and the earth) she is able to escape. She is speechless, without dialogue of any kind, except for her cries of pain in childbirth. And her presence is diminished—rendered barely visible—by the battle between God (Michael) and Satan, which takes place in the middle of the account about her and which overshadows her importance in the text.

If readings of the Grimms' *Kinder-und Haus Marchen* and other folk and fairy tales are any indication, then readers will identify (especially if the readers are women) with the heroine in a story. Karen Rowe offers an explanation as to how heroine identification works: "subconsciously women may transfer from fairy tales into real life cultural norms which exalt passivity, dependency, and self-sacrifice as a female's cardinal virtues. In short, fairy tales perpetuate the patriarchal *status quo* by making female subordination seem a romantically desirable, indeed an inescapable fate."¹¹

The implication is that readers will transfer this mother-archetype in the *Apocalypse* to real life—whereby the female as a sexual being is affirmed only in the act of giving birth to a male child (to the messiah!). The woman in *Apocalypse* 12 is identified twice by her reproductive event: "And she gave birth to a son, a male child, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron" (12:5) and "the woman who had given birth to the male child" (12:13). In other words, the message is that females are productive when they are reproductive. The sexual affirmation of the Heroine in the birth process is in direct opposition to the orgy of the Whore and her followers, depicted later in the *Apocalypse*.¹² Pain in childbirth is set against the pleasure of orgasm.¹³ Sexual difference in the text points out the dialectic of desire; that is, the text plays with the erotic on both sides—desire for the good females and desire for the evil females—while at the same time reaffirming traditional stereotypes of the good woman who is obedient and long-suffering (emphasis on "long").

In chapter 12 the woman is connected with nature. She is "clothed with the sun," has "the moon under her feet," with a "crown of twelve stars on her head," and she flees "into the wilderness." Sun, moon, stars, and wilderness evoke the natural order, particularly heaven, but they also open the way to God. Adela Yarbro Collins finds parallels between this Queen of Heaven figure in *Apocalypse* 12 and the goddesses Artemis (Ephesus), Atargatis (Syria), and especially Isis (Egypt and Asia Minor). Sun, moon, and stars as part of the zodiac are also used in depictions of these goddesses. Collins states, "The astral attributes with which she is endowed seem to belong to the typical depiction of a high goddess."¹⁴ Another detail of

the goddess Isis that is shared by the woman in the *Apocalypse* is that the Woman Clothed with the Sun "was given two wings of the great eagle, so that she could fly" (12:14). Similarly, Isis is represented in the form of a swallow who has power in flight. This bird motif is a typical image of the goddess. In the *Apocalypse*, the magical wings enable the woman to escape danger by flying to the wilderness. The bird motif is a powerful symbol of a high goddess. However, this positive female figure in the *Apocalypse* is not allowed to be a powerful high goddess. The evil female figure of the Whore is high goddess for a while, but she is brought down by the male god. Here is another example in literature, like the grotesque destruction of the goddess Tiamat in the *Enuma Elish*, of the death of the goddess and her replacement by the male god as head.

The Heroine in this story does not get enough credit. She gives birth on her own to the messiah child, who is immediately "snatched away" from her by God and "taken up to God and his throne" (12:5). Meanwhile, the woman flees to the wilderness two times (in 2:6 and 14), and there she is left. She enacts a kind of "traveling heroism" that is evident in women characters of fantasy literature.¹⁵ She is an active heroine, except that she does not enact her own equality.¹⁶ She takes the initiative in fleeing to the wilderness, yet there she is taken care of by the male God (12:6, 13). The Woman Clothed with the Sun is a goddess subdued, tamed, and under control. After her reproductive activity is completed, she is no longer useful; and so she ends up in the wilderness. The traditional female values that customarily accompany the act of mothering—nurture and caretaking—are suppressed. Instead, the child is taken immediately to live in heaven, where traditional male values of competition and separation come to the fore. While the Heroine, Jezebel, and the Whore are all three hunted in the *Apocalypse*, only the Heroine escapes. Nevertheless, her escape banishes her from the center of power to the marginal space of the wilderness. The female is de-centered, even when she is held as an ideal woman.

The irony of the function of women in the *Apocalypse* is incredible. Why even portray the Woman Clothed with the Sun with the motifs of the goddess of heaven when she will end up so marginalized? If the woman in *Apocalypse* 12 is the producer of the one who will liberate the oppressed—the mother of the messiah—then why is she not herself liberated to play a powerful role in her own right? Instead she flees to the wilderness and remains there under the male god's protection—and we hear no more of her. In the *Apocalypse*, the Queen of Heaven is condemned to silence.

Silence has an interesting function for the females of the *Apocalypse*. The model of the silent woman is a model for many heroines in fantasy and folklore. According to Eugen Weber, "it is not surprising that in a lot of folktales [the idea of] enduring in silence is one of the most common tests a heroine (or even a hero) has to pass, often connected with torment by witches or by devils."¹⁷ Ruth Bottigheimer finds that the majority of folktales in *Grimms' Tales* condemn "women to silence during which they are often exposed to mortal danger,"¹⁸ which is part of what Bottigheimer refers

to as "textual silence and powerlessness."¹⁹ The Heroine of *Apocalypse* 12 "cried out in her pangs of birth." So, we hear her anguish but not her words. Instead of words, she is given wings, "the two wings of the great eagle" (12:13) to fly into the wilderness. Still, she does not speak; she endures in silence in the wilderness. The two brief scenes of power where she flees and then flies into the wilderness (12: 6, 14) are quickly joined with scenes of dependency on the power of God as the ultimate protection, as the one who will take care of her, who will "nourish her" in the desert. She is a goddess with her own power, but she needs a male god to rescue her and to keep her power under control.

The textual/sexual strategies at work in the motif of the silent female are dangerous to women's consciousness. Female voice and values are suppressed. Marcia Landy summarizes the problem:

for the most part women have concurred, have accepted the male images [of them] as their own or have created accommodations satisfactory to them [men] within the given power structure—a Virgin Queen, an Amazon, a Wielder of Power over Children and Lovesick Men—or women have agreed to see themselves as witches, demons, and deceivers. The consequences of straying from legitimized social norms were obviously too costly to entertain—deprivation of God, of man, of sociability, of economic sustenance, of biological needs.²⁰

Political, economic, and religious structures are subverted in the *Apocalypse*, but women's roles and functions remain the same. The cost of straying from the traditional gender roles was apparently too great. So, women remain objects. Like the Heroine, they are to remain silent. They do not become subjects in their own right by being given speech, their own voice. The only woman who "speaks" in the *Apocalypse* is "Jezebel," and she is vicious not virtuous—and will be suppressed. The whore of Babylon is given words, but they are unspoken words that she harbors in her heart (18:7). The archtyping of the female and her narrative silence relay a powerful message to the reader/hearer of the text: all women are to remain silent, but not even all silent women are "good."

The Archetypal Prostitute: The Whore of Babylon

The Whore of Babylon is made to symbolize all the evil of the Roman Empire and, in particular, the city of Rome, with all its social, political, economic, and religious dynamics of oppression. Yet the focus of my concern here is not with what the image symbolized. Rather, I am concerned with the way in which this image of a prostitute is portrayed and used as a female symbol.

The harlot is characterized in different ways in the Hebrew tradition. In the Hebrew Bible, for example, the harlot is sometimes characterized as a heroine. Here

we could point to Tamar (*Genesis* 38) and Rahab (*Joshua* 2 and 6). On the other hand, the loose woman of the *Book of Proverbs* is depicted as a deceiver and a forger. Clearly, the Whore of the *Apocalypse* is no heroine. The name on her forehead (a sign of slavery) is Babylon, and she is the "mother of harlots and of earth's abominations" (17:5). She is the ultimate deceiver and "loose woman." The Whore is seductive; she is adorned in fine clothes and jewels and sits upon a scarlet beast. And when one looks closer, the golden cup is full of the evil of her sexual acts—her fornications—with the kings of the earth. Furthermore, as a result of her oppressions and persecutions, she is "drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the witnesses of Jesus" (18:6). The whole depiction of the Whore is extremely grotesque; she is a huge, exaggerated presence who is "seated on many waters" (17:1). As in chapter 12, the setting for this vision of a female is the wilderness, but in this scene, instead of being protected by God, the female ends up being brutally murdered.

This female figure has power. The thoughts of the Whore about her power are revealed to the reader: "in her heart she says, 'I rule as a queen; I am no widow, and I will never see grief'" (18:7). The belief in and expression of the powers of women are remnants of ancient beliefs in the Mother Goddess. Bottigheimer comments, "the female's original access to power through her association with nature became perverted and denied, so that more recent versions of fairy tales (e.g., the Grimms) relegate power held by females to the old, the ugly, and/or the wicked."²¹ In the *Apocalypse*, the female is seductive and she has power—and she will not be tolerated. The Whore declares herself (to herself) to be a queen, and because of her egoism she will be judged and destroyed.

The destruction of the Whore in the scenes that follow is violent and total. She is hated, stripped naked, and burned up. All this is told in language that is graphic and repeated. The whole visionary scenario of the Whore of Babylon from beginning to end—from the depiction of her enthronement on the beast to her utter demise—is grotesque and larger than life. This fantastic scene, played on such a grand scale, plays out as a "parody" of the social, political, economic, and religious system of the Roman Empire.

The dialogical model of Mikhail Bakhtin is useful in reading this fantastic "parody." As Rosemary Jackson summarizes: "Unlike the marvelous or the mimetic, the fantastic is a mode of writing which enters a *dialogue with the 'real' and incorporates that dialogue as part of its essential structure*. To return to Bakhtin's phrase, fantasy is 'dialogical,' interrogating single or unitary ways of seeing."²² Bakhtin's formalist ties show that language is subversive. Through the fantasy language of parody, the dominant ideology is "interrogated" and challenged. By parody, Bakhtin means, "the creation of a *de-crowning double*; it is that same 'world turned inside out.' . . . It was like an entire system of crooked mirrors, elongating, diminishing, distorting in various directions and to various degrees."²³ Bakhtin finds parody in the New Testament

(*Gospels*, *Acts*, and *Apocalypse*) but notes that the "dialogic element" of satire there is expressed in a relationship of opposites (good and evil) and is thereby managed.²⁴

Parody primarily is located in the genre of the carnivalesque, where it is not "managed." In medieval carnivals, there were elaborate public rituals by people in masks and costumes in which "the powers that be" were paraded, parodied, ridiculed, and destroyed in mock festivals and plays with great exaggeration and hilarity. Similarly, in the scene of the enthronement and destruction of the Whore of Babylon, indeed in the *Apocalypse* as a whole, there are clearly carnivalesque features. The carnival is used in folklore to express a "serio-comical" approach to the world.²⁵ Bakhtin reveals three main characteristics of the genre of the serio-comical: (1) the time of the narrative is the present reality; (2) the narrative is based on history and not legend, relying on "experience . . . and on free invention"; (3) the narrative has multiple levels, or in Bakhtin's words:

Characteristic of these genres are a multi-tone narration, the mixing of high and low, serious and comic; they make wide use of inserted genres—letters, found manuscripts, retold dialogues, parodies on the high genres, parodically reinterpreted citations; in some of them we observe a mixing of prosaic and poetic speech, living dialects and jargons . . . are introduced, and various authorial masks make their appearance. . . . And what happens here, as a result, is a radically new relationship to the word as the material of literature.²⁶

This "carnival sense of the world" as both comic and serious is found in Christian narrative. Bakhtin gives the example of the ridicule and hilarity that accompanied "the scene of crowning and decrowning" of Jesus as King of the Jews in the Gospel narratives.²⁷ The scene of the fall of Babylon in the *Apocalypse* is also directly carnivalesque. The Whore who is all adorned on the scarlet beast and who considers herself to be a queen is dethroned. The narrator tells us of the erotic image of the Whore as queen: "When I saw her, I was greatly amazed" (17:6). In medieval times, such a mock coronation/de-coronation scene was a ritual event that was performed in the public square and streets as a communal ritual.²⁸ Bakhtin describes the significance of this ritual:

Carnival is the festival of all-annihilating and all-renewing time. This is not an abstract thought but a living sense of the world, expressed in concretely sensuous forms (either expressed or play-acted) of the ritual act. Crowning/decrowning is a dualistic ambivalent ritual, expressing the inevitability and at the same time the creative power of the shift-and-renewal, the *joyful relativity* of all structure and order, of all authority and all (hierarchical) position. . . . Birth is fraught with death, and death with new birth.²⁹

Through the carnival of the *Apocalypse*, the masquerading queen is stripped of her power. The dominant ideology of power and oppression is overthrown in the carnival ritual. The mixture of poetry and prose provides a powerful sense of the eccentricity of the Whore and the shift of the structures of authority.

In the *Apocalypse*, the horror of the carnival death of the Whore is expressed in vivid terms: "And the ten horns that you saw, they and the beast will hate the whore; they will make her desolate and naked; they will devour her flesh and burn her up with fire" (17:16). In this scene, the erotic tension is heightened. The Whore is literally stripped "naked" of her fine garments and jewels. Nakedness equals helplessness. The people at the carnival "devour her flesh" (17:16). And the violent feast image is repeated in chapter 19, when the birds of mid-heaven are called to "Come, gather for the great supper of God, to eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of the mighty, the flesh of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all, both free and slave, both small and great" (vv. 17-18) "and all the birds were gorged with their flesh" (v. 21). These two grotesque depictions of a feast frame the marriage supper of the Lamb in 19:9. The menu of the marriage supper is not given.

Furthermore, the Whore is "burned up with fire." Bakhtin finds the image of fire ambivalent in carnival: "It is a fire that simultaneously destroys and renews the world" (126). Three times the burning of the Whore is mentioned (17:16; 18:8, 9), and once it says that she will burn forever (19:3). And three times it is mentioned that the destruction occurs in one hour (18:10, 17, 19). Like the dragon goddess Tiamat in the *Enuma Elish*, the Whore is disembodied. The erotic tension here points to the ultimate misogynist fantasy. All of the world's hatred of oppression is heaped on the Whore. With such violence, "Babylon the great city will be thrown down, and will be found no more" (18:21).

Everything is turned inside out in this carnival: the Whore is "drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the witnesses of Jesus" (17:6 and 18:24), the nations are drunk from fornicating with the Whore, the nations in turn feast on the Whore's desolate body (and in the process lose all their delicacies), and, finally, the birds of heaven feast on the nations.³⁰

The utter destruction of the Whore leads to resurrection and renewal. With the death of the Whore, the Bride "has made herself ready" (19:7) and "to her it has been granted to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure—for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints" (19:8). This rebirth after the death of the Whore is a sexual rebirth, or at least a rebirth in sexual imagery (the marriage feast). The witch is burned (the hunting of the Whore is a form of witch hunt), and the heroine image is finally free.

The Whore is totally seductive. The Whore seeks to dominate totally. In *Apocalypse* 18:4, a voice from heaven says, "Come out of her, my people, so that you do not take part in her sins, and so that you do not share in her plagues." The erotic power of the Whore is all-encompassing, for the people cannot stay within her sphere of

influence without being consumed by her. So they are asked to "come out of her." Then in 22:17, the word "come" is repeated to the believers: "The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come.' And let everyone who hears say, 'Come.' And let anyone who is thirsty come, let anyone who desires take the water of life as a gift." The believers who come out of the Whore are able in the end to enter the New Jerusalem, to "come" into the Bride.

Richard Kearney explains Derrida's comment on the significance of the word "come":

"Come" is a paradigmatic figure of postmodern apocalypse because it deconstructs every conceptual or linguistic attempt to *decide* what it means. It hails from an altogether *other* world. And what it puts into play is an apocalypse *without* apocalypse—since we cannot say or know or imagine what the 'truth' of apocalypse means. Derrida thus confronts us with the word of an apocalyptic writing which can only be grasped, if at all, as an *ending without end*. . . . What is to come is, apparently, beyond the powers of imagination to imagine.³¹

The deconstructive play of apocalypse leaves the text open-ended and (temporally) shifts the object of desire from the Whore to the Bride. The narrative itself is seductive, drawing the reader to the "ending without end"—the open spaces of the fantastic vision.

The Apocalypse in American Culture

Over the past ten years, I have received interesting responses from students at other colleges who are reading something I have written on the *Apocalypse*. At one liberal arts college in the South, students in a course on the *Apocalypse* have called me on speakerphone a few times. They prepare their questions in advance, and they generally have really insightful comments, even if they think I am totally wrong in my reading of the text. But a general perception accompanies many of these student responses—that I must be a radical, feminist, lesbian separatist. For these students, a feminist reading that deconstructs and challenges a biblical text must reflect directly on the lifestyle and politics of the author. And these politics must (in their more conservative Christian minds) in turn be immoral and unpatriotic politics. It is almost as if their interpretation is based on an unwritten "Patriot Act for Reading the *Apocalypse*," with the U.S. Department of Homeland Security setting interpretive guidelines. In their view, the authoritative borders of the biblical text must be protected against exegetical terrorists such as me, and the sacred plan of the canon must be allowed to proceed on course.

I am especially intrigued by their labeling of me as a "separatist." If one objects to the violence in the *Apocalypse*, and especially to the gendered nature of the vio-

lence against women, one must have "separated" from the norm of upholding the authority and God-giveness of this final biblical text. And, for them, allegiance to this textual authority of the Bible somehow gets combined with national loyalty. To separate from a certain view of the Bible is, in their minds, to be anti-American. This attitude demonstrates to me that the *Apocalypse* helps to hold in place in America what I consider to be injustices and myths. For example, the *Apocalypse* supports the injustice of a dualistic perspective that divides the world into the saved and the damned—thereby making it acceptable to exert violence against the damned and to accept losses from among the saved as martyrs for the faith.

The chief example of a "patriotic" reading of the *Apocalypse* is the Left Behind series of novels about the tribulation period. In these novels, the Tribulation Force battles (with God's help) the Antichrist dictator of the one world order. Even though America is not the location of the future kingdom, American citizens who have been "left behind" convert to dispensationalist Christianity and then prepare for and lead the charge at Armageddon. The authors of this series, Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, are only the current popular purveyors of the myth of American superiority and the belief that God is ultimately "on our side."

Such end-time fantasies about world politics are always accompanied by traditional gender roles of male domination and female subordination. Although the Christian women in the Left Behind series have some leadership roles in the underground community, they follow strict heterosexual norms of relationships and family life. In the view of the (male) authors, the thousand-year reign of Jesus will be a heterotopia, in which "American" Christian values (except for democratic government and human rights!) are transferred to the Holy City. In this scenario, the Woman Clothed with the Sun and the Bride are the acceptable female, apocalyptic role models. Regarding their image of the New Jerusalem vision, God the Father rules from the throne with his Son, setting up an urban heaven on earth. But in a literal reading of the biblical text, there is no mention of women, only the 144,000 holy men. In the Left Behind series, women are added into this premillennialist vision like some *Dr. Strangelove* fantasy of ten women for every man, all of them hiding and procreating in the underground shelter after the nuclear holocaust.

Conclusion: Resisting a Violent, Male Future

Gender is always part of the equation in apocalyptic texts. The utopian political fantasy as a liberating, cathartic, revolutionary, symbolic experience is directly related to communal human experience. Liberation readings of texts have always warned against such emphasis on the general (in this case, the cosmic), because oppression and marginalization are always specific, always personal. The only female figures in the *Apocalypse* are given symbolic names and symbolic tasks; they

are not allowed to speak their own identity. This technique distances the reader from the female images, leaving the women as stereotypes of good and evil and not real flesh-and-blood women. At the same time, the *Apocalypse* is a symbolic universe that is a parody of flesh-and-blood reality. Therefore, there is a relationship between the fantastic world of the *Apocalypse* and reality. And the female images are indeed a part of the larger paradigm of the final scenes of the *Apocalypse* that depict the liberation of the oppressed.

Yet, as I have argued, it is misleading and distorting to say that women are liberated in the end along with everyone else. On the one hand, in the Christian utopia of the *Apocalypse*, the broad political expectations of power and authority are reversed, such that the beasts are defeated and the Lamb rules. But, on the other hand, the reversal of these political expectations is reserved for men. And in terms of gender expectations of power and authority, women are left exactly where they were in ancient patriarchal society—excluded from the realm of power. The utopia (no place) for men is an atopia (not a place) for women. The marriage of the Bride and the Lamb brings hope (brings utopia), but this image is not an inclusive model for women. Women have historically been excluded from many areas of culture, but here they have even been excluded from the New Jerusalem! In the world of the *Apocalypse*, what happens to the female believers other than being subsumed under this image of the Bride? Here the text is silent.

In their anthropological study of female roles in culture, Judith Hoch-Smith and Anita Spring summarize the mythical representation of the female images: "The idea of female evil is transformed into specific cultural expression through *the manifestation of that culture's ideological content in art*. Female sexuality is seen as a disruptive, chaotic force that must be controlled or coopted by men, periodically purified, and at times destroyed."³² The ideological portrayal of the female in the *Apocalypse* remains true to the dominant ideology of its culture. So when women read the narrative (especially contemporary women readers), their experience is similar to the experience described by Jonathan Culler: "When we posit a woman reader, the result is an analogous appeal to experience: not to the experience of girl-watching but to the experience of being watched, seen as a 'girl,' restricted, marginalized."³³ Likewise, women readers of the *Apocalypse* are typed, hunted, adorned, and rejected. The domination of male over female remains intact.

Fredric Jameson is correct about the class struggle in history when he points to the relationship of utopia and ideology: "ideological commitment is not first and foremost a matter of moral choice but of the taking of sides in a struggle between embattled groups . . . [and] must always necessarily be focused on the class enemy."³⁴ But while he is correct on the level of class conflict, Jameson's analysis falls short on the level of gender difference and conflict. Ideology is not just class-based; it is also gender-based and gender-biased. The *Apocalypse* focuses on the enemy in terms of class (Rome) but neglects the oppressed/oppressor categories of gender relations.

And, as we have seen, the class enemy is even imaged as female (the Whore). In the political realm, women are defeated or banished to the wilderness; only the submissive, sexual Bride is allowed at the utopian wedding feast of the Lamb. The image and the function of the female end up being quite ambiguous: the erotic desire at the end of the narrative may be intact with the symbol of the Bride, but the men who enter her must be ritually pure, and the female figures with any sexual autonomy (the Jezebel, the Whore, and the Heroine share this feature) are destroyed or pushed out to the edge of the narrative world.

If the writer of the *Apocalypse* is treated to the same gender critique as writers like Paul, Chaucer, and Rabelais, there will probably emerge defenders on both sides. There will be those who defend the writer "John" as "a man of his era," in which women were debased and powerless. And there will be those who accuse and dismiss the writer as continuing and reinforcing a sexist ideology that is harmful to women. A feminist reading can seek to be redemptive by focusing on the positive remnants of the goddess reflected in the winged flight of the Heroine and by grieving the murder of the Whore. Or a feminist reading can hope with Roland Barthes that the future will involve a destruction of the past "in which the potent seed of the future is *nothing* but the most profound apocalypse of the present."¹⁵ The destruction of the past means the destruction of *all* the forces of oppression!

The Christian *Apocalypse of John* is limited in its destruction of the forces of oppression. The irony of the grotesque burning of the Whore is that the Christian utopia is itself an oppressive world (for women). In other words, for women there is no escaping oppression (except perhaps to flee to the wilderness!). Historically, by the fourth century, the church merges with the Roman state. And there Christian women seek autonomy in the monastery (in the wilderness) in a sexually exclusive environment. But in the *Apocalypse*, narrative gender oppression is left untouched by the sword of God.

The tale of the Heroine and the Whore is not a tale of the liberation of female consciousness. The *Apocalypse* is not a tale for women. The misogyny that underlies this narrative is extreme. As a result, women of the past as well as the present are going to have to be about the business of creating their own apocalyptic tales, their own utopian narratives.

Notes

1. This is a revised version of an article that first appeared in *Semeia* 60 (1992): 67-82. The article was adapted from Tina Pippin, *Death and Desire: The Rhetoric of Gender in the Apocalypse of John* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992).
2. Robert Scholes, "A Footnote to Russ's 'Recent Feminist Utopias,'" 87.
3. Adela Yarbro Collins, "Women's History and the Book of Revelation," 90.
4. Gayatri Spivak, "Displacement and the Discourse of Woman," 185.
5. Lance Olson, *Ellipse of Uncertainty: An Introduction to Postmodern Fantasy*, 19.
6. *Ibid.*, 22.

7. Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, 4.
8. V. Allen and T. Paul, "Science and Fiction: Ways of Theorizing about Women," 171.
9. Donald Palumbo, "Sexuality and the Allure of the Fantastic in Literature," 4.
10. *Ibid.*, 23.
11. Karen E. Rowe, "Feminism and Fairy Tales," 237.
12. Judith Hoch-Smith and Anita Spring provide a brief summary of "chaotic female sexual-divine are usually male" (*Women in Ritual and Symbolic Roles*, 2).
13. See Spivak on Derrida on orgasm as crime: Spivak, "Displacement," 175.
14. Adela Yarbro Collins, *The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation*, 75.
15. Sarah Lefanu, *Feminism and Science Fiction*, ch. 3.
16. Marie Maclean, "Oppositional Practices in Women's Traditional Practices," 45.
17. Weber, "Fairies and Hard Facts: The Reality of Folktales," 110.
18. Ruth Bottigheimer, *Grimms' Bad Girls and Bold Boys: The Moral and Social Vision of the Tales*, 71.
19. Bottigheimer (*Grimms' Bad Girls*, 53) adds, "In *Grimms' Tales*, however, silence is almost exclusively female; enforced silence exists for both heroines and heroes as a precondition for redeeming oneself or others; and it also exists as a punishment for heroines (but not heroes) and as a narrative necessity for heroines (but not heroes), as in 'The Robber-Bridegroom' (74-75)." She also points to the Christian prohibition against female speech in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 (78). In another article Bottigheimer states that "one must conclude that fairy tales offered an apparently innocent and peculiarly suitable medium for both transmitting and enforcing the form of the silent woman serving as paradigms for powerlessness" ("Silenced Women in the Grimms' Tales," 130).
20. Marcia Landy, "The Silent Woman: Towards a Feminist Critique," 27.
21. Bottigheimer, "The Transformed Queen: A Search for the Origins of Negative Female Archetypes in Grimms' Fairy Tales," 12.
22. Jackson, *Fantasy*, 36.
23. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 127.
24. *Ibid.*, 135.
25. *Ibid.*, 108.
26. *Ibid.*, 108.
27. *Ibid.*, 135.
28. *Ibid.*, 128.
29. *Ibid.*, 124-25.
30. The juxtaposition of the feast on the Whore and the marriage feast of the lamb is described by Michael Harris, "Singing a New Song: The Literary Function of the Hymns in the Apocalypse of John."
31. Richard Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination toward a Postmodern Culture*, 294-95.
32. Smith and Spring, *Women in Ritual and Symbolic Roles*, 3; emphasis mine.
33. Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*, 44.
34. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, 290. Jameson makes an interesting point about the semiological arrangement of the folktale: "the crucial moment for the folk tale is not that of the *parole*, but that of the *langue*. It is always anonymous or collective in essence" (*The Prison-House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism*, 29).
35. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, 157.