

Thank you all for coming today to talk about rethinking women and power. For those that don't know, I'm—God willing and damn the torpedoes—less than a year away from finishing up my doctoral dissertation and getting my PhD in English. My focus is on medieval literature, and within *that*, I started out with an emphasis on monster theory, on ways the Other is represented in literature, or on how both individuals and groups can come to be “othered” for the benefit of those on the “inside”. It's a field of study that still has chilling application even today—after all, if you can manage to get people to perceive a particular group as less than human, as “monstrous”, as the Other, then it no longer matters how you treat them, right?

But over the past few years, my focus has shifted, and I've been focusing more and more on maternal empowerment. It's actually an easy transition from monstrosity to maternity. Monsters, after all, “challenge categorizations, endanger borders, and pose a threat to systems of order,” according to Misty Urban, author of *Monstrous Women in Middle English Romance*. And what is a mother if not a creature that challenges categorizations? To this day, the debate rages on about where the fetus ends and where the mother begins. Even before she is a mother, to the medieval medical mind a woman is already somewhat monstrous. In Bettina Bildhauer's book *Medieval Blood*, she argues that “the body is a symbol of society, and therefore substances such as bodily fluids that leave its boundaries are seen as violating the integrity of the social group and are hence policed by taboos.” And, of course, the boundaries of women's bodies are permeable in a way that men's bodies are not. The fact that there are medical texts that talk about women emitting poisonous vapors from their eyes that can kill babies and give men leprosy sort of helps add to the whole “woman as monstrous Other” motif as well—and by the way, it's mostly post-menopausal women who can poison you with a look, so even after her childbearing days are done, she's still monstrous. Maybe even *more* monstrous.

All of that said, I decided to make the jump and focus my dissertation on maternity. But talking about ways in which women—especially mothers—were oppressed or marginalized felt both redundant and, frankly, unproductive. Women make up more than half the world's population; I really didn't want to write about how to keep them down. No: I wanted to do some digging and see whether or not, in the literature of the period, I could find ways in which medieval mothers were actually *empowered*, rather than the opposite. And I did, both good and bad. So what I wanted to do today is share some of the stories I've been working on, how they deal with mothers and power, and maybe consider how some of those models may or may not still work for us today. And for those of you who may not have children, I'm still talking to you: As Clarissa Pinkola Estés puts it in her book *Women Who Run With the Wolves*, “whether we have children or not, whether we nourish the garden, the sciences, or the thunderworld of poetics,” we're all nurturers of something. Maybe many somethings.

So let's back up several hundred years. When you think about “medieval ladies,” I'm betting most of you get a mental picture that goes something like this: long dresses with big sleeves, probably a pointy cone hat, sort of damsel in distress-esque...and pretty much lacking in autonomy. A thing to be exchanged in marriage for political or financial convenience, who will then bear lots of children—preferably sons—to carry on the male line. Especially if she marries a king, right? If she does *that*, then basically her *only* job is to have a son. Women who were essentially repressed, with very little rights, privileges, or power that didn't come through their fathers or husbands, and whose sexuality was strictly controlled and highly charged with moral connotations by the Church. That about sum most of it up?

You wouldn't be entirely wrong, either. Medieval England—and really, most of the medieval world—was generally a patriarchal system, in which women did not have anywhere

near the same rights as their male counterparts, with a very few exceptions. If you were here last week, and you got to hear Rose talk about her very aptly named “Amazing Spiritual Life,” then you heard her discuss growing up in such a fundamentalist community they didn’t even have a *name*. What stuck out for me was that, to paraphrase Rose, “you can imagine a group like that had a lot of rules...especially for the women.” Such would have been the case in the medieval West as well, and the situation in England only got worse for women after the Norman Conquest. In Anglo-Saxon England, women actually had *more* rights available to them, but as the French came and the culture shifted, those rights were slowly eroded. And, no, the Church didn’t help matters much, either: as it gained authority, sexuality and morality were firmly linked, with woman being the site of corruption, thanks to the curse of Eve that hung over the entire gender. Part of that curse was that Eve and all women after her were to be subordinate to men, a part that was taken very seriously in the Middle Ages. But to be fair, and only to add to the ambivalence surrounding women and mothers, they weren’t exactly unhelpful, either. Canon law dictated that no marriages could be performed without consent from *both* parties, which in the Middle Ages was a very big deal. It gave women agency at a point in time when marriage was a means of exchange. What families did to obtain that consent is a separate matter. And this was the period when veneration of and devotion to Mary came into full flower. She was officially recognized as the *Theotokos*, for one thing. I love that word—its Greek, and it means “Mother of God.” You don’t get more powerful than to be a human being that actually mothers and raises a deity. But this veneration meant that motherhood in general was now an empowering thing. As Mother of God, Mary gains incredible intercessory and mediating power, which in turn justifies women’s roles as mediators in this world. Marian devotion created a spectrum for women, with the fallen

Eve on one end and the Queen of Heaven on the other, helping to elevate women and mothers in particular, making motherhood a potential route to power.

I included the reading from social psychologist Jean Baker Miller because I think she does sum up, rather accurately, what we think of when we think of the word “power”: “‘the faculty of doing or performing anything: force; strength; energy; ability; influence...’ and then a long string of words leading to ‘dominion, authority, a ruler.’” Certainly, when I began my research, that was what I had in mind. And there are cases of women who try to exert power in just that way. One of my favorites is the legend of Pope Joan, which was treated as historical fact from its first references in the thirteenth century until Pope Clement VIII declared it untrue in 1601. As the legend goes, for one reason or another, Joan spent most of her life disguised as a man. As a man, she received an excellent education and was regarded as a well-learned individual who ended up in Rome and, because of her reputation, was elected to be Pope. Everything went well for more than two and a half years, until, during a Papal procession through the streets of Rome, she suddenly went into labor and gave birth on the Via Sacra. When you're a Pope in the ninth or tenth century, you wear a *lot* of robes in public, so no one really noticed her belly bump. What happened afterward varies according to the sources: in one, she's deposed, imprisoned, and spends years doing heavy penance. In another, she's dragged by a horse and stoned to death right then and there. Either way, according to the chronicler Martin of Opava, “nor is she placed on the list of the Holy Pontiffs, both because of her female sex and on account of the foulness of the matter.”

So. Here we have a story of a woman who *did* try to act like a man, literally, usurping one of the highest, most exclusively male authoritative roles in the West. According to historian Clarissa Atkinson, “the story is about disorder, and about the filth and chaos that ensue when

objects and persons and events are out of place...The woman whose learning and virtue carried her to the heights was destroyed by motherhood...she was brought down by her own body.”

Think about that for a second. “Filth.” “The foulness of the matter.” “Destroyed by motherhood.” Pretty grim tidings, huh? And they’re all tied viscerally to the female body, to its capacity for bearing children, a capacity that was viewed with serious ambivalence at the time. On one hand, childbirth was anxiety-ridden, and it was presented in devotional writings as sickening and undesirable, an act that corrupts the woman because it requires her to have sex; this is why women had to go through the churching ritual after giving birth to cleanse them of the impurity associated with the process. And, in a society that depends so heavily on patrilineal succession, there were serious concerns about how a mother could negatively influence the fetus within her, what her mysterious female imagination was doing to pollute the father’s bloodline. Medical texts went so far as to proscribe what sort of images a woman should look at while pregnant, lest she see the wrong thing and produce a monstrous child. Pope Joan stands at the pinnacle of this sort of anxiety, a dire warning to women to keep to their places.

Yet on the other hand, it’s sort of undeniable that, without childbirth, you don’t have the next generation, which made women rather invaluable. And within that framework, mothers could find personal empowerment, in surprising ways that don’t always look like “power” as we think of it. Such is the case in a lesser-known romance today, *The King of Tars*. The story is actually not about the King of Tars at all—he shows up for a bit at the beginning and the end—but instead focuses on his daughter, a Christian princess who is, like all princesses in medieval romance, the most beautiful, virtuous, etc., etc. ever to be born. The Muslim Sultan of Damas learns about this pearl among women and decides to marry her, waging war for her hand when his diplomatic offer is refused. Eventually, she agrees to wed him, and he places one condition

on her: she must, according to his ancient laws, become a Muslim. So she accepts—on the surface. She goes through the rituals while secretly remaining Christian. Eventually, she ends up pregnant, which is expected. What's *not* expected is that she gives birth to a formless lump of flesh, affectionately referred to in scholarship on the romance as the “lump child.” In that moment, the Sultan accuses her of deceiving him about her religion. When accused by the Sultan of causing their child's deformity, she does not deny it, nor does she respond by accusing him and him alone; rather, she suggests a shared responsibility for the situation.

It's worth mentioning that according to medieval theories of conception, the father supplies the *anima*, or capacity for reason and higher order thinking and being, whereas the mother contributes nothing but *materia*, or shapeless matter, like a lump of clay that the father's seed then shapes into a fully formed human being. This is what female imagination and immorality can corrupt during pregnancy, and in this case, the princess utilizes her ability to disrupt and “corrupt” the father's *anima*: she's spent her time praying—a form of imaginative thought—that Christ will shield her child from shame. The way her prayer is answered is unexpected, but it presents an opportunity: the princess suggests a test of faith on the spot. Since they both made the child, they will pray to their gods in turn, and whoever's religion can turn the child into a human being is the winner, the prize being the conversion of the spouse. As the lump child's mother, the princess becomes an active agent in the forcing of the trial of faith, rather than a passive player who takes advantage of a chance opportunity, and this is where the princess demonstrates her greatest exercise of personal agency: in her ability to produce a monstrous birth in order to protect her son from the dangers of a heathen faith.

As you might expect from an English romance, Christianity wins; once the lump is baptized, it becomes a beautiful baby boy. And when the Sultan marvels at the child they made

together, she cuts him off from his paternity completely, telling him he will have no part in the child or in her until he, too, is baptized. Just as when she proposes the test of faith, the princess's denial of the Sultan's place in her now Christian family is immediate; she once more recognizes an opportunity for transformative power that suits God's purposes and acts on it, so that the Sultan's own baptism becomes a duplicate of his son's: father and child both are spiritually transformed, and this change is marked by profound physical transformation, as the Sultan's skin changes from black to white. As a pregnant mother, the princess is fully empowered, essentially saving an entire kingdom and restoring the succession of the Sultan's line. The princess must be somewhat responsible for the lump-child's deformed birth, based on the active role she has played in using prayer as a means to focus her female imagination in such a way that she can insist on her son's baptism and, by extension, his physical and spiritual transformation once he is born. This allows the poet, in a rare instance, to portray the power of female imagination in a positive light, and to celebrate her use of this power as the mother of an infant who will one day rule over his kingdom.

But this isn't really power as dominion or force; she doesn't really have power *over* anyone. And this is where the rest of what Miller has to say comes into play: she defines *transformative power* as the capacity to produce a change. When you say it out loud and really think about it, it's practically obvious—of *course* that's a powerful thing to do. But Miller's essential point is that we don't think of this as a kind of power; it's something we take for granted as just part of what women do every day, the kind of thing that women tend to be self-conscious about acknowledging. Psychologists Andrea O'Reilly and Marie Porter build on Miller's concept, seeing transformative power "in terms of agency—the power to make a difference...When women," they argue, "act as they have acted in their nurturing, whether that is

mothering or other forms of nurturing, they exercise power to alter present circumstances; they are active agents.” This kind of transformative power is, according to O’Reilly and Porter, “power that does not totally control,” which runs counter to our expectations of what power is supposed to be. Power is supposed to rule, not gently change the course of whatever it comes into contact with. But think about what it means to nurture something. To raise a child from infancy to maturity, guiding it to be an independent adult. To take the germ of an idea—for a story, a painting, an experiment—and see it through to its full development, releasing that creation to the world, where its impact will ripple out invisibly with unknown consequences. Supporting a friend in need, and nurturing them back to spiritual wholeness. All of these may seem small, but think about the word *transformative*. You’re literally taking something and remaking it, and if that’s not powerful, I don’t know what is.

One more story, which speaks to the impact of the transformative, nurturing power of a woman. This time it’s *not* a tale of the Christian West, because I believe this kind of power is global, and just as important in every culture. I’m betting most of you are familiar with the *Alf Layla wa Layla*,” which translates from the Arabic as “The Thousand Nights and a Night,” and may be better known as *The Arabian Nights*, famous as a frame narrative, or story within a story. But it’s the frame itself I want to talk about. King Shahrayar, after catching his wife in the middle of an orgy when she thinks he’s out hunting, decides that he and his brother King Shahzaman—whose wife is *also* having an affair with their kitchen slave—must be the most unfortunate people alive, and that woman is the root of all their suffering and pain. So, after killing his wife, Shahrayar decrees that he will marry another woman, sleep with her for a single night, behead her, and repeat the process ad nauseum until there aren’t any women left. This slaughter goes on for a while, until the vizier’s daughter, the well-read, well-educated Shahrazad

devises a plan. She insists her father—who is responsible for choosing the King's nightly brides—give her to Shahrayar as his wife. He does so—not without protest—and as they are about to go to sleep, Shahrazad sighs and declares it's such a shame she is to die in the morning because she has a strange and amazing tale she could tell. Curiosity piqued, Shahrayar asks her to begin, and she speaks, weaving a story she cannot complete before dawn. Desperate to know how it ends, Shahrayar decides to let her live another night, so he can hear the rest. This pattern continues for a thousand and one nights. For roughly two years and nine months, Shahrazad spins tale after tale, all interwoven, captivating the king's attention and prolonging her own life. But she doesn't just tell stories, she works around a set of themes: there are women who are malicious and harm their husbands...but there are also foolish husbands who harm their wives. There are men who are good and wise...and there are women who aid them, who help them to be better people and rulers. As the nights progress, King Shahrayar actually on occasion is moved to pity for the characters in the story; he is re-learning empathy through Shahrazad's fictions. Until finally, at the end of everything, Shahrazad asks him a boon: she has, over the course of the nights, borne him three sons, and she begs that her life be spared so she can raise them. Shahrayar agrees immediately, thus ending his purge for good, and living out his days as a just and wise ruler, with Shahrazad at his side.

Shahrazad does more than save her own neck by telling a lot of good stories and knowing how to set up a good cliffhanger. The entire thousand and one nights she's talking, Shahrayar isn't beheading any other women—that's a thousand and one women's *lives* she's spared, and when she finishes, she's saved every woman in the kingdom from death. Simply by talking, by nurturing her own creativity, and by using that nurture to in turn nurture her husband back to a place of wisdom and mercy, Shahrazad completely changes the king's heart and saves

the entire kingdom from ruin. And it is important to note she has no control over her fate until the very end—she ends each night with a variant of, “How much stranger the tale I can tell, if I am allowed to live,” because she knows, at any point, King Shahrayar can simply decide enough is enough, command her to stop stringing him along and finish the story, and behead her.

Shahrazad is perhaps transformative power at its finest: it does not seek to control, it adapts to fit the needs of the circumstances, and it slowly takes the king, who retains absolute authority, from a state of misogyny to compassion, all because she is careful to “nourish the thunderworld of poetics,” truly a remarkable feat.

The literary scholar Tara Williams, writing about how womanhood was “invented” in the literature of medieval England, says that “motherhood offers a clearer (and less threatening) model for women’s access to power,” some of which comes from “the acceptance of maternal nurturing as a power dynamic not only within earthly families but also between spiritual ‘parents’ and ‘children.’” My own work focuses exclusively on motherhood and power as it relates to mothers and sons in Middle English romance, but Williams opens that field up to any kind of nurturing relationship, and other scholars do examine the ways in which the community of women “mother” one another. This nurturing connection across a community of women can be just as powerful as a parent-child relationship; sometimes even more, since it’s a relationship that’s actively chosen. Psychologist and poet Clarissa Pinkola Estés believes that “relationships with *todas las madres* the many mothers...are kinship relationships of the most important kind,” and she’s not wrong. Nor is this kind of power irrelevant today. We are living at a point in history where women have come *so far*...and yet I suspect many of us feel there is still *so far* to go. We can vote and even hold political power in office...and yet we struggle with wage inequality. We are much freer to express our sexuality...and yet we still need the #MeToo

movement and fight tirelessly against victim blaming. We can have families *and* careers, or both, or neither...and yet a woman breastfeeding in public is shamed. And yet in some institutions, having children can give employers pause, because a family means a woman might not give her full dedication to her job. And yet, we *still* have to fight for the basic right to make decisions about our own bodies. In the Middle Ages—and stretching all the way back to antiquity, as medieval minds built on the words of Aristotle and Galen—it was considered fact that men were the more rational, intellectual gender, whereas women were more carnal, emotional, and mercurial. In fact—and I quote Aristotle here—it was believed that “we should look upon the female state as being as if it were a deformity, though one which h occurs in the ordinary course of nature.” A necessary deformity, a malformed male that doesn’t quite reach the ideal standard. We’ve moved past that definition...and yet it still casts a long shadow over Western culture that’s hard to entirely shake off.

And yet, and yet, and yet. Every advance seems to have an equivalent roadblock. It can sometimes feel like there’s nothing we can do. And don’t get me wrong—I love men. Two of my favorite people in this world are men, though granted, one of them is still only four. So I’m not here to advocate for misandry of *any* kind—it’s counterproductive. Men make up half of the population too, and we need them as much as they need us. And there are plenty of men who *do* believe in equality and fairness—I’m willing to bet every man in this room feels that way. And that’s important, because it takes everyone, male and female, to really bring about change.

This week, two things happened. One is that a female historian called out the sexist remarks of a male colleague, who said something along the lines of he probably wouldn’t be asked to be on television again unless he was an “ugly woman.” But she thanked him for the comment, because it reminded her of something important. Men have done remarkable things in

the field of history, she said, and they continue to do so, and their voices are just as important as ever. But history, she argued, also needs *female* voices, looking at the same events from the perspective of the women involved, and it takes those voices—of women, of people of color, of any marginalized community—to really create a full and complete picture of civilization and culture. I think this is true for any field: we need *all* voices, nurturing their creativity, to really get a full perspective, because every voice has something to say that's worth listening to.

The second thing is this: for those who don't know, I'm a big Amanda Palmer fan. Recently, she collaborated with Jasmine Power, a Welsh singer/songwriter, and the two of them released a song they unapologetically called "Mr. Weinstein Will See You Now." And this week, they shot the video for it, with a cast of dozens of women. The video won't be released for another month or so, but Amanda sent everyone who worked on it a thank you message that she shared with her mailing list. It was a long email, but it spoke directly to the kind of transformative power of women that I believe is so critical. She said, "We can never underestimate the power of making something that isn't 'direct action,'" that we don't know what kind of ripples we make in the lives of those we touch. Or how powerful those ripples can be. She went on to say, several paragraphs later, "when women tell their truths, support each other, LISTEN to each other, HEAR each other, give each other strength and space...this has been our female super-power since the dawn of time." So I say, whatever we may feel about the way things are in our culture, whenever we feel we're more powerless than we'd like, we need to remember this super-power. We need to listen to each other, to hear each other, to give each other strength and support and space. To create and nurture. Because when we do, we're more powerful than we could ever know.