

# The Metaphysical Basis of the Difference between Men and Women

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*Trinitarian love is the basis of the male-female distinction. This makes drama the mediating analogy between anthropology and theology. The 'drama' of the intratrinitarian relations need not be conceived melodramatically, as relationships of power and submission, since persons are not only fallen but also redeemed. Unlike melodramatic characters, who are either victims or villains, characters in tragic and comic drama are many-sided, just as there are many ways of being male and female. A tragedy like King Lear provides an analogy for what masculinity and femaleness might be like within God; Lear is a father who wills to become vulnerable.*

I plan to argue that the way in which the persons of the Trinity are related to one another is the metaphysical basis of the difference between men and women.<sup>1</sup> This may sound like a crazy idea. There are at least three strong reasons for avoiding the notion that mutual sex differentiation reflects the way in which the persons of the Trinity evoke one another's personhood. A first problem is that treating man-woman distinctions as reflecting the reciprocity of the persons of the Trinity seems to require us to link one divine person to what is 'masculine' and another divine person to what is 'feminine.' For instance, Hans von Balthasar asks whether, since Christ "proceeds eternally from the eternal Father," he is "at least quasi-feminine vis-à-vis the latter?"<sup>2</sup> An objection to this query has been raised by the English Catholic theologian Gerard Loughlin. Loughlin does not disparage the sexual analogy as such, but complains that von Balthasar's Trinitarian view is *hetero-sexist*. Loughlin writes that it "may be that only when theology makes the same-sex couple its paradigm of sexual difference, it will be able to think sexual difference not in crudely biologicistic terms, as in so much of Balthasar, but in more properly theological ones."<sup>3</sup> If we "start from the paradigm of the homosexual couple," Loughlin thinks, we will not be "burdened by the power asymmetries that have infected the heterosexual relationship from at least Aristotle onward."<sup>4</sup> Those who do not favour the same-sex paradigm could add that Loughlin's argument shows why it is a disastrous manoeuvre to establish human sexual difference by reference to an analogy to 'sexual' difference in God. Any suggestion of sexuality in God seems to open the door for *any* kind of sexual interplay within God.

Loughlin considers that von Balthasar's position is founded in "ancient, pagan biology."<sup>5</sup> In pre-Christian pagan literature, there are gods and goddess, and they have plenty of sex. Homer's *Iliad* gives us a splendid image of Zeus and Hera making love on a pink

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<sup>1</sup> Originally delivered at the Metaphysics Colloquium at Saint Anselm College (Manchester, NH) in June 2006, this paper has been revised for online publication. I would like to thank Agnes Curry Saint for her especially helpful queries, which helped me to reflect on certain ambiguities in the original text. I am very grateful to the organisers, Dr. Kevin McMahon and Fr. John Fortin, for inviting me and thus enabling me to think about these matters for the first time.

<sup>2</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama. Theological Dramatic Theory III. Dramatis Personae: Personae in Christ*, translated by Graham Harrison, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988-1998, p. 283.

<sup>3</sup> Gerard Loughlin, "Sexing the Trinity," *New Blackfriars* (January, 1998), Vol 79, No 923, pp. 18-25, p. 25.

<sup>4</sup> Gerard Loughlin, *Alien Sex: The Body and Desire in Cinema and Theology*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2004, pp. 160-161.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 156.

cloud. Nowhere in Scripture do we find anything like this in relation to Father and Son. Scripture pictures Christ and his Church as ‘groom’ and ‘bride’, but it does not present Father and Son like that! Ephesians and the book of Revelation describe *the Church* as the Bride of Christ. A second objector can ask, “Why complicate matters by adding to this a non-Scriptural analogy to sex-differentiation in the persons of the Trinity?”

One might think the defender of a *metaphysical* basis for human sexual difference should apply to metaphysical categories, such as categories of actuality and potentiality, which Aristotle himself used to explain that men are the more ‘actual’ of the two, women the more ‘potential.’ Both Augustine and Thomas Aquinas appear to believe that the male is the perfect image of God, and that although woman is in the image of God, she is slightly less so than the male, because less actively rational. We can all see the problem with this. But a third objector might wonder whether privileging the marital relationship is any more inclusive. Francis Martin speaks of “the reciprocal relationship between man and wife” as the “exemplar and source of other relationships.”<sup>6</sup> If marriage is exemplary or normative, there’s a lot of involuntary abnormality about: although the moral theologians have Hollywood’s blessing, more people are unmarried than either acknowledges. For instance, Adam, the young son of my next-door office neighbour, has Downs Syndrome and could never marry. It is impossible for him to form a marital union let alone belong to a religious community. I have known young women whose Christlike beauty of character is outshone by their facial disfigurements, in the eyes of visually directed males. If the couple is the perfect *imago Trinitatis*, anyone who can’t say ‘me Jane’ or ‘me Tarzan’ is an imperfect image of the Trinity. It should be obvious that *any* theological anthropology which excludes or devalues a large portion of the human race is defective.

Despite such telling criticisms, sexual difference enters into the definition of the divine image given in the Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatis* (1988). The Letter links Genesis 1.27: “God created man in his own image ... male and female he created them” to Genesis 2.18: “man cannot exist ‘alone’” (cf. Gen 2.18). This means, John Paul says, that:

...he can exist only as a ‘unity of the two’, and therefore *in relation to another human person*. It is a question here of a mutual relationship: man to woman and woman to man. Being a person in the image and likeness of God thus also involves existing in ... relation to the other ‘I’. This is a prelude to the ... self-revelation of the Triune God: a living unity in the communion of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. ... *God ... is the unity of the Trinity: unity in communion. ... The fact that man ‘created as man and woman’ is the image of God means not only that each of them individually is like God, as a rational and free being. It also means that man and woman, created as a ‘unity of the two’ in their common humanity, are called to live in a communion of love, and in this way to mirror in the world the communion of love that is in God, through which the Three Persons love each other in the intimate mystery of the one divine life. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit ... exist as persons*

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<sup>6</sup> Fr. Francis Martin, “The New Feminism: Biblical Foundations and Some Lines of Development,” in *Women in Christ: Toward a New Feminism*, edited by Michele M. Schumacher, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2004, p. 168.

through the inscrutable divine relationship. Only in this way can we understand the truth that God in himself is love (cf. 1 Jn. 4.16). *The image and likeness of God in man*, created as man and woman (in the analogy ... between Creator and creature), thus also expresses the ‘unity of the two’ in a common humanity. This ‘unity of the two’, which is a sign of interpersonal communion, *shows that the creation of man* is also marked by a certain likeness to the divine communion (*communio*).<sup>7</sup>

We have to read these remarks very carefully in order to avoid the error of the defender of sexual ‘essentialism’ who asked us to “look ... at our fellow mammals to see what we are. The stallions, the dogs, the bulls, the tomcats, ... haven’t been ‘conditioned’ by Daddy saying, ‘Grow up to be a real bull, lad!’ – but that’s the way they *do* grow up: the fighting bulls.” Sheldon Vanauken contrasted the “great war horses,” the “stallion” who “fights, ... is the hunter,” and “protects his females and the young” with “the patient cows, the gentle mares so safe to ride, the often-ladylike bitches: they take care of the young.”<sup>8</sup> This simultaneously makes animals actors in a moral drama of which they know nothing and demoralizes the human kingdom. The impersonal analogy on which it builds is pre-moral. A mare could not make sense of the complaint of the discarded middle-aged wife in Tom Wolfe’s *A Man in Full* that young women today are “boys with breasts.” To the mare, the stallion is precisely a stronger version of herself with semen, just as, to the stallion, a mare is a weakling with a scabbard. Writers such as Prudence Allen have pointed out that the philosophy of human sexuality in *Mulieris Dignitatis* is not a genetic or biological determinism.<sup>9</sup> The definition of the divine image in *Mulieris Dignitatis* is a conscious development of the classical account of the divine image which referred the image to Boethius’ definition of the person as “an individual substance of a rational nature.” A Boethian rational nature is a free nature. Human beings have to *choose* how, whether, and to what extent to appropriate the biological givens, or genetic programming. And yet, once freedom and thus morality enter our image of the human, sex differentiation seems to become a construct, a choice.

In this paper, I will consider femininity and masculinity through the lens of certain plays by William Shakespeare and John Webster. I do not ask you to reflect on these plays in order to give some additional *examples* of what ethical behaviour might be like, or to illustrate it, or otherwise to *decorate* what might be a dry metaphysical disquisition. The literary or aesthetic images belong to the substance of the argument. All dieters remember Hamlet wishing that “this too, too solid flesh would melt”: the flesh never melts from a character who is aesthetically imagined. Masculinity and femininity are factors of human life of which we are aesthetically or sensitively aware. The discussion of *plays* like *King Lear* gives the concrete basis for what we shall argue. Because they are *dramas*, they create a context for what we mean by words like ‘freedom’ and choice. Or, to put it another way, the dramatic analogy entails perceiving free choices as taking place within a *context*, the context of a flesh and blood character responding to a situation and to the actions and voices of the

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<sup>7</sup> John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatis*, # 2 and 6.

<sup>8</sup> Sheldon Vanauken, *Under the Mercy*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1985, p. 210.

<sup>9</sup> Prudence Allen R.S.M., “Philosophy of Relation in John Paul II’s New Feminism,” in *Women in Christ: Toward a New Feminism*, edited by Michele M. Schumacher, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2004.

other actors. Because it is linked to *beauty*, which is perceived first by the senses, an aesthetic analogy solidifies or concretises. Building on this, the dramatic analogy gives a concrete or specific context. When something is contextualized, it is related to its surroundings; when freedom is contextualized, it is related to the address of another person, a person as solidly real as oneself. Noting that von Balthasar "...t[ook] this insight as his point of departure," Joseph Ratzinger commented that "True knowledge is being struck by the arrow of beauty that wounds man: being struck by reality, 'by the personal presence of Christ himself.'"<sup>10</sup> Thus, for von Balthasar, "All biblical ethics is based on the call of the personal God and man's believing response." He rejects the idea that people who live after the Christ event can draw ethical norms from "cosmic laws": "Once the biblical fact has come into view, on the free initiative of God," he writes, "man is raised to a freedom that can no longer take its pattern of behavior from subhuman nature."<sup>11</sup> A lot depends on the precise quality of our contextualization of divine and human freedom.

Historically, once people began to contextualize the biological factors in the horizon of personal and thus ethical decision, they began to conceive being a man or a woman as acting within a role, a role enacted in relation to other actors. Moralizing the practice of role-play has been popular amongst Christian writers since the sixteenth century, when preachers gave such titles to their tracts as *The Theatre of God's Judgements* by Thomas Beard. For such early modern writers, the constructor of the ethical frame of the *Theatrum Mundi* is God. Thomas Beard's 1597 tract is subtitled "concerning the admirable Judgement of God upon the transgressors of his commandments."<sup>12</sup> Puritan sermonizers depicted the drama of human life as a drama of sin and punishment. Shakespeare's *King Lear* may be ironizing them when he says, "I'll preach to thee – Mark! ... When we are born we cry that we are come / To this great stage of fools."<sup>13</sup> Seeking to demonstrate that "you may see the first action of the tragedye of the lyfe of humanes," Pierre Boaistuau asked with what the baby is clothed when he enters this world, and answers, "Only with bloud, in which he is bathed and covered, which is nothing else than the Image and figure of sinne." Boaistuau declares that "at the root of all transgression is woman." So it is not surprising that, in this era, "female transgression has an important relation to tragedy" in that "femininity is punished with what [Sir Philip] Sidney called 'sweet violence.'"<sup>14</sup>

When God is conceived as an actor in the drama of salvation history, one may, as Luther did, replace "chilly juridical term[s]" like "retributive justice" with the more theatrical notion of God's Wrath, as the "enemy from which Christ delivers us."<sup>15</sup> This picture is in some respects a step forward from an impersonal schema. "That which in Luther

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<sup>10</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *On the Way to Jesus Christ*, translated by Michael J. Miller, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005 [German 2004], p. 36.

<sup>11</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Nine Propositions on Christian Ethics," in Heinz Schurmann, Joseph Ratzinger and Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Principles of Christian Morality*, translated by Graham Harrison, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986, pp. 89 and 101.

<sup>12</sup> Cited in Dymphna Callaghan, *Women and Gender in Renaissance Tragedy: A Study of King Lear, The Duchess Of Malfi and The White Devil*, New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989, p. 51.

<sup>13</sup> Shakespeare, *King Lear*, IV.6.181-183.

<sup>14</sup> Boaistuau, *Theatrum Mundi* 51-52, cited in Callaghan, *Women and Gender in Renaissance Tragedy*, pp. 52-53 and 55; Callaghan, p. 50.

<sup>15</sup> Gustaf Aulen, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement*, translated by A.G. Herbert, first published 1931, London: SPCK, 1970, pp. 113-114.

makes all else bearable,” Ratzinger observed, is that “the religious center” of his thought is “the call to forgiveness.”<sup>16</sup> Because he takes the fall of human beings into sin seriously, Luther takes historicity and personality into account.

Nonetheless, his atonement theory has been said by a fellow Lutheran to exhibit, an antinomy, a conflict, between the Divine curse, the Wrath, and the Divine blessing, the Love. The wrath is the Wrath of God; yet it is the blessing that represents His inmost nature. ... *even at this point* the dualistic outlook is maintained. ... the fact that the Wrath is overcome means not at all that it is ... only a pretended wrath, or that it ceases to exist; rather, through the Atonement it is *aufgehoben*, transcended in the Hegelian sense – ... it remains latent in and behind the Divine Love, and forms the background of the work which Love fulfils.<sup>17</sup>

The theatricals presented here are inner-divine: neither Mary’s consent to the Incarnation nor Christ’s human free will make their way into Luther’s picture of atonement. He “represents Christ’s sin-bearing ... as purely passive in the dramatic process: it is the bait that is ‘swallowed’” by the Leviathan of the “evil powers.”<sup>18</sup>

We do not improve on such one-sidedness by readjusting it to include a metaphysical understanding of nature in which *all* value resides in actuality, and in which no permanent value is attributed to ‘passivity.’ If potentiality is simply weakness, it remains difficult to understand the drama of the atonement as a two-sided affair in which grace really is passed on to nature, to the human nature of Christ, and to his Mother and to the Church.

In his *Commentary on Galatians*, in which he pictures Christ as obeying the Father’s command to become the ‘arch-sinner,’ Luther is trying to catch hold of the truth that the Incarnation is a self-emptying, or *kenosis*, for God. But he does not fully capture the paradox of Philippians 2.6-11, that emptying is a source of elation, energy and elevation. Because his role is to be immolated in the fire of the Father’s Wrath, Luther’s Christ suffers alone. The great dramatist of forgiveness, William Shakespeare, makes Edgar in *King Lear* speak of a mitigating companionship in suffering:

When we our betters see bearing our woes  
We scarcely think our miseries our foes.  
Who alone suffers, suffers most i’ the mind.  
Leaving free things and happy shows behind;  
But then the mind much sufferance doth o’erskip  
When grief hath mates, and bearing fellowship.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology*, first published in German in 1982, translated by Sister Mary Frances McCarthy, S.N.D. Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1987, p. 263.

<sup>17</sup> Aulen, *Christus Victor*, pp. 114-115.

<sup>18</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama. Theological Dramatic Theory, IV: The Action*, translated by Graham Harrison, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988-1998, pp. 286-287.

<sup>19</sup> Shakespeare, *King Lear*, III.6 100-107.

It seems helpful to take forethought for the atonement in our anthropology. One would then say that man–woman differences reflect a “fellowship” between the persons of the Trinity, which is revealed to us in the history of fall and redemption.

If it’s true that human beings are made in the image of the Trinitarian relations, then Feuerbach was not entirely wrong to think that our idea of God is a *projection* of human nature: it’s just that we think about God well or badly depending on the extent to which our idea of God is conditioned by our fallenness. A fallen human being will imagine the Trinitarian communion and human relations in a distorted way. In its fallen state, the image of God is distorted by *animist* projections of the self. Animism accounts for belief in God by the hyperactivity of the human imagination: we tend to posit *agency* in everything, from clouds to dead bodies. Animals can posit *agency* or the “intentional stance” in others, but this is just the ability to use them as prey, predators or mates. Humans not only regard others as agents with intentions, but also can adopt complex role games requiring them to have beliefs about each other’s beliefs. Daniel Dennett has recently revived the animist theory by arguing that this hyper-sensitivity to other persons’ intentions is evidence of a human “God gene.” He proposes that a superfluity of a protein that enables persons to be hypnotized by shamans would be excellent “health insurance” in a primitive society without Medicare.<sup>20</sup> In the situation Dennett describes, the role player’s responsiveness to the primitive doctor is a way of getting the shaman to discharge his healing power into himself. It’s an exchange of power.

Dennett’s materialist anthropology is a realistic view of the fallen human self. The Anglican Bishop Butler remarked that, “The thing to be lamented is, not that men have so great regard to their own good or interest in the present world, for they have not enough; but *that they have so little regard to the good of others.*” Mary Midgley quotes this observation in the course of putting original sin in an evolutionary perspective: she describes human wickedness as a cessation of our normal, human ability to balance many motivations and values, and a reversion to the animal’s condition of “emotional tunnel vision.”<sup>21</sup> The fallen human self reverts to an animal, and animist, condition. A single-minded determination to survive is a-moral in animals, but a mark of original sin in free human persons. The concentration of opposed agents in a single character trait produces an entertaining spectacle, whether a dinosaur versus King Kong or Nate versus David in *Six Feet Under*.

Human beings carry the divine image and a fallen self-image, both the image of the right use of freedom in respect of the other person and the distortion of freedom into absolute autonomy. If human beings really are created in the image of the Trinity as relational beings, they are also fallen and thus gripped by the image of *themselves*: “since every man is entangled in the consequences of original sin, ... his natural desire for God (*desiderium naturale*) is weakened by a negative desire to be-for-itself.”<sup>22</sup> The desire to allow the other his or her freedom is undercut by the desire to control and overpower the other person. Each person is created in a divine image which is *evocative* of other persons. The image of God is

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<sup>20</sup> Daniel C. Dennett, *Breaking The Spell: Religion As A Natural Phenomenon*, New York: Viking, 2006, p. 140.

<sup>21</sup> Mary Midgley, *Wickedness: A Philosophical Essay*, London: Routledge, Kegan Paul, 1984, pp. 189-190 and 183.

<sup>22</sup> Von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama IV*, p. 189.

complete in each person, but its function is that of *evoking* humanity in others. The divine image is a sensor for otherness, responding to the differentness of the other person: an evoker and protector of this other person's independence. Each human being wants to make a right use of its own freedom by respecting the other in his or her own freedom, and thus to see God's freedom reflected in the other person. But, simultaneously, in its reversion to single-mindedness, it wills the submission of the other to itself and denies that his or her differentness from me is good.<sup>23</sup> Due to original sin, human nature is in a tragic situation, divided between the natural desire to respect the other's differentness from itself and the fallen desire to dominate and absorb the other into itself – to be God.

For this reason, tragedy has often been about a lost "justice," which can only be restored through a death, and comedy has depicted an imbalance or disorder righted by grace. Paul Fiddes has recently argued that *King Lear* regards

...humankind as reduced to nothing *in itself*. Lear's conclusion, 'None does offend' is a riddling way of affirming that 'all have sinned' ... this 'nothing' must be recognized in all its destructiveness before salvation can come. Lear is ... wrong that 'nothing can come of nothing.' Humanity is reduced to nothingness in judgement as a prelude to justification by grace through faith alone, and not by human actions.<sup>24</sup>

Here's where the question of how we imagine divine and human freedom stands in need of careful qualification. The tragedy of *King Lear* is certainly marked by "embattled opposites."<sup>25</sup> Where human relationships are conceived solely in terms of *power*, the theatre of human roles becomes a "reciprocal opposition of symmetrical forces" where we "constantly meet the words 'power' and 'violence,' never the word 'justice' and it is assumed "that the justice for which men long is nothing but power in disguise," the "dramatic tension between the world and God is so overstretched that the link breaks, rendering impossible a drama that involves the two sides."<sup>26</sup> Once we snap the elastic of freedom, we have, not tragedy, but melodrama. Paul Fiddes might have found a more apt parallel with Luther's atonement theory in Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*. Webster's play is about the slow mental and physical destruction of the eponymous heroine by her two brothers. Robert Heilman found the Duchess to be a "monopathically innocent" victim in a black world which must inevitably immolate her:

Lear has made his world in a way that the Duchess has not. As Webster presents evil in the two brothers, it is autonomous – a human analogue of the force of nature...that destroys blindly.... The President of the United States is empowered to designate as 'disaster areas' parts of the country that have undergone heavy accidental damage.... Similarly in the moral realm we find

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<sup>23</sup> Midgley, *Wickedness*, p. 175.

<sup>24</sup> Paul S. Fiddes, *The Promised End: Eschatology in Theology and Literature*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2000, p. 72.

<sup>25</sup> Helen Gardner, *King Lear*, London: Athlone, 1967, p. 2.

<sup>26</sup> Von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama IV*, pp. 301 and 309.

disaster areas, areas in which evil forces overwhelm and destroy. The world in which the Duchess of Malfi lives is such a disaster area.<sup>27</sup>

Luther's Christ is a victim who is both entirely innocent and fully blameworthy since he has 'become sin' on our behalf. His Christ is thus a sort of 'twin,' somewhat as Webster's heroine is literally the twin of the villain Ferdinand.<sup>28</sup> Luther favoured that colourful image of the Incarnation story which treats it as a divine deception, intended to trick the devil in the way that a fisherman tricks a fish with a fly-bait: "Christ sticks in his gills, and he must spue Him out again ... and even as he chews Him the devil chokes himself and is slain, and is taken captive by Christ."<sup>29</sup> The Duchess of Malfi compares herself to a Fish: "Our value never can be truly known", she says, "Till in the Fisher's basket we be shown / I'th Market then my price be the higher / Even when I am nearest to the Cook, and fire / So, to great men, the moral may be stretched. / *Men oft are valued high, when th' are most wretch'd.*"<sup>30</sup>

Webster's play occurs in a domain in which hell is other people. Jean Paul Sartre was setting his anthropology in a melodramatic disaster area when he argued that "The true limit of my freedom lies purely and simply in the very fact that an Other apprehends me as the Other-as-object ... This limit to my freedom is...posited by the Other's pure and simple existence – that is, by the *fact* that my transcendence exists for a transcendence."<sup>31</sup> Sartrean anthropology works in a movie because, as Simone Weil said, "imaginary evil is romantic and varied, while real evil is gloomy, monotonous, barren, boring." The *personae* of melodrama are "theatrical rather than dramatic" because, like Midgley's fallen humans, they suffer no "conflict of motives," but are undividedly and obsessively set on a single goal.<sup>32</sup>

In terms of bums on seats, and indeed in terms of influence on our aesthetic image of the world, it is Webster rather than Shakespeare who has had the long-term success. Melodrama became the foremost imaginative medium of the modern world – most cinematic portrayals of male-female relations are not precisely tragic or comic, but melodramatic. Whether in pessimistic or optimistic mode, the plot vehicle is a combat between the opposed forces of masculinity and femininity. Simone de Beauvoir suggests a parallel melodramatization of man-woman relations when she writes that "what peculiarly signalizes the situation of woman is that she – a free and autonomous being like all human creatures – nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the Other."<sup>33</sup>

The lead character of the forerunner of modern melodrama is a *heroine*, and, of course, women have good reason to complain of victimization: we would not enjoy good soap operas if they did not reflect the fallen world as we know it. If one applies this to

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<sup>27</sup> Robert Bechtold Heilman, *Tragedy and Melodrama: Versions of Experience*, University of Washington Press: Seattle and London, 1968, pp. 63-64.

<sup>28</sup> John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, IV.1, 262.

<sup>29</sup> Luther, cited in Aulen, *Christus Victor*, p. 104.

<sup>30</sup> Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, III.5, 135-140.

<sup>31</sup> Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, cited in Sr. Prudence Allen, R.S.M., "Can Feminism Be A Humanism?" in Schumacher, ed. *Women in Christ: Toward a New Feminism*, pp. 269-270.

<sup>32</sup> Heilman, *Tragedy and Melodrama*, pp. 65 and 67.

<sup>33</sup> Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*, cited in Allen, "Can Feminism be a Humanism?," p. 270.



Trinitarian theology without considering how fallenness affects one's line of vision, it is natural to picture the Father as the dominant male, the Son as the subservient female. This happened, within Western theology, because Reformers like Luther recognized that atonement theory requires one to impart some sort of 'passivity' to the persons of the Trinity, but the means of doing so which they inherited from the Catholic, Augustinian and Thomistic tradition was not fully adequate to the task. Seeking to personalize this tradition, but still going from visual, empirical observation of male-female relations, Luther 'feminizes' the Son and 'masculinizes' the Father. The result is Christ as the Duchess of Malfi.

Literal observation is inclined to make the Son the female of a pair and the Father the male. One must therefore be cautious about the tendency to ascribe the 'feminine' role to any one person of the Trinity. Rather, one should suggest that there is something analogous to the gift of love binding man and woman in *all* of the Trinitarian relations: in certain relations, the Son must be conceived as feminine in relation to the Father, but in others one must see the Father as feminine in relation to the Son, and so forth. This is what von Balthasar says:

...the divine unity of action and consent ...is expressed in the world in the duality of sexes. In Trinitarian terms ... the Father, who begets him who is without origin, appears primarily as (super-) masculine; the Son, in consenting, appears initially as (super-) feminine, but in the act (together with the Father) of breathing forth the Spirit, he is (super-) feminine. There is even something (super-) feminine about the Father, too, since...in the act of begetting and breathing forth he allows himself to be determined by the Persons who thus proceed from him; however, this does not affect his primacy in the order of the Trinity.<sup>34</sup>

This Trinitarian grounding of sexual difference is *theological* in the sense that it comes back to revealed givens: it advertently offers no answer at all to questions such as Gerard Loughlin's "Why Father?" Nor does it imagine that anything could count as *proof* in responding to Loughlin's puzzlement over why "the Father's primary act" should "be considered supermasculine rather than superfeminine," that is, "Why not think donation suprafeminine and reception supramasculine?"<sup>35</sup> Nothing could count as evidence for those who ask a question without a context. Without a dramatic context, the freedom which Boethius ascribed to human nature has no other to which to respond and is merely self-invention. Within the theo-dramatic context, "Man may continue to be called a 'rational animal,' but only on condition that we acknowledge that the full idea of *ratio* can unfold only within the free venture of love." Within this context, that is, "freedom cannot be explained at the level of mere reason but only at the level of love."<sup>36</sup> Those who propose a Trinitarian grounding of sexual differentiation are trying to dive from the revelation of the Trinity deeper into human experience and metaphysics, and thus to pull out something which is *recognizable*: that freedom is not self-assertion, it is making a *gift* of oneself to the other so

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<sup>34</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama. Theological Dramatic Theory*, V, translated by Graham Harrison, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998, p. 91.

<sup>35</sup> Loughlin, *Alien Sex*, p. 158.

<sup>36</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Bernanos: An Ecclesial Existence*, translated by Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, San Francisco: Ignatius, 1996, pp. 225 and 223.

that he or she can become a person. My gift cannot be given unless the other receives it. The existence of other persons entails that actualising *my* self, by addressing them, is putting myself into a posture of waiting, a posture of dependency. The name for this act is love.

The statement of this case requires, not that metaphysics prescind from “pagan biology,” but that it considers biological reality from the even more realist perspective of belief in human fallenness and redemption. Von Balthasar puts the case for re-thinking the metaphysical metaphors like this:

Wherever the self tries to prescind from its rootedness in God and establish its own autonomy, it is attempting to consolidate its freedom; it is attempting to seize power. And so long as God appears primarily in the form of power – omnipotence – the self can use this as an excuse ... to set itself up, likewise, as a ‘power’ over against God. ... is it not an image of God? What is needed is ...the insight that God may disclose and give himself, thus transcending the notion that freedom means power; true freedom is thus seen in self-giving.<sup>37</sup>

It takes Trinitarian revelation for us to see that, in personal relations, actuality and potentiality reverse their roles, for actuality and freedom put one into a passive relation to the other person. But the words and the experiences are there in the common currency: we have some intuition of what a gift is, or what it means to *address* another and await a response, and we may even have a hunch that passivity, even the passivity of death, has its own strength. If the idea of the potency of silence and passivity were outside our affective vocabulary, Lear holding the lifeless body of Cordelia would not touch our humanity as it does. “Love and be silent,” Cordelia has said to herself at the outset of the play and “in her absence from herself becomes the thing itself, in which the perfect speech of love is her dead body, uttered without breath.”<sup>38</sup> This scene rights our fallen values by dramatizing the fact that our natural, imaged, desire to be with and for the other person is *love*.

How can the Trinitarian revelation both be an (unexpected) *revelation* and yet speak to the common currency of our *humanity*? Have we not said that, according to von Balthasar, pagan “*theo-cosmological ethics collapses when the biblical fact attains resonance in world history*”? Von Balthasar means by this not that with the advent of Christ humans cease to be physical creatures inhabiting male and female physiognomies, humans who are indwelt by physical laws, but that we can no longer take their biological differences as the register or measure of our different callings. Rather, we must now take our different callings by God as the register of their biological differences. This Swiss theologian explicitly disavows the suggestion that this entails imposing an “‘ethics from above’” on our physical natures, which henceforward carry no ethical meaning. For Christ, who is now the sole “norm” of Christian ethics, himself became fully and thus physically *human*: “Since faith’s content – namely, Jesus Christ, the revealer of a love that is triune and divine – has adopted both the form and the guilt of the First Adam, as well as the constrictions, perplexities and crises of the latter’s existence, the Christian is in no danger of failing to find the First Adam, and hence his own

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<sup>37</sup> Von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama IV*, p. 147.

<sup>38</sup> Glenn Arbery, “King Lear and the Space of Ritual,” in Glenn Arbery, ed., *The Tragic Abyss*, Dallas: Dallas Institute Publications, 2003, p. 244.

ethical problems, in the Second.”<sup>39</sup> Here again, we see why taking the aesthetic analogy of drama to understand the meaning of God’s call upon our human freedom is not merely a decoration, but indispensable to the meaning of the metaphysical notion of man-woman difference. The physically determinate existence of each man and woman is determined by the call which God intends to make upon it. For example, God made Mary a woman because he intended to make her the Mother of Jesus Christ. Every man and woman is called in a unique way by God and yet as recognizably, naturally male or female. The dramatic analogy helps us to see how the unique call from God and the generalizations which biology can make about male-female differences are related. All of Shakespeare’s women are recognizably female and yet, in the very different dramatic situations to which they must respond, all of Shakespeare’s women – Portia, Cordelia, Lady Macbeth, Ophelia, Goneril, Regan – are unique. Shakespeare made Cordelia a woman so that she could play the role of a daughter in *King Lear*. The dramatic analogy enables us to appreciate with both precision and flexibility the way in which a distinct physical *embodiment* of a calling is required by a character’s embodying a distinct *calling*. The dramatic analogy takes up, on the one hand, concrete or aesthetic sense perception, and thus Hamlet is a prince, not a princess, and, on the other hand, it takes up the varieties of human freedom, with its particular “constrictions, perplexities and crises,” and thus Hamlet is sufficiently on the left of the male spectrum to have been played by Sarah Bernhardt. There is something humanly appropriate in any of Shakespeare’s male characters playing the guy role; and yet, of course, Othello is nothing like Macbeth. Because Christ’s own mission includes the whole Adam (and Eve) of human nature, the Trinitarian love illuminates our aesthetic perception of men and women in their sexual similarity and personal uniqueness, and enables those of us who can, like Shakespeare, to articulate them in terms which touch ordinary human hearts.

The theology of Augustine and Aquinas conceived Trinitarian love as a form of pure activity. This seems to exclude any *dependency*, such as the dependent relation in which we place ourselves when we offer another a *gift* and await her response. Of course Thomas acknowledges that the atonement is an event of divine love and that it “turns God’s hand.” For Thomas, “Christ’s passion ...is ...the event *whereby* God’s anger is turned away from the sinner, even if ...from before all time, God has already specified Christ’s Passion and satisfaction as the means whereby this is to be brought about.” Thomas brings the two poles of the paradox (...that God is untouchable and yet can be touched by some earthly event) toward each other: God’s eternal love appoints that the work of love shall achieve reconciliation, for “*mors Christi virtutem satisfaciendi habuit ex caritate ipsius qua voluntarie mortem sustinuit ...the whole emphasis lies on the freedom of the divine love.*”<sup>40</sup> Since the Reformation era, it has become imaginatively necessary to deepen what is already latent in Thomas, so that love as the evocation of a distinct other can be visible as the basis of atonement. Perhaps Shakespeare was the first to recognize this and, in addition to the psychological and political settings for the character of King Lear, one should conceive a theological symbolism in Lear’s personae. Shakespeare’s contemporaries like the Puritan Thomas Beard spoke of the hiddenness of God and sermonized on human life as the theatre of God’s judgement. Placing his drama “in a world outside Christendom”,<sup>41</sup> Shakespeare

<sup>39</sup> Von Balthasar, “Nine Propositions,” pp. 101, 82 and 77.

<sup>40</sup> Von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama IV*, 265, citing Thomas Aquinas, *S.C.G. IV*, 55, resp 22-23.

<sup>41</sup> Gardner, *King Lear*, p. 7.

acknowledges more profoundly the spiritual desolation of a world stripped of analogies running from peasant to King to God. If *King Lear* envisages resident aliens in a polity in which political power does not protect good persons, are these “unaccommodated” characters an image of a God unshielded by might? A first turning point in the play occurs when Lear recognizes that he has rendered himself impotent, powerless. Goneril and Regan are in collusion against him and can refuse him his hundred knights. Regan says, “I pray you father, being weak, seem so.”<sup>42</sup> Is this an image of the Father’s eternal decision to give away his love in his Son?

If, conversely, all relations are bi-polar power-relations, the “other drama,” which must necessarily be “suppressed” is the drama between man and woman.<sup>43</sup> Helen Gardner remarks that “what we honour and what moves us in *Lear* is his vulnerability.” Gardner envisaged the penultimate gesture of the play, in which Lear holds the dead Cordelia in his arms, as a “Secular Pieta.”<sup>44</sup> In the *Pieta* scene, it is a *woman* who holds the dead Christ. A dramatic exchange has taken place here: the all-powerful God has handed the accomplishment of his task over to a woman. Omnipotent strength has made itself reliant on another. Christ has done this

from the first act of his earthly life, for initially every child is entrusted, defenceless, to its mother’s hands. It has to let itself be clothed, carried, fed and looked after. Similarly, those who are dying no longer have control over themselves; they must let others look after them – if indeed there *is* someone to care for them. And the Son of God...freely entered into this condition of dependence when he became incarnate. It is on this basis that, as he goes along his path of suffering, he can allow the Church control over him and his sacrifice.... In his Passion...he is sustained by the consent of the feminine Church, suffering with him.... Christ is entrusted to the hands of Mary at birth and at his death: this is more central than his being given into the hands of the Church in her official, public aspect. It is from this archetypal Yes that the faith ... of the other members of the Church is nourished.<sup>45</sup>

If atonement for sin is *both* an exchange of personae in which Christ receives humanity, humanity his deity, *and* a substitution accepted by the Father, then it is two dramas, a drama within God and an economic drama. *King Lear* is unique among tragedies in telling two stories, the Cordelia-Lear story and the Edgar-Gloucester story. It is Edgar, rather than Cordelia, who uses deceptive disguise. It is Edgar the surrogate *Son* who mortally wounds the fiendish Edmund in a ritual combat whose theological provenance I have already discussed. In comedies, disguise is a device for putting on energy. But one hesitates to suggest that Shakespeare found the disguised and “hunted Edgar” any more *amusing* than the current plight of England’s Jesuits.<sup>46</sup> Nonetheless, *King Lear* stands out among tragedies in allowing comedy to penetrate the “heart of the play.” When Lear’s companion quits “the

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<sup>42</sup> Shakespeare, *King Lear*, II.4 196.

<sup>43</sup> Von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama IV*, p. 290.

<sup>44</sup> Gardner, *King Lear*, pp. 22 and 28.

<sup>45</sup> Von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama IV*, pp. 396-398.

<sup>46</sup> Gerard Kilroy, *Edmund Campion: Memory and Transcription*, London: Ashgate, 2005, p. 27.

scene to leave Lear to unite in his own person the King and the Fool and to hold the Great Assize upon humanity, where all are forgiven,” Lear declares:

None does offend, none – I say none; I’ll able’em.  
Take that of me, my friend, who have the power  
To seal th’accuser’s lips.

Helen Gardner is “never certain how far a full response to this great scene on the stage should include a kind of shocked laughter.”<sup>47</sup>

In the economy of salvation, the work of the *Son* culminates in the passion, an act dramatically conceived as tragedy. Salvation history does not end here: in the economy, the work of the Holy Spirit is the gift of grace to the Church. The vocation of the Church, under the impetus and uplift of grace, can be conceived as a divine comedy. If we isolate the *justification*-tragedy of the passion, it veers into melodrama, because it is set apart from the sanctifying gifts of the Spirit. When Christ is conceived as victim in relation to an angry, masculine Deity, the relation between Son and Father is eroticized whilst losing its erotic or loving character. Melodrama concerns an “erotic” struggle, a loveless battle to the death in which one or the other partner must be sublated or absorbed into the other. With the uncoupling of the passion from the gifts of grace, the gift of the Holy Spirit is no longer generated by the atonement. If we hold justification and sanctification together, tragedy and comedy retain their bond, and comedy or grace<sup>48</sup> have the last word without ever eliminating tragedy.

If a ‘masculine-feminine’ difference within the Trinity is the *metaphysical* basis of human male-female differences, the *metaphysical* substratum at stake is *love*. *Love* is a relation between two lovers, drawn to each other by their difference in similarity. This duality achieves a chemical purity of eroticism whilst losing its profound erotic nature when it is taken as “pure coupledness.” Here we have the absolutization of the “pair” and the suppression of the Third, who is the “bond of love,” the Holy Spirit. This view of sexual difference is not a ‘binitarian’ position, but a Trinitarian one. Von Balthasar puts *love* at the basis of everything divine and creaturely which looks like sexual difference. This is to put the Holy Spirit, the bond of love, as the shaping gesture of the Trinity.

We began by discussing theologians who object to the *hetero*-sexualization of the Trinity and those who think a ‘gay Trinity’ is a *reductio ad absurdum* of any sexualization of God. The idea we have presented turns on *love* as an evocation of another person who is different from oneself: it turns on communion as the gift and fruit of love, not on biological coupling. But it is not sufficiently prim to put theological love and mere biology in a zero-sum relation: the energy of divine love is the fertile principle of every creaturely budding, from that of stamens and pistons, stallions and mares, to human men and women.

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<sup>47</sup> Gardner, *King Lear*, p. 10.

<sup>48</sup> Von Balthasar explicitly treats comedy as the analogy for grace or God’s graciousness in *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theology II. The Dramatis Personae: Man in God*, translated by Graham Harrison, San Francisco: Ignatius, 1990, pp. 83-84.

Loughlin claims that von Balthasar “has imagined the incestuous pederastic coupling of Father and Son.”<sup>49</sup> Our second objection to a Trinitarian grounding of human sexual differentiation was that it seems to be unscriptural, in that Zeus and Hero make out in the *Iliad*, but nothing like that can be detected in the canonical Christian Scriptures. One might reply that, just as there is less sexual differentiation among animals than among free human beings, and the Homeric gods seem to have stunning sex lives, so the perfection of the principle of differentiation is what God is – love. Physical love-making looks as it does in the *Iliad* because divine *love* is an elated self-giving: the unitary being of the Trinity. Creaturely love-making is a consequence of the unitary love which is God, and not vice-versa. As von Balthasar puts it, “The very fact of the *Trinity* forbids us to project any secular sexuality into the Godhead.” The “activity and fruitfulness” of the Trinity is “the transcendent origin of what we see realized in the world of creation: the form and actualization of love and its fruitfulness in sexuality.”<sup>50</sup> Hence, I John 4.16, “God is love,” is sufficient Scriptural basis for our analogy.

The third and most serious problem which we posed against the paradigm was that the romantic exaltation of “coupledom” excludes unmarried persons, like my colleague’s Down Syndrome son. But in fact, we are not talking about a Hollywood male-female duo: we are speaking of a Trinity which does not just tack on a third as an added extra, but is made what it is, made a true “couple,” by that Third. Every person, single or married, is a child within a family. Nor is the “perpetual child” a tag-along extra, who defectively images the Trinity. He or she doesn’t just make some positive, additional contribution: the ‘Third’ is the making of the “Two,” as the uniting bond between them.

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<sup>49</sup> Loughlin, *Alien Sex*, p. 158.

<sup>50</sup> Von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama V*, p. 91, my italics.