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The Transformative Female Body

Embodied Womanhood, Domestic Imagery, and Scriptural Language in Mother's Milk: Poems in Search of Heavenly Mother by Rachel Hunt Steenblik

WOMEN'S VOICES AND EXPERIENCES HAVE OFTEN been left out of Christian theological writing, but Rachel Hunt Steenblik's volume of poetry, *Mother's Milk: Poems in Search of Heavenly Mother*, foregrounds the female embodied experience of childbearing while presenting a powerful representation of the feminine divine and the religious authority, power, and presence that women in Christianity, specifically in Mormonism, can claim. In the introduction to *Women, Writing, Theology: Transforming a Tradition of Exclusion*, Emily Holmes argues that writing, while often a tool of oppression by the dominant culture, is also a tool of liberation because it cannot be completely controlled by the dominant group (4). Likewise, Subashish Bhattacharjee and Girindra Narayan Ray assert, "women's writing has consistently challenged patriarchal norms by the simple act of creation independent of male intervention" (2). Women's theological writing specifically has allowed women to access religious authority typically only given to men in Christian structures, because writing about one's personal experiences with God conveys a certain authority regardless of gender (Holmes 6–9). However, in order for works of women's theological writing to have lasting impact they must deconstruct traditional authority structures, not merely scramble for individual power in a system of domination. Women's theological writing must illustrate a new pattern for claiming and expressing authority that rests outside historically oppressive models.

Hunt Steenblik's poems explore what connection with and knowledge of a feminine deity might look like, figuring God as a woman giving birth and caring for children while speaking with (female) prophets and orchestrating the redemption of humankind. Her work illustrates a new pattern of claiming and expressing theological authority through the depiction of women fulfilling traditionally feminine roles, which have

historically been used as barriers to keep women from religious leadership, while also showing women as God, as prophets, and as recipients of divine light. Thus, Hunt Steenblik's poems revalue female religious authority, power, and presence. (For the purposes of this paper, I use the term "religious authority" primarily to refer to the authority that comes from one's personal connection with God, "religious power" to connote institutional leadership roles, and "religious presence" to address women's visibility in their authority and power.)

Mother's Milk uses embodied womanhood, domestic imagery, and scriptural language to imagine female deity and prophets and thus break down the traditional binary structure that separates female bodily experience from male religious authority, gesturing toward possibilities for religious authority and knowledge rooted in the female body and experience. The deconstruction in which *Mother's Milk* engages, questioning traditional binaries that set male and female, spirit and body, and reason and emotion as opposites by depicting a deity that encompasses both sides of the binary, allows Hunt Steenblik to claim her own religious authority while offering similar authority and institutional power to other women and putting women into scriptural narrative. *Mother's Milk* re-imagines women's role in Christianity, bringing women into equal partnership with men in religious spaces.

Poststructuralism and Binary Thinking in Christianity

In order to understand how Hunt Steenblik reclaims female religious authority, power, and presence by deconstructing binaries that have mandated women's exclusion from these spaces, we must first articulate the basics of poststructuralist theory. Jacques Derrida, perhaps the most well-known post-structuralist, outlined the flaws of structuralism throughout his work, arguing that the "center," or what structuralism privileges as the fixed origin of meaning, actually represents a paradox, because "while it often appears to be within a particular structure of signification, it simultaneously occupies an exterior position that allows it to operate and control the structure" (Chow 197). The center is both within and outside the structure. Thus, structures can be understood as arbitrary, rather than natural or inherent. The opening of binary structures has vast implications. Derrida notes that when the world is categorized in terms of dualistic differences, these differences are put into value systems, privileging one half of an opposition over the other half (Williams 28). In other words, "usually

one of the two terms in a relation of difference is given epistemological precedence and used as the criterion to determine the value of the other in a hierarchical fashion” (Chow 197). Poststructuralism demonstrates that one of the primary distortions that result from binary oppositional thinking “has been the distortion of humanity as male and female into a dualism of superiority and inferiority” that leads to women’s subordination (Ruether 165). Hélène Cixous, in her use of post-structuralism to develop a theory of *l’écriture féminine*, or women’s writing, refers to this process of valuing one side of a binary as inherently or naturally better than the other side as “patriarchal binary thought,” also arguing that all systems of binaries lead back to the male/female binary in which the female is lesser (Moi 102–3).

The damaging effects of binary oppositional thinking are foundational to patriarchal structures and can be clearly seen in major trends in Christianity. Certainly, these generalizations are not true of all Christian faiths; however, the basic sketch outlined by feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether in her book *Sexism and God-Talk* is useful to understand the intersection between poststructuralist thought and trends in Christianity. Ruether argues that because the male has been privileged over the female historically, Christian leadership has been, for the most part, male, and Christian theology figures its God as male as well (194). Ruether notes the implications of what she terms “male monotheism,” arguing that “male monotheism reinforces the social hierarchy of patriarchal rule” (53). This sets up a structure in which God is above men, who are in turn above women. Thus, “Women no longer stand in direct relation to God; they are connected to God secondarily, through the male” (53). When women can reach God only through men, men are seen not only as representatives but also a representation of God, and women become “the image of the lower, material nature” of humanity (54). Further, Ruether argues that male monotheism splits reality between “transcendent Spirit (mind, ego) and inferior and dependent physical nature,” associating women with the physical and men with the spirit (54). Men come to represent reason, spirit, and goodness while women are seen as irrational, carnal, and sin-prone (94, 168, 195).

When Christian theology is based on a binary opposition between men and women, further dualisms follow, splitting reality between mind/body and reason/emotion. Women become associated with the term in the binary pair that is determined to be inferior. Again, it is important to remember that there are many Christian faiths that avoid the pitfalls of patriarchal binary thought, and that these trends are generalizations. However, for the most part, this binary has historically meant, in Christianity as well as

other major social institutions, that men have not attached authority to female voices (Moi 35), both leaving women out of theological discussion and work as well as preventing them from claiming the authority needed to join the spaces in which theology is formulated (Holmes 3).

Woman as Religious Authority

French literary theorists Cixous, Irigaray, Kristeva, and Wittig developed the concept of “*l’écriture féminine*,” or “women’s writing,” to describe writing that subverts the patriarchal binary structures described above. Male domination of binary oppositional structures—specifically in Christianity—has made women “the Other” in opposition to men, turning them from agents into objects (Moi 90). Thus, a poststructuralist philosophy is essential to a theory of women’s writing as a way to break out of the limited roles in which women have been contained. While the particularities of each theorist’s work on *l’écriture féminine* invariably differ and cannot be covered in the scope of this paper, these theorists all work from the basic premise that the female body opposes itself to male cultural domination (Jones 252) and that a focus on the female body exposes the false dichotomies between male/female, mind/body, and reason/emotion that are replicated throughout patriarchal social structures (Crowder 141).

Hunt Steenblik’s poetry and her context as a Mormon woman fit into this definition of poststructuralist women’s writing. The general Christian tendency to devalue the body as inferior and sinful, as well as to associate the susceptibility to the body’s passions with women in particular as outlined by Ruether, continues in Mormonism. The Christian religion to which Hunt Steenblik belongs teaches that the body is important to God’s plan, the body is generally regarded as something to be mastered, continuing older Christian traditions that privilege the mind and spirit above the body. Mormonism sees the body as part of the soul and believes in an embodied God, but religious scholar Aaron S. Reeves argues that this premise has not been fully realized, noting that earlier positive teachings about the body have become less common as leaders emphasize that the fall of Adam and Eve led to a body that is unredeemed, weak, and susceptible to temptation (145, 149).

The focus on the body as eventually eternal but currently flawed is seen in common interpretations of the Book of Mormon, part of Mormonism’s scriptural canon, that focus on the idea that redemption includes triumph over the “carnal” nature of the body to a spiritual state and that God’s

influence helps people reject the body's passions (Volluz 154–58). Therefore, despite belief in an embodied God and that the body is part of the soul, these teachings and interpretations engender a theology in which the body and the spirit are currently opposed, and will only be reconciled once the body has been sufficiently mastered or improved by the spirit's influence (Reeves 147–51, 153–63). Mormon theology does not specifically label women as more bodily and thus more sinful, but in a society shaped by binary thinking, devaluing the body as lesser than the mind means that often, in Mormon culture, women are associated with the body because gender is mapped to binary oppositions. Further, because Mormon spiritual leadership is mostly male, men become implicitly associated with spirituality, which in turn, due to binary structures that shape societal thought, connects women to the body and excludes them from positions of authority. For example, the common Mormon understanding that the female equivalent of the all-male Mormon priesthood is motherhood (Farnsworth 166–68) is directly related to the lasting cultural foundation that associates men with spirituality and women with the body, because motherhood is generally an embodied experience. In contrast to both Christianity's harmful connection of women and the "inferior" body and Mormonism's complex but often disdainful attitude toward the body, Hunt Steenblik uses embodied womanhood as a metaphor for God, allowing a deconstruction of the patriarchal binaries that separate the female body from traditional conceptions of God and God-given authority. Hunt Steenblik uses the female body as a site of special revelation and makes woman the subject rather than the "Other" in her writing. Thus, *Mother's Milk* conceptualizes a form of religious authority that validates embodied experience, allowing both bodily and spiritual experiences to confer the authority to know and speak about God, regardless of gender.

In *Mother's Milk*, we see these themes strongly in the poems "Postpartum" and "The Morning Søren Was Born," both of which deconstruct the binary between male religious authority and female bodily experience by depicting revelation that is rooted in the female body during and just after giving birth. That Hunt Steenblik chooses birth as the subject of each of these poems is significant, as birth has often been seen in traditional Christian theology as an example of women's "bodily . . . inferior, sin-prone self," a fact that precludes women from religious authority (Ruether 95–97). However, Hunt Steenblik's use of embodied womanhood as a metaphor for God allows her to claim religious authority from—not in spite of—her female identity. Both poems discuss "the Mother," using capitalization to set up the metaphor of God as an embodied woman.

The capitalization, which occurs throughout the volume, signals a larger and more important mother than one woman giving birth, connecting motherhood and Godhood. “Postpartum” begins, “After creation / the Mother knew” (Hunt Steenblik 53, lines 1–2), connecting the creation of the world by God to physical birth through the juxtaposition of the title and the first line. The contrast between the title and the first line sets up the metaphor of the poem and the book: that God is an embodied woman. Similarly, in “The Morning Søren Was Born,” Hunt Steenblik writes, “I heard the Mother’s / birth cries” (93, lines 1–2), again establishing a scene in which God is an embodied woman giving birth.

The metaphor of God as an embodied woman, as seen in the connection between the title and the first line of “Postpartum” as well as its capitalization of “Mother,” suggests that women, particularly those who have given birth, have authority to speak about God. Further, in “Postpartum,” the act of creation results in knowledge, thus reinforcing the idea that women’s embodied experiences can be a revelatory process that brings women close to God. This idea directly opposes the historical religious notion that reason and understanding must be separated from the body and that men—because of their separation from the body—are more suited to spirituality (Ruether 54) by depicting an embodied experience as a form of connection to God. Thus, “Postpartum” contributes to the deconstruction of the binary between male religious authority and female bodily experience through its connection between God’s actions and women’s experiences giving birth, demonstrating that embodiment, rather than a detriment to spirituality, is a way to connect with God and something that bestows religious authority. The poem continues, “The emptiness / that comes after fullness, / the softness that remains / for a long time” (lines 3–6). These lines depict Hunt Steenblik’s experience after giving birth, reiterating the metaphor of Godhood as embodied womanhood, and further developing the idea that the female bodily experience can be a revelatory process. It is Hunt Steenblik’s own experience with the “emptiness” and “softness” after birth that gives her further understanding of God.

Finally, lines 3–6 of “Postpartum” present a view of opposites that are contained within a single body, destabilizing the validity of a structure built upon binary oppositions. The final lines of the poem oppose “emptiness” and “fullness,” “softness” and hardness, the joy and “sorrow” of creation. That these conflicting emotions and physical attributes can exist in one person argues against the false dichotomy set up by patriarchal binary thinking. If one person can experience both emptiness and

fullness, softness and hardness, joy and sorrow without valuing one above the other, a system built on strict binary oppositions becomes suspect. “Postpartum” opens the possibility of a religious experience that does not set male and female, mind and body as oppositional and hierarchical, promoting instead an experiential and bodily view of revelation and religious authority that does not use gender or embodiment to preclude one group from religious authority.

Hunt Steenblik’s “The Morning Søren Was Born” again uses the metaphor of God as an embodied woman, resisting the binary that separates female experience from religious authority by depicting a female embodied experience that leads to religious knowledge and asserting her own experiential authority. Hunt Steenblik writes, “I heard the Mother’s / birth cries / from my / own / mouth” (93, lines 1–5). In this poem, Hunt Steenblik connects to God by hearing God’s “birth cries” through her own childbearing, experiencing what God has experienced. “The Morning Søren Was Born” shows the way the female experience mirrors God’s experience. This rhetorical move paints Hunt Steenblik—and all women—as representatives of God, granting religious authority. Men have claimed their religious authority on the basis that God is male, and therefore men are God’s representatives (Ruether 53–54). If God can be figured as female and found in the female embodied experience, Hunt Steenblik argues, women can be God’s representatives and leaders, too.

“Postpartum” and “The Morning Søren Was Born” take as their primary subject the experience of childbirth and motherhood. Historically, Christianity has seen birth as evidence of women’s inferiority due to Eve’s sin, and in some aspects of Mormon theology, motherhood is figured as a counterpart to male religious authority through the priesthood (Farnsworth 166–68). Hunt Steenblik rejects the idea that childbirth and motherhood preclude or exempt women from religious authority and instead turns the female embodied experience into a revelatory and transcendent experience that actually bestows religious authority. While narratives about the inferiority and punishment of women make them “the Other” in binary opposition with men, Hunt Steenblik narrates how childbirth brings knowledge of and closeness to God and makes women the subject of the story, restoring their authority to know, learn, speak, and teach about God. Hunt Steenblik’s emphasis on the embodied female experience as a metaphor for God deconstructs the separation between body and revelation, demonstrating the false nature of this duality by showing that embodied experience can lead to connection with God, thus allowing women to reclaim bodily

experience and insist on religious authority alongside men. In Hunt Steenblik's work, the body is not an obstacle to religious authority but rather an asset. Thus, women can both embrace their embodied selves and claim religious authority. She does not seek, however, to reverse binary structures and place women on top instead of men, but to open different possibilities for our understanding of God's nature, such as seeing God as an embodied woman rather than as solely male, and validating the many different ways in which people connect with and learn of God, whether through their bodies or their minds. These different possibilities release women from the negative association with the body while also not requiring that they bend to the assumptions of society and reject the body as prohibitive of connection with God, freeing religious authority from limiting binary structures.

Resisting Gender Essentialism

The theory of *l'écriture féminine* has been criticized for its gender essentialist tendencies (Crowder 132, 136; Jones 252–55; Moi 109, 146–48). Particularly in the writings of Cixous we see a tendency to ascribe gender difference to biological difference (Crowder 137), and as French feminist literary theorists like Cixous, Kristeva, and Irigaray position the female body as the source for “women's writing,” they run the risk of upholding the systems that perpetuate the male/female binary and lending biological inheritance to social and cultural differences between men and women (Jones 252–55). Monique Wittig's work on *l'écriture féminine* emphasizes the need to avoid perpetuating or replicating the false male/female duality while focusing on women's experiences (Crowder 118–20). She writes, “Our first task . . . is to thoroughly dissociate ‘women’ (the class within which we fight) and ‘woman,’ the myth” (Jones 257). This is the approach through which we must see Hunt Steenblik's work—not as a bid to subjugate men and reverse patriarchal society, but as an effort to remove domination in all forms.

Throughout *Mother's Milk*, Hunt Steenblik resists merely reversing patriarchy into a system of female domination and avoids representing womanhood as something inherently tied to biology. While the majority of her poems use the metaphor of God as an embodied woman, the purpose of this technique is to validate the body as a foundation of knowledge rather than something that needs to be overcome, not to represent biological motherhood as something required either for true womanhood or true religious authority. Hunt Steenblik's work utilizes

pregnancy and birth as metaphors for God to combat the separation of the body and the mind in which the mind is privileged as a more valid way of knowing, not to argue that the body should be privileged over the mind instead. The poems “Crack, II” and “As She Is” demonstrate Hunt Steenblik’s resistance to replicating unjust systems of power through their universalizing language. “Crack, II” reminds us, “She is everywhere” (123, line 2). Hunt Steenblik’s use of the word “everywhere” helps readers resist the temptation to simply flip the common ideas about God and tie God inherently to physical childbirth by signaling that God can be found in every place and every person. “As She Is” states of God, “We shall be like Her / for we shall see Her / as She is” (135, lines 2–4). Hunt Steenblik’s use of the pronoun “we” throughout the poem includes all readers and universalizes the poem. She does not say that only those who have given birth, or who have uteruses, or who fit within cultural gender roles will be like and see God, she writes that we will all be like God; Hunt She does not imply that any major changes are needed to “be like Her,” suggesting that the multiplicity of humanity, with our various personalities, interests, and experiences, is reflected in God.

Though the central metaphor of the book is grounded in embodied womanhood, the God in *Mother’s Milk* is described in a wide variety of ways. She is described in many vocations, such as a linguist, an author, an astronomer, a potter, and a weaver (87, 44, 99, 48), has dynamic personality traits—loud and quiet, calm and stormy, and wise (57, 79, 58)—and is found in all the elements of the natural and human-made world, including fireworks, the ocean, a bear, the moon, a bird, music, trees, a temple, and the wind (131, 35, 78–79, 75, 29, 11, 90, 114, 141, 69, 73, 80, 68, 80). Hunt Steenblik ascribes all these traits and vocations to God, expanding our definition of God and of what women can be beyond the traditional male/female binary. By incorporating a plurality of representations, Hunt Steenblik’s depiction of God manifests the both/and mentality that post-structuralist theories of women’s writing need in order to be truly effective in deconstructing the patriarchal binaries that ensure one group’s superiority over another. Without such plurality, writers and theorists run the risk of simply creating a different binary structure, instead of rejecting binaries altogether. While Hunt Steenblik uses embodied womanhood as a tool to demonstrate the invalidity of binary structures, she does not set womanhood and domesticity as the new privileged half of the binary. Rather, she uses embodied womanhood, domestic imagery, and scriptural language to allow both women and men to embrace the religious authority that comes from knowledge about God, a knowledge that

can come from both sides of the binary, from the mind and from the body, from traditionally male experiences and from conventionally female ones. Thus, Hunt Steenblik seeks to change how readers think about religious authority.

Transforming the Nature of Power

Cixous notes that women's writing is not necessarily linked to the sex or gender of the writer in question, but rather the type of writing. "Feminine" writing is writing that seeks to undermine the dualistic thinking that comes from structures defined by opposition, because such thinking results in one group becoming lesser than the dominant group (Moi 106–07). The poems of *Mother's Milk* use embodied womanhood as a metaphor for God as a way to demonstrate the falseness of this binary thinking and to show that the religious authority bestowed by embodied experiences facilitates a connection with and knowledge about God. However, the binary thinking that has become entwined with Christianity, including Mormonism, cannot be deconstructed by merely recognizing women's knowledge about God. That knowledge must be translated into the ability to lead, to hold institutional religious power. Hunt Steenblik's *l'écriture féminine* continues to break down binaries that separate male and female, reason and emotion, and body and spirit by presenting the dual role of prophet, a position only held by men in the Mormon tradition (as well as in most Christian traditions), and mother, a position Mormon women are often told obviates the need for institutional church authority (Farnsworth 166–68), placing revelatory power alongside her identity as a woman and her experiences with the domestic. This juxtaposition forces readers to reconsider what "prophet" and "God" really mean, allowing them to separate these roles from their traditional gender categorizations and the traditional patriarchal conceptions of power associated with them.

Domestic life is a connecting theme throughout *Mother's Milk*. The focus on the domestic links the roles and realms typically assigned to women with Godhood, breaking down the theological construction of God and God's prophets and leaders as necessarily male. It is not controversial to note that, particularly after the Industrial Revolution precipitated what modern scholars call the Cult of True Womanhood, women have often been limited to the domestic sphere, seen as defenseless and in need of protection against the world of business and political leadership (Boydston 142–44). Mormonism arose during the nineteenth century, when this romanticized view of women as the "Angel of the Hearth" was at its peak,

and it is understandably marked by the culture in which it grew. Mormons have sacralized traditional gender roles, painting women's role as "birther and follower" and men's role as "provider and ruler" as God-given (Kline 193). These roles are justified by "women being described by Church leaders as inherently nurturing, loving, sympathetic, spiritual, and kind" (193). Women's most divine role in Mormonism is mother, while the primary role for men is "leader and priesthood holder," and while neither is explicitly categorized as superior, this view sets up a God-given structure in which women are associated with nurture and men with leadership (194–96). Thus, in order to fulfill their spiritual potential, women must not concern themselves with power and leadership and instead focus on their children. However, this worldview assumes the inherence of a dualistic split between male and female natures and the need to assign roles accordingly.

Rather than replicate the separation between conventional female roles and male religious authority by depicting herself reflecting in isolation in order to learn about God, Hunt Steenblik uses her domestic experiences as a way to connect with God, similar to her use of embodied womanhood as a metaphor for God. For example, in the poems "Mother Tongue" and "Veil," Hunt Steenblik associates raising her daughter, Cora, with how God might interact with her. In "Mother Tongue," she writes, "Cora sticks her fingers / in my mouth, to learn / my language" (33, lines 1–3). "Veil" opens, "When my daughter cried / for me as I showered, / I gave her soft words" (124, lines 1–3). After illustrating an experience with her daughter, Hunt Steenblik then carefully links these events with God's nature. "Mother Tongue" finishes with Hunt Steenblik asking, "Did I do this / with my Mother?" (lines 5–6). "Veil" recounts the reassurance Hunt Steenblik gave her crying daughter—"I'm right here. / I'm just on the other side / of the curtain" (lines 4–6)—before finishing, "And suddenly, / I knew my Mother / was" (lines 7–9). These epiphanies about God are explicitly connected to domestic life, demonstrating the false nature of the traditional split between womanhood, associated with the domestic, and manhood, associated with leadership. Hunt Steenblik and the God she portrays embody both domestic care and religious leadership.

The lack of space between the domestic experience and the epiphany depicts the revelatory nature of domestic life. The lines containing realization/revelation about God come directly after the lines describing Hunt Steenblik's interactions with her daughter, without a stanza break to separate the different ideas. This further entangles the domestic sphere and religious authority, making it clear that these two things are

not mutually exclusive, nor is Hunt Steenblik retiring to a space separate from her domestic life to learn about and connect with God. Rather, her knowledge of God comes directly from her domestic life. The single-stanza structure of these two poems illustrates the merging of the two sides of the traditional split between domestic care and religious leadership.

However, Hunt Steenblik does not only demonstrate female religious authority in terms of knowledge about God throughout *Mother's Milk*. She also translates that authority into religious power, destabilizing the masculinity of God and using her experiences in the traditionally-female domestic role to deconstruct the false separation between women and religious leadership. Hunt Steenblik aligns herself—a woman—with prophets of the Bible as well as contemporary Mormon prophets in her poems “My First Article of Faith” and “Holy Places.” Christianity has been historically male-dominated, denying women leadership for centuries (Ruether 194). In Mormonism, only men hold the authority from God to lead general church organizations, and thus, only men can be appointed to the highest levels of leadership (Terry 4–11). As discussed earlier, leadership in the Mormon church is often seen as a male God-given role that corresponds to women’s role as mothers (Kline 198; Farnsworth 166–68). While many women do hold leadership roles at all levels in the Mormon organization, women “do not actually have the [office of the] priesthood, an abstract authority that is bestowed only on men and boys” (Terry 17–19). While it may seem that Hunt Steenblik embraces the role Mormon culture has assigned to her, her focus on the domestic serves a larger purpose. When we juxtapose domestic experiences, which provide their own connection with God, with Hunt Steenblik’s poems that position her as religious leader, *Mother's Milk* clearly disavows the dualistic split between female experience and male authority and fully integrates womanhood, as portrayed through embodied experience and domestic imagery, alongside religious authority.

For example, Joseph Smith, who translated the Book of Mormon and established the Mormon religion, wrote thirteen Articles of Faith explaining Mormon Christianity to the world. These are well known by members of the Mormon faith today and have been canonized as part of Mormon scripture. Hunt Steenblik’s “My First Article of Faith” tweaks the well-known aphorism, associating it with the prophet Joseph Smith and his ethos in the Mormon community. The original version of the First Article of Faith reads, “We believe in God, the Eternal Father, and in His Son, Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Ghost” (Articles of Faith 1:1). Hunt Steenblik’s changes to this sentence, along with her versification, bring

a new meaning to light. The poem begins, “I believe in God the Eternal / Father and Mother / and in their Son” (132 lines 1–3), adding “and Mother” and referring to Christ as “their Son” rather than using the male possessive pronoun that Smith employs. These changes bring to the surface a broader understanding of God by recognizing a female deity figure who is equal with and involved alongside the traditional male God, and a more expansive idea of who can exercise religious leadership by positioning Hunt Steenblik as a prophetic teacher. Hunt Steenblik claims the ethos of a prophet by using the words of Joseph Smith and by teaching further doctrine about God.

Hunt Steenblik also uses the line break between the first two lines of “My First Article of Faith” in order to broaden readers’ understanding of God, cementing her prophetic status with concrete teaching. The first two lines read, “I believe in God the Eternal / Father and Mother” (lines 1–2), splitting the introduction of God from further descriptions of God. While Smith’s version presents “God the Eternal Father” as one noun, Hunt Steenblik’s poem uses the line break to split apart God and the question of gender, separating the roles God plays as “Father and Mother” from God’s identity as “the Eternal.” This separation allows readers to understand God’s identity and power isolated from the socially constructed gender norms with which parenthood is laden. That Hunt Steenblik strays from the typical Mormon conception of God indicates her prophetic role. In “My First Article of Faith,” not only does she clearly align herself with perhaps the most-celebrated prophet of Mormon history, Hunt Steenblik leverages that association alongside her own teaching to fully claim religious leadership for herself and other women.

Similarly, in Hunt Steenblik’s “Holy Places,” she uses the scriptural metaphor of going to a mountain to commune with God to depict herself spending time with a feminine Deity, again positioning herself as a prophet. Mountains are central to the stories of the Bible: Moses received his call and the ten commandments from God on Mount Sinai, Abraham was asked to sacrifice his son and Solomon built the first temple on Mount Moriah, and Jesus first taught his disciples on the Mount of Olives (Green 159). Well-known Book of Mormon prophets also spent time in the mountains in order to commune with God (1 Nephi 11:1, 17:7, 18:3; 2 Nephi 4:25; Ether 3:1, 4:1, 6:2). Like these scriptural prophets, Hunt Steenblik writes, “We climbed to / the mountain top, / She and I, / and sat awhile” (140, lines 1–4). As in earlier poems, the capitalization of “She” helps readers understand that Hunt Steenblik is talking about God. That she and God are spending time together on “the mountain top” connects Hunt Steenblik and her work with the scriptural prophets mentioned

earlier, giving her the right to claim religious leadership like scriptural prophets did, regardless of her gender. Further, the use of the plural personal pronoun “we” articulates that Hunt Steenblik and God are working together. Hunt Steenblik is the modern-day prophet learning from God in the mountains and returning to assert her religious power despite the limitations Mormonism places on female leadership.

The juxtaposition of these two roles, the conventional mother and the new prophet, is key in understanding the deconstruction *Mother’s Milk* accomplishes. Hunt Steenblik positions herself as “both” on every page. To write a section about her prophetic role and then a section about motherhood would be to replicate the patriarchal binary that already separates these two roles. Instead, each page contains records of Hunt Steenblik’s domestic experiences and her revelation and teaching, demonstrating through the structure of the book the invalidity of the dualistic thinking that has informed the exclusion of women from religious leadership. Further, Hunt Steenblik’s mingling of domestic relationships with her prophetic power enacts a new model of religious leadership. Rather than institute a new version of religious hierarchy, Hunt Steenblik recurs to a communal model for relating to God and exercising religious leadership, doing away with the binaries that have supported the hierarchical model for so long.

Putting Women in Scripture

As Holmes and Bhattacharjee et al. note, writing is used as a tool of patriarchal power structures, but it is not inherently patriarchal. Similarly, Kristeva articulates this nuance in her conception of *l’écriture féminine*. She asserts that cultures give language its context, and therefore its sexism or lack thereof. Writing is productive, according to Kristeva, and we can get more out of it than what we put in (Moi 156–57). Therefore, when women have the freedom to express their stories and make their own meaning out of their experiences, language can be used to shift society away from the binaries that have resulted in male being privileged over female, reason privileged over emotion, and mind privileged over body. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, a prominent feminist Biblical scholar, articulates the liberatory potential that even historically patriarchal texts like the Bible have, arguing that while the Bible has “often inculcated patriarchal . . . (e.g., lord, slave-master, father, elite male domination) values and visions,” we need not simply disregard the Bible, but can learn “new ways of reading the Bible in order to prevent

Biblical knowledge from continuing to be produced in the interest of domination and injustice” (1, 89).

Hunt Steenblik’s project of deconstruction, which validates female religious authority by revaluing female embodied experience and restores female religious leadership by demonstrating the illegitimacy of the priesthood/motherhood binary, ultimately allows the freedom to remake religious narratives so they are inclusive of women and, in poems like “Genesis” and “The Spirit of Eliza,” facilitates a new reading of the Bible. In a cyclical pattern, female religious authority and leadership grants the right to rewrite religious narratives, and this rewriting serves to further affirm female religious authority and leadership. In each of these poems, Hunt Steenblik draws on well-known scriptural language and stories, but subverts the expectation the familiar language evokes and uses it to foreground feminine deity and prophets, putting female experience into sacred text, thus liberating women to claim the religious authority, power, and presence *Mother’s Milk* demonstrates is theirs.

The poem “Genesis” plays on the King James Version (KJV) of Genesis 1:26–27, using unexpected substitutions to the familiar passage of scripture to bring the arbitrary nature of the male default to light as well as suggest a more egalitarian and democratic view of humanity’s creation. The poem begins, “And God said, Let us / make woman in / our image” (50, lines 1–3), substituting “woman” for the word “man” as used in the KJV. Additionally, Hunt Steenblik reverses the typical phrase “male and female,” writing, “female and male / created She them” (lines 9–10). These reversals are jarring, especially when the rest of the text is so familiar to a Christian audience; they subvert the expected phrasing and force the reader to slow down, calling attention to themselves. With focused attention comes the realization that using the word “man” to mean humanity is expected, illuminating the male default that pervades much of religious writing.

“Genesis” does not merely call attention to the male default that has left women out of religious authority and leadership. It also works against that default, asserting female presence in Christianity. While traditional Christian theology has always asserted that both men and women are created in the image of God, Ruether aptly notes that this belief “has tended to become obscured by a second tendency to correlate femaleness with the lower part of human nature . . . femaleness also becomes linked with the sin-prone part of the self” (93). Because Mormonism does not view Eve negatively, women generally escape this association with lower bodily categories (Kline 186). However, this does not mean that Mormonism escapes the binary thinking that separates

male/female along with mind/body and reason/emotion. Mormon leaders tend to elevate women as more naturally spiritual than men but also assert that leadership has been assigned to men by God, failing to counteract women's ultimate subordination to men (Kline 188–92). Hunt Steenblik's substitution of "woman" for "man" in the first few lines of "Genesis" counters the Christian theological amnesia that associates women with sin by making it clear that woman is *imago Dei* just as much as man, reminding readers of female presence and participation in Mormonism and other Christian traditions.

Further, this assertion resists the notion that God has assigned religious leadership and authority to one gender. "Genesis" reiterates women's participation in the image of God, and their religious authority and right to religious leadership because of such, through further substitutions. Hunt Steenblik writes, "God created women in / Her own image" (lines 5–6), using the plural "women" instead of the singular "woman" that is expected when she begins to substitute "woman" for Genesis 1:26–27's use of "man." This choice may seem small—it is, after all, merely the difference of a single letter—but its implications are vast and liberatory. With the use of the plural, Hunt Steenblik argues that all women are *imago Dei*, not just a paradigmatic Eve figure described in the Biblical creation story, placing all women at the center of this religious narrative and indicating that female religious authority and leadership are just as valid as the leadership men have exercised for centuries.

"The Spirit of Eliza" works in a similar way to "Genesis," using a familiar scripture with gender-bent substitutions to question why religious leadership has been so male-dominated historically and to suggest that righting gender relations is a key part of the Church's work. "The Spirit of Eliza" uses Malachi 4:5–6 as its inspiration, an eschatological prophecy in which Elijah appears as a messenger to "reinforce and restore the covenant" (Davis 102); in other words, Malachi sees Elijah's work as necessary before God can come. Elijah "will restore people to God by reforming their bad behavior" (Davis 104). In Hunt Steenblik's version, the messenger is a woman—"Eliza the Prophetess" (96, line 1). That the eschatological messenger is identified as female serves a similar purpose to the substituting of female for male in "Genesis." The substitution renews female presence in religious narratives. Met with this unexpected turn, readers slow down and ask themselves why women are not typically identified as prophets and whether there is something inherent about women that makes them incapable of religious leadership in the highest offices.

It is important also to note the tense of these lines. In this poem, "Eliza the Prophetess" has already come and "turned / . . . the hearts of

the children / to their Mother” (lines 2, 5–6). In Mormon tradition, Malachi’s prophecy about Elijah was fulfilled “when Elijah appeared to Joseph Smith in the Kirtland Temple,” restoring Godly power to seal families together for eternity (“The Great” 226, 228). Hunt Steenblik’s poem mirrors this belief, but refers to a different messenger. The name Eliza is not merely a female analogue for Elijah. When we note the tense of the lines alongside its focus on the feminine divine, we can recognize it as a reference to Eliza R. Snow, who was one of the first Mormons to write about a female Deity. Snow was an extremely influential leader and public figure in early Mormonism, was married to two Mormon prophets and sister to a third, and was an advocate for women’s spiritual capabilities (Mulvay 253–54). The third verse of Snow’s hymn “O My Father” states, “In the heavens are parents single? / No, the thought makes reason stare! / Truth is reason; truth eternal / Tells me I’ve a mother there.” Therefore, in Hunt Steenblik’s version of Malachi 4:5–6, a necessary step toward the eventual redemption of the world is recognizing the imago Dei of women—their presence and participation in Christian traditions—as well as their potential for religious authority and leadership. The “Mother” to which we, “the children,” must turn is the feminine divine, yes, but in light of Hunt Steenblik’s larger project, it is also the unrecognized and undervalued female authority in the Mormon church today. According to the poem, without a righting of the gender relations in the church so that women’s authority, leadership, and presence are recognized, we cannot move toward a redeemed world.

Conclusion

Hunt Steenblik uses embodied womanhood, domestic imagery, and scriptural language in order to present a version of God that is bodily and female and resist common traditional Christian binaries that privilege male above female and mind over body. Poems like “Postpartum” and “The Morning Søren Was Born” show the process of giving birth, a specifically female embodied experience, as a revelatory process that facilitates communion with God; they also connect God’s creation of the world to physical birth, suggesting that God has experienced embodied womanhood. These two arguments help undo the binary structure that has associated women with body and categorized both as inferior by representing God as an embodied woman. Further, poems such as “Mother Tongue” and “Veil” depict domestic life as another avenue for revelation, as Hunt Steenblik shows herself learning about God through interacting with her daughter; juxtaposed with these domestic-focused poems are

poems like “My First Article of Faith” and “Holy Places,” which put Hunt Steenblik in the position of prophet alongside Joseph Smith, the first Mormon prophet, and other scriptural prophets. The Christian binary has separated women from religious leadership by aligning motherhood and leadership as distinct and gendered roles that do not overlap, but Hunt Steenblik resists simple categorizing by demonstrating that she can gain knowledge about God through embodied and domestic experience and can encompass both the role of mother and prophet. Finally, poems such as “Genesis” and “The Spirit of Eliza” rewrite women into scripture, reminding readers that all women are created in the image of God and reiterating the importance of including women in religious leadership in creating the kingdom of God.

As Hunt Steenblik’s poems deconstruct patriarchal binaries—allowing for the equalization of male and female religious authority, the liberation of women to claim that authority and lead in new ways, and the representation that proves this model of leadership is possible—they assert a new, more egalitarian basis of knowledge, and therefore, authority. *Mother’s Milk* resists merely recognizing women’s rationality; these poems also emphasize the validity of the body. In doing both, Hunt Steenblik not only opens traditional forms of religious leadership to women but also demonstrates possibilities for different types of knowledge, roles, and leadership not based on gender. Her use of embodied womanhood as a metaphor for God suggests that everyone, not just women, can use their bodies as a site of religious authority, indicating plural foundations for that authority. Hunt Steenblik’s juxtaposition of domestic life, traditionally assigned to women, and religious leadership, typically given to men, allows a fluidity in which both men and women can be both invested in the home and have institutional religious power. Finally, Hunt Steenblik’s appropriation of scriptural language to include women in traditional religious narratives, as in the creation of Adam and Eve and the story of Elijah the prophet, provides an example of what it might look like to have women and men share religious power equally and emphasizes that women have always been intimately involved in religious matters.

Writing about *l’écriture féminine*, Diane Crowder asserts, “Oppression is a state in which one is prevented by others from acquiring or acting upon knowledge which one needs and wants” (125). *Mother’s Milk* is an opening of essential knowledge, a key to dismantling the binary structures that have meant leaving Mormon women out of authoritative and leadership roles for so long. Words have the power to shape reality; our theological words change the way we see the world. So does repre-

sentation. Words and representation in Hunt Steenblik's poems become liberatory by deconstructing the dualisms that separate men and women, leaders and those led, mind and body. *Mother's Milk* enacts the arguments it makes, as Hunt Steenblik uses her embodied and domestic experiences to connect with God and share the knowledge she gains as a prophet and mother, making it clear that religious authority, power, and presence is available to anyone willing to resist traditional binaries and claim it.

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