

**Pope Joan and the Black Swan:
Medieval Christianity as a Resource for Gender Justice in the Church**
By Ulrike Wiethaus

My image of History would have at least two bodies in it, at least two persons talking, arguing, always listening to the other as they gestured at their books; and it would be a film, not a still picture, so that you could see that sometimes they wept, sometimes they were astonished, sometimes they were knowing, and sometimes they laughed with delight.

~Natalie Zemon Davis¹

Introduction

During my graduate studies in the Department of Religion at Temple University in the early eighties, the second feminist wave was in full force—exhilarating, energizing, and, as was gradually discovered, also laced with plenty of blind spots. From coast to coast, U.S. activists worked to undue a gendered system of interlocking habits of economic, legal, and social discrimination derived from European practices and ideologies. In an act of male solidarity, John C. Raines and Daniel C. Maguire convened an international group of male colleagues to critically assess gender injustice in world religions. The title of the ensuing collection of essays still rings activist and urgent today: *What Men Owe to Women*.²

In his introduction to the volume, John C. Raines summarized the group's main findings about gender oppression. One, that world religions mirror social constructions of gender and vice versa; two, that the analysis of religious power is always a choice of political allegiance; three, that culturally specific and culturally competent academic work is needed in order to be persuasive; and four, that gender justice activism in religious domains demands multiple culturally appropriate tools and tactics.³ The contributors posited that all world religions carry their own seeds of positive change within. In John C. Raines' words, "each of these religious traditions has a strong theory of social justice, and these resources can be harnessed to contemporary issues of gender. We ask, how can our Scriptures, how can our founding Prophets, how can our ancestors be used today to further justice in relations between genders?"⁴

This essay offers resources from within medieval European Christianity in a feminist reading of the Christian dogma of hypostatic union, medieval political theory on royal twinning, and two medieval legends on the numinous double. Pulling these strands together as a feminist hermeneutics of double lives, I argue that the popular medieval story of a ninth century female Pope and the myth of a Fairy Lover have served to unhinge

¹Natalie Zemon Davis, "History's Two Bodies", *The American Historical Review*, 93: 1 (February 1988), 1-30, 1.

² John C. Raines and Daniel C. Maguire, editors, *What Men Owe to Women. Men's Voices from World Religions* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001). Gerard S. Sloyan contributed a chapter on Roman Catholicism, "A Roman Catholic Perspective", 151-187.

³ Raines and Maguire, *What Men Owe to Women*, 5.

⁴ Raines and Maguire, *What men Owe to Women*, 1.

hegemonic claims of male Christian superiority in the Middle Ages and in contemporary film today.⁵ As acts of subversive story telling or truth to be believed, the stories reconnoiter the possibility of a woman's benevolent reign in the highest ecclesiastical office, and think up ingenious ways beyond institutional networks through which women might gain access to male dominated higher learning and a liberating sexuality. Safely positioned in part or in whole in the dreamlike realm of the numinous and supernatural, the narratives invite their audience to undo false consciousness. They insist that women deserve better and deserve more than what a misogynist status quo has to offer.

The key to unlock the subversive possibilities of these medieval resources is embedded in the premodern understanding of the self as multiplex rather than unitary. A medieval self is constructed of a natural and thus mortal body and of an uncanny or supernatural double, its soul or spirit. Such medieval doubling has survived in various discursive domains into the modern era. The supernatural double makes appearances in the arts as uncanny Doppelgänger, evil twin with supernatural powers, and more recently, as free roaming avatar in virtual communities.



⁵ An earlier version of this essay, entitled "Pope Joan's Two Bodies: Toward a Hermeneutics of Double Lives" has been presented at the 47th International Congress on Medieval Studies in 2012.

Enjeong Noh, *Doppelgänger* (1999)

<http://americangallery.wordpress.com/2011/02/28/enjeong-noh/>

The Doppelgänger in Religion and Secular Culture

In contemporary Christianity, the composite model of personhood has endured as a union of natural body and supernatural soul. In psychoanalytic theory and depth psychology, the model of the conscious and unconscious replicated earlier composite structures of the self. It manifests in the Freudian tripartite ego, super ego, and id, the Jungian ego and its shadow, and the Lacanian process of mirroring. Seemingly ubiquitous cultural formations of the uncanny double are observable in dreams, fantasies, and the arts. The boundaries between individual fantasy, psychological processes of transformation, and expressions of cultural creativity such as film and literature are porous. Indeed, psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas defines dreams as night fiction and primal theatre. Dream work transforms the self into an observable Other by elaborately and artfully staging a nocturnal “intrasubjective rendezvous” between the subject and the ego.⁶ In a raw existential reading, the figure of the double points to the paradox of our existence as human beings as we pursue the wish for immortality and avoid the acknowledgment that our demise is unavoidable. Psychoanalyst Otto Rank (1884-1939) was the first to explore this underlying psychological tension in a wide range of literary and religious sources.⁷ Rank interpreted the function of a double as a coping mechanism to curtail the self’s fear of death.⁸ Whether as the Chalcedonian dogma of hypostatic union, the Doppelgänger motif in secular literature and world religious traditions, or Christian belief in a personal and numinous soul, the numinous twin protects against the threat of physical death by surviving it.⁹ In the lives of the subaltern, emotional death can be experienced as systemic social and political erasure. Transposed into a feminist frame, the concept of a numinous doubling of the self allows for a range of cultural moves to counter the threat or reality of social death. For example, the allure of a numinous female Doppelgänger, a Superwoman of sorts, can be harnessed as strategic narrative subversion.

⁶ Christopher Bollas, *The Shadow of the Object. Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known* (London: Free Association Books 1987, impression 1999), 64.

⁷ Otto Rank, *The Double. A Psychoanalytic Study*. Translated by Roy Huss (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1971).

⁸ In Rank’s summary, “the thought of death is rendered supportable by assuring oneself of a second life, after this one, as a double”, in Rank, *The Double*, 85.

⁹ In his study, Rank suggested that the Christian concept of the soul is a potent example of religious doubling. He hypothesized that the concept of soul began as the numinous experience of a physical body double and only gradually lost its materiality. Sigmund Freud in turn depended on Rank’s study in his work on the Uncanny.



<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Superwoman>¹⁰

Counter narratives of a potent female double challenge the truth claims of an ideological construction of female selves hemmed in by purportedly immovable social structures. Stories of a female Pope or the Virgin Mary who takes the place of a female nun bent on exploring the world beyond monastic walls models subversive acts of medieval female solidarity.¹¹ In a contemporary secular context, the politically charged function of the subaltern double is elucidated in critical race theory, post-colonial theory, and queer theory through key concepts such as double consciousness, passing, masquerade, mimicry, drag, and impersonation. From nocturnal theatre to queer theory, the double's ubiquitous appearances are a measure of the vitality of our human need for processes of gemination or twinning and a persona mixta.

Medieval Christianity worked the concept of the double into dominant discursive practice as well. In the fifth century, the Council of Chalcedon created a theological paradigm of doubling that found its way into theocratic ideologies. Medieval historian Ernst H. Kantorowicz argued this point for political and ecclesiastical offices.¹² As illustrated in the proclamation "The King is dead, long live the King", a belief in royal twinning mirrored the dogma of hypostatic union by splitting a king's identity and authority into a mortal body natural and a supernatural body politic. Royal gemination theory articulated the reasons for the divinization of male monarchs, but Kantorowicz noted that a similar mystification of office shaped the ideological justification of papal and priestly rule as well. Kantorowicz

¹⁰ This is artist John Sikela's first image of Lois Lane as Superwoman. Note how the Doppelgänger's claim to be real is enhanced by her shadow and reflection in the full length mirror.

¹¹ For an example of the Virgin Mary as numinous double, see the Dutch legend *Beatrijs*, printed in E. Colledge, *Mediaeval Netherland's Religious Literature* (London and New York: London House & Maxwell, 1965), 123-189.

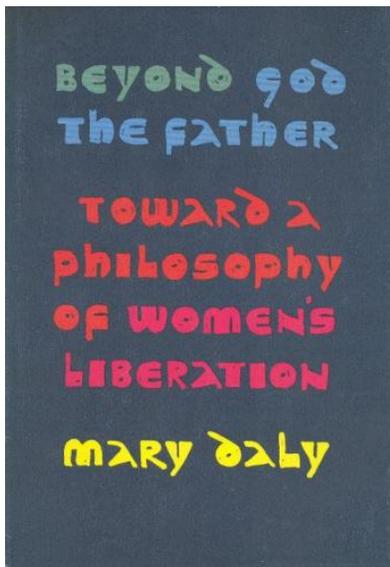
¹² Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies. A Study in Medieval Political Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957, seventh edition 1997).

summarized the historical arc of royal and ecclesiastical twinning as an extension of the logic of the Council of Chalcedon as follows.

The corporational, non-Christological concept of the Two Bodies of Christ [encompasses]... a body natural, individual, and personal (*corpus natural, verum, personale*); the other, a super-individual body politic and collective, the *corpus mysticum*, interpreted also as a *persona mystica*. Whereas the *corpus verum* developed a life and mysticism of its own, the *corpus mysticum* proper came to be less and less mystical as time passed on, and came to mean simply the Church as a body politic or, by transference, any body politic of the secular world.¹³

The cultural and political Rezeptionsgeschichte of the ecclesiastical and royal doubling extended well into the seventeenth century. Although the theological concept of royal gemination eventually lost cache in political history, its pseudo-mystical charisma on the popular level never quite disappeared.

In each theocratic social domain, a byproduct of such gemination was the legitimization of the exploitative structures of sexism. Not surprisingly, second wave Christian and post-Christian feminists took on the task to deconstruct the ideologically saturated *persona mixta mystique* of male ecclesiastical authority.



http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_Daly

Among the first to do so, radical theologian Mary Daly articulated some of the feminist implications of an ideological office/person germination. Daly outlined the implications of such deconstruction in her pioneering study *Beyond God the Father: Towards a Philosophy*

¹³ Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*, 206.

of *Women's Liberation*.¹⁴ Pointing to the need for a change in consciousness and creative re-imaginings, she noted that

I [Daly] have already suggested that if God is male, then the male is God. The divine patriarch castrates women as long as he is allowed to live on in the human imagination. The process of cutting away the Supreme Phallus can hardly be a merely "rational" affair. The problem is one of transforming the collective imagination so that this distortion of the human aspiration to transcendence loses its credibility.¹⁵

The Supreme Phallus did get cut in the collective imagination, and much earlier than the seventies and eighties. Although religion reproduces racial, political, and economic gender privilege, as has been analyzed in a global context in *What Men Owe to Women*, the social relationships through which such privilege is created and maintained are antagonistic and structurally unstable. The array of "weapons of the weak" is extensive, and as Daly understood, it includes narrative strategies and imaginative counter narrative. Since structural injustice is couched in an idealization of the exploitative status quo, it "inevitably creates the contradictions that permit it to be criticized *in its own terms*".¹⁶

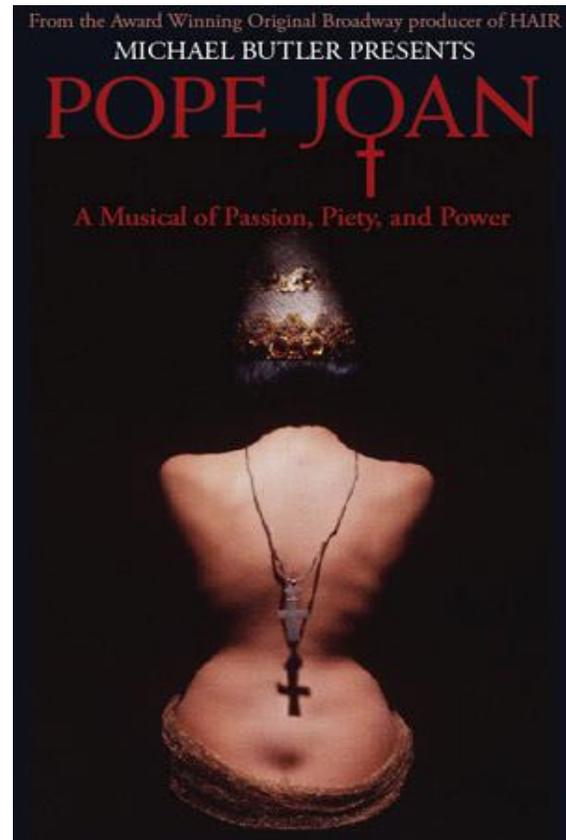
A medieval resistance to the social prerogatives of male divinization took narrative shape on the local level, coagulated in cultic practices with a focus on the holiness of female twinning, and traveled widely through story telling. For example, medievalists Vern and Bonnie Bullough, Valerie Hotchkiss, and others have documented the cultural presence and function of cross-dressing women, including the veneration of over thirty female transvestite saints.¹⁷ Despite Deuteronomy 22:5, Christian women's masculine doubling eventually became encoded as a sign of saintliness and the object of cultic veneration on the ground. A sacred icon, the cross-dressed female "body natural" daringly displays an alternate spiritual "body politic", a critical gemination practice that taunts the exclusionary claims of institutional patriarchal rule. The medieval folk narrative that targets the center of ecclesiastical power is the story of the successful but short-lived reign of a female Pope. Frequently known by the name of Johannes Anglicus, she is said to have reigned in the 9th century. The written version of the story of Pope Joan began to be circulated in local clerical circles in the thirteenth century. Retold and remembered through a range of printed media, including Tarot cards, the story has continued to live on in film, music, and novels.

¹⁴ Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Towards a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973).

¹⁵ Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, 19.

¹⁶ James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak. Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985), 317.

¹⁷ Vern L. Bullough and Bonnie Bullough, *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993); Valerie R. Hotchkiss, *Clothes Make the Man: Female Cross Dressing in Medieval Europe* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996).



Following James C. Scott's insight, I am reading the female Pope legend as undermining the idealization of papal office on its own terms by the creation of a counter twinning. In this narrative move, the structure of the papal office remains intact, but is radically redefined as an allegedly "superior" male natural body is replaced by an allegedly "inferior" female body. In several medieval versions, the threat of a female Pope becomes identified in the story itself. From a misogynist point of view, Joanna could embody the papal corpus verum et mysticum only through magic and witchcraft, yet even clerical authors could respond sympathetically. For example, cleric Dietrich Schernberg's sixteenth century play *Fraw Jutta* absorbs Pope Joan's Two Bodies into the more forgiving template of female transvestite saints' lives (mid-16th century).¹⁸

The Fairy Lover legend constitutes a second type of medieval mutinous counter narrative with a focus on supernatural twinning and female empowerment. The core of the story evolves around the exchange of power for love. A source of numinous strength and liberation, the Fairy Lover, a shape shifting being fond of assuming animal form, is attracted

¹⁸ On Dietrich Schernberg and the medieval to modern trajectory of the Pope Joan legend, see the recent review article by Thomas F.X. Noble, "Why Pope Joan?" in *The Catholic Historical Review* XCIX:2 (April 2013), 219-23.

to a human. When the human reciprocates the Fairy Lover's affection or interest, the supernatural companion bestows special gifts on her or his beloved. In its patriarchal and anti-pagan Christian version, the devil takes the place of the Fairy Lover, as is evident in some versions of the Pope Joan legend. In all versions of this story, however, the lover's miraculous gift is that which is forbidden to women under patriarchy. Once received, the gift turns into life-changing transgressive knowledge and practice, an exuberant jouissance that is both carnal and intellectual. In the medieval Christian telling of the tale, a young and beautiful lay woman chooses to be the devil's sexual companion in exchange for wealth and extensive knowledge in the liberal arts, which were taught by and for men.¹⁹ The devil/fairy lover's tale is better known in its desexualized male version as the story of Dr. Faustus, but a medieval Dutch text with a female lay protagonist named Mariken van Nieumeghen (Mary of Nijmegen) precedes the Dr. Faustus legend in print by at least two hundred years. Mary of Nijmegen lives as the devil's mistress for seven years in exchange for knowledge, the mastery of foreign languages, and material abundance. She eventually repents of her choice, and begins the life of a holy woman.²⁰ Processes of gemination are central to the Fairy Lover mythologem. Not only does the power of the Fairy Lover manifest in his or her shape shifting abilities by moving back and forth between human and animal body, but as in the case of Mary of Nijmegen and Pope Joan, the bounteous gift changes the receiver. Whether as fairy or fallen angel, the shape shifting lover endows her or his mortal partner with ontological potency, knowledge, and agency. Ignorant but determined Mary becomes knowledgeable and world wise Emma. Impoverished but gifted Joanna becomes all powerful Pope Johannes Anglicus. A stronger and bolder female double not just daydreams, but fully lives the life of freedom desired. To rephrase Mary Daly, such a woman sins big.²¹

Contemporary Film

The medieval stories of Pope Joan and the demonic fairy lover have resurfaced in three recent films, *She...who would be Pope* (Michael Anderson, 2009)²², *Die Päpstin/Pope Joan* (Sönke Wortmann, 2009)²³, and *Black Swan* (Darren Aronofsky, 2010). As contemporary works of art, the films add a fresh layer of commentary on the gendered relationship between office and person, between private and public life, between female desire and the

¹⁹ For a literary context, see Eric Jaeger, *The Tempter's Voice: Language And the Fall in Medieval Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 191-241.

²⁰ See E. Colledge, *Mediaeval Netherland's Religious Literature*, 189-225.

²¹ Mary Daly, *Amazon Grace: Recalling the Courage to Sin Big* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

²² For more information on the double life of the film, see its website at <http://shewhowouldbepope.com>. Originally produced in 1972, it became reissued with previously omitted scenes in 2009. Anderson's film is an adaptation of Emmanuel Royidis' 1886 novel *Papissa Joanna*, translated into English by Lawrence Durrell. Royidis was excommunicated for having written the novel as a satire of the Greek Orthodox Church.

²³ Sönke Wortmann's 2009 *Die Päpstin/Pope Joan*, with Johanna Wokalek in the title role, is based on Donna Woolfolk Cross's best-selling novel by the same name, which was published in 1996.

rule of the fathers. The Pope Joan films remain anchored in the medieval diegetic world. *Black Swan*, in contrast, transposes the theme of uncanny Fairy Lover from Pyotr Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* fairytale to a New York City ballet company. As in the medieval template, a silver screen female Doppelgänger exuberant with determination and talent transgresses taboos and relishes what her subaltern female self cannot experience.



<http://www.shewhowouldbepope.com/>

In both Pope Joan movies, Johannes Anglicus is committed to social reform and an activist return to Christian roots by helping the poor and heal the sick, implementing education for women, missionizing pagans (Anderson) and exhorting fellow Christians. Apart from being an activist “people’s pope”, Wortmann’s Pope Joan also writes books, revises unspecified doctrines, and pushes more resolutions through administrative channels “than ever before”.

Sexual repression and the challenge to single-mindedly pursue professional goals shape the plotline of *Black Swan*.



<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0947798/>

As in a hallucination, the ballet roles of the Swan Queen and the Black Swan become synonymous with protagonist Nina's (Natalie Portman) repressed ego and its potent and liberated shadow self embodied by her rival and Doppelgänger Lily (Mila Kunis). The Swan Queen persona is propelled by a mix of sexual desire and ambition to break the confines of her status as dutiful daughter and subordinate member of a ballet company. By emotionally shape shifting into the aggressive and libidinous Black Swan, Nina fulfills her desire for artistic excellence, adulthood, and sexual freedom. The film's Fairy Lover motif plays out bisexually – both company director Thomas Leroy (Vincent Cassel) and Lily exchange erotic encounter for professional knowledge, sexual pleasure, and freedom from pre-adolescent dependency.

As any truth-telling tale does, the films and legends do not hide the cost for claiming a fuller life beyond systemic gender injustice. The function of stories about a gendered double is neither utopian nor dystopian, but to assess possibility and danger. The potent double activates swift social punishment for its transgressions: the female Pope is savagely murdered, a triumphantly successful ballerina self-immolates at the height of her newly discovered powers, and Tchaikovsky's White Swan self-sacrifices in the name of love. As a creature of the imagination and the world of spirit, the double's material manifestation can only be episodic and theatrical. Success is only possible for as long as the fiction of the numinous double can be maintained in an unchanged social environment of unequal power relations. When the double's success pries open a social space for the reemergence and reality of the subaltern self, the dynamics of oppression reassert themselves. As the body natural is discovered as the "true" self, it becomes re-inscribed as patriarchal object. The corpus verum returns to the world of suffering like her sisters. For the audience, the hard work of changing the socio-economic and political environment begins at the moment of recognizing the reentry of the corpus verum and the public discovery of the fictitiousness of the double.

Conclusion

When compared with gemination processes that consolidate patriarchal hierarchies of domination, germination processes from below differ in substantial ways. Unlike the institutionalized and collective formation of a royal, papal, and priestly persona mixta as described by Kantorowicz, the films and medieval legends depict self-generated processes that are triggered by confronting a female subject's gender limitations and the threat of her social or physical death. Instead of a homosocial ideological practice of the royal, papal, or priestly double, female twinning bridges male and female social domains, and must engage a mix of male and female support networks. Aronofsky, Wortmann, and Anderson show the protagonist crossing private and public spaces alike. Wortmann's film locates female support at the level of family and home to gender women's knowledge of herbs and the healing arts. Wortmann and Anderson show a female Pope who moves with the same ease among the poor and sick and the elites. Despite the protagonist's demise, the strategic practice of doubling is shown to have future use. Bishop Arnalda, the narrator of Joan's story, is revealed to be a female transvestite herself. She evokes the possibility of a mystical body politic of female ecclesiastical transvestites. In a voice-over at the very end of Pope Joan, Arnalda muses, "I wonder whether I met other women like her – how many are there?" In *She... who would be Pope*, a contemporary female evangelical preacher in the US

knows herself to be the reincarnated Pope Joan. It is left open at the end of *Black Swan* whether Nina, unlike Tchaikovsky's Swan Queen, will survive her abdominal wound.

Yet even the masculinist twinning discourse that began at Chalcedon contains its own gynocentric subtext and subversion. In 451 CE, the Council members who convened at Chalcedon fasted and prayed for a miracle from St. Euphemia (martyred ca. 304-307) to learn whether the Monophysite or Orthodox position was true. St. Euphemia communicated through a miracle that she favored the Orthodox position of hypostatic union. She must have known how handy her concept of dual natures would be one day to support other women in the Church and to remind men what they owe to women.

Ulrike Wiethaus, Ph.D.
Professor of Religion and American Ethnic Studies
Wake Forest University
Winston-Salem, North Carolina