

Stealing Lot's Wife and Daughters from the Bible: A  
Response to Rozmarin's 'Staying Alive'

Introduction

I very much welcome the appearance of Rozmarin's essay, which offers a fascinating feminist re-telling of the Biblical story of Lot's wife. I am in sympathy with Rozmarin's premises that we need to re-write the cultural scripts that frame lived mother-daughter relationships and that we need to do so by re-reading and re-appropriating inherited stories of mothers and daughters. I was immediately intrigued by Rozmarin's choice of the story of Lot's wife and daughters for her re-reading and re-appropriation - intrigued because on the face of it this tale is a distinctly unpromising source for any feminist re-appropriation, and in particular for the particular kind of re-appropriation that Rozmarin seeks.

Rozmarin wishes to steal the figure of Lot's wife, turned into a pillar of salt because she looks back at the sinful city of Sodom that she, Lot, and their daughters are fleeing. Rozmarin's aim is to elicit ways that Lot's wife refuses to comply with the injunction that we must commit psychical matricide, the transmission of which is arguably at the kernel of Western culture. The injunction is stated by Kristeva amongst others: 'For man and for woman the loss of the mother is a biological

and psychic necessity, the first step on the way to autonomy. Matricide is our vital necessity, the *sine qua non* of our individuation' (Kristeva 1989, p. 38). Whether it is really an invariant psychical necessity for everyone that they should make this kind of sharp and violent mental and emotional break from their mothers, and from the entire field of the maternal, has recently been contested by several feminist theorists (see, e.g., Jacobs 2007, Stone 2012). But these theorists accept that in fact Western culture has treated matricide as necessary, with real lived consequences for all of its inhabitants. The resulting feminist project is to work towards creating cultural change, change in which we would cease to treat matricide as being necessary, and instead be guided by cultural models of positive relations with one's maternal origins.

It is in the context of this project of creating cultural change that Rozmarin returns to Lot's wife. Yet she is killed, whilst her daughters and husband escape to continue their lives without her. That is the kernel of Lot's wife's story, and to that extent it is difficult to re-read her figure as one that is anti-matricidal. Of course, it is not the case that Lot's daughters literally kill his wife; she is killed by God, either as punishment or as a side-effect of his destruction of Sodom. Despite that, we can see the text as specifying that Lot's wife

must be killed for her daughters to become mothers themselves and take up their own places in culture, as they subsequently do. Thus a matricidal message is in effect conveyed, where it is through similarly indirect and figurative means that the injunction to commit matricide is most often transmitted overall - it is relatively rare for it to receive the sort of explicit prescriptive formulation that it receives from Kristeva.

With all this said, I think that Rozmarin does a powerful job of recovering positive meanings from this ostensibly bleak tale, unearthing anti-matricidal possibilities in the tale beyond the matricidal injunction that it manifestly communicates. In my response I want, first, I want to fill in some more of what I take to be the intellectual background to and rationale for Rozmarin's anti-matricidal project. Then, second, I will pursue some further possibilities of alternative meanings contained in the figures of Lot's wife and daughters, inspired by but not wholly convergent with the paths followed by Rozmarin. In that light I will conclude by circling back to broader questions concerning the feminist project of stealing female figures from texts of the patriarchal tradition.

#### 1. Matricidal History and Cultural Re-Reading

Rozmarin is explicit that her project is informed and

guided by Luce Irigaray's critique of the erasure of mother-daughter genealogies that Irigaray identifies as a structural feature of Western culture(s). This is so not only in that descent and the transmission of property have generally passed through the male line but also in a psychical sense that our culture destines women to have acute difficulties in situating themselves psychically vis-à-vis their mothers. These difficulties arise because becoming a self, in Western culture, has been taken to require a break from the background of maternal bodily care in which people have their beginnings (it having been the social norm for mothers to be the principal givers of that care).<sup>1</sup> Yet if one is to assume a female identity, one cannot break from that maternal background, because one needs to identify with one's own mother to assume a female identity - since it is through that identification that the basis of a female identity is established. Thus the dilemma is as follows: One can either be a non-female self or, if one is to be female, a non-self or non-subject, in which case woman 'submits to being objectified by discourse - insofar as she is "female"' (Irigaray 1985a, p. 133).

To be sure, these claims about 'Western culture' and its effects on the female psyche are highly generalised. In this connection Rozmarin raises important questions about how we can combine an Irigarayan-type critical

perspective on 'Western culture's' preclusion of female subjectivity with attention to the intersectionality of different forms of oppression and power relations. The fact of these intersections suggests that there can be no single uniform way in which female subjectivity is denied or impeded: if cultural scripts mediate the difficulties of becoming a woman, and different power relations and oppressive systems shape these mediations, then it seems that the opposition between subjectivity and femininity cannot take the single shape that Irigaray critiques. Or are there merely many different variations on one universal pattern of opposition? So I suspect Irigaray would say. I also believe that she is wrong, although I cannot fully examine this question here.

I have previously argued, though, that the meanings of matricide and the self have changed fundamentally over the course of Western history (Stone 2011). In the classical world, as presented above all by the *Oresteia*, matricide was taken to be necessary for one to become a self in the sense of a full participant in the community of the *polis*. In the Judaeo-Christian tradition, as established above all by the texts of the Old and New Testament, matricide is necessary for becoming a self *qua* full participant in the spiritual community united under God. In modernity, matricide is instead taken to be necessary if one is to become an autonomous individual

subject, the author and architect of the meaning of one's experience and of the normative authority of the values and meanings to which one commits oneself. Furthermore, the classical and modern worlds and the Judaeo-Christian traditions all contain many diverse strands; it is only in their dominant strands that they uphold versions of matricide. Saying this does not address intersecting power relations, but it does suggest a starting-point for treating matricide as taking a plurality of historical forms, not one single invariant form.

Returning to Irigaray's analysis of women's relations with their mothers and with the maternal, women face the options of either repudiating or remaining identified with them. But in the latter case a woman has no means of adequately differentiating herself from her mother or from the field of maternal corporeality, because to differentiate herself she would have to carry out the mental processes by which one establishes difference between oneself and the other (i.e. the maternal background). The only available script to guide such processes, though, is that of repudiating this background, which one cannot do if one is remain identified with it. This is not to say that women take one or the other alternative (repudiation or mergence). Generally, women combine both; but this is not a happy combination but an uncomfortable straddling of two

incompatible alternatives, involving a painful splitting of the self.

In sum, from Irigaray's perspective, the problem is that Western culture (or cultures) allow no female subject-position - that 'any theory of the "subject" will have always been appropriated as "masculine"' (Irigaray 1985a, p. 133). And this is entwined with the problem that mother-daughter relationships are in irresolvable tension. Thus, Irigaray concludes,

When I speak of the relation to the mother, I mean that, in our patriarchal culture, the daughter is absolutely unable to resolve her relation to her mother. Nor can the woman resolve her relation to maternity, unless she reduces herself to it. ... [Under this cultural script] there is no difference between being a mother and being a woman, ... there is no articulation to be made, by the woman, between these two desires of hers. (Irigaray 1985b, p. 143)

Irigaray insists that patriarchal culture (or cultures) need to change in directions that would permit daughters to differentiate themselves psychically from their mothers whilst remaining female, and so whilst retaining a form of identification with their mothers and with the maternal which nonetheless permits differentiation. One of the necessary conditions of

possibility of this scenario, Irigaray believes, is new cultural mediations, new scripts that would help us to imagine and conceive of the possibility of our differentiating ourselves from our mothers while continuing to identify with them. But it is not a question of dreaming up new stories that are quite unlike anything we have known before. Inevitably, new cultural mediations must be produced by re-working and re-writing the existing ones - otherwise we will only invent the wheel, trying to imagine things wholly unlike the past whilst actually re-creating the past unknowingly.

Accordingly Irigaray returns to the ancient Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone, also mentioning the relationship of Mary to her mother Anne (Irigaray 1994: 89-112).

It is Adriana Cavarero who most fully develops the kind of practice of re-reading the past for which Irigaray's work calls. In her book *In Spite of Plato*, Cavarero recasts a series of female figures from the classical world: Penelope, for example, the *Odyssey's* model of the faithful wife, awaiting her husband's return and preserving her loyalty by endlessly undoing the weaving that she has completed each day so as to retain her pretext for deferring her suitors. So Penelope seems to preserve Odysseus's patriarchal power over his domain, his house and lands, which she keeps waiting for him. And yet, as Cavarero beautifully writes,



Homeric memory has tried, of course, to load the figure of Penelope with [patriarchal] ... attributions. ... But the figure as such - as material for myth - has a certain malleability with respect to these interpretive intentions. Penelope has a symbolic power of her own that is open to different readings. Thus Homer's sketch disseminates possibilities for other possible hermeneutical trajectories. These are clues for a female symbolic order that has its own rhythms and spaces, that seeks its *figures* by stealing them from a context that has dealt with them otherwise. (Cavarero 1995, p. 13)

The strategy, then, is one of theft - as Cixous also proposed (1989, p. 97). Cavarero steals Penelope from Homer, suggesting that through her daily repeated weaving and unweaving she creates a slowed-down temporality quite unlike the linear time of history in which patriarchal power struggles take place. Penelope staves off any wedding; at the same time, she staves off the return of Odysseus himself. Revealingly, she does not recognise Odysseus when he finally arrives, insists on having proofs of his identity, and, it seems, does not want to recognise him. Thus, it was not that Penelope staved off her suitors to preserve Odysseus's dominion; rather, she was staving off the patriarchal regime and its

temporality altogether, including the time when Odysseus would return and restore her to her subordinate place in his household.

## 2. Lot's Wife and Daughters

I take it that this practice of stealing female figures from the places they are allotted within the very patriarchal texts that refer to them provides inspiration for Rozmarin's essay. One obvious candidate for theft from the Bible is the story of Ruth and her mother-in-law Naomi, notably the anti-matricidal lines in which Ruth declares to Naomi (who admittedly is Ruth's mother by marriage, not birth):

Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God: Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the Lord do so to me, and more also, if aught but death part thee and me. (Ruth 1: 16-17)<sup>2</sup>

Rozmarin turns instead to the ostensibly bleak tale of Lot's wife in Genesis 19, bleak because the position assigned Lot's wife seems so clearly fixed by patriarchy. We never learn her name, nor those of her daughters, their identities being entirely defined by their relations to Lot; and where Lot's wife deviates from this

constraint by looking back when Lot does not, she is turned to salt (Genesis 19: 26). Moreover, her story is entirely framed within that of Lot - the essentials of which are these. A righteous man, Lot is warned by two angels that the city of Sodom where he and his family live is imminently to be destroyed by God, in punishment for its inhabitants' sins. Lot and family are hastened by the angels to safety, but during their flight Lot's wife looks back and is turned to a pillar of salt. The moral? Most straightforwardly: 'Do not retain any lingering longing for the sinful people amongst whom you've been living, but leave them steadfastly behind on your journey towards righteousness'.

What are the sins of the Sodomites for which Lot's wife retains this note of longing? In received common-sense their sin is to permit sex between men, 'sodomy'. Although Genesis 19 leaves this unstated, that received meaning gets support from Jude 7, which says that the Sodomites 'gave themselves over to fornication, and went after strange flesh'. Rozmarin, however, suggests that the Sodomites were hostile and close-minded towards strangers. Yet further details of Lot's story suggest that the Sodomites' sins at least included acceptance of sex between men - and these details diminish the story's savour even further from a feminist perspective. When the angels visit Lot, men of Sodom ranging from young to old

clamour to 'know' them (Genesis 19: 5). Lot tries to dissuade these men by offering them his two virgin daughters to 'do to them as is good in their eyes' - the men's eyes, that is (Genesis 19: 8). By implication, then, it was actually sex that the men wanted of the angels, hence Lot's attempt to dissuade them by offering them the chance to have sex with his daughters instead. Lot shows himself here to be an emblematic patriarch who considers sex between men - or perhaps between men and angels - more sinful than the gang-rape of his own daughters.

By this point, the Biblical text has introduced the first of a succession of inconsistent references to Lot's daughters. According to Genesis 19:14 Lot has two sons-in-law who have both married daughters of his - sons-in-law whom Lot warns, to no avail, to leave the city. Then Lot flees, with his wife and two daughters (Genesis 19:15, 19:16). So are the daughters married or not? Do they escape from Sodom or not? One solution, adopted by Rozmarin, is to take Lot to have four daughters, two married and abandoned to destruction with their husbands, and two unmarried, who escape.

Later, these two escaped daughters have taken refuge in a cave with Lot, and they agree with one another to get Lot drunk on successive nights and have intercourse with him so as to become pregnant. What are their

motivations? They say that there is no other man available to them; they also say, each in succession, that they want to 'preserve [the] seed of [their] father' (Genesis 19: 32 and 34). They seem to accomplish this goal, bearing sons through whom Abraham's line continues.

This textual material is the basis of Rozmarin's ingenious re-reading. The punishment meted out to Lot's wife is extremely harsh, especially when Lot too had delayed the departure from Sodom and had to be hastened out by the angels. Admittedly, I'm assuming that Lot's wife's petrification is a punishment and not merely the effect of the conflagration spreading to her, as if to someone looking at a nuclear explosion. Even in that case, her death remains the side-effect of the prohibition on bodies circulating outside of patrilineal and patriarchal terms, which the Sodomites have sinfully failed to observe. Rozmarin points out, though, that in her fate Lot's wife embodies the paradox of witnessing. To bear witness to a catastrophe one must participate in it and so be consumed by it; but then one is no longer there to bear witness. If on the other hand one survives, then one is at enough distance from the catastrophe that one can no longer truly witness to its full extent. Lot's wife, though, turned to a pillar of salt, witnesses the destruction of Sodom as she looks back at it, *and* is consumed in doing so, caught up in this destruction of

all life. Yet she remains a witness nonetheless - becoming a monument that, like a gravestone, records and serves as a reminder of the fate of Sodom and its people; made of salt, a symbol of fidelity and preservation (as when used to preserve food). She 'solves' the paradox, or rather embodies both horns of the dilemma of witnessing at once by becoming a non-living witness; she thereby bears faithful witness, by succumbing fully to the fate of the Sodomites.

Furthermore, Rozmarin proposes, Lot's wife looks back in regret - at leaving behind her married daughters, her home, her city. She looks back because she cannot simply discard without a backward glance the ties that have bound her, the relationships she has maintained over time. She retains a level of fidelity, again, this time to her past. She is unable simply to repudiate her background, which would be a matricidal gesture. It would obey the law: 'Commit matricide in order to join the spiritual community of those united under God'. But it would also obey a further law embedded in the first: 'Do not mourn, regret, or grieve for the lost maternal body, for it was worthless, you have lost nothing'.

Because she cannot commit matricide Lot's wife ends up destroyed, consumed. Hence, her story appears to convey very starkly the cultural requirement of matricide. The alternative, if one insists on being

faithful to one's maternal past, is to suffer death by petrification, by turning to salt - which is barren and unfruitful, has no future, no line of descent: the message being that the maternal body may reproduce only under the aegis of patriarchal transmission. What other imperatives we take the story to convey depends on what we take Sodom's sins to consist in. Given that townspeople gather at Lot's house wanting to 'know' the angels, one interpretation is that within Sodom bodies and pleasures are permitted to circulate outside the hetero-patriarchal framework that Lot seeks to re-enforce by offering his daughters to the crowd. Perhaps it's this ill-defined possibility of pleasures that exceed the patriarchal framework towards which Lot's wife looks back in longing.

Turning to Lot's daughters, let me explore some senses in which they resist the imperative to commit matricide, again somewhat divergent from those unearthed by Rozmarin but building on the openings that she has created. For Rozmarin, the mother's act of witnessing and remaining faithful to the past and loss is an ethical gesture that enables her daughters to create a positive genealogical relation. The mother's backward look testified to the value of life that she recognised in feeling, not shutting herself off from, the sorrow and loss of Sodom's life being destroyed. The daughters take

up their mother's testimony by recognising and valuing life, which they do so at a bodily level, in creating new life for themselves, directly, in pregnancy and birth.

Now, according to the King James rendition, the daughters want to continue their father's line - the ur-patriarchal line, descending from Abraham. Leaving behind the barren place to which their mother was consigned, the daughters bear fruit, by attaching themselves to the father's line and not the mother's body. But even if this is what the daughters want to accomplish, it can hardly be said that the daughters succeed unequivocally in carrying on the paternal line, for their sons by their father are also their brothers. Rather like Oedipus and Antigone, at least as Judith Butler re-interprets them in *Antigone's Claim* (2000), the daughters end up with confused, crossed kin relations. The patriarchal line has been interrupted, broken, in that Lot was poised to have no sons or sons-in-law; then the line has been stitched up again, but imperfectly so, for he gains two sons who are at once his grandsons, in whom his line of descent is muddied. The story of Lot's daughters thus exposes the imperfections of the patriline - its failure seamlessly to pass goods from origin to destination in an unbroken transmission, and its interruption by gaps, breaks, and multiplications.



Besides, the text actually suggests that the daughters have other motivations than that of perpetuating the paternal line. Where the King James Version says that they wish to 'preserve [the] seed of [their father]', a more literal translation of the original - *U'Nechayeh meiavinu zera* - is that they wish to 'give life to [Nechayeh] offspring [Zera] through [their] father' (Me'avinu - 'from our father') (Genesis 19: 32, this phrase being repeated by the other sister at 34).<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the sisters explicitly claim to do this because there are no other men available. This implies that their overriding aim is simply to bear children - or to give life, as Rozmarin has it - rather than to transmit their father's lineage.

Perhaps, then, in setting out to have children, the sisters are trying to find a replacement for their two siblings who have died in Sodom. Alternatively, by becoming a mother each sister comes to stand to the other one as a replacement for their lost mother - so that what they re-create is not so much the father's line as the mother's body. This is so in two ways. First, in that the two sisters agree together to get pregnant by their father; they mirror one another in words and deeds, and once pregnant they can in looking at one another find in the other's body a reflection of their own motherhood. Second, the daughters become *de facto* mothers to one

another through the kinship relations that their reproductive acts have scrambled. In that each of them is coupled with the father, she occupies the position vis-à-vis her sibling that their mother formerly held. The sisters come to stand as mothers to one another in lineage as well as body.

Through this strategy the daughters re-create maternal bodies that are fruitful, not turned to salt; alive, not dead; the maternal body has been re-animated, where God's imperatives had sought to destroy it and render it barren. To some extent, this re-animation is permitted because the daughters' reproductive functionings now serve the transmission of Lot's paternal line (even if this is not their explicit intention). But to the extent that that line is also scrambled, the maternal body is operating outside of service of patriarchy, creating life and potentials for descent on independent terms.

However, there is also a less hopeful interpretive possibility. Namely, that each sister has taken their mother's place, fulfilling the fantasy at the heart of the female Oedipus complex, namely that of killing the mother and taking her place as the father's lover. Evidently, this complex is bound up with a fantasy of matricide, yet at the same time it involves the daughter's and mother's identities being merged, as in

Irigaray's diagnosis. Their identities are conflated to the point that the daughter can take up a female position within intersubjective relationships only by taking her mother's position and, in so doing, violently ousting her mother from it.

However, in Genesis 19 the two daughters have agreed each in succession, under identical words, to have children by their father. They make a pact to share their father, and so, implicitly, that each of them will share him with their mother, assuming that to each of them the other sister stands in the mother's position insofar as she couples with their father. The agreement, then, is that the sisters will not kill their mother - or one another - in murderous rivalry but will co-exist alongside one another. In making this pact the sisters diverge from the divine law that turns their mother to salt, instituting an alternative script. This importance of there being two daughters, mirrors of one another, is reflected in the text's ambiguities about how many daughters Lot has. Not only do the two daughters speak and act alike, but there is also the further pair of two daughters, where it is unclear whether they are the same as the first pair or not: a doubling of a doubling, making the motif of mirroring highly salient. Perhaps, then, the daughters succeed in enacting a relationship of identification *and* difference, not only with each other

but also with their mother as they remember and imagine her.

### 3. Engaging with the Past

These have only been suggestions, possible ways of unravelling and re-weaving the strands of the Biblical text, following lines opened up by Rozmarin. But finally I want to come back to the unpropitious character of the episode of Lot's wife from the perspective of re-scripting mother-daughter relations. Despite all that Rozmarin has said, and the further intra-textual seeds of hope that she prompts us to explore, there remains an obstacle in the way of finding a model here of living, loving mother-daughter relationships. This is the fact that Lot's wife is killed and her daughters left to go on without her, and to copulate with their father in their mother's absence. To this extent matricide *is* carried out, symbolically and psychically. Lot's daughters are at best endeavouring to re-create, through their relationship with one another, a liveable relationship with their mother - but only as they remember and imagine her after her death, not as an actual flesh-and-blood mother who remained amongst them.

Yet in this very respect the situation of Lot's daughters arguably parallels that of women generally to the extent that we inhabit cultures that insist upon the

necessity of matricide, psychically speaking. Insofar as we have each carried out a psychical act of matricide to become subjects, but then wish to challenge this paradigm of subjecthood, we have to re-weave a positive relation with our mothers and with the maternal where our culture has interdicted this. That said, I suspect that we never do fully act upon the cultural injunction to commit matricide, and that our subjectivity is always formed in more positive relations with our mothers and with the others who give us quasi-maternal care. Even so, the broader injunction to commit matricide remains, being carried and conveyed by many facets of our cultures. Insofar as we cannot avoid negotiating that injunction, even if we do so by resisting or failing to act upon it, our predicaments retain affinities with those of Lot's daughters. And, like them, we stand in need of new cultural mediations.

More than this, perhaps there is positive value in the very fact that the story to which Rozmarin turns *is* unpropitious from the point of view of opposing matricide. After all, we cannot create new cultural mediations by dreaming them up entirely *ex nihilo* - this is impossible and so only liable to lead to the unintended re-invention of the wheel. We are more likely to create cultural mediations that offer something genuinely new by engaging *with* figures and stories of the

patriarchal past whilst endeavouring to uncover in these figures possibilities that run against the very meanings that the patriarchal texts assign them. Inevitably, then, in looking for new figures of positive mother-daughter connections we need to revisit older matricidal stories and find alternative possibilities within them. Or as Rozmarin puts it, 'The cultural resources that women have for creating non-matricidal relations are driven from these [existing, inherited cultural] components and their cultural excess'. But because those components under their earlier meanings are matricidal, our re-castings and re-readings will always carry traces of those meanings. We cannot craft something wholly and unambiguously positive out of a negative past; some of the negativity will remain within any new positivity. Furthermore, to try to leap out of this past and its negative meanings entirely would be to succumb to a matricidal fantasy: the fantasy of leaving one's origins behind, breaking apart from this shaping background into one's own totally separate and autonomous identity.

Interestingly, this is the very fantasy in which Lot's wife is unwilling or unable to indulge when she looks back at the past that has shaped her and to which she has been attached. In re-reading and tarrying with the patriarchal past, then, we come full circle and remember Lot's wife. We do so by re-enacting her gesture:

that of looking backwards, remaining connected to our backgrounds and resisting the symbolic law that commands us to break from those backgrounds absolutely.

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<sup>1</sup> Irigaray never makes it clear whether she thinks that mothers provide bodily care for young children by virtue of social norms - the gender division of labour - or by virtue of biology, or some mixture of the two. In contrast some other feminist theorists, such as Chodorow (1978), hold that it is now entirely a result of social norms that mothers are the principal child-carers,



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although in early periods biology played more of a causal role. Either way, insofar as mothers' child-caring role is at least partly a consequence of social norms, those norms obtain in tandem with the cultural imperative that we commit matricide in order to become selves. For given this imperative, becoming a self involves repudiating the background of maternal bodily care; therefore providing this care for others and re-immersing oneself in this maternal field is devalued, seen as undesirable. Rather than the powerful seeking to share in caring for young children, then, they will always be motivated to push off this responsibility onto those who are less powerful, and in particular onto women or the least powerful women, since women can never fully escape the devalued maternal realm anyway.

<sup>2</sup> All passages from the Bible are cited according to the King James Version.

<sup>3</sup> My thanks to Gordon Brandt for clarifying this to me, informed by the Artscroll translation.