

BLESSED IS SHE: GENDER CRITIQUE THROUGH PERFORMATIVITY AND
PORTRAYALS OF THE DIVINE IN NAOMI ALDERMAN'S *THE POWER*

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Blessed Is She: Gender Critique Through Performativity and Portrayals of
the Divine in Naomi Alderman's *The Power*

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ABSTRACT

Naomi Alderman's 2016 novel *The Power* details the events that occur after women develop the ability to produce an electrical current throughout their bodies. This new physical power allows a matriarchal power structure to take the place of a patriarchy. Judith Butler's theories regarding pastiche and drag help conceptualize Alderman's portrayal of gender. Alderman essentializes gender roles but switches our common conception of them—in *The Power*, women are authoritative and violent, and men are submissive and passive. The discussion of gender performativity transitions into a discussion of gender in religious power structures. The character Allie employs ritual performativity to gain power in a manner that mimics Jesus Christ's performativity in the gospel stories. I discuss the importance of male religious figures in the formation of the patriarchy, and I draw on feminist theological writing to describe the impact of Allie's theological teachings, which name God as feminine.

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INTRODUCTION

Science fiction is not predictive; it is descriptive.

-Ursula K. Le Guin, Introduction to *The Left Hand of Darkness* (xiv)

In her 2016 novel *The Power*, Naomi Alderman crafts a story that identifies the different types of power structures that influence society and sexism. The fourth novel to come from Alderman, *The Power* details the events that occur after women develop a “skein,” a muscle in their chest that allows them to produce an electrical current throughout their bodies. The novel details the confusion and chaos that results after this electrical power emerges. Ultimately, women gain political and social power, and at the end of the novel a matriarchal power structure has taken the place of a patriarchy. Each of the major characters represents a different aspect of power in the novel and gender’s relationship to power structures. Roxy is the daughter of a drug lord and eventually takes on the same role for herself, employing a host of women to distribute a drug that enhances women’s use of their electrical and physical power. Margot is the mayor of a city in the United States who uses the panic inspired by the power to build a military camp where girls are taught to harness their powers for defense. This entrepreneurial production allows Margo enough authority to work her way up to the Senate. Tunde, the only main male character, is a journalist who reports on (and eventually experiences) men’s lessening status throughout the world. Finally, Allie serves as a religious reformer who is largely responsible for women’s acquisition of religious power and the implementation of language for God shifting from masculine to feminine. All in all, while many of these changes seem to be positive, *The Power* describes a cruel world in which women are often more violent than they are kind and men quickly disappear from positions of power.

In an interview for the *New York Times*, Ruth La Ferla asks Alderman about the “gratuitous” “menace and violence perpetrated by women” in the novel. Alderman responds by noting the events of World War II— “for me, the larger question about the Holocaust is not, How do you avoid being a victim? It is, How do you avoid being a Nazi? [...] If you and I lived in a world where women were dominant, would you be telling yourself: This is very unjust; I will fight for the rights of men?” In the same interview, Alderman says, “you have to ask, are women better than men? They’re not. People are people. You don’t have to think that all men are horrible to know there are some men who abuse their strength. Why wouldn’t the same hold true for women? There is a small minority of sadists in the world who muck it up for the rest of us” (La Fera). This interview identifies that Alderman recognizes the great power to be found in political and social systems— “I behave the way the system teaches me to behave,” Alderman states (La Ferla). This is perhaps the greatest theme throughout the novel—power corrupts, no matter who it is wielded by. At the heart of Alderman’s novel is the idea that men and women are not so different—both genders have the capacity to be corrupted by the allure of power.

This theme makes Alderman’s novel fascinating. In his review, Ron Charles calls *The Power* an “electric satire” (“you should read it wearing insulated gloves”). Indeed, the role reversal (women in power, men subjugated) is often tongue in cheek, a satire so absurd one has no choice but to reflect on sexism in society. In this paper, Chapter One investigates the overall presentation of gender in *The Power*. Judith Butler’s theories regarding pastiche and drag helps conceptualize how Alderman portrays gender throughout the book. Alderman essentializes gender and gender roles but switches our common conception of them—by the end of *The Power*, women are authoritative and violent, and men are submissive and passive. Alderman’s characters play specific roles based on their gender. This is primarily shown in the way men and

women relate to one another; a person's role in the world of the novel is essentialized based on their gender. Second wave feminist writers (like Carol Christ and Mary Daly) often rely on the essentialization of gender in their texts; however, the effect of Alderman's pastiche actually exemplifies the theories of third wave feminists like Judith Butler better. Butler identifies that gender is primarily performative and, because of that, gender is deemed a social construction. Because of the way *The Power* allows the reader to find fault in gendered relation to power and the different avenues of sexism in society, Alderman presents a very Butlerian argument.

Chapter Two builds on Butler's understanding of gender as performative to discuss how gender performativity impacts different types of power structures. In this chapter, I specifically look at the character Allie, who serves as a religious prophet and/or messiah figure and reforms Christianity into a new religion that focuses on the femininity of the divine. Allie employs ritual performativity to gain power within her specific community (performing miracles and baptisms) in a manner that mimics Jesus Christ's performativity in the gospel stories. I discuss the importance of male religious figures in the formation of the patriarchy—this parallels the authority Allie builds in the new female dominated society in *The Power*. The "Holy Mother" (as Allie names God) serves as justification for women's inherent superiority to men in *The Power*, just as the predominance of a masculine God has impacted the growth of the patriarchy in our society. I draw on feminist theological writing to support this argument and identify the impact of gendered language of the divine on religious and secular society.

All in all, *The Power* goes contrary to many feminist texts that imagine a world run by women as more productive and more empathetic than our current patriarchy. This calls into question the possibility of *The Power*'s identity as a feminist book. Can a novel that portrays women as abhorrent be considered feminist? I argue that yes—it can, primarily because of the

specific genre of the work (pastiche). However, the novel is nevertheless complex. Alderman's portrayal of LGBTQ+ sexual orientation is slim to none, and her portrayal of other gender identities is too focused on the physical body rather than other identifying factors that people consider when thinking of gender identity (identity that may or may not be related to a person's sex). There is little mention of race and other compounding issues that impact a person's positionality in the world. At the end of the day, *The Power* is less an argument and more of a looking glass—allowing the readers to more clearly see the issues of sexism in our world.

CHAPTER 1: GENDER ROLES IN *THE POWER*

The female body that is freed from the shackles of the paternal law may well prove to be yet another incarnation of that law, posing as subversive but operating in the service of that law's self-amplification and proliferation.
-Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (93)

Naomi Alderman begins *The Power* by framing the text as if she did not write it. The novel begins with a correspondence between someone named Naomi and a man named Neil (Although Naomi in the novel shares Naomi Alderman's name and is therefore the default substitution for Alderman's voice in the novel, it is Neil who actually performs as the implied author. It is often Neil who outlines major themes within the book and serves as the author's voice). The title page describes *The Power* as "A historical novel" written by Neil Adam Armon. The reader therefore is to assume Neil is the true author of the book. In the opening correspondence, Neil writes to Naomi about his book—he describes it as a "hybrid piece"—"Not quite history, not quite a novel. A sort of 'novelization' of what archeologists agree is the most plausible narrative." As *The Power* is set in an ambiguous future society (both alike and very different from our own), the readers understand that the novel is describing events that occurred prior to Neil and Naomi's correspondence.

Not only do Neil and Naomi set up the basic premise of the book, but their correspondence introduces the reader to the performance of gender roles within this world. One understands that Naomi is the one in charge upon reading the opening correspondence. Naomi writes to Neil in a way that parallels clichés women (in our society) might expect to hear from men. She writes to Neil about his book, "I see you've included some scenes with male soldiers, male police officers and 'boy crime gangs,' just as you said you would, you saucy boy! [...] I think I'd rather enjoy this 'world run by men' you've been talking about. Surely a kinder, more

caring and—dare I say it? — more sexy world than the one we live in.” Naomi finds Neil’s “male soldiers” unique and special, and she finds the idea of a world run by men alluring and promising. The world in which the novel occurs is very different and yet very similar to our own. Similar ideas are being expressed in our world—women soldiers would be sexy, societies run by women are kinder and more empathetic—it is just that the *women* in these statements in the novel have been replaced by *men*.

To continue the role reversal, Neil writes in passive patterns — “Anyway, sorry, I’ll shut up now [...] Thank you so much for this. I am so grateful you could spare the time.” Feminist theologian Mary Daly notes that women are taught to act with “false ‘humility’” (53).¹ She writes that this shows itself in a “strangely ambivalent fear of success [...] This avoidance of success is rooted partially in guilt feelings over being a ‘rival’ to males or ‘threatening male ego’” (*Beyond God* 53). Moreover, as power theorist Jean Baker Miller writes, women fear being perceived “as wanting to be powerful” (244). Miller continues to posit that this fear leads to an anxiety that an apparent desire for power will lead to “disapproval” and “evoked fears of attack and ultimate abandonment by all women and men” (244). Women recognize that a desire for power is not “appropriate” for women to display. Miller’s argument points to the idea that women fear this abandonment because of *perceived* dangers. That said, this fear is likely based

¹ I use Mary Daly in this paper with hesitation—there is some debate as to her relevancy and legitimacy as a scholar and as a feminist because of her history of transphobic remarks and apparent beliefs. Daly writes in *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* that “Transsexualism is an example of male surgical siring which invades the female world with substitutes” (von der Horst). As Dirk von Der Horst notes, Daly’s explanation of transgender individuals is that of an unfortunate extension of patriarchal influence— “a manifestation of the same forces that reduce the vibrancy of the living world to a dead counterfeit” (von der Horst). One can recognize this as problematic for a variety of reasons. I feel it is necessary for me to note this—as Zachary Thomas Settle writes, “Any sort of constructive engagement with Daly in the twenty-first century must account for these deeply problematic lines of thought, and there is no easy fix through which one might carefully excise the problematic aspects of her project while leaving her liberative insights intact, untouched” (25-26). However, as Settle also explores in their essay, Daly’s understanding of language, particularly in relation to divine figures is nevertheless intriguing and especially constructive for understanding the influence of the church on secular society. While Daly is deeply problematic, she is also extremely useful and prevalent. I use Daly not with the intention of erasing her transphobic viewpoints, but rather to engage with her on a critical level.

in reality—in a patriarchal world, a woman who does show too much desire for power is often punished or disregarded. However, Miller’s point identifies that whether or not what women fear comes to fruition, there is preeminent action taken to be sure it does not. One can observe this within Neil’s writing. He is not claiming authority over his work. He hedges, apologizes, and profusely thanks Naomi as if he fears the work of reading his manuscript is a terrible burden. He is, moreover, not claiming the piece to be any good. He is looking for Naomi for approval. Neil is performing a “female” role while Naomi is performing the “male” role.

Neil and Naomi’s relationship demonstrates the hierarchy of power in the world of the novel. Simply from reading the opening passages, the reader identifies that Naomi has power over Neil, and the reader later assesses that this power over is tied to Naomi’s identity as a woman. Alderman’s discussion of gender is implicitly tied to ideas regarding power—who has power, who has power inherently, and how people get/gain power. In particular, Alderman’s novel demonstrates well that power infiltrates all different aspects of life—from political office to communicating with a mentor about a manuscript. Thomas Wartenberg, in his book *The Forms of Power* talks about his understandings of social power—

By using the term ‘social,’ I also refer to power in all its different forms as a social reality. All the more particular forms of social being such as the political, the economic, and the familial are encompassed by the idea of the social. A theory of social power conceptualizes the forms that power takes in intersubjective human life, abstracting from the specific character of more particular forms of power such as political and economic power (3).

Wartenberg widens the understanding of power from just political (3). An understanding of power as political limits the “certain questions that [...] are crucial to the enterprise of political thought” (Wartenberg 29). *The Power* certainly discusses the acquisition of political power (particularly with Margot and Allie), but it also demonstrates what Wartenberg describes as “power over,” which Wartenberg describes as “the ability of one human being to control

another” (23). Naomi’s power over Neil, for example, is not necessarily political, but it definitely is a performative type of power. Many relationships throughout *The Power* demonstrate this idea that one holds power over another. This control is mediated multiple different ways. For Neil, it is the knowledge of his own positionality and relationship to power (he cannot show desire for it) and the knowledge that Naomi’s advice could launch his career (or so the reader might assume). Other characters, like Allie, demonstrate the way different types of power feed into political power. As Allie gains power within religious communities, she gains a say in political discussions as a figure leaders trust. As the novel progresses, women’s capacity for demonstrating power over others reaches its height when men cannot leave their homes without fear of attack (273, 297-298). *The Power*’s definition of power identifies that power over another is alluring and dangerous, particularly when one person or a group of people begin to abuse it. Others will likely follow that example.

In addition, the skein ensures that power in the novel remains at its core a very physical thing. It is important that women in Alderman’s world only gain power because they suddenly have greater physical strength than men. Because of this, things like political power and other expressions of power over become based in who has this ability/physical strength. The skeins not only represent our anatomical fixation regarding sex/gender (more on this later), but they also show that power and gender performativity is extremely physical as opposed to a power gained in other ways, like language (which is also a way women characters gain power in the novel, but that use of language is only authoritative because of their gain of physical power). One character, Darrell, acquires a skein after surgically removing it from his sister (he does this by force and against her consent). Because of its connection to power, the skein becomes an object of desire. In that particular scene, Alderman writes, “Power doesn’t care who uses it” (333). If there is the

desire, people will do whatever it takes to become powerful or claim power for themselves. This is often done through violence. However, once the women realize what Darrell done, they overtake him and pull the skein from his body once more. This event identifies the kind of violence the society values—for violence to be “acceptable” (as in, violence that is not punished by law or, in this case, accepted as necessary (or excusable) by the group with more physical and societal power), it must be a woman attacking a man, not a man attacking a woman. It also identifies that women’s loyalties primarily reside with other women.

This focus on violence is something that progresses throughout the novel. However, it is Naomi who first introduces the reader to the fact that women leaders in the novel do not work to form an egalitarian matriarchy, because of the way in which she a) talks to Neil, b) notes that men would lead a more peaceful society. Mary Daly and other feminist writers like Carol Christ posit that women, if in positions of power, would use their influence, their power over others to form a kinder, more just place.² However, most major women leaders in *The Power* reinforce power over structures, systems that accept violence against another gender, and justify one gender having a “natural” right to rule. Daly writes that women in positions of power are women existing in a patriarchal society and filling roles they have been taught to inhabit by patriarchal structures. This is similar to Foucault’s conception of “productive power,” which identifies that “power relations are productive of the subjects embedded in them” (Oksala 475). An individual can only exist within the power structures of society (Oksala 475). One example of this stipulates

² Daly and Christ are both feminist theologians who focus on issues of gender within religious organizations. Often, particularly in feminist discussions, the relation of gender and power is strictly a secular one (even, at times, it is discussed as secular within feminist theology). However, feminist theologians do a particularly good job of identifying different types of institutions that have enforced gendered division. I use them in this paper in this context because of their nuanced understanding of power and their focus on egalitarian matriarchy. It is my theory that many feminist theologians focus on matriarchal societies because of their interests in goddess symbols and beliefs. For some, like Christ (“Why Women Need”), this means identifying the influence of these symbols in societies before female terms and images for God became, as Rosemary Radford Ruether notes “inappropriate and indeed ‘pagan’” (9).

that to be members of society, women must play a role within the patriarchy where men often have the primary roles in power. Judith Butler in particular is concerned with the implications of this idea. Johana Oksala summarizes Butler's thoughts; if Foucault's ideas are true, "does this not imply that the subject of feminism, 'women,' is produced by the very same oppressive power relations it aims to theorize and eradicate?" (475). Daly's ideas reside along this same train of thought. "There are no alternate models," Daly writes about the patriarchy, pointing to the idea that other groups of people have not had the chance to lead and develop new systems and models (*Beyond God* 14). Daly continues, "As sociologist Alice Rossi has suggested, [a continuation of patriarchal power structures] is not what the women's movement in its most revolutionary potential is all about" (*Beyond God* 14). Moreover, Daly writes, "it is quite clear that women's liberation is essentially linked with full human liberation. Women generally can see very well that the movement will self-destruct if we settle for vengeance" (*Beyond God* 25). Daly believes that, at its core, a women's movement should overhaul patriarchal power structures (create an alternate model) and find something better, more liberating for all people. It would not be liberating just for women, but for people of all kinds.

Feminist theologian Carol Christ writes about the concept of egalitarian matriarchy, noting historical and current examples of matriarchal societies. She defines egalitarian matriarchy as such—"a society and culture organized around the mother principle of love, care, and generosity, in which mothers are honored and women play central roles, and in which men also have important roles and every voice is heard" ("Egalitarian Matriarchies"). Christ draws on the work of Peggy Reeves Sanday to clarify that these societies had an equal distribution of power, therefore making them "not female dominant but egalitarian" ("Egalitarian Matriarchies"). Nevertheless, because of the work of anthropologists like Sanday, readers may

come to *The Power* expecting the emergence of a matriarchal egalitarian society that prioritizes empathy and good-will. Or, at the very least, a society would emerge that better distributes the allocation of power. However, Alderman takes the opposite route and writes a world that is just as cruel (perhaps crueler) than the patriarchal one we currently inhabit. She does not imagine a world in which patriarchal structures are dismantled. There is still a gendered prejudice.

Later in the novel, Alderman describes a particularly brutal scene in which a female president forces a male servant to lick broken glass from the floor (257). Allie the prophet observes and contemplates whether to stop the abuse. However, the mysterious voice she hears in her head says, “We don’t have to ask what [men would] do if they were in control. We’ve seen it already. It’s worse than this” (Alderman 257). However, the reader is to understand that it is not necessarily worse—they will just have read a heartbreaking theft of Tunde’s (the only main male character) life work published under a woman’s name (300), the brutal and graphic scene where a woman rapes a powerless man (315), and a female newscaster contemplating the necessity of men in society (312-313) (“The subject is: how many men do we really need? Think it over, they say. Men are dangerous” (312)). Through these various scenes throughout the novel, it is made explicitly clear that the abuse of power is not better under women’s control—these are all things that women experience under patriarchy; the world depicted in the novel is certainly not a better society. Christ writes that, because of our enculturation into patriarchal society, there is an anxiety that matriarchal societies would result in “keeping men as slaves, sexually abusing and raping them, and forcing them into subordinate positions. Such images are so abhorrent that we may conclude patriarchy is not so bad at all” (“Egalitarian Matriarchy”). After reading *The Power*, one may be tempted to agree with this perspective.

Alderman's text, therefore, seems to be at odds with the idea of egalitarian matriarchy. Part of this discrepancy is due to the shift of perspective between waves of feminist theory. Anna-Katharina Höpflinger and colleagues note that feminist theologians (like Daly and Christ) writing during the second wave of feminism (1960-early 1980s) had "a highly essentialist understanding of men and women" (628). Höpflinger further notes that matriarchal structures were an interest and focus for second wave feminists (628). Further, she writes "the category of 'woman' and, implicitly, the one of 'man,' were used as essentialist categories of differences and—without further reflection—often as 'externalized objects' and not as 'thinking subjects' [...] reflecting the feminist and public discourse of the time" (Höpflinger 629). Alderman's novel does exemplify this—men and women are essentialized, "externalized objects" throughout the text; we can see that throughout the various examples listed previously. Men, for example, begin the novel as violent, and therefore, women in leadership decide men do not deserve the same rights as women (as punishment for the crimes of men). This essentialization is also shown through Naomi and Neil. As Naomi notes, a world run by men would be "a kinder, more caring [...] sexy world," indicating that she believes these are qualities women do not naturally possess. The point here, too, is to demonstrate that gender roles/the understanding of gender roles have changed drastically over time—as the novel progresses, men are still remembered as violent before women develop the power, but in the future as Naomi writes to Neil, men are considered primarily gentle caretakers (376). Naomi (and Neil, to a lesser extent), however, does not have an understanding of this. To Naomi, the gender roles are rigid. Women are soldiers. Men are not. Women are political leaders. Men are not. Being a mother becomes a revered position; men are only briefly necessary for the formation of a fetus.

Although genders are very much essentialized throughout *The Power*, the imitation is not for the sake of perpetuating gender roles or pointing out the differences between genders. The imitation is meant to showcase the absurdity inherent in gender performativity and gender roles. For example, Naomi notes, “Have you thought about the evolutionary psychology of it? Men have evolved to be strong worker homestead-keepers, while women—with babies to protect from harm—have had to become aggressive and violent. The few partial patriarchies that have ever existed in human society have been very peaceful places” (376). Recall Christ and Sanday who discuss egalitarian matriarchies—women focused, peaceful societies. Neil, however, critiques this perspective. He responds,

“As to whether men are naturally more peaceful and nurturing than women... that will be up to the reader to decide, I suppose. But consider this: are patriarchies peaceful because men are peaceful? Or do more peaceful societies tend to allow men to rise to the top because they place less value on the capacity for violence? [...] If we keep on repeating the same old lines about the past when there’s *clear evidence* that not all civilizations had the same ideas as us... we’re denying that anything can change” (377).

Neil focuses on the idea that genders inherently evolved to have specific traits attached to a particular gender. As noted, this argument is not necessarily at odds with second wave feminists like Daly and Christ who focus on the ideas of matriarchal structures. It is the way that Alderman so closely essentializes gender roles to the opposite gender (men are the caretakers; women are aggressive and violent) that pushes the text closer to a third wave perspective. The rejection of egalitarian matriarchy, in many ways, is the point of the book.

Beginning in the 1990s, third wave feminism “react[ed] against essentialism and seek[ed] instead to explore gender differences which are now understood as complex, multifaceted, fluid, constructed, and only loosely related to the body (Woodhead 67)” (Höpflinger 629). Moreover, third wave feminists believe that “masculinities and femininities” are considered “social constructions” and emmeshed in “power relationships” and “knowledge production” (Höpflinger

629). The idea that gender is a social construction and performed as a result of socially determined roles is most famously argued by Judith Butler. In her seminal book *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler makes the distinction between anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance; “If the anatomy of the performer is already distinct from the gender of the performer, and both of those are distinct from the gender of the performance, then the performance suggests a dissonance not only between sex and performance, but sex and gender, and gender and performance” (137). Therefore, anatomy does not necessarily denote gender performance. Moreover, gender itself does not necessarily denote gender performance. Performance may be related to both, but it is not determined by either. As Sara Salih notes, Butler explains that in regard to gender, “the performance pre-exists the performer” (10). Butler argues gender identity is not a simply a performance as “that would presuppose the existence of a subject or actor who is doing that performance” knowingly (Salih 10). If an actor is not aware of a performance, can it be called a performance? According to Butler, it cannot. Butler makes the distinction between performance and performativity. Miriam Meyerhoff describes Butler’s distinctions as such—

“If performance is something controlled and possibly characterized by a degree of artifice, performativity is talking about something completely different. To say that gender is performative is simply to say that how we understand gender, and how we position ourselves as gendered or sexual beings in relation to others is achieved through the repetition of these activities” (Greenough 24).

If an actor is unaware of the performance, they are demonstrating performativity, not performance. Performativity is created through repetition, and this is how we grow to understand gender roles and gender performativity.

Butler herself writes, “gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which ‘sexed nature’ or ‘a natural sex’ is produced and established

as ‘prediscursive,’ prior to culture, a politically neutral surface on which culture acts” (7).

Gender, therefore, is a type of rhetoric that allows people to make conclusions about others based on their given sex. Gender is socially constructed, and therefore, the idea that gender roles are determined by science or anatomical sex is deemed absurd. Butler explains it like this: “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (25). Butler understands gender as an ongoing circle with no beginning or base—the same gender performances keep revolving in society, and yet, that cycle has no base. Gender has no origin or cultural foundation—it is simply something that keeps returning and performing in similar ways.

Because gender is a performance that often goes unknown, it takes something like drag to help people recognize their own performativity. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler talks about how drag performers parody the idea of “an original or primary gender identity” (137). She continues to explain, “The performance of drag plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed” (137). Butler then notes drag is not just a parody; it is a pastiche. The genre pastiche “mocks” the idea of an original—this is something parody does not do. Drag is a pastiche, Butler explains, because through drag, “‘the normal,’ ‘the original’ is revealed to be a copy, and an inevitably failed one, an ideal that no one can embody” (138-139). In the case of *The Power*, this original is the idea that gender is a fixed entity and the idea that gender roles and gender superiority are solidified as natural and/or scientific. For Butler, the practice of drag and its “imitation of gender” allows the observer (as well as the performer) to identify “the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency” (Butler 137). Alderman’s novel demonstrates this imitative structure and gender’s contingency through the absurdity of the gender role reversal. As noted with Neil and Naomi, men act

“feminine” and women act “masculine.” Other characters embody this throughout the novel as well. Margot starts searching for sexual favors from younger men lower in rank than her (250-251). Allie acts in the fashion of male religious leaders, sermonizing and performing miracles, something traditionally associated with the male figure of Jesus. Through these actions, by Butler’s definition, the characters parody the opposite gender, based on our society’s interpretation and understanding of gender. The characters in *The Power* are performing drag, a pastiche of gender roles.

It is necessary to note that the characters themselves are not aware of the gendered drag they are performing. In a way, they perfectly exemplify Butler’s idea that gender performativity is unconscious. At least regarding the imitation of gender roles, the characters in *The Power* largely remain unconscious of their gender performance. There are exceptions, but for the most part, the characters (like Naomi) remain largely unaware of their gender roles, even as these roles change.³ Drag, in Butler’s description, is very intentional and defiantly performative. The men and women performing drag recognize the gendered role reversal they are performing; they set out to perform a pastiche, an exaggerated imitation of the opposite gender (think drag queens and their exuberant and performative femininity). Alderman specifically writes the characters so that the reader is able to pick up on their performativity—she superimposes a drag on the characters for the readers to understand, not for the characters to understand. In *The Power*, we read about women who are acting as we might expect men to act and vice versa. Therefore, as Butler writes about drag, “Indeed, part of the pleasure, the giddiness of the performance is in the recognition

³ One of these exceptions occurs as Margot recognizes the power she has over a male coworker as her skein grows strong. This confidence translates to a confidence in the workplace. As Margot brushes off the comments and concerns made by Daniel (her coworker), she contemplates, “That is how a man speaks. And that is why” (79). She recognizes that she is imitating a male pattern of behavior, and more importantly, she basks in the rush of power it gives her.

of a radical contingency in the relation between sex and gender in the face of cultural configurations of casual unities that are regularly assumed to be natural and necessary” (137). Through the various characters in *The Power*, the reader can identify the ways in which gender is learned and imitated—both in the “real” world and the world Alderman has created.

Neil is perhaps the only character who is truly aware and cares about the impact gender and gender-defined power has on society throughout the history of *The Power*'s world. As he writes to Naomi, “Gender is a shell game. What is a man? Whatever a woman isn't. What is a woman? Whatever a man is not. Tap on it and it's hollow. Look under the shells: it's not there” (381). Here, Alderman indicates the idea that gender is indeed contingent on culture. The gendered binary is recognized in this statement—a woman is whatever a man is not. As noted by Butler, gender performance is something that is unconscious, something most people do not recognize they inhabit. Therefore, it takes something like Neil and Naomi's overtly performative reverse gender roles for the reader to identify a gender performativity that may have been previously unknown or unrecognized. Women, for example, do not necessarily recognize their tendency to apologize until they read Neil's attempt to stay in Naomi's good graces. The correspondence allows the reader to assess—Why does this feel strange? Should it feel strange? Why shouldn't a woman be in a position of power? Why does this feel wrong? Should it feel wrong? All of these questions allow the reader to assess their own assumptions about the perceived ways in which a man and a woman should and shouldn't act.

As Butler writes, “Discrete genders are part of what ‘humanizes’ individuals within contemporary culture; indeed, we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right” (139-140). In *The Power*, a skein is indicative of a “discrete gender.” Those who push the boundaries of gender performativity (intentionally or unintentionally) are punished over and over because of

the society's refusal to think beyond the binary. The prophet Allie, for example, refuses to acknowledge that women can be the root of evil just as much as men. She bases her whole campaign on a distrust of men—it is very much an “us vs. them” movement. There is no understanding of, or room for, a middle ground. Despite Alderman's essentialization of gender, there are characters who nevertheless reside somewhere in the middle of the binary (often as a result of a unique skein or something related to their weak control of the power).

For example, the character Ryan has a skein when most men do not. Therefore, he is seen as a “feminine” man within the society. Alderman writes of Ryan's girlfriend, “Jos quite likes girls. She quite likes boys who are a bit like girls” (171). For Jos, Ryan's apparent “gender trouble” is appealing. However, others call those like Ryan “deviants,” “abnormals” (170). Other girls make fun of Jos, saying she likes “weird men, deformed men. Disgusting, strange, repulsive men” (Alderman 233-234). These statements identify that Ryan, because of his skein (an identifying feature of women), is considered not quite male but also not quite female. Obviously, Jos views this as a much more positive thing than others do, but Jos can also relate to Ryan's identity. Jos's skein is not strong like other women's, and she often has trouble wielding her power. Therefore, she is also often considered abnormal or weird among her peers—not wholly accepted as a woman. The other girls around her call her “pzit,” referencing her weak power (233). Therefore, in this society, the presence/absence of a skein and the strength/weakness of its performance designates gender and subsequently gender performance.

Butler writes, “One way in which power is both perpetuated and concealed is through the establishment of an external or arbitrary relation between power, conceived as repression or domination, and sex, conceived as a brave but thwarted energy waiting for release or authentic self-expression” (95). In this case, power is related directly to a skein and who has one. As they

are “natural” for women (baby girls begin to be born with skeins), they indicate that women are powerful, but only if women’s skein holds the acceptable amount of power (a reliable source of physical aggression). If a man has a skein, it represents abnormality or shame because a skein is not considered a “normal” experience in masculinity. Throughout the novel, the skein acts as a physical representation of gender and subsequently indicates how well one is performing or embodying their respective gender.

Moreover, as Ryan and Jos find comfort and, as Butler says, “authentic self-expression” in each other, Jos’s mother Margot convinces Jos that Ryan is a male extremist and terrorist who has been posting alarming notes on a message board. This is a lie— Jos asks her mother, “How do they even know it’s him?” (212). The passage continues, “Margot waves at the thick file of documents. ‘Oh, I don’t know. They have their ways.’ This is the tricky part. Margot holds her breath. Will Jos buy it?” (213). Margot says then, “If we could find someone to help you... well, you’d just be able to like normal boys” (215). A sentence later, “You can be just like all the other girls. I know we can fix it for you” (215). As a senator, Margot does not want a) a daughter who does not have a strong skein, b) a daughter who dates a boy who is not “normal.” The fact that her daughter has found comfort with this boy does not matter.

Because Jos and Ryan’s identities do not fit into a strict gendered binary, Jos and Ryan can be read as metaphors for nonbinary and/or transgender people. Not because the weakness of their skeins identifies a parallel weakness in nonbinary and transgender individuals, or because gender identity is solely a physical thing (despite what the skein represents; this is not true, as our discussion of Butler has identified). Rather, it is their positionality in the middle—perceived by society as not quite male or female—and their respective relationship to power and acceptance into society that identifies the problems society has in accepting those of gender

identities that are not strictly male or female. Granted, it is important to note that Jos and Ryan's respective gender trouble is mainly physical and identified by others as wrong or different. Jos and Ryan subsequently are bothered by it, but they do not *identify themselves* as another gender. The point of Alderman's novel is to essentialize the two ends of the gender binary—in showing the absurdity present in this binary, it opens the possibility for discussion about others who might identify in the middle. However, that discussion is not in the book itself.⁴

On the one hand, it makes sense that characters who have different gender expressions would take the back seat in Alderman's novel (or not exist at all). As noted, one of the major explorations of the novel—gender's relationship to power—is shown through the use of an extreme binary. Butler notes that the “cultural matrix” that has created gender identities

requires that certain kinds of ‘identities’ cannot ‘exist’—that is, those in which gender does not follow from sex and those in which the practices of desire do not ‘follow’ from either sex or gender. Indeed, precisely because certain kinds of ‘gender identities’ fail to conform to those norms of cultural intelligibility, they appear as only developmental figures or logical impossibilities from within that domain (17).

Later in *Gender Trouble*, Butler explores Monique Wittig's discussion about sex and gender, particularly relating to heteronormative power structures. Essentially, Wittig's claim is that because lesbians defy cultural expectations for women, they cannot be labeled as women in a

⁴ In many ways, Alderman's discussion of gender remains one-note— Butler writes, “Gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out ‘gender’ from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained” (3). Alderman is very clearly focused on gender and its relationship to power in this novel. Any other identity, such as race and sexuality might be mentioned, but all those aspects are rarely explored in depth.

Moreover, there is little differentiation between how different cultures perceive gender. Tunde travels the world, and it is mentioned that some women are emerging from harsher treatments in some countries than in Britain or the United States. However, the exploration dies there. Allie's sermons are meant to apply to all different faiths (127), and yet, most of her jargon and her language are Christian. Allie is mentioned to be “mixed race” (33) and Tunde is from Nigeria (12) and there is little-to-no reference of how race plays a role in sexism. On the one hand, one could commend Alderman for her focus away from race and racialized language. However, with the growth of intersectional feminism it has become apparent that it is necessary for us to recognize the ways in which people of different races, class, or sexual orientations experience gender and power structures differently.

heteronormative power structure. Butler summarizes, “A woman, [Wittig] argues, only exists as a term that stabilizes and consolidates a binary and oppositional relation to a man; that relation, she argues, is heterosexuality [...] Indeed, a lesbian, she maintains, transcends the binary opposition between woman and man; a lesbian is neither a woman nor a man” (112-113).

Granted, Alderman focuses more on physicality than Wittig or Butler do—they, in turn, focus on sexual attraction. However, in Alderman’s novel, the characters who exemplify other gender identities/performances and/or sexual identities are pushed to the margins of the story (literally, as they all play minor roles).

As one can see, Alderman’s construction of gender in *The Power* is a complicated, multifaceted concept to understand. Ultimately, it is important to note that Alderman essentializes gender roles for the purpose of building a pastiche about gender—a drag that the readers can understand and therefore identify gender roles and gender’s relationship to power as absurd. While this pastiche is effective for identifying this absurdity, this limits the diversity of identities that do not fit into the heteronormative structures that are portrayed in the novel.

CHAPTER 2: RELIGION AND THE GENDER OF THE DIVINE IN *THE POWER*

*The voice says: If the world didn't need shaking up, why would this power have come
alive now?*

*Allie thinks, God is telling the world that there is to be a new order. That the old way is
overturned. The old centuries are done. Just as Jesus told the people of Israel that God's
desire had changed, the time of the Gospels is over and there must be a new doctrine.*

The voice says: There is a need for a prophet in the land.

Allie thinks, But who?

*The voice says: Just try it on for size, honey. Remember, if you're going to stay here,
you're going to need to own the place so they can't take it from you. The only way you're
safe, honeybun, is if you own it.*

*-Naomi Alderman, *The Power* (50)*

As noted in Chapter One, the ways in which the characters in *The Power* perform their respective genders is particularly fascinating. As I wrote, the characters nicely exemplify Butler's theory that gender is performative; if the actor is not aware of the performance, it cannot be called a performance. Through the act of drag—an exaggerated performance of the opposite gender—gender becomes consciously performative. As noted, most of the characters in *The Power* are unaware of the drag they are performing—it is the reader that is aware of the gender performativity. Nevertheless, because of the way Alderman so strictly switches gender roles and performativity (men acting as women, women acting as men), the reader becomes aware of the gender roles the characters are enacting.

Moreover, *The Power* further reinforces Butler's idea that “gender identity is an effect of the ‘stylized repetition of acts’ rather than the expression of an inner core” (Lloyd 575). *The Power*, overall, demonstrates that gender does not reflect an “inner core” and nor does gender's relationship to power reflect an “inner core.” Women perpetuate the same hierarchical power structures they encountered within a patriarchy because that is the “repetition of acts” they recognize as authoritative. Butler further writes,

acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface of the body*, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means (136).

The imitative act of gender is surface level; it only points to the illusion that there is identity beyond the performance. In this chapter, I investigate gender and gender performance within one of the power structures Alderman describes throughout the novel—religion. Through the character Allie (or, as she is known later, Eve and Mother Eve)⁵, Alderman demonstrates further that there is no inherent relationship between gender and power, specifically within religion. The ritual acts Allie performs clearly are fabrications meant to help her gain authority within a religious community. Allie serves as a new prophet and messiah figure as she performs miracles through the use of her power. Her actions have a clear (and likely intended) parallel to the actions of Jesus Christ throughout the biblical gospel stories. As a result, Allie’s femininity itself has a huge impact in the symbolic foundation of the new religion. Allie’s clear imitations help the reader identify the impact of ritual performance on religious authority and its subsequent consequences for gendered power structures within the church. The fact that Allie moves through the ranks of religious and political leadership because of an illusion further symbolizes the idea that gender’s relationship to power does not have a “core.”

The second part of the chapter focuses on Allie’s use of language to describe the divine. Many of Allie’s theological teachings focus on reclaiming language for and images of the feminine divine in place of the masculine. She tells those around her that “God the Father” is to be the “Holy Mother.” Jesus’s importance is largely overhauled, with his mother Mary taking his place as the primary savior figure. Allie tells her new congregation, “God the Mother came to

⁵ For the purpose of clarity, I will primarily refer to the character of Allie/Mother Eve as Allie.

earth in the body of Mary, who gave up her child that we could live free from sin. God always said She would return to earth. And She has come back now to instruct us in her ways” (89). Identifying the divine as female impacts women’s capacity for other areas of leadership and power acquisition, much as male divinity has impacted men’s acquisition of power. The swapped gender of the divine further identifies Alderman’s point that gender roles are absurd. These linguistic markers identify the impossibility of naming the divine in human, gendered terms. The act of naming God helps identify that no name for God is adequate, nor is a conception of God as gendered adequate.

Ritual Performativity

Allie’s specific understanding of gender roles stems from a very patriarchal system and an abusive foster care family. It is clear early in the novel that her father figure, Mr. Montgomery-Taylor, has sexually abused her for quite some time (32-33). Her foster mother, Mrs. Montgomery-Taylor excuses the abuse—Allie imagines her saying, “You know how men are” as she sits downstairs drinking sherry, purposefully ignoring what happens upstairs between her husband and Allie (33). Allie runs away (after killing Mr. Montgomery-Taylor with her electrical power) and finds refuge in a convent that shelters young women exiled from their families because of their power. It is no surprise, given her experience with men that Allie enjoys being around women over men. “She likes it at the convent. The nuns, for the most part, are kind, and the company of women is pleasing to Allie. She’s not found the company of men has much to recommend it” (45). And so, Allie renames herself Eve (45) and starts a new life.

As women rise to the forefront of society, the female characters do not often acknowledge how their gender has influenced their rise to power. However, they are often very strategic about how they act to gain power as the structure flips from favoring men to favoring

women. For many, that means mimicking male performativity or actions they recognize will have strong influence. Allie exemplifies this well. Throughout the novel, Allie will progress to be a religious prophet who helps lead society into a new age, both religious and political. Allie is very conscious and purposeful about the role she plays in society. She is intentional about gaining power through her strategic enactment of religious rituals and through the language she uses to talk about divine figures. Much of what she does is recognizable because similar actions were completed by previous, male religious leaders like Jesus Christ. While she does not seem particularly conscious of the significance her femininity has, she nevertheless focuses strictly on the superiority of women and feminine qualities from within a religious standpoint, likely inspired by her deep (and validated) hatred of her foster father.

Allie's focus on the divine qualities of women is inspired by the negative patriarchal experiences in her life. Similarly, Allie does not begin performing the religious leader role because of any apparent religious devotion (although, this becomes less clear as the novel progresses and Allie appears to believe aspects of her own teachings)—she views the role she plays as a way to gain safety, acceptance, and a place to call home.⁶ The voice in Allie's mind prompts her to the conclusion that becoming a new prophet might be the way to do this—

⁶ Alderman has written about the complicated relationship religion has with power in her preceding novel *The Liars' Gospel* (2013). Alderman wrote this novel with the idea that Yehoshuah (Jesus) "wasn't the son of God" (Brunstein 5). The story is told from four different characters (much like *The Power*) who either knew Yehoshuah or were influenced in some way by his story after his death. Looking at *The Liar's Gospel* can help situate Alderman's view of religion and power. At their hearts, both *The Power* and *The Liar's Gospel* deal with the potential danger religious power has ("No man should be told he's a god while he still lives [...] It doesn't promote good thinking" (*The Liars' Gospel* 129)) and the close relationship religion has to political power. In both novels, this power relationship between religion and politics is explored with heavy skepticism. In *The Liars' Gospel*, Yehoshuah is a brilliant, misguided figure who has too much influence. It is never quite clear if he is intentionally misleading people or if he truly believes in his own message and divinity. In *The Power*, similarly, the reader understands that Allie is not truly a savior or a messiah. It is made clear that while she is clearly very talented with the power and a little mysterious, there is consistent evidence throughout the story that she is merely manipulating other's perspectives of her to make herself seem divine. It once again comes down to a desire for power—Allie wants nothing more than to feel safe and have a home, and the only way she believes this to be possible is to control the spaces she inhabits. She realizes (correctly) that one way to control the spaces and people she interacts with is to appeal to their religion.

The voice says: There is a need for a prophet in the land.

Allie thinks, but who?

The voice says: Just try it on for size, honey. Remember, if you're going to stay here, you're going to need to own the place so they can't take it from you. The only way you're safe, honeybun, is if you own it (50).⁷

After living in multiple abusive homes, Allie's desire for independence and safety is clear and understandable. Allie uses her power to imitate miracle-like acts that arguably have no connection to a divine force. Allie knows her cures and miracles are never permanent – “The cures are real, even if they are only temporary. She cannot teach the body to do its work better, but she can correct its mistakes for a time” (86).⁸ The miracles are actions that Allie has taught herself to do with an incredible amount of practice. However, many people (who are not privy to this internal dialogue or Allie's unique skills with power) come to believe that Allie is the real deal, a new savior for the masses in a time of great turbulence. Allie's voice is right— religion has great power. Religion is particularly important when studying power because of the ways

⁷ Allie's voice lends some ambiguity to her role. Allie does not know who the voice is—she calls it mother (32, 34), Mary the mother of Christ (46), God (49), and the devil (359). At the end of the novel, the voice is implied to be the voice of God because of a connection to an opening epigraph from 1 Samuel 8. The voice tells Allie that “another Prophet came to tell me that some people I'd made friends with wanted a King” (361). This is what happens to God in 1 Samuel 8. However, regardless of identity, the voice in her head provides guiding advice and comfort in times of trial.

Moreover, it may be significant to note that Iehuda (Judas) begins “hearing” the voice of God once he loses his faith in Yehoshua. “As they walked toward the house of Caiaphas, the High Priest, Iehuda said to God, ‘I have returned to you. I am sorry for my absence.’ And God, who is a loving Father said, ‘You are welcome in my house, my beloved son’” (*The Liars' Gospel* 133). This is perhaps comparable to Allie's voice. The comparison between the two characters is notable.

⁸ In Alderman's *The Liars' Gospel*, a similar phenomenon occurs. The reader follows Iehuda (Judas) for a portion of the book and observes as he loses his faith in his friend Yehoshuah. In one scene, Iehuda attempts to perform a miracle and cure a crippled boy. Alderman describes the attempted miracle in terms similar to the ones she uses to describe Allie's work. “Iehuda had laid his hands on the boy's leg. He felt the *power* in him, in his heart and his hands, a *warm tingling rush* inside his whole body, the spirit of God moving him, so that he understood why God is called a terror as well as a love. He felt *the power go into the boy*, and praised the name of God, the one who is and was and will be” (my emphasis) (114). However, the boy is not healed, just as the people Allie “heal” typically do not retain the cures. Iehuda lies to the other disciples when asked about his work and tells them that the boy was cured— “Iehuda wondered how many of them had lied as he'd done” (114). He later meets a man named Calidorus who has a knowledge of tricks and deceptions—he is able to describe to Iehuda how Yehoshuah is likely performing the miracles.

“religion indicates where power lies and allows people to interact with it on various levels” (Höpflinger 621). As Allie becomes more powerful and a more influential religious leader, it indicates that women are becoming more powerful. On the opposite side, because women are becoming more powerful, Allie is able to become a more influential religious leader.

And so, while she resides at the convent with other outcast girls like herself, Allie becomes a miracle worker. One of the girls, Luanne, has epileptic like symptoms that seem to be connected to her control over the power. Allie touches Luanne, flips a few switches in Luanne’s body with her power, and Luanne is no longer plagued by extended seizures. The other girls watching recognize that Allie has done something remarkable; however, because they are unaware of Allie’s unique control over her power, they believe Luanne’s recovery to be an act of God through Allie. “And this was the first sign, and at this time they came to say: this one is special to the Heavens” (86). Through the act of performing a healing, Allie signals to the other girls that she is like the religious leaders and symbols the girls have been taught to admire and worship. Moreover, Allie is like them, young and female and exiled from her family. To see someone like them do this work makes it feel special and attainable.

In *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory*, Mona Lloyd notes that Judith Butler argues “human life as ritual social drama depends on the repetition of social performances, a repetition that is simultaneously ‘a reenactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established’ but one that also secures their legitimation” (575). The girls recognize that Allie is walking in the tradition of other great religious healers who have come before—the “set of meanings” around healing is known among them. Alderman writes, “So they start to believe in her. That there is something within her” (86). One of the girls, Savannah, tells Allie, “I think you have the power to heal in you. Like we read in Scripture” (86). To Savannah, Allie’s actions are

recognizable because of their connection to Jesus's actions in the gospel stories. The actions of Jesus are considered authoritative because of his theological identity as both human and divine. Therefore, to participate in a healing ceremony/miracle or a baptism is to participate in a divinely inspired tradition. As the girls observe Allie, they make these connections and label Allie as authoritative because of what they interpret as a connection to God.

Amy Hollywood, in her essay "Performativity, Citationality, Ritualization," discusses the links between Judith Butler and religious ritual. She quotes Tala Asad to help define ritual. Asad writes,

"[a] crucial part of every religion, ritual is now regarded as a type of routine behavior that symbolizes or expresses something and, as such, relates differently to individual consciousness and social organization. That is to say, it is no longer a *script* for regulating practice but a type of practice that is interpretable as standing for some further *verbally definable*, but tacit, event" (Hollywood 266).

Asad's main argument is that ritual is now defined as action; ritual is now considered performative. Allie draws from Christian tradition as she performs miracles, but she also adapts them for her own purposes, like using them primarily for the benefit of women. All Allie needs to do is perform a few recognizable actions, and the girls around her begin to respond.

The frame of reference Allie mirrors is very much a male one. Not only are Allie's ritual performances important for the very sake of visual proof (and signification of her relationship to the divine), but they also indicate the importance of gender in action and gender roles. If God becomes incarnate in a male body, people will begin to interpret the male body as significant. If a woman begins performing a similar role (as Allie does), the female body begins to become religiously significant, more-so than before. Allie's gender becomes particularly significant when one considers the foundational and symbolic beliefs that since Jesus is male, then God similarly favors men over women. For example, Mary Daly notes, "The underlying—and often explicit—

assumptions in the minds of theologians down through the centuries has been that the divinity could not have deigned to become incarnate in the ‘inferior’ sex, and the ‘fact’ that ‘he’ did not do so reinforces the belief in male superiority” (“After the Death” 58-59). This is demonstrated throughout history. See this example—The *Malleus Malleficarum*, which rationalizes the persecution of women as witches reads, “And blessed be the Highest who has so far preserved the male sex from so great a crime: for since He was willing to be born and to suffer for us, therefore He has granted to men this privilege” (Kramer and Sprenger 129). Jesus’s gender performativity may not be the most important aspect here, but the very existence of his maleness made it possible for his actions to be interpreted evidence that men are more powerful. Because of Jesus’s gender, his actions become significant (as a result of patriarchal structures), and because of his actions, his gender becomes important (God becomes incarnate in man). Similarly, Allie’s gender becomes important because of her actions (women gaining power) and as a result of her actions.

One of the reasons the girls are so responsive to Allie is because, in their eyes, she is performing miracles and other authoritative rituals that hold a lot of meaning in Christianity. As Allie herself notes, the girls she lives with at the convent are scared, young, and impressionable. She thinks, “Not many miracles are required. Not for the Vatican, not for a group of highly strung teenage girls cooped up together for months and in fear of their lives. You don’t need so many miracles. Two is plenty. Three’s an abundance” (83). It is also a culturally unique time—no one quite knows how to explain the power. Therefore, Allie’s miracles and other seemingly inexplicable religious rituals a) are contextualized by their significant history and legacy within the Christian faith, b) are situated in a time of cultural unrest and uncertainty (An omniscient narrator remarks, “In those days there was a great fever in the land, and a thirst for truth and a

hunger to understand what the Almighty meant by making this change in the fortunes of mankind” (89)), and c) seemingly indicate the new status of women as favored by the divine. As feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Reuther notes, Augustine and other church fathers believed “[women] reflected bodily creaturely reality. The idea of woman as body takes for granted the androcentric perspective of the male as the one who ‘looks at’ woman, controlling her and defining her as bodily object” (11). Reuther identifies that the focus has often been on women’s bodies—they are “looked at” and evaluated based on their physical forms. Reuther continues, “The male is ‘mind or subject,’ and the woman is body or object” (11). In many senses in *The Power*, there is still a large focus on women’s bodies—the crucial shift is that the woman’s body is no longer considered as something solely for the consumption of male pleasure and/or reproduction. As exemplified through Allie’s miracle working, women’s bodies are now to be feared and/or revered as they are a great source of physical power. On the one hand, this clear focus on femininity does a lot to reinforce the holiness of women themselves. Allie tells her followers, “You have been taught that you are unclean, that you are not holy, that your body is impure and could never harbor the divine. You have been taught to despise everything you are and to long only to be a man. But you have been taught *lies*. God lies within you, God has returned to earth to teach you, in the form of this new power” (127). Allie is reforming the negative connotation women’s bodies have. Now it is not simply something for the taking, it is a great source of power (literally).

It is not just action that Allie employs in ritual, however. Language is important as well. Later, Allie brings a few girls to the ocean— “They were not the charismatic ones, not the most popular, or the funniest, or the prettiest or the cleverest girls. They were, if anything drew them together, the girls who had suffered the most” (88). She tells the girls that “a voice” prompted

her to bring them to the water (not entirely untrue) and “Then God will show us what She wants of us” (87). The whole process is recognizably ritualistic, the voice Allie tells the girls about has blatant hints of other prophetic figures in religious tradition (who often hear the voice of God before inspiring a meaningful moment). Even before the girls are dipped underwater (with the assistance of Allie’s power), the reader (and the girls) can recognize this process as a baptism. “Eve says, ‘Holy Mother, show us what you want of us. Baptize us with your love and teach us how to live.’ And each of the girls around the circle suddenly feels their knees buckle under them [...] ducking their heads into the ocean to rise up [...] gasping and knowing that God has touched them and that this day they are born anew” (87). J.L. Austin talks about speech acts that “‘do’ something rather than ‘say’ something” (Hollywood 258). He gives the example of marriage vows (“‘I do (sc. Take this woman to be my lawful wedded wife)’—as uttered in the course of the marriage ceremony”) and naming ships (“as uttered when smashing the bottle against the stern”) as verbal cues that may indicate or cue a literal action (breaking a bottle) or a symbolic one (joining two people in marriage) (Hollywood 258). In a similar fashion, Allie’s baptism ritual “does something” rather than simply “say something.” Allie’s verbal cue indicates both action and symbolic action. She causes the girls to be dunked under water (“baptize us”), but the action of baptism also symbolizes a new beginning to the girls gathered with Allie (“born anew”). Moreover, the act of speaking *creates* a new community (the speaking, as Austin notes, “does” something)—Allie now has disciples who begin to share her message with the world at large. What happens in the ocean is indicative of how power is gained in the novel, particularly with Allie and her religious community. As Alderman writes, “They stand in the circle, wet-headed and amazed. Only Eve remained standing, dry in the water. They felt the presence of God

around them and among them, and She was glad. And the birds flew above them, calling out in glory for a new dawn” (88). It is a new beginning for young women, in particular.

Allie performs these speech acts and rituals as a way to build authority as (and before) she starts building her new theologies. Performativity is an important way for people to build power. As Austin notes, there are certain conditions that must be met for “happy performatives” or performative speech acts that are successful. One type of “abuse” that can happen is an infelicity, which “happen[s] [...] when certain of the conventions that govern the performative are breached; for instance, when the person conducting a marriage service [...] is legally ineligible to do so” (Lloyd 585-586). Allie’s actions are perceived as complete and successful because her ritual actions allow the observer to visualize Allie’s apparent connection to the divine. Hollywood writes, “Bell argues that power and its dispositions are generated and regulated through rituals themselves rather than lying outside them as that which constrains or otherwise marks these activities off as special” (Hollywood 267). The ritualistic actions Allie performs give visual ethos for those observing her. However, as the reader understands, this is not the case. Therefore, just like Butler’s understanding of gender as having no core, Allie’s ritual performance must be labeled as constructed.

This is most exemplified later in the novel as Allie’s healing miracles reach a grand scale. Eventually, Allie’s miracles are televised and performed in front of “thirty thousand people” (202). Allie herself thinks about how the event has been fabricated to make her look the best. “And the people who curate these events for her and make sure that the nerve damage isn’t too severe for her to be able to do anything” (203). Moreover, the main objective of the event is to raise money— “all this has been funded by good people like [the audience] who opened their hearts and their wallets” (205). It is very clear that Allie recognizes these actions are first and

foremost a performance. It is not always clear if she does or does not believe in the religion she is proliferating. If Allie expresses a doubt, the voice is often there to reassure her. For example, when Allie thinks about those who have not been cured by her miracle working, the voice says, “You never know; if they had more faith, maybe it would have stuck around longer” (205). This indicates that the blame is not on Allie but rather focused on the person getting healed.

Moreover, this miracle act in particular demonstrates the power dynamic within ritual; in this case, of course the focus is gendered power dynamic. Allie prays, “Not my will, Holy Mother, but Thine be done. If it is Your will to heal this child, let him be healed, and if it be Your will that he suffer in this world to reap a great harvest in the next, let that be done” (204). The Holy Mother (as the crowd, again, does not know of Allie’s unique power control) grants power to Allie, who in turn has the power to cure the boy. The boy is deemed worthy because he is “humble and obedient” (204). As Allie prays for the boy, “The crowd is full of people rocking back and forth on their heels and weeping and muttering” (204). Hollywood writes about the impact of ritual repetition and repetition’s relationship to power—“Margaret Thomson Drewal argues that ritual involves repetition, but always (as does all repetition) repetition with a difference (it has to occur in a different time and place in order for it to be repetition). The room for improvisation (which differs in different ritualizations) within the ritual space marks it as a site of both domination and resistance” (Hollywood 269). Ritual creates a power dynamic—the one performing the ritual (often) and the ones observing or receiving. Alderman clearly identifies the power in performativity, particularly when it is paired with a specific belief system.

As noted earlier, Judith Butler describes ritual as the “repetition of social performances” that have “a set of meanings already socially established” (Lloyd 575). Lloyd notes that Butler further stipulates “that the same is true of gender; it, too, is a ‘ritualized, public performance’”

(Lloyd 575). In *The Power*, there is a further similarity to ritual and to gender performance—just as Butler argues that gender has no “inner core” or no true base, so too do Allie’s miracles lack a truth to them. She is intentionally repeating ritual action with the intention of using the visual and verbal cues of ritual to gain power; she knows what she does is not true. The people she performs for believe that Allie acts with the power of God; however, Allie (it largely seems) is acting only with her own power and manipulating what she can do to appear as if they are miracle acts of healing. Neil certainly seems to be under the impression that Allie was a fraud—he writes to Naomi, “I’ve put in some terrifically troubling stuff about Mother Eve... but we all know how these things work! Surely no one will be too distressed... everyone claims to be an atheist now, anyway. And all the ‘miracles’ really *are* explicable.” Allie’s ritualization has no “core,” as she has no true connection to the divine. The rituals are repeated, just as gender performativity is repeated with no true beginning or “core.” Therefore, gender and its relationship to power is most certainly a construction.

Femininity of the Divine

If God is viewed consistently as male, it is natural that men will see an immediate connection to the higher power, simply because the higher power looks (and acts) like them. Carol Christ explains, “Symbols have both psychological and political effects, because they create the inner conditions (deep-seated attitudes and feelings) that lead people to feel comfortable with or to accept social and political arrangements that correspond to the symbol system” (“Why Women Need” 274). Feminist theology, in particular, seeks to identify gender’s role in the power structures of religion. Feminist theologians spend a lot of time thinking and writing about the ways in which “the values and ideals of Christianity” have impacted women’s

experiences in religion (“Feminist Liberation Theologies” 308). Feminist theologians often do this by taking a close look at how God has been portrayed in prominent teachings and images.

As noted in the previous chapter, many feminist theologians wrote prominent texts within second wave feminism (Christ and Daly in the 1970s, for example). Linda Woodhead calls the second wave of feminist theology “incisive”; however, she also notes that there are areas in which second wave feminist theology was “flawed” (69). For example, in addition to an overemphasis on the term “patriarchy” as a catch-all term for “complex forms of social and cultural organization”, second wave feminist theology “essentialized understanding of the difference between men and women” which neglected the existence of identities beyond the binary (Woodhead 69). This often led to a focus on “explicitly feminized versions of spiritualities of life” (Woodhead 71). This feminization of the divine is not necessarily a bad thing, but it does nevertheless fail to recognize the complexity of gender (that third wave feminists were more apt to note) and other social power structures at play. This said, the views of second wave feminist theologians are useful for this particular study because of their parallel with Alderman’s novel. While Christ and Daly do not have the tongue-in-cheek approach to gender essentialization that Alderman does (they are sincere), their identification of the influence of a gendered God on secular society is useful and particularly relevant to what occurs in Alderman’s novel.

As noted, Allie’s ritual performance helps to build her ethos as a religious authority figure. After this authority is gained, Allie begins to build a new theology. In her sermons and her speeches, Allie focuses almost exclusively on the divinity of women.⁹ Allie has a deep

⁹ To women still enwrapped in the patriarchy, like some of the nuns at the convent, the divinity of the feminine is an alienating rhetorical and symbolic stance. One of the nuns, Sister Veronica, is a particularly outspoken opponent of the girls. She believes the power is from the Devil— “The Devil walks abroad and tests the innocent and the guilty, giving powers to the damned, as he has always done [...] Younger girls awaken it in older women. This is the Devil

mistrust of men; therefore, as she gains power within the religious community, the femininity of the divine provides a way for her to assist with the acceptance of women as the superior gender. Despite the persistence of the masculine noun God, Allie begins also (and more predominantly) referring to the higher power as “Holy Mother.” As God becomes the Holy Mother, God has a further direct correlation to femininity and therefore the existence of women. Christ writes about the power of a goddess figure, “Goddess Symbolism undergirds and legitimates the concerns of the women’s movement, much as God symbolism in Christianity undergirded the interests of men in patriarchy” (“Why Women Need” 276). One of the first times Allie uses feminine language for God, the girls at the convent respond: “And this ‘She’ is a new teaching, and very shocking. But they understand it, each of them. They have been waiting to hear this good news” (87). Religious symbols reflect the values of society: Christ, for example, notes the work of anthropologist Clifford Geertz to say, “religious symbols shape a cultural ethos, defining the deepest values of a society and the persons in it” (“Why Women Need” 274). As women become more prominent members of society, the language for divine figures begins to reflect that.

The impact of God’s image as a gendered human has incredible impacts on society, both secular and religious. Allie provides a new rhetoric—one that identifies the divine in the feminine and the power as a force for good and from God. Allie also provides a new symbol

working in the world, passing from hand to hand as Eve passed the apple to Adam” (49). Sister Veronica is part of the system of Catholicism—one that only allows men to hold positions of great power. She, in some ways, has internalized these messages and watches the growth of women’s power with growing skepticism—as she says of the girl’s power, “The Devil is in this house” (Alderman 90). In her view, the power is not something to be celebrated but rather condemned in favor of the old power structures. However, it is not long after Veronica begins voicing her doubts that it is implied that Allie kills Veronica while the convent sleeps. The nuns wake one morning to see Sister Veronica dead on the floor before a newly arranged statue of Jesus— “they look toward the figure on the cross. And they see that, engraved now into his flesh, traced with scored lines as if carved with a knife, are the fern-like markings of the power. And they know that Sister Veronica was taken in the moment that she witnessed this miracle and had so repented of all her sins” (Alderman 91). Allie metaphorically (and literally) kills the patriarchal remains of Christianity through Sister Veronica and begins to build a new church on the crumbling foundations. In our current patriarchal society, Sister Veronica’s internalized patriarchal norms would perhaps be considered ordinary. However, in this new society, it becomes increasingly clear (at least by Allie’s standards), that Sister Veronica’s viewpoints are no longer considered valid or acceptable.

system, a new language for people to use to explain what is happening. This, specifically, has a relationship to feminist theology, which, as noted, often is one form of scholarship that identifies how language, specifically male-centered language has impacted formation and retention of a patriarchy. Like ritual context, Allie's new theology works so well is because of the quickly changing culture and power dynamics as women continue to figure out their physical power. Mary Daly writes, "Religious symbols die when the cultural situation that supported them ceases to give them plausibility" ("After the Death" 56). In this case, the religious symbols that die are God the Father and Jesus. However, as Carol Christ writes, "Symbol Systems cannot simply be rejected, they must be replaced" ("Why Women Need" 275). Allie identifies this. So, she replaces the archaic male imagery with a female God and a new focus on Mary the Mother.

It is not by accident that a large portion of Allie's reformation revolves around a new language system used to refer to God. As much of *The Power* has focused on embodied power, Alderman's focus shifts to identify the importance of language in power structures. Just as Allie's ritual action helped create her authority, the words she speaks and the language she uses to describe God further solidify and justify women's role as superior. Zachary Settle writes, "Language creates a specific type of reality, even if the language is said to be metaphorical" (24). In English, male/masculine pronouns have been the default, overarching terms used to address humanity. The term "man" is used to refer to men, women, children of all genders and sexualities (less so now, but frequently in the past). It is argued that male pronouns have a neutrality that allows them to refer to the whole of humanity. However, *The Inclusive Language Lectionary* states, "in common English idiom, 'man' has been defined by his humanity, but 'woman' by her sex, by her relationship to man [...] This is but one example of how language *reflects* the way in which we think but also *informs* the way in which we think" (163). These tiny

words, “man,” “his,” “him,” “God,” have an incredible impact on the way we conceptualize power. This translates directly to religious language and terms used to refer to God.

Many feminist theologians have identified how masculine language for God has influenced the spread of patriarchy in both secular and religious communities. For example, Mary Daly writes that “as long as God is imagined exclusively as male, then the male can feel justified in playing God” (“The Women’s Movement” 316). Even if God is not truly meant to be viewed as male or female, the primary pronouns/gendered language for God will nevertheless shape the public’s view of divine figures and their relationship to power. Moreover, Mary Daly believes that for women to gain power, God must be reconceptualized as not-just-Male (Settle 38). This helps identify the relationship between language, gender, religion, and power. Reuther writes, “Christianity has never said that God was literally male, but it has assumed that God represents preeminently the qualities of rationality and sovereign power. Since men were assumed to be rational, and women less so or not at all, and men exercised the public power normally denied to women, the male metaphor was seen as appropriate for God” (9). Qualities of God, here, are taken from men’s apparent gender performativity. Similarly, in the Old Testament, James Gordon McConville notes that language for God as male is often put in metaphor, while language that may insinuate God as female is put in simile (173-174). There is a distinction, he writes. Metaphor helps qualities, like fatherhood, be “directly predicated of God,” while “motherhood is not” (174). Even within biblical language, there can be a divide between gendered qualities and how imbedded within God’s perceived character they are.

Throughout her ministry, Allie continually notes that women are to be superior to men. She says, “They have said to you that man rules over woman as Jesus rules over the Church. But I say unto you that woman rules over man as Mary guided her infant son, with kindness and love

[...] They have said to you that man and woman should live together as husband and wife. But I say unto you that it is more blessed for women to live together, to help one another, to band together and to be a comfort one to the next” (92). Allie’s sermons structure directly parallels Jesus’s sermon on the mount (*The Harper Collins Study Bible*, Matthew 5-7). This format is not only linguistic (“You have heard it said [...] But I say unto you”), but both sermons relay some of the major aspects of each prophet’s teachings. For Jesus, this ranges from anger to almsgiving. For Allie, this revolves mainly around reclaiming the holiness of femininity and women’s apparent inherent superiority to men. We know Allie’s identification of women as divinely superior works effectively for building power structures because of the way male divine figures have worked to support the patriarchy.

There is a powerful scene in which a parent relays their young son had been told he was “bad and that God wanted him to be obedient and humble” by a young woman in a store (161). This is a direct role reversal—there are biblical passages calling for *women* to be obedient and humble to their fathers, their brothers, their husbands (Specifically, this recalls 1 Timothy 2:11-15; “Let a woman learn in silence with full submission [...] the woman was deceived and became a transgressor”). In this society, the rise of a female God has empowered women to rise to what they believe is their God-given position as the superior gender. There is no apparent middle ground in which men and women can be equally divine—despite what religious leaders might claim; action and interpretation are often different than the initial claim. For example, even as Allie begins identifying God as “She” and “Her,” she also stipulates that God is beyond human comprehension and therefore cannot be totally defined by human expression or language. For example, Allie says, “God loves all of us [...] She wants us to know that She has changed Her garment merely. She is beyond female and male. She is beyond human understanding”

(127). This is a common caveat to be made about God, regardless of the pronouns used.

Similarly, third wave feminist theologian Elizabeth Johnson writes, “The mystery of God transcends all images but can be spoken about equally well and poorly in concepts taken from male or female reality” (56). Theologians have also identified God beyond gender. As Elizabeth Johnson writes,

The incomprehensibility of God makes it entirely appropriate, at times even preferable, to speak about God in nonpersonal or suprapersonal terms. Symbols such as the ground of being (Paul Tillich), matrix surrounding and sustaining all life (Rosemary Ruether), power of the future (Wolfhart Pannenberg), holy mystery (Karl Rahner), all point to divine reality that cannot be captured in concepts or images (Johnson 45).

There are many images used and recognized for God, even in our society. Despite these caveats that God is beyond gender, God as male (or in the case of *The Power*, female) is still the pervading linguistic cue and image. James Gordon McConville, in an essay about Old Testament language for God, notes “that humans find it hard to think or talk about God apart from their own experience, cultural, emotional, and intellectual” (177). Within art and language, there is a limitation to what people can often conceive of as Other (beyond human). One need only to look to art—more often than not, like Michelangelo’s “The Creation of Adam,” God is portrayed as white and male. God is often tied to our understanding of power, and imagery for God as patriarchal reflects this understanding.

Yet, the dichotomy between male and female divinity is characteristic of Alderman’s pastiche. Just as Alderman cannot portray an Allie that exemplifies more of Jesus’s non-gender conforming tendencies because it would not fit into her strict binary system. The closest Alderman gets to a non-gender conforming God is by keeping the masculine “God” in addition to the adage “Holy Mother.” Reuther notes that in Jewish tradition, God is beyond gender, but because of the masculinity of the word “God,” “this might suggest that God is an androgynous

male” (13). However, it is pretty clear that the same cannot be said for Allie’s God, as her theology indicates clearly her preference for a feminine image of God. Moreover, gendering the Holy Mother/God exemplifies and identifies the gendered nature of Christianity in particular. Höpflinger and colleagues write, “As pointed out by Ursula King, gender and religion are ‘not simply two analogues or parallels existing independently of each other, but they are mutually embedded within each other’” (Höpflinger 627). The secular and the religious society remain emmeshed. Religious systems create inner and outer circles; they create systems of “domination” and “subordination” and indicate who will be “inclu[ded]” and “exclu[ded]” (Höpflinger 621). Depending on one’s specific positionality within (or without) that religion, it will impact their secular life, particularly when a religious system becomes extremely influential over the general public, like Christianity in western societies or Allie’s new religion in *The Power*.

This focus on language of the divine indicates where language fails. Through the gender performativity and the gendering of God, Alderman demonstrates that gender is a “shell game,” as Neil writes (381). Like gender performativity’s implication of gender roles (absurd), Allie’s attempts to name God indicate that there is no language that can adequately name God. As feminist theologians note, naming God by one gender alone is not productive and that is indicated through the disproportionate gendered power relations in *The Power*. Language for God is “produce[d] on the surface of the body [...] but never reveal the organizing principle of identity as a cause” (Butler 136). If the highest power cannot be identified with gendered terms, and humans are supposedly made in the image of the higher power, the gender is certainly a “shell game.”

CONCLUSION

*A human being is made not by our own will but by that same organic, inconceivable, unpredictable, uncontrollable process that drives the unfurling leaves in season and the tiny twigs to bud and the roots to spread in tangled complications.
Even a stone is not the same as any other stone.
There is no shape to anything except the shape it has.
Every name we give ourselves is wrong.*
-Naomi Alderman, *The Power* (373)

At the end of the novel, Allie, the newly instated as the president of a female republic, calls Mrs. Montgomery-Taylor. The call has some eye-opening results. Throughout the call, Allie recognizes that Mrs. Montgomery-Taylor was the orchestrator behind Allie's abuse as a child. "'You understand,' [Mrs. Montgomery-Taylor] says, 'that God was working in us. All that we did, Clyde and I, we did so that you would be here.' It was her touch she felt every time Mr. Montgomery-Taylor laid himself upon her. She cuppeth the power in her hand. She commandeth it to strike. Allie says, 'You told him to hurt me'" (358). Allie is forced to reevaluate her entire perspective. She asks her voice, "How am I supposed to tell which side is good and which is bad?" (360). The voice responds,

Your whole question is the mistake. Who's the serpent and who's the Holy Mother? Who's bad and who's good? Who persuaded the other one to eat the apple? Who has the power and who's powerless? All these questions are the wrong question [...] You can't put anyone into a box. [...] They say: only exceptional people can cross the borders. The truth is: anyone can cross, everyone has it in them. But only exceptional people can bear to look it in the eye" (360).

The voice concludes their lesson by saying, "The whole idea that there are two things and you have to choose is the problem" (361). These conversations help Allie identify that life is more than black and white; it is more than good and bad; it is more than male and female, and it is more than a combination of these things. The notion that the world cannot simply be separated into "good" and "bad" (or other sorts of "black and white" thinking) is one of the books biggest

themes. Allie's voice teaches her this lesson fairly explicitly, and Allie appears to understand. However, Allie nevertheless feels that it is necessary to embark on the path to war so that women "win" once and for all (352). Allie still chooses to reign with violence and to support the superiority of women above men, despite the knowledge that there are not simply "two things" to choose from (whether that be men and women, good and bad, powerful and not powerful).

All in all, *The Power* presents a complicated vision of a world where women reign not with a benevolent hand, but a hand full of vengeance and violence. On the one hand, it is good that women gain power. It is good that God is discussed with feminine language. It is good that mothers become more respected in society. The things feminists and feminist theologians write about and hope for happen. However, each of these actions and acquisitions have severely detrimental impacts on society within *The Power*, even if that impact remains simply symbolic.

Without critical thought, *The Power* might dangerously enact the same kind of response Carol Christ warns about when she writes that female power might "conjure up pictures where 'women wield the power' by going to war, keeping men as slave, sexually abusing and raping the, and forcing them into subordinate positions." Without acknowledging the satire, *The Power* might do more damage than good (but, at that point—is the responsibility on the reader or the author?).

Moreover, *The Power* fails to imagine a world where humans (regardless of gender) can move beyond our fixation with violence and cruelty. As Allie encourages the world to start a war, she reinforces the idea that power and violence are inseparable—one is necessary to the other, regardless of who has the power. To an optimistic reader, this might be disappointing; after all, hope is an incredibly powerful force, and there is little hope to be found in the pages of *The Power*. But, as Ursula Le Guin writes, "Science fiction is not predictive; it is descriptive"

(xiv). In this case, Alderman has taken an observation—all humans have the capacity for power lust and violence—and described it in a way I argue is very effective. The drag Alderman superimposes onto her characters, the pastiche of the whole piece, the exemplification of the different avenues of religious power and how that bleeds into secular society all work together to provide a snapshot of our own society. In a way, the novel is effective because Alderman is not afraid to go to and describe extremes—whether that be by essentializing the gender binary or by describing violence through the hands of women that, in turn, teach us something about who we are.

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