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"MOTHER IS GOD IN THE EYES OF A CHILD:"
MARIOLOGY, REVELATION, AND MOTHERS IN *SILENT HILL*

INTRODUCTION

As a mainstream, video game-based horror offering, the film *Silent Hill* (Christoph Gans, 2006) surprises by straying from a safe and straightforward narrative. Instead of offering the requisite gory showdowns with the monstrous denizens of the *Silent Hill* franchise, although such elements certainly do exist, screenwriter Roger Avary offers a complex study of women through a lens of Mariology, the theological study of the Virgin Mary, and the women of the book of Revelation. This focus on hyperdulia, "the ecclesiastical term for the special veneration given to the Virgin Mary,"¹ lends symbolic weight especially to the female characters who anchor the film. Further still, the film explores the dichotomy of Mary, Mother of Jesus, and Mary Magdalene. These two women, arguably the two closest to Jesus, offer a further insight of the dichotomies of mother and whore, and of the forgiver and the penitent. The resulting narrative provides several distinct categories of mothering, and the specific ties such forms have to the veneration of the Virgin Mary. The first of these categories has to do with adoptive mothers who, thought they lack a biological connection to their children, feel no less love toward them, and evokes a larger sense of maternal love akin to that the Virgin Mary is most known for, especially within the Catholic church, a deep love for humankind. The second concerns biological motherhood. In relation to the film, this is explored through a mother who betrays her child by giving that daughter over to members of her cult who she surely must suspect will do her harm, then waiting until too late to intervene on her behalf. The final exploration of the mother figure deals with her in the form of a leader, in this case portrayed as the leader of a cult. This version proves especially treacherous, as she is depicted as a figure of malice wrapped in a false shell of motherly caring and compassion.

Silent Hill also finds its primary female protagonists aligned with the four women of the Book of Revelation: the heavenly woman of Revelation 12, the Bride of Christ of Revelation 21 and 22, the Whore of Babylon of Revelation 17 and Jezebel, the false prophet of Revelation 2, presented here in the order they appear in the character analyses. The biblical imagery, taken in its totality, adds

¹ Joe Nickell, *Looking for a Miracle: Weeping Icons, Relics, Stigmata, Visions and Healing Cures* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1993), 31.

nuance to the horror story itself, and asks the audience to consider not only the redemptive power of a mother's love, but also the issue of righting sin through physical torment and vengeance.

Considering the choices in storyline and symbolic imagery, the film is necessarily female-centric. The shift in this film to a female-dominated narrative marks another instance in which the *Silent Hill* series – comprising this film, a mediocre sequel released in late 2012, multiple video game titles, and several graphic novel adaptations – refuses to play completely to expectations of gender roles. Ewan Kirkland notes of the video games, "This is a series that deviates from the uncompromisingly macho, triumphantly aggressive, and uncritical narratives and expressions of masculinity with which video games are associated."² In terms of the video game series, and without delving too deeply into it as a whole, it is interesting to point out that each game features a different protagonist, one of whom is female, the rest male, all broken and in some way adhering to what Kirkland describes. Of importance is that, regardless of the gender of the protagonist, each is richly developed and all avoid simple gender stereotypes. The *Silent Hill* film follows this tradition by featuring a cast dominated by female characters, both major and minor. The genre of horror allows for a freedom in both plot and circumstance unavailable in typical "women's film" outlets like the romantic comedy. Critic David Greven comments that "the seemingly defunct genre of the woman's film takes a significant new form in the modern horror film."³ The *Silent Hill* film takes this one step further by aligning some of the elements of the video game series into a more structured focus on Mariology and biblical imagery.

The core plot of the film centers on adoptive mother Rose Da Silva (Radha Mitchell) as she seeks to ease daughter Sharon's (Jodelle Ferland) mental distress by taking her to Silent Hill, the town Sharon mentions in her sleep. Silent Hill itself is a nightmare, literally and figuratively, and is dominated by two opposed forces. Christabella (Alice Kirge) rules over a small group of Christian cultists who are trapped in the town. Alessa (also Jodelle Ferland), tortured by the cult, is also able to physically alter reality and torments Christabella and her flock. Rose eventually finds an ally in police officer Cybil Bennett (Laurie Holden), who becomes trapped in Silent Hill as well. While Rose, separated from Sharon early on, tries to find her daughter and unravel what is going on in Silent Hill, her husband Christopher (Sean Bean) works with police detective Thomas Gucci (Kim Coates) to find his wife.

The choice to align Rose with the Virgin Mary may at first appear to be an odd choice considering that the film itself targets a wide range of audience members,

² Ewan Kirkland, "Masculinity in Video Games: The Gendered Gameplay of *Silent Hill*" (*Camera Obscura*, 24:2), 166.

³ David Greven, *Representations of Femininity in American Genre Cinema: The Woman's Film, Film Noir, and Modern Horror* (New York: Palgrave, 2011), 83.

especially in the coveted young male market, from fans of the video game series to fans of horror. The immediate risk would lie in the symbolism being missed entirely, most especially with regards to Rose, who symbolically anchors the remaining imagery. Scholar Harvey Cox addresses this issue in terms of Marian imagery in modern films more generally. He speaks of "premodern Mariological material," that which goes back to very traditional representations of Mary, as remaining symbolically accessible to modern filmgoers. While he references specifically adherents of Catholicism, both on the left and right, this can be safely extrapolated out to include a more general Western audience.⁴ Christianity remains the dominant Western religion and its imagery permeates popular culture. Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ* (2004), while controversial for its roots in very conservative Catholicism, nonetheless played to large audiences and re-introduced images of both Mary and Mary Magdalene to younger filmgoers. What is of most interesting note is that the *Silent Hill* film breaks away from more careful representations of Mary. Adele Reinhartz argues, "almost all films treat Mary with kid gloves. They reverentially highlight her serene beauty, her chastity, and her special relationship with both God and Jesus."⁵ Modern filmmakers, therefore, "must decide how to formulate her (Mary's) character: from the humble handmaiden beloved of patriarchy to the independent woman heralded by female Mariologists."⁶

Silent Hill presents a more complicated view of Mary, one that centers on her independence and her capacity for vengeance, both of which have root in both Marian apparitions and in exegetical analyses of her. Harvey Cox speaks of religious imagery in film as a means to "reintroduce a religious dimension into an ailing modern one."⁷ While he considers specifically here the film *Hail Mary* (1985), his ideas have wider application and he explores the issue that "modernity's answers are no longer final, authoritative, or satisfying,"⁸ thus setting up a filmic space wherein *Silent Hill* can explore not only symbolic representations of Christianity, but also the issue of faith more generally.

The discussion centering on Rose as a symbolic representation of Mary focuses in part on claimed apparitions of her, especially those happening at Fatima and Medjugorje, although numerous other sightings are claimed around the world. For the purposes of this analysis, it is not ultimately important whether or not the claimed sightings of the Virgin Mary are real, faked, or imagined. What is of critical importance is the number of faithful who solidly believe in their authenticity, so the following discussion treats the events as if they actually

⁴Harvey Cox, "Mariology, or the Feminine Side of God," *Jean-Luc Goddard's Hail Mary: Women and the Sacred in Film* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1993), 88.

⁵Adele Reinhartz, *Jesus of Hollywood* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007), 69.

⁶Catherine O'Brien, "Mary in Film," *Mary: The Complete Resource* (London: Continuum, 2007), 534.

⁷ Cox, *Jean-Luc Goddard's Hail Mary*, 86.

⁸ Ibid., 87.

occurred, rather than delving into the issue of either proving their miraculous nature or analyzing alternate explanations for them. The sightings at Fatima and Medjugorje both center on Mary appearing to poor children and providing them with sets of prophecies. The sightings of the Virgin Mary at Fatima started in 1915 in Fatima, Portugal and centered on a number of visitations by her to three local children. Interest in the sightings and Mary's revelations to the children reached such interest that some 70,000 people came out to witness her last predicted appearance. While the children themselves described Mary in positive terms and the faithful at her last appearance claimed to see miraculous and beautiful events, a tinge of darker things centered on Mary's prophecies to the children. She gave the children "certain undisclosed visions"⁹ to the children, a series of three secrets which they claimed they did not have permission to reveal to the world at large and which were thought to contain revelations of the end of the world. While those prophecies have since been disclosed, the last of which was made public in 2000, some still dispute whether or not they have been provided in full or if material pertaining to the world's end remains secreted by the Vatican. These three final prophecies, taken in totality and as currently revealed, do deal with darker matters, including Hell and war.

THE MECHANISM OF SILENT HILL

At Christabella's command, thirty-nine years prior to the start of the film and when Alessa is nine, the cult members burn Alessa alive because her mother Dahlia (Deborah Kara Unger) bore her out of wedlock and would not name the father. Alessa, horrifically burned but alive, begins to manifest psychic powers and an ability to shift the physical world as she endures both agony and isolation. I will refer to this version of the character as Alessa. Shortly thereafter, a demon or creature of some sort visits Alessa, offers to help her fully enact revenge, and merges with her. I will refer to this version as dark Alessa.

In the film, the town of Silent Hill exists in three iterations. The first, a real world version, lies abandoned and with a "coal fire" burning beneath it. Rumors of toxic gas within its ruins presumably keep the curious at bay. Christopher and Detective Gucci explore this real-world version of Silent Hill after Rose absconds there with Sharon. The second version, into which Sharon, Rose, and Cybil enter, appears grey, devoid of almost any color. A constant stream of ash rains from the sky and monsters roam its streets. This will be referred to as Silent Hill. The final version, which will be referred to as the Otherworld, reflects the full influence of Alessa's power. Silent Hill itself already exists outside of place and time, so Alessa has already partially transformed physical reality and taken the members of the cult with her. However, she can shift this version into an even more nightmarish iteration. The Otherworld is all metal and fire, rot and gore. The town transforms physically, into an unrecognizable maze of metal, stairways, and hallways. The monsters in this version prove far more lethal as well. It is this

⁹ Nickell, *Looking for a Miracle*, 177.

Otherworld that Alessa desires to bring to bear on the cultists, a symbolic and literal fiery hell in which they all deserve to burn. However, the cult members are safe so long as they are within the confines of their church when Alessa transforms Silent Hill into the Otherworld. Alessa shifts the reality of the town frequently, but for relatively brief periods of time.

THERE'S NO MEN IN THIS!

Screenwriter Roger Avary recalls of the studio's reaction to his initial screenplay, "One of the studio notes, however, when we finally turned it in was "THERE'S NO MEN IN THIS!" So they requested that we make more out of the husband character, which is exactly what we did."¹⁰ While the resulting expanded role for Christopher adds a sense of tension to the search for Rose and Sharon, the film could have excised his role almost completely and the narrative would not have suffered and indeed, this elimination would further strengthen the film's focus on biblical imagery and Mary. One wonders if the studio heads would have exclaimed, "THERE'S NO WOMEN IN THIS!" had the screenplay explored a male-driven narrative instead.

What does remain, despite the inclusion of Christopher, is a female-driven story focusing especially on the mythos of mother as a being with true and demonstrable power. One of the controversies within Marianism lies in whether or not the veneration of Mary provides a positive image for women, or one that emphasizes their diminished role as the Catholic Church expanded. Peter Loizos proposes that people see "Marianism less as the Church capturing women through an image of submission" and instead as a product of women's insistence on Mary's importance¹¹ and further still, that Mary in her identity as Mother evolves as more important than that of her as Virgin.¹²

Going further, the film explores an image of Mary not as a subservient woman, but one marked by her independence. George Tavard, in tracing the view of Mary as self-possessed and powerful, notes that, "in the maternity of the Word of God, Mary of Nazareth was the supremely free woman, responsible only to God for carrying out her mission."¹³ Once Rose decides that the only cure for Sharon is a journey to Silent Hill, she deliberately excludes Christopher from accompanying them. In response to Sharon's inquiry about this, Rose responds,

¹⁰ "Interview with Roger Avary." Originally published on *Edge Online* Sept. 2005. http://www.silenthillmemories.net/creators/interviews/2005.09_avary_edgeonline_en.html. Accessed June 15, 2012.

¹¹Peter Loizos, "The Virgin Mary and Marina Warner's Feminism," *Religious Regimes and State Formation: Perspectives from European Ethnology* (New York: University of New York Press, 1991), 231.

¹² Ibid., 233.

¹³George H Tavard, "The Genesis of Mariology," *A Feminist Companion to Mariology* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2005), 119.

"It's gonna be just you and me," relying on her intuition as a mother that taking Rose to Silent Hill will solve the problem.

From the start, the narrative moves away from a patriarchal ordering of events. Researcher Liena Gurevich explains that "there is a movement away from the traditional patriarchal conception of motherhood toward the paternalist one, in which the state and its medico-legal establishment, in particular, play a direct and ever more important role."¹⁴ In such a realm, Christopher would take over the child-rearing decisions and instead place Sharon in a medical institution, a place of science and medication. Joan Engelsman sees one of the themes of Mariology is Mary as "co-redemptrix" with her son¹⁵ and considers that some portraits of and infant Jesus and Mary feature him in Mary's lap "as though it were a throne."¹⁶ Such artistic renderings again reflect the importance of the identity of mother and even for the powerful Son of God, he would be nothing without the love and power of Mary. There is "an iconic dimension, which presents the Virgin as a recognizable symbolic figure beyond the biblical context,"¹⁷ and one that takes form in Rose.

THE WOMEN OF *SILENT HILL*

CYBIL, ODD-WOMAN OUT

Officer Cybil Bennett begins the film pursuing Rose as the latter speeds toward Silent Hill, then becomes her ally once both women become trapped in the town. While not immediately and as closely aligned to biblical imagery and to Mariology as the remaining four primary female characters, Cybil does add a final nuance to the theme of Christianity and faith found in the others. Her first name, Cybil, references the ancient Greek myth of the Oracle, who was always female and called the Sibyl. It was she who would be consulted on matters of prophecy and was thought to be divinely inspired with regards to her gift of revelation. The last, Bennett, derives from "benedictus," meaning "blessed." Cybil, even earlier on than Rose, takes an immediate dislike to Christabella. Further still, it is Cybil who first declares to Rose, "Mother is God in the eyes of a child," a sentiment which ties together not only Rose's devotion to Sharon, but also Dahlia's twisted and painful relationship with Alessa. Finally, Cybil

¹⁴Liena Gurevich, "Patriarchy? Paternalism? Motherhood Discourses in Trials of Crimes Against Children," *Sociological Perspectives*, 51:3 (Fall 2008), 516-17.

¹⁵Joan Chamberlain Engelsman, *The Feminine Dimension of the Divine, Revised Edition* (Wilmette: Chiron Publications, 1994), 122.

¹⁶ Ibid., 126.

¹⁷ O'Brien, *Mary: The Complete Resource*, 532.

eventually forms a strong friendship, almost sisterly in nature, with Rose. She sacrifices her life and holds the cultists at bay in order to give Rose time to escape into the lower levels of Silent Hill to confront Alessa. This leads not only to her being painfully beaten, but then burned alive at the stake, in one of the film's deliberately lingering and protracted death scenes.

As a police officer, Cybil serves as a form of authority at the start of the film. Any number of horror films might feature a male police officer of varying competence as a source of help or of hindrance. Here, what audiences might be expecting in the form of a masculine authority figure takes instead female form, although arguably, her initial confrontations with Rose find her upholding such a masculine form of authority, in stark contrasts to Rose's intuitive and emotional drives to find Sharon.

ROSE, MARY AND THE HEAVENLY WOMAN

The focus on Mary as a figure of devotion within the Catholic Church has not been without controversy. For example, Pope John Paul II was concerned with "Mariological devotion that makes Mary into a goddess on her own and breaks her relationship to Jesus."¹⁸ *Silent Hill* deliberately does this and focuses on female power, both redemptive and terrible. Rose represents both the sorrowful, searching mother and also the one ready to enact violence to be reunited with her offspring and to punish evildoers. Peter Loizos, as a part of a larger critique of Marina Warner's view of Marianism as inherently harmful to women, speaks of her view of Mary as "the Platonic yearning towards the ideal."¹⁹ The key here, as demonstrated across different views of Mary, from the subservient woman to the independent one, is that the ideal itself exists in a fluid state. Rose, in her iteration as Mary, provides an ideal for a new time and for modern viewers. While she is a caring and loving mother, she also becomes a violent avenger, and is more than a woman waiting for the hero to come in to save the day. The rose, by the time of the Middle Ages, symbolized purity and the ability to purify.²⁰ Rose, then, transforms from being merely the mother of her adopted daughter Sharon to a figure of righteousness and divine retribution over Christabella, a false mother preaching a false religion.

Joan Engelsman considers the archetype of the Mother more generally as existing in two primary forms, the first of which she designates *mater*. This is the mother who physically goes through pregnancy and birth and cares for the child. However, the *mater* has both a good and bad form.²¹ Engelsman further notes, "in her positive guise, *mater* frequently appears as the sorrowful mother who,

¹⁸ Cox, Harvey, *Jean-Luc Goddard's Hail Mary*, 88.

¹⁹ Loizos, *Religious Regimes and State Formation*, 223.

²⁰ Robyn Greenstone, "The Image of the Rose," Cloisters Museum Gallery Talk, August 9, 1997.

²¹ Engelsman, *The Feminine Dimension of the Divine*, 20.

deprived of her child, moves heaven and earth to be restored to it."²² While Rose is not Sharon's biological mother, the film renders this inconsequential due to the mantle of mater, of mother, which she undertakes. Dahlia, Alessa's biological mother, proves too weak and is unable to protect her child. The fact that she physically births her into the world proves to be of little consequence. Rose, then, as a larger archetype of mother, in the tradition of Mary's care for the entirety of humanity, acts as a representation of the image of Mary as Virgin and Mother. While Rose is not a virgin, she comes into motherhood without sex and the relationship between her and her daughter functions as the strongest bond of the film.

Rose also functions as a mother figure on a larger scale, specifically in her relation to the burning children, one of the types of monstrous denizens residing in the Otherworld. The burning children provide the most disturbing of the monsters in that they are both pitiable and deadly. They are small, hunched, child-like figures with distorted faces. Their faces, open-mouthed in screams, face to the side of their heads, as if some malevolent force twisted their flesh. They emit terrible screams and appear to be burning from the inside out. On the simplest level, the burning children are a symbolic manifestation of what the cult has done to Alessa. Given that the burning children will attack, and presumably kill, any of the cultists trapped outside of the church when Silent Hill shifts to the Otherworld, they impose Alessa's wrath on both a physical and symbolic level. However, the children relate to Rose as well. During her first experience in the Otherworld, Rose becomes hemmed in by a group of the burning children. They paw at her, tugging at her, pulling at her clothes. They do not immediately kill her when given the chance. There is a strong suggestion that the burning children are drawn to Rose, perhaps pulled in by the mother love which drew her to Silent Hill. This explains, later on, why dark Alessa knows that Rose will help her get revenge.

The equating of Mary and Rose has further weight through their names. The rose shares a strong tie with Marianism and is often symbolic of the Virgin Mary as well. Additionally, the symbolism of the rose provides for a fascinating reading into Rose's clothing shifting color. Specifically, "white roses in Paradise are said to have blushed red when she (Mary) kissed them."²³ However, this is not the only instance where color plays a prominent role with regards to Rose. By the end of the film, Rose's original grey-toned outfit transforms to a deep, bloody red. This final act of the film certainly represents blood retribution for the terrible wrongs committed by Christabella and her followers, and when Rose unleashes Alessa and dark Alessa into the church, none of the cultists are spared, save Dahlia.

²² Ibid., 22.

²³ Greenstone, "The Image of the Rose."

After Rose's first experience in the Otherworld, she passes out and reawakens in an abandoned cafe after the town goes back to its relative normal. On the jukebox plays Johnny Cash's "Ring of Fire." The first line, "Love is a burning thing" applies to the mother love of both Rose and Dahlia. Dahlia failed Alessa, but she clearly exists in great torment for what she had done. Cynthia Bourgeault dislikes the idea of separating human and divine love, for love is "the most potent force at our disposal to unify the heart and transform the soul,"²⁴ and herein lies the starting point in Rose's connection to the queen of heaven mentioned in Revelation 12. Revelation 12.1 describes her as "a woman clothed with the sun with the moon under her feet" who then gives birth to a male child. Revelation 12.16 finds the woman besieged by a dragon, but she ultimately escapes from it. Joy Schroeder notes that "Later Christian exegetes equated the woman of Chapter 12 with Mary, the mother of Jesus."²⁵

ALESSA, THE TRIPLE-ASPECTED BRIDE OF CHRIST: SHARON

The film presents a degree of ambiguity in terms of exactly how Sharon came into being. Dark Alessa says to Rose, "The little girl is what's left of her goodness," meaning that Alessa somehow split the last vestiges of her innocence off into a separate person. Whether this was done by a literal birth, which would fall in line with the film's sustained explorations of motherhood, or by some other supernatural means never gets fully addressed. The audience sees, in recollection, dark Alessa bringing an infant Sharon to an orphanage and leaving her there. Curiously, the townspeople, specifically police detective Tom Gucci and a nurse at the orphanage, seem to know that something extraordinary has occurred with regards to Sharon's appearance, given that she is the mirror image of Alessa, and Tom himself rescued Alessa from the cult. Sharon, while originating from a source of anger bordering on evil, does not share these traits herself. While she ends up drawn to Silent Hill, she does not harbor any darkness inside of her. In essence, she becomes the perfect daughter.

The choice of Sharon as the name for Rose's adopted daughter at first glance might appear incongruous, given the strong religious imagery of the other female characters' names. However, the connection of this name to Rose comes via the flower the rose of Sharon. The rose of Sharon often represents Jesus in religious artwork and also represents Mary herself.²⁶ An interesting relationship between the two characters in the film forms with this symbolism in mind. If

²⁴Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Meaning of Mary Magdalene: Discovering the Woman at the Heart of Christianity*. (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2010), 93.

²⁵Joy Schroeder, "Revelation 12: Female Figures and Figures of Evil," *Word and World*: Vol. XV, No. 2 (Spring 1995), 178.

²⁶Cindy Osborn, "100 Plants for a Larger Mary Garden," The Marian Library/International Marian Research Institute. http://campus.udayton.edu/mary/resources/m_garden/overview_List100.html. Updated February 9, 2012. Accessed June 16, 2012.

taken in literal order, "Rose of Sharon" would imply "Sharon's Rose." Rose's bond to Sharon as a mother drives the heart of the narrative. As Rose prepares to go into the horrors of Silent Hill's hospital in search of Sharon, she tells Cybil, "Sharon's adopted, but I'm her mother. I knew that from the moment I first laid eyes on her." Tellingly, Sharon's name also finds reference within the "Song of Songs," where the lover declares, "I am a Rose of Sharon" (2.1), which speaks of the tie in the film between mother and daughter.

ALESSA, THE VICTIM AND THE MOTHER OF MONSTERS

The movie poster for *Silent Hill* hints at the horrors faced by the nine year-old Alessa. Because they are played by the same young actress, the girl might be mistaken for Sharon, but the symbolism of the image points to Alessa. She looks like she might be posing for a portrait, as she stares directly at the viewer and the image is cropped to her upper half. Her mouth is completely missing from the picture, as if erased, leaving behind a disconcerting field of flesh tone. Alessa's journey begins the story and sets in motion the events that transform Silent Hill. Her vulnerability as a young girl underscores her body as an effective locus of suffering. Critic Rhona Berenstein specifically focuses on women in classic horror films, but her observations still prove relevant to a discussion of the genre in its modern form. She writes that "the cropped image of a woman gazing at an unseen threat has the kind of cultural and marketing clout that streamlines analysis and affirms the simplicity of visual symbols,"²⁷ but her analysis focuses in on the effectiveness of *Silent Hill*'s movie poster as well. The poster in this case ratchets up the tension by erasing Alessa's mouth. In many other classic and modern horror posters, the featured female might be gaping in exaggerated terror or screaming at the unseen foe. Here, Alessa simply gazes, perhaps pensively, perhaps in terror, into the camera and at the viewer. Without the further referent of her mouth to provide the final portion of her expression, her pain, fear, and terror remain unexpressed. It is this suffering and the lingering years of painful aftermath which align her with the Bride of Christ of Revelation 21 and 22. Although Revelation equates the Bride with Jerusalem, the symbolic significance lies in the Bride being worthy of redemption above all others, of being an innocent who finds favor with God. Alessa, even at her most furious and bloodthirsty, never moves past the realm of being sympathetic. She, like Sharon, are the true innocents of the film, with Alessa having been made to suffer at the hands of the adults around her, both those who victimize her and those who fail to save her in time.

Joan Engelsman splits the idea of the mother into two forms, one of which, the *mater*, which was discussed earlier. The other aspect, which she deems the *anima*, "represents her (the mother's) transformative powers."²⁸ Like the *mater*,

²⁷Rhona J Berenstein, *Attack of the Leading Ladies: Gender, Sexuality and Spectatorship in Classic Horror Cinema* (New York: Columbia UP, 1996), 1.

²⁸Engelsman, *The Feminine Dimension of the Divine*, 22.

the anima has both positive and negative forms. In terms of Alessa, who cannot possibly hope to be a mother in her own right, she expresses her identity as the anima, as the mother of monsters creating and shifting Silent Hill. She transforms both landscapes and flesh as she seeks out vengeance. Further still, there is a Marian tie between Alessa and Rose via the image of Mary, in this case as the virgin mother. Alessa manages to give birth to and create monsters and also births in some undefined way the best remaining part of herself in Sharon. She, like Mary, functions as "A woman becoming pregnant without the participation of a man"²⁹ in a miraculous act.

The dangers of silence center on Alessa and turn her into a victim. As the initial events happen to her when she is just a child, Alessa cannot be expected to have agency of her own, as she relies instead on the wisdoms and shortcomings of the adults around her. Christabella harasses Dahlia for the identity of Alessa's father, and then turns her wrath toward the child. As a result, Alessa becomes ostracized from everyone, including any form of female kinship or friendship. The students at her school bully her to the point of violence, throwing things at her while chanting, "Burn the witch!" Worse still, her alienation from her community allows for her to be sexually assaulted by a school janitor. While Dahlia clearly loves Alessa, she cannot defend her. Dark Alessa, while showing all of these memories to Sharon, comments, "Alessa was alone in the world. You know what can happen to little girls when they're left alone. Even her mother couldn't help, even though she loved her baby." Dahlia seems to know that something terrible has happened at school that day, but she simply fetches Alessa from where she cowers, crying, in a bathroom stall and takes her home. Later, she brings Alessa to Christabella and the cult and then, at Christabella's command, leaves her with the remaining members of the cult. The cultists then burn her on a metal rack over a cauldron of hot coals.

This scene in particular, although one among many surprisingly brutal scenes of graphic violence in a film intended for a mainstream audience, proves cringe worthy. Not only does the metal contraption to which Alessa is bound come free from its moorings and swing wildly around, a jarring moment in an already uncomfortable scene, the audience gets a full and unbroken view of Alessa after she is burnt. For an extended period, in both close up and overhead shots, the viewer sees Alessa, her hair burnt away, skin blackened and cracked, as she gasps for breath and through her agony. Later on, the older Alessa has healed more or less, but her skin is a disfigured mass of flesh. Alessa appears unable to move from her hospital bed, presumably because her skin and muscles have contracted to the point of uselessness. Alessa perhaps can be seen as having been literally purified through fire, existing for years as a figurative open wound, at once victim and tormentor. She uses her enhanced abilities to stalk the members of the cult one by one as she can find them, until the climax of the film when she

²⁹Jane Schaberg, "Feminist Interpretation of the Infancy Narrative of Matthew," *A Feminist Companion to Mariology* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2005), 17.

takes revenge on a larger scale. Despite the brutality and totality of her revenge, the indelible image of her burnt body and all else she has suffered renders her a sympathetic figure.

Alessa suffers in silence and then appears to lose her voice entirely in the aftermath of being burned alive. Once she goes into the hospital for treatment and even when Rose encounters the adult Alessa late in the film, she does not say a word. The implication is that she has been rendered mute as a result of her burning. Her silence, her inability to express her suffering directly – dark Alessa speaks for her and communicates the story to Rose – make her emblematic of a long tradition of female victims and martyrs. Witch trials, which are also a part of the cult's history and concern in the film, were nothing more than kangaroo courts through which innocent women were murdered. They, too, lacked a voice in these proceedings. Many, like Tituba of the Salem Witch Trials, confessed under torture, a tradition carried over from the Inquisition. Even then, these confessions did not necessarily lead to freedom. The woman might still be killed, albeit with the comfort that she had done so. These women, then, had no voice, especially against the male-dominated religious hierarchies governing such investigations into witchcraft. In the case of *Silent Hill*, Alessa has no voice or say and the townspeople are fixated on the idea that she must be purged from their community because she is the result of sin and her possible status as a witch. The difference here rests in Christabella's control of the cult, a false mother pretending to do what is best and right for everyone.

Silent Hill features a number of horrific and monstrous life forms, all of which exist solely due to Alessa's powers of creation and transformation. Some of them function as tormentors and executioners of all those unlucky people who do not make it back into the church before the Otherworld shifts completely into place. In one case, the audience, via Rose, watches as two of Christabella's flock are torn to pieces by large beetles. Another reveals a man who has been strung up and disemboweled, with his body positioned against a chain link fence, arms outstretched, reminiscent of the Crucifixion. As Rose shines her light into his face, the audience sees "a close-up of the bloodshot eyes of the crucified,"³⁰ signaling that he still lives. Alessa might, then, have the power to stave off death in her victims, lending her ultimate power over birth and death. Alessa transforms both humans and seemingly the very matter around her, through her will, into monstrous configurations as a means of tormenting the cultists.

There are many similarities between Alessa and the Bride of Christ, but she also bears a striking resemblance, in terms of character, to Lilith, the mythological/apocryphal first wife of Adam. She also shares the same ambiguities as Lilith: she can be either defiant or monstrous. Lilith demands equal standing with Adam and refuses to be his subordinate when they are both

³⁰Bernard Perron, *Silent Hill: The Terror Engine*, (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan Press, 2012), 134.

created from dust, from the same inherent substance. Adam goes to God for intervention and God takes Adam's side. Lilith flees in anger and disgust. As scholar M.T. Colonna describes the myth, "God, implored by Adam then sent forth the angels to trace her, but Lilith had been found...in dark and restless promiscuity with wanton demons"³¹ and she produces hundreds of demonic and monstrous offspring as a result. Depending on one's point of view, Lilith can be viewed as an iteration of the monstrous feminine who threatens male patriarchy and thus should be reviled or she can be viewed as a woman who refused to be less than equal and thus is not inherently monstrous. At first glance, Silent Hill and the Otherworld manifest one's darkest nightmares, a place where monsters lurk and people suffer torturous deaths at their hands; since Alessa ultimately controls both Silent Hill, and the Otherworld can only birth monsters from her unconscious, her darkest wishes made real. Like Lilith, Alessa became victim of and subject to the laws of an unjust system. Her decades-long quest for revenge does not make her inherently evil or inherently monstrous. Her act of defiance lies in her willingness to endure and survive in order to find a means of gaining revenge. Christabella, as part of acting out the role of a false savior, also appropriates powers associated with masculinity within many churches. She interprets scripture, leads prayers, and commands her flock with utter authority. Alessa, in refusing to succumb to this power, becomes a Lilith-figure, to some monstrous, to some sympathetic if not heroic.

DARK ALESSA

Dark Alessa's primary role is to act as bait to draw Rose further into Silent Hill. It is never made entirely clear how evil she really is and it is too simple to deem her, or the gender indeterminate demon masquerading as her, as Satan. If anything, the three aspects of Alessa exist along a continuum of light and darkness, with Sharon being the most innocent and Dark Alessa the most tainted. Dark Alessa seems to be more opportunistic, helping Alessa because she finds it an interesting endeavor, or, she perhaps truly believes Alessa deserves justice. Dark Alessa acts as Alessa's voice and her advocate, revealing to Rose the full horror of Silent Hill and asking for her help. However, the demon also has a darker side, evidenced by her dancing gleefully in the shower of blood raining down in the church during the film's climactic moments.

When confronted by Rose, dark Alessa refuses to reveal her identity, saying only, "I have many names" and "I am the dark part of Alessa." Neither answer is meant to satisfy the viewer. By her earlier admission, dark Alessa claims that she came to the hospital to help Alessa get revenge. That might also imply that Alessa created dark Alessa herself, as she creates other aspects of Silent Hill. In some ways, this explanation aligns with the idea that Alessa also creates Sharon, the light part of herself. Taken in this light, Alessa becomes mother to the two

³¹M.T. Colonna, "Lilith, or the Black Moon," *Journal of Analytical Psychology*, 25:4 (Oct. 1980), 326.

distinct and disparate aspects of her personality: the innocent child and the violated one. Rather than keep Sharon with her, perhaps as a reminder of happier times, Alessa instead gives the child away in the hope that she will have the love of a true mother. What becomes of dark Alessa is never fully addressed at the film's conclusion. The film hints that the demon possibly possesses Sharon in some way, but to what end remains unclear. Given that Rose and Sharon both seem content being together, the demon would not appear to wish to cause harm.

DAHLIA, THE MAGDALENE AND ACCUSED WHORE OF BABYLON

Dahlia, mother of Alessa and sister of Christabella, inhabits a painful space in the film. She is trapped in Silent Hill, but Alessa will not do her direct harm. She exists in a type of limbo, outcast from the other members of the cult and unshaven by her daughter. Taken in context of this exploration, the dahlia has symbolic significance as a flower often placed in gardens praising the Virgin Mary. Specifically, it is known as the "churchyard flower."³² Dahlia exists in the ashy ruins of Silent Hill and does not enter the church until late in the film. Instead, as the Otherworld descends, she lingers literally and figuratively in the churchyard as she calls on the cultists to acknowledge what they have done to Alessa. She is the only person penitent for what happened to her daughter. She not only carries the weight of having delivered her daughter to Christabella and the cult, but also of her own inaction. In that sense, her remorse flowers alone. She also bears symbolic significance to Mary Magdalene's original role as "one who is witness"³³ to the crucifixion and the resurrection. Additionally, Dahlia bears witness both to what the cult does to Alessa and what her daughter becomes as a result. This association of the Magdalene with the crucifixion also ties her to Mary, as both women bear witness to Jesus's final moments. Rose and Dahlia bond as well over the most painful events in their lives, the loss of a daughter, both temporary and permanent.

Dahlia garners both sympathy and disgust internally from characters in the film and externally from the viewing audience. Her greatest crime lies in her inability to stand up for and protect Alessa. After she leaves Alessa alone with Christabella and the cult, she worries, "What have I done?" but does not intervene when there was still time to save her daughter. Instead, she leaves the building, only to return with police, although it is too late. Dahlia reels in true horror and anguish when she sees the burnt form of her daughter, but her continued grief does not erase her culpability. Dahlia represents, then, the failed mother. She had to know, given the cult's history and the abundance of murals throughout the town and church featuring women burning at the stake, and an ominous banner stating, "The Foes of the righteous will be condemned," (Psalms

³² Osborn, "100 Plants for a Larger Mary Garden."

³³Birgit Breninger, *Feminist Perspectives on Cultural and Religious Identities: Rewriting Mary Magdalene, Mother Ireland, and Cu Chulainn of Ulster*, (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2012), 176.

34:21) that Christabella mean harm to Alessa for a perceived sexual transgression coupled with the accusation of witchcraft. More ominous still, Christabella, upon taking Alessa, specifically states that they will punish the sin, not the sinner. Dahlia, even knowing all of this, leaves Alessa. As a result, she exists in the form of the "penitent Magdalene,"³⁴ her remorse and change of mind coming far too late to do any good. Cynthia Bourgeault speaks of the "Song of Songs" as possibly referencing Mary Magdalene, especially with the notion that "the search for the missing beloved captures with excruciating poignancy the feeling tone of Mary Magdalene's own vigil"³⁵ at both cross and tomb. Dahlia holds her vigil, alone, on the ashen streets of Silent Hill, always under her daughter's omnipotent gaze, yet never able to reunite with her.

Considering the Whore of Babylon, one character only appears to occupy the role, as seen through the judgment of others, while another occupies it in reality. At first, Dahlia appears to be closely associated with the Whore of Babylon of Revelation 14, given that her refusal to name the father of her child, perhaps because he could be married but undoubtedly because she bears the child out of wedlock, sets events against Alessa. Yet closer reflection reveals that this association exists only as Christabella and the other cultists apply the label to her. Dahlia shares Mary Magdalene's association with prostitution, even though the origins of this identity are dubious at best. Adele Reinhartz asserts that the majority of film representations of Mary Magdalene, however, do focus on her as "a repentant adulteress or prostitute."³⁶ Dahlia certainly internalizes the identity of the adulteress and lives a celibate and lonely life on the margins of Silent Hill. Of Mary Magdalene as prostitute, "modern scholarship has tended to soften up the prostitute aspect."³⁷ However, Christabella reverts to an ironically patriarchal view of sin and its application to Dahlia, thus strengthening Dahlia's ties to Mary Magdalene, herself a victim or patriarchal attempts to lessen her standing in the eyes of churchgoers.

CHRISTABELLA, THE INVERSION OF MARY, THE WHORE OF BABYLON, AND JEZEBEL

Film reviewer Samuel Wigley observes that director Christoph Gans "at times reaches for the allegorical resonance of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* in his depiction of a community whipped into zealous frenzy by superstition."³⁸ In the case of *The Crucible*, however, the genders balance differently. The accusers are primarily, and at least initially, hysterical young women who are either playacting their distress or who are acting out of great malice. However, the adjudicators of the witch trial proceedings are men. It is they who hold the religious and judicial authority over the townspeople and it is they who

³⁴ Ibid., 177.

³⁵ Bourgeault, *The Meaning of Mary Magdalene*, 228.

³⁶ Adele Reinhartz, *Jesus of Hollywood* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007), 129.

³⁷ Bourgeault, *The Meaning of Mary Magdalene*, 4.

³⁸ Samuel Wigley, "Silent Hill," *Sight and Sound*, 16:7 (2006), 72.

pronounce sentence over the accused. In the case of *Silent Hill*, Christabella holds absolute power over her flock. As such, she exists as a false Christ, a false savior whose decrees lead her followers to unconscionable actions. She acts as an inversion of the image of Mary as Mother, and thus of Rose. Just as she is a false Christ, she is a false mother who pretends to nurture her flock only insofar as it keeps her in power. Mar Bax sees Marian apparitions as "power sources in processes of competition between religious regimes"³⁹ and as it applies to Christabella, the more she keeps things consolidated, the better for her. Christabella continually presents to the others that they are waging a battle against one who she calls the demon, which would seem to reference Satan, and that the burning of Alessa had nothing to do with their current situation. The whole manner in which Christabella runs the cult seems to focus on making the others feel special, that they are chosen. Christabella's are the chosen ones, holed up in the church, which itself is an inversion of goodness, but which she proclaims protects them due to the power of their faith.

It is Christabella who then emerges as the true Whore of Babylon. The name "Christabella" can be broken down into its specific constituent parts, "Christ" and "bella," thus rendering a meaning of "beautiful Christ" or perhaps "beautiful Christian." The first possibility provides the most obvious analog to the character, albeit an inverted one. Christabella, as leader of the cult, oversaw the burning of Alessa. Revelation 17.4 describes the Whore of Babylon in part, "and the woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet color and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls. She exists as an illusion of beauty, as surely as Christabella wears the guise of the matronly protector of her flock, the one holding the Devil himself at bay. Revelation 17.5 speaks of the inscription on the Whore of Babylon's forehead, which in part identifies her as, "The mother of harlots and abominations of the earth." Christabella, as the false shepherdess, exists as the root cause of all of Silent Hill's horrors, a mother of sorts to Alessa, having created the figure of wrath Alessa has become, as well as to the evil festering within the cult itself. Moreover, she has brought many members of the cult into grievous sin themselves. Leighton Whitaker writes about the means by which cult members more generally might easily be led to violence by "strong, uniformly authoritarian pressure that suggests they would be right in submitting."⁴⁰ Christabella, as the "mother" to her flock and the one inciting the others to violence throughout the film exerts just such a powerful influence and thus bears the weight of the sins she propagates in others.

Although the imagery might appear to play strongly in this direction, a critique of Christianity is not the main focus of the film. Instead, the narrative concerns

³⁹Mart Bax, "Marian Apparitions in Medjugorje: Rivalling Religious Regimes and State-Formation in Yugoslavia," *Religious Regimes and State Formation: Perspectives from European Ethnology* (New York: University of New York Press, 1991), 30.

⁴⁰Leighton C Whitaker, *Understanding and Preventing Violence: The Psychology of Human Destructiveness*, (Boca Raton: CRC Press, 2000), 92.

itself with what dark Alessa will deem "blind faith" through the behavior of the cult and the travesty of those who inflict suffering on others in the name of religion, therefore delivering a visual treatise and a warning against anyone who would follow blindly and the dangers of a charismatic leader. In terms of religion, the film focuses on blind belief, cruelty disguised as faith, and the issue of sacrifice. The idea of the apocalypse itself is not new to Christianity, as "the concept of imminent apocalypse is deeply embedded in the earliest records of the words of Jesus and his followers, who told believers to separate from an evil world on the eve of destruction."⁴¹ Indeed, Christabella preaches much along these lines, that the cult members are saved because of their willingness to be separated from the outside world, but she also couches this in the affirmation that they have special grace because of their faith. The sum of her characterization finally lends itself to an association with the final woman of Revelation, Jezebel the false prophet of Revelation 2. Like Jezebel, Christabella leads all those who follow her astray, plunging them both literally and figuratively into darkness through her false guise of being a loving mother.

CONVERGENCE – SLAUGHTER IN THE CHURCH

Joan Engelsman notes of the negative aspect of the mater that "she is also connected with death and devouring."⁴² The film's climax, when Sharon allows Dark Alessa and Alessa to gain access to the Church, explores this concern with death and devouring in full, and to troubling ends. Rose agrees to "absorb" Dark Alessa into her own body. Presumably, this allows her to bypass the protections afforded by the church, which Dark Alessa claims are the result of the cultists misguided but powerful belief in Christabella and their faith. While Rose may not know precisely what Alessa has in mind, she certainly knows that she does not intend to leave them unpunished. Here, Rose becomes the Mary capable of allowing punishment on those who deserve it, like the Mary of the La Salette apparition. The accounts of that sighting of Mary find her hopeful that humankind will stray from sin, yet willing to pronounce terrible punishment should her warnings not be heeded.

This last segment of the film brings together the four main women for a final confrontation and resolution. By this point, in the narrative, Rose's outfit, which has been changing in color all along, darkens to a blood red. This symbolizes both the blood price the cult members will pay for their crimes and the image of a mother's lifeblood, as Rose also prepares to face the cult and rescue Sharon, even at the risk of her own life. Once Rose reaches the front of the church, she turns to face Christabella and declares, "God is not here." She strips away Christabella's veneer of being a godly and caring mother to her flock and in so doing, becomes a true savior. In a literal sense, she saves Sharon. In a figurative

⁴¹Philip Jenkins, *Mystics and Messiahs: Cults and New Religions in American History*, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000), 225.

⁴²Engelsman, *The Feminine Dimension of the Divine*, 21.

sense, she sets the cult members free by bringing them to their fate. At this point, she becomes a figure of both female and male power and one of light and darkness, as she still carries within her dark Alessa. Christabella stabs Rose through the heart and through the resultant bleeding, becoming darker and more copious as dark Alessa spills out of her, Alessa herself becomes birthed again, rising up into the church from the depths of Silent Hill.

As Rose stands in front of the congregation as if preparing to preach to them, the mural behind her, which fills the entire altar area of the church, takes on deeper symbolic meaning. The banner, in Latin, reads "Domine Deus Omnipotens in Cuius Manu Omnis Victoria Consist," which translates to "Lord God Almighty in Whose Hand All Victory Consists (or perhaps Rests)." However, there is no room in this church for a masculine, patriarchal deity. Now, there is only the holy mother, Rose, delivering the god-like Alessa literally and figuratively into the cultists' sanctuary.

The narrative now becomes Alessa's, as Rose and Sharon, protected by Alessa, take refuge and wait for her vengeance to end. As she rises up into the church, from a gaping pit in its floor, the resulting image is as nightmarish as it is pitiable. Alessa does not appear to have much movement if any at all in her limbs and she remains confined to her hospital bed, disfigured by her burns. That her bed rises up on the support of a mass of barbed wire provides the stark contrast here. Alessa controls the barbed wire, which slithers in all directions in serpentine and phallic fashion. Here, raised high above the cult members and on her bed of writhing barbed wire, exists Alessa at her most powerful, at once monstrous and avenging and reminiscent of Lilith, who became a mother of monsters when she would not be subjugated.

Her barbed wire tendrils grab hold of Christabella, raising her up into the air in a dark rendering of the crucifixion. Here, Christabella dies for her sins and there appears to be no salvation for her. The false mother/savior is held in a state of ⁴³mockery before being rent. Interestingly, and perhaps in retribution for either or both her sexual assault by the janitor, the motherhood stolen from her, or as a commentary on Christabella's fixation with knowing the identity of Alessa's father and painting Dahlia to be a whore, Alessa's attack on Christabella takes first a form of sexual violation. Lengths of barbed wire launch up between Christabella's legs, presumably through her genitals since they eventually come out of her mouth. Now unable to scream and unspeakably violated, Christabella then hangs in suffering for a few moments before the barbed wire tears into pieces. Her womanhood is literally destroyed, as is the possibility of motherhood.

Aside from Rose and Sharon, Alessa spares only Dahlia. Dahlia beseeches Rose, "Why did she not take me with the others?" to which Rose answers, "Because you're her mother. Mother is God in the eyes of a child." Dahlia remains in the blood-spattered church as Rose and Sharon exit into daylight. She continues her Magdalene-like ritual of waiting and atoning, still at once with, and separated from, Alessa.

CONCLUSION

The film concludes on a note of ambiguity as Sharon and Rose seemingly manage to leave Silent Hill, but in reality, they remain inside its grey and isolated world. When they return home, Christopher appears to exist on another plane entirely, where he seems to sense their presence, but cannot interact with them. For their part, Sharon and Rose appear peaceful with this existence. Rose, from the start, wanted Sharon above all things and now, in the nebulous place Alessa has created, they can be together forever. Presumably, Alessa, with or without the continued presence of dark Alessa, will simply endure until she dies, perhaps at least sated of her desire for bloodlust.

Throughout, the film utilizes biblical imagery generally, and images of Mary and the Book of Revelation specifically, to set up a twist on the archetypal battle between the forces of good and evil. In this film, good and evil are not easily categorized. Rose, as Mary the mother, acts from a place of deep love, yet is also willing to see vengeance done to those who wronged Alessa. Alessa herself, while monstrous and terrifying as an adult, suffered unspeakable horrors as a child and thus her vengeance itself becomes excusable, if not wholly understandable. Dahlia might easily be condemned for abandoning her daughter to Christabella and the cult, yet her pitiable non-life in the ruins of Silent Hill, and Alessa's own refusal to take final revenge on her mother, speak to something sympathetic about her. Only Christabella herself, in direct opposition to and an inversion of the image of Rose as defending mother, proves worthy of utter contempt. The film, by utilizing recognizable biblical imagery, elevates its plot line above just strictly horror movie fare and asks its audience instead to consider more deeply the issues of sin and redemption.

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