

Saints, Seers, and Sorceresses: Femininity and the Spiritual Supernatural in  
Contemporary U.S. Film and Television

by

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To My Family,  
With Love and Gratitude

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction: The Spiritual Supernatural as a Discourse of Femininity

This study begins with the observation that during the late 1990s and early 2000s, there was a sharp uptick in representations of women as witches in film and television texts. Even more striking than the number of narratives about witches was the frequency with which they presented witchcraft not simply as magical powers, but as a belief system with a moral code. These texts often invoked “the Craft” or “Wicca”—the terms used by contemporary practitioners to denote witchcraft as a religion, a spiritual practice—to describe the practices in which on-screen witches were engaged. In the films *The Craft* (1995) and *Practical Magic* (1999) and the long-running television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) and *Charmed* (1998-2006), the witches certainly had supernatural powers, but these powers were tied, to varying degrees, to spirituality as well. Representations of the intersection of spirituality and the supernatural, what I am calling the “spiritual supernatural,” were not limited to representations of witchcraft or to stories about women with supernatural powers.

Indeed, in the past two decades the cultural landscape of the United States was marked by a florescence of popular film and television texts featuring women and the spiritual supernatural. In addition to texts featuring characters with supernatural powers tied to Wicca, this media phenomenon comprises texts which directly engage the

established, though controversial, religious institution of the Catholic Church: *Dogma* (1999), *Stigmata* (1999), and *The Da Vinci Code* (2006). Lastly, the trend also includes texts that meditate on faith and the nature of divinity: *Touched By An Angel* (1994-2003), *Joan of Arcadia* (2002-2004), and *Saving Grace* (2006-2010). The spiritual supernatural, as it appears in these film and television texts, is characterized by women cast as angels, witches, descendents of Jesus Christ, and mystics.

The multiplicity and diversity of these texts demonstrates the degree to which the “spiritual supernatural” pervaded various forms and levels of popular culture at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Indeed, these ten texts may at first appear to be more noteworthy for their differences than their similarities. For instance, they are not confined to a single medium, appearing on both film and television screens. Two films, *The Da Vinci Code* and *Practical Magic*, are adaptations of best-selling novels. Representations of femininity and the spiritual supernatural also appear across a range of genres including drama, comedy, fantasy, horror, romance, and suspense. Many of these texts display a high level of generic hybridity. Further, they are texts that appeal to an array of audiences of different sizes and demographic make-ups. The characters themselves range in age from young teenage girls to middle-aged women. Rather than simply offering an example of pseudo-individuation, the texts that make up this trend tell a multiplicity of stories.

Through close readings of these films and television series, this dissertation traces the rise of the spiritual supernatural as a significant and complex discourse in U.S. culture at the turn of both a century and a millennium. By “discourse,” I mean that the spiritual supernatural is, following John Fiske, “a repertoire of words, images, and practices by which meanings are circulated and power applied” (1994, 3). Importantly, discourse is

also a space of struggle over how to make sense of the world. As Fiske explains, “To make sense of the world is to exert power over it, and to circulate that sense socially is to exert power over those who use that sense as a way of coping with their daily lives” (3). Media texts are particularly important sites of discursive action because they function, as Fiske puts it, as a kind of “discursive relay station.” As such they take up existing topics and “give them high visibility, energize them, and direct or redirect their general orientation before relaying them out again into public circulation” (24). Thus, the texts that make up this media trend are not the origin point of public interest in the spiritual supernatural, but instead refract and refocus this interest in light of the cultural context which requires such sense-making work.

My discursive analysis of the spiritual supernatural is further guided by Fiske’s metaphor of culture as a river of discourses. This metaphor encourages us to think of both dynamism and constraining structures, after all, as Fiske notes, “rivers do flow in certain directions and not others, they are confined within limits, and certain social functions have privileged access to their banks and their waters” (9). The metaphor also allows us to recognize the existence of discourses as multiple currents. As Fiske notes, “currents that had been flowing together can be separated, and one turned on the other, producing conflict out of calmness” (9). In U.S. culture, there are deep and powerful “currents” which carry meanings about identity categories including gender, race, class, ability, and religion. These currents come to the surface at particular moments in the form of “discursive topics” in which we can see currents intermingle and act upon each other—“each is muddled with the silt of the others, none can flow in unsullied purity and

isolation” (9). The spiritual supernatural, then, is one such discursive topic in which we can see a number of intersections of different “currents.”

I argue that at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the spiritual supernatural offers a particularly powerful discourse about femininity. While there is nothing in the definition of the spiritual supernatural as a concept that necessarily ties it to women or femininity, in the media trend I analyze it is decidedly feminized in several ways. First, while these texts pay a great deal of attention to the hidden, ineffable, miraculous, and mysterious, the struggles over abstract concepts play out in narratives about individuals and on concrete bodies—even if they are fictional characters—and those bodies belong to women. They are narratives focused on female characters. Further, the texts are all engaged to varying degrees in grappling with anxieties about gender in the wake of Second Wave feminist activism and the backlash against it. At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, one of the key sites of popular anxiety was over gender norms, particularly norms of femininity. In the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, these norms were significantly destabilized and reconfigured by various forms of feminist activism and agitation. The texts analyzed in this dissertation respond to and refract countervailing discourses of both femininity and feminism circulating in popular, academic, and activist culture during the 1990s and 2000s. Even when this engagement seems peripheral to a text, the centrality of women to these narratives always has consequences for the ongoing struggles over the regime of gender power in U.S. culture.

Though the form they take is unique to the cultural-historical moment in which they appear, the images and narratives of femininity and the spiritual supernatural circulated by film and television of the 1990s and 2000s do not constitute a wholly new



discourse, but rather a resurfacing of one with deep and complex historical roots. U.S. culture in particular has a history of popular fascination with such themes (Jenkins, 2000; Urban, 2006) and the trend I analyze in this dissertation marks yet another upwelling of interest. Moreover, the particular forms of the spiritual supernatural represented in the texts I analyze have historically been gendered as feminine. Witchcraft is perhaps the most obviously feminized case of the spiritual supernatural in the trend I examine. This gendering applies to both historical figurations of witches, particularly during periods of their persecution (Ehrenreich and English, 1973; Karlsen, 1998 [1987]), but is also related to feminist reclamations of the witch as a figure and Witchcraft as a spiritual practice (Gibson, 2007). Angels, as another example, have been constructed in U.S. culture predominately as women or with feminine characteristics since the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Gardella, 2007). Often, associating women and femininity with the spiritual supernatural functioned to constrain women and re-stabilize the hegemonic social order. Recent representations of the spiritual supernatural certainly bear traces of earlier moments of attraction, or often, revulsion.

In treating the spiritual supernatural as a discourse of femininity, then, I am looking at the ways such stories and images rework these mythological precedents and put forth particular ideas about what constitutes the feminine and what is possible—and impossible—for women and girls at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In these texts it is women who are represented as the emissaries of God. It is women who wield supernatural powers as witches, it is women whose bodies are constructed as a very real threat to powerful institutions like the Catholic Church, and it is women who are chosen as instruments of God. Moreover, the women at the center of these narratives rarely embody

the kind of femininity popularly associated with spirituality or religiosity. And yet, as I will demonstrate in the subsequent chapters, these narratives simultaneously rein in the disruptive possibilities of these narratives through their use of the spiritual supernatural. Women's anger is delegitimized and demonized. Women act heroically in these texts, but they are repeatedly called to put the needs of others before their own, often in terms that reinscribe maternal instincts and desires as an immutable component of womanhood. In other cases, women are reduced to vessels through a similar valorization of their reproductive capabilities. Women are called by God to carry out tasks that involve the feminized work of building individual interpersonal relationships rather than attending to structural or systematic issues. By attending to the mythological precedents that these texts rework and their grounding in religion and spirituality, this dissertation begins to fill a significant gap in recent feminist criticism of media and popular culture at the turn of the century.

### Defining the Spiritual Supernatural

Before moving to an analysis of how the spiritual supernatural operates as a discourse of femininity within U.S. culture at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is necessary to explicate what exactly I mean by the "spiritual supernatural." The spiritual supernatural refers to the intersection of "the spiritual" and "the supernatural", two terms with a good deal of conceptual overlap. According to sociologists of religion Penny Marler and Kirk C. Hadaway, spirituality is, "above all, about a connection between the individual and some larger, usually supernatural, reality" (2002, 295). Rodney Stark defines the supernatural as "forces or entities beyond or outside nature which can suspend, alter, or ignore physical forces" (2004, 10). Thus, while each term covers much

of the same conceptual terrain, “spirituality” and the “supernatural” are not perfectly synonymous and there are manifestations of each element that do not include each other. To elaborate using a negative construct: some texts I am not looking at include *7th Heaven* and *The X-Files*. The former is very much about spirituality in that the plotlines often center on matters of the soul and of morality in the context of Christianity, but they do not present explicit manifestations of the supernatural. That is, the characters purport to have an active relationship with God, a supernatural being, but the show does not attempt to represent God or other spirit beings, nor does it foreground divine intervention in the mortal world. *The X-Files*, on the other hand, is steeped in questions about the supernatural such as whether psychic powers or mythological creatures can be verified through objectivist science, but such musings are rarely located within an explicitly spiritual context.

Using the concept of the spiritual supernatural allows us to avoid the definitional problems and connotations of other more familiar terms such as “mystical” or “magical”. Indeed, there is a great deal of overlap between these terms and they are part of the spiritual supernatural. One reason I do not use any of them is because of the wide variety of ways each has been defined. Consider “mystical,” which, as religious scholar Leigh Eric Schmidt has convincingly argued, has lost nearly all its explanatory value (2003). This is not terribly surprising given that we are talking about the ineffable—that which defies representation and explanation. Similarly, terms like “magic” and “the occult” are weighed down with multiple definitions and connotations which make them difficult to use effectively in this analysis. Beyond these basic parameters, the spiritual supernatural, in its current form, is an eclectic set of approaches to knowing and making sense of the

world. These approaches are driven by a concern with otherworldly connections and mysterious occurrences. The spiritual supernatural is a phenomenon that traverses a variety of belief systems and faiths<sup>1</sup>.

As a response to dissatisfaction with established institutions of knowledge and authority, much of the spiritual supernatural falls in line with what are often called “new” or “alternative” spiritualities, like Wicca or Paganism. One prominent Wiccan leader, Aiden Kelly, even asserted that Wicca’s “open” or flexible metaphysics are the only kind capable of coping with the uncertainties of living in the contemporary world (Adler, [1979], 2006). Philosopher, Francois Lyotard also invoked these traits of Paganism to theorize a response to the mounting critique of master discourses that long-dominated Western thought (Lyotard, 1989). That said, it is not just “new” or “alternative” spiritual practices moving from the margins towards the center. The mystical and magical elements of more mainstream and established faiths are also increasingly prominent. Many who identify primarily as belonging to a particular belief system also embrace elements of others, even if the combinations are contradictory (Marler and Hadaway, 2004). Specifically, these texts feature Wicca, the contemporary practice of witchcraft, various strands of Christianity, especially Roman Catholicism, and narratives that deny the supremacy of any one religious institution in favor of a more general notion of faith.

The concept of the spiritual supernatural allows us to recognize the commonalities that exist among these seemingly contradictory spiritual systems. For example, while there are significant differences between belief systems such as Wicca and Pentecostalism, there are several areas of significant overlap between them. Both

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<sup>1</sup> The almost complete absence of Judaism and Islam is noteworthy and troubling. While an explanation of these absences is beyond the scope of this dissertation, in each chapter, I attempt to explain why the belief systems that we see represented feature so prominently in the cultural landscape.

movements are concerned with the “rediscovery of invisible realms of sacred power” and “ecstatic, emotional experience of this power” (Lucas, 1992, 194). Additionally, both movements emphasize experiencing sacred power and contacting “noncorporeal intelligence” directly. Whether through channeling or speaking in tongues, “these events are experienced as a dramatic breakthrough of sacred power into an ordinary world, as an intensely personal, often ecstatic interaction with this power, and as compelling evidence of the proximity of other realms of being” (197). The belief in spirit beings is also central to both spiritualities as they are concerned with the “reintegration of the alienated individual into some form of sacred community.” Both believe in the imminence of world transformation and they prioritize “anti-institutionalism and democratization of spiritual authority” (205). While these are not the only faiths discussed in this dissertation, in all of the representations I analyze we see a heightened interest in individualized relationships with faith and divinity and the possibility of interaction between this world and the world beyond. While these interactions are not always represented as “ecstatic” they are intense emotional and often physical experiences.

Thus far, I have purposely avoided using the word “religion” in defining the spiritual supernatural, but we must also consider the relationship between these terms. In contemporary common use, spirituality is often used in opposition to the concept of religion<sup>2</sup>. While the two terms are not fully synonymous, religion is a key component of the spiritual supernatural and the media phenomenon I analyze. When I use the words “religion” or “religious” I am primarily referring to shared institutional structures and practices such as the Vatican in the Roman Catholic Church, services or worship, sacraments, and the individuals working in and facilitating them. Often I will use religion

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<sup>2</sup> I will further discuss the discourse of “spiritual but not religious” in a later section.

alongside spirituality when I mean to refer to all of these dimensions of belief systems and experiences. However, even when I use only one of the terms, as in the “spiritual supernatural,” it should be understood that while the spiritual can be found outside of religions, it is often found within and is largely inextricable from them. Indeed, while one can conceive of spirituality outside of any particular religion and the supernatural outside of both, in the trend under analysis here, the spiritual supernatural is very much bound up in moral and ethical codes provided by various religions.

U.S. culture is no stranger to popular interest in the intersection of the spiritual and the supernatural (Jenkins, 2000; Urban, 2006), but such beliefs have persisted in 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century U.S. culture in contradiction with dominant sociological theories of “secularization” advanced by Max Weber and his followers. These hypotheses predicted “the advance of reason over religious or magical thinking with regard to the world, the ‘disenchantment’ of nature and society” (Gardella, 2007, 6). Secularization has occurred unevenly and incompletely, but as philosopher Timothy Reiss (1982) points out, rationalism is still the dominant discourse of modernity. Thus, while non-rational ways of knowing and thinking persist, they are defined in opposition to “reason”. Moreover, they are usually understood to be less valid than rational thought. Belief in the spiritual supernatural—in the magical and mystical, in angels and demons, and in divine intervention and mortal control over supernatural forces—poses a challenge to the hegemony of rational or reason-based knowledge.

Contemporary texts that feature the spiritual supernatural do not simply assert the reality of those phenomena, but rather explore the permeability of socially constructed binaries of “reason” and “faith”, “science” and “religion”. “Reason” and “faith” are

commonly discussed as separate and often incompatible concepts, much like “religion” and “science.” Both sets of concepts, however, are historically linked. Still, binaries have developed that tend toward reason/faith, science/religion, and rational/irrational. These binaries are often mapped onto the even more pervasive oppositions of mind to body and masculine to feminine. Characters in these stories often embrace or come to embrace elements of both sides of these binaries. Of course, people in their daily lives have always managed the reality that the terms in these dichotomies are never truly mutually exclusive.

The point, then, is not that texts which feature the spiritual supernatural are the first to challenge the stability of these binaries. Rather, it is that these texts represent a move towards directly engaging those binaries and their inconsistencies in popular culture. Stories about the spiritual supernatural, then, are ones that insist on multiple ways of knowing. Moreover, they are stories that in a way legitimate forms of knowledge that are often marginalized and devalued. It is not surprising that discourses of identity are also substantial parts of this trend.

As Philip Jenkins notes, historically, spiritual and religious innovation and hybridity have tended to flourish in the US at moments where identity categories, particularly gender, sexuality, and race have been in “rapid flux” (2000, 21-22). Media content invariably shapes and is shaped by discourses of the social anxieties of a given moment, and thanks to the representational nature of the mass media, none more than those surrounding issues of identity. In the next section I discuss the ways these knowledges have often been gendered as feminine as well as the ways in which

contemporary popular epistemological struggles are in some cases about gender and femininity in particular.

### Femininity and the Spiritual Supernatural: Gendering Knowledge/Knowing Gender

While the texts I analyze here are a product of the context of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, the elements of the supernatural on which they are drawing invokes an eclectic set of well-established imagery, archetypes, and narratives. Examples of these precedents abound across epochs; they include the mystical saints such as Teresa of Avila whose communications with her god took the form of ecstasies akin to the throes of sexual passion but who also starved herself to death, and female Spiritualists in the 19<sup>th</sup> century who produced ectoplasm and could commune with the dead. These types of stories posit examples of feminized knowledge that is deemed valid and valuable in a given cultural and historical context.

It is telling, however, that the women in these historical cases were often decried as feeble-minded or mad and/or were often suspected of ties to evil precisely because of their supposed relationship to their bodies. For instance, the *Malleus Maleficarum*, the “witch hunting” manual used during the Inquisition, asserted that women’s heightened vulnerability to temptations of the flesh, their “carnal lust,”<sup>3</sup> also made them more prone to possession. As Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English assert, “In the eyes of the Church, all the witches’ power was derived from her sexuality” (1973, 11). Arthurian legend and the figures of Guinevere and Morgana in particular also constitute an important source of discursive sediment carried through to contemporary society. Another more recent example of these tensions can be found in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the U.S. and Europe, when women accounted for a significant portion of mediums.

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<sup>3</sup> Text from the *Malleus Maleficarum* cited in Ehrenreich and English, 1973.



Indeed, Spiritualists' own writings asserted that mediums, male or female, "were weak in the masculine qualities of will and reason and strong in the female qualities of intuition and nervousness" as well as passivity and physical frailty (Moore, 1975, 202-3). Female mediums emphasized these traits in order to practice their craft while maintaining a claim to respectable femininity. Still, Moore notes, female mediums were often subject to ridicule and ostracization as well as pathologization by their critics. So while women have at times been able to lay claims to particular forms of knowledge and to participate in spiritual life, these claims and that participation were often undercut by their association with the base body.

As Alison Jaggar and Susan Bordo note, "The body, notoriously and ubiquitously associated with the female, regularly has been cast, from Plato to Descartes to modern positivism, as the chief enemy of objectivity" (1989, 4). So, historically, while objectivity and reason have long prevailed over faith and emotion as epistemological paradigms, lofty concepts of spirit (enterprising, civilizing) have been seen as compatible with the mind side of the mind/body split presupposed by objectivism. Somewhat paradoxically, despite women finding themselves lodged firmly on the "body" side of the mind/body duality, they are also constructed as potentially more in tune with the supernatural. Of course, this link is often construed negatively, as in a proclivity for possession and/or seduction by forces of evil. Thus, women, constructed as inextricable from the body, were long-fated to have their encounters with the spiritual supernatural regarded as insanity or evil.

This project does not intend to make grand trans-historical claims about femininity and its links to the spiritual supernatural. Rather, it acknowledges that the

texts under investigation reference these historical trajectories and, thus, reflect the residue they have left on United States culture. Moreover, contemporary producers of these film and television texts are drawing on and adding to the cultural accretion of centuries of linking women to metaphysical questions about the intersection of the spiritual and the supernatural, often quite explicitly. In so doing, these precedents affect the contours of contemporary constructions of identity in a more direct way.

For example, we see these references in *Joan of Arcadia*'s use of the story of Joan of Arc. In its nomenclature, *Joan of Arcadia* references a distant past, but also a clear present – Joan of Arc being a nod to a French girl who becomes a messenger of God for herself and her people; Arcadia being a suburb and construction of 20<sup>th</sup> century processes of urban development, white flight, and de-industrialization. The stark contrast and simultaneous juxtaposition drawing upon those very different historical trajectories produces a tongue-in-cheek effect that lightens the otherwise seemingly weighty effect of holding contemporaries accountable for their moral and spiritual choices as the original Joan was. These texts, then, are foregrounding a non-dominant depiction of women in their narratives of women as spiritual beings. Moreover, they are intervening in discourses that have traditionally circumscribed the possibilities for women and girls' experiences and knowledge.

But these recent representations still traffic in troubling tropes of female bodiliness. The challenges that these texts make to dominant modes of knowledge, then, are often linked to ideas about femininity that suggest that to be a woman is to be more connected to one's physical body and to nature (a trait that can be constructed as a strength but is equally, if not more often deemed a weakness or danger) (Bordo and

Jaggar, 1989; Ortner, 1998 [1974]). For example, the film, *Dogma* (1999), challenges established Catholic narratives about God's will and the lives of Jesus Christ, his apostles, and most notably, the Virgin Mary. Its counter-narrative posits that Mary had more children after Jesus and that one of their descendants, a niece of Christ, lives on in the form of Bethany (Linda Fiorentino) a divorced, disillusioned Catholic, who works at an abortion clinic. Bethany, whose own crisis of faith was spawned by her infertility, is an unlikely figure to be summoned to act as "mother to the world." Ultimately, however the film's disruption of traditional Catholic prescriptions for women's place in spiritual life and the lived world is somewhat undermined by its conclusion in which Bethany is impregnated by God as a reward. In this moment she goes from being a savior to being a vessel, which realigns her with norms of femininity.

These texts' attempts to foreground forms of knowledge and experience that have been feminized and thus delegitimized and marginalized are a key component to the intervention they make in contemporary discourses of femininity. And yet, femininity and the spiritual supernatural are deployed in these texts to negotiate epistemological struggles that are not always explicitly or primarily about gender. Moreover, elements of feminist theology and politics—hardly common or expected topics for mainstream popular culture—are taken up not only to appeal to particular female audiences, but mass audiences. My point, to which I will return in my conclusion, is that these texts suggest that particular aspects of femininity are becoming important currents in other discourses as well.

It is true that many of these texts reproduce precisely the structures they purport to undermine and I am wholly uninterested in "redeeming" these shows and films. My point

is that these texts are using femininity and the spiritual supernatural to negotiate anxieties that are never only, or in many cases even primarily, about gender or spirituality. The problematic ways that women are often contained in the process of using them to level critiques against established institutions of knowledge are not terribly surprising. Instead, these texts are relevant because oppositional positions get foregrounded, and they are appropriate examples of mainstream commercial media. Oppositional positions and themes, therefore, are constituted by the ways that women move into new roles, but also the ways that the moral and ethical questions simultaneously constrain them and put forth deeply counter-hegemonic ideas. For instance, consumption is almost never offered up as a viable solution to these characters' dilemmas, though consumption is often represented as “therapeutic” in non-spiritual supernatural texts. While these characters may bristle under the spiritual supernatural, they never choose to quit, even when that option is offered. These qualities set these texts apart from both their contemporaries and predecessors, yet they are very much shaped by the broader context of discourses of femininity in the 1990s and 2000s.

#### Feminism, Femininity, and the Media

Discourses of femininity in the U.S. in the 1990s were indeed characterized by simultaneously progressive and regressive events and trends such as the rise of movements like Riot Grrrl and its transformation into Girl Power (both a program funded by the federal government and the Spice Girls' catch phrase) increased visibility of women athletes such as the 1994 World Cup-winning U.S. women's soccer team; panic-inducing popular psychology about girls' and young women's fragility such as Mary Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia* (1994), a cultural recognition of female sexuality that was

embraced by popular men's publications like *Maxim* and constrained by legislative attacks on reproductive rights; and the sudden visibility of sexual harassment (Douglas, 2010).

Interestingly, in the 1990s and continuing through the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, anxieties about femininity were not confined to those invested in upholding the patriarchy. Indeed, as a generation of women came of age taking for granted the hard-won gains made by Second Wave activism yet simultaneously disidentifying with that set of feminisms (or at least popular conceptions of them), these same activists and writers expressed apprehension towards cries of "Girl Power!," disclaimers like "I'm not a feminist, but..." and justifications such as "I choose my choice." At the same time, new feminisms emerged which, rather than dispensing with liberal feminist theories and practices altogether, built upon earlier activism and theorizing by engaging the critiques that women of color feminists and third-world feminists leveled against it for ignoring and/or actively working to erase difference (For a full discussion see Lotz, 2003).

This was a period of wide-spread cultural fomentation stemming from anxieties about identity and particularly femininity in the wake of Second Wave feminist activism and the culture of backlash against it (Faludi, 1991). As Angela McRobbie explains, what we see beginning in the early 1990s is actually a double movement in both popular culture and the feminist academy that produces what she calls a "complexification of backlash" (2009, 8). McRobbie notes that at this moment, the feminist academy rightly "dismantles itself, by asking questions about foundationalism and universalism, and about representational claims. It queries for example the processes by which feminists speak on behalf of other women... What hierarchies underpin certain feminist agendas?"

(8). She also traces the way that simultaneously, in popular culture, “there is also an undoing or dismantling of feminism, not in favour of re-traditionalisation, . . . but instead there is a process which says feminism is no longer needed, it is now common sense, and as such it is something young women can do without” (8).

While McRobbie is writing in the UK context, Susan Douglas (2010) has traced similar trends in the United States. Douglas observes that while in the past popular media in the U.S. have appeared to be behind the curve in terms of representations of women's places in society, certain contemporary media texts tend to portray women in such blindingly positive light that the real inequalities which remain a part of women's lived experiences gets obscured. She writes that what the media have been providing us with—through texts geared towards both male and female audiences—are “little more than fantasies of power.” (5) These fantasies “assure girls and women, repeatedly, that women's liberation is a *fait accompli* and that we are stronger, more successful, more sexually in control, more fearless, and more held in awe than we actually are” (5-6). Such “images of imagined power,” Douglas argues, “mask, and even erase, how much still remains to be done for girls and women, . . . make sexism seem fine, even fun, and insist that feminism is now utterly pointless—even bad for you” (6).

The spiritual supernatural with its focus on the mysterious and the miraculous seems likely to produce such illusions of power. Certainly, part of what these texts do is to contain anxieties that arise in the wake of visible feminist activism about what women and girls can and will do with their supposed empowerment. Much has been made in the field of feminist media studies about the rise of young women with links to the supernatural in popular culture over the last 15 years (Helford, 2000; Wilcox and Lavery,

2002; Dicker and Peipmeier, 2003; Early and Kennedy, 2003). However, the analysis of this trend has largely remained at the level of individual media texts and narrow views of the cultural-historical context in which it emerges (Heinecken, 2003 is an exception though it is limited to television). Most of this work focuses on girls and young women with superpowers that give them physical strength. Most significantly, almost none of this work recognizes the strong current of spirituality running through many of these representations.

This dissertation aims to expand understandings of contemporary media discourses of femininity by drawing out the meanings of the many representations of women and the supernatural that also invoke spirituality and religion. These are women and girls—whose ages range from young teens to their 40s and 50s—who communicate with divine beings, who possess and exercise magical powers as witches bound to a moral code, and whose bodies serve as vessels for grace. As a response to anxieties about gender and other popular epistemological struggles at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, these texts engage in the conflation of questions of femininity and the otherworldly in new and heretofore under-analyzed ways.

As Stuart Hall noted in his plenary address to the 2007 Cultural Studies Now conference, “...no study of television programmes or any other particular instance of culture is in my view properly Cultural Studies unless, in the end, it is haunted by the question – ‘But what does this have to do with everything else?’” The “everything else” that “haunts” this study is at the most basic level: the way that these texts work through the disjuncture of gender norms/ideals in the wake of second wave feminist activism. But “everything else” also refers to the centrality of religion and spirituality to these

negotiations of femininity. Significantly, in that same plenary, titled "This and That moment", Hall attempts to address the current "settlement" noting the difficulty of doing so but asserting that one issue that seems universally puzzling is religion. Hall states,

“You don’t understand and I don’t understand either how the long history of secular enlightenment ends up with the major opponent of the capitalist global system in a religious formation. We really don’t know anything about how this came about. This is a cultural question, if there is a cultural question – what is the place of religion today and why does it move around in this way in relation to social struggles of different kinds?”

Though Hall was speaking about more specifically about the rise of Islamic fundamentalism as an opponent of global capitalism, this dissertation is very much concerned with the question of the place of religion today and its relation to social struggles. In this case, I am most interested in social struggles over gender and have thus tried to ask: how do religion and spirituality operate in the struggle to achieve a new "settlement" of gender. McRobbie and Douglas (among others) have detailed the ways in which popular culture has constructed a concept of feminism that is unpalatable and obsolete to women and presented forms of objectification and constraint as fun and even empowering. Key to this work towards settlement is the fact that it is not a re-traditionalization of femininity that we see or at least that is not primarily what we see.

It is still surprising, however, that religion becomes such an effective part of reconfiguring discourses of femininity at this moment given that religion in US culture—however erroneously—is often associated with conservative social values. It is significant, then, that the forms of religion and spirituality that are represented in these texts are already gendered and even associated with feminist critique. But they are also widely regarded as "fringe-y", not mainstream. More often than not, though, they



function in similarly if not more conservative/constraining ways than more "traditional" spiritualites.

This analysis is significant because feminist media studies' failure to engage with these narratives, or to do so while dismissing their connections to religion and spirituality is a significant gap in recent work on the ways that certain elements of feminism and feminist thinking have been incorporated into popular media in such a way as to render feminism unnecessary and even contrary to women's well-being. These texts are certainly engaged in the work of containing the threat that feminist ideas pose to the status quo, but which ideas and the methods of containment are different and practically undiscussed in the extant literature.

#### Media and Religion: Research and Theory

Of course Hall is not the first to call for scholarly attention to the place of religion in contemporary culture. This dissertation is rooted in recent work by media studies scholars and others on religion in the media. Edited volumes such as Stout and Buddenbaum's *Religion and Mass Media: Audiences and Adaptations* (1996), Hoover and Lundby's *Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture* (1997), Lynn Schofield Clark's *Religion, Media, and the Marketplace* (2007), and Diane Winston's *Small Screen, Big Picture* (2009) make up a significant segment of this work and offer a wealth of scholarship on distinct religious communities and particular texts. Like the body of literature addressing supernatural women in the media, this body of literature is limited by a lack of longer sustained analyses and a focus on clearly identifiable and discreet religious institutions. The kinds of questions asked in these studies have also tended to focus on a few areas. As Hoover and Schofield Clark (1997) note, in their bibliography of

the extant work on media, religion, and culture, the three main strands of research have been televangelism, religion in the news, and the effect of portrayals of religion on religious institutions.

This study aims to take up issues that Hoover and Schofield Clark identify as understudied, namely, the interplay between religious thought and popular culture, the contestation and containment of religious symbols in the media, and the discourses resulting from each of these processes. As Schofield Clark demonstrated in her study of teens and media representation of the supernatural, *From Angels to Aliens* (2005), media attention to themes such as those I am discussing are a significant component—though not necessarily a direct cause—of young people’s development of their identity and worldview. Though the current study does not speak to viewers of these texts, it attempts to consider the ways that they encourage or discourage certain readings or ways of thinking about their underlying themes. Likewise, Winston’s edited volume offers a variety of meditations on Robert Orsi’s concept of “lived religion” which allows us to consider religious belief and practice as flexible and discursively constructed. Lastly, Heather Hendershot’s *Shaking the World for Jesus* serves as a powerful reminder that there are media producers and markets outside of the major Hollywood film studios, broadcast networks, and larger cable channels. It is important to remember that the texts I am discussing are not produced by religious or spiritual institutions any more than they are produced by feminist institutions (though people of faith and people who identify as feminists are central to the production of a number of them). That is, they are representations that do not come from within particular spiritual communities and are not necessarily intended to appeal to them. Just as these scholars’ work addresses matters

beyond the scope of this study, so this dissertation looks to make one small step towards filling the gap in sustained feminist analysis of matters of gender in the burgeoning field of media and religion and culture

While this dissertation draws much from the field of Religious Studies, and religions and religious institutions are a significant factor in the texts under investigation, this project does not intend to adhere to or generate a universal definition of religion or the complementary concept of spirituality. Moreover, I contend that it is a broader set of metaphysical concerns that links these texts and warrants their analysis. This is why I work within a conceptual framework of the intersection of the spiritual and the supernatural—which is interested in religions and religious institutions inasmuch as they directly engage the spiritual supernatural. As Marler and Hadaway argue, religion and spirituality are, “different and interdependent” concepts (275). Yet, we cannot ignore the fact that religious identification and religious institutions are powerful cultural forces at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A 2009 study conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life concluded that, “The relationship between religion and politics is particularly strong with respect to political ideology and views on social issues such as abortion and homosexuality, with the more religiously committed adherents across several religious traditions expressing more conservative political views” (Pew Survey of the U.S. Religious Landscape, 2009)

At the same time, there is evidence which suggests that US culture is moving from a structured, institution-based religious mindset to an amorphous, individualistic spirituality. Scholars of religious studies such as Wade Clark Roof (1993) and Robert Wuthnow (1998) and cultural critics such as Slavoj Zizek (2000) have claimed, and, to

varying degrees, lamented a shift in post-WWII religious and spiritual life in the United States. Roof describes the Baby Boom generation as one of “seekers” and argues that, “the boundaries of popular religious communities are now being redrawn, encouraged by the quests of the large, post-WWII generations and facilitated by the rise of an expanded spiritual marketplace” (10). Similarly, Wuthnow describes the emergence of a “religion industry” which in recent years had expanded significantly. He notes that, “the boundaries between it and other industries have become blurred. Publishers, therapists, independent authors, and spiritual guides of all kinds have entered the marketplace” (11-12). As early as 1985 (Bellah et al.), scholars were expressing their concern that the marketization and individualization of spiritual life was begetting a culture of isolation and indifference to the greater good akin to what Christopher Lasch (1978) has called a “culture of narcissism.”

Zizek (2000), who has been among the most outspoken critics of this alleged shift, agrees that the individualized, pick-and-choose approach to religion and spirituality leads to a narcissistic US culture. He also points out that the spiritual marketplace’s inclusion of “alternative” or “eastern” beliefs, symbols, and practices—most often taken out of context—or what he calls a New Age “fetish” fits seamlessly into the logic and operations of global capitalism allowing individuals to consume other cultures without considering cultural imperialism, the conditions under which religions and spiritualities become commodified, or their responsibility to the cultures from whom they not only extract metaphysical resources but also cheap labor and resources (2000).

While religion and spirituality have most certainly been marketized, hybridized, and decontextualized, the shift from claiming religiosity to claiming spirituality and the

narcissism that results from it may not be so clean-cut or grave as many claim. Scholars such as Roof base their claims on extensive survey data which has reported an increase in people identifying as spiritual and a simultaneous decrease in people claiming to be religious. Marler and Hadaway (2004), however, note that the survey methodology so often used in these studies is flawed in that the questionnaires do not offer respondents the opportunity to identify as *both* religious and spiritual. They argue that when offered this option the vast majority of respondents (between 64.2 and 74%) choose it. Marler and Hadaway also point to the difficulty (I would argue impossibility) of operationalizing religion and spirituality as distinct variables. For them, religion and spirituality are “different *and* interdependent” concepts (294, emphasis mine). Thus, while the situation may not be as cut-and-dry as some claim, the discourse of religious *or* spiritual circulates widely in popular culture. Moreover, however subtly, religious and spiritual life in the United States has been and continues changing.

Such changes are not limited to the emergence of new religious movements like Wicca or New Age spiritualities. Indeed, at the same time as the discourse of “spiritual but not religious” emerges, so too does a resurgence of Evangelical Christianity<sup>4</sup>. While the less restrictive spiritualities of the New Age and neo-pagan movements can encourage a depoliticized subjectivity, the Evangelicalism of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century is decidedly

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<sup>4</sup> While Evangelicalism, Conservative Christianity, Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity, and the Christian Right are important forces in US culture, it is vitally important to note that these categories are not necessarily synonymous. The Rev. Jennifer S. Butler notes that, “secular liberals too often see Christianity monolithically as the religion of the oppressor, rather than as a diverse, dynamic religion” (2006, 6). Not all Christian communities, or even all conservative Christian communities are part of the Christian Right. That term refers to “the *organizations* and *leaders* that mobilize key constituencies to a conservative social agenda motivated by religious values” (Butler, 2006, 12). While this project is not a mapping of Christianities, it does conceive of a plurality of denominations and strands of that faith.

politicized, mobilizing voters through organizations as the Christian Coalition, and using grass-roots organizing to carry out local campaigns for the inclusion of Creationism in public school science curricula or the banning of Harry Potter books on the grounds that they implicitly endorse witchcraft, for example. While these may seem like countervailing trends, as I discussed in my definition of the spiritual supernatural, Lucas (1992) traces several areas of significant overlap between these systems of belief which help illustrate the resonance of the spiritual supernatural throughout various segments of US culture as well as its multi-faceted nature.

Thus, the moment in which the media trend I am investigating emerges is characterized by cultural forces that are at one level diametrically opposed and at another overlap significantly. Looking at these representations can tell us something about what we believe about these themes at the given moment. This can, in turn, help us understand social anxieties which inform the way we think of and treat people in society. The texts to be analyzed in this dissertation, as part of the cultural consciousness, reflect and help shape the shifting discourses of femininity in two ways. First, they do so through the invocation of the spiritual supernatural in imaginings of women's and girls' lives in the wake of post-World War II feminist activisms. They also do so through the feminization of the spiritual supernatural in narratives which grapple with the place of religion and spirituality in contemporary U.S. culture.

### Chapter Outline

In the next chapter, "Angels on the Airwaves: Femininity and the Spritual Supernatural in Early 1990s Television," I present the historical context in which the trend emerges by describing the roots of these profound and interrelated anxieties about

gender and metaphysics which characterized the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. More specifically, I consider the place of New Age as well as evangelical spiritualities in the U.S. as well as the religious scandals which unsettled many people's faith in spiritual institutions. I also note the interactions between feminism and the changing religious landscape in U.S. Culture. Feminist activism both offered critiques of and alternatives to traditional religions. It also won legal gains that prompted strong reactions from conservative religious organizations. In this context, this chapter then reads *Touched By An Angel* and its use of femininity to explore metaphysical questions. The series' deployment of characters marked by their racial and ethnic identities, as well as their imperfections, were key to the way they shepherded people through moral dilemmas by restoring their faith in God. My analysis focuses on the show's engagement with feminist issues and themes surrounding motherhood, sex work, and abortion.

Chapter 3: "Seasons of the Witch: Women, Wicca, and Empowerment in Film and Television," looks at representations of women as witches. In the films *The Craft* and *Practical Magic* and the television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Charmed*, the central characters are women whose supernatural powers come from the practice of witchcraft. Witchcraft in these texts is referred to as Wicca or The Craft and portrayed as a woman-centered, nature-based belief system with a clear moral code. This group of texts is the one that is most clearly marketed towards women and most directly tied to popular discourses of Girl Power and post-feminism (the struggle between feminism and femininity). Moreover, these texts emerge at a moment of renewed popular interest in feminist rhetoric, but also a moment in which feminism must work to respond to the intersectionality of identities and the diffuse nature of institutionalized sexism. In these

texts, supernatural powers are something newly (re)discovered or acquired by the characters. This chapter analyzes how texts about women as witches explore anxieties about power; more specifically, this chapter analyzes how these women deal with learning that having access to power cannot solve every problem, and that exercising power always has unforeseeable, and sometimes undesirable, consequences. By placing the characters within the context of Wicca, the texts offer narratives of women who operate within a structure of morals and this means they must grapple with the complexities of power.

Like “Seasons of the Witch,” Chapter 4: “The Body, The Blood, and The Catholic Church: Essentializing Femininity in *Dogma*, *Stigmata*, and *The Da Vinci Code*” focuses on texts that invoke a feminist spirituality. All three films, *Dogma*, *Stigmata*, and *The Da Vinci Code* lodge a culturally relevant and resonant, if not wholly accurate, critique of the Catholic Church as an institution which controls access to spiritual knowledge. The narratives of these texts provide spaces for women in the Church, and spiritual life more generally, by suggesting alternate stories about Christ's life and teachings and celebrating femininity as a spiritual force. Ultimately, however, these texts' focus on blood, bloodlines, and the female bodies through which they flow offers an idealized essence of femininity which maintains dominant ideas about masculine and feminine roles.

Chapter 5: “They’re No Angels: Saintliness, Sin, and Femininity in Television of the 2000s” examines the television series *Joan of Arcadia* and *Saving Grace* in which women receive visions of God and an angel, respectively. Though these texts, particularly *Joan*, draw on the earlier examples of women mystics who received visions of and orders from God or another agent of the divine, the series do not make the same



kind of connection between femininity and the spiritual supernatural that the texts in the other chapters do. Still, it is not inconsequential that it is women who are represented as the very reluctant recipients of revelation. It is through these women's reluctance and resistance that these texts present narratives that grapple with basic questions of faith, particularly about the existence of God as well as the possibilities and limitations of individual knowledge and action in more nuanced ways than in the past. I end with a discussion of the fact that while Joan and Grace offer narratives distinct from their predecessors (and each other), they also demonstrate the repeated themes of the containment of not-so-saintly women through the suppression of women's anger, the emphasis on individual, interpersonal interactions, and the insistence on women placing the needs of others before their own.

I begin my conclusion with conclude with a brief reading of the recent attention to political candidate Christine O'Donnell as an illustration of the continued relevance of the interplay of discourses of femininity, spirituality, and the supernatural to women's lives and U.S. culture. I use this discussion to open up a consideration of these texts as responses to not only anxieties around gender but also to a moment in U.S. culture which seems to be epistemologically unstable on so many fronts that that is its defining characteristic.

## Chapter 2

### Angels on the Airwaves: Femininity and the Spiritual Supernatural in Early 1990s Television

Before the witches, before the mystic female saints like *Joan of Arcadia*'s Joan Girardi, and before the living female descendants of Jesus Christ, like *Dogma*'s Bethany Sloane, there were angels. The premiere of *Touched By An Angel* (*TBAA*) in 1994 marks the beginning of the trend I analyze in this dissertation. It is the first, and longest-running (1994-2003), representation of femininity and the spiritual supernatural in film and television at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Driven in large part by the spiritual views of head writer and executive producer Martha Williamson, *TBAA* hailed the religious and Christians in particular with an earnestness that is not to be found in the other texts I analyze. Williamson, who identifies as being a “born again” Christian, has claimed that the success of her show was based on the fact that, “People of faith were tired of being portrayed as lunatics, mass murderers, or abusive right-wing parents... Why would they want to watch a show that insulted them? What we’re tapping into is that people want to see themselves reflected on TV” (quoted in Valhouli, 2000, 97). Though *TBAA*'s God is never formally identified as the Christian deity and other faiths are often represented respectfully, the frequent use of Gospel music and passages from the Bible certainly support such a reading. Indeed, Williamson has said publicly that she reworked the pilot

of the show<sup>5</sup> to “align with her faith and scripture” (Valhouli, 2000, 97). The series centered on two angels, Monica (Roma Downey) a “caseworker” and her supervisor, Tess (Della Reese) who take human form and appear to humans in times of crisis<sup>6</sup>. Each episode of this “spiritual procedural” presented the angels with a new assignment and concluded with the revelation of the angels’ identity as messengers sent to tell people that, as the copy on the DVD release of the series’ first season states, “God exists. He loves you and He wants to be a part of your life”.

Such overtly religious programming on broadcast television defied dominant industry logic, but proved successful with *TBAA* building an audience averaging 20 million viewers per week, making it the second most watched show after *ER* during its 1996-97, 1997-98, 1998-99, and 1999-2000 seasons (Nielsen Reports cited in Clark, 2005). While Williamson’s claim that people of faith wanted to see better representations of themselves certainly explains much of the series’ success, Victoria Johnson has detailed the ways in which *TBAA*’s appeal to the American heartland more generally in both themes and settings helped anchor CBS’s counterprogramming strategies against edgier fare like *ER* and *Seinfeld* (2000). Johnson’s astute analysis of the interplay between content and industrial exigencies illuminates a set of circumstances that allowed for the norms of broadcast television production and programming to be transgressed. Indeed, for people of faith, people who did not identify with the cynical urban feel of shows like *Seinfeld*, and people who yearned for a therapeutic message of hope *TBAA*

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<sup>5</sup> The series was originally created by John Masius who went on to create the HBO series *Dead Like Me* and was much darker and more cynical in tone.

<sup>6</sup> In later seasons they are joined regularly by an angel of death, Andrew (John Dye). Though Andrew is a man and in a position often considered scary or menacing, he too is feminized in his manners, which are quiet and nurturing, as well as in his physical appearance including his soft, rounded facial features and his hair which is often worn long and slightly feathered.

offered a meaningful alternative to other television fare. However, *TBAA* must also be understood in the context of a more wide-spread interest in angels in the U.S. during the 1990s.

What scholars and journalists have referred to as an “angel craze” manifested in publishing before coming to television screens and was dominated by women (Smith, 1994; Gardella, 2007). In 1990, Sophy Burnham published her best-selling tome, *A Book of Angels*, which contained her and others’ stories of encounters with angels as well as a discussion of the various theological approaches to these heavenly beings. In 1992, Joan Wester Anderson published her collection of accounts of angelic doings, *Where Angels Walk*, which also sold millions of copies. That same year, Alma Daniel published *Ask Your Angels*, which she co-authored with two men, Timothy Wyllie and Andrew Ramer, and an angel they called Abigraël. Rather than collecting stories about angels, *Ask Your Angels* instructed readers in the complex art of contacting one’s “companion” angels. In 1993, Eileen Elias Freeman published *Touched By Angels* which offered a different approach for getting in touch with angels. She also founded the AngelWatch network to connect people who had experienced encounters with angels. Angels in the early 1990s were constructed as what scholar of religion, Peter Gardella calls, “useful spirits in the material world” (2007) and they were absolutely resonating with Americans. Gallup polls found that in 1994, the year the series premiered, 72 percent of Americans believed in angels, up from 64 percent from 1978 (2007). Without drawing any causal relationships, it is worth noting that in 2004, one year after *TBAA* ended, Gallup researchers found that 78 percent of Americans proclaimed their belief in angels.

Gardella (2007) and author/journalist, Wendy Kaminer (1999) have both observed that in the early 1990s, angels constituted a highly visible site in which religion and therapy intertwined in U.S. culture. In some important ways, *Touched By An Angel* exemplifies the claim that one of the “uses” of angels is as therapists. Most notably, *TBAA* frames Tess and Monica in therapeutic terms by referring to them as “caseworkers”. The use of this term and the description of Tess as a “supervisor” of caseworkers connote the work and structure of social service agencies. After identifying the sources of stress, unhappiness, and most often, guilt in their charges’ lives, the angels “treat” them with the message of God’s love. Though *TBAA* is influenced by traditional “guardian angel” narratives, Kaminer and other critics of *TBAA*’s tone and message pointed to it as evidence of the movement of New Age from the fringes of U.S. culture to its core.

#### The Rise of New Age Spirituality

New Age, a cultural phenomenon that epitomizes the blurred line between religion and spirituality, has been one of the largest movements in this shift. One repeated theme in both scholarly and popular writing on New Age is the difficulty if not impossibility of defining the phenomenon and its boundaries. Indeed, the roots of New Age are tangled and numerous. Theosophy and Spiritualism, New Thought, the human potentials movement, South and East Asian spirituality, the mystical Neoplatonism of the Hellenic world, modern physics, Native American spiritualities, and shamanism are primary contributors, but again, not the only ones.

Religious studies scholars James R. Lewis and J. Gordon Melton note that New Age is very much the result of the melding of the long tradition of US

metaphysical/occult religion with 1960s counterculture and that by the 1980s it had become part of a “new, truly pluralistic mainstream” (1992, ix). For Lewis and Melton, the most influential, though certainly not the only predecessor of New Age religions and spirituality is the metaphysical/occult spirituality of groups like the Theosophical Society (established 1875). For other religious studies scholars, such as Phillip C. Lucas (1992) and Mary Farrell Bednarowski (1989), a focus on transformation is what set New Age apart from previous and similar movements. Lucas cites four major features of the New Age movement: 1. People and the planet are, “on the verge of a radical spiritual transformation;” 2. “[A]n eclectic embrace of a wide array of healing therapies as well as spiritual beliefs and practices;” 3. “[A]n ethic of self-empowerment, which focuses on the realization of individual goals and aspirations as a prerequisite for efficacious societal transformation;” and 4. “[A] desire to reconcile religious and scientific world views in a higher synthesis that enhances the human condition both spiritually and materially” (192). Catherine Albanese (1993) notes that all of these perspectives tell us something, but they are necessary, not sufficient factors in explaining New Age spirituality. For her part, she argues that New Age is best understood “as an expression of American nature religion, intimately tied to a nineteenth century past that blurred distinctions between spirit and matter” (131). She also suggests that “it may be preferable to avoid the term [New Age] because, already, it carries connotations that may weigh negatively for some or suggests a provenance that does not fit for others” (132). While this might be preferable for the purposes of definition and a theological analysis, it is neither possible nor desirable for an analysis of the ways in which New Age cultural practices get represented in popular culture.

The earliest New Age publication, the *East West Journal*, began publication in 1968. In 1971, Ram Dass (ne Richard Alpert) published his bestselling psychedelic spiritual tome, *Be Here Now*, which is still in print today. In 1972 the first New Age directories, *Spiritual Community* and the *Year One Catalog* were published. In 1975, Helen Schucman and William Thetford published their Christianity-infused New Age work, *A Course In Miracles*, complete with a study guide and teacher's manual suggesting a coalescence of New Age devotees. The first major New Age gathering, the World Symposium on Humanity, was held the following year. In 1980, Marilyn Ferguson published *The Aquarian Conspiracy*, which many credit with bringing together the many disparate threads of New Age and establishing a more (if not completely) coherent movement. In 1981, channeler, Frank Alper published the first book of his *Exploring Atlantis* trilogy which popularized both channeling and the use of crystals for healing.

By 1987, New Age had become a booming business and an increasingly mainstream phenomenon. That year, *Forbes* detailed the profitability of what it called "mainstream metaphysics." While charismatic evangelists and spiritual healers have almost always been a part of the fabric of US social and cultural life, what marked the 1980s was the broadened appeal of such beliefs and practices. At this moment, audio and video taped materials about healing the body with the mind constituted a \$300 million business. Shirley MacLaine, conjuring voices from beyond the grave as well as the image of the Spiritualist Mediums of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, had already sold over 5 million books through her publisher, and ABC ran a miniseries based on her best-selling 1986 book, *Out On A Limb*. Publishers estimated that new age titles accounted for at least

\$100 million in retail sales. Periodicals concerning the mind-body-spirit connection were springing up and succeeding. *The New Age Journal*, for example, boasted 150,000 readers. New Age music netted more than \$50 million in retail in 1987. Related business, such as natural food stores were estimating sales at \$3.3 billion and major grocery chains like Safeway devoted significant store space to natural foods. Marketers were already watching this trend carefully as a possible avenue for reaching the lucrative Baby Boomer population who constituted the majority of consumers of New Age and self-help products at that moment. Kurt Willinger, vice chairman of the Saatchi & Saatchi, Compton firm observed that these consumers were “the leading edge of the baby boomers, the market we all want to reach. Now this generation is learning that finding themselves is not enough, and they are reaching out to other stuff” (Trachtenberg and Giltenan, 1987). According to Lewis and Melton, in 1992, most New Age participants were still part of the baby boomer generation (xi). While it is and always has been difficult to quantify New Age practitioners and devotees, it is safe to say the given its widespread mainstreaming of meditation and alternative medicine for example, it is not only Baby Boomers taking up these ideas and practices. It is at least partially this context of wide-spread interest in New Age thinking and practices (and products) that makes *Touched By An Angel* possible and to which it responds.

While *TBAA* provides large doses of the unflinching positivity that Kaminer, among others, cites as a hallmark of New Age thinking and spirituality its, well, faithfulness to traditional understandings of God the Father introduces a piety that is not often seen in U.S. popular culture, but resonates with many Americans at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For her part, writer and executive producer Martha Williamson has said that



she was interested in creating a series that was positive and uplifting while maintaining an ethical core. As she put it in one interview, “The angels never say, ‘Follow your heart.’” She continues in a way that seems to call out New Age gurus and aficionados without naming them as such, saying, “In TV, anything hip is always about listening to your inner child. I don’t discount that. We should listen to our hearts and our inner child, but following them around gets you in trouble. We can’t have angels spouting situational ethics” (Valhouli, 2000, 97). Thus, *TBAA* must also be understood in terms of a resurgence in Americans’ interest in morals and ethics often associated with traditional religions that occurred alongside and to some extent in reaction to the rise of New Age spirituality as well as the feminist social and spiritual interventions discussed in the introduction.

### The Return of Evangelicalism and the Religious Right

At the same time as New Age and the discourse of “spiritual but not religious” emerges, there is a resurgence of Evangelical Christianity. While the less restrictive spiritualities of the New Age and neo-pagan movements can encourage a depoliticized subjectivity, the Evangelicalism of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century is decidedly politicized, mobilizing voters through organizations as the Christian Coalition, and using grass-roots organizing to carry out local campaigns for purposes such as the inclusion of Creationism in public school science curricula or the banning of Harry Potter books on the grounds that they implicitly endorse witchcraft. Even here, however, the supernatural is not absent from spirituality as evidenced by the importance of the Book of Revelations to much Evangelicalism and more specifically, the massive success of cultural texts produced by Evangelicals on the subject of The Rapture such as the *Left Behind* series.

The mystical character of speaking in tongues and its significance to many Evangelical groups is also worth noting as is the practice of Christianizing non-Christian activities such as yoga.

A politically active and socially conservative strand of Christianity, dominated but not defined by Evangelicalism, emerged at the same time as and as a result of the rise of identity politics and new spiritualities and religious movements. Beginning with the migration of the nation's Christian population to the South and West and Southern voters alienation from the Democratic party's move towards socially liberalism such as the 1964 Civil Rights Act, conservative Christians shifted their allegiances to the Republican party and ultimately developed the nation-wide grass-roots organizing movement that has come to be known as the Christian Right.

While Evangelicalism, Conservative Christianity, Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity, and the Christian Right are important forces in US culture, it is vitally important to note that these categories are not necessarily synonymous. The Rev. Jennifer S. Butler notes that, "secular liberals too often see Christianity monolithically as the religion of the oppressor, rather than as a diverse, dynamic religion. There is less scholarship that evaluates the multiple kinds of 'Christianities' that are reshaping the world, even the several forms of conservative Christianity" (2006, 6). Not all Christian communities or even all conservative Christian communities are part of the Christian Right. That term refers to "the *organizations* and *leaders* that mobilize key constituencies to a conservative social agenda motivated by religious values" (Butler, 2006, 12). While this project is not a mapping of Christianities, it does conceive of a plurality of denominations and strands of that faith.

Ultimately, the roots of the Christian Right in the United States can be traced back to controversies of the 1920s when fundamentalists critiqued liberal interpretations of gospel and pushes towards social welfare activities. A new wave of the Christian Right emerged in the early 1970s in response to the political shift marked by events like the push for the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) and the Supreme Court's decision in *Roe v. Wade* (1973). While not the most famous or long-lasting initiative, Dr. Robert Grant's American Christian Cause, founded in 1974, was one of the earliest contemporary efforts to coalesce a politically active movement rooted in conservative Christianity.

Jimmy Carter's election in 1976 as an "out" Evangelical illustrates the fact that Evangelicals do not exist only at the margins of mainstream US culture and that they are not necessarily invested in Conservative politics. That year, a Gallup poll showed 34% of Americans identified as "born again" or "evangelical" ("Born Again' Experience Not Rare," 1976). *Newsweek* noted the significance of both Carter's election and the Evangelical movement, declaring 1976 the "Year of the Evangelical" and used Carter's photo for its cover. Not all Evangelicals were pleased with being linked to Carter's politics and policies. Dr. Robert Grant responded to Christian voters' support of President Jimmy Carter, founding a new organization, Christian Voice in 1976, with the aim of mobilizing voter turn-out for socially conservative candidates.

The more well known organs of the Christian Right emerged shortly thereafter. In 1977, Anita Bryant began her anti-gay and lesbian crusade. That same year, Dr. James Dobson, a prominent Evangelical preacher and speaker, founded Focus on the Family. He also founded the group's lobbying arm, Family Research Council in 1981. In 1979, Beverly LeHaye, wife of Evangelical preacher and eventual coauthor of the highly

successful *Left Behind* series of apocalyptic thrillers, Timothy LeHaye, founded Concerned Women for America. That same year, Jerry Falwell founded the high-profile and influential Moral Majority. As Heather Hendershot has noted, “In 1982, Francis Schaeffer’s *A Christian Manifesto*, a conservative evangelical call to political action outsold *Jane Fonda’s Workout Book* two to one” (2004, 32). After Reagan’s 1984 re-election victory, organizations like the Moral Majority declined in size and power. The Moral Majority ceased operations in June of 1989, but at that point another organization had already emerged as a new Conservative Christian political force (Wilcox, 1992, xv). In 1987, Pat Robertson founded the Christian Coalition which in 1992 published voter guides and distributed them to conservative Christian churches.

Again, it is important to note that Evangelical Christianity is not reducible to the Christian Right, nor can any of these movements be reduced to figureheads such as Falwell or Robertson. In 1993, *Christianity Today* noted a profound increase in American Christians’ interest in prayer. *Books In Print* listed almost 2000 titles on prayer at that moment. Jones quotes *Newsweek* which observed that this was more than triple the number of books about achieving sexual intimacy. In 1994, journalist Richard L. Berke pointed out that 60% of the 600 candidates up for election at all levels who had the support of religious conservatives won their elections” (1994, 1 10). *TBA* was certainly designed to appeal to many of the same people targeted by organizations like the Christian Coalition through a valorization of “traditional” values and behavior, but it was also a response to anxieties about churches and religious leaders.

## Scandals and Mistrust of Religious Institutions

An additional facet of the cultural context in which *TBAA* emerges and flourishes, is a series of scandals which resulted in significant loss of trust in religious institutions and the people who led them even as interest in prayer and more traditional spiritualities (with the social norms they often advocated) grew. First, in between the rise of the Moral Majority and the shift towards the Christian Coalition there were the televangelist scandals. Preacher and leader of the popular *PTL Club*, Jim Bakker was first discovered to be embezzling funds from his church in 1987. Later that year he resigned from his position in disgrace amid charges by Jessica Hahn that Bakker and another preacher raped her and then paid her to keep quiet. Bakker was succeeded by Jerry Falwell. Similarly, popular Pentecostal minister Jimmy Swaggart, who had publicly exposed a fellow minister for his extramarital affairs, was caught engaging the services of a prostitute in 1988. Though Swaggart publicly and tearfully apologized for his transgressions, he was ultimately defrocked by his denomination, the Assemblies of God. These men's misuse of their ministries marred their images as virtuous men as well as the evangelical or born again movement. In 1988 the "evangelical" or "born again" population dropped to a 25 year low of 33% of the US population in response to these scandals.

Of course, moral scandals were hardly limited to leaders of evangelical Christian organizations. In May 1992, *The Boston Globe* began reporting allegations that John R. Porter, a former Catholic priest in the Boston Archdiocese, had molested a number of young people in the 1960s and 70s<sup>7</sup>. Over the following months, news stories revealed

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<sup>7</sup> While major cases occurred earlier, such as the Gaulte case in the early 1980s (see Berry, 1992), it was only in the 1990s that the scandal drew major attention. A LexisNexis search for the terms "Catholic

that Church officials long knew of Porter's transgressions and still kept him active in the ministry, moving him from parish to parish without informing parishioners or his fellow clergymen and women. By the time he was indicted in late September 1992, Porter admitted to molesting some 100 children (Larrabee, 1992). Cases like the Porter affair pushed the leaders of the US episcopate to finally institute policies for dealing with sexual misconduct allegations that involved lay people and law enforcement agents in particular (Franklin, 1992). While Cardinal Bernard F. Law of the Catholic Archdiocese of Boston (where Porter committed the majority of his sins) insisted that sexual abuse by clergy was rare, just one month after Porter's indictment, journalist Jason Berry published his book, *Lead Us Not Into Temptation: Catholic Priests and the Sexual Abuse of Children*, which revealed that over 200 priests and religious brothers were reported to Church officials for sexually abusing young people between 1983 and 1987: a number that had doubled by the time the book was published (ixx). According to Catholic priest and sociologist, Andrew M. Greeley, the clergy sexual abuse scandal posed perhaps the greatest crisis for the Church since the Reformation (Niebuhr, 1993). I will address the Catholic Church and its place in U.S. culture in more depth in Chapter 4, but all of these scandals raised anxieties about hypocrisy and trust to which *TBAA* attempted to respond.

*TBAA*, then, is the product of turbulent blend of attraction to and revulsion from spirituality and religiosity. These high profile religious scandals all involved men. More specifically, they involved white men in and with power over spiritual knowledge but who were themselves spiritual and moral hypocrites. The fall of male priests and

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Church" and "Sexual Abuse" returned 76 stories between 1981 and 1989 with no more than 15 stories in any given year. In 1990, 20 stories appeared in US newspapers, increasing to 42 in 1991. In 1992, the number of stories on the topic more than quadrupled jumping to 190. In remainder of the 1990s, no fewer than 169 stories (and as many as 341) appeared per year.

preachers opens up a space for women to come to the these salvational narratives. Moreover, these narratives can be read about women as both saviors and the saved as well as the salvation of faith itself. *TBAA*'s female angels call to mind constructions of religiosity and spiritual purity as fundamentally feminine. While Gardella, who discusses the series as part of what he describes as the rise of a "religion of angels" in contemporary U.S. culture (2007), acknowledges the ways that discourses of angels are gendered, he does not consider the ideological implications of the way this plays out in the series. *TBAA* adds to extant discourses of femininity in two ways: First, through the construction of Tess and Monica *as* the spiritual supernatural in the form of women marked by racial and ethnic difference the series invokes a palatable but problematic form of multiculturalism that demonizes and at moments racializes anger; and second, through the repeated and complex attention paid to women struggling with questions of pregnancy, childbearing, and motherhood the text offers relatively subtle but no less regressive morals about the choices women can and should make.

### Angelic Femininity

*TBAA*'s discourse of femininity is constructed first through the characters of Tess and Monica. As angels, they do not only engage with the spiritual supernatural, they *are* the spiritual supernatural. Though they are not humans or the souls of humans who have died, they take human form to seem more like the humans to which they appear. Unlike other filmic and televisual angels, Tess, Monica, and the other angels with whom they work do not have wings. When they reveal their identity to people, however, they become illuminated by a warm glow from behind like an aura or the suggestion of a halo,

which reminds the viewer that though these characters may appear and sometimes behave as humans do, they are heavenly beings.

Of course, Tess and Monica's relationship and the femininities their characters present to viewers are also shaped by their racial and ethnic identities and the way the show frames them. Tess is a Black woman portrayed by Della Reese, an actress of African and Native American descent. Tess's characterization also relies on Della Reese's pre-existing persona as character actress, an ordained minister in the "New Thought" tradition and for most of her life a well-established pop, jazz, and gospel singer. Monica is an Irish woman and is played by Roma Downey who shares that ethnic identity. The spiritual connotations of these identities work to inflect their characters presentation of spirituality and femininity in significant and sometimes deeply problematic ways. For the character of Monica, her Irishness calls to mind Roman Catholicism with all its excesses (but none of the connotations of abuse or the longer history of violence committed in the name of the Church) as well as fairies (another popular topic in the 1990s) which in turn lends her youthfulness a particular kind of sprightliness. We can see this in her carefree lack of shoes in the series premiere as well as in the opening credits which feature her stepping lightly through the tall grasses of the American West, loosening her wavy auburn locks from a gauzy white scarf that when discarded transmogrifies into a white dove, a symbol of peace to most and of the Holy Spirit to Christians. As Diane Negra (2001) has discussed, Irishness, though not universally celebrated in U.S. culture at all times, often provides a kind of safe white ethnicity or "off-whiteness" that is particularly appealing in a cultural context characterized by the simultaneous rise of multi-culturalism as an ideal and the



dismantling of social policies designed to foster inclusion and ameliorate the effects of racism.

The particular construction of Tess as a Black woman draws on popular understandings of one form of Black identity in the U.S. that centers on faith and participation in Church communities and the traditions of producing and performing gospel music. In her discussion of representations of African-American women on television, Beretta Smith-Shomade has pointed out the many ways in which Christianity is an important aspect of Black identity in the United States, but not easily reconciled with liberatory or anti-racist agendas. She notes that in the case of Oprah Winfrey's rise to media stardom, ideas about and language and imagery derived from Black Christianity have been crucial to her appeal and success with white audiences (2002). Della Reese's character may also reach audience members who identify with that form of Blackness or find it palatable. But Tess is a character on a CBS series, which, as Johnson points out, was marketed to demonstrate that CBS was still very much a "broadcaster" with wide, not niche appeal. Such "wide" appeal has traditionally meant non-specific, which in turn, has meant white. Thus, without foreclosing on the possibility of different audience members interpreting Tess differently, it seems important to identify the ways in which racial and ethnic difference can be and are used to hail white audiences ambivalent about their privilege and criticisms thereof. Though there are moments where Tess alludes to prior experiences and cases, the show's construction of the angels as beings who do not develop on the same trajectory as humans, she lacks a meaningful backstory. This lack combined with her supervisory role, in turn, allows her character to veer towards a hybrid of troubling tropes of blackness so that she ends up rendered as something of a Magical

Mammy<sup>8</sup>. That is, Tess exemplifies the quality attributed to the “Magical Negro” a term popularized by filmmaker Spike Lee for the cinematic trope of an underdeveloped black character whose main purpose is to use special powers or emotional connections to assist a white protagonist. Though Tess is a much more developed character than, say, the classic example of Will Smith’s caddy, “Baggar Vance,” she is too frequently presented as in charge of Monica’s spiritual growth as well as that of their cases. The situation is somewhat complicated by the fact that the dynamic of their relationship is underscored by the visible age difference between the women who play Tess and Monica. Moreover, the tone of their interactions is more like a mother/daughter relationship than supervisor/subordinate one. Tess is frequently shown addressing Monica as “child,”—a term often associated with black women’s speech as well as a religious leader to a congregant—instructing her in one subject or another, and holding her in a warm embrace often while singing gospel songs or spirituals as in the episode, “Show Me the Way Home” (Season 1, Episode 2) in which Tess sings “The Lord Moves in Mysterious Ways” to Monica as they watch a sunset in the mountains of the American West.

Though interracial and intergenerational friendships are not an impossibility or unrepresentable in popular culture, Tess’s characterization also evokes the image of the “mammy” whether it is in explicit references to her taking care of children as in the series’ pilot or episodes like “In the Name of God” (Season 1, Episode 12) or through her bossy tone or fierce independence which Bogle (1973) cites as key components of that trope.

Tess and Monica’s relationship is also inflected by the supervisor/supervisee structure of their relationship and the gap between their levels of experience. Tess often

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<sup>8</sup> Thanks to Bambi Haggins and Susan Douglas for their help in identifying the multiple tropes at play in the character of “Tess.”

guides Monica in a similar way to how Monica guides the people to whom she is assigned. One form of guidance that Tess provides is in how to take human form and comprehend the human experience. In the series' premiere, Tess has to remind Monica to wear shoes when she takes human form. In an episode later in the first season, Tess takes Monica's coat and angelic powers so that she can better understand the pain of homelessness ("There But for the Grace of God," Season 1, Episode 11). Just as Monica brings God's message of love to the homeless man she is working with that week, Tess helps her receive God's command to love all, especially those on the margins of society. Individual action and agency are always at the root of the moral in *TBA*, never systematic change. This is true of the angels and, as I shall discuss in the second half of this chapter, their lessons for humans as well.

Though Monica needs Tess's help understanding certain aspects of the human experience, she also requires a fair amount of supervision to keep her on task. To be fair, the angels' assignments are often quite vague or, more accurately, deceptively simple which reproduces a concept of God that believes His plan to be real, but incomprehensible to any but Him. Tess often has to remind Monica of this and help her deal with the unexpected consequences of going off-task. For example, in the episode "Cassie's Choice" (Season 1, Episode 5), Monica's compulsion to offer comfort to hospital patients allows the young mother she is meant to be watching to slip away unwittingly putting her baby's life at risk. In other episodes, such as the third season's, "Random Acts" (Season 3, Episode 3) Monica struggles to focus on her mission in the face of human cruelty. Such episodes explore her own faith as well as that of the people she is attempting to help.

Tess, the visible mother/authority figure has her own foibles, though, notably her temper and recurring frustration with humans' abuses of each other. In the episode "In The Name of God" (Season 1, Episode 12), which aired just months after the bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City (it was written and produced before that tragedy), Monica is assigned to a female Jewish doctor who is working to open an AIDS hospice amidst fierce opposition from mainstream community members as well as a very active coalition of white supremacists, homophobes, and neo-Nazis. When Tess, who had been assigned to a family in the town some 30 years earlier, sees the hate-fueled graffiti covering the building she decides to stay and assist Monica. She is unable to contain her anger when she realizes that the young boy she cared for has grown into one of the leaders of the hate group. She lashes out at the man and a city councilman (who is later revealed to be Satan in human form) and is subsequently pulled off of the assignment by God for "meeting hate with hate". She is ultimately allowed to return when she is able to focus on her love for her former charge and by appealing to their bond they are able to expel Satan from the small town (it remains unclear what then becomes of the alarmingly well-armed militia of disaffected white people). Here we see the message of systemic problems being solved solely by individual relationships.

While the angels do occasionally have to grapple with Satan, Tess's patience is also tested by strictly human actions. In the third season episode "Random Acts," in which a teacher is kidnapped and brutally assaulted by disaffected students, Tess tells Monica that sometimes "humans behave so badly to one another that it's all an angel can do keep loving them." Though Tess remains "on duty" in that episode, in an episode from the fifth season, Tess is overwhelmed by grief and anger after finding the body of a

brutally murdered black man (“Black Like Monica,” Season 5, Episode 24). Holding the bloodied noose that had been around the man’s neck, Tess weeps and then marches off yelling towards the sky, “I can’t do this again. No more. I’m coming home.” Tess leaves Monica to try to deal with the murder as well as the racism—both tacit and overt—that runs through the small town. Towards the end of the episode, however, Tess returns and confesses to Monica that she gave in to her anger and grief and gave up on humanity for a moment. This resolution underscores the show’s valorization of acquiescing to God’s will and devaluation, demonization even, of anger.

Anger, no matter how righteous, has no place in the angelic femininity constructed by *TBAA*. While this might seem natural given the popular concepts of guardian angels circulating at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is important to remember that this feminization differs not only from scriptural angels described not only as messengers but also warriors of God as well as contemporary images of more masculine angels who are much closer to those predecessors than to Tess and Monica (consider Bartleby and Loki in *Dogma*, or Uriel in the TV series *Supernatural*, or Paul Bettany’s portrayal of the archangel, Michael, in the film *Legion*, for example). It is also troubling that it is only Tess as a black woman who we see abandoning or being pulled from cases because of her temper.

I argue that these deeply problematic forms of Black and Irish femininity put forth in *TBAA*’s characterizations of Tess and Monica lend the show’s non-denominational religion a kind of multicultural appeal. This in turn makes them compelling figures not only to audience members, but also to the people to whom they are assigned. Tess and Monica make difference safe but they do so by reproducing troubling images of racial

and ethnic identity. Moreover, the series insists on a troublingly individualized approach to systematic social problems and goes so far as equating all anger with hate and sinfulness if not pure evil.

### Human Femininity

In a sense, every episode of *TBA* is a “very special” episode in that the crisis on which each story centers is usually related to a “hot-button” social issue. Quite often the episodes deal with questions about what constitutes acceptable female behavior or what we might call more simply “women’s issues” particularly those related to ideas of child-bearing and motherhood. In one such episode, “The Empty Chair” (Season 7, Episode 7), which originally aired on November 19, 2000, the angels visit a middle-aged couple, Bud and Betsy Baxter, whose marriage is being strained by the fact that fifteen years earlier Betsy had an abortion which they’ve never really discussed. The Baxters, who have just lost their jobs as hosts of a local talk show, devolve into bickering in front of Monica and Andrew, posing as stranded motorists. When Monica accidentally finds baby clothes in a box while helping to look for a recipe, Betsy explains that they lost a baby they were expecting. Bud, however, calls Betsy out saying bitterly, “We lost that baby the same way we lost *Breakfast with the Baxters*. We didn’t lose it. That baby just got cancelled. Didn’t it? You cancelled it didn’t you?” By comparing Betsy’s abortion to their show’s cancellation, Bud suggests that Betsy’s actions were of a kind with those responsible for their professional loss: a faceless telecommunications conglomerate with no interest in local programming or concern for the employees of the station it just bought.

Heather Hendershot has written that, “Despite its own sense of victimization and its perennial complaint that leftists dominate the media, the Christian Right seems to have

won the battle over how abortion can be represented on television” resulting in a very limited instances of abortions presented on the small screen as well as disapproving moralistic tone in most of those instances (2009, 201). The fact that it happened over a decade in the past allowed the show the rare opportunity to explore life after an abortion without having to present the actual decision-making process or the procedure. Even without representing the actual process of choosing and going through with an abortion one might still expect such an explicitly and faithfully religious show to exemplify the kind of portrayals Hendershot discusses. Indeed, Bud’s angry words seem to bear this expectation out as they suggest that because women ultimately make the choice to terminate a pregnancy they must also bear the guilt of that decision without feeling sad about it. This, however, is not the angels’ position on the matter.

While other episodes have focused on women (and less frequently men) whose professional ambition has led to personal and spiritual trouble, this episode resists Bud’s assertion that only Betsy was responsible for the baby’s “cancellation.” After Bud confronts Betsy about the abortion, Monica tries to comfort Betsy telling her it’s understandable that the baby would come up at the same time as they lost their show. Monica tells her she and Bud need to grieve the earlier loss of the baby before they can process this new loss. Betsy replies:

“I don’t feel like I deserve to grieve. I know what I did and I know why I did it. Sometimes you do things you think you’ll never do. My life started falling apart and I just wanted to make it stop. I just didn’t know then what it would feel like now. We had a plan, you know? Do the show for a couple of years, get our careers going, then the babies would come later. It’s later. You know, Monica, they can talk all they want to about politics and rights and choices. I did. But when you’re in that little room and you’re putting your clothes back on, you know that you are leaving behind a little piece of your soul and you will never, ever get it back.”

Betsy's words here are key to the show's ultimate message of opposition to abortion. Women who have abortions, we are often told, feel shame and sadness about their decision and Betsy's speech adds to that discourse. These emotional expectations are circulated by opponents of reproductive rights like Vincent Rue, the controversial psychotherapist who in 1981 first used the term "postabortion syndrome" to describe the supposedly abundant psychological dangers of abortion in testimony before Congress. Similar expressions of concern are often advanced by pro-choice advocates as well when they argue that abortion is the most difficult choice a woman can ever make and that women's privacy is the ultimate concern. The point is not to say that abortion is or is not difficult for women; there are as many reasons for and responses to terminating a pregnancy as there are women who do so.

"The Empty Chair" is problematic because it suggests that abortions are always emotionally traumatic in moments such as Betsy's use of "you" rather than "I" in talking about her own experience of dressing after her procedure. Moreover, Monica even suggests that Betsy has been suffering from postabortion syndrome for 15 years. But in telling the story of people who are conflicted about their decision, *TBAA* nonetheless shines a light on the rarely discussed fact that within U.S. culture there is little space or means for people—women or men—to grieve the termination of a pregnancy as a loss in a way that facilitates healing or growth. Monica's response to Betsy's confession is to gently recite the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm...: "He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul." Here, Monica suggests that through Judeo-Christian religions healing is possible and that it is precisely cases like Betsy's for which that piece of scripture exists. That healing process occurs, Monica tells Betsy, when she and Bud actually discuss the abortion and



how they feel about it now. She encourages Betsy to share a poem she wrote about the abortion shortly after it happened. When Betsy laments that she just threw it into the fire, Monica reaches in and pulls out an unharmed copy. She hands it to Betsy saying, “It’s not too late.”

Inspired, Betsy begs Bud who is in the midst of literally walking out of their marriage to listen to her poem. Overcome with emotion, she asks Monica to read it for her. With her soft Irish brogue, Monica reads a poem rife with religious imagery:

“...Day after day  
I swallow our sin  
Gagging on pieces of grief  
...May I please be excused?  
To sit by the fire  
And rock the invisible sorrow  
To sleep...”

Moved by Monica’s delivery of Betsy’s words, Bud turns back and embraces his wife apologizing through tears. As Bud and Betsy edge closer to reconciliation with each other, Andrew (who has spent most of the episode talking to Bud about his responsibility for the pregnancy, its termination, and its lack of resolution) and Monica reveal themselves as angels. Monica, whose head is now subtly illuminated from behind, then begins a speech of her own:

“God could’ve made a very different kind of world, you know. With people who never made mistakes, never thought for themselves and did only what God wanted them to all the time. But then there wouldn’t have been any free will. And without the freedom to love, love is not a choice. And that is a choice that God gives you every day.”

Still feeling guilty and missing Monica’s point, Betsy interjects, “But I didn’t take it, did I?” to which Monica, drawing closer to the couple, replies:

“Betsy, 15 years ago you made a choice. And Bud, one way or another you helped her to make that choice. And God did not send us here to judge you and punish

you for that. God wants you to know that he is life itself and that he holds all the life that is and was and is to be in his hand already. And yes, there is a future that might have been that you chose to change. And for whatever reason you chose not to include God in that decision. But he asks you now to include him in the next one you make, because he understands your pain. Because no one knows better the “invisible sorrow” that you still carry in your hearts. And no one wants to heal you more.”

Each time Monica mentions or hears mention of the abortion her downturned face registers her sadness about that decision and suggests that this, too, is God’s opinion. Her words above suggest that Betsy has veered from God’s path by placing her career and relationship with Bud over motherhood. Yet the emphasis is not on that choice 15 years ago, but rather the choices to be made in the present and future. Moreover, the abortion is never named as a sin and thus Bud and Betsy’s feeling of guilt are cast as unnecessary. They do not need to seek forgiveness except from each other. Ultimately, the form this episode takes and the brand of religion that *TBAA* presents function to produce a rich and compassionate narrative about one of the most controversial issues in U.S. culture. Its position is one of opposition to abortion but that message and the way women who have abortions are portrayed is more sophisticated than the scant other representations.

While this episode aired towards the end of the series’ original run, during its 7<sup>th</sup> season, such explorations of the obstacles of the meanings of motherhood were a significant part of the series from its very beginnings. In the show’s first episode, “The Southbound Bus,” Monica is assigned her first case: a young boy whose mother left their family after the tragic death of his baby sister in a case of SIDS. Despite being told to stay with the boy, Monica goes searching for the boy’s mother and eventually finds her working at a diner with a new identity because she cannot overcome the guilt she feels for her daughter’s death. When Monica confronts the mother and tries to convince her to

return home she reveals that she is an angel. The mother says “So what” and demands to know where she and other angels were when her baby died. Monica shows her a vision of her laughing baby in her eyes and tells her there was an angel with the baby that night and is still with her now. Still, the woman angrily takes off again, convinced that her family is better off without her. At no point is the woman’s anger or shaken faith presented as invalid. Neither is she villainized as a bad mother. In the end her husband and son welcome her home warmly.

As in the case of the series’ premiere, the female characters who the angels come to are often restored to the home in their position as wives and mothers. Yet *TBA* considered other outcomes as well and in doing so circulated new or rarely seen images of “good” motherhood. In the episode, “Cassie’s Choice,” for example, an unwed teen mother (played by a young Alyson Hannigan, no less) has decided to give her baby up for adoption. Cassie initially tells everyone that she does want to see her baby or remain in the hospital any longer than necessary. The people in her life seem to support her desire to get through the process as quickly as possible. Cassie’s best friend even assures her that she can still try out for cheerleading. Cassie seems really happy the morning after giving birth, but when her boyfriend brings up the adoptive parents, the Feldmans, Cassie grows somewhat somber. They agree that they’re doing the right thing, giving up their baby, but as her mother breaks out the paper work for finalizing the adoption, Cassie grows sadder. Her mother says she can be discharged and that she thinks the sooner she gets back to school and past it all, the better.

Here, as in “The Empty Chair” we see the series suggesting that women in difficult positions should be allowed to experience the full range of their emotions rather

than move on as quickly as possible. Monica who is working in the hospital asks about the decision to give the baby up for adoption and Cassie insists the decision was easy, but now it is hard. “Down that hall there’s a part of me that I might never see again.” Unlike at the start of the episode, after giving birth Cassie does not know whether she should hold the baby or not. Monica tells her that it’s a decision only she can make, but as long as it’s a decision made out of nothing but love, it’s one she’ll be able to live with. Cassie decides to hold the baby and is so happy that she decides to keep the baby and without telling anyone she leaves to visit the baby’s father whose band is playing a show out of town.

Cassie’s new hopes of building a family are quickly dashed when the boyfriend tells her that he does not want to be a father, reminding her that he signed the papers and gave the baby up. When Cassie persists, he tells her, cruelly, “We made a mistake, not a family.” Cassie retorts, “If you won’t grow up, I’ll do this on my own.” Monica doesn’t understand exactly what she’s supposed to do with Cassie and Tess tells her that she’s supposed to be helping Cassie become a good mother but she can’t say more than that. In many narratives, being a good mother would mean Cassie sacrificing her own wants and dreams for adulthood for the sake of her child. At first, Cassie seems on her way to being a strong single teen mother. She is confident and motivated until she realizes just how hard it is to make ends meet.

The episode further suggests that Cassie has made a mistake when an angel of death, Adam (Charles Rockit), informs Tess and Monica and the baby is sick and dying. Monica appears to Cassie to tell her that she has to take her to a hospital which she does. There she discovers that her body made antibodies that are attacking the baby’s red blood

cells. Overwhelmed, Cassie leaves the hospital and takes off running through the woods until she comes upon Monica's car. Cassie cries out to her and Monica appears bathed in moonlight. Monica assures her that the baby will be fine. Cassie sobs, "It's so hard to be a mother. I don't know what the right thing to do is." Monica replies serenely, "Cassie, you are a good mother because you know what it is to love your baby more than yourself." Monica then reveals herself as an angel and tells Cassie about her daughter's future and reminding Cassie that it is giving her baby up for adoption that facilitates it. Cassie returns home with the baby and goes through with the adoption but is allowed to grieve what she perceives as a loss.

*Touched By An Angel's* foregrounding of traditional Judeo-Christian religious themes make it highly unusual prime-time television fare. So does its handling of controversial issues regarding women's lives particularly regarding pregnancy, childbearing, and motherhood. Sympathetic portrayals of women in contemporary film and television who lose their children to SIDS, teen mothers who put their babies up for adoption, and women who choose to terminate their unplanned pregnancies because of professional ambitions and a lack of support from their partner are almost unheard of. The show's episodic format facilitates the constant engagement with controversial themes by maintaining the angels and their message as the constant component of the show rather than the humans and their varied dilemmas. However, this format also means that there is no sustained attention on the human women at the center of these episodes from week to week, no vision of what their lives look like in the wake of their experience with the angels. Moreover, *TBAA* by virtue of its premise suggests that these kinds of experiences are crises which women cannot navigate or recover from without the aid of

divine intervention. Relatedly, the show's focus on turning to God as the key to resolving each week's problem draws attention away from the social forces that constrain these women's choices. Still, by framing these stories as instances of humans who need to be able to grieve without being overwhelmed by guilt and self-loathing, *TBAA* allows for a compassionate portrayal of women doing the best they can with limited cultural and emotional resources and a lack of understanding from those around them. These stories constitute a significant and yet completely overlooked addition to extant discourses of femininity circulating in film and television, and in U.S. culture more generally.

With its multicultural female angels and frequent attention to women grappling with issues related to motherhood, reproduction, and sexuality, *TBAA* offers an important and heretofore overlooked site for the production and circulation of religiously-based popular responses to gender anxieties. The series' use of actresses and characters marked by racial, ethnic, and national differences, nondenominational spirituality and message of God's unconditional love allows the show create a potent hybrid of conservative Christian and New Age ideas. Due to its tone and format, *TBAA* was able to engage controversial topics that are relevant to women's lives much more directly than most other popular cultural texts. These same elements also ultimately reproduced problematic racial dynamics and more often than not subtly regressive ideas about women's sexuality. Thus, the most recent spate of attention to the spiritual supernatural first appeared as a means by which difficult topics could be addressed, but in ways that constrained the possibilities of those discussions.

While the texts I analyze in the following chapters all emerge from the same conflicted cultural context, they also emerge from a context shaped in part by *Touched By*

*An Angel*. *TBAA* helped to open up space for the considerations of spirituality, the supernatural, and femininity found in the texts I analyze in the following chapters. In many cases, it provided something writers and producers could define themselves in opposition to. *Charmed*, for example, makes brief references to *TBAA* in two separate episodes. Kevin Smith appropriated the title for a cheeky tagline for *Dogma* and was ultimately forced to abandon it when CBS filed an official complaint (Elber, 1999). Finally, both Barbara Hall and Nancy Miller, the creators of *Joan of Arcadia* and *Saving Grace*, respectively, publicly and repeatedly as completely different from their predecessor. I argue that these texts actually have a great deal in common, but it is significant that so many subsequent texts use *TBAA* as a conceptual point of departure and differentiation. With its limitations and innovations, *Touched By An Angel* is itself a current of the spiritual supernatural which flows through subsequent texts and inflecting their constructions of femininity.

### Chapter 3

#### Seasons of the Witch: Women, Wicca, and Empowerment in Film and Television

In the late 1990s, at the height of *Touched By An Angel's* popularity, angels were not the only prominent representations of women with ties to the spiritual supernatural. Beginning with *The Craft* (1996, dir. Andrew Fleming), witches became an increasingly visible feature on the film and television landscapes. *The Craft*, a teen-focused horror film about four ostracized high school girls who use magic to exact revenge, was followed in 1997 by the television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer (BtVS)* which ran until 2003 and featured a witch, Willow, as a central character. *Charmed*, which also aired on the WB network (and eventually the CW network) from 1999-2007, centered on three sisters who learn they are powerful witches destined to fight evil. The film adaptation of Alice Hoffman's bestselling novel *Practical Magic* (dir. Griffin Dunne) also premiered in 1999 and emphasized the characters' identity as witches. While I began this dissertation by stating that it was not about witches, this chapter is very much about them, or more accurately, it is about the discourses of femininity produced by these particular representations of the spiritual supernatural in the form of Wicca or *The Craft*.

As a discursive construct the witch, and by extension witchcraft, exemplifies Fiske's argument that a single stream of discourse can comprise multiple "currents" with differing directions as well as "sediment" from a variety of earlier points. The witches of late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century film and television were certainly not the first popular representations of witches and US culture or even the first time that witches were



portrayed as something other than green-faced hags (more discursive sediment which persists in culture). The film adaptation of *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) may have provided the first popular portrayal of a good witch on screen: the frothy, bubble-dwelling Glinda, Good Witch of the North. Post-WWII film and television, however, offered more complex and compelling female characters who were witches. In the film, *Bell, Book, and Candle* (1958), Kim Novak, plays a witch who uses her powers primarily for pleasure and seduction. Novak's Gil uses her magic to lure her neighbor, Shep (Jimmy Stewart) away from his fiancée just before they marry. She ultimately falls in love with him herself and abandons witchcraft and her powers as a result.

By 1964, on the heels of Betty Friedan's bestselling book, *The Feminine Mystique*, the attractive young witch figure had moved from celluloid to the small screen in the sitcom, *Bewitched* (1964-1972). In many ways, *Bewitched* picks up where the earlier film leaves off with our heroine, a witch named Samantha (Elizabeth Montgomery), married to a mortal, Darrin (Dick York and, later, Dick Sargent) and negotiating her new role as a suburban homemaker with a very human husband, who remains in perpetual apoplexy over her powers and a mother, Endora (Agnes Moorehead), who disapproves of her decision to take on this subservient role. As Susan Douglas has written, in *Bewitched* and shows like it we can see that, "a significant proportion of pop culture moguls were trying to acknowledge the impending release of female sexual and political energy, while keeping it all safely in a straitjacket." (1995, 126) These texts, while kitschy and implausible at many levels, told very realistic stories about women struggling against dominant constructions of femininity and men who

feared they would succeed. *Bell, Book, and Candle*, and *Bewitched* were harbingers of the feminist activism of the 1960s and 1970s.

The representations of witches that appeared as the second wave of U.S. feminist activism was just swelling clearly mark the more recent texts analyzed in this chapter. Sometimes this mark takes the form of a brief visual reference as in *The Craft* where the title sequence of *Bewitched* can be seen on a TV screen in the background of one scene. Nicole Kidman's character in *Practical Magic* also shares the name "Gillian" with Kim Novak's similarly sexualized character from *Bell Book and Candle* (though they are pronounced differently). In other cases, these references can structure the narrative of a text itself as in the episode of *Charmed*, "Lost and Bound," in which Phoebe begins to transform into a stereotypical TV housewife (even flickering in black and white) after expressing her fear that marriage will lead her to wind up like Samantha on *Bewitched* (Season 4, Episode 12). Notably, Phoebe is defining herself in opposition to Samantha suggesting a break with these earlier women with powers.

Indeed, the texts of the late 1990s and early 2000s that refer to Wicca are also shaped by cultural developments in the years following those earlier representations. Whereas texts like *Bewitched* emerged as a means of grappling with anxieties about what was about to happen, however, the late 1990s and early 2000s narratives about witches emerge in the wake of the "release of female sexual and political energy," and in the midst of what Angela McRobbie calls the "aftermath of feminism" (2008). These texts emerge in this moment of "double movement" in which academic feminism works to respond to the intersectionality of identities and the diffuse nature of institutionalized sexism while simultaneously popular culture evidences a different deconstruction of

feminism, “which says feminism is no longer needed, it is now common sense, and as such it is something young women can do without” (8, 2008). These texts emerge at something of a “now what?” moment in US culture when, in the wake of second wave feminist activism and in the midst of the postmodern condition, what it means to be a woman and what it means to be an agent of positive change in the world are questions without single, or even enumerable answers.

Susan Douglas observes that one effect of this double movement is that while in the past popular media in the U.S. have appeared to be behind the curve in terms of representations of women's places in society, contemporary media texts tend to portray women in such blindingly positive light that the real inequalities which remain a part of women's lived experiences gets obscured. She writes that what the media have been providing us with—through texts geared towards both male and female audiences—are “little more than fantasies of power.” (5) These fantasies “assure girls and women, repeatedly, that women's liberation is a fait accompli and that we are stronger, more successful, more sexually in control, more fearless, and more held in awe than we actually are” (4-5). While Douglas is not just writing about media narratives that traffic in the fantastic, films and television series which use supernatural powers as a way of imagining empowerment certainly run the risk of producing these fantasies of power which suggest that feminism is no longer relevant. As Rachel Moseley has argued, the representation of witchcraft “is a significant site through which the articulation in popular culture of the shifting relationship between 1970s second-wave feminism, postfeminism in the 1990s and femininity can be traced” (2002, 403). These texts engage the question of what it means to be a woman in US culture at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Moreover,

because it is widely accepted that there is no longer a single answer to that question, these texts also grapple with differences and tensions *among* women.

In these texts, supernatural powers are something newly (re)discovered or acquired by the characters. Within these narratives, powers are never entirely predictable or controllable and there are limits to their effects. The characters' powers are substantial and often successful in effecting change, but they are not wholly liberatory. Power and powers are clearly linked, but they are not exactly the same thing. When I write "power," I refer to the more abstract and mundane notion of efficacy and control. When I refer to "powers," I am speaking of the control or invocation and use of supernatural forces to effect change. But my overarching argument is that through their focus on supernatural powers tied to witchcraft, these texts offer complex narratives about the nature of power itself. My aim in this chapter is not to dispute that these texts do not participate in what McRobbie calls the "undoing of feminism," or to produce what Douglas rightly calls "fantasies of power" but rather to expand our understanding of how this happens to include narratives which incorporate oft-overlooked elements of feminist interventions in spirituality, in this case Wicca.

What is striking about this pop culture trend, as I note at the start of this dissertation, is the fact that these texts presented witchcraft not simply as magical powers, but as tied to the practice of "the Craft" or "Wicca"—the terms used by contemporary practitioners to denote witchcraft as a religion, a spiritual practice. The references to Wicca or to Witchcraft as a spirituality are surprising because Wicca is still a very small and secluded religion. Moreover, it has long been associated with Satanism and deviance. While such misconceptions about Wicca persist even today, in the years leading up to the

emergence of these texts, public discussions of witches and Wicca that were decidedly tolerant, even positive in their tone, increased significantly over what took place in previous decades. The increased attention to witchcraft took place not only in the academic and alternative press, but in major regional US newspapers as well<sup>9</sup>. This is not to say that Wicca was a household word, but rather that it was not limited to college towns and communes. Thus, while interest in Wicca among Americans, an understanding that witchcraft could be a religion (that is, Witchcraft) increased rapidly after the appearance of these texts, it was already emerging as a significant discursive current.

The question this chapter answers, then, is: how does invoking Wicca, a form of the feminized spiritual supernatural, shape the discourse of femininity these texts produce? However loose the ties are between the lived practices of Wicca and the other popular representations of Wicca as a belief system analyzed here, Wicca still functions to order these story worlds and to shape the answers that these texts provide to questions about femininity and feminism. Before moving to that analysis, Wicca as a religion, and more specifically, one tied to feminism, and its presentation as a form of the spiritual supernatural in film and television merit some discussion. Contemporary Witchcraft or Wicca is a relatively new spirituality and one without a clear point of origin or unified theology. Wicca has ties to the broader Pagan and New Age movements but is not

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<sup>9</sup> The assertion of an increase in attention to witches, witchcraft and wicca is based on two key word searches conducted with ProQuest and LexisNexis. Two searches were run in order to first get at somewhat different databases and to also try and account for differences that appeared to be over time, but were really about how far back records of various publications went.) The ProQuest search showed that between 1980 and 1990 there were 189 instances of the word 'witch,' 96 of the word 'witchcraft,' and 2 of the word 'wicca'. After 1990, there were 2681 instances of the word 'witch' (674 of these coming before 1995), 1304 of the word 'witchcraft,' and 64 of the word 'wicca' (10 of these came before 1995). The guided search in LexisNexis of general news in the major papers. Between 1980 and 1990 the word 'witchcraft' occurred 346 times and the word 'wicca' occurred 17 times in the title or lead paragraphs. After 1990 the word 'witchcraft' appeared 3254 times and the word 'wicca' appeared 238 times (707 instances of 'witchcraft' and 47 instances of 'wicca' occurred between 1990 and 1995).

synonymous with either. Wicca is an elaborate assemblage of beliefs and practices borrowed from sources as varied as Hellenic mystery religions and Native American spiritual practices. In addition to combining disparate faiths, Wicca relies on some outright fabrication when the historical record fails to provide precedent. One of the most important characteristics of Wicca is its opposition to hierarchy and standardizations of belief and practice. This means that there are almost as many brands of Wicca as there are practitioners. Some, such as the Dianic and Gardnerian, branches of the faith are more institutionalized, but there is hardly something one could call “mainline” or “orthodox” Wicca. That said, almost all Wiccans can be said to practice a religion that emphasizes the power of femininity, is nature-focused, encourages individual experimentation and interpretation but still structured around a moral code. This moral code is concise: The Wiccan Rede states: “if you harm none, do as you will” (Eilberg-Schwartz, 1989, 77), the Law of Threefold Return asserts that what you put out through magic is returned upon you three times, and as one of the foundational texts of Wicca, Starhawk’s *The Spiral Dance*, puts it: “If you hex or curse, you yourself are cursed.” (1979, 114).

This moral guideline is present, in some form, in all of these narratives and this fact has been ignored in existing scholarship. Though these texts are using magical/supernatural powers as a metaphor for empowerment, which is undeniably problematic, the ways in which those powers can be/ought to be/are used in these texts offer a number of similarities to more theoretical discussions about the messy, diffuse, slippery, and uncontrollable nature of power relations. In the narrative arcs about the failures and perils of seemingly righteous inversions of hierarchies that abound in these

texts, we see something of what poststructuralist feminist scholars are simultaneously debating in terms of how to have a movement for social justice when it is difficult to identify an “enemy” and impossible to account for how well-intentioned and seemingly righteous moves will play out. Within popular culture, this offers something of a realistic portrayal of what it feels and looks like to try to effect social change. That said, one might wonder what the point of these fantastical scenarios is if the conclusions are all so realist or even defeatist.

Indeed, there is much in these texts that contains the utopian possibilities that might be afforded by placing the narrative in the realm of the mythological. While the supernatural powers wielded by these characters provide an appealing codification of female empowerment, these texts also strive for a certain kind of realism seen in the limits and consequences these female characters face. This realism stems from tying the characters' supernatural powers to the practice of Wicca. These teen-aged girls and young adult women are not just doing magic, they are practicing The Craft. Whether this is referred to explicitly as Wicca or not, the activities these characters are engaged in are tied to the Wiccan moral code (The Craft invokes the law of three-fold return and *Charmed* explicitly speaks of the Wiccan Rede and a rule against using powers for personal gain, *Buffy* and *Practical Magic* both offer general moral sanctions against abusing powers [particularly with regard to taking or reanimating human life]). Thus, the use of this particular current of the spiritual supernatural as a discourse of femininity functions to constrain the witches in significant ways. In other words, it is precisely the way these texts place the characters within the context of Wicca, focusing on the moral code, which contains the threat posed by “empowered” women and girls.

### The Craft

This brand of containment is most clear in *The Craft* (dir. Andrew Fleming, 1996). *The Craft* was the first of the popular film and television texts to take up the possibility of young women's empowerment through Witchcraft. In this film, four teenage girls, all ostracized by their Catholic high school classmates, turn to Witchcraft to deal with their alienation. Nancy (Fairuza Balk), is poor and from a violent home, Bonnie (Neve Campbell), is disfigured by extensive burn scars, and Rochelle (Rachel True), is Black and tormented by her racist classmates. These three regularly cast spells, but they have no effect until a new girl, Sarah (Robin Tunney), comes to their school and, after being similarly rejected by her fellow students, joins their group. Working together, the four main characters draw on Wiccan ritual and magic to right the wrongs done to them. Rochelle, exacts revenge on her blatantly racist classmate, Laura (Christine Taylor). Bonnie rids herself of disfiguring burn scars that cause her psychic and physical pain. Sarah repays the popular guy, Chris (Skeet Ulrich), for lying about them having sex by making him fall in love with her. Nancy rids herself and her mother of her deadbeat stepfather and their trailer park trappings. These girls' supernatural powers function as a means to empowerment and agency.

Though Witchcraft brings these girls together and offers them a means of changing the negative aspects of their lives, it ultimately tears them apart as their powers increase and their spells spin out of control. The film ends with a brutal physical fight between Sarah and Nancy and Nancy's subsequent institutionalization in a mental hospital. The narrative arc of the film is undeniably troubling and sparked criticism. One reviewer, Stephen Holden, concluded that, *The Craft* ultimately "preaches a heavy-



handed sermon about karma and the awful things that can happen to bad girls who dare to vent their evil thoughts” (1996, 10). There is no denying that the film’s resolution punishes the character whose actions most transgress norms of feminine conduct and whose appearance is constructed in opposition to the ideal of the girl next door. The film also tells us what a good girl does and this is key to the film’s use of Witchcraft to negotiate palpable cultural anxieties around young women and girls in the midst of the Girl Power moment. One could easily read—as critics like Holden did—*The Craft* as a regressive cautionary tale that tells young women that standing up for one’s self will only get you into trouble, particularly if you are poor, sexually active and aggressive, and reject conventional beauty norms, like Nancy. Yet to do so would be to ignore the way the film uses witchcraft—presented not just as supernatural powers, but as a belief system with a moral code—to grapple with the questions at the heart of feminist debate in academic and popular arenas in the 1990s.

Ultimately, the driving tension in the film is between Sarah and the other girls, but especially Nancy, as characters with two distinct relationships to Witchcraft and two opposing ideas about power(s). We can see this from one of the very first scenes of the girls coming together as a group. As the girls make their way through a crowded, seedy downtown area, they encounter a drifter who earlier scared Sarah when she was first moving in to her new home. When he is hit by a car while pursuing the girls, they literally run for the hills frightened and exhilarated by the thought that they may have caused the accident by simultaneously willing it. In a scene reminiscent of films like *The Lost Boys* for the vaguely menacing tone of its supernatural themes and its imagery of young people carving private space out of public spaces like beaches and woods, the four

finally stop running when they reach the wooded hills where they are illuminated by the glow of fires in trash barrels. Bonnie, Nancy, and Rochelle flop down on a group of discarded couches and chairs and pass around a bottle of liquor transported in a school bag. Sarah, meanwhile stands by looking horrified by the events of the afternoon and evening. Bonnie and Nancy begin to excitedly wonder if perhaps “he” is finally listening to them prompting Sarah to demand an explanation for who “he” is. Here, Nancy breathlessly describes the concept of “Manon,” the fundamental source of power and energy in the universe, to whom all of their spells are directed. She tells Sarah, who asks if Manon is a god, that Manon is the field upon which God and the devil struggle. Wearing an expression of near ecstasy on her face and in a tone usually reserved for female characters talking about their crushes, Nancy explains that, “Manon takes everything that’s wrong in your life and makes it all better”. Sarah, looking no less worried than before this explanation responds with certainty that “nothing makes everything all better”. In this exchange, we can already see crucial differences between Nancy and Sarah’s ideas of the possibilities of Witchcraft.

Though at first the girls’ spells work, well, like a charm, eventually, the long-term consequences of their magic bears out Sarah’s viewpoint. For example, the film suggests that Rochelle’s spell is a reasonable response to the harassment by her classmate Laura (Christine Taylor). Laura taunts Rochelle in the girls’ locker room—already a space of physical and psychical vulnerability for adolescents—with comparisons of her hair to pubic hair and slurs like “negroid.” Given the viciousness and unmitigated racism of Laura’s bullying, there is something quite satisfying about Laura’s rapid and disturbing hair loss and disfigurement. This pleasure in the suffering of a bigot fades, though, as

Rochelle eventually finds Laura sobbing in the shower, nearly bald, her scalp covered in sores, asking “What did I do to deserve this?” We see horror register on Rochelle’s face but she says nothing to Laura. Because Rochelle never confronts her directly, Laura doesn’t understand why she is being punished. Similarly, Sarah’s love spell on Chris functions to punish him by rendering him smitten to the point of willingly embarrassing himself in front of his friends and classmates. At no point, however, does the spell make him aware of why he is feeling this way or what he might have done to deserve his fate. The spell first causes him to follow Sarah around mindlessly, but this passivity quickly turns to obsession which manifests in late night visits to her house, pleas to move in with her, and ultimately an attempted sexual assault. He never comes to understand the problem with his treatment of women. As much as the young witches of *The Craft* have a right to be angry about their treatment and experiences, the narrative refuses the idea that revenge or a simple inversion of power relations between individuals can solve complex social problems like racism and misogyny.

Still, there is something troubling about a story in which a young woman who retaliates against someone who sets out to humiliate her using the most obvious sexual double standards is almost raped as a result of that retaliation. The film lays out this moral code when Sarah, who has become so uncomfortable with Chris’s increasingly intense pursuit of her and loss of his capacity for reason that she seeks Lirio the shopkeeper’s advice on how to reverse the spell. Here in the warm, candle-lit glow of the bookstore, Lirio explains that there is no undoing of spells and that moreover, whatever a witch puts forth in her casting will be returned to her three-fold. Lirio notes the connection to the Golden Rule that undergirds most religions. Lirio also notes that there

is no such thing as “black” magic asserting that “the only good or evil is in the heart of the witch”. If these are the rules of the universe in which this story takes place, then of course these girls must experience some negative consequences. Yet, more than any other example of Wicca-themed media at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, *The Craft* contains the utopian possibilities presented by thinking through stories about girls and women practicing Witchcraft.

The film foreshadows the negative consequences the girls experience as a result of their efforts through visually highlighting the differences between Sarah and the other girls. These differences are vital to understanding the way that this particular construction of the spiritual supernatural operates in the *The Craft* as a means of negotiating anxieties about femininity and particularly female power. Sarah, the film’s true protagonist, is conventionally and non-threateningly attractive. Her fair, make-up free, face and flowing red hair stand in stark contrast to the other girls who are physically marked by various forms of darkness. Rochelle’s Blackness is visible in her skin and hair and pointed out by her classmates’ taunting. Bonnie seems to hide behind her initially unkempt mane of black hair and under oversized black sweaters. Nancy’s darkness is the most obvious and perhaps the most affected. Her spiky jet-black hair matches her heavily kohl-rimmed eyes and dark lipstick. Nancy’s choice of make-up, clothes, and accessories serve to visually associate her with Goth subcultures. Members of Goth subcultures are popularly understood (or misunderstood) as having an unhealthy interest in the Occult and the supernatural. By visually presenting Nancy in such a light, the film links her unconventional looks with a kind of moral darkness.

Nancy, interestingly, is the most sincere, if misguided, practitioner of Witchcraft. It is she who knows the rituals and leads them. In one scene, after the other girls' spells seem to be working, but Nancy's is not, we see Nancy chanting at an altar in her cramped bedroom in her family's trailer. The film never shows any of the other girls having altars. Nancy is the most ambitious, urging the others to learn increasingly difficult spells and reveling in her newfound powers. It is her idea to invoke Manon, the fundamental source of power and energy in the universe.

Sarah is the only one of the group who has natural magical abilities. Her powers come, not from the studied practice of Wicca, but from her deceased mother. Sarah, however, is also the survivor of a suicide attempt, a fact that initially endears her to Nancy, Rochelle, and Bonnie who note upon seeing her scars that she "did it the right way" meaning her attempt was not simply a cry for help<sup>10</sup>. Though Sarah is a willing participant in casting the initial spells, she is the only one to express remorse when she sees their full effects. Upon seeing Chris driven mad by her love spell, Sarah asks, Lirio, the woman who runs the Wiccan bookstore, how to reverse the spell. Though Sarah does not fully commit to the practice of Witchcraft in the way that Lirio does, she grows increasingly uncomfortable with the frivolous and reckless ways that Nancy uses her powers.

Moreover, at the end of the film, it becomes apparent that Sarah is not only willing to police her own use of her powers. She also happily constrains others from using theirs. The climactic battle scene between Sarah and the others ends with Bonnie and Rochelle fleeing before Nancy is ultimately thrown into a large mirror and a semi-conscious Sarah begins the incantation to bind Nancy's powers. In the next, and

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<sup>10</sup> We never learn why Sarah attempted suicide.

penultimate scene, Bonnie and Rochelle approach Sarah in her driveway to see if she still has her powers. They reveal that they do not and when Sarah demurs from answering Rochelle snidely suggests that Sarah must have lost her powers too. The camera then zooms in on Sarah's face as she looks sharply to the sky. At her wordless command, the wind picks up, and we see the sky darken with storm clouds. With a slight narrowing of her eyes, Sarah commands a lightning bolt that strikes a tree branch which nearly falls on Bonnie and Rochelle. The two just manage to scramble out of the way and begin backing down Sarah's driveway looking terrified. Sarah, looking completely unfazed, calmly cautions the girls, "Careful. You don't want to end up like Nancy." The film then cuts to an aerial shot of Nancy, strapped to a hospital bed, struggling against her restraints and raving about her powers before being sedated. Sarah, then, is presented as the only one who understands the constraints that accompany her powers and is thus able to retain them.

Early in the film, Chris calls Bonnie, Rochelle, and Nancy the "Bitches of Eastwick" calling up the linguistic and more importantly the conceptual overlap between the terms "witch" and "bitch" as words used to label and disparage unruly women in U.S. culture<sup>11</sup>. The resolution of *The Craft*, with the formerly timid Sarah acting very much as the "new sheriff in town"<sup>12</sup> suggests that there is a way to practice Witchcraft without exhibiting behavior that gets one labeled as a "bitch." And yet, Sarah's behavior towards Bonnie and Rochelle could quite easily be described as "bitchy."

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<sup>11</sup> This same move is made by the children who taunt the Owens family in *Practical Magic*.

<sup>12</sup> This is a reference to Winona Ryder's character's final line, delivered, interestingly enough to Shannen Doherty, in *Heathers*. Caryn Murphy's 2008 dissertation discusses the *The Craft* and its thematic and narrative relationship to *Heathers*.

While such an attitude may be justified given what has taken place between these characters, by ending the film on this note, it clamps down firmly on unruly femininity. Sarah is valorized as the arbiter of who can and cannot have power and agency—who is “good” enough to be a “good” witch. *The Craft*, then, asserts that there are “bad” witches who refuse to adhere to a moral code and that, moreover, a good witch has and willingly exercises dominion over others.

The television series and film that followed on the heels of *The Craft* offer narratives that are rendered similarly ambivalent because of their references to Witchcraft as a belief system as well as a way of accessing supernatural powers. However, with their differing premises and utilization of conventions from multiple genres, (in particular, comedy), the stories of the Witches Halliwell, Owens and Rosenberg, explore other possibilities for girls and women as they learn to navigate their powers and identity as witches as well as the nature of power itself.

### *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

Following closely on the heels of *The Craft*, the television series, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) provided yet another representation of a young female witch in a central role. The character of Willow Rosenberg (Allyson Hannigan) begins the series as a meek girl marked by her nerdiness (she helps teach computer classes to her peers) and her Jewishness. Later, she also comes out as a lesbian. Willow, though not the show’s heroine, is a protagonist in the series: she is one of Buffy’s closest friends and she becomes increasingly important to Buffy’s work against evil as her powers develop. However, at the end of the show’s sixth season, Willow’s use of magic turns her into a violent threat to the world.

The episodes which center on Willow's turn as a villain reveal a number of visual and narrative similarities to *The Craft* and its use of lightness and darkness to convey appropriate and inappropriate uses of power by young female witches. The multi-episode arc begins when Willow's girlfriend, Tara (Amber Benson), is shot and killed during an attempt on Buffy's life. Mad with grief, Willow turns to what the program refers to as "dark" magic to try and bring Tara back to life. Though Willow's grief at the loss of her partner and her rage at the unjust circumstances of her death are understandable, the audience is cued to see Willow's reaction as troubling.

In those final four episodes of the season which originally aired in 2002, Willow's "dark" behavior is underscored by a physical transformation as well. In the episode "Seeing Red," Willow's girlfriend Tara, with whom she has recently reconciled, is accidentally shot and killed by Warren a wannabe supervillain who was trying to kill Buffy. Almost mad with grief, Willow first calls upon the ancient Egyptian god, Osiris, to restore Tara's life. Already in this scene we can see a darkness in the forces on which Willow is willing to call—Osiris appears in a swirling black cloud—and her physical being—her eyes turn black and white-less giving her an otherworldly appearance. When Osiris refuses to restore Tara's life because her death (a theme we see repeated in both *Charmed* and *Practical Magic*), Willow is enraged. Once she learns that Warren is the killer, she stalks off. In the next scene we see her enter the magic shop where the gang usually congregates and goes directly towards the collection of books of dark magic. Next we see Willow shot from below, looming over a large pile of ancient-looking magical texts. Laying her hands on the books she begins to absorb their magic, the occult symbols like an inverted pentagram and words in archaic languages travelling up her



arms and over her face. Her eyes again turn black and her normally red hair turns jet black (like Nancy's). In the next scene we see that Willow, who had been wearing blue jeans and a white peasant-style blouse, has changed into black pants, a black top, and a dark denim military-style jacket. The shift in color, fabric, and style all underscore her "darkness" and an emotional hardening as well. As she continues her transformation, Willow's already fair-skin becomes even paler and dark veins crisscross her face.

The visual juxtaposition of Willow as audiences usually saw her and "Darth Rosenberg" as one character calls her evil incarnation is similar to the one we see between Sarah and Nancy in *The Craft*. The narrative arc in *BtVS* also contains a similar caution against seeking and exacting revenge regardless how justifiable it may seem. In the episode, "Villains," Willow, seething with rage, hunts down Warren and in one of the more gruesome moments in the show's run, she kills him by stripping him of his skin, as Buffy, Xander, and Anya watch helplessly.

The scene is doubly horrifying because not only is such an act of brutality carried out by one of the series' protagonists, but it is also done in a completely blasé manner. In *The Craft*, when Nancy kills someone she is in a state of frenzied rage complete with screaming and hair rending. By the time Willow tracks down Warren in the woods, she is eerily calm, cold even. Warren, tied with his arms stretched between two trees, begs for his life and Willow sing-songs, "Bored now"<sup>13</sup> and flays him merely by flicking her wrist in the air.

The series suggests that rather than having her thirst for vengeance sated, Willow's use of magic to kill Warren only results in a kind of blood lust that threatens to

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<sup>13</sup> This is a phrase that avid viewers might remember her evil vampire doppelganger uttering in the episode "Doppelgangland" or "The Wish"

destroy her humanity. After dispensing with Warren, Willow looks to kill his henchmen, Andrew and Jonathan next. Buffy reluctantly works to protect them from Willow, partly because she maintains that this is a matter for the human justice system but moreover, because of her concern for Willow's soul. She and the others speak of Willow crossing a line by killing Warren, though it seems that they also think that killing Andrew and Jonathan would put Willow truly beyond the point of no return. Willow, who is increasingly dominated by the dark magic she has absorbed (speaking of herself in the third person and even at one point quipping "Willow doesn't live here anymore."), turns against her friends, willing to put their lives at risk in order to get to Andrew and Jonathan. Moreover, Willow begins to accuse Buffy and Giles of being jealous of her and her power and it becomes clear that Willow, is clearly no longer simply motivated by grief over the loss of Tara. Really it was never just that event. Willow's transformation, while immediately precipitated by Tara's murder, was really the product of the way that her relationship to Witchcraft developed over the course of the fourth, fifth and sixth seasons.

Some writers have argued that though the show uses the term Wicca to describe Willow and her practice, there is no connection to Wicca as a spirituality or religion (Winslade, 2001; Krzywinska, 2002). While I agree that the series often distances Willow from the spiritual aspects of Wicca, I argue that it is precisely this refusal of a more holistic approach to Witchcraft that leads to Willow's turn as a villain in the sixth season of the show and an engagement with Wicca as a spirituality that facilitates her redemption during the series' seventh and final season. In that narrative arc, Willow's relationship to Witchcraft begins to mirror Nancy's in *The Craft*. Whereas Nancy is

bound, however, Willow is rehabilitated and ultimately able to redeem herself. During the series' seventh and final season, she must learn to police, but also to develop her powers within a more spiritual understanding of Witchcraft. Though not unproblematic, the way that Willow's relationship to Witchcraft is resolved by the end of the series explores some of the more utopian possibilities of narratives about the spiritual supernatural and female empowerment.

The narrative arc about Willow's relationship to Witchcraft as a spirituality as well as the practice of magic begins during the series fourth season and in the episode, "Hush" (Season 4, Episode in particular. In this episode, the audience is introduced to Tara Maclay (Amber Benson) who becomes Willow's girlfriend through a scene about a meeting of the UC-Sunnydale campus Wicca group. Earlier in the series Willow described her spell-work as science rather than anything resembling a spirituality, at one point saying that Chemistry is "a lot like witchcraft. But with less newt" ("Bad Girls," Season 3, Episode 14). But the fourth season found her looking to expand her understanding of Witchcraft and connect with other practitioners. Aside from Tara, the group and its members are represented as a caricature of a feminist consciousness raising group complete with vapid talk about a bake sale to fund a dance recital and a Gaia newsletter for spreading "the message of blessing to the sisters." These young women are also portrayed as hypocrites, putting each other down at every opportunity. After attending the group's meeting, Willow dejectedly tells Buffy that the other women in the group are a "bunch of wanna-blessed-bes" and laments the fact that, "Nowadays every girl with a henna tattoo and a spice rack thinks she's a sister to the dark ones." Willow's critique of the group is certainly a comment on the trendiness of Wicca among young

women in the late 1990s and 2000s. But her complaint is not just that they are poseurs but that they are only interested in the spiritual and ideological aspects of Wicca, not the magical ones. She complains that all they do is talk and summarizes the talking as, “Blah, blah, Gaia. Blah, blah moon. Menstrual life force power thingy.” Willow’s use of these buzzwords of feminist spirituality in a dismissive tone can be read as distancing her character’s witchcraft from Wicca as a spirituality (Winslade, 2001; Krzywinska, 2002). I agree with that reading, but rather than concluding that Wicca on *BtVS* is distinct from spiritual concerns, I read Willow’s resistance to the spiritual and moral elements of Witchcraft as a foreshadowing of her increasingly reckless use of magic which begins to manifest in the fifth season.

Though my focus in this analysis is on Willow, it is impossible to fully consider the way that the discourses of Witchcraft and femininity operate in this text without discussing Tara and her relationship with Willow. Tara is integral to Willow’s development as a witch and as a woman, allowing her to expand her powers and to embrace her sexual identity. Often these developments are portrayed at the same time in scenes where the increasingly powerful spells Willow and Tara can cast together also stand in as a thinly veiled visual euphemism for lesbian sex that would be difficult to portray on broadcast television. This can be seen most clearly in the episode “Who Are You?” (Season 4, Episode 16) where as Willow and Tara attempt to undo a spell that has switched Buffy and Faith’s bodies they sit facing each other in a candle lit room and chant rhythmically. As their chanting and breathing quickens, the camera circles them similarly suggesting a build up to a kind of climax. If it were not already clear that sex and magic were being coupled here, the scene ends with Willow finally collapsing

backwards onto a pillow, breathless and smiling. Over the course of her relationship with Tara, Willow grows more confident and her spells (with and without Tara) become more and more important to the fight against evil.

That said, it is Tara who first comments on the alarmingly rapid development of Willow's powers in the episode, "Tough Love" (Season 5, Episode 19). During an argument, Tara blurts out, "It frightens me how powerful you're becoming." Hurt, Willow storms out leaving Tara vulnerable to an attack which renders her insane. Racked with anger and guilt, Willow goes to the books of dark magic and absorbs their power by placing the fingers on the pages (a scene we see repeated in season six). When she looks up, we see her irises have blackened and expanded making her appear to be no longer fully human. We next see her bursting in on Glory, the god who is the primary villain of the season and who thus far has been immune to all attacks. Hovering above the ground with toes pointed down and palms forward (much like Nancy in the scene where she kills Chris or when she and the others torment Sarah), Willow sends bolts of lightning at Glory stunning and temporarily binding her. Though Buffy ultimately has to intervene and pull Willow out of the fight, Willow proves herself to be both more powerful and less cool-headed than previously thought.

Though she is unable to save Buffy's life in the finale of season five, Willow's new powers make her integral to preventing an apocalypse and season six finds her emboldened to violate the laws of nature by raising Buffy from the dead. Willow does not act alone in bringing Buffy back to life, but she is the most certain about doing it. When Willow declares that it is time to cast the spell to reanimate Buffy, Xander balks, and Tara admits that, "It is wrong. It goes against everything in nature. But it's what we

agreed to.” (“Bargaining,” Season 6, Episode 1). In this moment we get an assertion of what the “rules” of magic and Witchcraft are, how it should and should not be used and we understand that Willow is not interested in following them. When the spell is successful, Willow expects to be praised for what she views as an achievement. Thus she is deeply hurt and angered by Giles who calls her a “rank, arrogant amateur” for putting herself, the group, and the entire world at risk with such a spell (“Flooded,” Season 6, Episode 4). She responds somewhat threateningly towards Giles suggesting that he might not want to “piss off” such a powerful person.

Throughout subsequent episodes, Willow’s use of magic is increasingly framed as a kind of “abuse,” a misuse and overuse of magic that develops into a dependency on it, an approach that somewhat surprisingly ends up reproducing the rhetoric of anti-occult groups. Critics of the occult, and particularly young people’s interest in it tend to speak of the potential for those who feel alienated to get lost in the fantasies of control offered by magic and the otherworldly. Much like in the rhetoric of those critics, there is certainly a broad metaphor of addiction at work in this narrative arc, particularly in the episodes, “Smashed” (Season 6, Episode 9) and “Wrecked” (Season 6, Episode 10) where Willow doesn’t so much cast spells as get stoned on other beings’ power.

This segment of the season also offers one of the show’s few discussions of the morality of magic in Witchcraft. Though Giles implies that Willow is missing the big picture in her approach to Witchcraft, Tara is more direct in her critique of Willow’s use of magic. In “All the Way” (Season 6, Episode 6), Tara asserts that magic shouldn’t be used for things that can be done naturally, like decorating the house for a party. Thus, these superficial kinds of spells that critics like Rachel Moseley suggest are characteristic

of media texts about witches in the 1990s, are recognized as frivolous and indicative of a misunderstanding of magic and Witchcraft. When Willow starts to rely on magic to control the details of her life and relationships with others, Tara again suggests that Willow is crossing an important moral boundary. In “All the Way” (Season 6, Episode 6) and “Tabula Rasa,” (Season 6, Episode 8) Willow uses a spell to erase Tara’s memories of fights they’ve had about magic. In the first case, Tara distinguishes between using Witchcraft to help people and better the world (what Willow claims to be doing) and using it order the world to your liking without respect for others. Though Tara never refers to the Wiccan Rede explicitly, she is essentially accusing Willow of violating the idea that magic should not harm others or interfere in their lives and their will.

After her use of magic leads to the demise of her relationship with Tara and to Buffy’s sister Dawn getting seriously injured, Willow recognizes that she is out of control and “quits” practicing Witchcraft for a period. While she is able to restrain herself for a period and reconciles with Tara, Willow is unable or unwilling to resist turning to magic first to try and restore Tara’s life after she is shot or second to take vengeance on Tara’s killer.

As I discussed at the start of this section, Willow’s storyline in the sixth season looks, at one level at least, a good deal like Nancy’s in *The Craft*. Both women use Witchcraft to attend to injustices (real or perceived) in the world, but wind up corrupted by their power. Both of these stories serve to open up and attend to cultural anxieties about what young women who feel alienated from dominant norms of femininity might do if empowered. What is different about the case of Willow’s turn to darkness and *BtVS*’s negotiation of those anxieties around overly empowered young women is that

Willow is able to redeem herself through policing her powers, but not through binding them. She can remain powerful without being a villain. Vital to that development and the opening of those possibilities is Willow's engagement with Wicca as a spiritual practice.

I have argued that when Willow decides to eschew the campus coven in the 4<sup>th</sup> season it is both because they are insufferable poseurs and because she is disinterested in the spiritual and ideological aspects of Witchcraft. At the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> season and the start of the 7<sup>th</sup>, it is a different coven that is vital to stopping Willow's rampage and helping her learn to live with her actions and the powers she absorbed. When Giles returns to Sunnydale from England to try and stop Willow in "Villains," (Season 6, Episode 19) he does so at the behest of what he terms "a very powerful coven in Devon" whose members sensed Willow's transformation and the danger she posed. They also imbued him with their powers so he could try to bind her and then tempt her into absorbing those powers which might in turn counteract the "dark" magic already within her. The 7<sup>th</sup> season begins with Giles having taken Willow back to England with him so she can work with the coven and, in a sense, be rehabilitated. In the episode, "Same Time, Same Place" (Season 7, Episode 3) we see Willow conjuring a tropical flower from the misty English countryside. When Giles approaches her, Willow speaks of how much she is learning from the coven about Gaia and the interconnectedness of everything in the earth and the true nature of magic. These words are significant because they hearken back to the words Willow used to dismiss the campus coven. What we see here is a narrative about the possibility of not simply being bound by the moral code of Wicca, but learning to experience empowerment in a different way. This is not to say that there is not a containment of Willow's power and anger. Willow is learning to police herself, if not



others, but she is also deepening her powers using them for healing and ultimately, to fundamentally change the nature of the series' narrative universe.

In the 7<sup>th</sup> and final season of *Buffy*, the gang faces off against the First Evil, the biggest nemesis they ever have and likely ever will battle. Over the course of the season, girls who are potential Slayers, who could be chosen in the event of Buffy's death, gather in Sunnydale after the First kills many of them and their watchers around the world. Buffy trains the potentials and must lead them into battle, but because they haven't yet been chosen, they lack her supernatural strength and skills. Until the final two episodes, all seems lost for Buffy, her friends and the potentials. When Buffy finds a powerful scythe with mystical powers, there is a glimmer of hope that the group can defeat the first and prevent yet another apocalypse ("End of Days," Season 7, Episode 21). Buffy realizes that while the scythe is powerful it is only one weapon and can only be wielded by one person at a time. She decides that if they are to defeat the First and save the world, Willow must use her powers to channel the essence of the scythe, a weapon forged specifically for Slayers, to activate every potential Slayer in the world and thus raise an army as fierce as the First's ("Chosen," Season 7, Episode 22).

Willow, who is still reluctant to practice magic after her "Dark Rosenberg" period at the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> season, balks at the proposed plan. When Buffy lays out the idea, the details of which the audience does not know, Willow protests that it is beyond anything she has ever done and that even if she can do it, it's incredibly dangerous for her and them. She reminds her friends of what happened when she had literally soaked up the dark powers after Tara's murder. Buffy, however, insists that it is the only way they can

possibly defeat the First and save the world. Though she lacks Buffy's confidence in her ability to carry out the spell successfully and safely she agrees to try.

When Buffy leads her friends and the potentials into battle against the First by opening the Hellmouth under the high school, Willow goes to the principal's office accompanied by her new lover, Kennedy, who is also a potential slayer. Willow has repeatedly tried to explain to Kennedy what could happen if she becomes evil again and insists that, if this happens, Kennedy must kill her. Though she doesn't believe it to be a real possibility, Kennedy agrees to take that responsibility. The unknown involved in the spell and in its aftermath exacerbate Willow's anxiety about the possibility of losing control--and the self she has struggled to regain. She tells Kennedy, "the darkest place I've ever been, this is what's on the other side of that." After once again reminding Kennedy that she may need to kill her, Willow begins the spell.

With Buffy and the other fighting the vampire horde underground, Willow begins chanting with the scythe in front of her. The commencement of the spell is intercut with a return to Buffy's pre-battle speech where she tells the potentials that they have a choice only this time, Buffy continues speaking and the audience hears the details of her plan. Buffy tells the potentials that Willow is more powerful than the men who made the first Slayer and who made the rule that there could only be one. Buffy declares that they are going to change that rule and that the potentials must decide if they want to be a part of it.

As the spell begins to take effect, magic once again begins to look a lot like sex as Willow's breath quickens and just before it takes effect she pants, "Oh. My. Goddess." With that, she throws her head back in ecstasy and she's enveloped in a bright aura and her hair turns white, a visual opposition from her black-haired, black-eyed, veiny Dark

Willow appearance. It is clear in this moment that Willow is working with a different kind of power than that which almost consumed her before. As the spell works, we see images of the newly awakened Slayers fighting below as well as girls around the world discovering a new strength and confidence. In the commentary track on the DVD release of the finale, “Chosen,” Joss Whedon notes that it was his goal with the narrative and the visuals of the spellcasting scene to convey, “the idea that when she empowers these women she comes to something more powerful, beyond the concept of power, beyond the power that’s evil, something that’s truly connected...about women’s connection to each other and the earth and that it would bring out the best in her...”. Magic, then, is what facilitates a vision of power that is complex and not something to be possessed by a single individual (though it may be). While it may not fix everything, magic can work as a positive force and perhaps, most importantly, one that is flexible and subject to reconfiguration.

In the next two sections, I turn my attention to *Practical Magic* and *Charmed* which attend to femininity in different ways than *The Craft* and *BtVS*. In *The Craft* and *BtVS* the characters are marked as “different” not only because of Witchcraft or gender, but also race/ethnicity, class, sexuality, and disability. This shapes the way those narratives negotiate gender anxieties in particular ways that differ from *Charmed* and *Practical Magic* which post characters who are different because they are witches. Age also maps onto this difference. There are also differences between the pairs of texts that correspond not only to medium, but also their premises. Whereas *The Craft* and *BtVS* focus on adolescent and young women characters whose affinity with Witchcraft is yet

another marker of their outsider status, in *Practical Magic* and *Charmed*, being witches is what marks these characters as different and makes them outsiders.

### *Practical Magic*

While *The Craft* ultimately contains the threat to the dominant regime of gender posed by feminism and non-hegemonic femininities through the construction of the “good witch” as “bitchy,” *Practical Magic* performs that containment work through a narrative driven by what I call “compulsory difference.” Julie Schutten, using Adrienne Rich’s (1986) concept of compulsory heterosexuality, argues that the film, “uses the potentially alternative image of the witch to hide the undergirding goal of sustaining the larger political project of the dominant paradigm to reinforce heterosexuality as the norm” (342). I agree with Schutten’s analysis of the film’s romantic plotline, but I want to consider the film not only as a romance narrative, but as a story of a woman, the character of Sally Owens, coming to terms with the fact that she is different. The resolution of not only the romantic plotline, but also the family’s curse, Gillian’s possession, tensions between Sally and her aunts and daughters, and the position of the Owens women within their town is accomplished through Sally’s acceptance and public acknowledgment (performance, even) of the fact that she is a witch. Unlike the other texts I discuss in this chapter, *Practical Magic* presents a world in which the main characters were raised as witches. That is, their powers and their identity as witches are not newly discovered.

From its very first scene, *Practical Magic*, plays up the multiple ways that witches and witchcraft have been made to mean in the course of U.S. history. Though the film focuses on the characters of Sally (Sandra Bullock) and Gillian Owens (Nicole

Kidman) in the present-day, the film opens by panning across sun-dappled ocean waters to the scene of dour Puritans standing around a gallows awaiting the hanging of a woman. As the voice-over provided by the Owens sisters' Aunt Frances (Stockard Channing) informs Sally and Gillian, that "For over 200 years, we Owens women have been blamed for everything that has ever gone wrong in this town."

Witchcraft and the use of supernatural powers are clearly linked to certain popular understandings of feminism in *Practical Magic*. The aunts are single women, though one is a widow, who dress eccentrically and engage in rituals like dancing naked under the full moon during the solstice. This characterization corresponds not only to the way witches were said to behave during times of witch hunts, but also to the practices reclaimed and/or constructed by latter day practitioners of Wicca.

While these "crones" are clearly a source of humor in the film, they are also figures of authority, particularly in matters pertaining to Witchcraft. They inform Sally and Gillian as young girls that they will teach them "things they'll never learn in school" referring to critiques of the mainstream educational system as patriarchal in its form and content. They also lay out the boundaries of what should and should not be done with magic. In particular, raising the dead. When Sally's husband Michael dies in an accident as a result of the family curse, she begs the aunts to bring him back. She opens the family's spellbook to a page with ominous drawings and symbols and insists that they bring him back, saying "You can do it. I know you can." The aunts reply, kindly but firmly, "We don't do that." The implication is that revivification is not outside their powers, but it is outside of their moral code. Moreover, in keeping with other narratives

about bringing the dead back to life through magic, the aunts note that the result of such spells is not the same person who died. Rather it is something “dark and unnatural.”

Though the film never explicitly refers to the Wiccan principle that what you send out with magic is returned upon you, there are serious consequences when Sally and Gillian violate the taboo against raising the dead after they accidentally kill Gillian’s abusive boyfriend, Jimmy Angelov (Goran Visnjic). Gillian suggests they use the reanimation spell after they decide that they cannot go to the police<sup>14</sup>. When Sally resists repeating the aunts’ caution, Gillian protests that Jimmy was already “dark and unnatural.” Despite that witty quip, the scene in which they cast the spell reminds viewers that the sisters are crossing a line and working with “dark” forces. It begins with extreme close-ups of the relevant pages of the spellbook which contain drawings of maggots and faces which appear to be howling in agony alongside occult symbols. These images are paired with the sound of indistinct but urgent whispering, adding to the sense of danger and foreboding. These elements of horror then give way to comedy as the sisters work the spell only somewhat competently using a can of whipped cream to spray a pentagram on Jimmy’s chest and balking at the spell’s instruction to insert needle’s into Jimmy’s eyes. Despite their imperfect form, they manage to bring Jimmy back to life but he is indeed even more dark and unnatural. The elements of horror and comedy intermingle as Sally, trying to stop Jimmy from strangling Gillian, strikes him on the head with a skillet, that classic weapon of the domestic space, “killing” him for a second time. Though the sisters manage to bury the body, they fail to rid themselves of Jimmy who possesses Gillian and almost kills her.

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<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, while their hesitance is in part due to the fact that they accidentally overdosed him with a sedative herb that Gillian had been using on him for months, there is also some of the rhetoric of abuse victims who do not trust the police to protect or even believe them.

According to the aunts, such an outcome is not only what comes from violating the laws of nature, but equally what comes from Sally and Gillian's approach to Witchcraft. When the aunts discover the extent of Sally and Gillian's troubles, Jet admonishes Sally, saying, "This is what comes from dabbling. You can't practice witchcraft while looking down your nose at it." The aunts' position is not so much that the spell could ever work out the way Sally and Gillian had hoped, but that they could have avoided such a total disaster had they been committed to Witchcraft rather than trying to largely remove it from their lives.

In order to save Gillian's life, Sally must finally take to heart her aunts' exhortations to embrace her difference, publicly declaring herself as, or "coming out" as the film puts it, a witch. Sally's revelation to the women of her town, who have largely resisted her efforts to live as a "normal" person, takes the form of her activating the PTA phone tree, an institution marked as the pinnacle of normalcy and responsibility. In a montage of phone calls, we see Sally tell one of the mothers, "Here's the thing...I'm a witch." Then we see her employees giddily sharing the news of Sally's "coming out." Lastly, we see one of the mothers who had previously snubbed Sally talking to another mother not about Sally being a witch, but rather that they needed to help her because Gillian was having trouble with an ex-boyfriend.

The townswomen's acceptance of Sally and willingness to help her after admits that she is a witch—something they all already knew or suspected—further the film's discourse of compulsory difference. Yet their ability to help facilitate the exorcism of Jimmy's spirit from Gillian also suggests that they are not so different from the Owens women after all. As the PTA mothers gather with the Aunts, Sally, and her daughters in

the Owens' kitchen, some of them talk about experiences with intuition and other inexplicable occurrences. Jet observes, using one of the film's tag lines, "There's a little witch in every woman." While this quip may be playing on the expression "There's a little bitch in every woman," the tone here is playful and works to include the women in a kind of sisterhood as they begin their stint as a make-shift coven. The focus in the exorcism scene is on the literal sisterhood of Sally and Gillian, with Sally begging her sister to hold on. It is ultimately by replicating the blood pact she and Gillian made by cutting their palms and pressing them together when they were teenagers, that Sally is able to banish Jimmy's spirit. As she presses their wounds together, she says, "My blood. Your blood. Our blood." Aunt Franny adds another dimension to the familial bond saying, "Maria's blood" and with these words, we see a vision of Maria Owens standing defiantly on the hangman's platform as we did at the very start of the film. Significantly, though, these words and images are intercut with shots of the other women's hands grasping each other firmly, each link paired with a sound like a steel gate shutting, suggesting another kind of strong bond as part of the magical work being done here.

At one level, the film's message of accepting one's difference seems liberatory. Certainly, Sally's embrace and declaration of her identity as a witch does allow for Gillian's survival, but it also functions to resolve other narrative tensions. By appealing to the other women on the phone tree and including them in the practice of Witchcraft, Sally facilitates her family's reconciliation with the town. Sally's transformation also allows her to find love again with the detective from Arizona who was investigating Jimmy's disappearance. It is worth noting that while such an outcome is to be expected in a romantic comedy, rather than the couple going off on their own, the man is brought into



the female-centered space of the Owens home. These resolutions are decidedly different from the lessons about policing powers and the hunger for power that circulate in the texts about younger witches.

Without dismissing that which adds a new dimension to Witchcraft as a discourse of femininity, we must also recognize the way that this film disciplines both Sally and Gillian's femininity, particularly their sexuality. Gillian's possession can be read as a consequence of her misuse of Witchcraft (reanimating Jimmy) but also her "excessive" sexual appetites. Visually, Gillian is chastened after the exorcism. Instead of seeing her smoking in her usual garb of slinky tank tops and midriff bearing pants (all the more scandalous in the still high-waisted 1990s), we see her working in the family garden, wearing a long-sleeved, high-necked gown that is similar in style to the aunts' garb. If Gillian is the quintessential "unruly woman" then Sally's striving for normalcy and resistance to falling in love reminds us that "unruliness" can take the form of both excess and deficiency. The narrative thus demands that she return to the fold of a heterosexual relationship even as it acknowledges the importance of relationships between women.

Ultimately, though, something of the magic in the Owens women's Witchcraft is lost in the film's final scene. It is Halloween and three generations of Owens women stand atop the roof of their home as the townspeople look up excitedly. They clasp hands and step forward off the roof, gliding gently to the ground, making truth out of one of the most widely circulated rumors about them. A close-up shot of Sally's feet landing firmly on the ground mirrors the earlier shot of Maria's feet as she landed on the ground after leaping forward off her scaffold. The point here is to remind us of Sally's connection to Maria and her newfound pride in it as well as the breaking of her curse. But there are

important and telling differences between the content of these similar shots. Maria leaps from a gallows in bare feet, wearing prisoner's garb, and a noose around her neck in an act of self-preservation and defiance of Puritanical society. Sally, on the other hand, steps forward for an audience as a performance of her "witchiness" for the townspeople. A rumor which circulated in the town as a testament to the Owens women's ability to defy death is transformed into a spectacle reminiscent both of Glinda the Good Witch descending to Munchkin Land in her bubble as well as Mary Poppins arrival as the Owens women alight with parasols overhead. Further, they are all clad in what appear to be store-bought Halloween costumes, comprised of black gowns, pointy hats, and buckle shoes worn with orange striped tights. Witchcraft and the disruptive femininity that it allows for, then, are exchanged for easily assimilable kitsch. In order to be free of the family's curse, Sally must take witchcraft seriously. She must understand and abide by its moral code. In order to complete her transformation, however, she must then publicly use those powers for entertainment rather than change.

### Charmed

Running for eight seasons, *Charmed* offers the longest-running and most focused representations of Witchcraft of the texts analyzed in this chapter<sup>15</sup>. *Charmed* (1998-

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<sup>15</sup>While not as critically acclaimed as a series like *Buffy*, *Charmed* was a solid performer for the WB and CW netlets, particularly among female audiences. The October 13, 1998 Nielsen Ratings put *Charmed* at #78 with a 5.2 rating and *Buffy* at 85 with a 4.3 rating. According to the AP, this propelled the WB to its highest weekly rating ever. As a point of comparison, the #1 show that week was *ER*, which had a 20.2 rating. *Hollywood Reporter* noted that, "The premiere of the WB's "Charmed" averaged 7.7 million viewers, making it the most-watched premiere ever on the network. The Shannen Doherty-Alyssa Milano drama also attracted record high ratings for the WB among adults 18-49 (3.7/9) among adults 18-49 and women 18-49 (4.7/12) (Rice, October 14, 1998). That same week *Daily Variety* reported that the WB picked up *Charmed* for the full season. "*Charmed* has averaged a 4.5 Nielsen household rating (percentage of TV homes) and 7 share (percentage of sets in use) so far this season." (Schneider, December 7, 1998, *Electronic Media*).

*Charmed* had continued success. As an on writer in the trade press put it, the start of the 2000-2001 series was, "a bewitching perf for third-year drama "Charmed," which topped its previous highs for the night in adults 18-34 (4.1/12) and adults 18-49 (3.7/10) while logging the WB's best homes score ever in

2006) follows the story of the Halliwell sisters, Prue (Shannen Doherty), Piper (Holly Marie Combs), Phoebe (Alyssa Milano), and later Paige (Rose McGowan) who learn as adults that they are the “Charmed ones,” powerful witches charged with using their powers in concert fighting evil demons and protecting innocents (humans). The sisters must learn how to use their powers while keeping their identities a secret. Though the theme of learning to use one’s powers is similar to the narratives of *Buffy* and *The Craft*, it is not linked to either adolescence or forms of difference other than gender.

Like *Buffy*, *Charmed* uses a narrative format that is both serial and episodic. While the sisters usually need to fight a “demon of the week,” there are also longer plot arcs involving demonic forces and their large-scale plans for world destruction as well as problems in their personal and work lives. *Charmed* (1998-2006), like *Buffy*, is a story about the battle between good and evil. Battling demons and warlocks and protecting innocents and magical creatures comprise a great deal of the action of the series. But the issues that the Charmed ones face on a regular basis throughout the series are very much concerns of adult women, much like in *Practical Magic*.

As in *Practical Magic*, Witchcraft is as much of a burden as a blessing in *Charmed*, but in the latter case Witchcraft is coupled with an additional imperative to protect the world. With their powers, the sisters are able, nay, required to vanquish

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the Thursday 9 p.m. hour (5.2/8)” (Kissel, October 9, 2000, *Daily Variety*). Further, in 2003, *Variety* reported that, “Although it’s never been an Emmy magnet, this Aaron Spelling fantasy hour has a core audience --- primarily young women --- that sticks with the show through cast and timeslot changes. It just wrapped its fifth season, ranking as the net’s No. 5 show in key demos. This season, it successfully anchored the WB’s new Sunday drama night, improving the 8 o’clock timeslot year-to-year by 100% in adults 18-34 (2.4/7 vs. 1.2/3). Compared to its perf on Thursdays last season, “Charmed” was up 26% in 18-34 and regularly beat CBS among young women” (Kissel, May 12-18, 2003, *Variety*). *Charmed* has been distributed in over 30 countries worldwide.

It is well worth noting that though *Charmed* was immensely successful with teenage girls, they were not the only viewers. In the 2000-2001 season, for example, the median age of *Charmed* viewers was 33 (McClellan, June 18, 2001, *Broadcasting and Cable*).

demons and warlocks and to protect innocent mortals and magical creatures. While the Charmed ones derive satisfaction and even sometimes pleasure from this work, the fact that their powers are tied to Witchcraft as a belief system contains them. In the second episode of the series, “I’ve Got You Under My Skin” (Season 1, Episode 2), the sisters grapple with their newfound powers and identities, and Phoebe seeks out information about Witchcraft from a Wiccan bookstore. She recites the Wiccan Rede to Piper, who is concerned that being a witch means being evil. This moment makes an explicit, if brief, connection between the show and Wicca as a belief system. By using the Rede, which states, “Do what thou wilt so long as it harm none” sets forth a moral code by which the characters must live. An additional rule of Witchcraft in this series states that their powers cannot be used for personal gain. Thus, early reviews which tended to dismiss *Charmed* as “a guilty-pleasure fantasy about three witch sisters...who live in a really great San Francisco house and fight evil in supercool outfits” (Flynn, 2004, 74) missed the fact that the Halliwells' powers never seem to make life easier, only more complicated and rarely in “supercool” ways. In the world of *Charmed*, magic is not a fun set of powers that allow for avoiding the drudgery of domestic labor, or any other kind of labor for that matter. Further, while the powers these witches wield are supernatural, they cannot overcome death or human suffering.

The limits and risks of magic and Witchcraft are a theme that is revisited numerous times throughout the series reinforcing the idea that being witches is not particularly safe, let alone glamorous. In the season one finale, “Déjà Vu All Over Again” (Season 1, Episode 22) the witches must live through the same day repeatedly as a demon, Tempus (David Carradine) who controls time repeatedly tries to kill the

Charmed ones, resetting the day every time his assassin fails. Phoebe is able to sense the repetition and also has a vision of Prue's boyfriend who also happens to be a police officer who helps the Halliwells, Andy's (Ted King), death. By recognizing the time loop, the sisters are able to thwart Tempus's plot, but unable to avoid or reverse Andy's death. Prue, who was seriously injured in the battle, tries to convince Andy to come back in a scene filmed with a gauzy lens indicating that the two are in a space of the afterlife. Andy reasserts the show's themes of duty and fate, insisting that Prue still has work to do with her powers. The idea that death is a possible consequence of standing up against evil is extended further with Prue's death at the end of the third season in the Season 3 finale, "All Hell Breaks Loose" (Season 3, Episode 22). While Prue's death was a narrative development motivated by Shannen Doherty's departure from the show, it nonetheless raised the narrative stakes of the series and reasserted the limits of Witchcraft and the risks of being a witch.

In the storyworld of *Charmed*, magical powers allow and insist that the sisters fight evil, but they cannot protect them from death or the pain of loss. In the wake of Prue's death we see a narrative about power and pain that parallels and predates Willow's struggles in the wake of Tara's death. In the episode "Hell Hath No Fury," which takes place shortly after both Prue's death and the arrival of Piper and Phoebe's half-sister, Paige Matthews (Rose McGowan), the daughter of Patty Halliwell (Finola Hughes) and her whitelighter or guardian angel, Piper goes on a demon vanquishing rampage. Normally, the most cautious of the sisters, Piper recklessly and relentlessly stalks demons ignoring her sisters' and husband's concern for her physical and emotional well-being. Piper's rage ultimately captures the attention of a group of demons called the Furies,

whose power increases as they feed on anger. As Piper's rage threatens to consume her, the Furies attempt to recruit her and almost succeed. Much as Willow's appearance changes during her "Dark Rosenberg" period, Piper begins to transform physically. The Furies are represented as an animal-like evil; they do not speak, but utter low growls, they're long dark hair is wild and uncombed, their faces are streaked with purple, their short dresses have ragged edges, and they have long talon-like nails which they use to scratch their victims. Ultimately, and again, like Willow, it is not magic that saves Piper from becoming a Fury, but acknowledging her grief and anger and powerlessness over death.

In many ways, the representation of witchcraft and magical powers as a burden resembles antifeminist rhetoric about how unhappy women are as a result of feminist activism and their subsequent "empowerment." And yet, the Charmed Ones do not "drop out" of witchcraft or the fight against evil even when they are offered the opportunity to do so. Even when they are not facing their own deaths or the loss of lovers and siblings, being one of the Charmed ones is hardly a charmed life. On a day-to-day basis, the Charmed Ones' magical powers regularly disrupt the lives they want to live. The sisters must struggle to maintain jobs and relationships without revealing their identity as witches. In the finale of the fourth season, "Witch Way Now?" (Season 4, Episode 22), the Angel of Destiny comes to the sisters and offers them a reward for defeating The Source, the season's "Big Bad". The reward is a life free of magic and fighting demons, a chance to live the normal lives they so often talk about wanting. Piper and Phoebe want to take the offer, noting not the number and variety of losses they have suffered. Piper, for instance, is deeply worried that the repeated physical trauma of fighting off demons

has left her unable to have a child. Piper's concern is a rare moment of reflection on the toll violence—mystical or otherwise—takes on bodies, but it also stands in for a wider concern about women's ability to work and parent. Paige, however, insists that their powers are a gift that they should keep. She reminds them of all the good they've done and the people they've helped.

Ultimately, they find their answer as they contend with being under surveillance by an FBI agent named Jackman (played by cult movie star, Bruce Campbell). Jackman claims to need their help finding a witch-hunter named Selena and offers to protect their identity in exchange. The sisters happily help deliver Selena to Jackman, but then realize that Jackman is actually the witch-hunter and is planning to burn Selena at the stake. The sisters manage to free Selena and defeat Jackman, realizing in the process that they do not want to give up Witchcraft or the fight against evil. Certainly, for the purpose of the show continuing this had to be the outcome of the story, but it also shapes the discourse of femininity and the spiritual supernatural that the series constructs.

The fact that the Charmed ones who were born into Witchcraft, like Sarah in *The Craft* or the Owens sisters in *Practical Magic*, are given the option to abandon their identities as witches and choose not to insists that despite the limitations and complications of magical powers they are not to be cast off. If we are reading Witchcraft as a metaphor for female empowerment, this seems to be a noteworthy departure from elements of the other texts under discussion in this chapter. While many of the witches discussed in this chapter must make a choice to accept their identity and make peace with it, none of them are offered the opportunity to cast it off. Thus, the Charmed ones'

decision to continue to use Witchcraft presents an interesting comment on persistence in the face of risk and unattainable goals.

The tone of reluctance when they deliver their decision, however, inflects that comment. When the Angel of Destiny asks for their decision, only Paige and Phoebe assert that they want to keep their powers. Piper simply agrees to go with the majority. When the Angel expresses surprise that they would not accept his offer, Piper replies with a sigh, “What can I say? We’re masochists.” While the quip garners laughter from her sister and the Angel, it exemplifies the way that Witchcraft as a moral code functions to contain the very “empowered” femininity that it attempts to represent in this series. It is, on the one hand, exciting to imagine and consume images of women working together for the betterment of the world. On the other hand, the themes of self-sacrifice and protecting innocence that pervade the series reinscribe traditional roles for women. Witchcraft, in the world of *Charmed*, may be a largely constraining and even dangerous force in the lives of its characters. Yet, in admitting the limits of power and empowerment and emphasizing persistence in spite of those limits, the series offers a moment where the fantastic offers an important comment on lived experience and the nature of working for change.

### Conclusion

Like many earlier popular representations of witches, these texts sometimes conflate female sexual power with magical powers and even assert the existence of some *magical essence* of femininity. However, by presenting witchcraft as a belief system, and not just supernatural powers, the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century representations also offer culturally resonant narratives about women and girls learning to deal with newfound



powers while acknowledging that the “damned if you do, damned if you don’t” conundrum, which act as a barrier to them truly controlling their lives. These texts acknowledge that power is messy but they also resist the conclusion that there is no hope for change. Moments such as Willow’s redemption and use of her power to literally change the world and girls’ place in it or the Charmed Ones refusing to abandon the project of protecting innocents despite the toll it takes on their lives offer small but meaningful engagements with how one might not be totally contained by the moral code. These moments may also stand out at too “on the nose” for many viewers and they still circulate via fantastical super powers, but they ought not to be ignored.

Ultimately, however, I argue that these texts’ focus on Wicca’s moral code largely contain the threats that both “empowered” women and Wicca as a largely anti-patriarchal religion pose to hegemonic power relations. In my analyses of the films and television series which portray witches with reference to Wicca or *The Craft*, I have laid out the ways that Wicca’s moral code is deployed to 1. Discourage feminine anger; 2. Encourage women to police themselves as well as their peers; 3. Embrace a narrow definition of “difference” that is safely heteronormative; and 4. Use their powers not to improve their own lives, but to put the interests of others ahead of their own. While there are certainly pro-social elements to these narratives as well as a kind of realism in the refusal of simple fantasies of power, the use of feminist spirituality (not inherently infallible, of course) to sooth anxieties about women’s empowerment offers yet another example of the ways that feminism is taken into account in contemporary popular culture.

## Chapter 4

### The Body, The Blood, and The Catholic Church: Essentializing Femininity in *Dogma*, *Stigmata*, and *The Da Vinci Code*

Americans' belief in angels and the increased visibility of religious subcultures like Wicca were not the only trends in discourses of spirituality in U.S. culture at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In fact, even more prominent was the scandal precipitated by revelations of rampant sexual abuse of children at the hands of priests and allegations of a decades-long Church sanctioned cover-up. Of course, US cultural history prior to the sex abuse scandal is marked with antagonism and ambivalence towards the Catholic Church, but over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Church and the Catholic faith had increasingly become part of the mainstream thanks to the waves of Catholic immigrants to the U.S., the political ascendancy of John F. Kennedy, and the widespread support for and admiration of Pope John Paul II's leadership of the Church during the 1980s. Still, by the late 1990s, the Church elicited widespread suspicion and derision as legions of cases of abuse and cover-ups became public.

It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that in the wake of the panic around and criticisms of the Church major motion picture studios in the U.S. released a number of films that featured the Church prominently and fairly negatively. While discussions of the scandal in the press focused on the Church's sins against young male victims, priests as

sexual predators only appeared rarely in these fictional entertainment texts and were often revealed to be falsely accused<sup>16</sup>

Instead, a number of popular films including *Dogma* (dir. Kevin Smith, 1999), *Stigmata* (dir. Rupert Wainwright, 1999), and the screen adaptation of Dan Brown's 2003 bestseller, *The Da Vinci Code* (dir. Ron Howard, 2006) appeared, each of which centered on female protagonists and the spiritual supernatural. Like the films and television series discussed in the previous chapter that use concepts of witchcraft drawn from feminist interventions into religion and spirituality, these films invoke feminist critiques of organized religion and Roman Catholicism, in particular. In the previous chapter, I argued that the representation of the spiritual supernatural found in texts featuring witches and referring to Wicca functioned to explore anxieties about empowered women and the possibilities and perils of attempting to effect change in the world. In this chapter, however, I argue that these films focus on female protagonists and the Church's conceptualization of and relationship to femininity as a means to a broader critique of the Catholic Church as an institution and authority of knowledge and truth.

*Dogma*, *Stigmata*, and *The Da Vinci Code* each take up and engage with long-standing tensions surrounding women's place within the Church and the Roman Catholic belief system. These tensions often stem from the particular ways women are constructed in relation to their physical bodies. Thus, before we can fully unpack the meanings circulating in these texts, we must first consider the problematic place of the body in Christianity, an anxiety perhaps most keenly felt in Roman Catholicism. Scholars of religion such as Wioleta Polinkska have argued that religion, and Christianity in particular,

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<sup>16</sup> As I will discuss in the next chapter, the cable television drama, *Saving Grace* (2006-2010) offers an important exception to this pattern by focusing substantial attention to the lead character as she grapples with her experience of being sexually abused by a priest when she was a young girl.

“has been one of the patriarchal structures that have objectified women and denigrated their bodies” (2000, 48). As she and others have noted, Church fathers almost always conceded that because women were created by God, they were good. However, Church teachings have almost as consistently defined and devalued women in terms and because of their bodily differences. Specifically, the Church has long conceptualized women as “more ‘naturally’ embodied than men” because of their reproductive capabilities (Ross, 1995, 331). To put it slightly differently, we can say that the Catholic Church has been one of the institutions central to the construction of femininity, over time, as, Sherry Ortner puts it, “more rooted in, or having more direct affinity with nature” (1998 [1979], 27). Nature, in turn, is constructed as that which must be contained and controlled lest the social order be undermined. Of course, Ortner argues that this construction is not unique to Catholicism or any religion or culture. Within Catholicism, however, the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene offer crystallized representations of the containment of femininity. Moreover, beyond the Church, these figures circulate in culture as the original pair in the virgin/whore dichotomy. The supposed “bodiliness” of women has also been used to align women with the irrational and the supernatural, particularly the demonic.

In his discussion of the matter, Richard Dyer (1997) notes that the focus of the religion is certainly on Christ and his body, but the female body, specifically, that of the Virgin Mary, is also central because it is key to the Christian conceptualization of the mind/body split in which the body is at best inferior and at worst evil. He writes, that “Mary is a vessel for the spirit, she does nothing<sup>17</sup> and indeed has no carnal knowledge, but is filled with God; her purity (of which her virginity is but one aspect) is a given of

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<sup>17</sup> By saying that the Virgin Mary does nothing, Dyer comes close to reproducing the devaluation of the feminized work of parenting. It cannot have been easy, after all, to be the mother of the kid who shows up the Pharisees at temple and changes water into wine.

her nature, not something achieved” (16). Dyer continues pointing out that the construction of the Virgin Mary's relation to the body in turn produces and advances a particular set of gender ideals: “In women these are of passivity, expectancy, receptivity, a kind of sacred readiness, motherhood as the supreme fulfillment of one's nature, all of this constituting a given purity and state of grace” (17). Thus, though the Marian ideal is impossible to attain, women are expected to work towards it and are chastised for failing<sup>18</sup>.

*Dogma*, *Stigmata*, and *The Da Vinci Code* critique the Church by offering counternarratives that challenge Catholic dogma or Church-established Truth by centering these stories on female characters and more specifically, women who deviate in a variety of ways from the virginal Marian ideal, an ideal, that is, of course, not unique to Catholic belief and culture. Often they take up the female figure widely regarded as the counterpoint to the Virgin Mary: Mary Magdalene. Significantly, the use, alteration, and even recombination of stories about the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene, and Jesus Christ play out in stories about particular women not about the nature of femininity. By linking these women to the spiritual supernatural and divinity, these films advance the idea that God does not only speak to or through the Pope, or the all-male clergy, or even necessarily the most pious and chaste women<sup>19</sup>. In other words, these films disrupt the idea that women can only occupy the position of virgin or whore. In so doing, these texts

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<sup>18</sup> Of course, as Dyer notes in his discussion, the figure of Christ also promotes norms of masculinity that are constraining in their own ways, and they will be discussed in subsequent sections as I analyze the ways these texts (partially) disrupt both the mind/body and male/female binaries that permeate U.S. culture. That said, the constructions of the male body do not marginalize men within the Church or limit their participation in spiritual life. Moreover, there is no male counter-part to the figure of Mary Magdalene, the second part of that other binary: virgin/whore.

<sup>19</sup> It is worth noting that the idea that Catholicism really only allows women to occupy two positions is reductive and not entirely accurate. These are popular understandings, and in some cases misunderstandings of the place of women within that belief system, but they are not manufactured from whole cloth.

invoke and evoke feminist critiques of the Church's devaluation of femininity and subordination of women. These fallible female characters are valued within and central to these texts, and, as Frederic Jameson might argue, the utopian possibilities of imagining new and different femininities within Catholic mythology can never be fully contained by the resolution of the narratives (1979).

That said, these texts' critique relies on concepts of femininity and the female character as rooted in and determined by the female body. In these narratives, this focus on female embodiment is tied up with images of and ideas about blood, a substance that is both sacred and profane. All of these texts' female protagonists are, in some way, chosen by blood<sup>20</sup>. That is, each of these characters finds herself at the center of the story because of her relationship or relationships to blood. Specifically, there are two main ways that women are related to blood presented in these films: 1. they are part of bloodlines that descend from Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary and thus have the potential to perpetuate them through childbearing; and 2. they make blood sacrifices that mirror Jesus Christ's own sacrifice in form (the wounds of the Crucifixion) and/or purpose (to save humanity and reveal something about the nature of the divine). Thus, in these narratives, these women's bodies offer a field upon which struggles over the meanings and place of women in the Catholic Church, as well as the meanings and place of the Church as an institution of spiritual knowledge in contemporary U.S. culture play out.

These three texts offer critiques of a Catholic Church as draconian and spiritually corrupt through narratives that foreground the religion's problematic gender politics, but ultimately they function to undermine the Church's claims on knowledge and truth more

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<sup>20</sup> Thanks to Bambi Haggins for offering this connection and phrase.

broadly. That is, these texts refer to feminist critiques of the Church as a means to lodge a broader critique of the institution not only as a site of patriarchal power, but also as an institution with the power to produce and control knowledge. Each of these texts, through female characters linked to the spiritual supernatural, presents mystical experiences that are coded as feminine. More specifically, *Dogma* takes up the issue of the perpetual virginity of Christ's mother, Mary and the possibility of God being a woman; *Stigmata*, plays less overtly on Marian themes and also explores the Church's silencing of mystical women; *The Da Vinci Code* offers a discussion of Goddess worship and a reclamation of the figure of Mary Magdalene. Ultimately, this positioning is facilitated—albeit incompletely—by the use of certain ideas associated with contemporary Gnosticism.

Gnosticism, in present usage refers to the teachings found in what religious scholar Elaine Pagels calls the 'Gnostic gospels,' documents found in Egypt in the mid-1940s (1979). Pagels notes, in her treatment of the Gospel of Thomas, that this term is imperfect but suggests a general use for an approach to one's relationship with God that is focused on seeking knowledge rather than belief (2003, 33). Over the last fifteen years, these ideas have experienced a great deal of popularity not only through these texts, but also in numerous works of non-fiction in various media, such as Pagels' *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* which became a national bestseller. In this gospel, the writer records what are supposed to be the secret sayings of Jesus Christ. One such saying which has circulated in popular culture is the exhortation to see Jesus as the light which brought forth the universe and shines on in everything: "Spilt a piece of wood, and I am there; lift up the stone, and you will find me" (in Pagels, 2003, 55). This sentiment has been extended in popular culture, and particularly, the films examined in this chapter,

into a critique of organized religion and the Catholic Church in particular. In response, Gnosticism, the ancient works associated with it, and its current proponents have all been criticized widely by Christian leaders. It is not only Christian and Catholic leaders, however, who have not embraced Gnosticism and its purported message of spiritual freedom for all.

The very aspect of Gnostic thought that seems to be most appealing to people—the assertion that the individual is the locus of the divine—not institutions or organizations—is precisely what makes it problematic for many. This emphasis on the individual as opposed to a religious community meshes with broader trends in approaches to religion and spirituality in post-World War II America, according to religious scholar Robert Wuthnow (1998). Wuthnow cites an increased interest in the miraculous and/or mysterious that is accompanied by a turn to the ‘inner self’ to find and experience the sacred. As Slavoj Žižek argues, this turn to the self allows individuals to create and sustain the illusion that they are not participating in systems of global capital when in reality they are essential to those systems (2000). The focus on the individual, combined with the Gnostic tenet that the soul is trapped inside the human body already suggest that while what is often taken from these gospels is interpreted as liberatory, it comes at a cost that is doubtless higher for some than others.

This critique of Gnostic ideas is important to my analysis because popular interpretations and deployments of Gnostic texts focus on the primacy of the embodied individual over the institutional as the link to divinity. While appealing to many in the context of millennial US culture, modern-day Gnosticism ultimately relies on and reproduces essentialized and unproblematized images of femininity that hinge upon



women's bodies as the link to the divine without taking into account the fact that the intersections of other identities with femininity mean that no woman is a) only a woman or b) necessarily experiences her body the same way as another woman.

Within the setting of popular understandings of the Catholic Church and its ideological dictums about the body, the focus on the "problem" of women's messy and miraculous bodies allows these texts to critique the institutional structure of the Church (and Christianity more generally) without really demanding that men concede any of their power within it. For example, none of these texts take up practical questions such as the ordination of women as priests.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, in the process of providing space for women and others traditionally marginalized by the Church, these filmic texts, through their references to mysticism and miracles, ultimately assert the primacy of an idealized femininity that is essentialized and defined by biology and particularly reproductive capacities.

The idealization of this uniquely female experience succeeds in making visible and resisting the denigration of women's bodies, but ultimately fails to acknowledge the ways in which this supposedly disruptive image relies on the erasure of other forms of difference. While these films take up the historic construction of women as more fundamentally linked to the flesh than men and the flesh as corrupt they displace one sexist concept of femininity with another. Women are still seen as defined primarily by their bodies because of their capacity to bear children in these texts. The texts celebrate this ability as a link to the divine, but this construct ultimately reduces women to their reproductive capacities. In so doing, these films deploy what I call fantasies of inversion

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<sup>21</sup> Of course, the ordination of women would not necessarily alleviate centuries old anxieties about women, but it is certainly an example of an alternative that is more directly engaged with how women can and should participate in Catholicism.

in which what is most often denigrated, devalued or vilified is reconfigured as valuable and seemingly superior. However, because these inversions do not really question the terms of the original binary, the overdetermined relationship between femininity and female bodies remains quite intact.

In what follows, I explore the appeal of this focus on embodiment as well as its ideological consequences. While I discuss each text in turn and acknowledge the important differences in their form and content, I return to the themes I lay out in the first textual analysis in each subsequent section, demonstrating the existence of a recurring narrative. Ultimately, I argue that these texts' counternarratives about women and divinity function not so much as a sustained critique of the Catholicism's gender politics as to undermine the Church's claims to spiritual and moral authority. These claims are, of course, claims about an accurate knowledge of Jesus Christ's life and teachings. More specifically, these films criticize the Church's knowledge claims which justify its centralized and hierarchical organization by positing ideals associated with Gnosticism. These ideals accommodate individualized spiritual lifestyles, centered as they are on direct knowledge of the divine more than the Church's focus on clergy-mediated sacraments. They also work to assuage tensions between reason and faith, between rational scientific knowledge and the mystical and miraculous. These ideals are not by necessity in cahoots with patriarchal power structures, but the ways that these films make use of female embodiment ultimately does much to reinforce them. Moreover, these texts offer other important, and largely unexplored examples of the ways in which elements of feminist thought prove useful and perhaps even necessary for negotiating popular

epistemological struggles and challenging established sites of authority while shoring up dominant regimes of gender.

*Dogma: The Mother and/as The Messiah*

Kevin Smith's *Dogma* (1999) was the first of the spate of films to criticize the Catholic Church through a narrative centered on a female character and the spiritual supernatural. While *Dogma* was not the massive cultural phenomenon that *The Da Vinci Code* was, it generated both controversy and revenue. *Dogma*, though the product of a practicing Catholic (director and writer, Kevin Smith), drew protests and calls for boycotts from Catholic and Protestant organizations, leading up to and upon its release. Though it was produced by Miramax, in a fairly uncommon move, it was ultimately sold to Lion's Gate for distribution in the US in order to shield Miramax's parent company, Disney from the controversy (Jones, 1999). The film grossed over \$30 million during its theatrical run in the US, which more than doubled its budget and continued to generate revenue upon its release on DVD thanks to Smith's cult-auteur status. Though *Dogma* was very much a niche film that appealed to largely young male audiences with its irreverent and sometimes juvenile humor, it was successful on a number of dimensions and arguably paved the way for the immense popularity of *The Da Vinci Code* a few years later.

*Dogma* (1999), tells the story of Bethany Sloane (Linda Fiorentino), a practicing, but disenchanted Catholic who also happens to be a divorced abortion clinic worker. These traits set her up as an unlikely candidate to receive a mission from God<sup>22</sup>. Yet this

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<sup>22</sup> Though the traits the female protagonists display in *Stigmata* and *The Da Vinci Code* differ from those that shape our understanding of Bethany as an improbable messiah, each of them is similarly characterized as deviating from the Marian ideal of chaste, passive, and obedient femininity. This characterization is key to the narratives' disruptive potential as well as to how they contain much of it.

is precisely what happens when an angel (Alan Rickman) asks her prevent two fallen angels from exploiting a loophole in Catholic dogma to return to heaven because their doing so would show that God is fallible and undo all of existence. In the course of the film, though, the reason for Bethany being tapped to stave off annihilation becomes clear as she is revealed to be a direct, and importantly, the last living descendent of the Virgin Mary and Joseph, a niece of Jesus Christ, making her the “Last Scion”<sup>23</sup>. Though it does not come with any powers of divinity, this title places Bethany in a position of responsibility to the world.

The success of such a blatant and blunt critique of a major religious institution in a popular film comedy is noteworthy, but even more significant to my analysis is the particular counternarrative it offers. This text is the first to explore the question of what would happen if Christ had descendants who live among us today. Of course, Martin Scorsese's (1985) film, *The Last Temptation of Christ* was immensely controversial for its portrayal of Christ living with a wife and having children. In a way, *Dogma* can be seen as an extension of that premise that explores the concept of a direct biological connection to divinity that lives on today and even more controversially, in the form of a woman and not the kind of woman typically associated with being biologically related to divinity.

Bethany's role is a hybridization of those played by Jesus Christ—the Messiah, who saves the world—and the Virgin Mary—the Mother of Christ. Like many mythological heroes (and, notably, many saints), Bethany is reluctant to take up her

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<sup>23</sup> This term is used in the film, but nowhere else that I can find and appears to be Smith's invention. It is worth noting that the secret society featured in *The Da Vinci Code* is the Priory of Sion, but they are spelled differently and don't seem to refer to exactly the same thing—unless it's the idea that Christ's human bloodline continued on after his death via one Mary or another.

mission. But her reasons for resisting the call to save the world are about more than concerns about personal safety or her ability to do what is being asked of her. Rather, her reasons for resistance are central to her crisis of faith and her identity as the “Last Scion.” Bethany, after all, has been chosen by blood, by her blood relation to the Virgin Mary and to Jesus Christ. Bethany is the Last Scion, though, because she cannot herself continue the bloodline because of an infection that left her sterile. When she is approached by the Metatron, the angel who acts as the voice of God (Alan Rickman), about her charge, she is disinclined to accept. She demands to know God's rationale for burdening her with the illness that took her fertility, which in turn, allowed her husband to leave her. The Metatron initially dismisses this resistance as selfish, but significantly, he goes on to engage her saying, “You lost the ability to create life; you have the chance to play mother to the world by acting like one and protecting it, saving it.” Bethany's mission, then, is framed in terms of motherhood and she is called upon to *act* as a mother as a substitute for *being* one.

Significantly, Bethany is also repeatedly likened to Christ himself throughout the narrative. Of course, the Christ figure, the hero or heroine who is sacrificed for the greater good is a long-standing staple of narrative fiction in the West. But Bethany, by virtue of her bloodline, is more closely and more literally tied to Christ himself. To link a woman so closely with Christ is uncommon and complicates the ideological work of *Dogma's* narrative of sacrifice. When the Metatron appears to Bethany in her bedroom and informs her that she has a divine purpose to serve, the film is very much offering a rewrite of the Biblical story of the Annunciation, when Mary learned she would give

birth to the Messiah. The key difference here is that Bethany cannot give birth so she must become the savior of the world.

The narrative pushes this identification further when Rufus tells an exasperated Bethany exactly why she has been charged with this mission and about her identity. Overwhelmed by the knowledge that the Church has not been telling the whole story of Christ and his family's lives as well as the fact that she is a part of that story, the usually blasé Bethany runs off and winds up in a lake, thrashing and cursing, demanding to know what God wants from her. In this scene, the Metatron comes to her again to try and comfort her, but rather than using the story of the Annunciation, he talks about informing Jesus of his identity and how difficult that was. Though this may simply seem like the more obvious story to discuss, it works to move Bethany from an identification with the Virgin Mary to the tie with Jesus Christ. The direct comparison of Bethany's experience to that of Christ makes for a narrative that is focused on a woman's agency rather than the more passive act of functioning as a vessel. In so doing, a new, or more accurately, a seldom-seen possibility for how women can operate within religious narratives is presented.

The climax of the film further positions Bethany as a Christ-figure. As all of existence stands on the brink of annihilation, Bethany has an epiphany and finds the comatose human body in which God is imprisoned and unplugs the life support machine releasing the deity in a blinding flash of light. As God is released, Bethany collapses, gushing blood from her lower abdomen-the site of the infection that made her sterile. The film cuts from the shot of Bethany's blood-soaked body slumped against a wall to a scene in which God appears just in time to stop the angels from carrying out their plan.

After God metes out divine justice and undoes the havoc Loki and Bartleby wrought, setting the world right again, Kevin Smith himself (in his role as Silent Bob) carries Bethany's lifeless body and lays her at God's feet. There is no doubt that Bethany gave her life so that others might live.

While any number of narratives of saints' lives (not to mention non-Christian and non-religious narratives about heroic sacrifice) end with such an act of selfless heroism, Bethany's story continues to be linked to Christ's in that she, too, is resurrected by God's hands. Bethany wakes up puzzled and the Metatron explains by way of *The Six Million Dollar Man*, saying, "She can rebuild you. She has the technology. She can make you better, stronger, faster." This isn't just a standard Kevin Smith-style pop culture reference, but also a comment on the condition in which God has left Bethany. The Metatron goes on to ask Bethany to take care of herself as she'll be needed in the future. Looking happy and confident for the first time in the entire movie, Bethany responds, "I know, I'm the Last Scion." He corrects her saying, "You're half right. You *were* the Last Scion." Then, placing his hand on the whole of her lower abdomen and squeezing it in a shot that only encompasses that part of her body, he tells her that now "This is" and asks her to "take care of that little parcel for us," revealing that God not only resurrected but impregnated Bethany. All of this occurs at the very moment Bethany has embraced her identity as the Last Scion and feels empowered by it, and because she is impregnated her role changes from acting like a mother to the world to carrying a parcel. In other words, she goes from being an agent of the divine to an incubator for it.

In this moment the Last Scion regains her life and loses her position and *Dogma* shifts from associating Bethany with Christ and returns much more literally to casting

Bethany in terms of the Virgin Mary. Though the Virgin occupies a position of great power within the Church—there is literally a cult devoted to her—this position is predicated on her subservience and her paradoxical simultaneous maternity and virginity. While Bethany is not portrayed as a virgin, she is desexualized within the narrative, resisting her friend’s suggestion that she would be happier if she would “get laid.” Further, though Bethany is played by the typically sexy and sexualized Linda Fiorentino, she is costumed and made up with bland clothes, minimal make-up, and barely brushed hair which attempt to desexualize her<sup>24</sup>. In the last scene of the film, the link between the cult of the Virgin and a femininity reminiscent of the Victorian cult of true womanhood is forged when in response to Jay’s discussion of the erection he got from God kissing him on the cheek and his assertion that “the bitch was hot,” Bethany replies that he can’t talk to her like that anymore because she’s going to be somebody’s mother. Motherhood, then is the ultimate reward and woman’s ultimate purpose and it requires a femininity that is chaste and desexualized. The fact that Bethany is impregnated via immaculate conception relies on a contradictory celebration of woman’s ability to bring forth life despite the denigration of the bodily activities usually required to make this happen.

Of course, we cannot ignore the fact that the simultaneous resurrection and relatively immaculate conception are carried out by God in female form. That *Dogma* offers not only a representation of God as a woman, but that she is played by Alanis Morissette, best known for her hell-hath-no-fury-like-a-woman-scorned-anthem, “You

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<sup>24</sup> Extratextual knowledge of Fiorentino’s other roles such as the seductive con artist in *Body Count* (1998), the kinky coroner in *Men In Black* (1997), and a true “femme fatale” in *The Last Seduction* (1994) may complicate this process for viewers who know her from these roles. Casting for the whole film was actually very intentionally tongue-in-cheek and reflective of its popular culture moment with then-Hollywood golden boys, Ben Affleck and Matt Damon starring as the fallen angels, Chris Rock as the “forgotten” black apostle, and George Carlin as the corrupt cardinal who sets everything in motion.



Oughta Know,” clearly disrupts dominant narratives of the nature of divinity. It is all the more significant that Alanis as God not only resurrects Bethany, but also impregnates her. The interaction between God and Bethany is not merely some numinous girl-on-girl action, but rather a moment where a connection between women is celebrated and the creation of life is an entirely female affair.

*Dogma's* representation of God taking female form and a woman messiah descended from the Virgin Mary disrupt traditional Catholic mythology in ways that Frederic Jameson might consider utopian. They offer new narrative possibilities and ways of imagining divine knowledge and truth and women's relationship to them. Though these elements and their interpretation by audiences can never be fully contained, they function in the service of negotiating not so much women's place within the Church, but Catholicism (and organized religion, more generally) as a powerful and often well-meaning institution that is inflexible and out of touch. The conclusion of the film bears this out in Bethany's parting exchange with Rufus who is returning to heaven with God and the Metatron. He asks the beaming Bethany if she has found her faith again. His word choice is noteworthy as earlier in the film he criticized the rigidity of dogma and noting the wide array of atrocities carried out in the name of faith. Bethany's response refers back to that conversation and she takes up the alternative Rufus suggested, responding, that she has a good idea.

In *Dogma*, the ability to craft and control spiritual truths and the narrative of the New Testament is key to the Church's authority as an institution of knowledge and truth. Though there are multiple aspects of Church teaching that Smith's film suggests have been subject to this kind of crafting and shaping, the most central pertains to Bethany's

identity as a relative of Jesus Christ and a direct descendent of the Virgin Mary. This move, though not as obviously counter to Catholic teachings as *The Da Vinci Code's* claims that Christ himself married and had children (calling his own divinity into question), contradicts the Church's belief in Mary's perpetual virginity. In disputing that teaching, *Dogma* takes up feminist critiques of the Church (and Christianity more broadly) that attempt to destabilize the virgin/whore dichotomy embodied in the figures of the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene as well as those that point out the contradictory nature of the former Mary's virginal motherhood.

Bethany, then seems like something of a third figure. She wants to be a mother, but is not and is physically incapable of bearing a child. She is not a virgin, but neither is she a whore. In fact, her sexual inactivity is established and mocked early in the film. There is also the matter of her work at an abortion clinic, which is not criticized in the film. This element of her character suggests that unlike Cardinal Glick and the Church leadership, Bethany is not blindly obedient to dogma and that she respects women's right to control their reproductive capabilities.

Unlike the other films I analyze in this chapter, *Dogma's* critique of the Catholic Church is not so much that it is malicious or deceptive, but rather that it is complacent and out of touch with human experience. The human face of the Church is Cardinal Glick of New Jersey who is played by the iconoclastic George Carlin. Carlin's Cardinal is a caricature that functions to mock the supposed excesses of the priesthood, particularly Church leadership, as well as these men's disconnection from their parishioners and even Christ's teachings. The audience's introduction to the Cardinal is at a press conference where he is introducing a new, but thoroughly misguided campaign to reinvigorate

Catholicism and make it more “relevant” to U.S. culture. The “Catholicism Wow!” campaign is central to the plot as part of the program is invoking an obscure piece of Catholic dogma to reconsecrate Glick's church. It is this process that provides the loophole that will allow the fallen angels Loki (Matt Damon) and Bartleby (Ben Affleck) to be absolved of their sins and return to heaven. When Bethany, now accompanied by the forgotten (or more accurately, erased) 13<sup>th</sup> apostle, Rufus (Chris Rock), Cardinal Glick is dismissive of their claims. While Bethany implores him to cancel the event, Glick nonchalantly practices his put using a Communion chalice as his target and dismisses her concerns. When Bethany and Rufus assert that the Church is responsible for the loophole that threatens all of existence, Glick becomes animated, insisting on the infallibility of Church decree. Thus, while the picture of the Church that we get is not malicious in its intent, it is far too committed to maintaining its power and the privileges that come with it. In the end, there is no further rebuke of the Church. Indeed, we never see Cardinal Glick after the meeting in his office. What Bethany's idea is or what it means for her relationship (biological or spiritual) with God is left unexplored and while the hierarchical and rigid aspects of the Church are critiqued, Catholicism and spirituality are by no means villainized. Both *Stigmata* and *The Da Vinci Code* more fully explore alternate ways of accessing spiritual truths and knowledge by advancing much more pointed critiques of the Church in tandem with increasingly problematic appropriations of feminist critiques and spirituality.

#### *Stigmata: The Medium Is The Message*

Released just months after *Dogma*, *Stigmata* (Rupert Wainwright, 1999) offered another narrative that critiqued the Catholic Church through the pairing of a female lead

character and the spiritual supernatural. Whereas *Dogma* was a comedy and the creation of an irreverent, but practicing and devoted Catholic (Kevin Smith), *Stigmata* (Rupert Wainwright, 1999), is a supernatural gothic horror film, which owes debts to both *The Exorcist* and vampire movies. Moreover, unlike the other central female characters in the films discussed in this chapter, however, Frankie Paige (Patricia Arquette), *Stigmata's* female protagonist, is not tied to Christ through her bloodline. Rather, her connection is established through bloodshed as she mysteriously begins to receive the wounds received by Christ according to Biblical accounts of his crucifixion<sup>25</sup>. Though she is not called upon to save the world, Frankie's encounter with the spiritual supernatural is key to the film's critique of the Church.

Frankie Paige, an atheist “wild child,” begins to display the stigmata after receiving a rosary from her mother who is traveling through Brazil. The Vatican sends Fr. Andrew Kiernan (Gabriel Byrne) to investigate the incident as a possible miracle. What no one in the story realizes at first is that the rosary which gave Frankie the stigmata is from the same church shown in the opening scenes where a priest, Father Kiernan (Gabriel Byrne) was investigating a statue of the Virgin Mary which began crying tears of blood when the parish priest, a Fr. Alameida, died. In fact, the rosary was the dead priest's. As Frankie receives more wounds she also begins to display symptoms of possession, writing in Aramaic, the language thought to be spoken by Christ and his followers. Father Kiernen is eventually sent to investigate Frankie's stigmata and he works to uncover who or what has taken hold of Frankie and what they are trying to

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<sup>25</sup> Frankie bleeds from the places on her body corresponding to the wounds suffered by Christ during his crucifixion: her wrists and feet where the nails hammered him to the cross, her back where he was whipped, her head where he was made to wear a crown of thorns, and ultimately, her side where Christ was stabbed with a spear.

communicate. It becomes clear, however, that the Vatican wants the message silenced. Ultimately, Kiernan discovers Fr. Alameida's message in the form of a "lost" book of the Bible, the Gospel of Thomas, whose message promotes an individual rather than institutional relationship with God.

While *Stigmata* received a lukewarm critical response, it grossed over \$50 million during its US theatrical run and was the first motion picture to knock M. Night Shyamalan's hit *The Sixth Sense* from the number one spot at the box office (Fuson, 1999). Moreover, it was immensely successful upon its release on DVD in 2000 ("Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Reports Third Consecutive Profitable Quarter," April 25, 2000). *Stigmata* received less Church opprobrium than *Dogma*, but the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops placed it on its lists of "morally offensive" and anti-Catholic films (<http://www.usccb.org/comm/archives/1999/99-210.shtml>).

*Stigmata*, like *Dogma* and *The Da Vinci Code*, centers on a female character, Frankie, who experiences contact with divinity even though she is understood as an extremely unlikely candidate for it. This unlikeliness as well as the way that the film is attempting to play with strands of Catholic mythology are highlighted in the opening credits of the film. The film cuts sharply from the first scenes of the church in Brazil to the opening credits and a montage of scenes of Frankie's life in Pittsburgh, PA. The soundtrack of this montage, which features very little audible dialogue, is British punk band Chumbawumba's song, "Mary Mary." The distorted guitars and pounding bass complement the visuals which establish Frankie as a hard-living rave aficionado who we see indulging in excessive drinking, smoking, and eventually fornication. The shots which establish Frankie's subcultural style (piercings and tattoos) and hedonistic life are

intercut with images of frescoes and stained glass windows featuring religious imagery of the Crucifixion, the Virgin Mary, and St. Francis of Assisi who we later learn (if we did not go through Catechism already) was a reformed playboy who received the stigmata. Visually, Frankie's face is often paired with that of Mary. While Mary Magdalene is absent from this sequence (and the movie as a whole), the lyrics of the song evoke the promiscuous and unrestrained image with which the "other" Mary is most commonly associated. The first line directly opposes the singer, and by extension, Frankie, to the Madonna, saying, "No virgin me, for I have sinned. I sold my soul for sex and gin." The female singer continues, shouting, "I'll spit on floors, and do more drugs, burn every bill, get drunk on love, wear next to nothing in the pouring rain, be a bad example, and do it all again." Though the lyrics of the song are not Frankie's words, they establish Frankie as a character who actively rejects the idealized femininity associated with the Virgin Mary and thus as someone we do not expect to have a profound religious experience.

Frankie's rejection of religion and its morality is emphasized repeatedly, further highlighting her status as unlikely candidate for sainthood. We see this estrangement from religious knowledge in the scene in which she receives a rosary from her mother and does not know what it is or what to make of it. She simply says "It's pretty" when her mother asks what she thinks. She also explicitly identifies herself as an atheist when she first meets Fr. Kiernan, the same Vatican investigator who was examining the church in Brazil. Kiernan himself is skeptical that Frankie's wounds are a true instance of the stigmata because according to Church teaching, only the deeply religious receive the wounds.

As in *Dogma*, the establishment of a female protagonist who deviates so far from the Marian ideal of femininity but who is also very closely linked to Christ is key to *Stigmata's* counternarrative and critique of the Church. Frankie in *Stigmata* is not a descendent of Christ but her blood is still central to her link to divinity. In receiving or displaying the stigmata, Frankie's suffering is interspersed with images of the crucifixion--although Christ is never seen in his entirety, only close-ups of the wounds being inflicted on a male body. In addition to receiving the wounds of Christ, Frankie's blood itself is compared to that of Christ. Shots of Frankie, who has suffered stigmata-like lashes on the subway, having her blood drawn in the hospital—with close-ups of the blood flowing through the plastic tubing—are juxtaposed with Fr. Kiernan giving the sacrament of Holy Communion: through transubstantiation, the wine is converted to Christ's blood. Finally, like Bethany, Frankie, too sacrifices her life as Alameida speaks through her, revealing the “secret” teachings of Christ threaten to undermine the Church's power over the spiritual lives of Catholics.

Ultimately, though, *Stigmata's* narrative feminizes Frankie's experiences in key ways that reproduce the notion that women are more open than men as vessels for mystical experiences (Sjørup, 1997) and that because of their deeper connection to their earthly bodies, they will receive more physical pain and suffering and even death. For example, though childbearing and bloodlines are not at the heart of the narrative, there is a way in which she is impregnated by grace through her experience. Upon receiving the rosary from her mother, and before she begins to exhibit the stigmata, Frankie displays symptoms associated with pregnancy, specifically, food aversion and morning sickness. Frankie is not characterized by her ability to perpetuate a divine bloodline, but she is very

much still conceptualized as a vessel. Though she does not deliver the “Word made flesh” as Catholics and Christians understand Mary to have done in giving birth to Christ, Frankie delivers what are supposedly the words of the Word made flesh according to Alameida.

Further, though it is St. Francis of Assisi and Padre Pio, male saints, that Fr. Kiernan uses to explain the stigmata to Frankie, her experience is also very similar to that of female mystical saints like Catherine of Sienna whose visions corresponded to her physical deterioration, and ultimately, her death at a young age<sup>26</sup>. After Kiernan tells Frankie that St. Francis of Assisi (a former wild child reformed by a religious vision) and St. Padre Pio both received the stigmata, Frankie asserts the difference in her experience: this “thing” is killing her. While neither the messenger nor the one who carries the messenger is important, the vessel, in this case, Frankie, is given neither agency nor foreknowledge of the price she must pay.

*Stigmata* directly criticizes the Church by portraying it as led by men more interested in the maintenance of the hierarchy of the organization than to the development of spiritual life. The Church is represented by Vatican officials who are solely interested in the maintenance of their and the Church's power to control spiritual knowledge and mediate individuals' relationship with divinity. As in *Dogma*, the Church is criticized precisely for dismissing miracles, for being out of touch with the supernatural elements of religious life. When we first meet Fr. Andrew Kiernan he is a Vatican scientist working to debunk false claims of miracles. When he brings his supervisor, who ultimately

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<sup>26</sup> Rudolph M. Bell has made the provocative argument that some mystical female saints exhibited behavior patterns similar to what is contemporarily understood as the eating disorder anorexia nervosa as part of their mysticism, which often led to their early deaths (1985). For a more general discussion of female mystical saints, see Maitland, S. and Mulford, W. (1998). *Virtuous Magic: Women Saints and Their Meanings*. London: Mowbray.



becomes the villain of the film, a case of a statue of the Virgin Mary crying blood that he cannot explain scientifically, his supervisor dismisses it and refuses to let Kiernan investigate further. Of course, he instead dispatches Kiernan to see Frankie, whose second stigmatic incident (receiving the lashes) which occurred on a subway train has become a news story. Kiernan's supervisor is clear that he is most interested in quieting the story down regardless of the incident's legitimacy as a miracle.

Thus, *Stigmata* lodges a critique of the Church that indicts the institution's own disenchantment and while assumptions about natural links between women and the supernatural are used to make that indictment, the counternarrative ultimately moves away from the place of gender in the Church. In a moment of possession, Frankie does chastise Kiernan and, by extension, the priesthood for devaluing women, regarding them as "inconveniences", but there is never a more clearly articulated feminist critique of the Church's treatment of women.

Though Frankie is significant to *Stigmata*'s narrative critique of the Church as an institution of spiritual knowledge, this feminization of her encounter with the spiritual supernatural and the consequences thereof eventually work to remove her from the story. It is not what Frankie knows or learns, but rather Alameida's message, which is the key to the film's critique of the Catholic Church as an institution of knowledge. It is telling that Frankie never has any recollection of Alameida speaking through her, of his guiding her to write the Aramaic characters that are eventually revealed to be part of the his message. Moreover, while *Dogma*'s conclusion asserts motherhood as the ultimate reward for a woman who gave her life in a Christ-like sacrifice, Frankie receives only death. After she perishes in the conflagration that accompanies Alameida's last act of speaking through

her, the film continues, following Kiernan as he returns to Brazil where he finds the actual text of the gospel of which Alameida had spoken. Frankie, as a character, serves as a challenge to dominant ideas of what kind of women experience a connection to divinity. The fact that she is necessary to the expression of spiritual truths is a not insignificant intervention into Catholic and Christian mythologies, but in the end, this challenge is undermined by the narrative's refusal to meaningfully engage with the Church's gender politics and by its reduction of Frankie to a medium through which men speak to other men. In the following section, I return to the characterization of the female protagonist as a puzzle to be solved by male characters in my analysis of *The Da Vinci Code*, but we must note that this text is the only one to explicitly make a sustained, if not wholly accurate, critique of the Catholic Church's gender politics.

#### *The Da Vinci Code: Solving the Mysteries of Femininity and Faith*

While both *Dogma* and *Stigmata* achieved commercial and popular success, they were, by and large, niche texts. In 2003, Dan Brown's novel *The Da Vinci Code*, hit bookstores and offered a text which engaged similar themes, but with such broad-based appeal that it quickly rose to the status of a full-fledged pop culture phenomenon. A highly successful movie version followed in 2006<sup>27</sup>. It was preceded, in 2005, by the Pope convening a task force to rebut Brown's narrative and worldwide calls for boycotts preceded the film's release. Despite this controversy, or more likely encouraged by it, the film grossed over \$77 million in North America its opening weekend and \$224 million worldwide (Gentile, 2006). It ultimately grossed over \$217 million in the U.S. (imdb.com).

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<sup>27</sup> According to one exit poll of movie audiences, 84% of respondents were familiar with the book (Fuson, 2006). Given this familiarity with both texts, my analysis takes both versions of the narrative into account.

The *Da Vinci Code* is at its heart a mystery and the narrative action centers on Harvard professor of “Symbology,” Robert Langdon (Tom Hanks) and French cryptographer, Sophie Neveu (Audrey Tautou) as they race to decode the messages left by the murdered secret society leader, and Neveu’s grandfather, Jacques Sauniere. They must solve the puzzle in order to prove their innocence in his murder and ultimately to reveal the true nature of the Holy Grail.

Like the other texts discussed in this chapter, *The Da Vinci Code* suggests that the Church has it wrong when it comes to what Jesus and God want for humanity—a less dogmatic, more individualized kind of faith and practice. As in *Stigmata*, the Church in the world of *The Da Vinci Code* is characterized by conspiratorial clergymen and followers willing to commit murder to suppress information that could destabilize the Church's claims to spiritual authority. While the “lost” Gnostic gospels also appear in *The Da Vinci Code*, they are not the secret with which the Church is concerned, but offer clues about it. This secret is that Christ was married and had children whose descendants live on today. The assertion that Christ's bloodline did not end with him is quite similar to *Dogma's* suggestion that the Virgin Mary had other children and that the bloodline continued into the present day.

Moreover, like both *Dogma* and *Stigmata*, a female character is at the center of the narrative and is linked through her body to the secret truth that challenges the Church's authority. That is, all of these films insert women into unusual positions with regard to Catholic mythology and trouble the usual portrayals of women in that mythology and thus invoke feminist critiques of Christianity implicitly, through individual characters. *The Da Vinci Code* does this with the character of Sophie who is

constructed to in some ways deviate from the Church's norms of femininity and thus, to appear as an unlikely relative of Christ. Sophie Neveu (Audrey Tautou) is an avowed atheist. She also works in the masculinized field of law enforcement and more specifically in the hyper-rational area of cryptography.

*The Da Vinci Code*, however, is the only one of these films to explicitly invoke the concepts of goddess worship and the sacred feminine, the idea of an inherent link between femininity and the divine, with its discussion of the “true” nature of the Holy Grail. Sophie's character and story, then, must be considered in light of the fact that *The Da Vinci Code* makes another and more explicit intervention into Catholic mythology. Even before Sophie's status as a living descendant of Christ is revealed<sup>28</sup>, the story establishes a spirituality that is steeped in a fetishization of female fertility. The secret society at the center of the story, the Priory of Sion, uses women's reproductive capacities to stake its claims about the “sacred feminine,” the link between women and the divine and the “true” nature of the Holy Grail. These images serve as symbols of the “true” Grail, which in the counternarrative of *The Da Vinci Code* is an even more unlikely woman: Mary Magdalene. Mary Magdalene is popularly known (by Christians and non-Christians) as the prostitute saved by Christ and the counterpart to the Virgin Mary in the Madonna/Whore dichotomy. However, as Leigh Teabing (Ian McKellan), the Grail scholar Langdon and Neveu turn to for help, explains, the Holy Grail is not really the cup used by Christ at the Last Supper, which according to dogma held the wine that became his blood, but rather a different kind of chalice, the womb of Mary Magdalene. The

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<sup>28</sup> In the film version, Sophie is the only living descendant, making her a Last Scion of sorts. In the novel, however, her brother is also still living.

Priory's imagery and lore frequently valorize the female fertility and reproductive organs through allusion to apples with their “seeded wombs” as the symbols of the Grail.

*The Da Vinci Code* refuses the popular construction of Mary Magdalene as the embodiment of female depravity, claiming that she was not a poor prostitute but rather a wealthy woman from a royal bloodline and later a devoted wife to Jesus Christ and mother of his children. Moreover, according to the evidence that Teabing and Langdon cite in the Gnostic gospels, including one supposedly according to Mary Magdalene herself, Jesus Christ never meant for his church to be male-dominated. Instead, the narrative alleges, he intended for Mary Magdalene to take over leadership and to maintain a gender balance<sup>29</sup>. According to *The Da Vinci Code*, these counternarratives, if verified, could undermine the Church's assertion that Christ was not human but divine and thus its claims that Catholicism is the only true path to salvation.

Though we never really meet Mary Magdalene, she is a haunting presence in *The Da Vinci Code* who is vital to the narrative's construction of a sacred femininity. Teabing and Langdon talk about “feeling her presence everywhere”. In the film, the expression of this sentiment is accompanied by a panning shot of the roses and apple blossoms which are her symbols and symbols of her womb. Further, she actually appears in the movie, albeit in fleeting glimpses through a gauzy filter seemingly meant to suggest that the audience is actually peering through the mists of time. The language of “presence” as well as the visual effects used in her presentation frame her as a phantom. Of course, she is a phantom who, by virtue of heredity, resides in Sophie’s blood.

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<sup>29</sup> It is important to note that this is not the Mary we are used to discussing in these terms. The Virgin Mary, exalted within Catholicism, is completely absent from these narratives as is any recognition of the complex theological debates and developments about her place in the Church.

While *The Da Vinci Code* never cites feminist theologians or critics of religion like Mary Daly or those discussed in the introduction to this chapter, it makes clear reference to those lines of thinking. After laying out the evidence for believing the Grail to be Mary Magdalene and that she and Christ's descendants live on, Teabing and Langdon discuss the Church's long history of suppressing the truth about Mary Magdalene and all evidence of the sacred feminine in order to consolidate its own spiritual and political power. Teabing refutes the dominant narrative about Mary Magdalene by citing a 6<sup>th</sup> century Papal decision to recast her as a prostitute. They also bring the medieval witch hunts and burnings into the discussion as further evidence of the Church's long-standing war on women. Teabing even explicitly refers to Jesus Christ as a feminist (268).

All of these moves work to present elements of feminist critiques of Christianity and the Catholic Church in particular, critiques that do not usually circulate widely in mainstream U.S. culture. While *Dogma* and *Stigmata* both refer to these critiques through their counternarratives and the focus on female protagonists, the reference remains largely implicit. For instance, the audience is clearly meant to perceive Bethany's identity as a Pro-Choice divorcee and the niece of Christ as a source of dissonance, but the narrative does not delve into why that is the case. In *The Da Vinci Code*, however, Teabing foreshadows the revelation of Sophie's identity as well as makes the point explicit by noting that given the Church's crusade against the sacred feminine, it would be a real kick in the proverbial robes for the bloodline of Christ to live on in the body of a woman.

Still, the reclamation of Mary Magdalene is hardly founded on a progressive understanding of female sexual agency. *The Da Vinci Code's* Magdalene is still marked as a sexual being, but her sexuality is no longer the supposedly wanton sexuality of a prostitute, but rather the re-productive and ideologically safe sexuality of a married mother. Moreover, the Mary Magdalene counternarrative relies upon a definition of woman as the sum of her reproductive parts. This definition informs the way that the narrative, in turn, critiques the Church as an institution of knowledge and spiritual authority.

*The Da Vinci Code* further contains the potential threat posed by women's sexuality through its more abstract formulation of the “sacred feminine,” particularly the discussion of the function of women in sexual rituals. Brown places a great deal of importance on discussing *Hieros Gamos*, or Sacred Marriage, the ritualized intercourse Sophie witnesses her grandfather, Sauniere, partaking in, and which causes their estrangement. While brief flashbacks show Sophie’s memory of witnessing the event, there is not much explicit discussion of the spiritual importance of the covert heterosexual encounter in the film. In the novel, however, Brown spends an entire chapter<sup>30</sup> laying out the connections between the sacred feminine and heterosexual intercourse. In one of the many moments of male didacticism, Langdon explains to Sophie that the ritual she witnessed was completely divorced from eroticism. In addition to explaining the true nature of the ritual to Sophie, who considers it perverse, he also lays out what made women necessary to it and thus sacred. Brown writes, “The ability of a woman to produce life from her womb made her sacred. A god. Intercourse was the revered union of the two halves of the human spirit—male and female—through which

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<sup>30</sup> Granted his chapters are quite short, this one, Chapter 74, being 6 pages long.

the male could find spiritual wholeness and communion with God” (335). That fact that women are celebrated in and necessary to this ritual marks a significant shift from popular understandings of Church dogma that sexual intercourse is strictly for reproductive purposes. However, intercourse, in this context is about men communing with the divine *through* contact with women's bodies.

Women are necessary to the ritual, but only as a conduit. As Langdon elaborates, “By communing with woman...man could achieve a climactic instant when his mind went totally blank and he could see God” (335). There is no discussion of women’s communion with the divine and certainly no mention of women experiencing any kind of “climactic instant.” One might say the female orgasm is not relevant here because the woman is already considered a god. But Langdon’s explanation of the ritual and the beliefs undergirding it make an untenable leap in logic: considering something or someone as sacred is not the same as considering it or them a god. Additionally, defining the sacred feminine in terms of women’s reproductive capacities reproduces a problematic idealization of motherhood and fails to engage with the facts that biology is not destiny and that not even all women’s biology is the same. Secondly, these same elements of *Hieros Gamos* also reinscribe what Adrienne Rich has called “compulsory heterosexuality” (1986, originally published 1980). Yes, women are necessary to and celebrated in this ritual as the only path to the divine for men, but this valorization of the heterosexual dyad excludes gay men. Ultimately, there is no place for same-sex unions or gender non-conformity in this belief system. Neither is there a recognition that such a union would differently affect or be practiced by women of color who have a historical legacy of being used as unwilling tools of white male sexual desire and pleasure. While



the absence of any critique of heteronormativity is not surprising in a popular commercial media text like *The Da Vinci Code*, the text's explicit reference to Jesus as a feminist illustrates serious problems in popular conceptualizations of feminism that should be pointed out.

Further, we must consider the characterization of Sophie in light of this more explicit criticism of the Catholic Church's gender politics and the kind of femininity it valorizes. Like the revamped image of the formerly fallen woman, Mary Magdalene, Sophie, with Audrey Tautou's almost child-like visage, is portrayed as sexually safe. She is constructed as "traumatized" by and unable to come to terms with her primal scene: the sexual ritual she witnessed as a young woman, where her grandfather was straddled by an older woman while a group of masked and robed men and women watched while swaying and chanting by torchlight<sup>31</sup>. Thus, while the narrative's discussion of *Hieros Gamos* attempts to establish that it is not something perverse, Sophie's resistance to it revalues women who are chaste and immune to the temptations of the flesh. Indeed, her own desire is completely absent from the film and only appears at the very end of the book when she finally kisses Langdon after discovering her identity at Rosslyn chapel. In the film, Sophie is even less of a sexual subject, showing little desire and even less agency as she and Langdon part with only a kiss on her forehead<sup>32</sup>.

Establishing Sophie in this way further contains the threat of the sacred feminine because by the time she is revealed to be the carrier of Christ and Mary Magdalene's bloodline, the divine feminine has been firmly established as contingent on fertility and

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<sup>31</sup> This ritual, as Langdon later explains, is called *Hieros Gamos* or sacred marriage, a ritual celebrating the union of the male and female forces in the universe. I discuss this ritual and its ideological implications more fully later in this chapter.

<sup>32</sup> Extratextual knowledge of Hanks and Tautou may also contribute to this lack of "spark."

maternity. Sophie is significant, then, because she can serve as a literal body of evidence, evidence of the existence of Christ's bloodline, which can expose what Teabing called "the greatest cover up in human history" (270), and possibly bring down the Vatican. However, given the valorization of women's reproductive capabilities and fact that the true Grail, the remains of Mary Magdalene, is still missing, Sophie's true power, like all women with functioning genitals and reproductive organs, is her own ability to bear children and thus perpetuate the bloodline.

The notion that women can and should serve as conduits for bloodlines and male religious experiences is mirrored in the resolution of the plot as well. Once Langdon and Sophie locate the Grail records in the basement of Rosslyn chapel, Sophie's identity as the descendant of Christ and Mary Magdalene is revealed and she is reunited with her grandmother who lived there in secrecy. The remains of Mary Magdalene are no longer at Rosslyn, however, making it impossible for Sophie to verify her ancestry. This diminishes Sophie's power to challenge the Church's suppression of the sacred feminine and seems to bring the search and the narrative to a close. After leaving Sophie and returning to Paris, Langdon, however, has a breakthrough and solves the final riddle which leads him back to the Louvre where we see that Saunier had moved the remains. Much like the conclusion of *Stigmata*, the film ends here with the ultimate knowledge of the Grail in Langdon's hands alone. Though Sophie is a part of the Grail, she is unable to discern the remainder of the riddle on her own and is completely unnecessary to Langdon's ultimate enlightenment.

## Conclusion

These three films produce an image of female heroism that critiques Catholic<sup>33</sup> ideas about women as more beholden to the urges and weaknesses of the flesh than men. In light of the Church's history of and contemporary reputation for devaluing women because female bodies serve as a constant reminder of the paradox of incarnation, revaluing women's bodies makes sense as a means to critique the Church's broader claims to being the sole avenue to spiritual truths. But by inverting the narrative so that the troubling things about women's bodies—the ways in which they are “messy”—are revered as sacred, these films advance an image that is not only a biologically deterministic ideal of femininity, it is one that reinforces compulsory heterosexuality and ignores the fact that as a culture we do not value all women's reproduction equally or at all.

These texts challenge Catholic orthodoxy by questioning the perpetual virginity of Mary, the gendered hierarchy of the Church, and the infallibility of the Pope, and even the truth of the gospels through narratives which center and value women and femininity. A key part of these texts' critique of the Church's gender politics lies in their constructions of the protagonists as people more likely to need salvation from the angelic figures of *Touched By An Angel* and *Saving Grace* than descendants of divinity or messengers of divine truth. These are women who are not overly pious or firm of faith:

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<sup>33</sup> Of course, the devaluation of women is not unique to Catholic thinking or even Christianity. But the particular stories and beliefs these texts engage with are particular to Christianity and Catholicism in particular.

an abortion clinic worker who is a practicing but deeply disillusioned Catholic (*Dogma*), a sexually active single party girl who is an avowed atheist (*Stigmata*), and another atheist who makes her living using reason to break codes (*The Da Vinci Code*). At the start of the narratives, these characters function to disrupt popular concepts of what kind of people are “closest” to divinity. By the end, however, each woman has been moved to or reframed in a more normative mode of feminine behavior through a valuation of their bodies' capacity to expose certain secrets.

I argue that these films use a pairing of femininity and the spiritual supernatural that focuses on women's bodies and the ways the Church has devalued them in order to facilitate a broader examination of issues of institutional power, corruption, faith, and knowledge. *Stigmata's* female protagonist, Frankie (Patricia Arquette), inexplicably begins to exhibit the wounds endured by Christ during his crucifixion (considered a rare and miraculous occurrence that is experienced by only the most religious and saintly people by the Church) and becomes possessed by the spirit of a priest who uses her to speak for him. The character of “Bethany” (Linda Fiorentino) in *Dogma* learns that she is a niece of Jesus Christ and his last living descendent. Like “Bethany,” the character of “Sophie” (Audrey Tautou) in *The Da Vinci Code* learns that she is the last member of the bloodline of Jesus Christ and Mary Magdalene.

The secrets carried in and through these women's bodies are where we find the broader statements about knowledge and truth in these films. These secrets are unbeknown to the women themselves who require men to “decode” them and to literally and figuratively birth them. Though these films put forth an epistemological ideal in which reason, logic, and science (which are coded as masculine) and faith, belief, and

mysticism (which are coded as feminine) are not conceptualized as mutually exclusive and are in some ways synthesized, the actual women in these texts do not get to inhabit that ideal or benefit from any potential liberation from supposed Catholic repression it might provide.

Though it has not always occupied the mainstream of U.S. culture, the Catholic Church has long been one of the dominant structures of spiritual life throughout the world. Further, the Church has at various points in history worked to expand its power by positioning itself as a political and scientific authority as well as a spiritual one. The Catholic Church is hardly the only religious organization to engage in such activities, but its rigid hierarchical structure and its centralization in the figures of the Pope and the Vatican render the Church's discursive work more visible and make it easier to conceive of it as a coherent actor in the world. That is, it is often easier to speak of the Church's position on an issue or its attempts to intervene in politics than it would be for a less centralized religious organization. This perceived consistency is key to understanding the way the Church is portrayed in these films. It does not, however, explain why women and femininity feature so prominently in these narratives.

The centrality of women and femininity to these narratives tells us something about both the way women can function narratively as well as the ways that supposedly feminist counternarratives can both constrain women *and* disrupt broader understandings of knowledge. Women don't necessarily benefit from these disruptions, but new possibilities for knowing and experiencing the world are opened up. These films offer stories that use concerns about women and the Church to lodge critiques about the Church's attempts to control knowledge and not just for and about women. In the next

chapter, I look at two television series, *Joan of Arcadia* and *Saving Grace* that combine elements of all the texts discussed thus far to that grapple with basic questions of faith, particularly about the existence of God as well as the possibilities and limitations of individual knowledge and action in more nuanced ways than in the past.

## Chapter 5

They're No Angels: Saintliness, Sin, and Femininity in Television of the 2000s

### Introduction

In *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post 9/11 America* feminist critic, Susan Faludi argues that since the disastrous events of September 11, 2001, the United States has dwelled in a “dreamscape” which looked to the past, particularly images like “John Wayne as the avenger and the rescuer” for comfort (2007, 8). Faludi claims that with the call for the return of ‘manly men’ came a similar demand for the “refeminization” of women, which required them to be less feminist (20). Faludi’s analysis of images and narratives of masculinity (firefighters and police officers) and femininity (widows and Pvt. Jessica Lynch) support her argument that 9/11 marked a point of intensification and consolidation in a process of recuperation of gender power already in progress (20-21). Certainly, the appearance and success of television programs like Fox’s *24* and cable channel FX’s *Rescue Me* with their focus on flawed but potent male protagonists and narratives of first responders and counterterrorist suggest that masculinity was a significant concern for Americans in the wake of 9/11. Yet her claims that feminists and women more generally were “pushed off the map” of U.S. culture (21) are not fully borne out in the popular culture landscape of the last decade.

Narratives and images of women that trouble Faludi’s typology persisted or emerged anew in the years following 2001. This was certainly true of texts which paired femininity with the spiritual supernatural: Both *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Charmed*

ran until 2003 and 2006, respectively. *The Da Vinci Code* was published in 2003 and its film adaptation premiered in 2006. In her study of the industrial and cultural circumstances which allowed for the florescence of female-centered television dramas, Amanda Lotz noted that in 2002 the televisual landscape was awash in female characters hearing otherworldly voices. Moreover, she pointed out that while the creators and producers of these shows almost uniformly invoke the post-9/11 zeitgeist when explaining their shows' appeals to the supernatural, they almost never address why women are at the center of the stories. In this chapter, I analyze two such television series which also foregrounded spirituality by invoking elements of the story of Joan of Arc: *Joan of Arcadia* (2003-2005) and *Saving Grace* (2006-2010).

*Joan of Arcadia* and *Saving Grace* were both created by women known for their innovative representations of women, Barbara Hall (who was a writer and producer on *Judging Amy*) and Nancy Miller (who created and produced *Any Day Now*). In interviews about these series, both Hall and Miller, who openly identify as Catholics, are quite candid about their desire to spark thoughts and discussions about religion and spirituality—particularly issues of belief and faith. Given their previous work, it is not surprising that they would choose to focus on women. Neither creator, however, offers much public discussion of what the decision to center these narratives on female protagonists means for the kinds of stories that television tells about women or about spirituality and religion. Nonetheless, in exploring knowledge and belief, Hall and Miller's series take up questions at the heart of contemporary feminist inquiry about how to make sense of non-rational, non-empirical forms of knowledge, how to deal with the



fact that all knowledge is partial, and what possibilities there are for individual action and agency.

Ultimately, these series represent and explore the uncertainties of late 20<sup>th</sup> century cultural life—including but not limited to those provoked by the events of 9/11—through the pairing of women and femininity with matters both spiritual and supernatural. In so doing, I argue that these texts offer complex narratives that portray flawed and fallible women and resist demonizing or essentializing them. These shows construct a world in which God and angels care about humans, and can and do interact with us. They can appear to us and they can appear like us, but they are not of us. It is this gap between mortality and divinity that is actually central to the narratives of both shows. The authoritative divine perspective is key to these series, perhaps more than in any of the other texts discussed in this dissertation aside from *Touched By An Angel*. God has a plan in these shows, but rather than moving from case to case restoring faith as Tess and Monica do on *TBAA*, *Joan* and *Grace* revel in exploring the mysteries of faith and acknowledging the challenge they pose to people, not necessarily resolving them. The limits of the human mind are confronted and pushed on again and again. Change and enlightenment are possible, but they are both incremental and slow to arrive.

#### Reading *Joan* and *Grace* Through Joan of Arc

While *Joan of Arcadia* and *Saving Grace* are not retellings of the Joan of Arc story in the way that nearly contemporary texts like the TV movie, *Joan of Arc* (1999) and the film *The Messenger: The Story of Joan of Arc* (1999) are, I argue that the story of the martyred saint provides a useful lens through which to view these texts' representations of femininity and the spiritual supernatural. *Joan of Arcadia* and *Saving*

*Grace* are two of the most recent in a long history of varied invocations and representations of Joan of Arc. As James A. Freeman has detailed, Joan has appeared in or on cultural artifacts ranging from novels, plays, and films to cheese labels and matchbooks. Freeman argues that this “heterogeneity has flourished because she mysteriously evades the usual requirements of biography, autobiography, saintly legend, and hero tale” (2008, 601). As film scholar Robin Blaetz has written about earlier filmic representations of Joan of Arc, “The historic Joan of Arc serves the cultures in which she appears to the degree that her story can mask or resolve social conflict” (Blaetz, 2001, 3). In the case of the shows discussed in this chapter, aspects of the Joan story which present her as androgynous, virginal, a hero and a sacrificial victim are invoked and played with as the narratives consider the existence of God as well as the possibilities and limitations of individual knowledge and action.

*Joan of Arcadia* and *Saving Grace* share a narrative focus on women who receive divine revelations. Unlike the televisual angels and witches who preceded them, Joan and Grace are mortals with no powers of their own and are, in fact, skeptical of God's existence. Neither Joan nor Grace is pleased when God, or an angel, respectively, appear to them and asks them to change their ways of living. God also asks Joan and Grace to put aside rational knowledge and skepticism in favor of faith. While both of these texts draw on narratives of women saints, Joan and Grace do not embody the obedient femininity found in the dominant narratives of the Virgin Mary or later female mystics like Catherine of Sienna who are popularly characterized by their extreme passivity. Neither are they the fecund and spiritually in-tune earth mothers valorized by New Age culture. Instead, they talk back to the divine, demanding explanations for the injustices

they witness and the demands being made of them. Freeman begins his discussion of the heterogeneous representations and remaking of Joan of Arc with an excerpt from Shakespeare's *I Henry VI* in which an English character Talbot denigrates Joan and the Dauphin through wordplay declaring, "Pucelle or puzzel, dolphin or dogfish, Your hearts I'll stamp out with my horse's heels" (quoted in Freeman, 601). As Freeman notes, 'pucelle' is a French word for maiden and 'puzzel' the Elizabethan low term for whore. Though neither of the female protagonists I analyze in this chapter, Joan Girardi or Grace Hanadarko, are reducible to these sexualized types, Freeman's claim that Joan of Arc is a figure that accommodates a range of femininities is a useful starting point for exploring *Joan of Arcadia* and *Saving Grace*.

#### Ordinariness and Otherness in *Joan of Arcadia*

*Joan of Arcadia* (2003-2005) centers on the titular character, Joan Girardi, a teenage girl who begins receiving visits from God. The onset of Joan's visitations coincides with her moving to a new town, the fictional Arcadia, Maryland with her family including her father, Will (Joe Mantegna), the new police chief, her mother, Helen (Mary Steenburgen) who works at her high school, her older brother, Kevin (Jason Ritter), a former star athlete struggling with paralysis resulting from a recent car accident, and her younger brother, Luke (Michael Welch) who is a gifted student and self-identified "geek." God, who appears to Joan in many human forms including a cute boy, a cranky old woman, a little girl, and a Senegalese doctor, tells her that she is his instrument and asks her to do things. During its first season, the series averaged just over 10 million viewers each week—respectable numbers for a Friday night program on a major broadcast network. *Joan's* ratings fell significantly during the second season,

however, resulting in its cancellation<sup>34</sup>. God's purpose in visiting Joan is to get her to think less about herself and to open herself up to others and taking social risks. It is not the case that Joan is particularly selfish, but she is cautious about her behavior and her associations, often thinking of how her peers will evaluate her. Given Joan's age and position in life, this makes a great deal of sense and speaks to her construction as “ordinary.” This was creator Barbara Hall's intent. In her commentary on the first season DVD of the series, Hall said that she wanted to Joan to be absolutely unexceptional—not too pretty or smart or rebellious. Joan is not spectacular in any way. She is not unruly then in that she does not defy the social injunction against women making spectacles of themselves. Joan, of course, does not fit in perfectly with her peers, but this is not for lack of desire or effort. Ultimately, what God asks of Joan again and again is to transgress the social norms in which she is so highly invested. As God explains again and again, Joan's tasks are about being open to the interconnectedness of things and building new connections and relationships. God explains that he chose Joan because of her openness—despite her protestations, or perhaps because of them, she is open to God appearing to her and to being an instrument of God. As God tells Joan in the pilot episode, she believes that she is talking to God because she has a feeling, nothing more. The language God uses is vague and requires Joan to try and interpret what she is being asked to do. Unlike Joan of Arc who was certain of her task, Joan Girardi usually appears to be grasping at straws and often misses the mark.

Though the tasks God gives Joan often appear simple, even mundane, they are not always easily fulfilled. For example, in the first season, when God asks Joan to keep her

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<sup>34</sup> The cancellation prevented the series from resolving a number of major plot lines. I do not read the series finale as indicative of where the story was meant to end, but it is the ending with which we are left.

friend, Adam (Christopher Marquette) from selling one of his sculptures, she cannot fathom a scenario in which that is the “right” thing to do for Adam or anyone else (“The Devil Made Me Do It,” Season 1, Episode 8). It is only after Adam sells a piece for \$500 dollars and decides to drop out of school that Joan understands why God asked her to intervene. Panicked, Joan destroys Adam's sculpture with a chair leading Adam to declare that they are no longer friends. When Joan tearfully demands to know why God would ask her to destroy Adam's art, God denies making that request and declares Joan's action a “failure of imagination.” This point is underscored when Joan's perplexed mother (Mary Steenburgen) asks why Joan didn't talk to Adam, or his father, or the buyer first. In this episode as in much of the series, Joan ultimately does what she is asked to do and one desired result is attained—Adam stays in school. Her inability to see all of her options, however, refuses an easy resolution and reinforces the image of Joan as young woman who receives visions, but does sometimes lacks vision.

While the tasks that God sets before Joan are mundane and do not involve the same kind of risk to life and limb that her namesake endured, they do entail a great deal of social risk for Joan in a context where the social stakes are high. Quite often they involve Joan reluctantly making a spectacle of herself as in “Bringeth It On” (Season 1, Episode 6) when Joan has to go through the very public process of trying out for the cheerleading squad. The spectacle here is not that of the practiced femininity so often associated with cheerleading—Joan is unpolished, clumsy even. Joan's participation in the cheerleading tryouts not only expose her to ridicule from those who feel at home on the pep squad—the “cool kids”—but also from her friends who construct their self-concepts in direct opposition to activities involving school spirit.

This episode also brings issues of women's sexuality and reproductive rights to the forefront, but not in service or criticism of any particular relationship with divinity. In this episode, God asks Joan to try out for the cheerleading squad and, seemingly unrelatedly, a baby is found abandoned in a dumpster. The episode attends to issues of women and femininity through the story of a young woman who abandoned her baby in a dumpster and called the police to alert them of its location. When the police want to question girls at Arcadia High, the administrators suggest putting together a list of girls who might be good to ask because they seem like the kind who would get into trouble eventually. Joan's mother, Helen, who works at the school, protests this decision when asked to assemble the list on the grounds that neither the school nor the police had any business setting up potentially innocent girls for harassment and interrogation. Ultimately, it is revealed that Brittany, the captain of the cheerleading squad is the mother of the baby and the person who put it in the dumpster. Once this discovery is made, Brittany's parents move her to a different school for a fresh start. Brittany's friends also shun her and continue to plead ignorance of her situation. In the end, Joan is the only person to ask Brittany if she is alright. Everyone else seems far more concerned with saving their own social skins to bother checking on their friend. Joan doesn't save anyone here. We are left without a clear discussion of what will become of mother or child. We do learn that the once blood-thirsty DA decides to drop the case rather than “sending a message” to “irresponsible” mothers not because his heart or mind is changed, but because the father of the abandoned baby turns out to be the son of a city councilman. When Joan's father, Will, asks his wife why this information did not come out sooner, Helen replies somewhat exasperatedly that no one ever bothered to ask about the father

reminding her family and the audience that women still bear a heavier physical and social burden with unplanned pregnancies. There is little in the way of righteous indignation or suggestions of political or policy solutions to these problems, but Joan is moved to comment publicly on the hypocrisy and double-standards the situation brought to light.

Joan's participation in cheerleading and her willingness to make a spectacle of herself (even reluctantly) facilitates her reaching out to captain of the squad after she is discovered to have abandoned her newborn baby. Moreover, it affords Joan the space to call out the other students who claimed to be Brittany's friend, but failed to see that she was in trouble and snubbed her after her actions were revealed. Though God did not ask Joan to compose and perform scathing social critique in cheer form, this is what Joan uses her individual agency to do.

Even as God pushes Joan to make connections and reach out to those who are regarded as outsiders or become marginalized, the tasks with which she is charged strain those relationships. In the episode, "St. Joan," (Season 1, Episode 9) for example, God instructs Joan to get an "A" on her History test, the subject of which is Joan of Arc. As Joan studies, she considers the parallels between her life and that of her namesake. When Joan succeeds in earning an "A"—an unusually high grade for her—her teacher suspects her of cheating and enlists the school administration to try and force her to re-take the exam. Joan stands her ground and her friend Grace (Becky Wahl) organizes a student movement in support. Ultimately, God asks Joan to re-take the test and in successfully repeating her performance, she manages to rekindle her teacher's love of his profession and sense of purpose in life. In accomplishing this work, however, she leaves her friends feeling betrayed by her acquiescence to the school's demands after they rallied around

her. Karin Beeler argues that this episode's outcome "reveals how being a public heroine can be less important than saving 'someone's life' in a more private manner. This private act can also be a form of resistance. In other words, the life of an individual can displace the symbolic value of a political cause" (2008, 90). Without denying that there are multiple forms of resistance and arguing that Joan's actions constituted a betrayal, I see this episode as exemplifying one of the major pitfalls of this series' reworking of Joan of Arc, namely, its emphasis of the individual to the almost total exclusion of collectivity. Significantly, though it is Joan who is linked to the saint through her name and her relationship with God, it is Grace who embodies the androgyny and resolve that are often attributed to Joan of Arc.

In the end, the fact that she has a face-to-face relationship with God keeps Joan at a distance from those around her. *Joan* valorizes the outsiders or "sub-defectives" as Grace and Adam refer to themselves and science geeks like her brother, Luke through its attention to them. God encourages Joan to reach out to these peers and often asks Joan to undertake tasks that push them to open their minds as well. But Joan, like the Halliwell sisters of *Charmed* must keep this aspect of her identity a secret. Practically speaking, Joan knows that to claim to see and speak with God would be to invite a whole host of psychiatric diagnoses. Indeed, when Joan talks to her parents about her visions while suffering from Lyme's disease in the first season's finale, the outcome is extensive psychotherapy. Even when she considers sharing her experiences earlier in the first season, God intervenes. Early in the first season, Joan almost tells Adam about her visions but God appears as a demanding customer to interrupt her and then asks her to



consider the fact that she might burden Adam with this information and that instead she should try to take some of his “load.”

Joan's adolescence and God's desires for Joan (for all of us, really) intersect perhaps most clearly in the first episode of the second season when Joan essentially “breaks up” with God insisting that she is not his girl (“Only Connect,” Season 2, Episode 1). God explains to Joan that she is not mentally ill because insanity is destructive and all he wants from her is to construct connections with other people. He tells Joan that all of his tasks are about building relationships and connections. He even has her read the “only connect” passage from *Howards End* which Joan summarizes saying that the book “is about a bunch of weird British people who can't understand each other because of their crazy manners”. Of course, ultimately, Joan does “get back together” with God in subsequent episodes, but not before Joan's resistance to God's requests and her failure to pay attention to her surroundings lead to her friend Judith almost dying of alcohol poisoning during a party (“Back to the Garden,” Season 2, Episode 3).

*Joan of Arcadia* draws on the elements of the Joan of Arc legend that focus on her as a virginal maiden following God's orders. Just as Joan of Arc's gender and peasant status made her an unlikely military leader and saint, Joan Girardi's ordinariness and spiritual ambivalence is meant to make her seem an unlikely choice for God's revelations. This characterization links her to the female protagonists discussed in the previous chapter. Similarly, Joan's almost uniformly exasperated response to God's requests of her offers a model of femininity that talks back to God. Of course, Joan ultimately tries to fulfill God's requests which seem mundane, but allow her to connect with people in significant ways. In contemplating the meaning of faith and the nature of

divinity, *Joan of Arcadia* values the often feminized activities of interpersonal relationships and caretaking as women's work, but also God's work. And yet, the extraordinariness of Joan's mystical experience keeps her perpetually separate from those with whom she connects and for whom she cares, reintroducing elements of saintly suffering and self-sacrifice to the narrative. Moreover, while *Joan* may not offer up "fantasies of power" for its female protagonist, and God is not uniformly masculinized, thinking of Joan as an empowered figure is difficult because though she exercises free will in deciding to do what God asks, she is always God's instrument, not her own. Joan Girardi is asked to make social sacrifices in each episode, but never to risk life and limb the way Joan of Arc did. Towards the end of the second season the show introduced another character who spoke to God, Ryan Hunter (Wentworth Miller) but chose not to do as he was asked. In the ominously titled series finale, "Something Wicked This Way Comes" (Season 2, Episode 22), God tells Joan that the past two years have been preparation for her to face off against Ryan and the threat he poses to Joan and the people around her. Because *Joan of Arcadia* was cancelled, the nature of Ryan's agenda and the battle with Joan are never revealed and the reimagining of the Joan of Arc story ends somewhat prematurely. In my second case study, however, the sacrificial element is explored more fully as is a very different construction of the female visionary.

#### Unruliness and Sacrifice in *Saving Grace*

*Saving Grace* was a TNT drama starring Holly Hunter as Grace Hanadarko, a hard-living Oklahoma City detective chosen by God to receive guidance from a tobacco-chewing good ole' boy named Earl (Leon Rippy) who describes himself as her "last chance angel." In the pilot Earl tells Grace in no uncertain terms that she is bound for

Hell if she does not change her ways. The show's early episodes suggested that the series would ultimately be about reforming Grace's behavior, like a kind of makeover for her soul . As the series progressed however, its tone changed from Earl discouraging Grace's cursing and drinking to encouraging her to work through traumas including the sexual abuse she suffered at the hands of a priest as a child and the violence she's witnessed and experienced as a police officer. Grace's character has much in common with *Stigmata's* Frankie but while the latter's encounter with the spiritual supernatural is a matter of chance, Grace is directly chosen and valued by God.

While Earl does not help Grace solve crimes, her work as a detective is often inflected by her relationship with Earl and the messages God sends her through him. For example, in "A Language of Angels" Grace's complex relationship to her sexuality is traced through her ongoing conversations with Earl as well as a case. At the start of the episode, Grace is left naked and handcuffed to her bed by a lover who gets scared when he finds out she's a police officer. Ham, her partner and married lover, finds her, but is dismayed that she's sleeping with other men and walks out. Earl comes in after Ham leaves but refuses to unlock the cuffs. While the rest of the detectives work the scene where a young woman was tortured and murdered, Grace has no choice but to talk to Earl. Grace pleads with Earl to let her out telling him that there's a case and that she needs to go to work. Earl retorts that she does need to get to work, but not on her job. He reminds her that she needs to be working on changing her life. When Grace protests that she's learned her lesson, Earl quips that for her that means holding the cuffs next time, not avoiding a next time in bed with a stranger.

When Grace finally gets to the crime scene after everyone else has left she moves easily through the warehouse until her eyes fall on the wall where “evil” is written in the victim's blood. Grace's eyes widen and she pulls down a row of lockers which reveals that the word written in blood is actually “devil”. Grace staggers backwards, turns and vomits—something unprecedented for Grace no matter how drunk or hungover we've seen her.

Between the comical predicament in which we find Grace at the start of the episode and the much darker storyline about the murder victim, the episode is focused on issues of women's sexuality. There are elements of the classic cautionary tale—woman goes out, gets drunk, meets a guy, guy turns out to be a vicious killer a la Jack the Ripper. Earl's insistence that Grace address the aspects of her life that have put her in this killer's path in the past and that she continues to indulge seems to add to this at first. As the episode moves towards its climax however and Grace pursues an assailant that she cannot remember because she was so drunk when she met him, Earl's insistence that Grace reflect upon her life choices takes on a different tone. He appears in her living room as she compares pictures she took at her old house after the killer cut her on her back. As in other cases, Grace is fiercely invested in solving the case and catching the “bad guy” but she's completely inattentive to her own psychological wounds. Earl asks, “When are you going to tell the people in your life about that scar and what happened to you?” Grace replies breezily, “I can't tell what I don't remember.” Earl, revealing both his connection to Grace's heart and mind as well as his growing frustration, retorts, “You remember waking up with a sliced shoulder and moving out of your house in a month.” When Grace tries to shut down the conversation, Earl responds by tossing a large rock in her lap, and

gruffly says, “Keep banging your head against it for a couple more decades” before leaving in an angelic huff. At this moment in the episode and really the whole series, it becomes very clear that God and by extension Earl are not interested in reforming Grace *per se*. Earl is frustrated at Grace’s secrecy and avoidance, not tsk-tsking her because she has sex.

Ultimately, Grace tells her friends and co-workers about her assault indirectly as they watch her interrogate the killer. When the suspect is brought in, Grace asks to question him alone and for her colleagues to observe. They watch through the one-way glass as Grace works to piece together what she knows of the events from evidence and her own limited memories of the night. Grace moves between a steely calm and the brink of tears as she relives the night she could have died. Aside from the fact that we know that the suspect will likely go to jail because he left a finger print at the site of the murder, this scene offers little in the way of clear resolution. While towards the beginning of her interrogation, Grace presses her assailant confidently demanding, “Why do you write “devil” in the victim’s blood?” She continues sarcastically, asking, “Did your mother call you evil when you were little? Called you the devil? Or did she tell you that women were evil...especially the ones who go out to bars?” He interrupts her vaguely Freudian line of questioning though and remarks with a similar tone of condescension in his voice, “I only had to buy her one drink and you were my whore.” He asks Grace if she remembers and she admits to him and to everyone watching that the entire night was a blackout for her because she was so drunk. The nonchalance with which Grace makes this admission shuts down her assailant’s reminiscing and Grace returns to his current charges. His only response to the news that he will be going to prison is that the woman

he murdered “was a whore. Just like you.” Grace doesn’t lash out verbally or physically. She sits silently, but she is no longer shaken. The fact that Grace was meant to confront her experience, not be ashamed of it or to exact revenge is confirmed at the end of the episode when Earl whisks Grace back to the Grand Canyon. As they once again stand on a tiny rock platform, towering above the ground, Earl tells Grace that he was wrong earlier and that she is making progress, however slowly. Grace herself is unconvinced. She demands to know why God would let her live and another woman die. Earl insists that it was the killer who decided who lived and who died and that only he can explain those choices. He also tells Grace that God “doesn’t sweat the small stuff” and that God has big plans for Grace. At this moment it seems like Grace may be asked to be an instrument of God like Joan. Really, the task God sets before Grace concerns Grace and other painful memories that she’s been avoiding, namely her sexual abuse by a priest when she was in grade school. In an episode that could have easily come off as demonizing women with excessive appetites for sex and booze, we get instead a focus on healing rather than redemption or salvation.

Though Grace stopped driving drunk after the pilot and eventually stopped (knowingly) sleeping with married men (at the behest of her best friend, Rhetta [Laura SanGiacomo], not God or Earl), Grace did not really change who she was or how she behaved. Over time, *Saving Grace* developed a narrative world in which God is not just involved in a “love the sinner, hate the sin” kind of relationship with humans and with a woman in particular, but actually values intemperance and inconsistencies. In the fourth episode of the second season, Earl tells Grace that he loves how she loves, that "It's a Fierce, White-Hot Mighty Love". Later that season, Earl also invokes Kerouac’s quote

about “the mad ones” in describing Grace’s spirit and why he finds her so compelling. In the third season another angel, Matthew (F. Murray Abraham) shows up and attempts to win Grace's favor and soul by showering her friends with money and gifts and promising her the same. Matthew suggests that Earl is not doing a very good job of helping Grace given how she continues to sin and Earl responds fiercely that Grace does not need to change the core of who she is in order to be saved. Earl insists that God made her perfect in her imperfection. The spirituality that *Saving Grace* values, then, is not tied to Commandments or laws of behavior or consistent and universal distinctions between right and wrong.

Rather, what we see as the series develops is that the God of *Saving Grace* is interested in fording and mending interpersonal relationships, much as was the case in *Joan of Arcadia*. In the series third season and beyond, God begins to charge Grace with tasks somewhat similar to those given to Joan Girardi. For example, after Grace’s brother, John (Tom Irwin) who is a Catholic priest has a dream in which Grace is performing miracles and raises him from the dead, he tells Grace he wants to meet Earl. Earl in turn tells Grace that she is supposed to help restore John’s faith. In the third season, Earl asks Grace to help Johnny renew his faith in God. Johnny may be somewhat jaded, but he is a good priest who helps his parishioners, and his non-believer sister for that matter, as best as he can. Unlike the abuser Father Murphy, Grace’s molester, Johnny is a good priest<sup>35</sup> who needs his own faith restored.

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<sup>35</sup> In the commentary track for the pilot episode, creator Nancy Miller explains that as a practicing Catholic she wanted to engage with the issue of priests' abuse of children, but she didn't want to “shit on the Church” and so she developed Johnny's character. He believes in the power of prayer and compassion and though he may judge Grace, he doesn't bat an eye at counseling a member of his congregation who is transitioning from male to female or going to a strip club in the middle of the day to pick up another person who is drunk and possibly a sex or pornography addict.

Given this description, Grace's story might seem more akin to the hagiography of St. Francis of Assisi who himself gave up pleasures and comforts of the flesh after receiving visits from God or much like the female protagonists discussed in the previous chapter, that of Mary Magdalene. Indeed, Anthea D. Butler and Diane Winston have argued that while earlier television representations of religion have "inscribed many sorts of gender constraints" shows like *Saving Grace* "pull some of these apart, inverting traditional roles and turning the whore into a spiritual woman" and even a savior (2009, 286). They offer a productive reading of Grace and her best friend Rhetta as the Magdalene and the Madonna, but with a nurturing relationship rather than as polar opposites.

While the Madonna/whore binary is among the most salient frameworks for understanding femininity in U.S. culture, we can also read Grace as a Diana or Artemis figure. In considering whether Grace's machismo mediates the archetype of the whore, Butler and Winston note the way Grace's (or rather, Holly Hunter's) body defies the kind of physical norm usually associated with female sensuality observing that she is "more Artemis than Aphrodite" with her incredibly muscular, almost angular figure. This may not be the most common mode of representing Joan of Arc in contemporary U.S. culture, but as Robin Blaetz notes, Dianic myths have been key to the construction of the Joan of Arc legend, particularly in images which pair Joan with bow and quiver like the huntress. Blaetz notes that even the insistence on calling her Joan of Arc (or Jeanne d'Arc in French) invokes Diana by aligning her linguistically with the words for crescent (like the moon) and the bow. Blaetz further points to the subversiveness the Diana figure lends to the legend of Joan of Arc by infusing it with Diana's mythical "careless beauty,



childlessness, and rejection of all men but those of her own choosing” which “reflect her autonomy and her obsession with the hunt” (188). While Blaetz is writing well before *Grace* was produced and about earlier constructions of Joan of Arc, this description of the Dianic Joan of Arc describes the character of Grace to a tee.

It is Earl who explicitly likens Grace to Joan of Arc in the episode, “Am I Going to Lose Her.” After Grace goes missing, abducted by a mentally ill childhood friend, Earl poses that very question to God (who always appears in the human world as a large dog with a very long tongue). Earl insists that he has not had enough time with Grace and that she is capable of so much. He finishes his plea for Grace’s deliverance by saying, “I have more faith in her than I had in Joan, and she took the fire to honor you.” (Season 3, Episode 6) Grace is found and liberated from her abductor, but Earl’s words make clear that Grace’s calling is to do more than save herself (as Butler and Winston read it) and foreshadows the manner in which the series is ultimately concluded.

The series not only ties up loose ends, but comes full-circle in the final episodes. This is most evident when Grace accidentally runs over a little girl, Esperanza, who runs into the street (“Loose Men in Tight Jeans,” Season 4, Episode 6). This tragedy sets the final plot arcs in motion and clearly brings the narrative back to the accident that initially introduced Grace to her “last chance” angel, Earl. While the initial incident was the result of Grace’s reckless drunk driving and actually staged by Earl/God in order to get her attention and set her on a path of righteousness, the show repeatedly tells us that Esperanza’s death was truly a tragic accident (“You Think I’m Gonna Eat My Gun,” Season 4, Episode 7 and “I’m Gonna Need You To Call Earl,” Season 4, Episode 8). The finale follows Grace to Mexico as she struggles to come to grips with killing Esperanza.

After Grace marches into the ocean fully clothed, seemingly intent on giving up on life, she emerges instead ready to give her life over to God and with a mission to go to Baltimore. That mission is seemingly delayed when Grace learns that her house has burned down by Hut Flanders (Gordon MacDonald), who appeared as a mysterious and vaguely menacing figure at the start of the fourth season.

After Grace determines that Hut is responsible for her house burning down (almost killing her nephew and her dog), Earl tells Grace that Hut is evil. Hut then appears to Grace while she is in bed with her partner (though he does not awaken). While he scratches and burns her skin, Hut tells her about the many forms he has taken in her life: “I wore the collar of a priest. I drove a Ryder truck. I went to a bar. One drink and you were my whore.” Here he refers to Grace’s molester, Father Murphy, an unaccounted for accomplice of Timothy McVeigh, and the man who raped Grace and slashed her back during a one-night stand gone bad (the subject of the first season episode, “A Language of Angels”). He also takes credit for giving Neely the drugs that finally killed her (we already saw him give her pills in an earlier episode) and sending a little girl’s soccer ball into the street so she would run into the path of Grace’s car. Evil, which had been the purview of humans up until this point, becomes another side of the spiritual supernatural and Grace believes it is her charge from God to fight it, or at least to try and stop Hut Flanders. It is his threat to commit a similar act of terror if Grace decides to let him walk away that leads Grace to flick her cigar—given to her by Earl—into the pile of explosives he’s placed in the back of her truck destroying Hut’s stock-pile, possibly destroying him, and killing herself.

While Grace is not put to death by Church or State as Joan of Arc was, her sacrifice, her willingness to “take the fire” for her beliefs call Joan to mind. By refusing a happy or even reassuring ending, *Saving Grace*'s finale stayed true to the series' brand of realism and defied expectations, but it also returned to some of the series initial shortcomings. The series' shift towards a supernatural source of evil in the world undercuts its previously complex approach to suffering and injustice in the world. Grace's unflinching self-sacrifice in the final scenes of the show was heroic and in keeping with her character, but it suggests that it is not yet possible to imagine a convincing conclusion to Grace's story that maintains both her place in this world and her integrity as a character.

### Conclusions

In this chapter I have read these series' titular characters through the lens of the Joan of Arc narrative on which both texts clearly draw. These texts do not engage in a retelling of Joan of Arc's life and death, but they each draw on elements of the facts and legends surrounding her in order to explore questions of faith and morality. Moreover, they do so in a cultural context where extant debates over gender norms and popular epistemological struggles were intensified and, in some cases, reshaped by the events of 9/11 and their aftermath. While these texts share a narrative focus on female characters as the recipients of divine revelation and invoke the same hagiography, they produce two quite different discourses of femininity.

*Joan of Arcadia* refers to Joan of Arc quite literally in its title and its focus on a 15 year-old girl who is visited by God. Unlike her namesake's military calling and ultimate self-sacrifice, Joan Girardi is asked by God to engage in forms of social (rather

than physical) risk taking. Joan's ordinariness, coupled with the seemingly mundane requests God makes of her open up a narrative space in which it is possible to consider the potential (and limits) of individual action in contemporary society. In contemplating the meaning of faith and the nature of divinity, *Joan of Arcadia* values the often feminized activities of interpersonal relationships and caretaking as women's work, but also God's work. And yet, the extraordinariness of Joan's mystical experience keeps her perpetually separate from those with whom she connects and for whom she cares, reintroducing elements of saintly suffering and self-sacrifice to the narrative.

While the Joan of Arc story may not seem to be the primary subtext of *Saving Grace* in its early episodes, the image of Joan the warrior and Joan who dies for her beliefs absolutely inform the series' resolution and conclusion. The show's early episodes suggested that the series would ultimately be about reforming Grace's behavior, kind of like a make-over for her soul. Over time, however, *Saving Grace* developed a narrative world in which Grace is also called by God, via her angel, Earl, to help others find redemption and ultimately to face an evil being. Throughout its run, the show presented a world in which an unruly woman (albeit a predictably straight and visibly white woman) could be valued without needing redemption or containment via institutions of marriage or motherhood (though she was not immune to their pull). Grace's unflinching self-sacrifice in the series' final scenes was heroic and in keeping with her character, but points out the difficulty of imagining a conclusion to Grace's story that maintains both her place in this world and her integrity as a character.

Joan and Grace are, as Karen Beeler puts it "women of vision" in the sense that they have unique visions of or visitations from divine beings; only they see God and, in

Grace's case, angels. But they are not "visionaries" in the more expansive sense of engaging in prophesy or precognition. In fact, Joan and Grace routinely sputter at the vagueness or seeming randomness of the tasks with which they are charged. In this sense, both characters deviate from the Joan of Arc story in particular and hagiographic narratives more generally, but reflect contemporary cultural anxieties and difficulties in imagining a future.

Nonetheless, *Joan of Arcadia* and *Saving Grace* illustrate the continued relevance and immense flexibility of Joan of Arc as a discourse of femininity in U.S. culture. While American viewers of these texts might not know every detail of Joan of Arc's life, it is not unreasonable to assume a familiarity with the key aspects of her story: she was a young woman who heard voices she attributed to divine beings, at God's request she donned male attire and led the French army to victory, she was subsequently betrayed, accused of witchcraft and burned at the stake. As James A. Freeman points out, Joan and parts of her story have circulated widely since just after her death (2008). Further, Robin Blaetz notes the many instances of U.S. films invoking St. Joan (2001). There were also the two biographical versions of the Joan of Arc story produced just before these texts' appearances potentially making Joan an even more salient reference for American viewers even if they did not watch those earlier texts. Given the long tradition of invoking that 15<sup>th</sup> century martyr in times of crisis, it should not be surprising to see texts like these during the first decade of the new millennium. Yet, *Joan* and *Grace* also feed back into the continuous construction of Joan of Arc as a cultural figure. The theme song used by *Joan of Arcadia* asks "What if God was one of us?" but the Rolling Stones seem to offer a better lyrical characterization of Joan and Grace in "Sympathy for the Devil"

where Mick Jagger sings, “Just as every cop is a criminal and all the sinners saints...” These texts present an image of saintliness that is both imperfect and accessible to even the spiritually ambivalent. Joan and Grace may be “chosen” by God, but it is not because of their purity or piety. Unfortunately, at their conclusions, both series move towards a consideration of supernatural rather than simply human causes for evil in the world with both Joan and Grace are called to stand against these forces, these male personifications of darkness. While the possibilities for female heroism that these narratives present are significant, they are undercut by the texts’ initial emphasis on the protagonists engaging in the feminized and mundane work of nurturing interpersonal relationships as well as their ultimate acquiescence to the desire for supernatural explanations for evil.

While *Joan* and *Grace* present stories that are substantively different from each other and those discussed in previous chapters, they also illustrate a number of commonalities among contemporary representations of femininity and the spiritual supernatural. Thus, they afford us an opportunity to consider the major components of this particular current of contemporary discourse about femininity. One of the key elements of these representations of femininity is a focus on women who deviate to varying degrees from popular images and ideas of divine femininity or the type of femininity that divinity might valorize. Like the other female protagonists in these texts, Joan and Grace are constructed as unlikely recipients of grace or power. Though they are straight, white, conventionally attractive women, they are presented as non-normative in their behavior and personality. They also represent quite different stages of womanhood with Joan on the cusp of young womanhood and Grace verging on being middle-aged. This range of ages is seen across all of the texts discussed in this dissertation and suggests

that “girls” are not the only relevant figure of femininity at this moment. Moreover, they “sass” their divine visitors and certainly do not embody the type of femininity usually associated with saints or likely candidates for conversations with God or angels. Thus, they are quite similar to the protagonists in the films about the Catholic Church discussed in Chapter 4. Even Tess and Monica in *Touched By An Angel* deviate from many popular images of angels as warriors of God or perpetually mild beings of light. Even the representations of witches defy both the negative stereotype of the cackling hag and the bubble-dwelling image of the “good witch”. Though they do not reject nature imagery completely, these texts even push against images of ethereal earth mothers often popularly associated with Goddess worship and pagan spiritualities like Wicca. Contemporary representations of femininity and the spiritual supernatural mark a departure from many other representation of femininity in that they not only normalize these characters’ relative deviations from normative femininity, they sanctify it. This move has the potential to disrupt popular ideas about who can claim authority within religious institutions, who has access to spiritual knowledge, who has the right to or capacity for empowerment.

And yet, even these limited forms of non-normativity and resistance are disciplined by these narratives. This is accomplished first through the containment of female anger in these texts. From Tess’s anger at humans’ racism in *Touched By An Angel* to Nancy’s disgust with her classmates’ classism and sexual double standards in *The Craft* to Bethany’s outrage upon learning true identity in *Dogma* to Grace’s violent hatred of the priest who molested her as a girl, each of these texts deals in stories about readily comprehensible anger. Ultimately, they also tell us that anger, no matter how

seemingly righteous, is never productive, never spiritually acceptable. Instead, it must be worked through, stifled, or punished. Simultaneously, these texts further re-cast these “non-normative” women within the bounds of hegemonic power relations through their insistence on individuals’ actions and interpersonal relationships as solutions to what are ultimately systemic problems. Whether the issue is teen pregnancy, domestic violence, abuses of power in the Church, or racism, these texts, more often than not, present individuals as their causes. Moreover, they assert that by engaging in the feminized work of taking social risks and building interpersonal relationships, the women at the center of these texts can address those issues as individuals rather than collectively. There are, of course, important exceptions to these patterns, but the recurring stories and characterizations indicate the dominant flow in this current of the discourse of femininity. In my next and final chapter, I consider the continued relevance of the discursive relationship between femininity and the spiritual supernatural as well as its relation to the broader cultural climate of uncertainty.



## Chapter 6:

### Conclusions: Femininity, the Spiritual Supernatural, and Popular Epistemological Crises

As I began to revise and conclude this dissertation during the Summer and Fall of 2010, the improbable candidacy of Christine O'Donnell figured prominently in news and entertainment culture. Her primary victory over former governor Mike Castle launched the relative novice O'Donnell and the usually overlooked electoral politics of Delaware into the national spotlight. As a self-proclaimed, but not universally endorsed, Tea Party candidate, O'Donnell built her platform around calls for fiscally and socially conservative politics and policies. She loudly proclaimed her identity as a Christian (raised Catholic and later becoming an evangelical) and her credentials as a Christian activist with a keen interest in sexuality.

Interestingly, that work is a large part of what came to dominate discourse about O'Donnell and her candidacy. As videos of a much younger O'Donnell holding forth on the sinfulness of masturbation in an MTV special about sex and her supposed teenage dabblings in witchcraft on Bill Maher's show, *Politically Incorrect*, she grew increasingly derided by critics on both the left and the right. O'Donnell's skewering for what many consider to be not only repressive, but also untenable beliefs about human sexuality (refraining from masturbation as well as premarital sex) was matched by criticism for her admission that she had not always walked that straight and narrow path (literally and figuratively) and had “dabbled” in witchcraft. This admission, which occurred when she made a quick comment in a discussion of Halloween on Maher's *Politically Incorrect*,

came to dominate her public persona as she repeatedly had to respond to questions about the extent of this dabbling from voters and journalists. Critics from the length of the ideological spectrum claimed that O'Donnell's youthful dabblings undermined her credibility as a Conservative Christian candidate. Among the cries of hypocrisy, though, there was also an air of derision about the subject of said dabbling, witchcraft, which for O'Donnell was equated with Satanism. These discussions of O'Donnell's ties to the occult reveal the persistence of discourses that refuse to acknowledge a religious practice linked to witchcraft that it not evil as well. This resistance to other definitions of understandings of witchcraft, particularly those put forth by Wiccans themselves, is not only a resistance to that which challenges dominant interpretations of Scripture, but also religious belief and practice that centers and celebrates femininity (albeit in ways that are often problematic).

In O'Donnell's widely circulated response ad we can see troubling signs of the way that discourses of gender and spirituality work to silence some voices as well as to attempt to avoid critiques. O'Donnell's actual involvement in any kind of organized witchcraft was likely only cursory (and had little to nothing to do with Wicca, Paganism, or other related spiritual practices), but her opening line in this ad is no mere toss off. When Christine O'Donnell declares, "I'm not a witch," she is not only attempting to allay concerns about the extent of her experimenting, but also invoking the figure of the witch and its various connotations. These connotations include the image of an unruly woman, the long history of using accusations of witchcraft to marginalize people—quite

often women—who do not conform to social norms and the more metaphorical concept of the political witch hunt.

In the ad, O'Donnell is careful to make sure that current or potential supporters are convinced of her current state of faith as a devout Christian. The tone of the ad is decidedly restrained and mature, with its slow piano track and soft focus close up of O'Donnell, who appears dressed in a modest black suit and pearls, with her hair straightened, looking directly into the camera. This stands in contrast to her earlier strategy of responding to questions about her experience with witchcraft by heartily laughing it off as a lark. In a sense, then, O'Donnell is chastened as a result of her associations with witchcraft.

But what O'Donnell is responding to is not an organized witch hunt, nor is it an accusation being leveled against her by Democrats or her opponent. Moreover, she is not being persecuted in a particularly menacing way by those who seem fascinated by her claims (mocked and dismissed in some troubling ways, yes, but not menaced pitchfork-and-torch style). O'Donnell seems fundamentally aware of the absurdity of her situation too, delivering her first line with a smile. Further, she makes the negative attention work to her advantage by positioning herself first of all as someone who sounds more like they are responding to accusations of witchcraft than one who brought it up themselves and on TV, no less. She moves from "I'm not a witch" to "I'm nothing you've heard" and this move allows her to not only deny the allegations but also to assume the moral high ground with respect to those who dismiss her because of her supposed spiritual experimentation. The second sentence of the ad is key here as it allows and even encourages the audience to reject critiques of other positions she has taken such as her

earlier anti-masturbation activism in an MTV documentary or her stance on theories of evolution. Perhaps most importantly, though, by suggesting that all this talk about witchcraft is something “you’ve heard” rather than something she said frames discussions of the Maher and MTV clips as hearsay or gossip despite the fact that they feature her own words. Ultimately losing her bid for the U.S. Senate seat formerly held by Vice President Joe Biden, O'Donnell seems likely to wind up a footnote in the political history of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, more noteworthy for the jokes made at her expense (including multiple late night comedy monologues, editorial cartoons, and *Saturday Night Live* sketches), than her public service. I argue that the (in some ways curious) case of Christine O'Donnell's rise and fall provides a clear example of the very complex and contradictory ways that femininity and religions are interwoven in popular discourse in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

As I noted in my introduction, feminist media studies in the U.S. has been reluctant to turn its attention to the question of religion. Scholars such as Diane Winston, Lynn Schofield Clark, Hannah E. Sanders, and Heather Hendershot offer some exceptions to this trend and this study aims to join them. It is crucial that feminist studies of the media and culture consider religion in its discussions, particularly of the U.S. context for several reasons. First, religion and spirituality have become such a significant part of the cultural landscape infusing policy debates, consumer culture, and popular media in unprecedented ways. As a dominant frame for cultural struggles over resource allocation and enfranchisement, religion and spirituality necessarily shape and to some extent are shaped by discourses of gender and sexuality. Additionally, much of the movements based in religion and spirituality in late 20<sup>th</sup> century U.S. culture has been in

response to feminist activism. The rise of politically active and organized conservative Christians was motivated in part by changes like the Roe v. Wade Supreme Court decision and the development of an attempt to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment. These pushes from feminist activists as well as broader critiques of patriarchal culture not only motivated a movement among (mostly) Evangelical Protestants, but Roman Catholic clergy and laypeople as well. These strange bedfellows have proved a potent force in U.S. culture as well as abroad.

Relatedly, traditional religions have been a key object of critique by feminist activists and thinkers. This work included not only the highly polemical yet systematic examination the ways that Judeo-Christian religions have functioned in the establishment and maintenance of patriarchy, but also explorations of woman-centered and/or woman-friendly spiritual beliefs and practices. These critiques and explorations have had marked influence on the development of a variety of spiritual movements including Wicca and associated Pagan faiths, New Age, and even some forms of Christianity and Judaism. The texts that I am discussing often refer to these critiques and innovations in fairly explicit ways. While they do not often function to the same ends, these texts reveal the extent to which these discourses about gender and spirituality, which are explicitly oppositional (though not unproblematic), have made their way into the mainstream of the American cultural imagination.

Though it cannot be ignored, we must also acknowledge that religion, whether established traditions or alternative practices, as a fundamentally non-rational enterprise presents at least two challenges to feminist media studies scholars: 1. how does one critically assess that which is not beholden to laws of reason or that which cannot be

verified or debunked through systematic observation? 2. how does one navigate both the often misogynistic traditions of most belief systems (and plenty of the newer and even the feminist-informed ones) and the way that feminist-informed religions and spiritualities marry the irrational to the feminine in such a way that denies women the ability to claim and speak from positions of reason (which, however, destabilized its dominance has become, remains favored and associated with the masculine in popular discourse).

Thus far, this dissertation has examined the ways that contemporary discourses of gender and religion/spirituality are shaped, reproduced, and disrupted in popular cultural texts. Through close readings of these texts, I argue that the spiritual supernatural operates as a significant and multi-faceted discourse of femininity at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is a discourse that reworks old narratives and tropes and opens up new possibilities for stories about women by sanctifying, sometimes quite literally, unlikely female protagonists. These women are represented as powerful through their status as emissaries of God, as witches able to control supernatural forces, as physical proof of the Catholic Church's fallibility, and as those chosen to receive divine visitation. And yet, by situation these considerations of female power and knowledge in the context of spirituality and religion, these texts have produced a femininity in which anger is unacceptable, in which individual action and interpersonal relationships are paramount. The point is not that such messages are inherently wrong or anti-feminist, but rather that they are messages of a passive, accepting, and well-behaved femininity.

If these texts and the case of Christine O'Donnell remind us that the historical "silt" of using spiritual or religious mandates and associations with the supernatural to contain women with or seeking power is still very much a part of contemporary

discourse, we must also recognize and consider the relationship of femininity and the spiritual supernatural other discursive “currents” in U.S. culture at that moment. While no moment in history is free from uncertainty, in the U.S. the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries have been marked by an increasing need for people in their day-to-day lives to grapple with what philosophers refer to as “first order” questions: questions of how we know what we are, how we know what we know, and how we can establish truth claims. In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, these anxieties emerged in response to major shifts in at least three interrelated dimensions:

1. The accelerated development of science, medicine, and technology
2. The rise of and backlash against identity politics
3. The decline of trust in institutions of social authority such as the government and organized religions.

As feminist philosopher, Susan Bordo puts it, “The limitations of science and the interested, even ideological nature of all human pursuits now seem unavoidable recognitions” (1987, 2). On the ground, the work of making sense of these shifts plays out as school boards debate teaching evolution and intelligent design in science classes, as pharmaceutical companies produce drugs like Viagra but no cure for AIDS, as diversity becomes a buzzword while states dismantle affirmative action programs, and in discussions of the seemingly unending parade of political and religious leaders embroiled in scandal, to offer just a few examples. Religious figures and institutions come under scrutiny, but it is important to note that much of the backlash against science in particular is religiously based.

The feminized spiritual supernatural emerges as a way to make sense of these sites of cultural turbulence, what I call “popular epistemological struggles” as well as anxieties specific to the nature of femininity and gender roles. This intermingling of discursive currents of course shapes the ways that media representations of the spiritual supernatural make sense of femininity in the 1990s and early 2000s and I have endeavored to note such moments of intermingling in the preceding chapters. While a full consideration of mediated responses to and interventions in popular epistemological crises is beyond the scope of this dissertation, I want to conclude by drawing out the ways that some these texts have used femininity to make sense of or contain some of these popular epistemological crises.

I argue that these texts offer three main types of responses to the questions of knowledge, morality, and efficacy that emerge as “rationality” and “objectivism” have become problematized in U.S. culture. Each of these responses advocates a kind of knowledge and a particular relationship to dominant concepts of reason: faith in God alone, the possibility of reclaiming or discovering “Truth” outside of allegedly corrupt religious institutions, and an equal valuation of faith and reason. *Touched By An Angel* appeared in the wake of the televangelist scandals and just after the Catholic Church’s pedophilia scandal was coming to light, a moment of deep distrust of religious institutions and their notably male leaders. This was also a moment characterized by incidents of terrorism on American soil (specifically, the World Trade Center and Oklahoma City bombings). Questions of physical security and spiritual trust came to the forefront of U.S. culture. *Touched By An Angel*’s response is characterized by faith in God with all other forms of knowledge deemed subordinate. This series’ angels, Tess and



Monica, function not just as guardians, but as restorers of faith. There is no discussion of verifying the angelic experiences of humans. Indeed, no one ever questions Tess or Monica's revelation of their divine identity as each episode draws to a close. The other texts which engage in these broad epistemological crises share a focus on faith and eschew institutionalized religious authority, but they also work to incorporate reason and science.

The films which focus on the Catholic Church, *Dogma*, *Stigmata*, and *The Da Vinci Code* work to challenge the authority of that institution or rather to critique the way that authority has been used through the assertion of counternarratives of Christ's true teachings and designs for his religion. In each case, characters have their faith restored or their non-belief challenged. This is accomplished through the physical possession of a woman's body (*Stigmata*) or the revelation that a woman's body bears the evidence of the Church's failure to acknowledge or see the real meaning of Christ's teachings, namely, that men and women are equally important and valuable. *The Da Vinci Code* extends this discussion furthest by positing the idea that Christ worshipped the Goddess as well as God and moreover that reason (coded as male) and mystical religious experience (coded as female) should equally be part of Christianity.

The television series which focus on women receiving divine visitation, *Joan of Arcadia* and *Saving Grace* offer even more attention to asserting the compatibility and complementarity of reason and science with faith and spirituality. *Joan's* response to questions about the abundance of evil and injustice in a world where the extant uncertainties were exacerbated by the events of 9/11 not only emphasizes the possibilities of individual action rooted in faith but also the idea that science, and physics in particular

(which God instructs Joan to take), is proof of God's existence and the beauty of the divinely designed universe. Similarly, *Saving Grace*'s characterization of "Rhetta" as a devoutly Catholic criminologist supports the idea that science and faith are not incommensurate. Rhetta even uses her scientific knowledge and reasoning to learn more about and validate Grace's experiences with Earl. In the end, however, even these series assert the primacy of God and the importance of faith in acting within the world.

Just as these texts open up heretofore underanalyzed possibilities for constructions of femininity, they do the same for people of faith more generally and posit some compelling alternatives or at least complements to "reason" which has lost its claim on being the path to objective truth at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Though each group of texts, with their distinct forms of the spiritual supernatural, posits a different set of solutions, to these various crises of knowledge, morality, and efficacy, each of them relies on a valuation of religious or spiritual knowledge and experience. These texts reinscribe the longstanding connection between such forms of knowing and the feminine. As I have already discussed, while new possibilities for imagining and valuing femininities are opened up, their disruptive and counter-hegemonic potential is largely contained and diffused. In the case of these texts which are responding to broader epistemological crises, there is similar containment through the ultimate valuation of individual action rather than collective responses to systemic social problems, through a romanticization of certain forms of Enlightenment-based thinking that works simply to restabilize the idea that there is a singular truth about spirituality, salvation and enlightenment, and that ultimately values faith over all other forms of knowledge. Further consideration of the place of femininity and the spiritual supernatural as a response to

broader cultural anxieties is certainly needed to understand both contemporary discourses of femininity and to better understand the place of religion and spirituality in U.S. culture in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Additionally, considerations of gender and religion in culture cannot remain at the level of textual analysis. As Fiske notes in his discussion of the limitations of the metaphor of culture as a river of discourses, the “naturalness” of the river as an image or concept “can imply an inevitability in flows and counterflows...can reduce or even eliminate political intervention, social agency, and discursive struggle” (7-8). The fact that so many texts offered considerations of femininity and the spiritual supernatural tells us that it is an important and complex discursive topic at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in U.S. culture. My analysis of these texts, the stories they tell—the sources of dramatic tension and modes of resolution, and the human qualities they valorize and demonize gives us a kind of map of the contours of the debates about gender and broader popular epistemological crises. That is, we now have a sense of one important set of terms and conceptual tools available to people as they grapple with a world that is epistemologically unstable on so many fronts that this instability is its defining characteristic. What remains to be explored is how and to what effect various groups of people are using that vocabulary and others to make sense.

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