

Post-modern Sainthood: ‘Hearing the voice of the saint’ and the uses of feminist hagiography

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Why only one song, one speech, one text at a time?

Luce Irigaray

Sainthood and Post-Modernity

This paper suggests that sainthood in contemporary times is a contested site, which produces contradiction and friction, throwing into question traditional understandings of what it means to be a spiritual or holy person. While there are complex historical and social forces that account for such change, I will argue that the emergence of post-modernity as a mode of cultural analysis lifts the lid on the traditional avenues through which saints are made for public consumption, offering fresh readings of holy figures and heroic deeds. I will further argue that feminist accounts of subjectivity re-write the possibilities of both holiness and authentic self knowing, radically releasing the saint from the confines of her traditional patriarchal place.

In a post-traditional, secularized world, traditional forms of sainthood can easily appear as eccentric and peculiar, given their origin in pre-modern modes of religious belief and institutions, with antiquated practices that glorify wounded bodies and reify strange spiritualities. Indeed, traditional sainthood might also be considered particularly dangerous territory for women because such accounts of women saints tend to produce a characterization of an idealized womanhood that equates femininity with self denial, sacrifice, disembodiment, patience and humility (Joy 1994: 117-118). These archaic virtues are highly problematic for contemporary women, and are out of step with more feminist-inspired values of self understanding and fulfillment.¹ When women saints did engage in the more irregular spiritual practices, particularly practices of self-inflicted bodily violence, they were most often subject to harsh forms of control via their families and clerics (see for example Sara Maitland's account of Rosa of Lima, 1990: 60-70).

Re-visiting and re-reading the lives of women saints using insights from post-modern and feminist theory could contribute to the project of a 'feminist religious imaginary', which philosopher Luce Irigaray proposes as a site where a new ethics of sexual difference can be constructed. This paper is a reflection on 'how to' go about re-reading the lives of women saints, and considers the life of one saint in particular: Mary MacKillop. To begin with I examine two readings of 'postmodern' sainthood, locating sainthood in a different theoretical terrain from traditional hagiography. The first reading is derived from Edith Wyschogrod's thesis on sainthood as radical generosity, and the second derived from

Derrida's notion of hospitality. Both engage the idea that a new ethics for the post-modern requires a re-positioning of our understanding of relations between Self and Other. A post-modern reading situates sainthood as text, as narrative, and as mode of production and therefore as de-constructible.

Religion and Post-modernity

The philosopher Edith Wyschogrod (1990: xiv), argues that modernity and its discourses will not "allow saints to breathe", so sainthood is best understood through a post-modern lens which allows contradiction and paradox to sit side by side. The techniques of post-modernism make religiosity visible as a serious cultural phenomenon, as opposed to the marginalized institutional location in modernity. Unlike modernity, post-modernity does not "disdain the artifacts and conditions of the New Age" (Wyschogrod 1990: xiv); is able to recognize processes of de-secularisation, post-traditionalism, and cultural re-enchantment; (post-modernity) destabilises the super story or meta narrative as the foundation of knowledge; encourages the queering of gender boundaries; and embraces alternative, marginal and new forms of religiosity (Wyschogrod: xxiii).

The sociologist David Lyons (2000:33) argues that we might see religion as a "cultural resource" rather than a "failing feature of a bygone era" where we can document the "ways in which it (religion) is expressed, utilized and forged...". He also suggests that post-

modernity need not necessarily signal ‘after’ modernity, but rather, a radical destabilizing of the central discourses of modernityⁱⁱ:

... postmodernity is a condition in which certain aspects of modernity are inflated to the extent that the old modernity is hard to recognize, then at those points, new opportunities may open themselves for religious activity (2000:33).

At the very least, a post-modern condition opens up discursive spaces and possibilities for religious experience, and one can see the potential for transgressive and alternative readings of sainthood and holiness that challenge the more traditional articulations of such phenomena.

Sainthood as Radical Generosity

Post-modernity is concerned with describing a new ethics, centred largely on right relations between Self and Other. In this regard, Edith Wyschogrod suggests that sainthood matters because the nature of the saintly character provides an important avenue of inquiry into ethical and moral philosophy. Wyschogrod argues that in modernity, the discourse of moral philosophy – which once may have provided a value system for moral action – no longer has the ability to direct the relationship between moral thought and ethical action. This is

most visible in the 20th century which has produced more conflict and violence and resulted in more violent deaths, than any other time period in human history. Moral theory is in crisis, and unable to produce ethical modes of action and being that can respond in kind to these levels of unprecedented violence. Wyschogrod turns to the phenomenon of sainthood as a way of revisioning moral theory and re-connecting ethical ideas and action. The central moral pull of sainthood is that it is based on a notion of radical generosity where “... traditionally saintliness has been closely associated with the dissolution of self-interest”. Saints have been people who “put themselves totally at the disposal of the other” (1990: xiv) and are able to embrace the alterity or *difference* of the other so “a saintly life is defined as one in which compassion for the other, irrespective of cost to the saint, is the primary trait” (Wyschogrod 1990: xxiii).

In this definition, sainthood is not limited to those individuals nominated by formal institutional processes, or connected to particular religious traditions, but to a wider phenomenon where a person is able to recognize the ‘other’ not as monstrous or devalued, but as profoundly human. Wyschogrod (2000: xxiv) terms this trait *radical saintly generosity*. Such a generosity:

...posits that there is no requirement or expectation of reciprocity in saintly action. It can be understood as post-modern desire ... an expression of

excessive desire, a desire on behalf of the Other that seeks the cessation of another's suffering and the birth of another's joy.

Sainthood could also be characterized by modes of disruption: saints disrupt the habits of institutions, exposing self-interest, greed and mediocrity; they disrupt gender patterns in the sense that the abnegation of their self is an act designed to allow them 'to speak with the voice of the Other' creating a non-gendered body (Wyschogrod 1990: xxiv); saints disrupt traditional practices of sexual desire and embodiment through their often extreme forms of bodily asceticism, premised on excess and pain yet which produces spiritual insight and communication with god. In Christian traditions, saints live their lives in imitation of Christ's life (*Imitatio Christi*) where conduct such as self-mortification and voluntary poverty is often at complete odds with more culturally acceptable behaviour (Wyschogrod 1990: 13).

Sainthood and hospitality

Wyschogrod already mentions that radical saintly generosity is premised on the desire to give without receiving. In his analysis of hospitality, Derrida (2002) suggests that the traditions of hospitality, of welcoming a guest into one's home, of caring for this guest, who may be completely unknown, offering food and refreshment to the guest, raises the possibility of care of the Other in radical ways. There are many different cultural traditions

of hospitality and there are also different forms of being hospitable. Hospitality can act as a motif for thinking about the relations between Self and Other, indeed as a metaphor for culture itself:

Not only is there a culture of hospitality, but there is no culture that is not also a culture of hospitality. All cultures compete in this regard and present themselves as more hospitable than the others. Hospitality – this is culture itself. (Derrida 2002: 361)

But it is also the case that if hospitality is intrinsic to culture, then there is always the possibility of being overtaken, of being caught unawares, of not being ready to welcome another, of being violated and stolen because one is not ready to receive. So for Derrida the radical possibilities of hospitality to the Other lies not in the moment of being ready to receive or of opening one's house to a stranger, but in the opposite, of welcoming the totally unexpected, especially the uninvited visitor, 'the absolutely unforeseeable stranger':

If I welcome only what I welcome, what I am ready to welcome, and that I recognize in advance because I expect the coming of the hôte as invited, there is no hospitality (2002: 361).

Hospitality is about receiving the guest that I am unable to receive, about the possibility of the unwelcome stranger (2002: 364). And here is where saintliness can be an exemplar of hospitality, not only in the sense that the saint welcomes the most marginalized and despised but that the desires of God may also be unwelcome and impossible. Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son; practices of excessive bodily asceticism; the giving up of one's life so the Other may live – all can be examples of hospitality. The arrival of an uninvited newcomer, Derrida says, is the real and best source of knowledge because it compels us to ask what's happening.

For women, Derrida's concept of hospitality may offer a possibility of selfhood in the sense that the specific work involved in 'becoming' divine requires women to search for an authentic self, one that is truly apart from the constructed self offered by patriarchy. Irigaray (1993) argues that in order for women to achieve divinity, a relationship with the Other needs to be established: but not necessarily another person. The Other is constituted by those rejected, despised, unknown and forgotten dimensions of women's selfhood with which she has never been in relationship. Hence the primary feat for women is that of reclaiming other-ness within (Joy 1994:127). This is a pathway to divinity for women, where to know God is to explore the multitudes of possibilities and "the realisation of our unrestricted potentialities, the fullness and perfection of all our capacities" (Joy, 1994:127). Hence, hospitality might involve a welcoming of an inner self, one that is deeply hidden and possibly deeply despised. Such an analysis invites us to pay close attention to the inner

lives of women saints, as pathways to Self and God, as expressions of radical generosity and hospitality.

Relating these concepts to feminist accounts or hagiographies of women saints helps produce a shift in thinking and seeing both Self and Other, as well as the space between or the intersubjective realms. In particular, feminist hagiographies can produce heteroglossic texts in the sense that they aim to excavate and identify the presence of multiple voices in saintly stories and in particular, the voice and body of the saint herself, distinct from her (male) biographers' interpretation and principal voice (see for example, Ashton 2000; Jantzen 1995; Maitland 1990). I turn now to consider some of the techniques that feminist hagiographers use in order to make audible the authentic voice of the saint and her insights into the conditions of women's subjectivity and the nature of divinity.

Hagiography and the production of Sainthood

The argument to date is that saints may have special and particular gifts to offer a world in moral crisis, and the lives of women saints in particular might provide moments of insight into radical forms of feminine subjectivity and ethics. There are two questions here. The first is how does one recognize or 'hear' a saintly voice and life in post-traditional, post-modern society; how should this voice be understood? And second, in what ways can texts

about saintly women be read against the grain, against the masculinist discourse in which they are produced?

Of importance here is the genre of hagiography, or the life stories of the saints, which play a pre-eminent role in the production of the saint. As a genre, hagiography can be defined as narratives that contain compelling material about a life that is holy, where the reader is encouraged to enter into a textual process that interprets a life linked together by certain spiritual events and moral outcomes. It is a very particular kind of life story-telling and for particular audiences and communities. Hagiographies use certain narrative techniques including the representation of the person as 'different' - often from an early age; often in conflict with religious institutions; and whose behaviour is marked by selflessness and a generous concern for the most despised and marginal other (Wyschogrod 1990: 10)ⁱⁱⁱ.

The basic narrative material of hagiography include written texts such as diaries, heroic stories, sites of pilgrimage, tales of wounded bodies, divine visions, prayer, miracles, and so on. Traditionally, female saints have been 'produced' for the community by male clerics who interpret the 'voice' of the saint and produce a saintly life in very particular discursive conditions. However, feminist hagiographers argue that the written text produced by the male hagiographer about the life of a female saint has played an over-determined role in the production of women saints. Feminist hagiographers writing today have thus had a dual function: to 'unravel' the hagiography produced by the male cleric, and to re-interpret the

life of the saint with regard to her authentic voice and body. Feminist hagiography constitutes an example of heteroglossia because it is committed to not only hearing the multiple voices in a text, but to examining all the ways in which the saint might be communicating spiritual truths and divine experience, some of which may be located in a written text and some which may be outside the normal conventions of hagiography, even the normal conventions of narrative. Indeed, Gail Ashton (2002: 4-5) argues that feminist hagiographies are:

...inherently fissured and unstable texts because of conflicting textual requirements.

That is, that a dual identity must be established by the male hagiographer: that of saint *and* ideal woman which results in such texts being marked by hesitation, ambiguity and suppression.

In addition there is a double discourse operating: that of the dominant masculine voice and the Other, the suppressed feminine voice. She may be silent – her voice censored - but she exerts pressure on the dominant text and shapes the discourse.

French feminism would also insist on this double discourse, particularly in theorizing language (see Jantzen 1998: 41-43). Because so much of the saint's life is bounded and produced by texts, understanding the function of language is vital. Language has an enculturating function, providing an entry into cultural codes and modes of being. The

problem for women is that language is dominated by masculine desire and will, so that a young girl's entry into language and culture is premised on the loss of the feminine. This is Lacan's Law of the Father which gives women no real place in culture – our only option is entry to culture as pseudo men. 'Woman' is a representation premised on the loss of authentic self. However, as Ashton argues, there are moments and textual inconsistencies which reveal at least the possibility of a feminine subject - the saint's voice has not been totally repressed: it is partially present, but hidden. So for Ashton, a primary function of feminist hagiography involves searching for tools that can excavate 'woman' as a speaking subject, rather than as object/reflection of male desire.

Feminist Hagiography: excavating the speaking subject

Write yourself. Your body must be heard..Censor the body and you censor breath and
speech at the same time.

Hélène Cixous

Although feminist hagiography has been most active in discussing medieval women saints, the insights of such analysis are very relevant to a discussion of contemporary sainthood. A good example is Australia's only canonized saint: Mary MacKillop. Mary MacKillop's official hagiography was written by a Jesuit priest (Paul Gardiner), and constituted a central part of the formal documentation required for canonization in the Catholic Church.^{iv} In this

regard it is a principal hagiography, and in approaching this text it is necessary to unravel which voices belong to whom, and in particular to determine how the hagiographer speaks 'for' the saint. Ashton (2000: 159) argues that at first glance a hagiography appears to be hermetically sealed:

Her identity is solely saintly. She appears totally appropriated by him, her transgressive behaviour diluted and reinscribed. He allocates her words and disseminates her fragmented life. Holiness closes her lips through the very act of writing: she surrenders her flesh and sacrifices her self. The biographer also speaks as a man, and consequently, it is masculine experience which is privileged as superior. Her body is a text marked by him..A n ideal of womanhood is promulgated emphasizing meekness, mildness, patience. His subject is merely man's other, receptacle of faith and masculine authority and thus she is sealed within the tower of his text just as she is in life.

Here are two excerpts from Gardiner's biography which demonstrate Ashton's points. Both refer to Mary in 'hagiographic' terms:

Mary was a sufferer, but not a sad sufferer, and she was certainly not a confused sufferer. She was always serene..there was never anything morbid about her

thinking, and she never got into any psychological tangles by saying she was glad when things went wrong. (Gardiner 1998: 67)

When three nuns who had been postulants in 1869 were questioned in 1926 about Mary MacKillop, it was her kindness that emerged as their most vivid memory of her. She was thoughtful about the needs and feelings of others, gentle and humble when she had to admonish anybody, and full of respect, compassion, and love towards everybody. As well as this kindness, they spoke of her inner peace and her trust in divine providence. (Gardiner 1998:70)

Ashton (2000:158) draws on the French feminists and suggests that we search for ‘fissures’ in the text – “to open up what is unsaid, to multiply and compound perspective, to reveal shadows, echoes, hidden space”. If fissures are openings which reveal more than one voice, then we can see in the text above that there are already five distinct voices: the hagiographer, Mary herself and the three postulants. We can hear the voice of the hagiographer speaking for the saint and we can hear that this voice comes from ‘the heart of patriarchal power structures, defining her as an idealized woman and saint’ (Ashton 2000: 2). Hélène Cixous calls this “marked writing” a writing run by a typically masculine economy. This writing, Cixous argues, conforms to a masculine tradition, that which affirms sexual opposition rather than *difference* and within this economy ‘woman never has her turn to speak’ (in Ashton 2000: 5). Irigaray calls such an economy a practice of mimesis

as everything is reduced to the laws of sameness where femininity must look like masculinity in order to be recognized as femininity. For both Kristeva and Cixous authentic feminine voices are concealed and necessarily subversive: they exist as a “necessary outside” to the dominant masculine voice. For Ashton, there *is* a feminine voice contained within the hagiographic text but it is articulated differently, often through the body and its apertures, but nevertheless it indicates the presence of a speaking ‘I’ that is ‘woman’ (Ashton 2000:159). This voice might be revealed when we can move beyond written text as the dominant signifier of saintliness, so the feminist hagiographer looks for gaps, inconsistencies, contradictions, the voice of the body, silence even.

Sara Maitland’s (1990) hagiography of Rosa of Lima exemplifies a hagiography that centres this speaking ‘I’. But the act of speech is not in a traditionally verbal form. The ‘I’ emerges through the body of Rosa: the body as a source of divinity read through the violent forms of penance which Rosa inflicted on herself from an early age (1990: 60). Maitland argues that the local clerics and her family pathologised her behaviour, and subsequent hagiographers fetishised her actions as a form of purity, sentimentalised her, and participated in “... a strangely voyeuristic pleasure in her sufferings” (1990: 69). Previous feminist accounts of Rosa’s life understood her actions as a psychoanalytic neurotic form of bodily denial and hatred bred by a patriarchal church. However, Maitland (1990: 64-9) argues for another reading: one which sees her actions as suggestive of desire for freedom and self-expression, of autonomy and equality with God. This is a very different reading:

one which accounts for excessive bodily harm as a way to encounter the (divine) Other. In doing so, such a reading de-pathologises excessive behaviour and understands it in relation to other values, which orient our understanding of Rosa toward a more phenomenological, bodily account of meeting God. Maitland acts as hagiographer to give space to the 'I' of the Saint: to reveal a Self at work. Maitland is in no way trying to romanticize violence, but she is drawing our attention to firstly the imposition of modern values on a 15th century woman, secondly to the function of hagiography in relation to the production of a life of suffering, and finally to the strong possibility that we just do not know what motivated Rosa to act in the distressing way she did.

In Gardiner's traditional account of Mary MacKillop, we can still search for clues to the presence of a speaking 'I'. The first is that Mary is revealed as a sufferer, a typical characteristic of a saint. Gardiner suggests that she suffers in particular ways, ways that non saints might not be familiar with. There is double reading here, a fissure in the text, because while the dominant voice reads her suffering as stereotypically feminine and passive, a transgressive reading could take us to Mary's experience of suffering as a place where she actively meets god through her body (a sixth voice), revealing the presence of a divine Other (a seventh voice). So it is her body, her flesh and pain that imparts the word of God, expresses the moment of meeting (hospitality) between divine and human. Flesh and body - particularly that of women - has been a dark place for patriarchy: the site of women's deepest oppression and control. Mary's suffering is no exception as she battled the

symptoms of dysmenorrhoea for many years. At one stage her canonization was held up for years when she was accused of being an alcoholic, where in fact she had been carefully self medicating severe period pain (O'Brien 1994; 174-185 & 268-70). The story of Mary's embodied spirituality has yet to be written, where as Cixous advocates: "write yourself. Your body must be heard...Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time" (in Ashton 2000: 5). Wyschogrod encourages us to understand the saintly body as a sensorium where rather than seeing suffering as either the basis of sacrifice/redemption or a pathological symptom, suffering can be viewed as a phenomenological account of the relationship between body and soul. Such an approach would centre the experience of the body as the site of divine revelation, as the subject of experience. Wyschogrod says (1990: 17):

When the entire body is implicated in saintly experience the body as a whole functions as a sensorium. It does not help to say Saint Catherine saw the passion, although visions of the passion are common. Instead, truer to her own account, she entered into the passion, felt it with her whole being. Nothing intervened between herself and it.

Not only could we read Mary's suffering as an instance of hospitality (of welcoming the unwelcome stranger) but also as a moment of radical generosity where she opens her soul

to the most despised aspect of ‘woman’: her body, and in so doing is open to an experience of God.

A Feminist hagiography of Mary MacKillop

If anyone will become divine, it will be as an embodied, gendered, situated

self: there can be no other selves than selves of woman born.

Grace Jantzen (1998:141)

A reading of the body as source of divine experience can be augmented with other readings ‘against the grain’. One does not have to excavate too deeply to understand that Mary’s battle was a struggle against a colonial triumphalist Catholic Church (see Dunne 1994; and O’Brien, 1994). There is also no doubt that she was a thorn in the side of such a patriarchal enterprise. She pursued her vision of setting up an order of nuns that would give service to the poorest of the poor by living in poverty themselves, not acquiring property, and living by ‘the Rule’ which put ultimate authority for the order into the hands of the Vatican rather than Australian Bishops. This vision for the Order went explicitly against everything that the Australian Bishops were intent on establishing in 19th Century Australia: a well educated middle class Catholic population under the constituency of the Australian Catholic Church. Mary had a long hard struggle to establish the Order but she did so finally. While her hagiographers present Mary as humble, meek, loving and kind, - and therefore

deserving of canonization - they also present the possibility that she was tough, resilient, determined, willful and politically astute with a zealous commitment to those most marginalized by the power structures of colonial Australia (Gardiner, 1994; Dunne, 1994; O'Brien 1994). For her vision and values, she was willing to queer the boundaries of acceptable feminine behaviour: she traveled alone over long distances in outback Australia, clashed with Bishops, was thrown out of dioceses, met in clandestine meetings with isolated sisters, traveled to Rome as a married woman, spoke out publicly, suffered the ignominy of excommunication, and learnt harsh political lessons. In short, she did little that could be identified with a typical femininity of the day and provides us with a girl's own colonial adventure. Indeed there is virtually nothing in her story to suggest the kind of passivity that Gardiner bestows upon her.

This very brief re-reading of a traditional hagiographer's text offers an example of the uses of feminist hagiography. Suffice to say that while there are multitudes of documents about Mary MacKillop, there are as yet, no feminist hagiographies of her life that actively seek to re-read the dominant texts, and excavate the voice of the saint herself. Yet, the life of Mary MacKillop, her spirituality and insight, may hold a deep wisdom for women seeking an authentic sense of Self.

Feminist hagiography reveals the lives of women saints to be dangerous texts: texts which have the potential to reveal a speaking self not completely colonized by the Law of the

Father. Shifting Mary MacKillop into the realm of a feminist religious imaginary is a highly productive move. Because if we really want to know who Mary MacKillop is and what she offers to us, her experience of God and her understanding of humanity, then we have to go beyond the surface of the text, to the deeper waters of the sea of heteroglossia where contradiction and multiplicity swim together and where the blurry outlines of a feminine subjectivity might be faintly visible.

Endnotes

ⁱ So for example, while Mother Theresa might be considered the epitome of traditional feminine saintliness in her self abnegation and service to the poorest of the poor, she is genuinely beyond the plausible models of contemporary popular femininity within which many of us negotiate our subjectivity. Princess Diana on the other hand, was a much more plausible role model, because she struggled with the demands of a family, working life, an unfaithful husband, divorce, fame and wealth. Only one however, will be canonized as a formal saint, yet the other continues to be mythologized as a people's saint. (McPhillips 1997).

ⁱⁱ An example of this is where secularization may actually have encouraged religiosity in the sense that it promotes differentiation by breaking up the old religious monopolies and promoting new expressions of a faith tradition. The flourishing of charismatic Christianities is very relevant here. The resulting fragmentation of tradition results in religious pluralism - even competition. Lyon (2000:33) says, 'Certain kinds of late – or postmodern conditions - may act as impulses for particular kinds of religious development' so that late modernity generates quite specific religious responses'.

ⁱⁱⁱ While hagiography is a textual genre, it is also a widely disseminated discursive form which is used in other forms of writing such as the novel, biography and autobiography in particular (Wyschogrod 1990: 6).

^{iv} It may also be the case that for a contemporary saint, the feminist hagiographer has both a more complex and in some ways easier task. There is plethora of material about the life of Mary MacKillop, written over the last 150 years. These include hundreds of journal articles, research essays, numerous biographies, TV documentaries, films, anecdotes, miracles attributed to Mary, official Church and Institute documentation, paintings, pilgrimage sites to visit, and of course Mary's own letters of which there are hundreds.

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